



“I ’member well when the war was on.”

Enslavement & Emancipation during the Civil War: 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. 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.

■ Talk about hard times! We see’d ’em in dem days, durin’ the war and most specially after de surrender. Folks dese days don’t know what trouble looks like. We was glad to eat ash-cakes and drink parched corn and rye ’stead o’ coffee. I’ve seed my grandmother go to de smoke house, and scrape up de dirt whar de meat had dropped, and take it to de house for seasonin’. You see, both armies fed off’n de white folks, and dey cleaned out dey barns and cellars and smoke houses when dey come.

ANDREW MOSS, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Tennessee, ca. 1937 ■

■ Well when they started off fightin at Murfreesboro [Tennessee], it was a continual roar. The tin pans in the cubbard rattle all time. It was distressful. The house shakin’ all time. All our houses jar. The earth quivered. It sound like the judgment. Nobody felt good. Both sides foragin’ one as bad as the other, hungry, gittin’ everything you put way to live on. That’s “war.” I found out all bout what it was. Lady it ain’t nothin’ but hell on dis earth.

HAMMETT DELL, enslaved in Tennessee, interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■

■ Member the war? ’Course I does. I ’member how some them march off in their uniforms, lookin’ so grand, and how some of them hide out in the wood to keep from lookin’ so grand. They was lots of talkin’ ’bout fighting, and rubbing and scrubbing the old shotgun. The oldes’ niggers was settin’ round the fire late in the night, stirrin’ the ashes with the poker and takin’ out the roast ’taters. They’s smokin’

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Text and photographs of interviewees courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division: WPA Slave Narrative Project, Federal Writers’ Project, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA). Digital images of the typed transcribed interviews at memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html. Bracketed annotations and some paragraphing added, and several typographical errors corrected by NHC when necessary for clarity. Photo above by David B. Woodbury, labeled “Arrival of Negro family in the lines,” 1 January 1863 (perhaps Virginia); courtesy Library of Congress, Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

*For more narratives on the African American experience in the Civil War, see Resource Toolbox, The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865, at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm, specifically IDENTITY #7: Soldiers; EMANCIPATION #5-7: Civil War I & II (Slaves and Soldiers), Emancipation: 1864-1865.

the old corn cob pipe and homemade tobacco and whisperin' right low and quiet like what they's gwineter [going to] do and whar they's gwinter to when Mister Lincoln, he turn them free.

The more they talk, the more I git scared that the niggers is going to git sot free and wondering what I's gwine to do if they is.

ABRAM SELLS, enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

I was too little to know much about de war but, little as I was, dere's one thing dat's still as fresh in my memory now as den, and dat's how people watched and waited to hear dat old Georgia train come in. Not many folks was able to take de papers den, and de news in 'em was from one to two weeks old when dey got here. All de men dat was able to fight was off at de front and de folks at home was anxious for news. De way dat old train brought 'em de news was lak dis: if de southern troops was in de front, den dat old whistle jus' blowed continuously, but if it was bad news, den it was jus' one short sharp blast. In dat way, from de time it got in hearin', evvybody could tell by de whistle if de news was good or bad and, believe me, evvybody sho' did listen to dat train. . . .

Dem Yankees brought de smallpox here wid 'em and give it to all de Athens folks, and dat was somepin awful. Folks jus' died out wid it so bad. Dey built a hospital what dey called de "pest house" out whar de stockade is now. It was rough and small but I reckon it holped some.

IKE DERRICOTTE, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Georgia, ca. 1937 ■

During the war mistis had one room all fixed up to take care of sick soldiers. They would come stragglin' in, all sick or shot, an' sometimes we had a room full of 'em. Mistis had one young boy to do nothin' but look after 'em and many's the night I got up and helt the candle for 'em to see they way to the room.

