

Nathan Best, ex-slave, Harrison County  
FC  
Mrs. Charles E. Wells.

NATHAN BEST.  
Age 92

Inmate of Beauvoir, Confederate Soldiers' Home, on Beach between Biloxi and Gulfport. About 5 ft. 5 in. tall, weight 115. Dark chocolate color, white mustache and hair, sight and hearing fairly good, medium intelligence, solemn in disposition.

I was borned May 19, 1845 in North Carolina. My ole marster's name was Henry Bes' but I was in the service wid his younges' son, Rufus Bes'. My father's name was Nathan Bes', I was named atter him, an' my mother's name was Maria, we was all Bes'es. I had a sister named Sairy Ann, an' a brother named Snovine, dere was so many of 'em, I don' guess I kin name 'em now, dey was 15 in all. I mah'ied in 1867, my wife was named Hester, she didn' belong to my ole marster, but to Dr. Seer, his plantation was about 7 miles from ours. She died - I had a secon' wife name Nancy. She had been dead about ten years - dat was 'fore I come here, I has been here 6 years.

My ole marster's house didn' have no name, but de servants called it de "Great House". It had a long hall clean acrost it, an' rooms on each side of de hall. De dinin' room was about 30 feet long, it was built off separate. De house was painted white, it was a two story house wid big postes in front - a big, fine house. De

Quarters was about a quarter of a mile long, de cabins was on each side of a street. My marster had 101 slaves. We was 3 miles from Snow Hill de county seat. We wa'nt on no railroad, we was way back in de country, 12 miles was de nearest railroad dey was.

My mistis name was Maria, too, she had eight chillun, 2 gals and six boys. All her sons went to de War, 'cept one.

We raised corn, cotton, peas an' everyting - my ole marster run 16 plows every day, he had 25 or 30 head of horses an' mules. He had a 'ticular saddle horse an' a 'ticular buggy horse, day didn' do nothin' but ca'hy him aroun'.

My mother worked on de farm, an' my father stayed in de woods an' run turpentine. My marster run a big farm, an' worked turpentine, too.

My marster was good to me while he lived, but atter he died I kotch it. Dey was jes' talkin' about dey was goin' to be a War when he died. Den his oldes' son, Marse Bob, drawed me from de estate. He was good to me hisself, but dey hired a overseer, he couldn' hear good, so dey 'zempted him from the War. He was mighty mean, I doan know how many times he did whup me. He would come out of a mornin' an' want to whup everyting he seen. Dis overseer wa'nt born rich, he was a poor man, jes' had a house way back in de woods. One time he hung me up in a peach tree an' whupped me. Kase I stuck a knife in a gal's arm - she got mad at me

an' slapped me in de mouf, an' I had dat ole knife an' stuck it in her arm.

Dey put me at service when I was eight years ole. Dey put me to foller'n de stock. Dey run out in de big woods, an' dey had to foller dem to keep 'em from breakin' into folkses fiel's.

I run away once, (he laughed) I didn't start to go nowhere jes' laid out in de woods, hidin' from de overseer. He come down de street in de Quarters dat mawnin' jes' a beatin' an' a whuppin' an' de niggahs all a cryin' an' a screamin' an' before he got to where I was, I was done lef' an hid in de woods. My ole mistis, thought dat de overseer had kilt me, an' she tole him not to bother me ef I was foun'. Ole mistis was mean too, she would tell de overseer to whup de niggahs, but she didnt 'low him to kill none of us, 'kase dat would lose her money. Well, dey foun' me an' took me to de Great House, but dey didn' whup me. Dey ship me off from dat place ober to her son's plantation. He was mah'ied off an his place was about 3 miles from ole mistis.

De war had been goin' on 'bout a year an' a half when I went wid my marster's younges' brother, Rufus. I stayed in it den, till it ended. I was in a heap of battles, but I cain' remember none of deir names, 'cept Petersburg an' Richmon'. My marster never did get wounded - one time a bullet went under his arm an' tore a bundle away, but it didn' hurt him. My marster was a Cap'n an' dey didn' rush de riches' folks to de fron' to fight dey rushed de poor

folks in firs'. I was in a big battle at Petersburg. I was carryin' a 'spatch for Cap'n Jordan, he was ober our camp, to a Colonel, 'bout 3 miles away, an' my horse fell down, an' broke my arm so bad, dey had to ca'hy me to de horspittle an' have it took off.

I wa'nt at Richmon'. My marster got a furlough to go see 'bout his mother, jes' a few days before, but he jes' done it to shun dat heavy battle. He kep' bushwackin' along an' we nebber did git to Richmon'.

Ebbery place de Yankees took, dey tole de cullud folks dey ain' got no more marster an' no more mistis, an' to go 'bout deir business. Dey 'stroyed de stock an' took what money dey could fin' - dey stroyed de stuff too, I seen 'em pull de plug outn a barrel of 'lasses an' pour it out in de road.

