

# **“Slavery in Florida” 1840’s-1850’s**

An educational module based on primary sources available at the Florida Historical Society’s  
Library of Florida History  
Cocoa, FL

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## “Slavery in Florida” Module Introduction

Slavery is a sensitive topic that is often difficult to discuss. However, it remains an extremely important part of American history, especially in the South. In that regard, Florida was no exception to the South’s systematic exploitation of individuals of African descent in its quest for economic advancement. In fact, African slaves were of particular importance in Florida from an early point in its history. Historian Larry Eugene Rivers notes that African slaves were of vital significance during Spanish rule in Florida as a result of the native Indian populations being decimated by war, disease, and mistreatment, combined with a shortage of Europeans that resulted in a demand for African laborers that only increased after the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> This established an early precedent of slavery in the state. However, Rivers notes that slavery under Spanish rule had a more “relaxed racial climate” and often allowed slaves to have more rights than the slavery system of the Old South, which Florida will come to adopt.<sup>2</sup>

The slavery system of the “Old South,” as it pertains to Florida, will be the focus of this module. Historian Julia Floyd Smith writes, “Slavery was first of all a labor system, and the primary concern of the owner was getting work out of his slaves.”<sup>3</sup> In this system, slavery existed simultaneously as both a cruel and brutal institution as well as a well-oiled economic machine. On large plantations, things were kept running through the efforts of men known as overseers. Many of these men were from the class of poor farmers who felt contempt for slaves, blaming them for their poor economic status.<sup>4</sup> Slaves typically feared these men since they were the ones responsible for disciplining them, often with whips and other means of physical punishment. Other slaves felt the need to rebel against overseers who were seen as the disposable middleman between the slaves and their owners. The result was often overseers who ruled with an iron fist. Overseers penned most of the documents in this module. They provided some of the best first hand accounts of daily life on plantations in the South.

The primary documents that will be discussed in this module will come from the 1840s and 1850s, prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. Several of these documents will come from the records of the El Destino Plantation. El Destino Plantation was a Florida cotton plantation about twelve miles east of Tallahassee straddling western Jefferson County and eastern Leon County.<sup>5</sup> The plantation was first owned by John Nuttall, who purchased it in 1828. When John Nuttall died, his son William Nuttall bought the plantation. The plantation was eventually passed to Mary Savage Nuttall, William Nuttall’s daughter, who was sold an additional nearby plantation named Chemonie. Ultimately, Mary Savage Nuttall’s husband, George Noble Jones of Savannah, would come to own both plantations.<sup>6</sup> While George Noble Jones may have owned the plantation, he was mostly an absentee owner who relied on overseers to ensure work on his plantation got done.

Not all slaves were bought, sold, or rented by plantation owners exclusively. Slaves were used to accomplish a variety of labor tasks. For example, one of the documents in this module comes from a set of records concerning David L. Palmer and Darius Ferris, two residents of Jacksonville who were partners in providing timber for the U.S. Navy. Unfortunately, they were later accused of cutting Live Oak on public lands and face trial.<sup>7</sup> However, before this, they used slave labor to undertake their business. The bill of sale for a young slave from these men’s records provides a sobering look at the true status of slaves as property to be bought, sold, and used in the Southern economy until their value diminished.

Slavery was a ruthless institution, yet it still managed to embed itself deeply into the everyday reality of the South. In fact, it is impossible to understand the culture of early Florida without examining the topic of slavery. While slavery was present long before Florida became a part of the United States, it was only more systematic and vicious once Florida gained its statehood. Once Florida was accepted as a state, Floridians

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<sup>1</sup> Larry E. Rivers, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1973), 53.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and James David Smith, eds., *Florida Plantation Records from the Papers of George Noble Jones* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 43.

<sup>6</sup> *El Destino Plantation Collection*, Library of Florida History, The Florida Historical Society at Cocoa, FL 32922.

<sup>7</sup> *Holmes-Palmer-Ferris Papers*, Library of Florida History, The Florida Historical Society at Cocoa, FL 32922.

became more accepting of the Old South ideas and ideals.<sup>8</sup> This will ultimately set it on the path of secession by the time Civil War broke out in 1861. Examining these documents from collections available through the Florida Historical Society provides a small, yet intriguing glimpse into the daily reality of slavery in 19<sup>th</sup> century Florida.

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<sup>8</sup> Rivers, *Slavery in Florida*, 14.

