

The Work of the Slaves in Coffee Production



The stages of coffee

Coffee was grown as an export crop during the days of slavery in the following colonies: **Jamaica, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia**. The forest or trees had to be burnt and cut and the land prepared for the coffee seedlings. This, of course, was done by the slaves as they worked their way on the steep slopes of the hillsides. They then marked out the fields in even rows with an equal distance from each other. The land was then leveled with terraces.

Why?

- (a) For convenience of working in the fields
- (b) To prevent soil erosion



Growing coffee

The field slaves planted ground provisions, for example, cassava between the young trees. This provided quick income for the estates until the coffee was matured. On most of the estates also, trees were planted to protect the plants from strong winds. Constant weeding of the fields was done. At reaping time which was usually from the end of August to the beginning of September, the slaves would go out to the fields as early as it dawned to pick berries. This exercise continued until about midday when they had a break for lunch.

After lunch, they resumed picking until sunset or it was too dark to see, whichever occurred first. At the end of each packaging session, a Negro slave driver checked the basket of each slave. Those whose baskets were not full were lashed.

Another set of slaves was responsible for passing the berries through a pumping/pulping mill. This process also allowed for the removal of the skin from the berries. The 'naked' berries are then washed in a certain cistern. Again it is the job of the slaves to ensure that the cisterns contained enough water for the washing process. After they are washed, the slaves spread them out on a platform or glasis to dry in the drying house. Meanwhile the old and sick slaves and children sit and clean the coffee. That is, they pick out the bad/spoilt berries and throw them away and store the 'good' ones in a granary. Another set of slaves packed the good beans for export on carts which are then driven by the slaves to the port where they are stacked on the waiting ship.



A coffee bean