Fitzgerald

Background on the Slave Narratives

**The Slave Narratives**

* 2,300 primary source documents - autobiographical accounts of slavery
  + Also took photographs of those who were interviewed
  + Gave former slaves the ability to preserve their own memories of slavery
  + Housed in the Library of Congress
  + Available online at the Library of Congress Website - Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938
    - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>
* Collected by national government through the Federal Writers' Project
  + During the Great Depression (1936 - 1938)
  + About 100,000 former slaves still alive at this point
* Method
  + Employed out-of-work writers to interview thousands of former slaves in 17 states
  + Collected responses to a list of topics
  + Recorded answers on tape or took notes
  + Typed a transcript of the recordings
* Language
  + Instructions to the interviewers given by the director of the Federal Writers' Project were that "details of the interview should be reported as accurately as possible in the language of the original statements."
    - Tried to capture in writing the spoken speech patterns of those interviewed
      * " in the vernacular" - as opposed to in standard english
      * Speech patterns not always accurate
    - Reasons
      * Historical accuracy
      * Inappropriate and disrespectful for the writer to change the words the person being interviewed chose to use
  + Words used were words of the former slaves
    - Acceptable within the historical period of recording
    - Today may be offensive or disturbing to some

**Meaning of Terms - Ideology, Policy, Practice, Institution**

* The South developed a way of thinking, an **ideology**, that allowed the white population to think of the black population as property, not humans.
* Whites began to follow certain standard **practices,** or ways of doing things, that dehumanized the black population.
  + Anyone who didn't follow these practices experienced negative consequences in the community
* Certain official **policies** were actually put into law.
  + The collection of these laws was called the slave codes.
* An **institution** is an established set of laws, practices and customs, so this ideology and these practices and policies created the institution of slavery.

**The Cotton Gin invented in 1790 by Eli Whitney**

* Gin – means “Engine”
* Cleans the seeds out of cotton
  + The kind of cotton that grows in America very difficult to clean
* Before Cotton Gin –
  + seeds had to be picked out of cotton fibers by hand
  + laborer could only clean a pound of cotton/day
  + Thus growing cotton was not profitable – couldn’t clean enough to sell enough to make a profit
* With Cotton Gin -
  + Worker could clean 50 times more cotton with the gin
* Cotton growing becomes profitable just as industrialization speeds up the production of cloth
  + Demand for many new laborers to grow cotton - INCREASES DEMAND FOR SLAVES

Examples of Policies and Practices used to build Institution of Slavery presented in *Unchained Memories*

* **Practice** - Selling of children away from families
  + no warning
  + never saw mom again
  + **Consequences** –
    - Whites are able to weaken slaves by denying them the strength family gives
    - devastation to parent – story of mom who fell off wagon and rolled on ground
    - Pride in the naming of the woman who was your mother apparent in all the narratives
    - Requests for others to raise child – tradition of extended families
* **Policy** – White owners had to keep a book recording all of their purchases and sales of slaves
  + **Reason**
    - Government can use the records for taxation and representation, as per the 3/5ths Clause.
  + **Consequences**
    - Black people have information on their lives.
* **Practice** - Black child bought as slave for younger white child (often 2 or 3-year-old)
  + Purpose
    - White child taught to be master, to give orders, and learns to see Black child as property
    - Black child humiliated, made to feel less even than one younger than he
  + **Consequences** –
    - Black child could benefit from education given to white child
    - Friendships could develop
* **Policy** - Illegal to educate black people
  + **Consequences** –
    - Whites are able to fool themselves into believing they are superior
    - Those who worked in house could steal book - Taught self in great secrecy at night
      * but ***most*** unable to find a way to learn
    - Could not show any intelligence or desire to learn for fear of whipping or being sold away
* **Practice -** Class of white people based on whether they owned slaves or not
  + Only two classes of white people
    - those who owned slaves
    - those who did not own slaves
  + **Consequence**
    - slave ownership a status symbol - great motivation for ownership of slaves even if not needed for labor
* **Practice** - Mixed race slaves, often related to white family of the house, often made servants
  + **Purposes** –
    - Whites can constantly watch them
    - Created classes in the black population – field hands v house servants, with the purpose of dividing black community to weaken
  + **Consequences** -
    - Separated mixed race slaves from both black population (and black family members) as well as white family, for whom they were just a servant
* **Policy** - Whipping standard punishment
  + Method – use cat-of -nine-tails, slave is staked out naked, others forced to watch, cross patterns made to take out hunks of flesh, salt rubbed in the wounds
  + **Purposes** –
    - Incredible pain
    - Fear
    - Salt – increase pain, prevent infection, increase scarring
    - Scarring – permanent mark of disobedience to other whites, symbol of terror to other slaves
    - Unlike beating, didn’t prevent future work