

## Education, Literacy, and Gender in Antebellum Rural Alabama

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*"Education, Literacy, and Gender in Antebellum Rural Alabama" utilizes both nineteenth century slave autobiographies, as well as twentieth century Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews of ex-slaves, to analyze literacy within the slave experience. The essay explores the ability to read and write through the themes of religion, race, gender, occupation, and education, focusing on a case study of rural Alabama. Like slavery itself, literacy among enslaved persons was not a monolithic phenomenon; rather, it varied significantly across region and even within a single household, with domestic, female slaves being taught to read significantly more often than their outdoor, male counterparts.*

Literacy constituted a significant means for slaves to subvert their bondage in the antebellum South. Yet, like the “peculiar institution” itself, slaves’ ability to read varied significantly across lines of status and, especially, gender. How the masters perceived literacy’s desirability depended on the gendered roles in which enslaved persons found themselves. For some female slaves, reading and writing were useful skills, such as in the teaching of children and maintenance of the household. Slave masters perceived female slaves’ literacy as innocuous because of the power of the gendered stereotype of female passivity. In contrast, masters pointed to inherent danger in enslaved men’s literacy which they believed threatened the social order. When the law prohibited teaching slaves to read and write, some slaveholders ignored these legalities out of Christian duty to instruct their “wards” in the faith. Sometimes such instruction led slaveholders to teach slaves to read; other times, it led them to offer perfunctory lessons and baptisms. Evidence for all of this can be seen by comparing Alabama-specific nineteenth century abolitionist narratives with the twentieth century Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives, both of which provide insight into slaves’ lives in their own words.

The University of North Carolina’s North American Slave Narratives compiles source materials on the slave and ex-slave experience published from the eighteenth century through 1920. Three biographical narratives directly pertain to slavery in Alabama between 1819, when Alabama entered the Union, and 1865, the abolition of slavery: those of Jordan H. Banks (93 pages), James Williams (103 pages), and Peter Still (409 pages). These rich, lengthy sources allow significant qualitative analysis. John Blassingame, a Yale scholar known for his work on American slavery, notes possible embellishment of these for use in the abolitionist cause; nonetheless, the similarity of evidence they provide suggests reliability and validity.<sup>1</sup>

For their part, the WPA narratives provide not only qualitative information on the slave experience but also quantitative data in the form of over 2,000 interviews. Created in 1935, the WPA employed Americans to improve the country’s infrastructure and engage in creative

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (1975): 478.

endeavors, like the interviewing of ex-slaves. These stories, transcribed in the late 1930s, fill the gap from the North American Slave Narratives which only includes published material to 1920. Further, the WPA narratives' large sample proves useful in corroborating perspectives across different regions and slave demographics.

John W. Blassingame rightly questions the authenticity of the WPA slave narratives by noting that the WPA employed few people of color as interviewers which, combined with 1930s culture governing white and black interaction in which the latter deferred to the former, probably biased the interviews. Indeed, prejudicial and stereotypical overtones abound in the transcriptions, exemplified by the racialized dialect rendered by white interviewers. For instance, one has former slave Billy Longslaughter say about General Grant: "I wuz right dere when de gen'l come into Richmond and sot us free."<sup>2</sup> Phrasing in this manner demonstrates perhaps more information about how the interviewer saw the narrator rather than being a purely truthful depiction of what was said. More recent scholarship by Sharon Ann Musher expands on this by adding that WPA interviewers were not always professional writers, but rather local literate whites. Further, lack of inexpensive, transportable, and available recording devices meant some interviewers edited and even rewrote narratives to convey the the material. In addition, according to Musher, local interviewers recorded the dialect to their recollection, then sent the material to a state office where "the majority of conscious editing appears to have occurred."<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, both Musher and Blassingame note the import of the WPA narratives when examined as a whole. Even if seen from the perspective of predominantly white interviewers, the words of ex-slaves are indispensable when appropriately triangulated among themselves and with the earlier nineteenth century narratives.<sup>4</sup>

Both the nineteenth century and WPA narratives demonstrate that slaves attained literacy in a variety of ways: teaching one another, attempting to teach one's self, learning to read after religious conversion, or masters teaching slaves to read because they found it useful, such as a physician needing clerical work regarding his patients' records. Even though some slaves did, indeed, teach themselves or each other to read and write, for the most part, according to Columbia University historian Thomas Webber, slaves "were taught by whites, especially by the sons and daughters of their masters."<sup>5</sup>

In her research on education in early America, Jennifer Monaghan claims there were few legal sanctions against teaching slaves to read and write in the early colonial period because "reading instruction was still so closely linked to Christian indoctrination that it remained immune

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<sup>2</sup> J. Morgan Smith, ed., "He Caned a Chair for President Buchanan," April 27, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=267> (accessed February 20, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Ann Musher, "Contesting 'The Way the Almighty Wants It': Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2001): 13.

