

**“A Quest for the Truth:”
An Analysis of the Background and Context behind the Southern University Slave
Narrative Project and the WPA Slave Narrative Project**

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INTRODUCTION

In 1935, A.B. Young visited 88-year-old Martin Jackson, a formerly enslaved person residing in San Antonio Texas, to interview him about his experiences laboring under the peculiar institution. While Jackson spoke, A.B. Young, a graduate student studying at Southern University (a Historically Black College located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana), recorded Jackson's responses by hand. After interviewing Jackson at his home, Young returned to Louisiana and handed his professor, John Brother Cade, the summary of his interview. Other students enrolled in the Southern University American History course also submitted interviews they had conducted with other formerly enslaved persons. These interviews were part of an effort initiated by Cade to collect oral testimonies from formerly enslaved individuals.

Jackson's responses were similar to the other formerly enslaved individuals who participated in this project. A.B. Young's did not embellish much in his summary of Jackson's responses. In the transcript of the interview, Young wrote from the perspective of Jackson, and elaborated on Jackson's forms of punishment, clothing, amusement, religious beliefs, and superstitions while enslaved. Based on this transcript alone, Jackson's responses weren't extraordinary.

John Cade began interviewing survivors of slavery in local communities in 1929, and he summarized his findings in an article published in 1935 in *The Journal of Negro History*. This article, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," detailed his interviews with formerly enslaved persons from 1929. He launched his second effort to collect the testimonies from survivors of additional slavery in 1935, which included the interview of Martin Jackson. Cade never summarized his findings in any official journal; however, the raw transcripts of these interviews remained shelved on the third floor of Southern University's John B. Cade

Library until 2015, when archivists scanned and published them online, naming the collection *Opinions Regarding Slavery: Slave Narratives*.¹

In 1937, Martin Jackson participated in another effort to interview formerly enslaved persons, conducted by the New Deal's Work Progress Administration (WPA). Unlike the previous transcript, Jackson's interviewer sketched a completely unrecognizable caricature, a mystical and legendary figure, who supposedly served in both the American Civil War and World War I. The interviewer, a white southerner, did not hesitate to use stereotypical and derogatory language to describe Jackson and other survivors of slavery. According to the interviewer, Jackson was supposedly "totally blind" and "bewildered" and had a mind that was "uncommonly clear" and "[spoke] with no Negro colloquialisms and almost no dialect."²

Upon reading both of Jackson's interviews, the reader may notice a stark difference between the transcripts. The Southern University and WPA Slave Narrative Projects, although conducted 70 years after emancipation and interviewing elderly, illiterate formerly enslaved persons, recreated antebellum America in ways that previous slave narratives had not. These differences illuminate the context behind each project, and may even perplex the reader. Why are there blatant and stark differences between two the narratives of the same person? How could each narrative's characterization of Jackson render a completely unrecognizable person when compared to one another? In order to understand these differences, we must explore the genesis of these two Great Depression slave narrative projects.

The WPA Slave narrative project has been a controversial topic discussed extensively among historians. In 1967, Norman Yetman—the first historian not personally involved in the WPA slave narrative collection project to write and publish an article solely dedicated to

¹ Judson Meshack, "Slave narratives are now available online," *Southern University News*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.subr.edu/news/847>.

²Jackson, Martin, "Ex-slave Stories (Texas)," interview by the Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*, July 6, 1937: 189.

discussing the context of the project—described the social and historical background surrounding the WPA slave narrative project. Yetman’s article contextualized the WPA interview process, emphasizing that the project “represents the culmination of a literary tradition that extends back to the eighteenth century.”³ He accurately predicted that historians would begin to draw upon the WPA slave narrative project as primary sources, and that debates regarding their reliability would ensue.

In 1975, John Blassingame wrote an article describing the benefits and challenges of using the the WPA slave narratives as primary sources. While he acknowledged the immense value of these interviews, he cautioned historians against solely relying upon them. He suggested that the age of the respondents, the nature of oral testimonies, and race relations between formerly enslaved persons and white southerners may have tainted the accuracy and reliability of the WPA interview responses. To overcome this, Blassingame recommended that historians should corroborate the responses with additional primary sources. Indeed, some historians of slavery have subsequently utilized the WPA slave narratives as primary sources to illustrate the experiences of formerly enslaved persons.⁴ They often cite the testimonials provided by formerly enslaved persons to provide evidence for the arguments they make regarding the peculiar institution. As Blassingame suggested, these historians do not solely rely upon these testimonials; rather, they have utilized a variety of primary sources to support their arguments.

Other historians have pointed out the many limitations of drawing upon the WPA Slave Narrative Project. Particularly, historians challenge the accuracy of the responses gathered, often suggesting that the informants did not reveal the entire truth to the interviewers for varying reasons. For example, Donna Spindel utilized psychological

³ Norman R. Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection” *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1967): 536.

⁴ John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (November 1975): 475.

research to evaluate how memory loss has impacted the accuracy of the responses from formerly enslaved persons. She concluded that elderly individuals often experience impairment when given “episodic memory tasks”—such as recalling past life events. Thus, considering the psychological evidence, the interview responses were bound to be inaccurate, especially since nearly seventy years had elapsed since emancipation.⁵ Spindel’s argument regarding the reliability of the responses is similar to some of the limitations surrounding oral history: it is subject to human memory, which can often modify and distort reality. Moreover, some historians have noted that the interviewees generally experienced slavery as children or adolescents, indicating that these oral testimonies may not accurately represent the experiences of the enslaved adults, offering “a simplistic and distorted view of the plantation.”⁶

Finally, some historians have emphasized that the WPA narratives revealed the social context surrounding the Great Depression, especially its unique impact upon African Americans. Stephanie Shaw argued that the WPA interview transcripts revealed that many of the New Deal relief programs neglected elderly survivors of slavery, and therefore, they used their interviews with the WPA as an opportunity to seek aid from the federal government. Catherine Stewart also argues that the WPA slave narratives reveal the state of race relations in the 1930s. In her book, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project*, she argued that the interactions between the survivors of slavery and the white interviewees exemplify the intense race relations in the south. For example, many of the white southerners projected racial stereotypes onto the survivors of slavery whom they interviewed. At the same time, Stewart argues that the interview transcripts reveal that many of the survivors of slavery found the interviews to be invasive, and often concealed their true

⁵ Donna J. Spindel, “Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 250.

⁶ John Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 480.

feelings from the interviewers. Some historians have found the derogatory descriptions of the survivors of slavery to be quite problematic, as they illustrate elderly Black Americans as stereotypical caricatures. Stewart argued that these portrayals of elderly African Americans, while offensive, reveal how white southerners perceived survivors of slavery, and how formerly enslaved persons interacted with white Americans in the 1940s.⁷

Although many historians have extensively discussed the WPA Slave Narrative Project, very few have analyzed the Southern University Slave Narrative Project. In some articles, historians have acknowledged the existence of the project, but they have not analyzed the content of the interviews or the background of the project. In his 1967 article for the *American Quarterly*, Norman Yetman acknowledged the project's existence and briefly mentioned that John B. Cade sought to interview formerly enslaved individuals to dispel the harmful and influential historiographical argument that "the slave had been contented in his lot."⁸ Yetman concluded his discussion of the Southern University project by stating "the results of these interviews remain unpublished."⁹

In 2015, however, Southern University digitized these interviews, and published 239 of them on their online archive. Despite the recent publication, there has not been much utilization of these interviews or discussion of the background and context of this project. In 2022, Catherine Halley interviewed the Southern University's head archivist, Angela Proctor, regarding the Southern University slave narrative project. In this interview, they explored John Cade's intentions behind leading the project, and its relationship to the WPA's effort to collect oral histories from formerly enslaved individuals. Like Yetman, this interview emphasized that the 'contented' enslaved person historiographical argument had prompted Cade to seek the perspectives of the survivors of slavery. Throughout the interview, Proctor

⁷ Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016): 12.

⁸ Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 540.

⁹ *Ibid.*

and Halley implied that the relationship between the Southern University Project and the WPA project is not very clear.¹⁰

Historians have not extensively described the relationship between the Southern University Slave Narrative Project and the WPA Slave Narrative Project. Therefore, this thesis seeks to contextualize both the Southern University Slave Narrative Project and the WPA slave narrative project, analyzing the intentions of these projects, and how they influenced the content of the narratives. I argue that the creators of both projects understood the value and importance of preserving the life histories of formerly enslaved individuals. Both projects sought to publish and disseminate these responses after completing the interviews. However, both projects did not accomplish this goal, and it took historians and archivists decades later to organize these interviews and disseminate them to the public.

This thesis is divided into two chapters, which explore this argument in greater detail. In the first chapter, I analyze the aspirations behind the Southern University Slave Narrative project. Specifically, John B. Cade, the leader of the Southern University project, wanted to squash the contented slave argument by going straight to the source and interviewing the survivors of slavery. After collecting the responses from the formerly enslaved, Cade sought to compile and publish these interviews. However, as this thesis emphasizes, Cade did not accomplish this, leaving the interviews in the Southern University archives for the rest of his life. The individuals involved in Cade's project, all descendants of the formerly enslaved, highly valued the project, and perceived it as a means of demonstrating their appreciation for the endurance their enslaved ancestors displayed.

In the second chapter, I analyze how several Black Americans in the federal government pushed for the Federal Writers' project (which was part of the WPA) to

¹⁰ Catherine Halley, "Angela Proctor on the 'Opinions Regarding Slavery: Slave Narratives:' Collection, last modified January 26, 2022, <https://daily.jstor.org/angela-proctor-on-the-opinions-regarding-slavery-slave-narratives-collection/>.

interview formerly enslaved individuals. These individuals understood the value of preserving the lives of formerly enslaved persons, and wanted to expand earlier efforts that sought to interview the survivors of slavery. However, the federal government utilized discriminatory hiring practices that barred Black Americans from largely participating in this project. Consequently, the vast majority of the interviews were conducted by white southerners who often projected their racial biases onto their interviewees. Similar to Southern University, the WPA never published the interviews themselves, because the Federal Writers' Project lost funding in the late 1930s. Instead, in the 1970s, George Rawick, another historian, found the interviews in the Library of Congress and compiled and published them into seventeen volumes.¹¹

In order to draw these conclusions, I have relied on a variety of primary sources which explicitly state the intentions behind both projects. Specifically, in the first chapter, I have utilized John Cade's 1935 article to the *Journal of Negro History*, in which he described his motivations for interviewing formerly enslaved individuals and summarized his findings. I also have looked at some of the raw transcripts of the interviews in order to analyze how the students involved perceived the project. Particularly, I looked at the Southern University interviews conducted in the state of Texas, which had 106 interviews, the most out of any other state. Finally, I interviewed Angela Proctor, Southern University's head archivist to gather more insights regarding the project, as she led efforts to digitize these interviews. In the second chapter, I utilize the correspondence and communications between the federal and state directors of the WPA and the Federal Writers' project. These sources have provided insight into the background and context of the project.

