

The Experience of Enslaved People

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Many White Americans had no problem with racial inequality prior to the Civil War, and White southerners, such as John C. Calhoun, developed arguments to justify slavery in their region. In their eyes, slavery was essential for a stable political and economic system that promoted White freedom and property ownership.

In contrast, enslaved African Americans experienced daily traumas as the human property of others. They resisted their condition in a variety of ways, and many found some solace in Christianity and in the communities they created on plantations. There were also several instances where enslaved people violently resisted their condition by fomenting open rebellion.

Our examination of the experiences of enslaved people breaks down as follows:

1. Life as an Enslaved Person

In addition to cotton, the great commodity of the antebellum South was human chattel. Slavery was the cornerstone of the Southern economy. By 1850, about 3.2 million enslaved people labored in the United States, 1.8 million of whom worked in the cotton fields.

Southern White leaders frequently relied upon the idea of **planter paternalism** to justify the existence of slavery and its importance to the Southern economy.



TERM TO KNOW

Planter Paternalism

The premise that enslavers acted in the best interests of the people whom they enslaved. Holders of enslaved people believed they acted in the best interests of enslaved people by taking responsibility for their care, feeding, discipline, and even their Christian morality. However, paternalism grossly misrepresented the reality of slavery, which was, by any measure, a dehumanizing, traumatizing, and horrifying condition.

Holders of enslaved people used both psychological coercion and physical violence to maximize the labor of enslaved people and to prevent any enslaved person from disobeying their wishes. Often, the most efficient way to discipline enslaved people was to threaten to sell them. The lash, meanwhile, was the most common form of physical punishment. Some slaveowners also used neck braces, balls and chains, leg irons, and other

objects to punish enslaved people. Such forms of punishment often occurred publicly, so that the entire population of enslaved people knew what could happen if they failed to satisfy their masters' demands.

Although holders of enslaved people justified their methods under the guise of paternalism, coercion and violence had important physical and emotional ramifications for enslaved people. Under planter paternalism, enslaved people worked in the fields from sunup to sundown, oftentimes enduring threats of intimidation throughout. They bore scars from hard labor and physical violence. They also lived under the constant possibility that their owner might sell family and friends to another plantation.

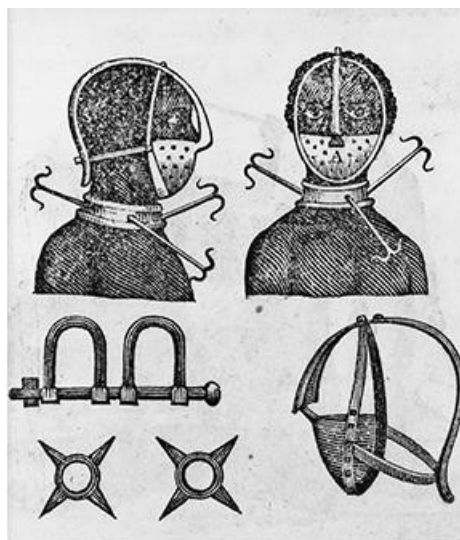


DID YOU KNOW

One lyric in a song of enslaved people went, "Mother, is Massa going to sell us tomorrow?"



(a)



(b)

Stark evidence of the cruelty of slavery. Peter (a), a former enslaved person from Louisiana, displayed his scars to a Civil War photographer in 1863. The original caption of the photograph reads: *"Overseer Artayou Carrier whipped me. I was two months in bed sore from the whipping. My master come after I was whipped; he discharged the overseer."* Meanwhile, the drawing of an iron mask, collar, leg shackles, and spurs (b) demonstrates the various cruel and painful instruments that owners and overseers used to restrain enslaved people.



THINK ABOUT IT

Peter notes that his master discharged the overseer who whipped him shortly after the incident. Why do you think his master did this, and do you think the ideology of planter paternalism played any role in that action?

Southern holders of enslaved people also attempted to control the personal lives of enslaved people they owned. Under Southern law, enslaved people could not marry. Nonetheless, some holders of enslaved people allowed them to marry in order to foster harmony on the plantation. Sometimes enslaved people were allowed to choose their own partners, but other times not.



DID YOU KNOW

Some masters forced certain enslaved people to form unions, anticipating the birth of more children (and consequently greater profits) from them.

Even if enslaved people were allowed to marry, couples always faced the prospect of being sold away from each other. Moreover, once they had children, parents faced the horrifying reality that they or their children could be sold and separated at any time.



DID YOU KNOW

Historians estimate that, during the 19th century, one-third of all enslaved children in the United States were separated from one or both parents.

2. Resistance of Enslaved People

Nevertheless, enslaved people did not accept their condition passively. Rather, they sought and found many ways to resist their shackles and develop their own communities and cultures that undermined planter paternalism.

