

African American Voices

The Life Cycle of Slavery

EDITED BY STEVEN MINTZ



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PREFACE

The experience of slavery defies simple generalizations. Novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe might neatly divide slaves into docile and deferential Uncle Toms and militant and rebellious George Harrises, and masters into brutal and sadistic Simon Legrees and gentle, guilt-ridden Augustine St. Clares. But the realities of slavery were far more complex. Slavery needs to be looked at from the inside, from the perspective of the enslaved. This book tells the story from the perspective of those who experienced it firsthand. Here readers will encounter such famous figures as Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner, as well as many lesser known individuals who will help answer the question: What was it like to be a slave?

This volume is not simply another collection of documents. It begins with a thorough, up-to-date introduction that summarizes what we now know about the history of slavery, the African slave trade, the conditions of slave life, the impact of slavery on the Southern economy, and the process of emancipation.

The introduction is followed by substantial excerpts from published slave narratives, interviews with former slaves, and letters written by enslaved African Americans. Together, these documents draw a comprehensive portrait of slavery. These selections are organized around the concept of the cycle of life under slavery: from memories of growing up in Africa to the trials of the Middle Passage and the horrors of the auction block; then on to the sustaining forces of family and religion, acts of resistance, and the meaning of the Civil War and emancipation. No single person experienced all of these phases of slave life. But all of the enslaved underwent many of these critical experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Two anecdotes suggest the complex realities of slavery. The first involves a woman listed in the census simply as Celia. She was just fourteen years old in 1850, when a sixty-year-old Missouri farmer named Robert Newsome purchased her. A widower with two grown daughters, Newsome raped Celia before he had even brought her to his farm. For five years he kept her as his sexual slave, forcing her to bear two illegitimate children. In 1855, pregnant a third time and ill, she struck back by hitting her abuser on the head with a club and burning his body in her fireplace. During her murder trial, Celia's attorneys argued that a woman had a right to use deadly force to prevent rape. But the court ruled that in Missouri, as in other slave states, it was not a crime to rape a slave woman. Celia was found guilty and hanged.

The second anecdote involves a Virginia-born slave named Benjamin Montgomery, who was seventeen when a Mississippi planter named Joseph Davis purchased him in 1850. Davis, the elder brother of the Confederate President Jefferson Davis, had previously met the British utopian reformer Robert Owen and wanted to apply Owen's ideas to his own plantation. So he instituted a system of self-government there, including a court system in which slaves ruled on any cases of misconduct, and gave slaves like Benjamin Montgomery access to his personal library. Montgomery educated himself and became a skilled mechanic. He managed the plantation's steam-powered cotton gin and ran a retail store, eventually earning enough money to purchase his family's freedom. As a freedman, he and his family decided to remain on the plantation, and after the Civil War, Montgomery actually bought the property from Davis and ran it until his death in 1877.

Obviously the experience of slavery varied widely, depending on a slaveholder's character and whims. Some masters, like

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Joseph Davis, attempted to treat their slaves in a kind, paternalistic manner. On the other hand, as Celia's example reveals, the institution of slavery could also bring out the very worst characteristics of human nature by allowing masters to treat human beings as property, to be exploited however they wished.

Slavery in Historical Perspective

During the nineteenth century, slavery was often described as "the peculiar institution." But throughout much of human history, wage labor, not forced labor, was the truly peculiar institution. Most people worked, not out of a desire to better their condition in life, but because they were forced to: as slaves, serfs, peons, or indentured servants.

Slavery began in ancient times. It could be found in societies as diverse as Assyria, Babylonia, China, Egypt, India, Persia, and Mesopotamia; in classical Greece and Rome; in Africa, the Islamic world, and among the New World Indians. While it declined in northwestern Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, it persisted along the Mediterranean Sea, largely as a result of warfare between Christians and Muslims. Slavery was practiced in eastern Europe and Russia; in North Africa; and in Renaissance Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Linking all these diverse societies was a shared conception of slaves as human beings who could be bought, sold, and exploited as though they were domestic animals.