¹¹ George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972): xiv.

CHAPTER ONE

“SECURING THE TRUTHS”

The Origins of the Southern University Slave Narrative Project

We are in a quest for the truth in effort to organize for dissemination.
The facts which have been so potent in determining our present status as
Negroes. No better method of securing the truths than firsthand
contact can be had.

—J.N. Freeman, April 1935¹

In 1929, John B. Cade, an African American professor of History at Southern University, initiated an ambitious, unprecedented effort to record the oral histories of America’s formerly enslaved. Under his leadership and guidance, graduate students set out to interview as many survivors of slavery as possible, armed with a wide array of questions about life under the peculiar institution. Once completed, John Cade and his students planned to compile and publish them. By 1938, approximately 400 had been recorded, and with each interview documenting an individual’s unique experience under slavery, the Southern University Slave Narrative Project (hereafter SUSNP) produced a valuable historical source. Yet historians rarely draw upon the SUSNP narratives as primary sources. This can be explained in part because they remained unpublished until 2014 when Southern University librarians and archivists scanned the original paper transcripts of 228 interviews and uploaded the transcripts to a public website.

The few historians who address or draw upon the SUSNP have not extensively explored the project’s origins. For example, Susanna Ashton published a brief article on JSTOR in January 2022 which described the background and context of the SUSNP, but she

¹J.N. Freeman Jr., “Foreword to *Opinions Regarding Slavery*,” Southern University Online Archive, April 1935.

did not elaborate upon the intentions behind the project.² In 2022, Catherine Halley, an editor of *JSTOR Daily*, interviewed Angela Proctor, head archivist at Southern University; Proctor revealed that Ulrich B. Phillips’s “contented slave argument”—which held that the institution of slavery was neither harmful nor immoral—inspired Cade to seek out the perspectives of the survivors of slavery, hoping to overturn and dispel this dangerous narrative.³ However, neither of these contributions further describe the origins of the project; they ignore the perspectives of instructors and students involved in the SUSNP, and, furthermore, do not explain or even speculate as to why the project remained almost completely unknown for eighty years. In this chapter, I hope to address these historiographical lacunae and offer new perspectives and analysis concerning the underpinnings of SUSNP.

This chapter argues that the individuals working for the SUSNP viewed their contribution as an act of resistance against arguments that portrayed slavery as beneficial to African Americans. Cade and the other instructors involved explicitly described the SUSNP as a “quest” for the truth behind the experiences of the formerly enslaved.⁴ The SUSNP team sought to achieve this by recovering the experiences of the firsthand witnesses of slavery, the survivors themselves. Thus, the interviewees could extract the survivors’ perspectives without the interference of Jim-Crow-Era white historians, who had shaped the historiography of slavery to mirror their personal biases and racism. After acquiring the responses, Southern University wanted to publish and disseminate the interviews, and, through this process, sought to dispel the narrative of the contented slave. However, the SUSNP’s specific interviews remained unpublished until 2014. While it is not entirely clear why this

² Susanna Ashton, “John B. Cade’s Project to Document the Stories of the Formerly Enslaved,” *JSTOR Daily*, last modified January 26, 2022, <https://daily.jstor.org/john-b-cades-project-to-document-the-stories-of-the-formerly-enslaved/>.

³ Catherine Halley, “Angela Proctor on the ‘Opinions Regarding Slavery: Slave Narratives:’ Collection, last modified January 26, 2022, <https://daily.jstor.org/angela-proctor-on-the-opinions-regarding-slavery-slave-narratives-collection/>.

⁴ Freeman, “Foreword.”

extraordinary delay occurred, I argue that a few factors can help explain why the SUSNP transcripts remained unpublished for eighty years: (1) the destruction of the 1929 interviews; (2) a similar, and ultimately more prominent, slave narrative project launched by the Works Project Administration; (3) or Cade may have felt that the project was completed when he left the raw interview transcripts in the Southern University's Library. To draw and support these conclusions, I rely upon several important sources, including John B. Cade's 1935 article "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," the interview transcripts themselves, and a foreword for the project written by a Black instructor involved in the Texas sector of the SUSNP.⁵ Moreover, in September of 2022, I interviewed the head archivist of Southern University, Angela Proctor, who provided insights about Cade's intentions surrounding the project.

* * *

Prior to the Civil War, abolitionists employed Black-authored slave narratives as a tool with which to expose the horrors of slavery. Works by Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Solomon Northup, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown, for example, reveal the immense physical, emotional, sexual, and verbal abuses enslaved persons experienced. Some of these narratives received significant attention from the public. The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* sold approximately 30,000 copies between 1845 and 1860; Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave* sold 27,000 within the first two years of publication.⁶ By revealing the realities of slavery, abolitionists hoped to change the hearts of the American public and further the cause of emancipation. Northerners published novels alongside the testimonies of fugitives from slavery to convince the public of slavery's immorality. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold thousands of copies in the United States during the first year after its publication.⁷ Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* told a fictional story,

⁵ Freeman, Foreward.

⁶ "Slave Narratives and Uncle Tom's Cabin: 1845-1862," Public Broadcasting System, accessed March 21, 2022, at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2958.html>.

⁷ Public Broadcasting System, "Slave Narratives and Uncle Tom's Cabin."

the novel was inspired by the memoir of Josiah Henson, who lived as a slave in Maryland.⁸

Abolitionists hoped that the popularity of such works would pressure state and federal legislatures to immediately emancipate enslaved persons.⁹

To counter this effort, pro-slavery advocates published propaganda portraying slavery as a benevolent and beneficial institution, under which the enslaved themselves were happy, content, and even *fortunate* to live. Such efforts to defend slavery preceded the Civil War, but continued unabated after the war's end in 1865. For example, in 1854 Southern sociologist George Fitzhugh absurdly claimed that each enslaved person "was as happy as a human can be."¹⁰ Pro-slavery authors, inspired by the experiences of white planter families, wrote novels to delegitimize abolitionism. Mary H. Eastman wrote *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* as direct response and refutation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, portraying enslaved persons and their enslavers as living in a state of mutual respect and harmony.

After Emancipation and Reconstruction, the discussion surrounding enslavement shifted focused. Once used to expose the horrors of slavery, narratives from Confederates and other southerners romanticized the antebellum South and often neglected to discuss the darker aspects of slavery.¹¹ The abolitionist-style exposé narratives—which graphically revealed the violence on plantations—waned in popularity because the Civil War accomplished the abolitionists' primary goal, the emancipation of enslaved persons. Historiography surrounding slavery began to sympathize with the plantation owners and Confederates, and often stated that slavery was a benevolent institution that benefitted both the white plantation owners and Black enslaved persons.¹²

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, Virginia, 1854), 246.

¹¹ Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3, (Autumn 1967): 537.

¹² Ibid.

In his 1918 book, *American Negro Slavery*, historian Ulrich B. Phillips argued that enslaved persons were content under the institution, explicitly stating that “negros for the most part did not mind slavery.”¹³ Phillips’ argument minimized the horrors of slavery while emphasizing the many ways in which it supposedly benefitted Black Americans. Without the institution of slavery, Phillips argued, African Americans would not have known Christianity and the Christian values that white Americans deemed important. Phillips also spurned the use of ex-slave narratives, contending that such sources could not be relied upon to paint an accurate picture of plantation life.¹⁴ In particular, Phillips reasoned that the majority of ex-slave narratives written before emancipation were written with the goal of overthrowing slavery, and were thus unreliable and tainted by political motives.¹⁵ Phillips’ writings paralleled the views of other major proslavery advocates and Confederate apologists at the time, and proved extremely influential in shaping early twentieth century scholarship surrounding slavery.¹⁶

Yet Phillips’ historiographical interventions inspired Black scholars to write about slavery themselves, wresting the narrative “from the pens of whites.”¹⁷ As stated by John B. Cade, director of the Southern University and Prairie View A&M University Slave Narrative projects, Black scholars “had the feeling that Negroes themselves should step in and make contributions found in their background.”¹⁸ Indeed, even as late as the 1930s, white historians produced academic writing on slavery that often neglected to discuss its horrors.¹⁹ Moreover,

¹³ Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery, A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, 1918): 200.

¹⁴ Angela Proctor, “John B. Cade’s Opinions Regarding Slavery: Slave Narratives Collection,” interview by Catherine Halley, audio 3:01, <https://daily.jstor.org/angela-proctor-on-the-opinions-regarding-slavery-slave-narratives-collection/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Phillips, *American Negro Slavery, A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime*, 200.

¹⁷ John Brother Cade, “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* 20, no.3 (July 1935): 294.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Black scholars recognized that white plantation owners produced a large number of the primary sources surrounding slavery that ignored the perspectives of the enslaved. Thus, two Historically Black Universities undertook efforts to preserve the life histories of formerly enslaved individuals. These testimonies focused primarily upon recording elderly African Americans' experiences as American slaves.²⁰ One such effort was initiated by Charles S. Johnson (1893-1956) at Fisk University in 1928. Johnson was an African American sociologist who spent his career studying race relations and advocating for civil rights.²¹ Similar to Southern University's subsequent project, the Fisk slave narrative project relied upon interviews with survivors of slavery, inquiring about their experiences prior to emancipation. The Fisk Slave Narrative project eventually merged with the Works Progress Administration's Slave Narrative project. Chapter two discusses Fisk University's project and its relation to the WPA slave narrative project in greater detail.

