

Introductory Essay

Slavery and the Struggle for Abolition from the Colonial Period to the Civil War



How did the principles of the Declaration of Independence contribute to the quest to end slavery from colonial times to the outbreak of the Civil War?

- ☐ I can explain how slavery became codified over time in the United States.
- ☐ I can explain how Founding principles in the Declaration of Independence strengthened anti-slavery thought and action.
- ☐ I can explain how territorial expansion intensified the national debate over slavery.
- ☐ I can explain various ways in which African Americans secured their own liberty from the colonial era to the Civil War.
- ☐ I can explain how African American leaders worked for the cause of abolition and equality.

Essential Vocabulary

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| Lower South | Cultural and geographical region of the South dependent on plantations and chattel slavery—the owning of human beings as property that can be bought and sold. At the time of the Founding, the lower South referred to the Carolinas and Georgia. Later, it also encompassed what later became Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, parts of Texas, and Florida. |
| Upper South | Cultural and geographical region of the South including Virginia, and in the Civil War, the border states of Kentucky, Missouri, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware. |
| Indentured servant | A person bound by a signed or forced contract to work for a master for a fixed amount of time in exchange for a benefit. |

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| Codify | To formally write into law |
| Chattel slavery | A system of slavery in which enslaved men, women, and children were actual property and could be bought, sold, traded, or inherited |
| Quakers | A Christian movement, also known as the Religious Society of Friends, devoted to peaceful principles |
| Natural law | The principle that all human beings possess rights by virtue of their existence. Because of its universality, natural law is considered to be higher than any law made by human authority. |
| Manumission | The act of voluntarily freeing enslaved individuals |
| Cotton gin | “Cotton engine” patented by Eli Whitney in 1794. The cotton gin automated the extraction of seeds from cotton, thereby making it easier to harvest and making cotton a much more profitable crop. |
| Abolitionist | A person who supported the end of slavery |

Slavery and the Struggle for Abolition from the Colonial Period to the Civil War

The English established their first permanent settler colony in a place they called Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Early seventeenth-century Virginia was abundant in land and scarce in laborers. Initially, the labor need was met mostly by propertyless English men and women who came to the new world as **indentured servants** hoping to become landowners themselves after their term of service ended. Such servitude was generally the status, too, of Africans in early British America, the first of whom were brought to Virginia by a Dutch vessel in 1619. But within a few decades, indentured servitude in the colonies gave way to lifelong, hereditary slavery, imposed exclusively on black Africans.

Because forced labor (whether indentured servitude or slavery) was a longstanding and common condition, the injustice of slavery troubled relatively few settlers during the colonial period. Southern colonies in particular **codified** slavery into law. Slavery became hereditary, with men, women, and children bought and sold as property, a condition known as **chattel slavery**. Opposition to slavery was mainly concentrated among **Quakers**, who believed in the equality of all men and women and therefore opposed slavery on moral grounds. Quaker opposition to slavery was

seen as early as 1688, when a group of Quakers submitted a formal protest against the institution for discussion at a local meeting.

Anti-slavery sentiment strengthened during the era of the Revolution and Founding. Founding principles, based on **natural law** proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and in several state constitutions, added philosophical force to biblically grounded ideas of human equality and dignity. Those principles informed free and enslaved blacks, including Prince Hall, Elizabeth Freeman, Quock Walker, and Belinda Sutton, who sent anti slavery petitions to state legislatures. Their powerful appeal to natural rights moved legislators and judges to implement the first wave of emancipation in the United States. Immediate emancipation in Massachusetts, gradual emancipation in other northern states, and private **manumission** in the **upper South** dealt blows against slavery and freed tens of thousands of people.

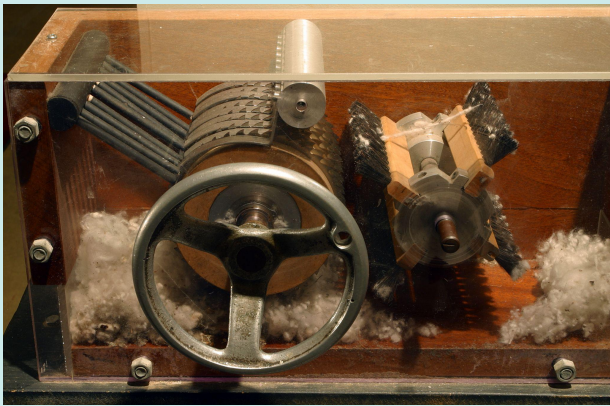
Slavery remained deeply entrenched and thousands remained enslaved, however, in states in both the upper and **lower South**, even as northern leaders believed the practice was on its way to extinction. The result was the set of compromises the Framers inscribed into the U.S. Constitution—lending slavery important protections but also preparing for its eventual abolition. The Constitution did not use the word “slave” or “slavery,” instead referring to those enslaved as “persons.” James Madison, the “father” of the Constitution, thus thought the document implicitly denied the legitimacy of a claim of property in another human being. The Constitution also restricted slavery’s growth by allowing Congress to ban the slave trade after 20 years. Out of those compromises grew extended controversies, however, the most heated and dangerous of which concerned the treatment of fugitive slaves and the status of slavery in federal territories.

