

Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938

Alabama Narratives

1. Joseph Holmes, Al. Narr., Vol I. page 191

Ole Miss taught de niggers how to read an' write an' some of 'em got to be too good at it, 'case dey learned how to write too many passes so's de pattyrollers wouldn't cotch 'em, an' on dem 'ccasions was de onlyes times dat I ever seed one of our niggers punished.

2. Lucindy Lawrence Jurdon, Al. Narr., Vol I, page 243

No'm, us never did learn nothing. If us tried to read or write dey would whack our forefingers off.

3. Anne Maddox, Al. Narr., Vol I, page 273 - 274

"It was too bad if dey kotched a nigger wid pencil an' paper in his han."

4. Reverend W. E. Northcross, Al. Narr., Vol I, born 1840

p. 299 "It was against the law for them to learn to read and write, so she taught them the Lord's prayer and a few other things in the book."

p. 300 [When he was 20 years old]

At this time I did not know "A" from "B" but I met a man who could read a little. This man liked me and promised to teach me how to read, provided I would keep it secret. This I gladly promised to do.

"I am weak, Thou art might, Hold me with thy powerful hand."

I secured a blue-back speller and went out on the mountain every Sunday to meet this gentleman, to be taught. I would stay on the mountain all day Sunday without food. I continued this way for a year and succeeded well. I hired my own time and with my blue-back speller went to the mountain to have this man teach me. The mountain was the great school which I attended.

p. 301 - 302 [after he was robbed of money and spelling book]

I went home and got another spelling-book, although it was not allowed. Some of my own people told my master that I had a book trying to read. He sent for me to come to the house, I obeyed, though I dreaded to meet him, not knowing what the consequence would be. But his heart had been touched by Divine power and he simply told me that he heard that I had a book, and if I was caught with it I would be hung. So I thanked him and departed.

Notwithstanding my master's counsel I thirsted for knowledge and got some old boards

and carried them to my house to make a light by which I could see how to read. I would shut the doors, put one end of a board into the fire, and proceed to study; but whenever I heard the dogs barking I would throw my book under the bed and peep and listen to see what was up. If no one was near I would crawl under the bed, get my book, come out, lie flat on my stomach, and proceed to study until the dogs would again disturb me. I did this for many nights. I continued in this way to try to learn to spell and read as best I could.

“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

I, like the Ethiopian, wanted a guide. I moved to Mrs. McReynold’s. God bless her! She gave me a lesson every night for a period of four years. Then I went to my old master’s brother, whose wife helped me every night as long as I would go to her for help. Rev. Shackelford (white) greatly aided me for a period of three years.

Boys and girls, grasp these golden opportunities which are now extended you from the school room. “Unlearned and ignorant” as I was I came along that way until the present time. My readers have better chances than I had. So I hope that they will make good use of their time and make my heart glad to see them setting their marks high and preparing themselves for the Great Beyond where all must go. Thither all nations will be called before the mighty judgment seat of their Ruler of the universe to give account for the deeds done in this world. My prayer for the reader is, that they may make strong, useful, wise and Christian men and women, and at the end of time meet their God in peace.

5. William Henry Townes (Bill), Al. Narr., Vol I page 390

Talk ‘bout learnin’ to read an’ ‘rite why iffen we so much as spoke of learnin’ to read an’ ‘rite we was scolded like de debil. Iffen we was caught lookin’ in a book we was treated same as iffen we had killed somebody. A servant bett’nt e caught lookin’ in a book’ didn’t make no diff’ence if you wan’t doing’ nothin’ but lookin’ at de pictures.

6. White, Mingo, Al. Narr., Vol I page 417

De white folks didn’t learn us to do nothin’ but wuk. Dey said dat us warn’t ‘spose to know how to read an’ write. Dar was one feller name E. C. White what learned to read an’ write endurin’ slavery. He had to carry de chillun’s books to school fer ‘em an’ go back atter dem. His young marsa taught him to read an’ write unbeknowance to his father an’ de res’ of de slaves.

Arkansas Narratives

7. Adeline Blakely,, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 1, born July 10, 1850, page 182

When I was little I wanted to learn, learn all I could, but there was a law against teaching a slave to read and write. One woman—she was from the North did it anyway. But when folks can read and write it’s going to be found out. It was made pretty hard for that woman.

