

Florida Slave Narratives: Austin, Bill

Federal Writers' Project

1937

Bill Austin—he says his name is NOT Williams—is an ex-slave who gained his freedom because his mistress found it more advantageous to free him than to watch him.

Austin lives near Greenwood, Jackson County, Florida, on a small farm that he and his children operate. He says that he does not know his age, does not remember ever having heard it. But he must be pretty old, he says, "'cause I was a right smart size when Mistuh Smith went off to fight." He thinks he may be over a hundred—and he looks it—but he is not sure.

Austin was born between Greene and Hancock Counties, on the Oconee River, in Georgia. He uses the names of the counties interchangeably; he cannot be definite as to just which one was his birthplace. "The line between 'em was right there by us," he says.

His father was Jack; for want of a surname of his own he took that of his father and called himself Jack Smith. During a temporary shortage of funds on his master's part, Jack and Bill's mother was sold to a planter in the northern part of the state. It was not until long after his emancipation that Bill ever saw either of them again.

Bill's father Jack was regarded as a fairly good carpenter, mason and bricklayer; at times his master would let him do small jobs of repairing a building for neighboring planters. These jobs sometimes netted him hams, bits of cornmeal, cloth for dresses for his wife and children, and other small gifts; these he either used for his small family or bartered with the other slaves. Sometimes he sold them to the slaves for money; cash was not altogether unknown among the slaves on the Smith place.

Austin gives an interesting description of his master, Thomas Smith. He says that "sumptimes he was real rich and all of us had a good time. The wuk wasn't hard then, cause if we had big crops he would

borrow some he'p from the other white folks. He used to give us meat every day, and plenty of other things. One time he bought all of us shoes, and on Sunday night would let us go to wherever the preacher was holdin' meeting. He used to give my papa money sumptimes, too.

"But they used to whisper that he would gamble a lot. We used to see a whole lot of men come up to the house sumptimes and stay up most of the night. Sumptimes they would stay three or four days. And once in a while after one of these big doings Mistuh Smith would look worried, and we wouldn't get no meat and vary little of anything else for a long time. He would be crabby and beat us for any little thing. He used to tell my papa that he wouldn't have a d---cent until he made some crops."

A few years before he left to enter the war the slave owner came into possession of a store near his plantation. This store was in Greensboro. Either because the business paid or because of another of his economic 'bad spells', ownership of his plantation passed to a man named Kimball and most of the slaves, with the exception of Bill Austin and one or two women—either transferred with the plantation or sold. Bill was kept to do errands and general work around the store.

Bill learned much about the operation of the store, with the result that when Mr. Smith left with the Southern Army he left his wife and Bill to continue its operation. By this time there used to be frequent stories whispered among the slaves in the neighborhood—and who came with their masters into the country store—of how this or that slave ran away, and with the white man-power of the section engaged in war, remained at large for long periods or escaped altogether.

These stories always interested Austin, with the result that one morning he was absent when Mrs. Smith opened the store. He remained away 'eight or nine days, I guess', before a friend of the Smiths found him near Macon and threatened that he would 'half kill him' if he didn't return immediately.

Either the threat—or the fact that in Macon there were no readily available foodstuffs to be eaten all day as in the store—caused Austin to return. He was roundly berated by his mistress, but finally forgiven by the worried woman who needed his help around the store more than she needed the contrite promises and effusive declarations that he would 'behave alright for the rest of his life.'

And he did behave; for several whole months. But by this time he was 'a great big boy', and he had caught sight of a young woman who took his fancy on his trip to Macon. She was free herself; her father had bought her freedom with that of her mother a few years before, and did odd jobs for the white people in the city for a livelihood. Bill had thoughts of going back to Macon, marrying her, and bringing her back 'to work for Missus with me.' He asked permission to go, and was refused on the grounds that his help was too badly needed at the store. Shortly afterward he had again disappeared.

'Missus', however, knew too much of his plans by this time, and it was no difficult task to have him apprehended in Macon. Bill may not have had such great objections to the apprehension, either, he says, because by this time he had learned that the young woman in Macon had no slightest intention to give up her freedom to join him at Greensboro.

A relative of Mrs. Smith gave Austin a sound beating on his return; for a time it had the desired effect, and he stayed at the store and gave no further trouble. Mrs. Smith, however, thought of a surer plan of keeping him in Greensboro; she called him and told him he might have his freedom. Bill never attempted to again leave the place—although he did not receive a cent for his work—until his master had died, the store passed into the hands of one of Mr. Smith's sons, and the emancipation of all the slaves was a matter of eight or ten years' history!

When he finally left Greene and Hancock Counties—about fifty-five years ago, Austin settled in Jackson County. He married and began the raising of a family. At present he has nineteen living children, more grandchildren than he can accurately tell, and is living with his third wife, a woman in her thirties.

Source:

Excerpt from "Bill Austin" The Federal Writers' Project. Jacksonville, Florida, 1937.

Keywords: african americans, bill austin, slavery, slavery in Florida, slaves

[Back](#)

[Home](#) > [Floripedia](#) > [Florida Slave Narratives](#) > Austin, Bill

[Site Map](#)

[Exploring Florida: A Social Studies Resource for Students and Teachers](#)

Produced by the [Florida Center for Instructional Technology](#),
College of Education, University of South Florida © 2005.