<sup>4</sup> Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 478.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 132.

from repressive legislation.”<sup>6</sup> Additionally, masters generally disdained teaching slaves to read and write. In the mid-eighteenth century, children of slaves were not taught to read because their owners saw it as a waste of time and resources, considered it unseemly for slave and non-slave children to intermingle in school, or feared slave revolts. Only after the Stono Rebellion intensified the writing of “Black Codes” in the 1730s culminating in South Carolina’s Negro Act of 1740, did teaching slaves to write become legally prohibited. A century later, Frederick Douglass wrote of the prevailing sentiment among slaveholders that education made a person “unfit...to be a slave...unmanageable, and of no value to his master...discontented and unhappy.”<sup>7</sup>

During the 1800s, legal restrictions softened in Alabama state legislation, which provides a window into how slave-owners and lawmakers changed their thinking about teaching slaves. The 1833 Slave Code notes, “Any person or persons who attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read, or write, shall, upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum not less than two hundred and fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars.”<sup>8</sup> The 1852 Slave Code does not include a penalty for teaching a slave to read or write, though it does penalize those who write on behalf of a slave or free person of color.<sup>9</sup> Carter Woodson, whose work focuses on antebellum education for slaves, writes that nineteenth century prohibitions applied only to teachers who were “mischievous abolitionists” but not to “southerners interested in the improvement of their slaves.”<sup>10</sup> The evidence below further supports this contention, specifically to the absence of teaching males, while only teaching female household slaves’ literacy if their masters deemed it useful.

Jordan Banks (born 1833 in Virginia) of Green County, Alabama, describes a shared childhood with his master’s children of the same age. He writes, “...I was sent to a very different school from that which he was sent; he was sent to his books, but I was sent to watch and scare the crows.” Banks’s nineteenth century slave narrative shows that beyond merely not providing an education, owners were “opposed to having them learn” and, as the Alabama code dictated, “Any friendly white person who should be found teaching a slave to read or write, would be punished by it for a fine...In some cases, colored persons managed to steal a little education, and teach others by night, but even that is a crime.”<sup>11</sup> Banks’ account, published in 1861 by an abolitionist lecturer, discusses how lack of a “Sabbath school” was the manifest reason for not teaching slaves but that churches were few in rural areas in Virginia. When Banks moved to Alabama, his new

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer E. Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 243.

<sup>7</sup> Douglass in Monaghan, 258.

<sup>8</sup> “Alabama’s 1833 Slave Code,” *Alabama Department of Archives and History*, n.p., n.d., Feb 27, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> “Alabama’s 1852 Code, Chapter IV: Slaved and Free Negroes,” *Alabama Department of Archives and History*, n.p., n.d., January 24, 2017. <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/cornerstone/slavecode1852/page01.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (Charleston, SC: Bibliolife, orig. 1919, 2007), 142.

<sup>11</sup> Jordan Banks, 1861, “A Narrative of Events of the Life of J. H. Banks, an Escaped Slave, from the Cotton State, Alabama, in America,” Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/penning/penning.html>.

master did not belong to a church, though Banks notes that even esteemed members of churches did not necessarily prioritize slaves in worship: “In those cases where the slaveholders themselves are even connected with churches as members, they never concern themselves about slaves going to attend upon divine service.”<sup>12</sup>

Another former enslaved person, James Williams (born 1805), published an account in 1873 noting that the master’s son George became his friend and taught him the alphabet. Williams wrote “...I should soon have acquired a knowledge of reading had not George’s mother discovered her son in the act of teaching me” and punished him for it.<sup>13</sup> The mother said that her father had taught a slave in the past to read, but that the slave forged documents and escaped to Philadelphia “from whence her father received from him a saucy letter, thanking him for his education.”<sup>14</sup> The cases of Jordan Banks and James Williams, show fear of male slave literacy as being dangerous or otherwise obnoxious.

