
Leisure Time on the Southern Plantation: The Slaves' Respite From Constant Toil, 1810-1860

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The type of life experienced by slaves residing on Southern plantations prior to the Civil War was a very precarious one. The treatment they received depended to a large extent upon the nature of the individual plantation, the disposition of the master or overseer, and a number of other factors which affected personal relationships. Even those bondsmen who spent the majority of their lives on only one or two plantations were continually forced to alter their attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors simply to survive the humiliating institution. But to think that slavery was all toil is a misconception and to discuss only its most salient features would be a parody since its reality was far more reaching than this.

Southern planters often granted brief periods of leisure time to their bondsmen because of any number of the following reasons: concern for their slaves' health, their own religious feelings, usual custom, their understanding that the slaves' lives would become unbearable without some free time, their attempts to nurture a paternalistic relationship with their

slaves, and their belief that through the utilization of leisure time they could curtail truancy and interplantation visiting. Leisure time was of significant importance to the slaves primarily because it afforded them much needed opportunities to socialize and engage in uninhibited merrymaking with fellow slaves under pleasurable conditions. In fact, the slaves' zeal for leisure was probably accounted for by the group solidarity and community spirit that it brought forth more than anything else. The fellowship attained during these occasions seems especially significant because it furnished individual slaves with a sense of security and a continuity of fraternal feelings that they very seldom experienced under any other circumstance. Moreover, the constant reinforcement, common language, and strong positive sanctions that characterized these events helped to succor the slaves in their fight for survival.