When Europeans began to colonize the New World at the end of the fifteenth century, they were well aware of the institution of slavery. Europeans used black and Russian slaves to raise sugar on Italian plantations as early as 1300. During the 1400s, decades before Columbus's "discovery" of the New World, Europeans exploited African labor on slave plantations on sugar-producing islands that lay off the West African coast. With European colonization of the New World came a dramatic expansion in slavery. During the sixteenth century, Portugal and Spain extended racial slavery into the New World, opening sugar, coffee, and cotton plantations in Brazil and the West Indies and forcing black slaves in Mexico to work in mines. During the seventeenth century, England, France, Denmark, and Holland established slavery in their New World colonies.

Was the slavery that developed in the New World different from the kinds of servitude found in classical antiquity or in other societies? In one respect New World slavery clearly was not

unique. Slavery everywhere permitted cruelty and abuse. Consider these examples: In Homer's Greece, it was not a crime for a master to beat or kill a slave, and the testimony of unskilled slaves was not allowed in court unless it was obtained through torture. Vedius Pollio, a citizen of Rome, reportedly fed the bodies of his slaves to his pet fish. Flavius Gratianus, a fourth century Roman emperor, ruled that any slave who dared accuse his master of a crime should be immediately burned alive. Roman slaves who participated in revolts were crucified on crosses. In ancient India, Saxon England, and ancient China, a master might mistreat or even kill a slave with impunity. Aztec Mexico publicly staged the ritual torture and killing of slaves.

Yet in other fundamental aspects New World slavery differed from slavery in classical antiquity and in Africa, eastern and central Asia, or the Middle East. For one thing, slavery in the classical and the early medieval worlds was not based on racial distinctions. In the ancient world, slavery had nothing to do with the color of a person's skin. In ancient Rome, for example, the slave population included Ethiopians, Gauls, Jews, Persians, and Scandinavians. Unlike seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth century Europeans, the people of the ancient world placed no premium on racial purity and attached no stigma upon racial mixture. Ancient societies, however, did tattoo, brand, or mutilate their slaves as a symbol of their debased status.

Racial slavery originated during the Middle Ages, when Christians and Muslims increasingly began to recruit slaves from East, North-central, and West Africa. As late as the fifteenth century, slavery did not automatically mean black slavery. Many slaves—both in southern Europe and in the Islamic world—came from the Crimea, the Balkans, and the steppes of Western Asia. But after 1453, when the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople, the capital of Eastern Christendom, and began to monopolize the supply of "white" slaves, Christian slave traders drew increasingly upon captive black Muslims, known as Moors, and upon slaves purchased on the West African coast or transported across the Sahara Desert. By the eighteenth century, Islamic societies also became dependent almost exclusively on sub-Saharan African slaves. Thus the most menial, arduous, and degrading forms of labor became associated with black slaves.

Apart from its racial basis, another distinction between modern and ancient slavery was that the ancient world did not necessarily regard slavery as a permanent condition. In many societies, slaves were allowed to marry free spouses and become members of

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their owners' families. In ancient Babylonia, for instance, freeborn women and male slaves frequently married, and their children were considered to be free. Access to freedom tended to be far easier under ancient slavery than it was under American slavery. In Greece and Rome, manumission of slaves—giving them their freedom—was not uncommon, and former slaves carried little stigma from their previous status.

A third key difference between ancient and modern slavery was that slaves did not necessarily hold the lowest status in pre-modern societies. While we today draw a sharp distinction between slavery and wage labor, such a distinction was largely non-existent in the world of classical antiquity. Slaves could be among the wealthiest or most influential people in a city. The Bible, for example, tells the story of Joseph, who after being sold into slavery by his brothers, became a trusted governor, counselor, and administrator in Egypt. In classical Greece, many educators, scholars, poets, and physicians were in fact slaves. And in ancient Rome, slaves ranged from those who labored in mines to many merchants and urban craftsmen. In the ancient Near East, slaves could conduct trade and business on their own for their masters. In certain Muslim societies, rulers were customarily recruited among the sons of female slaves.

Finally, it was only in the New World that slavery provided the labor force for a high-pressure, profit-making, capitalist system of plantation agriculture producing cotton, sugar, coffee, and cocoa for distant markets. While many slaves in the ancient world toiled in mines and agricultural fields or on construction and irrigation projects, and suffered extremely high death rates, it appears that ancient slavery was primarily a household institution. In general, ancient peoples did not breed slaves or subject them to the kind of regimented efficiency found on slave plantations in the West Indies or the American South. It appears that most slaves in Africa, in the Islamic world, and in the New World prior to European colonization, worked as farmers or household servants, or served as concubines or eunuchs. They were symbols of prestige, luxury, and power rather than a source of labor. Under modern New World slavery, slaves became the dominant labor force in plantation agriculture.

