

Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*



ABOUT THE READING Frances Kemble was a British actress who married Pierce Butler, heir to a huge plantation. Kemble wrote her journal during a four-month stay on Butler Island, part of Butler's plantation in Georgia. Before the trip, Butler had assured Kemble that the slaves were treated well. She believed this at first but as you can see below, her opinion soon changed. Kemble published her journal in 1863, after she and Butler had divorced.

VOCABULARY

conch spiral-shaped seashell

implore ask earnestly; beg

cooper barrel maker

preceptor teacher



As you read think about how Kemble's trip to Butler Island changed her understanding of slavery.

We now approached the low, reedy banks of Butler Island. . . As we neared the bank, the steersman took up a huge **conch**, and in the barbaric fashion of early times in the Highlands, sounded out our approach. . .

On our landing from the boat, the crowd thronged about us like a swarm of bees. . . They seized our clothes, kissed them—then our hands, and almost wrung them off. I believe I was almost frightened; and it was not until we were safely housed, and the door shut upon our riotous escort, that we indulged in a fit of laughing, quite as full, on my part, of nervousness as of amusement. . .

Before closing this letter, I have a mind to transcribe to you the entries for today recorded in a sort

Kemble is referring to a crowd of slaves that gathered to welcome the boat.

Source: *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*, by Frances Anne Kemble. Carey, Lea, & Blanchard, 1835.

of daybook, where I put down very succinctly the number of people who visit me, their petitions and ailments. . .

Fanny has had six children; all dead but one. She came to beg to have her work in the field lightened.

Nanny has had three children; two of them are dead. She came to **implore** that the rule of sending them into the field three weeks after their confinement might be altered. . .

Sophy, Lewis's wife . . . is suffering fearfully; has had ten children; five of them are dead. The principal favor she asked was a piece of meat, which I gave her. . .

Sarah, Stephen's wife: this woman's case and history were alike deplorable. She had had four miscarriages, had brought seven children into the world, five of whom were dead, and was again with child. She complained of dreadful pains in the back, and an internal tumor which swells with the exertion of working in the fields. . .

I have had a most painful conversation with Mr. [Butler], who has declined receiving any of the people's petitions through me.

Perhaps, after all, what he says is true: when I am gone they will fall back into the desperate uncomplaining habit of suffering, from which my coming among them, willing to hear and ready to help, has tempted them. . . If I should go away the human sympathy that I have felt for them will certainly never come near them again. . .

I had a long talk with that interesting and excellent man, **cooper** London, who made an earnest petition that I would send him from the North a lot of Bibles and Prayer Books; certainly the science of reading must be much more common among the Negroes than I supposed. . . In my farewell conversation with London I found it impossible to get him to tell me how he had learned to read: the penalties for teaching them are very severe—heavy fines, increasing in amount for the first and second

Slave mothers had three weeks to recover from childbirth before returning to work in the fields.

Learning to read was forbidden to slaves throughout the South.

offense, and imprisonment for the third. Such a man as London is certainly aware that to teach the slaves to read is an illegal act, and he may have been unwilling to betray whoever had been his **preceptor** even to my knowledge.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why did the slaves on Butler Island confide in Kemble?

2. What does Kemble fear will happen after she leaves Butler Island?

3. What does London's request for many Bibles suggest about the number of slaves on the plantation who could read? Explain your position and provide examples from the text to support it.
