

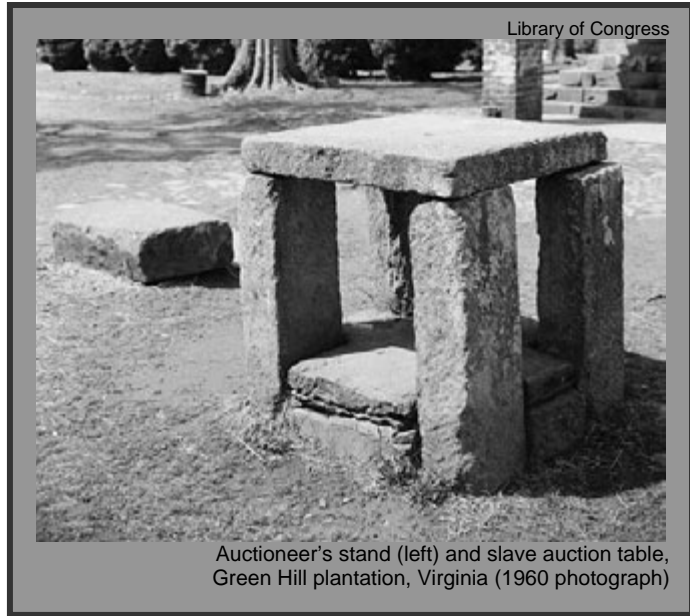


On Being Sold

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.



Auctioneer's stand (left) and slave auction table, Green Hill plantation, Virginia (1960 photograph)

I been sold in my life twice to my knowing. I was sold away from my dear old mammy at three years old but I can remember it. I remembers it! It lack selling a calf from the cow. Exactly, but we are human beings and ought to be better than do sich. I was too little to remember my price. I was sold to be a nurse maid. They bought me and took me on away that time. The next time they put me up in a wagon and auctioned me off. That time I didn't sell. . . A man come up to our wagon and say he'd split the difference. They made the trade. I sold on that spot for \$1400. I was nine or ten years old. I remembers it. Course I do! I never could forget it.

Harriet Hill, enslaved in Georgia ■

There was a auction block, I saw right here in Petersburg on the corner of Sycamore street and Bank street. Slaves were auctioned off to de highest bidder. Some refused to be sold. By dat I mean "cried." Lord! Lord! I done seen dem young'uns fought and kick like crazy folks; child it was pitiful to see 'em. Den dey would handcuff an' beat 'em unmerciful. I don' like to talk 'bout back dar. It brun' a sad feelin' up me.

Charles Crawley, enslaved in Virginia ■

Dey sold slaves jes' like people sell hosses now. I saw a lot of slaves sold on de auction block. Dey would strip 'em stark naked. A nigger scarred up or whaled an' welted up was considered a bad nigger an' did not bring much. If his body was not scarred, he brought a good price.

Andrew Boone, enslaved in North Carolina ■

When I was 15 years old, I was brought to the courthouse, put up on the auction block to be sold. Old Judge Miller from my county was there. I knew him well because he was one of the wealthiest slave owners in the county, and the meanest one. He was so cruel all the slaves and many owners hated him because of it. He saw me on the block for sale, and he knew I was a good worker so when he bid for me, I spoke right out on the auction block and told him: "Old Judge Miller don't you bid for me, 'cause if you do, I would not live on your plantation, I will take a knife and cut my own throat from ear to ear before I would be owned by you."

So he stepped back and let someone else bid for me. My own father knew I was to be for sale, so he brought his owner to the sale for him to buy me, so we could be together. But when father's owner heard what I said to Judge Miller, he told my father he would not buy me, because I was sassy, and he never owned a sassy niggah and did not want one that was sassy. That broke my father's heart, but I couldn't help that. Another nigger trader standing right beside my father's owner said, I wouldn't own a nigger that didn't have some spunk. So I was sold to a Southern Englishman named Thomas B. Steele for \$1500. He had an old slave he had in his home for years as their housekeeper, and his wife did not like her, and he had to sell her to keep peace at home so he put me in his buggy and taken me home to his wife and told her, "I bought you another girl, Susianna, but I don't want you to lay the weight of your finger on her when she disobeys. Let me know and I will punish her myself."

