THE PEOPLE'S RECORDER

EPISODE 2: A NEW KIND OF HISTORY

HOST: Hi, this is Chris Haley. A listener note. This episode contains language that could be uncomfortable or offensive. Please be advised.

[Archival audio of singing in Petersburg, Virginia]

HOST: In 1940, two books about Virginia and its history were released close together. One was part of a series of guidebooks on the states called the American Guides. The second book stood out from that series, both for how it was made, and the history that it told.

The book, titled The Negro in Virginia sounds problematic, even backwards to our ears. But its title belies the revolutionary work of its content and its mandate to recover the threads of Black history.

Roscoe Lewis, the book's editor, wrote the following, read here by an actor:

ROSCOE LEWIS (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *We cannot hope to do full justice to the ex-slaves we have interviewed. One must look into their eyes, hear their voices, watch their gestures, to appreciate them and their stories.*

[Archival audio of Annie Williams, who had been enslaved when she was young]

HOST: A team of about twelve African American writers and researchers created this collection while operating within a segregated unit, then referred to as the Negro Studies Project under the Federal Writers' Project. The team did ground-breaking work digging for stories that were on the verge of being erased forever and recording the voices of many formerly enslaved men and women. Their efforts would lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement and set the stage for a debate about the legacy of slavery in America that continues to this day. What they found would upend the way we tell American history.

[Theme music starts]

HOST:
This is The People's Recorder and I'm your host, Chris Haley. This is the podcast that explores the work of the Federal Writers' Project, a 1930s agency that set out to document the United States. In its quest to hold up a mirror to America, the Project ended up raising just as many questions as it answered - questions that we still ask ourselves today.

FOUNTAIN HUGHES (ARCHIVAL): *I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belonged to Thomas Jefferson. If I thought I'd ever be a slave again, I'd just end it all right away. Because you're nothing but a dog. You're not a thing but a dog.*

HOST: One of the big hurdles the so-called Negro Unit faced were skeptics – including some of their white colleagues on the Writers' Project. And that's because their work flew in the face of what many held as the indisputable truth about life in the South.

The white editors balked at the interviews that Roscoe Lewis, a young professor from the Hampton Institute and his team were gathering. They just didn't believe parts of the stories they were reading and repeatedly argued about what should be published.

One story of brutality was, as they called it, a "gross exaggeration." Gregg Kimball, a historian at the Library of Virginia, tells the story:

GREGG KIMBALL: *There was a narrative, I believe it was in West Point, Virginia, in the Tidewater area about a woman whose jaw had been crushed under a rocker – intentionally.*

HOST: As Roscoe Lewis described in his account for the book.

ROSCOE LEWIS (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Henrietta King bears the scars of slavery on her face…her face is a hideous mask, her mouth horribly twisted across one cheek with the jagged fangs of rotted teeth protruding. One cheek is speckled with lumps, "ends of the jawbones," she explains. She says she has no idea what she looked like before her face was smashed.*

GREGG KIMBALL: *There are various letters of the white supervisor, Eudora Richardson, who read this and simply thought this can't possibly be so.*

HOST: Struggling to believe the story as reported, Project Editor Eudora Richardson travelled to West Point, Virginia, to find the 98-year-old Henrietta King. Richardson would later write, "I had no difficulty finding her, merely by asking on the street where I might locate the old woman who had been severely beaten by her mistress."

The following is from a transcript of the original interview with Henrietta King, read by an actor:

HENRIETTA KING (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Want to know about slave days, do you? Well, sit on that chair. I'll tell you what slave days was like. In the house Old Missus was so stingy-mean that she didn't put enough on the table to feed a swallow. One morning I was so hungry that I can't resist. I went and grabbed a stick of candy and stuffed it in my mouth.*

Next morning Old Missus says, "Henrietta, did you take that piece of candy out my room?"

"No ma'am, ain't seen no candy."

"You're lying and I'm gonna whup you. Come here."

Then old Missus lifted me up by the legs, and she stuck my head under the bottom of her rocker, and she rocked forward to hold my head and whip me some more. I guess they must've whipped me near an hour, with that rocker leg pressing down on my head.

