

# in TIME



## Unchained Memories

READINGS FROM THE SLAVE NARRATIVES

What was it like to be enslaved in the United States?  
More than 2,000 African Americans answered that question  
in interviews conducted during the 1930s. Their voices come to life inside the  
pages of this magazine — and in the extraordinary new documentary

*Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives.*

Premiering Monday, February 10, 2003, at 8PM/7C.

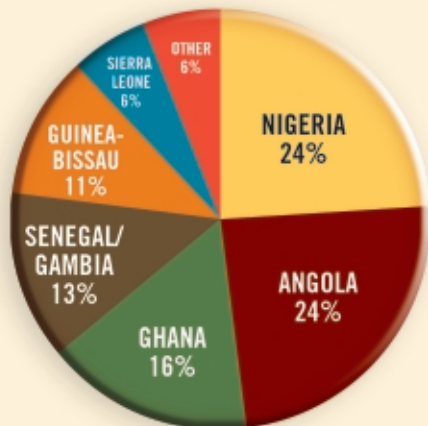
**HBO**<sup>®</sup>

[www.hbo.com/unchained](http://www.hbo.com/unchained)



# VERBATIM & NUMBERS

## From Africa to America: Enslaved Africans' Countries of Origin (1619-1865)



“No man can put a chain around the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.”

—**Frederick Douglass, liberated slave and civil rights activist, 1883**

“I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community

can constitute a state. I think we must get rid of slavery or we must get rid of freedom.”

—**Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet, 1856**

“Democratic liberty exists solely because we have slaves ... freedom is not possible without slavery.”

—**Richmond Enquirer, 1856**

“Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”

—**President Abraham Lincoln, 1865**

“I had crossed the line. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land.”

—**Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery in 1849 and went on to lead 300 slaves to freedom**

“If I had my life to live over, I would die fighting rather than be a slave again.”

—**Robert Falls, former slave, in WPA interview conducted in the 1930s**

## SLAVERY BY THE NUMBERS

**12,000,000** Approximate number of Africans shipped across the Atlantic Ocean between 1450 and 1850, primarily to colonies in North America, South America and the West Indies.

**3,953,760** Total number of enslaved people in the southern states in 1860.

**0** Total number of enslaved people in the free states of the North as of 1860.

**100,000** Number of ex-slaves still alive in the late 1930s.

**2,300** Ex-slaves interviewed in the 1930s for the Slave Narratives now housed at Library of Congress.

AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY



THE CHARLESTON MERCHANTS' ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE SALE OF NEGROES, 1769.

CHARLESTOWN, April 27, 1769.

