

CHAPTER
SEVEN



The View from the Bottom Rail

Thunder. From across the swamps and salt marshes of the Carolina coast came the distant, repetitive pounding. Thunder out of a clear blue sky. Down at the slave quarters, young Sam Mitchell heard the noise and wondered. In Beaufort, the nearby village, planter John Chaplin heard too, and dashed for his carriage. The drive back to his plantation was as quick as Chaplin could make it. Once home, he ordered his wife and children to pack; then looked for his slaves. The flatboat must be made ready, he told them; the family was going to Charleston. He needed eight men at the oars. One of the slaves, Sam Mitchell's father, brought the news to his wife and son at the slave quarters. "You ain't gonna row no boat to Charleston," the wife snapped, "you go out dat back door and keep a-going." Young Sam was mystified by all the commotion. How could it thunder without a cloud in the sky? "Son, dat ain't no t'under," explained the mother, "dat Yankee come to gib you freedom."

The pounding of the guns came relatively quickly to Beaufort—November of 1861, only seven months after the first hostilities at Fort Sumter. Yet it was only a matter of time before the thunder of freedom rolled across the rest of the south, from the bayous and deltas of Louisiana in 1862 to the farms around Richmond in 1865. And as the guns of the Union spoke, thousands of Sam Mitchells experienced their own unforgettable moments. Freedom was coming to a nation of four million slaves.

To most slaves, the men in the blue coats were foreigners. As foreigners, they were sometimes suspect. Many southern masters painted the

prospect of Northern invasion in deliberately lurid colors. Union soldiers, one Tennessee slave was told, "got long horns on their heads, and tushes in their mouths, and eyes sticking out like a cow! They're mean old things." A terrified Mississippi slave refused to come down out of a tree until the Union soldier below her took off his cap and demonstrated he had no horns. Many slaves, however, took such tales with more than a grain of salt. "We all hear 'bout dem Yankees," a Carolina slave told his overseer. "Folks tell we they has horns and a tail . . . W'en I see dem coming I shall run like all possess." But as soon as the overseer fled, leaving the plantation in the slaves' care, the tune changed: "Good-by, ole man, good-by. That's right. Skedaddle as fast as you kin. . . . We's



This slave family lived on a plantation at Beaufort, South Carolina, not far from the plantation where Sam Mitchell heard the thunder of northern guns in 1861. The photograph was taken after northern forces had occupied the Sea Island area.

| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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gwine to run sure enough; but we knows the Yankees, an' we runs that way."

For some slaves, the habit of long years, the bond of loyalty, or the fear of alternatives led them to side with their masters. Faithful slaves hid valuable silver, persuaded Yankees that their departed masters were actually Union sympathizers, or feigned contagious illness in order to scare off marauding soldiers. One pert slave even led Yankees right to the plantation beehives. "De Yankees forgot all about de meat an' things dey done stole," she noted with satisfaction; "they took off down de road at a run." But in many cases, the conflict between loyalty and freedom caused confusion and anguish. An old Georgia couple, both over sixty, greeted the advance of Sherman's soldiers calmly and with apparent lack of interest. They seemed entirely content to remain under the care of their master instead of joining the mass of slaves flocking along behind Sherman's troops. As the soldiers prepared to leave, however, the old woman suddenly stood up, a "fierce, almost devilish" look in her eyes, and turned to her husband. "What you sit dar for?" she asked vehemently. "You s'pose I wait sixty years for nutten? Don't yer see de door open? I'se follow my child; I not stay. Yes, anudder day I goes 'long wid dese people; yes, sar, I walks till I drop in my tracks."

Other slaves felt no hesitation about choosing freedom; indeed, they found it difficult to contain the joy within them. One woman, who overheard the news of emancipation just before she was to serve her master's dinner, asked to be excused because she had to get water from a nearby spring. Once she had reached the seclusion of the spring, she allowed her feelings free rein.

I jump up and scream, "Glory, glory hallelujah to Jesus! I'se free! I'se free! Glory to God, you come down an' free us; no big man could do it." An' I got sort o' scared, afeared somebody hear me, an' I takes another good look, an' fall on de groun' an' roll over, an' kiss de groun' fo' de Lord's sake, I's so full o' praise to Masser Jesus.

To the newly freed slaves, it seemed as if the world had been turned upside down. Rich and powerful masters were fleeing before Yankees, while freed slaves were left with the run of the plantation. The situation was summed up succinctly by one black soldier who was surprised—and delighted—to find that his former master was among the prisoners he was guarding. "Hello, massa!" he said cheerfully, "bottom rail top dis time!"

| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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IN SEARCH OF THE FREEDMEN'S POINT OF VIEW

The freeing of four million blacks surely ranks as one of the major events in American history. Yet the story has not been an easy one to tell. To understand the personal trials and triumphs of the newly liberated slaves, or freedmen as they came to be called, the historian must draw upon the personal experiences of those at the center of the drama. He must recreate the freedman's point of view. But slaves had occupied the lowest level of America's social and economic scale. They sat, as the black soldier correctly noted, on the bottom rail of the fence. For several reasons, that debased position has made it unusually difficult for historians to recover the freedman's point of view.

In the first place, most histories suffer from a natural "top-rail" bias. They tend to take as their subjects members of the higher social classes. Histories cannot be written without the aid of documentary raw material, left in the historical record by participants. The more detailed the records, the easier it is to write a history. By and large, those on the top rails of society produce the best and most voluminous records. Having been privileged to receive an education, they are more apt to publish memoirs, keep diaries, or write letters. As leaders of society who make decisions, they are the subjects of official minutes and records. They are more often written about and commented on by their contemporaries.

At the other end of the social spectrum, "bottom-rail" people lead lives that are commonly repetitious. While a political leader involves himself in what appears to be one momentous issue after another, a farmer most often plants the same crop and follows the ritual of the seasons year after year. Furthermore, the individual actions of the anonymous majority seem to have little effect on the course of history. Biographical details of such people appear both uninspiring and unavailable, at first glance anyway, when compared to the bustling lives of the powerful. Thus the elites of any society have long been the natural subjects of historians.

The decade of the 1970s saw an increasing interest by historians in the writing of social histories that would shed greater light on the activities and feelings of bottom rail people. We saw, for example, that a knowledge of the social and economic position of the serving class was essential to understanding the volatile society of early Virginia. Similarly, we

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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alliances behind the witchcraft controversy at Salem. Often enough, social historians have found it difficult to piece together the lives of any anonymous class of Americans; yet reconstructing the perspective of the black slave or freedman has proved particularly challenging, simply because few written source materials are available. Black slaves were not only discouraged from learning to read and write, southern legislatures passed slave codes which flatly forbade whites to teach them.

The laws were not entirely effective; a few blacks employed as drivers on large plantations learned to read and correspond so that their absent masters might send them instructions. Some black preachers were also literate. Still, most reading remained a clandestine affair, done out of sight of the master or other whites. During the war, a literate slave named Squires Jackson was eagerly scanning a newspaper for word of northern victories when his master unexpectedly entered the room and demanded to know what the slave was doing. The surprised reader deftly turned the newspaper upside down, put on a foolish grin, and said, "Confederates done won the war!" The master laughed and went about his business.

Even though most slaves never wrote letters, kept diaries, or left any other written records, it might at first seem easy enough to learn about slave life from accounts written by white contemporaries. Slavery, after all, was an institution whose faults and alleged virtues were hotly debated by nineteenth-century Americans. Any number of letters, books, travellers' accounts, and diaries survive, full of descriptions of life under slavery and of the experiences of freedmen after the war. Yet here too, the question of perspective raises serious problems. The vantage point of white Americans observing slavery was emphatically not that of slaves who lived under the "peculiar institution," nor of those freedmen forced to cope with their dramatically changed circumstances. The marked differences between the social and psychological positions of blacks and whites makes it extremely difficult to reconstruct the black point of view solely from white accounts.

Consider, first, the observations of whites who associated most often and most closely with black slaves: their masters. The relation between master and slave was inherently unequal. Blacks were at the mercy of their owners' whims. Slaves could be whipped for trifling offenses; they could be sold or separated from their families and closest friends; even under "kind" masters, they were bound to labor as ordered if they wanted their ration of food and clothing. With slaves so dependent on the master's authority, they were hardly likely to reveal their true feelings; the dangerous consequences of such indiscretion were too great.

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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In fact, we have already encountered an example where a black was forced to deceive his master, the case of Squires Jackson and his newspaper. A moment's reflection will indicate that we narrated that story from Jackson's point of view, not the master's. Our impression of the slave's conduct would have been remarkably different if we had access only to a diary kept by Jackson's master. "A humorous incident occurred today," the entry might have read.

