

Introduction

The essence of US slavery was forced labor. Enslaved people's unrequited toil built a significant portion of the nation's wealth. They labored in many farming, mining, construction, transport, and factory settings. But by the 1830s most worked in cotton fields in the Deep South in the most important sector of the American economy. The cotton bales they made streamed into factories in New and old England, spun into yarn and woven into fabric that clothed people across the globe. Cotton shipped abroad each year increased from just a few thousand bales in 1790 to 4 million by 1860. It rose as a proportion of US exports nearly fivefold from 1800 to 1820. By 1840, cotton made up half the value of the nation's exports, reaching above 57 percent in 1860. And the population of enslaved people grew rapidly too. Nearly 1.2 million bondspersons counted in 1810 became ancestors of nearly 4 million in 1860. They toiled over a landscape several times as large and were fourfold more productive in cotton yielded per enslaved worker. Slavery remade the landscape, shaping the contours of significant parts of the country.

Enslaved people became the largest share of property other than the land itself. As property they were worth correspondingly more over time. Between 1770 and 1810, slaves as capital were worth between two and a half and three years of national – not just Southern – income. The value of slaves was roughly double the national value of housing, and in the South, “slave capital largely supplanted and surpassed landed capital.”¹ In 1830, aggregated slave property was worth \$577 million or 15 percent

¹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 160–61 (quote, 161).

of the national wealth. By 1860, the figure reached more than \$3 billion or nearly 19 percent of the total US wealth (the equivalent of \$12.7 trillion as a share of 2016 gross domestic product).² By then slave property was worth more than all the investments in factories and railroads combined.

Cotton growth guided seemingly everything, even in parts of the country where cotton did not flourish. A slave market spanned the distance of 1,000 miles from the top of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland to the Brazos River bottom in Texas. To get all those bondspersons into the cotton fields, enslavers broke up African American families in old neighborhoods in the Seaboard South. Those were the descendants of enslaved people brought into colonies since the early seventeenth century. And when enslavers set out to make a fortune, they took the able-bodied with them, constructing slave labor camps or what they called plantations.

And slavery affected nearly every American, in the cotton shirts, ships' sails, and banknotes made of cotton fiber. Americans tasted slavery in pies or cookies sweetened with cane sugar, chewed twists of tobacco, enjoyed a bowl of rice, or ate bread baked with Virginia wheat flour. All those commodities were slave-made. Those who savored Texas beef steaks or Southern barbecue ate products of slave labor too. And collateral industries thrived on it even where slavery was outlawed. Some New England factories made coarse woollens designed to clothe bondspersons. Northern bankers furnished capital to buy cotton acreage and slaves. Some banks even sold bonds derived from slave assets, becoming virtual slave dealers. Other city merchants from Boston, Philadelphia, and New York took commissions and shipped cotton.

At the base of those supply chains, slavery was much more personal. It was violent social control over African-descended people. Slavery in colonial British North America became closely associated with African heritage. As it developed, slavery and race became fused to such a degree that noticeable markers of African descent became disqualifications from civil rights. Over time, African-descended people had to demonstrate that they were not slaves. And for black people in most states, slavery was the basic assumption in American law. By the same token, European descent became closely associated with citizenship and a rough political equality

² Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014), 246; Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to Present," *MeasuringWorth*, online: www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/, accessed: April 10, 2017.

in the early United States, so much so that by the 1840s, a recent male European immigrant could virtually step off the ship and go to the polls to vote while an African American man whose ancestors had been in the country for several generations could not.

African-descended Americans bore the social costs of slavery. They paid several times over, in fact. They paid at the point of sale when children were stolen by strangers, when parents were snatched up by slave traders, or when spouses were separated at sheriffs' auctions following owners' deaths or business failures. Enslaved people forfeited social capital when separations prevented ancestors' wisdom and knowledge from being passed to the next generation. They paid with ruined health. Their bodies were bruised, broken, or raped through machine-tooled violence in the fields and under their roofs, tears of anguish and humiliation running down the generations. They paid for the pernicious myth that dark skin was inferior to light – that African ancestry was lower than European. And they paid with the generations-deep theft of wages, stolen inventions, and unrepaid investments in mastering the skills that produced millions of bales of cotton and other goods and commodities. Yet enslaved people did not simply struggle along with the forlorn hope of a better day.