The invention of the **cotton gin** in 1793 renewed and enhanced slavery’s profitability and expansion, which intensified both attachment and opposition to it. The first major flare-up occurred in 1819, when a dispute over whether Missouri would be admitted to the Union as a slave state or a free state generated threats of civil war among members of Congress. The adoption of the Missouri Compromise in 1820 quelled the anger for a time. But the dispute was reignited in the 1830s and continued to inflame the country’s political life through the Civil War.

In 1831, in Virginia, a large-scale slave rebellion led by Nat Turner resulted in the deaths of approximately 60 whites and more than 100 blacks and generated alarm throughout the South. That same decade saw the emergence of a radicalized (and to a degree racially integrated) **abolitionist** movement, led by Massachusetts

activist William Lloyd Garrison, and an equally radicalized pro slavery faction, led by U.S. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina.

The polarization sharpened in subsequent decades. The Mexican-American War (1846–1848) brought large new western territories under U.S. control and renewed the contention in Congress over the status of slavery in federal territories. The complex 1850 Compromise, which included a new fugitive slave law heavily weighted in favor of slaveholders' interests, did little to restore calm.



A cotton gin on display at the Eli Whitney Museum by Tom Murphy VII, 2007.



“U.S. Cotton Production 1790–1834”
by Bill of Rights Institute/Flickr, CC BY 4.0

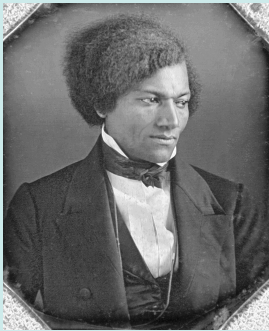
Separating the sticky seeds from cotton fiber was slow, painstaking work. Eli Whitney’s cotton gin (gin being southern slang for engine) made the task much simpler, and cotton production in the lower South exploded. Cotton planters and their slaves moved to Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama to start new cotton plantations. Many planters in the Chesapeake region sold their slaves to cotton planters in the lower South. This created a massive interstate slave trade that transferred enslaved persons through auctions and forced marches in chains and that also broke up many slave families.

A few years later, Congress reopened the Kansas and Nebraska territories to slavery, thereby undoing the 1820 Missouri Compromise and rendering any further compromises unlikely. The U.S. Supreme Court tried vainly to settle the controversy by issuing, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), the most pro-slavery ruling in its history. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln, a rising figure in the newly born Republican Party, declared the United States a “house divided” between slavery and freedom. In late 1859, militant abolitionist John Brown alarmed the South when he attempted to liberate slaves by taking over a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry,

Virginia. He was promptly captured, tried, and executed and thereupon became a martyr for many northern abolitionists.

Watch this BRI Homework Help video: *Dred Scott v. Sandford* for more information on the pivotal *Dred Scott* decision.

Link: [Dred Scott v. Sandford | Homework Help from the Bill of Rights Institute](#)



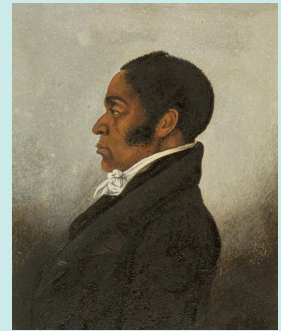
Frederick Douglass
by Photographer
Unknown, 1840s



