

SLAVERY IN USA

■ American Cotton Plantation

Slavery in the United States, the institution of slavery as it existed in the United States from the early 17th century until 1865. Slavery played a central role in the history of the United States. It existed in all the English mainland colonies and came to dominate agricultural production in the states from Maryland south. Eight of the first 12 presidents of the United States were slaveowners. Debate over slavery increasingly dominated American politics, leading eventually to the American Civil War (1861-1865), which finally brought slavery to an end. After emancipation, overcoming slavery's legacy remained a crucial issue in American history, from Reconstruction following the war to the civil rights movement a century later.

Slavery has appeared throughout history in many forms and many places. Slaves have served in capacities as diverse as concubines, warriors, servants, craftworkers, and tutors. In the Americas, however, slavery emerged as a system of forced labor designed for the production of staple crops. Depending on location, these crops included sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton; in the southern United States, by far the most important staples were tobacco and cotton. A stark racial component distinguished this modern Western slavery from the slavery that existed in many other times and places: the vast majority of slaves were black Africans and their descendants, while the vast majority of masters were white Europeans and their descendants.

Introduction of Slavery

There was nothing inevitable about the use of black slaves. Although 20 Africans were purchased in Jamestown, Virginia, as early as 1619, throughout most of the 17th century the number of Africans in the English mainland colonies grew slowly. During those years, colonists experimented with two other sources of forced labor: Native American slaves and European indentured servants. The number of Native American slaves was limited in part because the Native Americans were in their homeland; they knew the terrain and could escape fairly easily. Although some Native American slaves existed in every colony the number was limited. The settlers found it easier to sell Native Americans captured in war to planters in the Caribbean than to turn them into slaves on their own terrain.

More important as a form of labor was indentured servitude. Most

transatlantic passage. At first indentured servants came mainly from England, but later they came increasingly from Ireland, Wales, and Germany. They were primarily, although not exclusively, young males. Once in the colonies, they were essentially temporary slaves; most served as agricultural workers although some, especially in the North, were taught skilled trades. During the 17th century, they performed most of the heavy labor in the Southern colonies and also provided the bulk of immigrants to those colonies.

Slave Trade

For a variety of reasons, foremost among them improved conditions in England, the number of people willing to sell themselves into indentured servitude declined sharply toward the end of the 17th century. Because the labor needs of the rapidly growing colonies were increasing, this decline in servant migration produced a labor crisis. To meet it, landowners turned to African slaves, who from the 1680s began to replace indentured servants; in Virginia, for example, blacks, the great majority of whom were slaves, increased from about 7 percent of the population in 1680 to more than 40 percent by the mid-18th century. During the first half of the 17th century, the Netherlands and Portugal had dominated the African slave trade and the number of Africans available to English colonists was limited because the three countries competed for slave labor to produce crops in their American colonies. During the late 17th and 18th centuries, by contrast, naval superiority gave England a dominant position in the slave trade, and English traders transported millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean.

The transatlantic slave trade produced one of the largest forced migrations in history. From the early 16th to the mid-19th centuries, between 10 million and 11 million Africans were taken from their homes, herded onto ships where they were sometimes so tightly packed that they could barely move, and sent to a strange new land. Since others died before boarding the ships, Africa's loss of population was even greater. By far the largest importers of slaves were Brazil and the Caribbean colonies; together, they received more than three-quarters of all Africans brought to the Americas. About 6 percent

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Slavery spread quickly in the American colonies. At first the legal status of Africans in America was poorly defined, and some, like European indentured servants, managed to become free after several years of service. From the 1660s, however, the colonies began enacting laws that defined and regulated slave relations. Central to these laws was the provision that black slaves, and the children of slave women, would serve for life. By the 1770s, slaves constituted about 40 percent of the population of the Southern colonies, with the highest concentration in South Carolina, where more than half the people were slaves.

