

CHAPTER ONE



THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION

ON THE EVENING of January 12, 1865, twenty leaders of the local black community gathered in Savannah, Georgia, for a discussion with General William T. Sherman and Edwin M. Stanton, the Union's secretary of war. The encounter took place at a pivotal moment in American history. Less than three weeks earlier, Sherman, at the head of a sixty-thousand-man Union army, had captured the city, completing his March to the Sea, which cut a swath of destruction through one of the most productive regions of the slave South. On the horizon loomed the final collapse of the Confederacy, the irrevocable destruction of slavery, and the turbulent postwar era known as Reconstruction. Americans, black and white, would now have to come to terms with the war's legacy, and decide whether they would build an interracial democracy on the ashes of the Old South.

One of the most remarkable interchanges of those momentous years, the "Colloquy" between Sherman, Stanton, and the black leaders offered a rare lens through which the experience of slavery and the aspirations that would help to shape Reconstruction came into sharp focus. The meeting, which took place in the house where Sherman had established his headquarters in Savannah, was the brainchild of Secretary Stanton, who, the general later recalled, "seemed desirous of coming into contact with the negroes to confer with them." It was Sherman who invited "the most intelligent of the negroes" of the city to the gathering. The immediate purpose was to assist Union authorities in devising a plan to deal with the tens of thousands of slaves who had abandoned Georgia and South Carolina plantations and followed his army to the city. But in its deeper significance, the discussion, conducted in a dignified, almost solemn manner, revealed how the experience of bondage had shaped African Americans' ideas and hopes at the moment of emancipation.

The group that met with Sherman and Stanton, mostly Baptist and



General Sherman's Savannah headquarters, the residence of cotton merchant Charles Green

Methodist ministers, included several men who had already achieved prominence among Savannah's African American population and who would shortly assume positions of leadership in Reconstruction. Ulysses L. Houston, who had worked as a house servant and butcher while in slavery, had since 1861 been pastor of the city's Third African Baptist Church. He would go on to take part in the statewide black convention of 1866, where representatives of the freedpeople demanded the right to vote and equality before the law, and to serve in the state legislature. James Porter, an Episcopal vestryman, before the war operated a clandestine and illegal school for black children, who "kept their secret with their studies; at home." He would soon help to organize the Georgia Equal Rights Association, and, like Houston, become one of the era's black lawmakers. James D. Lynch would rise to prominence in Mississippi's Reconstruction, serving as secretary of state and winning a reputation, in the words of a white contemporary, as "a great orator, fluid and graceful," who "stirred the emotions" of his black listeners "as no other man could do." Most of the other Colloquy participants would play major roles in the consolidation of independent black churches, one of the signal developments of the postwar years.

If the Colloquy looked forward to the era of Reconstruction, it also shed light backward onto slavery. Taking place, as it were, at the dawn of

freedom, it underscored both the diversity of the black experience under slavery and the common culture—the institutions, values, and aspirations—that African Americans had managed to construct before the Civil War in the face of the extraordinary repression and dislocations visited by slavery.

The group that met with Sherman was hardly typical of all blacks. Only 5 percent of the nation's black population was free in 1860, but five of the twenty men who met with Sherman were freeborn, and of the remainder, no fewer than six had obtained their liberty before the war, either by self-purchase or through the will of a deceased owner. Although the law forbade teaching slaves to read and write, several at the Colloquy were literate. Houston had been taught to read by white sailors while working in the city's Marine Hospital. Lynch, the only participant in the Colloquy to live in the North before the war, had been educated at Kimball Union Academy, in New Hampshire, taught school in Jamaica, New York, and preached for the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Indiana prior to 1860. These were men of talent, ambition, and standing, fully prepared for the challenges of freedom.

The conversation with Sherman and Stanton revealed that the black leaders possessed clear conceptions of slavery and freedom. The group chose at its spokesman Garrison Frazier, a Baptist minister who had purchased the liberty of his wife and himself in 1856. Asked what he understood by slavery, Frazier responded that it meant one person's "receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent." Freedom he defined as "placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, and take care of ourselves"; the best way to accomplish this was "to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor." Frazier also affirmed (despite pro-slavery dogma to the contrary) that blacks, free and slave, possessed "sufficient intelligence" to maintain themselves in freedom and to enjoy the equal protection of the laws. Here were the goals—the right to the fruits of one's labor, access to land, equal rights as citizens—that would animate black politics during and after Reconstruction.

