

Interview of Mrs. Georgina Giwbs, Ex-slave

By—Thelma Dunston

Portsmouth, Virginia

January 15, 1937

Mrs. Georgina Giwbs, an ex-slave, resides at 707 Lindsey Avenue, Portsmouth, Virginia. The old lady marveled at the great change that has been made in the clothings, habits and living conditions of the Negro since she was a child. She described the clothing of the slaves in a calm manner, "All of de cloth during slavery time was made on de loom. My mastah had three slaves who worked in de loom house. After de cloth was made, mastah sent hit over town to a white woman who made hit in clothes. We had to knit all our stockings and gloves. We'd plait blades of wheat to make us bonnets. We had to wear wooden bottom shoes. Dere won't no stores, so we growed everything we et, an' we'd make everything we'd wear."

"We had a washing house. Dere wuz five women who done de washing an' ironing. Dey had to make de soap. Dat wuz done by letting water drip over oak ashes. Dis made oak ash lye, and dis wuz used in making soap. After de clothes had soaked in dis lye-soap and water, dey put de clothes on tables and beat 'em 'till dey wuz white."

"Mastah give us huts to live in. De beds wuz made of long boards dat wuz nailed to de wall. De mattress wuz stuffed wif straw and pine tags. De only light we had wuz from de fire-place. We didn't use no matches, 'stead we'd strick a rock on a piece of steel. We'd let the sparks fall on some cotton."

"My mastah had 'bout five hundred slaves. He'd never sell none of his slaves, but he'd always buy more. Dat keeps de slaves from marrying in dere famblies. When yer married, yer had to jump over a broom three times. Dat wuz de licence. Ef mastah seen two slaves together too much he would marry them. Hit didn't make no difference ef yer won't but fourteen years old."

"Work began at sun rise and last 'till sun down. When I wuz eight years old, I started working in de field wif two paddles to keep de crows from eatin' de crops. [16] We had a half day off on Sunday, but you won't 'lowed to visit. Sometimes de men slaves would put logs in de beds, and dey'd cover 'em up, den dey go out. Mastah would see de logs and think dey wuz de slaves."

"My father told me dere wuz once a mastah who sold a slave woman and her son. Many years after dis, de woman married. One day when she wuz washing her husband's back she seen a scar on his back. De woman 'membered de scar. It wuz de scar her mastah had put on her son. 'Course dey didn't stay married, but de woman wouldn't ever let her son leave her."

Superstitions told by Mrs. Georgina Giwbs

1. "Ef a dog turns on his back and howls', 'tis a sign of death."

2. "Ef yer drops a dish rag on de floor and it spreads out, 'tis de sign dat a hungry woman is gwine ter come to yer house. Ef de rag don't spread out den a hungry man is a coming."
3. "Efa black cat crosses yer path going to de right, 'tis good luck. Ef de cat goes to de left 'tis bad luck."
4. "Efa girl walks aroung wif one shoe off and one on, she'll stay single as many years as de number of steps she taken."

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Interview of Mrs. Candis Goodwin
Aged 80
Cape Charles, Virginia

Ah ain't knowd, 'xactly, how ol' ah is, but ah bawn 'fo' de war. Bawn ovuh yonder at Seaview, on ol' Masser Scott's plantation. Tain't fur f'om here. Yes, reckon ah 'bout six yeah ol' when de Yankees come, jes' a lil' thin', you know.

My white people dey good tuh me. Cose dey gits mad wid you but dey don' beat non o' us; jes' ack lak it. Why, ah was jes lak dey's chillun; ah played wid 'em, et wid 'em an' eb'n slep' wid 'em. Ah kinder chillish, ah reckon. Had muh own way. Muh mommer, she wuck in de quater kitchen. She ain' ha' tuh wuck hawd lak some. Had it kinder easy, too. Jes' lak ah tells yuh ah al'ys had my way. Ah gits whut ah wants an' ef'n dey don't gi' tuh me, ah jes' teks it.

No neber had no wuck to do in dem days 'ceptin' nursin' de babies. 'Twas jes' lak play; twan no wuck. Uster go ober to Nottingham's tuh play, go long wid Missus chillun, yuh know. Ah laks tuh go ober there cause dey has good jam an' biscuits. Ef'n dey don gi' me none, ah jes' teks some. Dey don do nuttin'; jes' say, "Tek yuh han' out dat plate". But ah got whut ah wants den. Why we chillun user hab a time 'round ol' Missus' place. All us chillun uster git togeder an' go in de woods tuh play. Yes, de white and black uns, too. De grea' big whi' boys uster go 'long wid us, too. Know how we play? We tek de brown pine shadows an' mek houses outer 'em an' den mek grass outer de green uns. Den we go ober Missus' dairy and steal inything we want an' tek it to our houses in de woods. Dem was good ol' times, ah tel yuh, honey.

Tel yuh, whut ah uster do. Ah uster play pranks on ol' Masser Scott. Ah's regular lil' devil, ah was. Come night, ev'y body sit 'round big fire place in living room. Soon it git kinder late, Massa git up outer his cheer tuh win' up, de clock. Ah gits hin' his cheer ret easy, an' quick sneak his cheer f'om un'er him; an' when he finish he set smack on de flow! Den he say "Dogone yuh lil' cattan', ah gwan switch yuh!" Ah jes' fly out de room. Wont sceered though cause[18] ah knows Massa won' gon do nottin' 'tuh me.

