

Servitude to Service: African-American Women as Wage Earners

Throughout the more than two centuries of African-American slavery in the South, it was black labor which built the antebellum southern economy. Field work provided by men, women, and children produced tobacco, cotton, sugar cane, and rice to create a stabilizing agricultural economy capable of maintaining a definitive society of classes. The management of a plantation was a complex operation demanding close attention to detail, careful accounting of all activities, expenses, and personnel based upon the optimum use of slaves. While most slaves toiled in the fields, some jobs were designated by planters as “women’s work.” Cleaning, cooking, and child care for the master’s family and home fit this category.

Objectives

1. To examine how the employment position of African-American women changed due to southern economic policies established after emancipation.
2. To analyze social and economic discrimination against African-American women in the work force.
3. To evaluate why African-American women were relegated to the status of second class workers.

Overview

Once emancipation of all the slaves was official following the Confederacy’s surrender at Appomattox, the overriding issue was the reorganization of the South’s economy around free labor rather than slave labor. Such a transition held political and social overtones just as explicit as economic ones. Under the direction of the U.S. Army and the Freedmen’s Bureau, a reordering along all of these lines began taking place. Believing, as did many freedmen, that they were due forty acres and a mule created initial problems when they were told otherwise by U.S. officials. Instead, officials told the freedmen to return to the plantations and work out contracts with their former owners.

Many black men now felt their women folk could stay at home and care for their children while they worked the fields. Both sexes expected to cut down on the number of hours they toiled in order to devote more time to their families. In the postbellum period as sharecropping and tenant farming took hold, however, it became obvious that each member of the family would have to be responsible for financially contributing to the welfare of all. The deepening national depression of the 1870s drove many black families into dire poverty. It became essential for women and children to work in addition to the male breadwinners. While all family members past the age of seven could engage in seasonal field work, women had to become full time wage earners outside of their homes to get ahead

economically. Thus, what emancipation accomplished for African Americans was to allow them initial and limited control over where, when, and how long they worked every day. It did not guarantee them land or an income on which they could survive (1).

To supplement a family’s income, female children over ten or twelve were often sent to the nearest large city to find work as live-in domestics while male children worked the fields with their fathers. In northern Virginia, proximity to Washington, D.C. allowed married and single women the opportunity to sell their services. Racial prejudice kept African-American women locked into such jobs as maids, laundresses, and cooks. In the South, being a domestic servant was almost always a term synonymous with being a black woman (2). These traditional female jobs allowed women to make only nominal pay. In the District of Columbia, for example, weekly wages for the 1890s were as follows: general servants—\$2.91; laundresses—\$3.39; and cooks—\$3.72. By 1900, the average weekly U.S. wage for domestic service occupations was \$3.51. As for hours worked per day, thirty-eight percent worked ten hours and thirty-one percent worked twelve hours in the District (3). If a woman (defined as fourteen years of age or older by the Labor Department in 1900) was a live-in domestic, she had a room and meals in the house in which she served and generally an afternoon a week off. This meant that she was always “on call” by family members to perform any kind of task regardless of hours. Living-out meant she had some control over the amount of time she spent on the job but rarely were her workdays less than ten hours (4).

The role of laundress came to be considered exclusively the province of African-American women in the South. Washing and ironing the clothes of a regular white clientele did allow these women a minimum amount of control over their time while also allowing them to care for their own children. Collecting the clothes on a Monday, most women laundered for two or three families. On the days which followed, they boiled the clothes in a pot of hot water outside and used a washboard to scrub them. Then the clothes were rinsed, starched, wrung out, hung out, and ironed to be returned to the owners for a few dollars on Saturday. From her earnings, a laundress bought her soap and starch. What was left went into the family till (5).

As for the single girls and women who went into nearby cities like Washington, D.C. to work, they relied on living assistance from an extended family network. Very young girls were employed by their relatives as babysitters and/or house cleaners so mothers could earn wages as domestics. Older single women could shop, cook, or clean for relatives while awaiting a position as a live-in. Churches provided a pivotal safeguard for African-American families and their communities. Word of mouth job availability often was spread by women

of a congregation. It was an automatic assumption that all money earned was sent home to one's parents to be contributed to the family's upkeep (6).

Near the end of the nineteenth century, a number of working girls' homes were established in major cities to provide a safe, clean place for them to live. In Washington, D.C., the Sojourner Truth Home for Working Girls was established by Amanda R. Bowen, a member of the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church and a Sunday School teacher. Miss Bowen's objective was to provide a reasonably priced, clean, living place for young women. She also kept employment records and sponsored some social recreation for her boarders (7).