Despite Frazier's optimism about blacks' capacity to take full advantage of emancipation, slavery cast a long shadow over the discussion. Asked whether blacks preferred to live in communities of their own or "scattered among the whites," he replied: "I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over." (On this point alone, disagreement followed, for Lynch insisted it would be best for the races to live together; all the others, however, agreed with Frazier.) At the same time, Frazier affirmed the loyalty of African Americans, free and slave, to the federal government. "If the prayers that have gone up

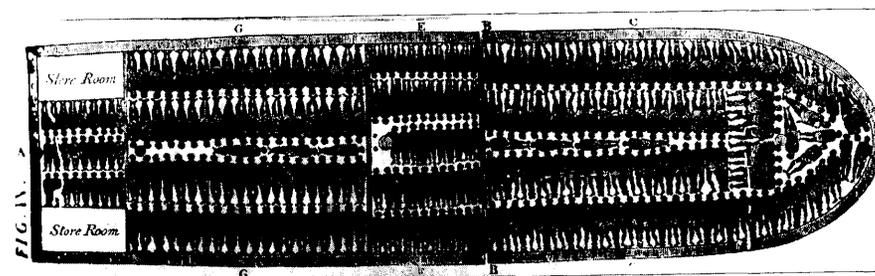
for the Union army could be read out," he added, "you would not get through them these two weeks." As for Sherman himself, Frazier remarked that blacks viewed him as a man "specially set apart by God" to "accomplish this work" of emancipation.

BY THE TIME of the Savannah Colloquy, slavery was an old institution in America. Two and a half centuries had passed since the first African Americans set foot in Britain's mainland colonies. Before the American Revolution, slavery existed in all the colonies, and in Spanish Florida and French Louisiana, areas subsequently absorbed into the United States. Slavery is as old as human civilization itself. It was central to the societies of ancient Greece and Rome. After dying out in northern Europe after the collapse of the Roman empire, it persisted in the Mediterranean world, where a slave trade in Slavic peoples survived into the fifteenth century. (The English word *slavery* derives from *Slav*.) Slavery in Africa long predated the coming of Europeans and the opening of the mammoth transatlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century.

The slave system that arose in the western hemisphere differed in significant ways from others that preceded it. Traditionally, Africans enslaved on their own continent tended to be criminals, debtors, and captives in war. They worked within the households of their owners and had well-defined rights, such as possessing property and marrying free persons. It was not uncommon for slaves in Africa to acquire their freedom. Slavery was one of several forms of labor, not the basis of the overall economy as it would become in large parts of the New World. In the western hemisphere, by contrast, slavery centered on the plantation system, in which large concentrations of slave laborers under the control of a single owner produced goods—sugar, tobacco, rice, and cotton—for the world market. The fact that slaves greatly outnumbered whites in plantation regions magnified the prospects for resistance and made it necessary to police the system rigidly. Labor on slave plantations was far more demanding than in household slavery, and the death rate among slaves much higher. And New World slavery was a racial system. Unlike in the ancient world or Africa, slaves who managed to become free remained distinct because of their color, a mark of bondage and a visible sign of being considered unworthy of incorporation as equals into free society.

Slavery proved indispensable to the settlement and development of the New World. Of the approximately 12.5 million persons who crossed the Atlantic to live in the western hemisphere between 1500 and 1820, perhaps 10 million were African slaves. The Atlantic slave trade, which flourished

from 1500 into the nineteenth century, was a regularized business in which European merchants, African traders, and American planters engaged in a complex and profitable bargaining over human lives. Most Africans were shipped in inhuman conditions. "The height, sometimes, between decks," wrote one slave trader, "was only 18 inches, so that the unfortunate human beings could not turn around, or even on their sides . . . and here they are usually chained to the decks by their necks and legs." Olaudah Equiano, the eleven-year-old son of a West African village chief, kidnapped by slave traders in the 1750s, later wrote a widely read account of his experiences, in which he described "the shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying" on the ship that carried him to slavery in Barbados. Disease spread rapidly on slave ships; sometimes the ill were thrown overboard to prevent epidemics. The colonies that became the United States attracted a higher percentage of free immigrants than other parts of the New World. Even here, however, of some 800,000 arrivals between 1607 and 1770, more than 300,000 were slaves.



A diagram from an 1808 report on the African slave trade shows the interior of a "slaver."

