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Published by: Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20064124
Accessed: 18/12/2014 15:49

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SONGS OF REMEMBRANCE

Josephine Wright*

The publication of P. Sterling Stuckey's 1968 essay, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," marked a defining moment in research of African American cultural history by challenging stereotypical treatments of slave life and culture published during the first half of the 20th century by such prominent historians as Ulrich B. Phillips, Stanley Elkins, and Samuel E. Morrison, and Henry S. Commager.1 Stuckey argued in "Through the Prism of Folklore" that the dehumanizing process of slavery in North America did not inhibit slaves from forging cultural traditions that allowed them "to maintain their essential humanity."2 In advocating the use of slave oral traditions as a legitimate source for rewriting African American history, Stuckey followed a legacy championed in the last century by W. E. B. Du Bois, Sterling Brown, John Lovell, Howard Thurman, James Cone, and Eileen Southern, who wrote from varying disciplinary perspectives about the "Negro Spirituals" serving as a mirror into the heart and soul of Africans held in bondage in North America. This essay revisits the subject of the historic origin of selected Negro Spirituals, defined here as the improvised sacred songs of Christians enslaved in the United States from the perspective of 19th century sources of North American provenance. We know from the pioneering research of Eileen Southern that the Spirituals evolved as a new genre of sacred song among African Americans in the southern and northern regions of the United States around the turn of the 19th century.3 According to John Watson, a European American elder and author of Methodist Error or Friendly Christian Advice to Those Methodists Who Indulge in Extravagant Religious Emotions and Bodily Exercises (1819), black Methodists in Pennsylvania improvised sacred songs derived from "short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetition choruses," performing them in manner of the harvest frolic of slaves in the southern United States.4

From the perspective of American music, the Spirituals comprise the largest repertory of slave music to come down to us from the antebellum era, preserved largely through the efforts of northern missionaries, Union Army officers, educators, and folksong collectors who compiled and published them immediately after the Civil War. These Spirituals represented, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, the African American's most enduring gift to the world; through them the slave spoke to the world with simple, forthright elegance.5

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In his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Frederick Douglass recalled that slaves were expected to sing as they worked:

A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. "Make a noise," "make a noise," and "bear a hand," are the words usually addressed to the slaves when there is silence among them. This may account for the almost constant singing heard in the southern states.6

Southern slaveholders and overseers quickly discovered the benefit of having slaves sing while they worked: singing helped them keep track of lone slaves working in the fields; it served as a useful tool for pacing the rhythmic flow of activity among field workers; and it took the slave's mind off the monotony of repetitive work. Christian slaves, according to their narratives, preferred singing hymns or sacred songs of their own composition while working, rather than secular ditties and so-called "devil" or fiddle songs.

Within such a context Christian slaves created a repertory of sacred oral literature—the Spirituals—to serve a functional role in their society.7 Such songs addressed a variety of needs in the slave community, reaching beyond the theology and spirituality of the enslaved into the innermost aspects of chattel slavery in the antebellum South, where black men, women, and children had little rights respected under the law. Under such conditions enslaved African Americans turned to song, in the tradition of their West African ancestors, to tell their histories, record experiences, articulate aspirations for justice, vent anger, and protest the institution of slavery. The lyrics express their undying belief that God would lead them out of bondage, as He had brought the Israelites out of Egypt.8

This essay examines the histories of four Negro Spirituals, each representing an archetype in one of four categories of songs sung by enslaved Africans and African Americans in the antebellum South: freedom songs, alerting songs, protest songs, and slave auction songs. It examines each song to document how Africans and African Americans in the southern United States understood and employed the Spiritual as a historical record of their life experiences.