## Primary Source Guide Page

### **Q: What is a Primary Source?**

A: According to the Library of Congress, “Primary sources are the raw materials of history — original documents and objects which were created at the time under study.” The key to remember is that primary sources were created during the time period being studied.

### **Q: Are primary sources exclusively written documents?**

A: No! It’s true that many primary sources take the form of written accounts, like newspapers, letters, and journals. However, primary sources can take many forms. Remember the key to a primary source is that it was created in the time period being studied. Therefore, photographs, film footage, paintings, maps, clothing, architecture, everyday objects, and many other items can also be seen as primary sources.

### **Q: Is my textbook a primary source?**

A: No. Resources like textbooks, biographies, research papers, histories, and encyclopedias are not primary sources. This is because they were created after the time period being studied. Therefore, sources about certain periods in history, but not created during that period of history, are not primary sources.

### **Q: If textbooks and similar sources created after the period of history being studied are not primary sources, what are they? Are they reliable?**

A: These types of sources are known as secondary sources. However, that does not mean they do not contain good information. Textbooks, histories, biographies, and other sources about historical periods are constructed from the information found in primary sources. Therefore, the information contained in primary sources give people in later time periods the necessary information to create summaries and draw conclusions about the past. Furthermore, many secondary sources include primary sources like photographs or excerpts of personal accounts to support their interpretations of the past.

### **Q: What should I look for when I am studying a primary source?**

A: There are many things to look for when viewing a primary source. Of course, it depends on the nature of the source you are looking at. For example, if you are reading a letter from someone you should look for things like the type of language used, author biases, dates mentioned, the purpose of the letter, and to whom it was being addressed. Naturally, if you are viewing something like a painting as a primary source you will be looking for different things, such as what the painting depicts, what type of materials were used in its creation, and an artist’s signature.

### **Q: Why study primary sources?**

A: Primary sources are the most important link we have to the past. They reveal the important events, thoughts, opinions, styles, attitudes, and customs of the past. Primary sources are the most dependable way to get information about the past because they were created by those who lived it.

### Source #1

1841 Letter from Perry A. Barrington to George Jones. Reports on the El Destino cotton crop and the health of the slaves. Dated El Destino, June 11, 1841. 1 sheet folded; 2 pages of writing.

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Eldisteno [El Destino] June the 11- 1841

Mr Jones

Sir I take this opportunity to drop you a few lines to inform you the condishion [condition] of your crop the cotton at Eldisteno [El Destino] is very Good the cotton at vases is good what the is standing the stand is very Bad and in consequence of the dry weather But little of the replanted cotton has stood we are very dry at this time My corn at Eldisteno is engord [engorged] very much the corn—at vases is doing very well as yet as it is Later than my corn at Eldisteno—the hands has Been quite sickly sence [since] you left My sick List will [illegible] five a days sence [since] you Left I now [know] at this time Seventeen hands sick three dies is a disintary [dysentery ] from drinking Bad water at vases— I think is the cause I had cotton Blossoms on the 30 of May the wind is from the East an [and] not Much appearance of rain the weather has Bin (been) too dry for Every thing But cotton cotton crops is Generally Good. I have comenced [commenced] hauling leaves for making manure— — I shall soon commene [commence] [illegible] the sick? as soon as My hands Get up the hands you sent out worck[work] very well I have seen abt [about] the people cloathes [clothes] I sent to cheemouonee [Chemonie] 50 yards of woven Burgs and [illegible] and two of Blue homespun— It is very sickly in Tallahassee this is the 3 letter I have rote [wrote] you tow to Savannah- Mr. Gambele(?) told me he had just reeved [received] a letter from you and he had not heard from you Me that indused [induced] me to rite [write] you suner [sooner] than I would of done we have now indian newes [news] I will rite [write] you in about three weeweeks [weeks] and then I will send the measures of the Negres [Negroes] feet I nothing more at Present I remain yours

Respectfully Perry A. Barrington

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#### Key terms:

- **Dysentery:** a disease of the lower intestine caused by infection with bacteria, protozoans or parasites and marked by severe diarrhea, inflammation, and the passage of blood and mucus.
- **Vases:** This is believed to be in reference to “Vass” a field at El Destino. It may also be the name of another field at the Plantation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and James David Smith, eds., *Florida Plantation Records from the Papers of George Noble Jones* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 590.

