

Life for Enslaved Men and Women

During the nineteenth century, enslaved African Americans worked on large plantations in the US South under brutal conditions.

Overview

- In the early 19th century, most enslaved men and women worked on large agricultural plantations as house servants or field hands.
- Life for enslaved men and women was brutal; they were subject to repression, harsh punishments, and strict racial policing.
- Enslaved people adopted a variety of mechanisms to cope with the degrading realities of life on the plantation. They resisted slavery through everyday acts, while also occasionally plotting larger-scale revolts.
- Enslaved men and women created their own unique religious culture in the US South, combining elements of Christianity and West African traditions and spiritual beliefs.

Life on the plantation

In the early 19th century, most enslaved people in the US South performed primarily agricultural work. By 1850, only 400,000 enslaved people lived in urban areas—where many engaged in skilled labor such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and pottery. Almost three million worked on farms and plantations.

Because most of the agricultural output of the South was produced on large plantations, more than half of all enslaved men and women lived on plantations that had more than 20 enslaved laborers; about a quarter lived on plantations that had more than 50.¹



Photograph shows approximately one hundred enslaved people standing in front of slave cabins, carrying their belongings in anticipation of leaving.

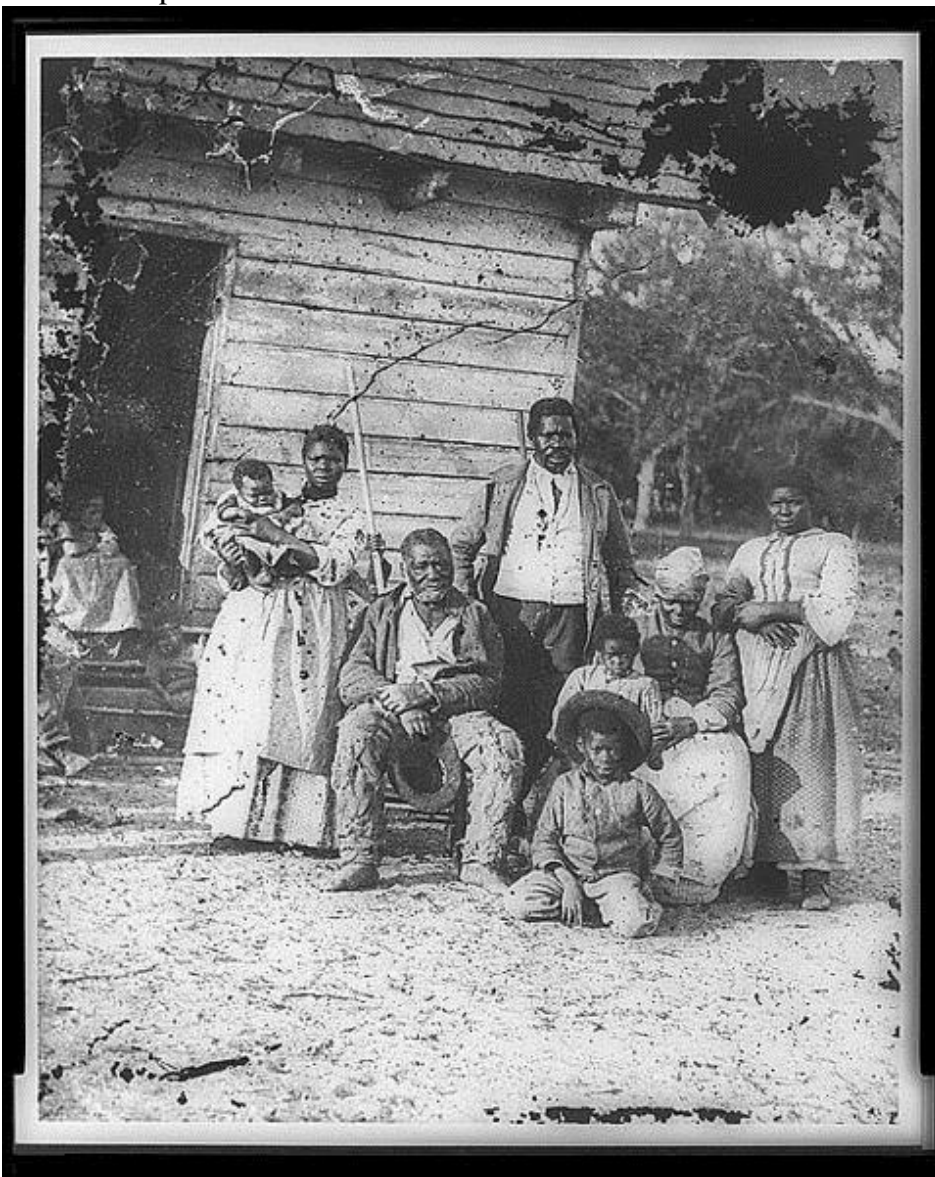
Photograph of formerly enslaved South Carolinians preparing to leave the plantation after the Emancipation Proclamation, 1862. Image credit: [Timothy O'Sullivan](#), courtesy of Google Arts & Culture