8. Molly Brown, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 1, age “90 or over,” page 309 – 310

I went to school in South Carolina. I went a little four or five years. I could read, spell, cipher on a slate. Course I learned to write.... What kind of books did we have? I read and spelled out of the Blue Back Speller. He had numbers on our slates. The teacher set us copies. We wrote with soapstone.

9. Ellen Cragin, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 2, age 80 or older, page 42

There was an old white man used to come out and teach papa how to read the Bible.

Papa said, ‘Ain’t you ‘fraid they’ll kill you if they see you?’

The old man said, ‘No; they don’t know what I’m doing, and don’t you tell ‘em. If you do, they will kill me.

10. Maria Sutton Clemments, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 2, age 85 – 90, page 20

They would whoop you if they seed you with books learnin. Might few books to get hold of fo the war. We mark on the ground. The passes bout all the paper I ever seed fo I came to Tennessee.

11. Hemmett Dell, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 2, born 1847, page 137

I stayed wid old master til he died. I was bout thirty-five years old. He lernt me a good trade, brick layin’. He give me everything I needed and more. After the war he took me by the old brass lamp wid twisted wick – it was made round – and lernt me outer the Blue Back Speller and Rithmetic. The spelling book had readin’ in it. Lady ain’t you seed one yit? Then I lernt outer Rays Rithmetic and McGuffeys Reader. Old master say it ginst the law to teach slaves foe the war. Dat we he said, it was ginst the law to educate a nigger slave. The white folks schools was pay foe the war.

12. Callie Donalson, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 2, page 167

Ma young mistress learnt me to read. I never got to go to school much. Whut my young mistress learnt me was me A B C’s and how to call words.

13. “Gate-eye” Fisher, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 2, age approx. 71, page 301

My mother, Caroline, stayed in the house nearly all the time and took care of Missy’s children, and when they come home from school she’d hear them learn their A B C’s. That’s how come I can read and write. My ma taught me, out of an old Blue Back Speller. Yes mam, I learned to read and can’t write much, jes my own name.

14. Mrs. Cora Gillem, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 3 age 86

p. 28 Master Tom taught his slaves to read. They say Uncle Tom was the best reader, white or black, for miles. That was what got him in trouble. Slaves was not allowed to read. They didn't want them to know that freedom was coming.

p. 29 A crowd of white gather and take uncle Tom to jail. Twenty of them say they would beat him, each man, till they so tired they can't lay on one more lick. If he still alive, they hang him. Wasn't that awful? Hang a man just because he could read? They had him in jail overnight. His young master got wind of it, and went to save the man.

15. Matilda Hatchett, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 3, age 98 – 100, page 199

Didn't git no chance to learn nothin' in slavery. Sometimes the children would teach the darkies 'round the house their ABC's. I've heard of folks teachin' their slaves to read the Bible. They didn't teach us to read nothin'. I've heard of it, but I've never seen it, that some folks would cut off the first finger of a nigger that could write.

16. Abram Harris, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 3, page 172

Dar warn't none er de white folks in dem slabery times whut wud let dey niggers hab any learnin. Yo sho better not be cotch er tryin ter learn no readin er writin. Our Marster neber eben lowed dat, en iffen er nigger wus ter to foun whut cud write, den right straight dey wud chop his fore finger offend at han whut he write wid. Dar warnt no sic her thing es no schools fer de niggers till atter de surrender.

17. G. W. Hawkins, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 3, born in Alabama in on 1 January 1865.

p. 212 "I was a slave only four months."

p. 213 I never went to school. I just got an old blue back speller and taught myself how to read and write with what I picked up here and there from people I watched. That's one way a man never fails to learn—watching people. That's the only way our forefathers had to learn. I learned arithmetic the same way. I never considered I was much at figuring but I took a contract from a man who had all kinds of education and that man said I could do arithmetic better than he could.

p. 220 The slaves were not allowed to learn anything. Sometimes one would be shrewd enough to get in with the white children and they would teach him his a-b-c's, and after he learnet to spell he would steal books and get out and learn the rest for himself.

18. Joe Haywood, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 3, born 1 Jan 1826 in Mississippi, page 229

“My mother said I was a New Year’s present.”

School? Oh Lord, I went to school all my days till I was grown. They kep’ me in school. My mother kep’ me in till she died and then my stepmother kep’ me in. I got very near through the fifth grade. In y day the fifth grade was pretty good. Wilson’s Fifth Reader was a pretty good book. They took me out of Wilson’s Fifth Reader and put me in McGuffy’s and there’s where I quit. Studied the Blue Back Speller.

