



“I was not sent to school — never”

The Pursuit of Learning by African Americans before the Civil War

Selections from 19th- and 20th-century narratives

Despite overwhelming obstacles, antebellum black Americans pursued learning through any opportunity they could grasp, as apparent in these selections from three groups of narratives: (1) interviews with former slaves in the 1930s by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency; (2) interviews with fugitive slaves in Ontario, Canada, in 1855; (3) narratives of former slaves published in the 1800s as abolitionist literature.

Note: Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. In the WPA narratives, some white interviewers, despite project guidelines, 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.

I have no education, I can neither read nor write, as a slave I was not allowed to have books. On Sundays I would go into the woods and gather ginseng which I would sell to the doctors for from 10¢ to 15¢ a pound and with this money I would buy a book that was called the Blue Back Speller.¹ Our master would not allow us to have any books and when we were lucky enough to own a book we would have to keep it hid, for if our master would find us with a book he would whip us and take the book from us. After receiving three severe whippings I gave up and never again tried for any learning, and to this day I can neither read nor write.

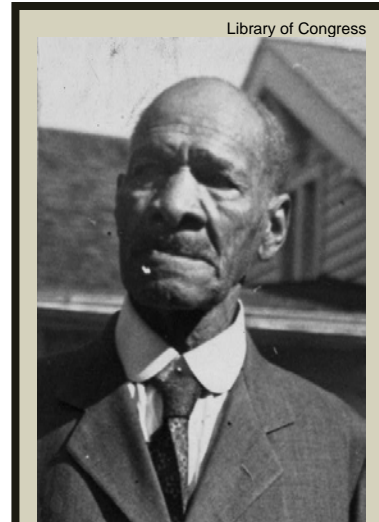
George Thompson, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in Indiana, 1937 ■

None of us was ’lowed to see a book or try to learn. Dey say we git smarter den dey was if we learn anything, but we slips around and gits hold of dat Webster’s old blue back speller and we hides it ’til way in de night and den we lights a little pine torch,² and studies dat spellin’ book. We learn it too. I can read some now and write a little too.

Jenny Proctor, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

In most of us colored folks was the greatest desire to be able to read and write. We took advantage of every opportunity to educate ourselves. The greater part of the plantation owners were very harsh if we were caught trying to learn or write. It was the law that if a white man was caught trying to educate a negro slave, he was liable to prosecution entailing a fine of fifty dollars and a jail sentence. 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.

John W. Fields, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in Indiana, 1937 ■



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John W. Fields, 1937



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National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. 1855 interviews in Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* . . . (Boston: Jewett & Co., 1856). Full text online in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/drew/menu.html. 1930s narratives and photographs in WPA Slave Narrative Project, Federal Writers’ Project, U.S. Work Projects Administration; digital images of the typed transcribed interviews online in American Memory, Library of Congress, at memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html. Bracketed comments added by NHC; parenthetical comments in original. Some typographical errors corrected by NHC when necessary for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Noah Webster’s *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, first published in 1783 and sold for fourteen cents, soon known as the *American Spelling Book* or the “Blue-Back Speller” for its cover. [NHC note]

² Several long splinters of rich pine, of a lasting quality and making a bright light. [Interviewer’s note]

■ The first time you was caught trying to read or write, you was whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine tails and the third time they cut the first j[o]int offen your forefinger. They was very severe. You most allus got 30 and 9 lashes.

Doc Daniel Dowdy, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Oklahoma, 1937 ■

■ No, sir, I haven't had any education. I should have had one, though. My old missus [slaveholder's wife] was sorry, after the War, that she didn't teach me.

Martin Jackson, enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

■ I learned to read, write and figger [figure: do math] at an early age. Master Brown's boy and I were the same age you see (14 years old) and he would send me to school to protect his kids, and I would have to sit up there until school was out. So while sitting there I listened to what the white teacher was telling the kids, and caught on how to read, write and figger — but I never let on, 'cause if I was caught trying to read or figger dey would whip me something terrible. After I caught on how to figger the white kids would ask me to teach them.

