

# Chapter 18: Slavery

## 1. The Southern World

### Life

While slavery was legal in the South, only 25%-30% of Southern whites held slaves. Of the **slaveholders**, the plantation owners held about half of all the enslaved people in the South. The rest of the families of the slaveholding South held only one or two enslaved people.

There exists no typical description of being enslaved. It differed from slaveholder to slaveholder. In smaller families, enslaved people often raised the children and had closer relationships with their owners. In large operations, slaveholders had little contact with many of the enslaved people.

On plantations, the house slaves raised the children, cooked the food, tended to house cleaning, and did personal chores for the slaveholding family. Some enslaved people had skills and worked as carpenters or **blacksmiths**. Slaveholders had them work around the plantation or hired them out to places where their skills could make money. However, most enslaved people worked in the fields.

For field work, the slaveholder usually hired an overseer to watch over the field workers to make sure that work got done. Field workers planted and harvested crops, cared for the animals, and fixed things around the property.

### Control

Punishment of enslaved people varied. Sometimes those in charge dealt with disobedience by hitting, whipping, or simply selling the enslaved person to someone else. Rarely did slaveholders kill enslaved people because of the loss of

money invested in slavery. Yet, slaves had almost no rights as the law considered them to be property and not people.

The South passed many **slave codes** to keep slaves from getting power. Slaves could not own a gun, own property, be out after dark, leave a plantation without permission, testify against a white person, gather together in groups, hit a white person, or learn to read and write.

### Rebellion

Yet, many enslaved people did resist slaveholders and overseers in different ways: horses and farm animals died mysteriously, tools broke, equipment disappeared, enslaved people frequently faked illness or worked slowly, and some ran away.

Whether the conditions were good, decent, or poor, slavery where ever practiced robbed a person of their freewill and thus remained a brutal and cruel institution.

## 2. Insurrection

### Denmark Vesey

Denmark Vesey was born around 1767. In 1800, he purchased his freedom. He worked at carpentry in South Carolina and did very well. However, repeated **discrimination** against him by the white authorities probably led Vesey to plan a slave revolt.

He held secret meetings in 1822 with over a hundred freemen and slaves. They planned to march on the city of Charleston, kill the slaveholders, and then escape to Haiti before the authorities could arrest them.

Before Vesey could lead the slave revolt, two slaves turned him in. Authorities arrested 131 people and convicted over half of them. Vesey and 34 others were hanged.

## **Nat Turner**

Born into Virginia slavery in 1800, Nat Turner learned to read and write growing up. He took an interest in religion and by his twenties, he became a passionate preacher. In time, he believed that God had told him to start a slave rebellion.

After being sold and moved several times, he ended up on the Travis plantation. When he witnessed a solar eclipse in 1831, he saw that as a sign to begin the revolt. Working with other enslaved people, he spread the word of his intentions. Turner got hold of some weapons and began a killing spree.

On August 21, 1831, Turner and his followers killed the Travis family and then began the march on the South. With perhaps 50 men, Turner gathered more weapons from his victims as he went. Nat Turner's rebellion resulted in the deaths of approximately 55 whites.

By the time Turner reached the town of Jerusalem, the white South reacted. Armed whites blocked Turner's path scattering the rebels. Turner fled into the woods where he stayed until captured six weeks later. Meanwhile, white mobs took revenge and killed up to 200 African Americans in the area.

The government hanged Turner and most of those who supported him. Angry and fearful Southern governments passed stricter laws denying African Americans an education, freedom of movement, and assembly. It also created fanatical anti-abolitionist sentiment that lasted until the Civil War.

## **3. Daily Life**

### **Family**

The family remained the core of African American life. Parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, helped raise the children and taught them how to survive slavery. One important lesson was to not talk around white people as they might be listening to see if the enslaved people were loyal.

Everyone looked out after each other because tragedy could happen at any time. Unfortunately, slaveholders sometimes broke up families by selling the parents or children to someone else somewhere else. So having extended families and friendships allowed others to step in and protect those left behind or sent to other places.

### **Religion**

For many enslaved people, the church became the only place enslaved African Americans from different places could gather. They exchanged information, gossip, and news.

The religious services often blended traditional African culture with that of the Christian church. People sang spirituals that discussed the suffering of the people and expressed hope for a day when slavery would end.