

## American Slavery

\* The following program contains material some may find disturbing.  
Listener discretion is advised. \*

### *Introduction*

There was a point in time when you could stand inside the walls of the US Capitol, the building where Congress wrote the laws which governed the Nation, and you could stand there, look out the window, and see a slave market.<sup>1</sup> Outside, on the Capitol's steps, rows of manacled slaves, chains around their arms and necks, were driven by slave traders down the city streets.<sup>2</sup> The sight was a constant reminder of the numerous slave pens scattered throughout the city where African American men and women were held before sale.<sup>3</sup>

Both the White House and the Capitol Building were built with slave labor.<sup>4</sup> Twelve of the first sixteen presidents held human beings in bondage at some point in their lives. Slavery is a glaring stain on our Nation's history.

We at American History Remix have not yet had an episode on slavery. That has been on purpose. Rather than compartmentalizing the story, we have tried to show how slavery touched nearly every part of life in the colonies and then the United States. We've tried to let it seep into multiple episodes: Before Jamestown, Atlantic Trade, Twin Revolutions. The story of the young Nation cannot be untangled from that of slavery. No more than those men on Capitol Hill could pretend that slavery wasn't outside their doors.

But...there comes a point in time when an interwoven and perhaps subtle narrative is insufficient, and you just need to talk about slavery. That's what we're going to do today.

Ira Berlin, was a historian of American slavery, and he divided the history of slavery into what he called "generations of captivity." Not literal generations, but different eras where the lives of enslaved persons took on different characteristics. We're going to follow his model and trace the story of African slavery in America from its origins all the way to emancipation. In the nearly 250 years of forced bondage, slavery evolved alongside the colonies and the early Republic. It varied over time, and it varied regionally as well.

Slavery was horrific, but it was not simple, static, or unchanging.

Let's dig in.

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<sup>1</sup> "Peoria Speech," National Parks Service, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/peoriaspeech.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Beth Corrigan, "Imaginary Cruelties? A History of the Slave Trade in Washington, D.C." *Washington History* 13, no. 2 (2001/2002): 16.

<sup>3</sup> Corrigan, "Imaginary Cruelties?" 14.

<sup>4</sup> "The Complexities of Slavery in the Nation's Capital," White House Historical Association, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-complexities-of-slavery-in-the-nations-capital>.

--Intro Music--

[Welcome to American History Remix, the podcast about the overlooked and underexplored parts of American history. We're glad you're here!]

*Charter Generation*

Anthony Johnson arrived in Virginia in 1621. The historical record is unfortunately unclear, but he most likely was born around 1600 in Angola before he was enslaved and brought to America. His owner was Richard Bennett. Anthony married another of Bennett's slaves, a woman named Mary. Together, they had four children.

In 1635, Johnson and his wife purchased their freedom from Bennett. Five years later, Johnson bought a small farm. In 1651, he purchased 250 acres and became a tobacco farmer. In 1654, John Casor, a Black man working for Johnson, claimed that he was an indentured servant whom Johnson was illegally holding in bondage. But the courts ruled in Johnson's favor, and Casor was returned to Johnson as his slave.<sup>5</sup>

The life of Anthony Johnson captures many of the characteristics of the first generation of Africans brought to the American colonies. Berlin calls this the "Charter Generation." Slavery, at the time, was flexible. African slaves and white indentured servants often worked alongside each other. Africans had at least the possibility of someday purchasing their freedom. And if freed, they too could own slaves.

The first "generation" of enslaved Africans in America were people of many cultures, what we call a "creole" culture.

They were Africans or of African descent but had long had contact with the broader Atlantic world. Many came from the Gold Coast, modern day Ghana, where the Portuguese had numerous trading forts. Enslaved persons who arrived in the Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland came not directly from Africa, but through the West Indies.<sup>6</sup>

This meant they had time to assimilate into a broader, Atlantic culture. Their language was a language of the Atlantic world—a mixture of diverse African languages as well as Portuguese, Spanish, and English.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, their religious practices drew from numerous sources. Often, figures like Jesus and Muhammad were incorporated into a pantheon of deities.<sup>8</sup>

As we've covered in prior episodes, the situation in the Chesapeake colonies was unstable. The economy of the region depended heavily on tobacco production, which was labor-intensive. However, the death rate was astounding due to war, disease, and malnutrition. So, tobacco planters took labor wherever they could find it, utilizing indigenous slavery, African slavery, and

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<sup>5</sup> "Anthony Johnson," Enslaved, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://enslaved.org/fullStory?kid=16-23-92873>.

<sup>6</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 24-25; Russell R. Menard, "The Maryland Slave Population, 1658 to 1730: A Demographic Profile of Blacks in Four Counties," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (Jan., 1975): 31.