The first mass consumer goods in international trade were produced by slaves—sugar, rice, coffee, and tobacco. The rising demand for these products fueled the rapid growth of the Atlantic slave trade. The profits from slavery stimulated the rise of British ports such as Liverpool and Bristol, and the growth of banking, shipbuilding, and insurance, and helped to finance the early industrial revolution. The centrality of slavery to the economy of the British empire encouraged an ever-closer identification of freedom with whites and slavery with blacks. This is not to say that all whites enjoyed equality. Many gradations of freedom coexisted in colonial America. The majority of English settlers who crossed the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came as indentured servants who agreed to labor for a period of years in exchange for passage. Even after

their term of labor ended, many remained poor, landless, and unable to meet the property qualifications for voting.

Slavery and ideas about innate racial difference developed slowly in seventeenth-century America. Some early black arrivals were apparently treated as servants rather than slaves, and gained their freedom after a fixed term of labor. Not until the 1660s did the laws of Virginia and Maryland explicitly refer to slavery. As tobacco planting spread and the demand for labor increased, however, the condition of black and white servants diverged sharply. "Race"—the idea that humanity is divided into well-defined groups associated with skin color—is a modern concept that had not fully developed in the seventeenth century. Nor had "racism"—an ideology based on the belief that some races are inherently superior to others and entitled to rule over them. But as slavery became more and more central to the colonial economy, views of race hardened. In 1762, the Quaker abolitionist John Woolman commented on the strength of "the idea of slavery being connected with the black color, and liberty with the white."

By the mid-eighteenth century, slaves accounted for nearly half of Virginia's population. Virginia had changed from a "society with slaves," in which slavery was one system of labor among others, to a "slave society," where the institution stood at the center of the economic process. Slavery formed the basis of the economy, and the foundation of a powerful local ruling class, in the entire region from Maryland south to Georgia.

Slavery also existed in the middle and northern colonies, although there, slaves generally worked on small farms or in their owners' homes or shops rather than on large plantations. Nonetheless, in 1746, New York City's 2,440 slaves comprised one-fifth of its total population. Among cities on the North American continent, only Charleston and New Orleans counted more slaves than New York. As immigration from Europe increased, the proportion of slaves in the workforce outside the southern colonies declined. But areas where slavery was only a minor institution still profited from slave labor. Merchants in New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island participated actively in the slave trade, shipping slaves from Africa to the Caribbean or the South. Much of the grain, fish, and livestock exported from Pennsylvania and other northern colonies was destined for the slave plantations of the West Indies.

The colonial era witnessed the simultaneous expansion of freedom and slavery in Britain's Atlantic empire. These were the years when the idea of the "freeborn Englishman" became powerfully entrenched in the outlook of both colonists and Britons. Yet the eighteenth century was also the great era of the Atlantic slave trade, a commerce increasingly dominated by

British merchants and ships. During that century more than half the Africans shipped to the New World as slaves were carried on British vessels.

The American Revolution threw the future of slavery into doubt. When Thomas Jefferson in 1776 proclaimed mankind's inalienable right to liberty, and he and other leaders of the new nation spoke of the United States as an asylum of freedom for the oppressed peoples of the world, one American in five was a black slave (including more than one hundred owned by Jefferson himself). The same colonial newspapers that carried arguments against British policies and accounts of resistance to British tyranny also printed advertisements for the sale of slaves. The Revolution did, however, make slavery for the first time a matter of widespread public debate. It inspired charges of hypocrisy, not only from British opponents of independence but also within America. How strong, wondered Abigail Adams, could the "passion for liberty" be among those "accustomed to deprive their fellow citizens of theirs"? But the Revolution also inspired hopes that the institution of slavery could be eliminated from American life.

The language of liberty echoed in slave communities, North and South. The first concrete steps toward emancipation in the North were "freedom petitions"—arguments for emancipation presented to New England's courts by slaves who claimed the rhetoric of liberty for themselves. In 1776, Lemuel Haynes, a black minister who served in the Massachusetts militia during the War of Independence, penned an antislavery essay. If liberty were truly "an innate principle" for all mankind," Haynes wrote, "even an African [had] as equally good a right to his liberty in common with Englishmen." The British offered freedom to slaves who joined the royal cause, and nearly one hundred thousand deserted their owners; twenty thousand of them accompanied the British out of the country at the end of the war—to Europe, Canada, Africa, and, in some cases, reenslavement in the West Indies. Perhaps five thousand escaped bondage by enlisting in the Revolutionary army or local American militias.