While entering the woodshed to attend some business, I came upon my slave Squires. His large eyes were fixed with intense interest upon an old copy of a newspaper he had come upon, which alarmed me some until I discovered the rascal was reading its contents upside down. "Why Squires," I said innocently. "What is the latest news?" He looked up at me with a big grin and said, "Massa, de 'Federates jes' won de war!" It made me laugh to see the darkey's simple confidence. I wish I could share his optimism.

This entry is fictional, but having Jackson's version of the story serves to cast suspicion on similar entries in real planter diaries. One Louisiana slaveowner, for instance, marvelled that his field hands went on with their Christmas party apparently unaware that Yankee raiding parties had pillaged a nearby town. "We have been watching the negroes dancing for the last two hours. . . . They are having a merry time, thoughtless creatures, they think not of the morrow." It apparently never occurred to the planter that the "thoughtless" merriment may have been especially great because of the Northern troops nearby.*

The harsh realities of the war brought many southerners to realize for the first time just how little they really knew about their slaves. In areas where Union troops were near, slaves ran for freedom—often the very servants masters had deemed most loyal. Mary Chesnut, whose house was not far from Fort Sumter, sought in vain to penetrate the blank expressions of her slaves. "Not by one word or look can we detect any

*Readers who review the opening narrative of this chapter will discover that they have already encountered quite a few other examples of blacks concealing their true feelings. In fact, except for the black soldier's comment about the bottom rail being top, every example of white-black relations cited in the opening section has some element of concealment or deception, either by blacks toward whites, or by whites toward blacks. It may be worth noting that we did not select the opening incidents with that fact in mind. The preponderance of deception was noted only when we

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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"They are having a merry time, thoughtless creatures, they think not of the morrow." This scene of a Christmas party, similar to the one described by the Louisiana planter, appeared with an article written by a northern correspondent for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1857. The picture, reflecting the popular stereotype of slaves as cheerful and ignorantly content with their lot, suggests that the social constraints of the times made it as difficult for southern blacks to be completely candid with their northern liberators as it had been to be candid with their southern masters.

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It is tempting to suppose that northerners, as liberators of the slaves, might provide more sympathetic or accurate accounts of freedmen's attitudes. But that is a dangerous assumption to make. Although virtually all northern slaves had been freed by 1820, race prejudice remained overwhelmingly evident. Antislavery forces often combined a vehement dislike of slavery with an equally vehement desire to keep blacks out of

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |



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tion facilities were segregated. Whites and blacks had much less contact than afforded by the easy, if unequal, familiarity common in the South.

Consequently, while some Union soldiers went out of their way to be kind to the slaves they encountered, many more looked upon blacks with distaste and open hostility. Many Yankees strongly believed that they were fighting a war to save the Union, not to free the "cursed Nigger," as one recruit put it. Even white officers who commanded black regiments could be remarkably unsympathetic. "Any one listening to your shouting and singing can see how grotesquely ignorant you are," one officer lectured his troops, when they refused to accept less than the pay promised them upon enlistment. Missionaries and other sympathetic northerners who came to occupied territory understood the slaves better, but even they had preconceptions to overcome. "I saw some very low-looking women who answered very intelligently, contrary to my expectations," noted Philadelphia missionary Laura Towne. Where she was serving, in the Carolina sea-islands near Beaufort, she observed that "some, indeed most of [the slaves], were the real bullet-headed negroes." Another female missionary, much less sympathetic than Laura Towne, bridled when a black child greeted her with too much familiarity. "I say good-mornin' to my young missus," recounted the child to a friend, "and she say, 'I slap your mouth for your impudence, you nigger.'" Such callousness underlines the need for caution when dealing with northern accounts.

Indeed, the more perceptive northern observers recognized that blacks would continue to be circumspect around whites. Just as the slave had been dependent on his southern masters, so the freedman found himself similarly vulnerable to the new class of conquerors. Blacks often responded to questions with answers carefully designed to please. "One of these blacks, fresh from slavery, will most adroitly tell you precisely what you want to hear," noted northerner Charles Nordhoff.

To cross-examine such a creature is a task of the most delicate nature; if you chance to put a leading question he will answer to its spirit as closely as the compass needle answers to the magnetic pole. Ask if the enemy had fifty thousand men, and he will be sure that they had at least that many; express your belief that they had not five thousand, and he will laugh at the idea of their having more than forty-five hundred.

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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Samuel Gridley Howe, a wartime commissioner investigating the freedmen's condition, saw the situation clearly. "The negro, like other men, naturally desires to live in the light of truth," he argued, "but he hides

in the shadow of falsehood, more or less deeply, according as his safety or welfare seems to require it. Other things equal, the freer a people, the more truthful; and only the perfectly free and fearless are perfectly truthful."

Even sympathetic northerners were at a disadvantage in recounting the freedmen's point of view, simply because black culture was so foreign to them. The world of the southern field hand, black religious culture, surviving African folk customs and songs—all these were unfamiliar to northern observers. Black dialect too created problems. Charles Nordhoff noted that often he had the feeling that he was "speaking with foreigners." The slaves' phrase "I go shum" puzzled him until he discovered it to be a contraction of "I'll go see about it." Another missionary was "teaching the little darkies gymnastics and what various things were for, eyes, etc. He asked what ears were made for, and when they said, 'To yer with,' he could not understand them at all."

If black dialect was difficult to understand, black culture and religion could appear even more unfathomable. Although most slaves nominally shared with northerners a belief in Christianity, black methods of worship shocked more than one staid Unitarian. After church meetings, slaves often participated in a singing and dancing session known as a "shout," where the leader would sing out a line of song and the chorus respond, dancing in rhythm to the music. As the night proceeded, the music became more vocal and the dancing more vigorous. "Tonight I have been to a 'shout,'" reported Laura Towne, "which seems to me certainly the remains of some old idol worship . . . I never saw anything so savage." Another missionary noted, "It was the most hideous and at the same time the most pitiful sight I ever witnessed."

Thus, as sympathetic as many northerners wished to be, significant obstacles prevented them from fully appreciating the freedman's point of view. With race prejudice so prevalent, with blacks in such a vulnerable position, with black culture so much at odds with white, it is not surprising that perceptive observers like Nordhoff felt as if they were speaking with "foreigners." The nature of slave society and the persistence of race prejudice made it virtually impossible for blacks and whites to deal with one another in open, candid ways.

THE FREEDMEN SPEAK

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

in the shadow of falsehood, more or less deeply, according as his safety or welfare seems to require it. Other things equal, the freer a people, the more truthful; and only the perfectly free and fearless are perfectly truthful."

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If black dialect was difficult to understand, black culture and religion could appear even more unfathomable. Although most slaves nominally shared with northerners a belief in Christianity, black methods of worship shocked more than one staid Unitarian. After church meetings, slaves often participated in a singing and dancing session known as a "shout," where the leader would sing out a line of song and the chorus respond, dancing in rhythm to the music. As the night proceeded, the music became more vocal and the dancing more vigorous. "Tonight I have been to a 'shout,'" reported Laura Towne, "which seems to me certainly the remains of some old idol worship . . . I never saw anything so savage." Another missionary noted, "It was the most hideous and at the same time the most pitiful sight I ever witnessed."

Thus, as sympathetic as many northerners wished to be, significant obstacles prevented them from fully appreciating the freedman's point of view. With race prejudice so prevalent, with blacks in such a vulnerable position, with black culture so much at odds with white, it is not surprising that perceptive observers like Nordhoff felt as if they were speaking with "foreigners." The nature of slave society and the persistence of race prejudice made it virtually impossible for blacks and whites to deal with one another in open, candid ways.

THE FREEDMEN SPEAK

Given the scarcity of first-person black accounts, how can we fully recover the freedman's point of view? From the very beginning, some observers recognized the value that black testimony would have and

worked to collect it. If few blacks could write, their stories could be written down by others and made public. Oral testimony, transcribed by literate editors, would allow blacks to speak out on issues that affected them most closely.

The tradition of oral evidence began even before the slaves were freed. Abolitionists recognized the value of firsthand evidence against the slave system. They took down the stories of fugitive slaves who had safely made their way North, and published the accounts. During the war, Congress also established the Freedman's Inquiry Commission, which collected information about blacks that might aid the government in formulating policies toward the newly freed slaves.

In the half-century following Reconstruction, however, interest in preserving black history generally languished. An occasional journalist or historian travelled through the South to interview former slaves. Educators at black schools, such as the Hampton Institute, published a few recollections. But a relatively small number of subjects were interviewed. Often the interviews were published in daily newspapers whose standards of accuracy were not high and where limitations of space required that the interviews be severely edited.

