

What was life like for enslaved people on an 18th-century Virginia farm?

A slave is a person who is owned or enslaved by another person. Many colonial Virginia farmers relied on the labor of enslaved African Americans to help work the fields. Each worker could raise about three acres of tobacco, but it was expensive to buy or lease a slave. The farmer had to balance the cost of an extra worker against the profit he would gain from planting more acres of tobacco. Small planters usually had fewer than five slaves, including children. During the growing season, the small planter might lease a slave from a neighboring planter to help in the fields.

Most slaves on small farms worked from sunrise to sunset. Men, women, and children worked in the tobacco fields since that was where their labor was needed most. Other work for women included helping with the cooking, laundry, gardening, and child-rearing. Men helped with hanging, drying, and packing tobacco, as well as building and repair work on the farm.

Because the small farmer owned only a few slaves, it was hard for slave men and women on these farms to find wives and husbands. Some had family on nearby farms, and their masters allowed them to visit each other. Other masters split up families and sent parents, and even children, to live and work in different places.

Slaves on small farms often slept in the kitchen or an outbuilding, and sometimes in small cabins near the farmer's house. On larger plantations where there were many slaves, they usually lived in small cabins in a slave quarter, far from the master's house but under the watchful eye of an overseer.

At the end of the workday and on Sundays and Christmas, most slaves were allowed time to attend to personal needs. They often

spent this time doing their own household chores or tending their gardens. Many farmers allowed slaves to keep their own gardens, and raise chickens and tobacco during their spare time. Sometimes they were allowed to sell these things to earn a small amount of money. In Virginia, most farmers did not teach their slaves to read and write. Some learned on their own, but for those on small farms where the master's family was usually not well educated, there was little opportunity.

When they could, slaves spent their limited free time visiting friends or family nearby, telling stories, and making music. Some of these activities combined African traditions with traditions of the Virginia colonists. Several musical instruments used by slaves are believed to be similar to instruments that were used in Africa. The banjo, made from a hollow gourd, and the drum were two instruments that slaves made and used to create music. African Americans in Virginia kept some aspects of their African religions as well. The life of a slave was hard and often cruel, and their religious beliefs reminded them that their lives had meaning and dignity.



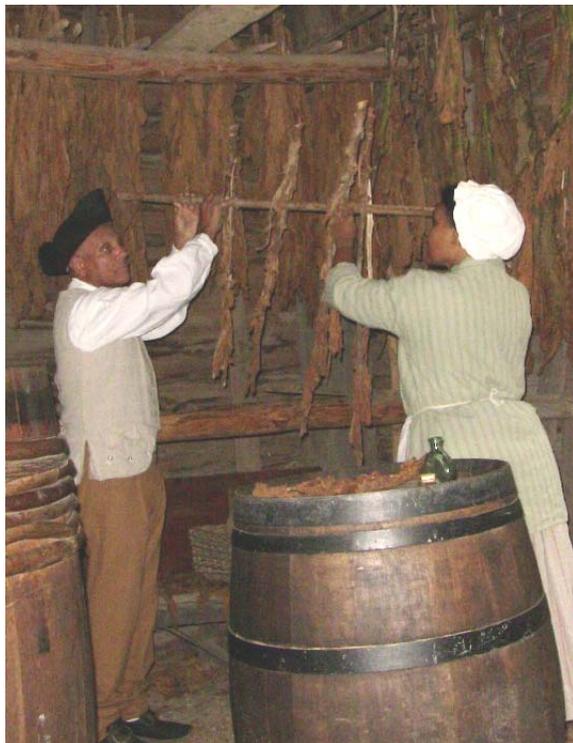
Tending tobacco



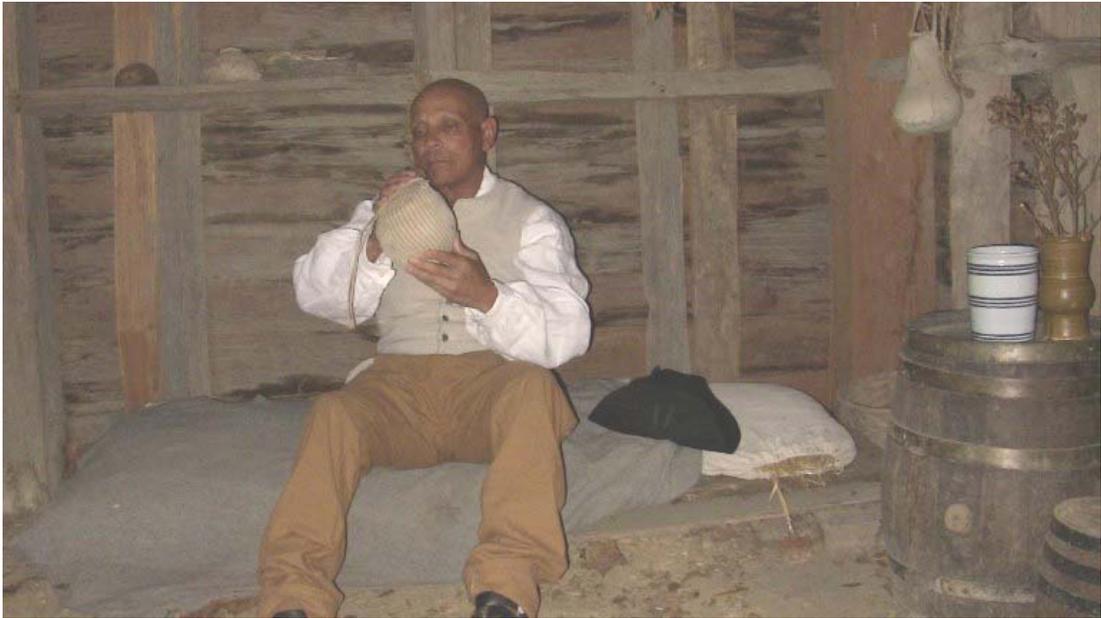
Washing clothes



Gardening



Drying tobacco



Life in the quarter



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