

## Chapter 3

### Solomon Northup and Mammy Harriet

There were some 4 million slaves living in the South in 1861, the year the Civil War began. Slaves did a large number of different jobs in the South. The wealthy slave owner lived in a beautiful mansion built by slave labor. Slaves were carpenters, brick masons, cabinet makers, and gardeners. Slaves performed most of the work inside these mansions, including cooking, cleaning, mending and sewing, and caring for the children. Slaves also cut hair, dug canals, built roads and railroads, worked on riverboats, mined coal, and worked in factories.

On the plantation, where most black people lived and worked, there were two kinds of slaves. One, was the house servant, whose work was somewhat like that of a full time maid or butler. The other was the field hand who spent most of his working days hoeing, planting, and picking cotton or tobacco. The house servant's life was far better than the field hands'. In addition to his work being easier, the house servant spent time with the owner and his family. Their loyal service often earned them kind treatment from those for whom they raised children, cooked meals, and cleaned homes.

Most slaves worked in the fields on large plantations under the watchful eye of an overseer. The image we have of large plantation with gangs of slaves picking cotton was true. The only question is what was life like for these people. Was it a hard grind from morning to night with hardly a break for lunch or, was it a much more comfortable work day, with time off during the heat of the sun at noon? Once their work was completed did slaves laugh and sing in the evening, as many Southerners claimed? Or did they lie down at night so tired that they were hardly able to finish their chores, as the critics of slavery believed?



**George Washington supervising his slaves**

In this chapter you will read two very different descriptions of the life of slaves. Both appeared in book form, told to and written down by whites. Read each of these reports carefully. Then try to decide which story probably best described the real life experience of the 4 million slaves living at the time of the Civil War and the lives of their parents and grandparents.

## Solomon Northup

Solomon Northup was a free black man before he was kidnapped and sold as a slave. He worked on plantations for twelve hard years. He was finally able to get a letter to his wife in New York. She talked to the governor of state and Solomon was freed. After returning home, Northup wrote a book with the help of an abolitionist. The book was published with the help of other abolitionists, to help inform the American public about the conditions suffered by slaves. As you read each account, try to decide whether it is probably true.

### Planting, Hoeing and Picking Cotton

*A plow drawn by a mule makes a hole in the center of the row. A girl carrying a seed bag around her neck, drops seeds into holes. Behind her comes a mule pulling a metal frame which covers the seed. This is how cotton is planted. It is planted in March and April. Corn is planted during February.*

*The hoeing season starts in April and continues to August. No sooner is a field hoed, when hoeing starts again.*

*During the hoeing, the overseer or driver follows the slaves on horseback. He carries a heavy whip. The fastest hoer takes first row. He is usually about five yards in front of the others. If someone passes the first man, the lead hoer is whipped. If one falls behind, or loafs for a moment, he is whipped. In fact, the lash is flying from morning until night, the whole day long.*

*Toward the end of August, cotton picking season begins. At this time each slave gets a sack. The sack is so large, it reaches from the chest to the ground. A strap goes around the neck and keeps sack on.*

*When a new picker starts work on the first day he is whipped to make him go as fast as he can. At night the cotton he picks is weighed so they know what he can do. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If he falls short, he is whipped for not working hard enough. If he picks more cotton, then he must measure up to his new ability the next day.*

*When the day's work is over, the baskets with cotton are carried to the gin – house. No matter how tired he may be – no matter how much he wants to sleep and rest – the slave is scared. If his weight falls short – he knows that he will suffer.*

### Slave's Daily Allowance

At a late hour, the slave reaches his quarters. He is sleepy and overcome with the day's toil. Then a fire must be made in cabin. The corn has to be ground, and lunch for the next day in the field must be made. All that is allowed a slave is corn and bacon, given out every Sunday morning. That is all – no tea, coffee, sugar, and hardly any salt.

When the corn is ground and the fire is made, a slice of bacon is thrown on the coal to broil. Most slaves have no knife, let alone a fork. The bacon is cut with the ax by the woodpile. The corn meal is mixed with a little water. It is then placed in the fire and baked. When it is done the ashes are scraped off and it is time for supper. By then the hour is usually midnight.

