

Application Essay

The University of Maryland library has played a massive role in helping me select my research topic and find several primary resources. Initially, I planned to write my thesis on enslaved mothers and children. I requested several books on this topic from the University of Maryland Library, as suggested by my advisor, Dr. Bell, suggested. I needed to familiarize myself with the scholarship surrounding my topic to better understand the historiography and make an original contribution. After reading each book, I went to look at the endnotes. In one book, I saw that the author had referenced the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Slave Narrative Project throughout the entire book. This primary source piqued my curiosity, as I had never heard of any efforts to record the life histories of formerly enslaved individuals at such a large scale. I requested several volumes of the WPA Slave Narratives from the University of Maryland library, and I picked them up shortly thereafter.

Several questions emerged after reading through a few volumes of the WPA Slave Narrative interviews. I initially noticed that many of the interviews were written in racially stereotypical and derogatory prose, and the survivors of slavery frequently expressed how much they enjoyed their days of enslavement. Many of these survivors expressed fond memories during the Pre-Civil War Era, and stated that they loved their enslaver. This surprised me because I never heard of any enslaved person enjoying their circumstances or actually them after emancipation. I wanted to understand why these survivors of slavery would state that they enjoyed enslavement. This prompted me to read more books, all which were available at the University of Maryland's library or the librarians graciously ordered them for me.

The books and journal articles written about the WPA Slave Narrative Project gave me some clarity on why the survivors of slavery presented enslavement positively. These books also led me to an additional pool of sources, the WPA slave Narrative appraisals and

additional correspondence between the WPA Federal administrators and officials. Unlike the narratives, these primary sources were only available at the Library of Congress. In the Spring of 2022, I went to the Library of Congress several times to review these sources and take notes. The librarians at the Library of Congress were extremely helpful and always helped me find the sources I needed.

While reading the secondary sources surrounding the WPA Slave Narrative Project, I discovered that another effort was conducted to collect the life histories of formerly enslaved individuals. John B. Cade, a Black professor of American history, conducted hundreds of interviews with formerly enslaved individuals several years before the federal government initiated the WPA Slave Narrative Project. Fortunately, the Southern University Archive uploaded scans of these interview summaries (written by John Cade's students who conducted these interviews) online in 2015. Despite the availability of these interviews, I found that no other historians had done a comprehensive study of these narratives or compared them to the WPA Slave Narrative Project. I decided that I would write my undergraduate history thesis on the backgrounds and motives behind both projects.

Upon reading the Southern University interviews, I noticed stark differences in the attitudes regarding enslavement. The vast majority of the survivors of slavery participating in the project explicitly stated that they hated enslavement and preferred freedom. When reading these sources, I found similarities between the responses from both projects, which helped me better understand the motives behind them. In order to further understand the background and context of the Southern University Slave Narrative Project, I contacted Angela Proctor, the head archivist of Southern University. I spoke with her via Zoom, and she answered all of my questions, providing me with insights into the Southern University Project and direction to more sources.

When looking at the primary sources, I wanted to find direct quotes that stated or implicated the intentions and motives behind each project. Some sources provided very clear and explicit quotes, while others were more difficult to analyze. I realized that I needed to understand the context of the sources to fully grasp the meaning of the sources. I also had to get very creative. For example, I decided to scour the University of Maryland's Newspaper database, and found articles written that described the impact of the WPA narratives on local Black communities. This research technique helped me build a pool of evidence that supported my arguments.

My thesis advisor (and professor), Dr. Bell was a tremendous help to my project. He provided me with feedback, offered suggestions to new sources, and challenged me to become a stronger writer and historical analyst. I first took a class with Dr. Bell my freshman year, which inspired my interest in American Enslavement. I am very grateful for all the support he has offered while writing my thesis, and I would not have been able to produce this work without him.

Throughout this research process, I learned that it is important to use my sources to lead my research and develop my argument. It is very easy to begin a project with preconceived notions about a topic. However, it is essential to keep an open mind and allow the sources to transform the argument. I mistakenly created an argument without conducting enough archival research, and I consequently had to revise my argument several times to match what the sources reflected. In my future academic and professional career, I hope this perspective will follow me. It is so important to reserve judgments and wait to draw conclusions until the evidence and data has been fully reviewed. If I could change anything about my research process, I would have allowed myself to thoroughly review all of the sources before conceiving my argument. Ideally, if I could change anything about the library systems, I would like more I would prefer that more sources be available online. Archival

research can be costly expensive, and many individuals do not have the means to travel or access documents located throughout the nation.