

Before Freedom (48 Oral Histories of Former North and South Carolina Slaves) by Belinda Hurmence, Penguin Group, New York, 1990 (29 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

Elisa Thomas

Age 84 when interviewed August 6, 1937 at 521 Cannon Avenue, Raleigh, N.C., by T. Pat Matthews

1. He waited till Sunday morning to whip his slaves. He would get ready to go to church, have his horse hitched up to the buggy, and then call his slaves out and whip them before he left for church. He generally whipped about five children every Sunday morning. [Page 10]

Hannah Crasson

Age 84 when interviewed by T. Pat Matthews

2. The white folks did not allow us to have nothing to do with books. You better not be found trying to learn to read. Our marster was harder down on that than anything else. You better not be caught with a book. They read the Bible and told us to obey our marster, for the Bible said obey your marster. [Page 16]

Josephine Smith

Age 94 when interviewed at 1010 Mark Street, Raleigh, N.C., by Mary A. Hicks

3. It was in the month of August, and the sun was bearing down hot when the slaves and their drivers leave the shade. They walk for a little piece, and this woman fall out. She dies there 'side of the road, and right there they buries her, cussing, they tells me, about losing money on her. [Page 29]

Mattie Curtis

Age 98 when interviewed at Route #4, Raleigh, N.C., by Mary A. Hicks

4. Preacher Whitfield, being a preacher, was suppose to be good, but be ain't half fed nor clothed his slaves, and he whipped them bad. I seen him whip my mommy with all the clothes off her back. [Page 30]

Jacob Manson

Age 86 when interviewed at 317 N. Haywood Street, Raleigh, N.C., by T. Pat Matthews

5. Many of the slaves went bareheaded and barefooted. Some wore rags around their heads, and some wore bonnets. We had poor food, and the young slaves fed out of troughs. The food was put in a trough, and little niggers gathered around and et. The chillun was looked after by the old slave women who were unable to

work in the fields, while the mothers of the babies worked. The women plowed and done other work as the men did. [Page 34]

Mary Anderson

Age 86 when interviewed August 23, 1937 at 17 Poole Road, R.F.D. # 2, Raleigh, N.C., by T. Pat Matthews.

6. There were about 162 slaves on the plantation, and every Sunday morning, all the children had to be bathed, dressed, and their hair combed, and carried down to Marster's for breakfast. It was a rule that all the little colored children eat at the great house every Sunday morning in order that Marster and Missus could watch them eat, so they could know which ones were sickly and have them doctored. [Page 38]
7. Those who refused to eat or those who were ailing in any way had to come back to the great house for their meals and medicine until they were well. Sunday was a great day on the plantation. Everybody got biscuits Sunday. The slave women went down to Marster's for their Sunday allowance of flour. [Page 39]
8. We were allowed to have prayer meetings in our homes, and we also went to the white folks' church. They would not teach any of us to read and write. Books and papers were forbidden. [Page 39]
9. My father and mother, two uncles, and their families moved back. Also Lorenza Brodie, and John Brodie, and their families moved back. Several of the young men and women who once belonged to him came back. Some were glad to get back they cried, 'cause fare had been mighty bad part of the time they were rambling around, and they were hungry. When they got back, Marster would say, "Well, you have come back home, have you?" and the Negros would say, "Yes, Marster." Most all spoke of them as Miss and Marster as they did before surrender, and getting back home was the greatest pleasure of all. [Page 42]

Thomas Hall

Age 81 when interviewed September 10, 1937 at 316 Tarboro road, Raleigh, N.C., by T. Pat Matthews

10. Getting married and having a family was a joke in the days of slavery, as the main thing in allowing any form of matrimony among the slaves was to raise more slaves in the same sense and for the same purpose as stock raisers raise horses and mules, that is, for work. A woman who could produce fast was in great demand and would bring a good price on the auction block in Richmond, Virginia; Charleston, South Carolina; and other places. [Page 43]

