



CONDITIONS OF ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY

PBS.org . "Conditions of Antebellum Slavery". Africans in America 1998. < <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2956.html>>

The slavery in the southern states in the early 19th century (the antebellum period) has been called the "Peculiar Institution". What questions do you have about life as a slave in the years before the Civil War?

While we can never emotionally understand the experiences of enslaved Americans, we can read secondary and primary sources to get a better idea of the challenges they faced in their day to day lives and how they coped with these challenges. As you read this selection from the PBS *Africans in America* website, your task is to **highlight** or **underline** the challenges faced by slaves in one color and **highlight** or **underline** the ways in which slaves coped or responded in a different color. In addition, annotate some reactions or questions in the space provided in the margins, as you would in English class (no need for sticky notes).

By 1830 slavery was primarily located in the South, where it existed in many different forms. African Americans were enslaved on small farms, large plantations, in cities and towns, inside homes, out in the fields, and in industry and transportation.

Though slavery had such a wide variety of faces, the underlying concepts were always the same. Slaves were considered property, and they were property because they were black. Their status as property was enforced by violence -- actual or threatened. People, black and white, lived together within these parameters, and their lives together took many forms.

Enslaved African Americans could never forget their status as property, no matter how well their owners treated them. But it would be too simplistic to say that all masters and slaves hated each other. Human beings who live and work together are bound to form relationships of some kind, and some masters and slaves genuinely cared for each other. But the caring was tempered and limited by the power imbalance under which it grew. Within the narrow confines of slavery, human relationships ran the gamut from compassionate to contemptuous. But the masters and slaves never approached equality.



The standard image of Southern slavery is that of a large plantation with hundreds of slaves. In fact, such situations were rare. Fully 3/4 of Southern whites did not even own slaves; of those who did, 88% owned twenty or fewer. Whites who did not own slaves were primarily yeoman farmers. Practically speaking, the institution of slavery did not help these people. And yet most non-slaveholding white Southerners identified with and defended the institution of slavery. Though many resented the wealth and power of the large slaveholders, they aspired to own slaves themselves and to join the privileged ranks. In addition, slavery gave the farmers a group of people to feel superior to. They may have been poor, but they were not slaves, and they were not black. They gained a sense of power simply by being white.

In the lower South the majority of slaves lived and worked on cotton plantations. Most of these plantations had fifty or fewer slaves, although the largest plantations have several hundred. Cotton was by far the leading cash crop, but slaves also raised rice, corn, sugarcane, and tobacco. Many plantations raised several different kinds of crops.

Besides planting and harvesting, there were numerous other types of labor required on plantations and farms. Enslaved people had to clear new land, dig ditches, cut and haul wood, slaughter livestock, and make repairs to buildings and tools. In many instances, they worked as mechanics, blacksmiths, drivers, carpenters, and in other skilled trades. Black women carried the additional burden of caring for their families by cooking and taking care of the children, as well as spinning, weaving, and sewing.

Some slaves worked as domestics, providing services for the master's or overseer's families. These people were designated as "house servants," and though their work appeared to be easier than that of the "field slaves," in some ways it was not. They were constantly under the scrutiny of their masters and mistresses, and could be called on for service at any time. They had far less privacy than those who worked the fields.



Because they lived and worked in such close proximity, house servants and their owners tended to form more complex relationships. Black and white children were especially in a position to form bonds with each other. In most situations, young children of both races played together on farms and plantations. Black children might also become attached to white caretakers, such as the mistress, and white children to their black nannies. Because they were so young, they would have no understanding of the system they were born into. But as they grew older they would learn to adjust to it in whatever ways they could.

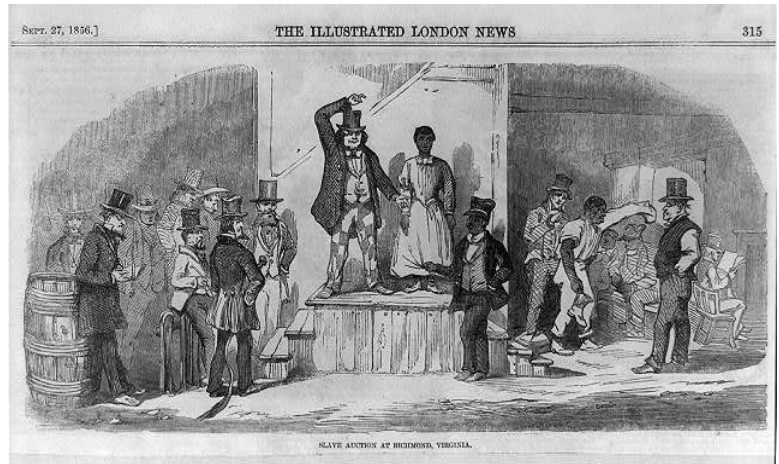
The diets of enslaved people were inadequate or barely adequate to meet the demands of their heavy workload. They lived in crude quarters that left them vulnerable to bad weather and disease. Their clothing and bedding were minimal as well. Slaves who worked as domestics sometimes fared better, getting the castoff clothing of their masters or having easier access to food stores.

The heat and humidity of the South created health problems for everyone living there. However, the health of plantation slaves was far worse than that of whites. Unsanitary conditions, inadequate nutrition and unrelenting hard labor made slaves highly susceptible to disease. Illnesses were generally not treated adequately, and slaves were often forced to work even when sick. The rice plantations were the most deadly. Black people had to stand in water for hours at a time in the sweltering sun. Malaria was rampant. Child mortality was extremely high on these plantations, generally around 66% -- on one rice plantation it was as high as 90%.

