

Life in Slavery at Monticello

Reading Level: Elementary School

In any given year, Thomas Jefferson owned about 200 slaves. Enslaved people worked in various roles around Monticello. Skilled workers built fences and barns, made nails and wove cloth. Farm workers planted, hoed, plowed and picked crops. House servants cooked meals and washed clothes. About eighty enslaved people lived and worked at Monticello. The others lived at Shadwell, Lego, Tufton and Poplar Forest, Jefferson's farm in Bedford County.

Jefferson As a Slave Owner

Jefferson owned many people. By law, the people enslaved by Jefferson were his property. That meant he could buy and sell them. He could give them away. He could hire them out to other farmers. Slaves who didn't obey were punished. Some people at Monticello ran away, even though it was very dangerous because they or their family could be punished for it. Slavery was wrong, but it happened in America and other places in the world for a very long time.

Jefferson's father owned people, too, so Jefferson grew up with slavery. He then owned slaves for the rest of his life. Like on other plantations, the lives of Jefferson and his family were very closely connected to the people they enslaved. He even fathered children by an enslaved woman named Sally Hemings. Jefferson's life and accomplishments were possible because he had enslaved people taking care of him.

A lot of people wonder if Jefferson was a "good" slave owner because he was against slavery in other ways. But even though Jefferson said he wanted to make life as a slave better, that did not always happen. Life as a slave at Monticello was just as hard as at other plantations in Virginia.

Life for Slaves at Monticello

Jefferson supplied the enslaved people with some food, clothing, firewood, and shelter. Each week one slave might be given a peck of cornmeal, a half-pound of pork, and four salted fish.

Two times each year, slaves were given cloth to make clothes. Once every three years they were given hats, socks, and a blanket. They might receive a mattress, which was a sack filled with straw or leaves.



What Jefferson gave them was not a lot, so they used the night hours to make and grow many of their own supplies. They made furniture, bowls, and spoons. They raised chickens and eggs. They grew squash, cucumbers, peas, and melons. They hunted, trapped, and fished to add to their food. They also sold fish, fruit, and walnuts to Jefferson and his family to earn money. On Sundays they took extras to Charlottesville to sell at the market.

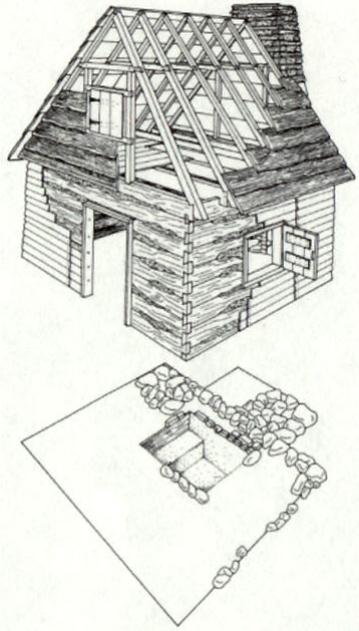
Display approximating the ration of food (cornmeal, fish, and pork) given to each adult slave per week.

Slave Families

Many enslaved families lived at Monticello. Slaves in Virginia could not marry by law, but enslaved couples saw themselves as married. Jefferson's records show that few marriages ended in 'divorce.'

Families at Monticello were often large. David and Isabel Hern had twelve children. Edward and Jane Gillette had twelve children. But Jefferson also recorded the deaths of many children. Some died at birth. Others died from measles, 'fever,' and whooping cough.

Enslaved children went to work by the age of ten. They became nailers and weavers. They became servants and cooks' helpers. When Sally Hemings was about thirteen, she traveled to France. She was an enslaved companion to Thomas Jefferson's daughter, Maria. When James Hubbard turned eleven, he left his home at Poplar Forest. He traveled eighty miles to live at Monticello. There he learned nail making.



Housing

Most of the slaves lived in log cabins. They were usually one room with lofts. Some measured about 12 by 14 feet. Others were larger. They were made of logs. The roofs were made of pine slabs. They had wood chimneys and dirt floors. Root cellars were dug into the floors for storing vegetables.

