

Slaves escape to Union lines

Former slave Mary Barbour, age 81, interviewed by Mary A. Hicks, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1937.

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. How did this family escape?
2. What had happened to their owner?
3. Why does Mary Barbour say that enslaved people were afraid of “the Yankees”?
4. Despite their fear, they still crossed to union lines. Why do you think they took such a risk?
5. What did enslaved people risk in leaving their master and crossing Union lines?
6. What does this story tell you about the social upheaval in North Carolina during the Civil War?



Figure 1. This illustration 1862 illustration from a northern magazine depicts the redistribution of captured Confederate soldiers' clothing to the poor in New Bern.

I reckon dat I wuz borned in McDowell County, case dat's whar my mammy, Edith, lived. She 'longer ter Mr. Jefferson Mitchel dar, an' my pappy 'longed ter er Mr. Jordan in Avery County, so he said.

'Fore de war, I doan know nothin' much 'cept dat we lived on a big plantation an' dat my mammy wucked hard, but we wuz treated pretty good.

We had our little log cabin off ter one side, an' my mammy had sixteen chilluns. Fas' as dey got three years old de marster sol' 'em till we las' four dat she had wid her durin' de war. I wuz de oldes' o' dese four; den dar wuz Henry an' den de twins, Liza an' Charlie.

One of de fust things dat I 'members wuz my pappy wakin' me up in de middle o' de night, dressin' me in de dark, all de time telin' me ter keep quiet. One o' de twins hollered some an' pappy put his hand ober its mouth ter keep it quiet.

Atter we wuz dressed he went outside an' pepped roun' fer a minute den he comed back an' got us. We snook out o' de house an' long de woods path, pappy totin' one of de twins an' holdin' me by de han' an' mammy carryin' de udder two.

I reckons dat I will always 'member dat walk, wid de bushes slappin' my laigs, de win' sighin' in de trees, an' de hoot owls an' whippoorwhils hollerin' at each other frum de big trees. I wuz half asleep an' skeered stiff, but in a little while we pass de plum' thicket an' dar am de mules an' wagin.

Dar am er quilt in de bottom o' de wagin, an' on dis dey lays we youngins. An' pappy an' mammy gits on de board cross de front an' drives off down de road.

I wuz sleepy but I wuz skeered too, so as we rides 'long I lis'ens ter pappy an' mammy talk. Pappy wuz tellin' mammy 'bout de Yankees comin' ter dere plantation, burnin de co'n cribs, de smokehouses, an' 'stroyin' eber'thing. He says right low dat dey done took marster Jorder ter de Rip Raps down nigh Norfolk, an' dat he stol' de mules an' wagin an' 'scaped.

We wuz skeerd of de Yankees ter start wid, but de more we thinks 'bour us runnin' way frum our marsters de skeerder we gits o' de Rebs. Anyhow pappy says dat we is goin' ter jine de Yankees.

We trabels all night an' hid in de woods all day fer a long time, but atter awhile we gits ter Doctor Dillard's place in Chowan County. I reckon dat we stays dar seberal days.

De Yankees has tooked dis place so we stops ober an' has a heap o' fun dancin' an' sich while we am dar. De Yankees tells pappy ter head fer New Bern an' dat he will be took keer of dar, so ter New Bern we goes.

When we gits ter New Bern de Yankees takes de mules an' wagin, dey tells pappy something, an' he puts us on a long white boat named Ocean Waves an' ter Roanoke we goes.

Later I larns dat most o' de reffes [refugees] is put in James City, nigh New Bern, but dar am a pretty good crowd on Roanoke. Dar wuz also a ole Indian Witch 'oman dat I 'members.

Atter a few days dar de Ocean Waves comes back an' takes all ober ter New Bern. My pappy wuz a shoemaker, so he makes Yankee boots an' we gits 'long pretty good.

I wuz raised in New Bern an' I lived dar till forty years ago when me an' my husban' moved ter Raleigh an' do' he's been daid a long time I has lived hyar ober since an' eben ifen I is eight-one years old I can still outwuck my daughter an' de rest of dese young niggers.

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Figure 1 (page 2)

"The campaign in North Carolina -- Headquarters of Vincent Collyer, Superintendent of the poor at Newberne -- distribution of captured rebel soldiers' clothing to the contrabands." 1862. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, June 14, 1862, p. 164. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.