

20.4 Working Conditions of Slaves

Slaves worked on farms of various sizes. On small farms, owners and slaves worked side by side in the fields. On large plantations, planters hired overseers to supervise their slaves. Overseers were paid to “care for nothing but to make a large crop.” To do this, they tried to get the most work possible out of slaves’ tired bodies.

About three quarters of rural slaves were field hands who toiled from dawn to dark tending crops. An English visitor described a field hand’s day:

He is called up in the morning at day break, and is seldom allowed enough time to swallow three mouthfuls of hominy [boiled corn], or hoe-cake [cornbread], but is immediately driven out to the field to hard labor.... About noon...he eats his dinner, and he is seldom allowed an hour for that purpose.... Then they return to severe labor, which continues until dusk.

Even then, a slave’s workday was not finished. After dark, there was still water to carry, wood to split, pigs to feed, corn to shuck, cotton to clean, and other chores to be done. One slave recalled:

I never knowed what it was to rest. I jes work all the time from morning late at night. I had to do everything.... Work in the field, chop wood, hoe corn, ’till sometime I feels like my back surely break.

Not all slaves worked in the fields. Some were skilled seamstresses, carpenters, or blacksmiths. Others worked in the master’s house as cooks or servants. When asked about her work, a house slave replied:

What kind of work I did? Most everything, chile [child]. I cooked, then I was house maid, and I raised I don’t know how many children.... I was always good when it come to the sick, so that was mostly my job.

No matter how hard they worked, slaves could not look forward to an easier life. Most began work at the age of six and continued until they died. As one old man put it, “Slave young, slave long.”



Slaves who worked as field hands labored from dawn until well into the night. If they failed to pick their usual amount, they were beaten.

20.5 Living Conditions of Slaves

Most masters viewed their slaves as they did their land—things to be “worn out, not improved.” They provided only what was needed to keep their slaves healthy enough to work. Slaves lived crowded together in rough cabins. One recalled:

We lodged in log huts, and on bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women, and children.... We had neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners.

Slaves seldom went hungry. “Not to give a slave enough to eat,” reported Frederick Douglass, “is regarded as...meanness [stinginess] even among slaveholders.” Once a week, slaves received a ration of cornmeal, bacon, and molasses. Many kept gardens or hunted and fished to vary their diets. The owner described here fed his slaves well:

Marse [master] Alec had plenty for his slaves to eat. There was meat, bread, collard greens, snap beans, 'taters, peas, all sorts of dried fruit, and just lots of milk and butter.

Slaves wore clothing made of coarse homespun linen or rough “Negro cloth.” Northern textile mills made this cloth especially for slave clothes.

Frederick Douglass reported that a field hand received a yearly allowance of “two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers...one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes.” The shoes usually fit so badly that slaves preferred going barefoot much of the time. Children too young to work received “two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day.”

While slaves were poorly housed and clothed compared to most white southerners, they were more likely to receive medical care. Slaveholders often hired doctors to treat sick or injured slaves. Given doctors' limited medical knowledge, this care probably did little to improve the health of slaves.

Most slave cabins consisted of a single room where the entire family lived. They had a fireplace for cooking and heat. The windows usually had no glass.