They unfastened chains as solitary fugitives and as armed rebels. Some stood up to individual owners and overseers. Others joined invading forces. In each generation, handfals picked up books and took up pens, using hard-won literacy to publicize African Americans' protests and visions of liberation. They worked to undermine slavery's laws and political support. In quiet places of worship, they developed new theologies, new ways of knowing, and new ways of narrating their world. African-descended artists set about creating literature, music, and poetry, fundamentals of American culture. The shared experience of forced labor bound many together, but the unruly strategies of enslavers tended to pull bondspeople relentlessly apart. Slavery was never one thing, and enslaved people were never homogenous. There was no stagnation or sleepy plantation. There was precious little community. And never before did slavery transform in such a short time and within one political nation as in the United States of America.

Cotton capitalism stood at the center of US slavery, but it was one among many variations over space and time. There was never one Slave South but "many Souths," each with differing kinds of slavery.³ Work

³ William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 1: *Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 35.

varied by region and social situation. Some bondspersons labored in city factories or urban dwellings. Others grew grain, sawed timber, smithed iron, milled flour, or caulked ships' hulls. Some cultivated rice in the swampy Lowcountry while others staffed Louisiana canebrakes. Bondspersons served plates of food or drove wagons, and worked on steamboats or in railroad gangs. Some were forced to perform sex work. The young pulled weeds and tended cattle. The aged cradled babies and groomed horses. And their toils changed over time. Cotton slavery, along with nineteenth-century African American language, folklore, and religious persuasions, would have been unrecognizable to the first African arrivals in British North America in the early seventeenth century. Instead of cotton slavery being normative, it should be thought of as the product of a certain time and place, distinctive in the Americas and indeed the globe, a highly commercialized outcome of a centuries-long process.

Slavery in British North America began when castoffs of a broader Atlantic slave trade arrived in distant outposts of empire. The engine of the transatlantic slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was sugar and, secondarily, gold and silver. But what became the Eastern United States grew no sugar, and its gold had not yet been discovered. One historian terms the first generations of enslaved people "Atlantic creoles."⁴ They arrived in New England, New York, the Virginia and Maryland Chesapeake, and the Carolina Lowcountry. Atlantic creoles were often multilingual, Muslim, Catholic, or adherents of African traditional religions.⁵ They generally understood the geography over which they were scattered.

On arrival in the colonies, few Atlantic creoles considered themselves African, let alone African American. Those identities took time to develop. Many seventeenth-century arrivals in New Amsterdam were from southwestern Africa and arrived speaking Kongo or Mbundu as well as Portuguese or Dutch. Some arrived from Madagascar. Others were already creolized, re-exported from the Caribbean or Brazil. The English conquered New Amsterdam in 1664, and New York became the biggest slave colony in English North America in the seventeenth century. Until 1700 more African-descended people lived in New York than in Virginia or South Carolina. In New York, African-descended

⁴ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 29.

⁵ Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

bondspersons tended to work on small farms or in trades and transportation. Things were different farther south.

Virginia's earliest African arrivals were also from southwestern Africa, and a few worked their way out of slavery to become small landowners. Many toiled side by side with unfree indentured servants, poor Englishmen and women in tobacco fields with whom some made common cause. But in seventeenth-century South Carolina, most enslaved people were not even African-descended. They were captured Indians, taken from confederacies reaching as far west as present-day Arkansas, exported from Charles Town to destinations like Boston and Barbados. In the seventeenth century, the English North American colonies were societies with slaves as opposed to West Indian slave societies, the difference being that societies with slaves were places in which slavery was marginal to economic activity and political institutions. Laws and customs tended to keep enslaved people in chains, but they had some degree of mobility and did not seem a grave threat to domestic security. During the eighteenth century, patterns changed.

The Chesapeake and Carolina Lowcountry emerged as slave societies in the decades after 1700. South Carolina enslavers shifted from exporting captive Indians to exporting rice. To do that they began buying Kongo and Senegambian captives (embarked from present-day Angola, Senegal, and Gambia) to toil in rice fields. As soon as the colony began importing Africans, South Carolina passed laws giving enslavers private authority to maim and kill in the name of discipline and security.

