

Overseer's House at the Rural Life Museum

History

The overseer's house at the Rural Life Museum was moved to the museum complex from Welham Plantation (in St. James Parish) in 1970. It had been continuously occupied from its construction (c. 1835) until the mid-1960's. Welham was sold as an industrial site (Marathon Oil) in 1975 and the "Big House" was demolished in May, 1979.

Traditionally, the overseer's house would be situated well back of the owner's house (or "Big House") at the head of the quarters' road. At the Rural Life Museum, the house is situated at one end of the quadrangle, and is enclosed by fencing to demonstrate a change in the labor and social hierarchy of the working plantation. The picket fence which sets apart the overseer's private domain is typical; made of rough-hewn cypress, it is broken by two butterfly gates in addition to the central entry. Adjacent to the road is a stile, a common alternative to gates. Stiles and butterfly gates barred foraging animals from lots and gardens, as well as eliminated the maintenance of creaky gates. This stile is adorned with a small shrine of St. Francis of Assisi, protector of nature and friend of the common man.

The People

The system of overseeing (continuing the feudal English system of bailiffs) was originally introduced into America by the Virginia Company. Some of the first American overseers were indentured servants whose terms had expired. The first blacks came to Louisiana between 1700 and 1710 from the West Indies, and the overseer's system was functioning well by 1744. During the colonial period slaves came straight off the slave ships from Africa.

The Overseer

The overseer has been called a "neglected figure" in Southern history. He also has been described as a "very important personage, since much of the success of an estate, as well as the

happiness or misery of the Negroes – which appears to be nearly the same thing – depends on him.”

The overseer was usually hired at the beginning of the year, on a one-year basis, from among a group of yeoman and professional farmers. Owners often advertised for overseers and requested references from former employers. Most overseers were acquired as a result of direct correspondence among proprietors or through application by prospective employees.

The overseer was usually a white man, but sometimes blacks or free men of color were employed. During the Civil War, a few women served as overseers. Louisiana is apparently the only state in which free Negro overseers were used. There were 11 in New Orleans in 1850, and 25 in 1854 (of which 24 were mulattos). In the sugar area, most overseers were sons of yeoman slaveholders or poor farmers, and were native Southerners.

There were assistant or sub-overseers on some plantations. On many larger plantations, Negro drivers or slave foremen were used to help the overseer direct the laboring force.

Usually, the overseer would manage 50 to 100 slaves, with 81 being the median number in Louisiana in the 1850's. Large holdings were divided into several units, with an overseer for each division. Fear of slave revolt accounts for even smaller units as the Civil War era approached.

Compensation

Many variables influenced the amount of pay an overseer received. To be taken into account were: size of plantation, number of slaves, resident or absentee proprietor, and considerations other than monetary ones, such as lodgings, servants, provisions, and other privileges. The salary paid ranged from \$100 to \$2,000 per annum; on rare occasions as much as \$3,000 was paid to a very exemplary overseer. Some were able to augment their income by hiring out slaves which they themselves owned.

Many planters required their overseers to sign a contract or work agreement outlining not only their responsibilities but their personal behavior, such as, marital status (they must be married), no drinking and no leaving the plantation without a pass. (Ref. Bennett Barrow's Diary, Highland Plantation, History of a Louisiana Plantation)

Problems of the Overseer

Since the overseer was not guaranteed tenure or paid a large salary, there was a fairly rapid turnover. They were often criticized and dismissed because they were given "maximum responsibility with minimum authority." However, the position was highly sought because it was one of only two escapes open to poor whites, the other being to become a commercial farmer in rural areas where cheap land was still available.

Of almost equal importance was the responsibility to harvest as large a crop as possible. Conflict between the owner and overseer often centered around the emphasis upon production at the expense of long range agricultural improvement. This pressure resulted in the overseer "overworking his slaves, exhausting his land, neglecting the livestock and allowing equipment to deteriorate."

The social status of the overseer was held in low regard by a large number of planters, and he was regarded merely as a dependent to be kept at a distance. He and his family were socially removed from the proprietary class, but were above any social exchange with the slave population beyond that required by the managerial duties. He was, on the whole, treated politely but with condescension. However, on smaller units, he and the owner were nearly on the same plane of social exchange. Of course, there were exceptions. It is interesting to note that female proprietors were reported to have held their overseer in higher esteem than did their male counterparts.

The overseers themselves seemed not to have felt inferior. Their greatest ambition was to make the transition from overseer to farmer, which was accomplished in great numbers. Some even became plantation owners, and a few gained political prominence.

The Overseer's Wife

Little is known of the role played by the overseer's wife, other than the fact that she sometimes helped her husband care for sick slaves. It does not appear that married overseers remained on a given plantation longer than unmarried ones; however, statistics show that 40 percent remained unmarried. Since there were often other white employees on some plantations – sugar makers, engineers, carpenters, brick layers, and coopers – it might be assumed that the overseer and family could have had friendly relationships with that group.

Overseer's Duties

The overseer was responsible for slaves, land, livestock and equipment with the welfare of slaves the paramount consideration. The two principles universally emphasized by planters in their directions to overseers were “a firm discipline tempered with kindness, and a uniform, impartially administered, system of justice.” Most planters placed limits upon the type and severity of punishment which their subordinates might administer. Many felt that fear was necessary, while others believed kindness was the key.

In spite of the fact that some brutality did exist, the majority of overseers treated the slaves fairly well. Constant admonishment from the proprietors, who had a vested interest in the productivity of their slaves, deterred most overseers from abusing their wards. The overseer was usually dismissed if the proprietor learned of severe or unmitigated punishment. Proper slave discipline was clearly the decisive factor determining the overseer's success or failure.

Other Overseer Duties

“Police protection” could be considered the duty of the overseer, because one of his more important duties was the prevention of runaways and their recapture when necessary. Just prior to and during the Civil War, overseers were called upon to give police protection against slave uprisings, and many were exempt from military service on that premise.

Keeping records and census figures were also entrusted to the overseer. He was the keeper of all keys to the smoke house, corn crib, barns, stables and the like. He had to

supervise care of the livestock and was also required to inspect the workers' houses. His responsibility also included the health care of the slaves.