19. H. B. Halloway, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 3 , age 89, page 296 – 297

In slave times, they didn’t have any schools for Niggers. Niggers better not be caught with a book. If he were caught with a book they beat him to death nearly. Niggers used to get hold of this Webster’s Blue Back Book and the white folks would catch them and take them away. They didn’t allow no free Niggers to go to school either in slave times.

20. Elijah Henry Hopkins, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 3, age 81, page 311

Some of the white people thought so much of their slaves that they would teach them how to write and read. But they would teach them secretly and they would teach them not to read or write out where anybody would notice them. They didn’t mind you reading as much as they minded you writing. If they’d catch YOU now and it was then, they’d take you out and chop off them fingers you’re doing that writing with.

21. Rev. Ellis Jefson, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 77, page 45

In 1872 I went to school 2 ½ miles to Arkansas Post to a white teacher. I went four months. Her name was Mrs. Rolling. My white folks started me and I could spell to ‘Baker’ in the Blue Back Speller before I started to school. That is the only book I ever had at school. I learned to read in the Bible next.

22. William Jackson, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 84, page 28

I went to school one day in my life. My third master’s children learned me my ABC’s in slavery times. I’m not educated but I can read. Read the Bible and something like that.

23. Ella Johnson, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 83, page 80

She sent me to school....I would read and spell without opening my book. They would have them blue-back spellers and McGuffy’s reader. They got more education then than they do now.

24. Charlie Jones, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 76, page 136

I went to school after the War a right smart. I got as far as the third grade. Studied McGuffey's Reader and the old Blue Back Speller. Yes'm, sure did.

25. Anna King, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 80, page 202

No mam, I never did go to school. You better not go to school. You better not ever be caught with a book in your hand. Some of 'em slipped off and got a little learnin'. They'd get the old Blue Back book out. Heap ef 'em got a little learnin', but I didn't.

26. Mose King, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 81, page 208

I went to school at Shaffridge, two miles from Clarks store.... I went to colored teachers five or six months. I learned in the Blue Back Books. I stopped at about 'Baker (?)'.

27. Solomon Lambert, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 89, page 233

[after the war] Two or three of us colored folks paid Mr. Lowe \$1.00 a month to teach us at night. We learned to read and calculate better. I learned to write. We stuck to it right smart while.

28. Frank Larkin, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 4, age 77, born around 1860, page 237

After the war, old boss brought me to Arkansas when I was bout twelve years old. Biggest education I got, sit down with my old boss and he'd make me learn the alphabet. In those times they used the old Blue Back Speller.

29. A.J. Mitchell, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 5, p. 105

The first thing I remember bout stydyin' was Junie, old master's son, studyin' his book and I heard 'em spell the word 'baker'. That was when they used the old Blue Back Speller.

30. Moses Mitchell, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 5, born 1849, page 115

I went to school two days in my life. I was privileged to go to the fist free school in Texas. Had a teacher named Goldman. Don't know what year that was but they found out me and another fellow was too old so they wouldn't let us go no more. But I caught my alphabet in them two days. So I just caught what education I've got, here and there. I can read well—best on my Bible and Testament and I read the newspapers.

31. Dinah Perry, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 5, age 78, page 319

My daddy learned me to spell 'lady' and 'baker' and 'shady' fere I went to school. I learned all my ABC's too . I got out of the first reader the second day. I could just read it right on

through. I could spell and just stand at the head of the class till the teacher sent me to the foot all the time.

32. Sarah Smiley, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 6, born 1860, page 172

Taught school before I was married....When asked about her books standing on her shelves -- namely Golden Gems, arithmetic, and the Bible, also a blue back speller -- said she just loved her books.

33. Omelia Thomas, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 6, born 1875

p. 300 My daddy learned to read and write after the emancipation.

p. 301 They wouldn't allow him to go to school in slavery time. After the war, he got a Blue Back Speller and would make a bowl of fire and at night he would study—sometimes until daybreak. Then he found an old man that would help him and he studied under him for a while. He never went to any regular school, but he went to night school a little. Most of what he got, he got himself.

34. Mary Williams, Ar. Narr., Vol II, part 7, age 82, born in Georgia, page 185

My master used to sneak out his Blue Back Speller and learned my father how to read, and after the war he taught school. He started me off and then a teacher from the North came down and taught us.

