



Reproduction of gourd slave 'banjar' made by Pete Ross for Appomattox Court House
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Illustration of a typical modern era “bluegrass” style banjo



“The Old Plantation” artist unknown- watercolor- circa 18th century, courtesy of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center

Fannie Berry Describing a Slave Dance with Banjos

Frances "Fannie" Berry was 86 years old when her picture here was taken. During her early life Fannie was a slave at the home of George Abbitt of Appomattox County - not far from the home of the Sweeneys. Fannie was interviewed in the 1930's by field workers for the Works Progress Administration (the WPA) in an attempt to collect the oral histories of former slaves who yet lived. In the following excerpt Fannie describes the slave dances she attended when young.



Mrs. Fannie Berry

"Used to go over to de Saunders place fo' dancin'. Musta been hundred slaves over thar, an' they always had de bes' dances. Mos' times fo' de dance dey had Dennis to play de banjer. Dennis had a twisted arm, an' he couldn't do much work. But he sho' could pick dat banjer. Gals would put on dey spare dress ef dey had one, an' men would put a clean shirt on. Gals always tried to fix up fo' partyin', even ef dey ain't got nothin' but a piece of ribbon to tie in dey hair. Mos' times wear yo' shoes to de dance an' den take 'em off. Dem ole hard shoes make too much noise, an' hurt yo' feet. Couldn't do no steppin' in dem field shoes."

from Wheevil in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves Edited by Charles I. Perdue.