

# Black History Month:

## Former Slaves in America Reveal Their Secrets

*Thousands of former slaves were interviewed by the US federal government in the 1930s. Their gut-wrenching and awe-inspiring words about living in slavery are published within The I WAS A SLAVE Book Collection.*



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### *Enslaved Family*

In the 1930s, thousands of formerly enslaved African-American elders dictated their full life stories during interviews that were conducted by the US federal government. The transcripts, filled with crucial details about American slavery as disclosed by the ex-slaves, were stored in six archives in the United States. Their accounts are essential to Black History Month.

[Donna Wyant Howell](#), a widely recognized expert in this field as proclaimed by chief archivists of the Library of Congress, a commended historian for PBS, and enthusiastic [keynote speaker](#), started full-time research over a decade ago. After extensive study, Howell began publishing the only series of books in which the former slaves' words are categorized by subject matter. The text of the books remains virtually in their unedited words. Included are their photographs that were taken during the interviews and others that were taken during slavery.

The title of each book is "[I WAS A SLAVE.](#)" The subtitles of the first six books of the series are Descriptions of Plantation Life, The Lives of Slave Men, The Lives of Slave Women, The Breeding of Slaves, The Lives of Slave Children, and Slave Auctions.

The book series is being used as supplemental textbooks in libraries, [special history classes](#), and seminars in high schools and universities, including Howard, Georgetown, Cornell, Vanderbilt, Notre Dame, and many more. They are available in hundreds of bookstores throughout America and abroad.

Anna Miller (TX): We keeps full on what we gits, such as beans, co'nmeal, and molasses. We seldom gits meat.

We gits 'bout all de milk we wants 'cause dey puts it in de trough and we helps ourselves. Dere was a trough for de slaves and one for de hogs.

Delia Garlic (VA): Babies was snatched from deir mothers' breasts an' sold to speculators. Children was separated from sisters an' brothers an' never saw each other again. Of course, dey cry. You think dey not cry when dey was sold like cattle? I was took to Richmond an' sold to a speculator. I never saw my mammy again.

Mary Ingram (TX): De master, he tell who can get married an' who can't. Him select de large an' prolific womens, an' a large man, an' use such fo' de breeder an' de father of de women's children. De womens dat am selected am not allowed to marry. De children dat am bo'n dat way don' know any father. De womens have nothin' to says 'bout de arrangement. If she am large an' well-formed, deys forced her wid de breeder. Why don' we refuse? Shucks, man, you don' know what you says. De rawhide whip keeps you from refusin'. I's know 'cause I's see de young girls cryin' an' deys gits whipped because deys stubborn. De old women advise de girls dat it was no use to refuse. Dat it jus' makes it worse fo' dem. Dat deys git de whippin' an' have to do it anyway. Now, wasn't dat awful to treat humans dat way?

Katie Darling (TX): Massa...just put 'em together. What he want am the stock.

Martha Jackson (AL): My aunt was a breeder woman and brought in a child ev'y twelve months jus' like a cow bringin' in a calf.

Willie Williams: De master was anxious to raise good, big slaves, de kind what am able to do lots of work and ones he could sell for a heap of money.

Henry James Trentham (NC): Some of de women plowed barefooted most all de time, an' had to carry dat row an' keep up wid de men, an' den do deir cookin' at night.

Martha Bradley: I always worked in the field, had to carry big logs, had straps on my arms and them logs was put in de straps and hauled to a pile where they all was.

Mary Reynolds (LA): They brought the food and the water to the fields on a slide pulled by a old mule. Plenty times, there was only a half-barrel of water and it was stale and hot for all the slaves on the hottest days. Most of the time, we ate pickled pork, cornbread, peas, beans and 'taters. There never was as much as we needed.

Florence Napier: [On this plantation:] All of us had plenty to eat. Master use to say de colored folks raised de food and dey's entitled to all dey wants.

William Mathews (LA): De clothes we wore was made out of dyed lowerings. Dat's de stuff dey makes sacks out of.

Cato Carter (AL): They was always good to me 'cause I was one of their blood. I did have plenty fine clothes, good woolen suits they spinned on the place, doeskins, and fine linens.

Isaam Morgan (AL): What we do after we finished work? Go to bed! Us was so tired us wouldn't lie down two minutes before us was 'sleep. More quotes: [iwasaslave.com](http://iwasaslave.com)

“Black History Month is complete only when the words of the first African Americans are included,” Howell explains. “Yet, they rarely are mentioned. Perhaps by truly absorbing the words of America’s enslaved ancestors, each reader will learn what really happened, will realize why the effects linger today, and will use that understanding to design one united nation.”