

**CALL #:** [http://0-www.jstor.org.library.uark.edu/journals/0882228X.ht ...](http://0-www.jstor.org.library.uark.edu/journals/0882228X.ht...)

**LOCATION:** **AFU :: Main Library :: [Most recent 5 years not available] JSTOR.**

TYPE: Article CC:CCL

JOURNAL TITLE: Magazine of history

USER JOURNAL TITLE: OAH Magazine of History

AFU CATALOG TITLE: Magazine of history / Organization of American Historians

ARTICLE TITLE: What Did Freedom Mean?: The Aftermath of Slavery as Seen by Former Slaves and Former masters in Three Societies

ARTICLE AUTHOR: Brink, Dean C.

VOLUME: 4

ISSUE: 1

MONTH: Winter

YEAR: 1989

PAGES: 35-46

ISSN: 0882-228X

OCLC #: AFU OCLC #: 11780691

CROSS REFERENCE ID: [TN:415777][ODYSSEY:130.74.92.7/ILL]

VERIFIED:

**BORROWER:** **MUM :: Main Library**

**PATRON:** **Boyd Harris**

PATRON ID: brharri2

PATRON ADDRESS:

PATRON PHONE:

PATRON FAX:

PATRON E-MAIL:

PATRON DEPT:

PATRON STATUS:

PATRON NOTES:



---

What Did Freedom Mean? The Aftermath of Slavery as Seen by Former Slaves and Former Masters in Three Societies

Author(s): Dean C. Brink

Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 4, No. 1, The Reconstruction Era (Winter, 1989), pp. 35-46

Published by: Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162636>

Accessed: 18/11/2010 17:24

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=oah>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Organization of American Historians* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *OAH Magazine of History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## What Did Freedom Mean?

### The Aftermath of Slavery as Seen by Former Slaves and Former Masters in Three Societies

Dean C. Brink

"Most anyone ought to know that a man is better off free than as a slave, even if he did not have anything," said the Reverend E. P. Holmes, a black Georgia clergyman and former house servant, to a Congressional committee in 1883. "I would rather be free and have my liberty. I fared just as well as any white child could have

fared when I was a slave, and yet I would not give up my freedom."<sup>(1)</sup> Holmes was just one of over six million individuals held in bondage in the Western Hemisphere who were freed either by force and violence (as in Haiti between 1793-1803 and the United States between 1861-1865) or by government decree (as in Jamaica in 1838, Cuba in

1886, and Brazil in 1888). Four million of these slaves lived in the Southern United States. In Russia, two years before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Czar Alexander II freed fifty million serfs. Certainly the abolition of slavery was one of the most revolutionary and far-reaching developments of the nineteenth century.

Undoubtedly most of these former slaves would echo the Reverend Holmes statement that "I would not give up my freedom." But what did freedom mean? One way for the student of history to begin to answer this question is to analyze the accounts of former slaves and former masters on the ending of slavery in several societies. The accounts presented here illustrate some of the difficulties of adjusting to freedom. The first set of readings consists of the observations of former masters--two from the Southern United States, where the masters were white and the slaves were black, and one from Zaria, a region in northern Nigeria, where both slaves and masters were black. The second set of readings is a collection of letters written by former slaves to their former masters during the first years of Reconstruction in the South. A final set of readings contains the recollections of former slaves in Cuba and the Southern United States many years after abolition.



A Freedmen's Bureau station issuing rations to the old and sick. Although the Bureau, with the help of Union troops, tried to protect the civil rights of Southern blacks, brutal riots against blacks occurred in Memphis and New Orleans in 1866.

---

---

## Accounts of Former Masters

---

Frances B. Leigh was the daughter of the acclaimed British actress Frances (Fanny) Kemble and Peter Butler, a Georgia planter. At the beginning of the Civil War, Butler had nearly one thousand slaves on two plantations. In 1866, Frances Leigh returned to Georgia with her father to manage the plantations. She described her experiences in *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War* (1883).