In the eighteenth century, Chesapeake tobacco planters replaced English indentured servants with imported Africans, this time from the Bight of Biafra in present-day southern Nigeria and Cameroon. Perhaps four in five were Igbo. Unlike Atlantic creoles, these bondspersons were captured from the forested interior. Captives did not arrive speaking English or other European languages, but they did carve out distinctive cultural spaces on plantations. And by the time George Washington was born in 1732, Virginia was a slave society exporting tobacco. Like the Carolina Lowcountry, Tidewater Virginia relied on its black majority as the labor backbone of the staple crop.

In slave societies, owners and managers intensified violence to boost productivity, mitigate rebelliousness, and prevent uprisings. Virginia passed laws permitting enslavers to inflict disfiguring punishments on bondspersons while requiring poor whites to perform militia service, policing the colony's growing slave population. At the same time, New York and the mid-Atlantic colonies north of Delaware relied less

on slave labor. Their slave laws relaxed or fell into disuse, yet racial designations did not. Anti-black racism followed slavery's development but did not unfollow its decline. As Virginia and South Carolina became slave societies, they drew a rigid color line. Any person of African descent was presumed to be enslaved. From the Lowcountry to New England, as one historian puts it, "racial exploitation and racial conflict have been part of the DNA of American culture."⁶ And as they invented racial slavery, Americans were quickly commercializing it. That made it distinctive in both North America and the Atlantic world.

Slavery was not generally commercialized in North America before the eighteenth century. In Native American contexts, captives were often incorporated – on the lowest rungs of a society – in place of lost members. They had spiritual and social worth rather than commercial value. Most captives were children and females, some traded and others captured, who were easier to incorporate than adult males. And captivity was not necessarily *better* in African or Native American contexts than in US slavery so far as material conditions or physical treatment were concerned. In the North American interior, Iroquois captives, for instance, were subject to arbitrary and intensive personal violence long after capture.⁷ Comparing circumstances of personal violence versus contexts misses the point. Differing global slaveries were not qualitatively better or worse; rather they had different defining characteristics and values structures.

In precolonial West Africa, being enslaved meant *not belonging* to a lineage. Captives had political value, and enslavement did not imply chattel slavery or commercial ownership. Captives were outsiders. Lineages or kinship networks – rather than individuals – were the building blocks of polities, states, and kingdoms. Bondspersons tended to be kidnap victims, human debt payments, or war captives. Some had been condemned for witchcraft. By definition they were outside of a lineage in places in which status and citizenship were determined by membership. Slaves streaming in from tributary states or captives of foreign wars were different ethnicities than captors, but African slavery was not a function of race.

The charge that black people enslaved – and sold – other black people would not have made sense to African people whose identity was Akan,

⁶ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 226.

⁷ Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

Yoruba, or Bambara. To Europeans unfamiliar with the intricacies of African political economies, captives looked black or African and could be lumped together. John Pory, colonial Virginia's first elected speaker in its assembly, popularized the myth that Africans were biblically "descended from Ham the cursed son of Noah."⁸ The Hamitic myth legitimating enslavement ignored historical context and difference. Some enslavers noticed differences but attributed stereotypes to them. "Igbos," writes one historian, were thought "prone to suicide and must be watched; Coromantees [Akan from present-day Ghana] were rebellious and must be chained; Angolas were passive and need not be chained." But such superficial observations mask the incredible complexity of African political, social, and linguistic diversity, along with the fact that participating in the slave trade was often a defensive strategy. Some polities, such as Dahomey in present-day Benin, were highly stratified kingdoms while others, such as the Balanta of present-day Guinea-Bissau, were acephalous (headless). Dahomey consolidated and took captives to protect its own citizens from slavery while the Balanta took refuge in places enslavers found hard to penetrate. There were other critical differences. Among African polities, linguistic differences could be as pronounced as those between English and Chinese. Some were Muslim like the states of the Sokoto Caliphate in present-day northern Nigeria; others were Christian, like the kingdom of Kongo centered in what is now northern Angola, while many were devoted both to a world-historical religion such as Islam and also the gods of their ancestors.⁹ In that context, enslaved people were those without a social identity other than that of their captors. Even so, slavery within West African polities was characterized by toil and degradation.