Furthermore, the vast majority of professional historians writing about Reconstruction ignored these interviews, as well as the freedmen's perspective in general. They most often relied on white accounts which, not unexpectedly, painted a rather partial picture. William A. Dunning, a historian at Columbia University, was perhaps the most influential scholar in setting forth the prevalent viewpoint. He painted the freedmen as childish, happy-go-lucky creatures who failed to appreciate the responsibilities of their new status. "As the full meaning of [emancipation] was grasped by the freedmen," Dunning wrote, "great numbers of them abandoned their old homes, and, regardless of crops to be cultivated, stock to be cared for, or food to be provided, gave themselves up to testing their freedom. They wandered aimless but happy through the country. . . ." At the same time Dunning asserted that Confederate soldiers and other southern whites had "devoted themselves with desperate energy to the procurement of what must sustain the life of both themselves and their former slaves." Such were the conclusions deduced without the aid of the freedmen's perspectives.

Only in the twentieth century were systematic efforts made to question blacks about their experiences as slaves and freedmen. Interest in the black heritage rose markedly during the 1920s, in great part spurred by the efforts of black scholars like W. E. B. DuBois, Charles Johnson, and

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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types promoted by the Dunning school. Moreover, the growth of both sociology and anthropology departments at American universities encouraged scholars to analyze Southern culture using the tools of the new social sciences. By the beginning of the 1930s historians at Fisk and Southern universities had instituted projects to collect oral evidence.

Ironically, it was the economic adversity of the Depression that sparked the greatest single effort to gather oral testimony from the freedmen. One of the many alphabet-soup agencies chartered by the Roosevelt administration was the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). Primarily, the project sought to compile cultural guides to each of the forty-eight states, using unemployed writers and journalists to collect and edit the information. But under the direction of folklorist John Lomax, the FWP also organized staffs in many states to interview former slaves.

Although Lomax's project placed greatest emphasis on collecting black folklore and songs, the FWP's directive to interviewers included a long list of historical questions that interviewers were encouraged to ask. The following sampling gives an indication of the project's interests:

What work did you do in slavery days? Did you ever earn any money?
 What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish?
 Was there a jail for slaves? Did you ever see any slaves sold or auctioned
 off? How and for what causes were the slaves punished? Tell what you
 saw.

What do you remember about the war that brought you your freedom?
 When the Yankees came what did they do or say?

What did the slaves do after the war? What did they receive generally?
 What do they think about the reconstruction period?

The results of these interviews are remarkable, if only in terms of sheer bulk. More than 2,300 were recorded and edited in state FWP offices and then sent to Washington, assembled in 1941, and published in typescript. A facsimile edition, issued during the 1970s, takes up nineteen volumes. Supplementary materials, including hundreds of interviews never forwarded to Washington during the project's life, comprise another twelve volumes, with additional materials forthcoming. Benjamin Botkin, the series' original editor, recognized the collection's importance:

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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social psychologists and cultural anthropologists, cannot afford to reckon without. For the first and last time, a large number of surviving slaves (many of whom have since died) have been permitted to tell their own story, in their own way.

At first glance, the slave narrative collection would appear to fulfill admirably the need for a guide to the freedmen's point of view. But even Botkin, for all his enthusiasm, recognized that the narratives could not simply be taken at face value. Like other primary source materials, they need to be viewed in terms of the context in which they originated.

To begin with, no matter how massive the nineteen volumes of interviews may appear on the library shelf, they still constitute a small sampling of the original four million freedmen. What sort of selection bias might exist? Geographic imbalance comes quickly to mind. Are the slave interviews drawn from a broad cross-section of southern states? Counting the number of slaves interviewed from each state, we discover that there are only 155 interviews from blacks living in Virginia, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware, and Kentucky—about 6 percent of the total number of interviews published. Yet in 1860, 23 percent of the southern slave population lived in those states. Thus the upper South is underrepresented in the collection. For researchers who wished to investigate whether conditions varied from the border states to the deep south, this geographic bias would have to be taken into account.*

What about age? Since the interviews took place primarily between 1936 and 1938, ex-slaves were fairly old: fully two-thirds of them were over 80. The predominance of elderly interviewees raises several questions. Most obviously, the Civil War was already seventy years in the past. How sharp were the informants' memories? Ability to recall accurately varies from person to person, but common sense suggests that the further away from an event, the less detailed one's memory is likely to be. In addition, age may have biased the *type* of recollections as well as their accuracy. Historian John Blassingame has noted that the average life-expectancy of a slave in 1850 was less than 50 years. Those who lived to a ripe old age might well have survived because they were treated better than the average slave. If so, their accounts would reflect some of the milder experiences of slaves.

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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Other possible sampling biases come to mind—the sex of the subjects or the kinds of labor they performed as slaves. But distortions may be introduced into the slave narratives in ways more serious than sample bias. Interviewers, simply by choosing their questions, define the kinds of information a subject will volunteer. We have already seen that sensitive observers, such as Charles Nordhoff, recognized how important it was not to ask leading questions. But even Nordhoff may not have realized how many unconscious cues the most innocent questions carry.

Social scientists specializing in interviewing have pointed out that even the grammatical form of a question will influence a subject's response. Take, for example, the following questions:

Where did you hear about this job opening?
 How did you hear about this job opening?
 So you saw our want ad for this job?

Each question is directed at the same information, yet each suggests to the subject a different response. The first version (“*Where* did you hear . . .”) implies that the interviewer wants a specific, limited answer. (“Down at the employment center.”) The second question, by substituting *how* for *where*, invites the subject to offer a longer response. (“Well, I’d been looking around for a job for several weeks, and I was over at the employment office when. . . .”) The final question signals that the interviewer wants only a yes or no confirmation to a question whose answer he believes he already knows.

Interviewers, in other words, constantly communicate to their subjects the kinds of evidence they want, the length of the answers, and even the manner in which answers ought to be offered. If such interviewing “cues” influence routine conversations, they prove even more crucial when a subject as controversial as slavery is involved, and where relations between blacks and whites continue to be strained. In fact, the most

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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before any conversation took place. Was the interviewer white or black? William Ferris, a sociologist obtaining oral folklore in the Mississippi Delta region in 1968 discussed the problem. "It was not possible to maintain rapport with both Whites and Blacks in the same community," he noted,

for the confidence and cooperation of each was based on their belief that I was 'with them' in my convictions about racial taboos of Delta society. Thus when I was 'presented' to Blacks by a white member of the community, the informants regarded me as a member of the white caste and therefore limited their lore to noncontroversial topics. . . .

Such tensions were even more prevalent throughout the South during the 1930s. In hundreds of ways, blacks were made aware that they were still considered inferior to whites, and that they were to remain within strictly segregated and subordinate bounds. From 1931 to 1935, more than 70 blacks were lynched in the South, often for minor or nonexistent crimes. Blacks in prison found themselves forced to negotiate grossly unfavorable labor contracts if they wished to be released. Many sharecroppers and other poor farmers were constantly in debt to white property owners.

Smaller matters of etiquette reflected the larger state of affairs. A southern white would commonly address adult blacks by their first names, or as "boy," "auntie," "uncle," regardless of the black person's status and even if the white knew the black's full name. Blacks were required to address whites as "ma'am" or "mister." Such distinctions were maintained even on the telephone. If a black placed a long-distance call for "Mr. Smith" in a neighboring town, the white operator would ask, "Is he colored?" The answer being yes, her reply would be, "Don't you say 'Mister' to me. He ain't 'Mister' to me." Conversely, an operator would refuse to place a call by a black who did not address her as "Ma'am."

In such circumstances, most blacks were naturally reticent about volunteering information to white FWP interviewers. "Lots of old slaves closes the door before they tell the truth about their days of slavery," noted one Texas black to an interviewer. "When the door is open, they tell how kind their masters was and how rosy it all was. . . ." Samuel S. Taylor, a skilled black interviewer in Arkansas, found that he had to reassure informants that the information they were giving would not be used against them. "I've told you too much," one subject concluded. "How come they want all this stuff from the colored people anyway. Do

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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Often the whites who interviewed blacks lived in the same town and were long acquaintances. "I 'members when you was barefoot at de bottom," one black told his white (and balding) interviewer; "now I see you a settin' dere, gittin' bare at de top, as bare as de palm of my hand." Another black revealed an even closer relationship when he noted that his wife Ellen "'joy herself, have a good time nussin' [nursing] white folks chillun. Nussed you; she tell me 'bout it many time." In such circumstances blacks could hardly be expected to speak frankly. One older woman summed up the situation quite cheerfully. "Oh, I know your father en your granfather en all of dem. Bless Mercy, child, I don't want to tell you nothin' but what to please you."

Although such statements put a researcher on guard, readers who are new to this field may still find it difficult to appreciate the varying responses that different interviewers might elicit. In order to bring home the point more forcibly, it may be helpful to analyze an interview that we came across during our own research in the slave narrative collection. The interview is with Susan Hamlin, a black who lived in Charleston, and we reprint it below exactly as it appears in typescript.

