

May 1937

## Folklore Stories from Ex-slave, "Mama Duck," May 19, 1937

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Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida

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### Recommended Citation

Frost, Jules A. and Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida, "Folklore Stories from Ex-slave, "Mama Duck," May 19, 1937" (1937). *Narratives of Formerly Enslaved Floridians*. 37.

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Complete

Tampa, Florida

Approx. 1500 words  
Jules A. Frost,  
Tampa, Fla

May 19, 1937

STORIES OF FLORIDA

Prepared for Use in Public Schools

by the

Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration

FOLKLORE

STORIES FROM EX-SLAVES

"MAMA DUCK"

"Who is the oldest settler, white or colored, that you know of in Tampa?"

"See Mama Duck," the grinning elevator boy told us, "she 'bout a humbert years old."

So down into the "scrub" we went and found the old woman hustling about from washpot to pump. "I'se mighty busy now, cookin' breakfast," she said, "but if you come back in 'bout an hour I'll tell you what I kin 'bout old times in Tampa."

Her dust-covered dog met us with elaborate demonstrations of welcome on the return visit.

"Gwan away f'm here, Spot; dat gemmen ain't gwine feed you nuthin. You keep yo' dirty paws offen his close."

Mama Duck sat down on a rickety box, motioning us to another on the shaky old porch. "Take care you don't fall thoo dat ol' flo", she cautioned. "Hit 'bout ready to go to pieces, but I 'way behind on rent, so I cain't ask 'em to have hit fixed."

"I see you have no glass in the windows - doesn't it get you wet when it rains?"

"Naw, no, kase I gits ovah on de odder side o' de room when hit rains. Didn't have no do', neither, when I moved in. Young folks 'round here used to use hit fo' a co't house afo' I come."

"A what?"

"Courtin' house. Kep a-comin' attar I done move in, an' I had to shoo 'em away. Dat young rascal comin' yondah, he one of 'em. I claijah to goodness--" and Mama Duck raised her voice for the trespasser's benefit, "I wight I had me a fence to keep folks outa my yahd."

"Qua-a-ck, quack, quack," the dressed-up young negro mocked, as he passed on, grinning.

"Dat don't worry me none; I don't let nathin worry me - worry makes folks gray-headed," the old woman said, as she scratched her thinly-covered dome. Three braids, about the length and thickness of a flapper's eyebrow stuck out at odd angles, and there were not more than a dozen gray hairs streaking the rusty black.

"I sho' had plenty chance to worry effen I wanted to," she mused, as she sipped ice water from a fruit jar foul with dirty fingermarks. "Relief folks got me on de black list. Dey give rations to young folks what's wukkin' and don't give me nary a mouthful."

"How's that?"

"Well, in de fust place, dey wanted me to go to de po' house. I wanted to take mah trunk 'long, an' dey wouldn't let me. I got some things in dere I be'n havin' nigh onto a hannort years. Got my ol' blue-back Webster, onliest book I ovah had, 'sousin mah Bible. Think I wanna throw dat stuff away? No-o,

suh!" Mama Duck pushed the dog away from a cracked pitcher on the floor and refilled her fruit jar. "So dey black-list me, case I won't kiss dey feet. I ain't kissin' nobody's feet - wouldn't kiss my own mammy's."

"Well, we'd all do lots of things for our mothers that we wouldn't do for anyone else."

"Mebbe you would, but not me. My mammy put me in a hick'ry basket when I was a day and a half old, with nuthin on but mah belly band an' di'per. Took me down in de cotton patch an' set de basket on a stump in de bilin' sun."

"What in the world did she do that for?"

"Kase I was black. All de othah younguns was bright. My gran'mammy done hear me bawlin' an' go fetch me to my mammy's house."

"Dat you, Mammy," she say, sweet as pie, when gran'mammy poun' on de do'.

"Don't you nevah call me 'Mammy' no mo', gran'mammy say. 'Any woman what'd leave a po' li'l mite lak dis to parish to death ain't fliten to be no datter o' mine.'

"So gran'mammy tak me to raise. I ain't nevah seen my mammy sence, an' I nevah wanted to."

"What did your father think of the way she treated you?"

"Nevah knew who mah daddy was, an' I reckon she didn't, neither. I was bawmed at Richard, Virginia. Mah sistah an' brothah be'n dead too many years to count - I de las' o' de fam'ly."