Day-to-day resistance in the fields and within plantation homes was the most common form of resistance, because it was difficult for owners and overseers to control. It could take numerous forms. Enslaved people could slow down the workday and sabotage the system in small ways, by breaking tools, faking illness or injury, or hiding their intelligence by feigning childishness and ignorance when talking to overseers or plantation owners.

Enslaved people also achieved degrees of independence by providing for their own nourishment.



DID YOU KNOW

Many enslaved people suffered from a disease known as *pellagra*, which was caused by a deficiency in essential B vitamins. This was because weekly rations on a plantation comprised primarily of corn and pork, which offered plenty of calories but little nutritional value. Symptoms of *pellagra* included pain, dry skin, headaches or dizziness, and, in its worst stages, diarrhea, hallucinations, and death.

Masters knew that they had to overcome obstacles such as *pellagra* to achieve maximum cotton production, so they often gave enslaved people sufficient time and resources to procure more food on their own. Many masters allowed enslaved people to tend their own gardens and livestock. Many enslaved people also hunted, fished, trapped, or gathered to supplement their diets further. By allowing enslaved people to engage in such activities, masters relinquished some of their power. Moreover, enslaved people were able to experience a degree of autonomy, and received an opportunity to provide for their families by engaging in such basic subsistence activities.

Some enslaved people resisted their enslavement by escaping North. If caught, the consequences were often more severe, resulting in brutal whippings, facial branding or mutilation, sale, or even sometimes death. Thus, this form of resistance was less common. Most runaway enslaved people were young men because women were more likely to be responsible for children. For both men and women, running away severed familial and communal ties.

While some ran northward to freedom, most runaway enslaved people did not go far. Many ran away temporarily in an attempt to flee disciplinary action. A number traveled to nearby plantations to see family members. Some also escaped to remote areas or to cities such as New Orleans, where they became

members of free Black communities.

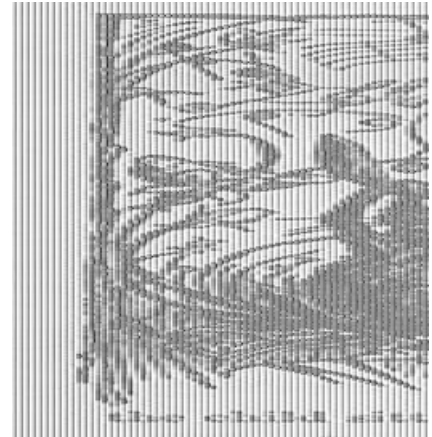


DID YOU KNOW

During escape attempts, enslaved people relied heavily on informal, verbal communication networks. It is from these networks that we have the phrase “heard through the grapevine.”

Other forms of resistance were cultural in nature. Enslaved parents went on to show their children the best ways to survive under enslavement. They taught children to be discreet, submissive, and guarded around White people. They also told children stories that included tales of tricksters, sly enslaved people, or animals who outwitted their antagonists. Such stories provided comfort in humor and reinforced a sense of the wrongs of enslavement.

Among the most popular children's tales was that of Brer Rabbit (Brother Rabbit), depicted here in an illustration from *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation* (1881) by Joel Chandler Harris. Stories of Brer Rabbit showcased his ability to outwit opponents and challenge authority figures.



Along with family, faith provided enslaved people with a means to endure and resist their condition. Many enslaved people embraced Christianity and, while masters emphasized a scriptural message of obedience to White people and a better day awaiting enslaved people in heaven, enslaved people focused on Christianity's uplifting message of freedom from bondage and equality in the eyes of God.

Spiritual and folk songs were another way that enslaved people interpreted enslavement and enslaved life in the South. Songs such as “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” referenced the Exodus (the Old Testament account of the Hebrews' escape from bondage in Egypt) and allowed enslaved people to freely express messages of hope, struggle, justice, and the eventual deliverance of their people from enslavement.



DID YOU KNOW

The song “Roll, Jordan, Roll” was originally written by a Methodist preacher in England. It arrived in the United States by the early 19th century and was sung at numerous camp meetings that were affiliated with the Second Great Awakening. Shortly thereafter, it became a well-known song among enslaved people. The version of “Roll, Jordan, Roll” provided below was originally included in *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), the first published collection of African-American music in the United States. Enslaved people interpreted the River Jordan (“roll, Jordan, roll”), which the Hebrews crossed to reach the Promised Land, as a metaphor for escaping the horrors of enslavement. Examine the lyrics and consider the questions provided:

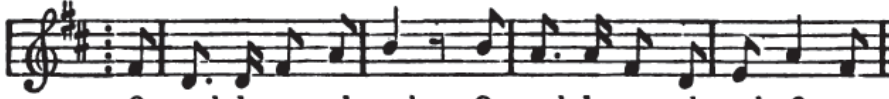
ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL.



