

# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## SLAVE AUCTION

The following account is from an article in 1859 in the *New York Tribune*, a newspaper edited by Horace Greeley. The reporter describes a large slave auction that took place in Savannah, Georgia.

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The slaves remained at the race-course, some of them for more than a week and all of them for four days before the sale. They were brought in thus early that buyers who desired to inspect them might enjoy that privilege, although none of them were sold at private sale. For these preliminary days their shed was constantly visited by speculators. The negroes were examined with as little consideration as if they had been brutes indeed; the buyers pulling their mouths open to see their teeth, pinching their limbs to find how muscular they were, walking them up and down to detect any signs of lameness, making them stoop and bend in different ways that they might be certain there was no concealed rupture or wound; and in addition to all this treatment, asking them scores of questions relative to their qualifications and accomplishments.

All these humiliations were submitted to without a murmur, and in some instances with good-natured cheerfulness . where the slave liked the appearance of the proposed buyer, and fancied that he might prove a kind “mas’r”.

*Eyewitnesses and Others . Readings in American History, Volume I: Beginnings to 1865* (Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1991), pp. 371-372.

# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## SLAVE AUCTION

The following is one slave's account of a slave auction.

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My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand. Her turn came, and she was bought by Isaac Riley of Montgomery County. Then I was offered to the assembled purchasers. My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting forever from her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother only could command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least, of her little ones. Will it, can it be believed that this man, thus appealed to, was capable not merely of turning a deaf ear to her supplication, but of disengaging himself from her with such violent blows and kicks, as to reduce her to the necessity of creeping out of his reach, and mingling the groan of bodily suffering with the sob of a breaking heart?

*Black Bondage . The Life of Slaves in the South* by Walter Goodman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp.98, 101.

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## RUNAWAY SLAVES

Many slaves tried to escape from the bondage of slavery. If caught, they were often severely punished. The following is an example of a reward offered to find a runaway slave.

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### **\$100 REWARD**

Will be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl HARRIET. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can easily be combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North. The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

JAMES NORCOM. Edenton, N.C. June 30

*Letters From A Slave Girl . The Story of Harriet Jacobs* by Mary E. Lyons (New York: Charles Scribner.s Sons, 1992), p.76.

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery EDUCATION

Frederick Douglass, abolitionist leader and former slave, was taught to read by his master's wife. This was unusual. He described the typical opinion of southern whites toward teaching slaves in the following way.

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If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master . to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now, if you teach that nigger to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.

*Black Bondage . The Life of Slaves in the South* by Walter Goodman (New York: Farrar, Straus

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## PUNISHMENT

Frederick Douglass recalled the following incident from his childhood as a slave. He ran away and later purchased his freedom. Douglass became a leading abolitionist.

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One of the first circumstances that opened my eyes to the cruelties and wickedness of slavery and its hardening influences upon my old master, was his refusal to interpose his authority to protect and shield a young woman, a cousin of mine, who had been most cruelly abused and beaten by his overseer in Tuckahoe. The poor girl, on her arrival at our house, presented a most pitiable appearance. She had left in haste and without preparation, and probably without the knowledge of Mr. Plummer (the overseer). She had traveled twelve miles, bare-footed, bare-necked, and bare-headed. Her neck and shoulders were covered with scars newly made, and not content with marring her neck and shoulders with the cowhide, the cowardly wretch had dealt her a blow on the head with a hickory club, which cut a horrible gash and left her face literally covered with blood. In this condition the poor young woman came down to implore protection at the hands of my old master. I expected to see him boil over with rage at the revolting deed, and to hear him fill the air with curses upon the brutal Plummer; but I was disappointed. He sternly told her in an angry tone, .She deserved every bit of it, and if she did not go home instantly he would himself take the remaining skin from her neck and back.. Thus the poor girl was compelled to return without redress, and perhaps to receive an additional flogging for daring to appeal to authority higher than that of the overseer.

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## SLAVE LABOR

The following describes the work of a slave on a cotton plantation.

