

Slavery

Background information



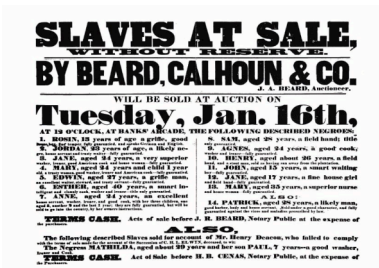
Conditions on the plantations

Most enslaved Africans were sold to a plantation to either work in the fields, or as domestic slaves in the plantation houses. Conditions were extremely harsh as slaves were forced to work in order for British plantation owners to make vast economic gains. They cultivated crops that were highly sought after in Britain, especially sugar, coffee, cocoa, and tobacco, and were given the most basic provisions in terms of food and living quarters.

Auctions

The dreadful experiences of Middle Passage were compounded by further hardships to come as slave ships landed in the West Indies or on the east coast of America. The growth of plantations was most significant in Virginia for growing tobacco (from 1619) and initially in the Caribbean islands of Barbados (from British domination in 1625) and Jamaica (from 1655) for growing sugar.

As the ships approached land, captives were cleaned and prepared for sale. *‘The prisoner leaps to lose his chains. But this joy is short-lived indeed. The condition of the unhappy slave is a continual process from bad to worse’*, John Newton.



Slave sale poster

Planters and their agents checked the state of their health of newly arrived Africans using the most intimate and humiliating examinations. Slave-traders would use many tricks to disguise ailments that could prevent a sale: anuses were plugged with wadding, grey hair dyed black, and palm oil rubbed into the skin to create a healthy looking shine. The healthiest people were sold first. Others, sick, injured or old, were called ‘refuse slaves’ and could take weeks to sell. These people were auctioned, or most terrifyingly, sold in a scramble. Olaudah Equiano was sold in this way on arrival in Barbados: *‘Once a signal is given (as the beat of a drum) the buyers rushed at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best. The noise and the clamour...increase the apprehensiveness of the terrified Africans...In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again’*.

Along with sale went renaming – a process designed to deny a person’s former identity and reinforce the control of his or her owner.

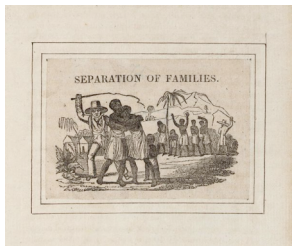


Ownership manacle (lock and key)

Given names were either European or non-descript such as 'Gift' or 'Nobody' which further objectified and re-enforced the subjugation of slaves. Many of the enslaved were named after prime ministers or great emperors, as was Equiano when he was called Gustavus Vassa, a deliberately ironic gesture by slave owners. However, Africans often managed to keep their own names as well, passing them down from generation to generation, as an assertion of their personal identity and a link to their own culture and ancestry.

Separation

Separation on arrival was not the only time an enslaved African might be torn from his or her family relationships. Slaves could be sold at their master's discretion, reinforcing their status as possessions rather than as people. Equiano even reported seeing some slaves weighed and sold by the pound. Mary Prince was sold when her owner died and the plantation changed hands. *Thomas Buxton described the separation of children and parents in a speech on slavery in the House of Commons*, 'The slave sees the mother of his children stripped naked and flogged unmercifully; he sees his children sent to market, to be sold at the best price they will fetch''



Separation of Families

Assimilation and sustaining a slave population

On arrival on the plantations enslaved Africans were subjected to a process of assimilation – they were given less hard work as they built up their strength and acclimatised to their new way of life. Even so, 1 in 4 people died within the first year in Virginia and 1 in 3 died within the first three years in the West Indies. It was a rule of thumb that one slave was needed for every acre of sugar cane plantation; therefore the supply of labour could only be sustained by continually capturing and transporting more people. In Barbados between 1764 and 1771 more than 35,000 people were brought in, but the population grew by only 5,000. Initially the men outnumbered the women until the plantation owners instituted 'breeding' as another way to sustain the slave population

Daily hardships

The daily existence for enslaved Africans on the plantations was hard and relentless. Plantation life combined the requirements of a rural labour force with the control of industrial workers, and the sugar mills were equivalent to the harshest factories. A daily routine would involve being woken at 4.00 am, and labouring from 6.00 in the morning until 6.00 at night; a six-day week could involve 96 hours work (more than twice the EU directives today). The agricultural cycle provided no respite, as after harvesting there was the sugar crushing and boiling, which often necessitated working through the night before the cane juice turned sour, and then preparing the fields again. Slaves often slept where they were, too exhausted to even return to their huts. Cultivating sugar cane by hand, with no protection from the knife-like leaves, was, and still is, one of the hardest ways of life.

