

Equal Justice Initiative

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SLAVERY IN AMERICA

An estimated 10.7 million Black men, women, and children were transported from West Africa and sold into slavery in South America, Central America, or North America. Nearly two million more are estimated to have perished during the brutal voyage.



These starving people were rescued from a slave ship. Disease and starvation killed 1.8 million enslaved people before they reached the Americas. (The National Archives of the UK: ref. F084/1310.)

The enslavement of Black people in the United States lasted for more than two centuries and created a complex legal, economic, and social infrastructure that can still be seen today. The legacy of slavery has implications for many contemporary issues, political and social debates, and cultural norms — especially in places where slavery or the slave trade was extensive.

In the Transatlantic Slave Trade, kidnapped Africans were “bought” by traders from Western Europe in exchange for rum, cotton products, and weapons like guns and gunpowder.¹ As Historian John Blassingame describes, the captured Africans were then shipped across the Atlantic Ocean in cramped vessels under horrific conditions:

“Taken on board ship, the naked Africans were shackled together on bare wooden boards in the hold, and packed so tightly that they could not sit upright. During the dreaded Mid-Passage (a trip of from three weeks to more than three months) . . . [t]he foul and poisonous air of the hold, extreme heat, men lying for hours in their own defecation, with blood and mucus covering the floor, caused a great deal of sickness. Mortality from undernourishment and disease was about 16 percent. The first few weeks of the trip was the most traumatic experience for the Africans. A number of them went insane and many became so despondent that they gave up the will to live. . . . Often they committed suicide, by drowning or refusing food or medicine, rather than accept their enslavement.”²

In this way, an estimated 10.7 million Black men, women, and children were transported

from West Africa and sold into slavery in South America, Central America, or North America.³ Nearly two million more are estimated to have perished during the brutal voyage.⁴

For the millions of Africans who would face enslavement in the United States — either at the end of a transatlantic journey from Africa, or from birth as the descendants of Africans transported to the country in bondage — the particular experience of American slavery took different forms based on region and time period. Those enslaved in the northeastern states were not as confined to agricultural work as those in the South and many spent their lives in bondage laboring as house servants or in various positions of unpaid, skilled labor.⁵ The less diverse Southern economy, primarily centered around cotton and tobacco crops, gave rise to large plantations dependent on the labor of enslaved Africans, who toiled in the fields and ran the planters’ homes.⁶



Slave cabin and family near Eufaula in Barbour County, Alabama. (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.)



Imprisoned men at Maula Prison in Malawi are forced to sleep “like the enslaved on a slave ship.” (Joao Silva/The New York Times/Redux.)



In many states where slavery was prevalent, most whites rejected emancipation and used violence, terror, and the law to disenfranchise, abuse, and marginalize African Americans for more than a century.

Largely for this reason, slavery in the two regions diverged. Slavery became less efficient and less socially accepted in the Northeast during the eighteenth century, and those states began passing laws to gradually abolish slavery. In 1804, New Jersey became the last Northern state to commit to abolition. In contrast, the system of slavery remained a central and necessary ingredient in the Southern plantation economy and cultural landscape well into the nineteenth century.⁷ By 1860, in the fifteen Southern states that still permitted slavery, nearly one in four families owned enslaved people.⁸ The South so desperately clung to the institution of slavery that, as the national tide turned toward abolition, eleven Southern states seceded from the United States, formed the

Confederate States of America, and sparked a bloody civil war.

In December 1865, just eight months after Confederate forces surrendered and the four-year Civil War ended, the United States adopted the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude, “except as punishment for crime.” This meant freedom for more than four million enslaved Black people living in the United States at the time. However, in many states where slavery was prevalent, most white residents rejected emancipation and used violence, terror, and the law to disenfranchise, abuse, and marginalize African Americans for more than a century after emancipation.

INVENTING RACIAL INFERIORITY: HOW AMERICAN SLAVERY WAS DIFFERENT



Many enslaved and orphaned children were unprotected during the turmoil of the Civil War. (George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film.)

The racialized caste system of American slavery that originated in the British colonies was unique in many respects from the forms of slavery that existed in other parts of the world.⁹ In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, for example, slavery was a class category or form of indentured servitude — an “accident” of individual status that could befall anyone and could be overcome after a completed term of labor or assimilation into the dominant culture.¹⁰

American slavery began as such a system. When the first Africans were brought to the British colonies in 1619 on a ship that docked in Jamestown, Virginia, they held the legal status of “servant.”¹¹ But as the region’s economic system became increasingly dependent on forced labor, and as racial prejudice became more ingrained in the social culture, the institution of American slavery developed as a permanent, hereditary status centrally tied to race.¹²



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Over the next two centuries, the system of American slavery grew from and reinforced racial prejudice.¹³ Advocates of slavery argued that science and religion proved white racial superiority: under this view, white people were smart, hard-working, and more intellectually and morally evolved, while Black people were dumb, lazy, child-like, and in need of guidance and supervision. In 1857, for example, Mississippi Governor William McWillie denounced



“Contrabands” were enslaved people who escaped from plantations and sought protection from Union forces during the Civil War. These men escaped from plantations in South Carolina in 1862. (Collection of the New-York Historical Society, neg # 44751.)



