George Fitzhugh, Cannibals All! Or Slaves Without Masters (1857)

The negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and in some sense, the freest people in the world. The children and the aged and infirm work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessaries of life provided for them. They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care or labor. The women do little hard work, and are protected from the despotism of their husbands by their masters. The negro men and stout boys work, on the average, in good weather, no more than nine hours a day. The balance of their time is spent in perfect abandon. Besides, they have their Sabbaths and holidays. White men, with so much of license and abandon, would die of ennui; but negroes luxuriate in corporeal and mental repose. With their faces upturned to the sun, they can sleep at any hour....
De Bow's Review, "The Stability of the Union" (1850)

...The black race, in its servitude to the whites, has undergone an improvement, which the same race, in its state of African freedom, has failed to manifest. By whatever degree, physically and morally, the blacks of the United States are superior to the nude cannibals of Africa, and are indebted to the white race for its active, though not disinterested agency....

James D.B. DeBow established his magazine in New Orleans in 1847 and moved it to Washington D.C. between 1853 and 1857 while he served as the Head of the Bureau of Census. DeBow was born in Charleston, South Carolina and was a strong supporter of slavery.
And yet the Master's lighter rule ensures
More order than the sternest code secures;
No mobs of factious workmen gather here,
No strikes we dread, no lawless riots fear;
Nuns, from their convent driven, at midnight fly,
Churches, in flames, ask vengeance from the sky;
Seditious schemes in bloody tumults end,
Parsons incite, and Senators defend,
But not where Slaves their easy labours ply.
Safe from the snare, beneath a Master's eye;
In useful tasks engaged, employed their time,
Untempted by the demagogue to crime,
Secure they toil, uncurst their peaceful life,
With freedom's hungry broils and wasteful strife,
No want to goad, no faction to deplore,
The Slave escapes the perils of the poor.

And yet the life, so unassailed by care,
So blest with moderate work, with ample fare,
With all the good the pauper Hireling needs,
The happier Slave on each plantation leads;
Safe from harassing doubts and annual fears,
He dreads no famine, in unfruitful years;
If harvest fail from inauspicious skies,
The Master's providence his food supplies;
No paupers perish here for want of bread,
Or lingering live, by foreign bounty fed;
No exiled trains of homeless peasants go,
In distant climes, to tell their tales of woe;
Far other fortune, free from care and strife,
For work, or bread, attends the Negro's life,
And Christian Slaves may challenge as their own,
The blessings claimed in fabled states alone—
The cabin home, not comfortless, though rude,
Light daily labour, and abundant food,
The sturdy health, that temperate habits yield,
The cheerful song, that rings in every field,
The long, loud laugh, that freemen seldom share,
Heaven's boon to bosoms unapproached by care,
And boisterous jest and humour unrefined,
That leave, though rough, no painful sting behind;
While, nestling near, to bless their humble lot,
Warm social joys surround the Negro's cot,
The evening dance its merriment imparts,
Love, with his rapture, fills their youthful hearts,
And placid age, the task of labour done,
Enjoys the summer shade, the winter's sun,
And, as through life no pauper want he knows,
Laments no poorhouse penance as its close.

William J. Grayson was a South Carolinian.
Slavery as an Economic Relationship

Whether enslaved people lived closely with their owners or not, their relationship was always affected by the fact that slavery was based on economics. Owners exploited enslaved humans in order to get work done; they saw enslaved people as property that performed labor. In a bill of sale from 1811, an enslaved woman named Eve and her child, at a price of $156.00, are listed between a plow for $1.60 and "Eight Fancy Chairs" for $9.25. Such treatment of humans as property was the essence of slavery.

Or consider the situation of one enslaved man, Moses Grandy. He happened to be standing in the street when he saw his wife go by in a group of enslaved people who had been sold to a slaveholder named Rogerson. Grandy later recalled:

Mr. Rogerson was with them on his horse, armed with pistols. I said to him, "For God's sake, have you bought my wife?" He said he had; when I asked him what she had done, he said she had done nothing, but that her master wanted money. He drew out a pistol and said that if I went near the wagon on which she was, he would
When Denver showed me where he used to live, I could hardly process it. Made of gray plank lumber, it was half the size of the shotgun shacks I'd grown up seeing in Corsicana, nearly small enough to fit in the back of a long-bed pickup truck. I stared up the road the way we'd come and remembered passing the Man's house—a big white country house, clapboard, with a gracious porch complete with swing. The contrast disgusted me.

Denver didn't say much as we poked around the place. Then he suggested we move on down to the house where Hershalee had lived. We climbed back into the Suburban, and as we rolled over the red dirt road, he told me how the Man had let her live in the house until she died even though she didn't work the fields anymore and couldn't pay rent. Denver seemed to think that was mighty decent of him.

For a moment, my mind drifted down a road it had traveled before: What kind of man was the Man? For decades, one Man kept sharecroppers barefoot and poor, but let a little colored boy earn a brand-new red Schwinn. Another Man let an old black woman live on his place rent-free long after she'd stopped working in the fields. A third Man kept Denver ignorant and dependent, but provided for him well beyond the time he probably could have done without his labor.

