



Narrative of Sarah Graves

Grade 6 and beyond.

Curriculum Connections: Slavery

From the book *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Federal Writers' Project, in the Newberry Library Reference, Local and Family History.

This activity could be used to introduce a class session or unit on slavery or to help students with close reading within a history curriculum.

Display the text. Give students time to generate and answer questions about the text and write notes. Use the background material at the end of this activity whenever you think it will encourage students to ask more questions and think more about how to engage with the **excerpt**.

My name is Sarah Frances Shaw Graves or Aunt Sally as everybody calls me. I am eighty-seven (87) years old and I was born March 23, 1850 in Kentucky somewhere near Louisville. I was brought to Missouri when I was six months old with my Mamma who was a slave owned by a man named Shaw who had allotted her to a man named Jimmie Graves who came to Missouri to live with his daughter, Emily Graves Crowdes. I always lived with Emily Crowdes. We left my Papa in Kentucky as he belonged to another man. My Papa never knew where my Mamma and me went and my Mama and me never knew where my Papa went. They never wanted Mama to know where my Papa was because they knew Mama would never marry as long as she knew where he was. Our Master wanted Mama to marry again and raise more children for slaves but Mama said she would never marry a man and have children so she married my step-father, Trattle Barber, because she knew he had a disease and could not be a father.

Potential Questions

- What kind of source is this? (*Oral history*)
- Is it a primary source? (*Yes, because Sarah Graves was an eyewitness to her own life.*)
- What information about Sarah Graves can you find in this **excerpt**? (*Her name, age, date of birth, where she was born where she lives her background and family history*)
- What information can you find about her mother? (*Her history, where she lived, who owned her, who she was married to, what she thought about having children*)
- What questions do you have after reading this?



Class Discussion

Have students discuss the choice Sarah Graves's mother made about her second marriage. Why did she marry the man she married? Why didn't she want to have more children? What does it tell us about a woman's life in slavery?

Background

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the federal government created many programs to provide paying work for people who were unemployed. One of these programs was the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), a part of the Works Progress Administration. The FWP employed writers to interview people who had formerly been enslaved. This oral history of Sarah Graves was one of more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery collected by these writers.

Sarah Graves says that her mother's owner, Shaw, had allotted her to another man, Jimmie Graves. This refers to the practice of "hiring out" enslaved people. Sarah Graves's mother would have worked for Graves, who would have paid Shaw for her services. She, of course, would have received no wages.

Additional Resources

- Hine, Darlene Clark and Kathleen Thompson. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
- White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman? : Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: Norton, 1985.
- [North American Slave Narratives](#), Documenting the American South
- [Photograph of Sarah Graves, Age 87, Library of Congress \(1936-1938\)](#)