Eldestina June the 11 - 1841

Mr Jones

Sir I take this opportunity to drop you  
a few lines to inform you the condition of your crop  
The cotton at Eldestina is very good the cotton  
at Nases is good what the is standing the stand  
is very bad and in consequence of the dry weather  
But little of the replanted cotton has stood we are  
very dry at this time My corn at Eldestina is  
in good very much the corn at Nases is doing  
very well as yet as it is later than the corn  
at Eldestina - The hands has been quite sickly  
since you left My sick list will arrange  
from a day since you left I have  
at this time Seventeen hands sick the disease is  
a dysentery from drinking bad water at Nases  
I think is the cause I had cotton Blossoms on  
the 30 of May the wind is from the East and not  
much appearance of rain the weather has  
been too dry for every thing But cotton  
cotton crops is generally good I have commenced  
hauling leaves for making manure  
I shall soon commence opening the ditches  
as soon as my hands get up the hands you sent  
out work very well I have given all the  
the people cloaths I sent to Cheesmore 50 yards  
of muslin Burys and out two pieces of Blue Thompson

it is very sickly in Tallahassee this is the 3 letter  
I have rate you I rate you to Savannah  
Mr Gamble told me he had just received a letter  
from you and you had not heard from ~~you~~  
me that engaged me to rate you sooner  
then I would of done we have some  
indian news I will rate you in about  
three weeks and then I will send the  
measures of the Negroes feet & nothing more  
at Present I remain yours  
Respectfully Perry & Barrington

Letter.  
P. A. Barrington.  
June 11<sup>th</sup> 1841.



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Mr. Geo. Jones. Esq.  
Care of  
Messrs Curtis Bolton Fox & Livingston  
New York



## **Source #1 Questions:**

**Directions: Answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Use the document to support your answers whenever possible.**

1. What audience was this document written for? How do you know? Use quotes from the document to support your answer.
2. The slaves at the El Destino Plantation are mentioned alongside topics such as crop health and the weather. What does this indicate about the role of slaves in a plantation economy?
3. What details does this document provide into the lives of slaves on a Southern plantation?
4. What does the phonetic spellings and imperfect grammar indicate about the person writing this document? What type of focus would the individual writing this document have had? Does this surprise you?

**Source #2**

*El Destino Collection: Operating Papers 1856, List of Negroes at El Destino Plantation with Ages and Quality Rankings*

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July 1856

A list of Negroes on G. -Jones' El Destino Plantation. –

	Age	Quality		Age	Quality
Ann	46	$\frac{3}{4}$	Martha	29	1
John Sail	25	1	Aberdeen	27	1
Lucy Sail	19	1	Whatley	5	
Anthony	1 $\frac{1}{2}$		Mary	2	
Jane Sail	18	1	Mini	3	
Betsey	1 $\frac{1}{2}$				
Sam	17	1	Nancy Flora	40	$\frac{1}{2}$
Lymas	14	$\frac{3}{4}$	Christiana	8	
Jerry	11	$\frac{1}{4}$	Kate	60	0
William +			Netta	34	1
			Caroline +	18	
Prince	53	1	Mary	13	
Nancy Isham	34	1	Seopia	11	
Phoebe	17	1	Alethea	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	
Louisa	15	1	Easter	$\frac{1}{2}$	
Jerry	4 $\frac{1}{2}$				
Johnny	$\frac{1}{2}$		Maria	30	1
Melia	$\frac{1}{2}$		Edward	14	

			John Henry	10	
Stephen	30	1	Charles	7	
Albert	21	1	Alie	5 ½	
Tamar	35	½	Sarah	3 ½	
Sampson	11 ½		Patsey	1 ½	

Jan 7 1856

A list of Negroes on G. Ross' Et Sister's Plantations -

	Age	Quality		Age	Quality
N Ann	46	3/4	Martha	29	1
John Seal	25	1	Abraham	27	1
Lucy Seal	19	1	Whalley	5	
Anthony	1 1/2		Mary	2	
Jane Seal	18	1	Mimi	3	
Betsy	1 1/2				
Sam	17	1	Nancy Foin	40	1/2
Hyman	14	3/4	Christiana	8	
Jerry	11	1/4	Kate	60	0
William +			Netta	34	1
			Caroline +	18	
Prison	53	1	Mary	13	
N Nancy Isham	34	1	Susie	11	
Phoebe	17	1	Abtham	1 1/2	
Rosau	15	1	Easter	1/2	
Jerry	4 1/2				
Johnny	1/2	N.S.	Maria	30	1
Abel	1/2		Edward	14	
			John Henry	10	
N Stephen	30	1	Charles	7	
Albert	21	1	Abu	5 1/2	
H. S. - Tamar	35	1/2	Sarah	3 1/2	
N. Sampson	11 1/2		Patsy	1 1/2	

