

Reading Primary Sources: Narratives of Enslaved People ^[1]

Abner Jordan was a life-long resident of North Carolina who was born into slavery in the 19th century. As an older, free man, he was interviewed as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project^[2], a program established to create work for unemployed writers during the Great Depression. Mr. Jordan's narrative and the stories of more than two thousand other formerly enslaved people were collectively included in the WPA's project to record the narratives of enslaved people.

A surface reading of this enslaved person's narrative provides a first-person description of some of Mr. Jordan's experiences during slavery. A deeper reading, however, reveals some of the cultural influences and historic realities that might have impacted the way a formerly enslaved person would describe his past — and the way an interviewer would record it.

As with any primary source document, the key to understanding an enslaved person's narrative lies in asking the right questions. This interactive guide steps through layers of questions, leading the reader through the process of historical inquiry.

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