A third slave narrative, published in 1856, discusses the link between female slaves and literacy. In it, Peter Still describes a household servant, Ann Eliza, who could read and “possessed excellent sense and real piety.” Although “her services in the house were invaluable” and “her conduct was above reproach” the mistress nonetheless held her in contempt not just for her literary skill, but also because she was an articulate slave who protested false accusations.<sup>15</sup> Although Eliza was not regarded highly by her owner, she was nonetheless assigned to household work. Still’s story of Eliza supports the findings of historian Janet Cornelius, who concluded that most literate slaves worked as house servants.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the nineteenth century narratives, the more recent WPA narratives evince a connection between literacy and gentility, wherein female slaves cultivated a gentility similar to that of their owners, for they were oftentimes raised and taught alongside the master’s children. A slave companion to the mistress of the house equated to old world sensibilities where even the servants of aristocrats could converse with their employers; indeed, literacy signified gentility for both slaveholder and slave. Cornelius describes a female slave, Adeline Willis, who was taught how to read so that she could select whichever newspaper the master or mistress wanted at the time.<sup>17</sup> Former slave, Ank Bishop, describes his mother’s life after being sold to a “Lady Liza” to be used as her “house gal” who cooked or cleaned when others were unavailable to do so.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> James Williams, 1838, “Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama,” Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/williams/williams.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Still, 1856, “The Kidnapped and the Ransomed. Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife ‘Vina,’ after Forty Years of Slavery, Alabama, in America,” Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pickard/menu.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Cornelius, “We Slipped and Learned to Read: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865,” *Phylon* 44, no. 3 (1983), 175.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Kytte, ed., “Gabr’el Blow Sof’ Gabr’el Blow Loud!,” July 8, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of

Working in the house of a prominent “lady” yet not concerned principally with domestic responsibilities that required manual labor shows a gendered cultivation of gentility because her role was not as a household laborer but as an aristocratic companion.

Two other cases, those of Emma Howard and Esther King Casey, show an intersection of race and gender with status. Emma Howard, age 84 or 85 at the interview, of Montgomery, Alabama, notes how proud she was of her lighter complexion that afforded her easier household duties and the ability to play with the owner’s children.<sup>19</sup> Further, she herself could read and write, a product of her elevated status, gender, and being raised alongside the master’s children. Howard states the entire plantation attended worship services each week, and she remained religious to the time of her interview. While literacy did not necessitate religiosity, religiosity sometimes was sufficient to achieve literacy. Esther King Casey of Birmingham, Alabama, conveys that slaves like her, owned by well-to-do families, shared their owners’ contempt for “poor white trash.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, the only thing she can recall being disciplined for was playing with children of this group who were said to be a bad influence. Like Howard, Casey grew up and was educated with the white children. Casey was taught to read and write by the owner’s wife during slavery, this continuing after emancipation when her former mistress paid for her education at a school.<sup>21</sup>

The educational experience of female slaves differed from that of male slaves because women more likely engaged in domestic service. Though the role of mistress of the manor included domestic administration, much of this work was delegated to or shared with female slaves, such that, as Janet Cornelius has written, “close association between white and black women sometimes included opportunities for reading.”<sup>22</sup> Opportunities for reading with the mistress accounted for a significant factor in female slave literacy. Jennie Bowen, born in Camden, Alabama in 1847, stayed on the owner’s plantation after the Civil War. She worked as nurse for her owner’s three children, and out of necessity “dey learnt me to read an’ write.”<sup>23</sup> Mandy of Fairhope, Alabama evidences the privileges from close association with the mistress. Mandy attended school for a total of ten

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Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=43> (accessed February 11, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Jack Kytly, ed., “Is Massa gwinn’er sell us?,” June 2, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=216> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Harper, ed., “Esther King Casey,” June 4, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=60> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Also, in terms of the pervasiveness of racial identity, Casey was the only one to refer to her mistress as ‘the white lady’ rather than ‘Mrs. -Surname-’.

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius, “We Slipped and Learned to Read,” 176.

<sup>23</sup> John Morgan Smith, ed., “No Bell Brung Him: Jennie Bowen,” June 4, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=47> (accessed February 9, 2016).

months at the rate of about three months per year, the tuition for which her mother paid. She discusses proudly how as a child, “When dey was any readin’ to do my mammy sent fer me.”<sup>24</sup>

The male slaves, as recorded in Alabama WPA narratives, though also raised alongside the owner’s sons, were not taught to read because their field labor did not warrant literacy as a useful skill. For example, Billy Longslaughter stated, “Dey neber teach me no readin’ and writin’ kaze I had to work in de fields.” At the time of the interview, he was professionally engaged by making canes, repairing chairs, and fishing, neither of which required literacy yet both typically male occupations.<sup>25</sup>