27 Sunday to G. J.  
 11 " to N.S. White  
 37

## **Source #2 Questions:**

**Directions: Answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Use the document to support your answers whenever possible.**

1. Based on this document, what conclusions can you draw regarding the “quality” ranking of slaves? Based on your knowledge of plantation life for slaves, what do you think the “quality” of the slave refers to?
2. Why would this type of document be created? What aspects of this document stand out (Age, names, ranking system, etc.)?
3. What is your reaction to this document? Are you surprised by the quality ranking system?

### Source #3

*El Destino Collection: Operating Papers 1855; Record of activities and sickness of Negroes on El Destino Plantation*

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Oct 9 Day fare[*fair*] & Cool Sick Bellah Jim & Lil Giney Jack minding Stock 3 hands making a rack to hall [*haul*] cotton [?] Come from the Depot Davey & Isaac gining balance picking cotton

“10 Day fare & warm Sick Bellah Jim Lil Giney & Big Hannah Jack minding Stock one wagon halling [*hauling*] Cotton from Oak—[*Oakland*] Davey & Isaac gining 2 hands tareing [*tearing*] down the old stalls Balance hands picking cotton

“11 Day fare & warm Sick Bellah Jim Patty & Lil Giney Jack minding Stock Forteen [*fourteen*] Painting at Oakland 6 packing Cotton Davey & Isaac gining balance hands picking cotton

“12 Day fare & frost Sick Bellah Jim Hannah & Lil Giney Jack minding Stock 3 hands working on chimneys Sam Sent to the Depot with No 79 Bales Davey & Isaac gining balance picking cotton

“13 Day fare & frost Sick Bellah Sarah Giney & one child Jack minding Stock 3 hands working on chimneys one wagon Sent to mill Davey & Isaac gining Sam Come from the Depot one hand cuting [*cutting*] Rice [?] halling [*hauling*] rice Balance hands picking cotton

“14 Day fare & cool Sick Sarah Bellah & one child Jack minding Stock Give the Hand Allowance

“15 Day fare & warm Sick Sarah Bellah & Patty Jack minding Stock Sam Sent off to Depot with No 87 Bales one wagon halling [*hauling*] corn 5 pulling Corn Davey & Isaac gining 3 working on Chimneys Balance hands picking Cotton

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[Backside:]

F. Nasworthy.  
Oct. 15/55

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#### **Key terms:**

**Gining**: The process in which cotton has the lint or fiber cut from the seed

**Allowance**: Food distributed to slaves. Common rate was a peck of corn meal and 3 ½ Pounds of salt pork per week for each adult and proportionately for children.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and James David Smith, eds., *Florida Plantation Records from the Papers of George Noble Jones* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 588.

F. Nasworthy, Oct. 15, 1855.

- Oct 9 Day fare & Cool Sick Bellah Jim + Lit' Giney Sack minding  
Stock 3 hands making a rack to hall Cotton Sam come  
from the Depot Davey + Isaac giving balance picking Cotton
- " 10 Day fare & warm Sick Bellah Jim Lit' Giney + Big Hannah  
Sack minding stock one wagon halling Cotton from Oakland  
Davey + Isaac giving 2 hands ~~turning~~ down the old stalls  
balance hands picking Cotton
- " 11 Day fare & warm Sick Bellah Jim Patty + Lit' Giney Sack  
minding Stock Forten painting at Oakland & packing  
Cotton Davey + Isaac giving balance hands picking Cotton
- " 12 Day fare & frost Sick Bellah Jim Hannah + Lit' Giney Sack  
minding Stock 3 hands working on chimneys Sam sent  
to the Depot with No 79 Bales Davey + Isaac giving balance <sup>Cotton</sup> picking
- " 13 Day fare & frost Sick Bellah Sarah Giney + one child Sack  
minding Stock 3 hands working on chimneys one wagon  
sent to mill Davey + Isaac giving Sam come from the  
Depot one hand cutting Rice Cart-halling rice  
balance hands picking Cotton
- " 14 Day fare & Cool Sick Sarah Bellah + one child Sack  
minding Stock Give the Bands Allowance
- " 15 Day fare & warm Sick Sarah Bellah + Patty Sack  
minding Stock Sam sent off to Depot with No. 87  
Bales one wagon halling Corn 5 pulling Corn Davey  
& Isaac giving 3 working on chimneys Balance hands  
picking Cotton)

1855  
-5581

Oct 9

F. Kaswothy  
Oct. 18/55

ms



## **Source #3 Questions:**

**Directions: Answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Use the document to support your answers whenever possible.**

1. Using this document, list some of the activities typically done on a plantation. What activities seem to have the most importance?
2. According to the information contained in this document, who is the most likely person to have written this document? Why?
3. Compare this document to the letter written to Mr. Jones by Perry A. Barrington. What elements are similar? How do you know that similar individuals wrote these documents for similar purposes?
4. What stands out about this document in terms of how it was written?