John Brother Cade Jr. (1894-1970) initiated another major organized effort to interview the survivors of slavery, leading the projects at Southern University and Prairie View A&M University. Born in Dansburg, Georgia, Cade served in the First World War and as a Second Lieutenant in the 366th Infantry, Company F. He was wounded in action while serving in France in November 1918, and won a Purple Heart Medal and was subsequently honorably discharged.²² Upon returning to the United States, Cade enrolled at Atlanta University, graduating with an A.B (Bachelor of Arts) in 1921. In 1928, Cade received an A.M (Master of Arts) from the University of Chicago. After earning his master's degree, Cade became registrar of Southern University (1929-1930), then registrar and director of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Prairie View State College in Texas (1931-1939), and later Dean

²⁰ Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 538.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Library History," Southern University, accessed August 12, 2022 at <https://www.subr.edu/page/2510>.

of Southern University (1939-1961). In the late 1920s, as a professor at Southern University, Cade devised a plan to interview the formally enslaved.²³

In his article “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves” (1935), Cade explained why he initiated an effort to record the oral histories of the formerly enslaved. During the 1920s, Cade taught a course on American history at Southern University and realized that very few of the primary sources surrounding slavery were authored by formerly enslaved people. He noticed, however, that a substantial number of elderly members within local Black communities were survivors of slavery.²⁴ Therefore, Cade conceived the idea of “securing views of the institution from living formerly enslaved individuals and enslavers.”²⁵ He recognized that it was urgent to collect these responses immediately. During the Depression Era, the majority of the survivors of slavery were octogenarians and a few were centenarians, born in the mid nineteenth century.²⁶ Their advanced age indicated that the surviving population from the pre-Civil War era was steadily declining. Given this fact, Cade felt it was necessary to initiate the project as soon as possible.²⁷

Cade’s main objective was to refute Phillips’s argument of the contented slave. While other Black scholars felt that their own scholarship would counter Phillip’s intervention, Cade decided to conduct interviews with survivors of slavery in local Black communities.²⁸ By going straight to the source, Cade hoped that the survivors’ testimonies would counter Phillips’s popular yet misleading interpretation of slavery.²⁹ Survivors themselves would be able to express their opinions and experiences regarding slavery unfiltered. Cade spoke on this sentiment, stating that Black historians wanted to return authorship to the formerly

²³ Cade, “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves,” 296.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 297.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Susanna Ashton, “John B. Cade’s Project to Document the Stories of the Formerly Enslaved,” last modified January 26, 2022, at <https://daily.jstor.org/john-b-cades-project-to-document-the-stories-of-the-formerly-enslaved>.

enslaved and their descendants. Moreover, Cade recognized the immense value of utilizing enslaved perspectives as an effective solution to refute the contented slave narrative. Unlike white authors, Cade felt that Black authors and the survivors of slavery would be able to “set forth the real black man as he was, is, and hopes to be.”³⁰ This way, Black authors would be able to present slavery in a way that reflected their experiences.

Cade recognized that returning authorship to enslaved persons would also allow the survivors to reclaim their voices within the archives, voices silenced by slavery and its legacy. Slavery thrived upon the ignorance of its victims, the vast majority of whom were illiterate while living under the institution. Indeed, many enslavers recognized the dangers of teaching enslaved persons how to read and write, fearing that increased literacy would lead to rebellion and the destruction of slavery itself. Nat Turner’s 1831 slave revolt heightened such fears, as Nat Turner was a literate enslaved person and spiritual preacher. Following Turner’s revolt, all slave states (except Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee) passed legislation barring teaching enslaved persons to read or write among other restrictions.³¹ Consequently, historians estimate that around ninety percent of enslaved individuals were illiterate by the time of emancipation in 1865.³² Although some formerly enslaved persons attempted to educate themselves during Reconstruction, many survivors remained partially or completely illiterate for the rest of their lives. As such, survivors could not actively refute the historiographical claims concerning their supposed feelings about life under slavery. Cade’s project was an attempt to allow the survivors to share their unfiltered oral testimonies, which would demonstrate each survivor’s unique perspective on slavery.

³⁰ Cade, “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves,” 294.

³¹ John W. Cromwell, “The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” *Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 2, (April 1920): 15.

³² Schweiger, Beth Barton, “The Literate South: Reading Before Emancipation,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3, no. 3 (September 2013): 333.

At the same time, Cade acknowledged that interviewing the formerly enslaved could spark a huge historiographical debate. Based on the large number of primary and secondary sources penned by enslavers and slave apologists, Cade reasoned that hearing the voices of enslaved persons would create the “danger of controversy,” igniting a debate between those who agreed with Cade’s analysis and those who did not.³³ He continued by stating that “These bickerings will cause judicious ones of each race to repudiate their errant fellows and set forth what will be nearer to the facts.”³⁴ In this statement, Cade not only anticipated but welcomed the debate that his project might initiate and also admitted that such debates would require research and analysis that would eventually come closer to revealing the truth. Active debate would force both sides to evaluate historical facts and ask necessary questions to garner a deeper understanding of slavery. Cade accepted and even celebrated the controversy that his work created. While historians have not extensively questioned the reliability of the Southern University Project, there have been historiographical discussions regarding the limitations of relying on the WPA slave narratives as a primary source. In this sense, Cade foresaw the rich historiographical debate that would ensue from interviewing the formerly enslaved.

Moreover, Cade stressed the challenges and limitations of interviewing the formerly enslaved. First, he stated that the “the early age of witnesses at the time” and “the love to weave a good story for attentive listeners” might be an argument against the accuracy of the responses that Cade recorded.³⁵ Cade refuted this by referring to other historians of slavery, like Ulrich B. Phillips, who had quoted ex-slaves themselves. After that, he simply stated that “if it is a fault, then we feel we are in good company.” While Cade’s refutation did not eliminate the possibility of embellishment and fabrication, his statement implied that simply

³³ Cade, “Out of the Mouths of Ex Slaves,” 294.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

preserving the experiences of the survivors of slavery was more valuable to Cade and the SUSNP's mission than verifying if their perspectives were accurate. Through this statement, he further established the importance of expanding the pool of primary sources to include the survivors of slavery, since their voices were often missing from the archives.

In 1929, Cade had first requested that his graduate students interview ex-slaves in local communities. He travelled throughout Louisiana every weekend to conduct interviews and supervise his students. Cade conducted the 1929 interviews within four Louisiana cities: Alexandria, Gretna, McDonoghville, and New Orleans.³⁶ Even though Cade instructed his students to interview as many formerly enslaved persons as possible, it is unclear how the students found the individuals they interviewed.³⁷ According to a letter penned by Cade, the 1929 collection—which contained a total of 82 interviews—was destroyed by a fire.³⁸ However, Cade still preserved these interviews' findings in the 1935 article “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves.” Throughout the article, Cade described his findings from the 1929 sample. The responses varied for each individual; however, each respondent emphasized that they preferred freedom over enslavement.

Although only 82 survivors of slavery participated in this study, their responses accomplished Cade's goal of dispelling the narrative of the contented slave. For the 1929 and 1935-1938 SUSNP projects, Cade set guidelines regarding what each interview should discuss. The interviews generally contained information regarding the state and county in which they had been enslaved; name of plantation owner; type of labor; their home and family lives; the food they ate; punishments received; working conditions; amusements; religious life or spirituality; superstitions and customs; their feelings regarding enslavement; and any other pertinent information they wished to record. Questions regarding family life

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

and auctioning experiences evoked responses that revealed the harrowing circumstances the survivors faced.

The interview responses emphasized that enslavers generally regulated the marriages and childbearing between enslaved men and women, placing a higher value on women who bore the most children. All of the participants indicated that the enslaver's consent for marriage was necessary. An enslaved man was to ask for permission to marry an enslaved woman, or the enslaver would arrange a marriage between two enslaved persons. These unions also required husband and wife to bear children, which served as a financial gain for the enslavers. For example, Harriet Robinson, a Texas slave, reported being sold four times at relatively high prices because she was "considered an excellent breeder."³⁹ Her enslavers usually kept her for a few years, while she bore children and increased the number of enslaved persons laboring under the enslaver, and then auctioned her off to another plantation. While the enslavers rarely whipped Robinson, she often felt despair because she was constantly separated from the children whom she was forced to bear. Other participants described being separated from their families. Frequently, enslaved persons were sold into plantations separate from their families. For example, Anna Eliza Woodson, a participant in the 1929 Southern University Slave Narrative Project, witnessed a young woman "weeping as one dying of a bleeding heart" because she was "being sold away from [her] two little children."⁴⁰

Some participants even described being sexually assaulted by their enslavers. The power differential between enslaved women and plantation owners allowed violent sexual harassment to occur. Luncedy Hall, a participant in the narrative project, described being overpowered by her master. After repeated sexual harassment, she gave birth to a girl, whose

³⁹ Interview with Harriet Robinson.

⁴⁰ Cade, 306.

father was the plantation owner. Hall forever “despised” her slave master for raping and impregnating her. Another formerly enslaved woman participating in the project also recalled the sexual violence she experienced at the hands of her white enslaver. Lettie Moonson reported witnessing an enslaved woman birth a child fathered by Moonson’s enslaver. By the time the child reached six months of age, the enslaver’s wife had “beaten [the child] to death.”⁴¹ If enslaved women did not comply with the plantation owners’ wishes, they were subject to the whims and punishments to the enslaver’s ire. Eliza Stokes elaborated upon her experience with sexual harassment. Her plantation owner made sexual advances towards her, which she refused. Nevertheless, he tried to beat her into submission. Stokes recalled this incident as one the most traumatizing events she experienced in her life.⁴²

These testimonies supported Cade’s inclination that almost all enslaved people loathed slavery and desired freedom. However, it is important to understand that the SUSNP acknowledged that the experiences for each enslaved person varied, and that some enslaved persons’ abuses were more severe than others. Mary Davis, a formerly enslaved interviewee, captured this sentiment: “Slavery at its best may suit some people, but many hope to never witness it anymore.”⁴³ Publishing the summaries and excerpts of the slave narratives in the *Journal of Negro History* in 1935 allowed Cade to disseminate these responses, which was another intention behind this project. Drawing attention to the testimonies of ex-slaves would successfully provide an alternative perspective to the slave experience⁴⁴.