Though the reality of American slavery was often brutal, barbaric, and violent, the myth of Black people’s racial inferiority developed and persisted as a common justification for the system’s continuation.

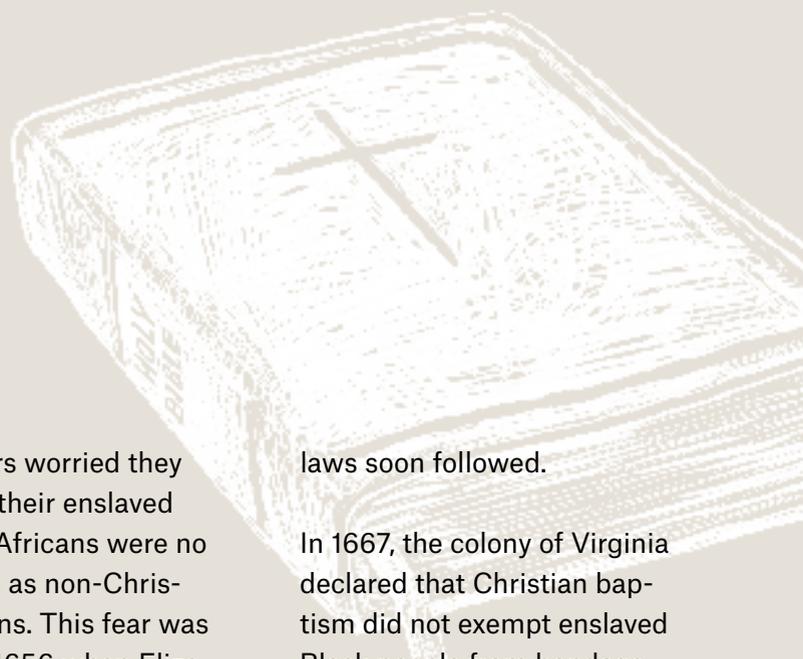
anti-slavery critics and insisted:

“[T]he institution of slavery, per se, is as justifiable as the relation of husband and wife, parent and child, or any other civil institution of the State, and is most necessary to the well-being of the negro, being the only form of government or pupilage which can raise him from barbarism, or make him useful to himself or others; and I have no doubt but that the institution, thus far in our country, has resulted in the happiness and elevation of both races; that is, the negro and the white man. In no period of the world’s history have three millions of the negro race been so elevated in the scale of being, or so much civilized or Christianized, as those in the United States, as slaves. They are better clothed, better fed, better housed, and more cared for in sickness and in health, than has ever fallen to the lot of any similar number of the negro race in any age or nation; and as a Christian people, I feel that it is the duty of the South to keep them in their present position, at any cost and at every peril, even independently of the questions of interest and security.”¹⁴

This perspective defended Black people’s life-long and nearly inescapable enslavement in the United States as justified and necessary. White slave holders were performing an act of kindness, advocates claimed, by exposing the Black people they held as human property to discipline, hard work, and morality. Though the reality of American slavery was often brutal, barbaric, and violent, the myth of Black people’s racial inferiority developed and persisted as a common justification for the system’s continuation. This remained true throughout the Civil War, the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, and the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

Indeed, ending slavery was not enough to overcome the harmful ideas created to defend it.¹⁵ “Freeing” the nation’s masses of enslaved Black people without undertaking the work to deconstruct the narrative of inferiority doomed those freedmen and -women and their descendants to a fate of subordinate, second-class citizenship. In the place of slavery, the commitment to racial hierarchy was expressed in many new forms, including lynching and other methods of racial terrorism; segregation and “Jim Crow”; and unprecedented rates of mass incarceration.

RELIGION AND SLAVERY



As early as the 10th century, biblical scripture was used to support the claim that Africans were a cursed people fit only for slavery.¹⁶ As scholar Ibram X. Kendi has documented, religion became a more common justification for slavery as national economies grew dependent on maintaining the system of bondage. To protect slavery, the American colonies and later the United States embraced religious teachings that endorsed ideas of Black inferiority, approved the inhumanity of chattel slavery, and promised reward to Black people who submitted to enslavement.

When slavery began in North America in the 17th century, the lands that would become the United States were colonies held by the British, and British law forbade the enslavement of Christians. Most Africans then practiced Islam or African folk religions — and as Christian missionaries set out to convert enslaved Africans in the colonies, British

slave owners worried they would lose their enslaved property if Africans were no longer seen as non-Christian heathens. This fear was realized in 1656 when Elizabeth Key, the daughter of an enslaved Black woman and a white Englishman, successfully sued for her and her child's freedom by arguing that her Christianity should shield her from enslavement. If slavery was to survive, religious teachings would have to adapt.¹⁷

