

Interview with Josephine Smith

Former slave Josephine Smith, 94 years old, interviewed by Mary A. Hicks, Raleigh, North Carolina. From the WPA Slave Narrative Project, 1936–38.

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. Smith was a child when she was a slave. How do you think her age affected her experience and what she remembered?
2. What did Smith tell the interviewer about slave sales? What does her account tell us about the family life under slavery?
3. How did Smith describe slave masters? What differences did he notice? What comparisons did she make between slave masters?
4. What did Smith say was the worst aspect of slavery?
5. At the end of the interview, Smith said that she learned how to work under slavery, and that young people in the 1930s did not work as hard as she did. Do you think she was correct? Why might she make this statement? Why would someone who had been a slave try to find life lessons in her experience?

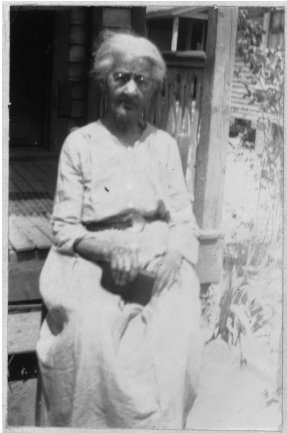


Figure 1. Josephine Smith, photographed when she was interviewed by the WPA in the 1930s.

I wuz borned in Norfolk, Virginia an' I doan know who we belonged to, but I 'members de day we wuz put on de block at Richmond. I wuz just todlin' roun' den, but me an' my mammy brought a thousan' dollars. My daddy, I reckon, belonged ter somebody else, and' we wuz jist sold away from him jist lak de cow is sold away from de bull.

A preacher by de name of Maynard bought me an' mammy an' carried us ter Franklinton, what we lived till his daughter married Doctor John Leach of Johnston County; den I wuz give ter her.

All my white folkses wuz good ter me, an' I reckon dat I ain't got no cause ger complaint. I ain't had much clothes, an' I ain't had so much ter eat, an' a many a whuppin', but nobody ain't nebber been real bad ter me.

I 'members seein' a heap o' slave sales, wid de niggers in chains, an' de spec'ulators¹ sellin' an' buyin' dem off. I also 'members seein' a drove of slaves wid nothin' on but a rag 'twixt dere legs bein' galloped roun' 'fore de buyers. 'Bout de wust thing dat eber I seed do' wuz a slave 'woman at Louisburg who had been sold off from her three weeks old baby, an wuz bein' marched ter New Orleans.

She had walked till she quz give out, an' she wuz weak enough ter fall in de middle o' de road. She wuz chained wid twenty or thirty other slaves an' dey stopped ter rest in de shade o' a big oak while de speculators et dere dinner. De slaves ain't havin' no dinner. As I pass by dis 'oman begs me in God's name fer a drink o' water, an' I gives it ter her. I ain't neber be so sorry fer nobody.

Hit wuz in de mont' of August an' de sun wuz bearin' down hot when de slaves an' dere drivers leave de shade. Dey walk fer a little piece an' dis 'oman fall out. She dies dar side o' de road, an' right dar dey buries her, cussin', dey tells me, 'bout losin' money on her....

Slavery wuzn't so good, case it divided famblies an' done a heap o' other things dat wuz bad, but de wuck wuz good fer ever'body. It's a pity dat dese youngins nowadays doan know de value o' wuck lak we did. Why when I wuz ten years old I could do any kind o' house wuck an' spin an' weave ter boot. I hope dat dese chilluns will larn somethin' in school an' church. Dats de only way dey can larn it.

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Notes

1. A slave speculator was a man who bought and sold slaves for a profit. Speculators bought slaves from one master and resold them for a higher price. Speculators had a reputation for being cruel to slaves.

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Figure 1 (page 2)

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