

WPA Slave Narratives  
Virginia  
Events: Things Seen and Heard Tell Of  
John Sepich, ed.

Fannie Berry VA-1

Yes, I 'member something 'bout him too. I know my Master came home an' said, dat on his way to de gallows ole John [Brown] stopped an' kissed a little nigger child.

I wuz one slave dat de poor white man had his match. See Miss Sue? Dese here ol' white men said, "what I can't do by fair means I'll do by foul." One tried to throw me, but he couldn't. We tusseled an' knocked over chairs an' when I got a grip I scratched his face all to pieces; an dar wuz no more bothering Fannie from him; but oh, honey, some slaves would be beat up so, when dey resisted, an' sometimes if you'll 'belled de overseer would kill yo'. Us Colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you.

I plan' to 'tend a big dance. Let me see, I think it wuz on a Thursday night. Some how it tooken got out, you know how gals will talk an' it got to ol' Bil Duffeys ears (ol' dog!) an', baby do you know, mind you 'twont slavery time, but de 'oman got so mad cause I runned away from her dat she get a whole passel of 'em out looking for me. Dar wuz a boy, who heard 'em talkin' an' sayin' dey wuz goin' to kill me if I were found. I will never forget dis boy com' up to me while I wuz dancin' wid another man an' sed, "nobody knowes where you ar', Miss Moore, dey is lookin' fer you, an' is gwine kill you, so yo' come on wid me." Have mercy, have mercy my Lord, honey, you kin jes 'magin' my feelin' fer a minute. I couldn't move. You know de gals an' boys all got 'round me an' told me to go wid Squireball, dat he would show me de way to my old Mistess house. Out we took, an' we ran one straight mile up de road, den through de woods, den we had to go through a straw field. Dat field seem' like three miles. After den, we met another skit of woods. Miss Sue, baby my eyes, (ha! ha! ha!) wuz bucked an' too if it is setch a thin' as being so scared yo' hair stand on yo' head, I know, mine did. An' dat wasn't all, dat boy an' me puffed an' sweated like bulls. Was feared to stop, cause we might have been tracked.

At last we neared de house an' I started throwin' rocks on de porch. Child I look an' heard dat white 'oman when she hit dat floor, bouncin' out dat bed she mus' felt dat I wuz comin' back to her. She called all de men an' had 'em throw a rope to me an' day drawed me up a piece to de window, den I held my arms up an' dey snatched me in. Honey, Squireball fled to de woods. I ain't never heard nothin' 'bout him. An' do you know, I didn't leave day 'oman's house no more for fifteen years?

Charles Crawley VA-2

There was a auction block, I saw right here in Petersburg on the corner of Sycamore street and Bank street. Slaves were auctioned off to de highest bidder.

Some refused to be sold. By dat I mean, "cried". Lord! Lord! I done seen dem young'uns fought and kick like crazy folks; child it wuz pitiful to see 'em. Den dey would handcuff an' beat 'em unmerciful. I don' like to talk 'bout back dar. It brun' a sad feelin' up me. If slaves 'belled, I done seed dem whip 'em wid a strop cal' "cat nine tails." Honey, dis strop wuz 'bout broad as yo' hand, from thum' to little finger, an' 'twas cut in strips up. Yo' done seen dese whips dat they whip horses wid? Well dey was used too.

I don't know but two sets of white folks slaves up my way; one was name Chatman, an' de tother one Nellovies. Dese two families worked on Allen's farm as we did. Off from us on a plot called Morgan's lot, there dey lived as slaves jes like us Colored fo'ks. Yes de poor white man had some dark an' tough days, like us poor niggers; I mean were lashed an' treated, some of 'em, jes as pitiful an' unmerciful.

### Minnie Fulkes VA-3

Honey, I don't like to talk 'bout dem times, 'cause my mother did suffer misery. [SP: misert] You know dar was an' overseer who use to tie mother up in de barn with a rope aroun' her arms up over her head, while she stood on a block. Soon as dey got her tied, dis block was moved an' her feet dangled, yo' know--couldn't tech de flo'.

