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# Garlic, Delia T.

(c. 1837- ?),

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former slave and narrator, was the youngest of thirteen children born to a slave woman in Powhatan, Virginia, probably in the late 1830s. All that is known about Garlic appears in a 1937 Federal Writers' Project (FWP) interview she gave in Fruithurst, Alabama, when she claimed to be one hundred years old. In that interview Garlic provides one of the most searing indictments of life under slavery in the nearly twenty-five hundred FWP interviews of former slaves. As in many Works Progress Administration narratives, Garlic's interviewer transcribed her speech in a dialect that somewhat exaggerates the rhythm and syntax of southern Black English.

Delia Garlic never knew eleven of her siblings or her father. When Delia was an infant, she, her mother, and her brother William were taken by slave speculators to Richmond, Virginia, where they were kept in a warehouse before being placed on an auction block. Delia and her mother were sold to the highest bidder, a sheriff in Henrico County named Carter; William was sold elsewhere and never saw his mother or sister again. When asked by her white interviewer if children cried during these auctions, Delia Garlic answered indignantly: "Course dey cry; you think dey not cry when dey was sold like cattle? I could tell you 'bout it all day, but even den you couldn't guess the awfulness of it" (Rawick, 129).

As a child, Garlic helped nurse the baby of Carter's daughter. Her experience was fairly typical of young antebellum house slaves, for whom "quick blows and occasional whippings rapidly became an expected feature of daily life" (Fox-Genovese, 154). On one occasion the daughter beat her with a hot poker when the baby in Garlic's care hurt her hand and began crying. A few years later Garlic's master's new wife became enraged when she found that Garlic had blackened her eyebrows with smut in what the mistress viewed as an attempt to mock her own application of eye makeup. For such apparent insolence, the mistress beat Garlic on the head with a stick of stove wood, knocking her unconscious. When Garlic regained consciousness, she ran off, but she returned later that night to find a speculator waiting to take her to Richmond. Sold to a hotelier in McDonough, Georgia, she never saw her mother again but remembered for the rest of her life their final moments together. "She pressed my han' in both of hers an' said: 'Be good an' trus' in de Lawd.'" Garlic recalled in her interview that "trustin' was de only hope of de poor black critters in dem days.... [We] jest prayed for strength to endure it to de end. We didn't expect nothin' but to stay in bondage 'till we died" (Rawick, 131).

When the hotelier's business failed, Garlic was sold first to a businessman in Atlanta and then to a planter named Garlic in Louisiana, where she worked as a field hand, plowing, hoeing, and chopping cotton. Although her narrative mentions neither whippings nor beatings in the field, Garlic recalled that she "didn't know nothing 'cept to work" (Rawick, 131). Rising at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, she ate only a piece of cornbread for breakfast—unsalted during the Civil War years because of shortages—

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and had the same for supper. For dinner she generally ate boiled greens, beans, and peas, “but never knowed nothing bout coffee” (Rawick, 132). The monotony of that diet was fairly typical, although historians have found that other slaves, like Tempie Herndon Durham, were able to augment these meager provisions with vegetables from their own gardens. Garlic's owners, however, provided the slaves with “no way to cook, nor nothin' to cook in our cabins” (Rawick, 131). Her clothing was also basic, consisting of a shimmy and a slip for a dress made out of cheap, unbleached but durable cloth.

Sometime before the Civil War, Garlic married a slave named Chatfield who worked on a nearby plantation and was forced into service for the Confederate cause in 1861. Garlic and her fellow slaves knew then that the war was going on but did not pay much attention to it, because they “never dreamed dat freedom would ever come” (Rawick, 131). Not all slaves were so fatalistic, but many probably shared Garlic's *schadenfreude* on seeing their owners grieve as their sons marched off to war. “It made us glad to see dem cry. Dey made *us* cry so much” (Rawick, 132). When Chatfield failed to return at the end of the war, Delia married Miles Garlic, who worked on the same plantation.

When the war ended and freedom came, Garlic remembered that “everybody wanted to git out” (Rawick, 132). Her husband found work on the railroad in Wetumpka, Alabama, but returned frequently to Louisiana, where Delia Garlic continued to work on the Garlic plantation and live in the former slave quarters. After the birth of her second baby—it is unclear whether her first was with Chatfield or Garlic—she moved to Alabama to raise her family, first to Wetumpka and then, after her husband's death, to Montgomery. Aged one hundred at the depth of the Great Depression in 1937, she declared that she was having the best time of her life and was delighted to be eating white bread rather than cornbread. She nevertheless welcomed death and expected to go to heaven. Speaking of her thirty years in bondage, however, Delia Garlic had only hatred and bitterness, declaring to her white interviewer, “Dem days was hell” (Rawick, 129).

## Further Reading

Garlic, Delia. “Interview of Delia Garlic,” in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, ed. George P. Rawick, ser. 1, vol. 6: Alabama and Indiana Narratives (1973–1976).

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988)

### See also

Durham, Tempie Herndon <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-36748>>