

## **Benjamin's Story**

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, President Roosevelt established a number of agencies to produce jobs for the unemployed. One of these projects was the WPA's Writer's Project that in part involved interviews with former slaves and putting their story into print. W. W. Dixon of Winnsboro came to York County and interviewed eighty-eight year old Benjamin Russell. This article is based on his account of slavery.

Benjamin was born and reared on the Nance plantation on Turkey Creek in the southwest corner of the county in the Bullocks Creek Township. Born about 1847, he said of this parents, "My father was just Baker, my mother [was] just Mary." Mary, Benjamin was told, was born on the Youngblood place that had been inherited by his mistress, Rebecca Nance.

Baker lived about three miles away on the Russell plantation and apparently became acquainted with Mary at church or on visits to the Nance farm. Benjamin said his mother encouraged his father's attention because he was "religiously inclined, dutiful and faithful as a slave." These qualifications apparently influenced the decision of Rev. Russell and Mrs. Nance who sanctioned their marriage. Baker was freely granted passes to visit his young bride, and in time she became pregnant. Mrs. Nance built Mary a log house in which to raise her children. Benjamin, it seems, was especially proud of the fact that their beds were made by the plantation's carpenter.

Benjamin admitted to Dixon that he had been fortunate to have been part of the Nance plantation where he and others were well treated, supplied with plenty of food and as good healthcare as the times provided. "When we were sick she [Mrs. Nance] visited us and summoned a doctor the first thing, but the remedies those days were castor oil, quinine, turpentine, mustard plasters and bleeding." Since the Nance plantation did not employ a large work force they had no need for an overseer, but personally attended their slaves and managed the farm themselves. Mrs. Nance oversaw that meals were properly prepared and served from the "big kitchen." Milk was plentiful, Benjamin said, and sometimes butter was made available, and each household was allowed to have their own chicken house.

Benjamin must have been a cute little boy and admired by "white folks and visitors" since he said he was sometimes given coppers (3 cent pieces) or on a good day a dime or two. With the extra money he purchased Sunday clothing or firecrackers and candy for Christmas. Saturday afternoon were usually "time off" which the women used to catch up on their housework and men cut firewood or

worked their gardens.

The agricultural society operated on the seasons, intermitted with planting and harvesting were lulls that gave both blacks and whites a time to relax and enjoy life. The most popular lull was 'laying-by time' that came late in July and August. At this time the crops were layed-by (plowed for the last time before harvest) and while waiting for the harvest, the time was used to visit friends and relatives, attend revivals, singings and parties. After the harvest was in and work was done, most farms observed Christmas with a two weeks 'vacation.' On the Nance farm the Mrs. Nance gave a big dinner for the farm hands, instruct them in the catechism and hand out clothing and shoes for the coming year.

The Nance family, like their other Presbyterian neighbors, was strict moralists and saw to it that their children and their slaves exemplified Christian attributes. Walking along the road with a young man greatly displeased Mrs. Nance who would call the girls to give an account of their action. She questioned, "Who was that young man? How did you come to be with him? Don't ever let me see you with him again--if you can't pick a better mate than that, then I will do the picking for you." "Sometimes," Benjamin said, "she'd whip the colored children, but only when it was needed for correction."

Like other plantations with a small number of slaves, Mrs. Nance required the slaves to attend church regularly. At the Bullock's Creek Presbyterian Church, they sat in the gallery and joined in singing hymns and psalms. Rev. R. Y. Russell was Benjamin's favorite preacher. Russell sometimes held special services for the slaves in the white school during winter and in the summer the slaves pitched a brush arbor of pine tops on the plantation. Slaves enjoyed these arbor meetings and came in large numbers to sing Negro spirituals like "Steal Away To Jesus."

As contented as most of the Nance slaves were, Benjamin was familiar with run-aways and the punishment that ensued. He took a dim view of anyone who, as he said, "Was contrary enough to run away..." It may surprise us that the run-aways sometimes reaped the ire of other slaves. On one occasion, a woman by the name Addie, was hired out to work for a nearby MacDonald family but she chose to ran away. When she returned to the Nance farm she was met by a receiving committee that promptly pelted her with rocks until she returned to the MacDonald farmk. A typical agreement between farmers for hiring out slaves would before sixty-five dollars a year paid to the owner with the promise of providing shoes and clothing, to pay for taxes and all medical bills.

Benjamin was also familiar with the buying and selling of slaves. At least on one occasion he went to Chester with his young master and at the courthouse he saw slaves “put on the block and auctioned off to the highest bidder just like land or mules and cattle.” Benjamin, no doubt, knew his own father had been purchased by Rev. Russell, when he was only five years old, from a drove of Virginia slaves.

The law of most Southern states forbid the wholesale education of slaves, but most farmers and planters found it convenient for some of their hands to read, write and do simple mathematics. Benjamin told Dixon that everyone on the Nance plantation was taught to read, though writing was strictly forbidden. He said, “On one occasion I ran in on my young master, William, teaching my Uncle Reuben how to write. They showed their confusion.” Reverend Russell not only taught his servant, Baker, to read, but also to write and interpret the Scriptures. This home schooling would place Baker in the forefront after emancipation.

A lack of education did not deter Benjamin or the other slaves from learning what was going on in local and national affairs. This was especially true on small farms or plantations where slaves were in close contact with the white families and where family members worked along side their slaves. It seems that the more determined owners tried to conceal information from the slaves the more alert they became, as Benjamin said, “the wider they opened their ears.” Those more likely to hear local gossip and news were the girls who served the meals, as well as personal maids and drivers. These, on their first opportunity, eagerly shared the news with others on visits to other farms and in town.

Benjamin denied being superstitious himself, but agreed it was common among his people to believe in “ghosts, spirits, haunts and conjurations.” Superstition, however, was not limited to slavery alone, many whites believed in ‘haints’ signs and omens. Benjamin recalled an evening on the Nance farm when many of his fellow slaves became excited and fell into fear. It was while William Youngblood was getting ready to leave the next day to join the Confederate Army; and a whippoorwill lighted on the windowsill and made his plaintive call, “whip-poor-will.” “All the slaves on the place,” recounted Benjamin, “were frightened and awed and predicted bad luck to Master Will.” It is doubtful the bird was a prophet, but Will ‘took sick in the war and died, just wasted away. He was brought back in rags toward the end of the struggle.” Military records show that William died of disease at Germantown, Virginia when he was only twenty. His body was returned to the family (in rags as Benjamin says) and was buried in Bullocks Creek Presbyterian Cemetery.

Following the war and at one of the sumptuous New Year's dinner during Reconstruction, that Rebecca Nance "impressed on us...that we were free. Some were sorry, some hurt, but a few were silent and glad. I and many others had been treated well."

After emancipation we lose track of Benjamin except for his interview when he was an old man. His father however, began a career as a local leader for the newly freed people. Having been taught to read and interpret the Scriptures, his former master recommended him to be ordained. As a Presbyterian minister, Baker established the Blue Branch Presbyterian Church in the Bullocks Creek Township. The church was conveniently located between the Nance farm and the Russell farm one what is now Blanton Road. Blue Branch later became known as the 'mother of churches' because other local churches--Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian--can trace their origins from this little backwoods congregation. Though the church is now defunct, once a year a small crowd fills the tiny sanctuary on a Sunday in August and recall former times.