

Interview with Lila Nichols

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Former slave Lila Nichols, 89 years old, interviewed by Mary A. Hicks in Cary, North Carolina, May 18, 1937. From the WPA Slave Narrative Project.

As you read...

This “slave narrative” was based on an interview conducted in the 1930s as part of a federal government project to record the experiences of formerly enslaved people. These narratives can be difficult to read, but from them we can learn not only about the experience of slavery but about the time period when the interview took place.

Before beginning, please read this guide to reading slave narratives (page). Then explore a single narrative in depth with this guided study before exploring this one on your own.

As you will note, the transcripts of the interviews with former slaves are often quite racist. Interviewers were instructed to transcribe interviews in a way that reflected white assumptions about how blacks spoke. As you read, be aware you may “hear” the person speaking in a way that is stereotypical and not necessarily accurate.

Oral history interviews are complicated sources. The person who was interviewed was remembering events that happened years earlier. The interviewer and interviewee made assumptions about each other, which affected the questions that were asked and the answers that were given. Interviews are not just memories; they are conversations shaped by beliefs and attitudes of the time period in which the interview was recorded.

Despite their difficulties and problems, the interviews with former slaves are one of the few sources we have about the lives of enslaved people from their own perspective, and we can learn a great deal from them about the experience of slavery.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Nichols was a child when she was a slave. How do you think her age affected her experience and what she remembered?
2. How did Nichols describe slave owners? What made a master “good?” What made a master “bad?” What did she say about her different masters?
3. What did Nichols say about food? How much were she given to eat? Was she given enough to eat?
4. What was Nichols given to wear?
5. What type of work were Nichols and her family asked to perform?
6. What did Nichols recall about being punished as a slave? Why was she punished and how? Why and how were other enslaved people punished, according to Nichols?



Figure 1. Lila Nichols, photographed when she was interviewed in 1937.

We belonged ter Mr. Nat Whitaker atter his marriage. His daddy, Mr. Willis, give us to him. We lived near Rhamkatte wid Mr. Willis, an' we wuz happy. My pappy wuz named Yancey an' my mammy wuz named Sabra. Dar wuz two brothers named Yancey an' Add, an' five sisters: Alice, Sally, Martha, Betty, an' Helia.

Ole massa wuz good ter his slaves, but young massa Nat wuzn't. We ain't had half nuff ter eat most o' de time, an' we ain't had no shoes till we wuz twenty-one. We had jist a few pieces of clothes an' dey wuz of de wust kind. Our cabins wuz shacks, an' we got seberal whuppin's near 'bout ever' day. For example, I had de job of gittin' up de aigs in de ebenin'¹, an if de ain't de right number of dem Missus Mae whupped me. I also looked atter de bitties², an' iffen one of 'em died I got a whuppin' too.

Once missus wuz sick, an' a slave gal named Alice brun her some water an' somethin' ter eat. issus got sick on her stomick, an' she sez dat Alice done try ter pizen her. Ter show yo' how sick she wuz, she gits out of de bed, strips dat gal ter de waist an' whups her wid a cowhide till de blood runs down her back. Dat gal's back wuz cut in gashes an' de blood run down ter 'er heels. Atter dat she wuz chained down by de arms an' laigs till she got well; den she wuz carried off ter Richmond in chains an' sold.

We wucked all de week, my mammy plowin' wid a two-horse plow all de year when she warn't cleanin' new ground or diggin' ditches; an' she got two days off when her chilluns wuz borned. We ain't had no passes ter go nowhar, an' we ain't allowed offe'n de groun's.

I know one time do' missus 'cides ter whup a 'oman fer somethin' an' de 'oman sez ter her, 'No sir, Missus, I ain't 'lowin' nobody what wa'r de same kind of shirt I does ter whup me.'...

I said dat we wuz glad dat de Yankees comed. We wuz, just cause our massa warn't good lak some massas, an' at dat, we ain't want ter be free.

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Notes

1. Gathering up the eggs in the evening.
2. She also took care of the chickens or hens.

About the author

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Figure 1 (page 2)

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