

Excerpts from Federal Writers Project 1936-1938
Sarah Frances Shaw Graves, Age 87

"I was born March 23, 1850 in Kentucky, somewhere near Louisville. I am goin' on 88 years right now. (1937). I was brought to Missouri when I was six months old, along with my mama, who was a slave owned by a man named Shaw, who had allotted her to a man named Jimmie Graves, who came to Missouri to live with his daughter Emily Graves Crowdes. I always lived with Emily Crowdes."

The matter of allotment was confusing to the interviewer and Aunt Sally endeavored to explain.

"Yes'm. Allotted? Yes'm. I'm goin' to explain that, " she replied. "You see there was slave traders in those days, jes' like you got horse and mule an' auto traders now. They bought and sold slaves and hired 'em out. Yes'm, rented 'em out. Allotted means somethin' like hired out. But the slave never got no wages. That all went to the master. The man they was allotted to paid the master."

"I was never sold. My mama was sold only once, but she was hired out many times. Yes'm when a slave was allotted, somebody made a down payment and gave a mortgage for the rest. A chattel mortgage. . . ."

"Allotments made a lot of grief for the slaves," Aunt Sally asserted. "We left my papa in Kentucky, 'cause he was allotted to another man. My papa never knew where my mama went, an' my mama never knew where papa went." Aunt Sally paused a moment, then went on bitterly. "They never wanted mama to know, 'cause they knowed she would never marry so long she knew where he was. Our master wanted her to marry again and raise more children to be slaves. They never wanted mama to know where papa was, an' she never did," sighed Aunt Sally.

John W. Fields, Age 89

"In most of us colored folks was the great desire to [be] able to read and write. We took advantage of every opportunity to educate ourselves. The greater part of the plantation owners were very harsh if we were caught trying to learn or write. It was the law that if a white man was caught trying to educate a negro slave, he was liable to prosecution entailing a fine of fifty dollars and a jail sentence. We were never allowed to go to town and it was not until after I ran away that I knew that they sold anything but slaves, tobacco, and whiskey. Our ignorance was the greatest hold the South had on us. We knew we could run away, but what then? An offender guilty of this crime was subjected to very harsh punishment."

William Moore, Age 82

"Some Sundays we went to church some place. We allus liked to go any place. A white preacher allus told us to 'bey our masters and work hard and sing and when we die we go to Heaven. Marse Tom didn't mind us singin' in our cabins at night, but we better not let him cotch us prayin'.

"Seems like niggers jus' got to pray. Half they life am in prayin'. Some nigger take turn 'bout to watch and see if Marse Tom anyways 'bout, then they circle theyselves on the floor in the cabin and pray. They git to moanin' low and gentle, 'Some day, some day, some day, this yoke gwine be lifted offen our shoulders.'

"Marse Tom been dead long time now. I 'lieve he's in hell. Seem like that where he 'long. He was a terrible mean man and had a indiff'ent, mean wife. But he had the fines', sweetes' chillun the Lawd ever let live and breathe on this earth. They's so kind and sorrowin' over us slaves.

"Some them chillun used to read us li'l things out of papers and books. We'd look at them papers and books like they somethin' mighty curious, but we better not let Marse Tom or his wife know it!