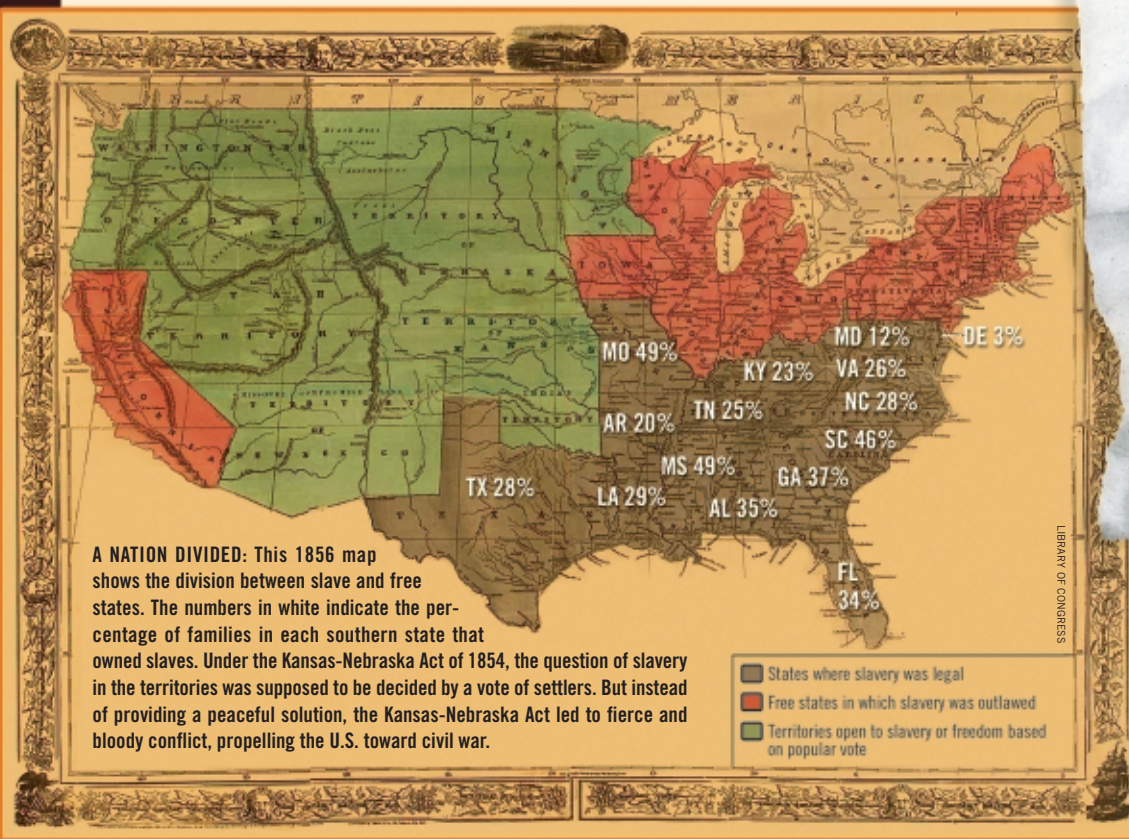


**TO BE SOLD,**  
On WEDNESDAY the Twelfth Day of  
MAY next,  
A CHOICE CARGO OF  
Two Hundred & Fifty  
**NEGROES:**

**ARRIVED** in the Ship  
COUNTESS of SUSEX, THOMAS DAVIES,  
Master, directly from GAMBIA, by  
JOHN CHAPMAN, & Co.

“ THIS is the Vessel that had the Small-Pox  
on Board at the Time of her Arrival the 31st of  
March last: Every necessary Precaution hath since  
been taken to cleanse both Ship and Cargo thoroughly,  
so that those who may be inclined to purchase need not  
be under the least Apprehension of Danger from In-  
fection.  
The NEGROES are allowed to be the likeliest Parcel  
that have been imported this Season.”

**HUMAN CARGO:** Flyers like this one, distributed in Charleston, South Carolina in 1769, advertised the sale of enslaved Africans.





# WHAT ARE THE SLAVE NARRATIVES?

**D**uring the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Federal Government came up with a creative new way to put unemployed writers back to work. Armed with tape recorders and lists of questions, members of the **Federal Writers' Project** set out to record the experiences and opinions of everyday people. As part of this project, thousands of former slaves in 17 states were interviewed. One result of these oral history interviews was the **Slave Narrative Collection**, an extraordinary set of 2,300 autobiographical documents now housed at the Library of Congress. These interviews, all of which were conducted between 1936 and 1938, gave former slaves an unparalleled chance to share their memories of life in bondage. For contemporary Americans, these narratives provide a riveting chronicle of what it was like to be enslaved in the United States.

## About the Language of the Slave Narratives

In his instructions to interviewers, the director of the Federal Writers' Project noted that "details of the interview should be reported as accurately as possible in the language of the original



**FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM:** This rare photograph shows a group of ex-slaves in Cumberland Landing, Virginia in 1862, the year after the Civil War began.



statements." In response, the interviewers—most of whom were white—made an effort to capture in writing the speech patterns of the men and women with whom they spoke. (Some interviewers tape-recorded the conversations, while many relied solely

on written notes.) In some cases, the resulting transcripts contain clear exaggerations or racist notions of African Americans. As one historian has noted, the transcripts are a mix "of accuracy and fantasy, of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism."

When reading or listening to the narratives, it is important to remember the process by which the interviewees' words were recorded on paper. It is also important to remember the historical context in which the narratives were produced. Certain words that the former slaves used may be offensive or disturbing. But the narratives are a reflection of the time and place at which they were created. As such, they illuminate a world that is important for all Americans to explore. ■

## The Slave Narratives on the Web



**More than 2,000** slave narratives—along with 500 photos—are available online at the Library of Congress' "Born in Slavery" website at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>. For

more information about the new HBO documentary *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives*, visit [www.hbo.com/unchained](http://www.hbo.com/unchained). And for teaching materials and additional resources related to the slave narratives, go to [www.timeclassroom.com/unchained](http://www.timeclassroom.com/unchained).



**BRUTAL CONDITIONS:** Devices such as this one were used to restrain slaves.



# VOICES *from the*



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (7)

Born in 1847 in Victoria County, Texas, **MARTIN JACKSON** was 90 when this 1937 photo was taken.

