

Document A (Original Spelling)

This is an interview with William Colbert, a 93-year-old former slave from Alabama. The interview was conducted by John Morgan Smith in 1937.

[Interviewer]: “Well, Uncle Will, tell me something about the slave days. Was your master good to you?”

[William Colbert]: “Nawsuh, he warn’t good to none of us niggers. All de niggers ‘roun’ hate to be bought by him kaze he wuz so mean. . . . One day I remembers my brother, January wuz cotched ober seein’ a gal in de next plantation. . . . Well suh, when da massa found out dat he wuz a hour late, he got mad as a hive of bees. So when brother January come home, de massa took down his **long mule skinner** and tied him wid a rope to a pine tree. He strip’ his shirt off and said:

“Now, nigger, I’m goin’ to teach you some sense.”

“Wid dat he started layin’ on de lashes. January was a big, fine lookin’ nigger, de finest I ever seed. He wuz jus’ four years older dan me, an’ when de massa begin a beatin’ him, January neber said a word. De massa got madder kaze he couldn’t make January holla.

“What’s de matter wid you, nigger!” ‘he say. “Don’t it hurt?”

“January, he neber said nothin’, and de massa keep a beatin’ till little streams of blood started flowin’ down January’s chest, but he neber holler. His lips wuz a quiverin’ and his body wuz a shakin’, but his mouf it neber open; and all de while I sat on my mammy’s and pappy’s steps a cryin’. De niggers wuz all gathered about and some uv ‘em couldn’t stand it; dey hadda go inside dere cabins.”

Vocabulary

long mule skinner: large whip

Document A (Modified Spelling)

This is the interview from William Colbert in Document A, but it has been changed to have more standard spelling. If there are parts of the original document that are confusing, use this document to help you understand what was written in the original interview.

[Interviewer]: “Well, Uncle Will, tell me something about the slave days. Was your master good to you?”

{William Colbert}: “No sir, he wasn’t good to none of us n----s. All of the n----s around hated to be bought by him because he was so mean. . . . One day I remember my brother, January was caught over seeing a gal in the next plantation. . . . Well sir, when the master found out that he was an hour late, he got mad as a hive of bees. So when brother January came home, the master took down his **long mule skinner** and tied him with a rope to the pine tree. He stripped off his shirt and said:

“Now, n----, I’m going to teach you some sense.”

“With that he started laying on the lashes. January was a big, fine looking n----, the finest I’ve ever seen. He was just four years older than me, and when the mater began beating him, January never said a word. The master got madder because he couldn’t make January holler.

“What’s the matter with you, n----!” he’d say. “Don’t it hurt?”

“January, he never said nothing, and the master kept beating till little streams of blood started flowing down January’s chest, but he never hollered. His lips was quivering and his body was shaking, but his mouth never opened; and all the while I sat on my mammy’s and pappy’s steps crying. The n---- was all gathered and some of them couldn’t stand it; they had to go inside their cabins.”

Vocabulary

long mule skinner: large whip

Document B (Original Spelling)

This interview was with Tempie Herndon Durham in North Carolina. The interview was conducted by a white interviewer named Travis Jordan in 1937. Durham reported that she was 103 years old at the time of the interview.

My white fo'ks lived in Chatham County. Dey was Marse George an' Mis' Betsy Herndon. . . . Dey had a big plantation an' raised cawn, wheat, cotton an' 'bacca. I don't know how many field niggers Marse George had, but he had a mess of dem, an' he had hosses to, an' cows, hogs an' sheeps. . . .

When I growed up I married Exter Durham. He belonged to Marse Snipes in Durham who had a plantation 'cross de county line in Orange County. We had a big weddin'. We was married on de front po'ch of de big house. . . . Exter couldn' stay no longer den dat night kaze he belonged to Marse Snipes Durham an' he had to back home. He lef' de nex day for his plantation, but he come back every Saturday night an' stay 'twell Sunday night. We had eleven chillum. Nine was bawn befo' surrener an' two after we was set free. . . . I was worth a heap to Marse George kaze I had so many chillum. De more chillum a slave had de more dey was worth. . . .

I was glad when de war stopped kaze den me an' Exter could be together all de time 'stead of Saturday an' Sunday. After we was free we lived right on at Marse George's plantation a long time. We rented de lan' for a fo'th of what we made, den after while be bought a farm. . . .

Freedom is all right, but de niggers was better off befo' surrender, kaze den dey was looked after an' dey didn' get in no trouble fighting an' killin' like dey do dese days. If a nigger cut up an' got sassy in slavery times, his Ole Marse give him a good whippin' an' he went back an' he went way back an' set down an' 'haved hese'f. If he was sick, Marse an' Mistis looked after him, an' if he needed store medicine, it was bough an' give to him; he didn' have to pay nothin'. Dey didn' even have to think 'bout clothes nor nothin' like dat. . . . Maybe everybody's Marse an' Mistis wuzn' good as Marse George an' Mis' Betsy, but dey was de same as a mammy an' pappy to us niggers."

