

Florida Slave Narratives: Sherman, William

Federal Writers' Project

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In Chaseville, Florida, about twelve miles from Jacksonville on the south side of the Saint Johns River lives William Sherman (locally pronounced _Schumann_) a former slave of Jack Davis, nephew of President Jefferson Davis of the Confederacy.

William Sherman was born on the plantation of Jack Davis, about five miles from Robertsville, South Carolina, at a place called "Black Swamp," June 12, 1842, twenty-three years prior to Emancipation. His father who was also named William Sherman, was a free man, having bought his freedom for eighteen hundred dollars from his master, John Jones, who also lived in the vicinity of the Davis' plantation. William Sherman, senior, bargained with his master to obtain his freedom, however, for he did not have the money to readily pay him. He hired himself out to some of the wealthy plantation owners and applied what he earned toward the payment for his freedom. He was a skilled blacksmith and cabinet maker and his services were always in demand. After procuring his freedom he bought a tract of land from his former master and built a home and blacksmith shop on it. As was the custom during slavery, a person who bought his freedom had to have a guardian; Sherman's former master, John Jones, acted as his guardian. Under this new order of things Sherman was in reality his own master. He was not "bossed," had his own hours, earned and kept his money, and was at liberty to leave the territory if he desired. However, he remained and married Anna Georgia, the mother of William Sherman, junior. She was also a slave of Jack Davis. After William Sherman, senior, finished his day's work he would go to the Davis plantation to visit his wife and sometimes remain for the night. It was his intention to purchase the freedom of his wife Anna Georgia, and their son William, but he died before he had sufficient money to do so, and also before the Civil War, which he predicted would ensue between the North and South. His son William says that he remembers well the events that led up to his father's burial; he states that the white

people dug his grave which was six feet deep. It took them three days in which to dig it on account of the hardness of the clay; when it was finished he was put sorrowfully away by the white folk who thought so much of him. William was a boy of nine at that time, and he remembers that his mother was so grieved that he tried to console her by telling her not to worry "papa's goin' to com' back and bring us some more quails" (he had been accustomed to bringing them quails during his life) but William sorrowingly said "he never did come back."

Anna Georgia was a cook and general house woman in the Davis' home. She was a half breed, her mother being a Cherokee Indian. Her husband, William, was a descendant of the Cheehaw Indians, some of his a forbears being full-blooded Cheehaws. Their Indian blood was fully evident, states William junior. The Davis family tree as he knew it was as follows: three brothers, Sam, Thomas and Jefferson Davis (President of the Confederacy.) Sam was the eldest of the three and had four children, viz: Jack, Robert, Richard and Washington. Thomas had four, viz: James, Richard, Rusha and Minna. Jefferson Davis' family was not known to William as he lived in Virginia, whereas, the other brothers and their families lived near each other at "Black Swamp."

Jack Davis, the master of William Sherman, was the son of Sam Davis, brother of Jefferson Davis. Thomas and Sam Davis were comparatively large men, while Jefferson was thin and of medium height, resembling to a great extent the late Henry Flagler of Florida East Coast fame, states William. Many times he would come to visit his brothers at "Black Swamp." He would drive up in a two-wheeled buggy, drawn by a horse. Oft'times he visited his nephew, Jack and they would get together in a lengthy conversation. Sometimes he would remain with the Davis family for a few days and then return to Virginia. On these visits William states that he saw him personally. These visits or sojourns occurred prior to the Civil War. Jack Davis being a comparatively poor man had only eight slaves on his plantation; they were housed in log cabins made of cypress timber notched together in such a way as to give it the appearance of having been built regular lumber. It was much larger and of different architecture than the slave cabins, however.

The few slaves that he had arose at 4:00 o'clock in the morning and prepared themselves for the field. They stopped at noon for a light lunch which they always took with them and at sun-down they quit work and went to their respective cabins. Cotton, corn, potatoes and other commodities were raised. There was no regular "overseer" employed. Davis, the master acted in that capacity. He was very kind to them and seldom used the whip. After the outbreak of the Civil War, white men called "patarollers" were posted around the various plantations to guard against runaways, and if slaves were caught off their respective plantations without permits from their masters they were severely whipped. This was not the routine for Jack Davis' slaves for he gave the "patarollers" specific orders that if any of them were caught off the plantation without a permit not to molest them but to let them proceed where they were bound. Will said that one of the slaves ran away and when he was caught his master gave him a light whipping and told him to "go on now and run away if you want to." He said the slave walked away but never attempted to run away again. Will states that he was somewhat of a "pet" around the plantation and did almost as he wanted to. He would go hunting, fishing and swimming with his master's sons who were about his age. Sometimes he would get into a fight with one of the boys and many times he would be the victor, his fallen foe would sometimes exclaim that "that licking that you gave me sure hurt," and that ended the affair; there was no further ill feeling between them.