The Atlantic Slave Trade

African slaves played a critical role in the settlement and economic development of the New World. Enslaved Africans arrived

in the New World at least as early as 1502. And over the next three centuries, European slave traders shipped to the West approximately 11.7 million Africans. (Islamic traders probably exported an equal number into North Africa, Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, and India). Nearly 2 million slaves died during the infamous Middle Passage across the Atlantic to the Americas, a trip that usually took more than seven weeks. During the peak years of the slave trade, between 1740 and 1810, Africa supplied 60,000 captives a year—outnumbering Europeans migrating to the New World.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, black slaves could be found in every New World area colonized by Europeans from Nova Scotia to Argentina. While the concentrations of slave labor were greatest in England's southern colonies, the Caribbean, and Latin America, where slaves were employed in mines or on sugar, rice, tobacco, and cotton plantations, slaves were also put to work in Northern seaports and on commercial farms. In 1690, one out of every nine families in Boston owned a slave. In New York City in 1703, the proportion was even higher. There, two out of every five families owned a slave.

How did the slave traders get their "merchandise"? African slaves were often captured in tribal wars or in surprise raids on villages. Adults were bound and gagged and infants were sometimes thrown into sacks. One of the earliest first-hand accounts of the African slave trade comes from a seaman named Gomes Eannes de Azurara, who witnessed a Portuguese raid on an African village. He said that some captives "drowned themselves in the water; others thought to escape by hiding under their huts; others shoved their children among the sea-weed."

After capture, the captives were bound together at the neck and marched barefoot, sometimes hundreds of miles, to the Atlantic coast. African captives typically suffered death rates of 20 percent or more while being marched overland. Observers reported seeing hundreds of skeletons along the slave caravan routes. At the coast, the captives were held in pens (known as barracoons) guarded by dogs. Here the captives who survived the forced march to the sea were then examined by European slave traders: "The Countenance and Stature, a good Set of Teeth, Pliancy in the Limbs and Joints, and being free of Venereal Taint, are the things inspected and governs our choice in buying," wrote one slave trader. Those who were bought were branded, assigned numbers, and forced aboard ships; the others were simply abandoned.

Once on shipboard, slaves were chained together and crammed into spaces sometimes less than five feet high. One

observer said that slaves were packed together “like books upon a shelf . . . so close that the shelf would not easily contain one more.” The death rate on these slave ships was very high—reaching 25 percent in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and remaining around 10 percent in the nineteenth century—as a result of malnutrition and such diseases as dysentery, measles, scurvy, and smallpox.

Many Africans resisted enslavement. On shipboard, slaves were known to mutiny, attempt suicide, jump overboard, or refuse to eat. To prevent their captives from starving themselves, slave traders sometimes smashed out their teeth and fed them by force. To prevent their escape, some captains actually cut off the arms and legs of a few kidnapped Africans.

Upon arrival in the New World, enslaved Africans underwent the final stage in the process of enslavement, a rigorous process known as “seasoning.” Many slaves died of disease or suicide, but other African captives conspired to escape slavery by running away and forming “maroon” colonies in remote parts of South Carolina, Florida, Brazil, Guiana, and Jamaica, and Surinam.

Apologists for the African slave trade long argued that European traders did not enslave anyone: they simply purchased Africans who had already been enslaved and who otherwise would have been put to death. Thus, apologists claimed, the slave trade actually saved lives. Such claims are a gross misrepresentation of the facts. Some independent slave merchants did in fact stage raids on unprotected African villages and kidnap and enslave Africans. Most professional slave traders, however, set up bases along the West African coast where they purchased slaves from Africans in exchange for firearms and other goods. Before the end of the seventeenth century, England, France, Denmark, Holland, and Portugal had all established slave trading posts on the West African coast.