Interview With Ex-Slave

On July 6th, I interviewed Susan Hamlin, ex-slave, at 17 Henrietta street, Charleston, S. C. She was sitting just inside of the front door, on a step leading up to the porch, and upon hearing me inquire for her she assumed that I was from the Welfare office, from which she had received aid prior to its closing. I did not correct this impression, and at no time did she suspect that the object of my visit was to get the story of her experience as a slave. During our conversation she mentioned her age. "Why that's very interesting, Susan," I told her, "If you are that old you probably remember the Civil War and slavery days." "Yes, Ma'am, I been a slave myself," she said, and told me the following story:

"I kin remember some things like it was yesterday, but I is 104 years old now, and age is starting to get me, I can't remember everything like I use to. I getting old, old. You know I is old when I been a grown woman when the Civil War broke out. I was hired out then, to a Mr. McDonald, who lived on Atlantic Street, and I remembers when de first shot was fired, and the shells went right over de city. I got seven dollars a month for looking after children, not taking them out, you understand, just minding

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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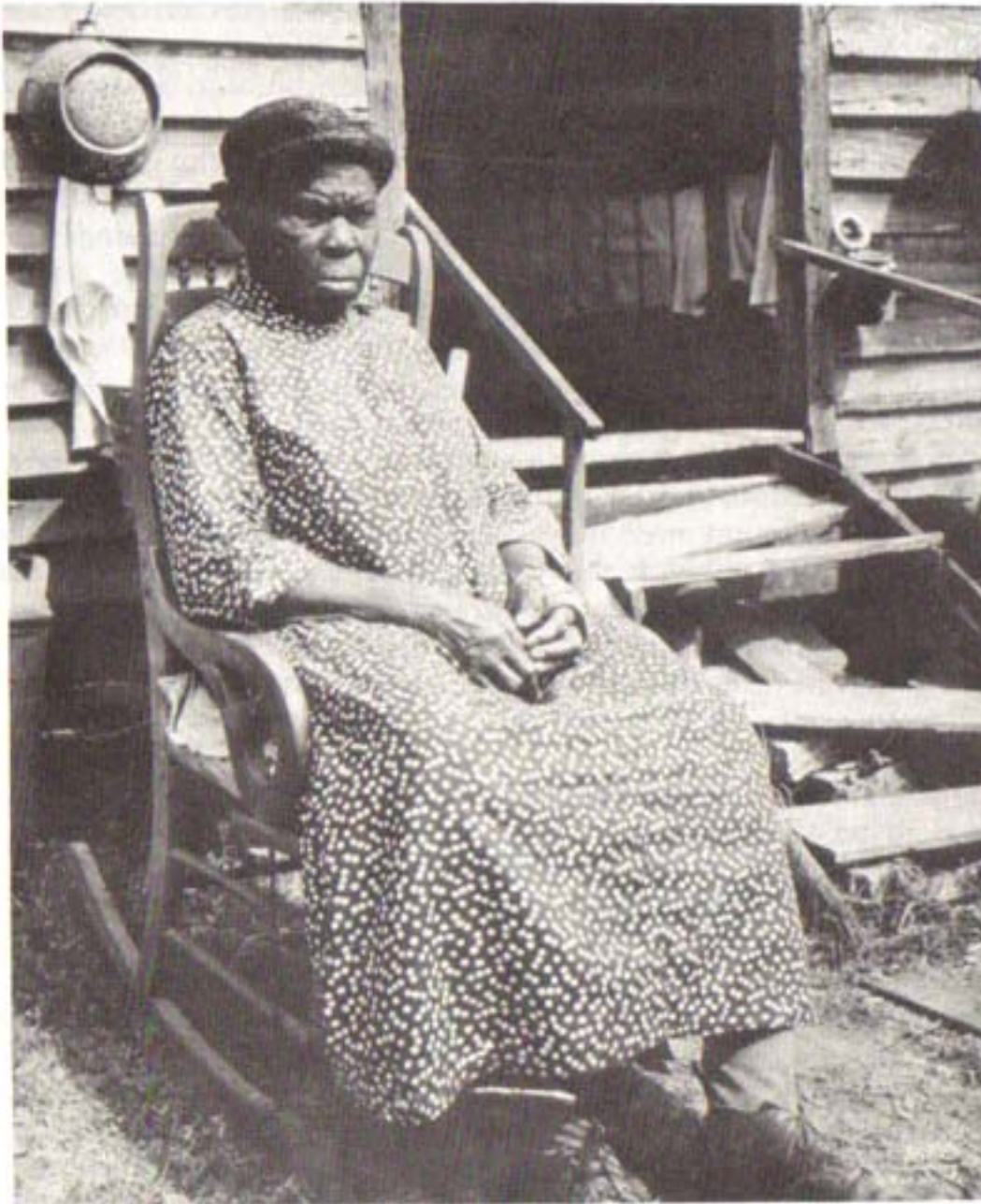
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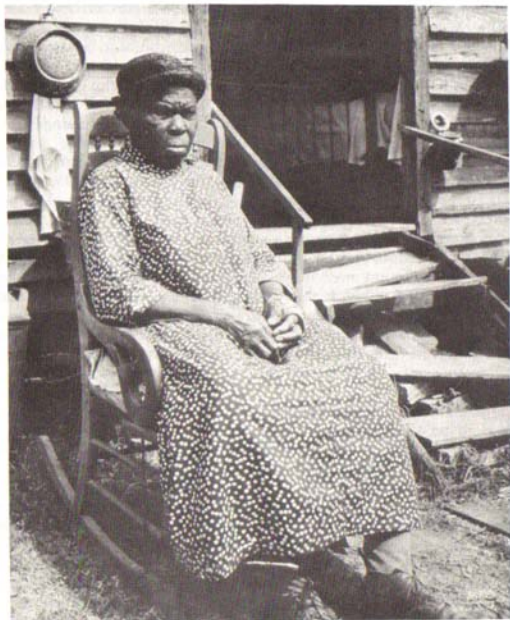
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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |



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for your work?" "Course it been fair," she answered, "I belong to him and he got to get something to take care of me."

"My name before I was married was Susan Calder, but I married a man name Hamlin. I belonged to Mr. Edward Fuller, he was president of the First National Bank. He was a good man to his people till de Lord took him. Mr. Fuller got his slaves by marriage. He married Miss Mikell, a lady what lived on Edisto Island, who was a slave owner, and we lived on Edisto on a plantation. I don't remember de name cause when Mr. Fuller got to be president of de bank we come to Charleston to live. He sell out the plantation and say them (the slaves) that want to come to Charleston with him could come and them what wants to stay can stay on the island with his wife's people. We had our choice. Some is come and some is stay, but my ma and us children come with Mr. Fuller.

We lived on St. Philip street. The house still there, good as ever. I go 'round there to see it all de time; the cistern still there too, where we used to sit 'round and drink the cold water, and eat, and talk and laugh. Mr. Fuller have lots of servants and the ones he didn't need hisself he hired out. The slaves had rooms in the back, the ones with children had two rooms and them that didn't have any children had one room, not to cook in but to sleep in. They all cooked and ate downstairs in the hall that they had for the colored people. I don't know about slavery but I know all the slavery I know about, the people was good to me. Mr. Fuller was a good man and his wife's people been grand people, all good to their slaves. Seem like Mr. Fuller just git his slaves so he could be good to dem. He made all the little colored chillen love him. If you don't believe they loved him what they all cry, and scream, and holler for when dey hear he dead? 'Oh, Mausea dead my Mausea dead, what I going to do, my Mausea dead.' Dey tell dem t'aint no use to cry, dat can't bring him back, but de chillen keep on crying. We used to call him Mausea Eddie but he named Mr. Edward Fuller, and he sure was a good man.

"A man come here about a month ago, say he from de Government, and dey send him to find out 'bout slavery. I give him most a book, and what he give me? A dime. He ask me all kind of questions. He ask me dis and he ask me dat, didn't de white people do dis and did dey do dat but Mr. Fuller was a good man, he was sure good to me and all his people, dey all like him, God bless him, he in de ground now but I ain't going to let nobody lie on him. You know he good when even the little chillen cry and holler when he dead. I tell you dey couldn't just fix us up any kind of way when we going to Sunday School. We had to be dressed nice, if you pass him and you ain't dress to suit him he send you right back and

| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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say tell your ma to see dat you dress right. Dey couldn't send you out in de cold barefoot neither. I 'member one day my ma want to send me wid some milk for her sister-in-law what live 'round de corner. I fuss cause it cold and say 'how you going to send me out wid no shoe, and it cold?' Mause hear how I talkin and turn he back and laugh, den he call to my ma to gone in de house and find shoe to put on my feet and don't let him see me barefoot again in cold weather.

