



SLAVERY IN AMERICA

Slavery in America began when the first African slaves were brought to the North American colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops as tobacco. Slavery was practiced throughout the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, and African-American slaves helped build the economic foundations of the new nation. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 solidified the central importance of slavery to the South's economy. By the mid-19th century, America's westward expansion, along with a growing abolition movement in the North, would provoke a great debate over slavery that would tear the nation apart in the bloody American Civil War (1861-65). Though the Union victory freed the nation's 4 million slaves, the legacy of slavery continued to influence American history, from the tumultuous years of Reconstruction (1865-77) to the civil rights movement that emerged in the 1960s, a century after emancipation.

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FOUNDATIONS OF SLAVERY IN AMERICA

In the early 17th century, European settlers in North America turned to African slaves as a cheaper, more plentiful labor source than indentured servants (who were mostly poorer Europeans). After 1619, when a Dutch ship brought 20 Africans ashore at the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, slavery spread throughout the American colonies. Though it is impossible to give accurate figures, some historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million slaves were imported to the New World during the 18th century alone, depriving the African continent of some of its healthiest and ablest men and women.

DID YOU KNOW?

One of the first martyrs to the cause of American patriotism was Crispus Attucks, a former slave who was killed by British soldiers during the Boston Massacre of 1770. Some 5,000 black soldiers and sailors fought on the American side during the Revolutionary War.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, black slaves worked mainly on the tobacco, rice and indigo plantations of the southern coast. After the American Revolution (1775-83), many colonists (particularly in the North, where slavery was relatively unimportant to the economy) began to link the oppression of black slaves to their own oppression by the British, and to call for slavery's abolition. After the war's end, however, the new U.S. Constitution tacitly acknowledged the institution, counting each slave as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of

taxation and representation in Congress and guaranteeing the right to repossess any “person held to service or labor” (an obvious euphemism for slavery).

IMPORTANCE OF THE COTTON GIN

In the late 18th century, with the land used to grow tobacco nearly exhausted, the South faced an economic crisis, and the continued growth of slavery in America seemed in doubt. Around the same time, the mechanization of the textile industry in England led to a huge demand for American cotton, a southern crop whose production was unfortunately limited by the difficulty of removing the seeds from raw cotton fibers by hand. In 1793, a young Yankee schoolteacher named Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, a simple mechanized device that efficiently removed the seeds. His device was widely copied, and within a few years the South would transition from the large-scale production of tobacco to that of cotton, a switch that reinforced the region’s dependence on slave labor.

Slavery itself was never widespread in the North, though many of the region’s businessmen grew rich on the slave trade and investments in southern plantations. Between 1774 and 1804, all of the northern states abolished slavery, but the so-called “peculiar institution” remained absolutely vital to the South. Though the U.S. Congress outlawed the African slave trade in 1808, the domestic trade flourished, and the slave population in the U.S. nearly tripled over the next 50 years. By 1860 it had reached nearly 4 million, with more than half living in the cotton-producing states of the South.

SLAVES AND SLAVEHOLDERS

Slaves in the antebellum South constituted about one-third of the southern population. Most slaves lived on large farms or

small plantations; many masters owned less than 50 slaves. Slave owners sought to make their slaves completely dependent on them, and a system of restrictive codes governed life among slaves. They were prohibited from learning to read and write, and their behavior and movement was restricted. Many masters took sexual liberties with slave women, and rewarded obedient slave behavior with favors, while rebellious slaves were brutally punished. A strict hierarchy among slaves (from privileged house slaves and skilled artisans down to lowly field hands) helped keep them divided and less likely to organize against their masters. Slave marriages had no legal basis, but slaves did marry and raise large families; most slave owners encouraged this practice, but nonetheless did not hesitate to divide slave families by sale or removal.

Slave revolts did occur within the system (notably ones led by Gabriel Prosser in Richmond in 1800 and by Denmark Vesey in Charleston in 1822), but few were successful. The slave revolt that most terrified white slaveholders was that led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. Turner's group, which eventually numbered around 75 blacks, murdered some 60 whites in two days before armed resistance from local whites and the arrival of state militia forces overwhelmed them. Supporters of slavery pointed to Turner's rebellion as evidence that blacks were inherently inferior barbarians requiring an institution such as slavery to discipline them, and fears of similar insurrections led many southern states to further strengthen their slave codes in order to limit the education, movement and assembly of slaves. In the North, the increased repression of southern blacks would only fan the flames of the growing abolition movement.

