

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Slave Narratives

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For a century after emancipation, historians of U.S. slavery relied almost exclusively on sources written by white people. These plentiful materials ranged from slaveholders' diaries to European travelers' accounts, and scholars deployed them all in their fierce debates over slaves' living conditions, productivity, and psychology. They reached radically different conclusions, comparing plantations to everything from schools to concentration camps. But something was missing. Without listening to the words of enslaved people, historians could not study slavery from their point of view. For all their disputes, early scholars focused on what masters did to or for their slaves. They paid scant attention to what slaves thought, felt, and did themselves.

By examining slave-produced sources, scholars in the 1970s permanently transformed the study of American slavery. They asked new questions, adopted new research methods, advanced new arguments, and unleashed new debates. Few primary sources did more to stimulate this innovation than the ex-slave interviews conducted by the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency, in the 1930s. Commonly called the "WPA Slave Narratives," this collection of more than 2000 transcripts changed how historians understand antebellum slavery. But scholars have not fully explored what they can teach us about later eras. Civil War historians—who stand to profit from this rich resource as much as anyone—would do well to make judicious use of these complex, sometimes frustrating, and always fascinating, narratives.

The term "slave narrative" can refer to several different types of sources, including autobiographies written by former slaves soon after gaining freedom. This genre dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century chronicles of Olaudah Equiano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and others, written to support the British movement to abolish the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>1</sup> In the U.S., these writings proliferated by the 1830s, as debates over slavery convulsed American politics. Readers seeking a rebuttal of proslavery propaganda found it in the testimony of ex-slaves who had escaped to the North or Canada. They ranged

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<sup>1</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustvaus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London: Printed and Sold for the Author, 1789); James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (Bath: W. Gye, 1770). More generally, see: Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1988).

from the brief statements compiled and published by white abolitionists like Theodore Dwight Weld, to full-length autobiographies, including those of Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northup, which are still widely read.<sup>2</sup> These documents are doubly important as records of slaves' experiences, and as political texts which shaped northern public opinion. Former slaves continued to publish memoirs after 1865, but popular interest faded. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, slave narratives attracted little attention and most historians rejected them as biased and unreliable. The fact that they readily used sources written by slaveholders—and largely accepted masters' benign portrayal of slavery—suggests that it was not staunch objectivity that steered them away from the narratives.

Studies of African-American history and culture flourished in the 1920s, however, and out of this renaissance the WPA narratives were born. In 1929, black scholars Charles Spurgeon Johnson (Fisk University) and John Brother Cade (Southern University) began to collect folklore and life histories from some of the thousands of living former slaves. These efforts yielded some publications,<sup>3</sup> but were limited in scope. In 1934, Johnson's former student, Lawrence Dunbar Reddick of Kentucky State College, conceived of a larger oral history project supported by a federal work-relief program. The idea soon bore fruit when the Federal Writers' Project, an initiative for writers and intellectuals sponsored by the Works Progress Administration, began to interview ex-slaves. Under the direction of folklorist John Avery Lomax, the WPA collaborated with local offices in seventeen states to dispatch interviewers, gather testimony from aged freed-people, type and edit the transcripts, and forward them to Washington. Most of the field work was completed in 1937 and 1938. By 1941, a collection of more than 2,000 interviews totaling over 10,000 pages had been indexed and deposited at the Library of Congress.<sup>4</sup>

The collection remained underutilized for a generation. A few historians drew on the WPA narratives, but the most influential books on U.S. slavery published in the 1950s and 1960s did not. The narratives' publication in 1972 made them more readily available.<sup>5</sup> Around the same time, historians rediscovered the narratives just as they began to reinterpret slavery from the viewpoint of the enslaved. Eugene Dominic Genovese, Herbert G. Gutman, Leon F. Litwack, and Paul D. Escott, among others, used

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<sup>2</sup> [Theodore D. Weld,] *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853).