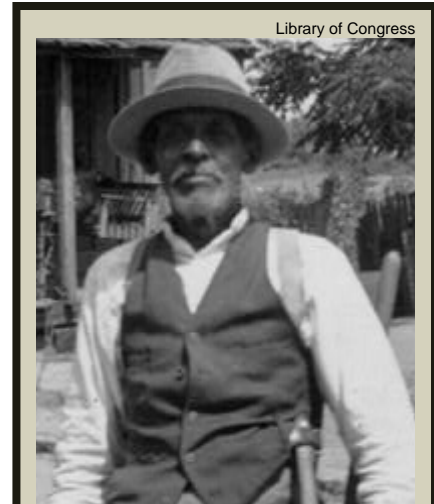
Oh my Gawd, I saw plenty wounded soldiers. We was right on the road to Wrightsboro, and plenty of 'em pass by. That Confed'rate War was the terriblest, awfullest thing.

ELLEN CLAIBOURN, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Georgia, ca. 1937 ■

When massa and the other mens on the place went off to war, he called me and said, "Cato, you's allus been a 'sponsible man, and I leave you to look after the women and the place. If I don't come back, I want you to allus stay by Missie Adeline!" I said, "'Fore Gawd, I will, Massa Oll." He said, "Then I can go away peaceable."

We thought for a long time the sojers had the Fed'ral [Union] whupped to pieces, but there was plenty bad times to go through. I carried a gun and guarded the place at nighttime. . . .

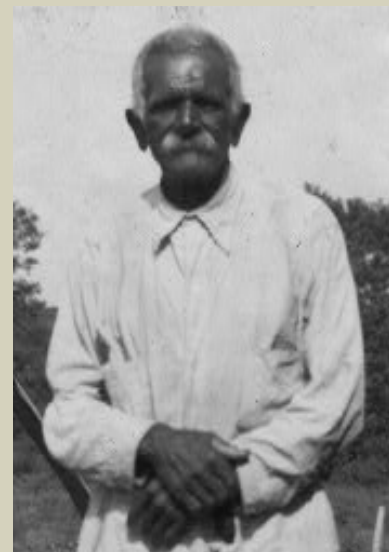
The young mens in grey uniforms [Confederates] used to pass so gay and singin' in the big road. Their clothes was good and we used to feed them the best we had on the place. Missie Adeline would say, "Cato, they is our boys and give them the best this place 'fords." We taken out the hams and the wine and kilt chickens for them. That was at first.



Abram Sells
"Member the war? 'Course I does."



Delia Garlic
"Dey made us cry so much."



Cato Carter
"They was rough somethin' terr'ble."

Then the boys and mens in blue [Yankees] got to comin' that way, and they was fine lookin' men, too. Missie Adeline would cry and say, "Cato, they is just mens and boys and we got to feed them, too." We had a pavilion built in the yard, like they had at picnics, and we fed the Fed'ral in that. Missie Adeline set in to cryin' and says to the Yankees, "Don't take Cato. He is the only nigger man I got by me now. If you take Cato, I just don't know what I'll do." I tells them sojers I got to stay by Missie Adeline so long as I live. The Yankee mens say to her, "Don't 'sturb youself, we ain't gwine to take Cato or harm nothin' of yours." The reason they's all right by us, was 'cause we prepared for them, but with some folks they was rough somethin' terr'ble. They taken off their hosses and corn.

CATO CARTER, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

De firs' thing dat I 'member hearin' 'bout de war was one day when Marse George come in de house an' tell Miss Emmaline dat dey's gwine have a bloody war. He say he feared all de slaves 'ud be took away. She say if dat was true she feel lak jumpin' in de well. I hate to hear her say dat, but from dat minute I started prayin' for freedom. All de res' o' de women done de same.

De war started pretty soon after dat an' all de men folks went off an' lef' de plantation for de women an' de Niggers to run. Us seen de sojers pass by mos' ever'day. Once de Yankees come an' stole a lot o' de horses an' somp'in t'eat. Dey even took de trunk full o' 'Federate money dat was hid in de swamp. How dey foun' dat us never knowed. . . .

When de war was over, my brother Frank slipped in de house where I was still a-stayin'. He tol' me us was free an' for me to come out wid de res'. 'Fore sundown dere warnt one Nigger lef' on de place. I hear tell later dat Mistis an' de gals had to git out an' work in de fiel's to he'p gather in de crop.