Sarah Debro

Age 90 when interviewed July 24, 1937 at Durham, N.C., by Travis Jordan

11. My folks don't want me to talk about slavery, they's shame niggers ever was slaves. But, while for most colored folks freedom is the best, they's still some niggers that ought to be slaves now. These niggers that's done clean forgot the Lord; those that's always cutting and fighting and going in white folks' houses at night, they ought to be slaves. They ought to have an old marse with a whip to make them come when he say come and go when he say go, till they learn to live right. [Page 51]

Ria Sorrell

Age 97 when interviewed August 23, 1937 at 536 E. Edenton Street, Raleigh, N.C., by T. Pat Matthews

12. We worked from sunup till sunset with a rest spell at twelve o'clock of two hours. He give us holidays to rest in. That was Christmas, a week off then, then a day every month, and all Sundays. He said he was a Christian and he believed in giving us a chance. He give us patches and all they made on it. He give slaves days off to work their patches.

We had prayer meeting any time, and we went to the white folks' church. There was no whiskey on the place, no, no, honey, no whiskey. Now at cornshuckings, they had a supper and all et all they wanted. I'll tell you Jake Sorrell was all right. We didn't have any dances no time. Some nights Marster would come to our cabins, call us all into one of them, and pray with us. He stood up in the floor and told us all to be good and pray. [Page 53]

Patsy Mitchner

Age 84 when interviewed July 2, 1937 at 432 McKee Street, Raleigh, N.C., by T. Pat Matthews

13. Slavery was a bad thing, and freedom, of the kind we got, with nothing to live on, was bad. Two snakes full of poison. One lying with his head pointing north, the other with his head painting south. Their names was slavery and freedom. The snake called slavery lay with his head pointing south, and the snake called freedom lay with his head pointed north. Both bit the nigger, and they was both bad. [Page 69]

W. L. Bost

Age 87 when interviewed September 27, 1937 at 63 Curve Street, Asheville, N.C., by Marjorie Jones

14. I've seen the ice balls hanging on to the bottom of their dresses so they ran along, just like sheep in a pasture before they are sheared. They never wore any shoes. Just run along on the ground, all spewed up with ice. The speculators always rode on horses and drove the poor niggers. When they get cold, they make them run till they are warm again.

The speculators stayed in the hotel and put the niggers in the quarters just like droves of hogs. All through the night I could hear them mourning and praying. I didn't know the Lord would let people live who were so cruel. The gates were always locked and they was a guard on the outside to shoot anyone who tried to run away. Lord, Miss, them slaves look just like droves of turkeys running along in front of them horses. [Page 80]

15. Us niggers never have chance to go to Sunday school and church. The white folks feared for niggers to get any religion and education, but I reckon something inside just told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter. We would sneak off and have prayer meeting. Sometimes the pattyrollers catch us and beat us good, but that didn't keep us from trying. I remember one old song we use to sing when we meet down in the woods back of the barn. My mother, she sing and pray to the Lord to deliver us out of slavery. She always say she thankful she was never sold from her children, and that our massa not so mean as some of the others. [Page 82]

Jake McLeod

Age 83, when interviewed by Lucile Young and H. Grady Davis, in Timmonsville, S.C.; August 1937

16. The community have man that called patroller [local slave patrol; also patteroller, pataroller, pattyroller, etc.], and they business was to catch them that run away. [Page 117]

17. You know, some slaves got along might bad, 'cause most of the white people wasn't like our white folks. [Page 118]

Adeline Jackson

Age 88, when interviewed by W. W. Dixon, in Winnsboro, S.C.

18. Everything lively at Christmas time, dances with fiddles, patting, and stick rattling; but when I joined the church, I quit dancing. [Page 121]

Zack Herndon

Age 93, when interviewed by Caldwell Sims, in Gaffney, S.C., Grenard Street; May 1937

19. Marster Zack never bred no slaves, but us heard of such afar off. He let his darkies marry when they wanted to. He was a good man. He always allowed the slaves to marry as they pleased, 'cause he allowed that God never intent for no souls to be bred as if they was cattle. [Page 113]

Elijah Green

Age 94, when interviewed by Augustus Ladson, at 156 Elizabeth Street, Charleston, S.C.