<sup>7</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 39-41.

<sup>8</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 27-28.

indentured servitude – in which poor Europeans, in exchange for passage across the Atlantic, agreed to work for a set number of years before being granted their freedom.<sup>9</sup>

In the New England colonies, the more rugged terrain and rocky soil limited the spread of large plantations. The labor of enslaved persons in the region tended to be more diverse than that of the Chesapeake. Some worked on small farms while others worked as domestic slaves, herdsmen, or boatmen.<sup>10</sup>

Distinct from later eras of slavery in America, enslaved persons at this time often had some flexibility in their work and time which allowed them to engage in their own economic pursuits separate from their masters.<sup>11</sup> Enslaved persons could keep gardens, hunt or fish for food, and some kept their own pack animals. The money they earned was *theirs*, and they could use it to purchase their freedom.<sup>12</sup>

Freedom was at least a possibility. In early Colonial Virginia, both Native American and African slaves could sue for their freedom, claiming they could not be enslaved because they were Christians and had been baptized. And the courts ruled in their favor. Meanwhile, some, like Anthony Johnson, were able to purchase their freedom.<sup>13</sup>

You see, social stratification at the time was not racial. It was class-based. Neither slave nor indentured servants were treated well. The historical record suggests plenty of abuse and harsh treatment.<sup>14</sup> But slaves and servants lived and worked in close proximity to one another and often interacted socially. They commonly ran away from their masters together and joined the same rebellions.<sup>15</sup> Court records from 17th century Virginia show several marriages between Blacks and whites.<sup>16</sup> Enslaved Africans and poor whites often had more in common with each other than with wealthy landholders.

American slavery in the early 1600s was flexible. Freedom was not guaranteed, but it was, in some cases, achievable. Race was not the sole criteria for enslavement.

However, and we want to be very clear here, just because enslaved persons had the *possibility* of freedom, and just because slavery existed alongside other forms of labor, did not mean that slavery was any less oppressive, less brutal, less...evil.

Anthony Johnson became free. But it took fourteen years for him to buy his freedom. He was *born* free before he was shackled and chained below deck of a slave ship and transported like cargo across the ocean.

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<sup>9</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 55-57.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 36; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 332.

<sup>13</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 52-54; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 331.

<sup>14</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 44-45, 57-58.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 333-35.

But the instability and flexibility of society at the time could sometimes work to an enslaved person's advantage. At least for a while....

### *Plantation Generation*

Olaudah Equiano was born in what is today Nigeria in 1745. As a child he was captured and sold into slavery. He was eventually brought to Virginia, where his owner renamed him Jacob and put him to work on a plantation. Olaudah was kept in isolation, working alone in the fields pulling weeds and clearing stones. He was allowed no company, no one to talk to. One day, Olaudah was brought into the house to care for his sick owner. There, he saw his first fellow slave, a woman working in the kitchen. Olaudah was deeply disturbed when he saw that the woman had an iron muzzle on her head, keeping her from talking, eating, or drinking.

Olaudah did not stay long in Virginia. He was sold again and taken to England.<sup>17</sup> But his experience reveals the change that had occurred in the colony. His treatment was purposeful, carefully arranged.

Masters forced new names on their slaves to undermine their identity.<sup>18</sup> Once on the plantation, they separated them from other workers to crush their spirit. Some masters would even use a muzzle. As one observer at the time said, "A new negro...must be broke."<sup>19</sup>

By the time Olaudah arrived in Virginia, it was a different world from what Anthony Johnson had encountered. During the late 1600s and early 1700s, slavery in the colonies evolved, especially in Virginia, the oldest and largest colony. Berlin calls this period the "Plantation Generation" because, in that region, slave labor – not indentured servitude – became the basis for large plantations. The planter class made it harder for enslaved persons to gain their freedom. They treated slaves with increased brutality, and race became the justification for slavery.

First, why did African slave labor replace white indentured servitude?

In the first decades of the Virginia colony, the death rate remained high. Most workers, both indentured servants and slaves, did not survive long. Purchasing slaves cost more upfront, because planters were theoretically buying a worker for a lifetime. But when everyone's lifespan was so short, the initial investment was rarely worth it. Indentured servants, because they were cheaper upfront, were more economically viable.

But as the death rate stabilized in the mid-1600s, indentured servants survived long enough to earn compensation. The planter class came to favor using slave labor to grow tobacco on their plantations instead of indentured servants.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by himself* (1789; Project Gutenberg, 2005), chap. 2-3, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15399/15399-h/15399-h.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 57-58.

<sup>19</sup> Quote from Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 57, footnote, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 142-46, 153; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 297-98.

