

Mississippi Narratives
Prepared by
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Ephriam Robinson, age 87

Ephriam is very small and bent but rather active. He claims eighty-seven as his age and says that he was born in Hinds County on the plantation of a Mr. Allen Morrison, who was his owner. He says he was a very smart child and was well thought of by the white family. His father and mother before him were owned by the same people.

He wore for a garment a single long lowel shirt until he was nine years old, in fact, the first pants that he owned were made for him by his mistress, and this was why she made them. His young "Marster", Captain Allen Morrison of the Federal Army, had carried a young Negro slave as his body-servant to Virginia, and he did not behave so well. So when a friend of the soldier was coming home on furlough, Captain Morrison sent him back home to his father and asked him to send him the boy, Ephriam, to be his waiting boy. Ephriam was anxious to go as he wanted to see things, so his mammy, who was a home-servant, dyed some dove-gray homespun, and his mistress cut out and made him a suit. He remembers the pants having a stripe on the legs.

He remembers changing trains some place in Alabama and riding on the train for many days with the friend of his captain. He also recalls that, at the end of the journey, they were met in a covered cart with two wheels drawn by a red mule and carried into the wilderness to the camp. He was very tired after his trip, and it was many days before he was able to be of any service to his "Marster." But, after that, he did all of his errands, kept his boots shined, and pulled up his boots at night with the aid of a bootjack.

Ephriam claims to have seen the result of two battles, and he says that he saw soldiers in blue piled up, killed in enemy position, and so the same was true of the soldiers in gray. He remembers helping to load

carts of arms and legs that army surgeons had removed at the hospitals in order to save lives. These legs and arms were later buried by colored helpers. When asked if he wished to see the Union Army win, he said, no, and that he did not believe they could win with such men as his "Marsters" fighting them.

At the time of the surrender he was in Culpepper, Virginia. He said that the Southern soldiers cried like babies, and that he cried, too. Later, however, he realized that he and his parents were free, and when he got back home he was glad. His parents stayed right on, as the family had always been kind to them, but as he got older he went off to make money for himself. That was why he came to the city of Vicksburg. He does not know what year he came here, but he says it was not long after the war.

He has always been a good worker, and he says he has never had a hard time getting a job. Although he is so feeble now, he still has his lawn mower and grass cutting tools and was on his way to cut a lawn that he has been caring for nearly thirty years when interviewed.

During the time he has been in Vicksburg, he has held different jobs such as horseman, yardman, grocery store porter, but the one he held the longest was grave digger in a cemetery. This job he held twenty-nine years. In that time, he said that he dug two thousand and eighty-seven graves, and at the same time, he used to do odd jobs for the "white folks." He says, "Why child, white folks used to pull after me to work as you'd pull for a fat chicken."

Ephriam was married once and was the father of five children. He outlived his wife who died twenty years ago, and has outlived all of his children except one, his baby boy whose age is about sixty-five.

When asked if he remembered overseers, he said, "Yes, and nigger drivers, too." He explained that the boss would always use colored men on the place as straw bosses. These were called nigger drivers.

He said that the drivers would whip you harder than the "Marster," because the Marster knew if he hurt you or killed you it was his loss. Once when a slave hand ran away and they were trying to catch him, another plantation owner shot his Marster's slave in the hips and magots got in the place. The slave died, and not only did the slave owner sue the other man but never spoke to him again.

"Yes," said Ephriam, "I knew some mean slave owners. One by the name of Mr. Jim Roach wouldn't even let his slaves rest on Sunday. I know, because his place was right next to us, and when we would gather in our Brush Arbor Church to pray and sing, led by old Uncle Jessie, a slave preacher, he would still have his men working. I have heard all kinds of stories, but these things I am telling you, I saw them with my own eyes."

"I was too young to go on another place, but I heard them say that Roach would whip you if he caught you on his place even if your Marster had given you a pass. Oh! They all had to get passes to go anywhere. The young men got them to go to frolic and to go courting on other places, but I went off to Virginia long before I was old enough to court, and when I got back I didn't need one."

Interviewer: Unknown