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In the latter part of August begins the cotton picking season. At this time each slave is presented with a sack. A strap is fastened to it, which goes over the neck, holding the mouth of the sack breast high, while the bottom reaches nearly to the ground. Each one is also presented with a large basket that will hold nearly two barrels. This is to put the cotton in when the sack is filled. The baskets are carried to the field and placed at the beginning of the rows. .When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capacity in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty..

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## SLAVE LABOR

The following describes the work of a slave on a cotton plantation. After picking cotton all day in the field, the slave's work is still not finished.

### FGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGF

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted" or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be "no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest" a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight, if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. So whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with fear and trembling. Most frequently they have too little, and therefore it is they are not anxious to leave the field. After weighing, following the whippings; and then the baskets are carried to the cotton house, and their contents stored away like hay, all hands being sent in to tramp it down. This done, the labor of the day is not yet ended, by any means. Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine, another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is all done by candle light. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil.

*Black Bondage . The Life of Slaves in the South* by Walter Goodman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp.19-21.

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## LIVING CONDITIONS

The following shows a slave's view of the living conditions on one plantation.

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We lodged in log huts and on the bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women and children. All ideas of refinement and decency were, of course, out of the question. There were neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners and boxed in with boards, a single blanket the only covering. Our favorite way of sleeping, however, was on a plank, our heads raised on a old jacket and our feet toasting before the smouldering fire. The wind whistled and the rain and snow blew in through the cracks, and the damp earth soaked in the moisture till the floor was miry as a pigsty. Such were our houses.

The principal food of those upon my master's plantation consisted of cornmeal and salt herrings, to which was added in summer a little buttermilk and the few vegetables which each might raise for himself and his family on the little piece of ground which was assigned to him for the purpose, called a truck patch.

*Father Henson's Story of his own Life* by Josiah Henson (New York: Corinth Books, 1962), pp.17-18.

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## LIVING CONDITIONS

A visitor made the following observations on the living conditions of slaves.

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We entered some negroes. huts, for their habitations cannot be called houses.. The husband and his wife sleep on a miserable bed, the children on the floor. A very poor chimney, a little kitchen furniture stands amid this misery.a teakettle and cups. A boy about fifteen was lying on the floor with an attack of dreadful convulsions. The general had sent to Alexandria for a physician.

A small orchard with vegetables was situated close to the hut. Five or six hens, each with ten or fifteen chickens, walked there. That is the only pleasure allowed to negroes.

They are not permitted to keep either ducks or geese or pigs. They sell the chickens in Alexandria and buy with the money some furniture. They receive a peck of Indian corn every week, and half of it is for the children, besides twenty herrings in a month.

They receive a cotton jacket and a pair of breeches yearly.

Federal Writers. Project. *The Negro in Virginia*. (New York: Hastings House, 1940), pp.67-68.

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# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## SLAVE RESISTANCE

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the government sent writers from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) all over America to capture the last remaining first-hand voices of slavery. This account is taken from an interview with a formerly enslaved person.

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They had a hard time trying to serve God. The patrollers would break up their prayer meetings and whip all caught in attendance-unless, of course, a Nigger saved himself in flight.

My father was once attending a prayer meeting in a house which had only one door ....The patrollers found them and broke in. Of course, every Nigger present was "in" for a severe whipping, but the Lord must have spoken to my father. Thinking fast and acting quickly (as if he were inspired), my father stuck a big shovel in the fireplace, drew out a peck or more of hot ashes and cinders and flung them broadcast into the faces of them patrollers. The room was soon filled with smoke and the smell of burning clothes and white flesh and, in the confusion and general hubbub that followed, every Negro escaped.

*Remembering Slavery*, ed. by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller. (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 56.

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In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the government sent writers from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) all over America to capture the last remaining first-hand voices of slavery. This account is taken from an interview with a formerly enslaved person.

FGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGF

Massa Charles and Uncle Jake don't like papa, 'cause he ain't so black, and he had spirit, 'cause he part Indian. Do somethin' go wrong and Uncle Big Jake say he gwine to give papa de whippin', he runs off. One time he gone a whole year ... Papa was mighty good to mama and me and dat de only reason he ever come back from runnin' 'way, to see us. He knowed he'd git a whippin' but he come anyway. Dey never could cotch papa when he run 'way, 'cause he part Indian...

Dey knows papa is de best tanner 'round dat part de country, so dey doesn't sell him off de place. I recollect papa sayin' dere one place special where he hide, some German folks, de name Ebbling, I think.

While he hides dere, he tans hides on de sly like and dey feeds him, and lots of mornin's when us open de cabin door on a shelf jus' 'hove is food for mama and me, and sometime store clothes. No one ain't see papa, but dere it is.

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*Remembering Slavery*, ed. by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller. (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 29-30.

# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## SLAVE RESISTANCE

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, government writers interviewed formerly enslaved people to capture the last remaining first-hand voices of slavery.

### FGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGF

One of de slaves married a young gal, and dey put her in de "Big House" to work. One day Mistress jumped on her 'bout something and de gal hit her back. Mistress said she wuz goin' to have Marster put her in de stock and beat her when he come home. When de gal went to de field and told her husband 'bout it, he told her whar to go and stay 'til he got dar. Dat night he ...carried her to a cave and hauled pine straw and put in dar for her to sleep on. He fixed dat cave up just like a house for her, put a stove in dar and run de pipe out through de ground into a swamp... He ceiled de house wid pine logs, made beds and tables out of pine poles, and dey lived in dis cave seven years. Durin' dis time dey had three chillun. Nobody wuz wid her when dese chillun wuz born but her husband. He waited on her wid each Chile. De chillun didn't wear no clothes 'cept a piece tied 'round deir waists .... De seven years she lived in de cave, diffunt folks helped keep 'em in food. Her husband would take it to a certain place and she would go and git it. People had passed over dis cave ever so many times, but nobody knowed dese folks wuz livin' dar. Our Marster didn't know whar she wuz, and it wuz freedom 'fore she come out of dat cave for good.

*Remembering Slavery*, ed. by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller. (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 23-24.

# Personal Accounts of Slavery

## SLAVE RESISTANCE

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, government writers interviewed formerly enslaved people to record the last remaining first-hand voices of slavery.

### FGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGFGF

Uncle Henry was a good-looking young fellow-carried himself straight as a stick... He was forever getting into trouble ...for stealing William's horse out of the barn at night and riding him all around the county until the pore horse would be nearly dead ...Finally Henry (rode)... the horse so hard one long night that it died as it reached its stall next morning. The whole house then decided Henry must be whipped... Well, ole Major came out to the barn, and Henry was tied up to a branch, having first been stripped to the waist. William sat by,... whittling a piece of wood... Ole Major raised the paddle and the leather thong came swishing down upon the back of the groaning Henry.

A second time it cracked through the air, mingling with the age-old cry of the slave, "Pray, master." This was too much for William, who jumped up and with one slash of his sharp knife cut Henry down. Henry just lay where he fell and groaned as he held his side. William and Ole Major were beside themselves and between them they got Henry up to the house and laid him on a bed in the dining room. Miss Nancy was horrified. "Now I suppose you are satisfied since you've killed him. William run and get Dr. Sneed."

Henry's mother, Julia, had come up from the quarters, and she was frantic. Henry had never ceased groaning and holding his side, and ole Major he'd say, "Now, Henry, you mustn't die."

Dr. Sneed finally arrived and examined Henry thoroughly, then ' he gravely ordered some medicine to be given regularly, with complete rest. Julia followed the doctor to the door, asking him, "Doctor, is he goin' ter die?" The doctor leaned over and whispered, "Julia, there is not a damn thing the matter with Henry." And do you know, that Henry laid up there for two weeks, right in the Major's dining room.