<sup>3</sup> John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20, no. 3 (July 1935): 294-337.

<sup>4</sup> Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1967): 534-53.

<sup>5</sup> George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pub. Co., 1972). Rawick also published supplemental series in 1977 and 1979, bringing the whole collection to 41 volumes.

the narratives to challenge earlier interpretations of slavery.<sup>6</sup> No longer did slaves seem passive— either as beneficiaries of master’s care or victims of his cruelty. Instead, they actively shaped their own lives within the boundaries of an inherently oppressive system. The new studies stressed the autonomy of slaves’ communities, the resilience of their families, the vitality of their culture, and the shrewdness of their resistance. In sum, the interviews provided a fresh perspective which scholars writing in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement were ready to adopt. By 1984, an enthusiastic essayist persuasively argued that the narratives made this paradigm shift possible.<sup>7</sup>

The narratives also sparked intense controversy. Since the 1970s, scholars have debated their usefulness and reliability, and critics’ objections must be taken seriously. John Wesley Blassingame outlined the most common concerns when he explained his decision not to use the narratives in his own scholarship.<sup>8</sup> He pointed out the obvious problems of age and memory, questioning the accuracy of testimony from persons in their 80s and 90s about their youth. He noted that because most of the interviewees were emancipated as children or teenagers, they may have escaped slavery’s worst abuses. He wondered if interviewees’ longevity made them unrepresentative, positing that uniquely good treatment in childhood may have helped them reach old age. He critiqued the narratives’ geographic distribution, which did not match the 1860 slave population, leaving states like Arkansas overrepresented and others, like Mississippi, underrepresented. He balked at the context in which the interviews were conducted; most interviewees were white and Jim Crow was alive and well in the 1930s. How candidly would elderly, often impoverished black southerners converse with white interviewers who, in some cases, were descended from their former masters? Would ex-slaves speak freely during a decade in which over 70 blacks were lynched? How would they handle leading questions which solicited answers that emphasized the kindness of a plantation mistress or the comfort of the slave quarters? Perhaps his most disturbing criticism involved the fidelity of the transcripts. The narratives were not verbatim reports. Interviewers and editors at the state and national offices had ample opportunity to rewrite the accounts, translating many them into caricatured “black” dialect, and sometimes revising, adding, or erasing material. In one case, Georgia interviewer J. Ralph Jones deleted 1,700 words from an interview with Washington B. Allen, including passages that discussed slave auctions and clashes with the infamous slave patrols. Predictably, Jones retained references to kind treatment but eliminated Allen’s discussions of overwork and whippings. Blassingame concluded that the narratives revealed more about Jim Crow than slaves’ experiences. He urged historians to use the 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave

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<sup>6</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Norman R. Yetman, “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery,” *American Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 181-210, esp. p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (November 1975): 473-92.

autobiographies instead. These sources, written soon after liberation and without proslavery revision, were more trustworthy. Other appraisals of the autobiographies and the WPA narratives have reached similar conclusions,<sup>9</sup> and later critics offered similar objections to the narratives.<sup>10</sup>

Proponents of the narratives have acknowledged these limitations while arguing that all primary sources contain bias and distortion; that the WPA interviews have advantages over other slave-produced sources; and that, if used properly, they provide substantial insight into the lives, thoughts, and feelings of antebellum slaves. Leading southern historian C. Vann Woodward endorsed the narratives and challenged scholars to evaluate primary sources impartially. They must not dismiss the narratives “unless they are prepared to be consistent and discard most of the other sources they habitually use,” including newspapers, diaries, letters, speeches, and public documents. “Full of paradox and evasions, contrasts and contradictions, lies and exaggerations, pure truth and complex fabrications as they are,” Woodward concluded, “such sources still remain the daily bread on which historians feed.”<sup>11</sup> Civil War historians who regularly untangle the webs of nostalgia, self-aggrandizement, and error that bedevil regimental histories, memoirs, and *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* articles, are familiar with these difficulties. Woodward’s reminder that we must be cautious with every source is a sensible one.

