

*Mary Estes Peters was born on January 30, 1860, in Missouri. The interviewer, S.S. Taylor, described her as having “a good memory and a clear mind for her age [she was 78 years old at the time of the interview].” Mr. Taylor describes her as being “reticent” to discuss the facts of her birth. Her mother was enslaved, but her father was white, the “white parentage being very evident in her color and features and hair.”*

*Although she was born in Missouri, she was “refugeed” first to Mississippi and then to Arkansas. She has lived in Arkansas since the Civil War and in Little Rock since 1879. She made a living as a seamstress for a while but is now unable to sew because of fading eyesight. She married in 1879 and led a long and contented married life until the recent death of her husband. She lives with her husband’s nephew and ekes out a living by fragmentary jobs. Her address was 3115 W. 17<sup>th</sup> Street, Little Rock, AR.*

**Excerpt from Interview:**

“There was a light brownskin boy around there and they give him anything that he wanted. But they didn’t like my mother and me—on account of my color. They would talk about it. They tell their children that when I got big enough, I would think I was good as they was. I couldn’t help my color. My mother couldn’t either.

“My mother’s mistress had three boys, one twenty-one, one nineteen, and one seventeen. Old mistress had gone away to spend the day one day. Mother always worked in the house. She didn’t work on the farm in Missouri. While she was alone, the boys came in and threw her down on the floor and tied her down so she couldn’t struggle, and one after the other used her as long as they wanted for the whole afternoon. Mother was sick when her mistress came home. When old mistress wanted to know what was the matter with her, she told her what the boys had done. She whipped them and that’s the way I came to be here.

My mother was separated from her mother when she was three years old. They sold my mother away from my grandmother. She don’t know nothing about her people. She never did see her mother’s folks. She heard from them. It must have been after freedom. But she never did get no fall understanding about them. Some of them was in Kansas City, Kansas. My grandmother, I don’t know what became of her.

“When my mother was sold into St. Louis, they would have sold me away from her but she cried and went on so that they bought me too. I don’t know nothing about it myself, but my mother told me. I was just nine months old then. They would call it refugeeing. These people that had raised her wanted to get something out of her because they found out that the colored people was going to be free. Those white people in Missouri didn’t have many slaves. They just had four slaves—my mother, myself, another woman and an old colored man called Uncle Joe. They didn’t get to sell him because he bought hisself. He made a little money working on people with rheumatism. They would run the n----- from state to state about that time to keep them from getting free and to get something out of them. My mother was sold into Mississippi after freedom. Then she was refugeed from one place to another through Helena to Trenton (?), Arkansas.

SOURCE: *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, Cannon-Evans*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material, p. 323-330.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn022/>

**A Note on Language of the WPA Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938**

These oral histories reflect both the experiences of formerly enslaved people and the historical moment in which the interviews were recorded. Interviewers often tried to record the interviewee’s spoken language as they heard it. But this process was not as straightforward as it seems. Historians recognize that “what most interviewers assumed to be ‘the usual’ patterns of speech of their informants’ speech was unavoidably influenced by preconceptions and stereotypes.”

For more information: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/note-on-the-language-of-the-narratives/>