

20.10 Slave Churches

Many slaveholders encouraged their slaves to attend church on Sunday. Some read the Bible to their workers and prayed with them. Owners and white ministers preached the same message: "If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master."

Not surprisingly, this was not a popular lesson among slaves. "Dat ole white preacher just was telling us slaves to be good to our marsters," recalled Cornelius Garner. "We ain't kerr'd a bit 'bout dat stuff he was telling us 'cause we wanted to sing, pray, and serve God in our own way."

Instead, slaves created their own "invisible church" that brought together African roots and American needs. This invisible church met in slave quarters or secret forest clearings known as "hush arbors." One slave reported that

When [slaves] go round singing, "Steal Away to Jesus" that mean there going to be a religious meeting that night. The masters...didn't like them religious meetings, so us naturally slips off at night, down in the bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.

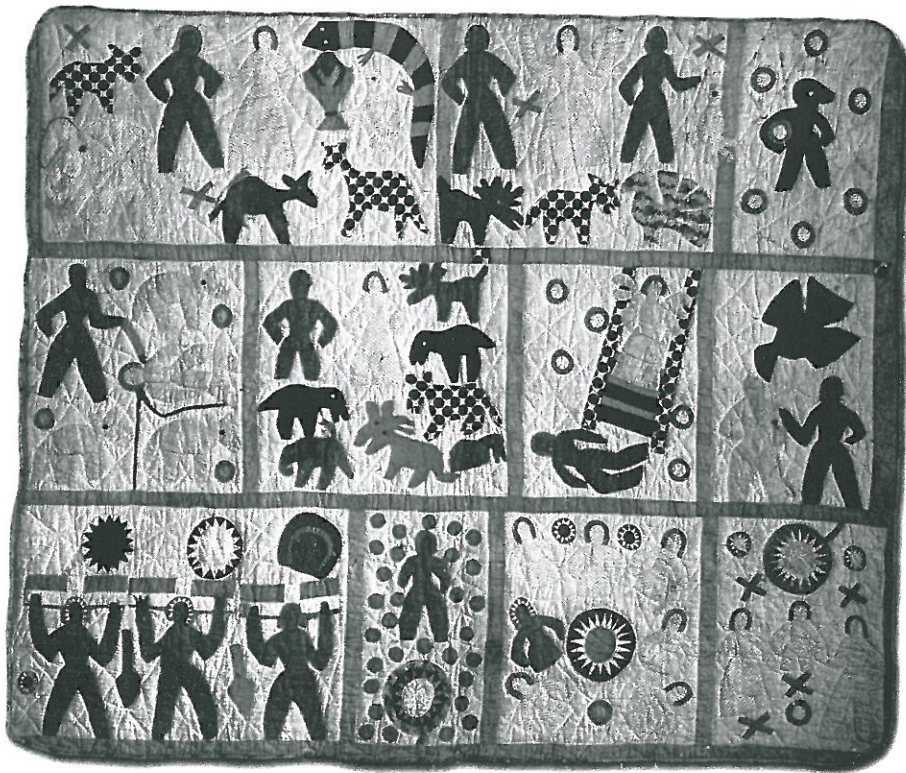
Rather than teach about obedience, black preachers told the story of Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt. Black worshipers sang spirituals that expressed their desire for freedom and faith in a better world to come. A black preacher wrote:

The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation [stopping] about half an hour.... The old house partook of their ecstasy; it rang with their jubilant shouts, and shook in all its joints.

Whites sometimes criticized the "enthusiasm" of black worshipers, saying they lacked true religious feeling. Many slaves, however, believed that it was their masters who lacked such feeling. "You see," explained one man, "religion needs a little motion—specially if you gwine [going to] feel de spirit."

Religion helped slaves bear their suffering and still find joy in life. In their prayers and spirituals, they gave voice to their deepest longings, their greatest sorrows, and their highest hopes.

Biblical stories were frequently illustrated on quilts made by slaves.





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.