

## The Importance of First-Person Narratives

### Interview Thread Transcript

#### Steven Hahn

I found this incredible narrative that was written by a guy named William Webb, and he was a slave who moved between Kentucky and Mississippi before the Civil War and then he published this narrative after the Civil War. And one of the things he talked about was trying to organize slaves around the election of 1856 when John C. Frémont was running and how their expectations were being elevated by the prospect of the Republican Party winning. And then, when Frémont lost, he, William Webb, talks about how slaves got together and discussed, now what do we do? And he said, some of them were in favor of rising up in rebellion and others said, "Wait four more years." Now, I read that and I thought, this is extraordinary. It wasn't simply the debate. It was that they knew everything about the cycles of American politics. They knew that there was an election of 1856, and there was going to be another one in 1860. They understood that there were these political parties, that there were parties that their owners were aligned with. They knew that the Republican Party wasn't even organized in the states where slavery was legal. And so, all of a sudden, you begin to recognize that what enslaved people are looking at is who their allies are and how they can reach out and develop those alliances. So, to some extent, they were hoping that Lincoln would win and somehow or other... So in some places, when it became announced that Lincoln was elected president, slaves just walked off the plantations thinking that this meant that slavery was over with.

Now, they had to be very, very careful, because their owners had the guns and their owners could inflict violence and their owners were not going to put up with this kind of stuff. So, all along, it was very dangerous for enslaved people to behave in what were regarded as political and therefore rebellious ways. But it helps us understand how it was that as soon as the Union Army moved into some territory in proximity to where enslaved people live, that they would be willing to take the risk and test out their understanding of what was going on politically, and little by little head to Union lines, where they thought it was possible that freedom might be there waiting for them.

as evidence that he didn't accept the notion that they were inhuman. But the idea that he did the Emancipation Proclamation for any other reason, other than what he said in the Emancipation Proclamation, which was, he was doing it out of military necessity. It may have made him feel better morally, he may have thought that morally, this makes sense. But given the manpower shortage that they had, it makes sense that he would do it for the reasons that he stated. And I have no reason to doubt him.

People who believed that we should say Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation out of a sense of morality or a moral consciousness perhaps would feel better about Lincoln and him as the great man and the great president if they could point to that and say, see, now you could argue on the other hand, supposedly Lincoln had decided not to issue the Emancipation Proclamation?

Even if there had been this manpower shortage, which was real. Suppose he said, "I don't really care if there is a manpower shortage, I'm not letting these people be free, no matter what. You have to lose, or we'll have to figure out some way to round them and make them fight or something, whatever it is. But I'm not going to do that." While he could have done it, but given the reality that he was commander in chief and was president and wanted to save the Union and the Union was about to get defeated in his view, if something didn't happen, it makes sense that as a practical man, and he was practical, that he would do this.

And I do not think it diminishes Lincoln at all to say that he saw the practicality of the Emancipation Proclamation and to frame it the way he did and that he didn't say a whole bunch of things about how sorry I am these people are slaves and I should do whatever – the act stands for itself as something that made sense that he did. And I think it adds to his reputation rather than diminishes.

#### Kerri Greenidge

One of the things that Frederick Douglass was very good at, was researching and collecting the stories of enslaved people like himself and finding a way to record them. So, Frederick Douglass, by 1853, edited an incarnation of his paper. It was at one time called the *North Star* then became Frederick Douglass' Paper, and then *Frederick Douglass' Monthly*.

And so, one of things that he did was to interview formerly enslaved people and tell their stories within his newspaper. And he talked to a descendant who had worked on the Washington plantation, Mount Vernon. He talked to descendants of the plantation owned by Thomas Jefferson in Virginia. And he really focused on the ways in which people emancipated and freed themselves. And that African American people for the most part were not freed by somebody. It usually happened because either they paid for their own freedom or they escaped in some way.

And so, using the stories that Douglass did to illustrate the fact that freedom required agitation and that enslaved people themselves had to constantly fight against the forces that were preventing them from realizing their freedom.

## Manisha Sinha

One of the slave narratives that really caught my attention was a narrative written by an enslaved man called William Grimes. And he published a narrative in which he said that his skin could be used as parchment to write the Constitution on. And to me that was such a remarkable statement and captured so well, this incredible paradox of a Republic, a slaveholding Republic founded on ideals of universal equality and liberty and at the same time, tolerating an institution that allowed these kinds of inhumane tortures. I think Grimes' evocation of the Constitution and of his own skin, of his own body was really quite remarkable. It caught my attention. I quoted it in my book, but it showed how clearly enslaved people realized those contradictions, realized those incredible hypocrisies of confessing a belief in universal liberty, et cetera, and at the same time enslaving nearly 4 million people.