Next thing I knew the ol' doctor was there. Seems like that rocker pressing on my young bones had crushed them all into soft pulp. I ain't never been able to chew nothing good since. Here, put your hand on my face—right here on this left cheek. That's what slave days was like.

HOST: After hearing and seeing with her own eyes, Richardson agreed to restore many of the pages she had cut. When The Negro in Virginia was published, Henrietta King's story, and many others, appeared there in full. King's story was just one of over three hundred interviews collected by Lewis and his group for an initiative called the Slave Narratives. These efforts combined with others conducting interviews in other states, would become the largest archive of firsthand narratives about slavery in the world. In the book, Lewis honored the formerly enslaved interviewees with the following passage.

ROSCOE LEWIS (VOICED BY ACTOR): *Soon the last person who has known what it meant to be a slave will have died. There are questions about the slave system that can be answered only by one who has experienced slavery. How did it feel to be owned? What were their pleasures and sufferings? Did they feel it was their right to be free?*

HOST: Roscoe Lewis and his team were documenting Black life even as they lived in the Jim Crow South. They were like undercover historians working on a dangerous mission behind the front lines of racial segregation.

[News clip]

WUSA9 NEWS REPORT: *New tonight. The Commonwealth is still wrestling with how Virginia educators will teach history, but some say policy changes are more about patriotism instead of a factual accounting of the past. [Trails out] Education leaders are getting input from communities now…*

HOST: Contests over history are not the distant past. We still see schools and libraries pushed to the forefront of public debates. Impulses for denial and complex feelings of shame, can lead to the prolonged pain of historical wounds.

Back in the 1930s, these writers engaged on a make-work project with fervor, recognizing the significance of their mission to document Black life and history, pushing past a desire of white society, and sometimes within their own communities, to look away.

The Federal Writers' Project had a mandate from Congress to document life from a local perspective. But whose story was being told? In the words of the Project's national director, Henry Alsberg:

HENRY ALSBERG (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *In each state, the staff working with local individuals is gathering unique and important material. A great deal of real American writing comes out of seeing what is really happening to the American people.*

HOST:
Alsberg insisted that his agency should reflect all of America, rich and poor, Black and white and indigenous. Ideally, the best way to do this would be to have a Project staff that was as diverse as the country they were documenting. But hiring in the states was done by local officials, and often reflected regional bias. In Virginia, people of color were left out of the plan at first.

JULIAN HAYTER: *Some African Americans probably would have asked you in the 1930s, "What Depression?" in large part because of the difficulties that they had to endure in the decades after Emancipation.*

HOST: Julian Hayter is a historian and professor of leadership studies at the University of Richmond. Throughout his career he has studied the history of race in America, especially in Virginia.

JULIAN HAYTER: *That was of course made worse, not just by the Depression, but by the manner in which the Federal government left it up to states to disseminate New Deal infrastructure to help people and try to resuscitate the economy. So, what we see in many instances throughout the 1930s, are African American communities suffer more than their white counterparts in large part because their white counterparts are responsible for orchestrating the New Deal on a state and local level.*

HOST: But in Virginia, a few powerful voices were committed to changing that. Into this setting stepped one strong-minded individual named Thomas Calhoun Walker. Historian Gregg Kimball, from the Library of Virginia, explains.

GREGG KIMBALL: *T.C. Walker was a teacher, a lawyer, an important figure in Black political and cultural circles. And he approached the local state folks and, you know, there were no Black people who working on the Virginia Writers Project. He wanted to change that.*

HOST: T.C. Walker knew the value of Black history. Hell, he had lived it. Born into slavery in 1862, he became the first African American to practice law in Gloucester County, Virginia in 1887. Four years later, he got into politics, and his influence in the African American community earned him the nickname "The Black Governor of Virginia." But Walker was interested in more than law and politics.

JULIAN HAYTER: *T.C. Walker had already been doing some work in Virginia and I think he provides the necessary momentum. He really is the guy who is trying to compile a kind of encyclopedic body of knowledge on Black people in Virginia.*

HOST: In 1934, President Roosevelt appointed Walker as a consultant on Negro affairs for the Virginia Emergency Relief Administration. Walker wanted the story of Black history in Virginia to be told, and he saw the Writers' Project as a way to do that. Walker based his team at the Hampton Institute, now Hampton University, a historically black university located at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The Institute had a strong academic reputation. Prominent African American thinker and writer Booker T. Washington was one of its graduates. And whether intentional or not, Hampton was a symbolic place to locate the new Negro Studies Project.

