

## [Slaves of Nueva Esperanza]

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August 14, 1939.

Mrs. Isabel Barnwell,

2116 Pearl Place,

Jacksonville, Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

SLAVES OF NUEVA ESPERANZA (SP. NEW HOPE)

PLANTATION, NASSAN COUNTY,

FLORIDA.

We were waiting for the operator, Mr. Cook, with the voice-recording machine to come and make records of the old plantation songs which Mrs. Barnwell was to sing from memory of her early childhood days on Nueva Esperanza (New Hope) Plantation where she was born on April 17, 1854.

As she rehearsed the songs to be sure of the key, her mind went over the circumstances under which, or referring to which, the songs originated.

“My father was a good businessman, a judge for that district which included a much larger section than just Nassan County, but he was very kind.

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"I never remember any instance of the whipping of slaves, except on one occasion. There were ninety-one, altogether. We had family prayers each morning, but there were no churches especially for the negroes, although they had their own celebrations and gatherings of different kinds when not at work, and one relaxation was dancing. There were many buildings on the plantation, the barns, and storage cribs, and the big lofts for hay, with [?] floors — that is, split legs laid close together with the smooth side up.

2

"My oldest brother, James N. o'Neill, born August 26, 1833, was the overseer.

"One Thanksgiving night there had been a big celebration among the negroes and a dance at night. Two young girls, Sally and Fannie, each about sixteen, fell out about which was the most popular among the [?] of the ball. Sally had two dresses and Fannie had three, and in between dances they would rush to their cabins and change quickly, hoping after each switch of costume, the change would add to their comeliness and popularity with the young negro bucks present. The quarrel lasted into the following day, and while they were busy at their assigned task they got to fighting, pulling each other's hair, and scratching faces, and biting each other's flesh whenever opportunity offered.

"Word was brought to father of the [?], and he took my brother, James, and went to the scene. He spoke to the girls, but they kept right on, evidently intending to fight to a finish, [?] father told James to whip them and make them behave themselves, as he could not permit fighting among the slaves. This was the only instance of whipping.

"I was only about six years of age at the time, and did not witness the whipping, of course, as such matters were not for the eyes of the womenfolk at the 'big house' but I overheard the conversation as father told mother about it.

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“Another thing, father never sold his slaves. They were kept and trained to their various duties and considered as a valuable and most necessary part of the plantation — in 3> fact, such a vast tract of land could not have been handled without their labor.

“Such one was given a task to do, in the field, the vineyard, in the orchards, around the barns, the chicken-houses, or among the livestock — horses, cows, sheep, and pigs.

“Some of the more intelligent negro men brother John broke in and trained as his helpers. Each slave in the early morning was assigned a task, generally enough to keep him busy until the end of the day; but if they were smart and learned to work fast, they often completed their task earlier, sometimes by two o'clock in the afternoon. Then the rest of the day they had for themselves. There were about twenty of the negro cabins around the cove just beyond the house on Lanceford Creek, each with its own garden, where the families raised garden truck, and if they had more than they wanted, they could sell the surplus. Some had a few chickens of their own. The women often baked home-made bread — salt-rising or yeast bread — and ginger cake and cookies, and on Saturdays they could take these to Fernandina and sell them.

“Saturday was generally regarded — that is, from noon on — as a holiday when the slaves, except those needed around the house, or for the milking or other chores, but they could not leave the plantation, or visit other plantations in the section without passes from brother James.

4>

“I remember only one instance where a slave was sold and that was not for profit. Father owned one man, a valuable field hand, whose wife belonged to Mrs. Bacon, and when the Bacons moved to Georgia, father sold Dr. Bacon the negro, Jack, so that he could be on the same plantation with his wife.

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“Father never separated families, wives and husbands, or children from their parents. As I remember, they were a very happy lot, and so were we.

“Another time father threatened to sell a negro, Wallace, who had been the property of my mother before she and father were married.