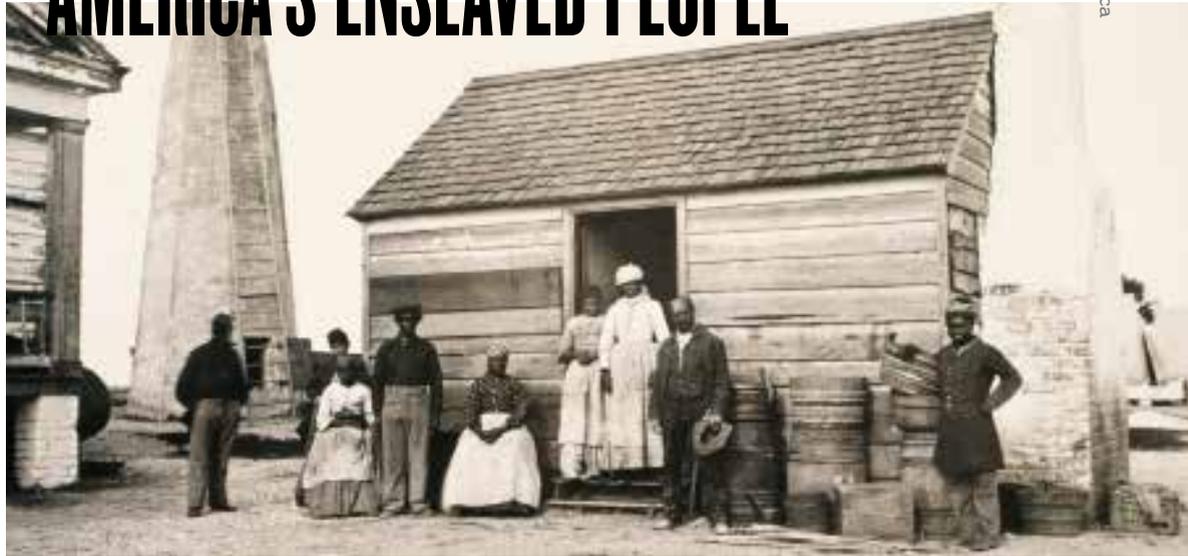
In 1664-1665, a British minister named Richard Baxter published a treatise encouraging slave owners to convert the enslaved to Christianity and arguing that slavery was a righteous institution that allowed for the saving of African souls — without requiring their freedom.¹⁸ He told his Puritan readers that slavery was beneficial to African people, and paved the way for white people to buy, sell, and abuse African people while maintaining a Christian identity. Compatible

laws soon followed.

In 1667, the colony of Virginia declared that Christian baptism did not exempt enslaved Black people from bondage, and New York and Maryland soon did the same.¹⁹ These laws allowed white evangelicals to share Christianity with Black people without the risk of forced emancipation, and later laws further restricted Black Christians' religious practice and barred interracial worship services. After the colonies won independence and established the United States of America, these laws only strengthened.

As the abolitionist movement grew in the North, some openly challenged the church's tolerance of slavery — but Southern churches, largely dependent on the support of white slave owners, almost never questioned the morality of owning human beings.²⁰

THE LIVES AND FEARS OF AMERICA'S ENSLAVED PEOPLE



Enslaved people had to fear brutal abuse and mistreatment on many plantations in the South. (Donated by Corbis.)

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, confronted with abolitionists' moral outrage and growing political pressure, Southern slave owners defended slavery as a benevolent system that benefitted enslaved Black people.²¹ Even today, some continue to echo those claims in attempts to justify more than two centuries of human bondage, forced labor, and abuse.²² Records from the era paint a much different picture, revealing American slavery as a system that was always dehumanizing and barbaric, and often bloody, brutal, and violent.

As an institution, slavery deprived the enslaved of any legal rights or autonomy and granted the slave owner complete power over the Black men, women, and children legally recognized as his property. Structurally, this weakened enslaved people's claims to even the most basic social bond: the family. The enslaved could not



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legally marry, needed an owner's permission to enter into non-legal marriages, and could be forced to marry a partner chosen by the slave owner. Once married, husbands and wives had no ability to protect themselves from being sold away from each other, and if "owned" by different masters, were often forced to reside on different plantations. Parents could do nothing when their young children were sold away,²³ and enslaved families were regularly and easily separated at an owner's or auctioneer's whim, never to see each other again.²⁴

White men and women justified this cruelty by claiming Black people did not have emotional ties to each other. “It is frequently remarked by Southerners, in palliation of the cruelty of separating relatives,” observed one visitor to the South in the 1850s, “that the affection of negroes for one another are very slight. I have been told by more than one lady that she was sure her nurse did not have half the affection for her own children that she did for her mistress’s.”²⁵

In a first-hand account published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839, a Kentucky woman told the story of two young Black men, Ned and John, who were frequently severely whipped by their master as punishment for “staying a little over the time with their wives” living on different plantations nearby: “Mr. Long would tie them up by the wrist, so high that their toes would just touch the ground, and then with

a cow-hide lay the lash upon the naked back, until he was exhausted, when he would sit down and rest. As soon as he had rested sufficiently, he would ply the cow-hide again, thus he would continue until the whole back of the poor victim was lacerated into one uniform coat of blood.”²⁶ Both men died young, from illness brought on by this abuse.

