

Florida Slave Narratives: Mullen, Mack

Federal Writers' Project

1936

Mack Mullen, a former slave who now lives at 521 W. First Street, Jacksonville, Florida, was born in Americus, Georgia in 1857, eight years before Emancipation, on a plantation which covered an area of approximately five miles. Upon this expansive plantation about 200 slaves lived and labored. At its main entrance stood a large white colonial mansion.

In this abode lived Dick Snellings, the master, and his family. The Snellings plantation produced cotton, corn, oats, wheat, peanuts, potatoes, cane and other commodities. The live stock consisted primarily of hogs and cattle. There was on the plantation what was known as a "crib," where oats, corn and wheat were stored, and a "smoke house" for pork and beef. The slaves received their rations weekly, it was apportioned according to the number in the family.

Mack Mullen's mother was named Ellen and his father Sam. Ellen was "house woman" and Sam did the blacksmithing, Ellen personally attended Mrs. Snellings, the master's wife. Mack being quite young did not have any particular duties assigned to him, but stayed around the Snellings mansion and played. Sometimes "marster" Snellings would take him on his knee and talk to him. Mack remembers that he often told him that some day he was going to be a noble man. He said that he was going to make him the head overseer. He would often give him candy and money and take him in his buggy for a ride.

Plantation Life: The slaves lived in cabins called quarters, which were constructed of lumber and logs. A white man was their overseer, he assigned the slaves their respective tasks. There was also a slave known as a "caller." He came around to the slave cabins every morning at four o'clock and blew a "cow-horn" which was the signal for the slaves to get up and prepare themselves for work in the fields.

All of them on hearing this horn would arise and prepare their meal; by six o'clock they were on their way to the fields. They would work all day, stopping only for a brief period at midday to eat. Mack Mullen says that some of the most beautiful spirituals were sung while they labored.

The women wore towels wrapped around their heads for protection from the sun, and most of them smoked pipes. The overseer often took Mack with him astride his horse as he made his "rounds" to inspect the work being done. About sundown, the "cow-horn" of the caller was blown and all hands stopped work, and made their way back to their cabins. One behind the other they marched singing "I'm gonna wait 'til Jesus Comes." After arriving at their cabins they would prepare their meals; after eating they would sometimes gather in front of a cabin and dance to the tunes played on the fiddle and the drum. The popular dance at that time was known as the "figure dance." At nine p.m. the overseer would come around; everything was supposed to be quiet at that hour. Some of the slaves would "turn in" for the night while others would remain up as long as they wished or as long as they were quiet.

The slaves were sometimes given special holidays and on those days they would give "quilting" parties (quilt making) and dances. These parties were sometimes held on their own plantation and sometimes on a neighboring one. Slaves who ordinarily wanted to visit another plantation had to get a permit from the master. If they were caught going off the plantation without a permit, they were severely whipped by the "patrolmen" (white men especially assigned to patrol duty around the plantation to prevent promiscuous wandering from plantations and "runaways.")

Whipping: There was a white man assigned only to whip the slaves when they were insubordinate; however, they were not allowed to whip them too severely as "Marster" Snellings would not permit it. He would say "a slave is of no use to me beaten to death."

Marriage: When one slave fell in love with another and wanted to marry they were given a license and the matrimony was "sealed." There was no marriage ceremony performed. A license was all that was necessary to be considered married. In the event that the

lovers lived on separate plantations the master of one of them would buy the other lover or wedded one so that they would be together. When this could not be arranged they would have to visit one another, but live on their respective plantations.

Religion: The slaves had a regular church house, which was a small size building constructed of boards. Preaching was conducted by a colored minister especially assigned to this duty. On Tuesday evenings prayer meeting was held; on Thursday evenings, preaching; and on Sundays both morning and evening preaching. At these services the slaves would "get happy" and shout excitedly. Those desiring to accept Christ were admitted for baptism.

Baptism: On baptismal day, the candidates attired in white robes which they had made, marched down to the river where they were immersed by the minister. Slaves from neighboring plantations would come to witness this sacred ceremony. Mack Mullen recalls that many times his "marster" on going to view a baptism took him along in his buggy. It was a happy scene, he relates. The slaves would be there in great numbers scattered about over the banks of the river. Much shouting and singing went on. Some of the "sisters" and "brothers" would get so "happy" that they would lose control of themselves and "fall out." It was then said that the Holy Ghost had "struck 'em." The other slaves would view this phenomena with awe and reverence, and wait for them to "come out of it." "Those were happy days and that was real religion," Mack Mullen said.

Education: The slaves were not given any formal education, however, Mullen's master was not as rigid as some of the slaveholders in prohibiting the slaves from learning to read and write. Mrs. Snellings, the mistress, taught Mack's mother to read and write a little, and Mr. Snellings also taught Mack's father how to read, write and figure. Having learned a little they would in turn impart their knowledge to their fellow slaves.

Freedom: Mullen vividly recalls the day that they heard of their emancipation; loud reports from guns were heard echoing through the woods and plantations; after awhile "Yankee" soldiers came and informed them that they were free. Mr. Snellings showed no resistance and he was not harmed. The slaves on hearing this good

news of freedom burst out in song and praises to God: it was a gala day. No work was done for a week; the time was spent in celebrating. The master told his slaves that they were free and could go wherever they wanted to, or they could remain with him if they wished. Most of his 200 slaves refused to leave him because he was considered a good master.

They were thereafter given individual farms, mules and farm implements with which to cultivate the land; their former master got a share out of what was raised. There was no more whipping, no more forced labor and hours were less drastic.

Mack Mullen's parents were among those slaves who remained; they lived there until Mr. Snellings died, and then moved to Isonvillen, near Americus, Georgia, where his father opened a black-smith shop, and made enough money to buy some property. Another child was added to the family, a girl named Mariah. By this time Mack had become a young man with a strong desire to travel, so he bade his parents farewell and headed for Tampa, Florida. After living there awhile he came to Jacksonville, Florida. At the time of his arrival in Jacksonville, Bay Street was paved with blocks and there were no hard surfaced streets in the city.

He was one of the construction, foremen of the Windsor Hotel. Mack Mullen is tall, grey haired, sharp featured and of Caucasian strain (his mother was a mulatto) with a keen mind and an appearance that belies his 75 years. He laments that he was freed because his master was good to his slaves; he says "we had everything we wanted; never did I think I'd come to this—got to get relief."

Source:

Excerpt from "Mack Mullen" The Federal Writers' Project. 521 West First Street, Jacksonville, Florida, 1936.

Keywords: african americans, slavery, slavery in florida, slaves, mack mullen

[Back](#)

[Home](#) > [Floripedia](#) > [Florida Slave Narratives](#) > Mullen, Mack

[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.