When de war start going good and de shell fly over Charleston he take all us up to Aiken for protection. Talk 'bout marching through Georgia, dey sure march through Aiken, soldiers was everywhere.

"My ma had six children, three boys and three girls, but I de only one left, all my white people and all de colored people gone, not a soul left but me. I ain't been sick in 25 years. I is near my church and I don't miss service any Sunday, night or morning. I kin walk wherever I please, I kin walk to de Battery if I want to. The Welfare use to help me but dey shut down now, I can't find out if dey going to open again or not. Miss (Mrs.) Buist and Miss Pringle, dey help me when I can go there but all my own dead."

"Were most of the masters kind?" I asked. "Well you know," she answered, "times den was just like dey is now, some was kind and some was mean; heaps of wickedness went on just de same as now. All my people was good people. I see some wickedness and I hear 'bout all kinds of t'ings but you don't know whether it was lie or not. Mr. Fuller been a Christian man."

"Do you think it would have been better if the Negroes had never left Africa?" was the next question I asked. "No Ma'am," (emphatically) dem heathen didn't have no religion. I tell you how I t'ink it is. The Lord made t'ree nations, the white, the red and the black, and put dem in different places on de earth where dey was to stay. Dose black ignoramuses in Africa forgot God, and didn't have no religion and God blessed and prospered the white people dat did remember Him and sent dem to teach de black people even if dey have to grab dem and bring dem into bondage till dey learned some sense. The Indians forgot God and dey had to be taught better so dey land was taken away from dem. God sure bless and prosper de white people and He put de red and de black people under dem so dey could teach dem and bring dem into sense wid God. Dey had to get dere brains right, and honor God, and learn uprightness wid God cause ain't He make you, and ain't His Son redeem you and save you wid His precious blood. You kin plan all de wickedness you want and pull hard as you choose but when the Lord mek up His mind you is to change, He

his precious blood. You kin pian all de wickedness you want and pull hard as you choose but when the Lord mek up His mind you is to change, He can change you dat quick (snapping her fingers) and easy. You got to believe on Him if it tek bondage to bring you to your knees.

| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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You know I is got converted. I been in Big Bethel (church) on my knees praying under one of de preachers. I see a great, big, dark pack on my back, and it had me all bent over and my shoulders drawn down, all hunch up. I look up and I see de glory, I see a big beautiful light, a great light, and in de middle is de Sabior, hanging so (extending her arms) just like He died. Den I gone to praying good, and I can feel de sheckles (shackles) loose up and moving and de pack fall off. I don't know where it went to, I see de angels in de Heaven, and hear dem say 'Your sins are forgiven.' I scream and fell off so. (Swoon.) When I come to dey has laid me out straight and I know I is converted cause you can't see no such sight and go on like you is before. I know I is still a sinner but I believe in de power of God and I trust his Holy name. Den dey put me wid de seekers but I know I is already saved."

"Did they take good care of the slaves when their babies were born?" she was asked. "If you want chickens for fat (to fatten) you got to feed dem," she said with a smile, "and if you want people to work dey got to be strong, you got to feed dem and take care of dem too. If dey can't work it come out of your pocket. Lots of wickedness gone on in dem days, just as it do now, some good, some mean, black and white, it just dere nature, if dey good dey going to be kind to everybody, if dey mean dey going to be mean to everybody. Sometimes chillen was sold away from dey parents. De Mause would come and say "Where Jennie," tell um to put clothes on dat baby, I want um. He sell de baby and de ma scream and holler, you know how dey carry on. Geneally (generally) dey sold it when de ma wasn't dere. Mr. Fuller didn't sell none of us, we stay wid our ma's till we grown. I stay wid my ma till she dead.

"You know I is mix blood, my grandfather bin a white man and my grandmother a mulatto. She been marry to a black so dat how I get fix like I is. I got both blood, so how I going to quarrel wid either side?"

SOURCE: Interview with Susan Hamlin, 17 Henrietta Street.

NOTE * Susan lives with a mulatto family of the better type. The name is Hamlin not Hamilton, and her name prior to her marriage was Calder not Collins. I paid particular attention to this and had them spell the names for me. I would judge Susan to be in the late nineties but she is wonderfully well preserved. She now claims to be 104 years old.

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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From the beginning, the circumstances of this conversation arouse suspicion. The white interviewer, Jessie Butler, mentions that she allowed Hamlin to think she was from the welfare office. Evidently, Butler thought Hamlin would speak more freely if the real purpose of the visit

was hidden. But surely the deception had the opposite effect. Hamlin, like most of the blacks interviewed, was elderly, unable to work, and dependent on charity. If Butler appeared to be from the welfare office, Hamlin would likely have done whatever she could to ingratiate herself. Many blacks consistently assumed that their white interviewers had influence with the welfare office. "You through wid me now, boss? I sho' is glad of dat," concluded one subject. "Help all you kin to git me dat pension befo' I die and de Lord will bless you, honey. . . . Has you got a dime to give dis old nigger, boss?"

Furthermore, Butler's questioning was hardly subtle. When Hamlin noted that she had to give her master the money she made from looking after children, Butler asked, "Don't you think that was fair?" "Course it been fair," came the quick response. Hamlin knew very well what was expected, especially since Butler had already answered the question herself: "If you were fed and clothed by him, shouldn't he be paid for your work?"

Not surprisingly, then, the interview paints slavery in relatively mild colors. Hamlin describes in great detail how good her master was and how she had shoes in the winter. When asked whether most masters were kind, Hamlin appears eminently "fair"—"some was kind and some was mean." She admits hearing "all kinds of t'ings but you don't know whether it was lie or not." She does note that slave children could be sold away from parents and that black mothers protested; but she talks as if that were only to be expected. ("De ma scream and holler, you know how dey carry on.")

Equally flattering is the picture Hamlin paints of relations between the races. "Black ignoramuses" in Africa had forgotten about God, she explains, just as the Indians had; but "God sure bless and prosper de white people." So blacks and the Indians are placed under white supervision, "to get dere brains right, and honor God, and learn uprightness." Those were not exactly the words proslavery apologists would have used to describe the situation, but they were the same sentiments. Defenders of slavery constantly stressed that whites served as benevolent models ("parents," Andrew Jackson might have said) leading blacks and Indians on the slow upward road to civilization.

All these aspects of the interview led us to be suspicious about its content. Moreover, there were several additional clues in the document that puzzled us. Hamlin had mentioned a man who visited her "about a month ago, say he from de Government, and dey send him to find out 'bout slavery." Apparently her interview with Jessie Butler was the

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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We found the answer when we continued on through the narrative collection. The interview following Butler's was conducted by a man named Augustus Ladson, with a slave named "Susan Hamilton." When compared with Jessie Butler's interview, Augustus Ladson's makes absorbing reading. Here it is, printed exactly as it appears in the collection:

Ex-Slave 101 Years of Age

Has Never Shaken Hands Since 1863 Was on Knees Scrubbing when Freedom Gun Fired

I'm a hund'ed an' one years old now, son. De only one livin' in my crowd frum de days I wuz a slave. Mr. Fuller, my master, who was president of the Firs' National Bank, owned the fambly of us except my father. There were eight men an' women with five girls an' six boys workin' for him. Most o' them wus hired out. De house in which we stayed is still dere with de sisterns an' slave quarters. I always go to see de old home which is on St. Phillip Street.

My ma had t'ree boys an' t'ree girls who did well at their work. Hope Mikell, my eldest brodder, an' James wus de shoemaker. William Fuller, son of our Master, wus de bricklayer. Margurite an' Catharine wus de maids an' look as de children.

My pa b'long to a man on Edisto Island. Frum what he said, his master was very mean. Pa real name wus Adam Collins but he took his master's name; he wus de coachman. Pa did supin one day en his master whipped him. De next day which wus Monday, pa carry him 'bout four miles frum home in de woods an' give him de same 'mount of lickin' he wus given on Sunday. He tied him to a tree an' unhitched de horse so it couldn't git tie-up an' kill e self. Pa den gone to de landin' an' cetch a boat dat wus comin' to Charleston wood fa'm products. He (was) permitted by his master to go to town on errands, which helped him to go on de boat without his master's permission. When he get here he gone on de water front an'

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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ax for a job on a ship so he could git to de North. He got de job an' sail' wood de ship. Dey search de island up an' down for him wood houndogs en w'en it wus t'ought he wus drowned, 'cause dey track him to de river, did dey give up. One of his master' friend gone to New York en went in a store w'ere pas wus employed as a clerk. he reconize' pa is easy is pa reconize' him. He gone back home an' tell pa master who know den dat pa wusn't comin' back an' before he died he sign' papers dat pa wus free. Pa' ma wus dead an' he come down to bury her by de permission of his master' son who had promised no ha'm would come to him, but dey wus' fixin' plans to keep him, so he went to de Work House an' ax to be sold 'cause any slave could sell e self if e could git to de Work House. But it wus on record down dere so dey couldn't sell 'im an' told him his master' people couldn't hold him a slave.