Delicia Patterson, enslaved in Missouri ■



Jordon Smith, ca. 1937

■ They was a trader yard in Virginia and one in New Orleans and sometimes a thousand slaves was waitin' to be sold. When the traders knowed men was comin' to buy, they made the slaves all clean up and greased they mouths with meat skins to look like they's feedin' them plenty meat. They lined the women up on one side and the men on the other. A buyer would walk up and down 'tween the two rows and grab a woman and try to throw her down and feel or her to see how she's put up. If she's purty strong, he'd say, "Is she a good breeder?" If a gal was 18 or 19 and put up good she was worth 'bout \$1500. Then the buyer'd pick out a strong, young nigger boy 'bout the same age and buy him. When he got them home he'd say to them, "I want you two to stay together. I want young niggers."

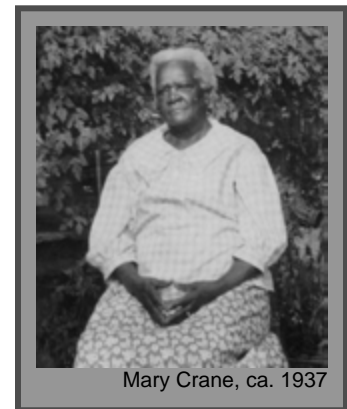
Jordon Smith, enslaved in Georgia and Texas ■

■ . . . I have seen slaves sold in droves like cows; they called 'em "ruffigees," and white men wuz drivin' 'em like hogs and cows for sale. Mothers and fathers were sold and parted from their chillun; they wuz sold to white people in diffunt states. I tell you chile, it was pitiful, but God did not let it last always. I have heard slaves morning and night pray for deliverance. Some of 'em would stand up in de fields or bend over cotton and corn and pray out loud for God to help 'em and in time you see, He did.

Clayborn Gantling, enslaved in Georgia ■

■ My father was to be sold at auction, along with all of the rest of Zeke Samples' property. Bob Cowherd, a neighbor of Matt Duret's, owned my grandfather, and the old man, my grandfather, begged Col. Bob to buy my father from Zeke Samples to keep him from being "sold down the river."* Col. Bob offered what he thought was a fair price for my father and a "nigger-trader" raised his bid \$25. Col. said he couldn't afford to pay that much and father was about to be sold to the "nigger-trader" when his father told Col. Bob that he had \$25 saved up and that if he would buy my father from Samples and keep the "nigger-trader" from getting him he would give him the money. Col. Bob Cowherd took my grandfather's \$25 and offered to meet the trader's offer and so my father was sold to him.

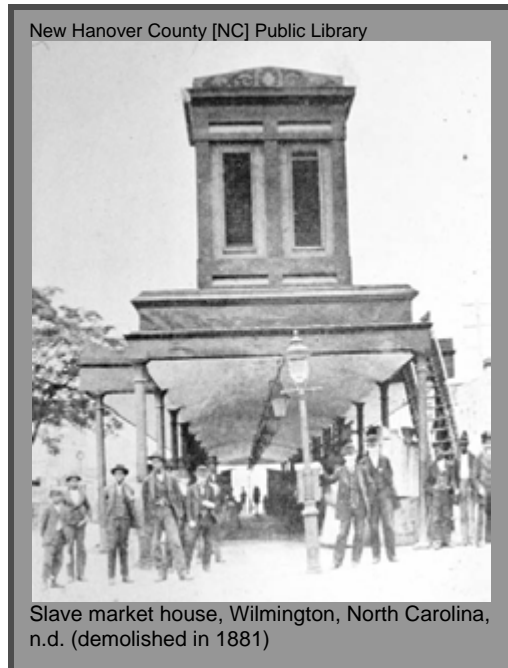
Mary Crane, enslaved in Kentucky ■



Mary Crane, ca. 1937

■ When we'uns gits to de tradin' block, dere lots of white folks dere what come to look us over. One man shows de intres' in pappy. Him named Hawkins. He talk to pappy and pappy talk to him and say,

* "In those days, there were men who made a business of buying up negroes at auction sales and shipping them down to New Orleans to be sold to owners of cotton and sugar cane plantations, just as men today, buy and ship cattle. These men were called "Nigger-traders" and they would ship whole boat loads at a time, buying them up, two or three here, two or three there, and holding them in a jail until they had a boat load. This practice gave rise to the expression, "sold down the river." Mary Crane, WPA interview, ca. 1937.



“Dem my woman and chiles. Please buy all of us and have mercy on we’uns.” Massa Hawkins say, “Dat gal am a likely lookin’ nigger, she am portly and strong, but three am more dan I wants, I guesses.”