De Yankees tole us to go to a big city, New bern, N. C. De slaves went dere by hunderds an' hunderds, whole train loads, an' when we got dere dey dumped us out, and dey wa'nt no houses for us to stay in. Dey jes' haul us out to a big battle groun' called Fort Totten an' dere dey dump us out on de bare groun' hunderds an' hunderds of niggahs. We got stakes an' driv' down in de groun' an' peeled off bark to make us shelters.

Atter dey dump us out dey tell us to go down to a place - I has forgot de name of it - an' dere we would draw some grub. Dey was a Yankee dere, dey called him de progo (provost) marshall an' he giv' us out hardtacks and codfish

an' ole pink beefs dat was lef' from de army. We stayed dere an' et dat till fall an' den de progo marshall let all dat wanted to go back to deir ole homes an' give us tickets on de train. I went back to my marster an' stayed wid him three years. He paid me \$3.50 a month an' he fed us from his table. I worked on farms all my life an' in turpentine, as long as I was able to work. Atter awhile I went to Georgy an' worked mos'ly in turpentine. I stayed dere a long time. De firs' station I lan' at in Georgy was Millwood, the nex' big town to it was Albany. I worked turpentine dere for 12 years, an' den I went to Crawford county an' worked turpentine.

I come to Mississippi 30 years ago, to Ocean Springs. For along time I worked for Mr. Harry Woodman, at Vancleave. Den I live in Biloxi. I plowed around dere for people, I had a team of my own, I jes' went around town an' plowed folkses' gardens for 'em. I jes' got a pension for two years before I come here, it was only \$40 a year. I went to de Reunion at Montgomery an' dey tole me I better get in de Home, ifn \$40 a year was all I was gettin'.

Yes, I voted for about 5 years atter de War. I voted at Snow hill, dat was in Greene county an' voted once in Georgy. None of my cullud frien's was ever 'lected to office - no more'n county commissioner. I quit votin' kase dey 'franchised us from votin'. I thought dem was good times in de country 'fore dey 'franchised us.

I has seen Klukluxes an' I has run from 'em. Dey sot

atter me, but dey didn' get me. Dey was atter us, jes' kase we was free. Dey killed up seberal of de cullud folks, dey would get atter 'em in de night.

I b'long to de Methodis' church, I jined in 1866. We went to our marster's church in slavery time. He was a Methodis' an all his cullud folkse was Methodis', all dem dat b'longed to church. I takes de bus an' goes to church in Biloxi mos' ebery Sunday, I don' go ebery Sunday.

I raises a garden an' sells de stuff, I used to sell de bigges' part of it right here at de Home. Dey gives us \$2.00 a month spendin' money now, I doan know what dey gwine to do, dey talks about quittin' dat. I got three chillun livin' so far as I knows, I got a daughter in Biloxi an' a son in Canton, Ohio. He works in a bank - he has worked dere 15 years. Den I has another son in Loosiana, I forgets de name of de place.

I likes it pretty well here, but I would like it better ifn dey'd jes' give me 'nough pension, so I could live at home.

Frank Childress, ex-slave, Harrison County

Frank Childress

Age 84

We next turned to Uncle Frank Childress, who was born 84 years ago in Memphis Tennessee. His mother had Indian blood, and lived to be 105 years old, and his father lived to be 97. His mother was housekeeper for Colonel Mark Childress, who served under General Forrest. Frank lived there until 12 years old. Uncle Frank told us a war story too. He said "During the war I went to Richmond with my Marse Mark Childress, carrying him whiskey and tobacco, wen I was a little over 12 years old. I was captured by Grant at Clayton Mississippi wen I was 14, and to keep fum feein' us He was goin' ter kill us, but Sherman said No, dont kill him. He served de south, now let him serve de north, den he sed to me "Load dat cannon or I kill you." an' I loaded it. I put four buckets of powder, put de flap back, den put de ball in, and pull de crank, it rolled right on back and nearly jarred me ter death."

Frank also told of how they were left with stolen money. As the yanks had wagon loads piled high requiring 8 horses to pull the wagons, and of how he was sent to Helena Arkansaw and put in a corral there, where he stayed until after the close of the war. Frank spoke of having 14 children, now all dead, saying they had worked themselves

to death on plantations making 50 and 60 bales of cotton a year. He said preaching had always run in his mind and he tried to be a preacher, and was sent to school for ten years in Nashville, Tennessee, to study to preach, as a methodist, but down here I goes ter de catholic church -- all churches come out de catholic church, it was de starting place, and a person must obey de Lord. I preached at Memphis, Friars Point, Clarksdale, and Little Rock Arkansas, and dey took me fum my church and sent me down here ter live, en day ought not to er done it, I ought to go preachin' ergin. But dey treats me mighty good here. But de callin' is stronger. I wanter go home."

Frank has been in the Home 3 years, and Nathan 5 years and say they are well cared for. These two old men are going toward the sunset of life well cared for amid beautiful surroundings.

Editor's Note: Original material at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers' Project Collection. *Mississippi History NOW* set the original material in different type to improve readability.