

20.10 Slave Churches

Many slaveholders encouraged their slaves to attend church on Sunday. Some read the Bible to their workers and prayed with them. Owners and white ministers preached the same message: "If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master."

Not surprisingly, this was not a popular lesson among slaves. "Dat ole white preacher just was telling us slaves to be good to our marsters," recalled Cornelius Garner. "We ain't kerr'd a bit 'bout dat stuff he was telling us 'cause we wanted to sing, pray, and serve God in our own way."

Instead, slaves created their own "invisible church" that brought together African roots and American needs. This invisible church met in slave quarters or secret forest clearings known as "hush arbors." One slave reported that

When [slaves] go round singing, "Steal Away to Jesus" that mean there going to be a religious meeting that night. The masters...didn't like them religious meetings, so us naturally slips off at night, down in the bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.

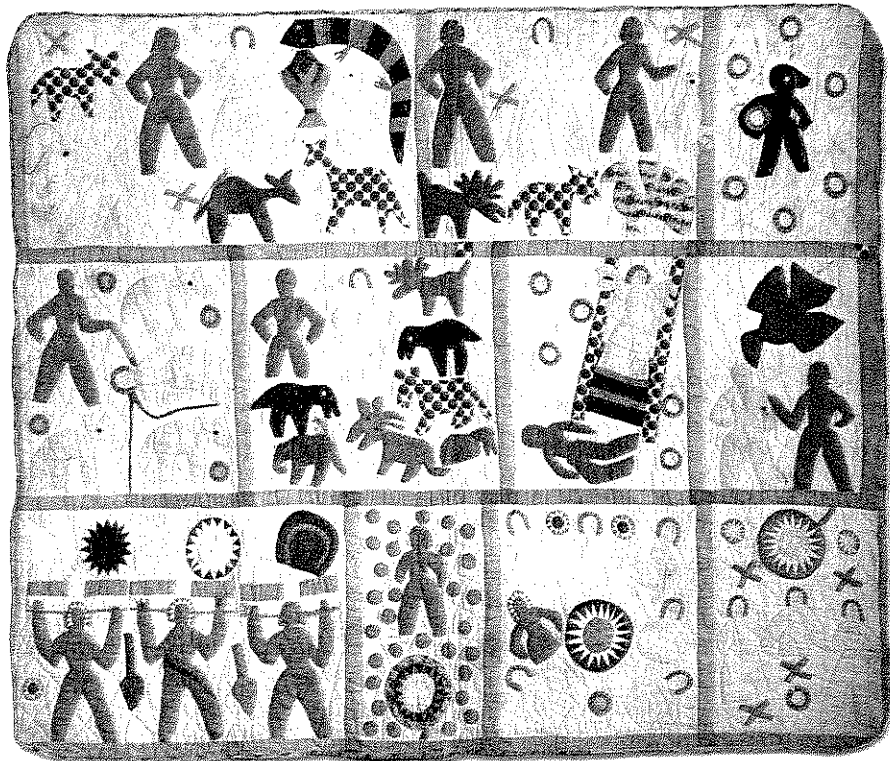
Rather than teach about obedience, black preachers told the story of Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt. Black worshipers sang spirituals that expressed their desire for freedom and faith in a better world to come. A black preacher wrote:

The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation [stopping] about half an hour.... The old house partook of their ecstasy; it rang with their jubilant shouts, and shook in all its joints.

Biblical stories were frequently illustrated on quilts made by slaves.

Whites sometimes criticized the "enthusiasm" of black worshipers, saying they lacked true religious feeling. Many slaves, however, believed that it was their masters who lacked such feeling. "You see," explained one man, "religion needs a little motion—specially if you gwine [going to] feel de spirit."

Religion helped slaves bear their suffering and still find joy in life. In their prayers and spirituals, they gave voice to their deepest longings, their greatest sorrows, and their highest hopes.



20.4 Working Conditions of Slaves

Slaves worked on farms of various sizes. On small farms, owners and slaves worked side by side in the fields. On large plantations, planters hired overseers to supervise their slaves. Overseers were paid to “care for nothing but to make a large crop.” To do this, they tried to get the most work possible out of slaves’ tired bodies.

About three quarters of rural slaves were field hands who toiled from dawn to dark tending crops. An English visitor described a field hand’s day:

He is called up in the morning at day break, and is seldom allowed enough time to swallow three mouthfuls of hominy [boiled corn], or hoe-cake [cornbread], but is immediately driven out to the field to hard labor.... About noon...he eats his dinner, and he is seldom allowed an hour for that purpose.... Then they return to severe labor, which continues until dusk.

