



RUNAWAYS

Selections from the WPA interviews of
formerly enslaved African Americans, 1936-1938

Over 2300 former slaves were interviewed during the Great Depression of the 1930s by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Note: Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. Some white interviewers, despite project guidelines for transcribing the narratives, used stereotypical patterns of representing black speech. See "A Note on the Language of the Narratives" at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and "Guidelines for Interviewers" at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf.

Slaves would run away but most of the time they were caught. The Master would put blood hounds on their trail, and sometimes the slave would kill the blood hound and make his escape. If a slave once tried to run away and was caught, he would be whipped almost to death, and from then on if he was sent any place they would chain their meanest blood hound to him.



OCTAVIA GEORGE, enslaved in Louisiana ■

My mother's brother, "Uncle Dick," and "Uncle July" swore they would not work longer for masters; so they ran away and lived in the woods. In winter they would put cotton seed in the fields to rot for fertilizer and lay in it for warmth. They would kill hogs and slip the meat to some slave to cook for food. When their owners looked for them, "Bob Amos" who raised "nigger hounds" (hounds raised solely to track Negro slaves) was summoned and the dogs located them and surrounded them in their hide-out; one went one way and one the other and escaped in the swamps; they would run until they came to a fence — each kept some "graveyard dust" and a few lightwood splinters" with which they smoked their feet and jumped the fence and the dogs turned back and could track no further. Thus, they stayed in the woods until freedom, when they came out and worked for pay.

SAMUEL SIMEON ANDREWS, enslaved in Georgia ■

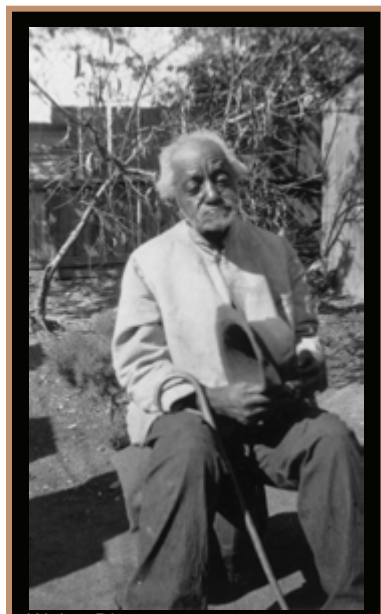
One of de slaves married a young gal, and dey put her in de "Big House" to wuk. One day Mistess jumped on her 'bout something and de gal hit her back. Mistess said she wuz goin' to have Marster put her in de stock and beat her when he come home. When de gal went to de field and told her husband 'bout it, he told her whar to go and stay 'til he got dar. Dat night he took his supper to her. He carried her to a cave and hauled pine straw and put in dar for her to sleep on. He fixed dat cave up just lak a house for her, put a stove in dar and run de pipe out through de ground into a swamp. Everybody always wondered how he fixed dat pipe, course dey didn't cook on it 'til night when nobody could see de smoke. He ceiled de house wid pine logs, made beds and tables out of pine poles, and dey lived in dis cave seven years. Durin' dis time, dey had three chillun. Nobody wuz wid her when dese chillun wuz born but her husband. He waited on her wid each chile. De chillun didn't wear no clothes 'cept a piece tied 'round deir waists. Dey wuz just as hairy as wild people, and dey wuz wild. When dey come out of dat cave dey would run everytime dey seed a pusson.

De seven years she lived in de cave, diffunt folks helped keep 'em in food. Her husband would take it

¹ "graveyard dust": used as magic to throw the dogs off their scent. Andrews is responding to a question concerning "slaves' belief in magic and spells."

to a certain place and she would go and git it. People had passed over dis cave ever so many times, but nobody knowed dese folks wuz livin' dar. Our Marster didn't know whar she wuz, and it was freedom 'fore she come out of dat cave for good.

LEAH GARRETT, enslaved in Georgia ■



Walter Rimm, ca. 1937



Jordan Smith, 1937

■ My pappy wasn't 'fraid of nothin'. He am light cullud from de white blood, and he runs away sev'ral times. Dere am big woods all round and we sees lots of run-awayers. One old fellow name John been a run-awayer for four years and de patterrollers² tries all dey tricks, but dey can't cotch him. Dey wants him bad, 'cause it 'spire other slaves to run away if he stays a-loose. Dey sots de trap for him. Dey knows he like good eats, so dey 'ranges for a quiltin' [bee] and gives chitlin's and lye hominey. John comes and am inside when de patterrollers rides up to de door. Everybody gits quiet and John stands near de door, and when dey starts to come in he grabs de shovel full of hot ashes and throws dem into de patterrollers faces. He gits through and runs off, hollerin, "Bird in de air!"