One of the worst conditions that enslaved people had to live under was the constant threat of sale. Even if their master was "benevolent," slaves knew that a financial loss or another personal crisis

could lead them to the auction block. Also, slaves were sometimes sold as a form of punishment. And although popular sentiment (as well as the economic self-interest on the part of the owners) encouraged keeping mothers and children and sometimes fathers together, these norms were not always followed. Immediate families were often separated. If they were kept together, they were almost always sold away from their extended families.

Grandparents, sisters, brothers, and cousins could all find themselves forcibly scattered, never to see each other again. Even if they or their loved ones were never sold, slaves had to live with the constant threat that they could be.



African American women had to endure the threat and the practice of sexual exploitation. There were no safeguards to protect them from being sexually stalked, harassed, or raped, or to be used as long-term concubines by masters and overseers. The abuse was widespread, as the men with authority took advantage of their situation. Even if a woman seemed agreeable to the situation, in reality she had no choice. Slave men, for their part, were often powerless to protect the women they loved.

The drivers, overseers, and masters were responsible for plantation discipline. Slaves were punished for not working fast enough, for being late getting to the fields, for defying authority, for running away, and for a number of other reasons. The punishments took many forms, including whippings, torture, mutilation, imprisonment, and being sold away from the plantation. Slaves were even sometimes murdered. Some masters were more "benevolent" than others, and punished less often or severely. But with rare exceptions, the authoritarian relationship remained firm even in those circumstances.

In addition to the authority practiced on individual plantations, slaves throughout the South had to live under a set of laws called the Slave Codes. The codes varied slightly from state to state, but the basic idea was the same: the slaves were considered property, not people, and were treated as such. Slaves could not testify in court against a white, make contracts, leave the plantation without permission, strike a white (even in self-defense), buy and sell goods, own firearms, gather without a white present, possess any anti-slavery literature, or visit the homes of whites or free blacks. The killing of a slave was almost never regarded as murder, and the rape of slave women was treated as a form of trespassing.

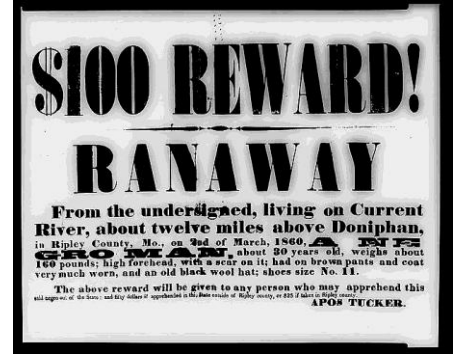
Whenever there was a slave insurrection, or even the rumor of one, the laws became even tighter. At all times, patrols were set up to enforce the codes. These patrols were similar to militias and were made up of white men who were obligated to serve for a set period. The patrols apprehended slaves outside of plantations, and they raided homes and any type of gathering, searching for anything that might lead to insurrection. During times of insurrection -- either real or rumored -- enraged whites formed vigilance committees that terrorized, tortured, and killed blacks.

While most slaves were concentrated on the plantations, there were many slaves living in urban areas or working in rural industry. Although over 90% of American slaves lived in rural areas, slaves made up at least 20% of the populations of most Southern cities. In Charleston, South Carolina, slaves and free blacks outnumbered whites. Many slaves living in cities worked as domestics, but others worked as blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, bakers, or other tradespeople. Often, slaves were hired out by their masters, for a day or up to several years. Sometimes slaves were allowed to hire themselves out. Urban slaves had more freedom of movement than plantation slaves and generally had greater opportunities for learning. They also had increased contact with free black people, who often expanded their ways of thinking about slavery.

Slaves resisted their treatment in innumerable ways. They slowed down their work pace, disabled machinery, feigned sickness, destroyed crops. They argued and fought with their masters and

overseers. Many stole livestock, other food, or valuables. Some learned to read and write, a practice forbidden by law. Some burned forests and buildings. Others killed their masters outright -- some by using weapons, others by putting poison in their food. Some slaves committed suicide or mutilated themselves to ruin their property value. Subtly or overtly, enslaved African Americans found ways to sabotage the system in which they lived.

Thousands of slaves ran away. Some left the plantation for days or weeks at a time and lived in hiding. Others formed maroon communities in mountains, forests or swamps. Many escaped to the North. There were also numerous instances of slave revolts throughout the history of the institution. Even when slaves acted in a subservient manner, they were often practicing a type of resistance. By fooling the master or overseer with their behavior, they resisted additional ill treatment.



Enslaved African Americans also resisted by forming community within the plantation setting. This was a tremendous undertaking for people whose lives were ruled by domination and forced labor. Slaves married, had children, and worked hard to keep their families together. In their quarters they were able to let down the masks they had to wear for whites. There, black men, women, and children developed an underground culture through which they affirmed their humanity. They gathered in the evenings to tell stories, sing, and make secret plans. House servants would come down from the "big house" and give news of the master and mistress, or keep people laughing with their imitations of the whites.

It was in their quarters that many enslaved people developed and passed down skills which allowed them to supplement their poor diet and inadequate medical care with hunting, fishing, gathering wild food, and herbal medicines. There, the adults taught their children how to hide their feelings to escape punishment and to be skeptical of anything a white person said. Many slave parents told their children that blacks were superior to white people, who were lazy and incapable of running things properly.

Many slaves turned to religion for inspiration and solace. Some practiced African religions, including Islam, others practiced Christianity. Many practiced a brand of Christianity which included strong African elements. Most rejected the Christianity of their masters, which justified slavery. The slaves held their own meetings in secret, where they spoke of the New Testament promises of the day of reckoning and of justice and a better life after death, as well as the Old Testament story of Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt. The religion of enslaved African Americans helped them resist the degradation of bondage.

Images from The Library of Congress <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/082_slav2.html> and Britannica Online <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/art-14387/Slave-quarters-on-a-South-Carolina-plantation-1860>>

What questions weren't answered? Do you have any new questions?