Hal Hutson, enslaved in Tennessee, interviewed in Oklahoma, ca. 1937 ■

■ Mr. Tabb was a pretty good man. He used to beat us, sure; but not nearly so much as others did, some of his own kin people, even. But he was kinda funny sometimes; he used to have a special slave who didn't have nothin' to do but teach the rest of us — we had about ten on the plantation, and a lot on the other plantations near us — how to read and write and figger. Mr. Tabb liked us to know how to figger. But sometimes when he would send for us and we would be a long time comin', he would ask us where we had been. If we told him we have been learnin' to read, he would near beat the daylight out of us — after gettin' somebody to teach us; I think he did some of that so that the other owners wouldn't say he was spoilin' his slaves . . .

Arnold Gragston, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in Florida, ca. 1937 ■

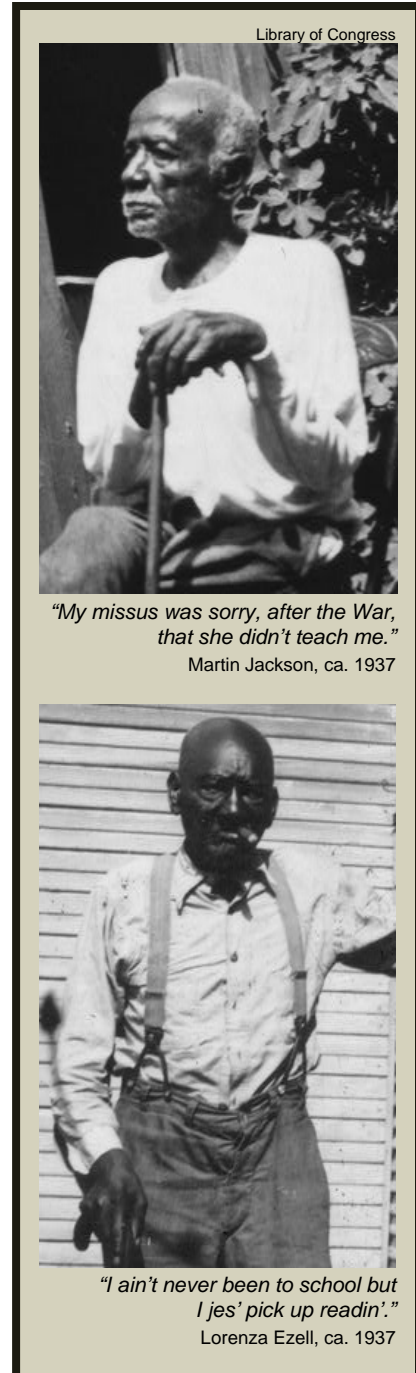
■ Us didn' have no schoolin. Us could go to school wid de white chillun if us wanted to, but didn' nobody teach us. I's educated, but I aint educated in de books. I's educated by de licks an' bumps I got.

Susan Snow, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Mississippi, ca. 1937 ■

■ I ain't never been to school but I jes' pick up readin'. With some my first money I ever earn I buy me a old blue-back Webster. I carry dat book wherever I goes. When I plows down a row I stop at de end to rest and den I overlook de lesson. I 'member one de very first lessons was "Evil communications 'rupts good morals." I knowed de words "evil" and "good" and a white man 'splain de others. I been done use dat lesson all my life.

Lorenza Ezell, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

■ There wasn't any Sunday Schooling. There was no place to learn to read and write — no big brick schools like they is now. The old Master say we can teach ourselves but we can't do it. Old Elam



Bowman owned the place next door to Mister Driver. If he catch his slaves toying with the pencil, why, he cut off one of their fingers. Then I reckon they lost interest in education and get their mind back on the hoe and plow like he say for them to do.

Andrew Simms, enslaved in Florida and Texas,
interviewed in Oklahoma, ca. 1937 ■

■ Nawsuh, I ain't never had no schoolin', 'ceptin' what I could git outen de little white folks' books myself. Us niggers useta tote dere books to school for 'em an' on de way I would look in de book and git a little learnin'.

