

Slave Narratives

From Frederick Douglass...

“The night, however, was shortened at both ends. The slaves worked often as long as they could see, and were late in cooking and mending for the coming day, and at the first gray streak of the morning they were summoned to the field by the overseer’s horn. They were whipped for over sleeping more than for any other fault... The overseer stood at the quarter door, armed with a stick and whip, ready to deal heavy blows upon any who was a rush for the door for the hindermost [last] one was sure to get a blow from he overseer. Young mothers who worked in the field were allowed an hour about ten o’clock in the morning to go home to nurse their children. This was when they were not required to take them to the field with them, and leave them ...in the corner of the fences...”

From Rev. L.E. Lowery

“On some plantations it was the custom to have all the slaves...to the white folks’ house on Christmas morning and receive a dram as ‘a Christmas present.’ Old and young, male and female, came forward for the ‘Christmas dram.’ It was certainly a lively time with the slaves on the old plantation. Those who came early to the yard would have to wait until all came. And while they waited they would whistle, jig, or dance. It was the custom on all plantations around to give at the beginning of the winter each male among the slaves a new outfit, consisting of shoes, pants, coat and a cap. The women and girls got shoes and dresses. Mr. Frierson made it a point to give out these on Christmas morning.”

From Solomon Northup...

“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. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be – no matter how much he longs to sleep and rest- a slave never approached the gin house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight – if it has not performed the full task appointed him - he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten to twenty pound, in all probability his master will measure the next day’s task accordingly...”

From Frederick Douglass...

"The men and the women slaves on Col. Lloyd's farm received as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pickled port, or its equivalent in fish. The pork was often spoiled, fish, they had five them one bushel of Indian meal...of which quite fifteen per cent was more fit for pigs then for men. With this one pint of salt was given and this was entire monthly allowance of a full-grown slave, working constantly in the open field from morning till night every day in the month except Sunday. There is no kind of work, which really requires a better allowance of clothing was not more ample than the supply of food. It consisted of two tow-linen shirts, on pair of trousers of the same coarse material, for summer, and a woolen pair of stockings and a pair of shoes for the coarsest description. Children under ten years old had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers. They had two coarse tow-linen shirts per year, and when these were worn out they went naked till the next allowance day – and this was condition of the little girls as well as the boys."

From Booker T. Washington...

"I was born in a typical log cabin, about fourteen by sixteen feet square. In this cabin I lived with my mother and a brother, and sister till after the Civil War, when we were all declared free. The cabin was not only our living place, but was also used as the kitchen for the plantation. My mother was the plantation cook. The cabin was without glass windows; it had only openings in the side, which let in the light, and also the cold chilly air of winter. There was a door to the cabin that is, something that was called a door- but the ...large cracks in [the door]...to say nothing of the fact that was too small made the room a very uncomfortable one. There was no wooden floor in our cabin, the naked earth being used as a floor. In the center of the earthen floor there was a large deep opening covered with boards, which was used to as a place to store sweet potatoes during the winter. There was no cooking stove on our plantation, and all the cooking for the whites and slaves my mother had to do over a open fireplace, mostly in pots and 'skillets.' While the poorly built cabin caused us to suffer with cold in the winter, the heat from the open fireplace in summer was equally uncomfortable."

From Rev. L.E. Lowery

But there were few isolated cases where the slaves were allowed to marry in due form and were given a wedding supper. Sam, the foreman on Mr. Frierson's plantation, was granted such a favor. He married a girl whose name was Bettie. She belonged to Mr. Isaac Keels, who owned the adjoining plantation just north of Mr. Frierson's. The time was Saturday night and the occasion was a great one. Careful and elaborate preparations were made. There were six bridesmaids and six groomsmen. The bridesmaids were all dressed in white and the groomsmen in black. Most of these costumes were borrowed—some from the white folks and some from the colored. The marriage feast was a bountiful affair. After supper the fiddle struck up, with the nimble fingers of Jerry Goodman on the bow, and the dancing began and continued until a very late hour of the night. Thus ended the wedding festivities on the old plantation.