DORA FRANKS, enslaved in Mississippi, interviewed in Mississippi, ca. 1937 ■

Us heard talk 'bout de war, but us didn't pay no 'tention. Us never dreamed dat freedom would ever come. . . .

Yas'm, Massa Garlic had two boys in de war. When dey went off de Massa and missus cried, but it made us glad to see dem cry. Dey made us cry so much.

DELIA GARLIC, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Alabama, ca. 1937 ■

When Gen'ral Sherman come 'cross de Savannah River in South Carolina, some of he sojers come right 'cross us plantation. All de neighbors have brung dey cotton and stack it in de thicket on de Lipscomb place. Sherman men find it and sot it on fire. Dat cotton stack was big as a little courthouse and it took two months' burnin'.

My old massa run off and stay in de woods a whole week when Sherman men come through. He didn't need to worry, 'cause us took care of everythin'. Dey a funny song us make up 'bout his runnin' off in de woods. I know it was make up, 'cause my uncle have a hand in it. It went like dis:

“White folks, have you seed old massa
Up de road, with he mustache on?
He pick up he hat and he leave real sudden
And I 'lieve he's up and gone.

(Chorus)

“Old Massa run away
And us darkies stay at home.
It mus' be now dat Kingdom's comin'
And de year of Jubilee.

“He look up de river and he seed dat smoke
Where de Lincoln gunboats lay.
He big 'nuff and he old 'nuff and he orter [ought to] know better,
But he gone and run away.

“Now dat overseer want to give trouble
And trot us 'round a spell,
But we lock him up in de smokehouse cellar,
With de key done throwed in de well.”

Right after dat I start to be boy what run mail from camp to camp for de sojers. One time I capture by a bunch of deserters what was hidin' in de woods 'long Pacolet River. Dey didn't hurt me, though, but dey mos' scare me to death. Dey parolees and turn me loose.

All four my young massas go to war, all but Elias. He too old. Smith, he kilt at Manassas Junction [Virginia]. Nathan, he git he finger shot at de first round at Fort Sumter. But when Billy was wounded at Howard Gap in North Carolina and dey brung him home with he jaw split open, I so mad I could have kilt all de Yankees. I say I be happy iffen I could kill me jes' one Yankee. I hated dem 'cause dey hurt my white people. Bill was disfigure when he jaw split and he teeth all shine through he cheek.

After war was over, old massa call us up and told us we free but he 'vise not leave de place till de crop was through. Us all stay. Den us select us homes and move to it. Us folks move to Sam Littlejohn's, north of Thicketty Creek, where us stay two year.

LORENZA EZELL, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

■ If de slaves could get as near as East St. Louis and Ohio without getting caught, dey would join de Yankees and help fight for freedom. But the Rebs wouldn't think of giving slaves any guns, as mean as they had been to us.

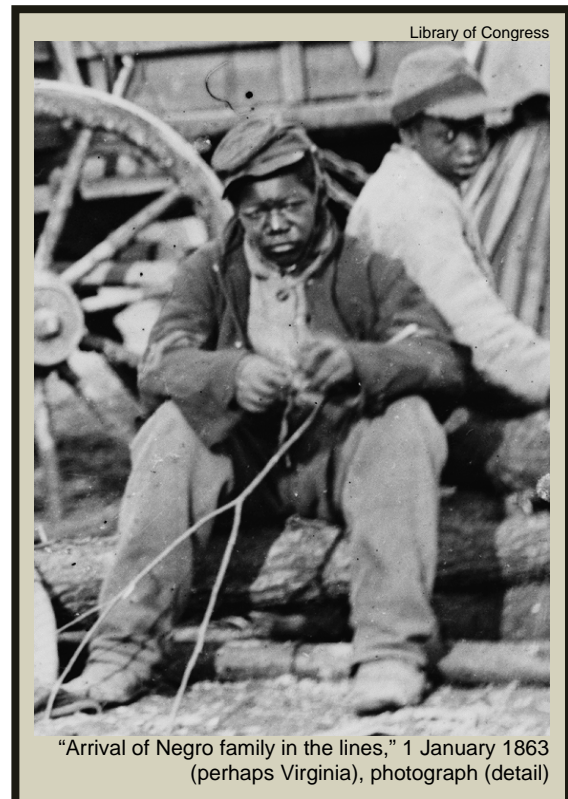
Dey knew too well, we would shoot dem first thing.