People den use to do de same t'ings dey do now. Some marry an' some live together jus' like now. One t'ing, no minister nebber say in readin' de matrimony "let no man put asunder" 'cause a couple would be married tonight an' tomorrow one would be taken away en be sold. All slaves wus married in dere master house, in de livin' room where slaves an' dere missus an' mossa wus to witness de ceremony. Brides use to wear some of de finest dress an' if dey could afford it, have de best kind of furniture. Your master nor your missus objected to good t'ings.

I'll always 'member Clory, de washer. She wus very high-tempered. She wus a mulatto with beautiful hair she could sit on; Clory didn't take foolishness frum anybody. One day our missus gone in de laundry an' find fault with de clothes. Clory didn't do a t'ing but pick her up bodily an' throw 'er out de door. Dey had to sen' fur a doctor 'cause she pregnant an' less than two hours de baby wus bo'n. Afta dat she begged to be sold fur she didn't [want] to kill missus, but our master ain't nebber want to sell his slaves. But dat didn't keep Clory frum gittin' a brutal whippin'. Dey whip' 'er until dere wusn't a white spot on her body. Dat wus de worst I ebber see a human bein' got such a beatin'. I t'ought she wus goin' to die, but she got well an' didn't get any better but meaner until our master decide it wus bes' to rent her out. She willingly agree' since she wusn't 'round missus. She hated an' detest' both of them an' all de fambly.

W'en any slave wus whipped all de other slaves wus made to watch. I see women hung frum de ceilin' of buildin's an' whipped with only supin tied 'round her lower part of de body, until w'en dey wus taken down, dere wusn't breath in de body. I had some terribly bad experiences.

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

ax for a job on a ship so he could git to de North. He got de job an' sail' wood de ship. Dey search de island up an' down for him wood houndogs en w'en it wus t'ought he wus drowned, 'cause dey track him to de river, did dey give up. One of his master' friend gone to New York en went in a store w'ere pas wus employed as a clerk. he reconize' pa is easy is pa reconize' him. He gone back home an' tell pa master who know den dat pa wusn't comin' back an' before he died he sign' papers dat pa wus free. Pa' ma wus dead an' he come down to bury her by de permission of his master' son who had promised no ha'm would come to him, but dey wus' fixin' plans to keep him, so he went to de 'Work House an' ax to be sold 'cause any slave could sell e self if e could git to de 'Work House. But it wus on record down dere so dey couln't sell 'im an' told him his master' people couln't hold him a slave.

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I'll always 'member Clory, de washer. She wus very high-tempered. She wus a mulatto with beautiful hair she could sit on; Clory didn't take foolishness from anybody. One day our missus gone in de laundry an' find fault with de clothes. Clory didn't do a t'ing but pick her up bodily an' throw 'er out de door. Dey had to sen' fur a doctor 'cause she pregnant an' less than two hours de baby wus bo'n. Afta dat she begged to be sold fur she didn't [want] to kill missus, but our master ain't nebber want to sell his slaves. But dat didn't keep Clory frum gitin' a brutal whippin'. Dey whip' 'er until dere wusn't a white spot on her body. Dat wus de worst I ebber see a human bein' got such a beatin'. I t'ought she wus goin' to die, but she got well an' didn't get any better but meaner until our master decide it wus bes' to rent her out. She willingly agree' since she wusn't 'round missus. She hated an' detest' both of them an' all de fambly.

W'en any slave wus whipped all de other slaves wus made to watch. I see women hung frum de ceilin' of buildin's an' whipped with only supin tied 'round her lower part of de body, until w'en dey wus taken down, dere wusn't breath in de body. I had some terribly bad experiences.

Yankees use to come t'rough de streets, especially de Big Market, huntin' those who want to go to de "free country" as dey call' it. Men an' women wus always missin' an' nobody could give 'count of dere disappearance. De men wus train' up North fur sojus.

De white race is so brazen. Dey come here an' run de Indians frum dere own lan', but dey couldn't make dem slaves 'cause dey wouldn't stan' for it. Indians use to git up in trees an' shoot dem with poison arrow. W'en dey couldn't make dem slaves den dey gone to Africa an' bring dere black brother an' sister. Dey say 'mong themselves, "we gwine mix dem up en make ourselves king. Dats d only way we'd git even with de Indians."

All time, night an' day, you could hear men an' women screamin' to de tip of dere voices as either ma, pa, sister, or brother wus take without any warnin' an' sell. Some time mother who had only one chile wus separated fur life. People wus always dyin' frum a broken heart.

One night a couple married an' de next mornin' de boss sell de wife. De gal ma got in in de street an' cursed de white woman fur all she could find. She said: "dat damn white, pale-face bastard sell my daughter who jus' married las' night," an' other t'ings. The white man tresten' her to call de police if she didn't stop, but de collud woman said: "hit me or call de police. I redder die dan to stan' dis any longer." De police took her to de Work House by de white woman orders an' what became of 'er, I never hear.

W'en de war began we wus taken to Aiken, South Ca'lina w'ere we stay' until de Yankees come t'rough. We could see balls sailin' t'rough de air w'en Sherman wus comin'. Bumbs hit trees in our yard. W'en de freedom gun wus fired, I wus on my 'nees scrubbin'. Dey tell me I wus free but I didn't b'lieve it.

In de days of slavery woman wus jus' given time 'nough to deliver dere babies. Dey deliver de baby 'bout eight in de mornin' an' twelve had to be back to work.

I wus a member of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church for 67 years. Big Zion, across de street wus my church before den an' before Old Bethel w'en I lived on de other end of town.

Sence Lincoln shook hands with his assasin who at de same time shoot him, frum dat day I stop shakin' hands, even in de church, an' you know how long dat wus. I don't b'lieve in kissin' neider fur all carry dere meannesses. De Master wus betrayed by one of his bosom frien' with a kiss.

SOURCE Interview with (Mrs.) Susan Hamilton, 17 Henrietta Street, who claims to be 101 years of age. She has never been sick for twenty years and walks as though just 40. She was hired out by her master for seven dollars a month which had to be given her master.

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |



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Discussions of happy family relations? Instead of tales about shoes in the winter, we hear of Hamlin's father, whipped so severely, he rebels and flees. We hear of family separations, not downplayed with a "you know how dey carry on," but with all the bitterness of mothers whose children had been taken "without any warnin'." We hear of a couple married one night, then callously separated and sold the next day. In the Butler account, slave babies are fed well, treated nicely; in the Ladson account, the recollection is of mothers who were given only a few hours away from the fields in order to deliver their children.

Benevolent white paternalism? This time Hamlin's tale of three races draws a different moral. The white race is "brazen," running the Indians off their land. With a touch of admiration, she notes that the Indians "wouldn't stan' for" being made slaves. White motives are seen not as religious but exploitative and vengeful: "Dey say 'mong themselves, 'we gwine mix dem up and make ourselves king. Dats de only way we'll git even with de Indians.'" The difference between the two interviews, both in tone and substance, is astonishing.

How do we account for this? Nowhere in the South Carolina narratives is the race of Augustus Ladson mentioned, but internal evidence would indicate he is black. In a culture where blacks usually addressed whites respectfully with a "Sir," "Ma'am," or "Boss," it seems doubtful that Susan Hamlin would address a white man as "son." ("I'm a hund'ed an' one years old now, son.") Furthermore, the content of the interview is just too consistently anti-white. Hamlin would never have remarked, "De white race is so brazen," if Ladson had been white, especially given the reticence demonstrated in her interview with Butler. Nor would she have been so specific about the angry mother's curses ("damn white, pale-face bastard"). It would be difficult to conceive of a more strikingly dramatic demonstration of how an interviewer can affect the responses of a subject.

| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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FREEDOM AND DECEPTION

The slave narrative collection, then, is not the direct, unfiltered perspective that it first appears to be. In fact, interviews like the ones with Susan Hamlin seem to suggest that the search for the "true" freedmen's perspective is bound to end in failure and frustration. We have seen, first, that information from planters and other white sources must be treated with extreme skepticism; second, that northern white sources deserve similar caution. Finally, it appears that even the oral testimony of blacks themselves must be questioned, given the circumstances under which much of it was gathered. It is as if a detective discovered that all the clues he had carefully pieced together were hopelessly biased, leading his investigation down the wrong path.

