

Interview with Cornelia Andrews

Former slave Cornelia Andrews, 87 years old, interviewed by Mary A. Hicks in Smithfield, North Carolina, May 21, 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 Andrews describe slave masters? What differences did she notice? What did she say about her different masters?
2. What did Andrews say about food? How much was she given to eat? Was she given enough to eat?
3. What was Andrews given for clothing?
4. What did Andrews tell the interviewer about slave sales? What does her account tell us about family life under slavery?
5. What did Andrews recall about being punished as a slave? Why was she punished and how? Why and how were other enslaved people punished according to Andrews?
6. Why do you think Andrews lied about being punished?
7. What did Andrews tell the interviewer about courtship and marriage?
8. According to Andrews, how did slave owners ensure that the children born on their plantation would be strong?

“De fust marster dat I ‘members wuz Mr. Cute Williams an’ he wuz a good marster, but me an’ my mammy an’ some of de rest of ‘em wuz sold to Doctor McKay Vaden who wuz not good ter us.

“Doctor Vaden owned a good-sized plantation, but he had just eight slaves. We had plank houses, but we ain’t had much food an’ clothes. We wored shoes wid wooden bottom in de winter an’ no shoes in de summer. We ain’t had much fun, nothin’ but candy pullin’s ’bout onct a year. We ain’t raised no cane but marster buyed a barrel of ‘lasses fer candy eber year.

“Yo’ know dat dar wuz a big slave market in Smithfield dem days, dar wuz also a jail, an’ a whippin’ post. I ‘members a man named Rough somethin’ or other, what bought forty er fifty slaves at de time an’ carried ‘em ter Richmond to re-sell. He had four big black horses hooked ter a cart, an’ behind dis cart he chained de slaves, an’ dey had ter walk, or trot all de way ter Richmond. De little ones Mr. Rough would throw up in de cart an’ off dey’d go no’t. Dey said dat der wuz one day at Smothfield dat three hundret slaves wuz sold on de block. Dey said dat people came from fer an’ near, eben from New Orleans ter dem slave sales. Dey said dat way ‘fore I wuz borned dey uster strip dem niggers start naked an’ gallop ‘em ober de square so dat de buyers could see dat dey warn’t scarred nor deformed.

“Whil I could ‘member dey’d sell de mammies ‘way from de babies, an’ dere wuzn’t no cryin’ ’bout it whar de marster would know ’bout it nother. Why? Well, dey’d git beat black an’ blue, dat’s why.

“Wuz I ever beat bad? No mam, I wuzn’t.”

(Here the daughter, a graduate of Cornell University, who was in the room listening came forward. “Open your shirt, mammy, and let the lady judge for herself.” The old ladies eyes flashed as she sat bolt upright. She seemed ashamed, but the daughter took the shirt off, exposing the back and shoulders which were marked as though branded with a plaited cowhide whip. There was no doubt of that at all.)

“I wuz whupped public,” she said tonelessly, “for breaking dishes an’ ‘bein’ slow. I wuz at Mis’ Carrington’s den, an’ it wuz jist ‘fore de close o’ de war. I wuz in de kitchen washin’ dishes an’ I draps one. De missus calls Mr. Blount King, a patteroller, an’ he puts de whuppin’ yo’ sees de marks of on me. My ole missus foun’ it out an’ she comed an’ got me.”

A friend of the interviewer who was present remarked, “That must have been horrible to say the least.”

“Yo’ doan know nothin,” the old Negro blazed. “Alex Heath, a slave wuz beat ter death, hyar in Smithfield. He had stold something, dey tells me, anyhow he wuz sentenced ter be put ter death, an’ de folkses dar in charge, ‘cided ter beat him ter death. Dey gib him a hundret lashes fer nin mornin’s an’ on de ninth mornin’ he died.

“My uncle Daniel Sanders, wuz beat till he wuz cut inter gashes an’ he wuz tu be beat ter death lak Alex wuz, but one day atter dey had beat him an’ throwed him back in jail wid out a shirt he broke out an’ runned away. He went down in de riber swamp an’ de blow flies blowed de gashes an’ he wuz unconscious when a white man found him an’ tuk him home wid him. He died two or three months atter dat but he neber could git his body straight ner walk widout a stick; he jist could drag.

“I ‘specks dat I doan know who my pappy wuz, maybe de stock nigger on de plantation. My pappy an’ mammy jist stepped ober de broom an’ course I doan know

when. Yo' knows dey ain't let no little runty nigger have no chilluns. Naw sir, dey ain't, dey operate on dem lak dey does de male hog so's dat dey can't have no little runty chilluns.

“Some of de marsters wuz good an' some of dem wuz bad. I wuz glad ter be free an' I lef' der minute I finds out dat I is free. I ain't go no kick a-comin' not none at all. Some of de white folkses wuz slaves, ter git ter de United States an' we niggers ain't no better, I reckons.”

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