One woman name Rhodie runs off for long spell. De hounds won't hunt her. She steals hot light bread when dey puts it in de window to cool, and lives on dat. She told my mammy how to keep de hounds from followin' you is to take black pepper and put it in you socks and run without you shoes. It make de hounds sneeze.

One day I's in de woods and meets de nigger runawayer. He comes to de cabin and mammy makes him a bacon and egg sandwich and we never seed him again. Maybe he done got clear to Mexico, where a lot of de slaves runs to.

WALTER RIMM, enslaved in Texas ■

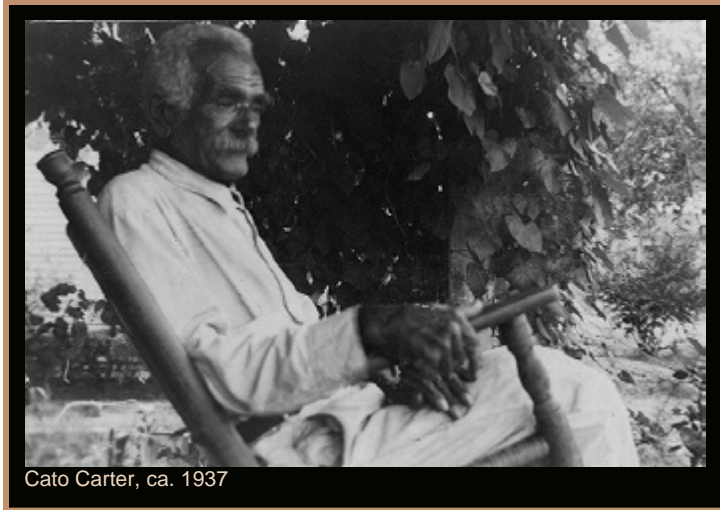
■ If a nigger ever run off the place and come back, master'd say, "If you'll be a good nigger, I'll not whip you this time." But you couldn't 'lieve that. A nigger run off and stayed in the woods six month. When he come back he's hairy as a cow, 'cause he lived in a cave and come out at night and [illegible] round. They put the dogs on him but couldn't cotch him. Fin'ly he come home and master say he won't whip him and Tom was crazy 'nough to 'lieve it. Master say to the cook, "Fix Tom a big dinner," and while Tom's eatin', master stand in the door with a whip and say, "Tom, I's change my mind; you have no business runnin' off and I's gwine [going to] take you out jus' like you come into the world."

Master gits a bottle whiskey and a box cigars and have Tom tied up out in the yard. He takes a chair and say to the driver, "Boy, take him down, 250 licks this time." Then he'd count the licks. When they's 150 licks it didn't look like they is any place left to hit, but master say, "Finish him up." Then he and the driver sot down, smoke cigars and drink whiskey, and master tell Tom how he must mind he master. Then he lock Tom up in a log house and master tell all the niggers if they give him anything to eat he'll skin 'em alive. The old folks slips Tom

bread and meat. When he gits out, he's gone to the woods 'gain. They's plenty niggers what stayed in the woods till surrender.

JORDON SMITH, enslaved in Georgia and Texas ■

² Patterrollers: "patrollers," i.e., slave patrols of white men who searched for runaway slaves and checked slaves' travel passes.



Cato Carter, ca. 1937

Long as I lived I minded what my white folks told me, 'cept one time. They was a nigger workin' in the fiel' and he kept jerkin' the mules and Massa Oll got mad, and he give me a gun and said, "Go out there and kill that man." I said, "Massa Oll, please don't tell me that. I ain't never kilt nobody and I don't want to." He said, "Cato, you do what I tell you." He meant it. I went out to the nigger and said, "You has got to leave this minute, and I is, too, 'cause I is 'spose to kill you, only I ain't and Massa Oll will kill me." He drops the hanes and we run and crawled through the fence and ran away.

I hated to go, 'cause things was so bad [during the Civil War], and flour sold for \$25.00 a barrel, and pickled pork for \$15.00 a barrel. You couldn't buy nothin' lessen with gold. I had plenty of 'federate money, only it wouldn't buy nothin'.

