

# Chatham County Slave Narratives From The Federal Writers Project

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*January 2011 (revised September 2022)*

Always on the lookout for resources for Chatham County researchers, we were happy to learn about the first-person narratives and photographs of formerly enslaved people from the Federal Writer's Project. These narratives and photographs are part of a joint online collection developed by the Manuscript and the Prints and Photographs Divisions of the Library of Congress.<sup>2</sup> In this brief paper we identify and link to the records of twelve formerly enslaved persons who lived at some time in Chatham County.



Charlie Crump and granddaughter.  
Library of Congress, Prints and  
Photographs Division

In the years 1936-38, former slaves then living in seventeen states were interviewed regarding their recollections about their lives as slaves. The collection preserved at the Library of Congress includes more than 2300 narratives and 500 photographs. These can be sorted by state of residence when interviewed, resulting in 176 narratives and 42 photos from former slaves interviewed in North Carolina. We were interested in identifying the interviews of former slaves who had spent some or all of their lives in Chatham County. The Library of Congress database allows only limited full-text searches, so we identified the Chatham County ex-slaves by reading all 176 North Carolina narratives.<sup>3</sup>

A few of the narratives do not identify the place in which the interviewee lived while enslaved. Some mention counties or towns, and it was that information we used to locate the narratives of individuals who had been slaves in Chatham County. Twelve of the interviews we read specifically mentioned Chatham County or described the plantations they lived on or the masters to whom they belonged as being near a particular community: Pittsboro, Merry Oaks, Moncure, Lockville, and Goldston. Two photographs of ex-slaves from Chatham were identified—Charlie Crump and Tempie Herndon Durham.

We have prepared brief descriptions of the twelve Chatham former slaves, their former owners, and other names mentioned in their accounts. [A link to a file containing the complete text of the twelve interviews, extracted from the Library of Congress website,](#)<sup>4</sup> also is provided. We hope that this will make the Chatham County interviews more accessible and perhaps will facilitate research about the African-American families they represent. Although the interviews are brief, the few clues they contain are precious in the context of the scarcity of information on African Americans of that time.

## Twelve Chatham County Slave Narratives

The twelve individuals we identified as having some relationship to Chatham County are listed below in alphabetical order by first name, as they are listed in the Library of Congress records.

**Adeline Crump:** Mother was Marie Cotton, who belonged to Rich Faucett. Master's plantation was about six miles from Merry Oaks. Father belonged to Wright Cotton. Husband's name was James Crump.<sup>5</sup>

**Charlie Crump:** born at Evan's Ferry in Lee or Chatham Co. Belonged to Mr. Davis Abernathy and wife Mis' Vick. Parents were Ridge and Marthy Crump. Brothers were Stokes and Tucker, and sisters were Lula and Liddy Ann.

**Dorcus Griffeth:** Belonged to Dr. Clark in Chatham County near Pittsboro. Missus was named Winnie. Father Billy Dismith belonged to Dismiths. Mother Peggy Council—belonged to Councils. Brothers George and Jack; sisters Rosa, Annie, Francis. Later went to school in Raleigh at the Washington School.

**Elias Thomas:** Born in Chatham County on a plantation near Moncure. Master was Baxter Thomas and missus was Katie. Mother was Phillis Thomas. Master took over John Boylan place. Master had two sons, Fred and John. Mentions other slave owners, William Cross, William Crump and Richard Faucett, and slaves who ran away, Tom Crump and Jacob Faucett. Also mentions doctors Hews, Wych, and Tom Buckhannan. Elias married Martha Sears in Raleigh.

**Emma Stone:** Mother, Polly Mitchel, was "free issue" and father, Edmund Bell, belonged to the Bells in Chatham County. Sisters were Fanny, Jane, Josephine, Narcissus, and Cressie. Brothers were Lizah, Hilliard, and another.

**Jane Lassiter:** Mother belonged to the Councils—Dr. Kit Council and Caroline—who lived on a plantation in the lower edge of Chatham County about three miles from New Hill. Father, Macon Lambert, belonged to the Lamberts—"At" Lambert and wife Beckie—who had a plantation near Pittsboro. Grandfather was Phil Bell and grandmother was Peggy Bell, who belonged to Chatham County Bells. Married Kit Lassiter and had seven children—two daughters named are Louis [Louise?] Finch and Venira McLean.

**Kitty Hill:** Born in Virginia and brought to Pittsboro by Isaac Long who ran a store and boarding house. Mother was Viney Jefferson, and father was Thomas Jefferson. Belonged to Jefferson family in Virginia. Sisters were Kate and Rosa, and brother was Robert. Kitty married Green Hill in Chatham County at Moncure. Lived in Moncure until after WW1.

