

Florida Slave Narratives: Coates, "Father" Charles

Federal Writers' Project

1936

"Father" Charles Coates, as he is called by all who know him, was born a slave, 108 years ago at Richmond, Virginia, on the plantation of a man named L'Angle. His early boyhood days was spent on the L'Angle place filled with duties such as minding hogs, cows, bringing in wood and such light work. His wearing apparel consisted of one garment, a shirt made to reach below the knees and with three-quarter sleeves. He wore no shoes until he was a man past 20 years of age.

The single garment was worn summer and winter alike and the change in the weather did not cause an extra amount of clothes to be furnished for the slaves. They were required to move about so fast at work that the heat from the body was sufficient to keep them warm.

When Charles was still a young man Mr. L'Angle sold him on time payment to W.B. Hall; who several years before the Civil War moved from Richmond to Washington County, Georgia, carrying 135 grown slaves and many children. Mr. Hall made Charles his carriage driver, which kept him from hard labor. Other slaves on the plantation performed such duties as rail splitting, digging up trees by the roots and other hard work.

Charles Coates remembers vividly the cruelties practiced on the Hall plantation. His duty was to see that all the slaves reported to work on time. The bell was rung at 5:30 a.m. by one of the slaves. Charles had the ringing of the bell for three years; this was in addition to the carriage driving. He tells with laughter how the slaves would "grab a piece of meat and bread and run to the field" as no time was allowed to sit and eat breakfast. This was a very different way from that of the master he had before, as Mr. L'Angle was much better to his slaves.

Mr. Hall was different in many ways from Mr. L'Angle, "He was always pretending" says Charles that he did not want his slaves beaten unmercifully. Charles being close to Mr. Hall during work hours had opportunity to see and hear much about what was going on at the plantation. And he believes that Mr. Hall knew just how the overseer dealt with the slaves.

On the Hall plantation there was a contraption, similar to a gallows, where the slaves were suspended and whipped. At the top of this device were blocks of wood with chains run through holes and high enough that a slave when tied to the chains by his fingers would barely touch the ground with his toes. This was done so that the slave could not shout or twist his body while being whipped. The whipping was prolonged until the body of the slave covered with welts and blood trickled down his naked body. Women were treated in the same manner, and a pregnant woman received no more leniency than did a man. Very often after a severe flogging a slave's body was treated to a bath of water containing salt and pepper so that the pain would be more lasting and aggravated. The whipping was done with sticks and a whip called the "cat o' nine tails," meaning every lick meant nine. The "cat o' nine tails" was a whip of nine straps attached to a stick; the straps were perforated so that everywhere the hole in the strap fell on the flesh a blister was left.

The treatment given by the overseer was very terrifying. He relates how a slave was put in a room and locked up for two and three days at a time without water or food, because the overseer thought he hadn't done enough work in a given time.

Another offense which brought forth severe punishment was that of crossing the road to another plantation. A whipping was given and very often a slave was put on starvation for a few days.

One privilege given slaves on the plantation was appreciated by all and that was the opportunity to hear the word of God. The white people gathered in log and sometimes frame churches and the slaves were permitted to sit about the church yard on wagons and on the ground and listen to the preaching. When the slaves wanted to hold church they had to get special permission from the master, and at that time a slave hut was used. A white Preacher was called

in and he would preach to them not to steal, lie or run away and "be sure and git all dem weeds outen dat corn in de field and your master will think a heap of you." Charles does not remember anything else the preacher told them about God. They learned more about God when they sat outside the church waiting to drive their masters and family back home.

Charles relates an incident of a slave named Sambo who thought himself very smart and who courted the favor of the master. The neighboring slaves screamed so loudly while being whipped that Sambo told his master that he knew how to make a contraption which, if a slave was put into while being whipped would prevent him from making a noise. The device was made of two blocks of wood cut to fit the head and could be fastened around the neck tightly. When the head was put in, the upper and lower parts were clamped together around the neck so that the slave could not scream. The same effect as choking. The stomach of the victim was placed over a barrel which allowed freedom of movement. When the lash was administered and the slave wiggled, the barrel moved.

