

Life under the "Peculiar Institution": Living Conditions

Slaveholders attempted to prevent African Americans from learning how to read because they thought it might fuel slaves' desire for freedom, encourage them to run away, and assist them in organizing widespread rebellions. As it turns out, they were right.

Slaves were not allowed books, pen, ink, nor paper, to improve their minds. There was a Miss Davies, a poor white girl, who offered to teach a Sabbath School for the slaves. Books were supplied and she started the school; but the news got to our owners that she was teaching us to read. This caused quite an excitement in the neighborhood. Patrols were appointed to go and break it up the next Sabbath.

Source: Bibb, H. (1851). *The life and adventures of an American slave*. New York: Published by the author.

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a [black person] an inch, he will take an ell. A [black person] should know nothing but to obey his master, to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best [slave] in the world. Now, if you teach that [Douglass] how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep

into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty: to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.

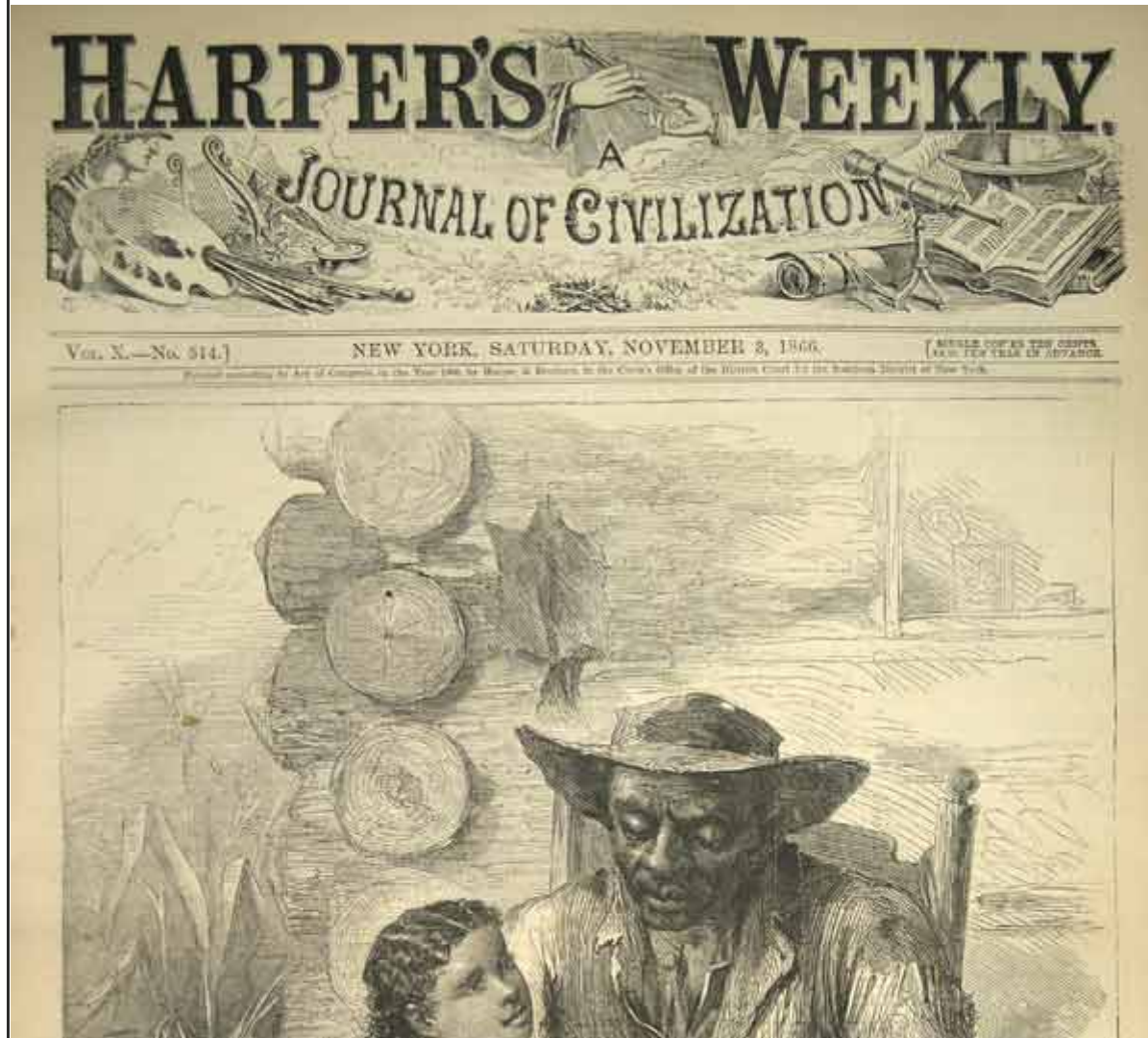
Source: Douglass, F. (1845). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office.