"GO DOWN, MOSES"

"Go Down, Moses," a freedom song, survives as one of the oldest Spirituals to pass from oral tradition to printed literature in the United States.9 Many freedom songs of the slaves contain encoded messages with double meanings. For example, "Canaan," "heaven," or "run to Jesus," according to Frederick Douglass, "simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery."10 By the onset of the Civil War, reports filtered out from Union lines that slaves as well as ex-slaves in contraband camps were singing improvised "deliverance songs" or freedom songs. Former slave Susie King Taylor, who served as a nurse with the Union Army during the war, reported that during the pre-war
hysteria of 1860, her maternal grandmother was beaten and thrown in jail at Savannah, Georgia, for praying and singing "Yes, we all shall be free . . . when the Lord shall appear." Similarly, white pro-slavery sympathizers at Georgetown, South Carolina, whipped slaves for singing "We'll soon be free, till de lord shall call us home" in celebration of Abraham Lincoln's election as President of the United States.

"Go Down, Moses" evolved from the same oral tradition. Dena J. Epstein has partially reconstructed the history of this spiritual in her book Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War, identifying December 1861 as the date when the Spiritual crossed over from oral tradition to published song literature. On 21 December of that year, the National Anti-Slavery Standard reprinted from the New York Tribune a letter by Harwood Vernon, Secretary of the YMCA, containing an abbreviated text of the Spiritual obtained from Rev. Lewis Lockwood. An American Missionary Association chaplain, Rev. Lockwood worked with enslaved African Americans behind Union lines, or "contrabands" at Fortress Monroe, Virginia.

It ["Go down, Moses"] is said to have been sung for at least fifteen or twenty years in Virginia and Maryland, and perhaps in all the slave states, though stealthily, for fear of the lash; and is now sung openly by the fugitives who are living under the protection of our government. . . .

The verses surely were not born from a love of bondage, and show that in a portion, if not in all the South, the slaves are familiar with the history of the past, and are looking hopefully toward the future.

Two years later, Lockwood published an essay about his work among freedpeople in the Independent magazine, referring to one song they sang, "O, Go Down, Moses," as having been sung for thirty or forty years before it was "introduced to the ears of the nation." If Rev. Lockwood was correct in this assertion, his report would push back an approximate date of origin for "Go Down, Moses" in African American oral tradition to around the 1820s or early 1830s.

What did the Spiritual "Go Down, Moses" mean, however, to enslaved Africans and African Americans in North America? Was it simply a narrative song about biblical characters, devoid of any deeper intrinsic meaning, as Harold Courlander would have modern-day readers believe? At least two 19th-century observers shed light on this question. The first, Charles Wheeler Denison, former editor of the Emancipator and chaplain for the Union Army at Port Royal, South Carolina, wrote in 1862 that,

[The slaves] have almost wholly, and for many years, acted on the belief that they are to be delivered from American bondage as the children of Israel were delivered out of the bondage of Egypt. Through many parts of the South, there is a song that illustrates this idea. It has been used in some parts of Virginia for years, but has been forbidden to be sung in certain quarters of the state, and is never or seldom heard in states further south.
The second informant, William Wells Brown, writer, playwright, and former slave, explored the meaning of this Spiritual for contrabands at their watch-meeting service in the nation's capital on the eve of Emancipation:

They [the contrabands] met on the last night in December 1862, in the camp and waited patiently for the coming day, when they should become free. The fore part of the night was spent in singing and prayer, the following song being sung several times:

Oh, go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land;
Tell king Pharaoh
To let my people go.
Oh, Pharaoh said he would go cross,
Let my people go,
But Pharaoh and his host was lost,
Let my people go.

Chorus—Oh, go down, Moses, &c.

Oh Moses, stretch your hands across,
Let my people go,
And don't get lost in the wilderness,
Let my people go.

Chorus—Oh, go down, Moses, &c.

You may hinder me here, but you can't up there,
Let my people go,
He sits in heaven, and answers prayer,
Let my people go.

Chorus—Oh, go down, Moses, &c. . . .

Brown, still our informant, continues:

It was quite evident, through the exercises of the day and night, that the [N]egroes regard the condition of the Israelites in Egypt as typical of their own condition in slavery; and the allusions to Moses, Pharaoh, the Egyptian task-masters, and the unhappy condition of the captive Israelites, were continuous; and any reference to the triumphant escape of the Israelites across the Red Sea, and the destruction of their pursuing masters, was certain to bring out a strong 'Amen!' . . .

