

Farm Laborers

Reading Level: Elementary School

On his plantation, Jefferson grew and harvested many crops. He used “gangs of half men and half women” to work in his fields. For thirty years, tobacco was the main ‘cash crop’. Slaves planted the seeds, weeded the fields, and hoed the soil. Later, they picked the leaves and hung them to dry. In the winter, they stripped, sorted and prepared the leaves for market.

Later, Jefferson switched from tobacco to wheat. The slaves labored from sunup to sundown to harvest the wheat. The men cut the wheat stalks. Women raked and laid the wheat in bundles called sheaves. Boys tied the sheaves together into shocks. They set the shocks on end. Last, stackers loaded the shocks onto carts. In 1796 Jefferson boasted of a fine harvest of 546 stacks of grain.

Farm laborers worked all year. In the spring, they plowed and planted corn, field peas, and oats. In September, they planted wheat and rye. In October and November, they gathered corn and peas. In the winter, they cleaned up the fields and mended fences. The men chopped trees and splitting fence rails. The women used hoes to get rid of rocks, roots and briars to get ready for spring plowing.