



Mid-19th Century Plant Uses



Introduction

Booker T. Washington wrote that, “No race can prosper until it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as writing a poem.” Washington carried out his beliefs in the uses of plants and crops in the vocational education programs at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Many of these programs were taught by the famous scientist George Washington Carver. Others were taught through extension programs for local farmers with the traveling agricultural wagon taking the school out to the farms. Plants were used by slaves and freedmen in the mid-to-late nineteenth century for survival, healing, and future economic independence. Washington also wrote, “The Negro needs not only that religion that is going to fill his heart, but that kind which is going to fill the stomach, clothe and shelter his body, and employ his hands.”

From Africa to the New World

Many plants in North America today were transported by enslaved people, some on their difficult journey of the Middle Passage. How were they transported under such harsh conditions? Slaves wore necklaces of seeds such as the red and black seeds of licorice from West Africa. Once in North America, the licorice would be used to treat coughs and fevers. Other plants transported from Africa were Benne sesame, yams, okra, and blackeyed peas.

How were these plants used once transported from Africa? Okra leaves were used as poultices for boils and sores. Jamaican Senna was used as a laxative.

“Surinam Poison” was the cure for chronic sores. Kola seeds were used to alleviate stomach pains.

Enslaved people began to use native North American plants and adapt them for medical remedies. They shared and adapted these uses with Native Americans. Roots and barks were used in treatments of fevers and other diseases. Cotton root was rumored to be used to induce miscarriages, something slave owners didn’t want. In 1868, the *Atlantic Monthly Journal* advised that witch hazel counteracted the affects of cotton root. This information helped slave owners protect their investments in slaves as property.

African Spiritual Herbalism

African Americans had a practical and spiritual relationship with plants. Herbalism practiced in Africa became an art of slave doctoring in North America and an integral part of slave religion. Colonoware bowls had markings linking to “Minkisi,” a Kongo religion. Archaeologists found markings on the bottoms of bowls that were symbols for water spirits used by colonial herbalists to mix and administer medicines.

Archaeologists also found remains of conjurer kits. Conjunction was a type of doctoring tied to other African religions such as divination, “a supernatural way of knowing” and minkisi were used in doctoring illnesses. Conjurers used “hoodoo” or “root work”

for healing, harming, and protection used to “harness spiritual forces.”

Interviews with former slaves suggested these practices were used to deal with afflictions caused by personal conflicts. The conjurer would “work roots,” “trick,” “fix,” “poison,” “witch,” or “conjure” the ill person’s antagonists. Illnesses that could not be cured by home or medical remedies would be “conjured.” Conjuring was the process of working backwards from the illness to its origin in social conflict, beginning with divination which is the ritualized practice of obtaining hidden knowledge through supernatural assistance.

Plants, Religion, and Punishment

Many white planters opposed conjuring practices because they felt the methods used did not fit into their religious beliefs and were “superstitious.” In slave communities, the movements of items such as coffee grounds, cards, bones, and other materials were read by the diviner to find a cure for the afflicted.

By the mid-nineteenth century, slaves began combining African sacred plant traditions with Christianity. They would give the Christian God credit for giving them the ability to “see” a plant that could be used for healing and also praise God for providing them with that plant.

Slave owners also used plants for things such as food and healing. However, some found certain plants useful in punishment of slaves. Booker T. Washington wrote little about physical punishment by his owner but described his uncle getting whipped by his master. Owners had their methods of punishment of slaves. “Hickory Oil” was sometimes used as a euphemism for whipping. Doctors would say “apply hickory oil to the back frequently.”

Other Plant Uses

Plants had many uses in the mid-nineteenth century as they do today. Many plants were grown in the garden to be eaten by residents of plantations for survival. Some slaves harvesting crops such as rice were using up to 8,000 calories per day. Food provided by plants was important for the slave to have energy to do this intense labor.

The Workers Progress Administration interviewed former slaves. In these interviews, it was shared that “Mackaroot tea” was used as a worm medicine dispersed by the mistress before breakfast. Studies have shown that slave children had stunted growth in height. One of the hypotheses for this was that slave children went barefoot and got worms through the soil in the areas that they traveled and worked. So this tea may have been commonly used on plantations for children.

Linseed oil and wheat were used for burns. A powder to cure a rupture was made of scurvy grass, comfrey root, fern root, juniper berries, and Solomon’s Seal. A mother had a remedy for “dropsy” which was a mixture of juniper berries,

mustard seed, ginger root, horseradish, parsley root, and hard cider.

One treatment for snakebites and poisoning was a mixture of plantain root and wild horehound. Leaves of the calico bush were used to cure the itch and mange in animals and people.

Hominy was eaten and used for doing laundry. The hominy water could be used as starch. Collard leaves were used for headaches and leaves of cabbage and ginseng to cure fevers.

Some botanicals were being imported in the antebellum period. Slaves might use honeysuckle and rose petals on their bodies for perfume. When courting, some would adorn themselves with chinaberries and paint with dye from plants.

African Americans survived centuries of enslavement creating their own sense of place within plantations. They adapted to North America but held closely to their African traditions using plants as a means of survival and physical and spiritual healing in a new world.

The Burroughs Plantation

Booker T. Washington was born a slave on the 207 acre farm of James Burroughs. The Burroughs neighborhood was tobacco country. James Burroughs and his slave-owning neighbors did not fit the stereotype of the Southern aristocrat. They were rugged farmers and their estates were largely unimproved land with the portion under till usually worked by both free white and black slave labor. Work was abundant and leisure was scarce for the families of those free and enslaved who eked out an existence on these “hard scrabble” farms.

Farming in the mid-nineteenth century presented a formidable calendar of tasks, all of which help explain the utility of slave labor. Most of the land in this region during the 1850s was unimproved and “breaking” new land with the plow was a task all farmers endured. One can only imagine the myriad of tasks on a farm such as this, where many varieties of crops were raised.

The 1860 census listed Burroughs’ crops: tobacco, Indian corn, wheat, oats, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, peas and beans, and flax.

Many subsistence crops were cultivated such as “Hickory King” white corn as food for master, slave and livestock. Flax was another important crop grown primarily to provide fiber for slave clothing. Wheat, oats, sorghum, and a variety of vegetable crops would also have been produced on the farm to help maintain the farm’s self-sufficiency.

Sweet potatoes were an important subsistence crop, both for the slaves and as a supplement for corn in

fattening stock. Washington’s recollection in *Up From Slavery* about how he would “often come into possession of one or two” illustrates their significance in his young life.

The Burroughs vegetable garden would have been planted with a variety of vegetables and herbs. Asparagus, beets, beans, blackeyed peas, carrots, cabbage, cucumbers, garden peas, Irish potatoes, kale, lettuce, lima beans, muskmellons, okra, onions, peppers, radishes, tomatoes, turnips, and watermelons would be planted, ripened, and harvested from spring through fall. Most vegetables would be started from seed collected the previous year. Some vegetables would be dried and stored for the winter.

The Burroughs’ orchard consisted of apple, pear, and peach trees.

Dark-fired tobacco, probably of the Oronoko or Pryor strains, was the primary “cash crop” on farms in the region. Planters were dependent upon slaves to cultivate the labor intensive crop, which required fourteen months from seedbed to market. Local factories manufactured plug and twist chewing tobacco. Some of the most favorable tobacco plants were allowed to flower and seed so that the planter would have seed for the next year’s crop. One teaspoon of seed could produce seedlings for two acres of tobacco. Three to five acres of tobacco were cultivated annually on this farm in the 1850s.

James Burroughs, the plantation owner died of “lung disease” July 24, 1861 and is buried on the property.

Sources used for information contained in this publication:

Bearss, Edwin C. *The Burroughs Plantation as a Living Historical Farm*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, Division of History, 1968.

Fett, Sharla M. *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Mackintosh, Barry. *General Background Studies. The Burroughs Plantation 1856-1865*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, Division of History, 1968.

Perdue, Charles L., Jr., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews With Virginia Ex-Slaves*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992.