*The year after the war between the North and South, I went with my father to look after our property in Georgia and see what could be done with it.*

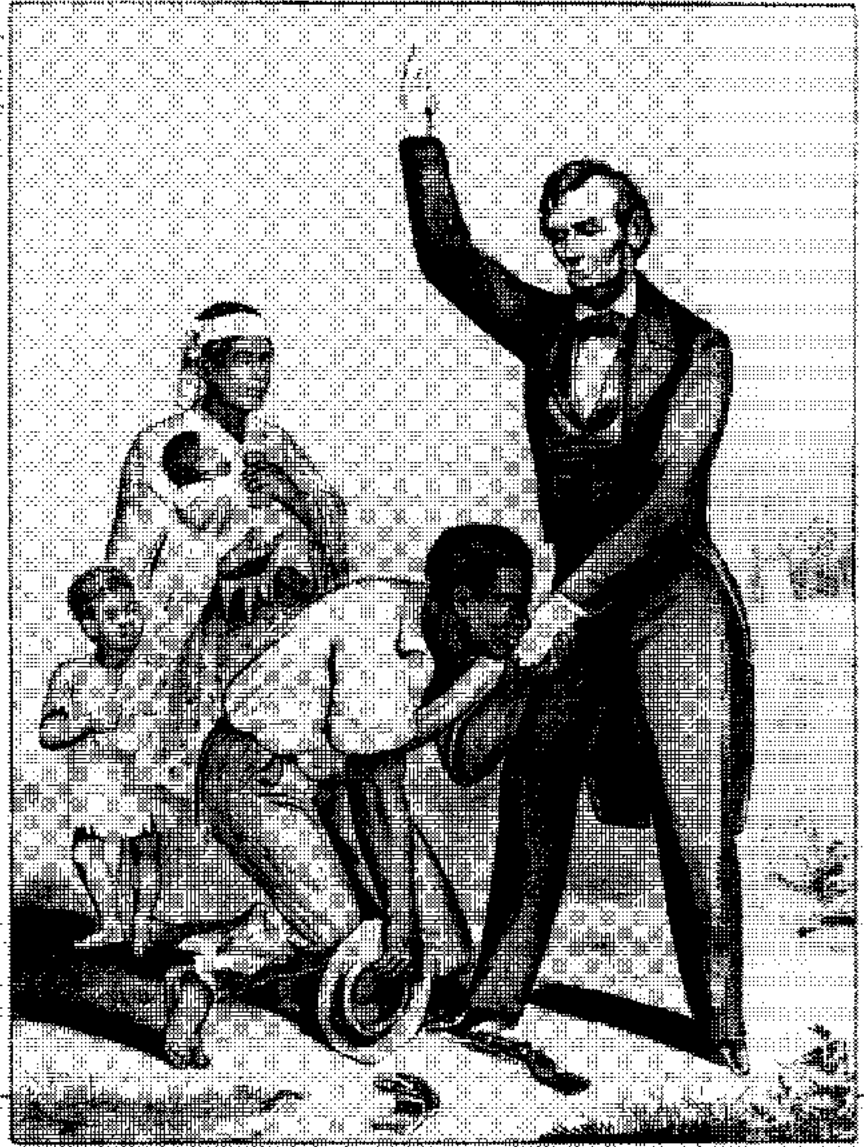
*The whole country had of course undergone a complete revolution. The changes that a four years' war must bring about in any country would alone have been enough to give a different aspect to everything; but at the South, besides the changes brought by the war, our slaves had been freed. . . . The South was still treated as a conquered country. The white people were disfranchised, the local government in the hands of either military men or Northern adventurers, the latter of whom, with no desire to promote either the good of the country or the people . . . encouraged the negroes in all of their foolish and extravagant ideas of freedom, set them against their masters, . . . in order to secure for themselves some political office which they hoped to obtain through the negro vote. . . .*

*We had, before the North, received two letters from Georgia, one from an agent of the Freedmen's Bureau, and the other from one of our neighbors both stating very much the same thing, which was that our former slaves had all returned to the island and were willing and ready to work for us, but refused to engage themselves to anyone else, even to their liberators, the Yankees; but they were very badly off, short of provisions, and would starve if something were not done for them at once. . . .*

*On Wednesday, when my father returned, he reported that he had found the negroes all on the place, not only those who were there five years ago, but many who were sold three years before that. . . . They received him very affectionately, and made an agreement with him to work for one half the crop. . . . Owing to our coming so late, only a small crop could be planted, enough to make seed for another year and clear expenses. . . . Most of the plantations were lying idle for want of hands to work them, so many of the negroes had died; . . . Many had taken to the Southwest, and other[s] preferred hanging about the towns, to working regularly on the plantations; so most people found it impossible to get any laborers, but we had as many as we wanted and nothing could induce our people to go anywhere else. My father . . . could attend to nothing but the planting, and we agreed that he should devote himself to that, while I looked after some furniture. . . .*

