



The Moment of Freedom

Selections & photographs from

***Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the
Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938***

as transcribed in the interviewers' typed reports

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How old is I? Law chile, I don't know. My mammy say I was fifteen year old time of de surrender. I 'members dat mighty well. Massa John call all de niggers on de plantation 'round him at de big house and he say to 'em "Now, you all jes' as free as I is. I ain't your marster no mo'. I'se tried to be good to you and take keer of all of you. You is all welcome to stay and we'll all wuk togedder and make a livin' somehow. Ef you don' want to

stay, dem dat go will jes' have to root, pig, or die'. Some stayed and some lef'. My daddy stayed wid Marse John till he was called home to glory. Now dey all gone but Siney, and I'se jes' here, waitin' for 'em to call me.

Siney Bonner, 87, emancipated in Alabama

I sho remembers when freedom was declare cause I was bout 16 year old den. When dem Yankees talk bout comin round, my Massa take all we colored boys en all he fast horses en put em back in de woods to de canebrake to hide em from de Yankees. It been many a year since den, but I recollects dat we was settin dere lookin for de Yankees to get us any minute. Wasn' obliged to make no noise neither. . . . Yes'um, I look at dem Yankees wid me own eyes. Dey was all dressed up in a blue uniform en dey was just as white as you is. Oh, dey said a lot of things. Say dey was gwine free de niggers en if it hadn' been for dem, we would been slaves till yet. Coase I rather be free den a slave, but we never have so much worryations den as people have dese days.

Charlie Davis, 88, emancipated in South Carolina



Louisa Adams

We left the plantation soon as de surrender. We lef' right off. We went to goin' towards Fayetteville, North Carolina. We climbed over fences and were just broke down chillun, feet sore. We had a little meat, corn meal, a tray, and mammy had a tin pan. One night we came to a old house; some one had put wheat straw in it. We staid there, next mornin', we come back home. Not to Marster's, but to a white 'oman named Peggy McClinton, on her plantation. We stayed there a long time.

Louisa Adams, 80, emancipated in North Carolina

Liberty and Freedom was all I ever heard any colored folks say dey expected to get out of de war, and mighty proud of dot. Nobody knowed they was goin to have a war till it was done broke out and they was fightin about it. Didn't nobody want land, they jess wanted freedom. I remembers when Lincoln was made the President both times and when

he was killed. I recollects all that like yesterday.

The army had been through and swept out everything. There wasn't a chicken or hog nowhere to be had, took the stock and cattle and all the provisions. So de slaves jess had to scatter out and leave right now.

Wylie Nealy, 85, emancipated in South Carolina

I remember so well, how the roads was full of folks walking and walking along when the niggers were freed. Didnt know where they was going. Just going to see about something else somewhere else. Meet a body in the road and they ask, "Where you going?" "Dont know." "What you going to do?" "Dont know." And then sometimes we would meet a white man and he would say, "How you like to come work on my farm?" And we say, "I dont know." And then maybe he say, "If you come work for me on my farm, when the crops is in I give you five bushels of corn, five gallons of molasses, some ham-meat, and all your clothes and vittals whils you works for me." Alright! That's what I do. And then something begins to work up here, (touching his forehead with his fingers) I begins to think and to know things. And I knowed then I could make a living for my own self, and I never had to be a slave no more.

Robert Falls, 97, emancipated in North Carolina

After the War I stay on the plantation 'til a soldier man tells me of the freedom. The master never tell us—negroes working just like before the War.

John White, 121, emancipated in Texas

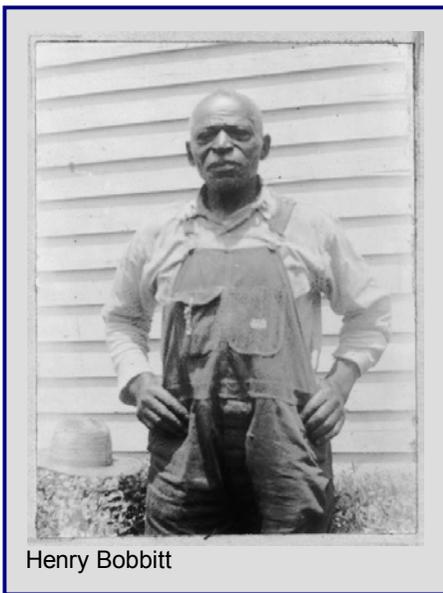
No ma'am, we ain't had no celebration after we was freed. We ain't know we was free 'til a good while after. We ain't know it 'til General Wheeler come thru and tell us. After that, de massa and missus let all de slaves go 'cepting me; they kept me to work in de house and de garden.