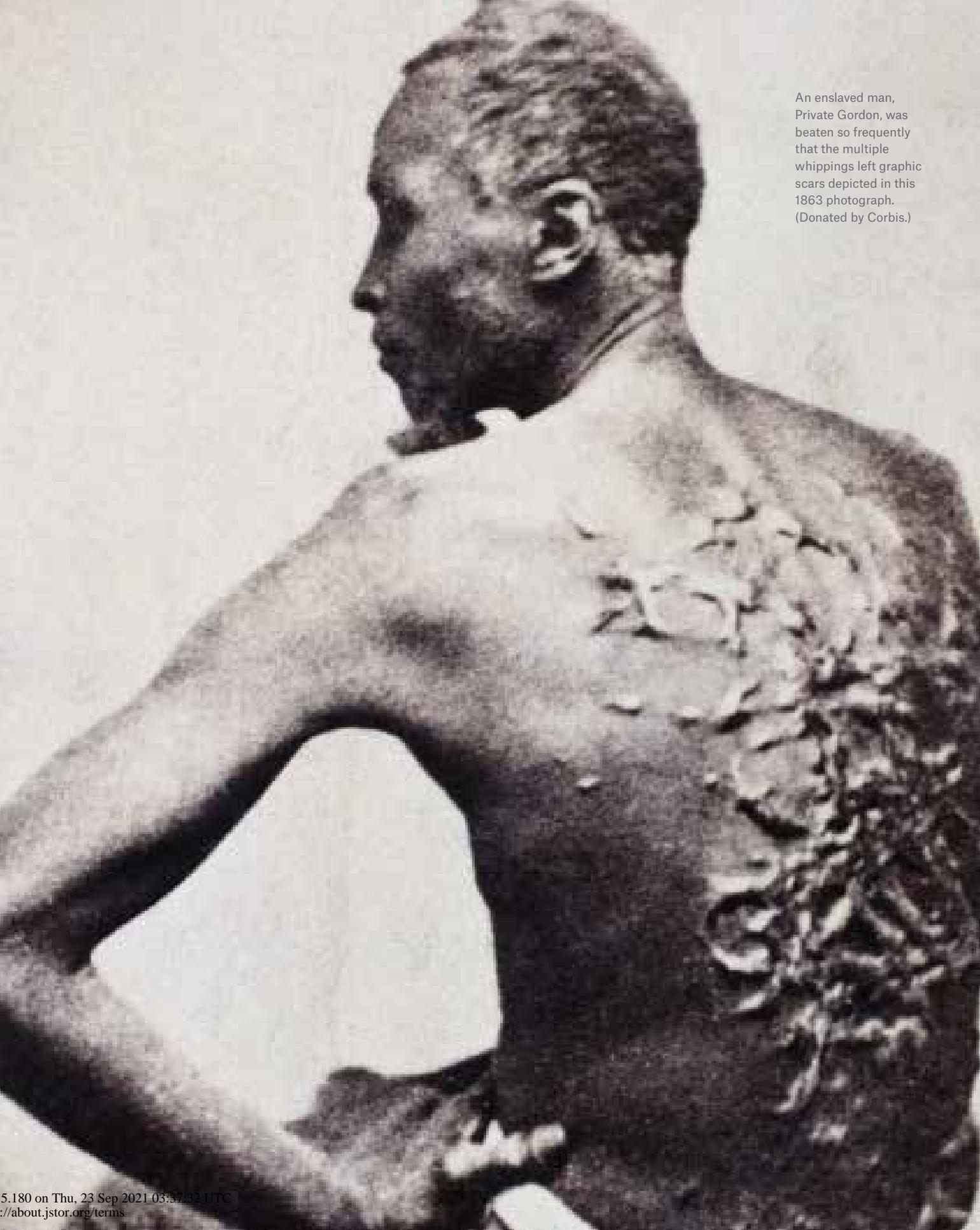
In addition to the labor exploitation inherent to slavery, slave owners had the power to sexually exploit the enslaved people they held, both male²⁷ and female. Sexual abuse of enslaved Black men included being forced to have sex with enslaved women against their will and in front of a white audience. In 1787, two white slave owners in Maryland forced an enslaved Black man, at gunpoint, to rape a free Black woman; when the act was done, one of the white men likened the act to breeding horses.²⁸

“

To be a man, and not to be a man—a father without authority—a husband and no protector—is the darkest of fates. Such was the condition of my father, and such is the condition of every slave throughout the United States: he owns nothing, he can claim nothing. His wife is not his: his children are not his; they can be taken from him, and sold at any minute, as far away from each other as the human fleshmonger may see fit to carry them. Slaves are recognised as property by the law, and can own nothing except by the consent of their masters. A slave's wife or daughter may be insulted before his eyes with impunity. He himself may be called on to torture them, and dare not refuse. To raise his hand in their defence is death by the law. He must bear all things and resist nothing. If he leaves his master's premises at any time without a written permit, he is liable to be flogged. Yet, it is said by slave holders and their apologists, that we are happy and contented.²⁹

”

An enslaved man, Private Gordon, was beaten so frequently that the multiple whippings left graphic scars depicted in this 1863 photograph. (Donated by Corbis.)



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In its most prevalent form — the rape of enslaved Black women by white slave owners — sexual abuse often resulted in the birth of biracial children who were also enslaved. As property, enslaved Black women were not protected by the law and had no refuge from sexual violence.