*The prospect of getting in the crop did not grow more promising as time went on. The negroes talked a great deal about their desire and intention to work for us, but their idea of work . . . is very vague, some of them working only half a day and some even less. I don't think one does a full day's work, and so of course not half of the necessary amount is done and I am afraid never will be again, and so our properties will soon be utterly worthless, for no crop can be raised by such labor as this, and no negro will work if he can help it, and is quite satisfied to scrape along doing an odd job here and there to earn money enough to buy a little food. . . .*

*My father was quite encouraged at first, the people seemed so willing to work and said so much about their intentions of doing so; but not so many days after they started, he came in quite disheartened, saying that half of the hands had left the fields at one o'clock and the rest by three o'clock, and this just at our busiest time. Half a day's work will keep them from starving, but won't raise a crop. Our contract with them is for half the crop; that is, one half to be divided among them, according to each man's rate of work, we letting them have in the meantime necessary food, clothing, and money for their present wants (as they have not a penny) which is to be deducted from whatever is due to them at the end of the year.*



A Currier and Ives print, "Freedom to the Slaves," depicts Lincoln breaking the chains of bondage for a slave family.

*This we found the best arrangement to make with them, for if we paid them wages, the first five dollars they made would have seemed like so large a sum to them, that they would have imagined their fortunes made and refused to work any more. But even this arrangement had its objections, for they told us, when they missed working two or three days a week, that they were losers by it as well as ourselves, half the crop being theirs. But they could not see that this sort of work would not raise any crop at all. . . . They were quite convinced that if six days' work would raise a whole crop, three days work would raise half a one, with which they as partners were satisfied, and so it seemed as if we should have to be too. . . .*

**In May 1867, Leigh and her father moved to their second plantation on a sea island off the coast of Georgia. Her account continues.**

*The rice plantation becoming unhealthy early in May, we removed to St. Simon's, a sea island on the coast, about fifteen miles from Butler's Island where the famous Sea Island cotton had*

---

---

formerly been raised. This place had been twice in the possession of the Northern troops during the war, and the negroes had consequently been brought under the influence of Northerners, some of whom had filled the poor people's minds with all sorts of vain hopes and ideas, among others that their former masters would not be allowed to return, and the land was theirs, a thing many of them believed, and they had planted both corn and cotton to a considerable extent. To disabuse their minds of this notion my father determined to put in a few acres of cotton. . . .

My father spent . . . time in talking to the negroes, of whom there were about fifty on the place, making arrangements with them for work, more to establish his right to the place than from any good work we expected to do this year. We found them in a very different frame of mind from the negroes on Butler's Island. . . . They were perfectly respectful, but quiet, and evidently disappointed to find they were not the masters of the soil and that their friends the Yankees had deceived them. . . .

In all other ways the work went on just as it did in the old times. The force, of about three hundred, was divided into gangs, each working under a head man--the old negro drivers. . . . To make them do odd jobs was hopeless, as I found when I . . . tried to make them clear up the grounds about the house, cut the undergrowth and make a garden. . . . Unless I stayed on the spot all the time, the instant I disappeared they disappeared as well. . . . And I generally found that if I wanted a thing done I first had to tell the negroes to do it, then show them how, and finally do it myself. Their way of managing not to do it was very ingenious, for they were always perfectly good tempered, and received my orders . . . and then always somehow or other left the thing undone. . . .

In August of 1867 my father died, and . . . I went down to the South to carry on his work, . . . but before anything else could be done the negroes had to be settled with for the past two years, and their share of the crops divided according to the amount due each man. . . .

Notwithstanding their dissatisfaction with the settlement, six thousand dollars was paid out among them, many getting as much as two or three hundred a piece. The result was that a number of them left me and bought land of their own, and at one time it seemed doubtful that I should have hands at all left to work. The land they bought, and paid forty, fifty dollars and even more for an acre, was either within the town limits, for which they got no title, and from which they were soon turned off, or out in the pine woods, where the land was so poor they could not raise a peck of corn to the acre. . . .

Most frightfully cheated the poor people were. But they had got their land, and were building their little log cabins on it, fully believing that they were to live on their property and incomes the rest of their lives, like gentlemen.(2)

Mary Boykin Chestnut was a woman of wit and intelligence who kept an intimate diary of life in the Confederacy during the Civil War. The daughter of one of South Carolina's finest families, she was married to James Chestnut, an aide to Jefferson Davis and a Brigadier General of the Confederacy. These two entrees are from *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, the most recent edition of her diary.

