

Farm Laborers

Reading Level: Middle School

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

Later, Jefferson switched from tobacco to wheat. All the slaves except for the house slaves, who continued their duties in the main house, were involved in the June harvest. To bring in the crop before summer rains fell, workers labored from sunup to sundown. The men cut the wheat stalks with scythes, from two to three acres a day. The women raked and laid the wheat in bundles called sheaves. Boys tied the sheaves together into shocks and set them on end. Lastly, stackers loaded the shocks onto carts. In 1796 Jefferson boasted of a fine harvest, which resulted in 546 stacks of grain.

Slaves worked year round. 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 worked in the woodlots chopping trees and splitting fence rails. The women used hoes to “grub” the ground—removing rocks, roots and briars in preparation for spring plowing.

The care and cultivation of Monticello depended on the labor and skills of Jefferson’s many enslaved workers. They toiled in the fields, the gardens, the main house and along Mulberry Row—six and sometimes seven days a week, from sunup to sundown.