Large plantations had field hands and house servants. House servants performed tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and driving, while the field hands labored for up to 20 hours a day clearing land, planting seed, and harvesting crops. Although enslaved men and women sometimes were able to exercise a degree of autonomy in their work—such as on rice plantations in South Carolina—field hands typically worked in a **gang-labor system**, under which large groups of enslaved laborers toiled under the supervision of an overseer.

The division of labor on most plantations was gender-based, with women typically in charge of duties such as sewing, cooking, quilting, cleaning the house, supervising the children, and serving as midwives—though many enslaved women worked in the fields as well.

Brutality and resistance

Life for most enslaved men and women was brutal and harsh. They were frequently separated from their family members because most slave-owners had no compunction about splitting up families in order to improve their own financial situation



Photograph shows a formerly-enslaved African American family in South Carolina, 1862. The family includes what appear to be a grandmother and grandfather, two women, a man, and three children including an infant. Two other children sit on the steps of a cabin in the background.

Photograph of a formerly-enslaved family in South Carolina, 1862. Image credit: [Timothy O'Sullivan](#), courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Moreover, as slavery expanded in the Lower South in the early 19th century, legal codes governing the behavior of enslaved men and women became harsher. Enslaved people were not allowed to defend themselves against violence from whites, nor did they have any legal standing in the courts. They were not allowed to testify, unless it was against another enslaved person or a free black person. They could not enter into contracts, nor could they own property; they were not allowed to leave their owner's property without express permission.

Punishments for infractions were severe. Whipping was prescribed for minor offenses, and branding, mutilation, and even death were employed as punishment for more serious transgressions. **Slave patrols**—basically militias of free white men—were created to oversee and enforce the slave codes. Such strict racial policing was designed partly to ensure that enslaved people would never be able to revolt against those who held them in bondage.

Despite all the precautions that white Southerners took to prevent slave rebellions, they did sometimes occur. In 1831, for instance, **Nat Turner**, an enslaved Virginia man whose owner had taught him to read and who was viewed as a prophet by the other enslaved men and women, organized an insurrection. The uprising began with the killing of Turner's owner, and within 24 hours, the enslaved rebels managed to kill 60 white people. The revolt was ultimately crushed by law enforcement, and Turner and 13 other slaves were executed. The insurrection terrified white Southerners and resulted in the formulation of even more stringent legal codes governing the behavior of enslaved people.⁴⁴

Resistance to slavery did not just manifest in organized plots and rebellions. Enslaved men and women engaged in acts of **everyday resistance**, such as stealing food to supplement their meager rations or feigning illness to get out of working. Slaves also performed acts of sabotage, such as breaking farm tools or purposely destroying crops. Sometimes they went so far as to injure, maim, or even kill themselves in order to escape the brutal reality of a life of forced servitude. Others simply fled the plantation, seeking to escape to freedom in the North



Engraving depicts Nat Turner, wearing torn clothes and carrying a sword, being held at rifle-point by Benjamin Phipps in a forest setting.

William Henry Shelton, engraving depicting the 1831 capture of Nat Turner, 1876. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Religion and slave culture

Religion played a big role in the lives of many enslaved men and women. Slaveholders often encouraged, condoned, or turned a blind eye to religious activity and worship among their slaves. In some cities of the South, slaves formed their own congregations with their own preachers and religious services. The biblical story of the exodus, during which Moses led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, held special resonance for enslaved people.

Slave culture in the US South drew on influences other than Christianity. West African spiritual traditions and beliefs were a huge part of the culture of enslaved men and women. Some of these traditions included the belief in the power of totems and protective charms, and the practice of conjuring—predicting the future. Enslaved people held their own gatherings and celebrations where they danced, sang, and told folktales.

What do you think?

How did enslaved people cope with the routine repression and degradation of life on the plantation?

Why do you think the slave codes were so strict?

How would you characterize slave culture in the US South?

From what influences did the culture of enslaved men and women in the South draw upon? Do you think this culture was a source of hope or relief for enslaved people?