Slaves performed numerous tasks, from clearing forests to serving as guides, trappers, craftworkers, nurses, and house servants, but they were most essential as agricultural laborers. Slaves were most numerous where landowners sought to grow staple crops for market, such as tobacco in the upper South (Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina) and rice in the lower South (South Carolina, Georgia). Slaves also worked on large wheat-producing estates in New York and on horse-breeding farms in Rhode Island, but climate and soil restricted the development of commercial agriculture in the Northern colonies, and slavery never became as economically important as it did in the South. Slaves in the North were typically held in small numbers, and most served as domestic servants. Only in New York did they form more than 10 percent of the population, and in the North as a whole less than 5 percent of the inhabitants were slaves.

Distinctive Features of U.S. Slavery

By the mid-18th century, American slavery had acquired a number of distinctive features. More than 90 percent of American slaves lived in the South where conditions contrasted sharply with those to both the south and north. In Caribbean colonies, such as Jamaica and Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), blacks outnumbered whites by more than ten to one and slaves often lived on huge estates with hundreds of other slaves. In the Northern colonies, blacks were few and slaves were typically held in small groups of less than five. The South, by contrast, was neither overwhelmingly white nor overwhelmingly black: slaves formed a large minority of the population, and most slaves lived on small and medium-sized holdings containing between 5 and 50 slaves.

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The second distinctive characteristic of slavery in the United States was in many ways the most important: in contrast to slaves in

other parts of the Americas, those in the United States experienced natural population growth. Elsewhere, in regions as diverse as Brazil, Jamaica, Saint-Domingue, and Cuba, slave mortality rates exceeded birth rates, and growth of the slave population depended on the importation of new slaves from Africa. As soon as that importation ended, the slave population began to decline. At first, deaths among slaves also exceeded births in the American colonies, but in the 18th century the birth rates rose in those colonies, mortality rates fell, and the slave population became self-reproducing. This transition, which occurred earlier in the upper than in the lower South, meant that even after slave imports were outlawed in 1808, the number of slaves continued to grow rapidly. During the next 50 years, the slave population of the United States more than tripled, from about 1.2 million to almost 4 million in 1860. The natural growth of the slave population meant that slavery could survive without new slave imports.

Natural population growth also hastened the transition from an African to an African American slave population. By the 1770s, only about 20 percent of slaves in the colonies were African-born, although the concentration of Africans remained higher in South Carolina and Georgia. After 1808 the proportion of African-born slaves became tiny. The emergence of a native-born slave population had numerous important consequences. For example, among African-born slaves, who were imported for their ability to perform physical labor, there were few children and men outnumbered women by about two to one. In contrast, American-born slaves began their slave careers as children and included approximately even numbers of males and females. Masters went through a similar process of Americanization. Those born in America usually felt at home on their holdings. Caribbean planters often sought to make their fortunes quickly and then retire to a life of leisure in England. American slaveholders, by contrast, were less often absentee owners. Instead, they typically took an active role in running their farms and plantations.

Colonial Opposition to Slavery

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Throughout most of the colonial period, opposition to slavery among white Americans was virtually nonexistent. Settlers in the 17th and early 18th centuries came from sharply stratified societies in which the wealthy savagely exploited members of the lower classes. Lacking a later generation's belief in natural human equality, they saw little reason to question the enslavement of Africans. As they sought to mould a docile labour force, planters resorted to harsh, repressive measures that included liberal use of whipping and branding.

Gradually, changes occurred in the way masters looked on both their slaves and themselves. Many second-generation masters, who unlike their parents had grown up with slaves, came to regard them as inferior members of their extended families. Such slaveowners looked upon themselves as kindly patriarchs who, like benevolent despots, ruled their people firmly but fairly and looked after their needs. Slavery remained harshly repressive: masters continued to rely heavily on the lash for discipline, and few if any slaves saw their owners as the kindly guardians that they proclaimed themselves to be. Still, many slaveowners accepted the idea that they should treat their slaves humanely.

Some slaveowners went further. The last third of the 18th century saw the first widespread questioning of slavery by white Americans. This questioning increased after the American Revolution (1775-1783), which sharply increased egalitarian thinking. The contradiction between the rhetoric of documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the reality of slavery was apparent. Many leaders of the new government, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, while slaveholders, were profoundly troubled by slavery. Although leery of rash actions, they undertook a series of cautious acts that they thought would lead to gradual abolition of slavery.

