

## Plantation Rules

*Masters made the rules on their plantations. The rules defined in general terms what the master expected slaves to do and not to do. Rules differed greatly from master to master, and, as circumstances required, they had to be changed. In most cases, masters communicated their rules in face-to-face encounters with their slaves. Some masters recorded their rules for their own reference or the use of an overseer or stranger. Bennet Barrow, the owner of nearly 200 slaves on his cotton plantation in Louisiana, noted his plantation rules in his diary on May 1, 1838, the source of the following selection. Barrow's rules illustrate not only his specific concerns but also the underlying question that every master confronted: How best to get slaves to do what their masters wanted?*

Edwin Adams Davis, ed., *Plantation Life in the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, 1836–1846, as Reflected in the Diary of Bennet H. Barrow* (New York: AMS Press, 1943).

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### **Bennet Barrow**

#### ***Highland Plantation Journal, May 1, 1838***

No negro shall leave the place at any time without my permission, or in my absence that of the Driver the driver in that case being responsible, for the cause of such absence, which ought never to be omitted to be enquired into —

The Driver should never leave the plantation, unless on business of the plantation

No negro shall be allowed to marry out of the plantation

No negro shall be allowed to sell anything without my express permission I have ever maintained the doctrine that my negroes have no time Whatever, that they are always liable to my call without questioning for a moment the propriety of it, I adhere to this on the grounds of expediency and right. The verry security of the plantation requires that a general and uniform control over the people of it should be exercised. Who are to protect the plantation from the intrusions of ill designed persons When evry body is a broad? Who can tell the moment When a plantation might be threatened with destruction from Fire — could the flames be arrested if the negroes are scattered throughout the neighborhood, seeking their amusement. Are these not duties of great importance, and in which evry negro himself is deeply interested to render this part of the rule justly applicable, however, it would be necessary that such a settled arrangement should exist on the plantation as to make it unnecessary for a negro to leave it. . . . You must, therefore make him as comfortable at Home as possible, affording him, What is essentially necessary for his happiness — you must provide for him Your self and by that means creat in him a habit of perfect dependence on you — Allow it ounce to be understood by a negro that he is to provide for himself, and you that moment give him an undeniable claim on you for a portion of his time to make this provision, and should you from necessity, or any other cause, encroach

upon his time — disappointment and discontent are seriously felt — if I employ a labourer to perform a certain quantum of work per day and I agree to pay him, a certain amount for the performance of said work When he had accomplished it I of course have no further claim on him for his time or services — but how different is it with a slave — Who can calculate the exact profit or expence of a slave one year with another, if I furnish my negro with evry necessary of life, without the least care on his part — if I support him in sickness, however long it may be, and pay all his expenses, though he does nothing — if I maintain him in his old age, when he is incapable of rendering either himself or myself any service, am I not entitled to an exclusive right to his time good feelings, and a sense of propriety would all ways prevent unnecessary employment on the Sabbath, and policy would check any exaction of excessive labor in common. . . . I never give a negro a Pass to go from home without he first states particularly where he wishes to go, and assigns a cause for his desiring to be absent. if he offers a good reason, I never refuse, but otherwise, I never grant him a Pass, and feel satisfied that no practice is more prejudicial to the community, and to the negros themselves, than that of giving them general Passes to go, Where they please I am so opposed to this plan that I never permit any negro to remain on my plantation, whose Pass does not authorize him expressly to come to it — Some think that after a negro has done his work it is an act of oppression to confine him to the plantation, when he might be strolling about the neighborhood for his amusement and recreation — this is certainly a mistaken humanity. Habit is evry thing — The negro who is accustomed to remain constantly at Home, is just as satisfied with the society on the plantation as that which he would find elsewhere, and the verry restrictions laid upon him being equally imposed on others, he does not feel them, for society is kept at Home for them. . . . No rule that I have stated is of more importance than that relating to negroes marrying out of the plantation it seems to me, from What observations I have made, it is utterly impossible to have any method, or regularity when the men and women are permitted to take wives and husbands indiscriminately off the plantation, negroes are verry much desposed to pursue a course of this kind, and without being able to assign any good reason, though the motive can be readily perceived, and is a strong one with them, but one that tend not in the Least to the benefit of the Master, or their ultimate good. the inconveniences that at once strikes one as arising out of such a practice are these —

