

*“Dem Was Black Times, Sure  
'Nough”*: *The Slave Narratives  
of Lydia Jefferson and  
Stephen Williams*

*Edited by*

CHARLES ORSON COOK

Metropolitan Research Center  
Houston Public Library  
Houston, Texas

and

JAMES M. POTEET

Department of History  
University of Houston  
Houston, Texas

INTRODUCTION

In recent years historians have been urged to write the “history of the inarticulate,” an admonition which, to many traditional historians, seems almost a contradiction in terms. As historians have grappled with this charge, however, they have discovered happily that the “inarticulate” are not quite so silent as previously thought. This is strikingly true of the area of black studies, particularly for those who seek to describe and analyze the institution of slavery. Certainly most studies of slavery have relied primarily on the testimony of masters for evidence, but this does not mean that the slaves left no record of their own for the future. One of the largest—though often ignored—sources of slave testimony is the Federal Writers Project collection of slave narratives.

In 1935, as part of the Works Progress Administration, Congress authorized the Federal Writers Project, a visionary, disorganized and often productive experiment. Although the greater part of the project’s energies were expended in preparing an extensive set of

state guide books, another of their activities involved seeking out former slaves and recording their recollections of "slavery days."<sup>1</sup> Ultimately deposited in the Library of Congress, these valuable records engaged the attention of only a few scholars until 1972 when George P. Rawick edited them for publication, a project that ran to nineteen volumes.<sup>2</sup> Since their publication, it has become apparent that there was a great deal of "leakage" in the original compilation of the narratives. Some were completed after the deadline and never sent to Washington, others were misplaced in state offices, while some were not forwarded because their contents offended various state officials. The narratives below are two of several found in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center of the Houston Public Library which did not, by some misadventure, reach Washington.

The narratives must, of course, be used with the same prudence and skepticism with which a historian approaches any document. As John Blassingame has reminded us, "every recorded interview has two authors, the person who asked the questions and the one who answered them."<sup>3</sup> In a useful article, he has detailed many of the potential defects inherent in the slave narratives. When all this is taken into consideration, however, the narratives remain uniquely valuable sources with which an attempt can be made to understand the hidden mind of the slave in the Old South. The narratives of Lydia Jefferson and Stephen Williams tell us much, perhaps more than they or the interviewers intended, about life as a slave in antebellum Louisiana. When the narratives are compared to Joe Gray Taylor's reliable and traditional *Negro Slavery in Louisiana*,<sup>4</sup> one realizes anew the many perspectives from which slavery can be viewed. Taylor carefully describes slavery as it emerges from legislative acts, economic reports and the lips of the masters. Lydia Jefferson and Stephen Williams tell us about slavery as it was

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive history of the Federal Writers Project is Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers Project, 1935-1943* (Boston and Toronto, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (19 vols., Westport Conn, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History*, XLI (November, 1975), 483.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Published by the Louisiana Historical Association, 1963).

endured, and perceived, in the fields and the slave cabins. It is this latter perspective that has been too long ignored and which the slaves themselves, speaking across time, are bringing into truer focus.

### LYDIA JEFFERSON

Lydia Jefferson, 86 years old, living at 1720 Carr St., Houston, Tex., was born during slavery on the plantation of Willis Prescott in Avoyelles Parish, La. Lydia and her twin sister Lucy, were raised in their master's house, because their mother Judy Bates, died at their birth, the result of a whipping she had received at the hands of Ben Gibbs, a "nigger driver," a few days before Lydia and Lucy were born. Lydia lives part of the time with her granddaughter Mary Fields at the above address, and part of the time with a daughter in Beaumont. Although she and her sister Lucy were evidently the pets of their master and his family, she retains a vivid mental picture of the cruelties inflicted on some slaves by the "nigger drivers!"

