

Life under the "Peculiar Institution": Working Conditions

Contrary to popular imagination, the majority of southern slaveholders did not own large plantations. For the most part, they were small farmers who worked alongside their slaves in the fields. However, while the majority of slaveholders were small farmers, the majority of slaves lived on medium or large plantations, with sizeable slave work forces. Most slaves actually preferred to live on larger plantations, because it gave them more privacy and a chance to develop their own cultural and social networks.

The principal crops grown on American plantations included tobacco, rice, sugar, and cotton. Field slaves typically worked from sunrise to sunset, putting in eighteen-hour days during harvest time. Women worked particularly hard. After a full day of work in the fields, they were often expected to go home and take care of the chores traditionally left to women, such as the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Pregnant women were expected to continue working in the fields right up until the day they gave birth and to return to their tasks a few days later.

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given to 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.

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be, no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest, a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight, if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with fear and trembling. Most frequently they have too little, and therefore they are not anxious to leave the field. After weighing, follow the whippings; and then the baskets are carried to the cotton house, and their contents stored away like hay, all hands being sent in to tramp it down. If the cotton is not dry, instead of taking it to the gin-house at once, it is laid upon platforms, two feet high, and some three times as wide, covered with boards or plank, with narrow walks running between them.

This done, the labor of the day is not yet ended, by any means. Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine, another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is all done by candlelight. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil. Then a fire must be kindled in the cabin, the corn ground in the small hand-mill, and supper, and dinner for the next day in the field, prepared. All that is allowed them is corn and bacon. Each one receives, as his weekly allowance, three and a half pounds of bacon, and corn enough to make a peck of meal. That is all: no tea, coffee, sugar, and with the exception of a very scanty sprinkling now and then, no salt....

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

We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!

Sunday was my only leisure time. I spent this in a sort of beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake, under some large tree. At times I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope that flickered for a moment, and then vanished. I sank down again, mourning over my wretched condition. I was sometimes prompted to take my life, and that of Covey, but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear. My sufferings on this plantation seem now like a dream rather than a stern reality.

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

My new master was one of the owners or holders of the salt ponds [and] I was immediately sent to work in the salt water with the rest of the slaves. This work was perfectly new to me. I was given a half barrel and a shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water, from four o'clock in the morning till nine, when we were given some Indian corn boiled in water, which we were obliged to swallow as fast as we could for fear the rain should come on and melt the salt. We were then called again to our tasks, and worked through the heat of the day; the sun flaming upon our heads like fire, and raising salt blisters in those parts which were not completely covered. Our feet and legs, from standing in the salt water for so many hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone, afflicting the sufferers with great torment. We came home at twelve; ate our corn soup, called blawly, as fast as we could, and went back to our employment till dark at night. We then shoveled up the salt in large heaps, and went down to the sea, where we washed the pickle from our limbs, and cleaned the barrows and shovels from the salt. When we returned to the house, our master gave us each our allowance of raw Indian corn, which we pounded in a mortar and boiled in water for our suppers.

We slept in a long shed, divided into narrow slips, like the stalls used for cattle. Boards fixed upon stakes driven into the ground, without mat or covering, were our only beds. On Sundays, after we had washed the salt bags, and done other work required of us, we went into the bush and cut the long soft grass, of which we made trusses for our legs and feet to rest upon, for they were so full of the salt boils that we could get no rest lying upon the bare boards.

Source: Prince, M. *The history of Mary Prince*. (London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1831).

On larger plantations, the master's family usually employed a separate domestic staff, who did not perform fieldwork. Slaves filled such positions as cooks, housemaids, waiting-maids, butlers, coachmen, and nursemaids. Domestic slaves tended to be lighter in skin-tone than other slaves were and more anglicized in terms of their language, manners, and dress. They performed less physically demanding tasks than the field hands did and experienced such comforts as sleeping in the "big house" and eating food left over from their master's table. Unfortunately, these perks seldom came without a price. Because of their close proximity to their masters, domestic slaves were under constant surveillance by whites, which allowed for more opportunity to be disciplined. Slaveholders often found fault with, and punished their domestic slaves for, any small deed that vaguely annoyed them.