De sale start and ’fore long pappy am put on de block. Massa Hawkins wins de bid for pappy and when mammy am put on de block, he wins de bid for her. Den dere am three or four other niggers sold befo’ my time comes. Den massa Black calls me to de block and de auction man say, “What am I offer for dis portly, strong young wench. She’s never been ’bused [abused] and will make de good breeder.”

I wants to hear Massa Hawkins bid, but him say nothin’. Two other men am biddin’ ’gainst each other and I sho’ has de worryment. Dere am tears comin’ down my cheeks ’cause I’s bein’ sold to some man dat would make sep’ration from my mammy. One man bids \$500 and de auction man ask, “Do I hear more? She am gwine [going] at \$500.00.” Den someone say, \$525.00 and de auction man say, “She am sold for \$525.00 to Massa Hawkins. Am I glad and ’cited! Why, I’s quiverin’ all over.

Massa Hawkins takes we’uns to his place and it am a nice plantation. Lots better am dat place dan Massa Black’s.

Rose Williams, enslaved in Texas ■

■ I seed lots of niggers put on the block and bid off and carry away in chains. One woman name Venus raises her hands and hollers, “Weigh dem cattle,” whilst she’s bein’ bid off.

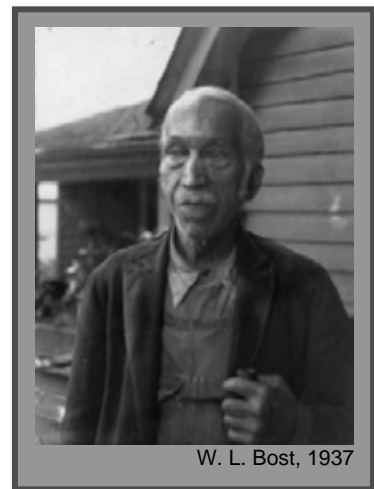
Mariah Snyder, enslaved in Mississippi and Texas ■

■ Lord child, I remember when I was a little boy, ’bout ten years, the speculators come through Newton with droves of slaves. They always stay at our place. The poor critters nearly froze to death. They always come ’long on the last of December so that the niggers would be ready for sale on the first day of January. Many the time I see four or five of them chained together. They never had enough clothes on to keep a cat warm. The women never wore anything but a thin dress and a petticoat and one underwear. I’ve seen the ice balls hangin’ on to the bottom of their dresses as they ran along, jes like sheep in a pasture ’fore they are sheared. They never wore any shoes. Jes run along on the ground, all spewed up with ice. The speculators always rode on horses and drove the pore niggers. When they get cold, they make ’em run ’til they are warm again.

The speculators stayed in the hotel and put the niggers in the quarters jes like droves of hogs. All through the night I could hear them mournin’ and prayin’. I didn’t know the Lord would let people live who were so cruel. The gates were always locked and they was a guard on the outside to shoot anyone who tried to run away. Lord miss, them slaves look jes like droves of turkeys runnin’ along in front of them horses.

I remember when they put ’em on the block to sell ’em. The ones ’tween 18 and 30 always bring the most money. The auctioneer he stand off at a distance and cry ’em off as they stand on the block. I can hear his voice as long as I live.

If the one they going to sell was a young Negro man this is what he say: “Now gentlemen and fellow-citizens here is a big black buck Negro. He’s stout as a mule. Good for any kin’ o’ work an’ he never gives



W. L. Bost, 1937

any trouble. How much am I offered for him?" And then the sale would commence, and the nigger would be sold to the highest bidder.

If they put up a young nigger woman the auctioneer cry out: "Here's a young nigger wench, how much am I offered for her?" The pore thing stand on the block a shiverin' an' a shakin' nearly froze to death. When they sold many of the pore mothers beg the speculators to sell 'em with their husbands, but the speculator only take what he want. So maybe the pore thing never see her husban' agin.

W. L. Bost, enslaved in North Carolina ■

I 'members seein' a heap o' slave sales, wid de niggers in chains, an' de spec'ulators sellin' an' buyin' dem off. I also 'members seein' a drove of slaves wid nothin' on but a rag 'twixt dere legs bein' galloped roun' 'fore de buyers. 'Bout de wust thing dat eber I seed do was a slave 'oman at Louisburg who had been sold off from her three weeks old baby, an' wuz bein' marched ter New Orleans.

