



Slave Narratives: Black Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century America

Curriculum Unit 85.05.02

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INTRODUCTION

The nature and effect of the enslavement of people of African descent in the United States constitute one of the most controversial subjects in the study of American history. Throughout much of the twentieth century, American historians have debated, sometimes quite heatedly, various interpretations of slavery in the United States. Many of the viewpoints of the scholars, however, have failed to consider seriously and systematically the documentary records of the slaves in their research. Nearly every social class involved in the history of American Negro slavery has had its views and opinions on slavery examined, but until quite recently the testimony of the victims of slavery has been neglected by historians.

For many years historians overlooked or underestimated the significance of slave narratives, because they dismissed the slave testimonies as unreliable sources for historical research. The result was an over-reliance on sources sympathetic to slavery. A classic example of such a work was Ulrich B. Phillips' *American Negro Slavery* (1918), one of the most influential studies of American slave history. These studies usually projected a distorted picture of slavery and a generally racist assessment of the character and ability of the slaves. The myth of plantation slavery as a benevolent, paternalistic and civilizing institution and the myth of the contented slave—a charming, childlike, comical but ignorant and unreliable creature—were the typical textbook conceptions of American slavery and American slaves held by students of American history for many generations. In more recent years, however, the world of the slaves has been more seriously examined by American historians from the viewpoint of the slaves.

The most significant sources for the study of American Negro slavery in the antebellum South are the nineteenth-century slave narratives—autobiographies written or dictated to others by former slaves, fugitive or manumitted. The slave narratives reveal the day-to-day life of the slaves, their values, ideas hopes, aspirations and fears. The slave narratives are most important in that they are the major sources the student of history can resort to gain access to the mind and the private life of the slaves. Frequently inspired or assisted by abolitionist editors who planned to use these testimonies for propaganda purposes, most of the slave narratives were the genuine expressions of the experiences, thoughts and feelings of human beings held in chattel slavery.

Any study of the thoughts and experiences of American slaves would not be complete without some examination of the Slave Narrative Collection of the Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration—a massive collection of twentieth-century records of nineteenth-century memories of slavery. The Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration was created in 1935 to provide jobs for unemployed writers, research workers, and other qualified educated persons during the depression. Beginning in 1936, the Federal Writers' Project undertook a major project to collect and preserve the testimony of the surviving former slaves in the United States. From 1936 to 1938, the WPA interviewers recorded the testimonies of over 2300 former slaves in seventeen states. This project was extremely important because the stories of most of these aged blacks would have been lost forever had it not been for the Federal Writers' Project. Because of the large number of former slaves interviewed, the Slave Narrative Collection represents a broad cross section of the slave population, one that is much more diverse than the nineteenth-century slave narratives. This remarkable collection of personal narratives provides an invaluable source of historical information to supplement the antebellum slave narratives.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to have high school students examine several nineteenth-century slave narratives and selected narratives from the WPA Slave Narrative Collection to obtain a more accurate, well-balanced account of the nature of the institution of slavery in the antebellum South and its impact on black men, women and children, individually and collectively.

This unit is designed to be used for classroom discussion as well as for independent research projects on American Negro slavery. By utilizing the primary sources of the slave narratives, students will be able to draw their own conclusions about slavery in the United States. Through the reading of several slave narratives, students will be exposed to a variety of personal experiences of people held in bondage in different sections of the South during different time periods. Teaching history through the personal narratives helps make history more real to students. It helps them grasp more fully the fact that slaves were real people who were owned and controlled entirely by others. From the class discussions and projects, and their own independent research, students will be able to reconstruct a coherent pattern of slave life in the United States prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

THE SLAVE NARRATIVES: THEIR BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The nineteenth-century slave narratives were written primarily to document slavery and to aid in the struggle for its abolition by providing eye-witness accounts of the victims of the peculiar institution to the American and European public. Because many of these narratives were used as abolitionist propaganda and several were written with assistance from white abolitionist editors, numerous historians have questioned the reliability, authenticity and objectivity of the slave narratives. However, the majority of the abolitionist editors were extremely careful to record and publish only the factual details they received from the former slaves. Although they may have occasionally injected abolitionist rhetoric into the testimonies of the slaves, the editors were conscious of the fact that fraudulent slave narratives only hurt the cause of abolition by giving the pro-slavery sympathizers grounds to challenge the validity of the abolitionist movement. Abolitionists,

therefore, made a consistent effort to track down and expose fictitious slave narratives in the abolitionist press.