Even then, a slave’s workday was not finished. After dark, there was still water to carry, wood to split, pigs to feed, corn to shuck, cotton to clean, and other chores to be done. One slave recalled:

I never knowed what it was to rest. I jes work all the time from morning late at night. I had to do everything.... Work in the field, chop wood, hoe corn, 'till sometime I feels like my back surely break.

Not all slaves worked in the fields. Some were skilled seamstresses, carpenters, or blacksmiths. Others worked in the master’s house as cooks or servants. When asked about her work, a house slave replied:

What kind of work I did? Most everything, chile [child]. I cooked, then I was house maid, and I raised I don’t know how many children.... I was always good when it come to the sick, so that was mostly my job.

No matter how hard they worked, slaves could not look forward to an easier life. Most began work at the age of six and continued until they died. As one old man put it, “Slave young, slave long.”



Slaves who worked as field hands labored from dawn until well into the night. If they failed to pick their usual amount, they were beaten.

20.5 Living Conditions of Slaves

Most masters viewed their slaves as they did their land—things to be “worn out, not improved.” They provided only what was needed to keep their slaves healthy enough to work. Slaves lived crowded together in rough cabins. One recalled:

We lodged in log huts, and on bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women, and children.... We had neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners.

Slaves seldom went hungry. “Not to give a slave enough to eat,” reported Frederick Douglass, “is regarded as...meanness [stinginess] even among slaveholders.” Once a week, slaves received a ration of cornmeal, bacon, and molasses. Many kept gardens or hunted and fished to vary their diets. The owner described here fed his slaves well:

Marse [master] Alec had plenty for his slaves to eat. There was meat, bread, collard greens, snap beans, 'taters, peas, all sorts of dried fruit, and just lots of milk and butter.

Slaves wore clothing made of coarse homespun linen or rough “Negro cloth.” Northern textile mills made this cloth especially for slave clothes.

Frederick Douglass reported that a field hand received a yearly allowance of “two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers...one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes.” The shoes usually fit so badly that slaves preferred going barefoot much of the time. Children too young to work received “two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day.”

While slaves were poorly housed and clothed compared to most white southerners, they were more likely to receive medical care. Slaveholders often hired doctors to treat sick or injured slaves. Given doctors' limited medical knowledge, this care probably did little to improve the health of slaves.

Most slave cabins consisted of a single room where the entire family lived. They had a fireplace for cooking and heat. The windows usually had no glass.



20.6 Controlling Slaves

Slavery was a system of forced labor. To make this system work, slaveholders had to keep their slaves firmly under control. Some slaveholders used harsh punishments—beating, whipping, branding, and other forms of torture—to maintain that control. But punishments often backfired on slaveholders. A slave who had been badly whipped might not be able to work for some time. Harsh punishments were also likely to make slaves feel more resentful and rebellious.

Slaveholders preferred to control their workforce by making slaves feel totally dependent on their masters. Owners encouraged such dependence by treating their slaves like grown-up children. They also kept their workers as ignorant as possible about the world beyond the plantation. Frederick Douglass's master said that a slave "should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as it is told to do."

Slaves who failed to learn this lesson were sometimes sent to slavebreakers. Such men were experts at turning independent, spirited African Americans into humble, obedient slaves. When he was 16, Douglass was sent to a slavebreaker named Edward Covey.

Covey's method consisted of equal parts violence, fear, and overwork.

Soon after Douglass arrived on Covey's farm, he received his first whipping. After that, he was beaten so often that "aching bones and a sore back were my constant companions."

Covey's ability to instill fear in his slaves was as effective as his whippings. They never knew when he might be watching them. "He would creep and crawl in ditches and gullies," Douglass recalled, to spy on his workers. Finally, Covey worked his slaves beyond endurance. Wrote Douglass:

We worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow too hard for us to work in the field. ... The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first got there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. ... I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. ... The dark night of slavery closed in upon me.

Beating, or whipping, was slave owners' most common way of controlling their workers. However, most slave owners avoided savage beatings because injured slaves could not work, and lash marks reduced their resale value.



20.8 Slave Families and Communities

Slavery made community and family life difficult. Legally, slave families did not exist. No southern state recognized slave marriages. Legal control of slave children rested not with their parents, but with their masters. Owners could break up slave families at any time by selling a father, a mother, or a child to someone else. Along with being whipped, slaves most feared being sold away from their loved ones.