Some defenders of the WPA narratives have stressed their advantages over other first-hand accounts, including the 19<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies. These published sources are highly stylized and some were clearly influenced by white abolitionists who shaped them to suit the tastes, values, and prejudices of northern readers. They lack the demographic breadth of the WPA narratives because most were written by runaway slaves—and thus by authors who fit the profile of the person most likely to run away: young, male, skilled craftsmen from the border states.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the WPA narratives were neither fine-tuned for political effect nor written by exceptional authors. According to their advocates, they are “a monument to the former slaves, whose collective testimony surpasses in vividness and freshness many other efforts to reconstruct ante-bellum life.”<sup>13</sup> All but the narratives’ harshest critics agree that, if used with care and in conjunction with other sources, they are indispensable for writing the history of antebellum slavery. Scholars have warned each other for more than forty years to approach the narratives

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<sup>9</sup> David Thomas Bailey, “A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery,” *Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 3 (August 1980): 381-404.

<sup>10</sup> Donna J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 247-61; Sharon Ann Musher, “Contesting ‘The Way the Almighty Wants It’: Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (March 2001): 1-31; Ellen Hampton, “‘Lawdy! I was sho’ happy when I was a slave!’: Manipulative Editing in the WPA Former-Slave Narratives from Mississippi,” *L’Ordinaire des Amériques* 215 (2013).

<sup>11</sup> C. Vann Woodward, “History from Slave Sources,” *American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (April 1974): 470-81 (quotation on p. 475).

<sup>12</sup> Yetman, “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historography of Slavery,” 184, 195. Even scholars who favor the 19<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies have illustrated this point. See Bailey, “Divided Prism,” 386-7.

<sup>13</sup> Yetman, “Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” 553.

with healthy skepticism, but there is a near-consensus that “the hazards of attempting to understand slavery without using them far outweigh the limitations their use poses.”<sup>14</sup>

This may understate the WPA narratives’ value in terms of chronological scope. Most of the debate over the narratives centers on their use for studying antebellum slavery. This is unsurprising. The narratives were collected to shed light on the lives and cultures of enslaved people and the interviewees were chosen for their personal experiences in bondage. But the narratives actually tell us much more because many interviewees traced their life histories through the Civil War and Reconstruction and beyond, sometimes up to the date of the interview. As a result, the narratives contain a wealth of information on topics from the 1850s to the 1930s, a turbulent period that saw slavery’s collapse, Reconstruction’s downfall, the rise of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, and the Depression. They also represent an underutilized resource for Civil War historians, particularly those interested in the Confederate home front and relations between Federal soldiers and southern civilians.

This broader potential has only been partially realized, but the results are promising. Stephanie J. Shaw’s ingenious essay on how elderly black southerners survived the Great Depression was among the first to use the narratives to study the period in which they were transcribed.<sup>15</sup> Paul Escott devoted nearly a third of his book on the narratives to the wartime, Reconstruction, and post-Redemption periods, charting the way for more specialized investigations.<sup>16</sup> Historians of emancipation have done the most to bring the analysis of the narratives past 1861. Leon Litwack, for example, used them extensively in his pioneering study of war, emancipation, and the onset of Reconstruction as he explored how the interdependence of white and black southerners set limits on the liberty enjoyed by freedpeople.<sup>17</sup> More recently, David Silkenat and John Barr used the narratives to examine how former slaves remembered Abraham Lincoln. They combined quantitative analysis with close reading to show that ex-slaves had surprisingly varied recollections of Honest Abe. These ranged from extremes of praise and censure, to (possibly feigned) apathy, and a curious number of claims that Lincoln visited their plantations, undercover, before the war.<sup>18</sup> This inventive essay suggests that there are always new things to say about the narratives.