The fact is that black men and women wrote practically all of the antebellum slave narratives without assistance from white abolitionist editors. Many of the fugitive and manumitted slaves were literate enough to publish their own straightforward impressions of their lives as slaves. Most of the slave narratives have a dramatic, hard-hitting quality that the imagination alone would have had difficulty in achieving.

The majority of the narratives, therefore, are factual and reliable accounts of slavery. Most narratives contain enough information that they can be verified by independent sources such as diaries and letters of whites, plantation and local government records and documents, census records, newspapers, and the testimony of acquaintances of the narrators. A large number of the slave narrators were also anti-slavery lecturers who had told their stories repeatedly before many audiences before putting them on the printed page.

Despite the authenticity of these narratives, some historians have neglected the slave narratives in their studies of slavery because they believe the narratives reflect the thought of only the most outstanding gifted and talented slaves and are, therefore, not representative of the thought and experiences of the masses of “average” slaves. That the majority of black narrators were exceptional men and women, however, does not mean that their narratives should be dismissed as totally unrelated to the experiences of the majority of the slaves. The slave narrators give much insight not only into their own responses to slavery, but also into the experiences of fellow slaves and many typical aspects of slavery. Also, with the use of the WPA slave narratives as a supplementary resource in the study of American slavery, the experiences of the “less exceptional” slaves can be studied and compared with some of the more illustrious figures who wrote narratives such as Frederick Douglass or William Wells Brown.

By studying the slave narratives, students will be able to learn about the nature of slavery, master-slave relationships, slaveholder brutality, the slave personality and consciousness, the slave family, the hierarchy of the plantation, the cultural and religious life of slaves, survival techniques and forms of slave resistance, and strategies used by slaves to escape. Students will consider such important questions as these in their study of the slave narratives: Was the slave a docile, contented, care-free individual whose leisure time was spent singing and dancing around the slave quarters? Was rebelliousness a common characteristic of the slave? Was the life of the slave marked by cruel beatings amid the worst imaginable living and working conditions? Was he treated with kindness and consideration in surroundings such as those which the peasants of nineteenth-century Europe enjoyed? Did the slaves on all plantations live approximately the same way, or did living and working conditions vary from one slaveholder to another and from one state to another?

The students will obtain some sense of what it meant to be owned by another human being, what it meant to be considered a piece of property that could be bought and sold, an object whose sole purpose and function was to make life more comfortable for the master and his family. Through this study of the slave narratives, students will also be able to gain insight into the fact that despite the general cruelty, inhumanity and degradation of slavery in American society, black people consciously struggled to maintain their dignity and humanity, and their moral and cultural integrity.

STRATEGY: HOW SELECTED NARRATIVES WILL BE USED IN THE CLASSROOM

There will be three nineteenth-century slave narratives assigned to be read by students for class discussion: Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave ; Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853 from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River in Louisiana* (1853) and Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Added to this reading will be selected narratives from a collection of WPA slave narratives edited by Norman R. Yetman entitled *Voices From Slavery* .

There are several reasons for the selection of these three nineteenth-century narratives and the inclusion of selected WPA slave narratives in this study. They are in print in paperback or hardback editions and, therefore, are readily available for classroom use. Douglass' and Northup's narratives are considered classics of the genre. They are well-written. Both narrators were shrewd observers of people and events. Both detail the daily routine and life of the slaves.