LOUIS THOMAS, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Missouri, ca. 1937 ■

■ Do you want to hear how I runned away and jined the Yankees? You know Abraham Lincoln 'claired freedom in '63, first day of January. In October '63, I runned away and went to Pine Bluff [Arkansas] to get to the Yankees. . . The young boy what cut the whips — he named Jerry — he come along wif me, and we wade the stream for long piece. Then we hide in dark woods. It was cold, frosty weather. Two days and two nights we traveled. That boy, he so cold and hongry he want to fall out by the way, but I drug him on.

When we gets to the Yankee camp all our troubles was over. We gets all the contraband [food taken by Union troops] we could eat. Was they more runaways there? Oh, Lordy, yessum. Hundreds, I reckon. Yes-sum, the Yankees feeds all them refugees on contra-band. They made me a driver of a team in the quarter-master's department. I was always keerful to do everything they telled me. They telled me I was free when I gets to the Yankee camp, but I couldn't go outside much. Yessum, iffen you could get to the Yankees' camp you was free right now.

BOSTON BLACKWELL, enslaved in Georgia and Arkansas, interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■



“Arrival of Negro family in the lines,” 1 January 1863
(perhaps Virginia), photograph (detail)

■ I went to Virginia with Dr. H. E. Bissell in the Army; he was a surgeon. A camp of negroes went ahead to prepare the roads; pioneers, they called them. I remember Capt. Colcock (he mentioned several other officers), Honey Hill — terrible fighting — fight and fight! had to “platoon” it. I was behind

the fighting with Dr. Bissell. I held arms and legs while he cut them off, til after a while I didn't mind it. Hard times came to the Army; only corn to eat.

AMOS GADSDEN, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in South Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

I's born in 1850 in Vicksburg and belonged to Missy Martha Gibbs. Her place was on Warner Bayou and the old battlefield was right there in her field. . . .

Dr. Gibbs was a powerful man in Vicksburg. He was the 'casion of them Yanks takin' 'vantage of Vicksburg like they done. 'Fore the war he'd say to missy, "Darling, you ought not whip them poor, black folks so hard. They is gwine be free like us some day." Missy say, "Shut up. Sometimes I 'lieve you is a Yankee, anyway."

Some folks say Dr. Gibbs was workin' for the North all the time 'fore the war, and when he doctored for them durin' the war, they say they knowed it. . . .

I seed the Yankee gunboats when they come to Vicksburg. All us niggers went down to the river to see 'em. They told us to git plumb away, 'cause they didn't know which way they was gwine to shoot. Gen. Grant come to Vicksburg and he blowed a horn and them cannons began to shoot and jus' kept shootin'. When the Yankees came to Vicksburg, a big, red flag was flyin' over the town. Five or six hours after them cannons started shootin' they pulled it down and histed a big, white one. We saw it from the [slave] quarters.

LITT YOUNG, enslaved in Mississippi, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■

I was here in Texas when the Civil War was first talked about. I was here when the War started and followed my young master into it with the First Texas Cavalry. I was here during reconstruction, after the War. I was here during the European World War [1914-1918] and the second week after the United States declared war on Germany I enlisted as cook at Camp Leon Springs.

This sounds as if I liked the war racket. But, as a matter of fact, I never wore a uniform — grey coat or khaki coat — or carried a gun, unless it happened to be one worth saving after some Confederate soldier got shot. I was official lugger-in of men that got wounded, and might have been called a Red Cross worker if we had had such a corps connected with our company. My father was head cook for the battalion and between times I helped him out with the mess [military dining hall or tent]. There was some difference in the food served to soldiers in 1861 and 1917!

