

Subject

Language arts
Social Studies

Summary

Slave Life on a Cotton Plantation in Florida was harsh. Although slaves were provided with homes, work and some food, they were not free. Work done by Archeologists has provided us with a picture of their life.

Overall

Expectations.

Students will examine non-fiction information about slave life.

Specific

Expectations

Students will develop an understanding of slave life during Florida's plantation period (1763 – 1865).

Students will answer questions on slave life and write in role as a slave.

Author

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Life of a Slave

BACKGROUND

Visiting the Kingsley Plantation on Fort George Island, Florida, we took a walking tour of the estate, visiting the Slave Quarters and touring the grounds.

Where did this information come from?

Archeologists worked on the Kingsley Plantation site and recovered a number of Slave artifacts. These artifacts gave clues and concrete evidence of the daily life of slaves in this area. Many traditions and stories of slave life were passed down orally, because most slaves could not read or write. However, owners often kept journals recording the daily occurrences on the plantation including what type of work slaves were doing or the regular workings on the site. Together, all this material paints us a picture of what life was like for slaves on typical cotton plantations in Florida.



What remains of the Slave Quarters today on the Kingsley Plantation. This first building is undergoing restoration as it may have looked at the time it was built. You can also see the outline of how the slave quarters were arranged.

Slave Life

Below are several paragraphs describing slave life on a plantation. Read the different sections and answer the questions that follow.

Slave Quarters

The Slave Quarters were the homes for 60 – 80 men, women and children who were enslaved on the Kingsley Plantation. There were 32 individual quarters or cabins and that was typical of plantations in this area. They were located about 1 km from the owner's home.

“Village” design

The quarters were laid out in a unique arrangement. Instead of being in a straight line, the quarters formed a semi-circle. This pattern is similar to village design in some areas in West Africa.

Not all the quarters were the same size. The larger ones were always at either end of the semi circle. The Driver and his family were given these quarters for the extra responsibility of managing the daily work assignments and reporting to the owner. These larger cabins were also shared for community activities such as cooking or were given to a skilled slave craftsman as a show of status.

Building Material

The quarters were built with a material called tabby. One of the main ingredients of tabby - oyster shells - were left behind by Native Indians – the Timucua Indians and their ancestors on the plantation and in the area. When the plantation owners and slaves first arrived in the area, they found they could use these huge piles of shells for building materials. Skilled slaves burned the oyster shells to make lime, which was mixed with sand and water. This “concrete” was poured to make the walls. Wooden roofs and doors were later added after the tabby hardened and dried.



Close-up of wall

Inside Layout

Each Slave Quarter had a fireplace and “kitchen” where slaves prepared their nightly meals and a room to sleep in. It was really just one room with an area set aside for food preparation and another area for sleeping. There were no beds or dressers, cupboards, a fridge or stove. Families slept on the floor with a blanket and food was prepared on a table or board and cooked in the fireplace.

Food

For their meals, the women used cornmeal, molasses, salt and a few other basics provided by the plantation owner, called “rations”. The men hunted or fished. The slave families had to also grow or gather the rest of their food and supplies on a plot of land provided for them in their area. The families often chose to grow food from their own African culture such as yams, okra, black-eyed peas, eggplant and sesame in their garden plot. The children worked along side their parents in the garden, hunting or fishing and then preparing the meals. All this was done AFTER the slaves finished their work in the fields or elsewhere on the plantation.

Their own life

There were some aspects of the slave life not controlled by their owners. Slaves had their own culture that included elements of their African heritage. They expressed themselves through music, dance and religious practices that were entirely their own and had nothing to do with their owners. Often, they would hide messages or expressions in lyrics that had double meanings. So, while working in the field, for example, they could sing songs all the while telling secret messages to each other. At times of celebration or religious ceremonies, music could be heard from the Slave Quarters around the plantation.

Work

On the Kingsley Plantation, slaves were assigned work according to the “Task System”. A task was the specific amount of work required for each slave to finish daily. Many slaves worked in the fields tending to crops such as cotton, sugar cane, corn, beans and potatoes. Others did housework, caring for the owner’s children or skilled tasks such as carpentry or blacksmithing. Upon completion of their tasks, slaves were then permitted to use the balance of the day hunting, fishing, tending to their gardens, preparing meals or attending to personal needs. If work was not completed as assigned, slaves would receive beatings or if work was unacceptable to the owner, they would be killed or shipped to another plantation without warning. For slaves with families, this could mean unexpected separation with little hope of returning or reuniting.

An example of cotton picking: The cotton plants grew up to 2.5 m with their blooms at all levels on the plant. These thorny plants were picked daily from late July to December. Workers had to be careful not to prick their fingers on the thorns as they picked the small cotton balls. They would be beaten and would have an additional task – cleaning blood from the cotton. Other slaves were given the task of removing seeds, the size of sesame seeds, by hand from the cotton balls – sitting out in the hot sun or in the cold. During the

peak of the growing season, in October, these tasks would take all day from first light to sunset. The cotton was then prepared for shipment to market.

Questions

Within the Slave Community, how was the work or skill of one or two slaves recognized and valued?

Give two examples of how slaves brought their African culture to the Plantations. Why would this be important to them?

Slaves were provided with homes, work and some food rations. How is this considered enslaved?

Think of 2 examples in our society today where people are provided with housing, work and some food. Are they referred to as slaves? Why or why not.

Here is a journal entry of a plantation owner recorded on October 10th, 1820, recovered by Archeologists.

“ Sun up saw the far field busy with 50 slaves. Driver Williams is handling his new position well. Keep my eye on his progress. Pickers are sloppy. Blood stains on some crops. They need to learn a few lessons. Not good enough. Women too slow with the seeds. Not certain we’ll make next shipment in time as pace is slowing. I need to take action. “

Slaves did not keep journals or diaries as they didn’t know how to read or write. Imagine you are one of the slaves in the field – picking cotton, cleaning or removing seeds. Write the conversation between you and Driver Williams about what you’ve witnessed.

To see more pictures of the Kingsley Plantation, you can visit their website at <http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/florida/photos/industry/kingsl/kingsl.htm>.

Teachers, you can visit the Timucuan Ecological and Historic preserve website http://www.nps.gov/timu/education_guide/anna_kingsley/anna_kingsley_home.htm which includes the Kingsley Plantation. Click on “Education Programs” for lesson plans and group visit information.