

# African American Voices

*A Documentary Reader,  
1619–1877*

*Edited by*  
Steven Mintz

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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## Series Editors' Preface

Primary sources have become an essential component in the teaching of history to undergraduates. They engage students in the process of historical interpretation and analysis, helping them understand that facts do not speak for themselves. Rather, students see how historians construct narratives that recreate the past. Most students assume that the pursuit of knowledge is a solitary endeavor; yet historians constantly interact with their peers, building upon previous research and arguing among themselves over the interpretation of documents and their larger meaning. The documentary readers in this series highlight the value of this collaborative creative process. Documentary readers can be used in a variety of ways. The introduction to each reader will discuss the kinds of sources available for the study of the subject under investigation and suggest how the documents can be adapted to various classroom situations.

The books in this series introduce students in American history courses to two important dimensions of historical analysis. They enable students to engage actively in historical interpretation, and they further students' understanding of the interplay between social and political forces in historical developments. Consisting of primary sources and an introductory essay, these readers are aimed at the major courses in the American history curriculum. The documents in these texts include such items as illustrations of material artifacts, letters and diaries, sermons, maps, photographs, song lyrics, selections from fiction and memoirs, legal statutes, court decisions, presidential orders, speeches, and political cartoons.

Each volume in the series is edited by a specialist in the field who is concerned with undergraduate teaching. The goal of each volume is not to provide a comprehensive selection of material but to choose items that

reflect major themes and debates and that illustrate significant social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of an era or subject. The editor of each volume discusses the central questions that have occupied historians in this field and the ways historians have used primary sources to answer them. In addition, each introductory essay will contain an explanation of the kinds of materials available to investigate a particular subject, the methods by which historians analyze them, and the considerations that go into interpreting them. Each source selection will then be introduced by a short head note that gives students the necessary information and a context for understanding the document. Also, each section of the volume contains questions to guide student reading and stimulate classroom discussion.

Steven Mintz's *African American Voices: A Documentary Reader, 1619–1877* provides an array of documents dealing with the history of African Americans from the Colonial Era through emancipation and Reconstruction. Divided into 10 chapters, this volume covers the period of African enslavement and the horrific Middle Passage. It discusses the impact of the American Revolution on slavery and the development of the plantation economy in the South. The sources Mintz presents show the reader the conditions that slaves endured as well as the effect of bondage on women, children, and families. The sources also attest to the various forms of resistance and cultural expressions that slaves developed to keep alive hopes of gaining freedom. Mintz presents the voices of slaves and masters, men and women, abolitionists and runaways, politicians and reformers, and soldiers and generals in demonstrating the inner workings of the slave system from its earliest days and the war it finally took to destroy it. The author draws on travel accounts, advertisements, memoirs, visual displays, and much more to show the operation of slavery and emancipation in all its forms. In addition, Mintz provides a comprehensive bibliographic essay on sources, which explains and contextualizes the most significant issues of African American history during this period. He also includes a valuable list of sources to guide students in pursuing their own research projects.

Steven F. Lawson and Nancy A. Hewitt, Series Editors

# Preface to the New Edition

Even though the subject evokes intense feelings of anger, frustration, guilt, and shame, it is absolutely essential that Americans study the history of slavery and the slave trade, for slavery occupies a central, if insufficiently recognized, place in America's past. A majority of the 650 workers who built the White House and the US Capitol were enslaved African Americans. The entire nation, not just the South, was complicit in slavery. Prior to the Revolution, every colony permitted slavery, and even after the institution was abolished north of the Mason–Dixon line and the Ohio River, northerners continued to benefit from slavery. Northern textile factories relied on slave-grown cotton, northern shipping interests transported the crop, mid-western meatpackers and farmers sold pork and corn to slave plantations, and northern banks and insurance companies financed and insured the production of cotton by slave labor. No major aspect of American history during the nation's formative era can be divorced from slavery. Slavery was central to the meaning and outcome of the American Revolution, the drafting of the US Constitution, American economic development, the growth of competing political parties, and the escalating sectional conflicts that resulted in civil war.

The history of the United States, and indeed of the entire western hemisphere, was inextricably bound up with slavery. African slaves and their descendants furnished the basic labor power that created dynamic New World economies and produced the first mass consumer goods such as sugar, rice, tobacco, and cotton. Even though it was abolished over a century ago, slavery has left a lasting legacy – a legacy evident in racism, economic inequality, and the social and economic underdevelopment of large parts of the Third World.

