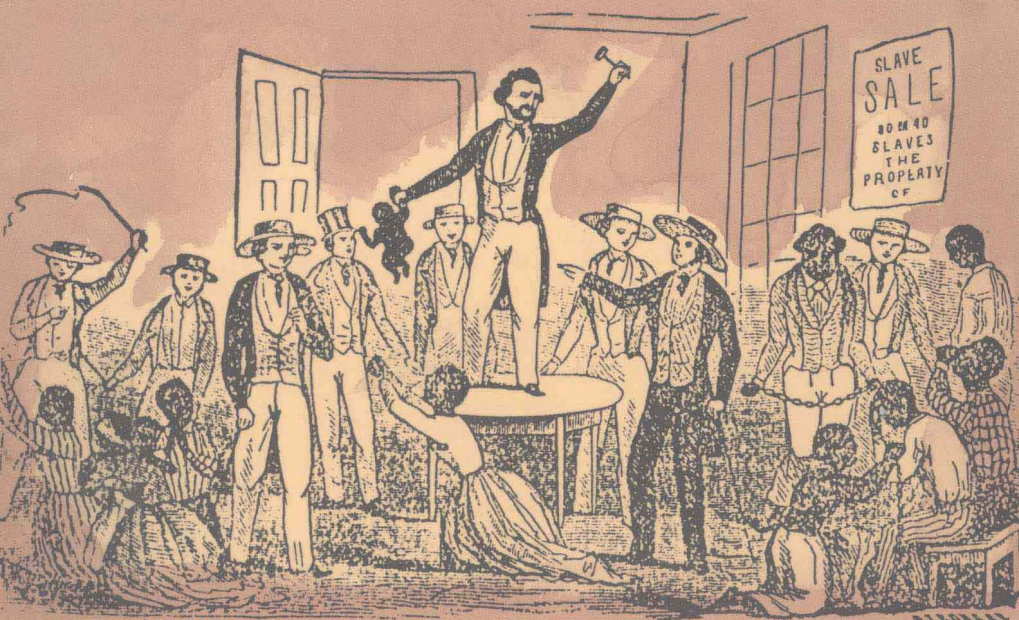


# American Slavery

1619-1877



Peter Kolchin

# AMERICAN SLAVERY

---

1619-1877

BY  
PETER KOLCHIN



HILL AND WANG • NEW YORK

*A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux*

Hill and Wang  
A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
19 Union Square West, New York 10003

Copyright © 1993 by Peter Kolchin  
All rights reserved  
Distributed in Canada by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.  
Printed in the United States of America  
Published in 1993 by Hill and Wang  
First paperback edition, 1994

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA  
Kolchin, Peter.  
American slavery, 1619–1877 / Peter Kolchin : consulting editor,  
Eric Foner.

p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
1. Slavery—United States—History. I. Title.  
E441.K64 1993 306.3'62'0973—dc20 92-46358 CIP

Paperback ISBN: 0-8090-1554-4

*Designed by Fritz Metsch*

www.fsgbooks.com

11 13 15 17 19 18 16 14 12 10

AMERICAN  
SLAVERY  
1619-1877

ALSO BY PETER KOLCHIN

*First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's  
Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (1972)

*Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*  
(1987), Winner of the Bancroft Prize for 1988

*For Michael and David*

## *Preface*

THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY has witnessed a huge outpouring of books and articles on American slavery. Scholars have probed it from a wide variety of angles, exploring new questions as well as old, in the process substantially revising our understanding of an institution that was a central feature of American history until 1865. One of the main foci of this research has been the slaves themselves—their day-to-day behavior, family lives, religious practices, community organization, resistance, and social values—but virtually no topic has escaped historical attention. Scholars have interpreted and reinterpreted the economics of slavery, slave demography, slave culture, slave treatment, and slave-owner ideology; they have paid new attention to slavery in colonial America; they have explored variations conditioned by time and space, comparing slavery in different regions and countries as well as in different eras; and they have examined the abolition of slavery, debating the impact and consequences of emancipation. **All history is subject to continuous revision,** but few areas of historical study have seen the kind of extensive reworking that has transformed our understanding of American slavery. Indeed, the sheer volume of historical work on slavery has become so vast that keeping up with it is a task of herculean proportions even for experts in the field. For everyone else, it is simply impossible.