May 2, 1865

Old Mr. Chestnut had a summer resort for his invalid negroes and especially for women with ailing babies. Myrtilla, an African, was head nurse then. She was very good, very sensible, very efficient, and her language a puzzle to me always. She went off with the Yankees. "Old Aunt Myrtilla run away," said Smith with a guffaw. Ellen (said)

"She was a black angel--she was so good."

"Yes," said Smith, "her arms hung back of her jis' like wings. She was always more like flying than walking--the way she got over ground."

"And Marster did treat her like a lady. She had a woman to wash and cook for her. You think the Yankees gwine do that for her? And then, she is that old--she is so old--I thought she

---

only wanted in this world a little good religion to die with."

And now from Orangeburg comes the most pathetic letters. Old Myrtilla begs to be sent for. She wants to come home. Miss C. who feels terribly any charitable distress which can be relieved by other people, urges us to send for "poor old Myrtilla."

"Very well," says her brother. "You pay for the horses and the wagon and the driver, and I will send."

And that ended the Myrtilla tragedy as far as we were concerned, but poor old Myrtilla, after the first natural frenzy of freedom subsided, knew all too well on which side her bread was buttered--and knew too, or found out, where her real friends were. So in a short time old Myrtilla was on our hands to support once more. How she got back we did not inquire. (3)

June 12, 1865

Captain Barnwell came to see us. . . . He gave us an account of his father's plantation from which he had just returned.

"Our negroes are living in great comfort. They were delighted to see me with overflowing affection. They waited on me as before, gave me breakfast, splendid dinners, etc. But they firmly and respectfully informed me: 'We own this land now. Put it out of your head that it will ever be yours again.'"(4)

Baba was a Hausa woman who lived in the Nigerian states of Kano and Zaria between 1890 and 1951. The Hausa are a group of west African peoples who speak a similar language. They are traditionally village farmers who adhere to the Islamic faith. When the British abolished slavery in Zaria in 1901, Baba was a young girl. Her father owned about 200 slaves. She described her experiences in an autobiography, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Moslem Hausa*. (1964).

When I was a maiden the Europeans first arrived. Ever since we were quite small the malams (scholars of the Koran) had been saying that the Europeans would come with a thing called a train, they would come with a thing called a motorcar, . . . They would stop wars, they would repair the world, they would stop oppression and lawlessness, we should live at peace with them. We used to go and sit quietly and listen to the prophecies. . . .

I remember when a European came to Karo on a horse, and some of his foot soldiers went into the town. Everyone came to look at them, but . . . everyone at Karo ran away--"There's a European, there's a European!" He came from Zaria with a few black men, two on horses and four on foot. . . . Later we heard that they were in Zaria in crowds, clearing spaces and building houses. . . .

The Europeans said that there were to be no more slaves; if someone said 'Slave!' you could complain to the alkali (a judge) who would punish the master who said it, the judge said "That is what the Europeans have decreed!" The first order said that any slave, if he was younger than you, was your younger brother, if he was older than you he was your elder brother--they were all brothers of their master's family. No one could use the word 'slave' anymore. When slavery was stopped, nothing much happened at our rinji (a slave village) except that some slaves whom we had bought in the market ran away. Our father went to his farm and worked, he and his son took up large hoes; they loaned out their small farms. Tsoho our father and Kadiri my brother . . . and Babambo worked, they farmed guineacorn and millet and groundnuts and everything; before this they had supervised the slaves' work--now they did their own. When the midday food was ready, the women of the compound would give us children the food, one of us drew water, and off we went to the farm to take the men their food at the foot of the tree; I was about eight or nine at the time, I think. (5)

---

---

## Letters of Former Slaves to Former Masters

---

Because they were kept illiterate while in bondage, few former slaves were able to record their thoughts about the meaning of freedom or their hopes and aspirations for life in a society without slavery. Still, some letters from former slaves to former masters exist, and they reflect the memories and emotions that they had about slavery, freedom, and the ties that bound master and slave together. These three letters express some of the feelings and attitudes that millions of other illiterate former slaves may have held. (6)

*Montgomery, February 10, 1867*

*My Dear Old Master,--I am anxious to see you and my young masters and mistresses. I often think of you, and remember with pleasure how kind you all were to me. Though freedom has been given to the colored race, I often sigh for the good old days of slave-times, when we were all so happy and contented. . . . I am tolerably pleasantly situated. I hired to a Mr. Sanderson, who treats me very well. I am very well and hope I may have an opportunity of coming to see you all next Christmas. I am still single and don't think very much about a beaux. I don't think the men in these days of freedom are of much account. If I could find one whom I think a real good man, and who would take good care of me, I would get married. Please, dear old master, ask some of my young mistresses to write me.*

