

Interviewer: Unknown
Transcribed by: Ann Allen Geoghegan

Mississippi Narratives
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Levi Ashley

Levi Ashley lives about two miles northeast of Liberty in Amite County. He is very old and somewhat feeble. "My name is Levi Ashley. I don't know how old I is, but I was tol' I was nine year old when I was sot free. Yes-sum, I 'member a heap 'bout de War. I was born on de Atacha-falaya River in Louisiana, on Mr. Dan McCraney's plantation. No'm, I don't know whut parish. Mr. Dan had a lot of slaves, an' he an' his wife, Miss Elviry, sho' was mean an' hard on 'em. All his cullud folks said he was hard an' laid de lash heavy. Dey tell me de levee broke, an' Marse Dan tuk ever'thing he had an' moved over in East Feliciana Parish, I reckon 'bout five or eight miles frum Baton Rouge. "Marse Dan owned a man an' his wife, name Rich an' Viney. Dey was good Christian people. Dey was Baptist, an' Marse Dan wouldn' let none of his slaves go to chu'ch. So dese darkies had prayer meetin' in dey home. Marse Dan hear'd 'bout it an' whupped 'em. Dey done it ag'in, an' he called 'em out to be whupped. Marse Dan sai, 'Rich an' Viney, didn' I tell you I'se gwine whup you ever' time I hear'd of you prayin'?' "Dey said, 'Yessir, but you can whup us ever' day, but you can't make us stop prayin' to my Jesus.' "Well, Marse

Dan said to Miss Elviry, 'Whut mus' I do wid 'em?' Miss Elviry said, 'Sot 'em free,' an' den she walked off. "Marse Dan sot 'em free. Den when de levee broke an' he moved off, he lef' 'em to drown. Nobody ever knowed whut become of 'em. Maybe dey drowned an' maybe dey got outer dat high water. "De place whar we moved in East Feliciana was name Mount Pleasant Plantation. We didn' live dere long fo' Marse Dan died. "Afte he died, Miss Elviry's brother, Mr. John Jones, an' her mother, Miss Fanny Jones, come to take charge of de plantation. De slaves thought Marse Dan was hard, but when Marse John come he was de hardes' man ever lived. De slaves had a good time befo'. Marse John would give 'em a peck of meal ever' Monday mornin' an' tell 'em it had to las' 'til nex' Monday. He give 'em fo' pounds of meat, an' dey had to grow dey own taters an' garden. Marse John kep' a li'l book, an' whenever a Nigger didn' do right to please him, he put dey name in dis book. Den when Friday night come, he would call up all de ones whose name was in de book an' tell 'em to strip, an' dey had to pull off ever'thing, jus' lak dey come into dis worl', women an' men. Den he would tell de driver to lay on de lash, an' would tell him jus' how many lashes to put on each of 'em. He laid de lash on heavy.

"De white folks had whut dey call de 'patteroll,' an' when slaves visited other plantations widout a pass, dis 'patteroll' would run you. Sometimes a slave would run 'way, an' de 'patteroll' would run you down wid dogs, an' den de lash was laid on heavy. Sometimes dey tied you when night come, to keep you frum runnin' 'way ag'in. "My mammy was name Ann, an' I was tol' my daddy was name Ashley. He lived on another man's plantation. I never seed him. My mammy died when I was small an' my Aunt Clarissy tuk me in charge. My aunt was de cook, an' she brung me up in de white folk's kitchen. Grown folks could stan' up in de fireplace, it was so tall. Yessum, dat kitchen was 'way off frum de house. It had iron rods hangin' frum de top of