Most enslaved people in Africa worked in food production, which was usually female gendered. Environmental conditions in forests and most savannas prevented agricultural methods using draft animals. Human power was essential. And most African slaves were female. Ironically, not belonging to a lineage could in some circumstances make slaves fit for civil service since it implied no family loyalties. And some polities fielded slave armies loyal to the government rather than to a lineage or

⁸ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2016), 34.

⁹ Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, NY: Viking, 2007), 212–13 (quotations); John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the New World*, 2nd edn. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

faction within it. Until the nineteenth century, there were few polities in West Africa in which enslaved people labored on commercial plantations.

West African captives lived so close to the bone that few women were able to reproduce. And in response to European demand at the coast, the “way of death” usually associated with the transatlantic Middle Passage started deep inland, along a slaving frontier.¹⁰ Some 25 million African captives were taken in the four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, males being sold and females retained by a one-to-two ratio. For males, captivity meant the likelihood of death, if not humiliation, violence, and transport to the coast, often through middlemen, followed by incarceration and sale to European enslavers based on ships. That was no free market. On the West African coast, the one-way trade in captives to maritime buyers was overlaid with a complex web of taxes and gratuities to the local and regional authorities. In Luanda, in present-day Angola, Europeans had to pay for the privilege of buying captives, and local authorities tightly controlled trade. So too in Ouidah in present-day Benin, where the captive trade supported the Dahomey monarchy.

Sale at the coast was the torturous beginning of the transatlantic crossing. Some 12 million – mostly males – crossed the Atlantic under those circumstances over four centuries; survivors were resold and enslaved in the Americas.¹¹ By 1776, of all of those who sailed to the Americas, 80 percent of those who had crossed the Atlantic were African. Of the millions who crossed the Atlantic, however, about 560,000 arrived in British North America and the United States, or about 4.7 percent of the total. By comparison, 21 percent went to Spanish America; 4 percent went to the Dutch colonies; about 22 percent went to the British West Indies, including Barbados and Jamaica; more than 14 percent went to the French West Indies, including St. Domingue (Haiti), Guadeloupe, and Martinique; and 34 percent (a third) went to Brazil.¹² For many, the path was indirect, and transport among colonies was part of a terrifying ordeal.¹³ That Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean was a journey into a new kind of slavery. It began in sugar fields where captives grew

¹⁰ Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

¹¹ Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

¹² Enrico Dal Lago, *American Slavery, Atlantic Slavery, and Beyond: The U.S. “Peculiar Institution” in International Perspective* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 22.

¹³ Gregory E. O'Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619–1807* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

crops for export and intensified over hundreds of years. Slave ships arrived legally in the United States until 1808, when Congress banned the landing of foreign captives.

As it developed in the nineteenth century, US slavery became closely associated with chattel slavery. As formerly enslaved James W. C. Pennington put it, “[t]he being of slavery, its soul and body, lives and moves in the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle.”¹⁴ Chattel slavery was the ability to sell a human being privately. It implied a market value and a cash equivalent. American enslavers bought captives with cash and credit and took out equity mortgages on slaves just as they did on real estate, the body of the enslaved person performing the function of collateral. Scholars call that commodification. In the early US republic, some states imposed restrictions on chattel slavery, such as outlawing the sale of a bondsperson under a deed of manumission (an act of freeing an individual). But even states that outlawed slavery did not convert chattel slaves to non-slaves simply because they crossed a border into free territory. Courts made that clear repeatedly. Instead, enslaved people were treated as moveable assets.

In fact, US slavery between 1815 and 1865 was a “radically commercialized” extension of slavery in the Atlantic world.¹⁵ In that antebellum moment, argues one historian, “[s]lave property was mobile, self-supporting, more liquid than any store of value short of sterling bills, and perhaps the most attractive kind of collateral in the entire Western world.”¹⁶ Enslaved people could be converted into cash readily. Their market value was equity enslavers could leverage to raise capital. But the process did not happen immediately. The commercialization of American slavery closely followed a transition from colonial slavery to cotton slavery. The old British system of merchant capitalism supported the growth of rice, sugar, tobacco, and collateral commodities markets. It was capitalistic but organized within an imperial framework. After 1783, the American economy changed dramatically, reorienting to a new birth of capitalism. Cotton – native to Mexico but scarcely planted before the Revolution – suddenly became vitally important. And the political economy of slavery shifted.

