

Bermuda/Oakland Plantation, 1830-1880 by Carolyn Breedlove, Unpublished master thesis, Northwestern State University, 1999.

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Excerpt, Chapter Four: Technology and Labor

Alphonse continued to pay the Bermuda hands wages in 1866 and 1867. He kept work accounts for forty-eight freedmen and women in 1866 and thirty-six in 1867. The names of the workers, as far as can be correlated with earlier references, were the names of Bermuda's former slaves, all now with surnames, meticulously categorized as to grade and pay rate. Men received \$5, \$6, \$8, \$9, or \$10; women, \$4, \$5, \$6, or \$8. Three men—Nathan Smith, foreman, Solomon Williams, Bermuda's longtime blacksmith, and Minique Toussaint—received \$15 in 1866.¹ In 1867 Minique's pay rate was \$16 and Nathan's, \$25. Solomon Williams had struck a separate deal, to come to the plantation once a month to do blacksmithing at \$2 a day.² Work evidently still was organized by gangs, special reference being made, as previously mentioned, to the "big gang" and the "suckler gang." Nursing mothers in the latter received half pay.³ Whether Nathan Smith's role as foreman was to supervise these work gangs as the slave drivers of old had is unclear. Punishments meted out for rule infractions, which in turn reveal the nature of some of the plantation rules, were generally fines. Thus for Sosie Stephens, fifty, in

June of 1866 appeared the comment "Rode horse-\$5 fine."⁴ In February of 1867 Alphonse fined Gregoire Francois, nineteen, \$2.50 "for cursing & threatening Andrew Toussaint," thirty. In March Gregoire was fined \$5.00-it being a second offense-for quarrelling with Jules Russell, who was fined \$2.50. So it went, a \$2.50 fine levied against René Plaisance, also in February, for "cursing & attacking Collins Page," \$2.50 apiece against Virginia Butler and Keré Smith, two teenagers, for quarrelling with each other in July.⁵ More serious violations apparently warranted firing. In September of 1866 Alphonse "discharged for misconduct" York Dorcino, twenty-five. The same day he discharged Rose Bob, sixteen, at her own request.⁶ Whether the misconduct were somehow mutual or Rose quit in sympathy is not clear, but four years later she and York appeared as a couple with two small children in the population schedules of the census.⁷ In January of 1867, they both also signed new contracts to work at Bermuda.⁸

Clearly, the labor system on this plantation, as throughout the South, was in transition. Paternalism and the old gang system co-existed with the reality of freedom. Precedents of paying even slave workers and permitting them ownership of livestock and cash crops contributed to the intricate relationship between landowner and laborer. After Phanor's death in October, 1865, Alphonse recorded the distribution of tools to the workers and of shoes to the workers and their families.⁹ Again in October, 1866, he distributed forty-five pairs of shoes and forty-nine men's and women's suits of clothing. Yet even in 1866 he was paying Bysinth [sic] for caring for the racehorse Uncle Jeff, and noting René Plaisance's ownership of a share in mares owned jointly with Ambroise Lecomte,¹⁰ and by 1867

Solomon Williams was independently negotiating a separate contract, driving a bargain based upon the demand for his particular skill. Two-thirds of Louisiana's freedmen refused the assistance of the Freedmen's Bureau in negotiating contracts for 1867.¹¹ That January there was considerable bargaining by all of the Bermuda workers, who held out several days for a full day off on Saturday. Alphonse opposed that concession, but took the freedmen's stand quite seriously, riding into Natchitoches to consult with his uncle, Felix Metoyer. His determination to "stick to my decision & give only Saturday P.M. at risk of losing all the hands" won out by January 5. The workers finally voted to accept the previous year's contract minus the requirement that Alphonse feed the children, all agreeing "but one or two" according to his journal.^{12,13}

1. Plantation and Other Accounts, 1866, Southern Historical Collection.
2. Accounts of Freedmen, Estate P.P. Prudhomme 1867-1868, Southern Historical Collection.
3. Plantation and Other Accounts 1866, Southern Historical Collection.
4. Plantation and Other Accounts 1866, Southern Historical Collection.
5. Accounts of Freedmen, Estate P.P. Prudhomme 1867-1868, Southern Historical Collection.
6. Plantation and Other Accounts 1866, Southern Historical Collection.
7. Ninth Census, Population Schedules.
8. Accounts of Freedmen, Estate P.P. Prudhomme 1867-1868, Southern Historical Collection.
9. List of Shoes Given on Plantation, List of Freedmen Who Received Tools, Vol. 15, Southern Historical Collection.
10. Plantation and Other Accounts 1866, Southern Historical Collection.
11. The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana, 119.
12. Oakland Journal 1867, Southern Historical Collection.
13. Breedlove, Bermuda/Oakland Plantation, 1830-1880

