

20.8 Slave Families and Communities

Slavery made community and family life difficult. Legally, slave families did not exist. No southern state recognized slave marriages. Legal control of slave children rested not with their parents, but with their masters. Owners could break up slave families at any time by selling a father, a mother, or a child to someone else. Along with being whipped, slaves most feared being sold away from their loved ones.

Most slaves grew up in families headed by a father and mother. Unable to marry legally, slaves created their own weddings that often involved the tradition of jumping over a broomstick. As one recalled:

The preacher would say to the man, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" He says, "Yes." "Well, jump the broom." After he jumped, the preacher would say the same to the woman. When she jumped, the preacher said, "I pronounce you man and wife."

Caring for children was never easy. Frederick Douglass's mother "snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done." Still, parents found time to teach their children the lessons they would need to survive.

Silence around whites was one such lesson. Elijah Marrs recalled that "Mothers were necessarily compelled to be severe on their children to keep them from talking too much." Obedience was another lesson. William Webb's mother taught him "not to rebel against the men who were treating me like some dumb brute, making me work and refusing to let me learn."

Parents also taught their children other essential lessons about caring, kindness, pride, and hope. They taught them to respect themselves and other members of the slave community, especially older slaves. "There is not to be found, among any people," wrote Douglass, "a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders."

These were the lessons that helped slaves, under the most difficult conditions, to create loving families and close communities. In doing so, they met the most basic of human needs—the need for a place to feel loved, respected, and safe.



This photograph shows five generations of a slave family on a plantation in South Carolina. Enslaved African Americans often found it difficult to keep their families together because Southern laws did not recognize slave marriages or families, and owners could split up families as they wished.

Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, 1838 by Christian Mayr, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.
Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina.



In this painting, black house servants are shown celebrating a wedding party in the kitchen. Dancing, singing, and telling tales allowed slaves to temporarily forget their harsh conditions.

20.9 Leisure Time Activities

*Come day,
Go day,
God send Sunday.*

These simple words capture the weariness of slaves. They toiled all week in fields that seemed to stretch “from one end of the earth to the other.” But, on Saturday night and Sunday, their time was their own.

Saturday nights were a time for social events, like corn-husking or pea-shelling parties, that combined work and fun. One slave recalled:

I've seen many a corn huskin' at ole Major's farm when the corn would be piled as high as the house. Two sets of men would

start huskin' from opposite sides of the heap. It would keep one man busy just getting the husks out of the way, and the corn would be thrown over the husker's head and filling the air like birds. The women usually had a quilting at those times, so they were pert and happy.

A quilting bee was one of the rare times when slave women could gather to work and talk. In those few precious hours, they were free to express themselves with needle and cloth. The quilts they created were not only beautiful, but very much needed as bedding for their families. Looking at a sunburst quilt she had sewn, one woman exclaimed, “It’s poetry, ain’t it?”

When the sewing was done, men joined the party for a “quilting feast” and dancing. Slaves made music out of almost anything. “Stretch cow-hides over cheese-boxes and you had tambourines,” one former slave recalled. “Saw bones from a cow, knock them together and call it a drum. Or use broom straw on fiddle-strings and you had your entire band.”

Sunday was a day for religion and recreation. Slaves spent their Sundays going to church, eating, hunting, fishing, dancing, singing, gambling, telling tales, naming babies, playing games, drinking whiskey, and visiting with friends. In New Orleans, hundreds of slaves gathered on Sunday afternoons in a public space known as “Congo Square” to dance, sing, and talk. All of these activities helped African Americans forget the sorrows of slavery.