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." [The speeches that this book contained] were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. What I got from [this book] was a bold denunciation of slavery and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men.

As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!

Source: Douglass, F. (1845). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office.

"Uncle Tom and his grandchild"





According to the text that originally accompanied this engraving, the young girl in the picture was a former slave who began to attend school for the first time after the Civil War. She is featured here teaching her grandfather how to read. This illustration points to the tragic fact that most slaves were prevented from obtaining even the most rudimentary of educations and speaks to the deep yearning for formal knowledge that pervaded all age groups as a result.

Source: Waud, A. "Uncle Tom and his grandchild." *Harper's Weekly* (1866, November 3, p. 689).

According to historian John Vlach, the slaves' quarters "were the definitive element of any plantation. Encoded in [these dwellings] was a complex and contradictory message; they were a sign of the planters' success and the slaves' captive status." Thus, on most

plantations, slave cabins were *meant* to be miserable and degrading. Little more than wooden shacks, they often had leaky roofs, dirt floors, malfunctioning chimneys, and walls full of gaping holes. As former slave Mary Ella Grandberry recalls, "There were a lot of cabins for the slaves, but they weren't [fit] to live in. We just had to put up with them." Providing slaves with substandard living conditions was just one more way for the white ruling class to humble and abase African-Americans and to maintain their position of superiority over them.

The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse Negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars.

The clothing allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year.

Source: Douglass, F. (1845). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office.

An hour before daylight the horn is blown. Then the slaves arouse, prepare their breakfast, fill a gourd with water, in another deposit their dinner of cold bacon and corn cake, and hurry to the field. It is an offense invariably followed by a flogging to be found at the quarters after daybreak. With the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the

middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt is given by the driver.

Source: Northrup, S. (1853). *Twelve years a slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup*. Auburn, NY: Derby & Miller.

We were lodged in log huts, on the 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. All ideas of refinement and decency were, of course, out of the question. We had neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners and boxed in with boards, a single blanket the only covering. Our favorite way of sleeping, however, was on a plank, our heads raised on an old jacket and our feet toasting before the smoldering fire. The wind whistled and the rain and snow blew in through the cracks, and the damp earth soaked in the moisture till the floor was as [dirty] as a pigsty. Such were our houses. In these wretched hovels, we were penned at night, and fed by day; here the children were born and the sick neglected.

Source: Henson, J. (1877). *Uncle Tom's story of his life: An autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson*. London: Christian Age Office.

Beaufort, South Carolina. Group of negroes on J.J. Smith's plantation, c1865.