Whereas the text for the chorus in both William Wells Brown's and Rev. Lockwood's versions are identical, the verses are not. Existence of multiple texts for the verses lends credence to Lockwood's claim that this freedom song had wider geographical distribution in slave states than previously believed.

"THERE'S A MEETING HERE TONIGHT"

Enslaved Africans and African Americans managed to carve out private space for themselves beyond the prying, watchful eyes of the owners and white overseers by inventing innovative methods to avoid detection. At times they placed large kettles or washtubs full of water in the middle of cabins to
muffle sounds of singing, praying, and shouting (performing the "Shout" or "Holy Dance"); or by singing "sotto voce" to avoid detection at clandestine meetings in the cabins and bush arbors.21 They also improvised sacred songs or used favorite hymns as coded tools of communication to warn of lurking slave patrols, to signal impending escapes, or to announce clandestine religious meetings in praise cabins or in bush arbors far away from white authority.22 From this practice evolved a repertory of alerting songs that the slave community utilized for a variety of purposes.

William Henry Robinson explained in his narrative, for example, how he and fellow slaves sang alerting songs as coded messages on the antebellum plantation where he resided near Wilmington, North Carolina.

The slaves would have to devise many schemes in order to serve God. Of course they had church once or twice a month, but some white man would do the preaching, and his text would always be, 'Servants obey your masters[.]' But this was not what our people wanted to hear, so they would congregate after the white people had retired, when you would see them with their cooking utensils, pots and kettles, go into a swamp and put the pots and kettles on the fence, with the mouths turned toward the worshipers. They would sing and pray, the kettles catching the sound. In this way they were not detected. I did not learn until just before the war why they carried the vessels with them to worship.

In order to notify the slaves on other farms when there was going to be a meeting they would sing this song [below], and the slaves would understand what it meant. White people would think they were only singing for amusement:

"Get you ready, there's a meeting here tonight." Matt. 7:16.

1  Get you ready, there's a meeting here tonight,
Come along there's a meeting here tonight,
I know you by your daily walk,
There's a meeting here tonight.

2  Oh, hallelujah, to the lamb,
There's a meeting here tonight,
For the Lord is on the given hand,
There's a meeting here tonight.

3  If ever I reach the mountain top,
I'll praise my Lord and never stop,
Get you ready, there's a meeting here tonight.

4  Go down to the river when you're dry
And there you'll get your full supply,
Get ready, there's a meeting here tonight.

5  You may hinder me here,
But you cannot there,
God sits in heaven
And he answers prayer.
There's a meeting here tonight.
They would carry with them iron lamps, with a greasy rag for a wick, and they would attach a sharp spike to the lamp so as to stick it in a tree. In this way they would light up the swamp, while they held their meeting.23

At least four other versions of the Spiritual "There's A Meeting Here Tonight" survive in published 19th century sources before 1875, mostly hailing from the Carolinas. An early version was sung by slaves during the 1850s in South Carolina at camp-meeting revivals, according to Laurence Oliphant, who visited the United States in 1856.

At the period of my visit, in consequence of a series of revivals, the result of perpetual camp-meetings, the Negroes had assumed a certain air of gravity and sobriety . . . . On some plantations in South Carolina, they had given up dancing, held constant prayer-meetings, and never sang anything but their own sacred compositions. These chants break with their pleasant melody the calm stillness of evening . . . . The words, however, are more original than the music. Here are specimens taken down as they were sung:—

'O, I takes my text in Matthew,
And some in Revelation;
Oh, I know you by your garment—
There's a meeting here tonight. . . ."24

A printed concordance for Oliphant's text was collected by Charles Pickard Ware at Port Royal, South Carolina, during the Civil War and later published with music in Slave Songs of the United States (1867), along with another variant version (both text and melody) sung by slaves at Charleston, entitled "He's A Blessing Here Tonight" (see music examples I–II, pages 421–22). A third variant, commencing with the chorus "Dar's a meeting here tonight/ I hope to meet you dar" and followed by the verse "Parson Fuller sittin' on de tree of life/ an' he heavy [sic] when Jordan roll," was sung at Beaufort, South Carolina, during the early 1860s.25 (Parson Fuller referred to the Baptist preacher Richard Fuller, who owned a local plantation at Beaufort.)26 The fourth and most enduring version of "There's a Meeting Here Tonight" was popularized during the 1870s by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, first appearing in Gustavus Pike's 1875 edition of Singing Campaign for Ten Thousand Pounds: Or, the Jubilee Singers in Great Britain.

