Slave Narratives Compiled by the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), 1936–1938

The collection of firsthand accounts of slavery, commonly referred to as the Slave Narratives, originated in 1936 as part of the Work Projects Administration’s Federal Writers’ Project (FWP). The mission of seeking and collecting interviews with former slaves began in spring 1937, with the encouragement of FWP consultant (and noted folklorist) John A. Lomax. Lomax circulated a list of suggested questions to the field writers to solicit information concerning the recollections of former slaves’ older relatives, experiences during the Civil War and upon Emancipation, and the relating of folklore and everyday antebellum life. Lomax insisted that FWP writers were to record the stories “in the language of the ex-slave, without editorializing and ‘artistic’ introductions.”

Published Volumes of Slave Narratives in the Archives Library Information Center (ALIC), National Archives Building, Washington, DC

___The American Slave: A Complete Autobiography, edited by George P. Rewick, is divided into three editions, arranged by state. Consult the alphabetized name index preceding the narratives from each state, regardless of edition, as there is no consolidated index.

ALIC has complete or partial slave narratives for Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

The initial edition (Call Number E444.A4 vols. 1–17, 1972) provides exact copies of all the known unpublished transcripts of the slave narratives at that time. Each of the more than 2,000 narratives are headed by the informant’s name, the date, and place of the interview, and consists of the transcribed answers to questions asked by FWP interviewers.

___Supplemental Series 1 (Call Number E444.A4 suppl.1, vols. 1–10, 1977) includes additional narratives collected from other archives and libraries. Supplemental Series 2 (Call Number E444.A4 suppl.2, vols. 1–9, 1979) consists primarily of discovered narratives from Texas.

___The collected slave narratives from sources in Oklahoma are in a separate publication: The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives, eds. T. Lindsay Baker and Julie P. Baker, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1996 (Call Number E444.W82 1996).

Selected Resources at the Library of Congress

___Born in Slavery, a digital collection of over 9,500 images of keyword and name-searchable text, is available through the Library of Congress web site at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html


The nearly 2,000 assembled slave narratives and much of the administrative correspondence of the undertaking are housed in the Library of Congress Manuscript Division.

For more information, see the following reference reports:
- African Americans and the Federal Census, 1790–1930
- Federal Court and Commission Records Relating to Slavery in the District of Columbia, 1820–1863

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