



Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University



Enslaved men born in Africa, or of African-born parents, named Renty and Fassena by the slaveholders; photographed in South Carolina in 1850



*"One day a big ship stopped off the shore"*

## CAPTURE

### SELECTIONS FROM THE NARRATIVES OF FORMER SLAVES \_\_\_\_\_

#### *I. The WPA Narratives, 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](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html) and "Guidelines for Interviewers" at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf).

■ My mother was Harriet Davis and she was born in Virginia. I don't know who my father was. My grandmother was captured in Africa when she was a little girl. A big boat was down at the edge of a bay an' the people was all excited about it an' some of the bravest went up purty close to look at it. The men on the boat told them to come on board and they could have the pretty red handkerchiefs, red and blue beads and big rings. A lot of them went on board and the ship sailed away with them. My grandmother never saw any of her folks again.

MARTHA KING, enslaved in Virginia & Alabama, interviewed in Oklahoma, ca. 1937 ■

■ My grandmother was captured in Africa. Traders come dere in a big boat and dey had all sorts of purty gew-gaws — red handkerchiefs, dress goods, beads, bells, and trinkets in bright colors. Dey would pull up at de shore and entice de colored folks onto de boat to see de purty things. Befo' de darkies realized it dey would be out from shore. Dat's de way she was captured. Fifteen to twenty-five would pay dem for de trip as dey all brought good prices.

DELLA FOUNTAIN, enslaved in Louisiana, interviewed in Oklahoma, 1938 ■

■ Ma lived to be 103 years old. Pa died in 1905 and was 105 years old. I used to set on Grandma's lap and she told me about how they used to catch people in Africa. They herded them up like cattle and put them in stalls and

brought them on the ship and sold them. She said some they captured they left bound till they come back and sometimes they never went back to get them. They died. They had room in the stalls on the boat to set down or lie down. They put several together. Put the men to themselves and the women to themselves. When they sold Grandma and Grandpa at a fishing dock in New Port, Va., they had their feet bound down and their hands crossed, up on a platform. They sold Grandma's daughter to somebody in Texas. She cried and begged to let them be together. They didn't pay no 'tension to her. She couldn't talk but she made them know she didn't want to be parted. Six years after slavery they got together.

LUKE DIXON, enslaved in Virginia, interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937 ■

■ My father's name was George and my mother's name was Nellie. My father was born in Africa. Him and two of his brothers and one sister was stole and brought to Savannah, Georgia, and sold. Dey was de chillen of a chief of de Kiochi tribe. De way dey was stole, dey was asked to a dance on a ship which some white men had, and my aunt said it was early in de mornin' when dey foun' dey was away from de land, and all dey could see was de water all 'round.

THOMAS JOHNS, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■

■ My father's name was Eli Jones and mammy's name was Jessie. They was captured in Africa and brought to this country whilst they was still young folks, and my father was purty hard to realize he was a slave, 'cause he done what he wanted back in Africa. . . .

The fun was on Saturday night when massa 'lowed us to dance. There was lots of banjo pickin' and tin pan beatin' and dancin', and everybody would talk 'bout when they lived in Africa and done what they wanted.

TOBY JONES, enslaved in South Carolina, interviewed in Texas, 1937 ■

■ My grandma and grandpa come here in a steamboat. The man come to Africa and say, "Man and woman, does you want a job?" So they gits on the boat and then he has the 'vantage.

RICHARD CARRUTHERS, enslaved in Tennessee & Texas, interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■

■ I had always been told from the time I was a small child that I was a Negro of African stock. That it was no disgrace to be a negro and had it not been for the white folks who brought us over here from Africa as slaves, we would never have been here and would have been much better off.

ADELINE \_\_\_\_\_, enslaved in Tennessee, interviewed in Arkansas, ca. 1937<sup>1</sup> ■

■ Most of the time there was more'n three hundred slaves on the plantation. The oldest ones come right from Africa. My Grandmother was one of them. A savage in Africa — a slave in America. Mammy told it to me. Over there all the natives dressed naked and lived on fruits and nuts. Never see many white mens.

One day a big ship stopped off the shore and the natives hid in the brush along the beach. Grandmother was there. The ship men sent a little boat to the shore and scattered bright things and trinkets on the beach. The natives were curious. Grandmother said everybody made a rush for them things soon as the boat left. The trinkets was fewer than the peoples. Next day the white folks scatter some more. There was another scramble. The natives was feeling less scared, and the next day some of them walked up the gangplank to get things off the plank and off the deck.

The deck was covered with things like they'd found on the beach. Two-three hundred natives on the ship when they feel it move. They rush to the side but the plank was gone. Just dropped in the water when the ship moved away.