Field Labour

The tobacco and cotton plantations in Virginia and the southern states of America and the sugar plantations in the Caribbean organized their labour quite differently, using a task and gang method

respectively. Task labourers were given targets to meet and therefore benefited if they were able to finish early although this was often not possible. Gang labourers toiled endlessly together, organized collectively, and often accompanied by a work song, lament or chanting, to maximize the effort and alleviate the monotony of repetitive tasks (these songs evolved into spirituals when slaves were exposed to Christianity). Although there were many variations in labour regimes throughout the British colonies, *'The bitterest of slave experiences were to be found in that sweetest of all crops – sugar'*, Walvin, 2001.

The being part of the field gang was regarded highly, and not only reserved for men. Of the 133 slaves in the field gang at Worthy Park Estate, Jamaica, in 1789, 89 were women. Male slaves were able to become skilled artisans and craftsmen, often leaving women as the majority in the fields, but literate roles such as book keeping and estate management were reserved for whites. Hard labour meant that half of all women slaves in the West Indies in the mid eighteenth century never had children. Slave gangs worked under a driver or overseer – usually African – who almost always carried a whip as a deterrent. Plantation owners had a continual concern that an overseer could organize rebellions as easily as a field gang. Slaves were moved between the 1st (the fittest) 2nd (youth, breastfeeding mothers and the elderly) and 3rd gangs (the very elderly, infirm and children) as their age, health and 'economic usefulness' decreased. Even children as young as three were organized to pick up leaves or to weed. A prevailing idea of the period to justify this ongoing exploitation was that black skins were more suited to toiling in the hot tropical sun than white.

Domestic slavery

Being a domestic slave was no less demanding than working in the fields. The enslaved working in the plantation houses escaped the worst of the weather and the most extreme physical labour, but they were under the close watch of their owners. A female slave is reported to have had her ear nailed to a tree for breaking a plate in Jamaica. And the women were often subjected to sexual abuse. Preference for domestic service was given to local-born and especially dual descent slaves – a privilege that acknowledged they were often the illegitimate offspring of the plantation owners. By 1788 25% of the slave population of Barbados was in domestic service. As black slaves looked after white children, and the women worked closely together, the plantation household became the place of greatest exchange of cultural influences and behaviour between blacks and whites.

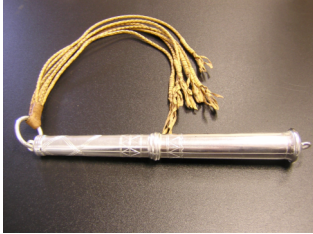


Maid De'ah

The British also began to exploit West African people and having black servants became 'fashionable'. The Duchess of Devonshire wrote to her mother, c.1790: *'Dear Mama, George Hanger has sent me a black boy eleven years old and very honest, but the Duke don't like me having a black.... if you like him instead of Michel I will send him, he will be a cheap servant and you will make a Christian of him and a good boy; if you don't like him they say Lady Rockingham wants one.'*

Punishment

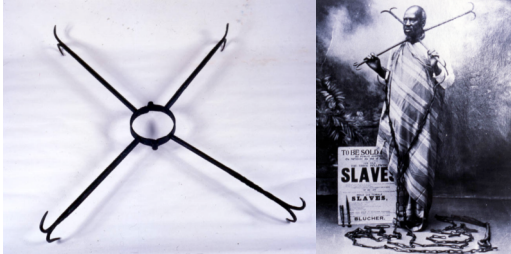
Barbaric punishments were inflicted on slaves, throughout this period in history. The threat of punishment was always evident as a form of suppression – to deter thoughts of uprising or escape – but many slave owners (both men and women) became addicted to whipping. Often thorny ebony twigs were used following the lacerations inflicted by a whip, and then salt was rubbed into the wounds.