Just what my feelings was about the War, I have never been able to figure out myself. I knew the Yanks were going to win, from the beginning. I wanted them to win and lick us Southerners, but I hoped they was going to do it without wiping out our company. I'll come back to that in a minute. As I said, our



company was the First Texas Cavalry. Col. Buchell was our commander. He was a full-blooded German and as fine a man and a soldier as you ever saw. He was killed at the Battle of Marshall [Missouri] and died in my arms. You may also be interested to know that my old master, Alvy Fitzpatrick, was the grandfather of Governor Jim Ferguson.

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 slaves 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.

MARTIN JACKSON, enslaved in Texas, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■

■ I was a grown-up man wid a wife an' two chillun when de War broke out. You see, I stayed wid de folks 'til 'long come de Yanks. Dey took me off an' put me in de War. Firs', dey shipped me on a gunboat an', nex', dey made me he'p dig a canal at Vicksburg. I was on de gunboat when it shelled de town. It was turrible, seein' folks a-tryin' to blow each other up. Whilst us was bull-doggin' Vicksburg in front, a Yankee army slipped in behin' de Rebels an' penned 'em up. I fit [fought] at Fort Pillow an' Harrisburg an' Pleasant Hill an' 'fore I was ha'f through wid it I was in Ba'timore an' Virginny.

I was on han' when Gen'l Lee handed his sword to Gen'l Grant. You see, miss, dey had him all hemmed in an' he jus' natchelly had to give up. I seen him stick his sword up in de groun'.

Law! It sho' was terrible times. Dese old eyes o' mine seen more people crippled an' dead. I'se even seen 'em saw off legs wid hacksaws. I tell you it ain't right, Miss, what I seen. It ain't right atall.

JAMES LUCAS, enslaved in Mississippi, interviewed in Mississippi, ca. 1937 ■

■ I was born in slavery [in 1850] and I enlisted in the Union Army, January 1, 1864, at Oberlin, Ohio, and according to the National Tribune, I was one of the youngest soldiers in the ranks.

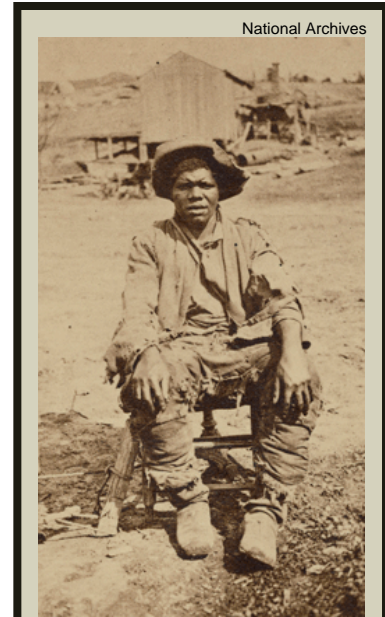
I was present at the battle of Petersburg, Virginia, July 30, 1864; one of the disasters to the Northern forces of the war, and present on June 15, 1864, at the initiatory battle of Deep Bottom, and also at Cold Harbor.

I was in the Ninth Army Corps, under Burnside, and was transferred around, in front of Richmond, Virginia.

General Butler went down to Fort Fisher [North Carolina] and failed, which was the last open port of the Confederacy. Another expedition was organized and General Terry given command. We embarked on the night of December 31, 1864; landed the morning of January 13, 1865, on the peninsula. On the night of January 15, 1864, we captured Fort Fisher.

We had a terrible, terrible time landing! There was an awful storm! I was told to jump overboard, and oh my! I swallowed a good deal of the Atlantic. . . .

I want to tell you of one of the tragic things that happened during the war, and I was there and saw it.



Hubbard Pryor, runaway slave in Tennessee, before and after enlisting in the 44th U.S. Colored Troops, 7 April 1864

It was at the Southside railroad, at Petersburg, on September 27, 1864.¹ I was put on picket duty. The “Rebs” had built a fire and the wind was driving it toward us. They began to holler and cheer, very happy over the fact.