Motivated by devotion to revolutionary ideals, a considerable number of southern slaveholders, especially in Virginia and Maryland, voluntarily emancipated their slaves during the 1780s and 1790s. The most famous to do so was George Washington, who died in 1799. His will provided for the emancipation of his nearly three hundred slaves upon the death of his wife, Martha, and for the education of the black children so that they could support themselves in freedom. Perhaps fearing that the executors of his will would seek to subvert this provision, Washington couched it in forceful language. He ordered his family to "see that *this* clause, respecting slaves,

and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled . . . without evasion, neglect or delay." He added, "I do hereby expressly forbid the sale . . . of any slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever." (Uncomfortable living among men and women who looked forward to gaining their freedom upon her death, Martha Washington liberated the family slaves the following year.) George Washington was the only founding father to liberate his slaves in this manner. Thomas Jefferson's will, by contrast, provided for the freedom of only five slaves, all of them relatives of Sally Hemings, a slave woman with whom he appears to have fathered one or more children.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, all the northern states had provided for gradual emancipation. State laws generally provided that children henceforth born to slaves would become free after working for their owner until adulthood, to compensate him for the loss of property rights. Thus, the end of slavery in the North was a drawn-out process. In 1810, there were fifty thousand free blacks in the North, but twenty-seven thousand slaves remained. A handful of elderly slaves still lived in New Jersey in 1861, when the Civil War began.

Nonetheless, the first large communities of free African Americans now came into existence. By 1860, the number of free blacks would increase to nearly half a million. A majority lived in the slave states, where they had been born and had family connections. In cities such as Charleston and New Orleans, the free black community included numerous persons of education, wealth, and professional accomplishment—individuals well positioned to take the lead in black politics in the early years of Reconstruction. Some free blacks owned slaves; a few were even plantation owners. Most free blacks, however, worked as poor urban or rural laborers and enjoyed few rights other than not being considered a form of property. Willis Hodges, a freeborn Virginian active in the antislavery movement before the Civil War and in Reconstruction politics afterward, described free blacks and slaves as "one man of sorrow." But despite numerous hardships, the very existence of free blacks offered a standing refutation of slaveholders' argument that African Americans could survive only in bondage.

Despite abolition in the North, slavery not only survived the Revolution but also in some ways emerged from it strengthened. No steps toward abolition took place in the South, where slavery was central to the economy and where the large size of the black population fueled the widespread conviction that two races, if free, could not live together on a basis of peace and equality. Slavery, moreover, was deeply embedded in the new federal Constitution (although it was not named in that document; slaves were called "other persons," as a concession to the sensibilities of delegates who feared

the word *slavery* would "contaminate the glorious fabric of American liberty"). The Constitution allowed the slave trade from Africa to continue for twenty more years and required states to return to their owners fugitives from bondage. It provided that three-fifths of the slave population be counted in allocating electoral votes and congressmen among the states. (The ratio was a compromise between the southern desire that all the slaves be counted and the northern insistence that none be.) Taken together, these measures ensured an increase in the slave population because of renewed imports from Africa and gave the slave South far greater power in national life than its free population warranted. Slavery, moreover, helped to shape the identity, the sense of self, of all Americans. The first Naturalization Act, of 1790, which created a uniform system of immigration, restricted the process of becoming a citizen from abroad to "free white persons." Thus, from the outset, a racial definition of American citizenship was built into national law.

Slavery not only survived the American Revolution, but also soon entered a period of unprecedented expansion. As in the colonial era, the economic interests of the North, and of England, remained intertwined with slavery. The industrial revolution in England, soon replicated in the antebellum North, created an insatiable desire for cotton, the raw material of the early textile industry. Cotton had been grown for thousands of years in many parts of the globe. The conquistador Cortés was impressed by the high quality of woven cotton clothing worn by the Aztecs. But in the nineteenth century, cotton assumed an unprecedented role in the world economy. Cotton production grew from fewer than three thousand bales in 1790 to nearly five million bales on the eve of the Civil War. By then, cotton was by far the most important export of the United States.

As the nation expanded westward, so too did slavery, giving rise to the Cotton Kingdom of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, which soon became the new center of gravity of American slavery. Because of its high rate of natural increase (about equal to that of whites), the slave population grew apace, even after the importation of enslaved Africans was barred in 1808. On the eve of the Civil War, there were nearly four million slaves, and the South had become the largest, most powerful slave society the modern world had known. By 1860, the economic value of property in slaves amounted to more than the sum of all the money invested in railroads, banks, and factories in the United States.

