

Interview with Charlie Barbour

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Former slave Charlie Barbour, age 86, interviewed by Mary A. Hicks, Smithfield, North Carolina, May 20, 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. Barbour was a child when he was a slave. How do you think his age affected what he remembered and how he described his experiences?
2. Did Barbour recall any fond memories of his life before freedom? What do these memories tell us about the abilities of enslaved men and women to create lives for themselves despite the brutalities of slavery?
3. What did Barbour recall about being punished as a slave? Why was he punished and how? Why and how were other enslaved people punished, according to Barbour?
4. Barbour told the interviewer he was glad to be free — why? What does his answer tell us about the fears of men and women who were enslaved?
5. What does Barbour’s interview tell us about the family and community life of enslaved people?

6. Barbour said at the end of his interview that African Americans wouldn't be "as good" as whites? What do you think he meant by this statement? How might the racial tensions in the U.S. South in the 1930s have shaped his belief that whites and blacks could not reach social equality?

I belonged ter Mr. Bob Lumsford hyar in Smithfield from de time of my birth. My mammy wuz named Candice an' my pappy's name wuz Seth. My brothers wuz Rufus, William, an' George, an' my sisters wuz Mary an' Laura.

I 'minds me of de days when I was a youngun', I played marbles an' hide an' seek. Dar wuzn't many games den, case nobody ain't had no time fer 'em. De grown folkses had dances an' sometimes co'n shuckin's,¹ an' de little niggers patted dere feets at de dances an' dey he'p ter shuck de co'n. At Christmas we had a big dinner, an' from den through New Year's Day we feast, an' we dance, an' we sing. De fust one what said Christmas gift ter anybody else got a gif, so of cou'se we all try ter ketch de marster.

On de night 'fore de first day of Jiniuary we had a dance what lasts all night. At midnight when de New Year comes in marster makes a speech an' we is happy dat he thanks us fer our year's wuck an' says dat we is good, smart slaves.

Marster wucked his niggers from daylight till dark, an' his thirteen grown slaves had ter ten' 'bout three hundred acres o' land. Course dey mostly planted co'n, peas an' vege'ables.

I can 'member, do' I wuz small, dat de slaves wuz whupped fer disobeyin' an' I can think of seberal dat I got. I wuz doin' housewuck at de time an' one of de silber knives got misplaced. Dey 'cused me of misplacin' it on purpose, so I got de wust beatin' dat I eber had. I quz beat den till de hide wuz busted hyar and dar.

We little ones had some time ter go swimmin' an' we did; we also fished, an' at night we hunted de possum an' de coon sometimes. Ole Uncle Jeems had some houn's what would run possums or coons an' he uster take we boys 'long wid him.

I 'members onct de houn's struck a trail an' dey tree de coon. Uncle Jeems sen's Joe, who wuz bigger den I wuz, up de tree ter ketch de coon an' he warns him dat coons am fightin' fellers. Joe doan pay much mind he am so happy ter git der chanct ter ketch de coon, but when he ketched dat coon he couldn't turn loose, an' from de way he holler yo' would s'pose dat he ain't neber wanted ter ketch a coon. When Joe Barbour wuz buried hyar las' winter dem coon marks wuz still strong on his arms an' han's an' dar wuz de long scar on his face.

I 'members onct a Yankee 'oman from New York looks at him an' nigh 'bout faints. 'I reckon', says she, 'dat dat am what de cruel slave owner or driver done ter him'....

Yes 'um, I reckon I wuz glad ter git free, case I knows den dat I won't wake up some mornin' ter fin' dat my mammy or some ob de rest of my family am done sold. I left de day I hyard 'bout de surrender an' I fared right good too, do' I knows dem what ain't farin' so well.

I ain't neber learn ter read an' write an' I knows now dat I neber will. I can't eben write a letter ter Raleigh 'bout my old man's pension.

I 'members de days when mammy wored a blue hankerchief 'round her haid an' cooked in de great house. She'd sometimes sneak me a cookie or a cobbler an' fruits. She

had her own little gyardin an' a few chickens an' we w'oud ov been happy 'cept dat we wuz skeered o' bein' sold.

I'se glad dat slavery am ober, case now de nigger has got a chanct ter live an' larn wid de whites. Dey won't neber be as good as de whites but dey can larn ter live an' enjoy life more.

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Notes

1. At a corn shuckings, people got together to husk corn from a field — to remove the green leaves that surround the corn cob. Once the work was finished, people would feast and dance.

About the author

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC's North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.