Additionally, in the mid-1600s, fewer English immigrants arrived in Virginia. The economy back in England was growing, and wages were increasing, and many poor chose to stay in England rather than seek opportunity in the colonies.<sup>21</sup> Even if planters had wanted to, finding indentured servants became difficult.

So, beginning in the 1660s, Virginia started importing more slaves from Africa.

During the 1680s, colonists imported about 2000 slaves to the Chesapeake. In the 1690s, that number doubled to 4000. In the first decade of the 1700s, it doubled again to 8000. Farther to the south, Charles Town, South Carolina became the largest slave market on the continent.<sup>22</sup>

In the North, as we've seen, the rugged terrain prohibited slave plantations, but colonists likewise turned to slave labor. In the port cities like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Providence, and Newport, about 75 percent of the white elite owned slaves who worked in their households or as shipbuilders, carpenters, or blacksmiths.<sup>23</sup>

The demand for slaves caused traders in Africa to reach farther into the continent. Instead of just drawing from the coastal areas, they drew from places such as Nigeria and Angola – regions that previously had less interactions with European slave traders.<sup>24</sup> The new arrivals didn't speak the creole language of the first generation of the enslaved in America, and they showed little interest in Christianity. Instead, they brought new languages, religions, and rituals.<sup>25</sup>

To the colonial elite, the new arrivals seemed strange and backwards. It made it easier to treat them as an "other."

The British colonies, led by Virginia, then began to revise their laws governing slavery.

In 1662, the colonial legislature enacted a law dictating that any child born to an enslaved *woman* would also be enslaved. Contrary to all other British laws of inheritance, slave children did not follow their father's line. In addition to securing future laborers for plantation owners, it also meant that slave owners could sexually assault female slaves without viewing the offspring as their true children.

In 1667, Virginia law declared that baptism into the Christian faith did not save someone from slavery, as it previously had. Slave owners could enslave Africans regardless of their religion.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *American Colonies*, 153.

<sup>22</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 45, 54-56; Dominik Nagl "The Governmentality of Slavery in Colonial Boston, 1690-1760," *American Studies* 58, no. 1 (2013): 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 81-82.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert S. Klein, "Slaves and Shipping in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5, no. 3 (Winter, 1975): 388-89; Menard, "The Maryland Slave Population," 31; Daniel B. Domingues da Silva, "The Atlantic Slave Trade from Angola: A Port-by-Port Estimate of Slaves Embarked, 1701-1867" *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 105.

<sup>25</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 331.

In the first half of the 1600s, interracial marriage was not the norm, but it was not uncommon either. But in 1691, the Virginia Assembly prohibited what they called the “abominable mixture” of the races.<sup>27</sup> It was illegal for a white man to marry a Black woman, it was not illegal for a white man to rape his slave.<sup>28</sup>

These and similar laws reveal the process by which slavery in America became racialized. But why? Why did the colonies pass laws like these?

You could probably spend a lifetime studying this question. We’re going to suggest two answers. First, economics. Plantations ran on enslaved labor. It was in the interest of the elite to protect their own power and authority over enslaved persons.

Second, racism was useful. The most dangerous members of society were poor whites with little economic opportunity. If they found common cause with poor Blacks, they could overwhelm the colonial elite.<sup>29</sup>

In 1676, that nearly happened. An aristocrat named Nathaniel Bacon led a rebellion which slaughtered Native Americans and then turned its eye to the planter class. They burned Jamestown to the ground, as the Governor of Virginia fled the colony. The rebellion only lasted a few months. Bacon died of dysentery before the year was over. But it *terrified* the elite, because Bacon drew both poor whites and poor Blacks to his cause. They fought side by side.<sup>30</sup>

It was in the best interest of the wealthy planter class to politically, socially, and economically separate poor whites from poor Blacks.<sup>31</sup>

The Virginia Assembly began the process even before Bacon’s Rebellion. In 1662, they ruled that when a slave and servant ran away together, the servant would be financially responsible to the slave’s owner for the loss of labor.<sup>32</sup> It was a clear attempt to try and keep Blacks and whites from working together.

In 1705, the Assembly passed a series of laws. They confiscated all animals belonging to African slaves and distributed them to poor whites.<sup>33</sup> They affirmed that a slave owner had “full power to dismember” their slaves. With the full protection of the law, slave owners could kill the enslaved with no legal repercussions. But African Americans could not strike any white person, no matter the circumstance.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 333-35. The original punishment for miscegenation was banishment from the colony. The Virginia Assembly revised the punishment to a six-month imprisonment, fine, and a separate fine for the minister who performed the marriage.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *American Colonies*, 156.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 327-28; Taylor, *American Colonies*, 156.

