

Using RICE PLANTATION Tools

Background

Working on a Rice Plantation

Growing rice was a difficult job. It took many months and required many different skills. Rice was a relatively new crop in America and planters knew very little about how it was grown. Slaves who were captured in West Africa were very familiar with the process—their knowledge made it possible for their masters to succeed.

Slaves on rice plantations worked under what was known as the task system. While slaves on cotton and tobacco plantations worked for the master from sunrise to sundown, rice plantation slaves had a specific task that they had to complete each day. Once they finished that job, they could spend the rest of the day doing things for themselves.

Still, slaves on rice plantations worked long, tiring days. Rice grows in water, and snakes, alligators, and dangerous insects that live in that water made the slave's jobs extremely dangerous. The marshy fields where rice was grown were breeding grounds for mosquitoes carrying diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. Because they were continually exposed to these dangers, slaves on rice plantations usually died much sooner than slaves on other types of plantations.

Some Things to Think About

World rice production totals nearly 600 million tons annually.

Today in the United States, people operating large machinery perform all of the processes associated with the growing rice. But in many countries around the world, these tasks are still performed by hand.

Rice is a type of grass with narrow, tapered leaves and grows from about 2 to 6 feet tall. Its edible grain is the primary food for over half the world's population.

Rice is used for a variety of non-food products. The inedible rice hull is used as fuel, fertilizer, and insulation. The straw from the leaves and stems is used as bedding for animals and for weaving roofs, hats, baskets, and sandals.

Archaeological evidence clearly shows that rice was cultivated (grown) in Thailand at least 6,000 years ago.

Facts excerpted from the BBC daily news April 4, 2002

Visit the Museum

You can learn more about slave life on a plantation by visiting the National Museum American History's Hands On History Room.

How Was It Used?

Historians learn about the past by studying objects. See what you can learn about life on a rice plantation by studying photographs of three objects and trying to figure out how they were used. When you're done, compare your descriptions to our answers.

Object 1



What was this tool used for?

- ▶ **Clue 1:** After the rice was harvested, this object was used to separate the grains of rice from the stalks that they grew on. This process is called threshing.
- ▶ **Clue 2:** This wooden object is 3 feet long and weighs 25 pounds. The piece of wood on the top is attached to the pole on the bottom with a piece of leather.

Describe how you think this tool was used:

How Was It Used?

Object 2



After the rice had been threshed, slaves took it away in baskets like this and performed the next stage of processing. How was it used?

- ▶ **Clue 1:** It is wide and flat.
- ▶ **Clue 2:** It was used outside.

Describe how you think this tool was used:

Object 3



After the tough brown husk was removed from each grain of rice, plantation owners could sell their rice for a much higher price. How was this tool used?

- ▶ **Clue 1:** It was very important to be gentle with the rice so that the grains didn't break.
- ▶ **Clue 2:** Using this tool was one of the most skilled jobs on the plantation.

Describe how you think this tool was used:

Answers

How It Was Used.

Object 1: Flail

The first step in getting rice ready to eat is called “threshing.” Slaves used a flail by repeatedly raising it over the head and bringing it down hard on the stalks of cut rice. This separated the rice grains from the long, wheat-like stalks. The grains of rice were then swept into a pile.



Slaves using a flails.

Object 2: Winnowing Basket (or Fanner Basket)

Once the rice had been threshed, women put the rice grains in flat winnowing baskets and gently tossed them into the air. The wind blew the chaff away and the rice fell back into the basket. Winnowing was a hot, dusty job!

Slaves who had grown too old or frail for heavy work around the plantation made the baskets from sweet-smelling grass that grew by the ocean.



Slave using a winnowing basket.

Object 3: Mortar and Pestle

The final step of processing rice is called “whitening.” The sides of the pestle (the long shaped pole) gently ground the rice around the mortar (the bowl) so that the hull fell off. The pointed end of the pestle gently cracks and loosened the tough outer hull of the rice from the softer, edible center. Only a small amount of rice could be processed at a time. Trying to process too much rice at once resulted in broken grains that were worth less money.



Slaves using a mortar and pestle.