If we focus on the 1861-1865 period, even a quick survey reveals that Civil War historians can use the WPA narratives to revisit a variety of familiar topics, and to ask new questions about how Americans dealt with the war.

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<sup>14</sup> Yetman, “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historography of Slavery,” 189 (quotation); Woodward, “History from Slave Sources,” 480; Thomas F. Soapes, “The Federal Writers’ Project Slave Interviews: Useful Data or Misleading Source,” *Oral History Review* 5 (1977): 33-38; Bailey, “Divided Prism,” 402-4; Spindel, “Assessing Memory,” 260; Musher, “Contesting ‘The Way the Almighty Wants It,’” 25-26.

<sup>15</sup> Stephanie J. Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (August 2003): 623-58.

<sup>16</sup> Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 119-75.

<sup>17</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long*.

<sup>18</sup> David Silkenat and John Barr, “‘Serving the Lord and Abe Lincoln’s Spirit’: Lincoln and Memory in the WPA Narratives,” *Lincoln Herald* 115, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 75-97.

The narratives remind us that there was not one universal “slave” experience of the conflict. Just as we expect great diversity among white northerners and white southerners, so, too, did slaves endure and respond to varied wartime conditions in different ways. Some who lived in the perilous border region coped with unpredictable raids and occupations. Phillip Johnson, born into slavery near Poolesville, Maryland, remembered watching house-to-house fighting during a Confederate incursion across the Potomac and saw a Confederate soldier killed in front of him. Another raid trapped him in the Methodist church. Confederates surrounded the building while they commandeered the horses and wagons outside. When one of the guards was distracted, Johnson fled.<sup>19</sup>

The war arrived on Johnson’s doorstep without warning, but he remained in place. For many other slaves, the war involved significant and often involuntary migration. The narratives reflect the frequency with which masters refugeed (transferred away from occupied or invaded territory) slaves in order to distance them from potential Union liberators. For those in the southwest, a common destination was Texas. William Mathews explained that the more they came into fleeting contact with Yankees, the more the slaves on his Louisiana plantation anticipated emancipation. “All de talk ‘bout freedom git so bad on de plantation,” he recalled, “de massa make me put de men in a big wagon an drive ‘em to Winfield. He say in Texas dere never be no freedom.” The men refused to continue the journey and returned home, so their master threatened to shoot them. Rather than submit to forced relocation or execution, Mathews’ peers “hang round de woods and dodge round and round till de freedom man come by” at the end of the war.<sup>20</sup> This was a fairly common tactic: remain beyond the reach of masters, but not away from faithful friends, until the war—and the danger of removal—had passed. Wesley Graves’s father ran away early in the war because his master wanted to take the elder Graves into the army as a body servant. The slave stayed “in the woods” until the war ended. His master’s wife contacted him through a letter, probably transmitted by another slave who knew his hiding place, and promised to free him if he returned home. Graves remained concealed until 1865; as his son told the WPA interviewer, “He wouldn’t take no chances on it.”<sup>21</sup>

Not all slaves could avoid relocation. Some accompanied their masters to the front lines: Amos Gadsden of Charleston, South Carolina, went to Virginia with Dr. H.E. Bissell, a Confederate surgeon. Gadsden assisted with amputations, holding arms and legs while Bissell performed the war’s most notorious medical procedure.<sup>22</sup> Others, like William Sykes of North Carolina, spent much of the war in the mountains, where masters

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<sup>19</sup> Federal Writers Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Volume VIII, *Maryland Narratives* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941), 42-43. All citations of the narratives refer to online version provided at the Library of Congress’s “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project” website:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> accessed February 10, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume XVI, Part 3, *Texas Narratives*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume II, Part 3, *Arkansas Narratives*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume XIV, Part 2, *South Carolina Narratives*, 94.

judged they would be less likely to encounter Federals. Sykes's master "come stompin' in one day" and complained of the "damn Yankees...comin' ter take my niggers 'way from me, an' I ain't gwine ter stan' fer hit nother," so he marched them to the Blue Ridge mountains, where "'dar won't be no trouble" with maurading northerners.<sup>23</sup> Before the war, forced migration was a fact of life for slaves who were separated from familiar places and people by sale or masters' relocation. But the war put even more people on the move, with slaveholders trying to stay a step ahead of Union incursions.

