**[Slavery in the United States](https://eh.net/encyclopedia/slavery-in-the-united-states/" \o "Slavery in the United States)**

Slavery is fundamentally an economic phenomenon. Throughout history, slavery has existed where it has been economically worthwhile to those in power. The principal example in modern times is the U.S. South. Nearly 4 million slaves with a market value estimated to be between $3.1 and $3.6 billion lived in the U.S. just before the Civil War. Masters enjoyed rates of return on slaves comparable to those on other assets; cotton consumers, insurance companies, and industrial enterprises benefited from slavery as well. Such valuable property required rules to protect it, and the institutional practices surrounding slavery display a sophistication that rivals modern-day law and business.

**THE SPREAD OF SLAVERY IN THE U.S.**

Not long after Columbus set sail for the New World, the French and Spanish brought slaves with them on various expeditions. Slaves accompanied Ponce de Leon to Florida in 1513, for instance. But a far greater proportion of slaves arrived in chains in crowded, sweltering cargo holds. The first dark-skinned slaves in what was to become British North America arrived in Virginia — perhaps stopping first in Spanish lands — in 1619 aboard a Dutch vessel. From 1500 to 1900, approximately 12 million Africans were forced from their homes to go westward, with about 10 million of them completing the journey. Yet very few ended up in the British colonies and young American republic. By 1808, when the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the U.S. officially ended, only about 6 percent of African slaves landing in the New World had come to North America.

**Slavery in the North**

Colonial slavery had a slow start, particularly in the North. The proportion there never got much above 5 percent of the total population. Scholars have speculated as to why, without coming to a definite conclusion. Some surmise that indentured servants were fundamentally better suited to the Northern climate, crops, and tasks at hand; some claim that anti-slavery sentiment provided the explanation. At the time of the American Revolution, fewer than 10 percent of the half million slaves in the thirteen colonies resided in the North, working primarily in agriculture. New York had the greatest number, with just over 20,000. New Jersey had close to 12,000 slaves. Vermont was the first Northern region to abolish slavery when it became an independent republic in 1777. Most of the original Northern colonies implemented a process of gradual emancipation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, requiring the children of slave mothers to remain in servitude for a set period, typically 28 years. Other regions above the Mason-Dixon line ended slavery upon statehood early in the nineteenth century — Ohio in 1803 and Indiana in 1816, for instance.

### Slavery in the South

Throughout colonial and antebellum history, U.S. slaves lived primarily in the South. Slaves comprised less than a tenth of the total Southern population in 1680 but grew to a third by 1790. At that date, 293,000 slaves lived in Virginia alone, making up 42 percent of all slaves in the U.S. at the time. South Carolina, North Carolina, and Maryland each had over 100,000 slaves. After the American Revolution, the Southern slave population exploded, reaching about 1.1 million in 1810 and over 3.9 million in 1860.

### Rapid Natural Increase in U.S. Slave Population

How did the U.S. slave population increase nearly fourfold between 1810 and 1860, given the demise of the trans-Atlantic trade? They enjoyed an exceptional rate of natural increase. Unlike elsewhere in the New World, the South did not require constant infusions of immigrant slaves to keep its slave population intact. In fact, by 1825, 36 percent of the slaves in the Western hemisphere lived in the U.S. This was partly due to higher birth rates, which were in turn due to a more equal ratio of female to male slaves in the U.S. relative to other parts of the Americas. Lower mortality rates also figured prominently. Climate was one cause; crops were another. U.S. slaves planted and harvested first tobacco and then, after Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin in 1793, cotton. This work was relatively less grueling than the tasks on the sugar plantations of the West Indies and in the mines and fields of South America. Southern slaves worked in industry, did domestic work, and grew a variety of other food crops as well, mostly under less abusive conditions than their counterparts elsewhere. For example, the South grew half to three-quarters of the corn crop harvested between 1840 and 1860.

Black slaves played a major, though unwilling and generally unrewarded, role in laying the economic foundations of the United States—especially in [the South](https://www.britannica.com/place/the-South-region). Blacks also played a leading role in the development of Southern speech, folklore, music, dancing, and food, blending the cultural traits of their African homelands with those of Europe. During the 17th and 18th centuries, African and African American (those born in the New World) slaves worked mainly on the tobacco, [rice](https://www.britannica.com/plant/rice), and [indigo](https://www.britannica.com/technology/indigo-dye) plantations of the Southern seaboard. Eventually [slavery](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology) became rooted in the South’s huge [cotton](https://www.britannica.com/topic/cotton-fibre-and-plant) and sugar plantations. Although Northern businessmen made great fortunes from the trade of enslaved peoples and from investments in Southern plantations, slavery was never widespread in the North.[Crispus Attucks](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Crispus-Attucks), a former slave killed in the [Boston Massacre](https://www.britannica.com/event/Boston-Massacre) of 1770, was the first [martyr](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyr) to the cause of American independence from Great Britain. During the [American Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Revolution), some 5,000 Black soldiers and sailors fought on the American side. After the Revolution, some slaves—particularly former soldiers—were freed, and the Northern states abolished slavery. But with the ratification of the Constitution of the United States, in 1788, slavery became more firmly entrenched than ever in the South. The Constitution counted a slave as three-fifths of a person for purposes of taxation and representation in Congress (thus increasing the number of representatives from slave states), prohibited Congress from [abolishing](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/abolishing) the African trade of enslaved peoples before 1808, and provided for the return of fugitive slaves to their owners.

