

Activity 2. Slave Drivers: Examining Evidence. Responses to Questions

1. Solomon Northup says he simulated or faked whippings in Source A. Cite another source where there is evidence of another slave driver faking whippings. Where was the plantation master when these faked whippings occurred according to these two sources? Why would a slave driver fake whippings?

Answer: Source F. provides evidence of another driver who faked whippings. Where was the Master when these faked whippings occurred? Faked whippings occurred in these two sources when the master was not physically close enough to actually visually observe what was taking place. Why would a slave driver fake whippings? By faking whippings the driver was meeting two of his own interests: 1) to appease the Master by give the impression of executing his job of “disciplining” the slaves and in so doing to avoid being whipped for insubordination or losing his status as slave driver and its privileges; and 2) to exercise his own belief that the whipping was morally wrong and also to demonstrate to the slaves he was looking out for their interests and at the same time resisting the authority of the Master and exerting his own agency. Having the trust of both the Master and the slaves was important for the Slave Driver in order to effectively execute his role of getting maximum productivity from his fellow slaves.

2. Which source/s provide(s) evidence that slave drivers could be “severe” and “harsh” in the how they executed their role ? Cite the source and underline relevant text:

Answers:

Source A. “When I first came to Epps, Tom, one of Roberts negroes, was driver. He was a burly fellow, and severe in the extreme.”

Source A. “Up to the time of my departure I had to wear a whip about my neck in the field. If Epps was present, I dared not show any lenity ... by refusing to perform the office.”

Source D. “They [slave drivers] had to demand a certain level of discipline and performance from the hands. When they did not get it, they used their whip. They asserted their authority and resolutely crushed, when they could, all challenges from below.”

Source E. “After receiving the instructions of their owners, they must forget even their own wives and children, and do all they can for ‘Master.’ If they do not do this, they must receive all that would be given the others. In this manner, their hearts and consciences are hardened, and they become educated to whipping, and lose all human feeling”

Source F. “Whan Mars was dere, he would lay it on ‘cause he had to.”

3. What source/s provide(s) evidence that some slave drivers were concerned with lowering the level of violence inflicted on their fellow slaves. Cite source and underline relevant text.

Source A. Northup says: “Practice makes perfect, truly; and during my eight years’ experience as a driver, I learned to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair’s breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them.”

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Source A. Northup says: *“If Epps was present, I dared not show any lenity . . . by refusing to perform the office. In that way, only, I escaped, and, withal, saved my companions much suffering, as it proved in the end.”* (By doing his duty as a slave driver when the Master was present Northup is saying that he earned his Master’s trust. By having that trust, he could then do much to prevent “much suffering” among his fellow slaves by “faking whippings” and also perhaps by other strategies.

Source D. Historian Eugene D. Genovese says: *“Consequently, they strove to mediate between the Big House and the quarters to lower the level of violence, to maintain order in the most humane way available which, to be sure, was not always all the humane.”*

Source F. Former slave West Turner says of slave driver, ‘Old Gabe’: *“But when ole Marsa wasn’t lookin’ he never would beat dem slaves. Would tie de slave up to one post and lash another one. Cose d slave would scream an’yell to satisfy Marsa...”*

4. Sources C and D present historians’ views of slave drivers. Which view comes closest to describing Solomon Northup as a slave driver and why?

Answer: *Source D. Northup is closer to Genovese’s description of a “man in between” than to Franklin’s view of a driver who takes his job “seriously” and is viewed as a “traitor” to the other slaves. Northup, takes his job very seriously but not in the way Franklin is referring to, i.e. doing the slave driver’s job by the book. Northup doesn’t necessarily always do the job “by the book” but is willing to take risks by simulating whippings to keep the master satisfied, while at the same time earning the trust and gratitude of his fellow slaves.*

He is also, at times, executing his own moral authority. Northup willingly admits that when the master is present he “dared not show any lenity... by refusing to perform the office. In that way, only, I escaped, and, withal, saved my companions much suffering, as it proved in the end.” In other words, if he’d not been willing to whip harshly in the presence of the master, he would not have earned the Master’s trust sufficiently to be able to get away with simulated whippings and other acts of humanity toward the slaves that saved “much suffering”.

Genovese points out that drivers had to live among the slaves as peers and therefore “had to be mediators between the Big House and the quarters to lower the level of violence, to maintain order in the most humane way available which, to be sure, was not always all the humane.” Clearly, Northup played this “mediation” role as well as he could, although it was at best a morally compromised position to be in.