*My kind and respectful remembrances to all.*

*Your former servant and friend.*

*Alice Dabney*



*February 5, 1867*

*Mas William,*

*I guess you will be somewhat surprised to receive a letter from me. I am well & doing just as well as I could expect under the circumstances, one blessing is that I have plenty to eat & have plenty of work to do, & get tolerable fair prices for my work. I have but two small children, they are good size boys, able to plow & help me out a great deal. I still work at my trade. I once thought I wanted to come back to that old country, but I believe I have given up that notion. Give my respects to old Mas Henry & his family Miss Jane & all the family.*

*Tell Austin howdy for me & tell him I want him to write me & give me all the news of that old country who has married who had died give me all the news I am anxious to hear from them all tell Austin to give them all my love to all I havent time to mention all ther names, but I wish to hear from all remember me to Coleman especially. As I am in a great hurry I will close please send me word, direct your letters to Camden in the Case or in the name of S. B. Griffin, Camden, Washita County, Arksas.*

*I remains as ever Respt  
Your humble Servent  
Jake*



President Abraham Lincoln entering the city of Richmond, Virginia, former capital of the Southern States, April 4, 1865. He is said to have told the masses of freed slaves, "You must kneel to God only, and thank Him for the liberty you will hereafter enjoy. I am but God's humble instrument."



Dayton, Ohio, August 7, 1865

To My Old Master, Colonel P.H. Anderson  
Big Spring, Tennessee

Sir: I got your letter and was glad to find you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anyone else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this for harboring Rebs they found at your house. . . . Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. . . .

I am doing tolerably well here; I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home here for Mandy (the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), and the children. Milly, Jane and Grundy, go to school and are learning well. . . . Now if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again,

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864. . . . Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you are sincerely disposed to treat us justly and kindly--and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. At \$25 a month for me, and \$2 a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothing and three doctor's visits for me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show that we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams Express. . . . We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. . . . Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up and both good-looking girls. . . . You will also please state if there are any schools opened for colored children in your neighborhood, the great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

P.S.--Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

From your old servant,  
Jourdan Anderson

---

---

## Recollections of Former Slaves

---

Esteban Montejo was a runaway slave who spent ten years hiding in the forests of central Cuba before slavery was abolished. He described his experiences after slavery had ended in *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (1973). He was over one hundred years old at the time.

*All my life I have liked the forest, but when slavery ended I stopped being a runaway. I realized from the way people were cheering and shouting that slavery had ended, and so I came out of the forest. They were shouting, 'we are free now.' But I didn't join in, I thought it might be a lie. I don't know . . . anyway, I went up to a plantation and let my head appear little by little till I was out in the open. . . . When I left the forest and began walking, I met an old woman carrying two children in her arms. I called to her, and when she came up I asked her, 'Tell me, is it true we are no longer slaves?' She replied, 'No, son, we are now free.' I went walking the way I was going and began looking for work. . . .*

*After this time in the forest I had become half savage. I didn't want to work anywhere, and I was afraid they would shut me up again. I knew quite well that slavery had not ended completely. A lot of people asked me what I was doing and where I came from. Sometimes I told them, 'My name is Stephen and I was a runaway slave.' Other times I said I had been working on a certain plantation and could not find my relations. I must have been about twenty at the time.*

*Since I didn't know anyone I walked from village to village for several months. I did not suffer from hunger because people gave me food. You only had to say you were out of work and someone would always help you out. But you can't carry on like that forever. I began to realize that work had to be done in order to eat and sleep in a barracoon (barracks for housing slaves) at least. By the time I decided to cut cane, I had already covered quite a bit of ground. . . .*

*The first plantation I worked on was called Purio. I turned up there one day in the rags I stood in and a hat I had collected along the way. I went in and asked the overseer if there was work for me. He said yes. I remember he was Spanish, with moustaches, and his name was Pepe. There were overseers in these parts until quite recently, the difference being that they didn't lay about them as they used to do under slavery. But they were men of the same breed, harsh, overbearing. There were still barracoons after Abolition, the same as before. Many of them were newly built of masonry, the old ones having collapsed under the rain and storms. The barracoon at Purio was strong and looked as if it had been recently completed. They told me to go and live there. I soon made myself at home for it wasn't too bad. They had taken the bolts off the doors and the workers themselves had cut holes in the walls for ventilation. They had no longer to worry about escapes or anything like that, for the Negroes were free now, or so they said. But I could not help noticing that had things still went on. There were bosses who still believed that the blacks were created for locks and bolts and whips, and treated them as before. It struck me that many Negroes did not know that things had changed, because they kept saying, 'Give me your blessing, my master.'*

