Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl: Life Of African Slaves In Early American History

Today I will be writing an essay, examining what life was like for African slaves in early American history. Now it should be understood that life for every slave in different parts of the country varied drastically; whether they lived in the North, where slavery was very lax or non-existent, or in the South, where slaves were worked in all weather (Douglas, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. OUP Oxford, 1845).

But the one constant was that slavery separated African families and lead to the cultural genocide of the hundreds of thousands of slaves in America. But through perseverance and admirable resiliency of the Africans who lived during these traumatizing times, they were able to create families, earn their freedom or take it back, and establish communities and businesses that left a greater impact on all of America.

Now a slave's life would start as soon as they got off of the enormous slave ships from Africa. They would be put up for auction to be sold to the highest bidder. Or in other circumstances, a child born into slavery would be taken away from the mother at a very young age such as to "blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (Douglas, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. OUP Oxford, 1845). Or as in the case of Henry "Box" Brown, where he was separated from his mother and father to be taken to Richmond, to work in a tobacco manufactory (Brown, Henry B. Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown. 1851).

Typically there were always two types of slaves: Field slaves that worked on large plantations or farms, and house slaves that worked as maids or servants inside their masters' house. Generally, it was the house slaves that saw better treatment and resources, but they had limited rations and their masters were often very unforgiving in letting some of the children or women go days without food while working inside the house. If dinner was not served on time their master of the house would spit in the dishes and withhold rations from the slaves (Jacobs, Harriet. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Dover Publications Inc., 1861.)

For house slaves their duties concerned chores in and around the house. These duties consisted of cooking meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, cleaning every room, serving the meals, doing yard work, and finally taking care of, and raising their masters' children. Each of these tasks had to be completed to their masters' specifications or they could face repercussions or harsh punishment. (Jacobs, Harriet. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Dover Publications Inc., 1861.)

The criteria for a house slave depended on the master, but the lighter skin Africans were usually the ones chosen for taking up the duties inside the house. These lighter-skinned house slaves would receive better treatment to their field hand counterparts (Clarke, Lewis. Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clark. Independently Published, 1845.), often receiving preferential treatment, from better clothes to better food as well as better shelter. When choosing house slaves, the masters usually choose older and more motherly looking slaves, as well as some of the older children to help clean or perform chores. However, some slaves were not fully

accustomed to being servants, so they would undergo a process called “seasoning”, an extreme and often violent means of trying to turn these newly accustomed slaves into obedient and sociable servants. The point of seasoning would be to remove any cultural memories from the enslaved and engrave the notion of white superiority over them. (Philips, Ulrich B. American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor, as Determined by the Plantation Regime. PG Distributed Proofreaders, 1913.)

House slaves had some aspects worse than field hands, however (Clarke, Lewis. Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clark. Independently Published, 1845.). Every house slave would often experience these teachings and these forms of mental and physical abuse from their masters (Jacobs, Harriet. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Dover Publications Inc., 1861.) Sometimes, however, house slaves would build trusting relationships with their masters or their masters' children as they raised them. During these years, house slaves would accumulate money in any way they could, if their masters gave them the opportunity, they would buy their freedom back, and continue to try to buy their family back as well. In less fortunate circumstances, however, a slave would serve their master until they became too old or ill to work, in which case they would die having never been freed.

The other and more known slave was the field hand. These slaves lived in large quantities in cramped spaces or a barn or barracks in which their master would assign them. The larger quantities of these slaves would often be purchased by wealthy plantation owners, and would be given the bare minimum means to survive. Slaves would be given one new pair of clothing every year, as well as another pair of shoes, and bedding (Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. OUP Oxford, 1845.). However, in the wintertime, they would be given another layer of clothing, or sometimes only the material to which make additional clothing out of. The type of clothing given to each type of slave varied as well.

The men were often given only pants, and then a long coat in the winter. Females were given long dresses, and then a shawl or pants in the winter (Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. OUP Oxford, 1845.). Finally, children would rarely receive their clothing and only given it when reaching an appropriate age or when they hit puberty. Along with these clothes, field hands would also be given rations by their masters. These rations would include things like a couple of pounds of flour, assorted meats, and sometimes vegetables. Masters would sometimes allow their slaves the freedom to go fishing on Sundays (Ball, Charles. The Life of an American Slave. Independently Published, 1859.), or to foster their gardens but these privileges were few and rare across the southern United States.

The life of a field slave would sometimes start at birth, children would be born slaves and would rarely work on the same plantation for the same master as their parents. The type of slaves chosen as field hands were the most able-bodied and healthy. These field hands would work on cotton, rice, sugar, and tobacco fields. These jobs were the utmost labor-intensive tasks and the rest field hands would get would be barely enough to support their bodies.

Field hands would wake in the earliest hours of the day before the sun rose, they would go into large plantations and start to pick cotton or harvest whatever other materials with almost no equipment whatsoever. They would be under watch from an overseer hired by their master.

These overseers would often time be a drunkard or a man with no moral compass (Douglas, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. OUP Oxford, 1845). The overseers' job

would be to ensure the field hands do not slow down, stop, or escape. In the unfortunate case, an overseer would catch a field hand doing so, they would either viciously whip, or shoot them publicly in front of everyone present (Douglas, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. OUP Oxford, 1845).

A field hands life rarely ended in freedom. Their main goals would either be to escape or buy back them and their families' freedom. The same would go for a house servant. Overall a slave's life would be decided as soon as they were captured. Death of loved ones would occur on the boat to the New World, or in life, under the control of a people, they never met. The life of a slave would be full of anguish and pain, they would face starvation and only given the bare minimum means of survival. (Ball, Charles. The Life of an American Slave. Independently Published, 1859.)

On an optimistic note, however, through these generations of pain and anguish, a new one was able to flourish. Through the courage of slaves who dared to escape and flourish in their reclaimed freedom, they built names for themselves and other African Americans. They created businesses and began to show the world they were equals, and that skin color meant nothing when in respect to equal rights of everyone on the continent.

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