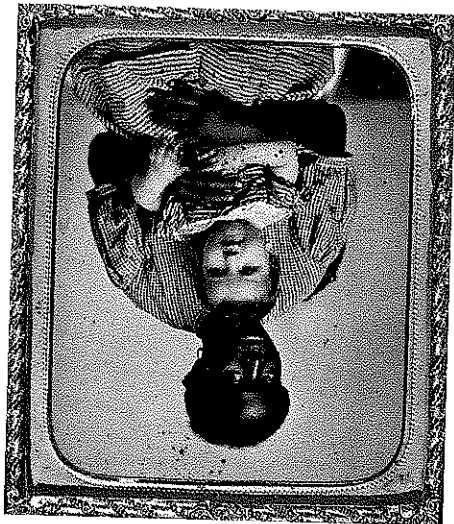


# The Slave System

**EYEWITNESSES TO HISTORY**

“The slave] was a thing for others' uses, and . . . he must bend his head, mind and body in conformity to that idea.”

—J. W. Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freedman*



*Proslavery advocates argued that slaves like this nurse were very well-treated.*

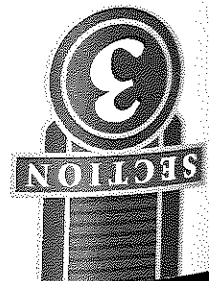
J. W. Loguen escaped from slavery, attended college, and later became a minister. In 1859 he published his memoir of slave life, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freedman*. The publication of his memoir led Sarah Loguen, his former owner, to discover his whereabouts. She wrote him a letter asking him either to return or to send her \$1,000 as compensation for the loss of his services. She stated, “You know we raised you as we did our own children.” Loguen’s reply was printed in an abolitionist newspaper, “Woman, did you raise your own children for the market?” he responded, “Did you raise them for the whipping post? Did you raise them to be driven off, bound . . . in chains?” Loguen’s story demonstrates the degree to which slaveholders’ view of slavery conflicted with the reality of life for enslaved African Americans.

## Southerners and Slavery

As cotton plantations spread throughout the South, the number of slaves in the South also grew—from half a million in 1790 to nearly 4 million in 1860. Cotton cultivation required a great deal of labor. In the picking season alone, a slave might work each field five separate times. Although slave labor formed the foundation of the southern economy, some southerners, particularly those in the Upper South, criticized slavery. A few argued that an economy based on plantation agriculture and slavery was less profitable than one based on wage labor and industry. Some southerners criticized slavery as incompatible with liberty and freedom. Supporters of slavery, however, were much more numerous. Planters argued that slavery was the only way to ensure an adequate supply of field-workers for southern cash crops. Slavery’s defenders also insisted that planters helped slaves by providing care in sickness and old age, as well as clothing, food, and shelter.

Virginia lawyer and writer George Fitzhugh contrasted the supposedly “secure” life of southern slaves with the sad plight of wage earners in northern U.S. and European factories and mines. Such workers, Fitzhugh argued, were at the mercy of employers. Factory owners paid them little, fired them at will, and heartlessly abandoned them when they became too old or sick to work. “Masters treat their sick, infant, helpless slaves well,” Fitzhugh argued, “not only from feeling and affection, but from motives of self-interest. Good treatment renders them more valuable.”

**READING CHECK: Identifying Points of View** What were the various arguments presented by slavery’s critics and supporters?



**READ TO DISCOVER**

1. How did critics and supporters of slavery explain their positions?
2. What were the living conditions of enslaved African Americans like?
3. What was the cultural life of slaves like?
4. What types of resistance did slaves practice?

**DEFINE**

- enslavers
- owners
- long labor
- contracts

**IDENTIFY**

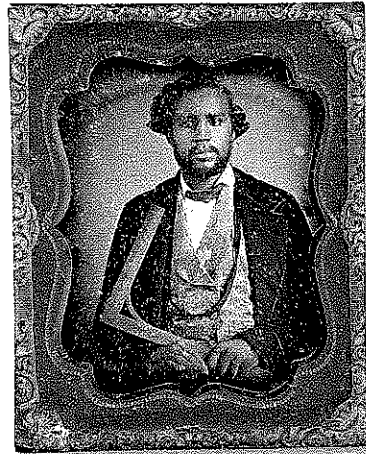
- Cadell Prosser
- Denmark Vesey
- Nat Turner
- Underground Railroad
- Harriet Tubman