<sup>30</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 269; Taylor, *American Colonies*, 148-50.

<sup>31</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 327-28, 344.

<sup>32</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 311.

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 332-33.

<sup>34</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 60-61; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 331.

Other colonies followed a similar process. We don't have time to mention every law because there were dozens upon dozens upon dozens of them.

The legalization and increased social acceptance of violence towards enslaved persons meant that owners could use much harsher treatment than they could prior.<sup>35</sup>

As we saw with Olaudah Equiano, planters tried to break the spirits of their slaves. For example, one Virginia planter placed bits in the mouths of would-be runaways, as if they were animals. Another planter had a slave who would frequently wet the bed, so he forced the young man to "drink a pint of piss."<sup>36</sup>

Even though the mortality rate for white colonists stabilized, the life expectancy and birthrate for the enslaved declined.<sup>37</sup>

In the midst of this, however, enslaved persons still found ways of resisting the planter class, sometimes with violence. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, there were numerous rebellions and conspiracies, particularly in the Chesapeake region. But the enslaved found subtle ways of resisting too. The slave-owning class believed Africans were brutish and dimwitted. Enslaved persons used this to their advantage. They would often feign ignorance about how to use basic tools. They'd drag a wheelbarrow by the wheel or use a hoe upside down. Overseers would have to show them how to use the tools correctly, again and again. These men and women weren't dumb. They were manipulating their overseers, getting them to do the work.<sup>38</sup> The planter class couldn't crush the spirits of everyone.

Let's recap. By the late 1600s, slave labor replaced indentured servitude. The colonial elite stripped away what freedoms enslaved persons had enjoyed. They tried to separate whites and Blacks from working together. And race became what marked someone for slavery.

### *Revolutionary Generation*

In 1763, while serving as a colonel in the British army, George Washington purchased a slave named Harry. Born in Africa, likely in the region of Senegambia, Harry was in his twenties when Washington purchased him. Like many enslaved persons, Harry received the last name of his owner and became Harry Washington.

Years later, as the conflict between the colonists and the British Empire was escalating, Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia and a British loyalist, offered freedom to any slave who would fight for the British.

We don't know the details, but somehow Harry heard of the proclamation. In July of 1776, only weeks after the Founders signed the Declaration of Independence, Harry and three other slaves escaped Washington's plantation to join the British forces. Harry became a corporal in the army.

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<sup>35</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 57, 82.

<sup>36</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 60-61.

<sup>37</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 57, 81-82.

<sup>38</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 65.

After the war, he received a certificate granting him his freedom. Harry then moved to Canada, where he lived until 1791, when he returned to Africa as a leader in the British Sierra Leone Company.<sup>39</sup>

Not all enslaved persons gained their freedom as Harry Washington did. But the American Revolution disrupted slavery. What Berlin called the “Revolutionary Generation” of enslaved persons did not have one singular experience. In fact, the regional variations of slavery became more pronounced, with slavery in the Northern, Chesapeake, and Southern colonies becoming more distinct from each other. Let’s look at each in turn.

In the North, the Revolutionary War helped undermine slavery. Free Black Americans in the North, who had long been anti-slavery advocates, began coopting the language of the Revolution. They pointed to the hypocrisy of white Americans refusing to recognize the rights of nonwhites while fighting for *their* freedom. As a group of African Americans from Boston said, they “have in common with all other men a natural and unalienable right to that freedom.”<sup>40</sup>

In some colonies, where slavery was less common – Massachusetts and New Hampshire, for example – abolishing the practice came more easily, than elsewhere. And it was spurred on by African Americans petitioning for abolition. But ending slavery did not always come quick. It took longer in New York, where there was a large urban slave population, and the wealthy owners were reluctant to give up the institution. Several states enacted gradual emancipation, where slaves were freed over time. In 1810, there were still 27,000 slaves living in *free* states of the North.<sup>41</sup>

While the war helped end slavery in the North, it helped preserve slavery in the Chesapeake region.

As we saw, Lord Dunmore offered freedom to enslaved persons in exchange for military service. Alongside Harry Washington, some 5000 slaves from the Chesapeake region gained their freedom during the war. Others were not so lucky. At the war’s end, some were betrayed by Dunmore and given as slaves to soldiers or loyalist planters who had lost property during the war. And the number of slaves who escaped was never high enough to truly disrupt the system. The Chesapeake states did not emancipate their slaves directly but instead passed laws making it easier for individual owners to free their slaves.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, the number of slaves in the region increased naturally. So much so that planters became worried about *over*population. Thus, the planter class in the Chesapeake region did not oppose slavery itself but began to oppose the international slave trade, which brought more enslaved persons to America.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “Harry Washington,” Enslaved, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://enslaved.org/fullStory?kid=16-23-126804>.