Dis ol' man, now, would start beatin' her nekkid 'til the blood run down her back to her heels. I took an' seed th' whelps an' scars fer my own self wid dese here two eyes. ([HW struck out: this whip she said,] was a whip like dey use to use on horses); it wuz a piece [SP: peice] of leather 'bout as wide as my han' from little finger to thumb. After dey had beat my muma all dey wanted another overseer. Lord, Lord, I hate white people and de flood waters gwine drown some mo. Well honey dis man would bathe her in salt and water. Don't you kno' dem places was a hurtin'. Um, um.

I asked mother what she done fer 'en to beat and do her so? She said, nothin', tother than she refused to be wife to dis man.

An' muma say, if he didn't treat her dis way a dozen times, it wasn't nary one.

Mind you, now muma's marster didn't know dis wuz going on. You know, if slaves would tell, why dem overseers would kill 'em.

Ha! ha! ha! dar wuz one ol' brudder who studied fer 'em one day an' tol all de slaves how to git even wid 'em.

He tol 'em to tie grape vines an' other vines across th' road, den when de Paddy rollers come galantin' wid their horses runnin' so fast you see dem vines would tangle 'em up an' cause th' horses to stumble and fall. An' lots of times, badly dey would break dere legs and horses too; one interval one ol' poor devil got tangled so an' de horse kept a carryin' him, 'til he fell off horse and next day a sucker was found in road whar dem vines wuz wind aroun' his neck so many times yes had choked him, dey said, "He totely dead." Serve him right 'cause dem ol' white folks treated us so mean.

Well, sometimes, you know dey would, the others of 'em, keep going 'til dey fin' whar dis meeting wuz gwine on. Dey would come in and start whippin' an' beatin' the slaves unmerciful. All dis wuz done to keep yo' from servin' God, an' do you know some of dem devils wuz mean an' sinful 'nough to say, "Ef I ketch you here agin servin' God I'll beat you. You haven't time to serve God. We bought you to serve us."

Den her mistess, Miss Betsy Godsey, tol' her she wuz free, an' she (muma) coul' cook fer her jes th' same dat she would give her something to eat an' help clothe us chillun, dat wuz ef muma continual' to sta wid her an' work.

You see, we didn't have nuthin' an' no whar to go, um, um, um so we all, you know, jes took en stayed 'til we wuz able wid God's help to pull us selves together. But my God it wuz 'ginst our will, but, baby, couldn't help ourselves.

#### Georgina Giwbs VA-4

"My mastah had 'bout five hundred slaves. He'd never sell none of his slaves, but he'd always buy more. Dat keeps de slaves from marrying in dere famblies. When yer married, yer had to jump over a broom three times. Dat wuz de licence. Ef mastah seen two slaves together too much he would marry them. Hit didn't make no difference ef yer won't but fourteen years old."

"My father told me dere wuz once a mastah who sold a slave woman and her son. Many years after dis, de woman married. One day when she wuz washing her husband's back she seen a scar on his back. De woman 'membered de scar. It wuz de scar her mastah had put on her son. 'Course dey didn't stay married, but de woman wouldn't ever let her son leave her."

#### Candis Goodwin VA-5

What 'bout muh pappy? Dat's suppin' ah ain' tol' yuh 'bout. Well, yuh know Uncle Stephen, he kinder overseer fo' some widow 'omans. He Mommer husband. He come see muh mommer any time he gits ready. But ah fin' out he ain' muh pappy. Ah knowd dat since when ah's a lil' thin'. Ah uster go ovur tuh massa William's plantation. Dey tell me all 'bout. De folks ober dere dey uster say tuh me, "Who's yuh pappy? Who's yuh pappy?" Ah jes' say "Tuckey buzzard lay me an' de sun hatch me" an' den gwan 'bout my business. Cose all de time dey knows an' ah knows too dat Massa Williams was muh pappy. Ah tell yuh suppin' else. Got uh brother libin' ret on dis here street; one den toof doctors, yuh know, what pulls yer teef. Cose he's white. But tain't knowed 'roun' here. 'Twould ruin him. He's a nice man though. Uster go tuh see muh son an' his wife, lots uh times. Yes dey's good frien's.