As the twentieth century proceeded, the nature of work for African-American women continued to be very limited beyond domestic jobs. While a small percentage of women moved into factory or government work, their jobs tended to be of a house keeping nature, not on assembly lines or in office work. Racial prejudice and discriminatory practices throughout the nation generally kept them from advancement into better paying jobs.

Teaching Procedure

1. Provide each student with a copy of the overview to read silently.
2. Divide the class into groups of three or four and distribute copies of the photographs.
3. Ask students to choose one of their number to write down comments to report them to the entire class.
4. Direct students to study the photographs of the women and typical African-American housing in the city and country in postbellum days attempting to answer these questions:
 - A. What is your first impression of these women?
 - B. What does their facial expressions and their attire suggest to you? Do you see any similarities? Differences?
 - C. What, if any, distinguishing characteristics of the dwellings or environment give you clues to the location? The economic well-being of the residents?
 - D. Can you speculate as to what the interiors of these dwellings might be like?
5. Now distribute copies of the documents to be read silently, directing students to read the secondary quotes first.
6. Ask students to attempt answers to these questions:
 - A. From the secondary sources:
 1. What do Rollins and Jones claim emancipation provided African-American women? Do you think these women were better off or worse off as a result?
 2. How would you describe a good servant based upon these quotes? Is this a job you might wish to perform? Why?
 - B. From the primary sources:
(NOTE: The first four quotes are describing immediate post-war circumstances, some as very old women. The next seven quotes describe later nineteenth-century circumstances.)
 1. How would you judge the economic success of these women? Would circumstances improve for

any of them? How? Why?

2. What advantages and disadvantages came with the different domestic jobs? Which job might you prefer? Why?
 3. What do you think happened to the quality of family life once these women married?
 4. What might these women have done to change their status? (i.e. education, become politically active.)
7. Have each group reporter describe their group's answers to the entire class.
 8. Lead a full class discussion around these ideas:
 - A. How much freedom did emancipation provide African-American women?
 - B. Why do you think women workers might have been overlooked by state and federal governments? (NOTE: The Freedmen's Bureau only demanded contracts for field work between black and white males.)
 - C. How might the economic situation of African-American women be further threatened in the late-nineteenth century? (i.e. immigration of Irish, Eastern Europeans)
 - D. Can you speculate what these women might have done within the growing labor movement to improve their hours and wages? How do you explain the success of a minority of African-American women? (i.e., Madame C.J. Walker)

IFTIME PERMITS: Students may try these extended activities, reporting results orally to their class or by writing an essay.

1. Research
 - A. African-American women who were successful—e.g., Madame C.J. Walker, Ida Bell Wells, Maggie Walker, Mary McLeod Bethune.
 - B. Laws adopted to regulate female and child labor.
 - C. "Jim Crow" legislation impacting African-American women.
 - D. Labor union practices regarding women.
2. Interview elderly African-American women about the jobs they have held during their lifetimes.
3. Write an essay describing your skills for domestic work which would encourage an employer to hire you. Or with a classmate, role play an interview with a prospective employer.

Endnotes

1. This brief summary is based upon Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). For more detailed coverage, see chapters 3 and 4.
2. David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 24.
3. Elizabeth Ross Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service in the U.S.," *Journal of Negro History* 8 (October 1923): 416, 424.
4. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In. Living Out* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 104-8.

5. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 125.
6. Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*, 22, 24, 34, 44.
7. Lindsay Isabel Burns, "The Participation of Negro Women in the Development of Post-Civil War Welfare Services in the District of Columbia," *Women in the District of Columbia* (Washington International Women's Year Coordinating Committee, 1977), 15.

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Secondary Source Quotes

I. Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domesticity and Their Employer* (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 1985), 51.

"The distance between master and servant in the South grew; the status of domestic servitude lowered. . . . Emancipation caused domestic slaves to become low-wage servants and gave them geographical mobility, but the composition of the servant class, the uniquely high ratio of servants to the overall population, and the quality of the relationship between employer and employee changed little in the South until World War I."

II. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 169.

"The economic revolution of the late-nineteenth century fundamentally altered the nation's job structure and created the employment possibilities for white women, but southern black women had virtually no access to these positions. Some wives, mothers, and daughters in urban areas peddled vegetables or stemmed tobacco leaves on a seasonal basis. The majority readily found full-time work as domestics, but their hours were long and their pay meager. Black communities supported only a handful of female employees in sales, clerical, and communications work."

III. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 101, 106, 108.

"Good servants were to be efficient and meet all of the rigid standards of the household. . . . a good servant must assume the role of humble subordinate at all times. . . ."

"No job description came with a live-in servant's work. . . . additional duties were assigned to servants simply because of the capricious demands of the 'mister' or 'mistress.'"

"Unlike her southern counterpart, the Washington mistress' personality and temperament dominated the households. . . . Live-ins were required to learn and respond to all of the mistress' idiosyncracies and demands, as this 1901 pronouncement of a Washington mistress made, clear: 'My servant is hired to do whatever she is told to do and to be at any time subject to my command.' . . . A good household worker . . . was one who knew how to please the mistress."

Primary Source Quotes

I. Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 355-6

“... women from the plantations found that they had marketable skills. ‘I have done a mountain of washing and ironing in my life,’ one freedwoman sighed. Washerwomen were so indispensable to city life that they ventured to get together to ask for higher wages. In June, 1866, the *Daily Clarion* of Jackson, Mississippi, published a politely worded ultimatum.

Mayor Barrows

June 20, 1866

Dear Sir:

At a meeting of the colored Washerwomen of this city, on the evening of the 18th of June, the subject of raising the wages was considered, and the following preamble and resolution were unanimously adopted: Whereas, under the influence of the present high prices of all the necessaries of life, and the attendant high rates of rent, we, the washerwomen of the city of Jackson, State of Mississippi, thinking it impossible to live uprightly and honestly in laboring for the present daily and monthly recompense, and hoping to meet with the support of all good citizens, join in adopting unanimously the following resolution:

Be it resolved by the washerwomen of this city and county, That on and after the foregoing date, we join in charging a uniform rate for our labor, and any one belonging to the class of washerwomen, violating this, shall be liable to a fine regulated by the class. We do not wish in the least to charge exorbitant prices, but desire to be able to live comfortably if possible from the fruits of our labor. We present the matter to your Honor, and hope you will not reject it. The prices charged are:

\$1.50 per day for washing

\$15.00 per month for family washing

\$10.00 per month for single individuals We ask you to consider the matter in our behalf, and should you deem it just and right, your sanction of the movement will be gratefully received.

Yours, very truly,

The Washerwomen of Jackson

The *Clarion* failed to print further news of the women’s struggle.

II. Eileen Boris, Nelson Lichtenstein, eds., *Major Problems in the History of American Workers* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath), 132.

Unnamed former slave recalls her life on a plantation: “My young mistress name Catherine. When her marry, I was give to them for a housemaid, ‘cause I was trim and light complected lak you see I is dis very day. Young missie say, ‘You come in my room Delia, I wants to see if I can put up wid you.’ I goes in dat room, winter time mind you, and Miss Charlotte sets down befo’ de fire. Well, she allowed to me, ‘Delia, put kettle water on de fire.’ So I does in a jffy. Her next command was: ‘Would you please be so kind as to sweep and tidy up de room?’ I do all dat, then she say, ‘You is goin’ to make maid, a good one!’ She give a silvery giggle and says, ‘I just had you put on dat water for to see if you was goin’ to make any slop. No, No! You didn’t spill a drop, you ain’t goin’ to make no sloppy maid, you just fine.’ Then her call her mother back in. ‘See how pretty Delia’s made dis room, look at them curtains, draw back just right, observe de pitcher, and de towels on de rack of de washstand, my I’m proud of her!’ She give old mistress a hug and a kiss and thank her for de present. Dat present was me. De happiness of dat minute is on me to dis day.”

III. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils In The Wheat* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976)

p. 121, Mrs. Mildred Graves: "All durin' de war I stayed wid Mr. Tinsley. After de war when I was set free I come to Richmond to wuk. I wuked fer lots o' people. Den I met Willie Graves an' I married him. He was from Washington, D.C. I have nine chillun an' my husban' died when de younges' was a baby two years ole. After he died I had to get out an' 'wuk agin. Dis time I had to cook, wash, an' iron, clean an' nurse de sick. I have attend many births in Richmond an' many o' de important people o' de city are 'my babies.' In dem days in Richmond when doctors was few I wuked wid a lot o' 'em. I also use to shroud de dead."

p. 344 Martha Zeigler: "Well, I stayed on there (on the plantation) after the niggers was freed. I didn't never see no use in making such a fuss over being free. It want (wern't) no good to me, cause I never had been nothing else. . . . A young doctor come to the place . . . and he rented him a house to keep what he called 'Bachelor Hall,' and I got the place to cook for him I was 'bout grown then, spry and a tolerable good cook, so he hired me right off. I stayed with him and when he got married and brought his wife home, I just kept right on doing for them. . . . I helped born all the chilluns and nussed 'em and looked after things, and helped 'em save 'till they 'cumulated a lot and 'cided to move to town where they could send the chilluns to free school, that had come in bout this time. Course I come with 'em and helped keep things stylish like they had to be to keep up with the town folks."