Despite the proliferation of this scholarly research, we still lack a volume that pulls together what we have learned to present a coherent history of slavery in America. Perhaps in part because of the enormous quantity of publications and in part because of the rapidity with which they have reshaped our understanding of diverse questions, no one has yet produced an account that satisfactorily synthesizes and makes sense of recent historical research on slavery. I believe that it is time to step back and consider where we now stand—where historians agree and disagree, what we have learned and what remains to be learned—and on the basis of this consideration to present a short interpretive survey of American slavery. Hence this book, which I hope will be useful to a broad range of readers, from those who know virtually nothing about the history of slavery to those who know a great deal about it.

In writing this volume, I have had several goals in mind. First, I have sought to create an account of slavery that is at the same time substantive and historiographical. Because historical reinterpretation is a continuing process, any understanding of slavery requires coming to grips with the diverse and changing ways in which historians have treated the institution. I thus combine a primary focus on the evolution of slavery itself with frequent brief (and I hope unobtrusive) discussions of historical controversies over slavery. These controversies, some of which have been resolved while others remain active, provide a useful means of exploring both the nature of slavery and its meaning and significance to later generations of Americans. In dealing with historical controversies, I have tried to explain divergent positions fairly, but I have not shied away from offering my own reasoned judgments where they seem warranted. This is an interpretive history.

Second, I have aimed for a balanced approach that pays attention to the slaves, the slave owners, and the system that bound them together. For years, historians treated slaves primarily as objects of white action rather than as subjects in their own right, and largely ignored the behavior and beliefs of the slaves themselves. Reacting against this emphasis, many scholars have more recently focused on the slaves as actors, stressing the world they made for themselves rather than the constraints imposed by their owners. I believe that neither slaves nor slave owners can be understood in isolation from each other: a well-rounded study of slavery must come to grips with slaves as both subjects and objects and must consider slavery from



the perspective of both the masters and the slaves while adopting the perspective of neither. This book is not a history of African-American culture or of black Americans in the era of slavery (although it touches on both); several good surveys on those subjects already exist, including John Boles's recent volume, *Black Southerners: 1619–1869*. This is, rather, a history of American *slavery*, and my focus centers on the master–slave relationship broadly conceived, and its impact on both white and black Americans.

Third, I have striven to show how slavery changed over time. This volume covers an unusually broad chronological stretch, beginning in the early colonial period and ranging through emancipation and Reconstruction. By encompassing the entire span of American slavery, I believe that I am better able to come to grips with what many recent critics have seen as a major problem in interpreting slavery—how to deal with its evolutionary nature—than are historians who confine their attention to a particular era or fraction of one. Occasionally, in order to avoid needless repetition, I have found it desirable to consolidate topics into particular chapters; thus, I treat the transformation of Africans into African-Americans in chapter 2, the growth of the free black population in chapter 3, and slave resistance in chapter 5, even though such treatment stretches the limits of strict chronology. The book's basic structure, however, is simple and broadly chronological. The first three chapters cover the colonial and Revolutionary eras, the next three chapters examine the antebellum period, and the final chapter deals with emancipation and its aftermath.

Finally, although this is a study of *American* slavery, I have placed that slavery within a broad comparative context. During recent years, historians have become aware that slavery, although frequently termed the “peculiar institution,” was hardly peculiar if by that term one means unique or unusual; indeed, throughout most of human history, slavery and other forms of coerced labor were ubiquitous. In the modern era, American slavery was part of a larger system of New World slavery that reached its height of development in the Caribbean and Brazil and emerged contemporaneously with the widespread use of forced labor in Eastern Europe, the most notable example of which was provided by Russian serfdom. The comparative approach to slavery has yielded important insights, enabling scholars both to note common patterns and to probe the ways in which geographically varied historical conditions shaped differing

social relations. These insights have begun to reshape the interpretation of American slavery, but too often historians have maintained a parochial approach to that slavery, as if it developed largely in a vacuum. Because I believe that a comparative perspective helps to clarify the particular nature of American slavery, I frequently examine that slavery in the light of unfree labor elsewhere in the modern Western world, especially Caribbean slavery but also Brazilian slavery and Russian serfdom.

