

Overseers ^[1]

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Overseers



"Slaves under the overseers whip." 1849. Image courtesy by Charles C. Davis, 2006 of LearnNC. ^[2]

Overseers is a term referring to employees of [plantation](#) ^[3] owners [before 1865](#) ^[4] who served as general managers of routine farming operations. They sometimes were former indentured servants themselves, liberated and in search of a better life. Others had been unsuccessful small farmers or the sons of small farmers who sought a more reliable source of income. Often lacking formal education, they generally were knowledgeable in the fields of agriculture, planting, harvesting, and husbandry and in the care and management of servants, slaves, and other laborers. Overseers routinely were entrusted with the care of property valued at thousands of dollars.

Although generally treated with courtesy, and despite the critical role he played in the life of the plantation, the overseer and his family were rarely accepted into the society of the planter class. In addition, he was typically despised by the black population for his role as disciplinarian on the plantation. The overseer could absent himself from the plantation only with the permission of the planter and had to be present whenever the owner was away. Although slaves usually worked no more than nine hours a day, an overseer's workday was frequently longer. He arose early to prepare for the day's tasks and remained late to attend to the needs of the workers. He had to see to the security of all property, often making rounds at night to do this. Attempting to maintain order and peaceful relations among the workers and enforcing the directives of the owner were also among the overseer's duties.

Reference:

John Spencer Bassett, ed., *The Southern Plantation Overseer as Revealed in His Letters* (1925).

Image Credit:

"Slaves under the overseers whip." *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: By the author, 1849), p. 115. Image courtesy of LearnNC.

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Authors:

[Davis, Charles C.](#) ^[12]

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