JULIAN HAYTER: *I mean, Hampton is ground zero, right? And it had been for a while, you know, with Virginia Union and Hampton. Those institutions essentially rise from the ashes of emancipation. So, there's this burgeoning intellectual culture in Hampton way before the 1930s.*

HOST: At Hampton, the legacy of slavery and emancipation is in plain sight. Steps away from the campus is Point Comfort, where the first Africans enslaved in America landed in 1619. And looming over the Hampton entrance is a centuries-old tree known as the Emancipation Oak. In its shade, formerly enslaved families learned to read and write. And in 1863, that same oak was the site of the first Southern reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. Students still pass by that oak every day.

AUDREY DAVIS: *My grandfather grew up in Hampton and has a long connection. We would spend vacations down in Hampton. For many years I spent Thanksgiving with my family in Hampton.*

HOST: Audrey Davis directs the Black History Museum in Alexandria. For many like her, Hampton embodied the path from slavery to education.

AUDREY DAVIS: *I just remember my grandfather having an elegance. And I think because of segregation and the way African Americans were perceived, I just always remember him in suits and in ties, always formally dressed. My grandfather smoked a pipe, so the smell of pipe tobacco in my grandparents' living room and speaking with my grandmother. It was just a history lesson hearing that. They both loved to tell stories and they were both very good storytellers. And I wish I had recorded these stories or could remember them.*

Our family, we've all been involved in the arts or museums in some way. And I think it comes from a strong sense in our family of preserving African American history and not letting those family stories fade.

HOST: Preserving these stories was a focus for Sterling Brown, the director of the Federal Writers' Project Office of Negro Affairs, headquartered in Washington DC. As the new Negro Studies Project got started at Hampton, Brown chose a kindred spirit in Roscoe Lewis, then a 32-year-old professor, to lead the unit. At first glance, he didn't seem like the obvious choice… because Roscoe Lewis was actually a chemistry professor!

But his first love was Black history. And he immediately saw the potential of the Federal Writers' Project as a way to collect stories of Black life and culture in the Commonwealth – stories they knew were in the process of being erased. It was all part of the reframing of Southern history in the aftermath of the Civil War, something called the "Lost Cause."

JULIAN HAYTER: *The Lost Cause gains particular momentum after the Civil War. And it's this idea that the Confederacy was a noble cause, that the Civil War was about states' rights and not slavery, that African Americans aren't ready to be free, and it's a particular strand in history that is still with us.*

[Archival clip of 'Southern Soldier' being sung, from the Library of Congress]

SINGER (ARCHIVAL): *And if our Southern cause is lost, And Southern rights denied us, We'll be ground beneath the tyrant's heel, For our demands of justice…*

HOST: Springing from the trauma of the Civil War and the defeat of the Confederacy, the myth of the Lost Cause gained traction steadily. Monuments to the Confederacy began to pop up right after the war ended, and the pace quickened in reaction to free people of color gaining the right to vote and a political voice. The Lost Cause was effective fuel for groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which first rose to prominence in the years after the Civil War.

SINGER (ARCHIVAL): *I'll give my all to the Southern Cause, And die in the Southern army.*

HOST: This distorted view, primarily pushed for by former Confederate generals and white southerners, would obscure Americans' understanding of our shared history for generations to come. There were just a handful of isolated voices who pushed back against the rise of monuments to the lost Confederacy.

John Mosby, the general nicknamed the "Gray Ghost" of Robert E. Lee's cavalry, was a romantic figure for the South during the war. In his later years, Mosby became a rare voice against the Lost Cause, especially the attempts to rewrite the reasons for the war.
In a public letter to a former Confederate comrade, Mosby warned that clinging to the Lost Cause was a dead end. Mosby wrote, read here by an actor:

JOHN MOSBY (VOICED BY ACTOR): *In retrospect, slavery seems such a monstrous thing that some are now trying to prove that slavery was not the cause of the War. Then what was the Cause? ... I've never heard of any other cause than slavery.*

HOST: That is coming from one of the Confederacy's most decorated heroes. But his was the rare voice. More monuments to the Confederacy went up. By the beginning of the 20th century, the white supremacy of the Lost Cause was entrenched across the South, from roadside markers to city hall statues.