These acts included measures in all states north of Delaware to abolish slavery. A few states did away with slavery immediately. More typical were gradual emancipation acts, such as that passed by Pennsylvania in 1780, whereby all children born to slaves in the future would be freed when they became 28 years old. Two significant measures dated from 1787. First, the Northwest Ordinance barred slavery from the *Northwest Territory* an area that included much of what is now the upper Midwest. Second, a compromise reached at the Constitutional Convention allowed the Congress of the United States

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to outlaw the importation of slaves in 1808. Meanwhile, a number of states passed acts making it easier for individuals to free their slaves. Hundreds of slaveowners, especially in the upper South, set some or all of their slaves free. In addition, tens of thousands of slaves acted on their own, taking advantage of wartime disruption to escape from their masters. As a result, the number of free blacks, which had been tiny before the Revolution, surged during the last quarter of the 18th century.

Nevertheless, the Revolutionary-era challenge to slavery was successful only in the North, where the investment in slaves was small. The antislavery movement never made much progress in Georgia and South Carolina, where planters imported tens of thousands of Africans to beat the cut-off of the slave trade in 1808. In the upper South, sentiment in favor of equality faded, along with revolutionary enthusiasm, in the 1790s and 1800s. The end of slave imports did not undermine slavery as it did elsewhere because the slave population in the United States was self-reproducing. The ultimate result of the first antislavery movement was to leave slavery a newly sectional institution, on the road to abolition throughout the North but largely intact in the South.

Growth of Slavery

Slavery expanded rapidly, along with the United States. Fueled by a surging world demand for cotton and the 1793 invention of the cotton gin, which efficiently separated the cotton seeds from the fiber, cotton cultivation spread rapidly westward. By the 1830s, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana formed the heart of a new cotton kingdom, producing more than half of the nation's supply of the crop. The great bulk of this cotton was cultivated by slaves. Between 1790 and 1860, about one million slaves were moved west, almost twice the number of Africans shipped to the United States during the whole period of the transatlantic slave trade. Some slaves moved with their masters and others moved as part of a new domestic trade in which owners from the seaboard states sold slaves to planters in the cotton-growing states of the new Southwest. ✦

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As slavery grew, so too did its diversity. Slavery varied according to region, crops, and size of holdings. On farms and small plantations most slaves came in frequent contact with their owners, but on very large plantations, where slaveowners often employed overseers, slaves might rarely see their masters. Some owners left their holdings entirely in the care of subordinates, usually hired white overseers but sometimes slaves. A few slaveowners were even black themselves: a small percentage of free blacks owned slaves, in some cases as a ruse so that they could protect family members, but more often to profit from slave labor. Most slaves on large holdings worked in gangs, under the supervision of overseers and slave drivers. Some, however, especially in the coastal region of South Carolina and Georgia, labored under the task system: they were assigned a certain amount of work to complete in a day, received less supervision, and were free to use their time as they wished once they had completed their daily assignments. In addition to performing field work, slaves served as house servants, nurses, midwives, carpenters, blacksmiths, drivers, preachers, gardeners, and handymen.

Despite such variations, there were a number of dominant trends. First, slavery was overwhelmingly rural: in 1860 only about 5 percent of all slaves lived in towns of 2500 people or more. Second, although some slaves lived on giant estates and others on small farms, the norm was in between: in 1860 about one-half of all slaves lived on holdings of 10 to 49 slaves. The remaining half of the slave population was evenly divided between larger and smaller establishments. Holdings tended to be bigger in the deep South than

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Slave Treatment

Southern slaveholders took an active role in managing their property. Viewing themselves as the slaves' guardians, they stressed the degree to which they cared for them. The character of such care varied, but in purely material terms such as food, clothing, housing, and medical attention, it was generally better in the pre-Civil War period than in the colonial period. Judging by measurable criteria such as slave height and life expectancy, material conditions also were better in the South than in the Caribbean or Brazil.