Document B (Modified Spelling)

This is the interview from Tempie Herndon Durham, but it has been changed to have more standard spelling. If there are parts of the original document that are confusing, use this document to help you understand what was written in the original interview.

My white folks lived in Chatham County. They was Master George and Miss Betsy Herndon. . . . They had a big plantation and raised corn, wheat, cotton, and tobacco. I don't know how many field n---s Master George had, but he had a mess of them and he had horses too, and cows, hogs, and sheep....

When I grew up I married Exter Durham. He belonged to Master Snipes in Durham who had a plantation across the county line in Orange County. We had a big wedding. We was married on the front porch of the big house. . . . Exter couldn't stay no longer than that night because he belonged to Master Snipes Durham and he had to [go] back home. He left the next day for his plantation, but he came back every Saturday night and stayed until Sunday night. We had eleven children. Nine was born before surrender and two after were was set free. . . . I was worth a heap to Master George because I had so many children. The more children a slave had the more they was worth. . . .

I was glad when the war stopped because then me and Exter could be together all the time instead of Saturday and Sunday. After we was free we lived right on at Master George's plantation a long time. We rented the land for a fourth of what we mad, then after while we bought a farm. . . .

Freedom is alright, but the n---s was better off before surrender, because then they was looked after and they didn't get in no trouble fighting and killing like they do these days. If a n---- cut up and got sassy in slavery times, his old master [would] give him a good whipping and he went back and sat down and behaved himself. If he was sick, Master and Misses looked after him, and if he needed store medicine, it was bought and given to him; he didn't have to pay nothing. They didn't even have to think about clothes or nothing like that. . . . Maybe everybody's Master and Misses weren't as good as Master George and Miss Betsy, but they was the same as a mammy and pappy to us n---s."

Document C

This interview was with Perry Lewis in Baltimore, Maryland. The interview was conducted in 1937 by a black interviewer identified as ----- Rogers in the final transcripts.

I was born on Kent Island about 86 years ago. . . . My father was a freeman and my mother a slave, owned by Thomas Tolson, who owned a small farm on which I was born in a log cabin. . . .

As you know the mother was the owner of the children that she brought into the world. Mother being a slave made me a slave. She cooked and worked on the farm, ate whatever was in the farmhouse and did her share of work to keep and maintain the Tolsons. They being poor, not have a large place or a number of slaves to increase their wealth, made them little above the free colored people and with no knowledge, they could not teach me or any one else to read. . . .

I have heard that patrollers were on Kent Island and the colored people would go out in the country on the roads, create disturbance to attract the patrollers' attention. They would tie ropes and grape vines across the roads, so when the patrollers would come to the scene of the disturbance on horseback at full tilt, they would be caught, throwing those who would come in contact with the rope or vine off the horse, sometimes badly injuring the riders. This would create hatred between the slaves, the free people, the patrollers and other white people who were concerned. . . .

I do not remember being sick but I have heard mother say, when she or her children were sick, the white doctor who attended the Tolsons treated us and the only herbs I can recall were life-everlasting boneset and woodditney, from each of which a tea could be made.

This is about all I can recall.

Guiding Questions

	How does the account portray slavery? (Be sure to cite specific information from the interview.)	How does the account compare to the other two documents?
Document A		
Document B		
Document C		

1. When evaluating historical interviews, historians ask questions about the documents to help them think about whether they are useful for learning about the past. Some of the questions historians might ask about interviews are:

- Is it reasonable to think that the person interviewed knows about the events they are discussing?
- Are there any reasons why the interviewee might not be telling the truth or telling whole story, either on purpose or unintentionally?
- Are there reasons that the interviewer might not be recording the interview accurately or completely, either on purpose or unintentionally?
- How relevant is the information to the issues or topics that I am interested in learning about?

Use these questions to think about the strengths and limitations of the interviews for learning about slavery.

Strengths	Limitations

Going Deeper

2. When were the interviews conducted? How might that make the accounts less reliable? Are there ways this could make the accounts more reliable?
3. The interviewer in Document B was white. The interviewer in Document C was black. How do the two accounts differ?

How might the race of the interviewer have affected the accounts provided?

4. The interviewers in Document A and Document B likely believed they were accurately recording the regional dialects and speech patterns of those they interviewed when they altered the spelling of words. (For example, the interviewer in Document A wrote “I’sse fum Jawja” instead of “I’m from Georgia”.) Why might someone argue that recording a local dialect could make a document more reliable?

Why might others argue that this makes the document less reliable?