de fireplace wid chains hangin' down fer pots an' pans. Dey cooks on de fireplace. Dey bakes bread an' cake in a oven wid three legs. De white folks had good things to eat, an' sometime I would slip a li'l of de cake er pie an' den I was sho' to be whupped if my aunt tol' on me. De white folks had silver spoons an' forks to eat wid, but de slaves had to eat wid mussel shells fer spoons, an' we sopped our gravy wid our bread. "When de War come, Marse John hid out in de woods. Men come 'round huntin' fer him but dey couldn' fin' him. One day two men caught me an' said, 'Whar you been, boy?' An' I said, 'To take Marse John his dinner.' Dey said, 'Whar is Marse John?' An' I said, 'He is back of de cow pen.' Dey sho' got him an' made him go wid 'em. I got a whuppin'." Afte while, de Yankees come an' went all thu de big house an' tuk all de silver an' money an' flour an' ever'thing dey could. Dey went out an' got our cattle an' mules. Miss Elviry had two fine mules - one name Nannie an' de other name Nancy, an' de man whut sot on his pony wid de big brass buttons on his coat made de sojers kill old Nancy. De sojers skin't her an' fo' long had her on a big fire cookin' dat meat. "I run up to de sojer an' said, 'Whut fer you kill Miss Elviry's car'iage mule?' He tol' me to shut up. I hit him wid a stick an' said, 'You oughter'n to kill Miss Elviry's mule.' He turn an' slapped my face, an' den I went to de house cryin', an' Miss Elviry said, 'You got whut was comin' to you.' I said, 'Miss Elviry, what makes you let 'em do dat?' "She had me shut up in de closet. Miss Elviry was skeered dey was goin' to burn her house. Befo' dey lef' dey put de well bucket in de bottom of de well an' tuk ever'thing outter de smokehouse. "We had mighty li'l lef' to eat. No salt, an' Miss Elviry had de dirt dug up in de smokehouse an' put in a hopper an' water poured on it an' dripped it, an' den boiled it, an' made salt. You know we had to go a mighty long way to git salt ever' year. "I was nine years old, so I was tol', when de War closed. When Marse John come home he an' Miss Elviry called

all de slaves up an' tried to make a 'pack' wid 'em. Dey didn' know nothin' 'bout a 'pack' an' dey wouldn' do it. Ever' one of 'em lef'. My Aunt Clarissa lef' too, an' tuk me wid her. Miss Elviry tol' my aunt ef she would leave me she would give her a hun'red dollars. But my aunt wouldn' leave me. We went over on de Fort Adams an' Woodville Road an' hired to a man by de name of Fletch Lewis. We had a hard time an' went frum place to place - git work fer a while an' den go on ag'in. "When Marse John was in de war he had his arm shot off an' afte' he come back, he didn' live long. Miss Elviry an' her mother, Miss Fanny, was lef' alone. Dey sho' got to be po' folks. Dey had to sell dey beddin' an' furniture in de house fer suppo't. All de old slaves sho' was glad to hear it. Dey was so mean to 'em. You know, lady, 'whut goes over de Devil's backbone is boun' to pass under his stomach' - an' dey got whut was comin' to 'em.

"I worked on fust one farm, den another. I didn' take my old marster's name lak a heap o' slaves done, 'cause he was so mean. Afte' while, I got work wid a man by de name of Mr. Howard Wright. He lived in Louisiana in de piney woods, but he had a sto'. He sho' was good to me. Not ever' slave owner was mean to his slaves, but Marse Dan an' Marse John was de meanes' ones. Mr. Wright had me to drive his mules an' wagon to Bayou Sara ever' week. I would haul cotton to town an' bring back things fer de sto'. I rode one mule an' drove de other three. He give me plen'y to eat an' paid me too. I worked fer him 'leven years. "One time de White Caps got afte' me, an' I run an' hid in a big thicket an' stayed dere all night. Early nex' mornin' when I was creepin' out, a white man got me an' said, 'I am goin' to whup you.' Den he an' I went together an' afte' while I got his gun; den I sho' did foot it to de house whar Mr. Wright was. I tol' Mr. Wright an' he tol' me to let him see dat gun. I showed it to him an' he said, 'I know dat gun; you

keep it.' I done so, an' afte' five years, a man give me \$5.00 to git it back. No'm, de white caps didn' whup me. Dat was de only time dey got afte' me. "I jined de St. Paul Baptist Chu'ch over in Louisiana an' I'se been a Baptist ever'since. Yes'm, I'se been mar'ied an' got a whole raft er hullun, but I don't know anything 'bout 'em. I'se tol' some of 'em might be in California. God knows whar dey be. "My wife lef' me twenty years ago. I'se been livin' in Amite County 'bout thirty years, maybe more. I live wid my daughter-in-law, Melissa. My son went off an' lef' her an' we live on Mr. John McGehee's place. I can't work. I'se blin' in one eye an' almos' blin' in de other. I git a li'l suppo't frum good white folks, who give me somepin' now an' den. An' sometime de 'lief helps me. People are mighty good to me.

"Fo' you go I want to tell you dat not all de white folks was mean to dey slaves. Some of 'em was mighty kin' an' good, so I is tol'. But mine was mighty mean. "Missus, fo' you go I want to tell you I tries to be a Christian, an' I don't wish nobody no harm, but somehow I know Miss Elviry was punished befo' she died. She sho' was sorry fer de way she treated her darkies. I'se had a hard time all my life, but I hopes to res' easy when I die."

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