



Narrative of Richard Jones

EXCERPTS: A BOATMAN ON THE BROAD RIVER

Enslaved in South Carolina, ca. 1830s(?)–1865¹

Interview conducted 9 July 1937
Union, South Carolina

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.

Richard Jones was a slave on a large South Carolina cotton plantation owned by Jim Gist (killed in battle during the Civil War). Around 100 years old when interviewed, Jones describes his work as a boatman transporting Gist's cotton from northern South Carolina down the Broad River to Columbia in the middle of the state, there to be shipped to Charleston and beyond for sale. The interview excerpts are presented as transcribed by the interviewer (parenthetical comments in original transcript; bracketed notes added by NHC).

Mr., I run on Broad River fer over 24 years as boatman, carrying Marse [Master] Jim's cotton to Columbia fer him. Us had de excitement on dem trips. Lots times water was deeper dan a tree is high. Sometimes I was throwed and fell in de water. I rise up every time, though, and float and swim back to de boat and git on again. If de weather be hot, I never think of changing no clothes, but just keep on what I got wet. Five niggers allus [always] went on Marse's boat. One man steer de boat and of course he was de steerman, and dat what he went by [was called]. I recollects two steermans, Bradley Kennedy and Andy McCluny. Charlie Gilliam was de second steerman, by dat I means dat he de young nigger dat Bradley and Andy had to break in.

Sometimes Marster have three flat boats a-gwine [going] down at one time, and I has recollections of as many as five a-gwine from our plantation; dat was not so often, though. Us had long poles to steer de boats wid; den dere was some paddles, and some of de niggers was called privates dat handled de cotton and used de paddles when dey had to be used. You knows dat batteaus² was what dey always used de paddles wid. Privates did de shoving and other heavy work. De seconds and de privates allus shoved wid de poles when de water was rough, and de steerman give orders. I was allus a boatman.

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Text courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. WPA Slave Narrative Project (South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 3), Federal Writers' Project, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA). Digital images of all typed transcribed interviews at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Jones's interview does not include his life during and after the Civil War; thus it is not known if he remained enslaved until 1865.

² bateau (or batteau, batoe, battoe), from the French *bateau*, boat: small flat-bottomed river cargo boat, pointed at each end, steered with long oars.

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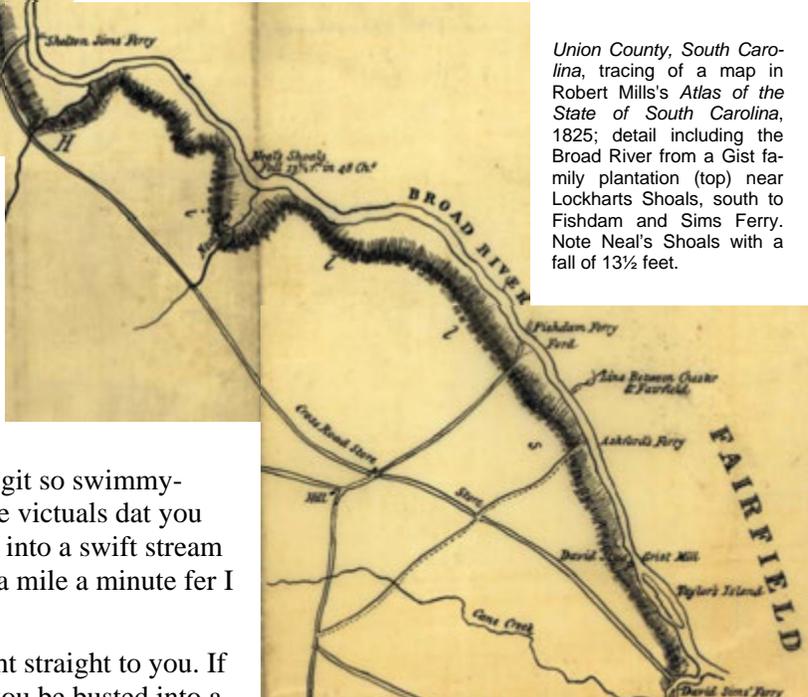
African American boatmen on a river bateau,
West Virginia, 1872





Charlie Gilliam acted as boatman, some; and den de other boatmen was: Bill Hughes, Warren Worthy, Green Stokes and John Glenn. Dey made de poles to suit de job. Some of de poles was longer dan others was. Some of dem was broad and flat at de end; others was blunt and others was made sharp. When de Broad River rose, sometimes de waves got higher dan my house dar. Den it was a real job to handle one of Marse's boats. Fact is, it was five men's jobs.

