

## Slavery in America: An Introduction

Early European settlers in America had a lot of work to do, but not many people to do it. To solve the problem, they brought slaves from Africa to do the work. Slavery was a cruel experience that has left lasting effects on American life.

Slavery began in the U.S. Colonies in the early 1600's and lasted until 1865. By that time, the slave population was approximately 4 million people. 95% slaves in America lived in the Southern states.

European slave traders kidnapped people from Africa and shipped them to America. Slaves were chained so that they could not escape or fight back. They were sent by ship across the Atlantic Ocean. The terrible voyage, called the "Middle Passage," lasted up to a month. As many as half of the slaves died along the way.

In America, Africans were sold and taken to new homes, where they would be forced to work, usually for more than twelve hours a day. Most slaves worked in the fields, picking tobacco or cotton. Slaves who did not work or tried to run away were beaten and sometimes even killed.

Slaves were given simple shacks and clothes and food to eat, but this did not make up for what was taken away from them.

By law, slaves were considered property that could be bought and sold. Families were often split up and never saw each other again. Slaves were forbidden to speak their native African languages or practice their native religions. Slave owners could kill a slave without punishment. Slaves were not allowed to own property, to gather for meetings, to marry whom they chose, or even to learn to read and write.

Slaves did manage to find ways to enrich their lives and keep connected to each other. One way was through music. Slaves often sang when they worked, or at church, which the white owners encouraged. These songs, called "spirituals," became a vital part of American life. Music such as jazz and blues has its roots in slave spirituals. Some slaves managed to publish "slave narratives," stories that taught people what the experience of a slave was like.

Many slaves fought back or ran away to the Northern states where slavery was illegal. Both black and white people opposed to slavery formed the "Underground Railroad," which were secret routes of safe houses – particularly in Ohio -- that sheltered slaves and helped them reach the North.

By the 1800's, many white Americans viewed slavery as wrong. "Abolitionists" were people who worked to ban slavery. However, people in the South depended on slave workers. They knew that if they lost slave labor, they would lose most of their wealth. Disagreement on the issue became heated. In 1861, the Civil War broke out. The North won, and slavery was made illegal in 1865.

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This was done in two steps – first President Abraham Lincoln created a statement freeing slaves called the “Emancipation Proclamation.” After that, the U.S. Constitution was changed. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment declared that from that time on, slavery would always be illegal in the United States.