¹⁴ James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), iv.

¹⁵ Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 120.

¹⁶ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 297.

That seismic transition was part of a world-historical event known as the Industrial Revolution. Between 1780 and 1810, Britain generated more wealth in a shorter time than any society in global history, and at the center of that divergence from the other empires of the world was the manufacture of cotton yarn and fabric and the money and credit that financed it. English factory owners imported technologies from traditional centers of spinning and weaving in South Asia and China, incrementally mechanizing production while bringing divisions of labor together under factory roofs. Water and then steam power from abundant coal boosted efficiencies that gave northwest England a global comparative advantage in the booming textile business. London and Liverpool merchants financed the process. And British imperial might opened markets for cheap cottons, which disrupted old patterns of trade, labor, and consumption. In factories, workers were brought under the supervision of owners who regimented their working days and, increasingly, policed their behavior. Owners paid workers for their output, whether measured in pieces or in hours spent working.

The key to American slavery was forcing work with violence and small incentives, and wages enslaved people earned were confiscated by owners. William Wells Brown called that “unrequited toil,” which was a protest against the dignity of fairly paid labor.¹⁷ Even without paying bondspersons, enslavers created factories in the fields. Enslavers strictly regimented time, policed workers’ lives, and demanded ever higher productivity. Their work regime was fully incorporated into an emerging capitalist modernity.¹⁸

The process spurred cotton cultivation in many places, including the Caribbean or West Indies, but the American South – within the newly independent United States – had a critical advantage. “What distinguished the United States from virtually every other cotton-growing area in the world was planters’ command of nearly unlimited supplies of land, labor, and capital, and their unparalleled political power.”¹⁹ Ironically, American independence gave unprecedented political representation to enslavers. All that was needed was a strategy.

The confluence of a newly independent United States and a growth in demand for cotton led to a vision of a continental empire. When enslavers

¹⁷ William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston, MA: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1847), 14.

¹⁸ Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2014), 105.

in South Carolina and Georgia – where cotton grew well – looked to the west (lands straddling the Mississippi River), they saw forests beneath which cotton plantations could be constructed. The sovereignties of Native Americans did not seem to count much against the shimmering possibilities of a cotton paradise worked by bound laborers. When Virginia and Maryland enslavers looked to that same southwest, they viewed an outlet for their seeming surplus of bondspersons, the descendants of Igbos and Kongo captives now farming grain, cutting shingles, and transporting bushels. And when New Yorkers and other East Coast city merchants cast an eye on the distant river bottoms draining into the Mississippi River meandering toward New Orleans, they glimpsed the potential market for credit and consumer goods in the southern interior.

And those interests in cotton, slavery, and credit coalesced in the federal government. The new US republic committed itself to westward expansion, a euphemism for conquering a continental empire. What it called the Old Southwest – the lands that became Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas – held the key to prosperity and power. And in a generation, American exports were reoriented to this global commodity, manufactured in England, and sold seemingly everywhere from New York to Luanda to Dhaka, in present-day Bangladesh. Even New England factory owners – upstarts in the new industrial bonanza – took a friendly interest in the expansion of cotton slavery. But as slavery expansion became entrenched in the political institutions of the federal republic, slavery sowed divisions.

Enslavers were too aggressively expansionist for many fellow citizens. Beginning in the 1810s, the movement of so many bondspersons across the South and into the West created suspicion among non-enslavers. Citizens in states like Ohio and Illinois, where slavery had been prohibited by the 1787 Northwest Ordinance and outlawed in state constitutions, looked west and saw enslavers as a threat to democracy. By the same token, enslavers considered barriers to slavery a threat to their rights. Citizens taking bondspersons from Virginia to Missouri held fast to their constitutionally protected property in people. Out of that conflict grew political disagreement that fell into crisis after 1845 when the United States annexed the enslavers' republic of Texas. Historians have viewed the resulting US war against Mexico as the catalyst of the American Civil War of 1861–65, which brought chattel slavery to an end.²⁰

²⁰ Michael F. Holt, *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2004).