

Life under the "Peculiar Institution": Punishment

In the antebellum South, slaves were considered chattel property. Thus, like any domestic animal, they could be bought, sold, leased, and physically punished. If an owner killed a slave while punishing him or her, it was generally not considered a crime. Slaves, however, faced the death penalty for physically (and sometimes even verbally) assaulting a white person. For most slaves then, there was virtually no time when they were ever completely safe from physical harm. According to Frederick Douglass, "It would astonish one, unaccustomed to a slaveholding life, to see with what wonderful ease a slaveholder can find things, of which to make occasion to whip a slave. A mere look, word, or motion, are all matters for which a slave may be whipped any time." Slave owners hoped that the constant threat of severe punishment would scare their slaves into docility and keep them from rebelling. Masters and mistresses commonly employed the use of the whip to punish their slaves. Occasionally, they mutilated or branded them.

Master was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up and whip [until] she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the bloodstained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a

most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.

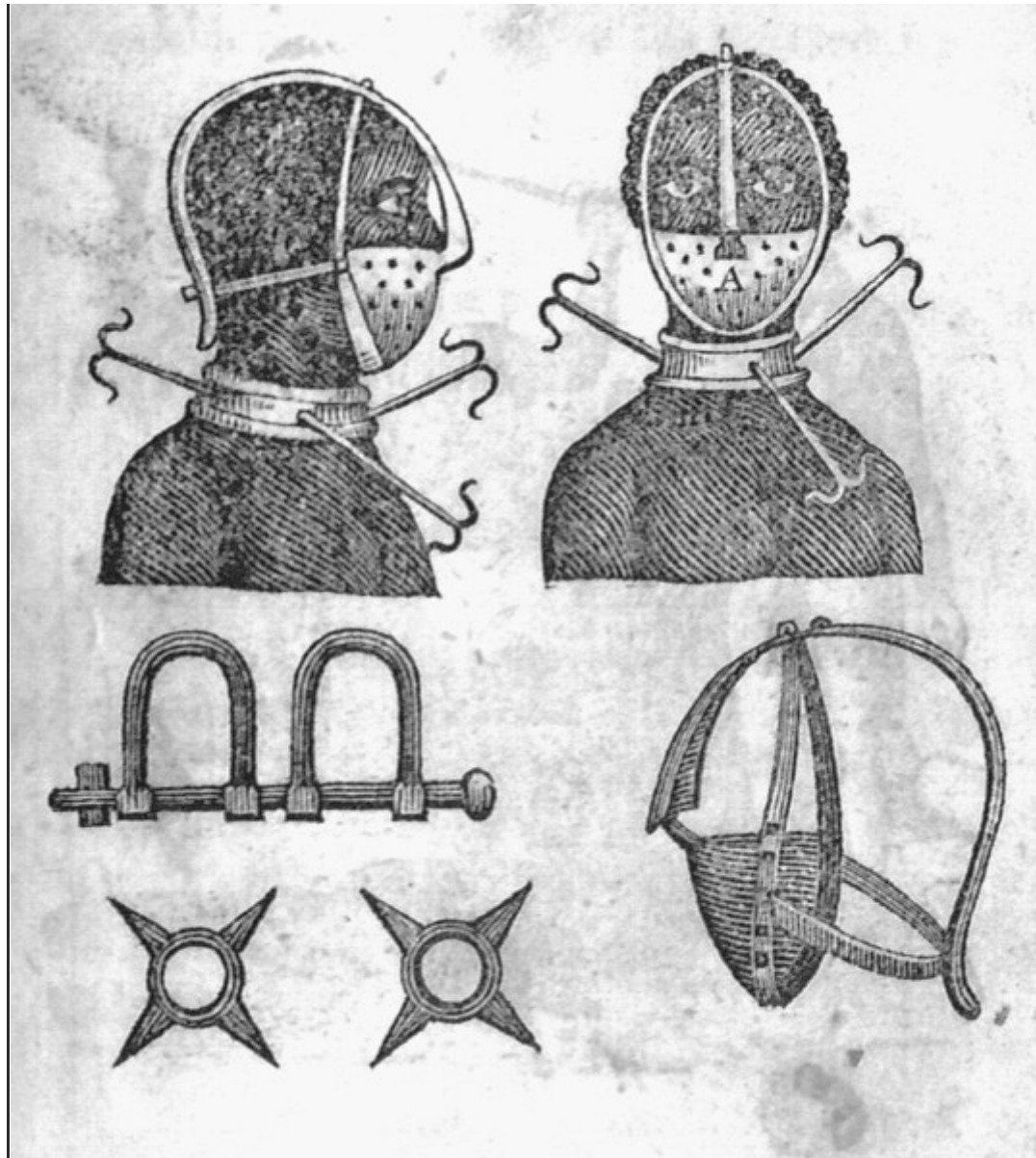
Source: Douglass, F. (1845). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Society.