Even though the 1929 slave narrative collection provided substantial evidence against Phillips’s claim, Cade wanted to continue this project and provide more oral testimonies from survivors of slavery. In 1935, Cade initiated another project with Prairie View State College

⁴¹ Ibid., 308.

⁴² Mary Davis, “A Sketch of Slavery as Told by Three Ex-Slaves,” interview by Victoria Washington, Southern University, March 23, 1935, 3.

⁴³ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁴ Cade, “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves,” 294.

to reproduce and expand upon his previous effort. From 1931 to 1939, Cade lived in Texas and served as the registrar at Prairie View State College, a Historically Black College.⁴⁵ This time, Cade and his students interviewed over 229 former slaves across 17 different states.⁴⁶ In order to interview as many survivors of slavery as possible, Cade enlisted help from local extension schools within those southern states. While some aspects of the sampling process remain unknown, the transcripts reveal that Cade likely enlisted assistance from instructors within the extension schools. In Texas, J.N. Freeman, an instructor at Midway Extension School for Negroes—located in Midway, Texas—coordinated many of the interviews. Freeman wrote that “Midway Extension School students have reported 100% of the story of slavery as told by ex-slaves who lived in Madison, Navarro, Limestone, Nalken, Leon, Rush, Brazos, and St. Augustine Counties.”⁴⁷ Similar to the 1929 project, Cade and the instructors requested that the students interview as many survivors as possible.⁴⁸ The project concluded its interviews in 1938.

It is not exactly clear how the students and the instructors managed to track down the survivors. However, interview transcripts suggested that some participants—who were not related by familial ties—were connected. Particularly, some of the formerly enslaved persons participating in the Southern University project had lived on the same plantation. Mary Calhoun, Elija Calhoun, and Mary Evans all had lived in Madison County, Texas, on John Calhoun’s plantation. Each of these enslaved persons described their experiences while laboring for Calhoun, but the connection to the same plantation reveals that the formerly enslaved may have suggested that the students interview other enslaved persons they knew. After all, in 1935, Cade requested his students to interview “as many formerly enslaved

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Freeman, Foreword.

⁴⁸ Cade, “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves,” 295.

individuals as possible,” but did not indicate if he gave them any guidance as to *how* they could best track down the formerly enslaved.⁴⁹ Ultimately, it is not certain exactly how the students found formerly enslaved individuals to interview, but it is likely that there was some variance between each interviewer. The students may have asked local residents to connect them to the formerly enslaved, reached out to their relatives or individuals who they knew had lived through slavery, or asked elderly African Americans if they were enslaved. Recovery of additional documents in the Southern University Archive, if they exist, may answer these questions.

Cade and his colleagues also emphasized that the SUSNP was an attempt to honor the strength and endurance that their enslaved ancestors displayed while oppressed under the peculiar institution. In April of 1935, J.N. Freeman, instructor at Midway Extension School for Negroes, wrote a foreword for the SUSNP which described the intentions and importance of the SUSNP. One of the intentions of the project, Freeman emphasized, was to understand and appreciate the origins of African Americans. He began the foreword by discussing the social and political climate in which Black Americans lived during the 1930s, writing that “the Negro is beginning to awaken to the mud for ‘self-realization,’ based upon traditionalism and tales of the prowess of his ancestors.”⁵⁰ This statement may have been referencing the Harlem Renaissance and other cultural movements that encouraged African Americans to embrace their unique cultural identity, through expressions of art and literature. Such movements inspired many African Americans to recognize that their culture was shaped by the “prowess of [their] ancestors.”⁵¹ In other words, their enslaved ancestors still managed to forge a strong sense of cultural identity while living under an institution that thrived upon stripping away their humanity. Freeman believed that gathering the perspectives of elders in

⁴⁹ Ibid, 294.

⁵⁰ Freeman, Foreword.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the Black community, who were survivors of slavery, would help Black Americans understand their racial identity in the 1930s. He concluded the foreword with a similar sentiment: “We hope to build respect for our race. We must first respect our beginnings.”⁵² This concluding statement further elaborated the importance of how the SUSNP connected to a larger cultural movement in the Black community.

Similar to Cade and Freeman, graduate students involved in the project saw the SUSNP as a way to express gratitude to their enslaved ancestors and reflect upon their ancestors’ plight. In his interview notes, A.V. Lee, a graduate student involved in the SUSNP, wrote “may the information serve as background for the appreciation of our foreparents, despite the sufferings and hardships in doing what they have for us in way of our educational elevation.”⁵³ Lee’s eloquent statement implied that the SUSNP efforts to recover the perspectives of their enslaved relatives was an act of service to the elders in their community. Without the immense endurance their enslaved relatives displayed, A.V. Lee and his colleagues recognized that they may not have been alive in the 1930s, let alone able to pursue an education. Birdie Baker, another graduate student involved in the project, expressed a similar sentiment in her introduction to the interviews she conducted:

I used to think that past records of the Negro had very little influence upon those who came after him. But, in recent years I find that the background of any people serves as a stimulant to their future progress and achievements. Feeling that the records accomplishments of the Negro are limited, I wish to give the ‘Life Facts of Two Ex-Slaves,’ as told to me by them.⁵⁴

Baker’s introduction expressed a similar theme to Freeman’s foreword, being that many of the individuals involved in the SUSNP viewed their ancestors’ experiences as fundamental to their current predicament as African Americans living in the Jim-Crow-Era. Baker and her fellow graduate students’ introductions reflect the personal connection the students and

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Mary Calhoun, “Life History of Former Slaves,” interview by A.V. Lee, 1935.

⁵⁴ Birdie Baker, “Introduction to Life Facts of Two Ex-Slaves,” 1935.

instructors felt to the project. Through these oral testimonies, the SUSNP recovered “the facts which have been so potent in determining our present status as Negroes.”⁵⁵ This sentiment may explain why the students evidently treated the survivors of slavery with admiration and respect. For example, they seemingly interacted politely with the survivors of slavery, often calling them Mister, Misses, Miss, Uncle, or Aunt, as a form of acknowledging their age and respecting them as elders.

The graduate students and their instructors also recognized that the SUSNP was an opportunity to expand the pool of primary sources surrounding slavery. In the 1930s, the few existing Black-authored primary sources were usually written by extraordinary gifted enslaved persons, like Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery prior to emancipation. While such perspectives are valid and significant, most survivors of slavery did not attain freedom until emancipation. Thus, to achieve this ‘self-realization’ Cade and the participating instructors and graduate students emphasized that Black Americans needed to reflect upon their families’ roots, which required them to listen to the perspectives of their formerly enslaved family members. As Cade mentioned in his 1935 article in the *Journal of Negro History*, many Black Americans felt as though most primary sources on slavery diminished the severity of violence and abuse against enslaved persons. Irene Tarrow, a graduate student conducting interviews in Texas, described the primary sources around slavery as “limited from their ability” to impart “information about the toils and hardships” experienced by enslaved persons.⁵⁶

Thus, the students, instructors, and Cade viewed the project as a way of providing substantial evidence to demonstrate the horrors of slavery. Ultimately, Freeman and his graduate students viewed the SUSNP as a “quest for the truth to organize for dissemination.”

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Lee Bridget, “Impressionable Experts of the Lives of Three Ex-Slaves as Told By Themselves,” interview by Irene Tarrow, Southern University, 1935.

In other words, the SUSNP wanted to preserve the perspectives of the formerly enslaved, but they also wanted to publish these responses. This sentiment not only expressed their intention to uncover the perspectives of the formerly enslaved, but also reveals that they viewed the perspectives of the formerly enslaved as more truthful than those of historians such as Ulrich B. Phillips. As Freeman wrote in his foreword to the Texas Project, “there is no better method for securing the truths” than going straight to the source and asking the survivors of slavery themselves.⁵⁷ By amplifying the voices of the formerly enslaved, the SUSNP gave the survivors of slavery the opportunity to have control over the presentation of their story.

Similar to the 1929 interviews, the 1935 collection provided a substantial number of oral testimonies that shattered the contented-slave narrative. Specifically, in the Texas collection, many formerly enslaved persons described the horrific punishments they received. Manuel McFletcher told his interviewer that “everyone hated slavery and did their best in trying to gain freedom, some prayed and some ran away.”⁵⁸ Bell McMillian, a ninety-one-year-old former slave, recalled that the enslaver and his wife “whipped her every day,” and on occasion “nearly whipped her to death,” simply because the mistress “did not like her.”⁵⁹ Another enslaved woman named Sarah Thomas described an incident in which the enslaver whipped her so severely that “blood ran from her body like her throat had been cut.” After this cruel punishment, Sarah Thomas “could not walk and had to be carried to her little cabin.” Recovery from such a brutal beating took Thomas two months, as she was left with “holes in her legs large enough to put an egg in and [her wounds] were infested with maggots.”⁶⁰ Esther-Lane Thomas, a graduate student involved with the SUSNP, interviewed Mark Slater, a formerly enslaved person residing in Washington County, Texas. During this

⁵⁷ Freeman, Foreword.

⁵⁸ Manuel McFletcher, No Title, Southern University, 1935, 3.

⁵⁹ Bell McMillian, “Impressionable Excerpts of the Lives of Three Ex-Slaves as Told by Themselves,” Southern University, 1935, 2.

⁶⁰ Sarah Thomas, “Case 3,” Southern University, 1935.

interview, Slater recited a prayer he had frequently heard among the enslaved persons laboring on the plantation:

*O Lord, lift the yoke of bondage of us that we may serve
God under our own vine and fig tree. And O Lord, control
Ole Master's temper so he will not be so mean to us.*⁶¹

These abuses are only a small number of the sufferings that enslaved persons endured. Each enslaved person interviewed experienced slavery uniquely; however, each testimony shared one similarity—they successfully countered the contented slave narrative. At the end of each interview, each interviewer asked if the survivor of slavery enjoyed slavery. Unsurprisingly, after describing the trauma they experienced while enslaved, most of the participants indicated that they preferred freedom over bondage.⁶² These horrific testimonies and the number of formerly enslaved persons that claimed they did not enjoy slavery provided more than enough evidence that slavery was an immoral institution.

