Life of a Slave on a Southern Plantation
By BirdBrain History
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In this informational text, the United States’ history of enslaving black people in the South is discussed. No matter the role a slave possessed on a plantation, they were mistreated and considered to be the property of white plantation owners. As you read, consider why it is important to remember the moments in history we are not proud of.

It’s important to know how your ancestors behaved . . . how they acted or how they were treated. For much of America’s history, many black people were thought of as the property of white people. It’s an uncomfortable truth that we need to talk about in order to understand how America became what it is today and also how our past changes how we act today. So come, let’s get uncomfortable for a little while.

Why did people keep slaves? Before the 1900’s, people in America made black people work for them for free so that they could make new goods without spending much money, making businesses in the South grow very fast. A plantation is a large piece of land that grows plants like coffee, tobacco, or cotton with a large number of people working. In the 1700s and 1800s, many of these had mostly slaves working on them. One plantation could be thousands of acres\(^1\) and had dozens if not hundreds of slaves who were made to work against their wills. It was an ugly business, and many Americans, especially those living in the South, did not see anything wrong with it. It was easier for them to overlook their bad behavior because so much money was rolling in. They also thought of people from Africa as being less than whites.

In order to make sure the money kept rolling in, the government made laws that would keep slaves working hard and stop them from getting away. Slave codes were laws that controlled what slaves were allowed to do and what their masters could do to them. This was anything from the number of lashes a master could give the slaves to whether slaves could trade with other slaves without their master saying they could. The government said that owning other people was okay and that treating them in some ways was okay. This led slave-owners to make some very scary choices.

When people make other people work against their wills, there is going to be some push back. On large plantations, they needed someone to make sure these slaves worked as hard as they could. An overseer is a white man who is paid to keep an eye on the slaves on the plantation to make sure they work as hard as they can. It was often this person’s job to give punishments if the masters were unhappy with the slaves’ work. They used whips, which if used with enough force, would tear open the slaves’ skin. Overseers became so used to whipping a slave that they stopped thinking about the pain they were creating. It was as easy to them as clipping a nail. Their goal was to get slaves to work as hard as possible without overworking them or killing them.

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1. Acre (noun): a measure of land area; an acre is slightly smaller than the size of a football field
Things were not easy on the plantation. Inside the master’s household, things could be a lot better ...or a lot worse. Domestic slaves were people owned as property who worked in the home, instead of the field. This means they were given more comfortable places to sleep and better food. Some of them thought of themselves as better than the slaves in the field. But as well as the masters treated them, the domestic slaves were often reminded that they were still property. They had no more rights than a dog or a broom. The plantation might have meant harder work, but slaves could be alone or with their friends and families. In the house, slaves were always under the eye of their master and mistress.

Knowing your ancestors’ history is important. Thinking about how their choices changed life today is important. Plantation slavery made America’s economy boom. It was driven by overseers, whites who kept an eye on the workers, and drivers, black slaves who were made to keep an eye on their own.

Domestic slaves might have had an easier time working in the households, but if their masters were strict, life was could be even harder. Plantation slavery affected everyone who lived in America, and it still does today.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
   A. Black people were treated as less than human in the southern states of America.
   B. Plantation slavery was the least harsh form of slavery in the South.
   C. Plantation owners were pressured to produce a certain quantity of work or face punishment themselves.
   D. Domestic slaves were ensured more rights than slaves who worked in the fields.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “America made black people work for them for free so that they could make new goods without spending much money” (Paragraph 2)
   B. “They used whips, which if used with enough force, would tear open the slaves’ skin.” (Paragraph 4)
   C. “This means they were given more comfortable places to sleep and better food.” (Paragraph 5)
   D. “Plantation slavery affected everyone who lived in America, and it still does today.” (Paragraph 6)

3. PART A: What is the relationship between the master and the overseer on a plantation? [RI.3]
   A. The master owns the overseer, a slave who manages other slaves.
   B. The master and the overseer are equals on a plantation.
   C. The master employs an overseer to violently discipline slaves.
   D. The master owns the plantation, while the overseer owns the slaves.

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “They also thought of people from Africa as being less than whites.” (Paragraph 2)
   B. “It was often this person’s job to give punishments if the masters were unhappy with the slaves’ work.” (Paragraph 4)
   C. “slaves were always under the eye of their master and mistress.” (Paragraph 5)
   D. “black slaves who were made to keep an eye on their own.” (Paragraph 6)
5. How does paragraph 5 of the text contribute to the development of ideas? [RI.5]
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why is it important to remember and study unpleasant events in history? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. How has America changed its treatment towards black citizens over time? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the text, how does power corrupt? What drove plantation owners to treat black people the way they did? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the text, why do people do bad things? What was the reasoning that white plantation owners used to excuse their poor treatment of black people? Can you identify similar forms of poor treatment and abuse of some people today in America? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

5. In the context of the text, what is the effect of following the crowd? How is slavery in the Southern United States an example of following the crowd? Why didn't anyone during this time speak out about the poor treatment of black people? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.