

The Typical 18th Century Sugar Estate or Plantation



Sugar cane harvest

When the newly arrived slave reached the plantations after his tedious journey from the auction or scramble, this is what would meet his or her eyes, a large sprawling plantation with different buildings and crops.

The land was used for mainly three purposes:

1. Agriculture: Canefields woodlands and provision grounds
2. Buildings: Factory, workshops and hospital/goal
3. Living Quarters: Great House, Overseer's house and slave huts



Image of a plantation estate

Canefields

Most of the land was used for the cultivation of the canes. Other colonies such as Jamaica had land that was not suitable for sugar cultivation but was used for other crops such as coffee.



Cane fields

Provision Grounds

These were small individual plots allotted to the field slaves to plant cash crops for their daily meals. These include plantains, yams, cassava and vegetables.

The Woodland

This was important in an age where there is no electricity or gas. The estates needed the wood to provide fuel for the boiling house, for cooking and other domestic purposes. The lumber was also used by the skilled slaves such as carpenters to repair broken fences and gutters and to build sheds.

On some estates a small portion of land was set aside for the grazing of the estate's animal. This was also important as it provided a means or supply of manure. The animals were also used to compliment the planter's imported food supply. For example, chickens provided both eggs and meat. Some planters kept cows for fresh milk and pigs that were slaughtered at Christmas and shared among the ex-slaves.

The Factory

The factory was a very important area of any sugar estate. It generally consisted of five buildings all of which were extremely crucial to the efficient operations of the manufacturing process. Here, the most expensive pieces of equipment are kept and used.

-Mill

-Boiling House

-Trash House

-Curing House

-Distillery



Slaves in the sugar mill

Workshops

This is the work area designated to the artisans. It is also the place where their tools and unfinished work is kept. Among these would be the cooper assembling the hogsheads, the carpenter making or repairing the wooden troughs and so on.

Hospitals

The makeshift hospital then, was the place where the sick, the infirmed, the convalescing and soon to deliver or new mothers are 'hosted'. It was shabbily built and sparsely furnished. It is also the place where enslaved who are in confinement as a means of punishment are kept.

The Great House

This was the largest house on the plantation. It belonged to the owner. It was built for his privacy, comfort and relaxation and had several rooms and a large verandah. It had to be large enough to afford himself and his family enough space. Most of the furniture was imported and the house was furnished to reflect his style, taste and opulence. Here was where he wined and dined, where he entertained his guests. He hosted lavish balls and parties at his whim and fancy.

It was usually located on a hill or at best an elevated area of the estate. This location was of course an indication of his status- at the top of the plantation hierarchy. It is also located away from the noise and heat of the plantation. Of course, it has to be located a good distance away from the slave huts.

The Overseer's House

This was the second largest house on the plantation. This is where the overseer ate, slept and relaxed but it also doubled as his office. Here he keeps important records and documents relating to his job on the estate. Sometimes items of medicine and clothing rations would be kept here as the overseer was responsible for the distribution of the latter and the former if and when the need arise.



Overseer's house

Slave Huts

Most if not all of these were built by the slaves themselves from thatch (for the roof) and wattle and daub (for the walls). Each hut was a one room and had one window and one door. They were intended for sleeping purposes only since the slaves were considered as property (chattel) and not people. These huts were located near to the canefields to facilitate the easy and quick transfer of the slaves to their area of work.



Slave hut

The Use of Labour

The labour force on an estate was divided into two main groups: white employees and the slaves.

1. White employees

They occupied the managerial and supervisory positions on the estates. The highest in rank among them was the overseer or manager.

The overseers have quite a lot to do. Apart from the overall supervision of the estates activities they have to ensure that all the material, equipment and other necessities for the production process is right there on the plantation. For example- he has to see to it that the staves and horses are ordered in time, as well as flour and saltfish for the slaves, that the mills are in working order and that there is adequate machetes and hoes for the field slaves.

Other white employees include clerks, bookkeepers and so on. Their job is to keep an accurate record of the estates assets and equipment. They record the number of hogsheads made, the number of carts/wains in stock and so on. We use the word employee because they get paid.

2. The slaves

This was undisputedly the largest percentage of the labour force. They did not receive wages for their work. There were two types of slaves: African slaves and Creole slaves but for the purposes of work, the slaves were divided into three main groups:

A. Domestic slaves

These were considered to be the *crème de la crème* of the slave population because they worked in the Great House and received favors and rewards from its occupants. For example, 'hand me down' clothes and left over food. The mere fact that they worked in close proximity to the owners seem to have been enough, for them to be considered as 'privileged' by some of the other slaves.

Their workload was also comparatively lighter. True, the job was more demanding, since they had to respond to the whims and fancy and every cry of the owner and his family, but at least they did not have to toil in the blazing heat under the watchful eye of a slave driver who was not afraid to use his whip.

On the other hand however, their daily working conditions depended upon the very nature of the master and his family that they served. Some were spiteful, ill-tempered and grossly inhumane. Still others were demanding and gave them quaint jobs to perform such as scratching their feet! They did not always have a scheduled time to begin or end work. In the event of a function (party, ball etc.) they could begin the work of preparing the food from before dawn and still be kept up on their feet all night.

This group of slaves include: *washerwomen *butlers *cooks
*nursemaids *coachmen



Domestic slaves

B. Artisans/Skilled slaves

These were considered to be the most valuable slaves on the estate because of the importance of their job in converting the cane to the export product known as raw muscavado sugar. This group of slaves worked in the workshops and factory.

C. Field/Praedial Slaves They represented the largest portion of the slave population. They did the most strenuous work in the fields. They had three main seasons of work: planting, maintenance and reaping or harvest time. This large group is further divided into three gangs. A slave driver is placed in charge of each gang. He is a fellow slave who has been given a bit of authority over the gang. He is expected to use the whip to keep the gang working.

First Gang: the strong and healthy slaves, both male and females make up this group. They are responsible for the planting of the cane to include the preparation of the land for planting. At harvest time they are the ones charged with the responsibility of quickly cutting the canes and tying them in bundles.

Second Gang: the young boys and girls about ten to twelve years old, pregnant and convalescing slaves make up this group. They do the lighter work of weeding and harrowing.

Third Gang: this gang is called the 'pickney' gang. These children of six or seven years are supervised by the elderly as they carry out their assigned tasks of weeding the gardens, carrying sticks for fire for the slaves' meals, collecting yam peels etc., to feed the estate animals and any other general light work that was deemed suitable for their age, size and strength.

The '**guinea bird**', as the newly arrived African was called would be assigned to a Creole slave who is to train them and teach them the new language. This is part of what is known as the **seasoning** period.