

**PLANTATION SLAVERY** Most slaves worked on large plantations. They were household servant and skilled worker, such as blacksmith and carpenter. Field hands were usually housed in one- or two-room wooden shacks with dirt floors. Based on detailed records from eleven plantations in the Lower South (South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi) scholars have calculated that more than half of all slave babies died in the first year of life, a mortality rate more than twice that of white infants.

Field hands worked from dawn to dusk. The slave codes adopted by the southern states subjected slaves not only to the slaveholder's governance but to surveillance by patrols of county militiamen, who abused slaves found at large. A majority of both planters and small farmers whipped slaves, at least occasionally. The difference between a good owner and a bad one, according to one ex-slave, was the difference between "one who did not whip you too much" and one who "whipped you till he'd bled you and blistered you."

Organized slave revolts were difficult in the face of overwhelming white authority and firepower. In the nineteenth century only three major slave insurrections were attempted, two of which were betrayed before they got under way. Only the Nat Turner insurrection of August 1831, in rural Virginia, got beyond the planning stage. Turner, a black overseer, was also a religious exhorter who professed a divine mission in leading the movement. The revolt began when a small group of slaves killed Turner's master's family and set off down the road, repeating the process at other farmhouses, where other slaves joined in. Before it ended, at least fifty-five whites had been killed. Eventually trials resulted in seventeen hangings and seven deportations.

The Virginia militia, for its part, indiscriminately killed many slaves in the process of putting down the rebels.

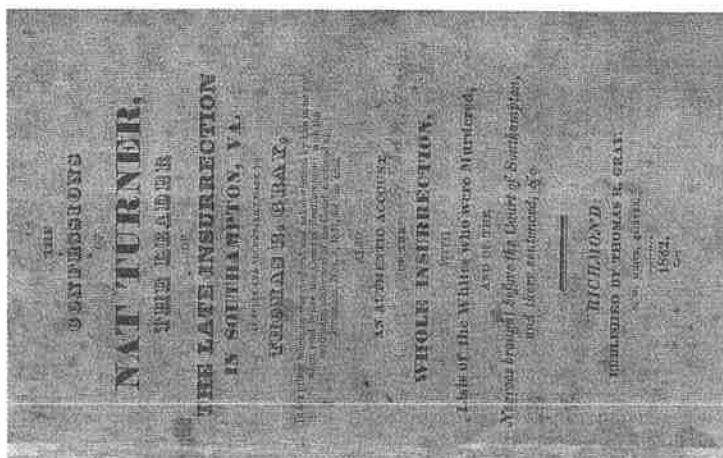
There were very few Nat Turners, however. Slaves more often

retaliated against oppression by malingering or engaging in cight sado-rosperous page. Yet slaves also knew that they would likely eat better on plantation than on one they had reduced to poverty, and the shrewdest slaveholders knew that they would more likely benefit by holding out rewards than by inflicting pain. Plantations based on the profit motive fostered mutual dependency between slaves and slaveholders, as well as natural antagonism. And in an agrarian society in which personal relations counted for much, blacks could win concessions that moderated the harshness of slavery, permitting them a certain degree of individual and community development.

**THE EXPERIENCE OF SLAVE WOMEN** Although black men and women often performed similar labors, they did not experience slavery in the same way. During the colonial period male slaves vastly outnumbered females. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the gender ratio had come into balance. Once slaveholders realized how profitable a fertile female slave could be over time, giving birth every two and a half years to a child who eventually could be sold, they began to encourage reproduction through a variety of incentives. Pregnant slaves were given less work to do and more food. Owners on some plantations rewarded new mothers with dresses and silver dollars.