In 1855, a 19-year-old enslaved Black woman named Celia stood trial for killing Robert Newsom. A white slave owner, Newsom had purchased Celia five years before and raped her regularly and repeatedly ever since — resulting in the birth of one child.³⁰ After repeated entreaties to the slave owner's daughter led nowhere, Celia took action. When Newsom came to her cabin seeking sex on the night of June 23, 1855, Celia told authorities, she clubbed him over the head twice with a large stick, killing him.³¹ The court concluded an enslaved Black woman had no right to defend herself against sexual attack, and an all-male, all-white jury convicted Celia of murder.³² Sentenced to death, she was hanged on December 21, 1855.³³

Finally, enslaved people frequently suffered extreme physical violence as punishment for or warning against transgressions like running away, failing to complete assigned tasks, visiting a spouse living on another plantation, learning to read, arguing with white people, working too slowly, possessing anti-slavery materials, or trying to prevent the sale of their relatives.³⁴

Because slave owners faced no formal prohibition against maiming or killing the enslaved, an enslaved person's life had no legal protection; for some slave owners, this led to reckless disregard for life and horrific levels of cruelty. In Charleston, South Carolina, in 1828, a slave holder flogged an enslaved thirteen-year-old girl as punishment, then left her on a table in

a locked room with her feet shackled together. When he returned, she had fallen from the table and died. The slave holder faced no consequence; under local law, "the slave was [his] property, and if he chose to suffer the loss, no one else had anything to do with it."³⁵ When an enslaved Black man named Moses Roper ran away from bondage in North Carolina, his owner whipped him with 100-200 lashes; covered his head in tar and lit it afire. When Moses escaped from leg irons, his owner had the nails of his fingers and toes beaten off.³⁶



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Even very young children were not safe from brutal abuse. In a letter to a cousin, a slaveholding white woman described the killing of a 12-18 month old child. "Gross has killed Sook's youngest child," she wrote. "[B]ecause it would not do its work to please him he first whipt it and then held its head in the [creek] branch to make it hush crying."³⁷

In May 1857, after a white family in Louisville, Kentucky, was murdered and their home de-

stroyed by fire, four enslaved Black men were accused of the crime and stood trial. After an all-white jury found the men innocent of the charges, an enraged mob of local white men armed with a cannon attacked the jail and overtook the building. Facing the threat of death at the hands of the bloodthirsty mob, one of the four enslaved men cut his own throat in terror; the mob beat, stabbed, and hanged the other three Black men to death.³⁸

As illustrated by this and many similar accounts, enslaved Black people faced the constant threat of attack, abuse, and murder under the system of American slavery, which devalued their lives, ignored their human dignity, and offered no protection under the law. Long after slavery ended, racialized attacks and extra-judicial lynchings like these continued, fueled by the same myth of racial inferiority previously used to justify enslavement.



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Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

“

The Poor Slave's Own Song

Farewell, ye children of the Lord,
To you I am bound in the cords of love.
We are torn away to Georgia,
Come and go along with me.
Go and sound the jubilee, &c.

To see the wives and husbands part,
The children scream, they grieve my heart;
We are sold to Louisiana,
Come and go along with me.
Go and sound, &c.

Oh! Lord, when shall slavery cease,
And these poor souls enjoy their peace?
Lord, break the slavish power!
Come, go along with me.
Go and, sound, &c.

Oh! Lord, we are going to a distant land,
To be starved and worked both night and day;
O, may the Lord go with us;
Come and go along with me.
Go and sound, &c.³⁹

”

THE DOMESTIC SLAVE TRADE IN AMERICA

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the United States acquired great swaths of land to the south of the original thirteen colonies. White settlers in search of cheap, fertile land began to move to this area from states in the Upper South, including North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky. These settlers brought with them enslaved Black people to work the land and care for their homes.⁴⁰ By the 1790s, the invention of the cotton gin allowed for increased production and the rising price of cotton created incentives for settlers to expand their plantations — and their supply of enslaved workers. In territories that would later become the Lower South states of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida, the demand for enslaved Black people skyrocketed.⁴¹

After Congress outlawed the Transatlantic Slave Trade beginning in 1808,⁴² growing demand for enslaved Black laborers had to rely on natural reproduction in the local enslaved population, or the sale of enslaved people from one state to another. Over the next half century, this “Domestic Slave Trade” became ubiquitous across the South and central to the debate over

whether to abolish slavery.

An estimated one million enslaved people were forcibly transferred from the Upper South to the Lower South between 1810 and 1860.⁴³ By the time Alabama became a state in 1819, the Domestic Slave Trade was booming. Over the next forty years, the enslaved population in Alabama increased from 40,000 to 435,000.⁴⁴

The most prominent reason for the forced transfer of so many enslaved people from the Upper to the Lower South was the economy. Due to the booming cotton industry, enslaved Black people were worth more in the Lower South than anywhere else in the country — and they were also a more secure investment in the Lower South, where they had less chance to escape to freedom in the North.⁴⁵ Forced abolition was less of a threat in the Lower South where, in comparison to the Upper South, there was much less political will or popular support for creating legal prohibitions on slavery.

