**Punishment of Slaves**

Slaves were punished by whipping, shackling, hanging, beating, burning, mutilation, branding and imprisonment. Punishment was often meted out in response to disobedience or perceived infractions, but sometimes abuse was performed to re-assert the dominance of the master (or overseer) over the slave.

They were punished with knives, guns, field tools and nearby objects. The whip was the most common instrument used against a slave; one said “The only punishment that I ever heard or knew of being administered slaves was whipping”, although he knew several who were beaten to death for offenses such as “sassing” a white person, hitting another “negro”, “fussing” or fighting in quarters.

Slaves who worked and lived on plantations were the most frequently punished. Punishment could be administered by the plantation owner or master, his wife, children (white males) or (most often) the overseer or driver.

Slave overseers were authorized to whip and punish slaves. One overseer told a visitor, “Some Negroes are determined never to let a white man whip them and will resist you, when you attempt it; of course you must kill them in that case.” A former slave describes witnessing females being whipped: “They usually screamed and prayed, though a few never made a sound.” If the woman was pregnant, workers might dig a hole for her to rest her belly while being whipped. After slaves were whipped, overseers might order their wounds be burst and rubbed with turpentine and red pepper. An overseer reportly took a brick, ground it into a powder, mixed it with lard and rubbed it all over a slave.

A metal collar was put on a slave to remind him of his wrongdoing. Such collars were thick and heavy; they often had protruding spikes which made fieldwork difficult and prevented the slave from sleeping when lying down. Louis Cain, a former slave, describes seeing another slave punished: “One nigger run to the woods to be a jungle nigger, but massa cotched him with the dog and took a hot iron and brands him. Then he put a bell on him, in a wooden frame what slip over the shoulders and under the arms. He made that nigger wear the bell a year and took it off on Christmas for a present to him. It sho’ did make a good nigger out of him.”

Slaves were punished for a number of reasons: working too slowly, breaking a law (for example, running away), leaving the plantation without permission or insubordination. Myers and Massy describe the practices: “The punishment of deviant slaves was decentralized, based on plantations, and crafted so as not to impede their value as laborers.” Whites punished slaves publicly to set an example. A man named Harding describes an incident in which a woman assisted several men in a minor rebellion: “The women he hoisted up by the thumbs, whipp’d and slashed her with knives before the other slaves till she died.” Men and women were sometimes punished differently; according to the 1789 report of the Virginia Committee of the Privy Council, males were often shackled but women and girls were left free.

The branding of slaves for identification was common during the colonial era; however, by the nineteenth century it was used primarily as punishment. Mutilation (such as castration, or amputating ears) was a relatively common punishment during the colonial era and still used in 1830. Any punishment was permitted for runaway slaves, and many bore wounds from shotgun blasts or dog bites used by their captors.