"Do you remember anything about the Civil War?"

"What dat?"

"The Civil War, when they set the slaves free."

"Oh, de fust war, you mean. I reckon I does - had three chillen, boys, bawmed befo' de war. Mah fust mastah didn't make us wak none when we was chillens. All I done was play. When I was old enough to wak, dey tuk us to Pelman, Jawjah. I novah wukked in de fields, not den, dey allus let me nuss de chillens. Den I got married. Hit wan't no church weddin' - we jes' got married in gran'mamma's kitchen and went to our own log house. By an' by mah mastah sol' me an' mah baby to de man what had de plantation nex' to ours - his name was John Lee. He was good to me, an' let me see mah chillens.

"No, I novah got no beatin's f'm mah mastah when I was a slave. Onliest thing I evah got was a little slap on de han', lak dat. Didn't hurt none. But I've seen cullud men on de Bradley plantation git freamed out plenty. De whippin' boss was Joe Silvester, a white man. He had pots 'mongst de wimmen folks, an' used to let some o' 'em off light when de 'served a good beatin'."

"How would he punish his 'po's?"

"Sometimes he jes' bop 'em 'crost de ear wid a battlin' stick--"

"A what?"

"Battlin' stick, lak dis. You don't know what a battlin' stick is? Well, dis here one. Use hit for washin' clothes. You lif' 'em outa de wash pot wid de battlin' stick; den you lay 'em on de battlin' block, dis here stump. Den you beat de dirt out wid de battlin' stick."

"Groat guns, that stick would knock a horse down."

"No, sah; wan't nigh as bad as some o' de othahs got. He had pets 'mongst de mens, too, but dey got it little wasser dan de wimmens. Effen dey wan't too mean, he jes' strap 'em 'orost de sharp side of a bar'l an' give 'em a few right smalt licks wid a bull whip."

"H'm--they did get off light, didn't they; and what would he do to the bad ones?"

"Well, sometimes dey try to run away; den he mek 'em cross dey han's, lak dis. Den he tie a rope roun' dey wrists an' throw hit ovah a tree limb. Den he pull 'em up so dey toes jes' touch de groun' an' smack 'em on de back an' rump wid a heavy wooden paddle, fixed full o' holes. Know what dem holes was for? Ev'y hole mek a blister. Den he mek 'em lay down on de groun' whilst he bus' all dem blisters wid a rawhide whip."

"I should think that would kill any man."

"Nevah heard o' nobody dyin' f'm gittin' a beatin'. Some couldn't wak for a day or two. Sometimes dey throw salt brine on dey backs, or smear on turpentine to mek it sit well quicker."

"Well, I suppose you're glad that those days are over."

"Not me. I was a heap better off den as I is now. Allus had sumpin' to eat an' a place to stay. No sack thing as gittin' on a black list. Mighty hard on a pesson old as me not to git no rations an' not have no reg'lar job."

"How old are you?"

"I don't know, 'sackly. Hobbe--wait a minute, I didn't

s ow you my nitcher wha' was in de paper, did I? I ca'n't read, but somebody say dey put how ol' I is under mah pitcher in dat paper."

Mama Duck rummaged through a cigar box and brought out a page of a Pittsburgh newspaper, dated a year ago. It was so badly worn that it was almost illegible, but it showed a picture of the old woman and below it was given her age, 109.

In answer to the question regarding the length of her residence in Tampa, she said that she didn't remember.

"Come here when dey was only one sto'," she mused. "His b'lon' to ol' man Murre. Dey raised cotton where Plant City is now. I picked some cotton dere, den I come to Tampa an' after a while I got a job nassin' Mister Perry Wall's chillen. Callin' folks jos' mek out de bes' dey could. Some o' 'em lived in tents tell dey could cut logs an' build houses wid stick-an'-dirt chimbleys."

Judging only by the appearance of this wiry old woman, it is hard to realize that the Massachusetts lawyer, John Quincy Adams, virtual author of the Monroe Doctrine, was serving as the country's sixth president when Kate Bennett left her unwanted black baby in a Virginia cotton patch. An interesting study, this patient old crone, resigned to unpleasant circumstances over which she has no control, curbing her temper in the face of petty annoyances, sitting in a dusty alley with her cur dog, as she stolidly waits for the last curtain to her long drama of life..