**Slave Living Conditions**

In the rural context, living conditions for enslaved people were determined in large part by the size and nature of the agricultural unit on which they lived. Contrary to the overwhelming image of the grand Southern plantation worked by hundreds of slaves, most agricultural units in the South up until about two decades before the Civil War were small farms with 20 to 30 slaves each.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Detailed photograph of slaves ploughing cotton http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif | http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif |
| Ploughing cotton (detail). Georgia Division of Archives and History. Office of Secretary of State. |
| http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif | |

The conditions of slaves under these circumstances were most easily grouped into the experiences of field slaves and house slaves. The vast majority of plantation slaves labored in the fields, while a select few worked at domestic and vocational duties in and around the owners' houses. Each situation brought its own set of demands, hazards, and perks regarding not only labor, but also quality of food, clothing, and shelter received.   
  
Weekly food rations -- usually corn meal, lard, some meat, molasses, peas, greens, and flour -- were distributed every Saturday. Vegetable patches or gardens, if permitted by the owner, supplied fresh produce to add to the rations. Morning meals were prepared and consumed at daybreak in the slaves' cabins. The day's other meals were usually prepared in a central cookhouse by an elderly man or woman no longer capable of strenuous labor in the field. Recalled a former enslaved man: "The peas, the beans, the turnips, the potatoes, all seasoned up with meats and sometimes a ham bone, was cooked in a big iron kettle and when meal time come they all gathered around the pot for a-plenty of helpings!" This took place at noon, or whenever the field slaves were given a break from work. At the day's end, some semblance of family dinner would be prepared by a wife or mother in individual cabins. The diets, high in fat and starch, were not nutritionally sound and could lead to ailments, including scurvy and rickets. Enslaved people in all regions and time periods often did not have enough to eat; some resorted to stealing food from the master. House slaves could slip food from leftovers in the kitchen, but had to be very careful not to get caught, for harsh punishments awaited such an offense.   
  
Clothing, distributed by the master, usually once a year and often at Christmastime, was apportioned according sex and age as well as to the labor performed by its wearer. Children, for instance, often went unclothed entirely until they reached adolescence.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif | |
| http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif | Photograph of a slave cottage near Bardstown, Kentucky  http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif |
| Slave cottage near Bardstown, Kentucky. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA Collection. |
| http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif | |

Elderly slaves who could not do physical labor were not given the shoes or extra layers of clothing during the winter that younger fieldworkers were. Whereas many field workers were not given sufficient clothing to cover their bodies, house slaves tended to be dressed with more modesty, sometimes in the hand-me-downs of masters and mistresses. Most slaves lived in similar dwellings, simple cabins furnished sparely. A few were given rooms in the main house.

The relationships of slaves with one another, with their masters, with overseers and free persons, were all to a certain extent shaped by the unique circumstances of life experienced by each slave. House slaves, for example, sometimes came to identify with their masters' interests over those of fellow slaves. Female house slaves, in particular, often formed very close attachments to their mistresses. Though such relationships did not always impact the slave's relationship with other slaves in any significant way, they could lead the slave to act as an informant reporting on the activities of her fellow enslaved. On the other hand, girls who waited upon tables could serve the slave community as rich sources of information, gossip, and warnings.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif | Illustration of slaves working in chains, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina. http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif |
| "Chained slaves with work tools," p.19 in: Henry Bibb, NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES ... (1849.) Joyner Rare E444.B58, Special Collections Department, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina 27858. |
| http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/images/spacer.gif | |

Different circumstances surrounded fieldwork. Laboring together in task groups, enslaved blacks might develop a sense of united welfare. Yet, they might also be supervised by a black driver or overseer responsible for representing the master's interests, a position which could prove divisive within the slave community particularly because the driver would be obliged to mete out punishments on other blacks.   
  
The lives of enslaved men and women were shaped by a confluence of material circumstances, geographic location, and the financial status and ideological stance of a given slaveholder. The experience of slavery was never a comfortable one. Nevertheless, the kind of labor assigned, the quantity and quality of food and clothing received, the type of shelter provided, and the form of punishments dealt could lessen or increase the level of discomfort slaves had to endure. These living conditions not only impacted the physical and psychological state of the slave, but also had effects on the relationships that African Americans built with each other and with whites in the age of slavery.   
  
Nicholas Boston is a writer and assistant professor or journalism and mass communications at Lehman College of the City University of New York.

**Slave Working Conditions**

Slaves worked on farms of various sizes. On small farms, owners and slaves worked side by side in the fields. On large plantations, planters hired overseers to supervise their slaves. Overseers were paid to “care for nothing but to make a large crop.” To do this, they tried to get the most work possible out of the slaves who worked in the fields.  
  
About three-quarters of rural slaves were field hands who toiled from dawn to dark tending crops. An English visitor described a field hand’s day:  
  
He is called up in the morning at day break, and is seldom allowed time enough to swallow three mouthfuls of hominy [boiled corn], or hoecake [cornbread], but is driven out immediately to the field to hard labor . . . About noon . . . he eats his dinner, and he is seldom allowed an hour for that purpose . . . Then they return to severe labor, which continuesuntil dusk.  
  
Even then, a slave’s workday was not finished. After dark, there was still water to carry, wood to split, pigs to feed, corn to shuck, cotton to clean, and other chores to be done.One slave recalled,  
  
I never know what it was to rest. I just work all the time frommorning till late at night. I had to do everything there was to doon the outside. Work in the field, chop wood, hoe corn, tillsometime I feels like my back surely break.  
  