*Those ones never left the plantation at all. I was different in that I disliked having anything to do with the whites. They believed they were the lords of creation. . . .*

*The work was exhausting. You spent hours in the fields and it seemed as if the work would never end. It went on and on until you were worn out. The overseers were always bothering you. Any worker who knocked off for long was taken off the job. I worked from six in the morning. The early hour didn't bother me since in the forest it had been impossible to sleep late because of the cocks crowing. There was a break at eleven for lunch, which had to be eaten in the workers' canteen, usually standing because of the crowd of people squashed in. This was the worst and hottest time. Work ended at six in the afternoon. Then I would take myself off to the river, bathe for a while, and go back to get something to eat. . . .*

*The Negroes who worked at Purio had almost all been slaves; they were so used to life in the*

barracoon they did not even go out to eat. When lunch-time came they shut themselves up in their rooms to eat, and the same with dinner. They did not go out at night. They were afraid of people, and they said they would get lost if they did, they were convinced of this. I wasn't like that--if I got lost I always found myself again. . . .

On Sundays all the workers who wanted to could work overtime. This meant that instead of resting you went to the fields and cleared, cleaned or cut cane. Or if not that, you stayed in, cleaning out the troughs or scraping the boilers. . . . As there was nothing special to do that day, all the workers used to go and earn themselves extra money. . . .

In those days you could get either permanent or temporary work on the plantations. Those employed on a permanent basis had to keep a time-table. This way they could live in the barracoons and did not need to leave the plantations for anything. I preferred being a permanent worker myself.

The barracoons were a bit damp, but all the same they were safer than in the forest. There were no snakes, and all us workers slept in hammocks which were very comfortable. Many of the barracoons were made of sacking. The one tiresome thing about them was the fleas; they didn't hurt, but you had to be up all night scaring them off with the Spanish broom, which gets rid of fleas and ticks. . . .

After months of work on the plantation of Purio, Montejo left to go work at a sugar mill on a plantation at Ariosa.

But life grew wearisome on the plantations. It was boring to see the same people and fields day after day. The hardest thing was to get used to one place for a long time. I had to leave Purio because life seemed to have stopped still there. I started walking South, and I got to San Agustin Ariosa sugar-mill, near the villiage of Zulueta. At first I did not intend to stop there because I preferred walking . . . but as luck would have it I found myself a mistress there and so I stayed. . . .

I stayed a long time at Ariosa. . . . The plantation was of medium-size, owned by a man called Ariosa, a pure-blooded Spaniard. It was one of the first plantations to become a mill, and a large-gauge line ran through it, bring the cane direct from the fields into the boiler-house. It was much the same as everywhere else. There were the usual yes-men and toadies to masters and overseers alike. This was on account of the hatred which has always existed between the groups of slaves, because of ignorance. This is the only reason for it. The freed slaves were generally very ignorant and would lend themselves to anything. It happened that if some fellow became a nuisance, his own brothers would undertake to kill him for a few centenes. . . .

They didn't give work to just anyone . . . and at Ariosa

you had to work hard. (The overseers) watched you the whole time, and they would book you for nothing at all. I remember a criminal by the name of Camilo Polavieja, who became Governor of Cuba in the Nineties. No one liked him. He said the workers were cattle and he kept the same views he had during slavery. Once he ordered all the workers (to have cards). . . . The cards were slips of paper . . . with the worker's address on. Anyone caught without his card got a good belting across the shoulders. . . . It was always given in a gaol, because that's where they took you if you were caught without your card. The card cost twenty-five cents . . . and it had to be renewed every year. . . .



A slave.

---

---

*There were lots of workers at Ariosa, I think it must have been one of the biggest plantations . . . The owner was an innovator and made many changes in the mills. Some plantations gave very bad food because the cooks didn't care, but Ariosa wasn't like that, you ate well there. . . .*

*When the dead season came everything stopped. . . . There was less work and fewer duties at this time, and naturally this led to boredom. . . .*

*The women carried on as usual, there was no such thing as dead time for them. They washed the men's clothes, mended and sewed. . . . They had plenty of other things to do, like raising pigs and chickens. . . . There was no freedom. (7)*