<sup>40</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 102-4.

<sup>42</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 112; Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 522.

<sup>43</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 113.



The Lower South was another story.

During the war, the number of slaves in the South temporarily decreased, as the fighting caused planters to evacuate their farms and enslaved persons fled to the British army. South Carolina's slave population declined by one quarter during the war. Georgia's slave population declined by two-thirds.<sup>44</sup>

After the war, the planter class tried to reassert its power, but it was no easy task. Escaped slaves formed independent enclaves out of the reach of the planter class, usually in swamps or the wilderness. Among the most prominent of these was a group of several hundred men who had served in the British Army and called themselves "the King of England's soldiers." They raided nearby estates, attacked the Georgia militia, and terrified the white population who feared the group would incite more slave insurrections. The Georgia militia was able to subdue the former slaves only by fighting formal battles and beheading their leaders.<sup>45</sup> The fighting between slaves and masters, in this case at least, was nearly an all-out war.

But the planter class did regain control. And soon afterwards they introduced a new crop – cotton. To meet the demands of cotton production, South Carolina and Georgia favored the international slave trade, unlike their neighbors in the Upper South. Between the war and the end of the international slave trade, South Carolina alone imported nearly 90,000 enslaved persons from Africa.<sup>46</sup>

Many in the Revolutionary Era, including the Founding Fathers, believed slavery would die a natural death.<sup>47</sup> For a while, it looked like they may have been right. With the new colonial values of liberty and equality, slave owners were, for the first time, forced to defend the institution.<sup>48</sup>

In this context, slave owners developed a new justification for slavery called paternalism. This was the belief that a slave master acted as a paternal figure to his slaves, and that African Americans were incapable of caring for themselves. Slavery was, therefore, good for African Americans, it was in their best interest.<sup>49</sup>

There is...*a lot*...to unpack in this idea.

At its best, paternalism could sometimes foster some sort of affection and care from masters toward their slaves, incentivizing them to provide adequate food, shelter, and clothing, just as a parent would for a child. But....it did more than that.

It also reinforced racism towards African Americans by imagining them as childlike and helpless, needing provisions, discipline, and to be put to work. It also allowed enslavers to

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<sup>44</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 126-27.

<sup>45</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 128-29.

<sup>46</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 128-31.

<sup>47</sup> Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 518-19.

<sup>48</sup> Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 523.

<sup>49</sup> Lacy Ford, "Reconfiguring the Old South: 'Solving' the Problem of Slavery, 1787-1838," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (Jun. 2008): 119.

rationalize violence. Even the worst abuse could be justified because it was, so they believed, for the good of the slave.

Paternalism was a powerful idea. And once embraced, it was, at least in the minds of slave owners, a powerful defense and moral justification of slavery.<sup>50</sup>

The master and slave relationship became intertwined with other social hierarchies: parents over children, rich over poor, men over women. Paternalism became the prism through which they viewed the whole of society.<sup>51</sup> Thus, when Northern anti-slavery advocates attacked slavery, Southern masters felt those attacks against their entire society and social order.

Now these ideas didn't set in all at once. Paternalism wasn't fully embraced by Southerners until into the 1800s, but it began during, and in reaction to, the American Revolution. So, while it was uncertain for a time whether the institution of slavery would survive, in the southern states, slavery and the racism that accompanied it grew stronger during the Revolutionary Era.

The Revolution did much to destabilize slavery in America. Northern states moved slowly towards emancipation. The war gave momentary freedom to enslaved persons in the South before the planter class reasserted its power. And Southerners were forced to find a new defense of slavery. It was then that the Northern and Southern states began their separate trajectories.

### *Migration Generation*

In Missouri, in the year 1850, fourteen-year-old African American girl named Celia was sold to seventy-year-old Robert Newsom. Somewhere on the journey home from the slave market, Newsom stopped, and he raped Celia. It was the first, but not the last time he forced himself on the young girl. He kept her in a cabin near his home to have easy access. He raped her often and fathered at least one child with her. She gave birth in 1851 and again in 1854. She became pregnant a third time in 1855, and her health was declining. She went to Newsom's daughters, asking for help, for protection from their father, but they would not help her.

Celia confronted Newsom himself, pleading to be left alone, at least while she was pregnant and ill. He refused and instead attempted to rape her again that very night. So, when he came to her cabin, Celia struck him in the head with a stick and killed him. Celia was put on trial and eventually confessed, saying, "As soon as I struck him, the Devil got into me, and I struck him with the stick until he was dead, and then I rolled him in the fire and burnt him up." Missouri law said homicide was justified if it was in self-defense, and it made no distinction on the subject regarding race. But the all-white jury found Celia guilty, nonetheless. While incarcerated, she gave birth to a stillborn child. Then Celia, only nineteen years old, was executed by hanging.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 3-7, quote from page 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ford, "Reconfiguring the Old South," 109; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 8-10.