Not all slaves worked in the fields. Some were skilled seamstresses, carpenters, or blacksmiths. Others worked in the master’s house as cooks or servants. When asked about her work, a house slave replied,  
  
What kind of work I did? . . . I cooked, [then] I was house maid,an’ I raised I don’t know how many [children] . . . I was alwaysgood when it come to [the] sick, so [that] was mostly my job.  
  
No matter how hard they worked, slaves could never look forward to an easier life. Most began work at the age of six and continued until they died. As one man put it, “Slave young, slave long.

**Plantation Management**

**De Bow's xiv (February 1853)**

The following rules for the instruction of overseers, and the *Management of Negroes,* are by Mr. St. Geo Cocke, one of the wealthiest and most intelligentplanters of the old dominion. They are worthy of the note of planterseverywhere:

**PLANTATION MANAGEMENT. POLICE.**

**1st.** It is strictly required of the manager that he rise at the dawn of day every morning; that he blow a horn for the assembling of the hands; require all hands to repair to a certain and fixed place in ten minutes after the blowing of the horn, and there himself see that all are present, or notice absentees; after which the hands will receive their orders and be started to their work under charge of the foreman. The stable will generally be the most convenient place for the assembling of all hands after morning call.

**2nd.** All sick negroes will be required to report to the manager at morning call, either in person, if able to do so, or through others, when themselves confined to the house.

**3rd.** Immediately after morning call, the manager will himself repair to the stable, together with the ploughmen, and see to the proper feeding, cleaning and gearing of the horses. He will also see to the proper feeding and care of the stock at the farm yard.

**4th.** As soon as the horse and stock have been fed and otherwise attended to, the manager will take his breakfast; and immediately after, he will visit and prescribe for the sick, and then repair to the fields to look after the hands; and he will remain with them as constantly as possible during every day.

**5th**. The sick should be visited not only every morning immediately after breakfast, but as such other times of the day and night as cases may require. Suitable medicine, diet, and other treatment, be prescribed, to be administered by the nurse; or in more critical cases, the physician should be sent for. An intelligent and otherwise suitable woman will be appointed as a nurse upon each plantation, who will administer medicine and otherwise attend upon the sick.

**6th.** There will be stated hours for the negroes to breakfast and dine, and those hours must be regularly observed. Breakfast will be at eight o'clock, and dinner at one o'clock. There will be a woman to cook for the hands, and she must be required to serve the meals regularly at those hours. The manager will frequently inspect the meals as they are brought by the cook, see that they have been properly prepared, and that vegetables be at all times served with the meat and bread.

**7th.** The manager will, every Sunday morning after breakfast, visit and inspect every quarter, see that the houses and yards are kept clean and in order, and that the families are dressed in clean clothes.

**8th.** Comfortable and ample quarters will be provided for the negroes. Each family will have a separate room with fireplace, to be furnished with beds, bedsteads, and blankets, according to the size of the family; each room will, also, be furnished with a table, chairs, or benches, and chest for the clothes, a few tin plates and cans, a small iron pot for cooking, &c.

**9th**. The clothing to be furnished each year will be as follows: -

* To each man and boy, 1 woolen coat, 1 pair do. pants, 1 pair of do. socks, 1 shirt, 1 pair of shoes, 1 wool hat, and a blanket every second year, to be given 15th of November. 1 shirt, 1 pair of cotton pants, 1 straw hat, 1 pair of shoes, to be given 1st of June.
* To each woman and girl, 1 woolen frock, and to those who work in the field 1

woolen cape, 1 cotton shift, 1 pair stockings, 1 pair shoes, 1 cotton head handkerchief, 1 summer suit of frock and shift, a blanket every second year, and to women with more than one child, 2 blankets every second year.

* To children under 10 years of age, 1 winter and summer suit each.

**10th**. Provisions will be issued weekly as follows:

***Field Hands .***To each man, three and a half pounds bacon, and one and a half pecks meal. To each woman, girl and boy, two and a half pounds bacon, and one peck meal.

***InDoor Hands****.* To each man and boy, two pounds bacon, and one peck corn meal. To each woman and girl, two pounds bacon, and one peck corn meal. To each child over two years and under ten years, one pound bacon, and half a peck of corn meal.

To the above will be added milk, buttermilk, and molasses, at intervals, and at all times vegetables, and fresh meat occasionally.

**11th**. As much of the clothing must be made on the plantation as possible, wool and cotton should be grown in sufficient quantities for this purpose, and the women having young children be required to spin and weave the same, and the managers' wives will be expected to give particular attention to this department, so essential to economical management.

**12th.** A vegetable or kitchen garden will be established and well cultivated, so that there may be, at all seasons, an abundance of wholesome and nutritious vegetables for the negroes, such as cabbages, potatoes, turnips, beets, peas, beans, pumpkins, &c.

**13th**. A horn will be sounded every night at nine o'clock, after every negro will be required to be at his quarters, and to retire to rest, and that this rule may be strictly enforced, the manager will frequently, but at irregular and unexpected hours of the night, visit the quarters and see that all are present, or punish absentees.

**14th.** Each manager will do well to organize in his neighborhood, whenever practicable, patrol parties, in order to detect and punish irregularities of the negroes, which are generally committed at night. But lest any patrol party visit his plantation without apprising him of their intention, he will order the negroes to report to him every such visit, and he will promptly, upon receiving such report, join the patrol party and see that they strictly conform