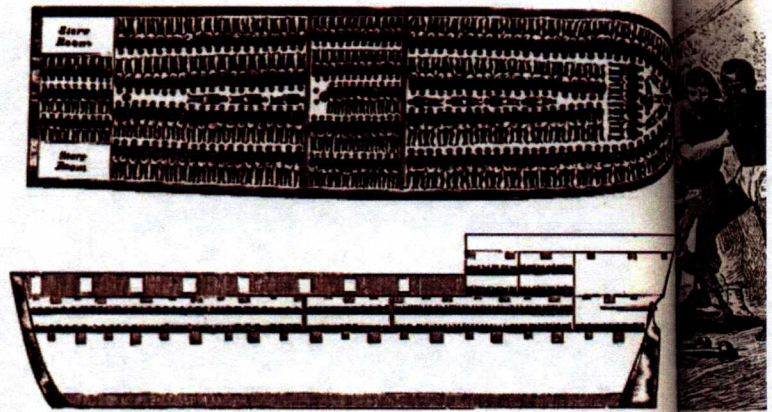




Journey into Bondage

Most slaves were brought into the U.S. by the harrowing overseas route mariners called "the middle passage," a triangle of trade involving three primary commodities: manufactured goods from Europe, slaves from Africa and crops and raw materials from the Americas. Aboard the ships, as many as 400 to 700 slaves were shackled together belowdecks, as shown at right; in the unsanitary conditions, disease, hunger and depression claimed the lives of an estimated 50% of those who began the journey. Once in the U.S. and put up for sale at auction houses like the one at far right in Alexandria, Va., slaves had no rights, and families were often separated.



The Bondsman's Toil

Scars and Stripes

As the Northern states increasingly came to see slavery as a moral evil, the importation of slaves into the U.S. was outlawed in 1808, when some 1 million slaves lived in America. But that did not put an end to slavery's growth: at the beginning of the Civil War, the slave population had risen to 4 million. While slavery was founded on racism, sexual relations between white owners and black slave women was widespread.

It is impossible to generalize about the daily lives of slaves: some of them were brutalized by the whip, like Peter, above, freed by Union troops and photographed in Baton Rouge, La., in 1863, who said he was "two months in bed sore from the whipping," while others were treated with (relatively) more decency. As the Southern plantation system evolved, slave society became divided between more polished house slaves, who served as domestics in plantation homes, and field hands, like the family pictured at left outside Savannah, Ga., in the 1860s.

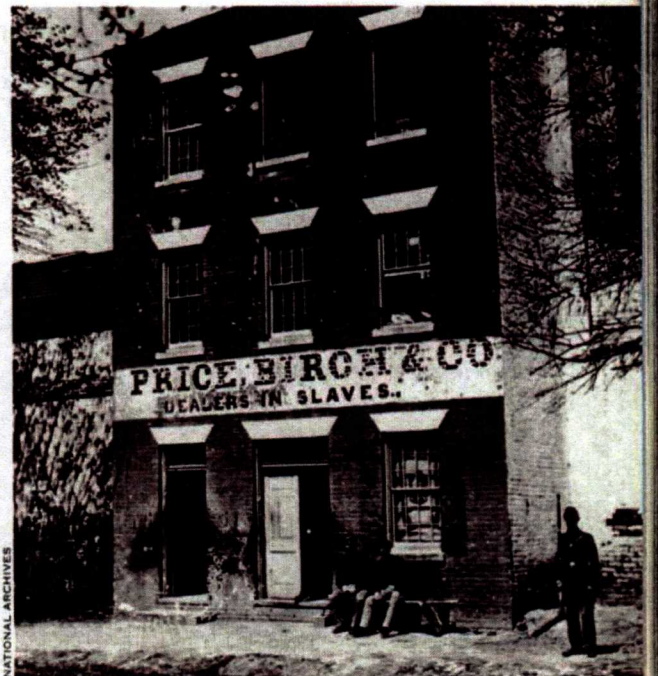


Artifact

Hinged Iron Collar

Slaveholders used a variety of techniques to break the will of any slave who resisted bondage, including the forced wearing of iron neck hoops. Aristocratic owners often consigned the treatment of their chattel to middlemen, the brutal slave drivers.

