

The Freedom Stone
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Historical Facts

Slavery in America is but one example of slavery in the world throughout history. There were slaves in ancient societies, going back as far as the 18th century BC - slaves in most countries around the Mediterranean Sea, in Slavic countries, in African nations, and in England.

Large towns, estates, or plantations needed cheap or free labor to do the necessary work to sustain them. Such was the condition for slavery. Slavery could be called "forced labor." People became enslaved in many ways. Wars between towns, tribes, or civilizations meant that there were winners and losers. The winners could take losers by force into slavery; typically, those taken were the ones thought to be strong workers. Criminals were enslaved. People who could not pay their bills were enslaved. Pirates captured people in order to sell them.

Enslaved people were first brought to America in 1619. The number of slaves increased each year until 1807 when the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves was passed. Though the law prohibited slave trade, it was enforced poorly and some slave trade continued. The number of slaves traded, however, diminished rapidly. In 1790, there were 697,524 slaves in the United States. By 1850, the population in the United States was 23,191,876, of which 3,204,313 were slaves, about 14% of the total population. The population of Virginia in 1850 was 1,119,348 of which 452,028 were slaves. There were more slaves in Virginia in 1850 than in any other state. There were 34,026 slave holding families in Virginia in 1850; 4880 of those held 20-49 slaves on their properties.

The routes used by slave ships became known as Triangular Trade. Three regions are involved in Triangular Trade: One region had goods or commodities in excess of its needs. Examples are: fish, agricultural products, lumber, wine, rum, olive oil, copper, cloth, guns, ammunition, and luxury items such as silver, glassware, even furniture. These goods were shipped on the first leg to another location. Upon arrival at the second region, the goods were paid for or bartered for slaves. The next leg of the triangle occurred when slaves were loaded onto ships carrying them to the third location where they were sold. Ship owners benefitted from all three trips.

Babies born to a slave mother became slaves too. Children took the legal status of the mother. Thus, even if the father was free, if the mother was a slave, the baby would be a slave. It is a fact that slave owners often forced themselves sexually on their female slaves. Babies born of such a situation thus increased the slave owners' assets. In that way, female slaves were more valuable to slave owners than male slaves because women could work and have children.

Overseers were men hired by the plantation owner to watch over the work of the slaves. The overseer was usually paid a portion of the profit from the sales of the crops, so it was in his best interests to make the slaves work harder and harder so that there would be more crops to sell. Overseers were often mean-spirited people who enforced the rules with a whip. Overseers of black slaves were typically white, but not always; occasionally there was a black overseer. President Thomas Jefferson had a black overseer at his home in Virginia, Monticello. White overseers belonged to a poor rank in society and they often hated black slaves because they believed that the black slaves had taken the jobs that, in their opinion, should have gone to them. This is but one example of slavery being about the supremacy of whiteness.

In most southern states, it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write. Slave owners feared that if slaves could read and write, they would be more likely to learn about abolitionist activities, would run away, would rebel, and they might question the authority of the overseer and the Master. Each state, therefore, passed its own laws about teaching slaves to read and write, and each state had its own penalties for doing so. In some states, a fine was imposed on slave owners who violated the law; in others the slave owner would receive no penalty, but the slave participating in such education would be whipped, incarcerated, or sold. In some states, it was written into the law that any person teaching a slave to read or write could be imprisoned.

The law did not give slaves any protection from their masters. Slaves could not testify in court against their masters. So, Masters and their overseers felt safe when whipping their slaves because they knew that they would not themselves get into any trouble for so cruelly treating the slaves. Many Masters and their overseers believed that bullying the slaves with the fear of the whip would encourage the slaves to work harder and faster to produce more of the crops, tobacco or cotton primarily. Whipping was the main method used to control slaves. The number of lashes depended on the seriousness of the offence, ranging from five to over 200.