THE ECONOMICS OF ENSLAVEMENT

Beyond its benefit to Southern plantation owners, American slavery was a major engine of prosperity throughout the United States and worldwide. The labor of enslaved Black people in the United States fueled explosive economic growth and wealth accumulation during the 19th century, particularly within the vast cotton and textile trades. Many Northern businesses and families made wealthy in this era still retain those riches today, and can directly trace their fortunes to the toil of the enslaved.

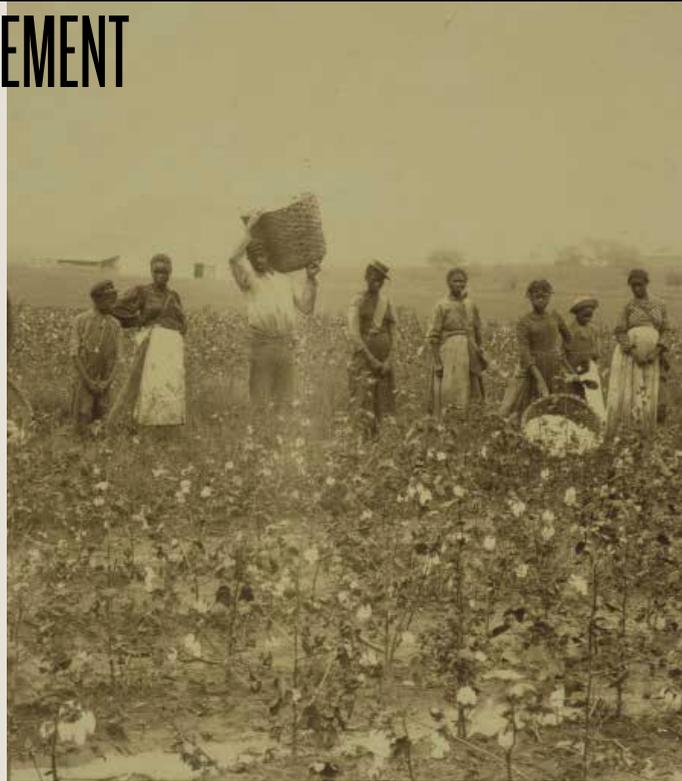
By 1830, one million people in America labored in the cultivation of cotton, and almost all of them were enslaved. Cotton constituted more than half of the United States' global exports. In addition to cotton, nearly all American industries were dominated by an economy dependent upon the work of enslaved people. Merchants in the North traded cotton, sugar, and other agricultural products grown by enslaved people. Banks and creditors accepted

enslaved human "property" as collateral when underwriting loans, and were authorized to "repossess" enslaved people if a debtor failed to repay the loan. In this way, financial institutions became directly involved in the slave trade.⁴⁶

As the Domestic Slave Trade expanded to meet the demand created by the booming cotton industry, cotton fueled America's emergence as the world's fastest-growing economy. Between 1810 and 1860, one million enslaved Africans were forcibly transported from the Upper South to the Lower South, and slave traders accumulated vast wealth in the

process. Federal laws like the Fugitive Slave Acts facilitated the widespread kidnapping for profit that left all Black people vulnerable.

The bodies of Black men, women and children enslaved in America were assigned monetary values throughout their lives. An enslaved person's purchase price was a painful reminder of how his or her life was commodified, and changes in this assigned monetary value could profoundly affect an enslaved person's destiny. Some of the greatest heartbreaks and inhumanities of enslavement arose from the cold valuation of human life.⁴⁷



Library of Congress

Library of Congress



attempting to raise money to buy their own children; typically these efforts were unsuccessful.⁴⁹

Profits from slavery laid the path for the Industrial Revolution, helped to build Wall Street, and funded many of the United States' most prestigious schools. Today, slavery is a prominent though largely ignored foundation of this nation's wealth and prosperity. Major companies and universities profited off of the institution of slavery, including Aetna, Inc., and New York Life Insurance Company, JP Morgan Chase, Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, and Yale. In 1838, two of Georgetown University's early presidents organized a massive auction to help the school evade bankruptcy, and sold 272 Black people for \$3.3 million. As one professor later said, "The university itself owes its existence to this history [which is] a microcosm of the whole history of American slavery."⁵⁰

Enslaved people were also appraised as human "assets" to allow slave owners to report on their "property" holdings for the purposes of insurance, wills, and taxes. Values for enslaved people could reach more than \$5000, representing more than \$150,000 today. Slave owners regularly ignored family bonds among enslaved people to prioritize profit goals, and treated reproduction as an economic process. After puberty, an enslaved woman's value was largely set based on her ability to bear children. Enslaved men were most prized for their physical ability, and men in their thirties considered to possess peak strength

and skill could be advertised as "prime hands," "full hands" or "A1 Prime." Depending on health and strength, enslaved men typically received high appraisals well into middle age, while enslaved women lost much of their value once past childbearing age.⁴⁸

Because enslavement was a permanent and hereditary status, by law, enslaved men and women had no recognized parental rights, and children could be sold from infancy. A child's value was calculated annually and influenced by health, demeanor, and skills. Many historical accounts describe aggrieved parents

The Domestic Slave Trade brought economic benefits to the entire South, but it also challenged the myth of benign slavery. Under that myth, white slave owners and enslaved Black people enjoyed an organic, mutually-beneficial relationship in which the master profited from the labor and the enslaved enjoyed the master's food, clothing, shelter, protection and civilizing influence.⁵¹ Prior to the growth of the Domestic Slave Trade, this myth faced little dispute because only slave owners, overseers, and the enslaved witnessed the brutal, day-to-day reality of slavery. As the Domestic Slave Trade grew, however, growing numbers of Southerners and travelers from the North had the chance to witness the system's inhumanity.