The seriousness of the problem should not be underestimated. It is fundamental. We can try to ease out of the dilemma by noting that there are doubtless differing degrees of bias—that some accounts, relatively speaking, are likely to be less deceptive than others. It can be argued, for instance, that Susan Hamlin's interview with Ladson is a more accurate portrayal of her feelings than the interview with Butler. In large measure that is probably true. But does that mean we must reject all of the Butler interview? Presumably, Susan Hamlin's master did give her a pair of shoes one cold winter day. Are we to assume, because of Ladson's interview, that the young child felt no gratitude or obligation to "kind old" Mr. Fuller? Or that the old woman did not look back on those years with some ambivalence? For all her life, both slave and free, Susan Hamlin lived in a world where she was required to "feel" one set of emotions when dealing with some people and a different set when dealing with other people. Can we rest completely confident in concluding that the emotions she expressed to Ladson were her "real" feelings, while the ones to Jessie Butler were her "false" feelings? How can we possibly arrive at an objective conclusion about "real" feelings in any social situation where such severe strains existed?

Yet putting the question in this light offers at least a partial way out of the dilemma. If so many clues in the investigation are hopelessly "biased"—that is, distorted by the social situation in which they are set—then the very pervasiveness of the distortion may serve as a key to understanding the situation. The evidence in the case is warped precisely because it accurately reflects a distortion in the society itself. The ele-

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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tions were necessarily grounded in mistrust and deception; where slaves could survive only if they remained acutely conscious of the need to adapt their feelings to the situation. The distortion in the evidence, in other words, speaks eloquently of the hurt inflicted in a society where personal behavior routinely operated under an economy of deception.

The deception was mutual—practiced by both sides upon each other. Susan Hamlin was adapting the story of her past to the needs of the moment, at the same time that Jessie Butler was letting Hamlin believe her to be a welfare agent. White masters painted lurid stories of Yankee devils with horns while slaves, playing roles they were expected to play, rolled their eyes in fear until they had the chance to run straight for Union lines. The deceptions fed upon each other and were compounded, becoming an inextricable part of daily life.

It would be tempting, given our awareness of this situation, simply to turn previous historical interpretations on their heads. Where William Dunning and his disciples took most of their primary sources at face value and thus saw only cheerful, childlike Sambos, an enlightened history would read the documents upside down, so to speak, stripping away the camouflage to reveal slaves who, quite rationally, went about the daily business of "puttin' on ole massa." And of course we have already seen abundant evidence that slaves did use calculated deception in order to protect themselves.

But simply to replace one set of feelings with another is to ignore the intricate and tense relationships between them. It drastically underestimates the strains that arose out of an economy of deception. The longer and more consistently masters and slaves were compelled to live false and inauthentic lives, the easier it must have been for them to mislead themselves as well as others. Where whites and blacks alike engaged in daily dissimulation, some of the deception was inevitably directed inward, simply to preserve the fiction of living in a tolerable, normally functioning society.

When the war came, shattering that fiction, whites and blacks were exposed in concrete and vivid ways to the deception that had been so much a part of their lives. For white slaveholders, the revelation usually came when Union troops entered a region and slaves deserted the plantations in droves. Especially demoralizing was the flight of blacks whom planters had believed most loyal. "He was about my age and I had always treated him more as a companion than a slave," noted one planter, of the first defector from his ranks. Mary Chestnut, the woman near Fort Sumter who had tried to penetrate the blank expressions of her slaves,

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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trusted, betrayed us," she lamented, while "Claiborne, that black rascal who was suspected by all the world," faithfully protected the plantation.

Many slaveholders, when faced with the truth, refused to recognize the role that deception had played in their lives, so deceiving themselves further. "The poor negroes don't do us any harm except when they are put up to it," concluded one Georgia woman. A Richmond newspaper editor demanded that a slave who had denounced Jefferson Davis "be whipped every day until he confesses what white man put these notions in his head." Yet the war brought painful insight to others. "We were all laboring under a delusion," confessed one South Carolina planter. "I believed that these people were content, happy, and attached to their masters. But events and reflection have caused me to change these opinions. . . . If they were content, happy and attached to their masters, why did they desert him in the moment of his need and flock to an enemy, whom they did not know . . . ?"

For black slaves, the news of emancipation brought an entirely different reaction, but still one conditioned by the old habits. We have already seen how one old Georgia slave couple remained impassive as Sherman's troops passed through, until finally the wife could restrain herself no longer. Even the servant who eloquently shouted the praises of freedom at a secluded brook instinctively remembered the need for caution: "I got sort o' scared, afeared somebody hear me, an' I takes another good look. . . ." Although emancipation promised a society founded upon equal treatment and open relations, slaves could not help wondering whether the new order would fully replace the old. That would occur only if the freedmen could forge relationships that were no longer based on the customs of deception nor rooted in the central fiction of slavery—that blacks were morally and intellectually incapable of assuming a place in free society.

No historian has more vividly conveyed the freedmen's attempts to achieve that goal than Leon Litwack. Having recognized the substantial value of the slave narrative collection, Litwack drew upon its evidence as well as the standard range of primary sources to recreate the freedmen's perspectives as they sought the real meaning of their new freedom. Certainly that meaning was by no means evident once the first excitement of liberation had passed. James Lucas, a slave of Jefferson Davis, recalled the freedmen's confusion: "Dey all had diffe'nt ways o' thinkin' 'bout it. Mos'ly though dey was jus' lak me, dey didn' know jus' zackly what it meant. It was jus' somp'n dat de white folks an' slaves all

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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were not long in taking their first steps toward defining freedom. On the surface, many of these seemed small. But however limited, they served to distance the freedmen in significant ways from the old habits of bondage.

The taking of new names was one such step. As slaves, blacks often had no surname, or took the name of their master. Equally demeaning, given names were often casually assigned by their owners. Cicero, Pompey, and other Latin or Biblical names were commonly bestowed in jest. And whether or not slaves had a surname, they were always addressed familiarly, by their given names. Such customs were part of the symbolic language of deception, promoting the illusion that blacks were helpless and even laughable dependents of the planter's family.

Thus many freedmen took for themselves new names, severing the symbolic tie with their old masters. "A heap of people say they was going to name their selves over," recalled one freedman. "They named their selves big names. . . . Some of the names was Abraham an' some called their selves Lincum. Any big name 'ceptin' their master's name. It was the fashion." Even blacks who remained loyal to their masters recognized the significance of the change. "When you'all had de power you was good to me," an older freedman told his master, "an I'll protect you now. No niggers nor Yankees shall touch you. If you want anything, call for Sambo. I mean, call for Mr. Samuel—that's my name now."

Just as freedmen took new names to symbolize their new status, so also many husbands and wives reaffirmed their marriages in formal ceremonies. Under slavery, many marriages and family ties had been ignored through the convenient fiction that blacks were morally inferior. Black affections, the planters argued, were dominated by impulse and the physical desires of the moment. Such self-deception eased many a master's conscience when slave families were separated and sold. Similarly, many planters married slaves only informally, with a few words sufficing to join the couple. "Don't mean nuthin' less you say, 'What God done jined, cain't no man pull asunder,'" noted one Virginia freedman. "But dey never would say dat. Jus' say, 'Now you married.'" For obvious reasons of human dignity, blacks moved to solemnize their marriage vows. There were practical reasons for an official ceremony too: it might qualify families for military pensions, or the division of lands that were widely rumored to be coming.

Equally symbolic for most blacks was the freedom to travel where they wished. As we have seen, historian William Dunning recognized this fact, but interpreted it from the viewpoint of his southern white sources as "aimless but happy" wandering. Black accounts make abundantly

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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Just as freedmen took new names to symbolize their new status, so also many husbands and wives reaffirmed their marriages in formal ceremonies. Under slavery, many marriages and family ties had been ignored through the convenient fiction that blacks were morally inferior. Black affections, the planters argued, were dominated by impulse and the physical desires of the moment. Such self-deception eased many a master's conscience when slave families were separated and sold. Similarly, many planters married slaves only informally, with a few words sufficing to join the couple. "Don't mean nuthin' less you say, 'What God done jined, cain't no man pull asunder,'" noted one Virginia freedman. "But dey never would say dat. Jus' say, 'Now you married.'" For obvious reasons of human dignity, blacks moved to solemnize their marriage vows. There were practical reasons for an official ceremony too: it might qualify families for military pensions, or the division of lands that were widely rumored to be coming.

Equally symbolic for most blacks was the freedom to travel where they wished. As we have seen, historian William Dunning recognized this fact, but interpreted it from the viewpoint of his southern white sources as "aimless but happy" wandering. Black accounts make abundantly

clear how travel helped freedmen to rid themselves of the role they had been forced to play during their bondage. Richard Edwards, a preacher in Florida, explicitly described the symbolic nature of such a move:

You ain't, none o' you, gwinter feel rale free till you shakes de dus' ob de Old Plantashun offen yore feet an' goes ter a new place whey you kin live out o' sight o' de gret house. So long ez de shadder ob de gret house falls acrost you, you ain't gwine ter feel lak no free man, an' you ain't gwine ter feel lak no free 'oman. You mus' all move—you mus' move clar away from de ole places what you knows, ter de new places what you don't know, whey you kin raise up yore head douten no fear o' Marse Dis ur Marse Tudder.