"Lord have Mercy, iffen I gits to talking 'bout times 'fore de War, I don't know most when to stop. Seems like I's see so much what is dif'unt from now, it's like coming outen a black hole into de sunlight, yes suh, jes' 'xactly like it. Every thing jes' seems quiet and peaceful now, and dat's what God love—peace—but I's see it dif'unt yes suh, a heap dif'unt. What I tells you is jes' what I's been told and what I's see myself, and I tells jes' de truth.

"First, I tells you whar at I was born. It was in Avoyelles Parish in Louisiana on de Sunflower Plantation what belong to old Willis Prescott what was my mamma's and pappy's marster.\* My mamma die when I appear with my sister Lucy, what was my twin sister. Mamma's name was Judy Bates, and I hears when I's older, de reason she die when we appear, is 'cause old Ben Gibbs, de nigger driver, whips her a few days 'fore, 'cause she is delicate and can't work on 'count she is heavy with us. An' I believe it's de truth too, 'cause I's see de cruelty what dey do to slaves with my own eyes.

"Pappy's name was Bartless Bates, and he was a 'free-born'. 'Sides Lucy, I has two more sisters, Frances and Mary, and four

\* Willis Prescott is listed in the U.S. census for 1840 in Avoyelles Parish. He owned forty-eight slaves at that time.

brothers, Dave, Milton, Alfred and Antony, but dey is all older'n Lucy and me. Pappy was a free-born man from de foreign country, but I jes' don't 'member whar he from. I know he tell me when I was little how he come he's a slave. He say when he's a young man, he work on a boat what comes to New Orleans, and he leaves de boat like de rest of de sailors do, and comes into de town to do a little courting, and de Law picks him up and sells him to some nigger traders what carry him away and den sell him to old Marse Willis Prescott. Mamma belong to old Marse Willis, too, and pappy say old Marse marry 'em legal and dat's how come us.

"Pappy when I first 'member him, was kinda old and jes' work 'round de yard. He has a house in de yard jes' back of whar de big house was at and my brother and sister, 'cept Lucy and me live dere too, but de reg'lar slave quarters was down by de sugar mill, 'bout a quarter-mile from de house.

"Course I don't know nothing 'bout de old Marse Willis or de old Mistus what was his wife, 'cause dey both died when I's a baby, but Marse Ben Prescott what was old Marse Willis' oldest boy and what was de boss of de plantation, was Lucy's and my marster, and he and Mis' Adie, what was his wife, raised us up right in dere house, 'cause we don't have no mamma and 'sides we is de only twins what was on de place.

"Marse Ben has three brothers what was on de plantation 'sides hisself. Lemme see now, dere was Aaron and his wife, Mis' Evie, Marshall and his wife, Mis' Mary, and Willis what was named after old Marse Willis, and his wife Mis' Lizzie.

" 'Bout de first I 'members and I's 'membered it 'til dis day, was pappy tellin' me to be obedient and do what de white folks tell me to. Dat's one reason no one ever give me a lick.

"Course we has to call de white folk's chillen 'young Marse' or 'young Mis' 'pending iffen it was a boy or girl, but we plays ring games with 'em like 'Choose your Partner' and 'Catch Liza Jane', and sociates with 'em every day.

"When de white folks have a new baby, dey calls all de little black folks what is too young to work, and take 'em in de house to whar de baby is at, and iffen it a boy, dey say 'See you little marster' and iffen it a girl 'See your little Mistis.'

"I don't 'member 'xactly, but I reckon dey is two, mebbe three

hundred slaves on de plantation, 'cause dey raise cotton, corn for de stock, sugar cane, most all kinds of vegetables, and 'sides dey has hogs, and sheep and cattle. Dey feed de slaves good, but dey sure work 'em hard.