Slave trading relied on the sale of human beings as commodities, but its tragic scenes highlighted the humanity of those in bondage.⁵² Throughout the South, urban and rural communities alike witnessed exhausted and dejected enslaved people chained together and whipped as they marched hundreds of miles to be sold. They heard the screams and saw the tears of enslaved people torn from their homes and sold to the highest bidder. They shopped and worked amidst enslaved people publicly confined in pens resembling dungeons, alongside livestock in filthy conditions. Press accounts documented the heartbreaking stories of enslaved mothers who jumped from buildings and enslaved fathers who slit their throats rather than be separated from their families.

Slave traders held auctions in buildings near commercial areas throughout the South. Whitehall Street, Atlanta, Georgia. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, [LC-DIG-cw pb-03351].)

Jourden Banks, a Black man who was enslaved in Alabama before escaping to freedom, published a book in 1861 recounting his experiences. While being held for sale in Richmond, Virginia, he recalled,

"...I saw things I never wish to see again. [The slave jail] was so constructed, I should think, as to hold some two or three hundred. There are no beds, or comfortable means of lodging either men, women, or children. They have to lie or sit by night on boards. The food is of the coarsest kind. Sales take place every day. And oh, the scenes I have witnessed! Husbands sold, and their wives and children left for another day's auction; or wives sold one way, and husbands and fathers another, at the same auction. The distresses I saw made a deep impression upon my mind, My attention was diverted from myself by sympathy with others."⁵³





Enslaved people work in cotton fields outside Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1860s. (Library of Congress.)

This clearly exploitative treatment of enslaved people undermined the claim that slavery benefitted the enslaved.

Perhaps due to the economic and geographic differences between the regions, the Upper and Lower South developed differing views of the Domestic Slave Trade. In the Upper South, the slave trade was viewed with a mix of support and scorn,⁵⁴ and a small minority of white people questioned whether the system's brutality warranted outlawing it altogether.⁵⁵ In contrast, residents of the Lower South generally accepted the slave trade as proper and necessary, and very few expressed any concern for the enslaved.⁵⁶

Despite these differing attitudes, the slave trade benefitted both the Upper and Lower South, economically.⁵⁷ The Upper South received high sales revenue for the enslaved people sold to the Lower South, and used the threat of that region's

harsher work conditions to control and discipline the enslaved people who remained.⁵⁸ In the Lower South, enslaved laborers were forced to work long hours under harsh conditions for no pay, allowing landowners to maximize their profits and accumulate unprecedented wealth. Thus, even amid clear evidence of slavery's inhumanity, the symbiotic economic relationship between the two Southern regions solidified most white Southerners' allegiance to slavery.⁵⁹

Throughout the South, defenders of slavery rejected critics' characterization of the slave trade as barbaric and cruel and instead insisted that the documented horrors of bondage were imagined or exaggerated.⁶⁰ These pro-slavery advocates took to national platforms to assure Americans that enslaved people were primarily sold locally and had the opportunity to choose their new owners, and that efforts were made to keep families together. In reality, most enslaved people were sold without a single other family member;⁶¹ it is estimated that more than half of all enslaved people held in the Upper South were separated from a parent or child through sale, and a third of all slave marriages were destroyed by forced migration.⁶²



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Proponents of slavery also claimed that slave-owners only sold enslaved people out of necessity — either to satisfy an insurmountable debt or to respond to dangerous misbehavior by the enslaved. In fact, only a small percentage of enslaved people were traded due to economic hardship or attempts to escape;⁶³ in most cases, slave owners of the Upper South sold enslaved people to gain supplemental income.⁶⁴

Pro-slavery advocates also tried to separate the inhumane slave trade from the “humane” institution of slavery by scapegoating slave traders as individually responsible for any brutal treatment of enslaved people being trafficked. While slave traders indeed committed myriad forms of abuse against the enslaved, including raping enslaved women,⁶⁵ slave owners did too — and the Southern social system did nothing to discourage this behavior. Despite their reputa-

tion for brutality, slave traders were generally among “the wealthiest and most influential” citizens in their communities.⁶⁶

Slave traders accumulated substantial wealth by purchasing the enslaved in the Upper South and transporting them to the Lower South. Transporting enslaved people on foot was considered the “simplest” way because it required only a horse, a mule, a wagon, and a whip.⁶⁷ The traders lined up enslaved adult Black men in pairs, handcuffed them together,



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Enslaved people on the Smith plantation in Beaufort, South Carolina. (The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, "Slaves on J. J. Smith's Plantation, near Beaufort, SC," 1864, Albumen silver print, 21.4 x 27.3 cm.)

and then ran a long chain through all of the handcuffs.⁶⁸ These arrangements were called "coffles."⁶⁹ Enslaved Black women and older Black children marched behind the men, and the smallest children and the sick rode in a wagon at the rear.