*ENSLAVED PEOPLE STARTED WORKING AT a very early age: many began their labors in the master's house, where they served as playmates for white children. Despite this closeness, black and white children could not attend school together. In fact, in most states it was against the law for slaves to be educated.*

## My New Master Was Only Two

“My earliest recollection is the day my old boss presented me to his son, Joe, as his property. I was about five years old and my new master was only two ... No, sir, I never went into books. I used to handle a big dictionary three times a day, but it was only to put it on a chair so my young master could sit up higher at the table. I never went to school. I learned to talk pretty good by associating with my masters in their big house.”

—**Martin Jackson, Texas**

“None of us was allowed to see a book or try to learn.”

## Mush and Beans

“I remember quite well how those poor little children used to have to eat. They were fed in boxes and troughs, under the house. They were fed cornmeal mush and beans. When this was poured into their box, they would gather around it the same as we see pigs, horses and cattle gather around troughs today.”

—**Octavia George, Oklahoma**

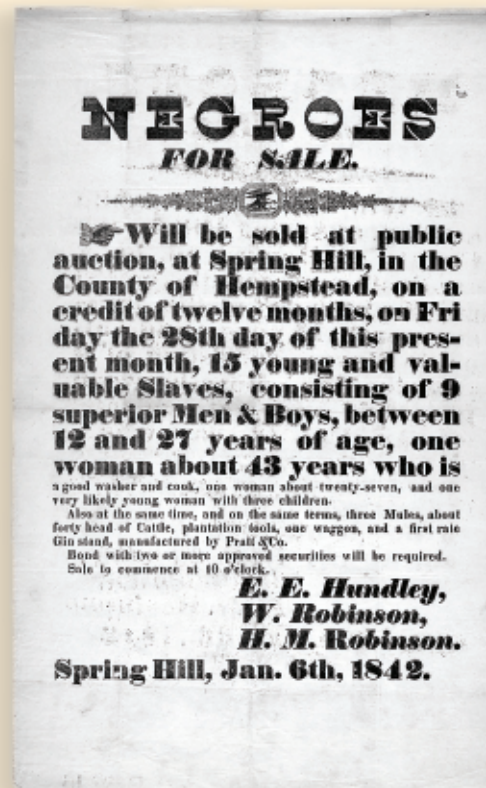
## Studying the Spelling Book

“None of us was allowed to see a book or try to learn. Dey say we git smarter den dey was if we learn anything, but we slips around and gits hold of dat Webster's old blue-back speller and we hides it 'til way in de night and den we lights a little pine torch and studies dat spellin' book. We learn it, too.”

—**Jenny Proctor, Texas**



**JENNY PROCTOR** began working in the cotton fields when she was 10. She was 87 when she shared her memories of slavery.



**PLANTATION LIFE:** This group of slaves, photographed in 1862, worked on Smith's Plantation in Beaufort, South Carolina.





# SLAVE NARRATIVES



COMING AND GOING: Horns like this one were used to call slaves to work.

BY AGE 12, MOST CHILDREN WORKED in the fields, where they grew crops like tobacco, rice and cotton. Slaves generally worked six days a week, from sunrise to sundown.

## Bells and Horns

“Bells and horns! Bells for dis and horns for dat! All we knowed was go and come by de bells and horns! Old ram horn blow to send us all to de field. We all line up,



about 75 field niggers, and go by de toolshed and git our hoes, or maybe go hitch up de mules to de plows.”

—Charley Williams, Arkansas

## 300 Pounds of Cotton

“I used to have to pick cotton and sometime I pick 300 pound and tote it a mile to de cotton house. Some pick 300 to 800 pound cotton and have to tote de bag de whole mile to de gin. Iffen dey didn’t do dey work, dey git whip till dey have blister on ’em ... I never git whip, cause I allus git my 300 pound.”

—Sarah Ashley, Texas



SARAH ASHLEY was 93 when she recalled her days on a Texas plantation.

**The children “were fed in boxes and troughs ... same as we see pigs, horses and cattle.”**

APPROXIMATELY ONE IN THREE SLAVE families was split apart. One-fifth of all enslaved children were separated from their parents.

## The Last Time I Heard Her Speak

“I never knowed my age till after de war ... and then marster gits out a big book an it shows I’s 25 year old. It shows I’s 12 when I is bought and \$800 is paid for me ... My mammy was owned by John Williams in Petersburg, in Virginia, and I come born to her on dat plantation ... Then, one day along come a Friday and that a unlucky star day, and I playin’ round de house and Marster Williams come up and say, ‘Delis, will you ’low Jim walk down de street with me?’ My mammy say, ‘All right, Jim, you be a good boy,’ and dat de las’ time I ever heard her speak, or ever see her.”