Other slaves remained relatively untouched by the war. Tom Wilcox lived in Warren County, North Carolina, in the north-central portion of the state. Unlike those who remembered battles, flight to Union lines, or enforced movement, Wilcox recalled little about the conflict. "Dar wuzn't nary a Yankee track made in our section, an' we ain't knowed much about de war." He continued to work in the fields with fifty or sixty other slaves. Yet perhaps he hoped to avoid offending his interviewer, for it came out that Wilcox well understood the political stakes of the war. When asked about the rival presidents, he responded politely but firmly: "No mam, we ain't liked Jeff Davis, but we did like Mr. Lincoln," and recalled a song he sang to celebrate the Union victory:

Ole Confederate has done played out,  
 Shrew ball, shrew ball,  
 Ole Confederate has done played out  
 Shrew ball say I,  
 An' ole Gen'l. Lee can't fight no mo';  
 We'll all drink stone blind  
 Johnnies go marchin' home.<sup>24</sup>

Dilly Yelladay's parents might have sung a similar tune, for she recalled their intense interest in the conflict and their disdain for Jefferson Davis. "Mammy an' dad dey said de niggers would get in de slave quarters at night an' pray fer freedom an' laf 'bout what de Yankees was doin' 'bout Lincoln an' Grant foolin' deir marsters so." When they heard the widespread, though erroneous, rumor that Davis was captured while disguised in women's clothing, they relished (perhaps more than any Yankee could) how far the mighty had fallen. "Ole Jeff Davis said he wus goin' to fight de Yankees till hell wus so full of 'em dad dere legs wus hangin' over de sides," Yelladay mused, "but when dey got 'im in a close place he dres in 'omans clothes an' tried to get away frum 'em but dey seed his boots....an' knowed who it wus. Dey jus laffed an' pointed at 'im an' said you hol' on dere we got you....Dat bird flew mighty high but he had to come back to de groun' an' course when he lit de Yankees wus waitin' for 'im an' ketched 'im."<sup>25</sup>

Slaves' most momentous wartime movement was flight to Union lines. Some fled alone. Bill Simms of Osceola, Missouri, was sent by his master to do manual labor for the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume XI, Part 2 *North Carolina Narratives*, 329.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 377-9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 426-7.

Confederate army but later returned home. He remained on the lookout for opportunities to flee, and when the Yankees “came close enough I ran away from home and joined the Union army” where he worked as a teamster.<sup>26</sup> Other slaves recalled absconding en masse, particularly those who lived in areas with large black populations, including coastal South Carolina and the Mississippi Delta. Rastus Jones of Mississippi remembered running off “with a crowd o’ Niggers” to join the Union army at Memphis. He served as a cook in the Vicksburg and Atlanta campaigns.<sup>27</sup>

Whether they acted alone or in groups, fugitive slaves took serious risks when they set out for Union-held territory. An ex-slave by the auspicious name of William Sherman recalled hearing cannon fire as the army under the general who shared his name neared his South Carolina home in 1865. “The only happy folk were the slaves,” Sherman remarked, “the whites were in distress.” When his master, Jack Davis, returned from the front lines, Davis’s wife asked if he thought the Yankees would win. “No,” Davis reportedly replied, “if I did I’d kill every damned nigger in the place.” Not willing to wait and see if Davis would carry out his threat, a pair of Sherman’s fellow slaves snuck off that night. They traveled from plantation to plantation, reporting that the Yankees were nearby and urging all the slaves to join up with them. “Soon the two had a following of about five hundred slaves who abandoned their masters’ plantations” to reach the Union lines. Along the way they evaded Confederate pickets posted to block their escape. Eventually, most stayed with General Sherman’s column as it moved northward through the Palmetto State. But even though they accompanied a powerful army, freedpeople still faced Confederate retaliation. Sherman recalled that some were killed by Confederate snipers, who decapitated them and placed their heads “upon posts that lined the fields so that they could be seen by other slaves to warn them of what would befall them if they attempted to escape.”<sup>28</sup> Wartime freedom was tenuous— life and liberty had to be guarded.

