

African Americans's Struggle for Freedom

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Historical Context of African American Enslavement

Today, the United States of America is known as the emblem of human rights and Freedom. However, not long ago, this very country enslaved an entire race. The [African Americans](#) were known to be the most persecuted race in the world. More than one generation of them was brought to America and sold into slavery, without their consent. This practice continued for two centuries, until the American Civil War. This paper discusses the meaning of [freedom for the African American](#) community and their struggle to achieve it.

Development of Slavery in Colonial America

Slavery first came to America when the first batch of slaves arrived in Virginia, back in 1619("Slavery and the Making of America . The Slave Experience: Freedom & Emancipation | PBS" 2017). The first slaves arrived to work as cheap labor on tobacco plantations. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the white man used African slaves to build the economic foundations of the United States. The settlers found African slaves as a cheaper alternative to indentured workers. Around 6 to 7 million Africans arrived in America as slaves; breaking families and ruining lives of a race that meant no harm to the white man.

Up until the 18th century, black slaves worked mostly on indigo, tobacco, and rice plantations in the South. Near the end of the 18th century, the land for tobacco plantations was exhausted, creating an economic crisis. At this time, the cotton gin was invented, resulting in creating a high demand for cheap and large amounts of cotton, produced through machines. It allowed plantation owners to switch from growing tobacco to cotton, with their slaves following their masters.

Slavery was a part of Southern life, although most people in business from the North became rich because of the slave trade. In the days following the American War of Independence, [slavery came to an end](#) in the North. The northerners began comparing slavery with imperialism practiced by the British in the colonies. The U.S. Congress passed a law that outlawed the slave trade. However, it would take almost a century for the slave trade to stop completely.

Conditions and Control Under Slavery

The South was full of small plantations and large farms with most masters owning as many as 50 slaves. Slave masters monitored their slaves vigilantly and were fully aware of them. They had established restrictive codes through which they controlled the slaves' lives. Slaves were not allowed to learn to write or learn; they were not allowed to behave inappropriately and show anger or rebelliousness. To make sure that their system worked masters would award obedient and well-mannered slaves with favors and gifts, while rebellious slaves received punishment.

To keep the slaves divided, slave masters established a strict hierarchical system. Slaves who worked in privileged houses were at the top of the system, followed by the artisans and craftsmen, while the field hands were at the lowest level. Slaves were usually not allowed to marry and raise a family, though there were some exceptions. However, even if they raised a family, their families were still divided later.

Resistance and the Emerging Demand for Freedom

During this period, even though the white man made sure that the African slaves lived in an artificial environment; cut off from other members of their race, but still, many slaves had objections to slavery. However, these slaves did not form an organized revolt until much later. The few attempts made were not successful in achieving anything. It was not until Nat Turner; a slave from Virginia, led a revolt, killing 60 whites, that the white men started questioning the institution of slavery ("Nat Turner - Black History - HISTORY.Com" 2017). Nat Turner's revolt made the slave masters believe that African slaves do have desires to live a free life and may resort to violence to ensure it.

Going through the history of slavery in America, it is quite apparent that the first slaves did not even know that they had any rights. For them, being kidnapped from their country and taken to a different; alien, land, and sold into slavery was a painful and humiliating experience. Most Africans were important people in their native villages, so it was quite logical for them to hide. The generations that followed were taught by their elders, not to question the white man, and so they didn't. It was not until much later that certain blacks began revolting against their slave masters. Even then, these early revolts were not against slavery as much as they were against the brutality of their slave masters.

It was not until after the American War of Independence was fought that the black slaves saw the hypocrisy of their white masters. They saw that while the white man talked about rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, he was not willing to share it with his black slaves. The people who labored to keep the [American economy](#) afloat were considered inferior. The African Americans saw the hypocrisy of their slave masters, who on one end were busy promoting fundamental rights while on the other end forced the African Americans into bondage. These were the reasons that propelled some slaves to revolt. Hence, when the British Governor Lord Dunmore ("Lord Dunmore" 2017) called

upon slaves to join his ranks in return for freedom, many blacks enlisted. Similarly, when the Colonial army made a similar proposal, African Americans joined them as well (“Slavery and the ‘Holy Experiment’ – Yale Scholarship” 2008).

