

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Polly Mason

**COLLECTION:** 4700.0041

**IDENTIFICATION:** Reported former slave born at Ulster (Boyce) Plantation near Alexandria, Louisiana.

**INTERVIEWER:** Michael Mulhern

**SERIES:** Michael Mulhern Centenarians

**INTERVIEW DATE:** April 18, 1971

**FOCUS DATES:** 1860-1900

**ABSTRACT:**

**Tape 51**

Introduction; Mason is about to celebrate her 116<sup>th</sup> birthday on June 6 [ed: Mason's birth year was 1855 or 1875 according to various sources, so she may have been about to turn 96]; Mason's daughter, Irene, and Mulhern's wife, Cathy, are also present at interview; Mason born on Boyce Plantation [aka Ulster Plantation]; a family Bible that contained Mason's birthday was burned in a fire; she receives an old age pension of \$100 per month; says she doesn't remember slave times or ever being sold; her master was Judge Henry Boyce, he ran a cotton plantation; she knows Boyce made good money because he was the boss man; she worked in the hotel at Boyce; when she was a child on the plantation, she cooked and did dishes; her parents used to farm and tell tales about slave times, but she's too old to remember now; Boyce had a wife and one child; everyone worked on the plantation; Mason says she wouldn't let anyone mistreat her, if someone did, she wouldn't work for him; she doesn't remember any overseers, probably because she worked in the house; she doesn't remember any slave songs or anything about the Civil War; may have heard stories about troops invading Alexandria, troops may have stolen food or burnt cotton or other crops, likely caused some people to starve; Irene and Mason think that sin caused the Civil War; Mason recalls people speaking about Lincoln's assassination, it's too bad he got shot; Mason denies seeing any of Lincoln's burial; Mason could have gotten glasses years ago but her eyesight is too far gone now; Polly may have taken the last name Boyce after leaving the plantation, she later married a Mr. Mason [ed: her maiden name was reported as Coleman]; she doesn't know about slaves having campfire meetings after peace was declared; denies claim that she drinks a quart of corn whiskey per day; she enjoys sausages, cold drinks, sitting around her house; she could never read or write; uncertainty about where she lived post-Civil War; she never heard of the Freedmen's Bureau; she knows about the KKK, she used to warn her children about them coming in the night, now she's not scared of them because she's, "got a captain [God] to fight" for her; recounts a story of when she was recently lost in the woods overnight, she wasn't scared because God led her and he watched her all night; a search party located her the next morning after she couldn't find her way back; Mason remembers when the Texas and

Pacific railroad established a station near Boyce, they called the first train that passed by “the Wildcat”, that was a long time ago; they put meat [cows] on the train from Texas; the meat workers were nice; she would enjoy it if they built another railroad; she doesn’t recall hearing about the Colfax riots when blacks sought the right to vote; she’s been in her house so many years that she can’t remember how long it’s been; Mason’s husband built the house and worked at a sawmill by day; she isn’t familiar with many U.S. Presidents; Mason goes to church, daughter Irene reads Bible passages to her; her husband drove a school bus; Mason’s mother and father lived long lives, “they were slave time people”; the secret to her long life is that God let her get old; Mason sometimes eats at Irene’s house; Irene was blind three times as a child; Mason used to chew tobacco, now she smokes a pipe, remarks that Mulhern should have brought her some tobacco; she doesn’t watch much television; discussion of 1969 moon landing, Mason and Irene doubt that it happened; Mason has lived long because she has faith in the Lord; Mulhern asks Mason if the world is changing for the better, she’ll leave that for God to judge; people rely on God because they can’t do anything else; she gets along okay because the government gives her a little money; Mason and Irene live close to each other on property where Mason grows beans and raises chickens and pigs; Mason lives alone but says that God lives with her, “That’s who I take with me”; God was with her when she was lost in the woods, God helped steer the men who found her the next morning; Mulhern tells Mason she was front-page news when she went missing; Mason asks about Mulhern and Cathy’s plans to return to Baton Rouge and asks when they’ll come back to visit again; says she’s going to live as long as God lets her live; she tells Jesus about her troubles and no one else, because it’s no use telling others when Jesus knows your heart; she trusts in God because he always does things for the better; Mason feels there isn’t anyone around as old as she is; describes a meeting that was set up in Alexandria with a woman who was 104 years old; Mulhern says at the meeting Mason received an award for her old age; Mason says she had a good time there; on seeing her first car: “I knew I couldn’t drive one. I just forgot about it”; Mason has mixed feelings on airplanes, they are large and well-appointed but she wouldn’t fly on one, “That’s too high!”; in slave times, all work was done by hand and by mules, no heavy machinery; Mulhern asks to take Mason’s photo and says they will send her a copy; interview conclusion.

**TAPES:** 1 (T51)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 46 minutes

**# PAGES INDEX:** 7 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** A copy of the essay "Polly Mason: A Lifetime of Contrasts" by Michael Mulhern

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