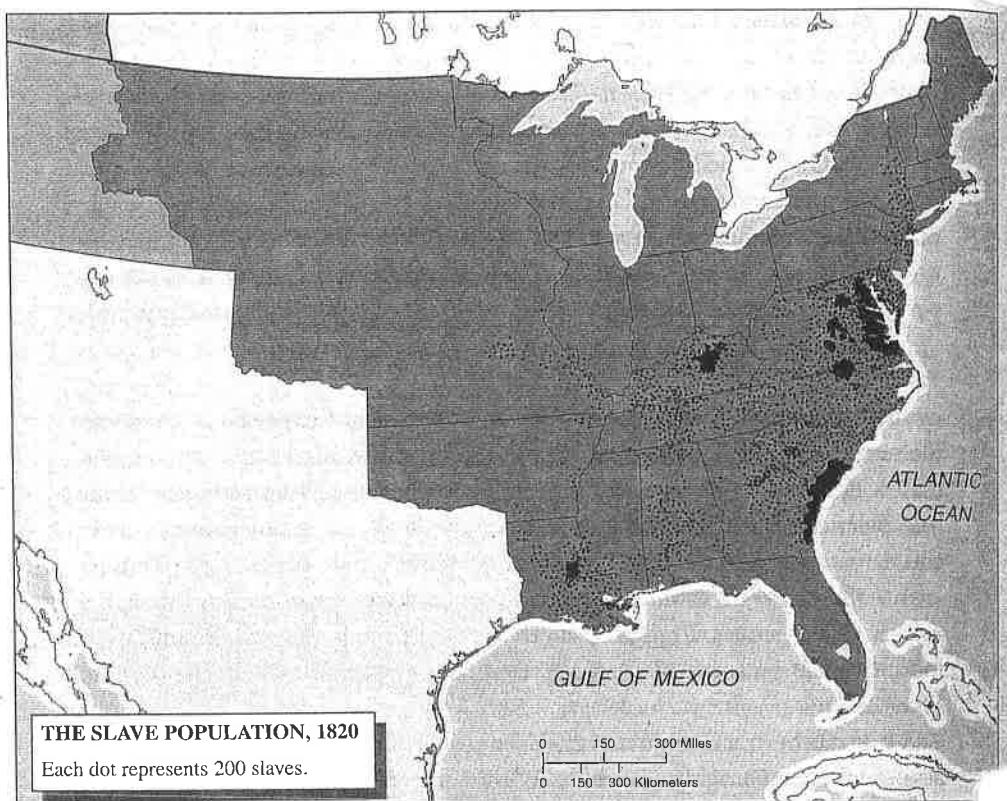
But if motherhood endowed enslaved women with stature and benefits, it also entailed exhausting demands. Within days after childbirth the mother was put to work spinning, weaving, or sewing. A few weeks thereafter mothers were sent back to the fields; breast-feeding mothers were often forced to take their babies to the fields with them. On larger plantations elderly women, called grannies, kept the children during the day while their mothers worked outside. Once slave women passed their childbearing years, around the age of forty, their workload increased. Slaveholders put middle-aged women to work full-time in the fields or performing other outdoor labor. Enslaved women were expected to do "man's work" outside. They cut trees, hauled logs, plowed fields with mules, dug ditches, spread fertilizer, slaughtered animals, hoed corn, and picked cotton. Slave women of all ages usually worked in segregated gangs, which enabled them to form close bonds with one another. To enslaved African Americans, developing a sense of community and camaraderie meant emotional and psychological survival.

Enslaved women faced the constant threat of sexual abuse. Sometimes a white master or overseer would rape a woman in a cabin with a male slave whose task times the owner would lock a woman in a cabin with a male slave whose task was to impregnate her. Female slaves responded to the sexual advances—and were usually ent ways. Often they fiercely resisted the sexual advances—and were usually



**The confessions of Nat Turner**

Published account of Turner's rebellion, written by Turner's lawyer, Thomas Gray.



Consider where the largest populations of slaves were clustered in the South in 1820. Why were most slaves clustered in these regions of the South and **not** in others? What were the limitations on the spread of slavery? How was the experience of plantation slavery different for men and women?

whipped or even killed for their disobedience. Some seduced their master away from his wife. Others killed their babies rather than see them grow up in slavery.

**FORGING A SLAVE COMMUNITY** To generalize about slavery is to miss elements of diversity from place to place and time to time. The experience was as varied as people are. Enslaved African Americans were victims, but to stop at so obvious a perception would be to miss an important story of endurance and achievement. If ever there was an effective melting pot in American history, it may have been that in which Africans with a variety of ethnic, linguistic, and tribal origins fused to form a new community and a new culture as African Americans. Slave culture incorporated many African