**Ora M. Flagg:** Born in Raleigh. Mother was Jane Busbee whose master was Quent Busbee, a lawyer. His wife was Julia Taylor Busbee. Mother came from the Chatham County Scurlocks to the Busbees when the Scurlocks died, and Julia Taylor drew Ora's mother in the estate division. Busbee remarried Lizzie Bledsoe.

**Rena Raines:** Mother was Vacey Rogers and father was Bob Hunter. Belonged to John Rogers who married Ann Hunter. The plantation was in Wake County between Apex and Holly Springs. The family moved to Chatham County after Emancipation, where her father bought a farm. She married and raised four children in Chatham.

**Sarah Anne Green:** Parents were Anderson and Hannah Watson. Belonged first to Billy and Mis Roby Watson who lived on a big plantation near Goldston. The Watsons had at least two sons, Billy and Gaston. Sarah Anne and her parents were given to the Watsons' daughter Susie when she married Billy Headen, so Sarah grew up as Sarah Anne Headen.

**Sarah Ann Smith:** Parents were Martha and Green Womble. Born in Chatham County near Lockville. Father belonged to John Womble and mother belonged to Captain Elias Bryant. Married Henry Smith.

**Tempie Herndon Durham:** Her white folks were George and Betsy Snipes Herndon who had a big plantation in Chatham County. Married Exter Durham who belonged to Snipes Durham in Orange Co. Married by Negro preacher, Uncle Edmond Kirby. Tempie's brother Sim went to war with Bill Herndon.

[Link to a file containing the images of the interview transcripts extracted from the Library of Congress website for the twelve formerly enslaved persons with Chatham County connections.](#)



Tempie Durham, 103.  
Library of Congress, Prints and  
Photographs Division

## BACKGROUND OF THE SLAVE NARRATIVE PROJECT

### How the Recording of the Slave Narratives Came About

In response to the massive unemployment of the Great Depression, many unemployed workers were hired to engage in public works projects such as building roads, bridges, libraries, and swimming pools. The program was administered by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). At the time, the government was also gathering all kinds of statistical data in order to get an accurate picture of the status of the country.

To balance the statistical data, unemployed white-collar workers were hired to travel the county and report on the plight of individual citizens and communities. The task of one of these programs—the Federal Writers' Project (FWP)—was to prepare a comprehensive and panoramic "American Guide," a geographic-social-historical portrait of different sections of the county. Included among the many Project activities was one that sought interviews for anthologies reflecting the lives of Americans from many diverse backgrounds. Initially, no plans were made to collect reminiscences of former slaves. It was a group of ex-slave narratives submitted to the FWP by the Florida Writers Project that changed that. Noting the richness of these narratives and recognizing that soon no former slaves would be alive to tell their stories, the FWP administrators directed other states with substantial populations of former slaves to begin to collect their stories. Eventually, writers in seventeen Southern, border, and other states conducted interviews for the Slave Narrative Collection.

### Interviewers and Instructions

When the FWP was underway, the techniques of in-depth interviewing and oral-history gathering were not the well-developed and somewhat standardized techniques that we know today. The slave narrative collection and other data gathered at the time must be evaluated with this in mind.

Today, it is widely accepted that the race of the interviewer can affect the outcome of an interview. When the FWP interviews were conducted, there appears to have been some sensitivity to this possibility, but no substantial effort was made to hire black interviewers for this project. There is some evidence that, for some questions, but not all, the race of the interviewer did affect the respondents' depiction of slave life. For example, 26% of those interviewed by white interviewers expressed unfavorable attitudes toward their former masters, while 39% of those interviewed by black interviewers did so.<sup>6</sup>

All of the North Carolina interviewers were white, and it is likely that some ex-slaves may have told these white interviewers what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. Instructions to the interviewers did, however, emphasize the necessity of obtaining an accurate account of the ex-slave's version of his or her experience. Interviewers were told, for example, "It should be remembered that the Federal Writers' Project is not interested in taking sides on any question. The worker should not censor any materials collected regardless of its nature."<sup>7</sup>

Interviewers were provided with a list of twenty questions for use in their interviews. However, the instructions accompanying the questions stated, "The main purpose of these detailed and homely questions is to get the Negro interested in talking about the days of slavery. If he will talk freely, he should be encouraged to say what he pleases without reference to the questions."<sup>8</sup> This instruction is very similar to what might be found in guides to conducting oral history interviews today.

The same memo to interviewers also stated that the details of the interview "should be written down as nearly as possible just as he [the interviewee] says them, but do not use dialect spelling so complicated that it may confuse the reader."<sup>9</sup> Dialect was obviously a complicating issue for these interviews and instructions to interviewers were not always clear or consistent. Just eight days prior to the issuance of the instruction above, a memo instructed, "Enclosed is a memorandum... with suggestions for simplifying the spelling of certain recurring dialect words. This does not mean that the interviews should be entirely in 'straight-English'--simply that we want them to be more readable to those uninitiated in the broadest Negro speech."<sup>10</sup> It is not hard to imagine the difficulties faced by interviewers who were attempting to write down exactly what was said, especially when so much attention was given to dialect.