In 1807 [Pres](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lester-Young). [Thomas Jefferson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Jefferson) signed legislation that officially ended the African trade of enslaved peoples beginning in January 1808. However, this act did not presage the end of slavery. Rather, it spurred the growth of the domestic trade of enslaved peoples in the United States, especially as a source of labour for the new cotton lands in the Southern interior. Increasingly, the supply of slaves came to be supplemented by the practice of “slave breeding,” in which women slaves were raped as early as age 13 and forced to give birth as often as possible.

Laws known as the [slave codes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slave-code) regulated the slave system to promote absolute control by the master and complete submission by the slave. Under these laws the slave was chattel—a piece of property and a source of labour that could be bought and sold like an animal. The slave was allowed no stable family life and little privacy. Slaves were prohibited by law from learning to read or write. The meek slave received tokens of favour from the master, and the rebellious slave provoked brutal punishment. A social [hierarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hierarchy) among the plantation slaves also helped keep them divided. At the top were the house slaves; next in rank were the skilled artisans; at the bottom were the vast majority of field hands, who bore the brunt of the harsh plantation life.

With this tight control there were few successful [slave revolts](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slave-rebellions). Slave plots were invariably betrayed. The revolt led by Cato in Stono, [South Carolina](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Carolina), in 1739 took the lives of 30 whites. A slave revolt in [New York City](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-City) in 1741 caused heavy property damage. Some slave revolts, such as those of [Gabriel Prosser](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gabriel-American-bondsman) (Richmond, Virginia, in 1800) and [Denmark Vesey](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Denmark-Vesey) (Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822), were elaborately planned. The slave revolt that was perhaps most frightening to slave owners was the one led by [Nat Turner](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nat-Turner) (Southampton, Virginia, in 1831). Before Turner and his co-conspirators were captured, they had killed about 60 whites.

Individual resistance by slaves took such forms as mothers killing their newborn children to save them from slavery, the poisoning of slave owners, the destruction of machinery and crops, [arson](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/arson), malingering, and running away. Thousands of runaway slaves were led to freedom in the North and in Canada by Black and white abolitionists who organized a network of secret routes and hiding places that came to be known as the [Underground Railroad](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Underground-Railroad). One of the greatest heroes of the Underground Railroad was [Harriet Tubman](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harriet-Tubman), a former slave who on numerous trips to the South helped hundreds of slaves escape to freedom.

[freedmen](https://cdn.britannica.com/12/712-050-84AED20F/group-freedmen-Richmond-Va.jpg)

During the period of slavery, free Blacks made up about one-tenth of the entire African American population. In 1860 there were almost 500,000 free African Americans—half in the South and half in the North. The free Black population originated with former indentured servants and their [descendants](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/descendants). It was augmented by free Black immigrants from the [West Indies](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Indies-island-group-Atlantic-Ocean) and by Blacks freed by individual slave owners.

But free Blacks were only technically free. In the South, where they posed a threat to the institution of slavery, they suffered both in law and by custom many of the restrictions imposed on slaves. In the North, free Blacks were discriminated against in such rights as voting, property ownership, and freedom of movement, though they had some access to education and could organize. Free Blacks also faced the danger of being kidnapped and enslaved.

The earliest African American leaders emerged among the free Blacks of the North, particularly those of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. Free African Americans in the North established their own institutions—churches, schools, and mutual aid societies. One of the first of these organizations was the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, formed in 1816 and led by Bishop [Richard Allen](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Allen) of Philadelphia. Among other noted free African Americans was the astronomer and mathematician [Benjamin Banneker](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Benjamin-Banneker).

Free Blacks were among the first abolitionists. They included John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish, who in 1827 founded *Freedom’s Journal*, the first African American-run newspaper in the United States. Black support also permitted the founding and survival of the [*Liberator*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Liberator-American-newspaper), a journal begun in 1831 by the white abolitionist [William Lloyd Garrison](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Lloyd-Garrison). Probably the most celebrated of all African American journals was the *North Star*, founded in 1847 by the former slave [Frederick Douglass](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-Douglass), who argued that the [antislavery movement](https://www.britannica.com/topic/abolitionism-European-and-American-social-movement) must be led by Black people.

Beginning in 1830, African American leaders began meeting regularly in national and state conventions. But they differed on the best strategies to use in the struggle against slavery and [discrimination](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discrimination). Some, such as [David Walker](https://www.britannica.com/biography/David-Walker) and [Henry Highland Garnet](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Highland-Garnet), called on the slaves to revolt and overthrow their masters. Others, such as Russwurm and [Paul Cuffe](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paul-Cuffe), proposed that a major modern Black country be established in Africa. Supported by the [American Colonization Society](https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Colonization-Society), whose membership was overwhelmingly white, African Americans founded [Liberia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Liberia) in [West Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/western-Africa) in 1822. Their ideas foreshadowed the development of Pan-African [nationalism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism) under the leadership of AME Bishop Henry M. Turner a half century later. However, most Black leaders then and later regarded themselves as Americans and felt that the problems of their people could be solved only by a continuing struggle at hom