

DAILY LIFE

1820-1850

Working at Mid-Century

In the years before the Civil War, most workers labored from dawn to dusk, six days a week, without benefits. Although many Northerners criticized the South for exploiting slave labor, Southerners criticized the industrial wage system, mostly in the North, for exploiting free workers. Both North and South used children—cheap labor—for full workdays. While 10-year-old slave children worked in the fields like adults, one Northern mill employed 100 children ages four to ten.



◀ COTTON PLANTATION FIELD SLAVES

The field slave's day during cotton harvest began with a bell an hour before dawn, a quick breakfast, and then a march to the fields. Men, women, and children spent the entire day picking cotton, bundling it, and coming back after dark carrying bales of cotton to the gin house. They then made their own suppers and ate quickly before falling asleep on wooden planks. No other antebellum workers had such harsh, brutal treatment imposed on them. For most field slaves, the master's whip was a constant threat.

Length of Day: pre-dawn until after dark
Type of Labor: picking and bundling cotton
Payment: substandard food and shelter

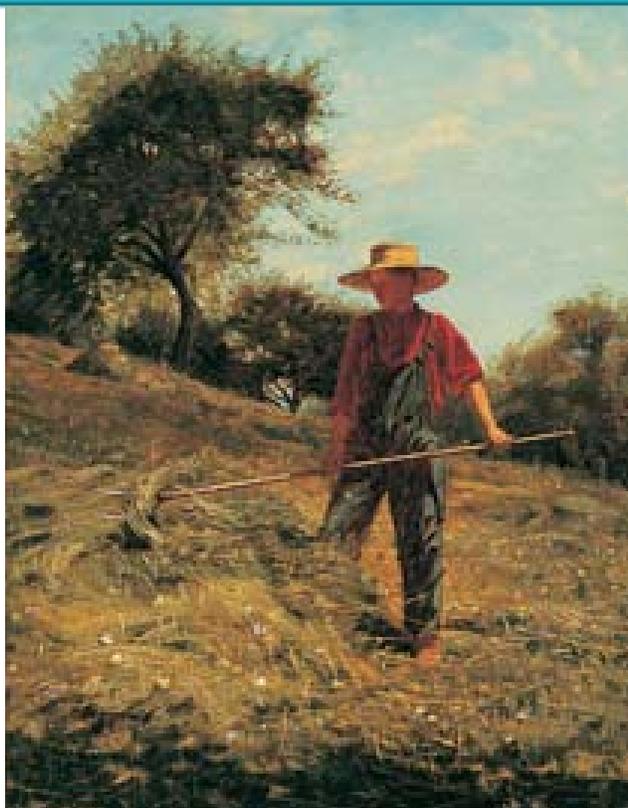
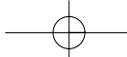
MILL WORKERS ▶

Approximately 80 percent of textile-mill workers were young women between the ages of 15 and 30. The day began with a bell for a quick breakfast in the boarding house, followed by a march to the factory, and the tending of machines all day. Workers put up with heavy dust, the roar of machines, and hot air with windows nailed shut to keep in the humidity. When competitive pressure increased on the owners, workers had to speed up their work for lower wages. Children made \$1 a week; older girls and women, \$3; men, \$6.

Length of Day: 12 hours
Type of Labor: operating machines
Payment: \$1 to \$6 a week

Courtesy George Eastman House





Haymaking (1864), Winslow Homer

▲ FARMERS

Because farmers' livelihoods depended on the weather, soil conditions, and the market prices of crops, their earnings were unpredictable—but usually very low. Generally men spent their days clearing land, plowing, planting, and hoeing the fields, while women raised vegetables for family consumption, helped harvest fields, cared for livestock and for the family, and made clothing.

Length of Day: dawn until after dark
Type of Labor: planting, tending crops, caring for livestock
Payment: dependent on crop prices

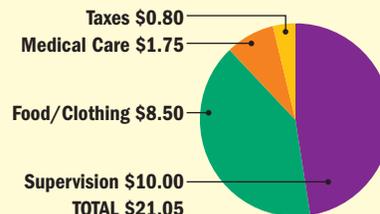


DATA

FILE

ANNUAL COST OF MAINTAINING A FIELD SLAVE

A typical Southern plantation owner in 1848–1860 would spend the following to take care of a field slave for one year.



Source: *Slavery and the Southern Economy*, Harold D. Woodman, editor

WORKERS IN THE MID-19TH CENTURY

Average monthly earnings from 1830 to 1850 for a few common occupations:

Job	Year	Monthly Earnings
Artisan	1830	\$ 45
Laborer	1830	\$ 26
Teacher, male	1840	\$ 15
Teacher, female	1840	\$ 7
Northern farmhand	1850	\$ 13
Southern farmhand	1850	\$ 9

Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States*

WORKERS IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

Average monthly salaries for each profession:

Job	Monthly Salary
Teacher—elementary	\$ 2,758
Teacher—high school	\$ 2,900
Construction worker	\$ 2,399
Service worker	\$ 1,518

Source: *Employment and Statistics*, June 1996, U.S. Department of Labor; *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1994.

THINKING CRITICALLY

CONNECT TO HISTORY

1. Drawing Conclusions What attitudes about women and children do you see reflected in work patterns during the mid-19th century?

 **SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R18.**

CONNECT TO TODAY

2. Researching Children's Rights Report on labor laws and societal changes that protected children's rights and prevented child labor in factories.



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