

Review of john blassingame's "the slave community" essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



John W. Blassingame was born in Covington, Georgia, in 1940. Blassingame joined the faculty of Yale University in 1970, where he taught in the African American Studies, History and African departments. He chaired African American Studies for most of the 1980's. He is the author of *New Perspectives on Black Studies* (1971), *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (1973), and *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972). Blassingame was also the editor of the *Papers of Frederick Douglass* in the mid-1970's. He has a Bachelor's Degree from Fort Valley State College, a Master's Degree from Howard University, and a Ph. D. from Yale. He passed away in February 2000, and is survived by his father, Grady Blassingame, his wife Teasie, and his two children, Tia and John.

In *The Slave Community*, Blassingame argues that despite their physical enslavement, African Americans avoided psychological enslavement and retained their culture through language, names and proverbs; a link with the past; customs, courtship and familial roles; music, dancing, acting and storytelling; and Southern planters' adaptation of their religion and customs to suit their slaves. To support his thesis, Blassingame pored through periodicals, personal letters, hymnals, birth and death records, autobiographies and diaries, church records, receipts, plantation records, travel accounts and agricultural almanacs.

A major way that slaves retained their culture was through their language. Despite the fact that slaveholders frequently named children born to their slaves, slave parents often gave their children traditional African names such as Abbrom or Golaga. Slaves new to America often began to speak a

combination of their native language and English. Slaves often gave objects and concepts new English names to facilitate their understanding of them, such as "a-beat-on-iron" for a mechanical device or "day clean" for dawn. Many proverbs were retained as well. To indicate that things often looked better from a distance, a slave might say, "Distant stovewood is good stovewood."

Southerners also integrated their slaves' languages into their own. Many words thought of as traditionally "Southern" are in actuality African. "Goober," meaning peanut, comes from the African word "gooba". Other African words incorporated into the English language include cooter, okra, gumbo, okay, cola and mumbo-jumbo, among others.

Another key cultural retention, one still observable today, was music. Slaves made instruments in the New World as they and their ancestors did in Africa, producing drums made from wood and skins and wooden banjos. Much leisure time was spent singing, playing instruments, dancing and storytelling.

Enslaved Africans also maintained their customs after being brought to America. For example, familial roles remained the same, with women being subordinate to men and an emphasis placed on obedience and respect from children, much like the familial roles in Western culture. When slaves courted, they did it according to traditional customs: women initially played "hard to get" whether they were interested or not, and men won them over by being witty and flattering. A woman could be considered cheap if she gave in too readily to a man.

White slave owners also contributed to their slaves' retention of culture by adapting to it. Whites incorporated African terms into their own language, adopted African music styles (giving birth, decades later, to jazz, the blues and rockabilly) and used African agricultural techniques. Further Africanization of the South occurred when slaves cared for white children. The children invariably picked up African proverbs, terms and attitudes.

Slaves retained their culture through language, songs, dances, stories, names, customs and white Africanization, maintaining a sense of psychological freedom in the face of physical enslavement.