<sup>52</sup> "Celia," Enslaved, accessed December 21, 2020, [https://kora.enslaved.org/files/16-23-106167/Celia\\_Missouri\\_AANB.pdf](https://kora.enslaved.org/files/16-23-106167/Celia_Missouri_AANB.pdf).

Slave owners in antebellum America, the decades before the Civil War, acted with the full power and authority of the law behind them.<sup>53</sup> Large plantations, sometimes with hundreds of slaves, expanded as the planter class spread its power into the Deep South.<sup>54</sup> So many slaves were forced into the region that Berlin calls this the “Migration Generation.”

Since the mid-1600s, unfree labor in the South centered on cash crops: tobacco in Virginia, rice in the Carolinas and coastal Georgia.

Until 1793, cotton production was too labor intensive to be very profitable. Laborers had to hand-pick the seed from each ball of cotton. But that year Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. The machine separated the seed from the fiber and made preparing cotton for the market much less time-consuming.

The environment of the Deep South, from Georgia to Louisiana, was prime for growing cotton. Now the cotton gin made the crop economically viable. In the early 1800s, planters flooded into the Deep South, establishing large plantations to grow cotton to feed the hungry textile mills of the Northeast and Europe. Between 1812 and 1819, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, all gained statehood. Between 1830 and 1860, southern cotton production increased an average of 5% per year. By 1860, the South supplied two-thirds of the world’s cotton.

And producing this cotton, were human beings held as property.<sup>55</sup>

To facilitate the growth of plantations in the Deep South, owners imported slaves from the eastern seaboard. Though Congress banned the international slave trade in 1807, the *internal* slave trade was alive and well. Historians call this journey the “Second Middle Passage.” In the 1810s, slave traders forced about 120,000 enslaved persons to the Deep South. During the 1830s, slave traders tore 300,000 men, women, and children from their families.<sup>56</sup>

The slave population that remained in the Upper South lived in constant fear of losing their loved ones. About one-third of marriages were forcibly broken-up by the slave trade. Viney Baker was born into slavery in Virginia. When she was a little girl, she went to sleep with her mother. When she woke up, her mother was gone. A speculator purchased her during the night. Baker recalled, “Dey had come an ’got my mammy widout wakin ’me up.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 32.

<sup>54</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 198.

<sup>55</sup> Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 20-21; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 166.

<sup>56</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 168; Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000), 70-71.

<sup>57</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 214; The Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938, Work Projects Administration for the District of Columbia. *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves, Vol. 11: North Carolina, Part 1: Adams-Hunter* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1941) Manifest/ Mixed Material, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn111> (accessed January 16, 2021).

So great was the demand for plantation labor that slave traders kidnapped many free Blacks from the North and forced them into slavery in the South. Traders also secretly engaged in the now illegal international slave trade and brought a new generation of Africans to work the fields.<sup>58</sup>

Plantation labor was not easy work, especially on the new plantations. It required the heavy labor of cutting forests, draining swamps, clearing fields, and *then* long hours growing cotton under an increasingly monitored and regimented picking system. The demanding work left enslaved persons with less time for themselves, fewer chances to escape, and they labored under the constant threat of violence.<sup>59</sup>

As the treatment of slaves again grew harsher, organized resistance to slavery grew more common. From the Revolutionary Era to the American Civil War, there were numerous slave rebellions in the western hemisphere. There was one in Jamaica in 1760, St. Domingue in the 1790s, French Louisiana in 1795, and Barbados in 1816.<sup>60</sup>

Slave owners in the United States took action against slaves who rebelled or planned to rebel. Those caught plotting an uprising could be hung or even burnt alive.<sup>61</sup>

In 1831, Nat Turner of Virginia led a rebellion which killed 57 people, as he and his fellow slaves traveled from farm to farm, murdering white owners. Turner believed he was sent by God to lead a new American Revolution. The rebellion, however, was put down after a few days and Turner was eventually hanged.<sup>62</sup>

Turner's Rebellion inspired incredible fear among the white planting class. Immediately, in Virginia, a white mob formed that murdered African Americans regardless of whether they had supported Nat Turner. It had long term effects, too. Virginia enacted new laws restricting slave travel, slave literacy, and slave gatherings for religious services.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, the culture of enslaved persons evolved during this era. The enslaved that arrived in the southern interior had to reconstruct their family life. Enslaved men and women took new arrivals under their wings and showed them how to adapt to the plantations. Young slaves bonded with their elders, calling them "uncles" and "aunts," which became terms of respect and affection. New children born in the Deep South were often named after family and loved ones lost in the Second Middle Passage.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 167.