Social historian Eugene Genovese focused on the slave/owner relationship, claiming that slaveholders saw their role as parental wherein the parent knows best and the subordinate children obey. Some owners taught their slaves to read because they felt it a duty; others thought that running their various operations necessitated literate slaves.<sup>26</sup> Genovese asserts ex-slaves typically note how their former masters “would teach mulatto children but not black, or house slaves but not field hands.”<sup>27</sup> Evidence from both the WPA narratives and the nineteenth century narratives corroborates Genovese’s assertion. Education and slavery have a curious relationship, oftentimes intersecting along lines of status and sex in addition to race. Alabama’s WPA slave narratives evidence this phenomenon. When asked if they were taught to read and write, male ex-slaves typically mention how they were not taught because they had to work in the fields, as testified by Charlie Aarons of Oak Grove, Alabama, who was around 18 or 20 years of age at emancipation. Aaron’s interviewer wrote, “When the writer asked Uncle Charlie if his master or mistress ever taught him to read or write, he smiled and said ‘No, Madam, only to work.’”<sup>28</sup>

Born a slave in Sumter County, Ank Bishop, at age 89, lived in Livingston, Alabama, at the time the WPA interviewed him. He stated that he and other slaves on his plantation did not “get to go to church” and did not benefit from schooling—Bishop was still illiterate at 89 years old. Except for his mother who was the mistress’s “house gal,” all women worked in the fields and none of these individuals could read or write. Also, though Bishop was a “believer” in voodoo, hoodoo, and spirits, these religions are unlike Christianity in that they do not require practitioners

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<sup>24</sup> Daphne L. E. Curtis, ed., “Mandy (by the day),” June 28, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=280> (accessed February 20, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> J. Morgan Smith, ed., “He Caned a Chair for President Buchanan,” April 27, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=267> (accessed February 20, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Eugene Genovese, “Toward a Psychology of Slavery: An Assessment of the Contribution of *the Slave Community*,” Al-Tony Gilmore, ed., *Revisiting Blassingame’s The Slave Community* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1978), 29.

<sup>27</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974), 564.

<sup>28</sup> Mary A. Poole, ed., “Charlie Aarons, Ex-Slave, Says he Loved Young Marster John,” August 6, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=6> (accessed February 21, 2016).

to read and follow a text. His religion, combined with his occupation, likely relate to his not being taught to read.<sup>29</sup>

The influence of Christianity on literacy, however, manifested itself in myriad ways, with gender and status sometimes moderating the relationship. Oliver Bell of Livingston, Alabama, describes coming from a skilled slave family of shoemakers and plow makers. After the Civil War, the former master read the Bible to his ex-slaves and had all slaves baptized. The master wanted salvation for his former slaves but thought this could be accomplished through preaching and baptizing—not through study and an individual conversion experience. So Bell remained unlettered, telling his interviewer that no one helped slaves on his plantation learn, and that although he had come to terms with his illiteracy, he wished “I could read an’ write.”<sup>30</sup>

Some masters refused to teach slaves to read and write from fear that doing so might make slaves rebellious. The idea that literacy empowered slaves was by no means a nineteenth century perspective. Genovese writes, “Even in colonial times, powerful opposition to slave literacy arose among slaveholders in an attempt to prevent the forging of passes but also to head off insurrection.”<sup>31</sup> Cornelius discusses such a “Liberation” literacy as distinct from “Bible” literacy, which I contend many slaveholders conceded for their domestic, female slaves. Liberation literacy allows for individual thought and interpretation, reflecting on scripture outside of the master’s chosen self-serving passages, which comprises Biblical literacy. Of liberation literacy, Cornelius concludes, “Knowing how to read gave slaves opportunities to assume religious leadership within the slave community, where reading and preaching were closely associated.”<sup>32</sup> While legal sanctions transitioned from colonial-era America to the early 1830s, normative day-to-day proscriptions changed little.

As time went on, laws against teaching slaves to read and write increased in severity. Genovese specifically mentioning the wake of Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion: “Alabama’s harsh legislation grew directly out of the post insurrectionary panic of 1831-1832,” which explains why the code of 1833 was more severe than the 1852 code.<sup>33</sup> Even where laws were lenient, Genovese argues, whites felt so threatened that they created de facto restrictions that stifled any real opportunity for slaves to become literate. Cornelius notes these extralegal restrictions as: “Patrols, mobs, and social ostracism faced owners who taught their slaves.”<sup>34</sup> In terms of legality, rarely do the WPA narratives mention education’s lawfulness; in contrast, the nineteenth century narratives explicitly note the criminality and physical punishment associated with teaching slaves. The

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<sup>29</sup> Jack Kytle, ed., “Gabr’el Blow Sof’ Gabr’el Blow Loud!,” July 8, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=43> (accessed February 11, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Jack Kytle, ed., “De Bes’ Friend a Nigger Ever Had,” July 17, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=37> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 562.