Yet to simply say that Europeans purchased people who had already been enslaved is a serious distortion of historical reality. While there had been a slave trade within Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans, the massive European demand for slaves and the introduction of firearms radically transformed West African society. A growing number of Africans were enslaved for petty debts or minor criminal or religious offenses or as victims in unprovoked raids on unprotected villages. European weapons certainly made it easier to capture slaves.

Some African societies, like Benin in southern Nigeria, refused to sell slaves. Others, like Dahomey, appear to have spe-

cialized in selling them. Still other societies, like Asante, in present-day Ghana, and the Yoruba, in Western Nigeria, engaged in wars that produced as many as half of all eighteenth and early nineteenth century slaves.

The slave trade also had profound effects on Europe. Between the early 1500s and the early 1800s, the slave trade became one of Europe's largest and most profitable industries. Profits from the slave trade were said to run as high as 300 percent. In the mid-eighteenth century, a third of the British merchant fleet was engaged in transporting 50,000 Africans a year to the New World.

But it was not just slave traders or New World planters who benefited from the slave trade. American shipowners, farmers, and fisherman also profited from slavery. Slavery played a central role in the growth of commercial capitalism in the colonies. While the slave plantations of the West Indies became the largest market for American fish, oats, corn, flour, lumber, peas, beans, hogs, and horses, New Englanders distilled molasses produced by slaves in the French and Dutch West Indies into rum.

Although slavery did not create a major share of the capital that financed Europe's industrial revolution (profits from the slave trade and New World plantations did not add up to five percent of Britain's national income at the beginning of the industrial revolution), slave labor did produce the major consumer goods that were the basis of world trade during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries: coffee, cotton, rum, sugar, and tobacco. In addition, the slave trade provided stimulus to shipbuilding, banking, and insurance; and Africa became a major market for iron, textiles, firearms, and rum.

The Origins of New World Slavery

Why did Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danish, and English colonists all bring slaves to their New World colonies? Few questions have aroused more heated debate than the origins of New World slavery. Was it, as some have argued, the product of deep-seated racial prejudice? Or was it the product of a haphazard and random process that gradually occurred with little thought about the ultimate outcome? Or were other forces at work?

Certainly there is a great deal of evidence showing that sixteenth-century Europeans held deeply racist sentiments well before the establishment of black slavery. We know, for example, that the Elizabethan English associated blackness with evil, death,

and danger. They portrayed the devil as having black skin and associated beauty with fair skin. Through their religion, the English denigrated people of color, claiming that Negroes were the descendants of Noah's son Ham who was cursed by having black offspring for daring to look upon his drunken and naked father. Long before the English had contact with Africa, racist stereotypes were widespread. One English writer claimed that Negroes were naturally "addicted unto Treason, Treacherie, Murther, Theft and Robberie." Without a doubt, it was easy for the English to accept slavery because they regarded Negroes as an alien people.

But there was nothing inevitable about New World colonists relying on an enslaved black labor force. At first, Europeans sought to enslave Indians. Within a century, however, the Indian population declined by 50 to 90 percent, mainly as a result of European-introduced diseases. So the European colonists had to consider other sources of labor.

Initially, colonists in every English colony relied on indentured white servants rather than on black slaves. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, England's population grew by over a third, much faster than its economy. To address a sudden explosion of crime and poverty, England's rulers forced the poor to toil in workhouses, and beginning in 1547 enslaved persistent vagabonds and branded them with the letter "S."

In the early 1600s, England came to view New World colonization as a providential solution to the country's problem of overpopulation. Thousands of England's unemployed and underemployed farmers, urban laborers, debtors, and criminals were sent as "indentured servants" to the New World, where they contributed to England's wealth by raising tobacco and producing other goods. Over half of all white immigrants to the English colonies during the seventeenth century consisted of convicts or indentured servants.

In becoming an indentured servant, a person agreed to work for a four or five year term of service in return for transportation to the New World as well as food, clothing, and shelter. In certain respects, the status of white servitude differed little from that of slavery. Like slaves, servants could be bought, sold, or leased. They could also be punished by whipping. Unlike slaves, however, servants were allowed to own property, and, when their term of service was finished (if they indeed survived—many did not), they received their freedom along with small sums of money known as "freedom dues."

Black slavery took root in the American colonies slowly. As early as 1619, a Dutch ship carried the first Africans to Virginia,