

The Alabama Slave Code of 1852

(Excerpts from a primary source)

The Alabama Slave Code of 1852 was a list of laws about slavery. The code was long and mostly controlled slaves' behavior, but it also included rules that affected whites and showed how they felt about slaves. Read the following laws and answer the questions.

Think about what these laws tell us about white Southerners.

Patrols

1. All white male owners of slaves...and all other free white persons...are subject to perform patrol duty.
2. Each detachment must patrol parts of the precinct as in their judgment is necessary, at least once a week at night...
3. The patrol has the power to enter in a peaceable manner, upon any plantation...
4. Any member of a patrol detachment may send a substitute.
5. The leader, or any member of the detachment, failing to appear...must be fined ten dollars.

Slaves

1. No slave must go beyond the limits of the plantation on which he (or she) resides, without a pass, or some letter from his master or overseer.
2. No slave can keep or carry a gun, powder, shot, club, or other weapon...
3. No slave can, under any pretence, keep a dog.
4. No slave can own property.
5. Not more than five male slaves shall assemble together at any place off the plantation.

QUESTIONS: Answer each question thoroughly and thoughtfully. Use evidence, whenever possible, to support your opinions.

1. What was the purpose of the nightly patrols?
2. Only one white person in four owned slaves in the South. Slaves were expensive. Most white Southerners were NOT slave owners. Why were all whites required to go on patrol?

3. People who owned slaves were among the richest people in the South, and many of them could pay for a substitute to take their place on the patrols. Most of the people without slaves were too poor to do this. How would you feel if the people with the most slaves never went on patrol, but you had to? According to the law, what was the consequence for a person who did not go on patrol?
4. Patrols could go everywhere. How would you feel about a patrol searching your house at night without your permission? Do you think these laws were constitutional? Explain.
5. If most white Southerners did NOT own slaves, why do you think they fought to protect the right to own slaves during the Civil War?
6. According to the law, slaves could not leave their plantation without some type of written pass. How did white Southerners prevent slaves from forging these types of documents?
7. Why were slaves forbidden to have weapons or own dogs?
8. Why do you think it was against the law for more than five male slaves to get together?
9. Many Southern slave owners claimed their slaves were well treated and better off than if they lived in Africa. However, the 1852 Slave Codes from Alabama would seem to indicate a different reality. What evidence can you find from these laws that shows the white masters didn't believe their own *propaganda*?