#### Moble Hopson VA-9

"Was one day down [HW: en] de lower woods in de shade he tell me 'bout Richmond, Oncle Shep did. Why, I remember et jes' lak it was yestiddy. Was whittlin' uh stick, he was, settin' on uh stump wid his game laig hunched up ontuh uh bent saplin'. He was whittlin' away fo' uh 'long time 'thout sayin' much, an' all at once he jump in de air an' de saplin' sprang up an he start in tuh cussin.

"Gawdammit, gawdammit, gawdammit,' he kept sayin' tuh hisse'f an' limp'in round on dat laig game wid de roomatissum. Ah know he gonna tell me sompin den cause when Oncle Shep git ehcited he always got uh lot tuh say.

"Gawdammit,' he say, 'twas de niggahs tak Richmond.'

"How dey do dat Oncle Shep?' ah ast, though ah knowed he was gonna tell me anyway.

"De niggahs done tuk Richmond,' he keep on sayin' an' finally he tell me how dey tak Richmond.

"Ah seed et muhse'f,' he say, 'my comp'ny was stationed on de turnpike close tuh Richmond. We was in uh ole warehouse,' he told me, 'wid de winders an' de doors all barred up an' packed wid terbaccy bales awaitin' fo' dem Yanks tuh come. An' we was a-listenin' an' peepin' out an' we been waitin' dere most all de ev'nin'. An' den we heer [HW: uh] whistlin' an' uh roarin' like uh big blow an' it kep' gittin' closer. But we couldn't see nothin' uh comin' de night was so dark. [HW struck out: But] Dat roarin' kep' a-gittin' louder an' louder an' 'long 'bout day break there cum fum down de pike sech uh shoutin' an' uh yellin' as nevuh in muh born days ah'd heerd.'

"An' de men in dat warehouse kept askinkin' away in de darkness widdout sayin' nothin', cause dey didn't know what debbils de Yankees was alettin' loose. But ah stayed right there wid dem dat had de courage tuh face et, cause ah know big noise mean uh little storm.'

"Dar was 'bout forty of us left in dat ole warehouse ahidin' back of dem bales uh cotton an' terbaccy, an' peepin out thew da cracks.'

"An' den dey come. Down de street dey come--a shoutin' an' aprancin' an' a yellin' an' asingin' an' makin' such uh noise like as ef all hell done been turn't loose. Uh [HW: mob uh] niggus. Ah ain't nevuh [SP: nevub] knowed niggus--even all uh dem niggus [SP: niggubs]--could mek sech uh ruckus. One huge sea uh black faces filt de streets fum wall tuh wall, an' dey wan't nothin' but niggus in sight.'

"Well, suh, dey warn't no usen us firin' on dem cause dey ain't no way we gonna kill all uh dem niggus. An pretty soon dey bus' in de do' uh dat warehouse, an' we stood dere whilst dey pranced 'rounst us a hoopin' an' holl'rin' an' not techin' us at all tell de Yankees soljers cum up, an' tek away our guns, an' mek us prisoners an' perty soon dey march us intuh town an' lock us up in ole Libby Prison.'

"Thousings of 'em--dem niggus.' he say, 'Yassir--was de niggus dat tuk Richmond. Time de Yankees get dere de niggus [SP: niggubs] done had got de city tuk.'"

#### Susan Kelly and Simon Stokes VA-11

"Me sho' didn't lik dat job, pickin' worms off de terbaccer plants; fo' our oberseer wuz de meanes old hound you'se eber seen, he hed hawk eyes fer seein' de worms on de terbaccer, so yo' sho' hed ter git dem all, or you'd habe ter bite all de worms dat yo' miss into, or [SP: ot] git three lashes on yo' back wid his old lash, and dat wuz powful bad, wusser dan bittin' de worms, fer yo' could bite right smart quick, and dat wuz all dat dar wuz ter it; but dem lashes done last a pow'ful long time.

#### Richard Slaughter VA-12

"Did slaves ever run away! Lord yes, all the time. Where I was born, there is a lots of water. Why there used to be as high as ten and twelve Dutch three masters in the harbor at a time. I used to catch little snakes and other things like terapins and sell 'em to the sailor for to eat roaches on the ships. In those days a good captain would hide a slave way up in the top sail and carry him out of Virginia to New York and Boston.

