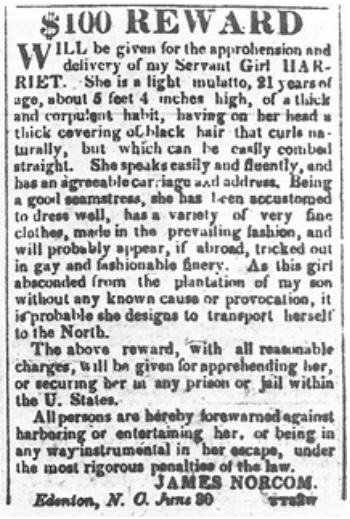
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Slave Narratives [1]

Slave Narratives

by Allyson C. Criner and Steven E. Nash, 2006; Revised by SLNC Government & Heritage Library, December 2022

See also: Harriet Jacobs [2]; Moses Grandy [3]; Hannah Bond [4]; Lunsford Lane [5]



$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 be easily 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 w78w

"N_87_10_3 Ad-capture of Harriet Jacobs," (Advertisement for $100 reward for the capture of Harriet Jacobs." Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

[6]Slave narratives are the firsthand accounts of Black and African American [7] people who were enslaved and experienced enslavement. These narratives are essential tools in the study of American history and literature and have played a central role in national debates about slavery, freedom, and American identity. The recorded experiences of Black people who were enslaved are also arguably one of North Carolina's greatest contributions to American literature as a whole. Following emancipation [8], the autobiography was the most popular literary tool of Black writers; slave narratives outnumbered other types of novels written by Black and African American people until the Great Depression [9]. Along with their fictional descendants, the state's slave narratives continue to challenge readers to explore questions of race, social justice, and the meaning of freedom.

Narratives of the antebellum period were usually written by enslaved people seeking freedom and focused primarily on the experiences of Black people held in bondage in the South. Many antebellum narrators depicted slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation. Their accounts created dialogue between people about slavery and freedom, as formerly enslaved people wrote both to enlighten white readers about the realities of slavery and to convince them that Black people were deserving of full human rights.

Published slave narratives began to appear throughout the English-speaking world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in part through the efforts of abolitionists, and a significant number sold in the tens of thousands. The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass [10], William Wells Brown [11], and Harriet Jacobs [2] (a native of Edenton [12]) were some of the most influential slave narratives of the antebellum period. Jacobs's autobiographical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) [13] contributed extensively to the study of women's experiences under slavery and is considered one of the two most important American slave narratives as well as one of the most significant canonical works of African American literature. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845) [14] is another seminal slave narrative and work of Black literature.

Dismissed by many white people as antislavery propaganda, slave narratives provide eyewitness accounts of personal struggles, sorrows, aspirations, and triumphs during slavery. They reveal the complex relationship between white enslaver and Black enslaved person, in addition to the tremendous efforts of Black people to build and shape their personal lives and communities. Many formerly enslaved people escaped to the North only to find that their concept of freedom clashed with the reality of racism in the so-called free states. The struggles of previously enslaved people as free citizens of color in the North increasingly appeared in narratives of the 1840s and 1850s.

Formerly enslaved people continued to record their experiences after the Civil War. In part, they wanted to ensure that the reunited nation did not forget the evils of the institution that had threatened its existence. When white southern writers and regional boosters of the 1880s and 1890s nostalgically recounted the myths of slavery and "the moonlight-and-magnolias"

plantation (in alignment with Lost Cause [15] ideology) to northern white audiences, the narratives of people who had been enslaved were among the few accounts providing a reliable, firsthand portrayal of what slavery had actually been like.

Slave narratives written after emancipation often depicted slavery as a trial wherein the resiliency, industry, and ingenuity of an enslaved person was tested and ultimately validated. Thus, some newly emancipated people used the genre to argue their capability and readiness to participate in the post-Civil War [16] social, political, and economic order. Booker T. Washington [17]'s *Up from Slavery* (1901) [18] is probably the most famous example of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century slave narrative.