Folks on the beach started to crying and shouting. The ones on the boat was wild with fear. Grandmother was one of them who got fooled, and she say the last thing seen of that place was the natives running up and down the beach waving their arms and shouting like they was mad. They boat men come

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<sup>1</sup> Identified and archived only as "Aunt Adeline" in WPA records.

up from below where they had been hiding and drive the slaves down in the bottom and keep them quiet with the whips and clubs.

The slaves was landed at Charleston. The town folks was mighty mad 'cause the blacks was driven through the streets without any clothes, and drove off the boat men after the slaves was sold on the market. Most of that load was sold to the Brown plantation in Alabama. Grandmother was one of the bunch.

JOHN BROWN, enslaved in Alabama, interviewed in Oklahoma, 1937 ■

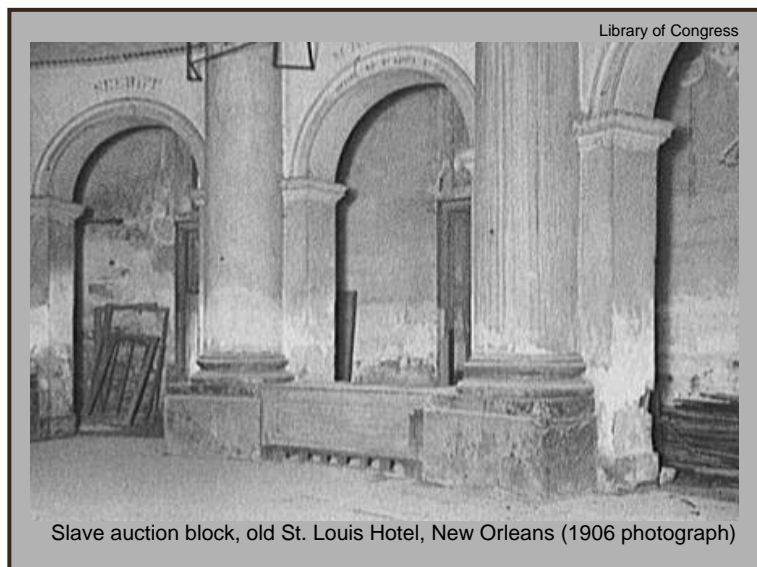
■ My pappy was name Jacob. My mammy went by de name of Jemima. They both come from Africa where they was born. They was [en]'ticed on a ship, fetch 'cross de ocean to Virginny, fetch to Winnsboro by a slave drover, and sold to my marster's father. Dat what they tell me. When they was sailin' over, dere was five or six hundred others all together down under de first deck of de ship, where they was locked in. They never did talk lak de other slaves, could just say a few words, use deir hands, and make signs. They want deir collards, turnips, and deir 'tators, raw. They lak sweet milk so much they steal it.

Pappy care nothin' 'bout clothes and wouldn't wear shoes in de winter time or any time. It was 'ginst de law to bring them over here when they did, I learn since. But what is de law now and what was de law then, when bright shiny money was in sight? Money make de automobile go. Money make de train go. Money make de mare go, and at dat time I 'spect money make de ships go. Yes, sir, they, my pappy and mammy, was just smuggled in dis part of de world, I bet you!

CHARLEY BARBER, enslaved & interviewed in South Carolina, ca. 1937 ■

■ I know I was borned in Morocco, in Africa, and was married and had three chillen befo' I was stoled from my husband. I don't know who it was stole me, but dey took me to France, to a place called Bordeaux, and drugs me with some coffee, and when I knows anything 'bout it, I's in de bottom of a boat with a whole lot of other niggers. It seem like we was in dat boat forever, but we comes to land, and I's put on de [auction] block and sold. I finds out afterwards from my white folks it was in New Orleans where dat block was, but I didn't know it den.

SILVIA KING, enslaved & interviewed in Texas, ca. 1937 ■



Slave auction block, old St. Louis Hotel, New Orleans (1906 photograph)

■ Ah yes, well does I 'member my Granny from Africa, and straight from dere, too; Judith Gist, dey named her. Dat ole lady could not work when she died, fer she was a hundred and ten years old. Dey had in de paper dat I was 125. It gives me notice to say dat I is de oldest man in Union County. Can't 'member any of my grandfathers. Millie Gist was my mother, and aunt Judith was her mother.