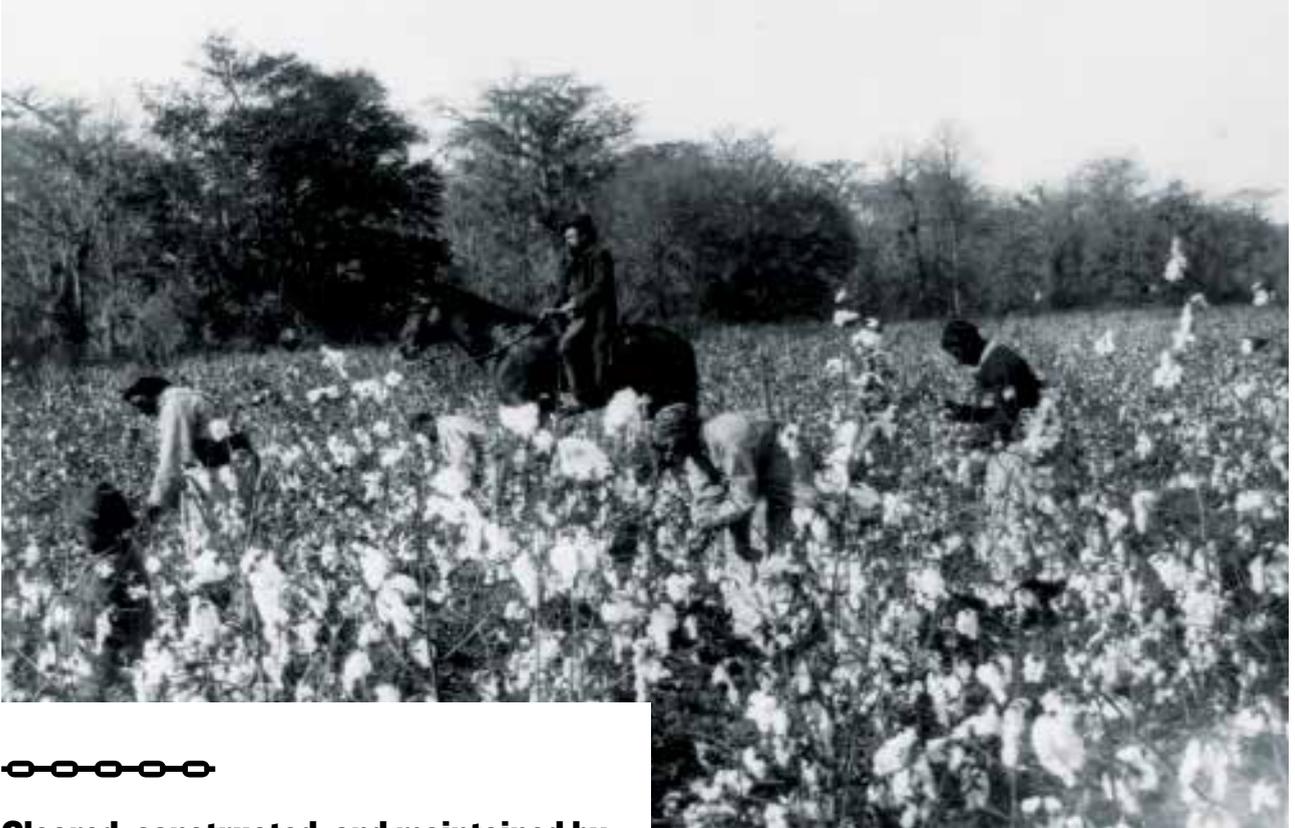
The overland march was common and brutal. One trek could last months and exceed one thousand miles.⁷⁰ The enslaved were forced to march quickly for hours until they dropped in the road, and those who fell risked being



Traders lined up enslaved adult Black men in pairs, handcuffed them together, and then ran a long chain through all of the handcuffs.

slashed to pieces by long whips.⁷¹ Slave traders often sold enslaved people as they moved from one community to another along their route, and coffles became a common sight across the South.⁷²

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the introduction of new methods of transportation began to alter the routes used by slave traders. The arrival of the steamboat in 1811 allowed traders to send the enslaved from markets along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to Natchez, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana.⁷³ The steam locomotive arrived in the 1830s and by the 1840s and 1850s, rail lines stretched across the South. Often cleared, constructed, and maintained by enslaved labor, these rail lines became a preferred method for transporting the enslaved to the Lower South. Trips that took weeks by foot now took less than two days by rail.⁷⁴



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These changes in transportation transformed Montgomery, Alabama, from one of many stops along the overland route to a primary trading market. In 1847, a direct steamboat line was established between New Orleans and Montgomery,⁷⁵ allowing Montgomery to rival Mobile, Alabama, as a center for trading in enslaved Black people.⁷⁶ In 1851, enslaved people bought by the State of Alabama constructed a rail line to connect Montgomery to Atlanta, Georgia.⁷⁷ As more and more slave traders utilized this rail system, hundreds of enslaved people began arriving at the Montgomery train station each day.⁷⁸ Now connected to the rest of the South by boat and by rail, Montgomery became the principal slave market in Alabama.⁷⁹



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