



Narrative of Charley Williams

EXCERPTS

Enslaved in Louisiana, 1843-1865

Interview conducted in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1937

Federal Writers' Project, WPA

In the 1930s over 2,300 formerly enslaved African Americans were interviewed by members of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal agency in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression.

Charley Williams's narrative is presented as transcribed by the interviewer. In these excerpts he describes the 300-acre plantation in northeastern Louisiana on which he lived and worked. (Bracketed notes added by NHC.)



Charley Williams, age 94, with his granddaughter at his home in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1937

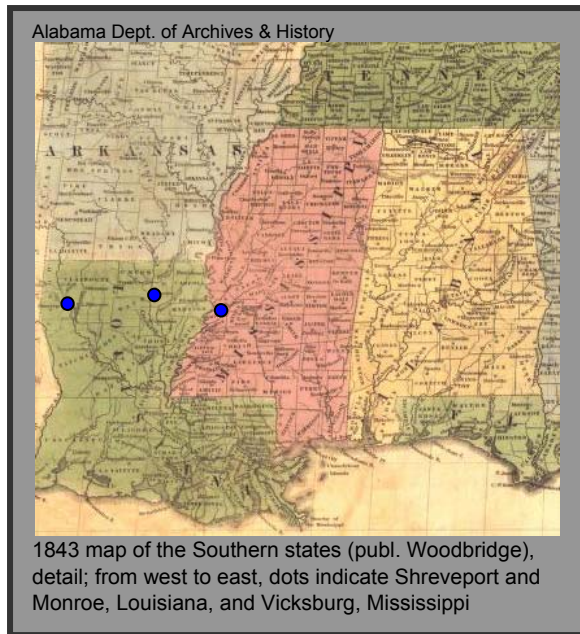
... I was borned on the 'leventh of January, in 1843, and was old enough to vote when I got my freedom, but I didn't take no stock in all dat politics and goings on at dat time, and I didn't vote till a long time after old Master passed away, but I was big enough before de War to remember everything pretty plain.

Old Master name was John Williams, and old Mistress name was Miss Betty, and she was a Campbell before she married. Young Missy was named Betty after her mammy, and Young Master was named Frank, but I don't know who after. Our overseer was Mr. Simmons, and he was mighty smart and had a lot of patience, but he wouldn't take no talk nor foolishness. He didn't whup nobody very often, but he only had to whup 'em jest one time! He never did whup a nigger at de time the nigger done something, but he would wait till evening and have old Master come and watch him do it. He never whupped very hard 'cept when he had told a nigger about something and promised a whupping next time and the nigger done it again. Then that nigger got what he had been hearing 'bout!

De plantation was about as big as any. I think it had about three hundred acres, and it was about two miles northwest of Monroe, Louisiana. Then he had another one not so big, two – three miles south of the big one, kind of down in the woodsy part along the White river bottoms. He had another overseer on that place and a big passel of niggers, but I never did go down to that one. That was where he raised most of his corn and shoats, and lots of sorghum cane.

Our plantation was up on higher ground, and it was more open country, but still they was lots of woods all around and lots of the plantations had been whacked right out of de new ground and was full of stumps. Master's place was more open, though, and all in the fields was good plowing.

The big road runned right along past our plantation, and it come from Shreveport and run into Monroe. There wasn't any town at Monroe in them days, jest a little cross roads place with a general store and a big hide house. I think there was about two big hide houses, and you could smell that place a mile before you got into it. Old Master had a part in de store, I think.



De hide houses was jest long shed, all open along de sides and kivered over wid cypress clapboards.

Down below de hide houses and de store was jest a little settlement of one or two houses, but they was a school for white boys. Somebody said there was a place where they had been an old fort, but I never did see it.

Everything boughten we got come from Shreveport, and was brung in by the stage[coach] and the freighters, and that was only a little coffee or gunpowder, or some needles for the sewing, or some strap iron for the blacksmith, or something like dat. We made and raised everything else we needed right on the place.

I never did see any quinine till after I was free. My mammy knowed jest what root to go out and pull up to knock de chills right out'n me. And de bellyache and de running off de same way, too.

Our plantation was a lot different from some I seen other places, like way east of there, around Vicksburg. Some of them was fixed up fancier but dey didn't have no more comforts than we had. . . .

De big house was made out'n square hewed logs, and chinked wid little rocks and daubed wid white clay, and kivered wid cypress clapboards. I remember one time we put on a new roof, and de niggers hauled up de cypress logs and sawed dem and frowed out de clapboards by hand.

De house had two setting rooms on one side and a big kitchen room on de other, wid a wide passage in between, and den about was de sleeping rooms. They wasn't no stairways 'cepting on de outside. Steps run up to de sleeping rooms on one side from de passageway and on de other side from clean outside de house. Jest one big chimbley was all he had, and it was on de kitchen end, and we done all de cooking in a fireplace dat was purty nigh as wide as de whole room.