But today I is a old man and my hands ain't stained with no blood. I is allus been glad I didn't kill that man.

CATO CARTER, enslaved in Alabama ■

My mammy's name was Harriet Clemens. When I was too little to know anything 'bout it she run off an' lef' us. I don't 'member much 'bout her 'fore she run off, I reckon I was mos' too little.

She tol' me when she come after us, after de war was over, all 'bout why she had to run away: It was on 'count o' de Nigger overseers. (Dey had Niggers over de hoers an' white mens over de plow han's.) Dey kep' a-tryin' to mess 'roun' wid her an' she wouldn' have nothin' to do wid 'em. One time while she was in de fiel' de overseer asked her to go over to de woods wid him an' she said, "All right, I'll go find a nice place an' wait." She jus' kep' a-goin. She swum de river an' run away. She slipped back onct or twict at night to see us, but dat was all.

ANNA BAKER, enslaved in Alabama ■

I was a young man and didn't see why I should be anybody's slave. I'd run away every chance I got. Sometimes they near killed me, but mostly they just sold me. I guess I was pretty husky, at that.

They never did get their money's worth out of me, though. I worked as long as they stood over me, then I ran around with the gals or sneaked off to the woods. Sometimes they used to put dogs on me to get me back.

AMBROSE DOUGLASS, enslaved in North Carolina and Florida ■

Some uv de slaves run away, lots uv um. Some would be cot and when dey ketched em dey put bells on em; fust dey would put a iron ban' 'round dey neck and anuder one 'round de waist and rivet um together down de back; de bell would hang on de ban' round de neck so dat it would ring when de slave walked and den dey wouldn' git 'way. Some uv dem wore dese bells three and four mont'n and when dey time wuz up dey would take em off 'em. Jake Overstreet, George Bull, John Green, Ruben Golder, Jim Bradley and a hos' uv others wore dem bells. Dis is whut I know, not whut somebody else say. I seen dis myself. En missus, when de big gun fished [when the Civil War ended], de runerway slaves comed out de woods frum all directions. We wuz in de field when it fished, but I 'members dey wuz all very glad.

MARGRETT NICKERSON, enslaved in Florida ■

Lots of old slaves closes the door before they tell the truth about their days of slavery. When the door is open, they tell how kind their masters was and how rosy it all was. You can't blame them for this,

because they had plenty of early discipline, making them cautious about saying anything uncomplimentary about their masters. I, myself, was in a little different position than most slaves³ and, as a consequence, have no grudges or resentment. However, I can tell you the life of the average slave was not rosy. They were dealt out plenty of cruel suffering.

Even with my good treatment, I spent most of my time planning and thinking of running away. I could have done it easy, but my old father used to say, “No use running from bad to worse, hunting better.” Lots of colored boys did escape and joined the Union army, and there are plenty of them drawing a pension today. My father was always counseling me. He said, “Every man has to serve God under his own vine and fig tree.” He kept pointing out that the War wasn’t going to last forever, but that our forever was going to be spent living among the Southerners, after they got licked.

MARTIN JACKSON, enslaved in Texas ■

■ Sometimes someone would come ’long and try to get us to run up North and be free. We used to laugh at that. There wasn’t no reason to *run* up North. All was had to do was to *walk*, but walk *South*, and we’d be free as soon as we crossed the Rio Grande. In Mexico you could be free. They didn’t care what color you was, black, white, yellow or blue. Hundreds of slaves did go to Mexico and got on all right. We would hear about ’em and how they was goin’ to be Mexicans.

FELIX HAYWOOD, enslaved in Texas ■

■ I ’member seein’ one big black man, who tried to steal a boat ride from Charleston. He stole away one night from Master Mobley’s place and got to Charleston, befo’ he was caught up with. He tell the overseer who questioned him after he was brought back: “Sho’, I try to git away from this sort of thing. I was goin’ to Massachusetts, and hire out ’til I git ’nough to carry me to my home in Africa.”

It was de rule when a trial was bein held lak this, for all de bosses and sometimes de missus to be there to listen and to ask the run’way slave some questions. After this one talked, it was Missus Mobley herself who said: “Put yourself in this slave’s shoes, and what would you do? Just such as he has. The best way to treat such a slave is to be so kind and patient with him, that he will forget his old home.”