In the 1930s the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) sent teams of interviewers into the South to interview surviving former slaves. The results of the interviews of over two thousand ex-slaves were compiled in the Slave Narrative Collection. Two-thirds of those interviewed were over eighty years of age and the interviews gave them an unparalleled opportunity to describe their lives both under slavery and after emancipation. These four narratives are taken from *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (1970) by Norman P. Yetman. (8)

1. Mary Anderson, age 86  
Interviewed near Raleigh, North Carolina

*I was born on a plantation near Franklinton, Wake County, North Carolina, May 10, 1851. I was a slave belonging to Sam Brodie, who owned the plantation at this place. . . .*

*We had good food, plenty of warm clothes, and comfortable houses. . . . The plantation was very large and there was about two hundred acres of cleared land that was farmed each year. . . . There were about one hundred and sixty-two slaves on the plantation . . . .*

*The War was begun and there were stories of fights and freedom. The news went from plantation to plantation and while the slaves acted natural and some even more polite than usual, they prayed for freedom.*

*Then one day I heard something that sounded like thunder and Marster and Missus began to walk around and act queer. The grown slaves were whispering to each other. Sometimes they gathered in little gangs in the grove. . . .*

*In a day or two everybody on the plantation seemed disturbed and Marster and Missus were crying. Marster ordered all of the slaves to come to the Great House at nine o'clock. . . . Then Marster said, "Good morning," and Missus said, "Good morning, children." They were both crying. Then Marster said, "Men, women, and children, you are free. You are no longer my slaves. The Yankees will soon be here." . . .*

*The slaves were awfully excited. The Yankees stayed there, cooked, ate, drank, and played music until about night. . . .*

*When they left the country, lots of the slaves went with them and soon there were none of Marster's slaves left. They wandered around from place to place, fed and working most of the time at some other slave owner's plantation and getting more homesick every day.*

*The second year after the surrender our Marster and Missus got on their carriage and went and looked up all the Negroes they heard of who belonged to them. Some who went off with the Yankees were never heard from again. . . . Some were so glad to get back they cried, 'cause fare had been mighty bad part of the time they were rambling around and they were hungry.*

2. Frank Bell, age 86  
Interviewed at St. Louis, Missouri

*I was owned by Johnson Bell and born in New Orleans . . . and my master . . . was real mean to me. . . . When war come, Master swear he not gwine to fight, but the Yankees they capture New Orleans and throws Marster in a pen and guards him. He gets a chance and escapes.*

---

*When war am over he won't free me, says I'm valuable to him in his trade. He say, "Nigger, you's supposed to be free but I'll pay you a dollar a week and if you run off I'll kill you." So he makes me do like before the War, but gives me a dollar a month, 'stead week. He says I cost more'n I'm worth, but he won't let me go. Times I don't know why I didn't die before I'm growed, sleepin' on the ground, winter and summer, rain and snow.*

*Master helt me long after the War. If anybody get after him, he told them I stay 'cause I wants to stay, but told me if I left he'd kill him another nigger. I stayed till he gits in a drunk brawl one night . . . and . . . got killed.*

*Then I am left to live or die, so I wanders from place to place. I nearly starved to death before I'd leave New Orleans, 'cause I couldn't think Master am dead and I afraid. Finally I gets up nerve to leave town. . . .*

*Then I gets locked up in jail. I didn't know what for, never did know. One of the men says to me to come with him and takes me to the woods and give me an ax. I cuts rails till I nearly falls, all with chain locked round feet, so I couldn't run off. He turns me loose and I wanders again. Never had a home. Works for me long 'nough to get fifty, sixty cents, then starts roamin' again, like a stray dog.*

*After a long time I marries Feline Graham. . . . We has one boy and he farms and I lives with him. I worked at a sawmill and farms all my life, but never could make much money.*

3. Elidge Davison, age 86  
Interviewed at Madisonville, Texas

*My birth was in Richmond . . . in Old Virginny. . . . Massa and Missus were very good white folks and was good to the black folks. . . . Us work all day till just before dark. Some times us got a whipping. . . . Massa learn us to read and us read the Bible. He learn us to write too. . . .*

*I 'member plenty about the War, 'cause the Yankees they march on to Richmond. . . . When the War over Massa call me and tells me I'se free as he was. 'Cause them Yankees win the War. He gives me five dollars and say he'll give me that much a month iffen I stays with him, but I starts to Texas. I heard I wouldn't have to work in Texas, 'cause everything growed on trees and the Texans wore animal hides for clothes. I didn't get no land or mule or cow. There warn't no plantations divided that I knowed about. . . .*