#### Elizabeth Sparks VA-13

Well I'll tell yer some, but I ain'ta goin' tell yer much more. No sir. Shep Miller was my master. His ol' father, he was a tough one. Lord! I've seen 'im kill 'em. He'd

git the meanest overseers to put over 'em. Why I member time after he was dead when I'd peep in the closet an' jes' see his old clothes hangin' there an' jes' fly. Yessir, I'd run from them clothes an' I was jes' a little girl then. He wuz that way with them black folks. Is he in heaven! No, he ain't in heaven! Went past heaven. He was clerk an' was he tough! Sometimes he beat 'em until they couldn't work. Give 'em more work than they could do. They'd git beatin' if they didn't get work done. Bought my mother, a little girl, when he was married. She wuz a real Christian an' he respected her a little. Didn't beat her so much. Course he beat her once in a while. Shep Miller was terrible. There was no end to the beatin' I saw it wif my own eyes.

Beat women! Why sure he beat women. Beat woman jes' lak men. Beat women naked an' wash 'em down in brine. Some times they beat 'em so bad, they jes' couldn't stand it an' they run away to the woods. If yer git in the woods, they couldn't git yer. Yer could hide an' people slip yer somepin' to eat. Then he call yer every day. After while he tell one of colored foreman tell yer come on back. He ain'ta goin' beat yer anymore. They had colored foreman but they always have a white overseer. Foreman git yer to come back an' then he beat yer to death again.

She uster make my aunt Caroline knit all day an' when she git so tired aftah dark that she'd git sleepy, she'd make 'er stan' up an' knit. She work her so hard that she'd go to sleep standin' up an' every time her haid nod an' her knees sag, the lady'd come down across her haid with a switch. That wuz Miss Jennie's mother. She'd give the cook jes' so much meal to make bread fum an' effen she burnt it, she'd be scared to death cause they'd whup her. I 'member plenty of times the cook ask say, "Marsa please 'scuse dis bread, hits a little too brown." Yessir! Beat the devil out 'er if she burn dat bread.

After the war they tried to fool the slaves 'bout freedom an' wanted to keep 'em on a workin' but the Yankees told 'em they wuz free. They sent some of the slaves to South Carolina, when the Yankees came near to keep the Yankees from gittin' 'em. Sent cousin James to South Carolina. I nevah will forgit when the Yankees came through. They wuz takin' all the livestock an' all the men slaves back to Norfolk, wid 'em to break up the system. White folks head wuz jes' goin' to keep on havin' slaves. The slaves wanted freedom, but they's scared to tell the white folks so. Anyway the Yankees wuz givin' everythin' to the slaves. I kin heah 'em tellin' ol' Missy now. "Yes! give'er clothes. Let'er take anythin' she wants." They even took some of Miss Jennie's things an' offered 'em to me. I didn't take 'em tho' cause she'd been purty nice to me. Whut tickled me wuz my husban', John Sparks. He didn't want to leave me an' go cause he didn't know whah they's takin' 'em nor what they's gonna do, but he wanted to be free; so he played lame to keep fum goin'. He was jes' a limpin' 'round. It was all I could do to keep fum laffin'. I kin hear Miss Jennie now yellin' at them Yankees. No! who are yer to Judge. I'll be the judge. If John Sparks wants to stay here, he'll stay. They was gonna take 'im anyhow an' he went inside to pack an' the baby started cryin'. So one of 'em said that as long as he had a wife an' a baby that young they guess he could stay. They took all the horses, cows, and pigs and chickens an' anything they could use an' left. I was about nineteen when I married. I wuz married in 1861, my oldest boy was born in 1862 an' the fallin' of Richmond came in 1865.

Plenty of slaves ran away. If they ketch 'em they beat 'em near to death. But yer know dey's good an' bad people every where. That's the way the white folks wuz. Some had hearts; some had gizzards 'stead o' hearts.

Mary Jane Wilson VA-14

My Mother was owned by one family, and my Father was owned by another family. My mother and father was allowed to live together. One day my father's mastah took my father to Norfolk and put him in a jail to stay until he could sell him. My missus bought my father so he could be with us."