We was led away and I never did hear if he was whipped. He lak a Cherokee Indian, he never whimper if he should be whipped ’til de blood stream from him; but I do know he never got away again. He was de first one to pick up his hat and laugh loud, when President Lincoln set all slaves free in January, 1863; He say: “Now I go, thank de Lord,” and he strike right out, but he not git much beyond de barn, when he turn and come back. He walked in de yard of de big house, and he see Missus Mobley lookin’ out at him. He take off his hat and bow low and say: “Missus, I so happy to be free, that I forgits myself but I not go ’til you say so. I not leave you when you needs a hand, ’less de master and all de white folks gits home [from the war] to look after you.”

De missus look down at her feet and she see de black man, so big and strong, sheddin’ tears. She say to him: “You is a good nigger and you has suffered much; make yourself at home, just as you have been



Martin Jackson, ca. 1937



Felix Haywood, ca. 1937

³ Jackson served in the First Texas Cavalry with his “young master” during the Civil War, carrying wounded men from the battlefield.

doin' and when you want to go far away, come to me and I'll see that you git 'nough money to pay your way to Boston and maybe to Africa." And that is what happen' a year or two later.

AMIE LUMPKIN, enslaved in South Carolina ■

■ We were never allowed to go to town and it was not until after I ran away that I knew that they sold anything but slaves, tobacco and whiskey. Our ignorance was the greatest hold the South had on us. We knew we could run away, but what then? An offender guilty of this crime was subjected to very harsh punishment.

JOHN W. FIELDS, enslaved in Kentucky ■

■ [I guess] I could be called a called a 'conductor' on the underground railway, only we didn't call it that then.⁴ I don't know as we called it anything — we just knew there was a lot of slaves always a-wantin' to get free, and I had to help 'em. . . .

Mr. Tabb was always specially good to me. He used to let me go all about — I guess he had to; couldn't get too much work out of me even when he kept me right under his eyes. . . .

It was 'cause he used to let me me go around in the day and night so much that I came to be the one who carried the runnin' away slaves over the river. . . .

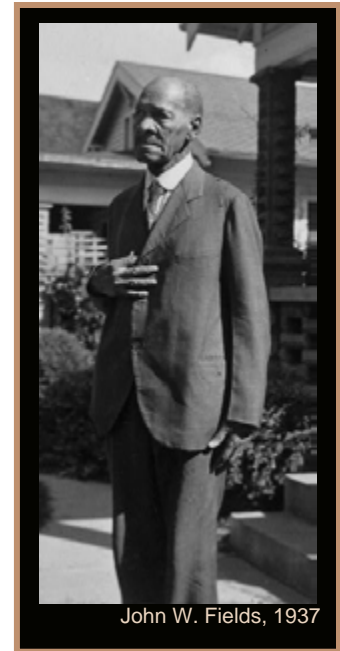
No, I never got anything from a single one of the people I carried over the river to freedom. I didn't want anything; after I had made a few trips I got to like it, and even though I could have been free any night myself, I figgered I wasn't gettin' along so bad so I would stay on Mr. Tabb's place and help the others get free. I did it for four years.

I don't know to this day how he never knew what I was doing; I used to take some awful chances, and he knew I must have been up to something; I wouldn't do much work in the day, would never be in my house at night, and when he would happen to visit the plantation where I had said I was goin' I wouldn't

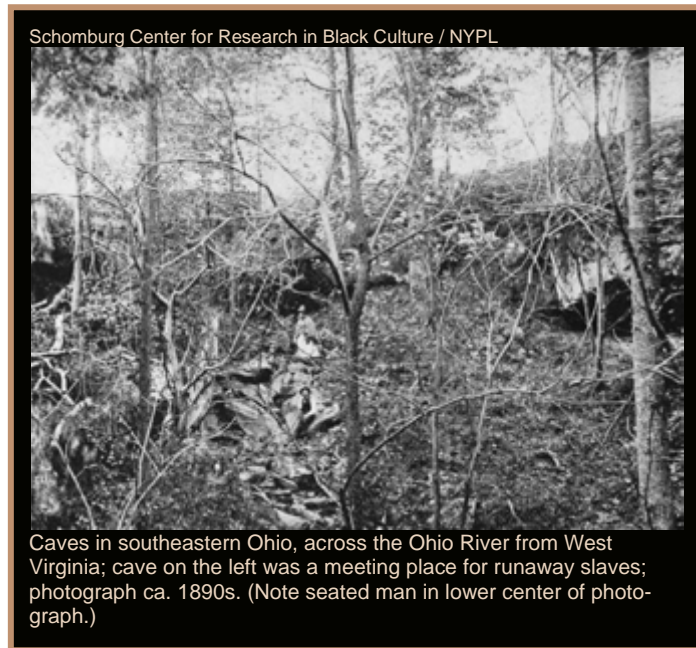
be there. Sometimes I think he did know and wanted me to get the slaves away that way so he wouldn't have to cause hard feelins' by freein' 'em. . . .