"BY AND BY, GWINE TELL GOD HOW YOU ABUSE ME"

Slave narratives abound with first- and second-hand accounts of wanton cruelty and brutality inflicted upon slaves by slave owners, overseers, and other whites in authority. The Spiritual "By and By, Gwine Tell God How You Abuse Me" comes down to us as a protest song, recording a slave mother's response to the murder of her child by an overseer. It survives only in text format in a narrative told in second person to a member of the
American Missionary Association, who reminds readers that the songs of the freedpeople "were improvised and never written down":

Aunt Vic [toria], who is [always] singing or chanting the wildest melodies, told me this story the other day. An overseer on a plantation had whipped a slave boy to death; the next day his broken-hearted mother was driven into the cotton field and through the long day worked, not wearily, but with energy of despair, at her usual task. Within that desolate heart the struggle went on; how could she bear it? Why did God give her this heavy cross? All day as her busy fingers plucked the fleecy balls the struggle went on, and this cry went up to God, till finally the victory came, and its triumph burst forth in song:

By and by, gwine to tell God how you abuse me,
By and by, gwine to tell Him of my heavy crosses,
Gwine to tell him 'bout this rugged way,
By and by, by and by.

By and by, gwine to slip sly into heaven,
By and by, gwine to have new shoes to try on,
By and by, gwine to have a shining robe to try on,
By and by, by and by.27

"MOTHER, IS MASSA GOIN' TO SELL US TOMORROW?"

Before and after Emancipation the freedpeople described in their narratives painful separations from family members through sales on the auction block. In many instances, the culling of the slave population occurred over the New Year's holiday, which was the time reserved by some slaveholders for trading slaves to the speculators.28 Vivid memories of this dehumanizing treatment persisted among those formerly enslaved well into the 20th century, as evidenced by the numerous interviews collected by Works Projects Administration (WPA) between 1936 and 1938.

"Mother Is Massa Goin' to Sell Us Tomorrow?" documents a rare lament (or "sorrow song") that appeared briefly in three printed sources between 1887 and 1901. The first publication to contain text and music of this song was Oliver Ditson's 1887 edition, Jubilee and Plantation Songs: Characteristic Favorites, as Sung by the Hampton Students, Jubilee Singers, Fisk University Singers, and Other Concert Companies, which credited Robert Hannibal Hamilton (RHH), one of the earliest African American collectors to publish arrangements of Spirituals, as the source.29 Thomas P. Fenner later reprinted Robert Hamilton's arrangement in two expanded editions of Cabin and Plantation Songs, as Sung by the Hampton Students in 1891 and 1901, before the Spiritual was dropped by commercial publishing houses. Yet, memory of this sorrow song lingered in oral tradition among at least two formerly enslaved African Americans interviewed in 1937 for the WPA interview project. Elizabeth Sparks, who was born in Virginia, recalled:
Old Massa done so much wrongness I couldn't tell yer all of it. Slave girl Betty Lilly always had good clothes an' all the privileges. She wuz a favorite of his'n. But cain't tell all! God's got all! We uster sing a song when he was shippin' the slaves to sell 'em 'bout "Massa's Gwyne Sell Us Temerrer [sic]." 

Emma L. Howard, born in 1852 in Lowndes County, Alabama, even sang a few lines of the song for her interviewer, commenting: "Dat was one of de saddest songs we sing endurin' slavery days.... It always did make me cry."

Mammy, is Ol' Massa gwin'er sell us tomorrow? Yes, my chile. 
What he gwin'er sell us? Way down South in Georgia. 

