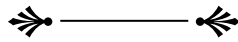


# SLAVERY



For nearly 250 years, the existence of slavery deprived African Americans of independent lives and individual liberty. It also compromised the republican dreams of white Americans, who otherwise achieved unprecedented success in the creation of political institutions and social relationships based on citizens' equal rights and ever-expanding opportunity.

Thomas Jefferson, who in 1787 described slavery as an "abomination" and predicted that it "must have an end," had faith that "there is a superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it." He later avowed that "there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach in any *practicable* way." Although Jefferson made several proposals to curb slavery's growth or reduce its political or economic influence, a workable plan to eradicate slavery eluded him. Others also failed to end slavery until finally, after the loss of more than 600,000 American lives in the Civil War, the United States abolished it through the 1865 ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

American slavery and American freedom took root at the same place and at the same time. In 1619—the same year that colonial Virginia's House of Burgesses convened in Jamestown and became the New World's first representative assembly—about 20 enslaved Africans arrived at Jamestown and were sold by Dutch slave traders. The number of slaves in Virginia remained small for several decades, however, until the first dominant labor system—indentured servitude—fell out of favor after 1670. Until then indentured servants, typically young and landless white Englishmen and Englishwomen in search of opportunity, arrived by the thousands. In exchange for passage to Virginia, they agreed to labor in planters' tobacco fields for terms usually ranging from four to seven years. Planters normally agreed to give them, after their indentures expired, land on which they could establish their own tobacco farms. In the first few decades of settlement, as demand for the crop

boomed, such arrangements usually worked in the planters' favor. Life expectancy in Virginia was short and few servants outlasted their terms of indenture. By the mid-1600s, however, as the survival rate of indentured servants increased, more earned their freedom and began to compete with their former masters. The supply of tobacco rose more quickly than demand and, as prices decreased, tensions between planters and former servants grew.

These tensions exploded in 1676, when Nathaniel Bacon led a group composed primarily of former indentured servants in a rebellion against Virginia's government. The rebels, upset by the reluctance of Governor William Berkeley and the gentry-dominated House of Burgesses to aid their efforts to expand onto American Indians' lands, lashed out at both the Indians and the government.

After several months the rebellion dissipated, but so, at about the same time, did the practice of voluntary servitude.

In its place developed a system of race-based slavery. With both black and white Virginians living longer, it made better economic sense to own slaves, who would never gain their freedom and compete with masters, than to rent the labor of indentured servants, who would. A few early slaves had gained their freedom, established plantations, acquired servants, and enjoyed liberties shared by white freemen, but beginning in the 1660s Virginia's legislature passed laws banning interracial marriage; it also stripped African Americans of the rights to own property and carry guns, and it curtailed their freedom of movement. In 1650 only about 300 blacks worked Virginia's tobacco fields, yet by 1680 there were 3,000 and, by the start of the eighteenth century, nearly 10,000.

Slavery surged not only in Virginia but also in Pennsylvania, where people abducted from Africa and their descendants harvested wheat and oats, and in South Carolina, where by the 1730s rice planters had imported slaves in such quantity that they accounted for two-thirds of the population.



The sugar-based economies of Britain's Caribbean colonies required so much labor that, on some islands, enslaved individuals outnumbered freemen by more than ten to one. Even in the New England colonies, where staple-crop agriculture never took root, the presence of slaves was common and considered unremarkable by most.

Historian Edmund S. Morgan has suggested that the prevalence of slavery in these colonies may have, paradoxically, heightened the sensitivity of white Americans to attacks against their own freedom. Thus, during the crisis preceding the War for Independence Americans frequently cast unpopular British legislation—which taxed them without the consent of their assemblies, curtailed the expansion of their settlements, deprived them of the right to jury trials, and placed them under the watchful eyes of red-coated soldiers—as evidence of an imperial conspiracy to “enslave” them. American patriots who spoke in such terms did not imagine that they would be forced to toil in tobacco fields; instead, they feared that British officials would deny to them some of the same individual and civil rights that they had denied to enslaved African Americans. George Mason, collaborating with George Washington, warned in the Fairfax Resolves of 1774 that the British Parliament pursued a “regular, systematic plan” to “fix the shackles of slavery upon us.”

As American revolutionaries reflected on the injustice of British usurpations of their freedom and began to universalize the individual rights that they had previously tied to their status as Englishmen, they grew increasingly conscious of the inherent injustice of African-American slavery. Many remained skeptical that blacks possessed the same intellectual capabilities as whites, but few refused to count Africans as members of the human family or possessors of individual rights. When Jefferson affirmed in the Declaration of Independence “that all men are created equal,” he did not mean all *white* men. In fact, he attempted to turn the Declaration into a platform from which Americans would denounce the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This he blamed on Britain and its king who, Jefferson wrote, “has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it’s [sic] most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere.”

The king was wrong, he asserted, “to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold.” Delegates to the Continental Congress from South Carolina and Georgia, however, vehemently opposed the inclusion of these lines in the Declaration of Independence. Representatives of other states agreed to delete them. Thus began, at the moment of America’s birth, the practice of prioritizing American unity over black Americans’ liberty.