Florida Narratives

35. Reverend Eli Boyd, Fl. Narr., Vol III, page 39. (born in South Carolina in 1864)

I never learned to read until I was 26 years old. That was after I left the plantation. I was staying at a place washing dishes for Goodyear's at Sepville, Georgia, six miles from Waycross. I found a Webster's spelling book that had been thrown away, and I learned to read from that.

36. Amanda McCray, Fl. Narr., Vol III, page 215

Mr. Pamell made land grants to all slaves who wanted to remain with him; few left, so kind had he been to them all.

Life went on in much the same manner for Amanda's family except that the children attended school where a white teacher instructed them from a "blue back Webster." Amanda was a young woman but she managed to learn to read a little. Later they had colored teachers who followed much the same routine as the whites had. They were held in awe by the other Negroes and every little girl yearned to be a teacher, as this was about the only professional field open to Negro women at that time.

37. William Sherman, Fl. Narr., Vol III, born in South Carolina on 12 June 1842, page 290

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.

38. Charley Roberts, Fl. Narr., Vol III, born in South Carolina, page 365.

I used to go to the Baptist church in the woods, but I never went to school. I learned to read out of McGuffey's speller. It was a little book with a blue back. I won't forget that.

Georgia Narratives

39. Hannah Austin, Ga. Narr., Vol. IV, part 1, 10 or 12 years old when war ended, page 21

Mrs. Austin proudly spoke of her old blue back speller, which she still possesses; and of the days when she attended Storrs School.

40. Jasper Battle, Ga. Narr., Vol. IV, part 1, age 80, page 68 – 69

Us never went to school much 'cause Mammy said white folks didn't lak for Niggers to have no learnin', but atter de war was don over our Old Mist'ess let colored chillum have some lessons in a little cabin what was built in de back yard for de white chillum to go to school in.

School for colored chillum was held den in our church house. Our teacher was a white man, Mr. Tom Andrews, and he was a mighty good teacher, but Lordy, how strick he was! Dese here chillum don't know nothin' 'bout school. Us went early in de mornin', tuk our dinner in a bucket, and never left 'til four o' clock, and sometimes dat was 'most nigh sundown. All day us studied dat blue back speller, and dat white teacher of ours sho' tuk de skin offen our backs if us didn't mind him.

41. Arrie Binns, Ga. Narr., Vol. IV, part 1, "15 er 16 years old when the war broke," page 78

When we wuz out dar [Arkansas] I went to school an' got as far as 'Baker'. Bat's de only schoolin' I ever had.

42. John Hill, Ga. Narr., Vol. IV, part 2, about 74 years old, page 202

When I wuz 'bout eight years old, dey 'lowed it wuz high time I wuz a larnin' somethin', and I wuz sont to de little log schoolhouse down in de woods. De onliest book I had wuz just a old blue back speller. Us took corn an' tatoes 'lang an' cooked 'em for dinner, for den us had to stay all day at school.

43. Mollie Mitchell, Ga. Narr., Vol. IV, part 3, 85 years old, page 134

When she was a little girl, they made them go to Sunday School and taught them out of a "blue back speller". After freedom, they were sent to school "some". The "little missus" used to teach her upstairs after they were supposed to be in bed.

44. Addie Vinson, Ga. Narr., Vol. IV, part 4, 86 years old

p. 105-106 No Ma'm, dey didn't low Niggers to larn how to read and write. I had to go wid de white chillun to deir school on Hog Mountain road evvy day to wait on 'em. I toted water for rem 'em kep' de fire goin', and done all sorts of little jobs lak dat.

p. 112 It was a long time atter de war was done over 'for schools for Niggers was sot up, and den when Nigger chillun did git to go to school dey warn't 'lowed to use de old blue-back spellin' book 'cause white folkses said it larn't 'em too much.

Indiana Narratives

45. George Thompson, In. Narr., Vol V, born 1854 in Kentucky, page 196

I have no education, I can neither read nor write, as a slave I was not allowed to have books. On Sundays I would go into the woods and gather ginseng which I would sell to the doctors for from 10c to 15c a pound and with this money I would buy a book that was called the Blue Back Speller. Our master would not allow us to have any books and when we were lucky enough to own a book we would have to keep it hid for if our master would find us with a book he would whip us and take the book from us. After receiving three severe whippings I gave up and never again tried for any learning, and to this day I can neither read nor write.

Kentucky Narratives

46. Bert Mayfield, Ky. Narr., Vol VII, born 1852, page 15

My old Mistus Mag taught me how to read from an old national spelling book, but I did not learn to write.