However the major reason for choosing these three antebellum narratives, as well as the selected WPA slave narratives, is to allow the students to view slavery from four distinctly different perspectives. Frederick Douglass describes the experiences of a black man who was born a slave and later escaped to the North. Solomon Northup's story is rather unique. All other slave narrators had been born into slavery. Northup was born a free man and was kidnapped and sold into slavery at the age of thirty-three. Linda Brent's story is also quite unique because she describes slavery from the viewpoint of a black woman—a rarity among the hundreds of slave narratives published before 1865. The WPA slave narratives give a wide range of descriptions of experiences and expressions of slave life and thought from those who were children as well as adults, from female as well as male slaves. Because of the large number of slave interviews in the Slave Narrative Collection, the lives of "average" slaves—a group portrait—can best be drawn from these narratives. An outstanding feature of the WPA narratives is that they are descriptions of slavery given by those who neither fled to the North nor were set free by their masters, but those who remained slaves until the events of the Civil War and ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment set them free. Also, because the former slaves were interviewed by the Federal Writers seven decades after Emancipation, there is an absence of any abolitionist influence or propaganda.

However, there are other difficulties in using the WPA slave narratives such as white southern interviewers. In an era of segregation and extreme racial oppression in the South, many elderly blacks may have been intimidated by white interviewers, which may have caused some to be less than candid in their recollections of slavery. Only one-fifth of the WPA slave narratives were recorded by black interviewers. One study comparing the interviews conducted by black and white writers concludes that the former slaves were much more open about their feelings and experiences as slaves with the black interviewers (see Paul Escott's *Slavery Remembered*).

In this part of their assignment, students will be asked to detect any differences in the various views of slavery presented in the assigned sources as well as any differences in the treatment of slaves. Students will also look for regional variations in the slave experience. Students will study the narrators' choice of words and stories in order to discover the range of responses toward slavery. This unit has been designed to get inside the slave experience as much as possible in order to convey the mood as well as offer an analysis of American slave life primarily from the personal narratives of the slaves.

Lesson Plan Outline

- I. The first two or three days of lessons for this unit will be an introduction covering the background of the nineteenth century and WPA slave narratives.
 1. Students will understand why the narratives were written.
 2. Students will know who wrote the narratives.
 3. Students will understand the impact of the slave narratives on antebellum American society.
 4. Students will assess the general reliability of the narratives.
 5. Students will understand the importance of the WPA narratives.
 6. Students will understand special problems in working with the WPA narratives, such as the hazy memories of the former slaves interviewed and the use of white southern interviewers.
- II. The next week to ten days will be used to discuss the assigned readings and the experiences of the slaves in the United States as portrayed in those readings.

Topics of discussion will include:

1. The Slave Character
2. The Slave and the Master: Interpersonal Relationships
3. Experience of the Black Family under Slavery (see Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*)
4. Living and Working Conditions on the Plantation
5. Slave Punishment
6. Flight, Resistance, and Survival Techniques Among Slaves
7. Slave Music and Religion (see works by Levine and Blassingame)
8. Hierarchy of the Plantation

Classroom Activities and Projects

1. Role playing: Student written plays based on incidents described in the assigned slave narratives.

Suggested topics:

- a. Master and Slave Dialogue.
 - b. Conversation among a group of slaves in their cabin after a day's work.
 - c. Discussion of a slave husband and his wife after being told by their master one of their children must be sold.
2. Arrange a mock slave auction based on descriptions of an auction in Solomon Northup's narrative. Students will play the various roles: auctioneer, male and female slaves, child slaves, and slave buyers. This activity will help students in the class to visualize the anxiety and dehumanizing effect of being sold on the auction block.
3. Creative writing assignment. Students will choose one of the following:
- a. Imagine you were a fugitive slave living in Connecticut in the 1840s. Write a narrative of your experiences as a slave in the South and your method of escape.
 - b. Write a detailed account of one day in the life of a slave on a southern plantation in the 1850s.
4. Critical analysis of a nineteenth century slave narrative. Students will select a narrative not already assigned, read and then write a 5-7 page critical analysis of the book.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books Recommended for Teachers

Allen, Richard. *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Right Reverend Richard Allen* . Nashville: Abingdon Press, [1833] 1960.