All at once we could hear someone coming toward us. The pickets opened fire on what they thought were “Rebs,” and found out to their distress that it was a bunch of recruits from our own lines. Many were killed. . . .

If I could choose my weapons for the next war, I would choose doughnuts, to be thrown at each other across the Atlantic.

SIM YOUNGER, enslaved in Missouri, interviewed in Missouri, 1937 ■

■ I remember the Yankees. I will remember seein’ them till I die. I will never forgit it. I thought it was the last of me. The white folks had told me the Yahkees would kill me or carry me off, so I thought when I saw them coming it was the last of me. I hid in the woods while they were there. They tore up some things but they did not do much damage.

ELIAS THOMAS, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed in North Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

■ I ’member well when the war was on. I used to turn the corn sheller and sack the shelled corn for the Confederate soldiers. They used to sell some of the corn, and I guess they gave some of it to the soldiers. Anyway the Yankees got some that they didn’t intend them to get.

It was this way:

The Wheeler Boys were Confederates, They came down the road as happy as could be, a-singin’:

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!
Hurrah for the Broke Brook boys.
Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!
Hurrah for the Broke Brook boys of South Car-o-li-ne-ah!”

So of course we thought they were our soldiers singin’ our songs, Well, they come and tol’ our boss that the Yankees were coming and we had better hide our food and valuable things for they’d take everything they wanted.

So they helped our Massy hide the things. They dug holes and buried the potatoes and covered them over with cotton seed. Then our Massy gave them food for their kindness and set out with two of the girls to take them to a place of safety, and before he could come back for the Missus THE YANKEES WERE UPON US!

But before they got there, our Missus had called us together and told us what to say.

Now you beg for us! You can save our lives. If they ask you if we are good to you, you tell them “YES”!

If they ask you if we give you meat, you tell them “YES”!

Now the rest didn’t get any meat, but I did ’cause I worked in the house, so I didn’t tell a lie, for I did get meat, but the rest didn’t get it.

We saw the Yankees coming. They never stopped for nothing. Their horses would jump the worm rail fences and they’d come right across the fiel’s an’ everything.

They came to the house first and bound our Missus up stairs so she couldn’t get away, they they came out to the sheds and asked us all kind of questions.

We begged for our Missus and we say:

“Our Missus is good. Don’t kill her!”
“Don’t take our meat away from us!”
“Don’t hurt our Missus!”
“Don’t burn the house down!”

¹ The WPA Interviewer typed 1865 in error. The Richmond-Petersburg campaign occurred from June 1864 to March 1865; the war ended in April 1865. (The two ellipses in this excerpt represent deleted transitional comments by the interviewer.)

We begged so hard that they unloosened her, but they took some of the others for refugees and some of the slaves volunteered and went off with them.

They took potatoes and all the hams they wanted, but they left our Missus 'cause we save her life.

RIVANA BOYNTON, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in Florida, 1936 ■

The Yankees burnt Boss Henry's father's fine house, his [cotton] gin, his grist mill, and fifty or sixty bales of cotton and took several fine horses. They took him out in his shirt tail and beat him, and whooped his wife, trying to make them tell where the money was. He told her to tell. He had it buried in a pot in the garden. They went and dug it up. Forty thousand dollars in gold and silver. Out they lit then. I seen that. . . . Every colored person on the place knowed where the pot was buried. Some of them planted it. They wouldn't tell.

MACK BRANTLEY, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■

I 'members lak yesterday, de Yankees comin' 'long. Marster tried to hide the best stuff on de plantation but some of de slaves dat helped him hide it, showed de Yankee soldiers just where it was, when they come dere. They say: "Here is de stuff, hid here, 'cause us put it dere." Then de soldiers went straight to de place where de valuables was hid and dug them out and took them, it sho' set old marster down. Us slaves was sorry dat day for marster and mistress. They was gittin' old, and now they had lost all they had, and more than dat, they knowed their slaves was set free. De soldiers took all de good hosses, fat cattle, chickens, de meat in de smoke house, and then burnt all empty houses. They left de ones dat folks lived in. De Yankees 'pear to me, to be lookin' for things to eat, more than anything else.

