

Slaves



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Slaves

Slaves and slavery existed in Native American cultures prior to the arrival of European explorers and colonists. Indians forced conquered and captured enemies to be their servants. When the Spanish subjugated central and south America, they unsuccessfully attempted to use indigenous people as their slaves. But in 1619, slavery (as Americans understand it today) began when about 20 African men and women were sold to residents of the Jamestown colony in Virginia.

During the colonial period, African slavery was an integral thread within the social, economic, and political fabric of life. Most slaves lived in the south and contributed to its agricultural economy (tobacco, rice, indigo, etc. and eventually cotton), although northern states benefited from slavery as well. Northern merchants took advantage of relatively low prices for southern products produced by slave labor and northern shipping firms participated and profited in the cruel practice of slave trading.

At first, slavery was legal in all of the colonies, but by the Revolutionary War, that began to change. After it declared our independence from Great Britain, the American Congress directed all 13 “states” to write new constitutions. Several northern states declared slavery illegal at that time. Between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, the issue of slavery was somehow embedded within almost every disagreement between northerners and southerners.

By 1860 there were nearly 4 million enslaved people of African descent living in the United States. Most of these people did not arrive in the US directly from Africa. Many were brought here after serving masters in the Caribbean or Central America; most were born here to enslaved parents.

Abraham Lincoln (and his family) were morally opposed to human bondage but did not necessarily believe in the equality of the races. Lincoln saw slaves chained together and sold at auction several times. He once said, “the memory of those images had the power to make (me) miserable.” Early in his political career, Lincoln believed that returning slaves to Africa would be in everyone’s best interests. Ironically, this was called the “Colonization Movement.”

Lincoln was clear about the spread of slavery - it should not spread into any American territory where it did not already exist. However, his statements about the abolition of slavery were not as clear. Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, Lincoln never called for the absolute annihilation of slavery in the United States. Nevertheless, because he was associated with the newly formed Republican Party, and many avowed abolitionists were in the Republican Party, it was assumed that if Lincoln was elected president that he would somehow set slaves free. To slaves living in the late 1850s, Abraham Lincoln represented their best hope for emancipation. This greatly pleased slaves and greatly agitated slave owners.