"De field hands goes out to work in de night and comes back in de night. When dey comes in, dey goes to de cook-house and gets dere bucket of supper, den go to de chillen house whar at dey keeps de chillen while de mothers is working, and get dere chillen. Some would have three or four chillen, and de mother has to find 'em in de dark and take 'em to de quarters and put 'em to bed jes' like dey was, 'cause de slaves ain't 'lowed to have no light in de quarters. Iffen de nigger driver what snoops 'round de quarters, hear a man and wife talking in bed 'fore dey goes to sleep, he'd go and tell de overseer and he'd come to de house whar de talking was at and call 'em out and whip 'em, den he's make 'em pull weeds all night.

"Oh, dem was black times sure 'nough. De cruelses' treatment what some of de slaves got dat I's see with my own eyes was awful. And it de overseers or nigger drivers what treat 'em so bad 'cause I don't reckon de owners know much 'bout what goes on out in de fields 'cause dey leaves de bossing to de overseer.

"Now dis' is the truth what I tells you and what my eyes has see. I has see de overseer make men and women too, pull off de clothes what dey has on, and dey would find de largest ant bed dey could and make 'em sit naked in it. Lord have mercy, it jes' make my flesh crawl to think 'bout it. And de overseer always strip de men, and women naked in de field and whip 'em. For a woman what is pregnant, dey dig a hole in de ground and lay her over de hole and whip her. Dat's de way dey did my mama.

"And dere wasn't any purity for de young girls in de slave quarters, 'cause de overseer was always sending for de young negro girls to be with 'em, and some girl was always finding a baby for him. 'Course I wasn't s'posed to know nothing 'bout anything like dis', but I hears older folks talk when dey don't know I's listening.

"Yes suh, dat was sure black times, but my own folks was treated good, 'cause we is all up close to de house whar de white folks is at and don't mess up with de folks down in de quarters. Huh; none of de nigger drivers better not lay a hand on none of us—and dey knew it.

"I told you 'while ago I never got no whipping' from de white folks, and I didn't but I got one what I ain't forgot 'til yet. You know what whipped me? It was a snake, yes suh, a coach-whip snake. 'Course I was more scared den hurt, but dat old snake sure whipped me. I's out in de big pasture with some more chillen, and I sees a flower what I goes over to pick. Jes' as I reach down to pick it, I see de grass moving up ahead of me a ways and here comes old Mr. Snake. I starts to run, but gets my feet cotched in some weeds and down I go, and 'fore I can scramble up, dat snake whams me 'cross the legs.

"Whoo-e-e, I sure holler and gets up and starts to run and dat snake run right after me. We had climbed in de pasture over a rail fence, but I didn't climb it going back, no suh I sure didn't I jes' roll over it and keep on running.

"One day, I hear Marse Ben tell de overseers to put de slaves to loading de wagons 'cause we is moving to Texas on 'count of de yankees is coming, and the nex' day we leaves de plantation. De slave men and women walk 'cept de women what is heavy with a chile, but de chillen ride in de cane wagons what is covered with canvass to keep out de rain.

"We travels all day, and camp at night, and we cooks 'nough at night for de nex' day. I knows we fords rivers but I don't 'member whar dey was or what dere names was. But I know we never reach Texas, 'cause we stop at de Piney Woods Plantation what is jes' 'fore you reach Texas.

"We makes a crop here, and dat is whar we was sot free, and it was jes' three days 'fore dey sot us free, dat pappy died. I 'member old Uncle Dob what was de carpenter, make de box to bury pappy in, and dey carries him out under some trees and digs de grave. Marse' Ben takes me and Lucy to de burying place and old Harmon what was a slave, he say a prayer and den some slaves what bring 'long shovels cover pappy up.

"Yes suh, I gives Marse Ben and de rest od de white folks credit for giving my pappy and brothers and sisters and me good treatment, but I has to give 'em blame 'cause dey keeps de slaves ignorant and wont even let 'em have no preaching on Sunday. Humph, no one better talk 'bout no church or prayer meetings, 'cause dey

gets a whipping sure. Now don't dat prove what I's said 'bout dat being black times?

