Slave Life on a Plantation

Slaves lived in various shacks depending on the plantation size and the attitude of the owner, but nearly all larger plantations used a village like this one to quarter slaves. This 1960 photo of the Green Hill Plantation Slave Village is considered one of the best modern views we have of that terrible institution.

Owners demanded slaves be near the kitchens, work sheds, and other outbuildings as if they were part of the plantation livestock.

Forced Labor Was Tricky

As slaves came in from the fields exhausted to beds in shacks like this; the owners would toil away at account ledgers. These detailed accounts were required because the labor and produce was taxed—and as a result we have fairly detailed views of the lives of slaves. The entire system was geared to keep slaves busy, and to prevent runaways.

Online image. GreenHillhttp://www.gwu.edu/~folklife/bighouse/images/vi4.jpg
Control Was Everything?

The slave’s labor was strictly controlled and noted. Individual slave names were recorded from the early morning to the final tally at night. Rations were some garden foods allowed to be tended on Sundays only plus rice husks, unwanted parts of the butcher’s table like pigs feet, and other similar fare.

This is an online image shows a slave shack at Sotterly Plantation in Maryland. The Cultural Life of the Plantation. George Mason University. Online image photographed by H. Bevile, 1953. May 2010. Online image. Green Hill http://www.gwu.edu/~folklife/bighouse/images/vii1.jpg
The Books

This is a typical Account Book where each slave is listed along with the pounds of cotton picked per day. Accounts also noted who was on the “sick list”; who was pregnant (and therefore allowed to go to the field late); even which women were nursing and had excuse to leave the fields. These were tied to narratives, called, events of the day, that described the work—branded mules, splitting logs, pressing cotton, etc.

“I never knew what it was to rest....”

Sara Grudger was interviewed in 1938 as a part of the New Deal. Her narrative along with many others added to our understanding of the life of slaves.

“I had to do everything there was to do on the outside. Work in the field, chop wood, hoe corn, till sometime I feels like my back surely break.”

From “can see... to can’t see.”

Kitchen work along with doing the plantation laundry was every bit as demanding as field work. Here is the huge heath of a plantation kitchen in Georgia, photographed in 1880. Although taken after slavery this photo shows an accurate view of the work involved. As the salves said, they worked from “can see to can’t see.”

This online image shows the kitchen of the Refuge Plantation, Georgia. The Cultural Life of the Plantation. George Mason University. Online image photographed ca. 1880. May 2010. Online image.
http://www.gwu.edu/~folklife/bighouse/panel9.html
Every building worked, and so did children...

Small sheds like this diary had a special purpose—here milk was kept cool and the cream was churned into butter. Usually younger slave children did such work—including work to make soap, candles, clothes, and many other items.

Why such an extensive system of slavery?

As the Civil war begins, 4 million slaves lived throughout the South in quarters such as these—most in smaller farms.

Yet the work and oppression was the same. By examining the extent of the slave quarters and work places, we see an extensive system—a sort of factory using slave labor, not just for the production of cotton, tobacco, or rice. But also used for the everyday necessities of life like soap.

As the debate over slavery grew, the Southern planters were deeply invested in a monetary and social system they could not afford to lose.