Despite this compelling evidence, the SUSNP did not successfully disseminate the oral testimonies beyond their local community until 2014. These interviews remained obscure to the public and unpublished until the twenty-first century. Few historians knew of the project's existence. In 1967, Norman Yetman published an article in the *American Quarterly* acknowledging the Southern University Project's existence, but lamented that “unfortunately the results of these interviews remain unpublished.”⁶³ Given the project's intention to preserve the experiences of the formerly enslaved for “dissemination,” it seems strange that the project stayed unpublished for almost a century. Moreover, when viewing the digitized interviews, it is very apparent that the transcripts are rough drafts. Particularly, there are

⁶¹ Mark Slater, “The Biography of a Slave,” interview by Esther Lane-Thomas, Southern University, March 6, 1935: 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” 540

many misspellings and grammatical errors that would most likely have been corrected and polished for a final draft. It is unclear how Cade intended to disseminate the interview responses, but there are a few measures the SUSNP might have taken. First, in 1935, John B. Cade summarized his findings of the 1929 interviews in an article to the *Journal of Negro History*. Cade may have envisioned the publication of the 1935-1938 set similarly, where he published another article in the *Journal of Negro History*. On the other hand, the SUSNP may have planned to compile the interview transcripts and publish them or to leave the transcripts in the Southern University's archives.

On the other hand, Cade may have believed that he sufficiently disseminated these responses to the community. During an interview, Angela Proctor, head archivist at Southern University, argued that Cade had publicized the responses in the way that he originally intended. During his tenure at Southern University as the Dean (1939-1961), Cade provided a tremendous number of resources to Southern University. Specifically, he created the Southern University archives (later to be named after Cade). Within the archives, Proctor argued, Cade left the 1935 SUSNP interviews laminated and on display to the public. While Proctor's explanation may be plausible, it leaves several questions unanswered. Mainly, if Cade planned to use these interviews to squash Phillip's 'contented slave argument,' then why would he leave these interviews confined to Louisiana? Why not publish these interviews in a book that could be widely accessible to historians around the nation? Access to Cade's personal diaries may answer these questions; however, Proctor stated that they are currently unavailable to the public.⁶⁴

Although it is unclear why the 1935-1938 interviews were not transcribed and published, there are several different possibilities that may explain this. Cade published his initial article in the *Journal of Negro History* approximately six years after beginning the

⁶⁴ Proctor, Angela. Interview by author.

interviews. The trajectory of the 1935 interviews may have been similar. Specifically, Cade may have planned to spend several years organizing the interviews, transcribing the findings, and possibly publishing a follow-up article similar to his first. However, in 1937, six years following the completion of the 1935 interviews, the Federal Government's Works Progress Administration launched an effort, separate from Southern University, to record the histories of the formerly enslaved in Louisiana. John B. Cade was not involved with this effort, but he may have thought that this project, funded by the Federal Government, would be able to record the lives of the formerly enslaved more efficiently. The Federal Government paid teachers and writers to conduct interviews, which the SUSNP could not provide for the students and faculty involved in this project.⁶⁵ Because Black historians pushed the federal government to fund these efforts, Cade may have felt that the WPA's effort would have successfully carried out the interviews and publication at a larger scale.⁶⁶

Almost one hundred years after its inception, the SUSNP is finally receiving some recognition. Southern University's digitization of the interview transcripts has allowed the world to view the interviews, providing historians with an invaluable collection of primary sources that give insight into the world of slavery. While the infamous "contented slave narrative" inspired Cade to interview the formerly enslaved, the SUSNP was more concerned with "securing the truths," regardless of each enslaved person's opinions regarding slavery. Unfortunately, Southern University did not publish the responses in the 1940s. However, one may argue that the SUSNP is still ongoing, and did not end in the 1940s. The first part of its mission, to interview the survivors of slavery, has been completed. Currently, Southern University archivists are working diligently to fulfill the second mission, to disseminate the

⁶⁵ Library of Congress, "The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection," accessed August 13, 2022 at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/>

⁶⁶Ibid.

responses to the public. In 2020, the archivists announced that they plan to publish an additional fifty interviews to the online collection.⁶⁷ These interviews have yet to be published, but the Southern University's announcement demonstrates the continuity of this project.

⁶⁷ The Advocate, "Southern University Plans to Add 50 More Slave Narratives to its Online Collection," accessed August 13, 2022 at https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/entertainment_life/article_06e6e524-bd73-11ea-92f7-ab3255efb16c.html

CHAPTER TWO

“TRUTH TO IDIOM BE PARAMOUNT”

The Origins of the Works Progress Administration’s Slave Narrative Project

In order to make this volume of slave narratives more appealing and less difficult for the average reader, I recommend that truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation secondary... I should like to recommend that the stories be told in the language of the ex- slave, without excessive editorializing and "artistic" introductions on the part of the interviewer. The contrast between the directness of the ex-slave speech and the roundabout and at times pulpy comments of the interviewer is frequently glaring.

—Henry G. Alsberg, 1937, Director of the Federal Writers’ Project¹

As John B. Cade concluded his work on the Southern University Slave Narrative Project (SUSNP), the federal government launched a similar effort to collect oral testimonies from formerly enslaved individuals. Undertaken by the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA), the federal government recorded 2,300 oral testimonies from formerly enslaved persons (approximately two percent of the surviving population in 1936), across seventeen different states from 1936 to 1938. Along with conducting interviews with formerly enslaved persons, the Federal Writers’ Project, a subdivision of the WPA, photographed over five hundred of them, and even recorded several testimonies. The project thus represented the largest national effort to record and preserve the experiences of survivors of slavery. The FWP intended to publish these interviews, but ultimately abandoned the effort, citing a lack of federal funding.² In the 1970s, however, historian George Rawick and his colleagues organized and published the manuscripts under the title of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.

¹ Henry G. Alsberg, “Memorandum,” memorandum to the State Directors of the Federal Writers’ Project, June 9, 1937.

² Norman R. Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection” *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1967): 536.

This chapter examines the genesis of the WPA Slave Narrative Project and the intentions behind the project. Specifically, the chapter will explain why the Slave Narrative Project did not successfully accomplish its goal of preserving the life histories of formerly enslaved persons. I argue that the creators of the WPA Slave Narrative Project intended the project to be executed with respect, diligence, and care: they recognized the immense value of preserving the life histories of survivors of slavery and sought to record these individuals' experiences in their own voices. However, the WPA lacked a strict, clearly defined method to conduct these interviews, instead allowing each state to do so in the manner they saw fit. The result undermined the project's objective: many narrative transcripts described the survivors of slavery in condescending, patronizing, and derogatory racialized language. Because each state was given the discretion to hire WPA workers, southern state directors of the WPA typically hired white Americans over Black Americans, even when mandated to hire people of color. The southern state directors and white interviewers did not share the vision of the WPA Slave Narrative Project's creators. Instead, these state directors argued against including the survivors of slavery in a national project. Completely indifferent to how they portrayed respondents, the southern interviewers often projected their own racial biases onto their interviewees, in particular the pervasive myth that slavery was beneficial to African Americans. Owing to inadequate organization and poor coordination between field workers (the interviewers) and federal administrators, the project was not conducted with the same diligence and care as the creators of the FWP project had originally intended. To draw such conclusions, I rely heavily upon the memorandums that the federal directors sent to the state directors and the interview transcripts themselves.

* * *

The origins of the WPA Slave Narrative Project can be traced to Fisk University, which represented another independent undertaking to record the lives of formerly enslaved

persons. Fisk's effort to collect interviews from survivors of slavery evolved unexpectedly from another research project that sociologist Charles S. Johnson established with Fisk's Social Science Institute in 1928.³ Johnson (1893-1956) received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1920, the first African American to earn a doctorate in sociology from the institution. In 1926, he moved to Nashville, where he joined the faculty of Fisk University—first as a professor, then as chair of the sociology department, and finally, in 1946, as the university's first African American president.⁴ While serving as chair of sociology, Johnson spearheaded a research project studying African American culture and race relations in the local Nashville community. Relying primarily on personal interviews, Johnson and his team, including some of his students along with other sociologists at Fisk, visited local communities and interviewed Black residents, requesting their life stories, and inquiring about their relationship to the community.⁵

Through these interactions with Black communities in the Nashville area, Johnson found that many elderly African Americans residing there were survivors of slavery, a fact that piqued his curiosity.⁶ He initiated a project to preserve the life histories of formerly enslaved persons; like John B. Cade at Southern University, Johnson recognized the immense value of recording the life stories of formerly enslaved individuals. However, unlike Cade, Johnson focused on another angle: religious conversion stories, which he found quite compelling. Assisted by his team, he compiled the personal testimonies of formerly enslaved persons, and eventually published these interviews in mimeographed form in *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of the Ex-Slaves* (1945).⁷

³ Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project," <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/>.

⁴ Ellis Briggs, *Proud Servant: The Memoirs of a Career Ambassador* (Kent University Press, 1998), 69.

⁵ Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

During the Great Depression, the federal government established the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) under the New Deal's Works Project Administration (WPA), which provided jobs to unemployed schoolteachers, artists, and writers. As part of this ambitious program, the FWP launched the "American Guide" project; it aimed to capture a diverse, panoramic social and historical "self-portrait" of the entire United States. Four dozen guidebooks were published, each dedicated to one of the 48 states.⁸ Parts of the "American Guide" project pursued folklore research, which required the FWP to interview residents of each state. Many of the interviews included life histories, which recorded the experiences of Americans living in each of the forty-eight states. To coordinate these interviews, the FWP appointed John A. Lomax—one of the nation's most renowned folklorists—as folklore editor. Born in Mississippi, Lomax (1867-1948) received a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Texas (1895) and eventually received a Master of Arts in English from Harvard (1907). After receiving his education, Lomax moved to Texas, and became the co-founder of the Texas Folklore Society, which was established to preserve and study Texas folklore and tradition. While working under the Texas Folklore Society, Lomax traveled extensively throughout the United States, recording folklore, songs, and music onto primitive recording devices. Eventually, he compiled these recordings and his field notes into several books.⁹

While conducting interviews for the American Guide Project, the federal field interviewers attempted to include information on all segments of society, which frequently entailed extensively interviewing elderly African Americans, who were often survivors of slavery. This created conflict between state directors and national editors of the "American Guide Project." Much of the conflict revolved around whether the "American Guide" should

⁸ Daniel M. Fox, "Achievements of the Federal Writers' Project," *American Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1961): 3.

