

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.

Several northern states declared slavery illegal just after the Revolutionary War. Between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, the issue of

slavery was embedded within nearly every disagreement between northerners and southerners.

By 1860 there were nearly 4 million enslaved Africans living in the United States. Lincoln saw slaves chained together and sold at auction several times. Early in his political career, Lincoln believed that returning slaves to Africa would be in everyone's best interests. This was called the "Colonization Movement."

Lincoln was clear about the spread of slavery – he did not want it to spread into any American territory where it did not already exist. Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, Lincoln never called for the absolute annihilation of slavery in the United States. Nevertheless, because he was a member of the newly formed Republican Party, and many true 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.