First — in allowing the men to marry out of the plantation, you give them an uncontrolable right to be frequently absent

2d — Wherever their wives live, there they consider their homes, consequently they are indifferent to the interest of the plantation to which they actually belong —

3d — it creates a feeling of independance, from being, of right, out of the control of the masters for a time —

4th — They are repeatedly exposed to temptation from meeting and associating with negroes from different directions, and with various habits & vices —

5th — Where there are several women on a plantation, they may have husbands from different plantations belonging to different persons. These men posses different habits are acustomed to different treatment, and have different privileges, so your plantation every day becomes a rendezvous of a medly of characters. Negroes who have the privilege of a monthly Passes to go

where they please, and at any hour that they say they have finished their work, to leave their Master's plan'tn come into yours about midday, When your negroes are at work, and the Driver engaged, they either take possession of houses their wives live — and go to sleep or stroll about in perfect idleness — feeling themselves accessible to every thing. What an example to those at work at the time — can any circumstance be more Intrusive of good order and contentment

Sixthly — When a man and his wife belong to different persons, they are liable to be separated from each other, as well as their children, whether by caprice of either of the parties, or When there is a sale of property — this keeps up an unsettled state of things, and gives rise to repeated new connections. . . . I prefer giving them money of Christmas to their making any thing, thereby creating an interest with you and yours. . . . I furnish my negroes regularly with their full share of allowance weakly. 4 pound & 5 pound of meat to evry thing that goes in the field — 2 pound over 4 years 1½ between 15 months and 4 years old — Clear good meat — I give them cloths twice a year, two suits — one pair shoes for winter evry third year a blanket. . . . I supply them with tobacco if a negro is suffered to sell any thing he chooses without any inquiry being made, a spirit of trafficking at once is created. to carry this on, both means and time are necessary, neither of which is he of right possessed. A negro would not be content to sell only What he raises or makes either corn (should he be permitted ) or poultry, or the like, but he would sell part of his allowance allso, and would be tempted to commit robberies to obtain things to sell. Besides, he would never go through his work carefully, particularly When other engagements more interesting and pleasing are constantly passing through his mind, but would be apt to slight his work That the general conduct of master has a verry considerable influence on the character and habits of his slave, will be readily admitted. When a master is uniform in his own habits & conduct, his slaves know his wishes, and What they are to expect if they act in opposition to, or conformity with them, therefore, the more order and contentment Exist.

A plantation might be considered as a piece of machinery, to operate successfully, all of its parts should be uniform and exact, and the impelling force regular and steady; and the master, if he pretended at all to attend to his business, should be their impelling force, if a master exhibits no extraordinary interest in the proceedings on his plantation, it is hardly to be expected that any other feelings but apathy, and perfect indifference could exist with his negroes, and it would be unreasonable for him . . . to expect attention and exaction from those, Who have no other interest than to avoid the displeasure of their master. in the different departments on the plantation as much destinction and separation are kept up as possible with a view to create responsibility — The Driver has a directed charge of every thing, but there are subordinate persons, who take the more immediate care of the different departments. For instance, I make one persons answerable for my stock. Horses cattle hogs, &c. another the plantation untensials &c. one the sick — one the poultry. another providing for and taking care of the children whose parents are in the field &c. As good a plan as could be adopted, to establish security and good order on the plantation is that of constituting a watch at night, consisting of two or more men. they are answerable for all trespasses committed during their watch, unless they produce the offender. or give immediate alarm. When the protection of a plantation is left to the negroes generally, you at once percieve the truth of the maxim that what is evry one's business, is no one's business. but when a regular watch is Established, Each in turn performs his tour of duty, so that the most careless is at times, made to be observant and watchful — the very act of organizing a watch bespeaks a care and attention on the part of a master, Which has the due influence on the negro —

Most of the above rules “in fact with the exception of the last” I have adopted since 1833. And with success — get your negroes ounce disciplined and planting is a pleasure — A Hell without it never have an Overseer — Every negro to come up Sunday after their allowance Clean & head well combed — it gives pride to every one, the fact of master feeling proud of them, When clean &c.

Never allow any man to talk to your negroes, nothing more injurious.