SAMUEL BOULWARE, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in South Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

When I used to hear de older niggers talking 'bout de Yankees coming, I was scared, 'cause I thought it was some kind of animal they was talking 'bout. My old aunty was glad to hear 'bout de Yankees coming. She just set and talk 'bout what a good time we was going to have after de Yankees come. She'd say: "Child we going to have such a good time a-settin' at de white folks table, a-eating off de white folks table, and a-rocking in de big rocking chair."

Something awful happen to one of de slaves though, when de Yankees did come. One of de young gals tell de Yankees where de missus had her silver, money and jewelry hid, and they got it all. What you think happen to de poor gal? She'd done wrong I know, but I hated to see her suffer so awful for it. After de Yankees had gone, de missus and massa had de poor gal hung 'til she die. It was something awful to see. De Yankees took everything we had 'cept a little food, hardly 'nough to keep us alive.

MARGARET HUGHES, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in South Carolina, ca. 1937 ■



Library of Congress

Lorenza Ezell

"I hated dem 'cause dey hurt my white people."



Martin Jackson

"I wanted them to win and lick us Southerners, but I hoped they was going to do it without wiping out our company."

■ After dat the Yankees come a swoopin' down on us. My own pappy took off wid 'em. He j'ined a comp'ny what 'fit [fought] at Vicksburg. I was plenty big 'nough to fight, but I didn' hanker to tote no gun. I stayed on de plantation an put in a crop.

It was pow'ful oneasy times after dat. But what I care 'bout freedom? Folks what was free was in misery firs' one way an' den de other.

I was on de plantation closer to town, den. It was called "Fish Pond Plantation." De white folks come an' tol' us we mus' burn all de cotton so de enemy couldn' git it. Us piled it high in de fiel's lak great mountains. It made my innards hurt to see fire 'tached to somethin' dat had cost us Niggers so much labor an' hones' sweat.

CHARLIE DAVENPORT, enslaved in Mississippi, interviewed in Mississippi, ca. 1937 ■

■ I never done anything fer myself in all my life. I always wurked fer de Rebels. I stuck right to 'em. Didn't have no sense fer doin' dat I guess. . . .

I was a great big boy [about 18] when de Yankees come through. . . De Yankees took jes' what dey wanted an' nothin' stopped 'em, cause de surrender had come. Before de surrender de slave owners begun to scatter de slaves 'bout from place to place to keep de Yankees from gittin' 'em. If de Yankees took a place de slaves nearby wus moved to a place further off.

All I done wus fer de Rebels. I wus wid 'em an' I jes' done what I wus tole. I wus afraid of de Yankees 'cause de Rebels had told us dat de Yankees would kill us. Dey tole us dat de Yankees would bore holes in our shoulders an' wurk us to carts. Dey tole us we would be treated a lot worsen den dey wus treating us. Well, de Yankees got here but they treated us fine.

ANDREW BOONE, enslaved in North Carolina, interviewed in North Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

■ When de Yankees come, what they do? They did them things they ought not to have done and they left undone de things they ought to have done. Yes, dat just 'bout tells it. One thing you might like to hear. Mistress got all de money, de silver, de gold and de jewels, and got de well digger to hide them in de bottom of de well. Them Yankees smart. When they got dere, they asked for de ve'y things at de bottom of de well. Mistress wouldn't tell. They held a court of 'quiry in de yard; called slaves up, one by one, good many. Must have been a Judas 'mongst us. Soon a Yankee was let down in de well, and all dat money, silver, gold, jewelry, watches, rings, brooches, knives and forks, butter-dishes, waters, goblets, and cups was took and carried 'way by a army dat seemed more concerned 'bout stealin', than they was 'bout de Holy War for de liberation of de poor African slave people. They took off all de hosses, sheeps, cows, chickens, and geese, took de seine [net] and de fishes they caught, corn in crib, meat in smoke-house and everything. Marse General Sherman said war was hell. It sho' was. Mebbe it was hell for some of them Yankees when they come to die and give account of de deed they done in Sumter and Richland Counties.