We're spending time here on the Lost Cause to show what the Negro Studies Project was up against as its writers researched black history in the state. The Lost Cause relied not just on creating new monuments to the Confederacy. It also depended on erasing or ignoring documents and landmarks that depicted the lives of those who had been enslaved.

Lewis and his team were challenging the Lost Cause narrative – and they were doing it through the Writer's Project. The project had a mandate to cover ALL Americans' stories, and Lewis' team was committed to recovering the facts of Black history. Along with the interviews, they had to dig deep in archives, property lists, and census records. But there were just so few documents of their ancestors' lives. They were exploring a terrain dominated by silence.

Kiki Petrosino is a poet and director of the writing program at the University of Virginia. In researching her own family history for a book of poems inspired by her grandmother's journey, Petrosino encountered the same gaps found by Lewis and his team decades earlier.

KIKI PETROSINO: *There's all this silence in the historical record that comes from the history of oppression and disenfranchisement, enslavement here in the United States. 1870 is usually– either it's a brick wall or it's the gate. If you try to go back to 1860, well, then you're prior to the Civil War, right? And everybody who was enslaved was still enslaved at that time. And they didn't count as people or citizens, they counted as property. And so, as you go backwards in time all of those names suddenly dissolve from the historical record.*

1870 is the first census in which the newly freed enslaved–those who were not free Blacks before the Civil War, right? So, like, the majority of Black people – are finally enumerated in the census as citizens. As people with names and surnames and places of birth and little check marks for whether they can read or write and little scrawled descriptions of what they did as an occupation.

But then there are these silences that started to feel to me in researching my family where it started to feel a little bit like intentional silence.

HOST: Stemming from a distrust of a social system that had enslaved their families, African Americans of the time often avoided participating in white-run institutions. Petrosino wrote about her one-sided dialogue with her ancestors. She imagined them explaining their silence in her poem, Message from the Free Smiths of Louisa County.

KIKI PETROSINO: *You ask why we didn't register as required. Why we failed to appear before the provost marshal, why we avoided the courthouse, the census, the bank. You ask where we sheltered while battles seethed, where our mothers gave birth, in which hidden houses, and why we didn't register as required. How did we manage? We avoided the courthouse, the census, the bank. Whatever we had, we held whatever we knew, we told no one who counted. We kept back our names. We didn't register as required. When you search for us now, you find silence. You may trace us back to a moment. No further. We chose inward passages. We kept deep council. We didn't register as required, which disappoints you. Why do you trust the courthouse, the census, the bank?*

HOST: That poem is from Petrosino's award-winning book White Blood, where she describes looking for her ancestors' stories in Virginia. When conventional research tools failed her, she had to find a different way into those stories.

She could personally relate to the difficulties faced by Roscoe Lewis during the 1930s. With limited records, Lewis and his team also tried a new approach to history. They began talking with people across the state who could speak to the experience of Black Virginians. And in their work, they kept one group clearly in view: the survivors of slavery. Many were still alive even 70 years after the Civil War. Roscoe Lewis and his team of investigators went on the road, seizing the opportunity to hear from people who survived those harrowing times.

The interviewing tools that came from Project headquarters in Washington were not well thought-out. They included instructions to write speech in dialect, and long, cumbersome lists of questions. Besides asking about their birthplace, age and health, they included tone-deaf questions like "Do you think being a slave hurt the Negro?" "Have you been happier in slavery or free?" and personal questions about miscarriages and abortions. Such questions were not likely to open up conversations. So, Lewis and his cohorts adapted their own questions. And they worked hard to build trust with the elders who shared their stories.

In Petersburg one of the investigators was a woman named Susie R.C. Byrd. Here's Gregg Kimball.

GREGG KIMBALL: *Susie R.C. Byrd. She was a teacher. And she has a nice eight-page summary of her life and how she came to do her interviews. It's funny because she talks about herself in the third person. And being, you know, an African American in Petersburg herself, and a teacher. She knew a lot of people.*

HOST: Here's an excerpt of Byrd's work, read by an actor.