"And den right after pappy die, de freedom sunshine out. I won't never forget dat day.

"I's a big girl den, 'bout fourteen year old, and Lucy and me is with Marse Ben and Mis' Adie fixing some flowers in front of de house at Piney Woods, and Marse Aaron come up and say 'Ben, don't you know you can't hold 'em no longer? Dey ought to be free two days ago! Den Marse Ben tells him he might jes' as well call all de folks in from de fields, and in a little while here dey comes with de hoes on dere shoulders. Marse Aaron and de overseers line 'em up in de yard and Marse Ben gets on de porch and tells 'em 'You all ain't got no marster or mistis no more—you is all free and can go whar you want. We's going back to de Sunflower Plantation and any what wants to, can come and I'll give you work dere and pay you. You can call us by our names jes' like we call you by yours, and iffen you works for me and anyone mistreats you, jes' come and tell me.'

"Dey wasn' no shoutin' nor singin'—everybody jes' go to de quarters, and dat's de last work what they do at Piney Woods 'cept to load de wagons and got up de stock to go back to Sunflower Plantation. And all 'cept two families go back with Marse Ben.

"I won't never forgit dat trip. We goes through Mansfield whar at dey was a big battle, and I's see with my own eyes hands and feet what hadn't been buried what belonged to some so'jer in de fight. Ugh! I sure was glad when we was 'way from dat place. I ain't never see no ghosts and I don't believe in 'em, but if dey is sech, I guess dere's plenty at dat place whar dey fit at Mansfield.

"De old Sunflower Plantation sure look awful when we gets back—buildings and fences all burnt down, and everything choked down with weeds.

"Marse Ben send Lucy and me with Mis' Adie to Little Washington whar he had 'nother place 'til dey gets things built up at Sunflower Plantation. We' comes back in de Spring and Lucy and I stays with 'em 'til I gets married legal.

"We works on sugar plantations and has ten chillen—five girls and five boys, but dey is all dead now 'cept two daughters.

“Matt what was my husband, died in 1912, and I come to Texas to live with my daughter, and I’s proud to say dat I’s always got ’long good with white folks, ’cause I’s been ’spec’ful to ’em, and I’s never had a minute’s trouble with ’em in my life.

“Yes suh, de freedom sun shine, and de black times all gone. Praise de Lord it’s quiet and peaceful like now, and dat’s what God love—peace.”

### STEPHEN WILLIAMS

Stephen Williams, living at the home of his daughter at 3028 Anita St., Houston, Tex., was born a slave on the plantation of John and Abram Byrd in Louisiana. Although born in 1844, Uncle Stephen as he is called, has a surprisingly active mind and memory, recalling incidents in his life that happened when he was a boy, quite some time before the Civil War, as well as later. His diction while talking is also very good, showing the effect of his close association with white people. Seated in a rocking chair drawn close to the stove with his feet encased in comfortable house slippers, his rather spare body enfolded by a well-worn bathrobe, and his white hair covered by a cloth skull cap, Uncle Stephen told his story.

“Well suh, to start at the beginning. I must say I’m not certain. Momma says I was born in Missouri jes’ ’cross the river from Baton Rouge. Now here ’bout a year back, a man what comes out here from the pension office, tells me that if I was born ’cross from Baton Rouge, I was born in Louisiana and not in Missouri.

“Of course I’ve had some learning and can read and write but old colored folks like mamma and papa, don’t know ‘A’ from ‘B’, and I reckon she got mixed up, ’cause she has told me our masters take us to St. Louis when I was only 3 weeks old from where I was born, ’cross from Baton Rouge.

“Til I’m ’bout 5 years old, I can’t tell you ’bout things ’cept what I have been told, ’cause I’m too little then to rec’lec’ anything and some things I’ll tell you ’bout happen before I’m born.