Nat Turner was a lonely, intelligent Virginia slave who spent much of his time praying. He believed in spirits and he often had visions about things to come. The visions he saw made him believe that he should fight against all things evil in order that he could go to heaven. One day the sun appeared blue-green, an unusual sight. Turned decided that this was a sign that he should follow through with his plan to get rid of evil. He and several other rebels went on an assault stabbing, shooting and clubbing at least 55 white people. He was captured, tried in court, and sentenced to execution. He was hanged. Following the rebellion, slaveholders were hysterical and they then murdered about 200 black people, most of whom had nothing to do with the rebellion. Also, slaves who lived in neighboring states were also accused of having a connection to the rebellion even though they did not. They were also killed.

Harriet Tubman (born 1820, named Araminta Ross) was a Maryland slave who escaped in 1849 to Philadelphia. She returned to Maryland to free her sister and her sister's two children. Later she returned to rescue her brother. Tubman made trip after trip bringing slaves to freedom, traveling by night and in extreme secrecy. Though no one knows for sure, it is estimated that she made 19 trips helping about three hundred slaves escape slavery. Nicknamed 'Moses', Harriet Tubman used the Underground Railroad and she was known as its most famous 'conductor'. She became friends with many of the abolitionists and she took part in antislavery meetings. Tubman was never captured and neither were any of the runaway slaves she guided. Tubman commented, "I was a conductor on the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say – I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger." Tubman and Frederick Douglass were friends.

Frederick Douglass, the son of a slave woman and an unknown white man, lived with his grandmother as a child. His mother, whom he did not see often, died when he was quite young; some reports say that he was seven when she died, others say he was ten. Shortly after his mother's death, he was sent to Baltimore where he lived with a ship carpenter, Hugh Auld and his wife Sophia. Sophia taught Douglas to read and write even though her husband forbade it. He tried to escape twice before he finally succeeded. Always wanting to better himself, Douglass read everything he could get his hands on and he soon became quite an educated man, giving lectures in northern states and in the Midwest. After meeting William Lloyd Garrison, a noted abolitionist and publisher of the weekly journal *The Liberator*, Douglass started making speeches about slavery. Some years later, he began publishing his own weekly, *The North Star*. He met with Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and recruited northern blacks to fight on the side of the North.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 was an act of Congress, signed by President George Washington, himself a slave owner, guaranteeing the right of the slave owner to recapture runaways. The act called runaway slaves 'fugitives from justice'. The Act was made even stronger in 1850 after the slave states of the South fought for the passage of the Compromise of 1850 which required that even the governments and residents of free states had to enforce the capture and return runaway slaves. The enforcement of this act made anti-slavery Northerners angry as it fined any person aiding a runaway slave \$500 in addition to a six-month prison sentence. The people who captured a slave were paid a fee for doing so. This actually encouraged some unscrupulous (not honest or fair) people to capture free black men and sell them to slave owners.

It was the custom to require a free colored person to have with him/her a document that was called 'free papers', or a 'certificate of freedom'. The papers had to be renewed very often for a fee. The

papers outlined the person's name, age, color, height, and mention of any scars or other identifying marks on the person's skin. Though technically free, 'free people of color' were in constant fear of being kidnapped and sold into slavery. It was important, therefore, for a free person of color to carry his/her papers at all times. Without such a document, it would have been impossible for a free person of color to obtain a job.

At the end of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment ended slavery. But people still had a lot of questions about what would happen to those who had just gained their freedom. In 1868, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified (made official by signing it or voting for it). This amendment granted citizenship and all of its benefits to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States” – a right that had been denied to slaves. In 1870, the 15th Amendment was ratified. This amendment granted African American men the right to vote by declaring that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

However, Southern states found ways through the use of poll taxes, literacy tests and other means to deny African Americans the right to vote for almost another one hundred years. (Poll taxes had to be paid by each adult before they could vote in an election. Poll taxes are now illegal.) The Voting Rights Act of 1965 allowed African Americans to register to vote as any other American citizen.