

Plantation Life before Emancipation

by R. Q. Mallard, D. D.



ABOUT THE READING The author, Robert Mallard, was born in 1830 and grew up on the plantation he is describing below. He was the son of a “well-to-do slaveholder” in Liberty County, Georgia.



As you read the passage below, try to create an image in your mind of what the plantation must have looked like.

Chapter III: The Old Plantation

It [the plantation mansion] has only four glazed windows, two lighting the parlor, and the other two our parents’ room just opposite, the panes small, and so imperfect that many is the time that our youthful imagination occupied itself, while waiting for the house-girl to **kindle** the fire in mother’s chamber, in shaping its bubbles and defects into the images of different creatures. The parlor, the common living room, is papered with a pattern I have never seen elsewhere—a curious group of figures, which I see distinctly before me as I write. There is on the wide fireplace, with its **fender** and **andirons**, polished until you can see your face in them, a generous supply of oak and rich pine, but the big door leading out upon the piazza is persistently left open, I presume for ventilation, but bringing the sensations of freezing and burning into startling conjunction!

The arrangement of the houses is somewhat peculiar, but convenient, and apparently made upon the principle of placing everything as far as possible under the master’s eye. Looking out from the front

VOCABULARY

kindle start burning

fender a metal guard on the front of a fireplace

andirons metal holder for logs

palings fence of pointed stakes

stile steps that allow someone to climb over a wall or fence

Families spent more time at the plantation during the winter months. The summer months were considered to be too dangerous because of the fear of malaria.

Source: *Plantation Life before Emancipation*, (copyright 1892), electronic edition from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/mallard/mallard.html>

door, you see on your right the smoke and meat house, made of yellow clay, in which the bacon (for our planter raises or purchases his hogs from his own people) is cured and stored; on the left-hand corner, and in sight, is the kitchen, where French cooks are completely distanced in the production of wholesome, dainty and appetizing food; for if there is any one thing for which the African female intellect has natural genius, it is for cooking. Just over the **palings** of the front yard, you see the cotton houses, and directly in front the horse gin, . . . On the left, just beyond the **stile** (we called it the “blocks”) your eye takes in the stables and carriage-houses, and still farther away, and stretching to the left and in front, the single and double rows of cottages, the “quarters,” the homes of the laborers, with their vegetable gardens, chicken coops, pig pens, rice ricks, and little storehouses. The only thing in the rear, and invisible from the front door, are the rice barns and winnowing house (for rice and Sea Island cotton constitute about in equal parts the market crop), and the vegetable garden. . .

Notice that the kitchen is not located in the main house.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

- 1. Main Idea** Why are most of the buildings on the plantation at the front of the mansion?

- 2. Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences** What does the description tell you about a plantation and a plantation owner?

- 3. Activity** Write a similar informational paragraph describing your school. Try to include details you think might be helpful to someone in the 22nd century who is learning about life in your community.