“Momma’s name was Liza and my papa was Stephen Williams. I was the only boy but I had eleven sisters, but I never knew any of my sisters ’cept Mary, and Jane. My sisters were all older’n me, and all ’cept Mary and Jane had been sold off by nigger traders. Yes suh, sold off jes’ like cattle.



“You see Momma and papa were from Virginia. I don’t know who they belong to, but all the children ’cept me was born back there. Then the whole family was sold to some nigger traders what had bought up lots more colored folks, and they was herded together and driven ’long the road jes’ like herd of cattle. The traders stop ’long the way and camp, and sell who they could, and mamma said when they get to where Baton Rouge is at all that was left was her and papa and my two sisters. All the rest had been sold off ’long the way.

“Then mamma and papa and my sisters that was left was sold to Mr. John and Mr. Abram Byrd. They have a sugar plantation ’cross the river from Baton Rouge, and that’s where I was born. They name me Stephen after my father, and me and him was named after the Prophet Stephen in the Bible.

“I don’t rec’lec’ mamma saying how long they stay on the plantation, but she tells me the masters sell the place and all of the slaves ’cept our family, and we go with ’em to St. Louis.

“From what I’ve been told, I guess the Byrds have a big, fine house in St. Louis, and ’bout the first thing I rec’lec’ is going to Mr. Abram at meal time with my cup and he filling it up. I rec’lec’ too, the room where they eat, is all lit up and shiny-like.

“Then ’bout the next I rec’lec’ is a big boat. That was when Mr. John and Mr. Abram separate and divide up property, ’cording to what mamma has told me. You see it’s like this in slave times. When a family separate, they divide up property, and in them days slaves was property jes’ like land or anything else.

“Mr. Abram takes up for part of his share, and moves to New Orleans. That’s what I remember ’bout the big boat, ’cause that’s the way we get there.

“I don’t rec’lec’ jes how long it was, but we ain’t been in New Orleans very long ’til Mr. Abram took sick and die, and we is taken to the trader yard to be sold. I reckon I musta been ’bout 6 or mebbe 7 year old at the time.

“Major Long was the one who owned the trader yard where we was put, and I guess we was kept there ’bout a week ’fore my sister Mary was sold away from us.

“One morning our family is all kinda huddled up together over in a corner of the yard away from the rest, and ’long comes Major Long carrying his bullwhip in his hand with another man. He

makes Mary stand up and says to the man with him 'Here's jes' the girl you want for a nurse girl.'

"Mamma begs Major Long not to separate us folks and hugged Mary and Jane and me to her. The major and the man with him talks a while, and then the major come over to where we are and pulled Mary away from mamma and he and the man took her off. 'Twan't 'til after freedom that we ever see her again.

"Man, man, folks what didn't go through slavery ain't got no idea what it was. I reckon there musta been a hundred colored folks in that trader yard, and the dirt and smell was terrible, terrible. I was jes' a little chap like I've told you, but I can remember that place like it happened yesterday,—husbands sold away from wives, and children taken away from mothers. A trader them days didn't think no more of selling a baby or little child away from its mother, than taking a little calf away from a cow.

"I rec'lec' the night after Mary is sold away from us the colored folks in the trader yard hold prayer meeting. Mamma is very religious, and if ever a soul went to Heaven, hers did. Seems like Major Long was gone that evening, and mamma and some more of the folks in the yard got together for a praying time. Didn't do no singing 'cause that would 'tracted attention, and the Major didn't 'low no meetings. But someone saw the folks praying and told him the next morning, and he comes out in the yard with a cat-o-nine-tails and rounds everybody up. Then he said, 'You niggers what was praying last night, step out here'. None come out though 'cept mamma, 'cause they was 'fraid they was going to get whipped. Major said to mamma, 'Well, you are the only truthful one in the yard and I won't whip you 'cause you have been truthful. I'll see if I can keep you and your man and your other children together and not sell you separate'. Mamma jes' fell on her knees and thanked the good Lord right in front of the Major, and he never touched her with his whip.