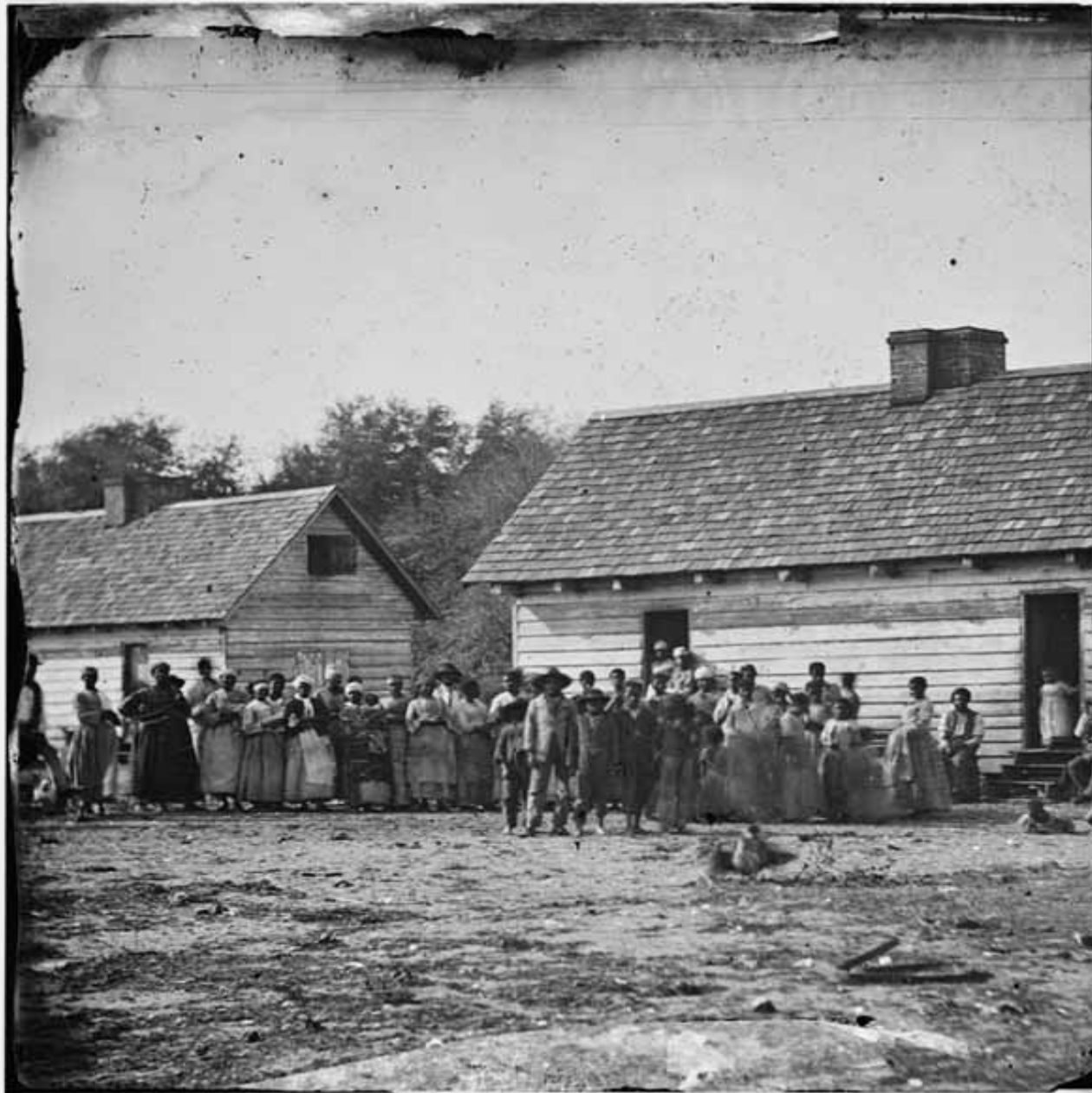


Image Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division
<<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpb.00735>>

Interior of old slave quarters near Caruthersville, Missouri.



Image Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, [LC- fsa 8b20382].

Additional Resources:

- The complete digital forms of some of the above texts are available from the Library of Congress American Memory Project: <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem>>and at the University of North Carolina's "Documenting the American South" project: <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/>>