

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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For the State of Mississippi
Henri Necaïse - age 105

Foreword: Henri Necaïse, ex-slave, 105 years old, lives a half-mile south of Nicholson on US 11. Uncle Henri lives in a small plank cabin enclosed by a fence. He owns his cabin and a small piece of land. He is about five feet ten inches tall and weighs 120 pounds. His sight and hearing are very good.

"I was born in Harrison County, 19 miles from Pass Christian, 'long de ridge road from de swamp near Wolf River. My Marster was Ursan Ladnier. De Mistis' name was Popone. Us was all French, My father was a white man, Anatole Necaïse. I knowed he was my father, 'cause he used to call me to him an' toll me I was his oldes' son.

"I never knowed my mother. I was a slave an' my mother was sol' from me an' her other chilluns. Dey tol' me when day sol' 'er my sister was a-holdin' me in her arms. She was standin' behin' de Big House peckin' 'roun' de corner an' seen de las' o' her mother. I seen her go, too. Dey tell me I used to go to de gate a-huntin' for my mammy. I used to sleep wid my sister after dat.

"Jus' lemme study a little, an' I'll tell you 'bout de Big House. It was 'bout 60 feet long, built o' hewed logs, in two parts. De floors was made o' clay dey didn' have lumber for floors den. Us lived right close to de Big House in a cabin. To tell de truf, de fac' o' de business is, my Marster took care o' me better'n I can take care o' mysef now.

"When us was slaves Marster tell us what to do. He say, 'Henri, do dis, do dat.' An' us done it. Den us didn' have to think whar de nex' meal comin' from, or de nex' pair o' a hose or pants. De grub an' clo'es give us was better'n I ever gits now.

"Lemme think an' count. My Marster didn' have a lot o' slaves. Dere was one, two, three, fo', yes'm, jus' fo' o' us slaves. I was do stockholder. I tended de sheep an' cows an' such lak. My Marster didn' raise no big crops, jus' corn an' garden stuff. He had a heap o' cattle. Dey could run out in de big woods den, an' so could de sheeps. He sol' cattle to N'awlins an' Mobile, where he could git de bes' price. Dat's de way folks does now, mint it! Dey sells wherever dey can git de mos' money.

"Dey didn' give me money, but, you see, I was a slave. Dey sho' give me ever'thing else I need, clo'es an' shoes. I always had a-plenty t'eat, better'n I can git now. I was better off when I was a slave dan I is now, 'cause I had ever'thing furnished me den. Now. I got to do it all myse'f.

"My Marster was a Catholic. One thing I can thank dem godly white folks for, dey raise' me right. Dey taugt me out o' God's word, 'Our Father which art in Heaven.' Ever'body ought-a know dat prayer."

(Note. In this Wolf River territory in Harrison County, where Uncle Henri was born and raised, all the settlers were French Catholics, and it was the scene of early Catholic missions.)

"I was rais' a Catholic, but when I come here twant no church an' I joined de Baptis' an' was baptised. Now de white folks lemme go to dey church. Dey aint no cullud church near 'nough so's I can go. I spec' its all right. I figgers dat God is ever'- where.

"My Mistis knowed how to read an' write. I don' know 'bout de Marster. He could keep sto' anyway. Us all spoke French in dem days. I near 'bout forgit all de songs us used to sing. Day was all in French anyway, an' when you don' speak no French for 'bout 60 years, you jus' forgit it.

"I'se knowed slaves to run away, an' I'se seen 'em whupped. I seen good marsters an' mean ones. Dey was good slaves an' mean ones. But to tell de truf, if dey tol' a slave to do anything, den he jus' better de it.

"I was big 'nough in de Civil War to drive five yoke o' steers to Mobile an' git grub to feed de wimmins an' chilluns. Some o' de mans was a-fightin' an' some was a-runnin' an' hidin'. I was a slave an' I had to do what dey tol' me. I carried grub into de swamp to men, but I never knowed what dey was a-hidin' from."

(This may be explained by the fact that Uncle Henri was owned by and lived in a settlement of French People. Many of whom probably had no convictions or feeling of loyalty, one way or the other, during the War Between the States.)

"My old Marster had fo' sons, an' de younges' one went to de war an' was killed.

"De Yankees come to Pass Christian, I was dere, an' seen 'em. Dey come up de river an' tore up things as dey went along.

"I was 31 years old when I was set free. My Marster didn' tell us 'bout bein' free. De way I foun' it out, he started to whup me once an' de young Marster up an' says, 'You aint got no right to whup him now, he's free.' Den Marster turnt me loose.

"It was dem Carpetbaggers dat 'stroyed de country. Dey went an' turned us loose, jas' lak a passel o' cattle, an' didn' show us nothin' or giv' us nothin'. Dey was acres an' acres o' lan' not in use, an' lots o' timber in de country. Dey should-a give each one o' us a little farm an' let us git out timber an' build houses. Dey ought to put a white Marster over us, to show us an' make us work, only let us be free 'stead o' slaves. I think dat would-a been better'n turnin' us loose lak dey done.