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~~Although young children were often malnourished, most working slaves received a steady supply of pork and corn, which if lacking in nutritional balance (about which Americans of the era knew nothing) provided sufficient calories to fuel their labor. Slaves often supplemented their rations with produce that they raised on garden plots allotted to them. Clothing and housing were crude but functional.~~

dressess for women, long shirts for children) and lived in small wooden cabins, one to a family. Wealthy slaveowners often sent for physicians to treat slaves who became ill; given the state of medical knowledge, however, such treatment—which could range from providing various concoctions to “bleeding” a patient—often did as much harm as good.

Masters intervened continually in the lives of their slaves, from directing their labor to approving or disapproving marriages. Some masters made elaborate written rules, and most engaged in constant meddling, directing, nagging, threatening, and punishing. Many took advantage of their position to exploit slave women sexually.

What slaves hated most about slavery was not the hard work to which they were subjected, but their lack of control over their lives, their lack of freedom. Masters may have prided themselves on the care they provided, but the slaves had a different idea of that care. They resented the constant interference in their lives and tried to achieve whatever autonomy they could. In the slave quarters, the collection of slave cabins that on large plantations resembled a miniature village, slaves developed their own way of life and struggled to increase their independence while their masters strove to limit it. The character and resolution of this struggle depended on a host of factors, from size of holdings and organization of production to residence and disposition of masters. Masters rarely were able, however, to shape the lives of their slaves as fully as they wanted.

Slave Life

Away from the view of owners and overseers, slaves lived their own lives. They made friends, fell in love, played and prayed, sang, told stories, and engaged in the necessary chores of day-to-day living, from cleaning house, cooking, and sewing to working on garden plots. Especially important as anchors of the slaves' lives were their families and their religion.

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Throughout the South, the family defined the actual living arrangements of slaves: most slaves lived together in nuclear families with a mother, father, and children. The security and stability of these families faced severe challenges: no state law recognized marriage among slaves, masters rather than parents had legal authority over slave children, and the possibility of forced separation, through sale, hung over every family. These separations were especially frequent in center of private lives that owners could never fully control.

Religion served as a second refuge. In the colonial period, African slaves usually clung to their native religions, and many slaveowners were suspicious of others who sought to convert their slaves to Christianity, in part because they feared that converted slaves would have to be freed. During the decades following the American Revolution, however, Christianity was increasingly central to the slaves' cultural life. Many slaves were converted during the religious revivals that swept the South in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Slaves typically belonged to the same denominations as white Southerners, the largest of which were the Baptists and Methodists. Some masters encouraged their slaves to come to the white church, where they usually sat in a special slave gallery and received advice about being obedient to their masters. In the quarters, however, there developed a parallel, so-called "invisible" church controlled by the slaves themselves, who listened to sermons delivered by their own preachers. Not all slaves had access to these preachers and not all accepted their message, but for many religion served as a great comfort in a hostile world.

Slave Resistance

If their families and religion helped slaves to avoid total control by their owners, slaves also challenged that control more directly through active resistance. Their ability to resist was limited. Unlike slaves in Saint-Domingue, who rebelled against their French masters and established the black republic of Haiti in 1804, slaves in the United States faced a balance of power that discouraged armed resistance. When it occurred, such resistance was always quickly suppressed and followed by harsh punishment designed to discourage future rebellion. In some instances, planned slave rebellions were nipped in the bud before an actual outbreak of violence. Such aborted conspiracies

before an actual outbreak of violence. Such aborted conspiracies occurred in New York in 1741, in Virginia in 1800, and South Carolina in 1822. The most notable uprisings included the Stono Rebellion near Charleston, South Carolina in 1739, an attempted attack on New Orleans in 1811, and the Nat Turner insurrection that rocked Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. The Turner insurrection, which at its peak included 60 to 80 rebels, resulted in the deaths of about 60 whites; the number of blacks killed during the uprising and executed or lynched afterward may have reached 100, But the rebellion lasted less than two days and was easily suppressed by local residents.

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Less organized resistance was both more widespread and more successful. This included silent sabotage, or foot-dragging, by slaves, who pretended to be sick, feigned difficulty understanding instructions, and "accidentally" misused tools and animals. It also included small-scale resistance by individuals who fought back physically, at times successfully, against what they regarded as unjust treatment.