The slave system varied markedly in different parts of the South. In 1860, 40 percent of the slaves still lived in the upper South, where small- and medium-size farms, rather than large plantations, predominated. Throughout the South, slaves engaged in virtually every kind of economic

activity—they worked on farms and plantations, in factories and homes, as skilled artisans and field hands. Agricultural slaves, young and old, male and female, generally were required to labor from sunup to “first dark,” often under the close supervision of an overseer or driver. Slaves grew a variety of crops, including rice, sugar, and tobacco, but the “white gold,” cotton, was central to the southern and national economies. Labor in the cotton fields was arduous and incessant, especially when an overseer directed the work. “The requisite qualifications for an overseer,” wrote Solomon Northup, a free black who spent twelve years in slavery after being kidnapped from the North, “are utter heartlessness, brutality, and cruelty. It is his business to produce large crops, no matter [what the] cost.”

Slaves also worked in southern cities, where skilled laborers often enjoyed far better conditions than on plantations. Frederick Douglass, who escaped from slavery as a young man and went on to become the era’s greatest abolitionist writer and orator, later recalled being sent to work in Baltimore from rural Maryland: “Instead of the cold, damp floor of my master’s kitchen, I found myself on carpets; for the corn bay in winter, I now had a good straw bed, well furnished with covers. For the coarse cornmeal in the morning I now had good bread, and mush [a loaf made from cornmeal] occasionally; for my poor tow-linen shirt, reaching to my knees, I had good clean clothes. I was really well-off.” Skilled urban slaves such as Douglass were sometimes allowed to “hire their own time”—that is, to live on their own and make their own labor arrangements, surrendering their earnings to their owner. Ulysses Houston, one of the group at the Colloquy, worked in this manner as a butcher in prewar Savannah. Such slaves had a wide range of choices in living arrangements: they could rent rooms in a boardinghouse, live with family members, or stay in the homes of free blacks. They spent their nonworking time as they wished. Their experience produced a sense of independence and broad experience that helps to explain why so many urban slave artisans emerged as political leaders after the Civil War.

Three out of four white southern families did not own slaves. Since planters monopolized the best land, most small white farmers lived outside the plantation belt, in hilly areas unsuitable for cotton production. They worked the land using family labor rather than slaves or hired workers. Many southern farmers lived comfortable lives of economic self-sufficiency remote from the market revolution. They raised livestock and grew food for their families, and purchased relatively few goods at local stores. Those residing on marginal land in isolated hill areas and in the Appalachian mountains were often desperately poor and, since nearly all the southern states lacked systems of free public education, more often illiterate than

their northern counterparts. Rarely in the antebellum period did the non-slaveholding majority pose a political threat to the planter domination of southern politics. But, especially in the mountain areas, many poor whites remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War. During Reconstruction, some would become scalawags—southern-born white Republicans willing to support civil and political rights for the former slaves.

It is essential to bear in mind the overwhelming economic and political power of slavery in order to appreciate the radicalism of emancipation and Reconstruction. Planters dominated antebellum southern society and politics, and exerted enormous influence in national affairs as well. The wealthiest Americans before the Civil War were planters in the South Carolina low country (where rice was the principal crop) and the Mississippi Valley cotton region around Natchez. Frederick Stanton, a cotton broker turned planter in the Natchez area, owned 444 slaves and more than 15,000 acres of land in Mississippi and Louisiana. The South’s “peculiar institution” enriched many northerners as well. Northern ships carried cotton to New York and Europe, northern bankers and merchants financed the cotton crop, northern companies insured it, and northern factories turned cotton into textiles. The “free states” had abolished slavery, but they remained intimately linked to the peculiar institution.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the economic importance of slavery increased steadily, even as the institution came under increasing criticism from reformers in the North and from the slaves themselves. White southerners found themselves more and more dependent on an institution under assault from within and without. In response, the southern states drew tighter and tighter the bonds of slavery, closing off nearly every avenue to freedom and increasing the severity of the laws under which slaves lived and labored.

Before the law, slaves were property with virtually no legal rights. Completely subject to the will of their masters and, more generally, of the white community, they could be bought and sold, leased, fought over in court, and passed on to one’s descendants. Blacks and whites were tried in separate courts. No black, free or slave, could own arms, strike a white man, or employ a white servant. Any white person could apprehend any black to demand a certificate of freedom or a pass from the black person’s owner giving permission for him to be away from his place of residence. In cases where one parent was free and one slave, the status of a child was determined by that of the mother. This provision, first enacted into law in seventeenth-century Virginia, opened the door to the sexual exploitation of slave women by their owners by ensuring that any offspring would have no legal claim on their fathers, who would own them as property. Slaves’ family ties had no

legal standing, slaves could not leave the plantation or hold meetings without the permission of their owners, and no aspect of their lives, no matter how intimate, was beyond the reach of their owners' interference.