In recent years, slavery has become a divisive political battleground. Americans have bitterly debated whether to issue a national apology for slavery and to pay reparations to the descendants of slaves. To participate intelligently in this debate, it is essential to correct certain myths and misconceptions that many Americans hold about slavery: that slavery was a marginal and insignificant institution; that it was unprofitable and inefficient; and that freedom was a gift granted to African Americans solely by whites.

The history of slavery is profoundly unsettling. In the pages that follow you will discover that many of the most progressive societies in history were slave societies, including ancient Greece and Rome, the centers of Islamic civilization, Renaissance Italy, and, of course, the United States. You will learn that Europe's rise to global power was inextricably linked to slavery; that it is inconceivable that the New World could have been settled and developed by Europeans without slave labor; and that some Africans as well as many Europeans were complicit in the slave trade and exercised considerable control over it.

You will also discover that while politicians sought to suppress this fact, slavery was the supreme issue in American politics. The Constitution's three-fifths clause not only increased the South's representation in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College, it played a critical role in the two most important presidential elections before 1860: the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 and of Andrew Jackson in 1828. Even though the South had a free population just half that of the North as early as 1812, it held equal power in the US Senate for most of the pre-Civil War era. The South was also over-represented on the US Supreme Court, where slaveholders comprised 18 of the first 31 justices.

This book will tell several very different stories about slavery. One story is profoundly depressing. It describes the origins, development, and significance of the most extreme form of dehumanization and exploitation in history. But there are other stories that are more inspiring. Slavery is a story of human resilience and cultural survival under the most exploitative conditions imaginable. It is also a story of resistance that took cultural and physical forms. As we shall see, slavery involved a process of constant negotiation and testing of boundaries.

Above all, there is the remarkable story of how enslaved Africans and their descendants helped shape everything that we think of as American: our language, music, food, religion, and even our ideals of freedom. Today, African Americans constitute about 12 percent of the American population – about one in eight. But the influence that African Americans exert on American culture is far greater – an influence that began during this country's crucial formative period.

# 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. A more holistic view of slavery requires us to look at slavery from the inside, from the perspective of the enslaved. This book tells the story of life under slavery from the inside, from the perspective of those who experienced it first hand. In this volume, readers will encounter such famous figures as Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner, as well as many less well 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 the 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, the horrors of the auction block, 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.



# Introduction

A woman listed in the census simply as Celia was just 14 years old in 1850, when a 60-year-old Missouri farmer named Robert Newsome purchased her. A widower with two grown daughters, the 60-year-old 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, knocking her abuser unconscious by hitting him 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.

A Virginia-born slave named Benjamin Montgomery was 17 when he was purchased by a Mississippi planter named Joseph Davis in 1850. Davis, Confederate president Jefferson Davis's elder brother, had met the British utopian reformer Robert Owen, and wanted to apply Owen's ideas to his own plantation. Davis instituted a system of self-government on his plantation, including a court system in which slaves ruled on any cases of misconduct. He also 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. Nevertheless, he and his family decided to remain on the plantation. After the Civil War, Montgomery actually purchased the property from Davis, and ran it until his death in 1877.

The experience of slavery varied widely, depending primarily on a slaveholder's character and whims. Some masters, like Joseph Davis, attempted

to treat their slaves in a kindly if paternalistic manner. Yet as Celia's example reveals, the institution of slavery could also bring out the very worst characteristics of human nature, for it allowed masters to treat a human being as a piece of 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, free 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 in the United States was not unique in treating human beings like animals. The institution of slavery could be found in societies as diverse as ancient Assyria, Babylonia, China, Egypt, India, Persia, and Mesopotamia; in classical Greece and Rome; in Africa, in the Islamic world, and among the New World Indians. At the time of Christ, there were probably between two and three million slaves in Italy, making up 35–40 percent of the population. England's Domesday book of 1086 indicated that 10 percent of the population was enslaved. Among some Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest, nearly a quarter of the population consisted of slaves. In 1644, just before the Dutch ceded Manhattan to the British, enslaved Africans made up 40 percent of the population.

It is notable that the modern word for slaves comes from "Slav." During the Middle Ages, most slaves in Europe and the Islamic world were people from Slavic Eastern Europe. It was only in the fifteenth century that slavery became linked with people from sub-Saharan Africa.