⁹ Fox, "Achievements of the Federal Writers' Project," 3.

include the histories of African Americans. Several state directors opposed the inclusion of African American history in their state guidebooks. For example, Alabama state director Myrtle Myles argued that African Americans should not be even mentioned in the Alabama American Guidebook, as Black Americans “simply comprise a part of the laboring class and [have] contributed nothing to [Alabama’s] culture or beauty.”¹⁰

This racial discrimination also existed in hiring African Americans to the Federal Writers’ Project and other New Deal Programs. In the FWP, only seven percent of the employees were Black, and only one out of fifty of the supervisors were Black.¹¹ To address this inequity, Henry G. Alsberg (1881-1970), a Jewish-American journalist and the director of the FWP, created the Office of Negro Affairs, in which highly educated Black Americans were appointed to positions within numerous projects. Known as the “Black Cabinet” or “Black Brain Trust,” these individuals often served as the race relations advisors of their project. In 1934, the FWP appointed Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989), a Black poet and folklorist, as the program’s director of the Office of Negro Affairs. Earning his master’s degree from Harvard, Brown taught English at Howard University for over forty years (from 1929 to 1969).¹² As a director of the Office of Negro Affairs, Brown served as an editor of the FWP, reviewing the essays written about African American culture, and wanted to ensure that “the Negro [was] not neglected in any of the publications written or sponsored by the Writers’ Project.”¹³ Despite these efforts to include Black Americans in the New Deal, the federal government continued to exclude African Americans, hiring White Americans over any other racial group. Frustrated with these hiring practices, Sterling Brown wrote in an

¹⁰ Myrtle Miles to George Cronyn, October 4, 1937, Federal Writers’ Project, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

¹¹ Office on Negro Affairs, “Report on the Status of the Negro in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee,” to Couch, October 19, 1938, Entry 27, Box 1, File “General Letters,” RG 69 quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 128

¹² “Sterling Brown, Professor, and Poet Born,” African American Registry (AAREG), May 15, 2019, <https://aaregistry.org/story/sterling-a-brown-innovative-teacher-and-poet/>

¹³ Sterling A. Brown, interview by Yetman, 20 July 1965 in Yetman, “Slave Narrative Collection,” 546.

essay, which was eventually featured in the FWP Washington DC guidebook, that “the Negro in Washington has no voice in government because he is economically prescribed and segregated as rigidly as the southern cities he condemns.”¹⁴

In an attempt to provide economic relief to unemployed Black college graduates, one of Johnson’s former students and a faculty member at the University of Kentucky, Lawrence D. Reddick, proposed that the federal government should initiate a project to collect oral testimonies from survivors of slavery. Reddick wanted the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) to employ at least five hundred Black college graduates who would then conduct interviews with the entire population of formerly enslaved persons in the state of Kentucky. Under FERA, Reddick led an initial project at the University of Kentucky, where twelve Black FERA workers conducted 250 interviews with survivors of slavery between 1934 and 1935.¹⁵ This Kentucky project ended in 1935 when the FERA transitioned into the WPA.

After Reddick’s project ended, the Black Unit of the Federal Writers’ Project (in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia) continued to collect testimonies from formerly enslaved persons. In Florida specifically, the state director assigned employees of the FWP Black unit, including the famous novelist Zora Neale Hurston, to interview a substantial number of the formerly enslaved as an attempt to record folklores in the Black and Native American communities. In March of 1937, the Florida State Director sent several of the slave interviews to Lomax for editorial comments. Lomax, impressed with these projects, described them as a “remarkably interesting collection.”¹⁶ He emphasized that “such documentary records by the survivors of a historical period in

¹⁴ Sterling A. Brown, “The Negro in Washington,” Washington: City and Capital (Washington, D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1937), 89.

¹⁵ Yetman, “Background to the Slave Narrative Collection,” 542.

¹⁶ George Cronyn, “Folklore,” memorandum to North & South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, Oklahoma, April 1, 1937.

America are invaluable.”¹⁷ After praising the interviews collected by the Black FWP in Florida, he promoted the project to a national level under the FWP, and planned to “secure its publication.”¹⁸

Unlike Reddick’s Kentucky project and the projects under the Black Units of the FWP, the FWP hired predominately white southerners to interview the survivors of slavery. A few reasons explain why this project, which intended to provide relief to Black college graduates, was arguably hijacked and given to mostly unemployed white writers, teachers, and journalists. The WPA delegated some responsibilities to each state, including the power to hire unemployed individuals to carry out these projects. The WPA Slave Narrative project, conducted in the Jim Crow South, was not immune to the discrimination present in these former slave states. Even though working with elderly African Americans may have been perceived as a substandard job to vehemently racist white southerners, it provided funds and employment in a time when that was scarce. Rather than hiring African Americans, these southern state directors of the WPA gave the vast majority of these positions to unemployed white workers. In other words, southern states prioritized hiring white Americans over Black Americans, even if the positions were created for Black Americans. Myrtle Miles, the director of the Alabama WPA, argued that all of the African American applicants were unqualified to work for the WPA, explicitly stating that “the type of Negro available for work on the certified bases is not capable of doing research work or writing.”¹⁹ The New Mexico state director concurred with Miles’ statement, adding that “nearly all of the colored people in New Mexico are cooks or chauffeurs.”²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Myrtle Miles to Henry Alsberg, December 9, 1936, Entry 27, Box 1, File “Incoming Letters,” RG 69, quoted in Catherine Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 125.

²⁰ New Mexico State Director Ina Sizer Cassidy to Henry Alsberg, January 13, 1936, Entry 27, “Records and Misc. Pertaining to Negro Studies,” Box 2, File “Negroes—Employee Letters on Negroes,” RG 69, quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 125.

Henry G. Alsberg, the director of the FWP, and Sterling Brown, both dissatisfied with the discrimination against Black Americans, attempted to confront these blatant displays of racism. The *Negro Press Digest* compiled articles in the Black press across the nation that described instances of racial discrimination in the WPA. One such instance involved Mable Montgomery, the director of the South Carolina WPA, who refused to hire Black interviewers to collect oral testimonies from formerly enslaved persons. Even in the North and Midwest, discrimination against Black employees occurred. Particularly the *Cleveland Call and Post* reported that “not a single Negro has a job on the state WPA staff,” even though many Black researchers and writers were qualified to carry out these positions.²¹ Brown reported these incidents to Alsberg, who then attempted to confront individual state directors. For instance, Alsberg tried to encourage Georgia’s state director Carolyn Dillard to hire Black workers to the WPA. In response, Dillard and other state directors refused to hire African Americans unless their federal administrators increased their quotas. Many of these states had already filled their quotas with white workers, and refused to replace them with African Americans. Thus, Alsberg increased the racial quotas for each state, providing additional funding to the states, and mandating them “to get a few Negroes on their projects.”²² With adequate funding, southern states created segregated “Negro Units” of the FWP. By 1938, 140 out of the 4,500—approximately three percent—of FWP workers identified as Black.²³

While the WPA collected testimonies from formerly enslaved persons, the Black interviewers’ positions were still vulnerable to dismissal, especially when the WPA experienced budget cuts. In order to maintain these budgets, the state directors would often

²¹ “Are We to Have a Scandal,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, March 26, 1938, 4-5.

²² Darel McConkey, Acting Field Supervisor, Field Report on Georgia to Henry Alsberg, December 26, 1935, Entry 6, Box 1 “Field Reports, 1935-37,” File “McConkey—Georgia,” 2 RG 69, quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 128.

²³ “Number of Negro Workers,” 1938, 2-4, Entry 27 “Reports and Misc. Pertaining to Negro Studies,” Box 1, File 2 Memos,’ RG 69, quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 125

let go of the Black FWP interviewers prior to the white workers.²⁴ In March of 1936, the *Cleveland Call and Post* warned its readers that “2000 to 2200 men will be fired” from the WPA in the following month due to budget cuts. The article further cautioned that directors may “take advantage of these layoff rules to dismiss persons they do not like, or colored workers because of race prejudice.”²⁵ State directors argued that these budget cuts prevented them from meeting the racial quotas; therefore, “all of the Negro workers were dropped from the [payrolls].”²⁶ Moreover, many southern states required additional funding to maintain segregated working conditions in office spaces. For example, North Carolina’s director blamed the lack of Black WPA employees on the budget, which had “not permitted the setting up of separate establishments which would be required for such employment.”²⁷ Although Alsberg initially instated the quotas, he stopped pressing the issue after receiving pushback from the state directors. Therefore, this may explain why the WPA Slave Narrative project lacked Black interviewers, as states preferred to provide relief to unemployed white Americans. Despite the efforts of Alsberg and Brown, the vast majority of the WPA Slave Narrative field workers (i.e., interviewers) were white southerners, who often had familial ties to former enslavers within the local community.²⁸

After FERA’s transition to the WPA, in 1937, the field workers began conducting their interviews with survivors of slavery. Initially, the field workers undertook these interviews spontaneously and sporadically, with little organization or guidance from the WPA state and federal directors. They also did not have an organized system of finding informants and conducting interviews, as they searched for elderly African Americans within

²⁴ William O. Key to Henry Alsberg, January 7, 1936, Entry 1, Box 10, File “Georgia—Employment, 1935-36,” RG 69, quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 127.

²⁵ “2000 to Lose WPA Jobs: Prejudice May Cause Many to Be Dismissed,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, March 26, 1936, 1.

