

The Life of a Slave

Most slaves were not permitted to learn to read and write, so it's not easy to know what their lives were like. But some slaves did learn, and wrote their life stories. More than 150 were published during the time of slavery. These "slave narratives" showed people all over the world what slavery was like. Many people living in the North, who did not know the realities of slavery, read the narratives and decided they wanted to do their part to end it.

What do these narratives show?

Two of the best-known narratives are by Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass. Equiano wrote his in 1789. It is the story of an African prince taken into slavery and was very shocking to readers for its precise and frightening descriptions of slave ships.

Frederick Douglass was born a slave and treated harshly in his young life. He taught himself to read and eventually escaped to the North. There, he published his narrative and became one of the country's most important speakers against slavery.

The life of a slave was a life of hard work. Most slaves worked from sun-up to sundown, six days a week. Some slaves worked in the "master's" home cleaning, cooking, or taking care of the children. Most slaves worked in fields, planting or picking corn, tobacco, or cotton.

Slaves lived in small wooden shacks. They had one set of clothes, which they wore until they couldn't mend them any more. The slave owner fed them the least expensive food available – usually corn meal or grits. Meat was a special treat reserved for holidays.

Slaves were made to work by "overseers." These were men who managed the slaves and beat them if they did not work hard enough.

Some slaves ran away and were able to reach the North, where they could be free. Most escaped slaves did not make it very far before being chased down. Some slaves also fought back against the owners. They almost always lost their lives.

Slaves who did not run away or fight back found other ways to resist cooperating. They worked slowly, broke their tools, pretended not to understand instruction, or pretended to be sick. This was their way of fighting back. One issue that comes up in many narratives is the sad story of split families.

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Slaves were, by law, simply the property of their owners. When the owners wanted to sell slaves, they did. That meant that no slave could be sure when a father, mother, husband, wife, or child might be taken away – forever. Slaves who were sold to new owners had no way of telling their family where they had been taken to.

In some cases, slaves were treated fairly well by their owners. Some owners taught slaves reading and writing, and even gave them their freedom. Slaves also managed to enrich their daily lives in many ways. They made artwork such as quilts, they created a rich heritage of music, and attended their own churches.

These cultural traditions continued after slavery ended, and are evidence of the strength of the human spirit even in the most difficult situations.