

DOCUMENT #1

Voices of those in bondage

A collection of primary source accounts describing life in slavery

A

I was born in Petersburg, Va. When very young, I was taken to Montgomery county. My old master died there, and I remember that all the people were sold. My father and mother were sold together about one mile from me. After a year, they were sold a great distance, and I saw them no more. My mother came to me before she went away, and said, "Good by, be a good girl; I never expect to see you any more."

...I was employed in hoeing cotton, a new employment: my hands were badly blistered... My hands got hard, but I could not stand the sun. The hot sun made me so sick I could not work, and [my husband] says if I had not come away [and escaped with him], they would surely have sold me again. There was one weakly woman named Susan, who could not stand the work, and she was sold to Mississippi, away from her husband and son. That's one way of taking care of the sick and weak. That's the way the planters do with a weakly, sickly "nigger,"—they say "he's a dead expense to 'em," and put him off as soon as they can.

- Mrs. John Little, mid-1850s, United States

B

In most of us colored folks was the great desire to [be] able to read and write. We took advantage of every opportunity to educate ourselves. The greater part of the plantation owners were very harsh if we were caught trying to learn or write. It was the law that if a white man was caught trying to educate a negro slave, he was liable to prosecution entailing a fine of fifty dollars and a jail sentence... Our ignorance was the greatest hold the South had on us. We knew we could run away, but what then?

- John W. Fields; 1800s (interview in 1937); United States

C

I grew up working as a slave for a family. My mother worked for them before me and my children also worked for the family once they were old enough. It was hard work and we had to go out and look after the goats in the day and then come back and do all the housework in the evening. I didn't always get enough to eat and was hit and beaten regularly. Two of my daughters are the children of the master's eldest son. He said he would behead me if I ever told anyone that he was the father.

When I had my fourth child, a baby girl, the family wouldn't let me take her out to the fields with me. They said I couldn't look after my baby and look after the goats as well. I came home one day and found that the baby had been left out in the sun all day. She had died and her body was being eaten by ants. I had to bury her myself, with my hands; it felt like I was burying an animal instead of my child.

- Moulkheir, 1900s, Mauritania

D

I cleaned dishes, the house, everything. My "aunt" would beat me whenever I didn't get water. I worked so hard that my body ached and I couldn't move, but she would beat me if I didn't do more work... One day my aunt sent me to fetch water. I refused, so she took a pot of boiling water and threw it at me and burned my face and slammed the hot cooking pot on my hand.

- Michele; 2000s; Haiti

We have to work all day long. Often for a couple of days in a week, we have to work for the whole day and night... Omar often gets miserable and fatigued with the long hours of work, and he tries to escape. Then the master weaver keeps a strict watch on him and never lets him move for three or four days.

- Omar and Rashid; 2000s; Pakistan

The army was a nightmare. We suffered greatly from the cruel treatment we received. We were constantly beaten ... just to keep us in a state of terror. I still have a scar on my lip and sharp pains in my stomach from being brutally kicked by the older soldiers. The food was scarce, and they made us walk with heavy loads, much too heavy for our small and malnourished bodies. They forced me to learn how to fight...

- Pedro; 1900s or 2000s; Guatemala

SOURCE CITATION

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