SUSIE BYRD (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *Sue Byrd was assigned as Federal Writer for the Petersburg district of the Negro Federal Writers' Project of Virginia. Her job was to collect data concerning the history of Petersburg Negroes. Petersburg is a very rich sector historically for Negroes and Miss Byrd, knowing this,"let down her bucket" where she was, for two blocks away from her home lived a settlement of approximately 40 ex-slaves.*

GREGG KIMBALL: *Petersburg had a large population of free people of color. It was an industrial town, really. I mean, it looked a lot like Richmond, lots of tobacco factories and iron foundries and things of that sort.*

HOST: Unlike many of the white staff on the Writers Project, Susie Byrd had no access to a typewriter. She had to write out her interviews long hand on legal-size paper. Yet she was innovative in her approach, meeting with her interviewees in groups, and recording them singing songs.

SUSIE BYRD (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *The first ex-slave group was called at the time set by Rev. Brown and his wife. At this meeting there were about 40 ex-slaves. I wrote interviews which were very long. They sang slave songs, then each one told a story that they remembered… They asked to come every Wednesday, meeting at a different house each time…*

HOST: Kiki Petrosino first encountered the fruits of Byrd's work and what came to be called the Slave Narratives when she was a young girl.

KIKI PETROSINO: *I have this flashback to middle school when I was one of the only African American students in a small Catholic school. I felt displaced and I felt pretty othered. And I remember carrying around this little book and it was a book called To Be a Slave. The book itself contained abridgments of texts from the Federal Writers' Project. I remember just reading through them as if I were reading stories. There were the vivid depictions of time spent as an enslaved person. I remember carrying that little book around school and reading it and rereading it until it became a tattered paperback. And that must have primed me to read these other accounts taken during the Federal Writers Project when I was older. There was a uniqueness and a specificity to that material that drew me into a world. And I wanted to read more and more…*

GEORGINA GIWBS (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *My master had about five hundred slaves. He'd never sell none of his slaves, but he'd always buy more…When your married, you had to jump over a broom three times. If master seen two slaves together too much, he would marry them. It didn't make no difference if you weren't fourteen years old.*

HOST: Those were the words of a formerly enslaved woman named Georgina Giwbs, read by an actor. I remember reading those accounts, too. They are unique and at times brutally honest. Although Project workers in other states were also interviewing the survivors of slavery, there was something different about the work being done in Virginia. Gregg Kimball filled us in on why Virginia's interviews were so different.

GREGG KIMBALL: *One of the things that was unique about Virginia was here you have this program being run by Black people out of a major Black university. The majority of the interviews were done by African American interviewers. And that was not that common. Obviously, this is the time of Jim Crow segregation and repression, and Black people are not going to reveal themselves or their inner thoughts to white people. And it's a huge difference to have Susie R.C. Byrd and several other African Americans who were involved in this work.*

One anecdote, which I think gives you some sense of the difference between a white interviewer versus a black interviewer. There was an elderly gentleman in the group who was telling stories and Susie R.C. Byrd had brought her white supervisor Eudora Richardson to the meeting because she was interested in Byrd's work and wanted to kind of see what it was all about. And this gentleman happened to be blind and he was joking and telling various incidents and stories and at the next morning, he sees Susie R.C. Byrd and kind of chided her and said, "If I'd known that white woman was here, I wouldn't have told it just like that." So you know, it made a big difference.

HOST: In 1937, Susie Byrd and Roscoe Lewis sat down with survivor Annie Williams at her home in Petersburg. At age one hundred, Williams sang when they recorded her.

This trove of interviews and recordings would be fuel for a national series of books planned by Sterling Brown, the director of the Federal Writers' Project Office of Negro Affairs. The ground-breaking series would give Americans a glimpse into the realities of Black life across the country. The first book in the collection would be The Negro in Virginia. In its preface, Roscoe Lewis wrote about the importance of the book.