Mississippi Narratives

47. Rev. James Singleton, Ms. Narr., Vol IX, born 1856, page 127

My pappy, he had a stolen education – ‘at was cause his mistress back in South Ca’line hoped him to learn to read an’ write ‘fo he lef’ there. You see, in dem days, it was ag’inst de law fer slaves to read.

48. Clara C. Young, Ms. Narr., Vol IX, approximately 95 years old, page 170

Dey had a nigger woman to teach all de house darkies how to read an’ write an’ I larned how to sign my name an’ got as fur as b-a-k-e-r in de Blue Back Speller.

Missouri Narratives, Volume X

49. Delicia Ann Wiley Patterson (Lucinda), Mo. Narr., Vol X, age 92, page 275

My father’s owner’s children use to take my father in their basement and teach him to read in a blue back spelling book. I never got any education. My English is good because I boarded all the first Negro school teachers and Negro principals St. Louis ever had for years.

North Carolina Narratives

50. Mary Anngady, NC. Narr., Vol XI, part 1, born 1853, page 33

She was plenty good to all of the slaves. Her daughter Sallie taught me my A B C’s in Webster’s Blue Back Spelling Book. When I learned to Spell B-a-k-e-r, Baker, I thought that was something. The next word I felt proud to spell was s-h-a-d-y, shady, the next l-a-d-y, lady. I would spell them out loud as I picked up chips in the yard to build a fire with. My missus Bettie gave me a blue back spelling book.

South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 3

51. Jimmie Johnson, SC Narr., Vol XIV, part 3, born in Virginia, page 53

Old Missus used to come to the house where I lived and teach me my alphabet. After I got older, I used to take care of Masser’s horse and buggy for him; used to hitch up the horse for him and go with him on his way to see a patient. Bless his heart, he let me take my Webster’s blue back speller and my history with me when I would drive with him. I would study those books and Masser would tell me how to pronounce the hard words. That is the way I got my education. Master would tell Missus that Jimmie was a smart boy, that he had no father nor mother and that they must be good to him. They sure was. I never wanted for a thing. Sometimes on our drives Masser would tell me some Latin words, but I never did study Latin—just English.

52. Benjamin Russell, SC Narr., Vol XIV, part 4, 88 years old, page 52

We were taught to read, but it was against the law to teach a slave to write. The Legislature passed an act to that effect. A number of cases in which the slaves could write, the slave would forge a pass and thereby get away to a free territory. They had a time getting them back.

53. Hector Smith, SC Narr., Vol XIV, part 4, 79 years old, page 103

It like I tell you de colored peoples never get no learnin but what little dey catch from de plantation men in dem night schools. Oh, dey give everyone of us a slate en slate pencil en we study dere in de quarter in de night time by de light of de fire. Studied dem Blue Back Websters. Dat was de text we know bout den.

Texas Narratives

54. Lorenza Ezell, Tx. Narr. Vol XVI, part 2, born in 1850 in South Carolina. p. 31

I ain't never been to school but I jus' picked up readin'. With some my first money I ever earn I buy me a old blue-back Webster. I carry that book wherever I goes. When I plows down a row I stop at de edn to rest and den I overlook de lesson. I 'member one da very first lessons was, 'Evil communications 'rupts good morals.' I knowed de words 'evil' and 'good' and a white man 'splain de others. I been done use dat lesson all my life.

55. Hiram Mayes, Tx. Narr. Vol XVI, part 3, page 73.

Dey wasn't no school but after I get free I go to school on de edge of de woods. Dey have teacher name Runnells and a old blue-back speller to learn out of.

56. Jenny Proctor, Tx. Narr. Vol XVI, part 3, born 1850 in Alabama, page 213

None of us was 'lowed to see a book or try to learn. Dey say we git smarted den dey was if we learn anything, but we slips around and gits hold of dat Webster's old blue back speller and we hides it 'til way in de night and den we lights a little pine torch, and studies dat spellin' book. We learn it too. I can read some now and write a little too.

57. Irella Battle Walker, Tx. Narr. Vol XVI, part 4, born 1851, page 123

Old man Jack James [a slave] work at day and have school at night. He have long boards fer benches and let dem down by ropes from de rafters, and have blue back spellers. He point to de letters with de long broom straw and dat's how we larn our A B C's. I can read purty good, when my eyes let me, but I can't write nothin'.