Tom McAlpin, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Alabama, 1937 ■

■ I was never sent to school, nor allowed to go to church. They were afraid we would have more sense than they.

Mrs. James Seward, enslaved in Maryland,
interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■

■ I came from Norfolk, Va.; was in bondage twenty-six years. I was not sent to school — never. My first master and mistress gave me no religious instruction at all, nor any other. I learned to read: the way was, I hid in a hayloft on Sunday, and got the younger white children to teach me. I bought the book with a nupence that a man gave me for holding his horse.

James W. Sumler, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■

■ When I was young, while my first master lived, I was sent to a school for white children. My mistress's sister kept the school, and I was allowed to go to keep me out of the way. When I was about ten years old, my first master died. My mistress married again, and my new master said they ought not to have sent me to school — that I knew too much any how. So I was taken from school. I remained at home doing work for the family.

John A. Hunter, enslaved in Maryland, interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■

■ I cannot read or write. A free-born man in North Carolina is as much oppressed, in one sense, as the slave: I was not allowed to go to school. I recollect when I was a boy, a colored man came from Ohio, and opened a school, but it was broken up. I was in the field ploughing with my father, — he said he wished we could go and learn. I think it an outrageous sin and shame, that a free colored man could not be taught. My ignorance has a very injurious effect on my prospects and success. I blame the State of North Carolina — the white people of that State — for it. I am now engaged in a troublesome lawsuit, about the title to my estate, which I would not have got into, had I known how to read and write.

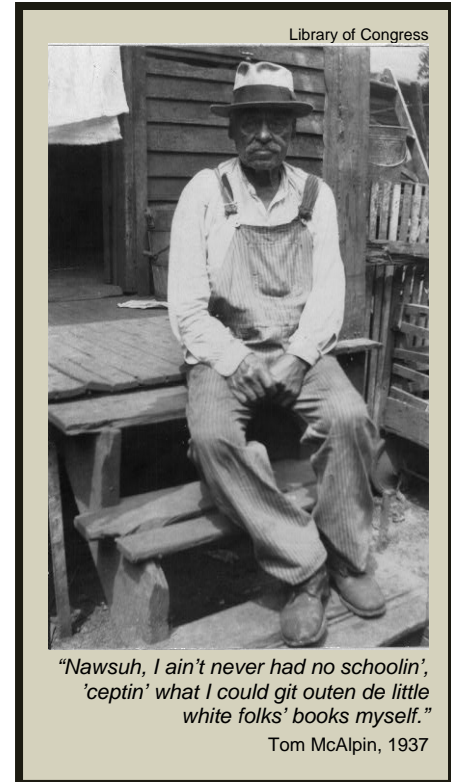
Thomas Hedgepeth, free-born in North Carolina, interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■

■ In the slave States I had no part in the laws: the laws were all against the colored men: they allowed us no schools nor learning. If we got learning, we stole it.

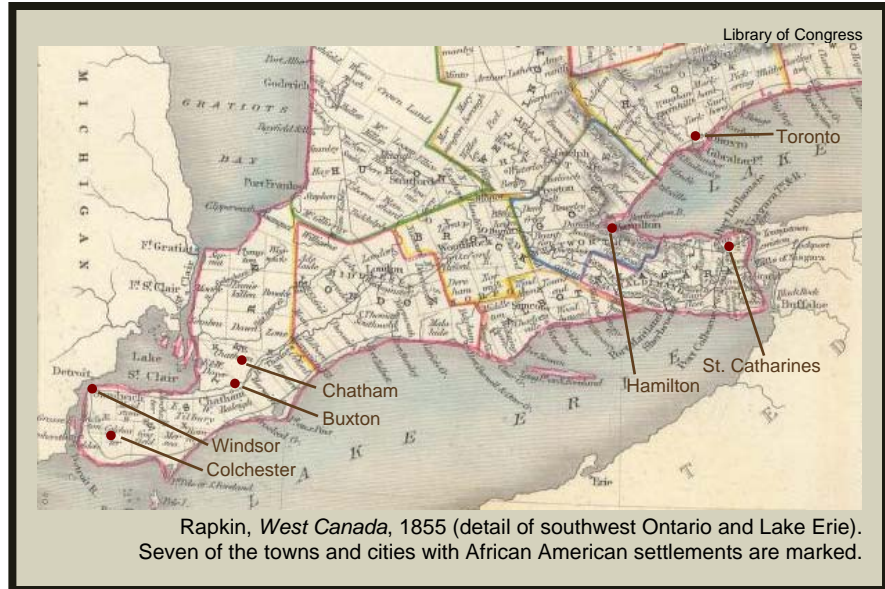
Mrs. Colman Freeman, free-born in North Carolina, interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■