## Locating Former Slaves

It is difficult to determine the process by which former slaves were selected by interviewers. The sample appears to be one largely of convenience. Although most elderly African Americans in the participating states lived in rural areas, most of the ex-slaves interviewed were living at the time of the interview in towns. Those in close proximity to cities where the federal writers were based—such as Raleigh and Durham—were more likely than others to be interviewed.

## Problems of Memory

The trustworthiness of the interviews in the Slave Narrative Collection has been questioned because the interviews asked respondents about a time more than seventy years in the past. Recollection is always a highly subjective phenomenon, and it is wise to question the accuracy and reliability of recollections of the past. Most of the respondents were quite elderly and, even so, many had experienced slavery only as children or

young adults. Many were living in conditions of abject poverty during the Depression years when they were interviewed. These factors might have combined to make them look at the past more favorably than they otherwise might have done. In any case it is prudent to keep these factors in mind when reading the narratives.

## Evaluating and Using the Slave Narrative Collection

Norman R. Yetman's introduction to the narratives on the Library of Congress website concludes:

... a blanket indictment of the interviews is as unjustified as their indiscriminate or uncritical use. Each kind of historical document has its own particular usefulness as well as its own inherent limitations for providing understanding of the past. The utility of the ex-slave interviews can only be determined in the context of the objectives of the researcher. For example, if one is interested in entering the perennial debate over the profitability of slavery, information obtained from the narratives will be highly impressionistic and much less valuable than that from other sources such as plantation records. Yet if one wishes to understand the nature of the "peculiar institution" from the perspective of the slave, to reconstruct the cultural and social milieu of the slave community, or to analyze the social dynamics of the slave system, then these data are not only relevant; they are essential. That is not to imply that they should be used exclusively or without caution. Yet the hazards of attempting to comprehend slavery without using them far outweigh the limitations of their use.<sup>11</sup>

So, how should one use these sources? Researcher Saidiya V. Harman suggests that we do so "...with the hope of gaining a glimpse of black life during slavery and the postbellum period while remaining aware of the impossibility of fully reconstructing the experience of the enslaved."<sup>12</sup>

The narratives may also prove useful to those researching African-American families, since many contain the names of parents and siblings. To test the usefulness of the information in the narratives as clues to facilitate genealogical research we researched the case of Adeline Crump. Adeline's case was chosen simply because it was the first on this list. Her narrative provided information about the location of the family, Adeline's mother's name, and her husband's name--James. It also indicated that Adeline and James had four children, that her mother had 21 children and that she had a twin sister named Emeline. With that starting point, we were able to identify the names of both of Adeline's parents, James' parents, all four children, a number of James' siblings, a few of Adeline's siblings, and several grandchildren. Census records provide information about occupations. [The information about Adeline and James Crump's family is reported in another article on the CCHA website](#) to illustrate how the limited information in the narratives might be used to further genealogical research on African-American families.

### NOTES and REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup> If you have comments or questions about this article, please contact Beverly Wiggins, c/o [history@chathamhistory.org](mailto:history@chathamhistory.org), or c/o CCHA, PO Box 93, Pittsboro, NC 27312. The Wiggins wish to thank Jean Vollrath for bringing to their attention the existence of slave narratives from the FWP as reported in several books by Belinda Hurmence. After looking at the books,

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which contain edited versions of some of the narratives, the authors discovered that the Library of Congress has made available the full text of all of the interviews.

<sup>2</sup> The collection and extensive background information can be accessed at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/>

<sup>3</sup> It is possible that there are additional Chatham County slave records included in the collection. We read only the interviews of former slaves who lived in North Carolina at the time of the interview. Additional Chatham County former slaves could have been interviewed while living in states other than North Carolina. If you are aware of other narratives with Chatham connections, please let us know.

<sup>4</sup> An earlier version of this paper provided links to each narrative directly on the Library of Congress website, but the configuration of the LOC website was changed so that direct links are not available. Because of that, we have extracted the twelve Chatham narratives and provided them in a file on the CCHA website.

<sup>5</sup> See also:

<https://chathamhistory.org/resources/Documents/PDFs/ResearchArticles/GlimpsesintotheLifeandFamilyofAdelineCrump.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Yetman, Norman R. An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives, "The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection: Race and Representativeness." <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative-collection/>

<sup>7</sup> Federal Writers Project Administrative Files: Supplementary Instructions #9E to The American Guide Manual, p. ix. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn001/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. xx.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. xx.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Yetman, Norman R. *An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives*: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/>

And "Should the Slave Narrative Collection Be Used?": <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative-collection/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., "Should the Slave Narrative Collection Be Used?"