<sup>59</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 132; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129.

<sup>60</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 50-51.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 274.

<sup>62</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 323-25.

<sup>63</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 325-27; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 204-5.

<sup>64</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 190-93.

African Americans, both free and enslaved, also took part in the evangelical revivals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Out of these revivals came the Black Baptist and Black Methodist churches.<sup>65</sup>

But African American Christianity broke free from the bonds of white-American belief. White Protestants interpreted the biblical themes of bondage, freedom, and deliverance in spiritual terms.<sup>66</sup> The African American church derived a different meaning from the text. The biblical stories were not merely history or allegory, they were something to be lived in the present. Just like the Hebrews, they were enslaved in Egypt, they were wandering with Moses in the wilderness. Like Israel, they were exiles in Babylon.<sup>67</sup> Though their hands and their feet were bound, African American theology broke free from the confines of slavery.<sup>68</sup>

### *Emancipation Generation*

John Washington was born a slave in Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1838.<sup>69</sup>

When the American Civil War began, he was working at a hotel, hired out by his owner. In 1862, Union forces were moving south, towards the city. Secretly, Washington read the papers, following the army's movements and plotting an escape. His overseer warned him that if the Yankees caught him, they would cut off his hands or exile him. Washington pretended to agree, but he knew his overseer was lying.<sup>70</sup>

April 18, 1862 was Good Friday. As the Union Army got closer, white residents evacuated Fredericksburg and burned its bridges down to prevent the forces from crossing the river. After the white men and women had fled the hotel, Washington took his fellow bondsmen to the bar, poured a round of drinks, and sent them on their way. He told them to make sure the Yankees had no trouble finding them.

He then stopped by to see his master as she was packing up her goods and preparing to flee the city. She *still* assumed his loyalty and told him to come with her to the country, away from the Yankees. "Yes madam," he told her, "I will come back."

But instead, he made his way out of the city and crossed by boat to the Union camp. The soldiers immediately began asking him about the movements of the Confederates. Washington unloaded Confederate newspapers he had been keeping and distributed them to the soldiers. They were delighted by the information he provided.

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<sup>65</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 162, 193-94; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 117.

<sup>66</sup> Irwin Silber, ed., *Soldier Songs and Home-front Ballads of the Civil War* (New York: Oak Publications, 1964), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 48.

<sup>68</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 32-33.

<sup>69</sup> David Blight, *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2007), 165.

<sup>70</sup> Blight, *A Slave No More*, 188.

He told the soldiers that he had been a slave all his life. They told him that two days before, Congress had passed an act outlawing slavery in the District of Columbia. Washington no longer had an owner. He was free.

Washington stayed that night in the Union camp. On that first night of freedom, John Washington wrote, “[W]ith the help of God, I would never be a slave no more. I felt for the first time in my life that I could now claim every cent that I should work for as my own. I began now to feel that life had a new joy awaiting me.” He ended his entry with one final thought, “It was good Friday. Indeed the best Friday I have ever seen thank God.”<sup>71</sup>

The abolishment of slavery in Washington, DC was one in a series of legislative acts which legally ended slavery in the United States. It was followed by the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed enslaved persons in the rebellious states, and then finally the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery throughout the Nation.

The federal government and the Union Army were the enforcers of freedom. But enslaved men and women were not passive recipients of emancipation. The “Emancipation Generation,” as Berlin calls them, were active, as John Washington was active, fervently pursuing their *own* freedom.

For decades prior to the war, African Americans had been calling for emancipation. Indeed, slavery’s fiercest opponents were those most affected by it.

David Walker, for example, born to an enslaved father and free mother, published in 1829 an anti-slavery book titled *Appeal to the Colored Persons of the World*. Walker’s bold writings called for the abolition of slavery and for equal rights. He even criticized Thomas Jefferson for his racist beliefs. Frederick Douglass, born into slavery in 1818, was aided by free Northern Blacks when he escaped in 1838. In freedom, Douglass became one of the greatest orators and writers in American history. He toured the United States and England, speaking against slavery.<sup>72</sup>

Mary Ann Shadd was a freeborn African American whose family helped fugitive slaves’ escape to freedom. She wrote a pamphlet encouraging other African Americans to move to Canada. In 1853, she launched an anti-slavery newspaper, *The Provincial Freeman*, which made her the first woman of color in North America to publish her own newspaper.<sup>73</sup>

African Americans understood the horrors of slavery better than anyone. They were the strongest champions of their liberty and took an active role in undermining slavery well before the Civil War began.

