

Slave Life on a Southern Plantation

FOR SALE. LONG COTTON AND RICE NEGROES.

A GANG OF 460 NEGROES, accustomed to the culture of Rice and Provisions; among whom are a number of good mechanics, and house servants. Will be sold on the 2d and 3d of March next, at Savannah, by JOSEPH BRYAN.

TERMS OF SALE.—One-third cash; remainder by bond, bearing interest from day of sale, payable in two equal annual instalments, to be secured by mortgage on the negroes, and approved personal security, or for approved city acceptance on Savannah or Charleston. Purchasers

Advertisement offering slaves for sale as well as cotton and rice

In the 1800s people advertised in the newspaper when they wanted to sell something. Here's what one **advertisement** from the 1820s might have looked like:

To Be Sold! Cargo of twelve healthy slaves will be sold on Thursday the 15th. Men, women, and boys including two house servants. Slave available for examination. Tobacco, cotton, and two cows also available for sale.

This advertisement is not similar to advertisements today. We don't sell people! Back in the 1800s, however, people did sell other people. During this time some people were considered everyday items. They were enslaved individuals, brought from Africa to work on Southern plantations.

Many slave owners treated slaves badly because they considered slaves inferior to white people. Slave owners used fear and violence to control their slaves. As a result, slavery not only broke people's bodies, it also tried to break their spirits. First, let's take a look at the daily life of a slave on a tobacco **plantation** in South Carolina.



This drawing shows a slave auction, where family members were often separated.



Slaves working in a cotton plantation.

In the morning, slaves worked in the fields. In the afternoon, they worked in the fields. And in the evening, they could be still working in the fields. This was true for the vast majority of slaves who worked on a large plantation. These slaves included children as young as five or six as well as the elderly.

The workday began when it was still dark. On some plantations, only after several hours of work the slaves had breakfast. Many more hours passed before they had supper. They had to work without breaks. If they stopped or took a rest, they were punished by someone called the overseer. The overseer was in charge of the slaves. Slaves hated and feared the overseer. He carried a whip, and he used it frequently on the backs of the slave.



An overseer whipping a female slave.



This slave was an artisan expert in sewing.

After 12 to 15 hours of work, the slaves could return to their cabins. Although they were tired, they still had to prepare their evening meals, tend to their children, **mend** their clothing, etc. Many slept very little when they had to work again.

Slaves worked from dawn to well after dark from Monday through Saturday. Sundays were the only day they had to rest during the week. The only holidays that were usually free of work were Christmas and the Fourth of July.

Many large Southern plantations also had a small number of skilled **artisans** who were also slaves, as well as enslaved house workers. The artisans were carpenters, blacksmiths, and craftsmen of every description. They were usually men. House workers could be male or female. Slave women did all the cooking, cleaning, washing of clothes, milking, iron polishing, sweeping, food service, and child care. Slave men tended the horses, drove the carriages, and kept the gardens. House slaves worked seven days a week. They also had to be alert at any hour of the day or night.

Housing, Clothing, and Food



Slaves lived in cabins like this one in the picture.

Most slaves lived in one-room **cabins**. The cabins were made of logs. They were not well built. As a result, some roofs could not stop rain or snow. If a slave cabin had windows, it didn't have glass. When the rain and snow came in, the dirt floor of the cabin turned into mud. Slaves didn't have any furniture. They slept on a pile of rags or **straw**. Some were given a blanket; many were not.

House slaves often lived in the plantation house. They might have had a space to sleep near the kitchen, laundry, or stable. House slaves usually had better clothing than slaves in the field because they

often received their slave owners' old clothes. Some slaves received shoes; many did not receive any.

Slaves received only enough food to keep them alive. Most plantation owners gave a ration of food at the beginning of the week. It consisted of corn, fat, and

possibly a bit of bacon. Slaves might also receive bread, flour, some vegetables, and some buttermilk. Because this diet was low in vitamins and minerals, many slaves became ill. Some could grow their own vegetables or do some fishing on Sundays. Still, most slaves were hungry much of the time. Many died from illness or from the combination of **malnutrition** and intense labor.

House slaves often had better diets than the field hands. They prepared the food, for one thing. In addition, they could usually eat whatever was left from their masters' meals.



A slave distributing food to enslaved children



Some enslaved people lived and worked in the plantation house, where they had to be available to cater to the slave owners at any time of the day or night.

The Psychology of Slavery

Owners always wanted to remind their slaves that they had no value as human beings. White owners and overseers humiliated their slaves. Here's one example of the many ways in which slaves were humiliated. Answer this question: How old are you? It is a simple question. But if you were a slave on a Southern plantation, you did not know your birthday or how old you were. Slaves could not learn how to read or write, so they couldn't write dates or events.



White owner separating the mother and her child

One of the worst aspects of slavery was that owners could separate families. It was common for mothers to be separated from their children. It is painful to imagine the agony of a mother as they took her baby from her arms; a baby she would never see again.

White owners created something called slave **codes**. Slave codes prohibited slaves to learn to read and write. If slaves ran away, they could be killed. Slaves could not vote or attend school.



Like other African Americans at the time, this mother and father would have lived in fear of being separated from one another or from their children.