Narrative of Richard Allen, founding Bishop of the A.M.E. Church.

Ball, Charles. *Fifty Years in Chains; Or The Life Of An American Slave* . New York: H. Dayton, 1858.

Narrative of Charles Ball.

Bibb, Henry. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* . New York: Negro Universities Press, [1849] 1969.

Narrative of Henry Bibb.

Blassingame, John W. ed. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies* . Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

A large collection of primary sources relating to the slave experience in the United States including slave narratives.

Bontemps, Arna, ed. *Five Black Lives* . Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1971.

A collection of narratives written by ex-slaves who lived in Connecticut: Venture Smith, James Mars, William Grimes, Rev. G. W. Offley, and James L. Smith.

Bontemps, Arna, ed. *Great Slave Narratives*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

A collection of the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, James Pennington, and William and Ellen Craft.

Botkin, B. A., ed. *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945.

A selection of excerpts and several complete narratives from the WPA Slave Narrative Collection.

Brown, Henry Box. *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* . Philadelphia: Rhistoric Publishers [1851] 1969.

Narrative of Henry Box Brown.

Davis, Charles T. and Henry L. Gates, Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

A comprehensive collection of critical and analytical essays and reviews of the slave narrative literature by several authors.

Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom* . New York: Arno, [1855] 1968.

Narrative of Douglass' life up to 1850s.

———. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* . Garden City: Doubleday [1845] 1963.

Douglass' first narrative; considered the best of the slave narrative genre.

Egypt, Ophelia Settle et al., eds. *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* . Nashville: Social Science Institute, 1945.

A collection of slave interviews made by Fisk University in the 1920s.

Elkins, Stanley. *Slavery* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

A controversial study of slavery which argues that American slavery was so psychologically repressive that blacks were reduced to fawning, dependent, childlike “Sambos.”

Escott, Paul D. *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* . Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979.

An analysis of the slave experience based on the WPA and Fisk University slave narratives.

Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordon, Roll: The World The Slaves Made* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.

An analysis of the American slave experience.

Gutman, Herbert. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

An important study of African American family and cultural development.

Henson, Josiah. *Truth Stranger Than Fiction, Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* . Chicago: Afro-American Press, [1858] 1970.

Narrative of Josiah Henson.

Hurmen, Belinda, ed. *My Folks Don't Want Me to Talk About Slavery* . Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1984.

A selection of 21 interviews of former North Carolina slaves from the WPA Slave Narrative Collection.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* . Detroit: Negro History Press, [1861] 1969.

Narrative of Linda Brent.

Katz, William L., ed. *Five Slave Narratives* . New York: Arno Press, 1969.

A collection of narratives by Lunceford Lane, James Pennington, William Wells Brown, Jacob Stroyer and Moses Granby.

Killion, Ronald and Charles Waller, eds. *Slavery Time When I Was Chillun Down On Marster's Plantation: Interviews with Georgia Slaves*. Savannah: The Beehive Press, 1973.

A collection of WPA interviews of former slaves from Georgia.

Lane, Lunceford. *The Narrative of Lunceford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N. C.* New York: Arno Press, [1842] 1968.

Narrative of Lunceford Lane.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

An important study which uses slave narratives to analyze the cultural and religious life of Afro-Americans.

Loguen, Jermain W. *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, As A Slave and As A Freeman: A narrative of Real Life* . New York: Negro Universities Press, [1859] 1968.

Narrative of J. W. Loguen.

Nichols, Charles H., ed. *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account Of Their Bondage and Freedom*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963.

An important study of slavery which relies heavily on slave narratives.

Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years A Slave*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, [1853] 1968.

