

Document 1: Narrative of Sarah Ashley, age 93

I was born in Mississippi in 1844 and Master Henry Thomas bought us and brought us here. He was a speculator and bought up a lot of slaves to sell them. My family got separated. My two sisters and my papa were sold to a man in Georgia. Then they put me on a block and sold me off. That was in New Orleans and I was scared and cried.

I used to have to pick cotton and sometime I pick 300 pounds and tote it a mile to the cotton house. Some pick 300 to 800 pounds of cotton and have to tote the bag the whole mile to the gin. If they didn't do their work they would get whipped till they have blisters on 'em. I never got whipped, 'cause I always got my 300 pounds. We have to go early to do that, when the horn goes early, before daylight. We have to take our food in the bucket to the field.

We never got enough to eat, so we kept stealing stuff. We had to. Master gave us the peck of meal to last the week and two or three pounds of bacon in chunk. We never had flour or sugar, just cornmeal and the meat and potatoes. We had a big box under the fireplace, where we kept all the pigs and chickens that we stole, down in salt.

When the boss man told us freedom had come he didn't like it, but he gave us the bale of cotton and some corn. He asked us to stay and help with the crop but we were so glad to get away that nobody stayed.

Now, I'm all alone and think of them old times that were so bad, and I'm ready for the Lord to call me.

Speculator: Someone who bought and sold slaves for a profit.

Block: Auction block

Tote: Carry

Cotton house: Where the cotton gin was located

Gin: Machine that separated the seeds from the cotton fiber

Peck: Two gallons

Meal: Cornmeal

Document 2: Narrative of Arnold Gragston, age 97

Before I got my freedom, I helped a lot of others get theirs. Lord only knows how many; might have been as much as two or three hundred. It was way more than a hundred, I know.

I was born on a plantation that belonged to Mr. Jack Tabb in Mason County, just across the river [from Ohio – a free state] in Kentucky. Mr. Tabb was a pretty good man. He used to beat us, sure; but not nearly so much as others did.

Mr. Tabb was always especially good to me. He used to let me go all about. It was because he used to let me go around in the day and night so much that I came to be the one who took the running away slaves over the river to freedom.

My first trip, it took me a long time to get over my scared feeling, but I finally did, and I soon found myself going back across the river, with two and three people, and sometimes a whole boatload. I got so I used to make three or four trips a month.

I guess you wonder what I did with them after I got them over the river. Well, there in Ripley [Ohio] was a man named Mr. Rankins.

Mr. Rankin he had a big lighthouse in his yard, about thirty feet high and he kept it burning all night. It always meant freedom for a slave if he could get to this light.

After I had made a few trips I got to like it, and even though I could have been free any night myself, I figured I wasn't getting along so bad so I would stay on Mr. Tabb's place and help the others get free. I did it for four years.

Finally, I saw that I could never do any more good in Mason County, so I decided to take my freedom, too. I had a wife by this time, and one night we quietly slipped across and headed for Mr. Rankin's bell and light. It looked like we had to go almost to China to get across that river, and I knew if I didn't make it I'd get killed. But finally, I pulled up by the lighthouse, and went on to my freedom—just a few months before all of the slaves got theirs.

Document 3: Narrative of Mary Reynolds, age over 90

Slavery was the worst days ever seen in the world. I got the scars from beatings on my old body to show to this day. I saw worse than what happened to me. I saw them put the men and women in the stock with their hands screwed down through holes in the board and their feet tied together. Solomon the overseer beat them with a big whip and master looked on. The slaves better not stop in the fields when they hear them yelling.

The conch shell blew before daylight and all hands better get out for roll call or Solomon bust the door down and get them out. It was work hard, get beatings and half fed. They brought the food and water to the fields on a slide pulled by an old mule. Plenty of times there was only a half barrel water and it was stale and hot, for all of us on the hottest days. Mostly we ate pickled pork and corn bread and peas and beans and potatoes. There never was as much as we needed.

The times I hated most was picking cotton when the frost was on the bolts. My hands would get sore and crack open and bleed.

We prayed for the end of beatings and for shoes that fit our feet. We prayed that we could have all we wanted to eat and especially for fresh meat. What I hated most was when they'd beat me and I didn't know what they beat me for.

Stock: A wooden structure with holes to hold the hands and feet to keep the person from moving. It was used to keep a person still while whipping them.

Conch shell: Large shell that, when blown, sounds like a horn

Boll: The white fluffy part of the cotton plant that is picked and then processed to make into cloth.

Document 4: Narrative of Hal Hutson, age 90

I was born at Galveston, Tennessee, October 12, 1847. There were 11 children: 7 brothers and 3 girls. Together with my mother and father we worked for the same man whose name was Mr. Barton Brown.

Master Brown had a good weather-board house, two story, with five or six rooms. They lived pretty well. We lived in one-room huts. There was a long string of them huts. We slept on the floor like hogs. Everybody slept everywhere. We never knew what biscuits were! We ate rabbits, possums baked with potatoes, beans and bean soup. No chicken, fish or anything like that.

I learned to read, write and figure [do math] at an early age. Master Brown would send me to school to protect his kids, so while sitting there I listened to what the white teacher was telling the kids, and caught on how to read, write and figure--but I never let on 'cause if I was caught trying to read or figure they would whip me something terrible.

I think it's a good thing that slavery is over. It ought to have been over a good while ago, but it's going to be slavery all over again if things don't get better.

Weather-board: overlapping, horizontal strips of wood covering the exterior of a building.