Pragmatism confronted principle not only on the floor of Congress but also on the plantations of many prominent revolutionaries. When Jefferson penned his stirring defense of individual liberty, he owned 200 enslaved individuals. Washington, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and future first president, was

*In 1650 only about 300 African Americans worked Virginia’s tobacco fields, yet by 1680 there were 3,000; by the start of the eighteenth century, there were nearly 10,000.*

one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia. James Madison—who, like Jefferson and Washington, considered himself an opponent of slavery—was also a slaveholder. So was Mason, whose Virginia Declaration of Rights stands as one of the revolutionary era’s most resounding statements on behalf of human freedom. Had these revolutionaries attempted to free their slaves, they would have courted financial ruin. Alongside their landholdings, slaves constituted the principal asset against which they borrowed. The existence of slavery, moreover, precluded a free market of agricultural labor; they could never afford to pay free people—who could always move west to obtain their own farms, anyway—to till their fields.

Perhaps the most powerful objection to emancipation, however, emerged from the same set of principles that compelled the American revolutionaries to question the justice of slavery. Although Jefferson, Washington, Madison, and Mason considered human bondage a clear violation of individual rights, they trembled when they considered the ways in which emancipation might thwart their republican experiments. Not unlike many nonslaveholders, they considered especially fragile the society that they had helped to create. In the absence of aristocratic selfishness and force, revolutionary American governments relied on virtue and voluntarism. Virtue they understood as a manly trait; the word, in fact, derives from the Latin noun *vir*, which means “man.” They considered men to be independent and self-sufficient, made free and responsible by

habits borne of necessity. Virtuous citizens made good citizens, the Founders thought. The use of political power for the purpose of exploitation promised the virtuous little and possessed the potential to cost them much. Voluntarism was virtue unleashed: the civic-minded, selfless desire to ask little of one's community but, because of one's sense of permanence within it, to give much to it. The Founders, conscious of the degree to which involuntary servitude had rendered slaves dependent and given them cause to resent white society, questioned their qualifications for citizenship. It was dangerous to continue to enslave them, but perilous to emancipate them. Jefferson compared it to holding a wolf by the ears.

These conundrums seemed to preclude an easy fix. Too aware of the injustice of slavery to expect much forgiveness from slaves, in the first decades of the nineteenth century a number of Founders embarked on impractical schemes to purchase the freedom of slaves and "repatriate" them from America to Africa. In the interim, debate about the continued importation of slaves from Africa stirred delegates to the Constitutional Convention. South Carolina's Charles Pinckney vehemently opposed prohibitions on the slave trade, arguing that the matter was best decided by individual states. The delegates compromised, agreeing that the Constitution would prohibit for twenty years any restrictions on the arrival of newly enslaved Africans. As president, Jefferson availed himself of the opportunity afforded by the Constitution when he prohibited the continued importation of Africans into America in 1808. Yet he had already failed in a 1784 attempt to halt the spread of slavery into the U.S. government's western territory, which stretched from the Great Lakes south toward the Gulf of Mexico (the compromise Northwest Ordinance of 1787 drew the line at the Ohio River), and in his efforts to institute in Virginia a plan for gradual emancipation (similar to those that passed in Northern states, except that it provided for the education and subsequent deportation of freed African Americans). Of all the Founders, Benjamin Franklin probably took the most unequivocal public stand against involuntary servitude when, in 1790, he signed a strongly worded antislavery petition submitted to Congress by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. This, too, accomplished little.

The revolutionary spirit of the postwar decade, combined with the desire of many Upper South plantation owners to shift from labor-intensive tobacco to wheat, created opportunities to reduce the prevalence of slavery in America—especially in the North. Those opportunities not seized upon—especially in the South—would not soon return.

Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793 widened the regional divide. By rendering more efficient the processing of cotton fiber—which in the first half of the nineteenth century possessed a greater value than all other U.S. exports combined—Whitney's machine triggered a resurgence of Southern slavery. Meanwhile, the wealth that cotton exports brought to America

fueled a booming Northern industrial economy that relied on free labor and created a well-educated middle class of urban professionals and social activists. These individuals kept alive the Founders' desire to rid America of

slavery, but they also provoked the development of Southern proslavery thought. At best, Southerners of the revolutionary generation had viewed slavery as a necessary evil; by the 1830s, however, slaveholders began to describe it as a positive good. African Americans were civilized Christians, they argued, but their African ancestors were not. In addition, the argument continued, slaves benefited from the paternalistic care of masters who, unlike the Northern employers of "wage slaves," cared for their subordinates from the cradle to the grave. This new view combined with an older critique of calls for emancipation: since slaves were the property of their masters, any attempt to force their release would be a violation of masters' property rights.

Regional positions grew more intractable as the North and South vied for control of the West. Proposals to admit into statehood Missouri, Texas, California, Kansas, and Nebraska resulted in controversy as Northerners and Southerners sparred to maintain parity in the Senate. The 1860 election to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, a Republican who opposed the inclusion of additional slave states, sparked secession and the Civil War.

"I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just," Jefferson had prophetically remarked, for "his justice cannot sleep for ever." Americans paid dearly for the sin of slavery. Efforts by

*"I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just," Jefferson had prophetically remarked, for "his justice cannot sleep for ever." Americans paid dearly for the sin of slavery.*

members of the founding generation failed to identify moderate means to abolish the practice, and hundreds of thousands died because millions had been deprived of the ability to truly live.

*Robert M. S. McDonald, Ph.D.  
United States Military Academy*

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

- Bailyn, Bernard. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, reprint, 1992.
- Freehling, William W. *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1754*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Jordan, Winthrop D. *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1968.
- Miller, John Chester. *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, reprint, 1991.
- Morgan, Edmund S. *American Slavery—American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1975.
- Tise, Larry E. *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987.