²⁶ Office on Negro Affairs, “Report on the Status of the Negro in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee.,” to Couch, October 19, 1938, Entry 27, Box 1, File “General Letters,” RG 69 quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Library of Congress, “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project.”

local communities. Members of the community sometimes directed the WPA interviewers to the residencies of formerly enslaved individuals.²⁹ Then, the interviewers generally greeted the elderly residents and started the questionnaire, recording the responses by hand. The state directors gave the field workers the liberty to ask any questions pertaining to the survivors of slavery's experiences when they labored under the institution.³⁰

An organized mechanism of conducting interviews emerged only when the Florida state WPA director submitted another group of ex-slave narratives submitted by the Florida Writers' Project established an official inauguration to collect narratives in April of 1937. Lomax then proposed that similar efforts be extended to the remaining southern and border states. In April of 1937 Lomax launched an effort to provide formal instructions to the state directors to collect slave narratives.³¹ He distributed a questionnaire that consisted of twenty questions, and also included guidelines for asking said questions, and extracting responses from the participants. These questions included (1) when and where they were born; (2) information about their parents and siblings; (3) clothes they wore, what they ate, and their labor while enslaved; (4) their relationship with the enslaver (5) if they were literate (6) their religious beliefs, spirituality, and beliefs in superstitious; (7) several questions about their experiences after emancipation. Lomax indicated that "the main purpose of these detailed and homely questions is to get the Negro interested in talking about the days of slavery."³² WPA Administrative files indicate that interviewers were not required to ask the questions verbatim, but could utilize the questions as a guideline for the interview process.³³

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John A. Lomax, "Instructions #9-E to American Guide Manual," memorandum to FWP state directors, April 14, 1937.

³¹ Ibid.

³² John. A. Lomax, "Supplementary Instructions #9-E to the American Guide Manual," memorandum to FWP State Directors, April 22, 1937, xx.

³³ Ibid.

Many of the questions Lomax proposed focused on daily life, folklore, and superstitious practices among the survivors of slavery. He encouraged the interviewers to explore the folklore among formerly enslaved persons, rather than issues regarding enslavement and freedom. In May of 1937, quoting Lomax, George Cronyn sent a memorandum to the state directors requesting that the interviewers ask about “their belief in signs, cures, hoodoo, etc.,” emphasizing that including these responses would “add greatly to the value of the collection now being made.”³⁴ Sterling Brown and other Black scholars involved in the project objected to Lomax’s focus on folklore, and encouraged the interviewers to inquire about attitudes toward freedom, resistance, and persistence. Shortly after Lomax distributed his interview questions, he went on a ninety-day furlough, and ceased working for the WPA in October of 1937.³⁵ Brown used this time to add ten additional questions that emphasized themes of resistance, attitudes towards freedom, and Reconstruction. Brown felt that asking such questions was important to understand the horrific conditions formerly enslaved persons endured and their impact on the Black community after Emancipation. Specifically, these questions asked the survivors of slavery (1) their expectations after freedom; (2) what they did after the Civil War; (3) if they ever voted; (4) their interactions with “secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan;” (5) and instances of rebellion during enslavement.³⁶

Brown’s emphasis on formerly enslaved persons’ perceptions towards freedom and enslavement may indicate that, like John B. Cade, Brown felt the need to squash the historiographical argument that enslaved persons thrived laboring under the peculiar institution. As the son of an emancipated slave, Brown knew firsthand about the horrors such persons faced. By providing formerly enslaved persons with a chance to express their

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ George Cronyn, “Ex-Slave Narratives,” memorandum to FWP State Directors, May 3, 1937.

³⁶ Henry Alsberg, “Memorandum,” memorandum to State Directors of the Federal Writers’ Project, July 30, 1937.

experiences, this project gave them a voice when enslavement had silenced them. Not only did Brown seek to include Black workers in the Federal Writers' project, but he also wanted to ensure that their voices were represented.³⁷

Henry Alsberg also attempted to prevent the interviewers from projecting biases onto the survivors of slavery. After receiving the original texts of interviews from various states, in June of 1937, Alsberg sent a memorandum to the state directors requesting that the “stories be told in the language of the ex-slave, without excessive editorializing and ‘artistic’ introductions on part of the interviewer.”³⁸ He continued by criticizing the usage of dialect in the interview transcripts that imitated the accents of elderly African Americans. Often, the interviewers would phonetically spell out how the survivors of slavery pronounced a word—for example, “wuz” for the word was—that the transcripts became difficult to read. He provided a list of twenty-one words in which he recommended that the interviews refrain from using. Following the list, Alsberg reminded the state directors that “truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation secondary,” emphasizing that the actual stories and perspectives of the formerly enslaved persons were more important than capturing the dialect.³⁹ At the end of the memorandum, Alsberg recommended that the interviewers refrain from using derogatory phrases such as “darky and nigger and such expressions as a ‘comical little old black woman’” unless the formerly enslaved person explicitly utilized these expressions during the interview.⁴⁰ The use of such dialect and phrases has come under scrutiny recently as many historians have criticized it for depicting the survivors of slavery in a derogatory and stereotypical light. Even though Alsberg did not explicitly state that these words and expressions were harmful, disrespectful, and even racist, he acknowledged that they were distracting and inappropriate for the collection.

³⁷ “Sterling Brown, Professor, and Poet Born,” African American Registry (AAREG).

³⁸ Alsberg, “Memorandum.”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Although some interviewers implemented Brown and Alsberg's suggestions, they had little impact. On July 30, 1937, Henry Alsberg sent another memorandum to the state directors of the FWP with general suggestions for the interviewers. He specifically advised the interviewers against influencing "the point of view of the informant," and sharing "his own opinion on the subject of slavery."⁴¹ Furthermore, some of the interviewers did not ask the respondents the additional questions that Brown had proposed. Brown never reprimanded them, but in 1972, he criticized the WPA Slave Narrative project for focusing on the "quaint and eccentric."⁴² Brown may have been referring to the many questions that focused on the daily routines of the formerly enslaved persons, and the questions regarding the spirituality, superstitions, and folklore among survivors of slavery.

At the same time, the survivors of slavery did not always answer the questions honestly, possibly out of fear of retaliation from white southerners. Specifically, the survivors of slavery often portrayed their enslavement and their relationship with the enslavers in a more positive, often inaccurate manner. Martin Jackson, a formerly enslaved person in Texas, eloquently explained why this occurred:

Lots of old slaves close the door before they tell the truth about their days of slavery. When the door is open, they tell how kind their masters was and how rosy it all was. You can't blame them for this, because they had plenty of early discipline, making them cautious about saying anything uncomplimentary about their masters. I, myself, was in a little different position than most slaves and, as a consequence, have no grudges or resentment. However, I can tell you the life of the average slave was not rosy. They were dealt out plenty of cruel suffering.⁴³

In this response, Jackson emphasized the social conditioning that enslaved people experienced throughout their entire life. Such conditioning forced them to portray their enslavement as positive and beneficial, especially when speaking to white person. Although

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sterling Brown interview by Gladys-Marie Fry, March 1972, in Joanne V. Gabbin, Sterling Brown: *Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 73.

⁴³ Jackson, Martin, "Ex-slave Stories (Texas)," interview by the Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*, July 6, 1937: 189.

emancipation had ended slavery, many of these societal norms remained, especially with the emergence of white supremacist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, that actively targeted African Americans. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of the interviewers were white southerners, who often maintained the racial status quo. It is unclear if these white interviewers were part of these white supremacist groups, or if they actively protested against the segregation in the South. Even if these white southerners had no intention of harming the respondents, in order to protect themselves from the retaliation they may face by exposing the horrors they faced, survivors of slavery often concealed their true feelings when prompted. In other words, as Jackson emphasized, survivors of slavery felt that it was safest if they portrayed slavery more positively.

The apprehension of the survivors of slavery to truthfully discuss their feelings and experiences while enslaved demonstrated the project's ignorance (and possibly) indifference to southern racial relations. Although many modern interview practices of confidentiality and anonymity were not prevalent in the 1930s, the FWP still could have implemented strategies to counter the effects of racial conditioning. The decision to not hire all African American interviewers may have been more detrimental to the project than the FWP directors initially realized. However, as previously discussed, Henry Alsberg and Sterling Brown received a tremendous amount of pushback when trying to increase the number of Black FWP workers. This conflict displayed the indifference of the many state directors towards this project, who were often more concerned with providing employment opportunities to unemployed white southerners. In comparison, the Southern University Slave Narrative Project's interviewers were Black, and also treated the survivors of slavery as respected individuals in their community.

It is unclear how respectfully each white FWP interviewer interacted with their respondents; however, it is very plausible that the interviewers did not help alleviate the

mistrust and anxiety the survivors of slavery may have felt when prompted to share their controversial thoughts with a white stranger. The very presence of a white southerner may have initiated the social conditioning that may have caused the formerly enslaved respondents to present slavery more positively. Based on the memorandums and communications between the state and federal directors of the FWP, it seems as though they did not take tense southern race relations into consideration. Thus, as a result of discriminatory hiring practices and early social conditioning, the survivors of slavery may have felt less comfortable revealing their innermost thoughts.

In early 1938, the FWP finished conducting the interviews as the directors of the FWP erroneously felt that they had interviewed a large portion of the formerly enslaved. In reality, they interviewed approximately 2,300 survivors of slavery, representing a small fraction of that entire population in the 1930s.⁴⁴ After the interviewing process ended, the FWP organized the interviews, based on each state, and included local “slave codes, overseer records, and the like.”⁴⁵ Such organizing of the interviews entailed completing appraisal sheets that evaluated the validity and value of each interview. At the end of the appraisal sheets, editors determined whether the interview should be published.⁴⁶ After the editor finished their evaluation, they compiled the interviews, organizing them by state and then alphabetically by the name of the informant. Then, the editors placed the narratives in the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress, to await publication.

In addition to believing that the FWP had interviewed the majority of surviving formerly enslaved persons, many FWP directors of the project lost their drive to pursue interviewing the survivors of slavery. One state director wrote that “enthusiasm about making these interviews has somewhat waned since we had no definitive plans for publication and

⁴⁴ Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” 542.

⁴⁵ John A. Lomax, memorandum to George Cronyn, April 9, 1937.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the assignments seemed more like fill in time when there was nothing left to be done on the [American Guide Project].”⁴⁷ This sentiment expressed that many of the individuals involved with the project did not really perceive it as a valuable, historical contribution. Rather, they were more concerned with providing employment and relief during the Great Depression.