One man told me that he had sold 41,000 Negroes and that he once cut off a Negro man's leg for running away. I told him that the Christian doctrine taught us to do unto others as we would [want] others should do unto us. He then said that his scheme had had the desired effect - it cured that man and some others of running away.

Another Negro man was half hanged, and then burnt, for attempting to poison a cruel overseer. Thus, by repeated cruelties, are the wretched first urged to despair, and then murdered, because they still retain so much of human nature about them as to wish to put an end to their misery, and retaliate on their tyrants. These overseers are indeed for the most part persons of the worst character of any denomination of men in the West Indies. Unfortunately, many humane [plantation owners], but not residing on their estates, are obliged to leave the management of them in the hands of these human butchers, who cut and mangle the slaves in a shocking manner on the most trifling occasions, and altogether treat them in every respect like brutes.

Source: Equiano, Olaudah. *The life of Olaudah Equiano the African*. (London: Cradock and Jov, 1789).

Iron mask, collar, leg shackles, and spurs used to prevent and punish slaves for trying to run away.

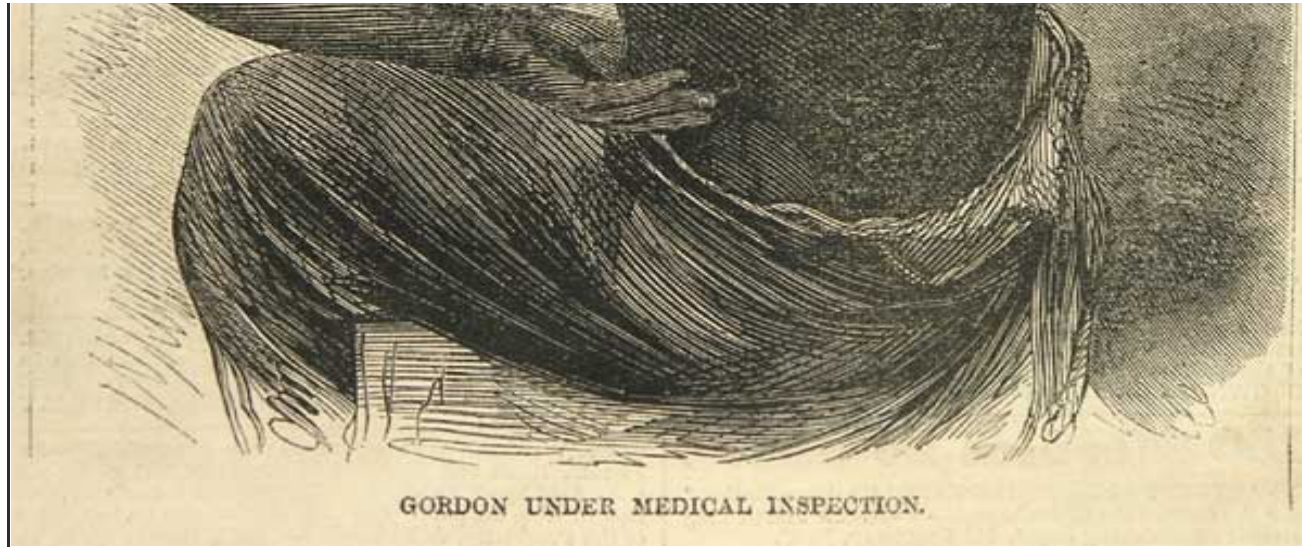


Source: Branagan, Thomas. *The Penitential Tyrant; or, slave trader reformed*. (New York, Printed and sold by Samuel Wood, no. 362, Pearl-street, 1807). University of Rochester

Libraries.

"Gordon under Medical Inspection," 1863





This illustration originally appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in 1863. It depicts an escaped slave who made it across Union lines. His back bears the scars he received from his master's lash, providing vivid testimony of the brutality of slavery.

Source: Gordon under Medical Inspection. *Harper's Weekly*, (1863, July 4, p. 429).
University of Rochester Libraries.

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/>>

