

## Brown, Hattie: A Freedom Story <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Hattie Brown: A Freedom Story

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 8/9/1998. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I spoke with Hattie Brown as we walked through the old graveyard in Goshen, a black farming community in Jones County. She had a story for each of the dead. Her most striking memories were her grandmother's stories of slavery days. The first time I met her, we talked for an hour and her remembrances still had not reached the Civil War.

Slaves could not legally read or write, but they preserved their history in song, sermon and saying. Brown attests to the enduring power of that oral tradition. Now 70 years old, a tobacco farmer most her life, she has never forgotten the stories of slavery told by her grandmother, Luvenia Smith Loftin.

She began her account by telling me about Luvenia's father, a slave rebel named Luke Smith.

In Hattie Brown's words:



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I was told by my grandmother, Luvenia, that she was freed when she was 14 years old. She was born in 1848, at Richard Oldfield's plantation in White Oak, a little settlement out of Maysville. I knew her for a long time. Granddaddy died in 19  
My grandmother mentioned many, many things about growing up under slavery. At the Oldfields', they were cleaning up new places to farm.

They would dig up trees, getting more and more land ready to be cleared. That was extremely hard work, I know it was. The women would plow and keep the children, see that everything was right around the house. Luvenia did a lot of baby-  
My grandmother's daddy was named Luke Smith. They called him Pardee. He would run away a whole lot of the time, she said. Luke would get upset and go away. Then they would put out a search party till they found him, bring him back ar  
The last time, he got a real bad whipping, but he ran away again and he stayed longer this time. He didn't come back to the plantation.

They got upset because Luke was one of the best working slaves. Finally, his master promised Luvenia's mother, Melissa, that he wouldn't whip Luke anymore if she would go get him back. I don't know how Melissa arranged it, but she conta  
Luke did whatever he could to educate himself. He would get Luvenia books whenever he could, the master not knowing what he was up to, of course. Sometimes, late at night, when everybody up at the Big House was asleep, that's when t  
Luke had a place way down in the woods. He thought the place would be hidden. He planted himself some pumpkins and he raised a few hogs and chickens. Once, his master saw him when he was bringing one of his prized pumpkins to the  
"I planted it, I grew it," Luke told him.

"I'm going to have to take that," his master said.

"This is mine, this is mine," Luke said.

"No, it isn't yours," his master said. "You are my property and property can't own property."

That made Luke so angry, that's when he decided to change his name to Smith. He had been an Oldfield up till then.

When the Civil War came, Luke heard that if you ran away and made it to Fort Totten, in New Bern, you'd be free. So, one night, Luke got the family together and crossed the White Oak River. The two older children, Luvenia and Anthony, we  
Luvenia became a midwife and a doctor of sorts. Everybody would come to her. I have a scar on my leg. I was about 6, I suppose, when I hurt it. I was sort of tomboyish-like and I was being bad and I was told to quit climbing. I had jumped of  
Luvenia knew every herb you could mention. Lion's tongue, an herb with striped leaves that grows near the swamp, was good for the kidneys. Rabbit tobacco is good for colds, coughs, bronchitis, asthma. Mullein is good for swelling. Red oak  
Once, when grandma was still a slave, the mistress's little girl wandered off and fell in a well. Everybody was concerned and upset, and Luvenia went out, found her, and pulled the girl out of the well. She was a little girl herself, about 6 years  
My grandmother passed away in 1941. Toward the end, she often talked about being lonely. Nobody still around had been through what she had been through. She told these stories again and again. She drilled them into us. She knew that,

### Additional Resources:

[Audio Recording](#) <sup>[3]</sup>: Interview with Hattie Brown by David S. Cecelski, 22 November, 1994, K-0030, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/13360> <sup>[3]</sup>

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### Origin - location:

[Jones County](#) <sup>[11]</sup>

[Goshen](#) <sup>[12]</sup>

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9 August 1998 | Cecelski, David S.

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