As the interest to pursue publication of the interviews continued to wane, in 1939, the FWP eventually lost federal funding. Consequently, the state directors sent the remaining manuscripts to the Library of Congress, where they remained in the Rare Books Division.⁴⁸ Benjamin A. Botkin, who succeeded Lomax as the folklore editor of the FWP, lead efforts to finish organizing these interviews, and arranged for them to be featured in the Rare Books Room. In total, only four-fifths of the interviews were completely indexed and organized, leaving the several hundred interviews scattered and disorganized, destined for archival oblivion.⁴⁹

In the 1970s, many historians became increasingly interested in the psychology of enslavement. They began to utilize autobiographies and other primary sources that included the perspectives of enslaved persons to satiate this curiosity. This growth in interest prompted historian George Rawick (1929-1990) to visit the Library of Congress to review the original texts of the interviews. A renowned American Jewish Socialist and historian, Rawick attended Oberlin College, and eventually became a civil rights activist. After twenty-five years of sitting in the Rare Books Room, displaced, disorganized, and scattered, in 1973, Rawick completed organizing the interviews and published them with Greenwood Press, as *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. The loss of federal funding left many of the FWP records displaced and located in state archives, where they still are today. In

⁴⁷ Dillard to Alsberg, April 15, 1937, Ex-Slave Studies NA, quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 127.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” 542.

addition to publishing the interviews conducted by the FWP, George Rawick compiled and published the Fisk University interviews into volumes 18 and 19 of the *American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.⁵⁰

George Rawick and his colleagues led the initiative to publish the slave narratives, making them widely available. Specifically, Rawick stated that his primary reason in publishing these interviews was to “make it possible to gain a perspective on the slave experience in North America from those who had been slaves.”⁵¹ He further explained that “the black slave usually has been portrayed as the victim who never enters his own history as its subject, but only as the object over which abstract forces and glorious armies fought.”⁵² Thus, like the creators of the WPA narrative project and John Cade, Rawick saw the importance of distributing these responses to historians and anyone interested in learning about the lives of the enslaved. As Rawick outlined in his introduction to the volumes of narratives published, “the slaves themselves have rarely been heard telling their own stories;” therefore, by interviewing formerly enslaved individuals and eventually publishing them, the WPA and Rawick gave the survivors of slavery the opportunity to reclaim their voices.⁵³

Rawick also pioneered using the narratives as primary sources. Rawick wrote a book—which served as the introductory volume to the published narratives—titled *From Sundown to Sunup*. The book analyzed the narratives and drew conclusions about the institution of slavery, arguing that the narratives reveal “the creation of the black community, which largely went on outside of work relations.”⁵⁴ By relying upon the narratives as primary sources, Rawick initiated a historiographical discussion that lasted decades after the

⁵⁰ Library of Congress, “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project.”

⁵¹ George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972): xiv.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

publication. Many historians of slavery have written about the reliability of the FWP narratives, criticizing Rawick for relying upon them, and have also analyzed these narratives.

Ira Berlin, Mare Favreau, and Steven F. Miller's efforts helped further publicize the WPA narratives. In 1998, these three historians published a book titled *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Slavery and Emancipation*, in which they used the WPA interviews with formerly enslaved persons to illustrate life while enslaved. When conducting the interviews in the 1930s, very few of the FWP field workers recorded their interviews with the survivors of slavery. Berlin, Favreau, and Miller found these tapes in the Library of Congress in the 1990s, and worked along with the Smithsonian project to remaster these tapes and place them on cassettes. This effort served as another way of preserving the voices of the formerly enslaved.

The WPA Narrative Project created an invaluable pool of primary sources that otherwise may have never existed. The FWP's contributions and Rawick's publications of the interviews have preserved over 2,300 life histories of formerly enslaved individuals. This project recorded and preserved formerly enslaved individuals' voices and the perspectives for future generations. Through prohibiting the enslaved from becoming literate, the enslavers robbed them from sharing their experiences. This project allowed the survivors of slavery to regain autonomy over the narrative of enslavement, by giving them the opportunity to describe their life histories in their own words, immortalizing the voices of thousands of survivors of slavery. Unlike previous efforts to collect oral testimonies from formerly enslaved individuals, the WPA Slave Narrative Project also created jobs for writers and researchers when the Great Depression devastated the nation, leaving over thirty percent of Americans unemployed. At the same time, the project has given future generations the opportunity to understand enslavement from the perspective of ordinary survivors of slavery.

These individuals were never famous or ‘gifted’ like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. Yet, the experiences of ordinary enslaved persons are just as important in truly understanding their lives, creating historical arguments, and recognizing the tremendous amount of endurance they displayed.

As this chapter has examined, several factors prevented this project from reaching its full potential. First, many of the state directors involved did not fully understand or appreciate the project’s immense historical importance and value. Rather, they perceived it as another opportunity to provide employment during the Great Depression. The WPA delegated many responsibilities to the state directors, including the hiring of field interviewers. Consequently, many state directors utilized discriminatory hiring practices, even when given direction to include African American workers. Unbeknownst to the FWP, this decision to neglect African Americans may have hindered the project’s accuracy and value. Moreover, many survivors of slavery felt reluctant to share their trauma and true feelings with (mostly) white strangers, as they feared the interviewers would have violently retaliated against them. As many historians have emphasized, this apprehension reveals the tense race relations in the Jim Crow South. At the same time, this fear reveals that enslaved individuals were socially conditioned into silence, which lasted decades after Emancipation.

CONCLUSION

While we may never know how accurately each project reflected Martin Jackson's experiences, his interviews highlight the differences in how each institution conducted their interviews. More focused on countering the contented argument, Southern University sought to highlight Jackson's attitudes regarding his enslavement and emancipation. The WPA interviewers, unemployed white writers who were often ignorant of the historical significance of this project, felt more concerned about telling a story and consequently projected their racial biases onto the survivors of slavery. This thesis briefly revisited Jackson's WPA interview in the second chapter, when Jackson actually explained to his white interviewer why many survivors of slavery felt hesitant to share their experiences while enslaved. In particular, Jackson emphasized that enslavement often conditioned its victims into silence and deference to white individuals.¹ Therefore, this conditioning could explain why many survivors of slavery did not outright describe their interviews. Many additional factors determined the quality and breadth of these projects.

This thesis has attempted to analyze and contextualize both the Southern University and the federal government's projects to interview formerly enslaved individuals. In the first chapter, this thesis explored the motivations surrounding the Southern University Slave Narrative Project, arguing that its creators wanted to collect oral testimonies from the formerly enslaved to squash the popular historiographical argument that enslaved individuals felt content laboring under the peculiar institution. After collecting these interviews, Cade intended to distribute them publicly. Furthermore, the students involved in the Southern University project perceived the project as a form of expressing gratitude to their enslaved ancestors and relatives. These students, who were often the interviewers, understood the

¹ Jackson, Martin, "Ex-slave Stories (Texas)," interview by the Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*, July 6, 1937: 189.

importance of preserving the stories of the survivors of slavery, and expressed this sentiment in their interview field notes. However, John Cade never published these interviews, which I argue was one of his intentions, and the reasons for this remain unknown.

In the second chapter, this thesis analyzed the origins of the Works Project Administration's project to interview survivors of slavery. Like Cade, many of the creators of the project understood the value of preserving the life histories of the formerly enslaved. The creators and federal administrators of the project, including Lawrence Reddick, Sterling Brown, John Lomax, and Henry Alsberg, wanted the interviews to be conducted with respect, diligence and care. Racial discrimination often prevented this from happening. Throughout the second chapter, this thesis highlighted the conflicts between the federal administrators of the project and the state administrators. The state administrators, who were responsible for hiring the interviewers for the project, often excluded African Americans for these positions, even though the project was created to provide financial relief to educated Black Americans during the Great Depression. Instead, these state administrators pushed back when the federal administrators of the WPA suggested that they hire more African Americans, arguing that no Black Americans were qualified for these positions. Consequently, the interviews were left subject to the implicit (and often explicit) racial biases of the white southern interviewers, who were unemployed writers, schoolteachers, and artists. Similar to Southern University, the WPA never published these interviews, citing a lack of funding. Instead, thirty years later, George Rawick compiled them and published the interviews.

This thesis has only scratched the surface of these two projects, and there are many areas for future research. Firstly, Angela Proctor, head archivist of Southern University, revealed that the Southern University Archive contains around fifteen large boxes of John Cade's personal letters and journal entries. However, these boxes are unavailable to the public indefinitely unless Southern University organizes them and releases them. Cade's

personal documents may answer several questions regarding the project, specifically explaining why Cade abruptly stopped conducting interviews with the survivors of slavery. Some additional pieces of information may arise, such as how Cade and his students found individuals to interview, whether Cade knew about the WPA's similar effort to document the lives of the formerly enslaved, and details regarding the help he enlisted from other Black colleges and extension schools. His letters may also describe how he specifically wanted to organize and disseminate the interview responses. As mentioned in the first chapter, Proctor argued that Cade adequately disseminated these responses by making them available to the Southern University's community in Louisiana. In 1967, however, historian Norman Yetman indicated that the findings of John Cade's 1935 project remained unpublished at that time.² Even if Cade did not explicitly explain why he left the project incomplete, these personal documents may shed light on the potential circumstances that might have prevented him from continuing his work.

Historians can utilize these interviews to provide greater analysis into their arguments regarding enslavement. Many historians have drawn upon the WPA narratives as primary sources to support their arguments regarding enslavement; however, very few—if any—historians have utilized the Southern University narratives. This may have occurred because the Southern University narratives became widely available to the public in 2015. Moreover, no historians have conducted an in-depth comparative study of the interview responses between both projects. This could provide insight into the historical context surrounding the 1930's and the Great Depression as well as the antebellum and Civil War era. Historians could also utilize these interviews to explain why the stories of indigent, illiterate survivors of slavery remained obscure, while the perspectives of white enslavers were well-documented.

² Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection" *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1967): 536

This is only the tip of the iceberg, as there are so many additional ways to analyze the interviews and their respective projects.

These projects were one of the few efforts to record the lives of ordinary, formerly enslaved individuals. The many biographies and life histories of formerly enslaved individuals told the stories of extraordinary enslaved persons, who generally escaped enslavement, became literate, and eventually retold their experiences. The respondents in both projects were not free of enslavement until emancipation, and some even stayed on the former plantations, laboring as sharecroppers. These formerly enslaved individuals often did not become fully literate and remained indigent for the remainder of their lives. However, their experiences and stories are important and valuable. Both projects, despite their shortcomings, gave a voice to the victims of enslavement, forever preserving them for posterity.