In de sleeping rooms dey wasn't no fires 'cepting in brazers made out of clay, and we toted up charcoal to burn in 'em when it was cold mornings in de winter. Dey kept warm wide [with] de bed clothes and de knitten clothes dey had.

Master never did make a big gallery on de house, but our white folks would set out in de yard under de big trees in de shade. They was long benches made out'n hewed logs and all padded wid gray moss and corn shuck padding, and dey set pretty soft. All de furniture in de house was home-made, too. De beds had square posts as big around as my shank and de frame was mortised into 'em, and holes bored in de frame and home-made rope laced in to make it springy. Den a great big mattress full of goose feathers and two – three comforts [comforters] as thick as my foot wid carded wool inside! Dey didn't need no fireplaces!

De [slave] quarters was a little piece from de big house, and dey run along both sides of de road dat go to de fields. All one-room log cabins, but dey was good and warm, and every one had a little open shed at de side whar we sleep in de summer to keep cool.

They was two or three wells at de quarters for water, and some good springs in de branch at de back of de fields. You could ketch a fish now and den in dat branch, but Young Master used to do his fishing in White River, and take a nigger or two along to do de work at his camp.

It wasn't very fancy at de Big House, but it was mighty pretty jest de same, wid de gray moss hanging from de big trees, and de cool green grass all over de yard, and I can shet my old eyes and see it jest like it was before de War come along and bust it up.

I can see old Master setting out under a big tree smoking one of his long cheroots his tobacco nigger made by hand, and fanning hisself wid his big wide hat another nigger platted out'n young inside corn shucks for him, and I can hear him holler at a big bunch of white geeses what's gitting in his flower beds and see 'em string off behind de old gander towards de big road.

When de day begin to crack de whole plantation break out wid all kinds of noises, and you could tell what going on by de kind of noise you hear.

Come de daybreak you hear de guinea fowls start pottracking down at de edge of de woods lot, and den de roosters all start up 'round de barn and de ducks finally wake up and jine in. You can smell de sow belly frying down at the cabins in de "row," to go wid de hoecake and de buttermilk.

Den purty soon de wind rise a little, and you can hear a old bell donging way on some plantation a mile or two off, and den more bells at other places and maybe a horn, and purty soon younder go old Master's old ram horn wid a long toot and den some short toots, and here com de overseer down de row of cabins, hollering right and left, and picking de ham out'n his teeth wid a long shiny goose quill pick.

Bells and horns!
Bells for dis and horns for dat! All we knowed was go and come by de bells and horns!

Old ram horn blow to send us all to de field. We all line up, about seventy-five field niggers, and go by de tool shed and git

our hoes, or maybe go hitch up de mules to de plows and lay de plows out on de side so de overseer can see iff de points is shart. Any plow gits broke or de point gits bungled up on de rocks it goes to do [de] blacksmith nigger, den we all git on down in de field.

Den de anvil start dangling in de blacksmith shop: "Tank! Deling-ding! Tank! Deling-ding!", and dat ole bull tongue gitting straightened out!

Course you can't hear de shoemaker awling and pegging, and de card spinners, and de old mammy sewing by hand, but maybe you can hear de old loom going, "frump, frump", and you know it all right iff deen your clothes do be wearing out, 'cause you gwine git new britches purty soon!

We had about a hundred niggers on dat place, young and old, and about twenty on de little place down below. We could make about every kind of thing but coffee and gunpowder dat our whitefolks and us needed.

When we needs a hat we gits inside cornshucks and weave one out, and makes horse collars de same way. Jest tie two little soft shucks together and begin plaiting.



State Library of Louisiana

Cotton fields near Monroe, Louisiana, 1947

All de cloth 'ceptin de Mistress' Sunday dresses come from de sheep to de carders and de spinners and de weaver, den we dye it wid "butternut" and hickory bark and indigo and other things and set it wid copperas [ferrous sulfate]. Leather tanned on de place made de shoes, and I never see a store boughten wagon wheel 'cepting among de stages and de freighters along de big road.

We made purty, long back-combs out'n cow horn, and knitting neddles [needles] out'n second hickory. Split a young hickory and put in a big wedge to prize it open, then cut it down and let it season, and you got good bent grain for wagon hames [curved pieces in an animal harness] and chair rockers and such.

It was jest like dat until I was grown, and den one day come a neighbor man and say we in de War.

Little while young Master Frank ride over to Vicksburg and jine de Sesesh [Confederate] army, but old Master jest go on lak nothing happen and we all don't hear nothing more until long come some Sesesh soldiers and take most old Master's hosses and all his wagons.¹



¹ For the continuation of Charley Williams's narrative through the Civil War and after, see Toolbox Theme V: #8, Emancipation, "When the Yankees came through."