

Slave Occupations

Inventories of slaves from 1840-1860 do not reveal the names of all who worked part or full time in the house, shops, gin, and stables of Oakland, but some were identified. For example, in the period from 1840-18621 Charles was a coach driver for the family. Solomon Wilson, Bob, and Lens were carpenters. Solomon Wilson was mentioned as having received a set of augers, five planes, an adze, and a trimming hatchet on 7 March 1837. (1837 Journal, Vol. 2, p. 3, left.)

Solomon Williams was a blacksmith, as was Philip until he became deranged and was hospitalized in New Orleans. Marie, Caroline, Nancy, Aimee, Janvier, Johnson, and Edward were Estate documents in 1850 identify Martha Ann, 30, as the washerwoman. Celeste and Nanette were midwives and nurses in charge of the plantation hospital. Venus was the head cook until the estate sale of 1850 when she was purchased by a non-family member. Ben [Helaire] cooked. Lindor, a male in his mid-fifties in 1850, was in charge of weaving, a somewhat unusual assignment for a male slave. Alexis was the head shoemaker, and Joseph was his apprentice. Butler was the brickmason, and Nathan was the painter. Bysainte, in his fifties in 1850, kept tabs on Oakland's cattle, which numbered between 250 and 300, sometimes assisted by Cesaire and Dorcino. Hilaire was the driver. Arsen, called "Big Belly" in plantation diaries worked as ginner.

Even in an unpaid labor system, leadership positions carried status in both the owner's estimation and in the eyes of the slave community. House and personal servants such as carriage

drivers often had better clothes and housing than field workers. The primary driver during slavery was Helaire an ancestor of the Helaire clan which has played such an important role in Oakland's history. Because of their constant interaction with the owner's family house servants often developed bonds of affection with the owner they served: Thus individuals such as a cook or carriage driver had high status with the owners, but not necessarily in the field slaves' quarters. A midwife or nurse, however, had high status in the quarters because field workers' health was so dependent upon her.

Artisans who worked in the shops came in close contact with the field workers often lived in the quarters and had high status both in the Big House and quarters. One such individual was Solomon Williams mentioned above. Born in 1819 in Virginia, he was to all accounts an ---- extraordinarily inventive craftsmen. After emancipation his smithing abilities allowed him to negotiate a separate and more favorable contract than the other workers. He was probably the Solomon Williams who created the well drill displayed at Oakland (although it could not have been contrived in 1822, as family lore contends). It is possible that the well drill was constructed by his father also Solomon Williams and that the family was bought from Virginia together. One indication that this might be the case comes from his descendants. His great-granddaughter recalled that William Smith, Solomon's son, spoke only French. If Solomon had been bought as a young adult from Virginia, he would have spoken mostly English at home with his family. However, if he was bought as an infant or child he would have been reared in the

French culture of Natchitoches Parish.

In any case, Solomon Williams who remained part of the Prudhomme work force well into the 1880's was an exquisite craftsman whose handiwork can be seen throughout the Big House. He also created the iron crosses retrieved from a Freedmen's Cemetery at Oakland. A marker for his beloved wife Laide is among them. They both died in the late 1880's, but their children, including Eugene Williams, continued to work at Oakland.

Slave craftsmen and skilled workers appear to have been encouraged to innovate at Oakland, and the Prudhommes were willing to invest in their training. For example, a letter of 1854 reveals that Oakland worker Raymond was receiving training as an engineer for the steam cotton gin under John B. Clarkson at the Union Plantation. After two months, Clarkson sent Phanor Prudhomme a progress report:

I have seldom met with a Negro who "shewed" more anxiety to learn everything pertaining to a Steam Engine ... [He is] cheerful, attentive, and obedient in all things, and I have no hesitation in saying that with a little more practice he will make a competent and careful engineer.

Basket makers were very important on a cotton plantation. A June 20, 1862 entry in the Plantation Journal, kept by Phanor Prudhomme noted, "Sent the wagons to mill to get oak lumber for Thibaut to make baskets." Another Prudhomme basket maker during slavery and after was Claiborne who became Clement Claiborne after emancipation. He continued to make high quality

baskets for planters well in the 1920's. He would serve as a basket maker at Melrose when he was in his seventies and eighties. His sons and grandsons worked for the Prudhommes and Cloutiers as tenants but also as basket makers as revealed by his descendents and Prudhomme family member.

In 1866, workers were hired under contracts, with yearly contracts commencing on January 4 ... with monthly wages ranging from \$4 to \$10, with working days per month ranging from 22 to 24. Nursing mothers received half-pay. Among the workers having accounts in the 1866 ledger were Albert Goodson, Alexis Petit, Francoise Petit, Andrew Toussaint, Rosalie Toussaint, Louisa Toussaint, Simon Toussaint, Peggy Toussaint, Collins Page, Dorcino Antoine, Louisa Antoine, Derzilin Nagot, Marie Nagot, John Errante, Margaret Errante, Gregoire Francois, Auguste Gregoire Francois, Jack Jones, Fanchonette Bob Melanie Francois, Neville John Louis, Honore Jules, Stephen Smith.

Continuing to work on contract in 1868 were carpenter Solomon Wilson, Solomon Williams, Minique Toussaint, Sosie Stephens, Kitty Butler, and others. The administrator's account for 1868 indicates that on December 28, 1868, "to hands -- their pay & share for 1868 ...\$3,449.98" and for 1867, pay for hands was \$594.33. The ledger does show however, that after all deductions were made for the sharecroppers, most were slightly in debt to the Prudhomme estate beginning the 1869 season.

Among the skilled workers who bridged the transition from slavery to freedom on Bermuda/Oakland was head carpenter Solomon Johnson (not to be confused with the blacksmith, Solomon Williams). He was born in Virginia in 1815, a source strongly

used by Louisiana planters for the purchase of skilled workers. He married an older creole woman, Maria, born in about 1782.

Although Solomon William's son William Smith used his ingenuity to leave, he had many of the same traits were displayed in his father, who chose to stay. Solomon William's own story shows the inventiveness, creativity, and industriousness displayed by many black workers even within the confines of enslavement, tenancy and segregation. In 1867, he struck a deal "to do the plantation blacksmithing throughout the year at \$2 per day."

One of the cooks in the 1870s was young Albert Helaire, who must have been an excellent cook for he was always getting in trouble but remained with the plantation.¹

1. Oakland Plantation, Its People Testimony by Anne Malone pp. 74-77, 113-115, 117-120