And so, in the spring and summer of 1865, southern roads were filled with blacks, hiving off "like bees trying to find a setting place," as one ex-slave recalled. Generally freedmen preferred to remain within the general locale of family and friends, merely leaving one plantation in search of work at another. But a sizeable minority travelled farther, to settle in cities, move west, or try their fortunes at new occupations.

Many ex-slaves travelled in order to reunite families separated through previous sales. Freedmen "had a passion, not so much for wandering, as for getting together," a Freedman's Bureau agent observed; "and every mother's son among them seemed to be in search of his mother; every mother in search of her children." Often, relatives had only scanty information; in other cases, so much time had passed that kin could hardly recognize each other, especially when young children had grown up separated from their parents.

A change of name or location, the formalization of marriages, reunion with relatives—all these acts demonstrated that freedmen wanted no part of the old constraints and deceptions of slavery. But as much as these acts defined black freedom, larger issues remained. How much would emancipation broaden economic avenues open to blacks? Would freedom provide an opportunity to rise on the social ladder? The freedmen looked anxiously for signs of significant changes.

Perhaps the most commonly perceived avenue to success was through education. Slavery had been rationalized, in part, through the fiction that blacks were incapable of profiting from an education. The myth of intellectual inferiority stood side by side with that of moral inferiority. Especially in areas where masters had energetically prevented slaves from acquiring skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic, the freedmen's hunger for learning was intense. When Northerners occupied the Caro-

| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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After the war, when the Freedman's Bureau sent hundreds of northern school teachers into the South, blacks flocked enthusiastically to the makeshift schoolhouses. Often, classes could be held only at night, but the freedmen were willing. "We work all day, but we'll come to you in the evening for learning," Georgia freedmen told their teacher, "and we want you to make us learn; we're dull, but we want you to beat it into



"My Lord, ma'am, what a great thing larning is!" a freedman exclaimed to a white teacher. Many whites were surprised by the intensity of the ex-slaves' desire for an education. To say that the freedmen were "anxious to learn" was not strong enough, one Virginia school official noted; "they are *crazy* to learn." This woodcut, drawn in 1867, depicts several youngsters studying their lessons along a village street.

| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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Important as education was, the freedmen were preoccupied even more with their relation to the lands they had worked for so many years. The vast majority of slaves were field hands. The agricultural life was the one they had grown up with, and as freedmen, they wanted the chance to own and cultivate their own property. Independent ownership would lay to rest the lie that blacks were incapable of managing their own affairs; but without land, the idea of freedom would be just another deception. "Gib us our own land and we take care ourselves; but widout land, de ole massas can hire us or starve us, as dey please," noted one freedman.

In the heady enthusiasm at the close of the war, many ex-slaves were convinced that the Union would divide up confiscated Confederate plantations. Each family, so the persistent rumor went, would receive forty acres and a mule. "This was no slight error, no trifling idea," reported one white observer, "but a fixed and earnest conviction as strong as any belief a man can ever have." Slaves had worked their masters' lands for so long without significant compensation, it seemed only fair that recompense should finally be made. Further, blacks had more than hopes to rely on. Ever since southern planters had fled from invading Union troops, some blacks had been allowed to cultivate the abandoned fields.

The largest of such occupied regions was the Sea Islands along the Carolina coast, where young Sam Mitchell had first heard the northern guns. As early as March 1863, freedmen were purchasing confiscated lands from the government. Then in January 1865, after General William Sherman completed his devastating march to the sea, he extended the area which was open to confiscation. In his Special Field Order No. 15, Sherman decreed that a long strip of abandoned lands, stretching from Charleston on the north to Jacksonville on the south, would be reserved for the freedmen. The lands would be subdivided into forty-acre tracts, which could be rented for a nominal fee. After three years, the freedmen had the option to purchase the land outright.

Sherman's order was essentially a tactical maneuver, designed to deal with the overwhelming problem of refugees in his path. But blacks widely perceived this order and other promises by enthusiastic northerners as a foretaste of Reconstruction policy. Consequently, when white planters returned to their plantations, they often found blacks who no longer bowed obsequiously and tipped their hats. Thomas Pinckney of

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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they would continue to work for him. "O yes, we gwi wuk! we gwi wuk all right . . ." came the angry response. "We gwi wuk fuh ourse'ves. We ain' gwi wuk fuh no white man." Where would they go to work, Pinckney asked—seeing as they had no land? "We ain't gwine nowhar," they replied defiantly. "We gwi wuk right here on de lan' whar we wuz bo'n an' whar belongs tuh us."

Despite the defiance, Pinckney prevailed, as did the vast majority of southern planters. Redistribution of southern lands was an idea strongly supported only by more radical northerners. Thaddeus Stevens introduced a confiscation bill in Congress, but it was swamped by debate and never passed. President Johnson, whose conciliatory policies pleased southern planters, determined to settle the issue as quickly as possible. He summoned General O. O. Howard, head of the Freedman's Bureau, and instructed Howard to reach a solution "mutually satisfactory" to both blacks and planters. Howard, though sympathetic to the freedmen, could not mistake the true meaning of the President's order.

Regretfully, the general returned to the Sea Islands in October and assembled a group of freedmen on Edisto Island. The audience, suspecting the bad news, was restless and unruly. Howard tried vainly to speak, and made "no progress" until a woman in the crowd began singing, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." The crowd joined, then was silent while Howard told them they must give up their lands. Bitter cries of "No! No!" came from the audience. "Why, General Howard, why do you take away our lands?" called one burly man. "You take them from us who have always been true, always true to the Government! You give them to our all-time enemies! That is not right!"

Reluctantly, and sometimes only after forcible resistance, blacks lost the lands to returning planters. Whatever else freedom might mean, it was not to signify compensation for previous labor. In the years to come Reconstruction would offer freedom of another sort, through the political process. By the beginning of 1866, the radicals in Congress had charted a plan that gave blacks basic civil rights and political power. Yet even that avenue of opportunity was quickly sealed off. In the decades that followed the first thunder of emancipation, blacks would look back on their early experiences almost as if they were part of another, vanished world. The traditions of racial oppression and the daily deceptions that went with them were too strong to be thoroughly overturned by the war. It is perhaps significant that the term "freed-

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| [BACK](#) | [NEXT](#) |

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"I was right smart bit by de freedom bug for awhile," Charlie Davenport of Mississippi recalled.

It sounded pow'ful nice to be tol: "You don't have to chop cotton no more. You can th'ow dat hoe down an' go fishin' whensoever de notion strikes you. An' you can roam 'roun' at night an' court gals jus' as you please. Aint no marster gwine a-say to you, 'Charlie, you's got to be back when de clock strikes nine.'" I was fool 'nough to b'lieve all dat kin' o' stuff.

Both perceptions—the first flush of the “freedom bug” as well as Davenport’s later disillusionment—accurately reflect the black experience. Freedom had come to a nation of four million slaves, and it changed their lives in deep and important ways. But for many years after the war put an end to human bondage, the freedmen still had to settle for the view from the bottom rail.

| [BACK](#) |

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CHAPTER
SEVEN

The View from the Bottom Rail

Thunder. From across the swamps and salt marshes of the Carolina coast came the distant, repetitive pounding. Thunder out of a clear blue sky. Down at the slave quarters, young Sam Mitchell heard the noise and wondered. In Beaufort, the nearby village, planter John Chaplin heard too, and dashed for his carriage. The drive back to his plantation was as quick as Chaplin could make it. Once home, he ordered his wife and children to pack; then looked for his slaves. The flatboat must be made ready, he told them; the family was going to Charleston. He needed eight men at the oars. One of the slaves, Sam Mitchell's father, brought the news to his wife and son at the slave quarters. "You ain't gonna row no boat to Charleston," the wife snapped, "you go out dat back door and keep a-going." Young Sam was mystified by all the commotion. How could it thunder without a cloud in the sky? "Son, dat ain't no t'under," explained the mother, "dat Yankee come to gib you freedom."

The pounding of the guns came relatively quickly to Beaufort—November of 1861, only seven months after the first hostilities at Fort Sumter. Yet it was only a matter of time before the thunder of freedom rolled across the rest of the south, from the bayous and deltas of Louisiana in 1862 to the farms around Richmond in 1865. And as the guns of the Union spoke, thousands of Sam Mitchells experienced their own unforgettable moments. Freedom was coming to a nation of four million slaves.

To most slaves, the men in the blue coats were foreigners. As foreigners, they were sometimes suspect. Many southern masters painted the

| [NEXT](#) |