Education: The slaves were not allowed to study. The white children studied a large "Blue Back" Webster Speller and when one had thoroughly learned its contents he was considered to be educated.

Religion: The slaves had their own church but sometimes went to the churches of their white masters where they were relegated to the extreme rear. John Kelley, a white man, often preached to them and would admonish them as follows; "you must obey your master and missus, you must be good niggers." After the beginning of the war they held "meetings" among themselves in their cabins.

Baptism: Those slaves who believed and accepted the Christian Doctrine were admitted into the church after being baptized in one of the surrounding ponds.

Cruelties: There was a very wealthy plantation owner who lived near the Davis plantation; he had eleven plantations, the smallest one was cultivated by three hundred slaves. Oftimes they would work nearly all night. Will states that it was not an unusual thing to hear in the early mornings the echoes of rawhide whips cracking like the report of a gun against the bare backs of the slaves who were being whipped. They would moan and groan in agony, but the whipping went on until the master's wrath was appeased. John Stokes, a white plantation owner who lived near the Davis' plantation encouraged slaves to steal from their masters and bring the stolen goods to him; he would purchase the goods for much less than their value. One time one of the slaves "put it out" that "Massa" Stokes was buying stolen goods. Stokes heard of this and his wrath was aroused; he had to find the "nigger" who was circulating this rumor. He went after him in great fury and finally succeeded in locating him, whereupon, he gave him a good "lacing" and warned him "if he ever heard anything like that again from him he was going to kill him." The accusations were true, however, but the slave desisted in further discussion of the affair for "old Massa Stokes was a treacherous man." On another occasion one of the Stokes' slaves ran away and he sent Steven Kittles, known as the "dog man," to catch the escape. (The dogs that went in pursuit of the runaway slaves were called "Nigger dogs"; they were used specifically for catching runaway slaves.) This particular slave had quite a "head start" on the dogs that were trailing him and he hid among some floating logs in a large pond; the dogs trailed him to the pond and began howling, indicating that they were approaching their prey. They entered the pond to get their victim who was securely hidden from sight; they disappeared and the next seen of them was their dead bodies floating upon the water of the pond; they had been killed by the escape. They were full-blooded hounds, such as were used in hunting escaped slaves and were about fifty in number. The slave made his escape and was never seen again. Will relates that it was very cold and that he does'nt understand how the

slave could stand the icy waters of the pond, but evidently he did survive it.

Civil War: It was rumored that Abraham Lincoln said to Jefferson Davis, "work the slaves until they are about twenty-five or thirty years of age, then liberate them." Davis replied: "I'll never do it, before I will, I'll wade knee deep in blood." The result was that in 1861, the Civil War, that struggle which was to mark the final emancipation of the slaves began. Jefferson Davis' brothers, Sam and Tom, joined the Confederate forces, together with their sons who were old enough to go, except James, Tom's son, who could not go on account of ill health and was left behind as overseer on Jack Davis' plantation. Jack Davis joined the artillery regiment of Captain Razors Company. The war progressed, Sherman was on his famous march. The "Yankees" had made such sweeping advances until they were in Robertsville, South Carolina, about five miles from Black Swamp. The report of gun fire and cannon could be heard from the plantation. "Truly the Yanks are here" everybody thought. The only happy folk were, the slaves, the whites were in distress. Jack Davis returned from the field of battle to his plantation. He was on a short furlough. His wife, "Missus" Davis asked him excitedly, if he thought the "Yankees" were going to win. He replied: "No if I did I'd kill every _damned nigger_ on the place." Will who was then a lad of nineteen was standing nearby and on hearing his master's remarks, said: "The Yankees aint gonna kill me cause um goin to Laurel Bay" (a swamp located on the plantation.) Will says that what he really meant was that his master was not going to kill him because he intended to run off and go to the "Yankees." That afternoon Jack Davis returned to the "front" and that night Will told his mother, Anna Georgia, that he was going to Robertsville and join the "Yankees." He and his cousin who lived on the Davis' plantation slipped off and wended their way to all of the surrounding plantations spreading the news that the "Yankees" were in Robertsville and exhorting them to follow and join them. Soon the two had a following of about five hundred slaves who abandoned their masters' plantations "to meet the Yankees." En masse they marched breaking down fences that obstructed their passage, carefully avoiding "Confederate pickets" who were stationed throughout the countryside. After marching about five miles they