■ The colored children can all go to school here in Galt [Canada], and are generally sent to school. The black horse and the white are both ignorant: there is prejudice on both sides. When I came here, colored children were not received into the schools. I fought, and fought, and fought, and at last it got to the governor, and the law was declared, that all had equal rights.

William Thompson, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■



I came to Buxton [Canada] to educate my children. I lived twenty-three years in Massillon, Ohio, and was doing well at draying and carting — wanted for nothing — had money when I wanted it, and provisions plenty. But my children were thrust out of the schools, as were all the colored children — one *must* know how I would feel about it. My daughter was doing well — advancing rapidly. She began to climb up into the higher classes, among the ladies, and the noblemen of the town thought it wouldn't do. The teacher liked her, but she was thrust out. The teacher called about it, but I could not send her there again: had they altered the law, I would have been too spunky to send her again. We were careful to keep her cleanly, and to dress her nicely and well. Her mother took a great deal of pains with her, because she was going to a ladies' school. I went to see the trustees: they told me the vote was passed — nothing was the matter only she was black. The white children of her class wished her to remain, and voted in the school against the law, — the teacher told me so — but I said I could not send her on account of the law.



Henry Johnson, freeman in Pennsylvania and Ohio, interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■

The fugitives who come to this country [Canada] for freedom from bondage, have been kept down in such a manner, that these privileges granted to them seem somewhat strange, and they have to take some time to consider whether they shall send their children to school with the white children or not. This free school is something so unusual to them, that they can't realize it, until they become naturalized to the country. Although they know they are free, they have a kind of timidness about them, so that they cannot mingle with the whites of this country, as they would if they had been free born. Yet the day, I believe is fast approaching, when the people of color will see that they stand in their own light by not sending their children to school. The time is now, when the colored men begin to see that it is the want of education which has kept them in bondage so long.

Henry Morehead, enslaved in Kentucky, interviewed in Canada, 1855 ■

I played with my master's children, and we loved one another like brothers. This is often the case in childhood, but when the young masters and misses get older, they are generally sent away from home to school, and they soon learn that slaves are not companions for them. When they return, the love of power is cultivated in their hearts by their parents, the whip is put into their hands, and they soon regard the negro in no other light than as a slave. My master's oldest son was six months older than I. He went to a day school, and as I had a great desire to learn to read, I prevailed on him to teach me. My mother procured me a spelling-book. (Before Nat Turner's insurrection, a slave in our neighborhood might buy a spelling or hymn-book, but now he cannot.) I got so I could read a little, when my master found it out, and forbade his son to teach me any more. As I had got the start, however, I kept on reading and studying, and from that time till I came away, I always had a book somewhere about me and if I got an opportunity, I would be reading in it. Indeed, I have a book now, which I brought all the way from North Carolina.

James Curry, "Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave," *The Liberator*, 10 January 1840 ■

■ I learned . . . from seeing them [white people] reading and writing, that they could make paper and the little black marks on it talk. It is difficult for children who see this from their earliest years to realise the incredulity with which a slave-boy ten years of age regards the achievement of reading when he notices it for the first time. For a long time I could not get it out of my head that the readers were talking to the paper, rather than the paper talking to them. When, however, it became a reality to me, I made up my mind that I would accomplish the feat myself. But when I asked the white boys with whom I played marbles to teach me how to read, they told me that the law would not allow it. . . .