Finally, I saw that I could never do any more good in Mason County,⁵ so I decided to take my freedom, too. I had a wife by this time, and one night we quietly slipped across and headed for Mr. Rankin's bell and light.⁶ It looked like we had to go almost to China to get across that river; I could hear the bell and see the light on Mr. Rankin's place, but the harder I rowed, the farther away it got, and I knew if I didn't make it I'd get killed. But finally, I pulled up by the lighthouse, and went on to my freedom — just a few months before all of the slaves got theirs.

ARNOLD GRAGSTON, enslaved in Kentucky ■



John W. Fields, 1937



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / NYPL
Caves in southeastern Ohio, across the Ohio River from West Virginia; cave on the left was a meeting place for runaway slaves; photograph ca. 1890s. (Note seated man in lower center of photograph.)

⁴ Gragston took several hundred fugitive slaves across the Ohio River to freedom before escaping himself shortly before the end of the Civil War.

⁵ For two years Gragston knew that he was being watched and several times escaped capture in Kentucky.

⁶ The home of Rev. John Rankin on the Ohio River was a well-known "station" on the Underground Railroad.

■ “Run, nigger, run,
De Patteroll git you!⁷
Run, nigger, run,
De Patteroll come!

“Watch, nigger, watch —
De Patteroll trick you!
Watch nigger watch,
He got a big gun!”

Dat one of the songs de slaves all knowed, and de children down on de “twenty acres” used to sing it when dey playing in de moonlight ’round de cabins in de [slave] quarters. Sometime I wonder iffen de white folks didn’t make dat song up so us niggers would keep in line.

None of my old Master’s boys tried to git away ’cepting two, and dey met up wid evil, both of ’em.

One of dem niggers was fotching a bull-tongue [plow] from a piece of new ground way at de back of de plantation, and bringing it to my pappy to git it sharpened. My pappy was de blacksmith.

Dis boy got out in de big road to walk in de soft sand, and long come a wagon wid a white overseer and five, six, niggers going somewhar. Dey stopped and told dat boy to git in and ride. Dat was de last anybody seen him.

Dat overseer and another one was cotched [caught] after awhile, and showed up to be underground railroaders. Dey would take a bunch of niggers into town for some excuse, and on de way jest pick up a extra nigger and show him whar to go to git on de “railroad system.” When de runaway niggers got to de North dey had to go in de army, and dat boy from our place got killed. He was a good boy, but dey jest talked him into it. Dem railroaders was honest, and dey didn’t take no presents, but de patrollers was low white trash! . . .

. . . He was de low-down Sesesh⁸ dat would take what a poor runaway nigger had to give for his chance to git away, and den give him ’structions dat would lead him right into de hands of de patrollers and git him caught or shot!

Yes, dat’s de way it was. Devils and good people walking in de road at de same time, and nobody could tell one from t’other.

ANTHONY DAWSON, enslaved in North Carolina ■

■ I thinks to myself, dat Mr. Anderson, de overseer, he’ll give me dat cat-o-nine tails [whip] de first chance he gits, but makes up my mind he won’t git de chance, ’cause I’s gwine run off de first chance I gits. I didn’t know how to git out of dere, but I’s gwine north where dere ain’t no slaveowners. . . [O]ne day he calls me to go [to hunt deer] and says not to go off de plantation too far, but be sho’ bring home some meat. Dis de chance I been wantin’, so when we gits to de huntin’ ground de leader says to scatter out, and I tells him me and ’nother man goes north and make de circle round de river and meet ’bout sundown. I crosses de river and goes north. I’s gwine to de free country, where dey ain’t no slaves. I travels all dat day and night up de river and follows de north star. Sev’ral times I think de blood houn’s am trailin’ me and I gits in de big hurry. I’s so tired I couldn’t hardly move, but I gits in a trot.