In the 1930s the Federal Writers' Project [19], a New Deal program commissioned by the Works Progress Administration [20] (WPA), conducted interviews with formerly enslaved Black American people. The accounts of 176 formerly enslaved people provided rare, firsthand reminiscences of life under slavery in nineteenth-century North Carolina. One woman said that she and her family faced constant hunger, forcing them to steal from their enslaver. Her clothing was also inadequate: she and other enslaved people received only one pair of shoes a year; when the shoes wore out, they went barefoot. Education on her plantation was strongly discouraged, and any enslaved person found with a book would be sold as punishment.

The Federal Writer's Project had limitations that affected the accuracy of some represented narratives. Most of the subjects were young during the Civil War, and it had been many years since they had experienced slavery, which affected recollections of some participants. There were also additional hurdles that stemmed from the culture and history of race relations in the South. According to the Library of Congress, "the staffs of the Writers' Projects in the states in which formerly enslaved people were interviewed were overwhelmingly white. The relative absence of Black interviewers introduced an important source of bias, for the interviewer's race was a significant factor in eliciting responses from the former enslaved people. The etiquette of Southern race relations influenced the definition of the interview situation for these aged African Americans, and some of their interviewers were even family members of former enslavers. As a result, informants may frequently have told their white interviewers 'what they wanted to hear.' For similar reasons many were undoubtedly less than fully candid or refused to tell a complete story, resulting in a kind of self-censorship." Many of these interviewers also maligned what formerly enslaved people said or described, often transcribing typographical and dictated errors to illustrate a lack of education, diction, or class among interviewees. Nevertheless, the WPA interviews and the Federal Writers' Project serve as an important basis for studying slavery, as many of the people interviewed were able to directly recall their living conditions during the period of enslavement.

North Carolina's slave narratives, including Harriet Jacobs’s, portray the sexual exploitation of Black women by white enslavers as one of the most horrific aspects of slavery. Several WPA interviewees corroborated this testimony. Martha Allen, a woman who was enslaved in her youth and interviewed by the WPA recalled her master's penchant for carnal interludes with enslaved women and told an interviewer that enslaved people on the plantation called such men "Carpet Gitters."

Treatment by enslavers varied. One man who had been enslaved recounted that one night his mother was taken from her bed and sold without his knowledge. On another occasion he was tied to a tree and brutally beaten until blood flowed down his back. A woman recalled being publicly flogged after she broke some of the enslaver's dishes. Other enslavers vehemently opposed physical abuse and refused to divide families through sale. Some owners allowed social outlets for enslaved people, such as religious meetings, corn shuckings, and dances; others taught enslaved people to read and write. Varied accounts of slave quarters also exist: some were comfortable, others were derelict and harsh. A few freedpeople recounted slavery with a sense of loss. One woman lamented the absence of slavery's cradle-to-grave care, and one man recalled his mother claiming that "her master was better than other folks."

Slave narratives have contributed extensively to African American literary and cultural traditions. They also have directly influenced certain classic American works, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852 [21]) and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) [22] to contemporary novels such as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) [23] and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) [24].

Educator Resources:

Grade 5: Narratives of Enslaved North Carolinians. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium.
http://civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2012/05/NarrativesofEnslavedNorthCarol... [25]

Grade 8: Narratives of Enslaved North Carolinians. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium.
https://civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2012/05/NarrativesofEnslavedNorthCarolinians.pdf [26]

Grade 8: The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium.
http://civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2012/04/FrederickDouglas.pdf [27]

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Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Slave Narratives* (2000).

Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (1979).

George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols., 1972-76).

"The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection: Problems of Memory."*Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938*. Library of Congress: Washington, D.C. Accessed December 7, 2022 at https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writer... [28].

Image Credit:

"N_87_10_3 Ad-capture of Harriet Jacobs," (Advertisement for $100 reward for the capture of Harriet Jacobs." Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina. Available from https://www.flickr.com/photos/north-carolina-state-archives/6803433903/ [6](accessed May 4, 2012).

Subjects:
Agriculture [29]
Authors:
Criner, Allyson C. [30]
Nash, Steven E. [31]
From:
Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.[32]
User Tags:
Lesson Plans [33]

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