

Slave Quarters

Before the Civil War, southern slaves lived in family units. The one or two-room cabins located in the slave quarters usually housed one family each, although more than one family occasionally occupied one shelter. Here in the small, cramped indoor spaces, in the yards surrounding each cabin, and in the unpaved streets, slave families tried to fashion a private life for themselves that allowed each member to be more than a slave. They courted and married, bore babies and raised children, all actions that imparted meaning to their lives. In 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, about half of all slaves were younger than age sixteen; nearly one-third were under the age of ten. Rather than to act solely in the role of slave, men, women, and children defined themselves as mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles—human beings who experienced life within families despite hardships difficult for modern people to imagine.

Slave families placed special importance on having a source of food that was not controlled by owners. Slaveholders provided slave families with “rations,” or weekly food allotments, which they considered sufficient for keeping slaves healthy enough to perform the heavy labor demanded of them. From the slave’s perspective, however, the rations were insufficient. For one thing, they tended to be monotonous and of a poor quality. Rations regularly consisted of some type of fatty, salted meat, corn meal, and potatoes. More important, they could be withdrawn if the slaveholder decided to punish the slave family for some infraction of plantation rules. For example, if a slave ran away or could not or would



not work as the owner specified, the slaveholder could withhold some of the rations from the family or from all the slaves living in the quarters. The owner hoped that this would prompt the runaway slave to return to the plantation or to work harder or better so as to prevent relatives and friends from suffering. The practice helped slaveholders maintain discipline on the plantation, but it also encouraged slave family members to work together to ensure that they would have food and other necessities of life if an owner withheld them.

Slaves not only consumed food taken or cultivated, they also sold or traded it, along with other goods and services, and used any cash they obtained to better their living conditions.

They trapped and sold fowls found in abundance in the region. They also trapped animals and sold the furs. Other slaves earned cash by clearing paths and driveways and making buckets, barrels, and boots for sale. All of this they did at night or on Sundays, when slaves usually had time for themselves.

Slave families did not spend all their private time working. They gathered together at night or on Sundays (if they had the day to themselves). Leisure activities often involved more than one generation, and many a child was held spellbound by scary stories told in the dark or was entertained with songs and musical instruments. Parents also tried to make work fun for children by incorporating enjoyable activities. Stories, songs, and riddles livened up the lives of children who worked into the night helping parents complete such chores as picking seeds from cotton or spinning thread from the fiber.

Resources: Teacher: Chris Muniz

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