

The Life of an Enslaved Person ^[1]

By UNC Libraries, 2009. From "[Stories of the American South](#) ^[2]." Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, October 2023.

Daily life for an enslaved person in North Carolina was incredibly difficult. People who were enslaved, especially those in the field, worked from sunrise until sunset. Even small children and the elderly were not exempt from these long work hours. Enslaved people were generally allowed a day off on Sunday and on infrequent holidays such as Christmas or the Fourth of July.

During their few hours of free time, most enslaved people performed work for their own personal needs. The diet supplied by enslavers was generally poor, and people who were enslaved often supplemented it by tending small plots of land or fishing. Many enslavers did not provide adequate clothing, and mothers who were enslaved often worked to clothe their families at night after long days of forced labor. One visitor to colonial North Carolina wrote that enslavers rarely gave the people they enslaved meat or fish and that he witnessed many enslaved people wearing only rags. Although there were exceptions, the prevailing attitude among enslavers was to allot people they had enslaved the bare minimum of food and clothing. Anything beyond that was up to the enslaved people to acquire during their very limited time away from work.

Shelter provided by enslavers was also meager. Many enslaved people lived in small stick houses with dirt floors, not the larger slave cabins often depicted in books and films. These shelters had cracks in the walls that let in cold and wind and had only thin coverings over the windows. Again, enslavers supplied only the minimum needed for survival. They were primarily concerned with keeping enslaved people, whom they considered financially valuable, alive and working and did not provide for their comfort, health, or safety.

One area of their lives in which enslaved people were able to exercise some autonomy from their enslavers was creating a family. Enslavers felt it was to their advantage to allow people they enslaved to marry because any children from the marriage would add to their wealth. According to law, a child took on the legal status of its mother; a child born to an enslaved woman would in turn be enslaved, even if the father was free. People who were enslaved usually had to ask permission from their masters to marry, and those marriages had no legal protection. Enslavers could break up marriages and separate families as they wished.

The trade of enslaved people in North Carolina separated countless husbands, wives, parents, and children. Most enslavers cared little about the kindred bonds of enslaved people and tore families apart by selling them for profit.

Because the large plantations of the Lower South used more enslaved labor than the smaller farms of North Carolina, it was not uncommon for people who were enslaved in the state to be sold to traders of enslaved people who took them south to Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana or Alabama. Once a family member was sold and taken to the Deep South, they became almost impossible to locate or contact.

Enslaved people had no way to legally protest their masters' harsh treatment and abuse. A Black person had no means of bringing a complaint to court, and could not even testify against a white person. In fact, before 1774 it was not a crime in North Carolina to assault or even kill an enslaved person. After 1774, a white person who murdered an enslaved person would receive only 12 months in prison if it was their first offense. However, according to the 1774 law, if an enslaver killed a person they enslaved while using "moderate correction" to punish them, there would be no criminal charge.

There was a special court for enslaved people separate from the regular court system. This court had the authority to try, sentence, and even execute enslaved people without trial by jury. Enslaved people who went to this court were not given representation and could not call witnesses to defend themselves. During the colonial period, about 96 percent of enslaved people tried in these courts in North Carolina were convicted.

In addition to these public courts, each plantation or farm had its own private system of justice in which individual enslavers dealt out the punishments they felt were appropriate. Enslaved people were usually only brought to the slave courts for what were considered the most serious crimes, such as murder, theft from a white person, or assault on a white person.

One of the few escapes from the severity of enslaved life was participation in religion. During the early 1700s, few enslaved people in North Carolina converted to Christianity. Many held on to the religious traditions they had brought with them from Africa. These traditions could include Islam, or more commonly, [religions with spiritual ties](#) ^[3] to the natural world and a person's tribe. ^[4] Christian missionaries feared and misunderstood these traditions and wanted to convert enslaved people, who they considered "heathens". Anglicans were the first group to try to convert people who were enslaved in North Carolina but didn't achieve much success. Enslaved people during early colonial times were reluctant to give up their familiar and meaningful traditions and saw no reason to adopt the religion of those who enslaved them.

By the early 1800s, enslaved people were converting to Christianity in increasingly large numbers. Protestant groups like the Baptists and Methodists were more successful at recruiting new members than the Anglicans had been. Their dealings with Black Americans were more tolerable and included joint revivals for white and Black people. Enslavers were uneasy with this religious fervor. They worried that converting to Christianity would encourage the people they enslaved to think of themselves as spiritual equals and demand better treatment or even freedom. Enslavers also resented the time enslaved people spent at religious services instead of working. Despite these objections from their enslavers, many people who were enslaved enthusiastically participated in religious services, which provided them some relief from work, time for fellowship, and a way to express their spirituality.

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