47



Slavery in the American South

www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/slavery-in-the-american-south

Slavery in the American South

*O Lord, O my Lord!
O my great Lord keep me from sinking down .
— From a slave song*

No issue has more scarred our country nor had more long-term effects than slavery. When we celebrate American freedom, we must also be mindful of the long and painful struggle to share in those freedoms that faced and continue to face generations of African Americans. To understand the present, we must look to the past.



A painting depicts George Washington and workers on his plantation. (Wikimedia Commons)

Buying and Selling Slaves

Before the Civil War, nearly 4 million black slaves toiled in the American South. Modern scholars have assembled a great deal of evidence showing that few slaves accepted their lack of freedom or enjoyed life on the plantation. As one ex-slave put it, "No day dawns for the slave, nor is it looked for. It is all night — night forever." For many, the long night of slavery only ended in death.

In 1841, a bounty hunter kidnapped Solomon Northup, a free black man from Saratoga, New York, on the pretext that he was a runaway slave from Georgia. When the bounty hunter sold him into slavery, Northup lost his family, his home, his freedom, and even his name.

Solomon Northup was taken to New Orleans, Louisiana, where he was put into a "slave pen" with other men, women, and children waiting to be sold. In "Twelve Years a Slave," a narrative that Northup wrote after he regained his freedom, the citizen of New York described what it was like to be treated as human property:

Freeman [the white slave broker] would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our heads and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth.... Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale.

By law, slaves were the personal property of their owners in all Southern states except Louisiana. The slave master held absolute authority over his human property as the Louisiana law made clear: "The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor; [the slave] can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to his master."

Slaves had no constitutional rights; they could not testify in court against a white person; they could not leave the plantation without permission. Slaves often found themselves rented out, used as prizes in lotteries, or as wagers in card games and horse races.

Separation from family and friends was probably the greatest fear a black person in slavery faced. When a master died, his slaves were often sold for the benefit of his heirs. Solomon Northup himself witnessed a sorrowful separation in the New Orleans slave pen when a slave buyer purchased a mother, but not her little girl:

The child, sensible of some impending danger, instinctively fastened her hands around her mother's neck, and nestled her little head upon her bosom. Freeman [the slave broker] sternly ordered [the mother] to be quiet, but she did not heed him. He caught her by the arm and pulled her rudely, but she clung closer to the child. Then with a volley of great oaths he struck her such a heartless blow, that she staggered backward, and was like to fall. Oh! How piteously then did she beseech and beg and pray that they not be separated.

Perhaps out of pity, the buyer did offer to purchase the little girl. But the slave broker refused, saying there would be "piles of money to be made of her" when she got older.

Slave Labor

Of all the crops grown in the South before the Civil War including sugar, rice, and corn, cotton was the chief money-maker. Millions of acres had been turned to cotton production following the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. As more and more cotton lands came under cultivation, especially in Mississippi and Texas, the demand for slaves boomed. By 1860, a mature male slave would cost between \$1,000 and \$2,000. A mature female would sell for a few hundred dollars less.

Slaves worked at all sorts of jobs throughout the slaveholding South, but the majority were field hands on relatively large plantations. Men, women, and children served as field hands. The owner decided when slave children would go into the fields, usually between the ages of 10 and 12.

The cotton picking season beginning in August was a time of hard work and fear among the slaves. In his book, Solomon Northup described picking cotton on a plantation along the Red River in Louisiana:

An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds.... The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see.... The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be ... a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short of weight ... he knows that he must [be whipped]. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly.

Only when the slaves finally finished working for their master could they return to their own crude cabins to tend to their own family needs.



An illustration of slave's life from a song book published in 1881. (Wikimedia Commons)

'The Quarters'

Slave families lived in crowded cabins called "the quarters." Usually bare and simple, these shelters were cold in winter, hot in summer, and leaky when it rained. Slave food was adequate but monotonous, consisting mainly of corn bread, salt pork (or bacon), and molasses. The master also usually provided a winter and a summer set of clothes, often the cast-offs of white people. Sickness was common and the infant death rate doubled that of white babies.