Wid water a-roaring and a-foaming and a-gwine round you like a mad tiger a-blowing his breath, so dat you was feer'd (scared) dat all your marsters cotton gwine to be spilt, you had to be up and a-doing something real fast. Sometimes dat river take your boat round and round like a merry-go-round, 'til you git so swimmy-headed dat you have to puke up all the victuals dat you done eat. Den it swing from dat whirl into a swift stream dat take you a mile a minute, yes sir, a mile a minute fer I don't know how fer.



Union County, South Carolina, tracing of a map in Robert Mills's *Atlas of the State of South Carolina*, 1825; detail including the Broad River from a Gist family plantation (top) near Lockhart's Shoals, south to Fishdam and Sims Ferry. Note Neal's Shoals with a fall of 13½ feet.

Den you see a tree a-coming right straight to you. If de boat hit dat tree, you knowed dat you be busted into a million pieces. You had to git your poles and somebody had to let a pole hit dat tree ahead of de boat. Of course dat change de boat's course from de tree and you went sailing on by. Once in a freshet [sudden rise in stream level from rain] us raced twenty-five miles in twenty-five minutes. Marse Jim was wid us dat time, and he tole us so by his watch. De water a-jumping real high and dat boat a-jumping still wusser made me so skeer't dat I just shake in my knees and all de way up and down my legs.

On dis trip we had went plumb up in North Carolina. Us never had been dat fer up befo'. I ain't never seed North Carolina befo'; neither is I seed it since. Broad River was real narrow when we went up and she look like a lamb; but when we come down it had done and tuck and rained and dem banks was vanished . . . but dat water sho did rare up dar to git back in its regular channel.³ De rocks up dar was mo' scary looking dat dey is whar it run through Union to Columbia. Dat night we run into a nine-mile shoal [stretch of shallow water]. Couldn't none de niggers keep dat boat off'n dat shoal it was so powerful . . . dat is, de water just tuck dat boat plumb smack out'n our hands. But it throwed our boat in shallow water and of course dat made it drag. Good dat it never drug over no sharp rocks — and dey was setting all around us — but it happened dat it hit sand. We camped dar fer de night. By morning we had done go a quarter mile from de channel.

When we et (ate), we worked de boat out into de main channel again. Den we staked her to a tree and tuck a look around befo' we started down stream fer Union [SC, near the Gist plantation]; dat seemed fer off right den. Finally de master boatman give de order, "Shove off, boys!" We shoved and we fell into

³ Ellipses in these excerpts from original interview transcript.

a clear open channel and our boat went a-skeeting down stream. We never had to hit a lick, but she went so fast dat we was all skeer'd to take a long breath. Finally Marster said, "Boys, see dem willow trees down yonder; well, steer her to run over dem so dat she will slack her speed." Us did, but it never deadened our speed a mite, dat us could see. Marster shake his head and 'low [allow, i.e., admit], "Bound fer hell, maybe, boys."

Got to Cherokee Falls, wid water so high couldn't tell no falls dar. Marster say, "Lay her to de right, we can't wreck dis boat widout putting up a honest man's fight." Den he say, "If us does, us'll sho got to hell." We tried to swing her by grabbing to a big willow, and we broke a lot of limbs in trying, but we did swing her and she run a 100 yards widout steering, and de boat landed on a little mountain of land, Marse 'low, "Ain't never seed sech a ocean of water since I was eighteen years old, damn if I have." He look at me and say, "Don't know whether Dick scared or not, but he sho is a brave man." I was a-setting my feets on land den, and I look at him and 'low, "No sir, I ain't skeer't, why I could come over dat little place in my bateau." Truth is, dat I was so skeer't dat I wasn't skeert. We lay over a day and a half. De water had done receded back some, and we come 27 miles down to Lockhart Shoals in dat one day. De water was still so high dat we run over de shoals widout a tremor. Come sailing on down to Fish Dam and went over de Fish Dam and never knowed dat it was dar. Den we landed at de road wid everybody safe but still scar't.

Dar was two Charlie Gilmores . . . one was kil't right below Fish Dam. He was hit in de head by a private. When de private was cutting de boat, Charlie got in de way of de pole and it hit him in one of his temples and he fell over in de water dead. When dey got him, wasn't narry drap of water in his lungs, dat's how-come us knowed dat he was kil't straight out. Some says dat he was hit in de y'er (ear), but anyway it was on a tender spot and de lick sho done him up. Nothing wasn't done to de private, kaise ['cause] it was all accidental and Marse and everybody felt sorry fer him.

On river trips, we took rations sech as meat, bread and cabbage, and us cotch all de fish dat we wanted and had coffee. We each took day in and day out to cook, dat is, all dem dat could half-way cook did dat.

H. Messerley



river bateau (re-creation), James River, Virginia

New York Public Library



cotton loaded on the steamer *Planter* and on a pier in Charleston harbor, ca. 1860s

Library of Congress



Perrine's new topographical war map of the southern states, 1863, detail of South Carolina; brown line marks the Broad River from the Gist plantation to Columbia