
Excerpt describing enslaved work from Prentice Hall's African American History textbook

Skilled Work

Skilled work tended to have even more advantage than house work. Male skilled forced laborers also were more common, and gained other greater advantages. Skilled workers included carpenters, blacksmiths, and millwrights. They built and maintained plantation houses, enslaved quarters, and machinery. Because they might need to travel to get tools, they gained a broader outlook. They got a taste of freedom and from the owner's point of view this sense of freedom was very dangerous.

Skilled workers could also "hire their time." Either they or their owners negotiated contracts so that the slaves could work for money. Although owners kept most of the money, some of the slaves received some compensation.

Urban Slaves

Life in a city could be much more complicated for a slave than life in a plantation. When urban slaves were not working for their master, they could earn money themselves. They could even buy their own food and clothing.

Urban slaves served as washwomen, waiters, artisans, hack drivers, and general laborers. In general, they did the urban work that foreign immigrants took in northern cities. If urban slaves purchased their freedom they even continued in the same line of work. Urban slaves also relied on their free black neighbors, and sympathetic white people to escape north.

Industrial Slaves

By about 1860 5% of southern slaves – approximately 200,000 people – worked in industry. Industrial slaves made up of men, women, and children worked in textile mills in South Carolina and Georgia, and some even besides white people. In Richmond, and Petersburg, Virginia, about six thousand industrial slaves (mostly male), worked in factories producing chewing tobacco.

The bulk of people who worked in the South's lumber industry was also industrial slaves. Under the supervision of black drivers, they cut trees, operated sawmills, and delivered lumber. Industrial slave work was a path for freedom for some, as some slaves could earn income. However, the slaves' work was often dangerous, as well as physically tiring.