"I lef' my Marster an' went over to de Jordan River, an' dere I stayed an' worked. I saved my money an' dat giv' me a start. I never touched it 'til de year was winded up. To tell do truf, de fac's o' de matter is, it was my Marsters kinfolks I was workin' for!

"I bought me a schooner wid dat money an' carried charcoal to N'awlins. I done dis for 'bout two years an' den I los' my schooner in a storm off o' Bay St. Louis.

"After I los' my schooner, I come here an' got married. Dis was in 1875 an' I was 43 years old. Dat was my firs' time to marry. I'se got dat same wife today. She was born a slave, too. I didn' have no chillun, but my wife did. She had one gal-chil'. She lives at Westonia an' is de mammy o'

ten chillun. She done better'n us done. I'se got a lot o' gran'-chillun. What does you call de next dent Lemme see, great gran'-chillun, dat's it.

"I never did b'lieve in no ghos' an' hoodoos an' charms.

"I never did look for to git nothin' after I was free. I had dat in my head to git me 80 acres o' lan' an' homestead it. As for de gov'ment making me a present o' anything, I never thought 'bout it. But jus' now I needs it.

"I did git me dis little farm, 40 acres, but I bought it an' paid for it myse'f. I got de money by workin' for it. When I come to dis country I dug wells an' built chimneys an' houses. (Once I dug a well 27 feet an' come to a coal bed. I went through de coal an' foun' water. Dat was on de Jordon River.) Dat clay chimney an' dis here house has been built 52 years. I's still lives' in 'em. Dey's mine. One acre, I giv' to de Lawd for a graveyard an' a churchhouse. I wants to be buried dere myse'f.

"A white lady paid my taxes dis year. I raises a garden an' gits de Old Age 'Sistance. It aint 'nough to buy grub an' clo'es for me an' de old woman an' pay taxes, so us jus' has to git 'long de bes' us can wid de white folks he'p.

"It aint none o' my business 'bout whether de Niggers is better off free dan slaves. I dont know 'cept 'bout me, I was better off den. I did earn money after I was free, but after all, you know money is de root o' all evil. Dat what de Good Book say. When I was a slave I only had to obey my Marster an' he furnish me ever'thing. Once in a while he would whup me, but what was dat? You can't raise nary chile, white or black, widout chastisin'. De law didn' low dem to dominize over us, an' dey didn' try.

"I's gittin' mighty old now, but I used to be pretty spry. I used to go 60 miles out on de Gulf o' Mexico, as 'terpreter on dem big ships dat come from France. Dat was 'fore I done forgot my French talk what I was raised to speak.

"De white folks is mighty good to me. De riches' man in Picayune, he recognizes me an' gives me two bits or fo' bits. I sho' has plenty o' good frien's. If I gits out o' grub, I catches me a ride to town, an' I comes back wid de grub.

"De good Lawd, he don't forgit me."

My wife Minnie was a slave too, but she doan' remember it, an' she won't talk, she allus say, "Ask Henry".

Minnie was called but would only say, - I was born in a swamp near Gainesville. My marster was Mist' Roche, an my father was Jack Roche an' my mammy Harriet Roche. Here is my age in de Bible, Mintora Necaïse, born March 11, 1861.

Here Henri took up the story.

I firs' met Minnie right out here in front of dis house. She was visitin' her sister an' was out walkin' wid her mother. She had on a green dress, an' two or three young mens was a followin' along behin'. I walked up to 'em an say, "Who de gal in de green dress?" Dey tells me, but dey say, "She won't talk none." "What, is she deaf or dumb"?

"No, but she won't talk."

"Interjuce me" I says, "an' I'll make her talk."

Dey promise dey would, but when we 'proach de gal an' her mother de boys fell back an' lef' me alone.

Den I bowed to her mother an' say, "Miz Roche, I is Mist' Henri Necaïse", an' den she make me 'quainted wid de gal.

Well, jes' as I says, I make de gal talk to me. (he was 43 and she was 14) an we is married an' livin' in dis house more'n 50 years. She is de onlies' wife I has ever had - dat's love ain' it?

But the interview had to end abruptly, for the old darky had heard the millwhistle blow at Picayune, and began to wiggle uneasily in his chair.

Minnie, what we goan' do now. I wants my coffee.

Oh, we will go at once and if you want to go down to Westonia to see your daughter, we will take you, but can you leave Minnie?

Yes, yes, I goes away from her a heap. I used to go 60 miles out on de Gulf of Mexico, as 'terpreter on dem big ships dat come from France, dat was before I done forgot my French talk what I was raised to speak.

They went in the house, where Minnie's tongue was evidently unloosed for we heard her chattering volubly. He came out on the porch.

Doan' wait for me, Minnie say I cain't go dis time.

Interviewer: Unknown

Transcribed by Ann Allen Geoghegan