Most slaves grew up in families headed by a father and mother. Unable to marry legally, slaves created their own weddings that often involved the tradition of jumping over a broomstick. As one recalled:

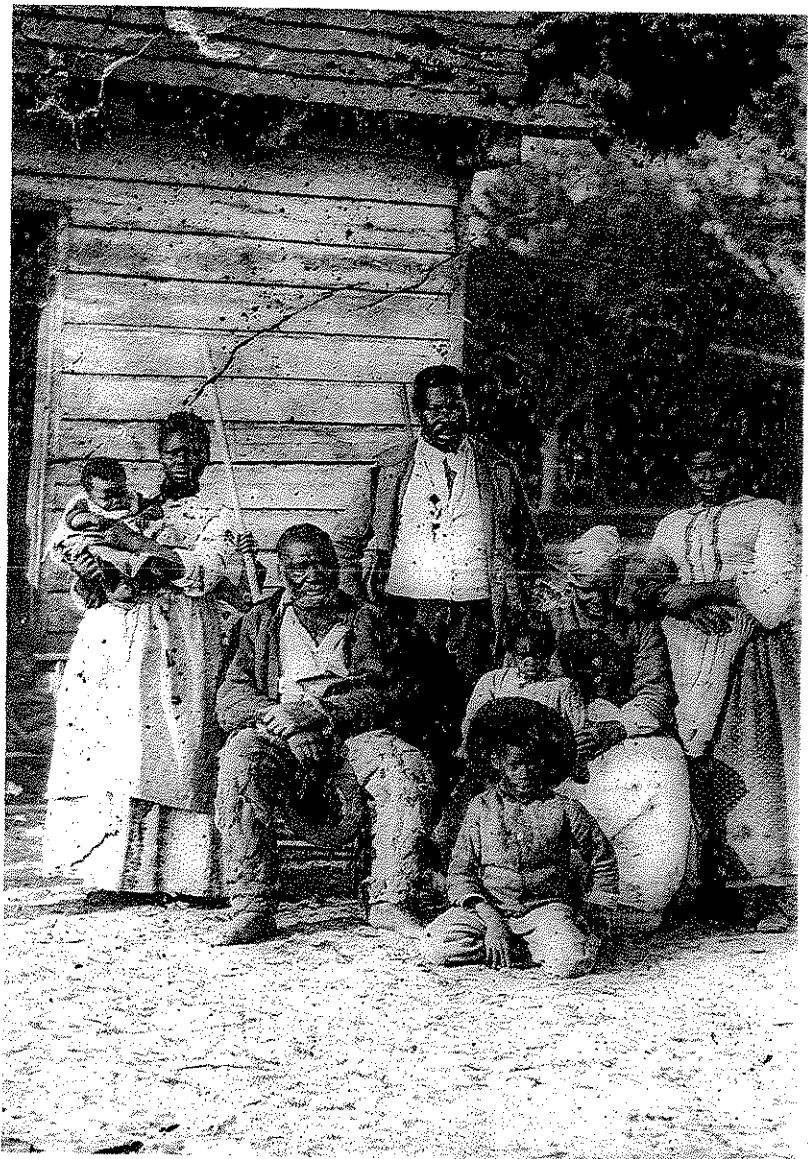
The preacher would say to the man, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" He says, "Yes." "Well, jump the broom." After he jumped, the preacher would say the same to the woman. When she jumped, the preacher said, "I pronounce you man and wife."

Caring for children was never easy. Frederick Douglass's mother "snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done." Still, parents found time to teach their children the lessons they would need to survive.

Silence around whites was one such lesson. Elijah Marrs recalled that "Mothers were necessarily compelled to be severe on their children to keep them from talking too much." Obedience was another lesson. William Webb's mother taught him "not to rebel against the men who were treating me like some dumb brute, making me work and refusing to let me learn."

Parents also taught their children other essential lessons about caring, kindness, pride, and hope. They taught them to respect themselves and other members of the slave community, especially older slaves. "There is not to be found, among any people," wrote Douglass, "a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders."

These were the lessons that helped slaves, under the most difficult conditions, to create loving families and close communities. In doing so, they met the most basic of human needs—the need for a place to feel loved, respected, and safe.



This photograph shows five generations of a slave family on a plantation in South Carolina. Enslaved African Americans often found it difficult to keep their families together because Southern laws did not recognize slave marriages or families, and owners could split up families as they wished.