



The Family Life of the Enslaved

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Framing Question

How did slavery shape the family life of the enslaved in the American South?

Understanding

The slave family did all the things families normally do, but the fact that other human beings owned its members made it vulnerable to unique constrictions, disruptions, frustrations, and pain.

Text

[Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African-Americans, 1936–1938](#)



“Cumberland Landing, Va. Group of ‘contrabands’ at Foller’s house,” May 1862.

Background

Between 1936 and 1938 the Federal Writers Project of the Works Project Administration, a New Deal agency, sent field workers, most of whom were white, into seventeen states to interview former slaves about their lives in bondage. They compiled over 2,000 accounts, which now reside in the Library of Congress. For many years scholars discounted their reliability as historical evidence. They were, of course, subject to the lapses and biases that distort all memories. Moreover, scholars suspected that the particular circumstances of their collection made them especially susceptible to concealments and evasions. Would elderly African Americans, who passed from slavery to Jim Crow, be completely forthright with white strangers asking probing questions about a painful subject?

Despite such concerns, contemporary scholars have come to realize the value of the interviews. When using them, teachers and students should keep three considerations in mind. First, they are, in the words of the Library of Congress’s website, “highly impressionistic.” Second, they yield insight into only certain aspects of the slave experience.

As the Library of Congress notes, “if one wishes to understand the nature of the ‘peculiar institution’ from the perspective of the slave, to reconstruct the cultural and social milieu of the slave community, or to analyze the social dynamics of the slave system,” then the WPA narratives “are not only relevant; they are essential.” Third, the interviewers transcribed oral testimony and used words and punctuation that

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of texts are we dealing with?
2. When were they written?
3. Who wrote them?
4. For what audience were they intended?
5. For what purpose were they written?

sometimes seem to reflect their own expectations rather than the way people actually spoke. In some cases the spelling and punctuation reveal more about the interviewer than the interviewed.

Text Analysis

Excerpts from the WPA Slave Narratives, 1936–1938

1. Malindy Maxwell: I was born close to Como and Sardis, Mississippi. My master and mistress was Sam Shans and Miss Cornelia Shans. I was born a slave. They owned mama and Master Rube Sanders owned pa. Neither owner wouldn't sell but they agreed to let ma and pa marry. They had a white preacher and they married out in the yard and had a big table full of weddin' supper, and the white folks et in the house. They had a big supper too. Ma said they had a big crowd. The preacher read the ceremony. Miss Cornelia give her a white dress and white shoes and Miss Cloe Wilburn give her a veil. Miss Cloe was some connection of Rube Sanders. They had seven children. I'm the oldest — three of us living. After 'mancipation pa went to see about marrying ma over agen and they told him that marriage would stand long as ever he lived.

1. From this passage what can you surmise about Malindy Maxwell's status on the Shans plantation? What evidence leads you to this conjecture?

2. What evidence in this passage suggests that Mrs. Maxwell and her husband achieved a degree of stability in family life?

3. On what conditions did that stability depend?

4. How does this passage suggest the precariousness of family life for the enslaved?

2. Sarah Graves: I was born March 23, 1850 in Kentucky, somewhere near Louisville. I am goin' on 88 years right now. I was brought to Missouri when I was six months old, along with my mama, who was a slave owned by a man named Shaw, who had allotted her to a man named Jimmie Graves, who came to Missouri to live with his daughter Emily Graves Crowdes.... We left my papa in Kentucky, 'cause he was allotted to another man. My papa never knew where my mama went, an' my mama never knew where papa went... They never wanted mama to know, 'cause they knowed she would never marry so long she knew where he was. Our master wanted her to marry again and raise more children to be slaves. They never wanted mama to know where papa was an' she never did.... Mama said she would never marry again to have children,... so she married my step-father, Tattle Barber, 'cause he was sick an' could never be a father. He was so sick he couldn't work, so me and mama had to work hard. We lived in a kitchen, a room in a log house joined on to the master's house. My mama worked in the field, even when I was a little baby. She would lay me down on a pallet [small wooden platform] near the fence while she plowed the corn or worked in the field.

5. How does this passage illustrate a slaveowner's power to disrupt the family life of slaves?

6. How does it illustrate a master's power to isolate and control slave's knowledge of and access to the wider world?

7. How does Sarah's mother transform her family life into an act of resistance?

3. Robert Glenn: [My owner] died when I was eight years old [1858] and I was put on the block to be sold.... I was bought by a Negro speculator* by the name of Henry Long who lived not far from Hurdles Mill in Person County. I was not allowed to tell my mother and father goodbye. I was bought and sold three times in one day. My father's time was hired out and as he knew a trade he had, by working overtime, saved up a considerable amount of money. After the speculator, Henry Long, bought me, mother went to father and pled with him to buy me from him and let the white folks hire me out. No slave could own a slave. Father got the consent and help of his owners to buy me and they asked Long to put me on the auction block again. Long did so and named his price but when he learned who had bid me off he backed down. Later in the day he put me on the block and named another price much higher than the price formerly set. He was asked by the white folks to name his price for his bargain and he did so. I was again put on the auction block and father bought me in, putting up the cash. Long then flew into a rage and cursed my father saying, "You damn black son of a bitch, you think you are white do you? Now just to show you are black, I will not let you have your son at any price." Father knew it was all off, mother was frantic but there was nothing they could do about it. They had to stand and see the speculator put me on his horse behind him and ride away without allowing either of them to tell me goodbye. I figure I was sold three times in one day, as the price asked was offered in each instance. Mother was told under threat of a whupping not to make any outcry when I was carried away.

** Editor's note: Long is a white man who speculated in the buying and selling of Negroes.*

8. What evidence suggests that Glenn's family enjoyed a degree of stability?

9. What does the passage suggest about the status of Glenn's father? Cite specific evidence to support your conjecture.

10. What forces prevent Glenn's father from keeping his family intact?

Image

- Photograph of newly freed slaves, including men, women, and children, captioned "Cumberland Landing, Va. Group of 'contrabands' at Foller's house," photograph by James F. Gibson, 14 May 1862 (detail). Civil War Glass Negative Collection, LC-DIG-cwpb-01005.