It seemed a throwback to the slavery-era doctrine called "paternalism," the idea that black people were childlike and incapable of living free, and therefore better off as slaves. That it had happened to Denver in the mid-twentieth century shocked me.

About a quarter-mile down the road, we stopped at Hershalee's. It was a
Know all men by these presents that I, William J. Ogburn, of the County of Guilford and State of North Carolina, have this day delivered to Isaac Thacker of the County and State aforesaid, a negro slave boy named Bob, twelve years five months old, for the sum of six hundred and seven dollars ($607.00) the right and title to said boy I warrant and defend now and forever. I also warrant him to be sound and healthy. January 5th. A.D. 1853.

Isaac Thacker

This is the bill of sale of slave “Bob” to Isaac Thacker. It reads as follows:

"Know all men by these presents that I, William J. Ogburn, of the County of Guilford and State of North Carolina, have this day delivered to Isaac Thacker of the County and State aforesaid, a negro slave boy named Bob, twelve years five months old, for the sum of six hundred and seven dollars ($607.00) the right and title to said boy I warrant and defend now and forever. I also warrant him to be sound and healthy. January 5th. A.D. 1853."

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I should here state, that I repeat on Sunday what I do every time that I see any of my Negroes viz. to examine that their clothes are not ragged or broken. Recollecting that a "stitch in time saves nine," I suffer none of them ever to appear with broken clothes. I give them the best clothes and I see that they do not suffer them to be ruined from carelessness. In all of my inspections I have a little book, in which I note down every thing that I see amiss. The Negro who has been the cause, is called up on the morrow, and receives such reprimand or punishment as his case may require.

Having mentioned their own duties, it will, perhaps, not be amiss to state what I owe them also. Exacting as I do, the utmost cleanliness of them, I particularly observe cleanliness in my own person. For instance, I never appear before my Negroes unshaved, or negligently dressed, and every thing that I have to do, I do with as much punctuality and exactness as I am capable of. Ignorant minds are ever apt to imitate their superiors, and upon this principle it will be found, that if the master is negligent in the observance of his duties, the slave will also become so.

2. Diet.—This is a matter of more importance than most planters are aware of. It is only necessary to inquire of the physician, or to consult any medical work, to be convinced that an improper attention to diet, is one of the most prolific causes of disease among our Negroes, as well as whites. It is the almost universal custom in this state, to give out to each Negro a weekly allowance of corn or potatoes, and to suffer them to cook it as they please. For many reasons, this plan is the most agreeable to the Negroes. I shall show, however, that it is far from being the most advantageous either to their health, or comfort. Every planter knows that there are many Negroes, who rather than be at the trouble of cooking their own victuals, will trade away their allowance with their more industrious fellow-workers, for one-half; and even where this is not the case, they are always found ready to barter away their whole weekly allowance to some neighboring dram shop, for a gallon of whiskey, or a pound or two of tobacco, or bread. Where Negroes are permitted to cook their own food, they neither have the time, nor capability to do it properly. It cannot be expected that the slave who is all day at hard work, can pay a proper attention to preparing his food after the day's labor. He generally comes home tired, and before he has half cooked his meal, hunger induces him to devour it. It is true that some Negroes cook their food in the field, while at work, but even this mode, must at once strike everyone as very improper. In nine cases out of ten, they cook with bad water, in dirty pots, and without salt. But I shall not enlarge upon the many ill effects arising from permitting Negroes to have their allowance, and to cook it themselves. One of your correspondents, in a former number in an article on this subject, has pointed out many of the evils; I shall, therefore, detail a remedy which I have been applying for many years; and let me assure you, Mr. Editor, each year has caused me to be better pleased with its observance. First, then, when I give out corn as an allowance, I have it all ground into grist. And that this might be done with ease, I at first procured myself a corn mill worked by horse power, which, while it grinds and cracks all the corn on my plantation, only cost me a couple of hundred dollars. The corn being ground, I allow to each Negro ten quarts of grist. Seven quarts of this I retain to be cooked for them, by a cook appointed for the purpose. The balance, three quarts, I give them to feed their poultry, or to do with, what they please. I have a person appointed to cook for all my Negroes, who amount to about fifty in all. It is her business to prepare two meals per day; and for each meal she cooks a pint of grist to each grown hand, and in a smaller proportion for the younger Negroes. That the food may be well done, she is required to cook in two or three distinct pots. Both for breakfast and dinner, I allow a small portion of meat of some kind, to boil with their food. And here let me observe, that a bit of meat, which when divided among them all, would not afford a taste for anyone, will when cooked together, make soup enough to satisfy the whole plantation. In winter I require of the cook to have their breakfast ready at 8 o'clock, at which time the horn is sounded, and each Negro comes with his piggin or bowl, and receives his portion, which is measured out to him by the driver. Dinner is required to be ready at 2 o'clock, and the same rules are observed as at breakfast. Since I have been cooking for the Negroes of my plantation, I have never known one of them to complain of not having enough to eat. When I first adopted this rule, my Negroes objected to it very much. But in a year or so they saw the utility of the practice, and now I am convinced, that they would not abandon it for a great deal, so much does it contribute to their comfort and health.

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1. What does this account tell us about slave life? What does it tell us about the status of slaves on plantations?

2. How might this account have been used by abolitionists? By pro-slavery factions?