

Slavery in the American South

One day Master takes us to town and puts us on that auction block and a man name Bill Dunn bought me. I was about seven years old. Talk about something awful, you should have been there. The slave owners were shoutin' and sellin' children to one man and the mamma and pappy to another. The slaves cried and carried on somthin' awful.

- Millie Williams, born into slavery in 1851

Why do we learn about slavery? We learn about history to understand our past – where we came from, and how we got where we are today. Slavery is part of the history of the world and of the United States. It is very hard for many of us to understand how and why slavery happened here – by our own people, to our own people. As you go through this lesson, it is okay to feel angry or sad. You may question why we even learn about something as bad as slavery. It is important, though, to learn what happened in the past. We need to honor the lives of the men, women and children who endured and survived these hardships and tragedies so that we will not repeat the acts of destroying other human lives.

What did it mean to be an enslaved person in the southern United States? People in the United States practiced a form of slavery called *chattel slavery*. Chattel slaves were considered property and could be bought and sold just like any other piece of property. Enslaved people had no rights and were expected to perform labor on the orders of a slave master. The lives of enslaved people were controlled completely – where they lived, and what they did for work, even whether or not their family could stay together. This also meant that children born to enslaved people were also enslaved. Enslaved people were bought and sold at their owner's whim.

Why did slavery happen in the United States? Slavery existed in the American colonies, beginning in the 1619, before the formation of the United States. Wealthy people wanted others to do work for them so they could make more money and have time for other tasks. Slavery was one option for labor. Slavery was not just a Southern institution. At one point there were enslaved people in all of the Northern states as well as Southern states. By 1790, slavery had mostly vanished in the North, with only 6% of the enslaved people in the northern United States. It was around this time that slavery began to grow in the South. The invention of the cotton gin made growing cotton on plantations very profitable. More enslaved people meant more cotton plants to grow which equaled more money for the plantation owners. By 1860, there were almost four million enslaved people in this country, with the majority of them living and working on cotton plantations.

How could the United States' government and people let this happen? There were people in the North and South who thought slavery was wrong. Some fought hard to free all enslaved people and end slavery. Most white people thought of slavery as a normal part of the United States' society and economy. Some thought people of other races were meant to be controlled. Many even came to believe that people of African descent were naturally suited to slavery, or could not take care of themselves if they were free. This false idea was used to justify and promote the enslavement of people of one race.

Why would Northerners support slavery? The southern part of the United States was primarily agriculture, with plantations growing cotton, rice and tobacco among other crops. The North was a growing industrial center. Many Northern industries, like cotton mills, depended on the South for raw materials – raw materials that required enslaved people to produce. If slavery was abolished, many feared that the price of raw materials might rise, meaning less money for everyone.

How did enslaved people respond? Enslaved people resisted in many ways. Some stole food and hid it so they could have enough to eat. Some snuck away in the night to meet with others to pray and sing. Some found ways to learn to read and write, which was against the law in many states. If caught, they would surely have been punished, but they risked punishment to make their stand against their masters. For some, the ultimate resistance was to run away. If a freedom-seeker made it to the North, he or she could be free. According to a law called the “Fugitive Slave Act”, if a run-a-way person was caught, it meant the ultimate punishment of severe beatings, or perhaps being sold away from family.

When did enslaved people in the United States achieve freedom? In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation stating that all enslaved people in the southern United States were free. This did not go into full effect until the end of the American Civil War. Formerly enslaved people were then free to make their own decisions about their lives and work. Some formerly enslaved people stayed on the plantations to work for pay. They may have stayed hoping that long lost family members would return, or because they didn’t know where else to go. Others quickly left to make lives for themselves in new places.

How do we know what we know? Many people who had escaped from slavery shared their stories. They wrote books, and presented speeches about their lives. They tried to raise awareness of slavery, so that others would realize how wrong it was. Another source of knowledge is from a special government project. In 1937, the federal government set out to record the stories of formerly enslaved people. Slavery had ended 70 years before, and many former enslaved people had already died. Many of those still alive were interviewed. They were asked about their lives as slaves, how they were treated, and how they reacted when they learned they were free.