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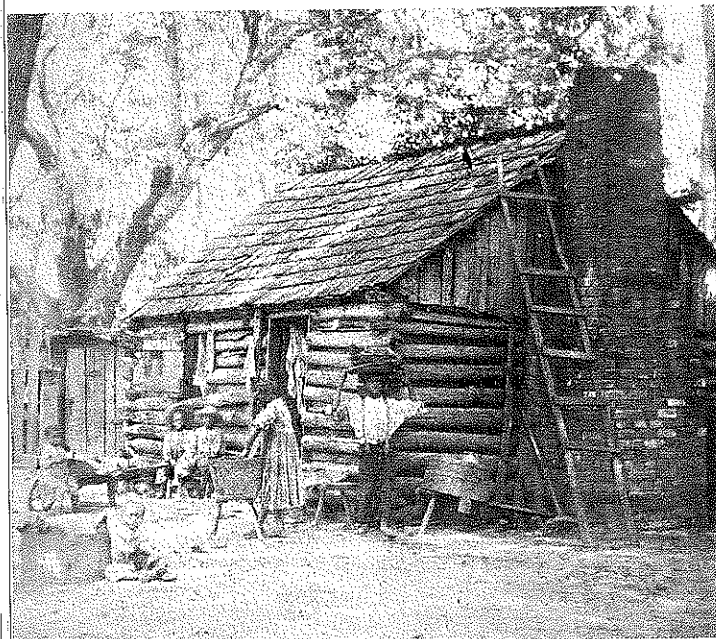
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**INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD**

**Slave labor.** Haywood Dixon was a slave whose master often hired him out. *What skills might Dixon have possessed?*

*This 1860s image shows a slave family in front of their log cabin in the woods of Georgia.*



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## Slave Labor

More than 75 percent of enslaved African Americans lived and worked on plantations and farms. The lives of slaves in the cities were generally less grim than those of field hands. Frederick Douglass hired himself out for labor in Baltimore, Maryland. He later wrote:



**“I was to be allowed all my time; to make all bargains for work; to find my own employment, and to collect my own wages; and, in return for this liberty, I was required, or obliged, to pay [to his owner] . . . three dollars at the end of each week.”**

—Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*

In contrast, most field hands on plantations worked from dawn to dusk and beyond—as many as 18 to 20 hours per day during the harvest. Former slave Peter Clifton explained, “The rule on the place was: Wake up the slaves at daylight, begin work when they can see, and quit work when they can’t see.” Instead of working the fields, some slaves, particularly women, served the plantation household as cooks, maids, or nannies. Others did sewing or laundry. Some male slaves worked as blacksmiths, carpenters, coach drivers, or gardeners.

On small farms, slaveholders usually supervised their slaves directly. On larger plantations, **overseers**—who were usually small farmers, skilled workers, or planters’ younger sons or other relatives—managed the slaves. To help supervise the slaves, overseers used **drivers**—assistants picked from among the slaves. Drivers occupied a difficult position between owner and slave. A driver might be praised by the owner for a job well done, but despised by slaves for working them too hard. Mississippi slave Henry Cheatam gave a typical slave’s description of a driver when he called him “the meanest devil that ever lived.”

On plantations, slaves were organized into work crews with drivers as foremen. This system of **gang labor** allowed overseers to assign groups of slaves to do specialized jobs, such as hoeing, picking, or plowing.

## Slave Life

The lives of slaves varied depending on where they lived and what kind of owners they had. One thing unified all the slaves, however: they had little say in what happened to themselves or their families.

**Housing and diet.** Slave quarters were cramped and sparsely furnished. A family might live in a one-room log cabin with no comforts other than a fireplace. In winter, biting cold air penetrated through gaps between the logs and the uncovered openings used as doors and windows. In such homes, an observer noted, “the wind and rain will come in and the smoke will not go out.”

Food was rationed on the plantation. Ben Horry, a former slave from South Carolina, recalled that on Saturdays every slave on the plantation lined up at the smokehouse to draw his or her weekly share of grits, meal, meat, and rice.

These shares, however, were rarely enough to last the week. To supplement their diet, slaves hunted and fished at night or on Sundays and grew greens or sweet potatoes in small gardens. House slaves sometimes received food from the planter’s kitchen. Many slaves also stole food when they did not get enough to eat.

Slaves’ clothing was simple. It was usually made of linsey-woolsey, a coarse woolen and linen or cotton material similar to burlap. This cloth, said one former Virginia slave, “was just like needles when it was new. Never did have to scratch our back. Just wriggle your shoulders and your back was scratched.”



