

“Voices from the Days of Slavery” (1932-1975)

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Essay by Ann Hoog



*Isom Moseley, one of the individuals
Featured in this collection*

The recordings of former slaves in the online presentation “Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories” were recorded primarily between 1932 and 1941, across nine southern states. Twenty-four first-person accounts tell of brutal punishments, coercion, auctions, and freedom, as well as community traditions including songs, tales, dances, and family life. Though these recordings were made 60 or more years after the end of their enslavement, the interviews in this presentation reveal much about living as African Americans during the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, and their everyday lives at the time these recordings were made.

Most of these recordings were compiled from several different collections documenting African American traditions. The earliest ones are part the American Dialect Society collection, which were made between 1931 and 1937 with the intent to document American English dialects. Gullah dialects recorded on the Georgia and South Carolina coast in 1932 include these earliest remembrances of slavery. Another set of recordings comes from a 1935 recording expedition to Georgia, Florida, and the Bahamas made by Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. This collection is primarily of music, tales, and church services, but also includes recordings on St. Simon's Island, Georgia, with Gullah speakers, and it is here that they recorded Wallace Quarterman about his life, including his memories of being a former slave.

A group of recordings from the Commonwealth of Virginia, made between 1937 and 1940, by Roscoe E. Lewis, were made in affiliation with the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The FWP also documented interviews in writing, and it is important to note that an additional 2,300 of these non-audio interviews with ex-slaves are available online at: “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938.” The contextual and interpretive material accompanying those interviews is useful for understanding the recordings.

Other recordings include those made by John A. Lomax and his wife Ruby T. Lomax in Texas (1940); Robert Sonkin in Alabama (1941); and John Henry Faulk in Texas (1941). In 1941, as part of a joint venture between the Library of Congress and Fisk University, Charles S. Johnson, Lewis W. Jones, John W. Work, and Alan and Elizabeth Lomax conducted interviews in Mississippi. Hermond Norwood, a Library of Congress sound engineer, recorded an interview in 1949 in Maryland. The most recent interviews were conducted by Elmer E. Sparks in Texas (1974) and in Florida (1975).

These recordings are a national treasure not only because of the voices and stories recorded, but also due to their contribution to the discipline of recorded oral history and narrative. In a 1999

article titled “The Federal Writers' Project and the Archive of American Folk-Song” (Folklife Center News, Winter 1999), former AFC director Alan Jabbour noted the following:

Lawrence Reddick of Kentucky State Industrial College is often credited with contributing the idea to the FWP of interviewing former slaves, but John A. Lomax may also have been a conduit funneling the idea to the FWP. He served on the FWP committee that developed a comprehensive project to document the recollections of former slaves. As that project developed, it was done primarily by taking written notes during oral interviews. But because of the close working relationship between the FWP and the Archive, a few FWP project workers borrowed the Archive's field disc-recorder to record interviews. These pioneering documentary efforts, by the way, were referred to in Archive correspondence as “oral history”--a pioneering use of both the term and the concept.

Due to the technical limitations of the equipment used during the time of these original recordings, the audio can, at times, be difficult to hear, therefore AFC staff created transcripts of each recording as a research aid. Also included in the online presentation are featured photos of a handful of the interviewees and short essays about those who made the recordings and conducted the interviews.

Thousands of stories of former slaves exist in the form of diaries, letters, word of mouth, and FWP transcripts of interviews. These 24 recordings are the only known audio of former slaves' voices, providing unique insights and accounts of personal experiences of a world they survived.

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