

Henry Bibb's Story

My first impressions when I arrived on the Deacon's farm, were that he was far more like what the people call the devil, than he was like a deacon. Not many days after my arrival there, I heard the Deacon tell one of the slave girls, that he had bought her for a wife for his boy Stephen, which office he compelled her fully to perform against her will. The next thing I observed was that he made the slave driver strip his own wife, and flog her for not doing just as her master had ordered.

Next a mulatto girl who waited about the house, on her mistress, displeased her, for which the Deacon stripped and tied her up. He then handed the lash and ordered me to put it on, but I told him I never had done the like, and hoped he would not compel me to do it. He then informed me that I was to be his overseer, and that he had bought me for that purpose. He then commenced on this poor girl and gave her two hundred lashes before he had her untied.



After giving her fifty lashes, he stopped and lectured her awhile, asking her if she thought that she could obey her mistress. He commenced on her again; and this flogging was carried on in the most inhuman manner until she had received two hundred stripes on her naked quivering flesh, tied up and exposed to the public gaze of all. And this was the example that I was to copy after.

He then compelled me to wash her back off with strong salt brine, before she was untied, which was so revolting to my feelings, that I could not refrain from shedding tears.

Every slave had to prepare a light wood torch to meet the overseer with, before daylight in the morning. Each person had to have his torch lit, and come with it in his hand to the gin house, before the overseer and driver, so as to be ready to go to the cotton field by the time they could see to pick out cotton.

The object of blowing the horn for them two hours before day, was, that they should get their bite to eat, before they went to the field, that they need not stop to eat but once during the day. Another object was, to do up their flogging which had been omitted overnight. I have often heard the sound of the slave driver's lash on the backs of the slaves, and their heart-rending shrieks, which were enough to melt the heart of humanity, even among the most barbarous nations of the earth.



This was a very warm climate, abounding with musquitoes, galinippers and other insects which were exceedingly annoying to the poor slaves. But more especially to their helpless little children, which they had to carry with them to the cotton fields, where they had to set on the damp ground alone from morning till night, exposed to the scorching rays of the sun, liable to be bitten by poisonous rattle snakes which are plenty in that section of the country, or to be devoured by large alligators, which are

often seen creeping through the cotton fields going from swamp to swamp seeking their prey.

The cotton planters generally never allow a slave mother time to go to the house, or quarter during the day to nurse her child. This is the reason why so very few slave children are raised on these cotton plantations, mothers have no time to take care of them--and they are often found dead in the field and in the quarter for want of the care of their mothers. But I never was eyewitness to a case of this kind, but have heard many narrated by my slave brothers and sisters, some of which occurred on the deacon's plantation.

Their plan of getting quantities of cotton picked is not only to extort it from them by the lash, but hold out an inducement and deceive them by giving small prizes. For example; the overseer will offer something worth one or two dollars to any slave who will pick out the most cotton in one day. He then gives the present to those that pick the most cotton, and then if they do not pick just as much afterward they are flogged.

I have known the slaves to be so much fatigued from labor that they could scarcely get to their lodging places from the field at night. And then they would have to prepare something to eat before they could lie down to rest. By the time they would get their suppers it would be midnight; then they would herd down all together and take but two or three hours rest, before the overseer's horn called them up again to prepare for the field.

My wife was very sick while we were both living with the Deacon. We expected every day would be her last. While she was sick, we lost our second child, and I was compelled to dig my own child's grave and bury it myself without even a box to put it in.

Questions:

1. What does Bibbs mean when he referred to Deacon's farm as being far more like the devil than a deacon?
2. What was Henry Bibbs forced to do when he arrived at the farm? What is an overseer?
3. What was the overseer's job first thing every morning at this farm?

4. Describe three ways in which slaves were treated inhumanely at this farm.
5. Why do you think slaves were treated in this manner if they were expensive to buy?