Ladies silver whip

Runaways often endured 100-150 lashes, as well as being branded on the face, having their nose slit, or losing an ear. Until the late 1780s runaways or persistent thieves could have a limb amputated. Castration was also used as a punishment for running away or striking a white person. In the words of a North Carolina judge: *'The power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect'*, Walvin 2001. Abolitionists began to use evidence of the extreme corporal punishments as part of their argument for the end of slavery. Parliament passed legislation that limited the number of lashes to 39 in the British West Indies in 1807. William Wilberforce felt that banning the use of the whip would be going too far, but that whippings should only be carried out in the evenings after the day's work was finished.

Punishments were made very visible, through the wearing of punishment collars, through branding, and displaying decapitated heads of rebellion leaders prominently on a plantation.



Punishment collar

A British Army physician, George Pinckard, posted to Barbados in 1796 described in his letters how he met a slave wearing *'a heavy iron collar about his neck, with three long iron spikes projecting from it, terminating in sharp points at the distance of nearly a foot and a half from his person.'*

Killing slaves was not viewed as murder, it was seen as *'an economic issue'* rather than a moral one, and consequently plantation owners were compensated slaves who were put to death for their part in a rebellion. Execution was however reserved for *'extreme offences'* such as killing a white or rebellion. In the Caribbean those who rebelled were executed in using the methods of the Middle Ages rather than contemporary forms of execution., *'by progressive mutilation, slow burnings, breaking on the wheel, or starvation in cages'*, Walvin 2001.

There were clearly sadistic individuals involved in the slave trade (particularly on board the ships), and this violence became accepted as the norm. It was the system of slavery itself, which debased and corrupted. Even when Parliament tried to regulate the brutality of the punishments the harshness with which they continued was evident: 50-75 lashes, tarring, burning and mutilation. Although slave owners did not seem to notice the level of violence they had established – others had. Evidence of the brutal punishment of slaves was ammunition for the abolitionists.



An Interior View of a Jamaica House of Correction

Plantation owners

The number of slaves was often a greater indicator of wealth than land alone for, the plantocracy. They were ostentatious in their lifestyles, but not necessarily cultured (living in remote, self-contained estates). They were often successful white immigrants, not having their origins in the wealthy upper classes. Their pretensions made them into caricatures, ridiculed by their slaves as well as by other Europeans. But they used their position, power and wealth to reiterate the divide between themselves and their slaves – and in the process physically exploited labour as well as sexually abusing the women. Black people regularly outnumbered whites on the Caribbean islands by 10:1 at the height of the slave trade; which is way so much was invested in control and suppression [see also Resistance and Rebellion Background Information]. There was a high level of absentee ownership in the Caribbean (especially on the French island of St Domingue which was one factor leading to the successful revolution there). The Codrington estate on Barbados was owned not by an absent individual, but by the Church of England. People from all social, economic and moral backgrounds, including most British Parliamentarians and those in the American Congress and Senate, including the Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, were slave owners or had economic interests in the plantations at the end of the eighteenth century. The working classes were consumers of slave products. Slavery as an institution had infiltrated all aspects of society.

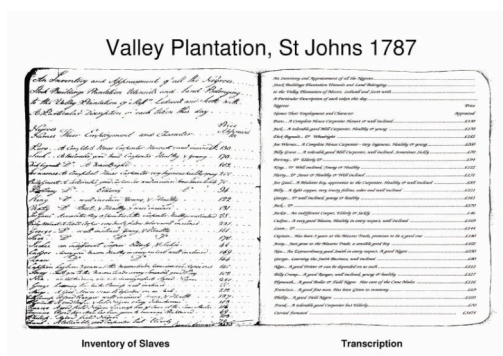
Illness

The most common disease affecting slaves was, as on board ship, dysentery or the ‘bloody flux’. Yaws and smallpox also affected many Africans in the Caribbean – yaws being a particularly painful disease with fever, ulcers and arthritic like pains. Western doctors were unable to treat yaws successfully, and unsympathetic owners often simply put sufferers in the stocks. The African remedies of hot baths and herbs seemed to work better. Many of the enslaved died of ‘dropsy’ or beriberi, a deficiency disease that caused swelling and bloating. Dirt-eating – where people craved eating clay – was probably linked to deficiencies in the diet (slaves frequently suffered from rickets and scurvy) but was seen as unacceptable by the plantation owners and often resulted in being forced to wear a locked iron face mask.