*It about a year before I gets to Texas. I walks nearly all the way. . . . Sometimes I work for folks along the way and gets fifty cents and start again. I get to Texas and try to work for white folks and try to farm. I couldn't make anything at any work. I made five dollars a month for I don't know how long after the War. Iffen the woods wasn't full of game us . . . all starve to death them days.*

4. Henri Necaise, age 105  
Interviewed in Mississippi

*I was thirty-one years old when I was set free. My Marster din't tell us about bein' free. De way I found out about it, he started to whip me once and de young marster up and says, "You ain't got no right to whip him now; he's free." Den Marster turn me loose. . . .*

*. . . Dey went out and turned us loose, just like a passel of cattle, and didn't show us nothin' or give us nothin'. Dey was acres and acres of land not in use, and lots of timber in dis country. Dey should-a give each one of us a little farm and let us get out timber and build houses. . . .*

*I never did look for to get nothin' after I was free. I had dat in my head to get me eighty acres of land and homestead it. As for the government making me a present of anything. I never thought about it. . . .*

*I did get me this little farm, but I bought it and paid for it myself. I got de money by workin' for it. . . .*

Many of the major developments or experiences in American history are local topics for comparative study and analysis--the Revolution, the frontier experience, slavery and race relations, to name just a few. The growing body of research by scholars into the aftermath of emancipation in different societies now offers teachers and students an opportunity to study Reconstruction from a comparative perspective. The following suggestions from a lesson in comparative history are based on the assumption that students will have a good knowledge of American slavery and race relations including events during the Civil War leading to emancipation. The lesson can be used to introduce a unit on Reconstruction.

To begin, tell your students that you are going to have them assume the role of a slave who has been freed as a result of the Civil War. "It is 1866 and you have been free for nearly a year. What is freedom like? How is it different from slavery? You have the opportunity to write your former master a letter. What would you tell him or her about being free?" Spend a day having students read their letters in class, giving them the opportunity to draw comparisons about their descriptions of freedom. Have them speculate whether their letters would reflect the feelings of slaves who were freed at the time of the Civil War.

Next, tell your students that they will read "eyewitness accounts" about the aftermath of slavery by former masters and former slaves in three different societies--the United States, Cuba, and Zaria. Divide the class into small groups of equal size and give each group a different set of accounts--accounts by former masters, letters of former slaves, and recollections of former slaves. Appoint a discussion leader and tell each group to read and analyze the

accounts and agree on three generalizations about what freedom meant to either former masters or former slaves. Students should consider such matters as attitudes toward work, changing roles of masters and slaves, how and when slaves learned about freedom, attitudes toward land ownership, and so on. Allow several days for this activity, and when each group has reported and defended its generalizations, lead a class discussion about the difficulties of adjusting to freedom and whether the attitudes about freedom stated by students in their letters were shared by the writers of the accounts they have just analyzed.

---

*Teachers and students now have an opportunity to study Reconstruction from a comparative perspective.*

---

Finally, present to your students some of the insights about the aftermath of slavery in several societies from Thomas J. Pressly's article, "Reconstruction in the Southern United States: A Comparative Perspective." This might include a discussion of the common desire for land ownership by former slaves and the extent to which it was obtained, the reasons why former masters were able to retain their control after abolition, and the degree of political power, health care, and education gained by former slaves. Encourage the students to use the eyewitness accounts they have analyzed to support some of the ideas you have presented to them.

At this point you might turn to

a more detailed study of the Reconstruction Era. By reading, analyzing, and discussing accounts about the aftermath of emancipation in different settings, students will be able to develop a better understanding about the problems associated with the ending of slavery in the nineteenth century United States. ■

#### NOTES

1. Foner, Eric. *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*, 7. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983.
2. Leigh, Frances B. *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War*, 1-3, 13-16, 24-28, 32-33, 56-57, 73-74, 78-79. London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1883.
3. Vann Woodward, C., ed. *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, 805-806. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.
4. *Ibid.*, 827.
5. Smith, Mary B. *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Moslem Hausa*, 66-68. New York: Praeger, 1964.
6. These letters are reprinted in Litwack, Leon F. *Been In The Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, 333-335. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
7. Montejo, Esteban. *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, 59-60, 63-69, 83-85, 91-92, 171. New York: Vintage Press, 1973.
8. Yetman, Norman R. *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections From The Slave Narrative Collection*, 15, 17-18, 21-23, 91-93, 237-239. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970.

---

*Dean Brink is chairman of the history department at Roosevelt High School in Seattle Washington.*