Source #4

*Holmes – Palmer – Ferris Papers: 7 Dec 1842 Bill of sale by Francis D. Scarlett for a Negro slave, “Jacob”.  
\$500*

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Know all Men by these Presents,

THAT I Francis C. Scarlett of Duval County Territory of Fl<sup>a</sup> [Florida]

of the first part for and in consideration of the sum of Five hundred Dollars—

lawful money of the United States of America to me in hand paid,  
at and before the ensealing and delivery of these Presents, by David Palmer  
and Darius Ferris- through Mesers. Ross & Molnes of said County & Territory—

of the second part, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, have granted,  
bargained and sold, and by these Presents do grant, bargain and sell unto  
the said parties of the second part, their executors, administrators  
and assigns, a certain Negro Slave- to wit:  
“Jacob” aged about Eighteen Years,

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the said Slave named Jacob  
without incumbrance—

unto the said parties of the second part, their executors administrators,  
and assigns [assigns], for their own use. benefit \_abrhoof\_\_ forever  
And I the said party of the first part, for myself and my  
heirs, executors and administrators, do hereby covenant and agree, to and with  
the said parties of the second part, their executors administrators  
and assigns, to warrant and defend the sale of the said negro slave  
unto the said parties of the second against myself  
my heirs, Executors, administrators & assigns and  
against all and every person and persons whomsoever lawfully claiming  
or to claim the same.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and seal this  
seventeenth day of December in the year of our Lord, one thousand  
eight hundred and Forty Two

Signed, Sealed and Delivered  
In the Presence of

Wm W Douglas  
HH Philips

Francis D Scarlett

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[Back side]

Francis D. Scarlett

To

Palmer & Ferris

Dec 17, 1842

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**Know all Men by these Presents,**

**THAT** I Francis O. Scullitt of Wasatch County Territory of Ho<sup>o</sup>:

of the first part, for and in consideration of the sum of Five Hundred Dollars

lawful money of the United States of America, to me in hand paid, at and before the enseatng and delivery of these Presents, by David Palmer and Sarius Ferris - through Mrs. Ross & Holmes of said County & Territory

of the second part, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, have granted, bargained and sold, and by these Presents do grant, bargain and sell unto the said parties of the second part, their executors, administrators and assigns, a certain Negro Slave - to wit!

"Jacob" aged about Eighteen Years,

**TO HAVE AND TO HOLD** the said Slave named Jacob without incumbrance

unto the said parties of the second part, their executors administrators, and assigns, for their own use, benefit & behoof forever. And I the said party of the first part, for myself and my heirs, executors and administrators, do hereby covenant and agree, to and with the said parties of the second part, their executors, administrators and assigns, to warrant and defend the sale of the said Negro Slave unto the said parties of the second part against myself, my heirs, executors, administrators & assigns and against all and every person and persons whomsoever, lawfully claiming or to claim the same.

**In Witness whereof,** I have hereunto set my hand and seal this twentieth day of December in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and forty two

Signed, Sealed and Delivered, }  
In the Presence of

Wm Douglas  
H. H. Phillips

Francis O. Scullitt

Francis D. Scarlett  
to  
Palmer & Scribner  
Dec 17. 1872  
New York

## **Source #4 Questions:**

**Directions: Answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Use the document to support your answers whenever possible.**

1. What do you notice about the language used in this document? What does this say about its intended purpose?
2. What is different about this document than others in this module?
3. Why was this document created? Furthermore, whose benefit was this document created for? How do you know?
4. What about this document surprised you?
5. Part of this document is printed. What does that say about the nature of the document and its purpose?
6. How is this document similar to documents we use today? How is it different?
7. What details from this document reveal the status of African Americans at this time?

## References Used in this Module

*El Destino Plantation Collection*. Library of Florida History. The Florida Historical Society, Cocoa, FL.

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