
Excerpt from Prentice Hall's African American History Textbook

Conditioning Process

Conditioning followed sale. In the West Indies, this process involved not only apprenticeship in the work routines of the sugar plantations on the islands. It was also a way of preparing slaves for resale. Slave owners preferred “seasoned” slave to “unbroken” slaves.

Conditioning was a disciplinary process intended to modify behavior and attitude of slaves and make them effective laborers. As part of this process, the slaves were given new names: Christian names, generic African names, or names from classical Greece.

The conditioning process also involved slaves learning new European languages. In the French and English Caribbean islands and in parts of North America, slave society produced Creole dialects that had distinctive African features.

Division of Plantation Work

Masters or overseers broke slaves into plantation work by assigning them to one of the gangs. The great gang did the heavy fieldwork of planting and harvesting. The second gang, including women and older men, did lighter fieldwork, such as weeding. The third gang, composed of children, worked shorter hours and did such tasks as bringing food and water to the other gangs. Other slaves became domestic servants.

Plantation owners would rely on drivers and overseers to run day-to-day operations. Overseers could be white or black, and drivers were usually black. The drivers carried whips and frequently punished the slaves.

How do you know when an enslaved person is “seasoned” or “broken?”

The first criteria of a successful conditioning was survival. The slaves were already weakened and traumatized by the Middle Passage, and therefore many did not survive conditioning.

The second criteria was that the Africans had to adapt to new foods and a new climate. These new foods included codfish, corn, and squash. For many Africans they initially got sick of these new foods and didn't know how to grow or cook with them.

A third criteria of a successful conditioning was psychological. When new Africans stopped being suicidal, a slave was more “seasoned.” A “broken” slave would listen to the directions of their slave master and not think about running away.

As traumatic as the voyage was, most of the Africans had not been stripped of their memories or their culture. Even when they were taken away from their family, they created new bonds with shipmates. African slaves did not lose all their culture during the Middle Passage or conditioning. They just adapted their cultural customs to a new setting.