The most common form of resistance, however, was flight. About 1000 slaves per year escaped to the North during the pre-Civil War decades, most from the upper South. This represented only a small percentage of those who attempted to escape, however, since for every slave who made it to freedom, several more tried. Other fugitives remained within the South, heading for cities or swamps, or hiding out near their plantations for days or weeks before either returning voluntarily or being tracked down and captured.

Sectional Tensions

Escaped Slaves with Harriet Tubman

Slavery was an increasingly Southern institution. Abolition of slavery in the North, begun in the revolutionary era and largely complete by the 1830s, divided the United States into the slave South and the free North. As this happened, slavery came to define the essence of the South: to defend slavery was to be pro-Southern, whereas opposition to slavery was considered anti-Southern. Although most Southern whites did not own slaves (the proportion of white families that owned slaves declined from 35 percent to 26 percent between 1830 and 1860), slavery more and more set the South off from the rest of the country and the Western world. If at one time slavery had been common in much of the Americas, by the middle of the 19th century it remained only in Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the southern United

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States. In an era that celebrated liberty and equality, the slaveholding Southern states appeared backward and repressive.

In fact, the slave economy grew rapidly, enriched by the spectacular increase in cotton cultivation to meet the growing demand of Northern and European textile manufacturers. Southern economic growth, however, was based largely on cultivating more land. The South did ~~not~~ **revolution that was beginning to transform the North; the South remained almost entirely rural. In 1860 there were only five Southern cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants (only one of which, New Orleans, was in the Deep South); less than 10 percent of Southerners lived in towns of at least 2500 people, compared to more than 25 percent of Northerners. The South also increasingly lagged in other indications of modernization, from railroad construction to literacy and public education.**

The biggest gap between North and South, however, was ideological. In the North, slavery was abolished and a small but articulate group of abolitionists developed. In the South, white spokesmen, from politicians to ministers, newspaper editors, and authors, rallied around slavery as the bedrock of Southern society. Defenders of slavery developed a wide range of arguments to defend their cause, from those based on race to those that stressed economic necessity. They made heavy use of religious themes, portraying slavery as part of God's plan for civilizing a primitive, heathen people.

Increasingly, however, Southern spokesmen based their case for slavery on social arguments. They contrasted the harmonious, orderly, religious, and conservative society that supposedly existed in the South with the tumultuous, heretical, and mercenary ways of a North torn apart by radical reform, individualism, class conflict, and, worst of all, abolitionism. This defense represented the mirror image of the so-called free-labor argument increasingly prevalent in the North: to the assertion that slavery kept the South backward, poor, inefficient, and degraded, proslavery advocates responded that only slavery could save the South from the evils of modernity run wild.

From the mid-1840s, the struggle over slavery became central to American politics. Northerners who were committed to free soil, the idea that new, western territories should be reserved exclusively for free white settlers, clashed repeatedly with Southerners who insisted that any limitation on slavery's expansion was unconstitutional meddling with the Southern order and a grave affront to Southern honor. In 1860 the election of Abraham Lincoln as president on a free-soil platform set off a major political and

nomination. In 1860 the election of Abraham Lincoln as president on a free-soil platform set off a major political and constitutional crisis, as seven states in the Deep South seceded from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America. The start of the Civil War between the United States and the Confederacy in April 1861 led to the additional secession of four states in the upper South. Four other slave states—Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri—remained

Ironically, although Southern politicians supported secession in order to preserve slavery, their action led instead to the end of slavery. As the war dragged on, Northern war aims gradually shifted from preserving the Union to abolishing slavery and remaking the Union. This goal, which received symbolic recognition with the Emancipation Proclamation that President Lincoln issued on January 1, 1863, became reality with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, passed by Congress in January and ratified by the states in December 1865. Although slavery was ended, it was followed by an intense struggle during Reconstruction over the status of the newly freed slaves. In subsequent decades, black Americans continued to struggle against poverty, racism, and segregation, as they sought to overcome the bitter legacy of slavery.

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