Harriet Jacobs by
Gilbert Studios,
1894



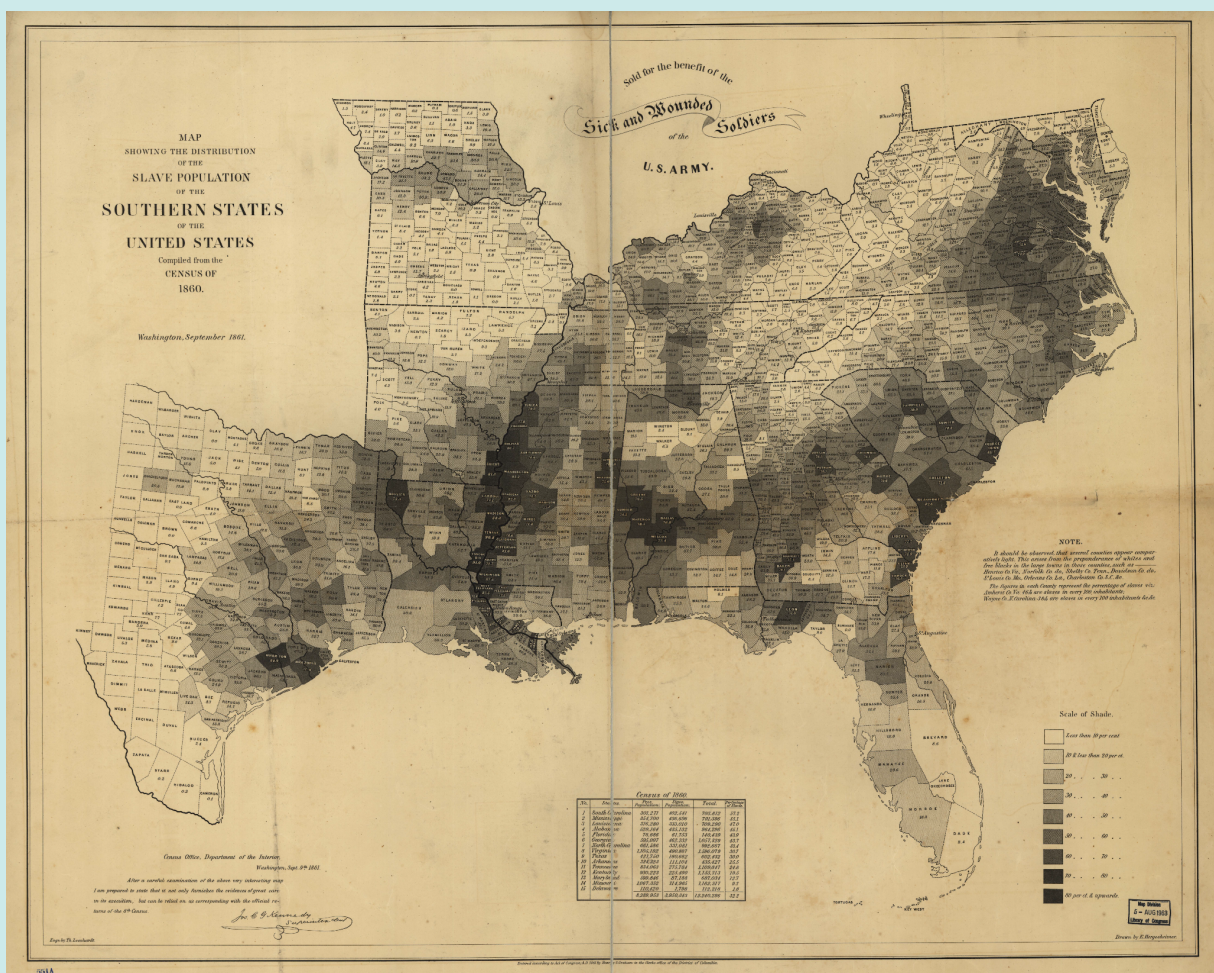
Harriet Tubman by
Benjamin F.
Powelson, 1868-69



James Forten by
Robert Douglass
Jr., 18th or 19th
century

Leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, and James Forten all worked for the cause of abolition and equality.

As the debate over slavery continued on the national stage, formerly enslaved and free black men and women spoke out against the evils of slavery. Slave narratives such as those by Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northrup, and Harriet Jacobs humanized the experience of slavery. Their vivid, heartbreaking accounts of their own enslavement strengthened the moral cause of abolition. At the same time, enslaved men and women made the brave and dangerous decision to run away. Some ran on their own, and others used the Underground Railroad, a network of secret “conductors” and “stations” that helped enslaved people escape to the North and, after 1850, to Canada. The most famous of these conductors was Harriet Tubman, who traveled to the South about 12 times to lead approximately 70 men and women to freedom. Free blacks faced their own challenges. Leaders such as Benjamin Banneker, James Forten, David Walker, and Maria Stewart spoke out against racist attitudes and laws that sought to limit their political and civil rights.



This map shows the concentration of slaves in the southern United States as derived from the 1860 U.S. Census. The so-called “Border states”—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and after 1863, West Virginia—allowed slavery but remained loyal to the Union. Credit: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

By 1860, the atmosphere in the United States was combustible. With the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in November of that year, the conflict over slavery came to a head. Since Lincoln and Republicans opposed the expansion of slavery and called it a moral evil, 7 slaveholding states declared their secession from the United States. And in April 1861, the war came. The next 5 years of conflict and bloodshed determined the fate of enslaved men, women, and children, and of the Union itself.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What actions were taken to oppose slavery in the colonial period and Founding era?

2. Why did the Constitution not use the words “slave” or “slavery”?

3. How did each of the following affect the debate over the expansion of slavery?
 - a. The invention of the cotton gin
 - b. The Mexican-American War
 - c. Dred Scott v. Sandford
 - d. The election of Abraham Lincoln as president

4. How did formerly enslaved and free black men and women fight to end slavery?