US History

Reconstruction Part I: Voices of Freed Slaves

**Step One: Voices of Former Slaves**

Below you find several selected interviews with former slaves, the first three of which were conducted by the [Federal Writer's Project](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html) in the late 1930s (popularly known as the "WPA Slave Narratives"). These stories allow us to briefly revisit slavery so that we may fully appreciate the meaning of freedom. Here you find ex-slaves' personal recollections of life under slavery in *the Old South,* as well as some memories of the Civil War, emancipation, and life in the Reconstruction years. Remember, these ex-slaves were very *old* by the time they were interviewed in the 1930s and 1940s, and their dialect was "reproduced" by the interviewers in the written transcriptions (see [Notes on the Language of the Narratives](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html)). So their stories can be a little tricky to follow at times.

Examine all of these sources below, including Jourdan Anderson's letter to his former master. Answer the questions below citing specific examples.

1. What is most striking, interesting or surprising to you about the thoughts and memories of these former slaves?
2. How did each of them experience their emancipation during and after the Civil War?
3. Do you find anything particularly revealing about the preoccupations, grievances or concerns these former slaves discuss in their stories? For example, why do you think Fountain Hughes was so preoccupied with the problem of debt?

WPA [Interview with Lee Guidon](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Guidon,+Lee))) (click *view page images,* then *next page* through pg. 126).

WPA [Interview with Henry Blake](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Blake,+Henry))) (click *view page images* , then *next page*, through pg. 179).

WPA [Interview with "Aunt" Rhody Holsell](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/mesnbib:@field(AUTHOR+@od1(Holsell,+Rhody))) (click *view page images* , through pg. 199).

[Audio Interview with Fountain Hughes](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/afcesnbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(afcesn000030))). (If you have Real Player or MP3 programs, click one of the "audio formats" to hear this former slave's voice in a tape-recorded interview made in 1949. This interview is about 30 minutes long. You may read the text of the interview if you do not have the necessary audio programs.)

[Jourdon Anderson](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6369), Letter to his former master (1865)

**Step Two: Political Issues and Debates**

Each of the primary sources below reflect the political debate and legal issues surrounding Reconstruction. Examine these sources and answer the following questions.

1. What were the political developments during Reconstruction that made freedom, as ex-slaves perceived it, possible?
2. What obstacles (social, legal, economic, or political) stood in the way of ex-slaves actually achieving a meaningful degree of freedom?
3. Consider the tensions and disagreements between members of Congress and between Congress and the President. What were the Radical Republicans up against when they fought for the rights of newly freed people?

[Thaddeus Stevens Speech, 1865](http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/D/1851-1875/reconstruction/steven.htm)

[Harper's Weekly,](http://blackhistory.harpweek.com/4Reconstruction/338TheRightWayBestWay.htm)   "Toward Racial Equality: The Right Way, The Best Way," June 3, 1865

[Address to Congress by Convention of Negroes, 1865](http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/D/1851-1875/slavery/addres.htm)

[Andrew Johnson, Veto of the first Reconstruction Act, March 2, 1867](http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/D/1851-1875/reconstruction/veto.htm)

[Charles Sumner, Opinion on the trial of Andrew Johnson, 1868](http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/D/1851-1875/reconstruction/ch_sumner.htm)

[Frederick Douglass,](http://www.frederickdouglass.org/speeches/index.html#wants) "What the Black Man Wants," Speech to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (1865) *Note: You may stop at the 6 th paragraph that begins "There are, however, other reasons..."*

[Senator Charles Sumner,](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/civilwar/recontwo/sumner.html) Debate with Senator Hill (1871)

[The 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments](http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am13)

[Civil Rights Act of 1866](http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=480)

[Civil Rights Act of 1875](http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=481)