Wallace was a thief. It seemed impossible to correct him of this bad habit. One night Wallace had broken into the sugar-house — the door was locked, as it contained the full harvest of sugar and barrels of syrup — but Wallace dug a hole under the back side of the sugar house, lifting one of the large log punchoons — it was a heavy piece two feet wide — with his strong back, moving it enough to permit him to crawl through this space in the floor. He was caught, with several buckets of syrup - and a quantity of the brown sugar, and father was so provoked.

“Wallace came to the house and asked for my mother, I remember my mother came out on the porch and Wallace kneeled before her, begging her — “Miss Mary, ‘fore God, I won't do it again — I won't steal any mo' — please, missus, don't let Marse Henry sell me off!’ Evidently,

mother's [?] in Wallace's behalf influenced the ‘court’ and Wallace stayed right on.

5>

“When the War between the States came on, the slaves of course knew about it, heard talks by the Abolitionists, that would be considered vile propaganda now, and they were much distressed.

“My father's slaves, however, seemed to have faith they would be taken care of, and they [?] to sing the following song to calm the fears of those who were weak-hearted in contemplation of having to shift for themselves.

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WE HAB A JEST GAWD We hab a jest Gawd [?] [?] cause, - Plead our cause. We hab a jest Gawd to plead our cause, Fur we are de chillun of Gawd. Come along, I tell yuh, dontcha be afeared, - Dontcha be afeared. Come along, my people, dontcha be shamed, Fur we are de chillun of Gawd. ————— O-o-h we hab a jest Gawd ter pleade our cause, - Plead our cause, We hab a jest Gawd to plead our cause, Fur we are de chillun of Gawd. —————

“I could not say the song was original, but I heard them singing it in 1860 and 1861, and never heard it anywhere else, so they probably made it up.

6>

“When my brother John, who was born July 19, 1842, brought word from his visit to the Harrison Plantation up the Lanceford Creek north of us that the Federal gunboats were in Fernandina Harbor in 1861, we had about fifteen women guests and relatives visiting us. Father took charge and ordered a hurried departure.

“Slaves were ordered to the ‘big house’ and told of the peril we were in from Federal invasion and possible loss of life from shelling of the vicinity by guns of the fleet. Only six of the ninety-one deserted to join the Federal forces.

“Farm machinery and supplies were hastily gotten together, and in four hours New Hope Plantation was deserted by his human inhabitants both white and black, and all livestock on the road to the west. The family, with what few belongings we [?] gather together in such a short space of time, were driven in buggies and wagons to the railroad yards, and placed on flats — that is open flat-cars used to transport machinery and vegetables, or other produce.

“I had a precious [?] box and one lone doll - the box held its clothing - and I remember my mother telling the ladies - my grown sisters and guests to form a ring on the flat-car, placing me in the middle, so I would not roll off when the engine started.

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“We went to Hamilton County. A friend, Mr. Bacon, took us all in, giving us shelter for five months. In the meantime, my father purchased a thousand acres of land near White Springs, and here we lived for the duration of the War in 7> the greatest plenty and without molestation.

“My four brothers joined the Confederate troops: James N., John Bolton Gunby, Dunbar, who was born December 1, 1846, and my youngest brother, Isador S. o'Neill, who was born on the 19th of January in 1848. They were with Lee in the Army of Virginia.

“I had three sisters: Anna Maria, born November 12, 1837; Mary Alberti, October 8, 1839; Florence Elizabeth, May 28, 1844, all of whom were married, and their husbands were also with the Confederate troops.

“When we came back to New Hope in the summer of 1860, it was almost completely wrecked. The house had been occupied as a headquarters by the Federal troops. It was in bad repair and all of the furniture had been removed, even the grand piano, which was a great loss, as we were all fond of music, and played and sang a great deal.

“The handsome row-boat/ Isabel, (named for me) which had only been in use about six months, was also gone. We were never able to get any trace of our belongings.

“The negroes had all been freed on the plantation in Hamilton County. Some remained and worked for wages, supporting themselves, but others left and we never heard of them again.”

Mrs. Barnwell had in her possession the old family bible, published by George Cushing, in Gund[?]rlano, Massachusetts in 1828, in which are written in her father's handwriting the names and dates of birth of the eleven o'Neill children.