

Health and Mortality (1835-1861)

In Louisiana, and especially in Natchitoches, slave children were more likely to have their families shattered by the early deaths of one or more parents than by estate division, sale, or transfer. This was a common occurrence because of a high rate of death among young adults as well as infants and children. High mortality rates existed among whites and blacks in Louisiana. Maintaining health was a continuous concern of Cane River slaves and their owners. Bermuda/Oakland had a building designated as a hospital, and medical doctors were called in routinely on difficult cases. The slaves themselves relied heavily on their own midwives or granny women and root doctors, and snake doctors, both in crisis and for preventative herbal treatments.

Nevertheless, Oakland's slaves were frequently ill, and the mortality rates were especially high among infants and small children. Among the causes of adult deaths listed in the Prudhomme papers for Oakland in the 1840s through the 1860s were consumption, dysentery, bilious fever, typhoid fever, pneumonia, dropsy, sore throat, paralysis [stroke], old age, and bay fever. Children on Oakland died from lockjaw, pneumonia, colds, fever, and inflammation of the bowels. Several infants were stillborn, and miscarriages were occasionally noted. In one case in 1863, Milla was suddenly taken sick and miscarried in the cotton field. One of the worst outbreaks of typhoid fever occurred in the fall of 1861. The Oakland overseer traced the siege from early August to its peak in mid October, with dozens out sick and several deaths noted. A major epidemical disease that occurred regularly

on Louisiana plantations, typhoid fever was transmitted from one person to another in contaminated water, food, and feces. Victims suffered with intermittent fevers for two to three weeks. Among those who died, on October 1, 1861, was the hospital nurse, who had worked so diligently to get Oakland slaves through the typhoid crisis, only to herself succumb.

Oakland slave's inventories also indicate common disabilities. In 1850 hernia was probably the most common disability for adult males, afflicting Dorsino, 42; Gustine, 64; and Gregoire, 60. Pomponne, a female, 52, and Little Laisa, 28, were described as "lame," and Rose, 55, had "dropsy" (accumulations of fluid in the chest, abdomen, face, and extremities, probably related to cardiovascular system disease).

Although many Oakland slaves fell ill and died in the unhealthy Louisiana environment (the state had the highest mortality rate in the nation throughout the antebellum period), mortality census scheduled for 1850 suggest that many other slave communities in Natchitoches Parish had higher rates of mortality. Common causes of slaves deaths noted in that census were whooping cough and worms for infants and children, and dirt eating for slaves of all ages. The latter mysterious condition was rampant in the parish, taking the lives of over twenty slaves ranging in ages from three to sixty, most of them slaves of small owners who may not have provided adequate nutrition (although some experts claim that addictive dirt or clay eating is a cultural phenomenon rather than the result of dietary deficiency). Only one slave from Oakland is recorded as having suffered from this malady.

Causes of deaths on Bermuda/Oakland were varied. In 1860, a

slave man named Toussaint passed away from what was described by Seneca Pace, the overseer, as typhoid pneumonia. [1860 Plantation Record, pg. 34]

Yellow fever epidemics swept the parish in 1852, 1853, 1854, 1858, and 1861 and cholera outbreaks were recorded in 1833, 1849, and 1851. Droughts [that of 1855 was legendary], floods [that of 1849 sent whites and blacks of Riviere aux Cannes to the hills, seeking safe haven, and storms, tornados, and hurricanes [in 1840 and 1844] all had direct impact on the health and well being of all plantation folk.¹

1. Oakland Plantation, Its People Testimony by Anne Malone
pp. 81-84