HENRY JENKINS, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in South Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

■ The Master went to the War and stayed 'til it was most over. He was a mighty sick man when he come back to the old place, but I was there waiting for him just like always. All the time he was away I take care around the house. That's what he say for me to do when he rides away to fight the Yankees. Lots of talk about the War but the slaves goes right on working just the same, raising cotton and tobacco.

The slaves talk a heap about Lincoln and some trys to run away to the North. Don't hear much about Jeff Davis, mostly Lincoln. He give us slaves the freedom but we was better off as we was.

The day of freedom come around just like any other day, except the Master say for me to bring up the horses, we is going to town. That's when he hears about the slaves being free. We gets to the town and the Master goes into the store. It's pretty early but the streets was filled with folks talking and I wonder what makes the Master in such a hurry when he comes out of the store.

He gets on his horse and tells me to follow fast. When we gets back to the plantation he sounds the horn calling the slaves. They come in from the fields and meet 'round back of the kitchen building that stood separate from the Master's house. They all keeps quiet while the Master talks! "You-all is free now,

and all the rest of the slaves is free too. Nobody owns you now and nobody going to own you anymore!" That was good news, I reckon, but nobody know what to do about it.

WILLIAM HUTSON, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Oklahoma, 1937 ■

De massa had three boys to go to war, but dere wuzn't one to come home. All the chillun he had wuz killed. Massa, he los' all his money and de house soon begin droppin' away to nothin'. Us niggers one by one lef' de ole place and de las' time I seed de home plantation I wuz standin' on a hill. I looked back on it for de las' time through a patch of scrub pines and it look' so lonely. Dere warn't but one person in sight, de massa. He was a-settin' in a wicker chair in de yard lookin' ober a small field of cotton and cawn. Dere wuz fo' crosses in de graveyard in de side lawn where he wuz a-settin'. De fo'th one wuz his wife. I lost my ole woman too 37 years ago, and all dis time, I's been a carrin' on like de massa — all alone.

WILLIAM COLBERT, enslaved in Georgia, interviewed in Alabama, 1937 ■

I was in the field when I first heard of the Civil War. The woman who looked after Henry Hall and myself (both slaves) told me she heard marster say old Abraham Lincoln was trying to free the niggers. Marster finally pulled me up and went and joined the Confederate Army. Kentucky split off and part joined the North and part the South. The war news kept slipping through of success for first one side then the other. Sometimes marster would come home, spend a few days and then go again to the war. . . .

. . . A big army of Yankees came through a few months later and soon we heard of the surrender. A few days after this marster told me to catch two horses that we had to go to Dickenson which was the County seat of Webster County [Kentucky]. On the way to Dickenson he said to me "Bob, did you know you are free and Lincoln has freed you? You are as free as I am." We went to the Freedmen's Bureau and went into the office. A Yankee officer looked me over and asked marster my name, and informed me I was free, and asked me whether or not I wanted to keep living with Moore. I did not know what to do, so I told him yes. A fixed price of seventy-five dollars and board was then set as the salary I should receive per year for my work. The Yankee told me to let him know if I was not paid as agreed.

I went back home and stayed a year. During the year I hunted at lot at night and thoroughly enjoyed being free. I took my freedom by degrees and remained obedient and respectful, but still wondering and thinking what the future held for me. After I retired at night I made plan after plan and built aircastles as to what I would do. At this time I formed a great attachment for the white man, Mr. Atlas Chandler, with whom I hunted. He bought my part of the game we caught and favored me in other ways. Mr Chandler had a friend Mr. Dewitt Yarborough, who was an adventurer, and trader, and half brother to my ex-marster, Mr. Moore, with whom I was then staying. He is responsible for me taking myself into my own hands and getting out of feeling I was still under obligations to ask my marster or missus when I desired to leave the premises.

ROBERT GLENN, enslaved in North Carolina and Kentucky, interviewed in North Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

Library of Congress



Litt Young

"Dem Yankees brought de smallpox here wid 'em. . . Folks jus' died out wid it so bad."



William Colbert

"I's been a carrin' on like de massa — all alone."