Even though slavery was at its most brutal form in those days, there still were policies that allowed the slaves to obtain freedom if their masters allowed them (“Buying Freedom from Slavery: American History for Kids ***” 2017). It is known as “Manumission.” The slaves could manage manumission if they agreed to buy their freedom by paying a certain amount to their masters. This act became known as Emancipation. Sometimes, a slave owner freed a slave of his own will. It might be either because of a loyal service or some heroic deed that motivated the slave owner to free his slave. The black slaves were usually not paid any wages, however, on certain occasions, they were allowed to earn money on the side. The famous classical Uncle Tom’s Cabin, in which Uncle Tom’s wife works for a baker to raise money to buy him out, recounts this issue (“Indentured Servants In The U.S. | History Detectives | PBS” 2017). For African Americans, the idea of freedom was still not clear. Among them, some still sympathized with their white masters, while others wanted equal rights for themselves.

Abolitionism and the Political Crisis Over Slavery

In the 19th century, the American economy witnessed massive growth, which allowed the country to expand its borders westwards. It was good news for both the white man and the African Americans. In 1820, the U.S. government signed the Missouri Compromise; a move to balance the slave and free states. In 1850, the government signed another compromise, for the territories captured in the [Mexican War](#). Later, the Kansas-Nebraska Act declared all new territories open to slavery. The haphazard laws declaring some states as free states and some as slaves later led to an all-out clash between the slave masters and abolitionists. Since the 1830s movements to abolish slavery, gained prominence in the North, these movements were led by free blacks; like Frederick Douglas, and white supporters, like William Lloyd Garrison (publisher of Uncle Tom’s Cabin). While the white supporters believed that slavery was a sin as well as an economic burden, African Americans believed that they should get equal rights. The free blacks from the North helped the slaves from the South, escape through a network of safe houses. This network became known as the Underground Railroad; it might have helped around 40,000 to 100,000 slaves to escape.

Civil War and Emancipation

The [Civil War](#) broke mainly because the southern states seceded from the Union and then President Lincoln wanted to stop these states from doing so. However, the abolition of slavery became a reason later on, when President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation; declaring slavery illegal and freeing all slaves. The war was thus, a turning point for the black slaves and their white supporters. It resulted in around 186,000 black soldiers enlisting in the Union Army, out of which 38,000 lost their lives. The American Civil War is the deadliest war ever fought by the Americans; more men died in it

than in any other conflict. It was a civil war for not just the white people but the blacks as well. During the Civil War, both sides declared that blacks who joined them would get freedom from slavery. Hence, blacks joined both sides of the war and fought side-by-side with their white masters, creating rifts in their own families.

Reconstruction and African American Freedom

President Lincoln's efforts to adopt the 13th Amendment officially put an end to slavery and freed all blacks. However, the status of **African Americans** remained unpredictable, and they had to face significant challenges during the later Reconstruction period ("America's Reconstruction: People and Politics After the Civil War" 2017). Right after the Civil War ended, African Americans gave meaning to freedom by searching for and reuniting with lost family members, separated during slavery. They began building African American neighborhoods, with their churches, schools, banks, and shops. It was a move to establish economic independence and equal rights for themselves.

The 14th and the 15th Amendments both gave the rights of citizenship, equal protection, and the right to vote in elections. However, the Constitution was often ignored and violated, and at times, it was difficult for the African American community to gain a foothold in society. Even though African Americans actively participated in the economic, political, and military lives of the nation, they still faced many problems. The Reconstruction period witnessed the rebirth of white supremacists; including such organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which grew in the South. It would take another century for **African Americans to launch civil rights movements in America** and achieve meaningful social and political gains for themselves.

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