Granny Judith said dat in Africa dey had very few pretty things, and dat dey had no red colors in cloth, in fact, dey had no cloth at all. Some strangers wid pale faces come one day and drapped a small piece of red flannel down on de ground. All de black folks grabbed for it. Den a larger piece was drapped a little further on, and on until de river was reached. Den a large piece was drapped in de river and on de other side. Dey was led on, each one trying to git a piece as it was drapped. Finally, when de ship was reached, dey drapped large pieces on de plank and up into de ship 'till dey got as many blacks on board as dey wanted. Den de gate was chained up and dey could not get back. Dat is de way Granny Judith say dey

got her to America. Of course she did not even know dat de pieces was red flannel, or dat she was being enticed away. Dey just drapped red flannel to de like us draps corn to chickens to git dem on de roost at night.

When dey got on board de ship dey were tied until de ship got to sea; den dey was let loose to walk about 'cause dey couldn't jump overboard. On de ship dey had many strange things to eat, and dey like dat. Dey was give enough red flannel to wrap around themselves. She liked it on de boat. Granny Judith born Millie, and Millie born me. No, I ain't never had no desire to go to Africa, kaise I gwine to stay whar I is.

. . . When dey talk, nobody didn't know what dey was talking about. My granny never could speak good like I can. She talk half African, and all African when she git bothered. No, I can't talk no African.

RICHARD JONES, enslaved & interviewed in South Carolina, 1937 ■

■ Adam [Thomas's father] was a native of the West Coast of Africa, and when quite a young man was attracted one day to a large ship that had just come near his home. With many others he was attracted aboard by bright red handkerchiefs, shawls and other articles in the hands of the seamen. Shortly afterwards he was securely bound in the hold of the ship, to be later sold somewhere in America. Thomas does [not] know exactly where Adam landed, but knows that his father had been in Florida many years before his birth. "I guess that's why I can't stand red things now," he says; "my pa hated the sight of it."

SHACK THOMAS, enslaved & interviewed in Florida, 1936 ■

## II. *The 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>-Century Narratives* \_\_\_\_\_

For a century, from the late 1700s to the late 1800s, narratives by formerly enslaved people were published extensively in the United States and England, especially through the support of abolitionist societies before the end of slavery in Great Britain (1834) and the United States (1865).<sup>2</sup>

■ *OLAUDAH EQUIANO was captured with his sister by slave traders in west Africa (present-day Nigeria) in the mid 1750s, when he was about eleven years old.*

Generally when the grown people in the neighbourhood were gone far in the fields to labour, the children assembled together in some of the neighbours' premises to play; and commonly some of us used to get up a tree to look out for any assailant or kidnapper that might come upon us, for they sometimes took those opportunities of our parents' absence to attack and carry off as many as they could seize. One day as I was watching at the top of a tree in our yard, I saw one of those people come into the yard of our next neighbour but one, to kidnap, there being many stout young people in it. Immediately on this I gave the alarm of the rogue, and he was surrounded by the stoutest of them, who entangled him with cords so that he could not escape till some of the grown people came and secured him. But alas! ere long it was my fate to be thus attacked and to be carried off when none of the grown people were nigh.

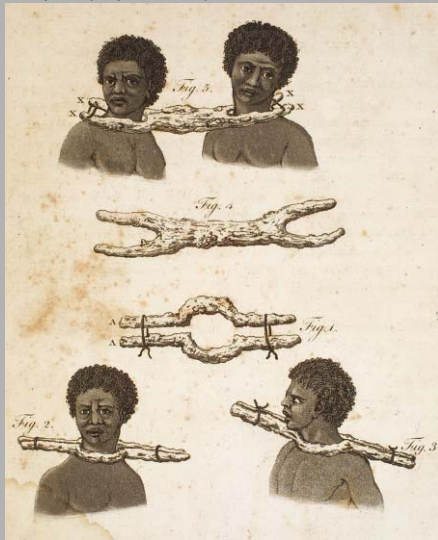
One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls and in a moment seized us both and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands and continued to carry us as far as they could . . .

Thus I continued to travel, sometimes by land, sometimes by water, through different countries and various nations [in west Africa], till at the end of six or seven months after I had been kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast. . . .

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew, and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits,

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<sup>2</sup> Punctuation in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup>-century narratives modernized by NHC for clarity.



Wooden yokes used in transporting captured slaves in coffles, Senegal, west Africa, late 1700s; illustrations in Thomas Clarkson, *Letters on the slave-trade, and the state of the natives in those parts of Africa*, London, 1791<sup>3</sup>



and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country.

When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair. They told me I was not; and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass; but, being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. . . .

Soon after this the blacks who brought me on board went off and left me abandoned to despair. I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore, which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo.

OLAUDAH EQUIANO, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, London: 1789 ■

■ BOYREREAU BRINCH was captured in Africa (probably Mali) at age sixteen, in the mid 1750s, while swimming in a river with friends.