What ah know 'bout whippin'. Well ah ain' had uh whippin' in my life. But ah hear tel o' how dey whips um though. Yuh know dey uster tek dat cowhide an' cut 'em till dey backs beeds. Some jes' lak see de blood run down. Better not cry neider. Mek yuh holler, "Oh pray! oh pray!" Couldn't say nottin' else. But Massa Scott neber had none dat kinder stuff on his place. He say tain't right. Didn't 'low no paddyrollers

'round eider. Say dey "trechous". Massa Nottin'ham neber had 'em on his place neider. He didn' neber strike one o' his niggers; nobody else better not neider.

Honey, ah teh yuh ah growd jes' as good's any chil' in dis country. Ol' Missus Scott gimme good clothes; cose ah didn't git 'em mone twice a yeah, but dey's good when ah gits 'em. She gimme Sis' dresses. Sis' one ob Missus' little girls. An' de whi' chillun dey learn me how tuh read, too. Cose de whi' folks din wan' yuh to learn. Ah 'member jes' as clare as yestidy how one dem chillun learn me how tuh read "compress-i-bility". Thought ah was suppin' den! Ah kin read Bible lil now but ah can' write; neber learn tuh write.

Did ah eber go tuh church? Cose ah did! Went ret 'long wid Missus' chillun. Had tuh set in de back, but dat won' nottin'. My mommer, she went tuh church too. Sometime de ol' folk uster git togedder in de quater-kitchen tuh shout an' pray. Dats where my mommer git 'ligion. She kinder tender 'oman; couldn' stan' dat preachin' no longer.

What 'bout muh pappy? Dat's suppin' ah ain' tol' yuh 'bout. Well, yuh know Uncle Stephen, he kinder overseer fo' some widow 'omans. He Mommer husband. He come see muh mommer any time he gits ready. But ah fin' out he ain' muh pappy. Ah knowd dat since when ah's a lil' thin'. Ah uster go ovur tuh massa William's plantation. Dey tell me all 'bout. De folks ober dere dey uster say tuh me, "Who's yuh pappy? Who's yuh pappy?" Ah jes' say "Tuckey buzzard lay me an' de sun hatch me" an' den gwan 'bout my business. Cose all de time dey knows an' ah knows [19] too dat Massa Williams was muh pappy. Ah tell yuh suppin' else. Got uh brother libin' ret on dis here street; one den toof doctors, yuh know, what pulls yer teef. Cose he's white. But tain't knowed 'roun' here. 'Twould ruin him. He's a nice man though. Uster go tuh see muh son an' his wife, lots uh times. Yes dey's good frien's.

Yes, dey had overseers. Sometime dey call dem stewards. Had colored uns too. Massa Scott had white overseers, good man though; but Massa Nottin'ham, he had big black boss on his place. [HW illegible over: cain'] 'member his name. He ain' had to git no p'mission tuh come tuh our place. He jes' come an' goes when he gits ready.

Kin ah 'member de war? Yes, indeed! 'Member jes' lak 'twas yestidy. Well dey had a stow down de conner f'om Massa's plantation, an' dey al'ys sen' me tuh stow fo' tuh buy things. Uster go down dere, an' dem Yankees be sittin' all 'long de road wid dey blue coats; ret pretty site; 'twas. But ah's scard tuh deaf, when ah gits neah 'em. Ah gits what ah wants f'om de stow, an' flys pass 'em. Dem Yankees show had dey way. Dey went in all de white folks house; tek dey silver, an' inything dey big 'nough carry out. Jes' ruin Missus furniture; get up on de table an' jes' cut capper. Nasty things! Den de Yankees goes 'round at night, tek anybody dey wants tuh help 'em fight. Twas dey "Civil right". Got my Jake, cose ah neber knowd him den. He twelve yeah oller ah is.

Lemmie tell yuh 'bout muh Jake, how he did in de war. He big man in dey war. He drill soldiers ev'y day. Firs' he be in one dem companies—Company "C" ah bliebe. Den he wucked up to be sergent-Major, in de Tenth Regiment. Jacob [HW illegible over: Godium] his name was. He say all look up tuh him an' 'spect him too. See dat "Sowd" ov'in dat coner? Dat's de ve'y sowd he used in de war, an' ah kep' it all dese yeahs. No de soldiers neber did no fighting 'round here's ah know of. But plenty ob 'em camped here.

My Jake, he handsome man, he was. 'Member, how we firs' got togeder. We all was tuh church one Sunday, an' Jake he kep' cidin' up to me. An' ah lookin' at him outer de coner muh eye, till finally he come up an' took holt muh han's. 'Twas af't de war ah had growd up. Ah was in muh earlyteens den. Dey say ah's de purtiet girl on de Shore. An' when Jake an' me got married, ev'ybody said, "You show maks a purty[20] couple."

De ol' Scott chillun what ah growd up wid? No, mone dem lef' now. Dey las' girl died heah las' yeah an' hur daughter come way down here f'om up in Maryland tuh tell "An' Candis" 'bout it. Wouldn' tell me sceard 'twould 'cite me. But ah hea'd hur tellin' my chil dere all 'bout it. Ol' Massa Scott's chillun, some dem, dey still comes tuh see me. Slip me some money now'n den, an' suppin' t'eat, too. Dey's all moughty nice folks, dem Scotts is