I’s hopin’ and prayin’ all de time I meets up with dat Harriet Tubman woman. She de cullud woman what takes slaves to Canada. She allus travels de underground railroad, dey calls it, travels at night and hides out in de day. She sho’ sneaks dem out de South and I thins she’s de brave woman.

I eats all de nuts and kills a few swamp rabbits and cotches a few fish. I builds de fire and goes off ’bout half a mile and hides in de thicket till it burns down to de coals, den bakes me some fish and rabbit. I’s shakin’ all de time, ’fraid I’d git cotched, but I’s nearly starve to death. I puts de rest de fish in my cap



Anthony Dawson, ca. 1937

⁷ Paterroll: slave patroller; see footnote 2.

⁸ Sesesh: secessionist, i.e., a Southerner, Confederate.

and travels on dat night by de north star and hides in a big thicket de nex' day and along evenin' I hears guns shootin'. I sho' am scart dis time, sho' 'nough. I's scart to come in and scart to go out, and while I's standin' dere, I hears two men say, "Stick you hands up, boy. What you doin'?" I says, "uh-uh-uh, I dunno. You ain't gwine take me back to de plantation, is you?" Dey says, "No. Does you want to fight for de North?" I says I will, 'cause dey talks like northern men. Us walk night and day and gits in Gen. Rosecran[s]'s camp and dey thunk I's de spy from de South. Dey asks me all sorts of questions and says dey'll whip me if I didn't tell dem what I's spyin' 'bout. Fin'ly dey 'lieves me and puts me to work helpin' with de cannons. I feels 'portant den, but I didn't know what was in front of me, or I 'spects I'd run off 'gain.

THOMAS COLE, enslaved in Alabama ■

■ Mother with the consent of Mr. Davidson [slaveholder] married George Berry, a free colored man of Annapolis with the proviso that he was to purchase mother within three years after marriage for \$750 dollars and if any children were born they were to go with her. My father was a carpenter by trade, his services were much in demand. This gave him an opportunity to save money. . . . Father paid Mr. Davidson for mother on the partial payment plan. He had paid up all but \$40 on mother's account, when by accident Mr. Davidson was shot while ducking on the South River by one of the duck hunters, dying instantly.

Mrs. Davidson assumed full control of the farm and the slaves. When father wanted to pay off the balance due, \$40.00, Mrs. Davidson refused to accept it, thus mother and I were to remain in slavery. Being a free man father had the privilege to go where he wanted to, provided he was endorsed by a white man who was known to the people and sheriffs, constables and officials of public conveyances [transportation]. By bribery of the sheriff of Anne Arundel County father was given a passage to Baltimore for mother and me. On arriving in Baltimore, mother, father and I went to a white family on Ross Street — now Druid Hill Ave., where we were sheltered by the occupants, who were ardent supporters of the Underground Railroad.

A reward of \$50.00 each was offered for my father, mother and me, one by Mrs. Davidson and the other by the Sheriff of Anne Arundel County. At this time the Hookstown Road was one of the main turnpikes into Baltimore. A Mr. Coleman, whose brother-in-law lived in Pennsylvania, used a large covered wagon to transport merchandise from Baltimore to different villages along the turnpike to Hanover, Pa., where he lived. Mother and father and I were concealed in a large wagon drawn by six horses. On our way to Pennsylvania, we never alighted on the ground in any community or close to any settlement, fearful of being apprehended by people who were always looking for rewards.

After arriving at Hanover, Pennsylvania, it was easy for us to get transportation farther north. They [Hammond's parents] made their way to Scranton, Pennsylvania, in which they both secured positions in the same family. Father and mother's salary combined was \$27.50 per month. They stayed there until 1869. In the meantime I was being taught at a Quaker mission in Scranton. When we came to Baltimore I entered the 7th grade grammar school in South Baltimore. After finishing the grammar school, I followed cooking all my life before and after marriage. My husband James Berry, who waited at the Howard House, died in 1827 — age 84. On my next birthday, which will occur on the 22nd of November [1938], I will be 95. . . . On Christmas Day 49 children and grandchildren and some great-grandchildren gave me a Xmas dinner and one hundred dollars for Xmas. I am happy with all the comforts of a poor person not dependant on anyone else for tomorrow.

CAROLINE HAMMOND, enslaved in Maryland ■

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