" 'Twan't but a little while 'til he comes back and says for us to get our bundles and come with him. We didn't know where we was going, but any place was better'n that trader yard. Jes' to get away from that place was a blessing from the good Lord.

"The Major kept his word to mamma and sell us to Mr. Dan Sullivan, and he takes us up to Alexandria in a wagon. He's a business man and has a store there but he don't have no family, jes'

a nephew what is the same age as me and what had the same name as his uncle. I reckon you've heard 'bout him. He has a bank in San Antonio and died 'bout six years ago.

"Like I tell you, young Mr. Dan and me was 'bout the same age, and I liked him right from the start and I guess he liked me 'cause we use to eat together and sleep on the same pallet.

"Mamma is the cook and Jane helps her and papa help 'round the store keeping things clean. I don't do nothing much 'cept go 'round with young Mr. Dan. I guess old Mr. Dan sure likes me too, 'cause I know one day a man say to him, 'How much you want for that young nigger?' Mr. Dan tell him I ain't for sale, that I'm worth my weight in gold, and if he hadn't liked me pretty well I don't reckon he'd of said that.

"But all the colored folks wasn't treated like us, no suh. The slaves what worked the plantations were driven jes' like mules, and when a colored girl get 'bout 12 years old, she mighty liable to get mistreated by some lowdown overseer. If her folks make a fuss 'bout it, the owner don't pay no 'tention to 'em, and they jes' bring on trouble for themselves and get whipped or mebber worse.

"I mind the time I see six slaves hung by the sheriff there in Alexandria, 'cause they had killed a overseer what had mistreated their families.

"Do I rec'lec' right, these folks what was hung belong to Mr. Thomas what had a plantation. The overseer on the place had been taking the young colored girls of these folks and mistreating 'em. So one night they slip out and catch de overseer and kill him and tie a plowshare to the body to weigh it down and throw him in the river. But somebody see 'em and they is caught and hung, jes' for trying to perfect their own children. The law was jes' for white folks, and colored folks didn't have no rights at all,—jes' do what they were told or get whipped or sold off away from their folks or mebber killed even.

"We stay with Mr. Dan in Alexandria, til I'm 'bout 13 years old, then one day he say we is going to Texas, and 'bout a week we leave and we goes to Indianola. Ain't nothing there now since the storm long 'bout '75, but it sure was a lively place when we goes there.

"Mr. Dan start a store there too, and young Mr. Dan go to school. And that's where I learn reading and writing, 'cause he teaches me what he learns.

“When freedom comes to us colored folks, Mr. Dan tell us we is free to do what we want and he ask papa and mamma what they want to do. They tell him they don’t want to do nothing ’cept stay with him and do jes’ like they’s been doing, and Mr. Dan tells ’em they won’t never want for nothing long as they live, and they stay with Mr. Dan ’til mamma died in July 1870 and papa followed her ’bout three years later.

“I’m growed up when freedom come to us, and Mr. Dan start me in the draying business at Indianola, and I does that ’til the big storms wipe the whole town out in 1875.

“Man, man, you never saw nothing like the ruin what it did. Jes’ wreck everything and killed lots of folks, too.

“I’d got married and had a little place out west of the cemetery, and the wind and water what come in from the Gulf didn’t leave a splinter of our house. We’d all been killed, but when the storm start getting bad, I takes my wife and two children up to Placedo and we ’scaped that way.

“Old Mr. Dan and his nephew what I growed up with, go to San Antonio and they goes in the banking business, and I moves to Victoria and goes to draying there. ’Twan’t long ’fore I’m doing all the hauling for the Levys and Roos folks and most all the business folks there.

“My wife and me raised 11 children, jes’ one less than what my folks had, but I’ve outlived my wife and 7 of the children, but I’ll be ’jjining ’em ’fore long I reckon, jes’ as soon as the good Lord calls for me.”