*John Burry, a slave on a plantation in Louisiana, made this woolen suit.*

**Treatment of slaves.** Slaves’ treatment varied from plantation to plantation. Some planters used rewards to gain their slaves’ obedience. These included the promise of money, gifts of extra food or clothing, easier tasks, dances, days off, or shorter working hours. Those who obeyed orders might be granted small favors, given a garden plot, or moved from the fields to work in the house.

Other slaveholders relied on the use or threat of violence to control their slaves. As a planter wrote in the *Southern Patriot*, “The fear of punishment is the principle to which we must and do appeal, to keep them in awe and order.” If slaves were late getting to the fields or did not work fast or hard enough, overseers could be brutal. Prince Smith, a former slave on a South Carolina plantation, recalled the use of the “sweat box” a particularly harsh form of solitary confinement. “[The box] was made the height of the person and no larger. . . . The box is nailed, and in summer is put in the hot sun; in winter it is put in the coldest, dampest place.”

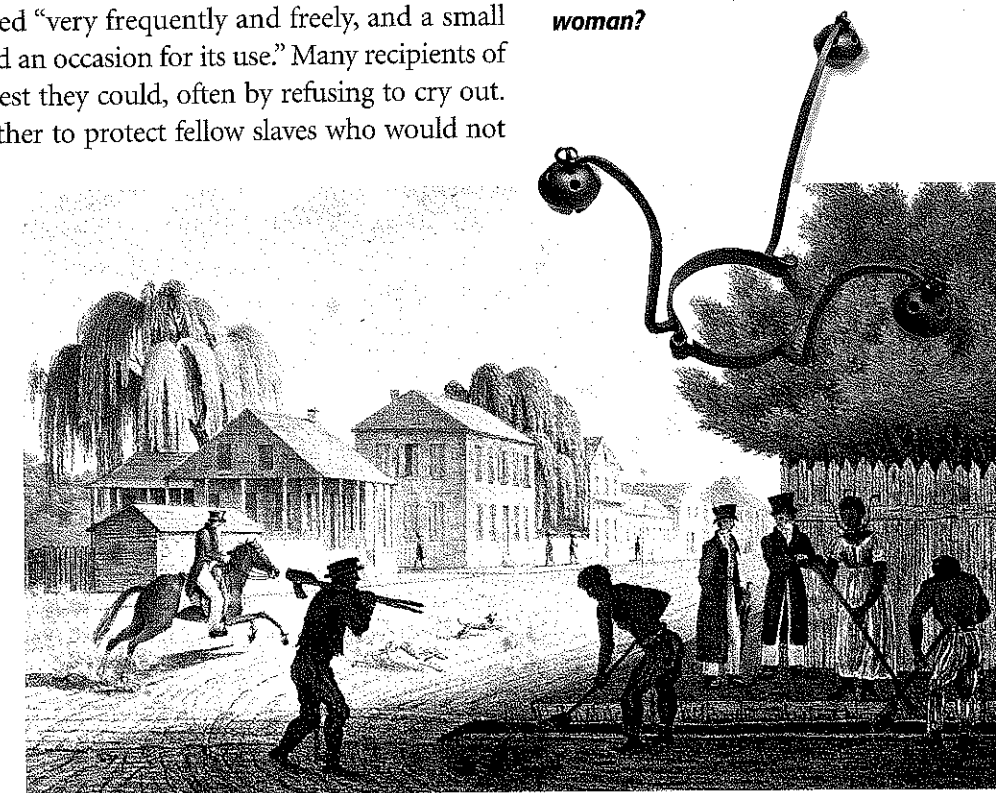
Whipping was the most common form of punishment. William Wells Brown was a former slave and the author of the first published novel by an African American. He wrote that the whip was used “very frequently and freely, and a small offence on the part of a slave furnished an occasion for its use.” Many recipients of the lash resisted the owner’s will as best they could, often by refusing to cry out. Occasionally, slaves would band together to protect fellow slaves who would not submit to a whipping. In these ways slaves could and did sometimes challenge their owners.

If such discipline failed, slaves could be sold “down river”—away from family and community ties. Slave children were often sold away from their parents. Slaveholders might even separate a married couple. Charles Ball, who had a wife and child in Maryland, was sold by his owner in 1805. He recalled, “[I] was told that I would be able to get another wife in Georgia.”

