

A History of Slavery in America

America was founded on the rights to freedom and liberty. However, for centuries, a significant part of America's population did not share in those rights. *A History of Slavery in America* provides a broad historical overview of the brutal system of slavery in the United States, tracing the "peculiar institution" from its origins in Jamestown to the Abolitionist Movement through the Reconstruction period. Students will be introduced to the oppressive nature of slavery and learn about the individuals who resisted and fought to end this brutal labor system.

Historical Overview

Slavery is a system of forced labor that has existed throughout the world for thousands of years. In the United States, an early system of indentured labor for both whites and blacks evolved into a policy of permanent servitude for African people who were forced to leave their native land to work on American farms and plantations. Cotton was king and slavery became firmly entrenched in the United States, especially the South. By 1860, there were four million enslaved Africans in the United States, owned by a small group of the wealthiest and most powerful whites in American society.

Numerous slave revolts in the United States were brutally crushed, while the Abolitionist Movement, led by Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass and the Underground Railroad, guided most famously by Harriet Tubman, worked unceasingly to end slavery. In 1860, President Abraham Lincoln's opposition to the expansion of slavery caused the South to revolt. After the Civil War, Congress passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing the hard-won freedom of African people. Despite the destruction of the institution of slavery, white racism and discrimination continued, calling forth a new generation of African-American leaders to fight for freedom.

Vocabulary

cotton gin — A machine invented by Eli Whitney that separates the seeds and shells from cotton bolls. Its invention resulted in a dramatic rise in the harvesting of southern cotton in the 19th century and the further entrenchment of slavery in the South.

Declaration of Independence — A document issued on July 4, 1776 that declared that the American colonies were free and independent states.

Abolitionists — Anti-slavery reformers who campaigned to emancipate enslaved people and end slavery.

The Liberator — An influential weekly newspaper published by William Lloyd Garrison beginning in 1831 that promoted the Abolitionist Movement.

The North Star — A weekly newspaper published by Frederick Douglass to advance the abolitionist cause.

Underground Railroad — A secret network of stations run by abolitionists to help fugitive slaves escape to the North and Canada.

Fugitive Slave Act — A law passed by Congress as part of the Compromise of 1850 that made it illegal for citizens to protect runaway slaves.

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Dred Scott v. Sandford — A critical 1857 Supreme Court decision that further inflamed hostilities between the North and the South regarding slavery. As part of its ruling, the Court stated that Scott, an African American, was not a citizen and did not have the right to sue for his freedom.

Harpers Ferry — The location of a federal arsenal in West Virginia where abolitionist John Brown led a raid to free enslaved people in 1859.

Civil War — A major war in the United States between 1861 and 1865 in which northern states battled southern Confederate states that were attempting to leave the Union.

Emancipation Proclamation — An executive order issued by President Lincoln during the Civil War that stated that slaves in the states that had left the Union were to be considered forever free.

13th Amendment — A constitutional amendment passed during the Reconstruction period that abolished slavery.

Reconstruction — A set of policies designed to rebuild the South and to bring the southern states back into the Union under terms and conditions set by Congress.

Ku Klux Klan — An organization set up to restore white control in the South in the Reconstruction Era through the use of terror and violence.

Discussion Questions

- Who was Sojourner Truth? How did she support the Abolitionist Movement?
- What did it mean to "walk about" in the aftermath of the Civil War? What did many who "walked about" discover?
- Describe political gains and setbacks the Freedmen experienced during Reconstruction.

Follow-up Activities

- Many African people did not accept their slave status and slave owners were in constant fear of uprisings. To help your class learn more about slave insurrections, ask students to research the lives of people such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Groups of students may write detailed biographical profiles of these leaders and summarize the strategies and outcomes of their various rebellions. Research may include Cinque and others who participated in the famous Amistad case.
- The African kingdoms of Dahomey and Ashanti accumulated great wealth and power as a result of their participation in the transatlantic slave trade. Ask students to investigate slave ports such as Ouidah and Elmina and identify them on a current map. As an extension, students may create charts that list the rulers of these kingdoms and describe their role in the perpetuation of slavery.
- The first Africans brought to Virginia were not referred to as "slaves," but as "indentured servants" who were freed after working for a specific period of time. Gradually, Virginia's laws changed and African people were declared to be permanent slaves. Ask students to read laws associated with slavery, known as Slave Codes and to create time lines indicating how these laws changed over time. More information may be found at the following web site: www.law.du.edu/russell/lh/alh/docs/virginiaslaverystatutes.html

Suggested Internet Resources

- sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/
The University of California at Berkeley has the full text of the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave."
- www.wsu.edu/~dec/Equiano.html
Washington State University provides excerpts from the first slave autobiography ever written, "The Life of Gustavus Vassa," by Olaudah Equiano.
- www.liu.edu/cwis/CWP/library/aaslavry.htm
Long Island University offers "The African-American: A Journey from Slavery to Freedom."

Suggested Print Resources

- Davis, David Brion. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. Oxford University Press, Oxford; 2006.
- Foner, Eric. *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*. Knopf, New York, NY; 2005.
- Hopkinson, Deborah. *Up Before Daybreak: Cotton and People in America*. Scholastic Nonfiction, New York, NY; 2006.

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