Now it so happened that Sambo was the first to be put into his own invention for a whipping. The overseer applied the lash rather heavily, and Sambo was compelled to wiggle his body to relieve his feelings. In wiggling the barrel under his stomach rolled a bit straining Sambo's neck and breaking it. After Sambo died from his neck being broken the master discontinued the use of the device, as he saw the loss of property in the death of slaves.

Charles was still a carriage driver when freedom came. He had opportunity to see and hear many things about the master's private life. When the news of the advance of the Union Army came, Mr. Hall carried his money to a secluded spot and buried it in an iron pot so that the soldiers who were confiscating all the property and money they could, would not get his money. The slave owners were required to notify the slaves that they were free so Mr. Hall sent his son Sherard to the cabins to notify all the slaves to come into his presence and there he had his son to tell them that they were free. The Union soldiers took much of the slave owners' property and gave to the slaves telling them that if the owners' took the property

back to write and tell them about it; the owners only laughed because they knew the slaves could not read nor write. After the soldiers had gone the timid and scared slaves gave up most of the land; some few however, fenced in a bit of land while the soldiers remained in the vicinity and they managed to keep a little of the land.

Many of the slaves remained with the owners. There they worked for small monthly wages and took whatever was left of cast off clothing and food and whatever the "old missus" gave them. A pair of old pants of the master was highly prized by them.

Charles Coates was glad to be free. He had been well taken care of and looked younger than 37 years of age at the close of slavery. He had not been married; had been put upon the block twice to be sold after belonging to Mr. Hall. Each time he was offered for sale, his master wanted so much for him, and refusing to sell him on time payments, he was always left on his master's hands. His master said "being tall, healthy and robust, he was well worth much money."

After slavery, Charles was rated as a good worker. He at once began working and saving his money and in a short time he had accumulated "around \$200."

The first sight of a certain young woman caused him to fall in love. He says the love was mutual and after a courtship of three weeks they were married. The girl's mother told Charles that she had always been very frail, but he did not know that she had consumption. Within three days after they were married she died and her death caused much grief for Charles.

He was reluctant to bury her and wanted to continue to stand and look at her face. A white doctor and a school teacher whose names he does not remember, told him to put his wife's body in alcohol to preserve it and he could look at it all the time. At that time white people who had plenty of money and wanted to see the faces of their deceased used this method.

A glass casket was used and the dressed body of the deceased was placed in alcohol inside the casket. Another casket made of wood held the glass casket and the whole was placed in a vault made of stone or brick. The walls of the vault were left about four feet above the ground and a window and ledge were placed in front, so when the casket was placed inside of the vault the bereaved could lean upon the ledge and look in at the face of the deceased. The wooden casket was provided with a glass top part of the way so that the face could easily be seen.

Although the process of preserving the body in alcohol cost \$160, Charles did not regret the expense saying, "I had plenty of money at that time."

After the death of his wife, Charles left with his mother and father, Henrietta and Spencer Coates and went to Savannah, Georgia. He said they were so glad to go, that they walked to within 30 miles of Savannah, when they saw a man driving a horse and wagon who picked them up and carried them into Savannah. It was in that city that he met his present wife, Irene, and they were married about 1876.

There are nine grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren living and in March of 1936, when a party was given in honor of Father Coates' 108th birthday, one of each of the four generations of his family were present.

The party was given at the Clara White Mission, 615 West Ashley Street by Ertha M.M. White. Father Coates and his wife were very much honored and each spoke encouraging words to those present. On the occasion he said that the cause for his long life was due to living close to nature, rising early, going to bed early and not dissipating in any way.

He can "shout" (jumping about a foot and a half from the floor and knocking his heels together.) He does chores about his yard; looks years younger than he really is and enjoys good health. His hair is partly white; his memory very good and his chief delight is talking about God and his goodness. He has preached the gospel in his

humble way for a number of years, thereby gaining the name of "Father" Coates.

Source:

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