The lives of black people under slavery in the South were controlled by a web of customs, rules, and laws known as "slave codes." Slaves could not travel without a written pass. They were forbidden to learn how to read and write. They could be searched at any time. They could not buy or sell things without a permit. They could not own livestock. They were subject to a curfew every night.

Marriage among slaves had no legal standing and always required the approval of the master. Generally, slaves could marry others living at their plantation, or at neighboring ones. Solomon Northup discovered the following rules during his enslavement in Louisiana:

Either party can have as many husbands or wives as the owner will permit, and either is at liberty to discard the other at pleasure. The law in relation to divorce, or to bigamy, and so forth, is not applicable to property, of course. If the wife does not belong on the same plantation with the husband, the latter is permitted to visit her on Saturday nights, if the distance is not too far.

Slave Resistance

In "Twelve Years a Slave," Northup reported one instance in which a young slave woman named Patsy was brutally whipped for visiting a neighboring plantation without permission:

The painful cries and shrieks of the tortured Patsy, mingling with the loud and angry curses of Epps [the slave master whipping her] loaded the air. She was terribly lacerated — I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood....

How did the slaves react to the whippings, the endless labor for others' profit, the lack of freedom? Some like Nat Turner rebelled. In 1831, he led a slave revolt that left nearly 60 white persons dead in Virginia. Such insurrections were relatively rare in the South. White people outnumbered slaves in most places, possessed firearms, and could call on the power of the government to suppress rebellions. Nevertheless, slaves everywhere found other ways to resist their bondage. They sabotaged tools and crops, pretended illness, and stole food from the master's own kitchen. The most effective way that a slave could retaliate

13th Amendment (1865)

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

against an owner was to run away. It is estimated that 60,000 black people fled slavery before the Civil War.

Solomon Northup attempted to run away but failed. Then, in 1852, a white carpenter with abolitionist sentiments met Northup and learned about his kidnapping. The carpenter wrote several letters to New York state officials on behalf of Northup. In response, the governor of New York sent an agent carrying documents proving that Northup was a free black man. After a court hearing in January 1853, a Louisiana judge released Northup from his bondage. He finally returned home to his wife and children.

When Solomon Northup wrote the narrative of his experiences in 1853, he left little doubt about his feelings toward slave owners: "A day may come — it will come... — a terrible day of vengeance, when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy."

For Discussion and Writing

1. In 1850, a Southern slave owner might have said something like this: "Our slaves are like children who need to be cared for and disciplined. They are content and are actually better off than free white laborers working in northern factories." How do you think Solomon Northup would have responded to these remarks?
 2. What was the legal status of slaves and their families?
 3. The 13th Amendment was finally ratified in 1865, long after most other nations in the world had abolished slavery. Why do you think slavery lasted so long in the American South?
 4. Today practices such as slavery seem to us unjust and unthinkable. When students of the future read about our world in their history books, will they be horrified by any of the conditions we find acceptable? What causes public opinion to change?
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Josiah Henson, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*, 1858

Josiah Henson was born enslaved in Maryland. As a young boy he was sold along with his mother and five siblings when their owner died. Although soon reunited with his mother, he never saw his brothers and sisters again.

Common as are slave-auctions in the southern states, and naturally as a slave may look forward to the time when he will be put up on the block, still the full misery of the event — of the scenes which precede and succeed it — is never understood till the actual experience comes. The first sad announcement that the sale is to be, the knowledge that all ties of the past are to be sundered, the frantic terror at the idea of being sent “down south,” the almost certainty that one member of a family will be torn from another, the anxious scanning of purchasers’ faces, the agony at parting, often forever, with husband, wife, child — these must be seen and felt to be fully understood. Young as I was then, the iron entered into my soul. The remembrance of the breaking up of McPherson’s estate [the property of his first owner] is photographed in its minutest features in my mind. The crowd collected round the stand, the huddling group of negroes, the examination of muscle, teeth, the exhibition of agility, the look of the auctioneer, the agony of my mother — I can shut my eyes and see them all.

