

Frederick Douglass: Abolitionist

Frederick Douglass was born a slave on a Maryland plantation in 1817. He escaped to freedom in 1838 and became famous as an abolitionist and crusader for Negro equality. The following selection is taken from Douglass' autobiography and describes his boyhood on the Maryland plantation of Colonel Lloyd.

It was the boast of slave holders that their slaves enjoyed more of the physical comforts of life than the peasantry [farmers] of any country in the world. My experience contradicts this. The men and the women slaves on Col. Lloyd's farm received as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pickled pork, or its equivalent [the same weight] in fish. The pork was often tainted [spoiled], and the fish were of the poorest quality. With their pork or fish, they had given them one bushel of Indian meal... of which quite fifteen per cent was more fit for pigs than for men. With this one pint of salt was given, and this was the entire monthly allowance of a full-grown slave, working constantly in the open field from morning till night every day in the month except Sunday. There is no kind of work which really requires a better supply of food...than the field work of a slave.

The yearly allowance of clothing was not more ample than the supply of food. It consisted of two linen shirts, one pair of trousers of the same coarse material, for summer, and a woolen pair of trousers and a woolen jacket for winter, with one pair of yarn stockings and a pair of shoes of the coarsest description.....

...The slaves worked often as long as they could see, and were late in cooking and mending for the coming day, and at the first gay streak of the morning they were summoned to the field by the overseer's horn. They were whipped for over-sleeping more than for any other fault...The overseer stood at the quarter door, armed with stick and whip, ready to deal heavy blows upon any who might be a little behind time.....

It was slavery...that I hated. I had been cheated. I saw through the attempt to keep me in ignorance.

Friendly Questions:

1. You are an escaped slave. Tell us why you ran away.
2. What are your feelings about slavery?

Unfriendly Questions:

1. Isn't it true that Colonel Lloyd, your employer when you were a slave, made every attempt to feed and clothe his slaves. Were they not well cared for?
2. You claim you hate slavery because slavery kept you ignorant. Do you think slaves with an education can be just as smart as white people?