



# History of Plantations and Slavery in Mississippi

By Lauren Holt

For thousands of years before the arrival of European explorers, the region we now call Mississippi was occupied by Native Americans. In 1832, under pressure from European Americans' westward expansion, leaders of the Chickasaw people signed the Treaty of Pontotoc, giving up all land east of the Mississippi River to the United States government. Chickasaws were forcibly removed to "Indian Territory" along the "Trail of Tears," and the land they left was sold at public auction. An important factor in European Americans' efforts to gain land in Mississippi was their desire to expand plantation agriculture, which had become extremely profitable in other areas of the country.

Over the next thirty years, many cotton plantations became well established in Mississippi, and by 1860, it was producing more cotton than any other state in the nation. These cotton planters relied entirely upon the labor of slaves, so Mississippi's enslaved black population grew as its white settler population did. Records show that the white population of the state grew from 5,179 in 1800 to 354,000 in 1860, and the enslaved population from 3,500 to 436,631 in the same years. While the majority of enslaved persons in Mississippi lived and worked on large plantations, most white Mississippians were small farmers who owned little land and no slaves. Planters who owned thirty or more enslaved persons made up about five percent of the state's white population.



## “King Cotton”

A traveler from the North observed in 1834 that the aim of cotton planters was “to sell cotton in order to buy Negroes, to make more cotton to buy more Negroes.” Plantation agriculture made those who controlled it very wealthy and powerful, but the system could not work without slave labor, which is why the practice expanded across the South. Cotton and other crops cultivated on plantations were valuable international commodities. It was the economic advantage that plantation agriculture gave to a small group of elite men that initiated the practice of slavery in the U.S., sustained it, and eventually led to southern states’ secession and to the Civil War. Cotton was so central to the South’s economy—and to the global economy—that South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond famously declared in a speech to the U.S. Senate in 1858 that no “sane nation...on earth dares make war upon [cotton]. Cotton is King.”



### Slave Labor

Most enslaved persons in Mississippi worked to cultivate and harvest cotton on large plantations. “Field slaves,” as they were called, worked from sunrise to sunset, often stopping only at mid-day for a short meal. Abe Kelley remembered that he and others “had to **git** up at three in the morning, then we carried our breakfast to the field...When we was working far from the house, we carried our dinner, too.” Field labor was physically exhausting and left enslaved people little free time. As Frances Fluker, a woman enslaved in Marshall County recollected, “at

night we was all tired and went to bed ‘cause we had to be up by daybreak—children and all.” In the fields, overseers supervised the work and were often violent and cruel—Aaron Jones and Belle Caruthers remember that enslaved persons were punished for displeasing overseers by being whipped, beaten, or “locked in the gin house.”

Though most enslaved persons worked in cotton fields, many also served as domestic labor, specifically as cooks, seamstresses, maids, nurses, gardeners, and coachmen. In larger urban areas, they also worked as mechanics, blacksmiths, carpenters, firemen, and laborers in mills and factories. Belle Caruthers recounted that she “worked in the house, waited on [her] mistress, fanned her when she slept and nursed the baby.” Callie Gray remembers the variety of work slaves performed: “Some plaited corn-shuck mule collars, and split rails and mended fences and bottomed chairs and lots of other things. Two women sewed all the time...and they sewed with they fingers ‘cause they warn’t no sewing machines. They spun the thread and dyed and wove it too.”

Enslaved persons who were too sick or too elderly to work in cotton fields were often responsible for less difficult tasks like raising chickens, milking cows, and churning butter. They also helped care for young children. Children who were old enough, as Frances Fluker recalls, were expected to work as well. Emma Johnson remembers that she “was taken in the big house to live when [she] was two years old.” Later, she recalled, “I waited on Old Miss, nursed and cleaned up. When I got big enough, I helped to wash and cook. I worked in the field, too, hoeing and picking cotton.”

## Slave Life

Even though the tasks and working conditions of enslaved persons varied, their labor was always forced, and they didn't receive the compensation for their work. Slaveholders provided food, housing, and clothing, but as Frances Flucker observed, "the slaves **didn't get nary thing give 'em** in the way of land nor stock." Like their work, the living conditions of enslaved populations were somewhat varied, though most lived in small huts or cabins with dirt floors. Frederick Law Olmstead observed at a plantation in northern Mississippi that "the Negro cabins were small, dilapidated, and dingy; the walls were not chinked, and there were no windows...Everything within the cabins was colored black by smoke."

While some slaveholders allowed enslaved families to remain together, others did not. Enslaved people had no legal rights regarding their children, and at times families were broken up by selling members to different buyers. Lizzie Johnson recounted that her mother and grandmother had "never seen none of [their] folks after they was sold," and George Washington Albright recalled that some plantation owners "thought no more of selling a man away from his wife, or a mother away from her children, than of sending a cow or horse out of the state." The separation of families was one of the most traumatic consequences of the system of slavery in the United States.



Enslaved persons were subject to a number of laws that restricted their mobility and education, in large part because slaveowners and other whites were afraid of mass rebellion against their authority. Between 1826 and 1860, there were at least four attempted slave uprisings in Mississippi, though none was successful. In order to prevent activity that could lead to insurrection, enslaved people were required to have a 'pass' or be accompanied by a white 'monitor' when traveling more than one mile away from their residences. Since church meetings were some of the only times that groups of enslaved people were allowed to congregate freely, they became an important place not only for fellowship, but also for sharing information or making plans away from owners and overseers.



Enslaved persons were also prohibited from having contact with free blacks and were not permitted to learn to read or write. Although it was difficult and dangerous, some enslaved persons *did* learn, many "by trickery," as George Washington Albright remembers. Belle Caruthers recalls that the white child she took care of "had Alphabet blocks to play with, and I learned my letters while she learned hers." When Caruthers was discovered studying a spelling book, her owner "struck [her] with his muddy boot." Though the consequences for learning were often severe, literacy was powerful as both a tool and a symbol in enslaved communities. When Caruthers discovered she was able to spell out the words in a hymnal, she remembers, "I was so happy...that I ran around telling all the other slaves."

*\*Historic photos courtesy of the Chesley Thorne Smith Collection & Henry Dancy.*