In addition, the slaves who lived in the big house tended to enjoy less freedom and privacy than their counterparts living in the slave quarters did. For instance, Harriet Jacobs's mistress, Mrs. Flint, forced her slave Nancy to sleep on the floor outside of her bedroom, to make sure that she would always be within earshot in case she wanted something. She continued this practice on Nancy's wedding night and after she was married. Slaveholders also forced their domestic slaves to conform to white cultural standards more fully than their field slaves, because domestic slaves came into greater contact with their white visitors. As a result, domestic slaves may have had difficulty relating to the rest of the slaves on the plantation who did not live in the Great House.

There were four house-slaves in this family, including myself, and though we had not, in all respects, so hard work as the field hands, yet in many things our condition was much worse. We were constantly exposed to the whims and passions of every member of the family; from the least to the greatest their anger was wreaked upon us. Nor was our life an easy one, in the hours of our toil or in the amount of labor performed. We were always required to sit up until all the family had retired; then we must be up at early dawn in summer, and before day in winter. If we failed, through weariness or for any other reason, to appear at the first morning summons, we were sure to have our hearing quickened by a severe chastisement. Such horror has seized me, lest I might not hear the first shrill call that I have often in dreams fancied I heard that unwelcome call, and have leaped from my couch and walked through the house and out of it before I awoke. I have gone and called the other slaves, in my sleep, and asked them if they did not hear master call. Never, while I live, will the remembrance of those long, bitter nights of fear pass from my mind.

Source: Clark, Lewis Garrard. *Narrative of the sufferings of Lewis Clarke, during a captivity of more than twenty-five years, among the Algerines of Kentucky, one of the so called Christian states of North America* (Boston: Ela, 1845).

Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind. If dinner was not

served at the exact time on that particular Sunday, she would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and then spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking. She did this to prevent the cook and her children from eking out their meager fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings. The slaves could get nothing to eat except what she chose to give them. Provisions were weighed out by the pound and ounce, three times a day. I can assure you she gave them no chance to eat wheat bread from her flour barrel. She knew how many biscuits a quart of flour would make, and exactly what size they ought to be.

Source: Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. (Boston: Published for the author, 1861).

During the time that Mr. Cook was overseer, I was a house servant - a situation preferable to that of a field hand, as I was better fed, better clothed, and not obliged to rise at the ringing of the bell, but about half an hour after. I have often laid and heard the crack of the whip, and the screams of the slave. My mother was a field hand, and one morning was ten or fifteen minutes behind the others in getting into the field. As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. She cried, "Oh! pray - Oh! pray - Oh! pray" - these are generally the words of slaves, when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any further. The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud. After giving her ten lashes, the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed, and found no consolation but in my tears. Experience has taught me that nothing can be more heart-rending than for one to see a dear and beloved mother or sister tortured, and to hear their cries, and not be able to render them assistance. But such is the position which an American slave occupies.

Source: Brown, W.W. *Narrative of William W. Brown, a fugitive slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1848).

One of the most dehumanizing and traumatic aspects of slavery in America was the systematic sexual abuse that many African-American women suffered under the institution. As Harriet Jacobs, a former slave from North Carolina writes, "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the common burden of all, *they* have wrongs, sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own." Given their physical proximity to their owners, female domestic slaves were particularly vulnerable to their masters' sexual advances. These women likely experienced less freedom of choice in their lives than any other group of slaves. They were taught that nothing was their own, not even their bodies, and were constantly reminded that they had no choice but to submit to their master's will in all areas. These women were not granted *any* freedom, not even in the most private, and most personal, of domains.

Because so few slaves wrote about their experiences, it is extremely difficult now to determine the frequency of interracial rape with any precision. In 1860, the US census classified ten percent of the slave population as mulatto, a figure that many scholars believe to be a very conservative estimate (especially considering the fact that census takers categorized race by sight at the time). Furthermore, the constant threat that experiences of rape and sexual abuse

posed for female slaves, and the toll that such worries likely took on their lives, cannot be quantified in any significant way. Nevertheless, the ample evidence that can be collected by examining the testimonies of former slaves who *did* leave written records of their experiences indicates that this type of abuse was far from uncommon.