Narrative of a free black who was kidnapped and sold into slavery for twelve years.

Osofsky, Gilbert, ed. *Puttin' On Ole Massa*. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1969.

An anthology of narratives by Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown and Solomon Northup.

Owens, Leslie Howard. *This Species of Property*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

An analysis of antebellum slave life and culture.

Phillips, Ulrich B. *American Negro Slavery*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918.

A classic study of slavery which portrays slavery as an essentially benign institution that conferred many benefits upon a backward race.

Rawick, George P., ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 31 vols. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972-78.

A multi-volume compilation of all known WPA slave narratives, including two volumes of Fisk University interviews of ex-slaves and an interpretive essay on slave life by the editor.

Redpath, James. *The Roving Editor: or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*. New York: Negro Universities Press, [1859] 1969.

Interviews with slaves prior to the Civil War made by a northern journalist.

Stampf, Kenneth. *The Peculiar Institution*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956.

A study which depicts slavery as a primarily harsh, repressive system for the exploitation of cheap labor.

Starling, Marion Wilson. *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History*. Doctoral thesis, New York University, 1946.

An important history and analysis of the slave narrative literature.

Starobin, Robert S., ed. *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves*. New York: New Viewpoints, 1974.

A collection of letters written by slaves.

Stern, Sheldon M. *The Black Response To Enslavement: Reinterpretations of the Behavior and Personality of American Slaves*. Washington: University Press of America, 1976.

An anthology of sections of nineteenth century and WPA slave narratives with an interpretive essay by the author.

Thompson, John. *The Life of John Thompson, A Fugitive Slave*. New York: Negro Universities Press, [1856] 1968.

Narrative of John Thompson.

Truth, Sojourner. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* . Boston, 1850. Narrative of Sojourner Truth.

Unger, Irwin and David Reimer. *The Slavery Experience in the United States*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

An anthology of articles on the slave experience.

Winks, Robin W. et al., eds. *Four Fugitive Slave Narratives*. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1969.

Narratives of William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, Austin Steward, and Benjamin Drew.

WPA. Federal Writers Project. *The Negro in Virginia*. New York: Arno Press, [1940] 1969.

Selections from the Virginia narratives of the WPA Slave Narrative Collection.

Yetman, Norman R., ed. *Voices From Slavery* . New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1970.

A collection of 100 complete narratives from the WPA Slave Narrative Collection.

Books Recommended for Students

All of the slave narratives and slave narrative anthologies listed in the teacher bibliography are also recommended for student use. The following additional material is also recommended for students:

Bayliss, John F. *Black Slave Narratives*. New York: The McMillan Co., 1970.

A collection of selections from eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives.

Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

An excellent analysis of slavery and plantation life based on slave narratives, white autobiographies, and plantation documents.

Chapman, Abraham, ed. *Steal Away: Slaves Tell Their Own Stories* . London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1973.

A collection of selections from nineteenth century slave narratives.

Lester, Julius, ed. *To Be A Slave* . New York: Dial Press, 1974.

A very brief but insightful selection of portions of nineteenth century and WPA slave narratives with commentary by the editor.

MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOM USE

The New Haven Public Schools Audio-Visual Department has three film presentations relation to this unit on slave narratives.

1. "Frederick Douglass" (2 parts).

This film portrays Douglass' life directly after his escape from slavery in Maryland and covers the problems he confronted as a fugitive slave in the North and the beginning of his career as an abolitionist lecturer.

2. "Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad" (2 parts).

This film details the experiences of Harriet Tubman and her efforts to aid hundreds of slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad.

3. "William and Ellen Craft."

This film dramatizes the remarkable escape of a slave couple from the South.

In, the Hillhouse High School History Department Audio-Visual Collection, there is a two-hour video entitled "Solomon Northup's Odyssey." This presentation faithfully follows Northup's narrative *Twelve Years A Slave* , portraying his life before and during his enslavement, and his release from slavery.

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