

*from*

# AN INTERVIEW WITH A FORMER SLAVE

1870s

----- *Annie Ruth Davis* -----

During the Great Depression, the federal government sponsored programs such as the Federal Writers Project (FWP) to provide work for unemployed Americans. In 1937, some writers employed by the FWP went to South Carolina to interview 284 African Americans who had been slaves. Sylvia Cannon of Florence, South Carolina, was age 85 at the time of the interview.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Motives**

What are some of the reasons that Cannon might have described slavery and emancipation in the way she did? What influence might the passage of time and the person interviewing her have had on her account?

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Times was sure better long time ago than they be now. I know it. Colored people never had no debt to pay in slavery time. Never hear tell about no colored people been put in jail before Freedom. Had more to eat and more to wear then, and had good clothes all the time 'cause white folks furnish everything, everything. Had plenty peas, rice, hog meat, rabbit, fish, and such as that.

Had they extra crop what they had time off to work every Saturday. White folks tell them: What they made, they could have. Peoples would have found we colored people rich with the money we made on the extra crop, if the slaves hadn't never been set free. Us had big rolls of money, and then when the Yankees come and change the money, that what made us poor.

It let the white people down and let us down, too. Left us all to about starve to death. Been force to go to the fish pond and the huckleberry patch. Land went down to a dollar a acre. White people let us clear up new land and make us own money that way. We bury it in the ground and that howcome I had money. I dig mine up one day and had over fifteen hundred dollars that I been save. People back there didn't spend money like they do these days and that how come I had that money. They would just spend money once a year in that day and time.

Rich man up there in Florence learn about I was worth over fifteen hundred dollars, and he tell me that I ought to buy a house, that I was getting old. Say he

had a nice place he want to sell me. He say, "Mom Sylvia, you stay here long as you live, 'cause you ain't going be here much longer."

Yes, ma'am, I pay that man over nine hundred dollars. Been paying on it long time and got it all paid but \$187 and city find out what that man had done. I thought this house been belong to me, but they tell me this here place be city property. I been trust white folks and he take my money and settle me down here on city property.

City tell me just stay on right here, but don't pay no more money out. I beg the town to let me go out to the poor farm and stay, but they say I done pay too much to move. Tell me stay on here and keep the house up the best way I can. They give me that garden and tell me what I make I can have.

I promise my God right then not to save no more money, child....

The peoples sure been blessed with more religion in them days than these days. Didn't never have to look up nothing then, and if you tell a story, you get a whipping. Now, the peoples tell me to tell a story. I been cleaning up a lady porch and she tell me to tell anybody what come there that she ain't home.

A lady come and ask for her, and I tell her, "She say anybody come here, tell 'em 'I ain't home.' If you don't believe she here, look in the bedroom."

Miss Willcox come out there and beat me in the back. I tell her, "Don't read the Bible and tell me to tell a story. I ain't going tell no story, 'cause my white folks learnt me not to do that."

Source: *Slave Narratives*, Federal Writers Project (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1937).