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<sup>71</sup> I have corrected the punctuation mistakes in the original manuscript to make the passage more readable but left the spelling and capitalization as it appeared. Escape to Freedom story in Blight, *A Slave No More*, 189-95.

<sup>72</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*, 47-49, 76; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 643-48.

<sup>73</sup> “Mary Ann Shadd,” Britannica, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Ann-Shadd-Cary>.

When the war came, it significantly altered the experiences of Blacks in Americans. By late 1862, tens of thousands of African Americans were working for the Union Army and Navy as camp hands, nurses, and cooks. In 1863, escaped slaves began joining Black regiments. Many regiments started off consisting of free Northern Blacks but were eventually overwhelmed by former slaves who enlisted. In all, 200,000 African American men served in the military during the Civil War, and the majority of them were formerly enslaved.<sup>74</sup>

On plantations, too, enslaved persons often exercised greater power during the war. With able-bodied white men serving in the Confederate Army, those who remained on the plantations were overwhelmingly women and old men. With less threat of violence, enslaved men and women began demanding to work fewer hours. They'd disappear when work needed to be done, or they would go and tend their *own* gardens, working for themselves.

To quote Ira Berlin, "Slavery collapsed under the pounding of federal troops from the outside and the subversion of plantation-bound black men and women from the inside."<sup>75</sup>

What did freed men and women do after emancipation? They commonly took new names. Names had long been an integral part of the slave experience, whether overseers stripped them their names to dehumanize them, or they were assigned the last name of their owner. In freedom, former slaves often took names based on their skills. They named themselves Barber, Cooper, Smith, claiming the labor they did as their own. Some took the last name White as a statement on their new position in society. Others proudly took the name Black or Brown.<sup>76</sup> Whatever name they chose, they showed they were not bound to their former masters. Like John Washington, they were slaves no more.

Across the Nation, African Americans celebrated their freedom and Union victory.

The first Memorial Day—the day when we honor fallen soldiers—is usually dated to May 1868. But the community of freed men and women in Charlestown, SC honored the fallen soldiers in 1865. Union soldiers there were buried in a mass grave that had been an open-air Confederate prison. The emancipated community dug up the bodies to give them a proper burial and constructed a fence around the grounds. To honor the fallen, they held a celebration with multiple choirs, several speeches, and picnics on the lawn, all done to honor the soldiers who died in the war.

The basic practices of what we now call Memorial Day were first seen among the African American community of Charlestown.<sup>77</sup>

Celebrations weren't confined to South Carolina, either. The holiday of Juneteenth came from Galveston, Texas.

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<sup>74</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 252, 255-56.

<sup>75</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 257-59.

<sup>76</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 260-61.

<sup>77</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 68-71.

Though on paper the Emancipation Proclamation freed all enslaved persons in the Confederacy in January 1863, in practice it wasn't implemented in the South until it came under Union control. As the Union Army moved through the South, some slave owners from occupied territory migrated to Texas, where they could continue to enslave African Americans away from Union oversight.

In June of 1865, two months after Confederate surrender, African American men and women in Texas were still being held in slavery. On June 19th, two thousand Union soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas and read the Emancipation Proclamation to a crowd of African Americans, informing them they had been freed by executive decree.

One year later the freedmen of Galveston gathered together to celebrate the first Juneteenth. The 19th of June became an annual holiday for the African American community in the region. In 1979, Texas made it a state holiday. Since then, numerous states have embraced Juneteenth as a day to celebrate the freedom of African Americans. And in June of 2021, the celebration became a national holiday.<sup>78</sup>

### *Conclusion*

What do we make of all this? What picture are we left with? We can see that American slavery evolved with society. At first, slavery was one of many forms of labor in the colonies. Then it replaced some forms of hired labor, and it became racialized as it spread to the plantations. After the Revolution, Northern states began to abolish slavery while slavery expanded into the Deep South through the internal slave trade. Then, it formally died during the Civil War. This was a dynamic, sometimes fluid institution.

However, we might also argue that it was a resilient institution. Even after emancipation, remnants of slavery survived in the sharecropping system, which kept African Americans indebted to white landowners. Or in the ritualized humiliation of African Americans under segregation. Or the near constant threat of white mob violence.

The story of emancipation is powerful. But the legacies of such an enduring institution could not die overnight. It took a century before many African Americans gained the full rights of citizenship promised to them. In many ways, the racial worldview, the assumption of Black inferiority and of white superiority, remains the most enduring legacy of American slavery.

Thanks for listening.

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<sup>78</sup> "The Historical Legacy of Juneteenth," Smithsonian, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/historical-legacy-juneteenth>; "What is Juneteenth?" The African Americans, PBS, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-is-juneteenth/>.



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