—James Green, Texas



JAMES GREEN, shown here in 1937, told of being bought for \$800.



# ESCAPE

# &

*ESCAPING FROM SLAVERY WAS EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT, and the penalty for being caught could be mutilation or death. Nevertheless, about 50,000 slaves ran away each year—but only a small fraction succeeded in attaining freedom. Many escaping slaves made use of the Underground Railroad, an informal network of safe houses and assistance for runaway slaves.*

## Going Across the River

“An old woman ... told me she had a real pretty girl there who wanted to go across the river to Ripley, Ohio, and would I take her? I was scared, and backed out in a hurry. But then I saw the girl, and she was such a pretty little thing ... I don’t know how I ever rowed the boat across the river; the current was strong and I was trembling. I couldn’t see a thing there in the dark, but I felt the girl’s eyes ... Well, pretty soon I saw a tall light and when I got up to it, two men reached down and grabbed her. I started tremblin’ all over again and prayin’. Then, one of the men took my arm and I just felt down inside of me that the Lord had got ready for me. ‘You hungry, Boy?’ is what he asked me.

“That was my first trip; it took me a long time to get over my scared feelin’, but I finally did, and I soon found myself goin’ back across the river, with two and three people, and sometimes a whole boatload. I got so I used to make three and four trips a month ...

“I never saw my passengers. It would have to be the ‘black nights’ of the moon when I would carry them ... I guess you wonder what I did with them after I got them over the river. Well, there in Ripley was a man named Mr. Rankins; I think the rest of his name was John. He had a regular station there on his place for escaping slaves. You see, Ohio was a free state and once they got over the river from Kentucky or Virginia, Mr. Rankins could strut them all around town, and nobody would bother ‘em ... Didn’t many of ‘em stay around that part of Ohio, though, because there was too much danger that you would be walking along free one night, feel a hand over your mouth, and be back across the river and in slavery again in the morning.

“And nobody in the world ever got a chance to know as much misery as a slave that had escaped and been caught.”

—Arnold Gravston, Florida

OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## 100 DOLLARS REWARD!

Ranaway from the subscriber on the 27th of July, my Black Woman, named

### EMILY,

Seventeen years of age, well grown, black color, has a whining voice. She took with her one dark calico and one blue and white dress, a red corded gingham bonnet; a white striped shawl and slippers. I will pay the above reward if taken near the Ohio river on the Kentucky side, or **THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS**, if taken in the State of Ohio, and delivered to me near Lewisburg, Mason County, Ky. **THO'S. H. WILLIAMS.**  
August 4, 1853.

**STAIRWAY TO FREEDOM:** Some 2,000 escaping slaves climbed these steps from the Ohio River up to the house of John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister who devoted much of his life to opposing slavery. Rankin’s house in Ripley, Ohio, was a key stop on the Underground Railroad.





# LIBERATION



OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**“It was de fourth day of June in 1865 [that] I begins to live.”**

*WHEN CIVIL WAR BROKE OUT IN 1861, Americans were deeply divided over whether slavery should be abolished or preserved. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863—but the freedom that Lincoln promised did not become a reality until the Union’s 1865 victory in the Civil War.*

## Freedom at Last

“I never forget de day we was set free! Dat morning we all go to de cotton field early ... After while, de old horn blow ... and we all stop and listen, ’cause it de wrong time of day for de horn. We start chopping again, and dar go de horn again. De lead row nigger holler, ‘Hold up!’ And we all stop again. ‘We better go on in. Dat our horn’ ... So we line up and go in.

“Setting on de gallery in a hide-bottom chair was a man we never see before. He had on a big broad black hat lak de Yankees wore ... His hair was plumb gray and so was his beard, and it come way down here on his chest ...

“De man say, ‘You darkies know what day dis is? ... Well dis de fourth day of June, and dis is 1865, and I want you all to ’member de date, ’cause you allus going ’member de day. To-day you is free, just lak I is, and Mr. Saunders and your Mistress and all us white people.

“I come to tell you,’ he say, ‘and I wants to be sho’ you all understand, ’cause you don’t have to git up and go



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (2)

**KATIE ROWE** recalled the day freedom came.

by de horn no more. You is your own bosses now ... I wants to bless you and hope you always is happy, and tell you got all de right and life dat any white people got, ... and then he git on his hoss and ride off.