## As soon as it is Light

An hour before day light the horn is blown. Then the slaves get up to prepare their breakfast, fill a drinking gourd with water, and take their lunch of cold bacon and corn cake. Then they hurry to the fields.

It is a crime, usually punished with a whipping, to be at the slave quarters after dawn. Then the fear and work of another day begin. Until the end of the day there is no such thing as rest. The slave fears he will be caught loafing during the day, he fears coming to the cotton gin-house at night, and he fears when he lies down, that he will sleep too long in the morning.<sup>10</sup>

## Mammy Harriet

Mammy Harriet was a slave on Thomas Dabney's plantation. She lived in Virginia until she moved with her master to Mississippi. Mammy was a house servant, and not a field hand. After the Civil War, her former master's daughter, Susan, decided to write a book about her father. Mammy was asked to contribute her memories. The following excerpt was written down by the daughter, supposedly just the way Mammy told it:

## We was Neber (Never) Hurried

*When we first come to dis country, Mississippi, master made de ploughers take in de mules at 11 o'clock. An he didn't allow em back in the fields before 3 o'clock. Nobody worked in dem hours. I suppose dat was to get us used to de new country. Oh, no, we was neber hurried. Master neber once said, 'Get up and go to work.' And no overseer said it, neither. If some of de slaves did not get up when de others went out to work master neber said a word. Oh, no, we was neber hurried.*

*In later times our ploughers and de others worked till 12 o'clock. Then dey take in de mules and 'everybody sat down to eat and rest till 3 o'clock. Sometimes when we was all settin roun' one would say to de odder, 'Come, let's get up an' go to work. We have been settin' long 'nuff'. But master never said such a thing.*

*In dem days some of de people used to oversleep deyselves. We used to larf at 'em especially at Sarah, my brother Billy's daughter. Marster would neber have no horn to wake us up. When one overseer come dyar wid his horn to wake us up master soon put a stop to dat. He said, 'I do not keep hounds to be called up with horns.' Sarah was a great hand to oversleep herself, and master didn't neber let nobody call her. Nor did he call any o' de others what oversleeps dyselfs. He say, 'Don't troble them. They cannot help that. 'An' to dem he would say, 'If you don't wake up till 12 o'clock, get up and come out to work then. Don't stay home and say that you are sick, because I don't blame you.' Sometimes I would not get through giving out de buttermilk to all de little black chillun, an' dat was 'bout 11 o'clock. An I would see marster an' Sarah goin' out to de field together. An' we would all larf at Sarah. She would say, 'What are you all larafin' bout? Go along. You do like you ain't got no sense. You fools, go along.' Sometimes we larf about dat to dis day wid Sarah, an' we set an' talk bout it. You ken ask her, an' she will tell you jes' what I tell you 'bout it.*

---

<sup>10</sup> Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, New York, 1855, pp. 63-71

## The Fourth' of July

*Yes, honey, dat he did give us Fourth' July - a plenty o 'holiday - a beef, a sheep, hogs, salt and pepper, an' everything. He had a great trench dug an' a whole load o' wooden spits across, an' dey had spoons an' basted de meat. He did not miss givin' us whiskey to drink - a plenty of it, too. An' we 'vite all de colored people aroun'. De come, an' we had fine times. Our people was so good, an dy had so much. Dyara warn't sich masters no whyar. Marster mus'nt be named de same day as odder people.<sup>11</sup>*

### Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Does the dialect used in the Mammy Harriet account add an aspect of authenticity to her story?
2. Summarize the different views of slavery given in the two accounts; include specific examples on how slaves worked and were treated.
3. Explain which of the two accounts is more likely to e true. Cover the following points:
  - a. who the story is told to - do either writers have reasons to distort.
  - b. whether the story is believable - i.e. is it likely that slaves would be treated that way.
  - c. whether the story agrees with other information you have about slavery.

---

<sup>11</sup> Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1965, pp. 44-45.