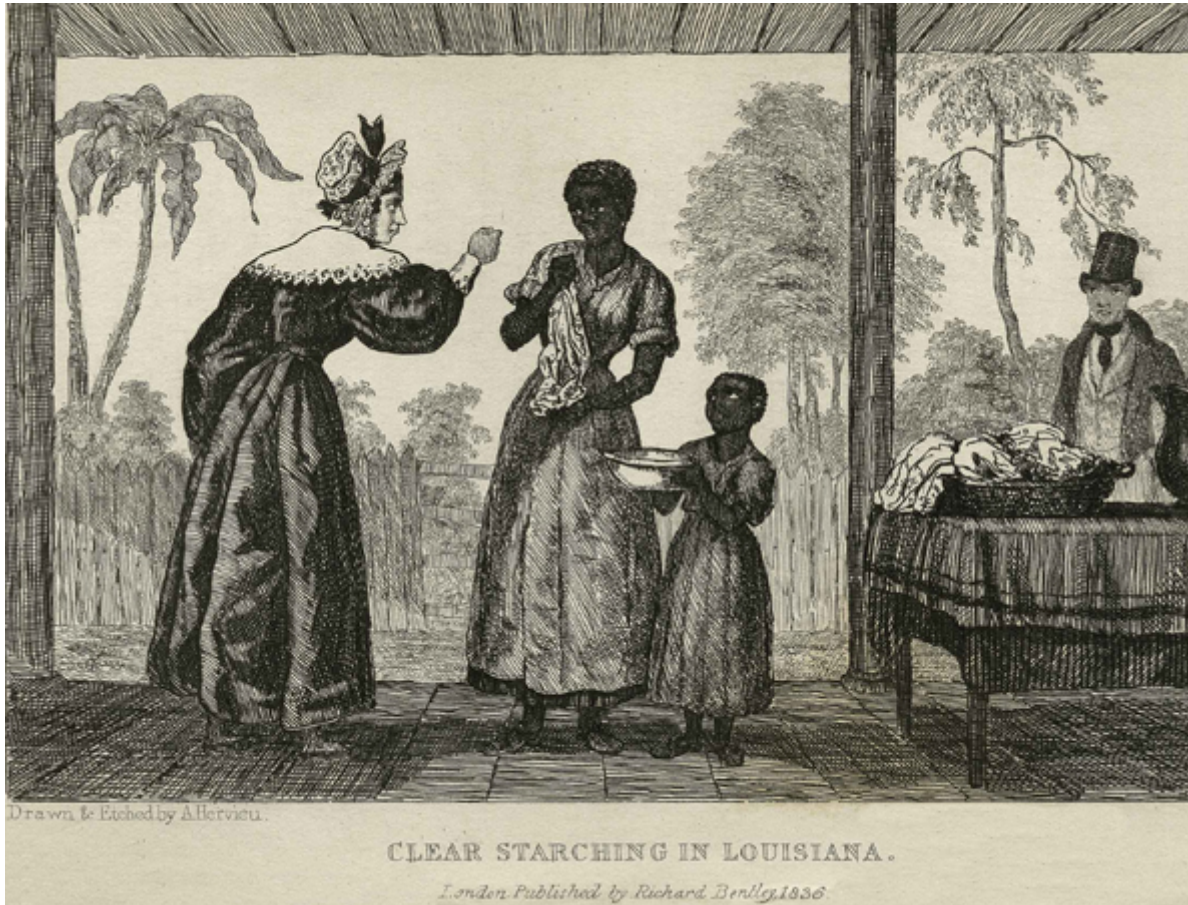
[My master] had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me. One time I had plates and knives in my hand, and I dropped both plates and knives, and some of the plates were broken. He struck me so severely for this, that at last I defended myself, for I thought it was high time to do so. I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man - very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh. So I went away to a neighboring house and sat down and cried till the next morning, when I went home again, not knowing what else to do.

Source: Prince, M. (1831). *The history of Mary Prince*. London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis.

My master, Dr. Flint, tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him - where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.

The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child's own mother is among those hated ones. She listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. I know that some are too much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position; but many slaves feel it most acutely, and shrink from the memory of it. I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect.

Source: Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. (Boston: Published for the author, 1861).



This 1837 etching by August Hervieu depicts an irate plantation mistress scolding two household servants. The slaves cower, carefully hiding whatever anger or resentment they might feel behind a submissive pose.

Additional Resources:

- The complete digital texts of some of the above texts are available at the University of North Carolina's "Documenting the American South" project: <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/>>