Records of illnesses include: Clarissa who was captured at about the age of 13, and bought by Worthy Park in 1792 and put into the 2nd gang with a new name, Prattle. 3 ¾ years later she died of dysentery at the age of 17. But a women called Raveface, was in the minority. She was bought at the same time and reached the age of 70 by the time freedom came in 1838. While the slave population began to grow steadily on mainland North America as slavery became established, in the Caribbean there was a continual reliance on capturing more people to replace those dying. ‘The Caribbean was a slaughterhouse’, *Hochschild, 2005*. Death was recorded in the plantation logbooks as a loss of a possession, a negative on the balance sheet. For many enslaved Africans it may have come as a relief – the only route to freedom.

Beyond the plantation

Although plantation life is seen as equating to slavery, as the colonies became more established, so substantial numbers of the enslaved earned their keep as domestic labourers, in the towns, on rivers, at sea and as skilled professionals. West Africans people maintained their own skills and even those working on plantations were encouraged to develop the new skills needed to sustain self-contained communities – as smiths, masons and carpenters. One slave was described in the Virginia Gazette in 1768 as ‘*an indifferent shoemaker, a good butcher, ploughman and carterer; an excellent sawyer, and waterman, understands breaking oxen well, and is one of the best sythmen in America; in short he is so ingenious a fellow that he can turn his hand to any thing,*’ *Walvin, 2001*.



Initially black and white artisans worked side by side, but gradually the slave community began to predominate throughout the Caribbean and the southern states of America. Slave markets and other economic systems operated autonomously from the plantation-dominated authorities. Many slaves became fluent in several European languages and although they were formally not allowed to learn to read and write many found ways to learn. In time, many of the enslaved as well as the emancipated had diversified into a wide range of occupations, ranging from sailors to cowboys. Slave-owners often encouraged and trained chosen slaves to become skilled musicians, and by the mid-eighteenth century black musicians were a common sight in Britain. Skilled slaves often had more opportunity, and were therefore more likely to escape, particularly on boats between Caribbean islands, or to buy their freedom, and so the number of black sailors was significant. There was fear amongst whites that black sailors would use their boats to help others escape, and a 1784 law in Virginia limited the number of black crew-members allowed to one third of the total.

Olaudah Equiano was a highly skilled man, working as a privilege slave to a Naval officer, and travelling the world as a result. He learned to read and write and earned money first by shaving sailors and cutting their hair and then trading to eventually save enough money buy his freedom.

Resilience and survival

Slaves worked six days a week, with only Sundays for themselves. This was when they tended their own plots of land to supplement their meagre food supplies, and to sell any surplus to generate a small income.



Negroes Sunday-Market at Antigua

Sunday was also an opportunity for some respite. Traditions such as cuisine, hair braiding, woodcarving and the use of herbal remedies were passed down the generations. Storytelling kept traditional West African tales alive The stories of Brer Rabbit were developed from African and American folktales from the southern states of the US. Music and dance was a vital part of slave society, as in Africa. *‘We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion’ Olaudah Equiano*

This section needs explanation Throughout the Caribbean Saturday night dances, which often reconvened on Sundays, attracted slaves from around the area. People used music to ridicule the plantocracy as well as to express themselves. The singing and dancing was often accompanied by food and drink (often in excess). It was said that wherever slaves gathered they made music, often using improvised instruments similar to those they had known in Africa – drums made of wood and hide, banjo, mandolin and other stringed instruments and a range of percussion instruments.

This section needs more detail – needs contextualising. A distinctive Creole (definition) culture emerged in the Caribbean with European influences, fiddles became a popular slave instrument. Drums were deemed to be dangerous by the plantation owners, with their links to African superstitions and voodoo, as well as their potential use to communicate messages, especially to signal a rebellion. They were often banned, as in Georgia, or only allowed at Christmas, as in St Kitts.



Drum from Haiti

Slaves were often given three days holiday at Christmas (on the 25th and 26th December and the 1st January) with festivities known as the 'Jonkunno' (John Canoe). Other Christian holidays, and the harvest, became major slave festivals [see also Legacy, click to go to background information]. The plantocracy were sometimes invited to slave festivities, and joined in contributing to the supply of food and drink.



A Negro Festival in the Island of St. Vincent