



Freedom and Slavery in Plantation-Era Florida



(Florida State Archives)

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many people came to Florida. Some, like Zephaniah Kingsley, sought to make their fortunes by obtaining land and establishing plantations. Others were forced to come to Florida to work on those plantations, their labor providing wealth to the people who owned them. Some of the enslaved would later become free landowners, struggling to keep their footing in a dangerous time of shifting alliances and politics. All of these people played a part in the history of Kingsley Plantation.

The Kingsley Family

In 1814, Zephaniah Kingsley moved to Fort George Island and established a plantation. He brought his wife and three children (their fourth was born at this plantation). His wife, Anna Madgigine Jai, was from Senegal, Africa, and was purchased by Kingsley as a slave. She actively participated in plantation management, acquiring her own land and slaves when freed by Kingsley in 1811.

With an enslaved work force of about sixty, the Fort George plantation produced Sea Island cotton. Kingsley continued to acquire property in northeast Florida and eventually possessed more than 32,000 acres, including four major plantation complexes and more than 200 slaves.

Changing Times

The United States acquired Florida from Spain in 1821. Harsh political, economic, and social reforms swept in with the new government. The Spanish had relatively liberal policies regarding issues of race, but American territorial law brought many changes. At a time when many slaveholders feared slave rebellions, oppressive laws were enacted and conditions for Florida's black population, free and enslaved, deteriorated.

Zephaniah Kingsley was against the restrictive laws, arguing the importance of free blacks in society. He advocated Spain's three class system, where enslaved people existed at the bottom tier, free blacks the middle, and white people as the top class. His pleas were ignored, and over the next two decades, laws were enacted that severely restricted the civil liberties of free blacks.

Despite the danger of being ostracized, Kingsley crusaded to alter the views of southern law makers. He wrote a series of editorials, speeches, and addresses, which

became public and widely circulated. He became best known for his *Treatise*, published in four editions between 1828 and 1834. His words were read throughout the North and the South. Kingsley's writings warned of the dangers of a society based on racial prejudice, but, at the same time, advocated the continuance of slavery.

Frustrated that his words were rejected, and to escape what he called a "spirit of intolerant prejudice," Kingsley moved his family to Haiti, the only free black republic in the hemisphere, in 1837. There, Kingsley established a colony for his family and some of his former slaves.

In 1839, Fort George Island was sold to his nephew Kingsley Beatty Gibbs. Zephaniah Kingsley continued to own slaves until his death in 1843.

Slave Quarters

A fifth of a mile from the plantation home of Zephaniah Kingsley are the remains of twenty-five tabby cabins. Arranged in a semicircle, there were thirty-two cabins originally, sixteen on either side of the road. This area is the slave quarters, homes of the enslaved men, women, and children who lived and worked at Kingsley Plantation from 1814 to 1865.

The homes are made out of tabby. Tabby represents a blend of West African, Spanish, and Native American cultures.

By the early eighteenth century, tabby appeared as a building material along both the west coast of Africa and the coastal south of the United States.

Oyster shells, harvested from Native American shell middens, were first cooked in a kiln. The cooked shells provided the lime to mix with sand and water to make cement. Whole shells were often added into the cement, as can be seen in the tabby concrete of the slave quarters.

Slave Daily Life

Slave labor on this Sea Island cotton plantation was performed according to the “task system.” Under this system, each slave was assigned a specified amount of work for the day. Upon completion of this task, the slave was permitted to use the balance of the day as he or she chose.

Under the task system, it was required that slaves raise a variety of crops in their own gardens. These products could supplement the slaves’ plantation rations, or be traded or sold through the plantation owner.

Choice of crops grown in these gardens often reflected the slave’s African heritage and provided a way to pass on traditions.



Kingsley Plantation Slave Quarters, post-Civil War
(Florida State Archives)

Family Life

Most aspects of slave family life were influenced by the needs and attitudes of the plantation owner. Legally, slave marriages were not recognized; the law dealt more with the issues of ownership. Children of enslaved parents belonged to the mother’s owner. Financial difficulties or death of the owner could prompt sales of slaves, separating families.

Medical attention for slaves varied from home remedies to physicians hired by the plantation owner – and could depend on how the injury or illness affected the slave’s ability to work.

Tasks often brought slaves into close contact with their owners. One example is a slave’s task to care for the owner’s child on a daily basis, spending more of the day with that child than her own.



Slave woman and George W. Gibbs
(National Park Service)

Our Heritage

Some aspects of slave life were not controlled by the plantation owner. Within their community, slaves created a culture that included elements of their African heritage. Slaves expressed themselves in music, dance, and religious practices that were their own and did not reflect the customs of their owners. Frequently these expressions were hidden, as in lyrics with double meanings and religious services held away from the watchful eye of the owner.

Many aspects of American culture are directly linked to the plantation period. From southern cooking to popular music, aspects of African culture survived slavery and are present today.

The buildings and stories of the people who lived at Kingsley Plantation are a reminder of a turbulent time in American history.

Contact Us: 904.251.3537
www.nps.gov/timu