reached a bridge that spanned the Savannah River, a point that the "Yankees" held. There was a Union soldier standing guard and before he realized it, this group of five hundred slaves were upon him. Becoming cognizant that someone was upon him, he wheeled around in the darkness, with gun leveled at the approaching slaves and cried "Halt!" Will's cousin then spoke up, "Doan shoot boss we's jes friends." After recognizing who they were, they were admitted into the camp that was established around the bridge. There were about seven thousand of General Sherman's soldiers camped there, having crossed the Savannah River on a pontoon bridge that they had constructed while enroute from Green Springs Georgia, which they had taken. The guard who had let these people approach so near to him without realizing their approach was court martialed that night for being dilatory in his duties. The Federal officers told the slaves that they could go along with them or go to Savannah, a place that they had already captured. Will decided that it was best for him to go to Savannah. He left, but the majority of the slaves remained with the troops. They were enroute to Barnswell, South Carolina, to seize Blis Creek Fort that was held by the Confederates. As the Federal troops marched ahead, they were followed by the volunteer slaves. Most of these unfortunate slaves were slain by "bush whackers" (Confederate snipers who fired upon them from ambush.) After being killed they were decapitated and their heads placed upon posts that lined the fields so that they could be seen by other slaves to warn them of what would befall them if they attempted to escape. The battle at Blis Creek Fort was one in which both armies displayed great heroism; most of the Federal troops that made the first attack, were killed as the Confederates seemed to be irresistible. After rushing up reinforcements, the Federals were successful in capturing it and a large number of "Rebels."

General Sherman's custom was to march ahead of his army and cut rights of way for them to pass. At this point of the war, many of the slaves were escaping from their plantations and joining the "Yankees." All of those slaves at Black Swamp who did not voluntarily run away and go to the "Yankees" were now free by right of conquest of the Federals.

Will now found himself in Savannah, Georgia, after refusing to go to Barnswell, South Carolina, with the Federals. This refusal saved him from the fate of his unfortunate brothers who went. Savannah was filled with smoke, the aftermath of a great battle. Lying in the "Broad River" between Beaufort, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia were two Union gun boats, the Wabash and Man O War, which had taken part in the battle that resulted in the capture of Savannah. Everything was now peaceful again; Savannah was now a Union city. Many of the slaves were joining the Union army. Those slaves who joined were trained about two days and then sent to the front; due to lack of training they were soon killed. The weather was cold, it was February, 1862, frost was on the ground. Will soon left Savannah for Beaufort, South Carolina which had fallen before the "Yankee" attack. Soldiers and slaves filled the streets. The slaves were given all of the food and clothes that they could carry--confiscated goods from the "Rebels." After a bloody struggle in which both sides lost heavily and which lasted for about five years, the war finally ended May 15, 1865. Will was then a young man twenty-three years of age and was still in Beaufort. He says that day was a gala day. Everybody celebrated (except the Southerners). The slaves were free.

Thousands of Federal soldiers were in evidence. The Union army was victorious and "Sherman's March" was a success. Sherman states that when Jefferson Davis was captured he was disguised in women's clothes.

Sherman states that Florida had the reputation of having very cruel masters. He says that when slaves got very unruly, they were told that they were going to be sent to Florida so they could be handled. During the war thousands of slaves fled from Virginia into Connecticut and New Hampshire. In 1867 William Sherman left Beaufort and went to Mayport, Florida to live. He remained there until 1890, then moved to Arona, Florida, living there for awhile; he finally settled in Chaseville, Florida, where he now lives. During his many years of life he has been married twice and has been the father of sixteen children, all of whom are dead. He never received any formal education, but learned to read and studied taxidermy which he practiced for many years.

He was at one time Inspector of Elections at Mayport during Reconstruction Days. He recalled an incident that occurred during the performance of his duties there, which was as follows: Mr. John Doggett who was running for office on the Democratic ticket brought a number of colored people to Mayport by boat from Chaseville to vote. Mr. Doggett demanded that they should vote, but Will Sherman was equally insistent that they should not vote because they had not registered and were not qualified. After much arguing Mr. Doggett saw that Sherman could not be made "to see the light" and left with his prospective voters. William Sherman once served upon a United States Federal jury during his colorful life.

In appearance he could easily be regarded as a phenomenon. He is ninety-four years of age, though he appears to be only about fifty-five. His hair is black and not grey as would be expected; his face is round and unlined; he has dark piercing but kindly eyes. He is of medium stature. He has an exceptionally alert mind and recalls past events with the ease of a youth. The Indian blood that flows in his veins is plainly visible in his features, the color of his skin and the texture of his hair.

He gives as his reason for his lengthy life the Indian blood that is in him and says that he expects to live for nintey-four more years. Today he lives alone. He raises a few vegetables and is content in the memories of his past life which has been full.

Source:

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[Back](#)

[Home](#) > [Floripedia](#) > [Florida Slave Narratives](#) > Sherman, William

[Site Map](#)

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