

Slave Life in the United States

By 1830 slavery was primarily located in the South, where it existed in many different forms. African Americans were enslaved on small farms, large plantations, in cities and towns, inside homes, out in the fields, and in industry and transportation.

Though slavery had such a wide variety of faces, the underlying concepts were always the same. Slaves were considered property, and they were property because they were black. Their status as property was enforced by violence -- actual or threatened. People, black and white, lived together within these parameters, and their lives together took many forms.

The standard image of Southern slavery is that of a large plantation with hundreds of slaves. In fact, such situations were rare. Fully 3/4 of Southern whites did not even own slaves; of those who did, 88% owned twenty or fewer. In addition, slavery gave poor farmers a group of people to feel superior to. They may have been poor, but they were not slaves, and they were not black. They gained a sense of power simply by being white.

In the lower South the majority of slaves lived and worked on cotton plantations. Most of these plantations had fifty or fewer slaves, although the largest plantations have several hundred. Cotton was by far the leading cash crop, but slaves also raised rice, corn, sugarcane, and tobacco. Many plantations raised several different kinds of crops.

Besides planting and harvesting, there were numerous other types of labor required on plantations and farms. Enslaved people had to clear new land, dig ditches, cut and haul wood, slaughter livestock, and make repairs to buildings and tools. In many instances, they worked as mechanics, blacksmiths, drivers, carpenters, and in other skilled trades. Black women carried the additional burden of caring for their families by cooking and taking care of the children, as well as spinning, weaving, and sewing.

Some slaves worked as domestics, providing services for the master's or overseer's family. These people were designated as "house servants," and though their work appeared to be easier than that of the "field slaves," in some ways it was not. They were constantly under the scrutiny of their masters and mistresses, and could be called on for service at any time. They had far less privacy than those who worked the fields.

The heat and humidity of the South created health problems for everyone living there. However, the health of plantation slaves was far worse than that of whites. Unsanitary conditions, inadequate nutrition and unrelenting hard labor made slaves highly susceptible to disease. Illnesses were generally not treated adequately, and slaves were often forced to work even when sick. The rice plantations were the most deadly. Black people had to stand in water for hours at a time in the sweltering sun. Malaria was rampant. Child mortality was extremely high on these plantations, generally around 66% -- on one rice plantation it was as high as 90% (the mortality rate is the percent chance a child would die as an infant).

Slaves resisted their treatment in innumerable ways. While responding in a violent way is perhaps how most would like, there are plenty of daily examples of how slaves rebelled against the system. They slowed down their work pace, disabled machinery, broke tools, faked sickness, and destroyed crops. Many stole livestock, other food, or valuables. Some learned to read and write, a practice forbidden by law, and field slaves took part in singing "coded songs" that insulted their masters. Some burned forests and buildings. Others killed their masters outright -- some by using weapons, others by putting poison in their food. Some slaves committed suicide or mutilated themselves to ruin their property value. Subtly or overtly, enslaved African Americans found ways to sabotage the system in which they lived.