## Defining Slavery

How does slavery differ from other forms of exploitation such as serfdom, indentured servitude, or the subordination of women in patriarchal societies? The traditional definition of slavery was legal. Slaves were people's property and could be bought, sold, traded, leased, or mortgaged like livestock.

Recent research, however, has revealed a great deal of diversity among slavery's forms and functions. In the ancient and non-Western world some slaves served as field laborers. But others served as sex objects in harems; as eunuchs; and as bureaucrats, doctors, and soldiers. In the South, slavery's primary functions were economic. But in many ancient and non-Western

societies, slavery served psychological, religious, sexual, and honorific functions.

To encompass slavery's diversity, scholars today tend to define the institution culturally. Slaves, according to this view, are people totally subject to their owners' will. They belong only to their owner, who can subject them to sexual exploitation and cruel punishment, and hold over them the power of life and death. In addition, slaves are people who are cut off from their traditional culture and dishonored in a variety of ways (for example, by being branded, tattooed, or required to wear distinctive collars, clothing, or hair styles). The most common form of dishonor is to disparage slaves' character and intellectual capacities. Regardless of place, time, or the slaves' ethnicity, all societies have imposed certain common stereotypes on slaves – that they were licentious, childlike, lazy, irresponsible, and incapable of freedom.

## **Slavery in the Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Worlds**

Slavery dates to prehistoric times and was apparently modeled on the domestication of animals. From the earliest periods of recorded history, slavery was found in the world's most advanced regions. The first civilizations – along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia, the Nile in Egypt, the Indus Valley of India, and China's Yangtze River Valley – all practiced slavery. The earliest known system of laws, the Hammurabi Code, recognized slavery and declared that slaves could be sold or inherited. But the percentage of slaves in these early civilizations was small, in part because these societies kept relatively few male slaves. In the tales of Homer and in the Old Testament, male war captives were typically killed, while women were enslaved as field laborers or taken as concubines.

Although slavery was a universal institution in the ancient world, only a handful of societies made slavery the dominant labor force. The first true slave society in history emerged in ancient Greece between the sixth and fourth centuries BC. In Athens during the classical period, a third to a half of the population consisted of slaves. Ancient Rome would be even more dependent on slavery. It is not an accident that our modern ideas of freedom and democracy emerged in these slave societies. Most early societies lacked a word for freedom; but large-scale slavery in classical Greece and Rome made these people more aware of the distinctive nature of freedom.

Slavery never disappeared from medieval Europe. While slavery declined in northwestern Europe, where it was replaced by serfdom, it persisted in Sicily, southern Italy, Russia, southern France, Spain, and North Africa. Continuing warfare between Christians and Muslims generated large

numbers of slaves to work in agriculture. Most of these slaves were “white,” coming from areas in Eastern Europe or near the Black Sea.

When Western Europeans began to colonize the New World at the end of the fifteenth century, they were well aware of the institution of slavery. As early as 1300, Europeans were using black and Russian slaves to raise sugar on Italian plantations. During the 1400s, decades before Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World, Europeans exploited African labor on slave plantations on sugar-producing islands off the coast of West Africa. European colonization of the New World led to 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.

### The Newness of New World Slavery

Was the slavery that developed in the New World fundamentally different from the kinds of servitude found in classical antiquity or in other societies? In one respect, New World slavery was not unique. Slavery everywhere permitted cruelty and abuse. 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. Nor does the Bible prohibit the beating of slaves. In the Roman Republic, a master might kill a slave. 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. 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 certain fundamental respects 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 ancient times, 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 to 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, however, 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. For the first time, the most menial, arduous, and degrading forms of labor were 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 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 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 and slaves could be among the wealthiest or most influential people in a city. The Bible, for example, tells the story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, who 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. 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.

## **Justifications of Slavery**

Over time, justifications for slavery have changed profoundly. Many ancient societies considered slavery a matter of bad luck or accident. Slaves in these societies were often war captives or victims of piracy or children who had been abandoned by their parents.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle developed a justification for slavery that would have profound consequences for the future. This was the notion of the “natural slave.” Slaves, in Aristotle’s view, lacked the higher qualities of the soul necessary for freedom. Slavery was not only good for the master, according to Aristotle, it was also good for slaves, who received the guidance and discipline they were incapable of providing themselves.