1. My brudder^s sit-tin' on de tree of life, An' he yearde when Jor-dan



roll ; Roll, Jor-dan, Roll, Jor-dan, Roll, Jor-dan, roll !



O march de an-gel march, O march de an-gel march ; O my



soul a-rise in Heaven, Lord, For to yearde when Jor-dan roll.

2 Little chil'en, learn to fear de Lord,
And let your days be long ;
Roll, Jordan, &c.

3 O, let no false nor spiteful word
Be found upon your tongue ;
Roll, Jordan, &c.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What imagery might the Jordan River suggest to enslaved people working in the Deep South?
2. What lyrics in this song suggest redemption and a better world ahead?

3. Rebellions of Enslaved People

Open rebellion was the most damaging and threatening form of resistance to slavery in the South. It was also the most dangerous and, therefore, the rarest form of resistance. Yet owners of enslaved people feared rebellions the most. Rebellions of enslaved people directly challenged the ideology of planter paternalism by raising the prospects of a violent and destructive war between the races.

Some rebellions failed to get off the ground. The most notable of these occurred in 1822 and concerned a free Black man in Charleston, South Carolina named Denmark Vesey.

Denmark Vesey had spent much of his early life enslaved in the Caribbean before arriving in South Carolina. In 1799, Vesey won \$1500 in a lottery, which was enough to buy his freedom. By 1822, Vesey was a well-established and respectable carpenter in Charleston. He was also a local leader in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, and when Vesey preached, he usually addressed injustices associated with enslavement.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1822, Vesey's estimated net worth was \$8,000.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Denmark Vesey

A carpenter, formerly enslaved person, and leader of the free Black community in Charleston, South Carolina, who was arrested and executed for planning an insurrection of enslaved people in the city. Just how many people supported Vesey's planned rebellion is unknown. White southerners estimated that as many as 9,000 Black men and women in Charleston and the surrounding area supported Vesey, but historians have concluded that this figure is an exaggeration. Nevertheless, Vesey's plan called for an attack on arsenals located within Charleston. After acquiring arms, all White people in the city were to be killed along with any African Americans who refused to join the cause.

Such was the story that the subsequent investigation released to the public, but details of the **Vesey conspiracy** are limited because authorities arrested Vesey and his supporters before they had a chance to spring their potential plan into action.



TERM TO KNOW

Vesey Conspiracy

A planned insurrection of enslaved people in Charleston, South Carolina, led by a formerly enslaved Black man named Denmark Vesey; White authorities uncovered the conspiracy before any uprising occurred.

Vesey and other conspirators destroyed evidence prior to their arrests, so the specifics of the planned rebellion might never be known.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Vesey was clearly the ringleader of an antislavery group within Charleston's AME church, but historians continue to investigate the extent of his contacts and the details of his plan.

Vesey and his supporters did not offer much assistance toward this end because they maintained their silence during the investigation and never proclaimed their innocence. In the end, authorities arrested 135 individuals, 35 of whom were executed (including Vesey). Another 43 individuals were sold into enslavement.

Other rebellions did get off the ground. The most notable of these concerned **Nat Turner** and his followers in Virginia in 1831. **Nat Turner's Rebellion** comprised the most significant rebellion of enslaved people in American history.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Nat Turner

An enslaved man in Southampton County, Virginia, who led the most significant rebellion of enslaved people in American history, resulting in the deaths of scores of White people before the rebellion was suppressed.