**READING CHECK: Summarizing**  
Describe the labor and living conditions of slaves.

**INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD**

**Punishment.** The woman in this picture has been forced to wear a metal collar as punishment. *How do you think the collar was intended to punish the woman?*

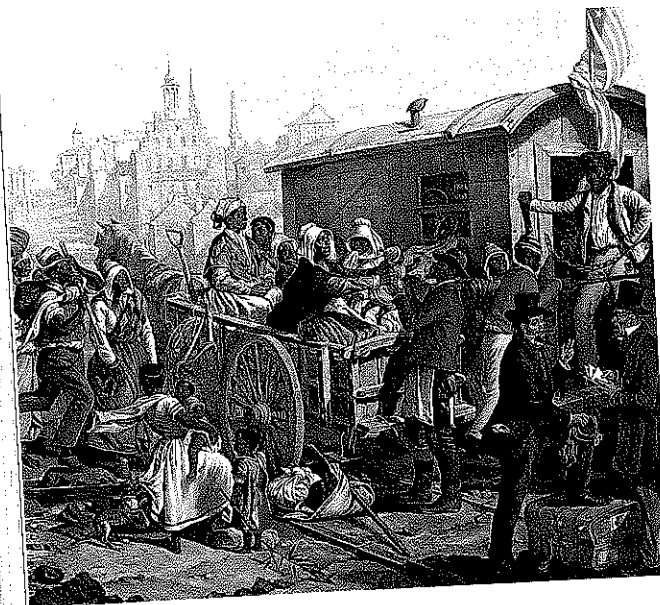


## Slave Culture

Slaves' lives were controlled from sunrise to sunset. However, after dark and on Sundays and rare holidays, slaves could devote their time to family and community. Slaves created a unique African American culture. This culture blended customs drawn from the variety of African groups thrown together under slavery as well as from their new cultural experiences in the United States.

**Family bonds.** Preserving family ties was a challenge for enslaved African Americans, particularly because slave families constantly faced the risk of the sale of individual members. For example, Charles Ball lost nearly all his family to slave traders and was himself sold or hired out more than half a dozen times. Yet, in each of his new homes, he created strong, meaningful relationships within the slave community.

Many slaves made heroic efforts to stay in contact with family members. One slave told of how he ran away from his owner to seek his mother on a distant plantation years after their forced parting.



A slave family heads south after being sold at auction.



“I asked [my mother] if she knew me? she said, no. . . . I then [described] . . . being sold into slavery, and how she grieved at my loss. . . . [Her] dire feelings . . . rushed to her mind; she saw her own son before her, for whom she had so often wept and, in an instant, we were clasped in each other’s arms.”

—Roper, quoted in *The Slave Narrative*, by Marion Wilson Starling

Some literate slaves kept in contact with their separated family members through letters. One slave whose family was sold wrote a letter to his wife, begging her to “send me some of the children’s hair in a separate paper.”

**Oral history, folktales, and humor.** Most slaves were not allowed to learn to read, however. The spoken word was therefore very important, particularly for maintaining links to the past. Good storytellers used body language, sounds, and mimicking to help tell their stories. Slaves used tales to relate their family histories. Many slaves told their family members about Africa.

Slaves also told folktales to preserve and pass on their culture. These stories were based on African stories but incorporated local situations and personal experiences. Most of the tales concerned everyday human relationships, detailing the importance of friendship or a parent’s love. Moral tales warned of the pitfalls of excessive pride or stressed the ideals of cooperation and love.

Storytelling, particularly the use of animal trickster tales, gave African Americans a way of talking about slaveholders and slavery in a guarded form. In these humorous tales, a strong animal attempts to trap a weaker animal but fails. Instead, the weaker animal, such as Anansi the spider or Brer Rabbit, tricks the stronger animal and gains power, success, and wealth. Such tales allowed African Americans to reverse, at least in their imaginations, the harsh reality of the owner-slave relationship. Humor helped slaves deal with painful situations. The ability to maintain hope in the face of overwhelming abuse was an important survival technique for slaves. However, white southerners often misinterpreted the laughter as a sign that slaves were happy with their situation.

## Skill-Building Strategies

### Interpreting Charts

Charts are used to organize and present information visually. They categorize and display data in a variety of ways, depending on the subject matter of the data. Types of charts include flowcharts, organizational charts, and tables. A *flowchart* displays a sequence of related events or the steps in a process. Cause-and-effect relationships are often shown by flowcharts. An *organizational chart* exhibits the structure of an organization and the function, ranking, and relationships between its internal parts. A *table* is a chart that presents data in columns that are easy to understand and compare.

spoken by African American slaves and their descendants in parts of Georgia and South Carolina.