Although Emma Howard's rendition, recalled more than 70 years after emancipation, varies slightly from published text concordances, it conveys the poignant narrative of the song first transcribed in score by Robert Hamilton in the 1880s:

1. Mother, is master going to sell us tomorrow? 
   Yes, yes, yes! 
   Mother, is master going to sell us tomorrow? 
   Yes, yes, yes! 
   Mother is master going to sell us tomorrow? 
   Yes, yes, yes! 
   Oh, watch and pray.

2. He is a-going to take us down to Georgia, 
   Yes, yes, yes! 
   He is a-going to take us down to Georgia, 
   Yes, yes, yes! 
   He is a-going to take us down to Georgia, 
   Yes, yes, yes! 
   Oh, watch and pray.

3. Mother, don't you grieve after me, 
   No, no, no! 
   Mother, don't you grieve after me, 
   No, no, no! 
   Mother, don't you grieve after me, 
   No, no, no! 
   Oh, watch and pray.

4. Fare you well, mother, I must leave you, 
   Fare thee well, fare thee well! 
   Fare you well, mother, I must leave you, 
   Fare thee well, fare thee well! 
   Fare you well, mother, I must leave you, 
   Fare thee well, fare thee well! 
   Oh, watch and pray.
5. Mother, I hope to meet you in heaven,
   Yes, yes, yes,
Mother, I hope to meet you in heaven,
   Yes, yes, yes!
Mother, I hope to meet you in heaven,
   Yes, yes, yes!
Oh, watch and pray.33

These four songs encapsulate more than a hundred years of remembrance by black men and women of their experiences under chattel slavery in the southern United States. They eloquently articulate the humanity and ingenuity of enslaved and free African Americans and document an historical past that many in the United States often ignore or seek to forget.

MUSIC EXAMPLES


11. THERE’S A MEETING HERE TO-NIGHT.

   1. I take my text in Matthew, and by de Reve - la - tion, I
   know you by your garment, There’s a meet-ing here to-night. There’s a
   meet-ing here to-night, (Brudder Tony,) There’s a meet-ing here to -
   -night, (Sister Kina,) There’s a meet-ing here to-night; I hope to meet a - gain.
Example II: "He's A Blessing Here Tonight," Variant Version of No. 11 in Slave Songs of the United States, 9.

\[ \text{I see brudder Moses yonder, And I think I ought to know him. For I know him by his garment, He's a blessing here tonight; He's a blessing here tonight, And I think I ought to know him. He's a blessing here tonight.} \]

NOTES


6Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (Boston, 1855), quoted in Southern, Readings, 83.

7The term "Negro Spiritual" was not uniformly applied to the improvised sacred songs sung by slaves until after the Civil War. During the antebellum era slaves and their masters variously referred to them as plantation songs, hymns, "sperchills," sorrow songs, or hallelujah songs (See, Charles Colcock Jones, Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States [Savannah, GA, 1842], 265–66).

8The use of songs in traditional African societies as transmitters of oral histories is explored by Thomas A. Hale in Griots and Giottes: Masters of Words and Music (Bloomington, IN, 1998).

9Thomas Baker published an arrangement of "Go Down, Moses" in 1861 for Oliver Ditson and Company that differs from the Fisk Jubilee Singers' 1872 version (see below n. 15). According to Baker, the Spiritual "originated among the Contrabands . . . and was first heard sung by them on their arrival at Fortress Monroe"; see Dena J. Epstein, Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Back Folk Music to the Civil War (Urbana, IL, 1977), 248.

10Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, quoted in Southern, Readings, 87.

11Susie King Taylor, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers (Boston, 1902); reprinted in A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs, ed. Patricia W. Romero and Willie Lee Rose (New York, 1988), 32.

