

“Born in Slavery”: Tracking the Movement of Former Slaves in the Post-Civil War Era

At the end of the Civil War, former slaves now found themselves with the power to independently decide not only where they lived, but also where they could go. The freedom of movement, now a luxury that many of us take for granted, must have seemed like a cherished new freedom to them. The intended purpose for travelling often varied. Many times, it was in order to reconnect with long lost relatives who had been sold away from them during slavery. Other times it was purely out of a sense of wanderlust. However, while many freedmen and freedwomen did pack up and leave, a large number of them remained in the South, often residing in the same county in which they had been enslaved. The primary methodology of this project involves analyzing the Library of Congress’ collection of ex-slave interviews: *“Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States.”* These interviews, transcribed between 1936 and 1938, were conducted as part of the Federal Writers’ Project, a program under the Works Progress Administration. A database, consisting of information such as the geographical locations of where the subject was enslaved, where the interview took place, and any additional information about the interviewee’s life following emancipation, is the primary undertaking of this project. By comparing one location with the other, we intend to track just how common post-Civil War migration was as well as its magnitude (i.e. distance traveled). Additionally, further qualitative assessment of the primary source material will hopefully reveal the reasons behind whatever decision they might have made. This will, in turn, offer some insight into the particular economic, social and/or legal conditions that freed people faced following emancipation, with particular emphasis placed not only on the ways in which their lives were changed, but also noting what aspects of their lives remained essentially the same.