20. Slaves was always buried in the night, as no one could stop to do it in the day. Old boards was used to make the coffin that was blackened with shoe polish. [Page 146]

Fannie Griffin

Age 94, when interviewed by Everett R. Pierce, 2125 Calhoun Street, Columbia S.C.

21. My marster was good to all he slaves, but Missy Grace was mean to us. She whip us a heap of times when we ain't done nothing bad to be whipped for. When she go to whip me, she tie my wrists together with a rope and put that tope through a big staple in the ceiling and draw me up off the floor and give me a hundred lashes. I think about my old mammy heap of times now and how I's seen her whipped, with the blood dripping off of her. [Page 159]

Prince Smith

Age 100+, when interviewed by Augustus Ladson, on Wardmalaw Island, S.C.

22. Marster had three kinds of punishment for those who disobeyed him. One was the sweat box. That was made the height of the person and no larger. Just large enough so the person didn't have to be squeezed in. the box is nailed, and in the summer is put in the hot sun; in the winter it is put in the coldest, dampest place. The next is the stock. Wood is nailed on or with the person laying on his back with hands and feet tied with a heavy weight on chest. Then tired is the Bilbao [or bilbo: foot shackles]. You are place on a high scaffold for so many hours, and you don't try to keep a level head, you'll fall and you will surely hurt yourself, if your neck isn't broken. Most of the time they were put there so they could break their necks. [Page 166]

George Briggs

Age 88, when interviewed by Caldwell Sims, at RFD 2, Union, S.C.; June 1937

23. In Union Country is where I was born and raised, and it's where I is going to be buried. Ain't never left the county but once in my life, and if the Lord see fitten, I ain't going to leave it no more, 'cept to reach the Promise Land. Lord, Lord, the Promise Land, That's where I is going when I leaves Union Country. [Page 171]

Peter Clifton

Age 89, when interviewed by W. W. Dixon, in Winnsboro, S.C.

24. I had to ask her old folks for her before she consent. Her have been a blessing to me every day since. [Page 183]

Robert Toatley

Age 82, when interviewed by W. W. Dixon, near White Oak, S.C.

25. I married Emma Greer in 1870; she been dead two years. Us lived husband and wife fifty-six years, bless God. Us raised ten chillun; all is going well. All us Presbyterians. Can read, but can't write. Our slaves was told if ever they leaned to write, they'd lose the hand or arm they wrote with. [Page 190]

Sylvia Cannon

Age 85, when interviewed by Annie Ruth Davis, at Marion Street, Florence S.C.;
October 1937

26. Oh Heaven, sweet Heaven,
When shall I see?
If you get there before me,
You tell my Lord I on the way.

27. The white folks didn't never help none of we black people to read and write no time. They learn the yellow chillun, but if they catch we black chillun with a book, they nearly 'bout kill us. They was sure better to them yellow chillun than the black chillun that be on the plantation. Northern women come there after the war, but they didn't let 'em teach nobody nothing. [Page 192]

28. Didn't get much clothes to wear in the day and time neither. Man never wear no breeches in the summer. Go in his shirttail that come down to the knees and a woman been glad enough to get one-piece homespun frock what was made with they hand. Make petticoat out of old dress and patch and patch till couldn't tell which place weave. Always put wash out on a Saturday night and dry it and put it back on Sunday. Then get oak leaves and make a hat what to wear to church. [Page 193]

Savilla Burrell

Age 83, when interviewed by W. W. Dixon, in Winnsboro, S.C.

29. Never see any money. Us half-naked all the time. Grown boys went around barefooted and in their shirttail all summer. There was plenty to eat such as it

was, but in the summertime, before us get there to eat, the flies would be all over the food and some was swimming in the gravy and milk pots. Marster laughed about that and say it made us fat. [Page 200]

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