In the Christian world, the most important rationalization for slavery was the so-called “Curse of Ham.” According to this doctrine, the Biblical figure Noah had cursed his son Ham with blackness and the condition of perpetual slavery. In fact, this story rested on a misunderstanding of Biblical texts. In the Bible, Noah curses Canaan, the ancestor of the Canaanites, and not Ham. But the “Curse of Ham” was important in that it was the first justification of slavery based on ethnicity.

It was not until the late eighteenth century that pseudo-scientific racism provided the basic rationale for slavery. Yet even before this era, there can be no doubt that racism inclined many Europeans to see sub-Saharan Africans as fit for little more than slavery. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many European Christians associated Africans with their Islamic enemies. At the same time, many Europeans devised a clear color symbolism. They associated whiteness with purity, while blackness had sinister and even satanic connotations, since black was the color of the Devil.

## **Slavery in Africa**

Slavery existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans – as did a slave trade that exported a small number of sub-Saharan Africans to North Africa, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf. It would be a grave mistake,

however, to assume that the kinds of slavery found in Africa were identical to the system of plantation slavery that developed in the New World.

For one thing, hereditary slavery, extending over several generations, was rare. Many African slaves were eventually freed and absorbed into their owner's kin group. Another difference was that in African societies most slaves were female. Women were preferred because they bore children and performed most field labor. They were responsible not only for agricultural production, but for spinning and weaving and other productive tasks.

Slavery in early sub-Saharan Africa took a variety of forms. Before the fifteenth century, there was some chattel slavery there, under which slaves could be bought and sold like livestock. But most slavery in Africa took a different form. The gap in status between masters and slaves was not as wide as it would be in the New World. While most slaves were field workers, some served in royal courts as officials, soldiers, servants, and artisans. Under a system known as "pawnsip," youths (usually girls) served as collateral for their family's debts. If their parents or kin defaulted on these debts, then these young girls were forced to labor to repay these debts. In many instances, these young women eventually married into their owner's lineage, and their family's debt was canceled.

Under a system known as "clientage," slaves owed a share of their crop or their labor to an owner or a lineage. Yet these slave "clients" owned the bulk of their crop and were even allowed to participate in the society's political activities. These slaves were often treated no differently than other peasant or tenant farmers.

The transatlantic trade profoundly changed the nature and scale of slavery in Africa itself – and imposed a heavy economic, political, and psychological cost on the continent. The development of the Atlantic slave trade led to the enslavement of far greater numbers of Africans and to more intense exploitation of slave labor within Africa. Over time, the Atlantic trade encouraged traders to seek slaves deeper in the interior.

The slave trade had an enormous impact on African society. One of its most profound consequences was demographic. While the trade probably did not reduce the overall population, it did produce a radically skewed sex ratio. During the slave trade era, in most parts of west and central Africa there were only 80 men in the age bracket 15–60 for every 100 women. In Angola, there were just 40 to 50 men per 100 women. As a result of the slave trade, there were fewer adult men to hunt, fish, rear livestock, and clear fields.

The slave trade had momentous social consequences. It generated violence, spread disease, and resulted in massive imports of European goods, undermining local industries. It also slowed population growth. According

to one estimate, in the absence of the slave trade, there would have been 100 million Africans in 1850 instead of 50 million.

## Why Africa?

Why was Africa so vulnerable to the slave trade? The answer lies first and foremost in west and central Africa's political fragmentation. By the era of the slave trade, many of the region's larger political units – such as the empires of Ghana and Mali – had declined. The absence of strong, stable political units made it more difficult for smaller states to resist the slave trade.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the Atlantic slave trade depended upon a highly complex set of variables. Trade winds and ocean currents made it easy to sail from the western African coast to Brazil and the Caribbean. The importation of new food crops from the Americas – such as cassava, squash, and peanuts – stimulated population growth in Africa. Rapid population growth, in turn, made the slave trade possible.

## Enslavement

Many Americans, influenced by images in the 1977 television mini-series *Roots*, mistakenly believe that most slaves were captured by Europeans who landed on the African coast and captured or ambushed people. While Europeans did engage in some slave raiding, the majority of people who were transported to the Americas were enslaved by other Africans. It is important to understand that Europeans were incapable, on their own, of kidnapping 20 million Africans. Indeed, the system became so institutionalized that Europeans had little contact with the actual process of enslavement.

How were people enslaved? Most slaves in Africa were captured in 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.”

The overwhelming majority of slaves sold to Europeans had not been slaves in Africa. They were free people who were captured in war or were