

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress  
The Ben Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

# VOICES FROM THE DAYS OF SLAVERY: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories

John Barton, Digital Conversion Specialist at the American Folklife Center  
Highlights of the new American Memory presentation  
featuring recordings of former slaves



FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

**Wednesday,  
February 25, 2004  
12 NOON - 1:00 PM  
Dining Room A**

sixth floor of the  
**Madison Building, Library of Congress,  
Washington, D.C.**

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# VOICES FROM THE DAYS OF SLAVERY: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories

"Voices from the Days of Slavery: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories" is a new American Memory presentation that provides the opportunity to listen to former slaves describe their lives. These recorded interviews, conducted between 1932 and 1975, capture the recollections of twenty-three people born between 1823 and the early 1860s and known to have been former slaves. Several of the people interviewed were centenarians, the oldest being 130 at the time of the interview. The almost seven hours of recordings were made in nine Southern states and provide an important glimpse of what life was like for slaves and freedmen. The former slaves discuss how they felt about slavery, slaveholders, how slaves were coerced, their families, and, of course, freedom. It is important to keep in mind, however, that all of those interviewed spoke sixty or more years after the end of their enslavement. They have much to say about living as African Americans from the 1870s to the 1930s, and beyond. As part of their testimony, several of the former slaves sing songs, many of which were learned during the time of their enslavement.

Approximately four million Americans enslaved in the United States were freed at the conclusion of the American Civil War. The stories of a few thousand have been passed on to future generations through word of mouth, diaries, letters, records, or written transcripts of interviews. Only twenty-six audio-recorded interviews of former slaves have been found. This collection captures the stories of former slaves in their own words and voices.

All known recordings of former slaves in the American Folklife Center are included in this online collection. Some are being made available to the public for the first time and several others already available now include complete transcriptions. Unfortunately, not all the recordings are clearly audible. Although the original tapes and discs are generally in good physical condition, background noise and poorly positioned microphones make it extremely difficult to follow many of the interviews.

In his Botkin lecture presentation, John Barton will share the experiences he and his colleague Myron Briggs had in working with these powerful materials, and point to especially moving examples in the American Folklife Center's "Ex-Slave Narrative Collection."