When we ascended the bank, to our astonishment we discovered six or seven animals fastening a boat, and immediately made towards us. Consternation sat fixed upon every brow, and fear shook every frame; each member refused its office [i.e., each limb refused to move]. However, home

invited so urgently that nature began to do her duty; we flew to the wood with precipitation. But Lo! when we had passed the borders and entered the body thereof, to our utter astonishment and dismay, instead of pursuers we found ourselves waylaid by thirty or forty more of the same pale race of white *Vultures*, whom to pass was impossible; we attempted without deliberation to force their ranks. But alas! we were unsuccessful, eleven out of fourteen were made captives, bound instantly, and notwithstanding our unintelligible entreaties, cries & lamentations, were hurried to their boat, and within five minutes were on board, gagged, and carried down the stream like a sluice; fastened down in the boat with cramped jaws, added to a horrid stench occasioned by filth and stinking fish; while all were groaning, crying and praying, but poor creatures to no effect. I after a siege of the most agonizing pains describable, fell into a

kind of torpid state of insensibility which continued for some hours. Towards evening I awoke only to horrid consternation, deep wrought misery and woe, which defies language to depict. I was pressed almost to death by the weight of bodies that lay upon me; night approached and for the first time in my life, I was accompanied with gloom and horror.

Thus in the 16th year of my age, I was borne away from native innocence, ease, and luxury, into captivity, by a Christian people, who preach humility, charity, and benevolence.

BOYREREAU BRINCH & Benjamin F. Prentiss, *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace. Containing an Account of the Kingdom of Bow-Woo, in the Interior of Africa*, Vermont: 1810 ■

■ AYUBA SULEIMAN DIALLO (known as Job ben Solomon after his capture), was the son of a Muslim leader. He was captured in west Africa (Senegal) in 1730 when in his late twenties. Through the intercession of American abolitionists, he was able to return to Africa four years later.

In February, 1730. Job's Father, hearing of an English Ship at Gambia River, sent him with two Servants to attend him, to sell two Negroes and to buy Paper, and some other Necessaries; but desired him not to venture over the River because the Country of the Mandingoes, who are Enemies to the People of Futa, lies on the other side. Job, not agreeing with Captain Pike (who commanded the Ship, lying then at Gambia . . . ) sent back the two Servants to acquaint his Father with it, and to let him know that he intended to go farther. Accordingly, having agreed with another Man, named Loumein Yoas, who understood the Mandingoe Language, to go with him as his Interpreter, he crossed the River Gambia, and disposed of his Negroes for some Cows.

As he was returning Home, he stopp'd for some Refreshment at the House of an old Acquaintance; and the Weather being hot, he hung up his Arms in the House while he refresh;d himself. Those Arms were very valuable; consisting of a Gold-hilted Sword, a Gold Knife, which they wear by their Side, and a rich Quiver of Arrows, which King Sambo had made him a Present of. It happened that a Company of the Mandingoes, who live upon Plunder, passing by at that Time, and observing him unarmed, rush'd in, to the Number of seven or eight at once, at a back Door, and pinioned Job before he could get to his Arms, together with his Interpreter, who is a Slave in Maryland still. They then shaved their Heads and Beards, which Job and his Man resented as the highest Indignity; tho' the Mandingoes meant no more by it than to make them appear like Slaves taken in War.

On the 27th of February, 1730, they carried them to Captain Pike at Gambia, who purchased them; and on the first of March they were put on Board. Soon after Job found means to acquaint Captain Pike that he was the same Person that came to trade with him a few Days before, and after what Manner he had been taken. Upon this Captain Pike gave him leave to redeem himself and his Man; and Job sent to an Acquaintance of his Father's, near Gambia, who promised to send to Job's Father to inform him of what had happened, that he might take some Course to have him set at Liberty. But it being a Fortnight's journey between that Friend's House and his Father's, and the Ship sailing in about a Week after, Job was brought with the rest of the Slaves to Annapolis in Maryland and delivered to Mr. Vachell Denton, Factor to Mr. Hunt, before mentioned. Job heard since, by Vessels that came from Gambia, that his Father sent down several Slaves, a little after Captain Pike sailed, in order to procure his Redemption; and that Sambo, King of Futa, had made War upon the Mandingoes and cut off great Numbers of them, upon account of the Injury they had done to his Schoolfellow.

THOMAS BLUETT, *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon, the High Priest of Boonda in Africa; Who was a Slave About Two Years in Maryland; and Afterwards Being Brought to England, was Set Free, and Sent to His Native Land in the Year 1734*, London: 1734 ■

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