

Outlying Farms — Slaves' Quarters

The majority of Mount Vernon's slave population live on the four outlying farms. Their chief duty on these farms is to tend the fields. An overseer, either slave or free white, lives at each farm to ensure that the work is done. Unlike the House for Families, where slaves live together, the slaves at outlying farms live in smaller structures that they build themselves. They work long hours, from dawn until dusk, and sometimes longer during the harvest. We will spend the day at River Farm, the largest of the four outlying farms.

The morning begins early for the slaves at River Farm. Lydia, a young mother, prepares for her day in the fields. It is harvest time and that means a long day's work ahead. Lydia is a strong, healthy woman, a much needed asset in the fields. More than half of the field hands are women in the prime of their lives, 17 to 40 years of age.

Lydia is running behind and must dress quickly. She wore her osnabrig shift to bed the night before. All she must do is pull on her petticoat that ties on over the shift. Since it is a warm day, she decides to go without shoes. As she leaves, Lydia grabs a cold hoeecake from last night's meal to eat on her way.

Lydia takes her three-year-old daughter to old Hannah, a slave who can no longer work the fields. Some women take their infants into the field, but Lydia's daughter is too old now. Her two sons are old enough to look after themselves and do chores around the house. Lydia expects them to chop wood for the fire and feed the chickens. She knows that the oldest will have to start working for General Washington in the next year or so. She hopes that he will stay on River Farm.

As she reaches the field, the sun is just beginning to rise. Davy, the overseer and a slave himself, assembles the field hands to

inform them of their day's duties. Since it is harvest, additional slaves have come from Mansion House Farm to help. Lydia hopes one of them is her husband George, a blacksmith. Unfortunately, he is not among them.

Lydia is assigned to cut and pile corn stalks. The fall sun is hot and the work is slow. She is tired, but it is Saturday and she looks forward to George's visit tonight. As the mid-morning meal approaches, Davy tells Lydia that her daughter has taken ill. She must go to her.

Lydia leaves the field, worried about her daughter and anxious to return to her small cabin. George and Lydia built the cabin in the early spring with the help of friends. It is a small, one-room log house, approximately 12' by 16'. Spaces between the logs are filled in or daubed with mud. The wooden chimney is made of stacks of wood that lean away from the house. A long stick supports the stacks. In case of fire, the stick can be pulled away and the chimney will fall to the ground, away from the house. It usually works, but last year a small boy was badly burned when a chimney unexpectedly collapsed. Two small windows covered with shutters offer the only light into the cabin. Most of the time it is dark and smoky inside, since the chimney does not draw well.

Lydia has few belongings — a pallet bed, a small wooden table, a bench, a chair, and a wooden stool. All the furniture is made of rough pine. The floor is bare packed earth. By the fireplace sits a cast-iron pot with a large dipper, made from a gourd. Lydia's clean clothes, the newest of the two suits of clothing she receives a year, hang from a peg on the wall alongside her daughter's.

Lydia must wait until Davy returns from the day's work to ask him to send for Dr. Craik. Perhaps by then her daughter's fever will break. In the meantime, Lydia decides to prepare a good stew for her family's evening meal. Next to the house is a small garden

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where she grows peas, squash, melons, beans, and yams. She uses this food to add some variety to her rationed diet of cornmeal and salted fish. She is lucky today though, because she has meat for the stew. She adds it to the squirrel her neighbor, Johnny, gave her yesterday. Tonight they will have quite a feast. Lydia needs to make another colonoware bowl to replace the one she broke last week. It now lies in the cabin's yard in pieces.

Maybe George will bring some rum tonight. That would be a nice addition to the meal. The last time he visited he brought Lydia an iron hoe that he removed from the blacksmith inventory. The hoe makes tending her garden much easier. George was allowed to go into town on Tuesday and bought himself a new clay pipe. Maybe he had some extra money for something special for her or the children.

Twilight falls and the field hands return. Lydia's daughter appears to be past the worst of her sickness. Soon Joe, the postilion from the Mansion, arrives with some bad news. George has not been producing quality work and Mr. Bloxham will not allow him to travel. Lydia is upset, but decides to not let a good stew go to waste. She invites her neighbors, Johnny and Esther, to join her for supper. After their meal, some of the men play marbles. One of the men plays the jaw harp and the night passes on until the early hours of the morning. Sunday is a day of rest. Tomorrow is a day the field slaves will enjoy. ♦

Comparing Lives and Lifestyles – Modern Teens and Colonial Slaves

Personal space and possessions

- Read "Outlying Farms – Slave Quarters", the story about a day in the life of Lydia, a young female slave at Mount Vernon.
- After completing the reading you will draw Lydia's cabin and possessions as described in the story on one side of the graph paper. Draw the cabin based on the dimensions described in the reading. Use 1 square on paper to represent 1 foot in real life.
- Draw and label Lydia's major possessions that were described in the story and place them inside the drawing of her cabin. Unless specifically stated, you'll put these items wherever they would best fit. Use the same scale of 1 square = 1 foot in real life and estimate the size of the items.
- At the bottom of the page, list all of Lydia's possessions, as described in the story.

NEXT...for homework

- On the other side of your graph paper, draw an outline of your bedroom as accurately as you're able. Draw your room using the same scale you used for Lydia's cabin (1 square = 1 foot).
- Draw and label some of your larger, more important, belongings where they are located in your room. This would include items such as a bed, computer, desk, dresser, stereo, fish tank, thigh master, etc.
- On the bottom of the paper (or in the margins) list all of the items you own – your possessions. Group similar items together, such as "12 pairs of pants" or "40 computer games". Try to be as thorough as possible. You may find some things you forgot you owned as a result of this activity!
- Lastly, write a paragraph to explain why a modern teen should never utter the phrase, "I'm treated no better than a slave." Think of specific examples from this activity as well as other facts you have learned about slavery during this unit. Use a separate sheet of paper, if necessary.