



SUGGESTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS OF FORMER SLAVES, WPA FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT, LATE 1930S

MEMORANDUM

July 30, 1937.

TO: STATE DIRECTORS OF THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
FROM: Henry G. Alsberg, Director

The following general suggestions are being sent to all the States where there are ex-slaves still living. They will not apply in toto to your State as they represent general conclusions reached after reading the mass of ex-slave material already submitted. However, they will, I hope, prove helpful as an indication, along broad lines, of what we want.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS:

1. Instead of attempting to interview a large number of ex-slaves the workers should now concentrate on one or two of the more interesting and intelligent people, revisiting them, establishing friendly relations, and drawing them out over a period of time.
2. The specific questions suggested to be asked of the slaves should be only a basis, a beginning. The talk should run to all subjects, and the interviewer should take care to seize upon the information already given, and stories already told, and from them derive other questions.
3. The interviewer should take the greatest care not to influence the point of view of the informant, and not to let his own opinion on the subject of slavery become obvious. Should the ex-slave, however, give only one side of the picture, the interviewer should suggest that there were other circumstances, and ask questions about them.
4. We suggest that each state choose one or two of their most successful ex-slave interviewers and have them take down some stories word for word. Some Negro informants are marvellous in their ability to participate in this type of interview. All stories should be as nearly word-for-word as is possible.
5. More emphasis should be laid on questions concerning the lives of the individuals since they were freed.

SUGGESTIONS TO INTERVIEWERS:

The interviewer should attempt to weave the following questions naturally into the conversation, in simple language. Many of the interviews show that the workers have simply sprung routine questions out of context, and received routine answers.

1. What did the ex-slaves expect from freedom? Forty acres and a mule? A distribution of the land of their masters' plantation?
2. What did the slaves get after freedom? Were any of the plantations actually divided up? Did their masters give them any money? Were they under any compulsion after the war to remain as servants?
3. What did the slaves do after the war? What did they receive generally? What do they think about the reconstruction period?
4. Did secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan exert or attempt to exert any influence over the lives of ex-slaves?
5. Did the ex-slaves ever vote? If so, under what circumstances? Did any of their friends ever hold political office? What do the ex-slaves think of the present restricted suffrage?
6. What have the ex-slaves been doing in the interim between 1864 and 1937? What jobs have they held (in detail)? How are they supported nowadays?
7. What do the ex-slaves think of the younger generation of Negroes and of present conditions?
8. Were there any instances of slave uprisings?
9. Were any of the ex-slaves in your community living in Virginia at the time of the Nat Turner rebellion? Do they remember anything about it?
10. What songs were there of the period?

The above sent to: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Ga., Kentucky, La., Md., Mississippi, Mo., N. Car., Okla., S. Car., Tenn., Texas, Virginia, W. Va., Ohio, Kansas, Indiana