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Document 5: Narrative of Sarah Gudger, age 121

I sure have had a hard life. Just work, and work, and work. I never knew nothing but work. My boss was old man Andy Hemphill. He had a large plantation in the valley. He had plenty of everything. All kinds of hogs, cows, mules, and horses. When Master Andy died I went with his son, William Hemphill.

No, I never knew what it was to rest. I just work all the time from morning till late at night. I had to do everything there was to do outside. Work in the field, chop wood, hoe corn, 'til sometime I felt like my back would surely break.

Old Master whipped us good if we did anything he didn't like. Lordy, Honey, I took a thousand lashings in my day. Sometimes my poor old body would be sore for a week.

The rich white folks never did any work; they had slaves to do it for them. In the summer we had to work outdoors, in the winter in the house. I had to card and spin till ten o'clock. Never got much rest, had to get up at four the next morning and start again. Didn't get much to eat, neither, just a little corn bread and molasses. Lordy, Honey, you can't know what a time I had. All cold and hungry. No, ma'am, I'm not telling no lies.

I never slept on a bed until after freedom, not until after freedom. Just an old pile of rags in the corner. Hardly enough to keep us from freezing. Nobody knows how mean the slaves were treated. Why, they were way better to the animals than they were to us.

Hoe: A tool used for digging up weeds, and arranging the earth around plants in fields.

Lashings: Being hit with the whip—usually on the back

Card: One of the steps in cloth making. Carding is the process of brushing the cotton fibers.

Spin: A step in cloth making. Spinning takes the carded fibers and twists them into thread.

Document 6: Narrative of Adeline Marshal, age unknown

Yes, Sir, Adeline Marshal is my name all right, but folks around here just call me “Grandma.”

(Slavery days) sure were bad times—black folks just raised like cattle in the stable, only Captain Brevard, he owned me, treated his horses and cattle better than he did his slaves.

Captain Brevard says I’m from South Carolina and he brought me to Texas when I was just a baby. I guess it’s the truth because I’ve never known a mother or father, neither one.

Captain was a bad man, and he drove us hard, too, all the time whipping the slaves to make them work harder. Didn’t make a difference to Captain how little you were, you went out to the field almost as soon as you could walk.

We worked every day except Sunday and had to do our washing then. If anyone was sick on week days, he had to work Sunday to make it up. When we came in at night we had to go right to bed. They didn’t allow any light in the quarters and you better be in bed if you didn’t want a whipping.

Old Captain had a big house but I just saw it from the quarters, because we weren’t allowed in the yard.

I know I was almost grown when Old Captain called us in to say we were free, but nobody told me how old I am and I never found out.

Library of Congress, Federal Writer’s Project, 1937

Document 7: “The Weeping Time”

Background: For two days in March, 1859, 436 enslaved people from the plantation of Pierce M. Butler were sold to pay off his debts. This was an ancestral property, inherited by Mr. Butler. The enslaved people had lived and worked on the plantation for generations.

“The buyers, about two hundred of them, clustered around the platform; while the slaves, who would not be sold immediately, gathered into sad groups in the back-ground. The wind howled outside, and through the open side of the building the driving rain came pouring in and the first lot of human chattels was led upon the stand. It had been announced that the slaves would be sold in “families,” that is to say, a man would not be parted from his wife, or a mother from a very young child. In this way many old or unserviceable people are sold who otherwise would not find a ready sale.

The first family brought out were announced on the catalogue as:

CHATTEL NUMBER	NAME	AGE	REMARKS
1.	George	27	Prime Cotton Planter
2.	Sue	26	Prime Rice Planter
3.	George	6	Boy Child
4.	Harry	2	Boy Child

This family brought \$620 each, or \$2,480 for the whole.

CHATTEL NUMBER	NAME	AGE	REMARKS
99.	Kate’s John	31	Rice, prime man
100.	Betsey	20	Rice, unsound
101.	Kate	6	
102.	Violet	3 months	

Sold for \$510 each

CHATTEL NUMBER	NAME	AGE	REMARKS
103.	Wooster	45	Hand and fair mason
104.	Mary	40	Cotton Hand

Sold for \$300 each

CHATTEL NUMBER	NAME	AGE	REMARKS
105.	Commodore Bob	Aged	Rice Hand
106.	Kate	Aged	Cotton
107.	Linda	19	Cotton, prime young woman
108.	Joe	13	Rice, prime boy

Sold for \$600 each

Great auction sale of slaves, at Savannah, Georgia, Doesticks G. K. Philander, Danliel Murray Pamphlet Collection (Library of Congress)

Document 8: Narrative of Marriah Hines

I lived with good people, my white folks treated us good. There was plenty of them [slaves on other plantations] that didn't fare as we did. Some of the poor folks almost starved to death. Why the way their masters treated them was scandalous, treated them like cats and dogs. We always had plenty of food, never knew what it was to want food bad enough to have to steal it like a whole lot of them. Master would always give us plenty when he give us our rations.

Of course we slaves were given food and clothing and just enough to keep us going good. Why master would buy cloth by the loads and heaps, shoes by the big box full; then he'd call us to the house and give each of us our share. Plenty to keep us comfortable, course it wasn't silk nor satin, no ways the best there was, but 'twas plenty good enough for us, and we was plenty glad to get it. When we would look and see how the slaves on the adjoining farms was faring, it would almost make us shed tears. It made us feel like we was getting along most fine. That's why we loved and respected master; 'cause he was so good to us.

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