Most slaves did not become free until the war ended. Their accounts often lack the drama of Sherman’s, but they reveal how important slave labor was to the Confederate war effort. Some of these wartime activities were probably not recorded elsewhere. Ellen Claibourn was a teenager in Columbia County, Georgia, where her mistress opened a small hospital in her home. The sight of the men “stragglin’ in, all sick or shot,” deeply affected the girl, who remembered it seventy years later. Her mistress assigned another slave to tend the soldiers and Claibourn often held a candle for him as they nursed the men at night. This close contact with the grisly aftermath of battle deeply affected Claibourn, who later exclaimed: “Oh my Gawd, I saw plenty wounded soldiers....That Confed’rate war was the terriblest, awfullest thing.”<sup>29</sup> Others, like Bill Simms of Missouri, traveled with Confederate soldiers working as teamsters; Simms

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Volume VI, *Kansas Narratives*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, Part 2: *Georgia Narratives*, 357.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Volume III, *Florida Narratives*, 293-295.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, Part 1: *Georgia Narratives*, 187.



remembered laboring for three years, “hauling canons, driving mules, hauling ammunition, and provisions” before he escaped to Union lines.<sup>30</sup>

Not surprisingly, many slaves echoed the prayers offered by Dilly Helladay’s parents for a Union victory. But their face-to-face interactions with Federals varied widely and the full range of encounters appear in the narratives. Mary Anderson of North Carolina recounted watching Yankees encamp on her master’s plantation. The cavalrymen dismounted, the infantrymen stacked arms and built campfires, and they “called [to] the slaves, saying, ‘Your [sic] are free.’” The mood was festive. “Slaves were whooping and laughing and acting like they were crazy. Yankee soldiers were shaking hands with the Negroes and calling them Sam, Dinah, Sarah and asking them questions. They busted the door to the smoke house and got all the hams...The Negroes and Yankees were cooking and eating together. The Yankees told them to come on and join them, they were free...The slaves were awfully excited. The Yankees stayed there, cooked, eat, drank and played music until about night,” when a bugle summoned them into line and they departed.<sup>31</sup> This was a best-case scenario. Other slaves remembered Federals as indiscriminate pillagers. “When the ‘Old War’ come on,” recalled Irene Robertson of Arkansas, “and the Yankees come they took everything...They would drive up at mealtime and come in and rake up every blessed thing was cooked.” After they left, Robertson and her mother had to “scrape about and find something else to eat. What they keer ‘bout you being white or black? Thing they was after was filling theirselves up.”<sup>32</sup>

More consistent were slaveholders’ concerns that Yankees’ presence would upset the hierarchy of slavery. Their fears were rational; when a potent outside force arrived at a plantation, masters’ authority weakened, sometimes leaving them at the mercy of their slaves. This was especially true when Federal soldiers asked how slaves had been treated and calibrated their theft and destruction to punish cruel masters. Born in 1850, Riviana Boynton was old enough to understand this when Federals arrived at her South Carolina home in 1865. Just before they reached the house, Boynton’s mistress ordered the slaves, in rather a pleading fashion: “‘Now you beg for us! You can save our lives. If they ask you if we are good to you, you tell them ‘YES!’ If they ask you, if we give you meat, you tell them ‘Yes!’”” Boynton, a house servant, did receive meat rations, though the other slaves did not. For some reason, they all lied and interceded on behalf of their mistress and her belongings—including the household’s provisions, which had to feed the black residents as well as the whites. Boynton’s fellow slaves were not blindly loyal, however, for several of them soon joined the Union army.<sup>33</sup>

