

Source: [How We Do Run On: Black Christmas in the Antebellum South](#)

Black Christmas in the Antebellum South

"For the first time in their lives the negroes were able to get all the whisky they might want. In slave days, it was something they never tasted except at Christmas, when each one received a 'drap' along with his gift."

--Gone with the Wind, Chapter XXXVII

Starting with 1820, criticism of slavery and of the Southern lifestyle based on it became more and more pronounced, as the problem of the former expanding to the new Western territories arose. Faced with this pressure, the Southerners countered by creating a "cavalier" myth of the South that would help define and defend its peculiar institutions, and Christmas was to play a central part to this end. As P.L. Renstadt notes in *Christmas in America. A History*, "Christmas became a key element in expounding the southern ideal, one in which the perceived virtues of the plantation system could be symbolized and ritualized. In the boldest ways, the southern Christmas provided a picture of harmony amid increasing tension."

The relationship between master and slaves and the way slaves themselves celebrated Christmas became essential in defending the perceived rightness of the state of affairs in the South. Memoirs and letters use Christmas as an example that the reality of slavery was much less harsh than the Abolitionists imagined. Christmas in the antebellum South was ultimately a charade of benevolent paternalism, glorified to the limits of caricature in stories like William Gilmore Simms' *Maize in Milk. A Christmas Story of the South*, where noble planters with names like Colonel Openheart ignore their own financial difficulties to buy the old and infirm slaves of neighboring plantations to save them from being sold down river.

And since *noblesse oblige*, this expensive act of charity couldn't shadow in the least the lavish celebrations of Christmas on the Carolinian plantation Maize in Milk. It was more important than ever to keep the old traditions alive in times of hardship, Colonel Openheart proclaimed to his somewhat more prudent wife. On Christmas day, he gathered all of his slaves -both old and new - to give them the gifts he had bought from them in the city. These included shawls, caps, razors, hatchets, knives, scissors and cases of pin and needles, but no money, for it would have been "spent perniciously at some neighboring groggery."

The custom of the slaves coming to the plantation house on Christmas morning to present their Christmas greetings to the planter's family and receive their gifts is recounted in many memoirs from the era. In Simm's story, the master knows best and he is the one to select what gifts his slaves should receive, based mostly on the items' utility. Eliza Ripley gives an account of a different system, one in which the slaves' wishes were taken into account. In the fragment below, you can see how the master of the Whitehall plantation handled the Christmas gift-buying for his slaves, along with the very touching story of one black woman's request for a Christmas present:

"Frequently before the holidays some of the negroes were questioned as to what they would like to have, and the planter would make notes and have the order filled in the city. That, I think, was the custom at Whitehall plantation. I was visiting there on one occasion when a woman told Judge Chinn she wanted a mourning veil. 'A mourning veil!' he replied. 'I thought you were going to marry Tom this Christmas?' 'I is, marster, but you know Jim died last grinding, and I ain't never mourned none for Jim. I want to mourn some 'fore I marries ag'in.' I did not remain to see, but I do not doubt she got the mourning veil and had the melancholy satisfaction of wearing it around the quarter lot a few days before she married Tom."

--excerpt from [Social Life in Old New Orleans, Being Recollections of my Girlhood](#)

The same Eliza Ripley recounts the ceremony of distributing gifts at her own plantation, along with the custom of giving everyone a dram or "drap" of whiskey, a custom also mentioned in *Gone with the Wind*:

"The following morning, Christmas Day, the field negroes were summoned to the back porch of the big house, where Marse Jim, after a few preliminary remarks, distributed the presents—a head handkerchief, a pocketknife, a pipe, a dress for the baby, shoes for the growing boy (his first pair, maybe), etc., etc., down the list. Each gift was received with a 'Thankee, sir,' and, perhaps, also a remark anent its usefulness. Then after Charlotte brought forth the jug of whisky and the tin cups, and everyone had a comforting dram, they filed off to the quarters, with a week of holiday before them and a trip to town to do their little buying."

--excerpt from [Social Life in Old New Orleans, Being Recollections of my Girlhood](#)

Many planters went further than just a dram of whiskey and made alcohol available in larger quantities, especially during the Christmas dinner in the slave quarters. "Not to be drunk during the holidays was a disgrace," the famous Frederick Douglass remarked. But though alcohol was a big part of the holidays' attraction, it was by no means the only one. "Slaves lived jus' fo' Christmas to come round," recalls Fanny Berry, an ex-slave. Christmas was the time for reuniting families and for creating new ones. Husbands that worked on neighboring plantations would come home to see the babies born in their absence for the first time. Men and women would take advantage of the holiday to get married.

In his *Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War*, Thomas Nelson Page recalls that no Christmas holiday would pass without at least one wedding in the slave quarters. The bride's trousseau was usually assembled with the help of the master's family, as Eliza Ripley recounts herself, and the wedding would be officiated by the master (or on occasions, a black preacher) in the mansion or down at the slave quarters.

Giving the plantation slaves some time off during the winter holiday was the sensible, let alone moral thing to do after a year of work. Not only that it allowed workers to rest and regain their strength, but it also attenuated a lot of the tension and resentment people in their situation would otherwise feel. It was Frederick Douglass who noted that "those holidays were among the most effective means in the hands of slave holders of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves."

But even so, not every planter was as moral as our saintly Colonel Openheart and not every planter was a sensible being. Many in fact were neither. Even in the last years of slavery, there were plantations on which the idea of giving slaves a day off on Christmas had never been posed. One particularly cruel master, by the name of Bennett Barrow, was in the custom of sharpening punishment for his slaves on Christmas day and taking the occasion to sanction misdemeanors from around the year. And even on the plantations where planters did allow their slaves to celebrate Christmas, it appears that four days was the maximum of time off that the workers could generally aspire to.

Nonetheless, the black inhabitants of the plantations began to recognize this free period as one of their rights and developed specific ways to celebrate it. One of the most famous, and peculiar, was the custom called Koonering (also appearing as John Koonering, John Canoeing or John Kunering) in which men dressed as animals or disguised with various masks would parade around the plantation, dancing and making noise.

Parallel to the Christmas parties of their masters, the slaves would hold their own parties in the slave quarters. A big supper was usually prepared in front of the cabins, as a counterpart to the meals served to the whites at the mansion. After the war, most of the ex-slaves remembered these meals as being the most lavish they had ever seen, with a wide variety of dishes including "roasted chickens, ducks, turkeys, pigs, and maybe a wild ox, varieties of vegetables, biscuits, preserves, tarts, and pies." Dancing would inevitably follow, in the sounds of fiddles and banjos and guitars, and the white masters would sometimes come down to watch as well.

These were the plantation Christmases in antebellum South. Like everything else, they reflected deep divide between the slaves and their masters and the various ways in which the latter tried to give a more human face to the institution of slavery and justify themselves in the process. Talking about antebellum Christmases in the period following the war is more than just an act of nostalgia as well. The image of "smiles on black and white faces" at Christmas, opposed to the dreary present filled with out-of-control ex-slaves, and the defensive tone the memoirs assume when touching on this theme, all serve the same basic function: trying to soften and change the past and make it more palatable to the readers and to the writers' themselves.

[You can check out White Christmas in the Antebellum South, the first post of this series here.](#)

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