

Slaves Speak Out

"Our overseer had a hawk eyes for seeing worms on the tobacco. You sure had to get them all, or you'd have to bite in two all the worms that you missed, or get three lashes on your back. That was bad—worse than biting the worms, for you could bite quick, and that was all there was to it; but them lashes last a powerful long time."

Simon Stokes, Virginia

Charley Mitchell was eighty-five when interviewed. While most slaves labored on farms or plantations, Charley Mitchell was a city slave.

I was born in Virginia, over in Lynchburg, and it was in 1852. I belonged to Parson Terry and Missy Julia. I don't remember my pappy, because he was sold when I was a baby, but my mammy was willed to the Terrys and always lived with them till Freedom. She worked for them and they hired her out there in town for cook and house servant.

They hired me out most times as nurse for white folks' chillun, and I nursed Tom Thurman's chillun. He run the bakery there in Lynchburg and come from the North, and when war broke, they made him and another Northerner take an iron-clad oath they wouldn't help the North.

I didn't get no schooling. The white folks always said Negroes don't need no learning. Some Negroes learnt to write their initials on the barn door with charcoal. They try to find out who done that, the white folks, I mean, and say they cut his fingers off if they just find out who done it.

During the war I worked in Massa Thurman's bakery, helping make hardtack and doughnuts for Confederate soldiers. He give me plenty to eat and wear and treated me as well as I could hope for.

Lynchburg was good sized when war come on and Woodruff's Negro trading yard was about the biggest thing there. It was all fenced in and had a big stand in the middle of where they sold the slaves. They got a big price for them and handcuffed and chained them together and led them off like convicts.

Of course, us slaves of white folks what lived in town wasn't treated like they was on most plantations. Massa Nat and Missy Julia was good to us, and most the folks we was hired out to was good to us. Lynchburg was full of patrollers just like the country though, and they had a fenced-in whipping post there in town and the patrollers sure put it on a Negro if they catch him without a pass.*

After surrender, a man calls a meeting of all the slaves in the fairgrounds and tells us we was free. We wasn't promised anything. We just had to do the best we could. We had to go to work for whatever they'd pay us. We didn't have nothing when we was turned loose and no place to go but down the street and road. I heard lots of slaves what lived on farms say they was promised forty acres and a mule; but they never did get it.

When I left the Terrys, I worked in a tobacco factory for a dollar a week. That was big money to me. Mammy worked too, and we managed somehow to live.

"If I had my life to live over, I would die fighting rather than be a slave again. I want no man's yoke on my shoulders no more. But in them days, us didn't know no better. All we knowed was work, and hard work. We was learned to say, 'Yes Sir!' and scrape down and bow, and to do just exactly what we was told to do, make no difference if we wanted to or not."

Robert Falls

"I remember washing dishes when I was four years old. When I was six, I carried water. When I got to be seven years old, I was cutting sprouts almost like a man, and when I was eight, I could pick one hundred pounds of cotton."

Mary Island

"After the war, the Ku Klux broke out. Oh, they was mean. In their long white robes, they scare the Negroes to death. They have long horns and big eyes and mouth. They never go around much in the day. Just night. They take the poor Negroes away in the woods and beat them and hang them. The Negroes was afraid to move, much less try to do anything. They never know what to do; they have no learning, have no money."

Fannie Moore

*Slaves had to get a dated permit to go off the owner's property.

Lewis has leave to pass & repass from my plantation to Mr. Scott's until 12 o'clock tonight.

Elvira Norris
January 1st, 1860

The text, above, was copied from a slave pass issued by a plantation owner.

Activity: "Dramatic Reading"

Distribute quotes to various students and have them practice reading the quotes in a manner that reflects how the slave must have felt when he or she said the words. Have students use appropriate facial expressions and body language to augment their reading. Some students may choose to memorize their quote.

Activity: "Slave Pass"

Provide an opportunity for interested students to create a short, but serious skit involving the slave pass. One student might portray the slave owner who sends the slave on an errand, issuing the pass so that he can leave the property. Another student might assume the role of an authority who thinks the slave is a runaway and demands to see his or her pass.

Source: *Slavery Time: When I was Chillun* (ISBN: 0-399-23194-3)
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