The war’s full revolutionary potential was realized every time a slave gained freedom. Popular commemoration of emancipation focuses closely on Abraham Lincoln, and he certainly received considerable praise from WPA interviewees. Rachel Adams

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Volume VI, *Kansas Narratives*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., Volume XI, Part 1, *North Carolina Narratives*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Volume II, Part 1, *Arkansas Narratives*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Volume VIII, *Florida Narratives*, 368-9.

summed it up neatly when she opined: “‘Cordin’ to my way of thinkin’, Abraham Lincoln done a good thing when he sot us free.”<sup>34</sup> Many slaves recalled the exact day of the Emancipation Proclamation, and some dated their freedom to January 1, 1863, even if they remained in bondage until war’s end.<sup>35</sup> But when asked to recall the actual process of emancipation, most interviewees related one of two distinct experiences. One group, who tended to live in areas occupied by Federal troops prior to 1865, remembered being freed by Union soldiers. Jefferson Frankin Henry, for instance, lived in northern Georgia and recalled: “[T]he Yankees come through and had the slaves come together in town whar they had a speakin’ and told them Negroes they was free, and that they didn’t belong to nobody no more.”<sup>36</sup> Freedom arrived in the form of the Union military. The second group of slaves, who typically remained enslaved until the war ended, became free in memorable rituals presided over by their masters. Irene Robertson related a typical scene. Her master went to town and learned that he must set his slaves free. “He had the farm bell rung,” Robertson recalled, and all the slaves “went up to his house. “He said, ‘You are free. Go. If you can’t get along come back and do like you been.’”<sup>37</sup> He outlined a fateful choice that confronted most freedpeople: work for the same boss under a new arrangement, or strike out for better fortunes elsewhere. The complex economic and social Reconstruction of the South had begun.

The more that Civil War historians explore the WPA narratives, the more insight they will gain into old questions. The venerable debate about whether the Union army practiced “total war,” for example, is important. Sometimes lost in the discussion is the fact that Confederate forces confiscated or destroyed huge amounts of southern property, to replenish their provisions and deny sustenance to the Federals. Former slaves who lived in Georgia and the Carolinas regularly commented on this, often arguing that Confederate General Joseph Wheeler’s cavalymen burned and stole as much as General Sherman’s men did.<sup>38</sup> How do we classify Wheeler’s scorched-earth policy? How did it influence relations between Federal soldiers and southern civilians? How did it shape how southerners, white and black, viewed the Confederacy?

The narratives may also inspire Civil War historians to ask new questions. How did slaves cope with the material deprivation of the war years, and how did this affect their expectations for, and experiences of, freedom? Rebecca Hooks’s account of making coffee out of okra seeds, extracting salt from smokehouse floors, and scrounging for other scarce commodities, reminds us that enslaved as well as free civilians relied on their ingenuity to survive.<sup>39</sup> Did this temper relations between masters and slaves? Or did it give enslaved people a greater sense of autonomy? How did it shape their postwar aspirations and opportunities?

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, Part 1, *Georgia Narratives*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*, Volume XIV, Part 3, *South Carolina Narratives*, 131.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, Part 2, *Georgia Narratives*, 190.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Volume II, Part 2, *Arkansas Narratives*, 267.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example: *ibid.*, Volume IV, Part 3, *Georgia Narratives*, 75; Volume IV, Part 2, *Georgia Narratives*, 95; and Volume XI, Part 2, *North Carolina Narratives*, 18, 87.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Volume III, *Florida Narratives*, 176.

Historians will have to use the narratives along with other sources to explore such questions, old and new. But if we bear in mind that two in five Confederate residents were enslaved, then it is clear that these documents are imperfect but indispensable sources for understanding how southerners experienced the Civil War

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