My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand. Her turn came, and she was bought by Isaac Riley of Montgomery county. Then I was offered to the assembled purchasers. My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting forever from all her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother only could command to buy her *baby* as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least, of her little ones. Will it, can it, be believed that this man, thus appealed to, was capable not merely of turning a deaf ear to her supplication, but of disengaging himself from her with such violent blows and kicks as to reduce her to the necessity of creeping out of his reach and mingling the groan of bodily suffering with the sob of a breaking heart? As she crawled away from the brutal man I heard her sob out, “Oh, Lord Jesus, how long, how long shall I suffer this way!” I must have been then between five and six years old. I seem to see and hear my poor weeping mother now.

This was one of my earliest observations of men, an experience which I only shared with thousands of my race, the bitterness of which to any individual who suffers it cannot be diminished by the frequency of its recurrence, while it is dark enough to overshadow the whole after-life with something blacker than a funeral pall. Almost immediately, however, whether my childish strength at five or six years of age was overmastered by such scenes and experiences, or from some accidental cause, I fell sick, and seemed to my new master so little likely to recover that he proposed to R., the purchaser of my mother, to take me too at such a trifling rate that it could not be refused. I was thus providentially restored to my mother; and under her care, destitute as she was of the proper means of nursing me, I recovered my health and grew up to be an uncommonly vigorous and healthy boy and man.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / NYPL

NEGROES
FOR SALE.

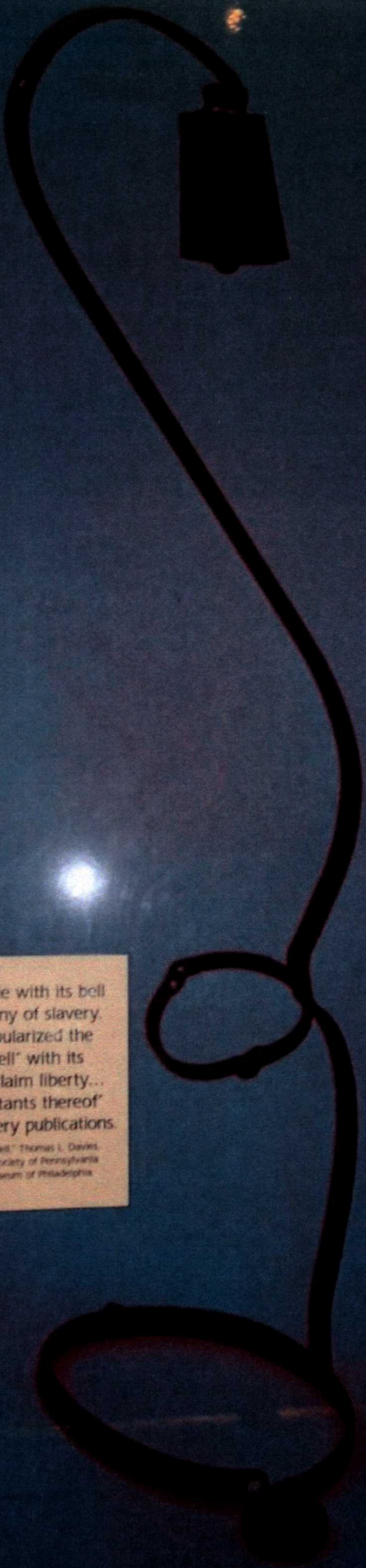
I will sell by Public Auction, on Tuesday of next Court, being the 29th of November, *Eight Valuable Family Servants*, consisting of one Negro Man, a first-rate field hand, one No. 1 Boy, 17 years of age, a trusty house servant, one excellent Cook, one House-Maid, and one Seamstress. The balance are under 12 years of age. They are sold for no fault, but in consequence of my going to reside North. Also a quantity of Household and Kitchen Furniture, Stable Lot, &c. Terms accommodating, and made known on day of sale.

Jacob August, jr.
P. J. TURNBULL, Auctioneer.

Warrenton, October 28, 1859.

Printed at the News office, Warrenton, North Carolina.

North Carolina, 1859



The head shackle with its bell shows the tyranny of slavery. Abolitionists popularized the name "Liberty Bell" with its inscription "Proclaim liberty... to all the inhabitants thereof" in their anti-slavery publications.

Photograph: "Shackle with bell" Thomas L. Davis. Courtesy of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection. Arwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia.