



## Slavery

### History of Slavery in the United States

Approximately 645,000 black Africans were shipped to the United States from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chained together and crammed side-by-side into the reeking holds of slave ships, tens of thousands died enduring the trans-Atlantic voyage known as the Middle Passage. Congress banned the importation of slaves into the United States in 1808. While this ended the horrors of the Middle Passage, it did nothing to stop the spread of slavery. By 1860, some four million people in the U.S. were enslaved.

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 declared that all slaves within the Confederate States "are, and henceforward shall be free." It did not, however, free the slaves in the border states of the Union. It was only with the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the constitution in December of 1865 that slavery was banned in all of the United States.

---

### Slavery in Louisiana

Slavery first came to Louisiana in 1706, when 20 Native Americans of the Chitimacha people were captured by the French in one of the frequent battles between the early colonists and the native peoples. The first African slaves in Louisiana were six people captured by the French army during the War of Spanish Succession in 1710. By 1721, some 2,000 Africans had been imported into the Louisiana colony, primarily for work in the fields of indigo, sugar cane and tobacco.

By 1850, slaves made up almost half of Louisiana's population. Nine out of ten slaves in Louisiana worked on rural farms and plantations. By 1860 there were 332,000 enslaved workers in Louisiana.

Both men and women labored in the fields and houses. The men specialized in skilled work such as carpentry or blacksmithing, and the women cared for the children. The majority of slaves worked from sunrise to sunset and beyond.

While very few masters ever allowed slaves to

learn to read and write, legislation passed in Louisiana in 1830 made it a crime to do so. Out of necessity, the slaves were thus forced to carry on the African tradition of conveying information orally.

Among the most prosperous planters and farmers in Louisiana were the Cane River Creoles of Color, some of whom were slave-owners themselves. In 1860 there were 472 free, black Louisianans whose average real estate holdings were worth over \$10,000. There were also 9,434 slaves in Natchitoches Parish in 1860.

It is worth noting the vast majority of rural whites and free blacks in antebellum Louisiana lived on small or modest farms and owned no slaves, or at most a very few, and they often worked side-by-side with them in the fields.

---

## Slavery at Oakland

Slavery was practiced at Oakland/Bermuda Plantation until emancipation in 1865. In 1845, there were 99 enslaved Africans working for the Prud'hommes. Plantation records list some of their names and occupations:

- Charles, coachman
- Venus, cook
- Hilaire, foreman
- Bysainte, cow herder
- Louis, cow herder
- Phillipe, blacksmith
- Solomon (Williams), blacksmith
- Solomon(Wilson),carpenter
- Lindor, weaver
- Marie, house servant
- Caroline, house servant
- Martha Ann, washerwoman
- Celeste, nurse
- Nanette, hospital nurse and midwife
- Alexis, shoemaker
- Butler, brick mason



Enslaved blacksmith Solomon Williams made this grave marker.  
CARI 6001

---

## Transition to Freedom

By 1853, 131 slaves were listed as plantation assets. Only 37 people inventoried earlier appear on the 1853 listing. It is likely that the others were sold off or inherited as the plantation passed from one generation of the Prud'hommes to another.

Records show that the Prud'hommes gave each male slave a coat with a hood, a Kentucky jean coat, and trousers made from brown kersey and a cotton shirt. Women received a skirt made from blue denim, a plaid shirt or a shawl, and a shift. Both men and women received hats. Each slave that worked in the fields received a blanket. Children too young to work in the fields received one blanket for every two children in a family.

The slave cabins at Oakland probably housed one family per cabin. The existing tenant cabins may indeed be the old slave cabins—but they may also have been built shortly after the Civil War. In either case, they are constructed of wood with bousillage filling, and measure 23 by 21½ feet.

When Union forces advanced up the Cane River during the Red River campaign of 1864, some of the slaves joined them hoping to gain their freedom. However, the majority of them stayed on at Oakland Plantation. Only months after the end of the war Phanor Prud'homme wrote about the situation of his labor force to his sister in a letter dated July 29, 1865. "What are going to do, with the new type of work? Will we be able to make the negroes work? That is the great question, for me the problem is more than doubtful. Up to the present, all of mine who did not leave with the Yankees in the spring of 1864, are still with me and continue to work."