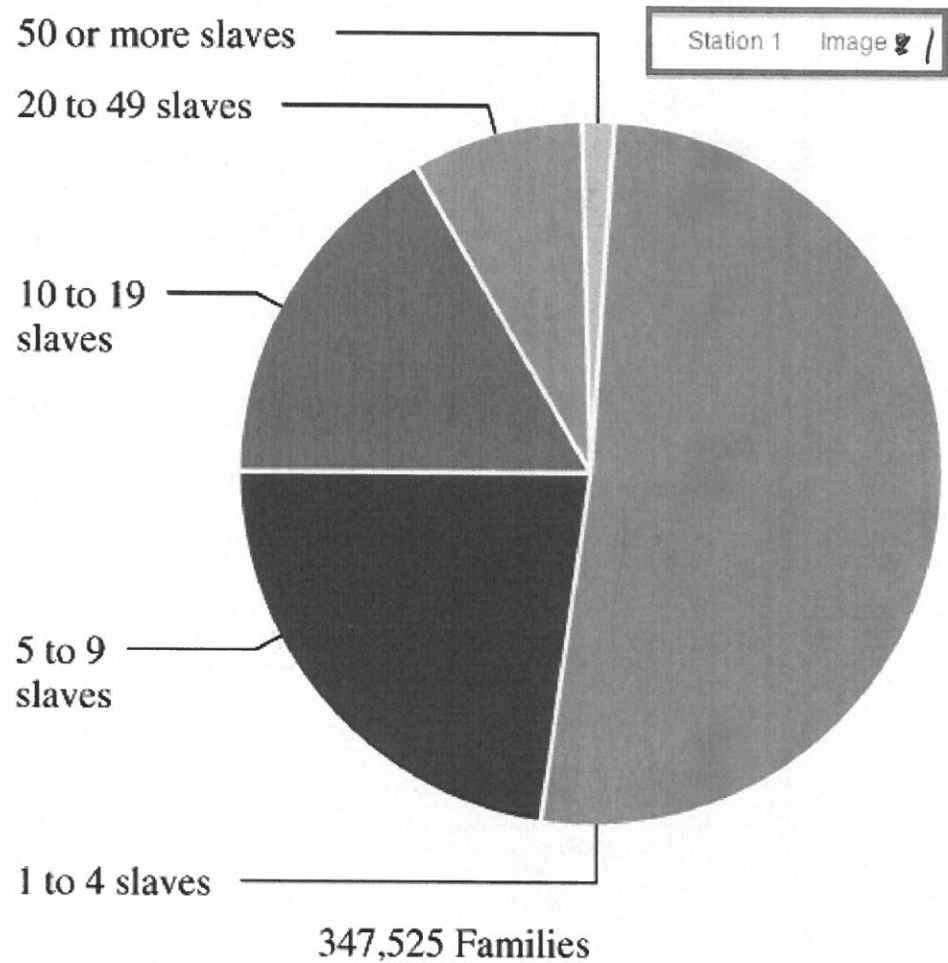
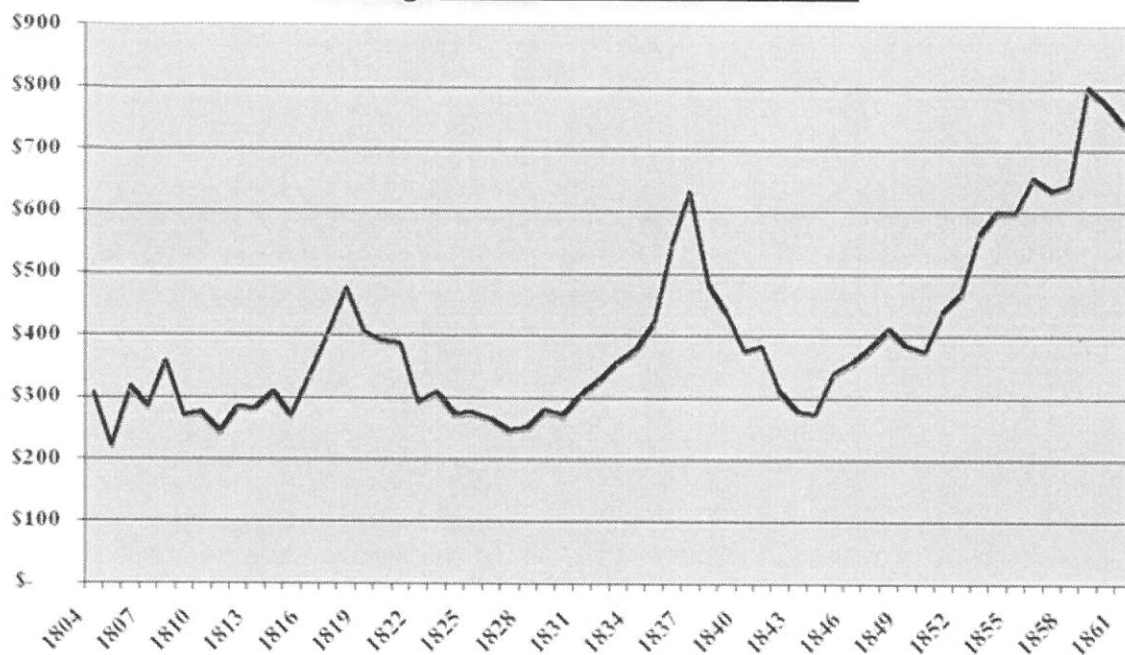


Figure 12.3°° Slaveowning Population, 1850

Average "Actual" Price Paid for a SlaveAverage Price (in 2009 Dollars) Paid for a Slave