

July 1937

Interview, Stephen Harville and Jules A. Frost, Stephen Harville, Ex-slave, July 8, 1937

Stephen Harville

Jules A. Frost

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

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Complete
approx. 95 words

Tampa, Florida
July 8, 1937

STORIES OF FLORIDA

Prepared for Use in Public Schools

by the

Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration

STEPHEN HARVILLE, EX-SLAVE

By Jules A. Frost

Supplemental
Reader

"Stephen Harville - yes, suh, dat's me. I cain't see yuh, I'se just about blind, but I'se always glad to have folks call on me."

A pathetic spectacle, the slight figure of this aged negro, sitting on the edge of his bed, his short fingers nervously combing his thin, white beard. His serious face was upturned as he spoke. He listened attentively when questioned, answering in a respectful, straightforward manner which contrasted sharply with the careless, half-sarcastic attitude assumed by the average young negro of today.

"No, suh, I don't git about much nowadays, because mah eyes gin me trouble; ef it wan't for dat, I'd be out wukkin' ev'y day. I feel good, an' I lak to keep movin'. Sometimes I walk up an' down dis here hall an' out to de back porch more'n a hunderd times."

When questioned as to his early life, the old man recalled with remarkable detail and clearness events of the Civil War and before. Born February 2, 1840, in Alachua County, Florida, he spent his childhood in the service of his master, James Lanier, whose plantation was between Micanopy and the present site of Gainesville. The area to the south was known as Payne's Prairie, and was a favorite hunting ground of the Indians, who used to go there for deer and other game.

The old ex-slave, who makes no attempt to appear spectacular or impressive, says that he saw very little Indian hostilities. He recalls seeing some of the Indian women and children in detention camps, where they were held while others were being brought in for deportation to Arkansas.

He recalled a skirmish with the Indians just before the Civil War. His master, Mr. Lanier, had moved from Payne's Prairie to Tampa in 1856. Lanier and a merchant by the name of Smart were standing on guard with guns to protect their property from the Indians while the slaves pulled fodder. No Seminoles were in sight, and the men took a walk down through the corn field.

They found a fine watermelon and cut it, each taking half. Lanier sat down to eat, but Smart stood up, looking for a better place to sit down. The instant that his head showed above the corn, a gun roared from a thicket near the edge of the field, and the merchant sank in his tracks, shot through the heart.

Grabbing his gun, Lanier ^{shot} in the direction of the attack and started to run toward a detachment of soldiers from Fort Brooke. The Indians wounded him twice in the legs, but he was still able to run and succeeded in getting behind a shock of fodder, where he sank down, weak from loss of blood. He was rescued by the soldiers, and recovered, only to be killed a short time later in a skirmish with deserters from the Confederate army.

Old Stephen is a loyal Southerner and has no sympathy for "carpet-baggers" and other agitators from the North. They had succeeded, he said, in organizing a band of Confederate deserters,

who menaced the farmers in the vicinity of Tampa and Fort Myers. Lanier and a man by the name of Thomas were riding together through the woods when they were attacked by a band of these marauders. Lanier was killed outright and Thomas' horse was shot from under him. Running to Lanier's horse, Thomas sprang into the saddle and escaped.

With the death of the master, the estate and property, including slaves, passed into the hands of his two sons, James, Junior, and Hardy. Stephen, who was about 22 or 23 at the time, was hired out to a Mr. Sloane, to work in the woods. Sloane's place was in the depths of a wilderness of native trees, near the point where the Tampa Bay Hotel now stands.

Harville was married, and his wife lived near Seffner. In order to be at home, he walked from Sloane's place, crossing the Hillsborough River by ferry, and carried a sack of groceries on his back, returning early next morning in time for work. The round trip of more than thirty miles was compensated, he explained, by the satisfaction of spending what was left of the night in his own home.

They let him go home at noon one Saturday, because his wife was ill. Sunday her condition became worse and Harville sat at her bedside until daylight Monday morning. That forenoon he was on his way to work when he met his masters, the Lanier boys, on horseback. They had been to the home of his employer and Stephen anxiously inquired if Mr. Sloane would be angry with him for being so late to work.

"I guess it won't matter, Steve, whether he likes it or not," Jim explained. "The Yankees are in Tampa and they say ~~that~~ the war is over and the slaves are all free."

"Wha' dat - you mean -- "

"That's right, Steve," Hardy agreed. "Reckon you won't have to go to work any more for Mr. Sloane. Go on back to your wife, or anywhere you want to."

"But Mistah Hardy, I cain't do dat; Mistah Sloane might be hoppin' mad. Anyhow, I got some ole close an' t'ings down dere - I reckon I better go on."

"If I had some paper I'd give you a note to Mr. Sloane," Jim offered. Hardy pulled a notebook out of his pocket and handed it to his brother, who wrote a few words and gave the slip of paper to the ex-slave; his emancipation proclamation - more important to him than the impressive document signed by President Lincoln.

"So I b'en a free man all dese years," faltered old Stephen. "Wh reckon de pas' sebben or eight years b'en more tryin' dan de time when I was wulden' fo' Mistah Sloane, walkin' to Seffner, an' eatin' good, fillin' rashions offen my own table. If it weren't fer some kind white folks what's he'ped me out a mighty lot sence I los' my sight, I don't know what I'd a done. . . . Well, mebbe it won't be long, now, 'fore I be a heap bettah off dan I is now."