TERM TO KNOW

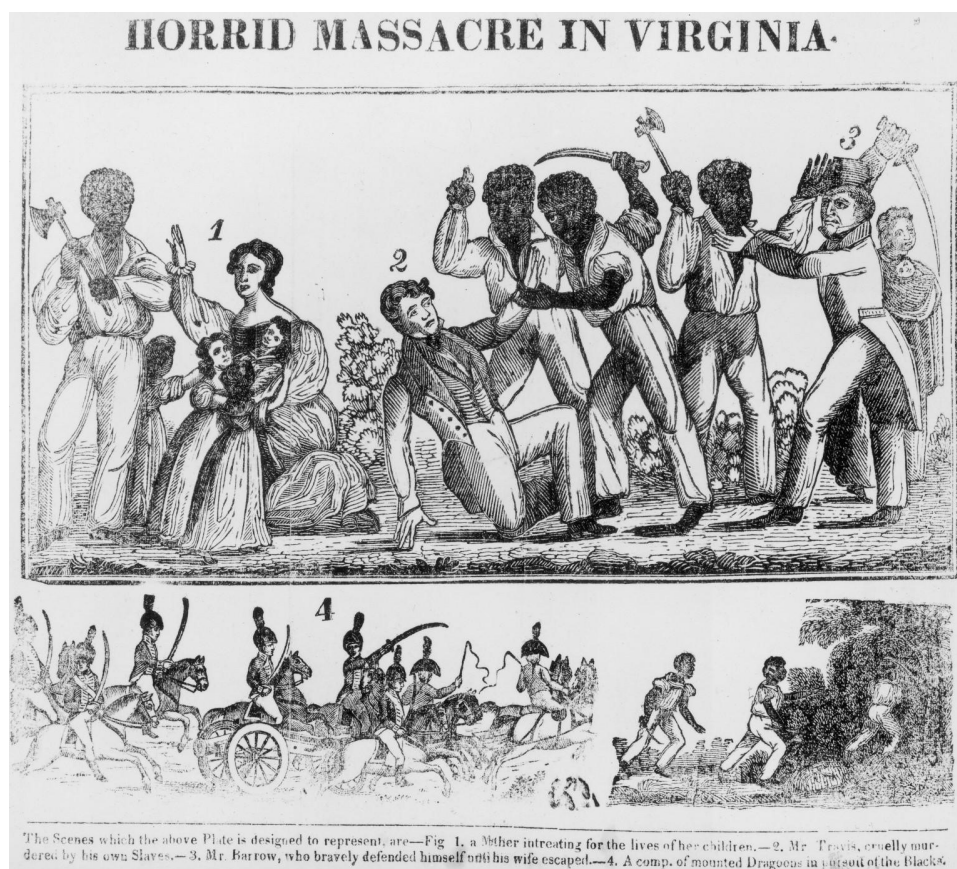
Nat Turner's Rebellion

A rebellion of enslaved people led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. Nat Turner worked in the fields during the day but at night, he prophesized, baptized, and even healed his fellow enslaved people. His parents had taught him to read the Bible at an early age and, by 1825, he experienced visions that convinced him that the Day of Judgment was approaching.

In the early morning of August 22, 1831, Turner and six of his companions entered the house of his enslavers, Joseph and Sally Travis. They proceeded to kill Joseph and Sally, along with their 12-year-old son and an

apprentice. Upon leaving, they remembered a baby who remained in the cradle, and they returned to kill him as well.

Two days later, Nat Turner's rebellion had killed approximately 57 White people, including 46 women and children. Turner killed only one person with his own hands and he usually brought up the rear, only arriving at a farm after the violence was over. Enslaved people joined Turner's group at several farms, and historians estimate that up to 60 individuals participated in the rebellion.



This woodcut, produced in the aftermath of Nat Turner's rebellion, captures the terror that many White Southerners felt toward rebellions. Scene 2 (in the middle of the image) depicts the murder of Joseph Travis, while scene 1 (to the left) shows a White woman pleading for the lives of her children. Scene 4 (bottom) shows armed cavalry chasing suspected rebels into a forest.



THINK ABOUT IT

What is the purpose of this image, and who is the intended audience?

A combination of vigilantes, Virginia militia, and federal troops put down the rebellion. The final shootout occurred at a plantation owned by Simon Blunt, where a combination of civilians and enslaved people repulsed the attackers. Yet, even after Turner's rebellion was defeated, a number of White vigilantes and armed mobs exacted vengeance on any Black person they could find. It is unknown how many African Americans were killed in the wake of Turner's rebellion.

Turner himself eluded capture until October 30. While in custody, Turner explained his motivations to Thomas Gray, who went on to publish an account of the interview as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. When Gray asked Turner whether he now believed his motivations were mistaken, Turner replied, "Was not Christ crucified?"

Turner was tried on November 5 and was hanged six days later.



DID YOU KNOW

In accordance with Virginia law, Turner received legal counsel during the proceedings, and the state paid \$375 to the estate of Joseph Travis as compensation for Turner's execution.

Additional Resources

Search “runaway ads” posted by enslavers in the 1700s and 1800s at [Freedom on the Move](#).



SUMMARY

Enslaved people endured numerous traumas and found much of their lives restricted by the racist assumptions behind planter paternalism and the demands of cotton production. Yet enslaved people resisted their condition in a variety of ways. Their resistance ranged from mundane, everyday instances to more extreme events such as open rebellion. Family and faith also provided means for enduring enslavement. Together, these modes of existence and resistance fundamentally challenged the foundations of Southern enslavement, particularly the ideology of planter paternalism.

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REFERENCES

Turner, N., & Gray, T. R. (1832). The confessions of Nat Turner. Richmond: T.R. Gray.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Image of “Horrid Massacre in Virginia,” ca. 1830s](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Image of Roll Jordon Roll \(1867\)](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

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