RISE OF THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

From the 1830s to the 1860s, a movement to abolish slavery in America gained strength in the northern United States, led by free blacks such as Frederick Douglass and white supporters such as William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the radical newspaper *The Liberator*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who published the bestselling antislavery novel “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (1852). While many abolitionists based their activism on the belief that slaveholding was a sin, others were more inclined to the non-religious “free-labor” argument, which held that slaveholding was regressive, inefficient and made little economic sense.

Free blacks and other antislavery northerners had begun helping fugitive slaves escape from southern plantations to the North via a loose network of safe houses as early as the 1780s. This practice, known as the Underground Railroad, gained real momentum in the 1830s and although estimates vary widely, it may have helped anywhere from 40,000 to 100,000 slaves reach freedom. The success of the Underground Railroad helped spread abolitionist feelings in the North; it also undoubtedly increased sectional tensions, convincing pro-slavery southerners of their northern countrymen’s determination to defeat the institution that sustained them.

WESTERN EXPANSION AND DEBATE OVER SLAVERY IN AMERICA

America’s explosive growth—and its expansion westward in the first half of the 19th century—would provide a larger stage for the growing conflict over slavery in America and its future limitation or expansion. In 1820, a bitter debate over the federal government’s right to restrict slavery over Missouri’s application for statehood ended in a compromise: Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state, Maine as a free state and all western territories north of Missouri’s southern

border were to be free soil. Although the Missouri Compromise was designed to maintain an even balance between slave and free states, it was able to help quell the forces of sectionalism only temporarily.

In 1850, another tenuous compromise was negotiated to resolve the question of territory won during the Mexican War. Four years later, however, the Kansas-Nebraska Act opened all new territories to slavery by asserting the rule of popular sovereignty over congressional edict, leading pro- and anti-slavery forces to battle it out (with much bloodshed) in the new state of Kansas. Outrage in the North over the Kansas-Nebraska Act spelled the downfall of the old Whig Party and the birth of a new, all-northern Republican Party. In 1857, the Supreme Court's ruling in the Dred Scott case (involving a slave who sued for his freedom on the grounds that his master had taken him into free territory) effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise by ruling that all territories were open to slavery. The abolitionist John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in 1859 aroused sectional tensions even further: Executed for his crimes, Brown was hailed as a martyred hero by northern abolitionists and a vile murderer in the South.

CIVIL WAR AND EMANCIPATION

The South would reach the breaking point the following year, when Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected as president. Within three months, seven southern states had seceded to form the Confederate States of America; four more would follow after the Civil War (1861-65) began. Though Lincoln's antislavery views were well established, the central Union war aim at first was not to abolish slavery, but to preserve the United States as a nation. Abolition became a war aim only later, due to military necessity, growing anti-slavery sentiment in the North and the self-emancipation of many African Americans who fled enslavement as Union troops

swept through the South. Five days after the bloody Union victory at Antietam in September 1862, Lincoln issued a preliminary emancipation proclamation, and on January 1, 1863, he made it official that “slaves within any State, or designated part of a State...in rebellion,...shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”

By freeing some 3 million black slaves in the rebel states, the Emancipation Proclamation deprived the Confederacy of the bulk of its labor forces and put international public opinion strongly on the Union side. Some 186,000 black soldiers would join the Union Army by the time the war ended in 1865, and 38,000 lost their lives. The total number of dead at war's end was 620,000 (out of a population of some 35 million), making it the costliest conflict in American history.

THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY

The 13th Amendment, adopted late in 1865, officially abolished slavery, but freed blacks' status in the post-war South remained precarious, and significant challenges awaited during the Reconstruction period (1865-77). Former slaves received the rights of citizenship and the “equal protection” of the Constitution in the 14th Amendment (1868) and the right to vote in the 15th (1870), but the provisions of Constitution were often ignored or violated, and it was difficult for former slaves to gain a foothold in the post-war economy thanks to restrictive black codes and regressive contractual arrangements such as sharecropping.

Despite seeing an unprecedented degree of black participation in American political life, Reconstruction was ultimately frustrating for African Americans, and the rebirth of white supremacy—including the rise of racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan—had triumphed in the South by 1877.

Almost a century later, resistance to the lingering racism and discrimination in America that began during the slavery era would lead to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which would achieve the greatest political and social gains for blacks since Reconstruction.

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