Some of the house slaves lived in rooms at the main house. These were under the South Terrace. Isaac Jefferson, a Monticello slave, recalled sleeping on a blanket on the floor of the South Pavilion.

Artist's rendition of "Building s", a slave cabin along Monticello's Mulberry Row

Education

During Jefferson's time, teaching slaves was not against the law. But Jefferson did not educate (teach)

his slaves. Yet many enslaved workers at Monticello knew how to read and write. John Hemmings, a woodworker, wrote letters to Jefferson. Joseph Fossett, a blacksmith, left records of his work. James Hemings, Jefferson's chef, kept lists. Jefferson also left written instructions for some of his workers. He wrote instructions to David Hern, a skilled laborer, and to Great George, his African-American overseer.

How did these slaves learn to read and write? Some learned from Jefferson's grandchildren. Some learned from each other. Madison Hemings recalled, "I learned to read by inducing [persuading] the white children to teach me the letters." Peter Fossett, an enslaved house servant, recalled that Jefferson "allowed" them to study with his grandchildren. Peter then used his skills to teach others.



Writing slate and pencils excavated at Monticello.

Treatment of Slaves

Jefferson wrote that he didn't like to sell slaves. Yet Jefferson sold 70 slaves in 1790 to pay off debts he owed. He also sold slaves as



RUN away from the subscriber in *Albemarle*, a Mulatto slave called *Sandy*, about 35 years of age, his stature is rather low, inclining to corpulence, and his complexion light; he is a shoemaker by trade, in which he uses his left hand principally, can do coarse carpenters work, and is something of a horse jockey; he is greatly addicted to drink, and when drunk is insolent and disorderly, in his conversation he swears much, and in his behaviour is artful and knavish. He took with him a white horse, much scarred with traces, of which it is expected he will endeavour to dispose; he also carried his shoemakers tools, and will probably endeavour to get employment that way. Whoever conveys the said slave to me, in *Albemarle*, shall have 40 s. reward, if taken up within the county, & l. if elsewhere within the colony, and 10 l. if in any other colony, from
THOMAS JEFFERSON.

Jefferson ran this ad offering a reward for the return of “Sandy” in “The Virginia Gazette” on September 14, 1769.

“Our own Time”

Monticello slaves worked long days for Jefferson. Sundays, holidays and after-work hours were their “own time.” During these too-few hours, slaves worked for themselves and their families. They made brooms and buckets, bowls and chairs. They tended gardens and caught fish and game. Jefferson’s grandson recalled moonlit adventures following enslaved men on the trail of possums and bee trees. On Sundays, slaves could travel to Charlottesville to the market to sell goods to earn money. They could visit with friends and family in the plantation community.

People enslaved at Monticello had their own stories and lives. They passed down stories about their families. This is called *oral history*. They were human beings who liked music or had favorite foods. Madison and Eston Hemings were enslaved and played the violin very well, just like their father Thomas Jefferson. Some people were religious. John Hemmings and his wife Priscilla were Christians. When Jupiter Evans was sick, he asked a local man who knew African healing traditions to treat him.

There were many ways to resist slavery, too. After Jefferson died, young Peter Hemings was separated from his family. He did not have control over that. But he continued to learn to read and write, and teach others. He made fake papers for other slaves so they could run away.

Slaves did not have control over a lot of things because they were not free. But they still made decisions and changed history.

punishment. And he sold those who continually ran away.

Between 1769 and 1820, twenty slaves ran away from Monticello. Several returned on their own. They were later sold. Only three slaves, Sam, Jenny and Harry, were never found. They may have reached freedom.

Overseer Edmund Bacon wrote that Jefferson “could not bear to have a servant whipped.” But Jefferson did have his slaves whipped. When runaway James Hubbard was captured, Jefferson “had him severely flogged.” Three other runaways were whipped. Letters and slave narrative told of several cruel overseers on Jefferson’s other farms.