She had walked till she wuz give out, an' she wuz weak enough ter fall in de middle o' de road. She wuz chained wid twenty or thirty other slaves an' dey stopped ter rest in de shade o' a big oak while de speculators et dere dinner. De slaves ain't havin' no dinner. As I pass by dis 'oman begs me in God's name fer a drink o' water, an' I gives it ter her. I ain't neber be so sorry fer nobody.

Hit wuz in de mont' of August an' de sun wuz bearin' down hot when de slaves an' dere drivers leave de shade. Dey walk fer a little piece an' dis 'oman fall out. She dies dar side o' de road, an' right dar dey buries her, cussin', dey tells me, 'bout losin' money on her.

Josephine Smith, enslaved in North Carolina ■



Josephine Smith, ca. 1937

The Master hear about there going to be an auction one day and he figgered maybe he needed some more slaves if they was good ones, so he took me and started out early in the morning. It wasn't very far and we got there early before the auction started. Reckon that was the first time I ever see any slaves sold.

They was a long platform made of heavy planks and all the slaves was lined up on the platform, and they was stripped to the waist, men, women, and children. One or two of the women folks was bare naked. They wasn't young women neither, just middle age ones, but they was built good. Some of them was well greased and that grease covered up many a scar they'd earned for some foolishment or other.

The Master don't buy none and pretty soon we starts home. . . .

That auction kept bothering me all the way back to the plantation. I kept seeing them little children standing on the platform, their mammy and pappy crying hard 'cause their young'uns is being sold. They was a lot of heartaches even they was slaves and it gets me worried.

I asked the Master is he going to have an auction and he jest laugh. I ain't never sold no slaves yet and I ain't going to, he says. And I gets easier right then. I kind of hates to think about standing up on one of them platforms, kinder sorry to leave my old mammy and the Master, so I was easy in the heart when he talked like that.

William Hutson, enslaved in Georgia ■

I was born in Grand Bluff, in Mississippi, on Old Man Carlton's plantation, and I was stole from my folks when I was a li'l gal and never seed them no more. Us kids played in the big road there in Mississippi, and one day me and 'nother gal is playin' up and down the road and three white men come 'long in a wagon. They grabs us up and puts us in the wagon and covers us with quilts. I hollers and yells and one the men say, "Shut up, you nigger, or I'll kill you." I told him, "Kill me if you wants to — you stole me from my folks."

Them men took us to New Orleans to the big slave market. I had long hair and they cut it off like a



Francis Black, ca. 1937

boy and tried to sell me, but I told them men what looks at me, the men cut my hair off and stole me. The man what cut my hair off cursed me and said if I didn't hush he'd kill me, but he couldn't sell us at New Orleans and took us to Jefferson [Texas].

I never knowed what they done with the other gal, but they sold me to Marse Bill Tumlin, what run a big livery stable in Jefferson, and I 'longed to him till surrender.

Francis Black, enslaved in Mississippi and Texas ■

■ I really doan know who my first marster wus, case I has been sold an' hired so much since den. I reckon dat I was borned in New Hanover er Beaufort County an' I wus sold fust time in my mammy's arms. We wus sold ter a man in Carteret County and from dar de speculators took me ter Franklin County. I was sold ter a Mr. Mckee an' dat's de fust thing dat I members. . . .

Marster McKee wus mean to us, an' we ain't had nothin' to eat nor wear half of de time. We wus beat fer ever' little thing. He owned I reckon two or three hundret slaves an' he had four overseers. De overseers wus mean an' dey often beat slaves ter death.

When word come dat we wus to be sold I wus glad as I could be. Dey tol' me dat de marster has gambled away his money an' lost ever'thing but a few slaves. Later I learned dat he had lost me to a Mr. Hartman in Nash County.

Marse Sid Hartman wus good as he could be, sometimes his overseers wusn't but when he foun' it out he let dem go.

Chaney Spell, enslaved in North Carolina ■



"Auction and Negro Sales," Atlanta, Georgia, 1864

■ Mother with the consent of Mr. Davidson [master], 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 and if any children were born they were to go with her. My father [a free black man] was a carpenter by trade, his services were much in demand. This gave him an opportunity to save money. Father often told me that he could save more than half of his income. He had plenty of work, doing repair and building, both for white people and free colored people. 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 freeman 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. By bribery of the sheriff of Anne Arundel County father was given a passage to Baltimore for mother and me. [The family proceeded to Pennsylvania and after the war returned to Baltimore to live.]

Caroline Hammond, enslaved in Maryland ■

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