



The Duties of an Overseer



Magnolia Plantation Overseer's House



Oakland Plantation Overseer's House

Who Was the Overseer?

The overseer on a plantation was the “middle man,” whose responsibilities included the management of the enslaved laborers according to the master’s orders. The overseer lived in a separate house away from the ‘big house,’ near the quarters or cabins occupied by the slaves and attended to the day-to-day farming activities of the plantation for the owner. The many duties of the overseer allowed the plantation owner the freedom to be away from daily plantation management. The overseer was often responsible for disciplining the workers and was a more active participant in the running of the plantation’s daily operations than the master himself or herself.

Magnolia Plantation

W. B. Eddins was the Magnolia Plantation overseer in the early 1850s. In several of his letters, he apprises the owner, Ambrose LeComte II, of a number of issues of which overseers were responsible. These included the health (or death) of slaves, construction work, the progress of the crops, weather, the livestock, and business transactions. Family history says that in 1864, retreating Union troops threatened to burn the main house. The overseer at the time, Mr. Miller, **said they would do that “over his dead body.”** The troops then shot Mr. Miller and burned the house.

Oakland Plantation

Seneca Pace was the overseer for Phanor Prud’homme on Oakland Plantation between the years 1852–1867. Pace left behind seven books of extensive records concerning the events on the plantation. The events of 1860 are chronicled on a daily basis and provide a detailed look at the activities of the enslaved work force.

By the standards of the day, Pace managed Oakland Plantation scientifically. A copy of *The Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book No. 3* by Thomas Affleck was found in Pace’s possessions. In addition to providing a place to keep plantation records, this book contained a “how to” guide for the overseer and included strict guidelines for the running of the plantation and in the treatment of the enslaved laborers.

The Overseer's Job

Extracts from *The Cotton Plantation Records and Account Book No. 3*, by Thomas Affleck, 1857

duty in most

careless.

- On entering upon your duties, inform yourself thoroughly of the condition of the plantation, negroes, stock, implements, etc.
- The health of the negroes under your charge is an important matter. Much of the usual sickness among them is the result of carelessness and mismanagement. Overwork, or unnecessary exposure to rain, insufficient clothing, improper or badly cooked food, and night rambles, are all fruitful causes of disease.
- It is indispensable that you exercise judgment and consideration in the management of the Negroes under your charge. Be *firm*, and at the same time *gentle* in your control. Never display yourself before them in a passion; and even if inflicting the severest punishment, do so in a mild, cool manner, and it will produce a tenfold effect. When you find it necessary to use the whip—and desirable as it would be to dispense with it entirely, it is necessary at times—apply it slowly and deliberately, and to the extent you are determined, in your own mind, to be needful before you began.
- You will find that an hour devoted every Sabbath morning to their moral and religious instruction, would prove a great aid to you in bringing about a better state of things amongst the negroes. The effect upon their general good behavior, their cleanliness and good conduct on the Sabbath, is such as alone to recommend it to the Planter and Overseer.
- Next to the Negroes, the Stock on the place will require your constant attention. You can, however, spare yourself much trouble by your choice of a stock-minder, and by adopting and enforcing a strict system in the
- The implements and tools require a good deal of looking after. By keeping a memorandum of the distribution of any set of tools, they will be much more likely to be forthcoming at the end of the month.
- Few instances of good management will better please an employer, than that of having all the winter clothing spun and woven on the place.
- Few plantations are so rich in soil, as not to be improved by manure. Inform yourself of the best means, suited to the location and soil of the place under your charge, of improving it in this, and in every other way.
- In conclusion,— Bear in mind that a *fine crop* consists, first, in an increase in the number, and a marked improvement in the condition and value of the negroes; second, an abundance of provision of all sorts for man and beast carefully saved and properly housed; third, both summer and winter clothing made at home; also, leather tanned, and shoes and harness made when practicable; fourth, an improvement in the productive qualities of the land, and in the general condition of the plantation: fifth, the team and stock generally, with the farming implements and the buildings, in fine order at the close of the year; and young hogs more than enough for next year's killing; *then--* as heavy a crop of cotton, sugar or rice, as could possibly be made under the circumstances, sent to market in good season and of prime quality.