### Practicing the Skill

- Using the table below, answer the following questions.
1. What Gullah words might likely be used as personal nicknames?
  2. What Gullah words are still used regularly by English speakers in the United States?

### How to Interpret a Chart

1. **Read the title.** Read the title to identify the topic of the chart.
2. **Study the major components.** Read the chart’s headings, subheadings, and labels to identify the categories it uses and the type of data it provides for each category.
3. **Analyze the details.** Read the chart’s data carefully and systematically. When studying dates, take note of time intervals. When studying numerical information, take note of increases or decreases in amounts. When studying textual information, take note of special terms and definitions.
4. **Put the data to use.** Use your analysis of the data, along with your knowledge of the historical period, to form generalizations and draw conclusions.

### Applying the Skill

Study the following table, which presents similar-meaning words and phrases in English and Gullah, a language

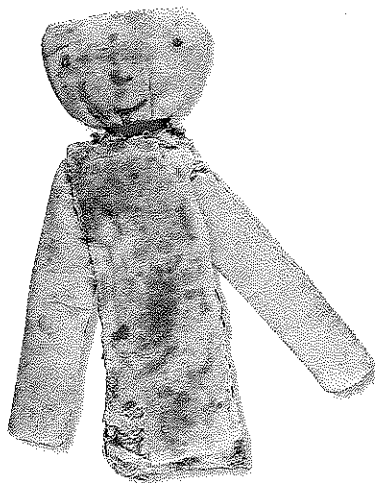
### Gullah Word Origins

Gullah word/phrase	English meaning	African origin
buckra	white man	Ibidio
da	mother, nurse, or elder woman	Ewe
eh	yes	Igbo
nana	elderly woman, grandmother	Twi
tote	to pick up	Kongo
yam	sweet potato	Mende
sweetmouth	flatter	Mende
hot the water	bring the water to boil	Mende
pakpakpak	knock	Mende

Sources: *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*; *The Water Brought Us*; *Bridges to Change*

**Music and folk art.** Music played an important role in the lives of slaves. The music’s African heritage was reflected in its rhythmic structure, strong beat, and use of communal singing. In the evenings, the African American “musicianers,” as their fellow slaves called them, would often bring out a banjo, drum, or fiddle to entertain the others and provide music for dancing. Slaves used music as a way to escape the pain of their lives as well as to express their feelings and thoughts. Slaves’ songs also chronicled their daily experiences. They told of work, criticized white society, and protested bondage.

Slaves also expressed themselves through folk art such as woodcarvings and pottery. They wove baskets using the techniques of their African ancestors and



**This doll is believed to have belonged to an enslaved African American child.**

decorated gourds and clayware with patterns learned from previous generations. Other types of slave art blended both European and African techniques, demonstrating the close connection of the two cultures.

## Slave Religion

Religion played a vital role in the lives of enslaved African Americans. Most worship services included a rich blend of Christian elements and traditional African beliefs, dance, and music. Embracing the Christian belief in salvation helped some slaves endure the hardships they faced. Central to the slaves' religion was their belief that they were God's chosen people. Like the ancient Hebrew slaves in Egypt, they wanted to eventually reach a "promised land" free from their oppressors. The slaves' promised land was not just an afterlife in Heaven. It was also a world without slavery.

White southerners often censored African American ministers, most of whom were slaves. Consequently, the ministers had to preach obedience to owners. However, they took the opportunity to speak what was close to their hearts, particularly when they were alone with other slaves.

When slaveholders, fearful of rebellions, forbade slaves from congregating, even for religious meetings, enslaved African Americans continued to hold secret gatherings in the woods. To quiet the noise of these meetings, slaves devised several creative methods of muffling sound. With the noise muted, one former slave explained that the gathered group "could shout and sing all they wanted to and the neighbors wouldn't go outside."

Of great importance to slave religion were haunting songs called spirituals. Rich in biblical lore, these songs of sorrow were sung during relaxation, work, and worship. Modeled partly on Christian hymns and partly on traditional African rhythms and musical forms, spirituals differed significantly from the religious songs of white worshippers. Spirituals movingly expressed the slaves' deep longing for freedom. Favorites like "Go Down, Moses," "Blow Your Trumpet, Gabriel," and "Did My Lord Deliver Daniel?" tell of deliverance from slavery.

✓ **READING CHECK: Analyzing Information** What were the different characteristics of slave culture?

### INTERPRETING THE VISUAL RECORD

**Religious worship.** Religion played an important part in slaves' lives and helped them endure hardships. **Where is this religious meeting taking place? Why do you think the slaves chose to have their meeting there?**

