
Durham, Tempie Herndon

(c. 1834-?),

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slave narrator, was born Tempie Herndon in Chatham County, North Carolina. All that is known about her appears in a Federal Writers' Project interview that she gave in Durham, North Carolina, in 1937 when she claimed to be 103 years old. As in many WPA narratives, the interviewer transcribed Durham's speech in a dialect that exaggerates the rhythm and syntax of southern Black English. Although Durham does not name her own parents, she provides quite a lot of information about her owners, "my white fo'ks" (Rawick, 285), as she calls them, George and Betsy Herndon, who ran a large plantation in Chatham County. Their large slave workforce grew corn, cotton, and tobacco, and also raised cattle, sheep, and hogs.

Durham's work routine centered on a large weaving room on the Herndon plantation, where female slaves made blankets and winter clothing. They were sometimes accompanied by the mistress of the house, who like Tempie enjoyed the clacking sound of the loom. Durham also recalled the communal singing of other slaves as they worked in a carding and spinning room, and the skills of Mammy Rachel, who worked in the dyeing room, and "knew every kind of root, bark, leaf an' berry dat made red, blue, green, or whatever color she wanted" (Rawick, 286). In the era before the widespread production of synthetic dyes, such native knowledge was essential to the fledgling southern textile industry. Ironically, when southern textiles expanded in the decades after the Civil War, most mill owners systematically excluded African Americans from their factories in favor of an all-white workforce, even though former black slaves like Durham possessed the relevant skills.

Although Durham was perhaps overeager to provide her interviewer with a positive assessment of slavery and her owners, her narrative reveals the reality of power and powerlessness that existed on antebellum plantations. This is most evident in her recollection of her wedding, probably in the early 1850s, to Exter Durham, a slave on the Snipes Durham plantation, just across the county line in Orange County. The wedding ceremony, held on the front porch of the big house, was a grand affair attended by the entire plantation, black and white, and presided over by George and Betsy Herndon. The bride recalled that she wore a white dress, long white gloves to her elbow, white shoes, and a white veil made by her mistress out of curtains. She stood at the altar with her groom on a "sho nuff linen sheet." After a service performed by the plantation's black preacher, the newly married couple jumped a broomstick, a traditional African American custom, though in this instance performed in part because "Marse George got to have his little fun." The elaborate preparations for Tempie Durham's wedding were not typical of most slave marriages, but they do reflect the efforts of some slaveholders to be seen as genial, paternalistic masters with the best interests of their slaves at heart. The competing slaveholder's impulse of maximizing profits and upholding the sanctity of property rights was also evident in George Herndon's case. Herndon allowed the married couple to stay at the cabin

for their wedding night, but required that Exter Durham leave the next day, as “he belonged to Marse Snipes Durham an' he had to go back home.” Tempie Durham recalled that Exter “left de next day for his plantation, but he come back every Saturday night an' stay 'twell Sunday night” (Rawick, 288).

Tempie Durham was under no illusions that these weekly visits were partly for the benefit of her master, since “de more chillun a slave had de more dey was worth.” As the mother of nine “muley strong and healthy” children before the war, she understood that she “was worth a heap to Marse George” (Rawick, 288). She also recalled that the slaves on the plantation had plenty to eat during the Civil War, but only because their master remained at home and kept them working, looking after the livestock and tending the crops. When freedom came, she was overjoyed, since she could be with Exter all the time, instead of just on weekends. The couple remained on Herndon's plantation for several years, renting the land for a quarter of the profits they made, and eventually saved \$300 to purchase their own farm.

Whatever affection Durham may have exhibited for her former owners in her WPA interview may have been partially calculated to appease her white interviewer, but it may also have been a product of genuine appreciation for the white Herndons' provision of furniture, seed corn, and cottonseed after the war. The Durhams' eventual success as small farmers depended, however, on their own labors, and especially on the work of their eleven children—two of whom were born free—who worked in the fields as soon as they could walk. In the context of a life of hard labor, the distinction between slavery and freedom mattered less to Durham than to other former slaves, such as Delia T. Garlic, also interviewed by the WPA in the 1930s, who recalled that “dem days was hell” (Rawick, 129). Tempie Durham recognized, however, that her own experience of slavery was not necessarily typical. “Maybe everybody's Marse and Missis wuzn' as good as Marse George and Miss Betsy” (Rawick, 290).

Further Reading

Griffin, Rebecca J. “‘Goin' Back over There to See That Girl’: Competing Social Spaces in the Lives of the Enslaved in Antebellum North Carolina,” *Slavery and Abolition* (Apr. 2004).

Rawick, George P. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Ser. 2, v. 14, North Carolina Narratives (1972–1979).

White, Deborah Gray. *Aren't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985).

See also

Garlic, Delia T. <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-36884>>