<sup>32</sup> Cornelius, “We Slipped and Learned to Read,” 172.

<sup>33</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 562.

<sup>34</sup> Cornelius, “We Slipped and Learned to Read,” 173.

different intended audiences of these two sources explain much: the WPA narratives reflected on long-past events while the slave narratives were designed to show the inhumanity of slavery through the denial of a basic human need—education.

In the immediate aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion, white powerbrokers at the state level sought to maintain a sense of order by enacting laws prohibiting teaching slaves. Slaves perceived their masters' attempts to prevent literacy as the most heinous limitations. Brenda Stevenson theorizes that the key to understanding the slave experience lay in the family, noting "Clearly, the inability to even teach one's children the rudiments of reading and writing was a powerful symbol of their bleak futures."<sup>35</sup> Conversely, ex-slaves viewed literacy for their offspring as a potent symbol of upward social and economic mobility. Illiterate male ex-slaves who had many children, taking pride in their own children's literacy, evidence this theme in the WPA narratives. Josh Horn, of Livingston, Alabama, who had fourteen children, proudly points out how each of his children could read and a few even taught school.<sup>36</sup> Oliver Bell, of Livingston, Alabama, who had sixteen children, likewise proudly states that most of his children were literate and even attended Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. As for his own education, he notes, "Didn't nobody he'p us learn nothin' much...I wish I could read and/write; den I'd tell you things you'd lak to know."<sup>37</sup>

The typical literate slave engaged in female gendered occupations, such that a woman more likely could read but her gender did not necessarily guarantee such an outcome. Anne Maddox, age 113 when she was interviewed, was born in Virginia but at 13 years old was sold to someone in Opelika, Alabama, where she remained. Her responsibilities included some tasks as a "house girl" but she spent the majority of her time working in the fields. She also escorted the owner's children to and from school. Slaves on her plantation were explicitly prevented from learning and received harsh punishments if "caught with pencil and paper."<sup>38</sup> The mistress read the Bible to Maddox and the other slaves and allowed them to attend her white church, albeit in a segregated area. Still, neither Maddox's sex nor her religiosity sufficed to learn reading and writing.

Amy Chapman, born outside of Livingston, Alabama, in 1843, likewise attended her master's white church, yet in contrast to Maddox obtained literacy. Chapman notes the master did not mind slaves attending a white church and learning to read, but that the overseer did everything

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<sup>35</sup> Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black & White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 276.

<sup>36</sup> D.A. Oden, ed., "Chasing Guinea Jim The Runaway Slave," July 14, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=215> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Jack Kytte, ed., "De Bes' Friend a Nigger Ever Had," July 17, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=37> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Jack Kytte, ed., "I Shouted Three Days," June 7, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=277> (accessed February 11, 2016).

to prevent church attendance or, indeed, any activity that may have led to literacy.<sup>39</sup> Since the overseer dealt directly with slaves and potentially would be the first victim of a slave uprising, his harshness likely derived from fear of slave empowerment toward his own person. Chapman goes on to describe a neighboring slaveholder, Jerry Brown, who taught his slaves to read and write. In terms of religion, she notes that there were no black churches around to attend; therefore, they attended the white Jones Creek Baptist Church.

Slave literacy varied significantly in form and purpose, influenced by factors such as occupation, gender, and standing in the masters' household. Alabama slaveholders often taught their own slaves when it served their purposes, such as when they needed literate female slaves to teach children or run a household. In some cases, literate slaves elevated their owner's status, where the presence of a cultivated, genteel, house slave symbolized sophistication. Other times, teaching slaves arose from a sense of duty or as an imperative of Protestant Christianity in which whites oftentimes saw it their duty to evangelize their slaves by teaching them how to read the Bible. All slave accounts sampled above show a genuine desire to read and write among the illiterate, or pride in their ability from the literate. Evidence from both the nineteenth century slave narratives and the WPA interviews of former slaves in Alabama confirms that slave literacy depended on the perceived obligation of a master to teach his slaves, the slaveholder's desired social status, or the type of occupation a slave worked inasmuch as it required literacy. Female slaves were taught to read and write because it aided their work. Male slaves were not because masters considered their literacy to be dangerous. In the rare circumstances of male education, it was out of a sense of "Bible literacy" that was seen as fulfilling a master's evangelization requirements while keeping a potentially dangerous force docile.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ruby P. Tartt, ed., "De master's good but overseers mean," June 17, 1937 in *Born In Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938, Alabama Narratives*, Vol. 1, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=010/mesn010.db&recNum=66> (accessed February 11, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Cornelius, "We Slipped and Learned to Read," 171.