



SLAVES AND SLAVEHOLDERS

Slaves in the South constituted about one-third of the southern population. Most slaves lived on large farms or small plantations; many masters owned less than 50 slaves. Slave owners sought to make their slaves completely dependent on them, and a system of restrictive codes governed life among slaves. They were prohibited from learning to read and write, and their behavior and movement was restricted. Many masters took sexual liberties with slave women, and rewarded obedient slave behavior with favors, while rebellious slaves were brutally punished. A strict hierarchy among slaves (from privileged house slaves and skilled artisans down to lowly field hands) helped keep them divided and less likely to organize against their masters. Slave marriages had no legal basis, but slaves did marry and raise large families; most slave owners encouraged this practice, but nonetheless did not hesitate to divide slave families by sale or removal.

Slave revolts did occur within the system (notably ones led by Gabriel Prosser in Richmond in 1800 and by Denmark Vesey in Charleston in 1822), but few were successful. The slave revolt that most terrified white slaveholders was that led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. Turner's group, which eventually numbered around 75 blacks, murdered some 60 whites in two days before armed resistance from local whites and the arrival of state militia forces overwhelmed them. Supporters of slavery pointed to Turner's rebellion as evidence that blacks were inherently inferior barbarians requiring an institution such as slavery to discipline them, and fears of similar insurrections led many southern states to further strengthen their slave codes in order to limit the education, movement and assembly of slaves. In the North, the increased repression of southern blacks would only fan the flames of the growing abolition movement.



Photos of typical southern American plantations in the 19th century.



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1. Explain how slave masters behaved with their slaves.
 - What was their intention.?
 - How did they do it?
2. Why did they want to divide the slaves?
3. Was it possible for slaves to get married?
4. Who is Nat Turner?
 - Explain what he did.
5. What was the obvious conclusion for supporters of slavery after the revolt?
6. Finally what were the consequences of these rebellions?