Writing a short, interpretive survey that synthesizes recent research, traces the evolution of American slavery over time, and places American slavery within a broad comparative context is a perilous undertaking that inevitably must produce casualties. One of these is detail. There is a good deal of information in this volume, but I have been more concerned with developing thematic clarity than with piling up as many facts as possible, and I make no pretense to producing an encyclopedic study that will tell the reader everything he or she ever wanted to know about American slavery; indeed, I hope that this book will serve as both an impetus and a guide to the further study of slavery. A second casualty is nuance. Put simply, in a book of this sort it is necessary to paint with broad strokes. Although I have tried to suggest the extraordinary variety of conditions and relationships that existed under American slavery, this variety may at times be lost in the effort to see the "big picture." I trust that readers will bear in mind that exceptions can be found to almost every generalization about slavery; the prudent analyst must be aware of these exceptions but at the same time avoid being incapacitated by them.

Let me turn to some technical matters, beginning with my use of several widely used terms. I use the words "America" and "American" in their restrictive meanings, to apply to the United States (or the colonies that later became the United States) and its residents; their common usage in this sense, although sometimes deplored in Canada and Latin America, is dictated by the lack of suitable synonyms. To refer more generally to territory or people throughout the Western Hemisphere, I use the terms "New World" and "the Americas" (as in "New World slavery" or "slavery in the Americas"). The term "black" has become widely accepted within the United States to refer to people of African or partial African origin (replacing "Negro," which prevailed until the late 1960s). I have adopted this American terminology, which must be distinguished from the ten-

dency in many other areas (for example, Latin America) to use “black” only when referring to persons of unmixed or overwhelming African ancestry, while using other terms—“colored,” “mulatto,” “mestizo,” and so on—for non-whites of lighter color. (I generally avoid use of “black” when such terminology would be confusing or awkward, however, as in discussion of color gradations among slaves and free blacks; the term “light black” leaves much to be desired.) I also use “African-American” (which has now largely replaced “Afro-American”), sometimes as a synonym for “black” American but often with a cultural connotation (as in “African-American family structure” or “African-American culture”).

Like “black” and “American,” the word “planter” has diverse connotations. Sometimes it has been applied to any landowning farmer, but to historians of the antebellum South it has usually meant a landowning farmer of substantial means; in the most restrictive usage, the term is reserved for those owning twenty or more slaves. Slaveholders themselves were usually much less rigid in their definition of “planter,” frequently referring to someone with ten or twelve slaves as a “small planter.” Because the condition and worldview of a slave owner with twelve slaves were not likely to be fundamentally different from those of a slave owner with twenty, I have adopted this somewhat more relaxed criterion for entry into planter ranks, while maintaining the distinction between a “farmer” (with few or no slaves) and a “planter” (with many). Further distinctions among “small slave owners,” “small planters,” and “large planters” (or “wealthy planters”) are useful, but these are imprecise terms that vary over time and place. Someone owning fifty slaves would have qualified as a very large planter in Virginia in the 1720s but not in Louisiana in the 1840s (let alone Jamaica in the 1810s).

Whatever my own use of terminology, I follow the standard historical practice of quoting language exactly as it is found in the original sources (except for minor adjustments of capitalization and punctuation for greater readability). At times, this language may be offensive to modern readers. I regret any offense caused, but trust they will understand that **quotations are designed to illustrate historical perceptions and opinions that often differed sharply from our own.** It goes without saying that **statements are quoted for what they reveal about the past, not for their acceptability in the present.**

I have debated in my mind for some time the proper method of documentation for this book. On one side is the historian’s natural

proclivity to cite sources whenever possible; on the other is the suspicion that any footnoting that would accurately document my reading over a period of more than two decades in the vast primary and secondary literature on slavery and emancipation would be likely to prove distracting rather than illuminating for most readers. In the end, I compromised between reliance on traditional scholarly apparatus and desire for greater readability and decided to include notes, but only for direct quotations. The works of scholars mentioned but not quoted can be found in the lengthy (but still necessarily selective) bibliographical essay that appears at the end of the book; I hope this essay will guide interested readers to the leading secondary sources, as well as to some of the more accessible primary ones. Documentation for much of the statistical information in this book can be found in the six tables located in the Appendix immediately following the text.