Fannie Griffin, 94, emancipated in South Carolina

Yes sir, I was 'bout fourteen years old when President Lincoln set us all free in 1863. The war was still goin' on and I'm tellin' you right when I say that my folks and friends round me did not regard freedom as a unmixed blessin'.

We didn't know where to go or what to do, and so we stayed right where we was, and there wasn't much difference to our livin', 'cause we had always had a plenty to eat and wear. I 'member my mammy tellin' me that food was gittin' scarce, and any black folks beginnin' to scratch for themselves would suffer, if they take their foot in their hand and ramble 'bout the land lak a wolf.

Daniel Waring, 88, emancipated in South Carolina



Henry Bobbitt

I 'members de day moughty well when de Yankees come. Massa Dick he walked de floor an' cussed Sherman fer takin' his niggers away. All o' de niggers lef', of course, an' me, I walked clean ter Raleigh ter find out if I wuz really free, an' I couldn't unnerstan' half of it.

Well de first year I slept in folkses woodhouses an' barns an' in de woods or any whar else I could find. I wucked hyar an' dar, but de folkses' jist give me sompin' ter eat an' my clothes wuz in strings 'fore de spring o' de year.

Henry Bobbitt, 87, emancipated in North Carolina

I was living in Bartow County in north Georgia when freedom came, I don't remember how the slaves found it out. I remember them saying, "Well, they's all free." And that is all I remember. And I remember some one saying — asking a question, "You got to say master?" And somebody answered and said, "Naw." But they said it all the same. They said it for a long time. But they learned better though.

Sarah Jane Patterson, 90, emancipated in Georgia

I think — now I don't know, but I think I was bout six or seven when they surrendered. . . . When we went down to the gate to see the soldiers, I heard Miss Judy say (she was old mistress' sister), I heard her say, "Well, you let em beat you" and started cryin'. I cried too and mama said, "What you cryin' for?" I

said, “Miss Judy’s cryin’.” Mama said, “You fool, you is free!” I didn’t know what freedom was, but I know the soldiers did a lot of devilment. Had guards but they just run over them guards.

I think Abraham Lincoln wanted to give the people some land after they was free, but they didn’t give em nothin’ — just turned em loose.

Course we ought to be free — you know privilege is worth everything.

Susa Lagrone, 79, emancipated in Mississippi

You ain’t gwine to believe dat de slaves on our plantation didn’t stop workin’ for old marster, even when they was told dat they was free. Us didn’t want no more freedom than us was gittin’ on our plantation already. Us knowed too well dat us was well took care of, wid a plenty of vittles to eat and tight log and board houses to live in. De slaves, where I lived, knowed after de war dat they had abundance of dat somethin’ called freedom, what they could not eat, wear, and sleep in. Yes, sir, they soon found out dat freedom ain’t nothin’, ‘less you is got somethin’ to live on and a place to call home. Dis livin’ on liberty is lak young folks livin’ on love after they gits married. It just don’t work. No, sir, it las’ so long and not a bit longer. Don’t tell me! It sho’ don’t hold good when you has to work, or when you gits hongry. You knows dat poor white folks and niggers has got to work to live, regardless of liberty, love, and all them things.

Ezra Adams, 83, emancipated in South Carolina

I ‘lieve they ought to have gived us somethin’ when we was freed, but they turned us out to graze or starve. Most of the white people turned the Negroes slam loose. We stayed a year with missis and then she married and her husband had his own workers and told us to git out. We worked for twenty and thirty cents a day then, and I fin’ly got a place with Dr. L. J. Conroe. But after the war the Negro had a hard struggle, ‘cause he was turned loose jus’ like he came into the world and no education or ‘sperience.

Tom Holland, 97, emancipated in Texas