But though the white boys would not teach me to read, they could not control or prevent the acquisition of a quick and retentive memory with which I was blessed, and by their bantering one another at spelling, and betting each on his proficiency over the other, I learned to spell by sound before I knew by sight a single letter in the alphabet.

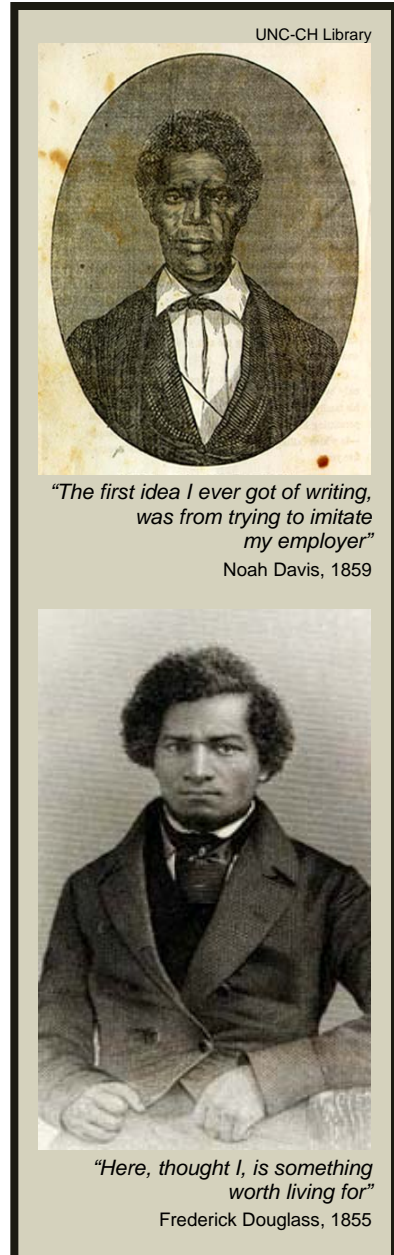
John Sella Martin, enslaved in North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, memoir published in *Good Words*, May 1 & June 1, 1867 ■

■ The first idea I ever got of writing, was from trying to imitate my employer, who used to write the names of his customers on the lining of the boots and shoes, as he gave them out to be made. So I tried to make letters, and soon succeeded in writing my name, and then the word Fredericksburg, and so on. My father had previously taught me the alphabet, in the spelling book, before I had left the mill. After I became religious, I would carry my father's New Testament to church, and always try to get to meeting in time to hear the preacher read a chapter before sermon. If he named the chapter before reading it, I would soon find it. In this way, I gathered much information in pronouncing many hard words in the Scriptures.

Noah Davis, enslaved in Virginia and Maryland, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, A Colored Man*, 1859 ■

■ In Baltimore, I could, occasionally, get into a Sabbath school, among the free children, and receive lessons, with the rest; but, having already learned both to read and to write, I was more of a teacher than a pupil, even there. When, however, I went back to the Eastern Shore, and was at the house of Master Thomas, I was neither allowed to teach, nor to be taught. The whole community — with but a single exception, among the whites — frowned upon everything like imparting instruction either to slaves or to free colored persons. That single exception, a pious young man, named Wilson, asked me, one day, if I would like to assist him in teaching a little Sabbath school, at the house of a free colored man in St. Michael's, named James Mitchell. The idea was to me a delightful one, and I told him I would gladly devote as much of my Sabbaths as I could command, to that most laudable work. Mr. Wilson soon mustered up a dozen old spelling books, and a few testaments; and we commenced operations, with some twenty scholars, in our Sunday school. Here, thought I, is something worth living for; here is an excellent chance for usefulness; and I shall soon have a company of young friends, lovers of knowledge, like some of my Baltimore friends, from whom I now felt parted forever.

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855 ■



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"The first idea I ever got of writing, was from trying to imitate my employer"

Noah Davis, 1859

"Here, thought I, is something worth living for"

Frederick Douglass, 1855