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13Epstein, Sinful Tunes, 243–51; see also Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tales, and Dance, 1600s–1920: An Annotated Bibliography of Literature, Collections, and Artwork (Westport, CT, 1990).
14Epstein, Sinful Tunes, 245.
15Ibid., 245–46. Vernon's 1861 transcription of "Go Down, Moses" contains the version of the text for the chorus and twenty verses later popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and published by Thomas F. Seward, ed., in Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers, of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, under the Auspices of the American Missionary Association (New York, 1872).
19William Wells Brown, The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity (Boston, 1867), 111–12.
20Ibid., 112. According to Brown, one recently emancipated female sang a parody on the Spiritual on this occasion: "Go down, Abraham, away down in Dixie's land, Tell Jeff Davis to let my people go. . . ." (118).
21See Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert, The House of Bondage; Or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves (New York, 1891), 11–12; see also "Inside Southern Cabins, Georgia—No. 1," Harper's Weekly 24 (13 November 1880), 733–34.
22Harriet Tubman, the famous conductor of the Underground Railroad, explained to her biographer how she used hymns and Spirituals as aids in helping slaves escape. According to Tubman, she improvised one altering song on the "Go Down, Moses" trope: "De first time I go by singing dis hymn ["Hail, oh hail ye happy spirits"], dey don't come out to me . . . till I listen if de coast is clear; den when I go back and sing it again, dey come out. But if I sing:

Moses go down in Egypt,
[Tell] ole Pharo' let me go;
Hadn't been for Adam's fall,
Shouldn't hab to died at all,

den dey don't come out, for dere's danger in de way"; quoted in Sarah Bradford, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman (Auburn, NY, 1869), 26–27.
24Laurence Oliphant, Patriots and Pilbustors: Or, Incidents of Political and Exploratory Travel (Edinburgh and London, 1860), 141; quoted in Epstein, Sinful Tunes, 226; see also Southern-Wright, African American Traditions, 37, no. 320.
26Richard Fuller (1804–1876) is best remembered for his newspaper debates during the mid-1840s with Francis Wayland, President of Brown University, over slavery; see, Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution (New York, 1846).
29Ditson included six additional Spirituals arranged by Robert H. Hamilton in this edition: "Humble Yourself" (48), "We Are Walking in the Light" (49), "End This War" (50), "Seek and You Shall Find" (50–51), "Hold the Light" (52), and "Fighting On! Hallelujah" (53).

A few biographical facts about Robert Hamilton can be pieced together from archival materials related to Tuskegee Institute. After experiencing slavery in Mississippi and Louisiana, Hamilton (d. 1895) escapes to Philadelphia during the Civil War. From 1872–1877 he attended Hampton Institute, where he sang with the Hampton Singers until he graduated. Following short teaching stints at Hampton Institute and the Butler School, he served as lead singer for the Tuskegee Quartet established in 1884 by Booker T. Washington. Hamilton published his first arrangements of Negro Spirituals in 1884, coinciding with his new association with Tuskegee; see, Helen W. Ludlow, ed. Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School, for Training of Colored Teachers at Tuskegee, Alabama: Its Story and Its Songs, . . . [With] Supplement, Cabin and Plantation Songs, as Sung by the Tuskegee Singers. Arranged by R. H. Hamilton (Hampton, VA, 1884), 12 songs. In 1887 Hamilton assumed charge of music instruction at Tuskegee; see, Louis R. Harlan, ed. The Booker T. Washington Papers, II (Urbana, IL, 1973), 85, n. 8.
Three other African American musicians besides Robert Hamilton compiled and published text and music anthologies of Negro spirituals in the early 1880s: M. G. Slayton, ed., Jubilee Songs, as Sung by Slayton's Jubilee Singers (Chicago, 1882), 14 songs; Marshall W. Taylor, comp., *A Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies, Composition by Miss Josephine Robinson...* (Cincinnati, 1882), 64 plantation songs; and Jacob J. Sawyer, arr., Jubilee Songs and Plantation Melodies (Words and Music), as Sung by the Original Nashville Students, the Celebrated Colored Concert Company (N.p., 1884), 12 songs. Jacob J. Sawyer served ca. 1882 as pianist for Slayton's Jubilee Singers.


32 "Autobiography of Emma Howard."

33 *Jubilee and Plantation Songs. Characteristic Favorites as Sung by the Hampton Students, Jubilee Singers, Fisk University, and Other Concert Companies* (Boston, 1887), 51.