“It was de fourth day of June in 1865 I begins to live, and I gwine take de picture of dat old man in de big black hat and long whiskers, setting on de gallery and talking kind to us, clean into my grave wid me.” ■

—**Katie Rowe, Oklahoma**

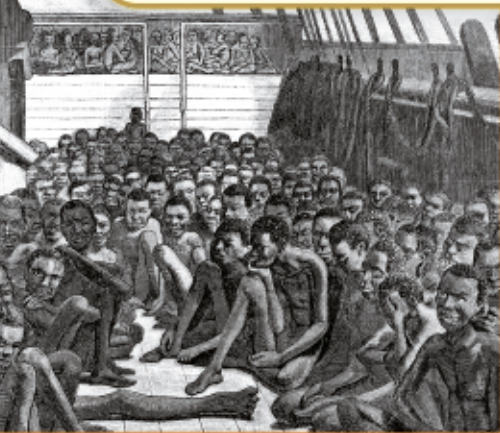




# FROM BONDAGE TO

# Freedom

## Key Dates in the History of Slavery



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**May 24, 1619** A Dutch ship arrives at Jamestown, Virginia, carrying enslaved people from Africa. Twenty Africans are traded for rations and food. These captives came to North America via the infamous and brutal **Middle Passage** (pictured above), the second leg of a three-part voyage that began in Europe, landed on Africa's "slave coast" to obtain captives, set out for the New World, and then returned to the European port of origin.

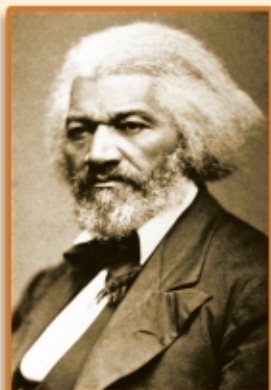
**1624** Two of the Africans who arrived in 1619, Isabella and Antoney, marry and have a son named William—the first child of African descent born in English America, and thus the first African American.

**1664-1667** Maryland and Virginia pass laws stating that baptism into Christianity does not free a slave.

**1688** Quakers in Pennsylvania sign an anti-slavery resolution, the first formal protest against slavery in the Western Hemisphere.

**1777-1820** Slavery is abolished in northern states.

**June 21, 1788** The U.S. Constitution is ratified, extending slavery for 20 years and counting each slave as three-fifths of a free man for purposes of representation and taxation.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

**February 12, 1793** The Fugitive Slave Act becomes a federal law, allowing owners to seize fugitive slaves in free states and territories.

**1820-1821** The Missouri Compromise admits Missouri and Maine as slave and free states, respectively.

**1831** William Lloyd Garrison begins the newspaper *The Liberator*, advocating the emancipation of slaves who account for one-third of U.S. population.



THE GRANGER COLLECTION

**August 1831** In Virginia, African-American slave **Nat Turner** (pictured above) leads the most serious slave rebellion in U.S. history. Fifty-five whites die; the organized abolition movement in the South comes to a virtual end. Turner is caught and hanged six weeks later.

**1838** **Frederick Douglass** (left), famed abolitionist and orator, escapes from slavery.

**March 9, 1841** In the *Amistad* case, the U.S. Supreme Court rules in favor of 50 Africans who had been seized by a U.S. government ship after having successfully revolted aboard a slave ship.

**1849** Maryland slave **Harriet Tubman** (below) escapes to the North and begins a career as "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. Between 1849 and 1860, Tubman makes 19 trips back to the South to free upward of 300 slaves.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**1850** Congress passes the Compromise of 1850, attempting to settle the slavery issue. The Compromise adds a new Fugitive Slave Act, allowing slaveholders to retrieve slaves in northern states and free territories; admits California as a free state; and bans slave-trading (but not slavery) in the District of Columbia.

**March 6, 1857** In the *Dred Scott* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court asserts that a slave does not become free when taken into a free state, Congress cannot bar slavery from a territory, and blacks cannot be citizens.

**April 12, 1861** Civil War begins when Confederate forces attack Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina.

**January 1, 1863** In the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln declares that "all persons held as slaves" within Confederate territory "are, and henceforward shall be free."

**April 9, 1865** Robert E. Lee surrenders at Appomattox, ending Civil War.

**December 18, 1865** The 13th Amendment is ratified, ending slavery.

**1936-1938** More than 2,300 former slaves share their memories with interviewers from the Federal Writers' Project.

### Think About It

At the time of the WPA interviews, how far had African Americans gone toward achieving equality?