During the preparation of this book, I have built up a number of intellectual debts that it is now my pleasure to acknowledge. I tried out some of my ideas about American slavery in comparative perspective in talks at Kenyon College, the University of New Mexico, and the University of Texas at Austin, as well as in a lecture to the Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Series at the University of Delaware; I am grateful for the opportunity that these talks provided me to refine my thinking, as well as for the many helpful comments they elicited. I also appreciate the support I have received from the University of Delaware, including a General University Research Grant that helped finance the writing of this volume.

Although I cannot cite them all by name, I would like to acknowledge collectively all the historians who have written on slavery; in a very real sense, they have made this book possible. A much smaller number of historians *must* be mentioned by name, because they have made this book *better*. Drew Gilpin Faust, Howard Johnson, and Howard N. Rabinowitz, specialists in Southern and African-American history, read the penultimate version of this manuscript and gave me the benefit of their expertise. I am grateful for their valuable suggestions, which have improved this book in many ways; it goes without saying, of course, that I alone am responsible for whatever deficiencies remain. Eric Foner, consulting editor at Hill and Wang as well as an expert in Civil War-Reconstruction history, read two drafts of this manuscript and offered insightful comments

that helped me strengthen my presentation, especially in chapters 2, 3, and 5; having long known of his brilliance as a scholar, I was delighted to learn of his skill and helpfulness as an editor.

My wife Anne M. Boylan, also a professional historian although not an expert on slavery, Southern history, or the Civil War and Reconstruction, read three (for some chapters four) drafts of the manuscript and has had to live with this project almost as closely as I have. She not only offered numerous specific suggestions for improvement but also helped me grapple with how to conceptualize *American Slavery* and served as a sounding board for ideas that panned out as well as those that did not, all the while maintaining her usual good sense and good cheer. She deserves much of the credit for whatever improvements the final version of this book shows over its predecessors.

Finally, Arthur W. Wang, although not a historian, deserves a special word of thanks. He has proven to be an ideal publisher, skillfully balancing the competing tasks of prodding an author not to fall too far behind schedule, providing support and encouragement, and offering helpful advice on how to streamline prose. It has been a pleasure to work with him.

# *Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1. Origins and Consolidation	3
2. The Colonial Era	28
3. The American Revolution	63
4. Antebellum Slavery: Organization, Control, Paternalism	93
5. Antebellum Slavery: Slave Life	133
6. The White South: Society, Economy, Ideology	169
7. The End of Slavery	200
<i>Appendix Statistical Tables</i>	239
<i>Notes</i>	247
<i>Bibliographical Essay</i>	257
<i>Index</i>	293

AMERICAN  
SLAVERY  
1619-1877





---

## *Origins and Consolidation*

### I

ALTHOUGH AMERICANS LIKE to think that the United States was “conceived in liberty,” the reality is somewhat different. Almost from the beginning, America was heavily dependent on coerced labor, and by the early eighteenth century slavery, legal in all of British America, was the dominant labor system of the Southern colonies. Most of the Founding Fathers were large-scale slave owners, including George Washington, “father of his country,” Patrick Henry, author of the stirring cry “Give me liberty or give me death,” and Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.” Indeed, eight of the United States’s first twelve Presidents, in office for forty-nine of the new nation’s first sixty-one years, were slaveholders. When, beginning about 1830, a small band of abolitionists boldly proclaimed that slavery was a dreadful sin, the majority of Americans, North as well as South, regarded them as fanatics whose provocative rantings threatened the well-being of the Republic.

During the century and a half between the arrival of twenty blacks in Jamestown in 1619 and the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1776, slavery—nonexistent in England itself—spread through all the English colonies that would soon become the United States (as