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IV. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994)

p. 42, Pernella Ross: "By ten you'd be trained—our people was seeing to that. You was thought to be 'bout grown as far as your training. Especially a girl. Your training was early and hard. No girl I know wasn't training for work out by ten. From the time a girl can stand—she's being made to work. Girls are started early with work—no play ever for a girl. That's just how they (adult females) was on girls. Work, work, work. No play, 'cause they told you, 'Life was to be hardest on you-always.'"

pp. 43-44, Bernice Reeder: "Your people all trained you to do service work. It was what they all knew you had to learn—period. Now, maybe a teacher, aunt, or somebody would tell you that you could do other work, but you know that you'd do service work. You knew, and sometimes you'd think about doing different work—but you knew it wasn't to be. 'Specially at home—service was all there was for you. They knew it. You knew it. . . . At the core of this regimen was the parental assumption that any money earned by the children would belong, without question, to the parents. Work and its rewards were not for the individual to enjoy."

p. 88, Marie Stone: "Who didn't do domestic work? Even the teachers did it for one while in their lives. Many people couldn't get teaching jobs here (D.C.) cause they went to schools in the South, so they had to do domestic work, too! I know ladies with college but got good pay and did domestic work to make that money. Everybody in Fourth Street had mothers, aunts, and cousins working right with you at one time or another. People didn't look at that so much as how you presented yourself. Good home training and people being ladylike, nice. That's what people down there look at."

p. 142, Dolethia Otis: "Now 'good' families like the Kents never sent they piecework out. They had a laundress who came and did just that. A full staff always had a laundress. Now laundresses never live-in and I know they was on the staffs of more than four or five families. But these good families wouldn't no more have they piecework sent out than die. No, they had all they jobs done in they homes. They had money and the staff was full. No cutting corners—for what? They had it and didn't want no sending out for they stuff. No, not a good family. Them people had money to keep they jobs done—right at home too."

p. 144, "The laundress ranked high in the staff hierarchy: She commanded respect . . . and served a number of families on a weekly basis. . . . her work allowed her to leave at the end of each day. . . . she arrived, completed all the laundry, and promptly left after her tasks were completed, escaping the innumerable duties expected of the live-in staff."

pp. 55-6, Velma Davis: "You worked all week for a white family, with somebody having you in a house to do everything. When you got to the week's end and home, there was that and more to do. No asking you about a thing. Nobody down there would. When time was to go, you'd be told what was to be what and where to go to do something more, someplace else!"

p. 148, Thedella Crockett: "Living-in, you had no choices about nothing. You was told what to do, and you had to do it. Period. But working out, you'd be able to pick homes, days, and kinds of work you didn't do. You always work. But you'd have some say in it. That's better."

V. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, "A Family Voice," *Washington History* 5 (Spring-Summer, 1993).

Diary Excerpts of Mary Johnson Sprow, Domestic Worker in Washington, D.C.:

1916, July 30

"Then what is work? Who made Work? To clean and scrub days in and days out. Above all who made the people that we toil for? That who never knows what it is to want and yet is never thankful for nothing that we do, no matter how hard no matter how we try to please . . . After all, work would not be such a task if it was not for the ingratitude we get from our employers. So while it is true that you work to make a living for yourself, I feels it will be little different than a slave . . . Not that I want slavery; no, I don't want that in my life.

1917, January 17

"Worked hard. Company for dinner. Home, very late again.

1917, June 21

"New day for me again. Working and living in. But who is stealing down to the lake to watch the water? Me. I will do every time now.

1917, July 17

"We went to the Falls today. A tiresome trip with no rest for me. Is this my life? Never. The others laugh when I say it but I will leave this job. I know in my heart my family does not see it. I sent money home."

Source for top two photographs on this page and lower two on the following page: Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The photograph at the bottom of the following page, "Loudoun County," is by James H. Jones, III.

Source for above photograph: Dorothy Sterling, *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the 19th Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

Source for top photograph on this page and bottom photograph on the previous page: *History Day News* (1994). The top photograph is of Washington, D.C. in 1866 and is located at the Historical Society of Washington.