

slavery still influenced every aspect of Southern life. Many people earned their incomes by selling goods or services to plantation owners or by shipping their cotton and other cash crops.

On small farms, slaves might work alongside their owners. Large plantation owners had **overseers** (*people who supervise workers*). These large plantations were self-sufficient communities. Each large plantation was actually like a village with a



An owner and a slave

been enslaved in the passage below.

main house, slaves' quarters, a blacksmith's shop, barns, a smokehouse, and other buildings. Skilled slaves acted as craftspeople and could make almost anything that was needed. Others worked as household servants for the plantation owner and his family.

Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland and became a famous abolitionist. He describes the plantation where he had once

That plantation is a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, regulations and customs. . . There are no conflicting rights of property, for all the people are owned by one man; and they can themselves own no property.

[H]ere were a great many houses . . . There was the little red house, up the road, occupied by Mr. Sevier, the overseer. A little nearer to my old master's, stood a very long, rough, low building, literally alive with slaves, of all ages, conditions and sizes. This was called "the Long Quarter." Perched upon a hill, across the long green, was a very tall, dilapidated, old brick building . . . now occupied by slaves, in a similar manner to the Long Quarter. Besides these, there were numerous other slave houses and huts, scattered around in the neighborhood, every nook and corner of which was completely occupied. . . .

Besides these dwellings, there were barns, stables, store-houses, and tobacco-houses; blacksmiths' shops, wheelwrights' shops, coopers' shops—all objects of interest; but, above all, there stood the grandest building my eyes had then ever beheld, called, by every one on the plantation, the "Great House." This was occupied by Col. Lloyd and his family. . . . The great house was surrounded by numerous and variously shaped out-buildings. There were kitchens, wash-houses, dairies, summer-houses, green-houses, hen-houses, turkey-houses, pigeon-houses, and arbors, of many sizes and devices, all neatly painted, and altogether interspersed with grand old trees . . . The great house itself was a large, white, wooden building, with wings on three sides of it. In front, a large portico (*porch*), extending the entire length of the building, and supported by a long range of columns, gave to the whole establishment an air of solemn grandeur.

—Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)



## The Historian's Apprentice

1. Make your own drawing or map of this plantation based on the description on the previous page.
2. Why were there such differences in the types of buildings found on this plantation?

### The Life of a Slave

Most of the slaves on Southern plantations worked as field hands. Life for these slaves was extremely hard. The plantation bell sounded



Harvesting cotton

before the sun rose. Slaves had to rise early and work all day in the fields until sunset. After dark they still had other chores. Many worked up to 18 hours a day for six days a week. The only days off were Sundays, when slaves enjoyed recreation and went to church.

Workers were controlled by the threat of brutal physical punishment. Overseers carried rawhide leather whips. They cracked their whips as slaves worked in gangs or individually picking cotton. Any violation, like taking a rest or not picking enough cotton, could be punished with a severe whipping. Slaves could be branded, chained, or worse. Overseers were usually paid by how much they made their slaves produce. Most had no sympathy at all for how the slaves felt as human beings.

## The Historian's Apprentice

Solomon Northup was a free African American who was kidnapped and sold into slavery. He described plantation life in his book *Twelve Years a Slave*. His story was later made into a movie, which received the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2013. In the passage below, a “hand” is an enslaved field worker.

When a new hand . . . is sent for the first time to the field, he is whipped up smartly and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard [*slow*], and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty.

An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds [of cotton]. A slave who is accustomed to picking is punished if he or she brings in a less quantity (*amount*) than that. . . .



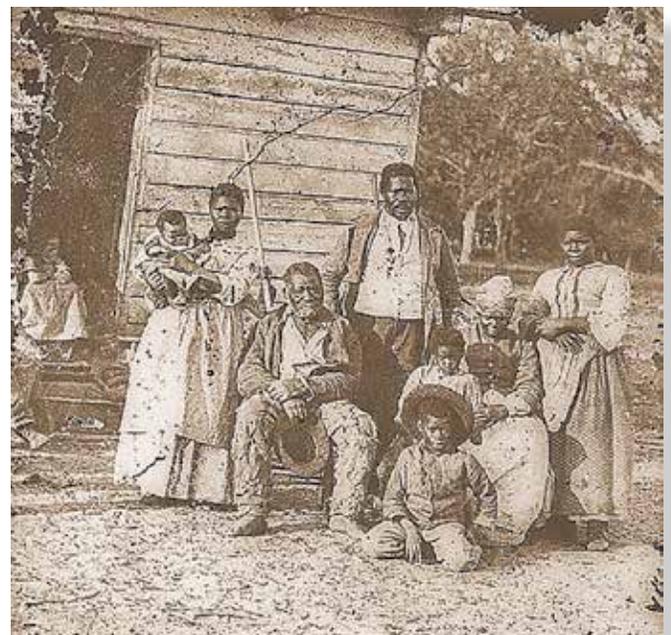
The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle (*at rest*) until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt (*stop*) is given by the driver (*overseer*).

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. . . . This done, the labor of the day is not yet ended, by any means. Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine (*pigs*), another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is all done by candlelight. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil. . . .

Read the passage above and discuss your answers to the following questions with a partner. Then share your answers with the class.

1. If you had been a slave, do you think you would have been able to survive such hard manual work?
2. If you had been an overseer, do you think you would have been able to treat other people so cruelly?
3. How could people who otherwise believed in liberty and human rights, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, have permitted such a system?
4. Do conditions like this still exist anywhere in the world today? If they do, do we have any responsibility to do something about it? Explain your opinion.

Most slaves lived in simple wooden cabins of one or two rooms, often with dirt floors. They had no furniture and usually slept on piles of rags or straw. Each week, slaves were usually given some bacon, molasses, and corn meal for making hominy grits or corn bread. Some were permitted to grow their own vegetables. They were responsible for making their own meals in the few hours when they were not working for the plantation owner. Twice a year, they might be given linen clothes, or clothes of coarse cloth made in Northern factories especially for slaves. The slaves also received shoes, which often did not fit. Some slaves preferred to go barefoot.



**A slave family in the 1860s**