ROSCOE LEWIS (VOICED BY AN ACTOR): *It is appropriate that the first WPA State book on the Negro be produced in Virginia; for here the first African natives were brought and held in enforced servitude. In a real sense, the story of the Negro in Virginia is also the story of the American Negro. It has been our aim to tell impartially of the springs that watered those roots and of the droughts that withered them.*

HOST: The Negro in Virginia was a handsome blue hardback that came out in June 1940. Clocking in at over 400 pages, it revealed a raw and authentic picture of Black life in the state. It was published around the same time as the Federal Writers Project's other book about Virginia, the WPA Guide to Virginia. The contrast between the two was eye opening.

For example, the WPA guide didn't mention lynchings in its 800-plus pages, even though lynchings in Virginia between 1880 and 1930 took the lives of more than 80 Black men and women. The guidebook does note briefly the big gap between salaries of white and Black school teachers. There is also a short chapter called The Negro where it says that every city, quote, "has a street that serves as the social and business center of Negro life. Here Negros from every walk of life congregate to purchase from Negro merchants, to ply their trades, and to discuss the latest developments in Negro America."

Basically, the guide is describing segregation without saying the word. But there is some interesting, and at times nuanced, information in this brief section, and I wish there had been more of it. I guess they just couldn't find the space in the 800 plus pages.

The Negro in Virginia, on the other hand, was a firsthand and often unflinching account of Black history in the state. For example, the book explains that 88 Black Virginians were lynched between 1880 and 1930, and that if a Black man was accused of a crime against a white woman, he was almost always convicted.

To be fair, the book is not a perfect representation. It went through many editorial hands on the way to the press to make the accounts, quote, "read better," for example, in some instances the words of the formerly enslaved were transformed into more stereotypical dialect. But even so, its cultural importance could not be denied.

GREGG KIMBALL: *It really is a really fine piece of scholarship. It got incredible press. I mean, it was a Book of the Month Club selection. H.L. Mencken in the American Mercury praised it. I mean, W.E.B. Du Bois praised it highly in a review. It was a really amazing accomplishment for its time. And still absolutely worth reading.*

JULIAN HAYTER: *If you know anything about Du Bois, he was a tough critic and he loved the story. This book was well received. What is the old saying, "hunger is the best chef?" I'm sure this book was devoured by any number of literate African Americans who wanted to know more about their history.*

HOST: As a professor of African American history, Julian Hayter can't stress enough the importance of The Negro in Virginia. Placed alongside the sanitized view of history in the Virginia Guide, The Negro in Virginia makes a striking statement.

JULIAN HAYTER: *They wrote this book in many ways, as a proverbial middle finger. I mean the book starts off in 1619. If you read The Negro in Virginia, there's nothing novel about the 1619 Project, right? So what we begin to see is these are the people who know that Black voices are legitimate voices in their own right [and] how absolutely essential Black life was to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Virginia.*

Just think about the sheer political will to record, what is it, 300 former slaves? The amount of work they did in the window that they did it – I don't know what those guys were doing in those four years, but they obviously didn't have a life other than this project because when you're trying to cobble together a narrative that's based on historical accuracy, that's a difficult task. This is a force of nature.

HOST: In the end, The Negro in Virginia was the only volume to appear in the national series about Black American life that Sterling Brown had envisioned. Politics and national budget cuts crippled the Federal Writers Project.

Without funding to continue their work, Roscoe Lewis went back to teaching at Hampton. But he continued to study the history and legacy of slavery for the rest of his life. He had hoped to publish a new book that would contain all 300 Virginia narratives together. But that never became a reality in his lifetime.

He died in 1961 with his book not published. He was buried on the campus of Hampton. His gravestone reads, "With Bias Towards None."

The history gathered by Lewis and the Negro Studies Project inspired generations of activists and storytellers. In the decades since, that audience has steadily grown.

JULIAN HAYTER: *It's fascinating that they were onto something 50 to 60 years before people on social media decided that this was sexy history. It still holds water, now more as a historical document, an initiator, if you will, of a strain of history that is now widely accepted. If there's a major contribution in The Negro in Virginia, it's that.*

HOST: Next time on The People's Recorder - we pick back up with Kiki Petrosino and her journey to retrace her family's roots in Virginia. Her research leads to a historic African American cemetery, lost in the woods, and effectively erased from history. How does that connect to the idea of the Lost Cause in Virginia and the work of the Federal Writers' Project? You'll just have to come back and find out. This is Chris Haley. Thanks for listening.

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