The South tried its best to sort of construct a cordon sanitaire against all abolitionists literature. They did this in the 1830s when abolitionists started mailing abolitionists' newspapers, pamphlets to the South, they had big bonfires of all abolitionist literature. They actually interfered in federal mail, which is a federal crime to interfere with the delivery of the US mail and burned abolitionist literature. So when it came to the question of slavery, there was absolutely no freedom of speech or press or thought in the South. They became increasingly closed on this question. For instance, this is not a slave narrative, but when David Walker publish his appeal to the Colored citizens of the world in 1829, this is the first abolitionists' pamphlet really that is published of the second wave of 19th-century abolition, Southern governors and mayors ask that this pamphlet be censored and that Walker be arrested. They put a price on his head. Walker unfortunately dies out of natural circumstances a couple of years later, but that's their reaction to abolitionist literature. It is complete censorship and they don't want any of this circulating in the South at all.

I think slave narratives are extremely important in just recovering Black testimony and firsthand experiences of slavery. We know the most famous of them, of course, Frederick Douglass' narrative that made slave narratives as a genre really popular and important. But long before Douglass and long after Douglass, many African Americans, men and women, wrote about their experiences in slavery, and abolitionists seized on those narratives as being an accurate portrayal of the horrors of slavery. And they printed them, they published them, they edited them. Many times narratives were actually narrated to white abolitionists who then published it, like Sojourner Truth's narrative or Harriet Tubman's narrative – they were all narrated to two white antislavery women. And I think it's important not to just see them as productions

of white abolitionists. It's the way that it was dismissed by many historians, but to see it also the ways in which Black people, men and women, ordinary enslaved people talked about their experiences in slavery.

And I argue that we should see them as the movement literature of abolition. This is what comprised the literature of abolition. And it is important to give them that do in terms of their indictment of slavery. Because what most people were hearing were slaveholders, defending slavery as a benevolent institution in which they were extremely paternalistic and quote "took care of enslaved people." What you get is the polar opposite picture of course, from African Americans in these slave narratives. So extremely important, I think, to remember that the slave narratives constituted the best answer to the pro-slavery argument, to the defense of slavery that slaveholding politicians were mounting vigorously at that time. And that is why they didn't like these slave narratives. They didn't want them to be popularized.

Everyone's heard of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but she relied on slave narratives to write that novel. And when Southerners challenged her portrayal in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she published another book called *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where she listed literally footnoted all the slave narratives that she had read that helped her write her novel. Now, there were problems with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its portrayal of Black people. She herself was a colonizationist like her father, but the fact remains that it is really slave narratives that inspired her to write this international bestseller, her anti-slavery novel. And she knew that. And she actually acknowledged that later on.

So Moses Roper's slave-whipping machine is something that the historian Ed Baptist has used so well to describe torture under slavery. Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is interesting because she chose the white abolitionist she wanted to cooperate with. She rejected Harriet Beecher Stowe – she found her too paternalistic and decided to collaborate with Lydia Maria Child, another white abolitionist author, very famous actually in the 19th century – to write the *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*, but there are many others. There's hundreds, literally hundreds, of slave narratives that were published at that time. And two of them really stuck with me. One is a narrative by Charles Ball, where he describes the way in which he is sold and resold and the harsh regimen of the cotton regime in the lower South. It's one of those narratives that is not really well known, but I think is really quite remarkable.

Charles Ball wrote about not only how he was being sold, he wrote about the way the cotton system worked in cotton plantations. The ways in which cotton that was picked by enslaved people was weighed and if it didn't meet a certain measurement, they would be whipped.

Very much similar to what Solomon Northup describes in *Twelve Years a Slave*. So I think Charles Ball's narrative, which was an early narrative published, I think at 1837 and then was republished again, after narratives became famous with the publication of Douglass' narrative was quite – one of the first to really talk about the driving regime of the cotton kingdom.

The second narrative that I was talking about– this narrative by John Brown is really interesting because he talks about medical experimentation on his skin performed by a doctor, a so-called doctor. And it really will curdle your blood when you read the descriptions of what they did to him. How they would try to peel off his skin, how they would submerge him in a pit and literally burn his skin to try to find a cure for sunburns. And so that was a narrative that grabbed my attention. And I recently wrote an essay on scientific racism and I looked at this particular slave narrative because it reminds you a little bit of the experiments the Nazi doctors like Mengele, et cetera, did in concentration camps. And it really tears down this notion that somehow slavery was this kind of paternalistic benevolent institution.