The entire system of southern justice, from the state militia and courts to slave patrols in each locality, was committed to enforcing the masters' control over their human property. In one celebrated case, a Missouri court considered the "crime" of Celia, a slave who had killed her master while resisting a sexual assault. State law deemed "any woman" in such circumstances to be acting in self-defense. But Celia, the court ruled, was not, legally speaking, a "woman." She was a slave, whose master had complete power over her person. The court sentenced her to death. However, since Celia was pregnant, her execution was postponed until the child was born, so as not to deprive Celia's owner's heirs of their property rights.

Slavery, wrote Thomas Jefferson, was "a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism." Masters had almost complete discretion in inflicting punishment, and rare was the slave who went through his or her life without experiencing a whipping. Even the most gentlemanly and prominent owners inflicted brutal, often sadistic punishments. Wesley Norris, a slave of Confederate general Robert E. Lee, later recalled how after he and his family had attempted to run away, Lee ordered a local constable "to strip us to the waist and give us fifty lashes each." Lee, Norris added, "stood by, and frequently enjoined the constable to 'lay it on well,' " then ordered him "to thoroughly wash our backs" with saltwater to increase the pain. At the cotton plantations in Tennessee and Mississippi owned by President James K. Polk, conditions were so brutal that only half the slave children lived to the age of fifteen.

In the face of this grim reality, slaves never surrendered their desire for freedom or their efforts to carve out a degree of autonomy in their day-to-day lives. Despite overwhelming odds, slaves succeeded in creating loose standards of expected work patterns for themselves that included "free time," space in which to forge a semi-independent culture, centered on the family and church. This enabled them to pass from generation to generation a set of ideas and values fundamentally at odds with those of their owners, ideas and values articulated at the Savannah Colloquy and in countless other venues as the war drew to a close. The slave community was the seedbed for the ways African Americans responded to the coming of emancipation and shouldered the responsibilities of freedom during Reconstruction.

The forging of a distinctive African American culture was a long, complex process. The nearly three hundred thousand Africans brought to the

mainland colonies during the eighteenth century were not a single people. They came from different cultures, spoke different languages, and practiced many religions. Slavery threw together individuals who would never otherwise have encountered one another and who had never considered their color or their residence on the same continent a source of identity or unity. The process of creating a cohesive African American culture and community took many years, and proceeded at different rates in different regions.

For most of the eighteenth century, the majority of American slaves were African by birth. For many years, they spoke African languages. Advertisements seeking information about runaways often described them by African origin ("young Gambia Negro," "new Banbara Negro fellow") and spoke of their bearing on their bodies "country marks"—visible signs of ethnic identity in Africa. Elements of African culture were evident throughout the southern colonies in eighteenth-century America—in the names of slaves, in their religions (including, in some areas, Islam), in their African food, music, rituals, and dance. Charles Hansford, a white Virginia



An anonymous late-eighteenth-century painting depicts a wedding ceremony in the slave quarters, where, by African custom, the bride and groom jump over a stick.

blacksmith, noted in a 1753 poem that he had frequently heard slaves speak of their desire to "reenjoy" life in Africa:

*I oft with pleasure have observ'd how they
Their sultry country's worth strive to display
In broken language, how they praise their case
And happiness when in their native place . . .
How would they dangers court and pains endure
If to their country they could get secure!*

By the nineteenth century, slaves no longer identified themselves as Ibo, Ashanti, Yoruba, and so on, but as African Americans. The War of Independence disrupted the slave trade to North America. The trade resumed briefly in the early nineteenth century, but Congress prohibited the further importation of slaves in 1808. Henceforth, the slave population grew almost entirely by natural increase. In music, art, folklore, language, and religion, the slaves' cultural expressions emerged as a synthesis of African traditions, European elements, and conditions in America. The values expressed during Reconstruction were rooted in the culture that slaves developed in bondage.

At the center of the slave community stood the family, even though the law did not recognize slave marriages and many were disrupted by sales. Because of the exigencies of life under slavery, many kinds of family structures coexisted in slave communities. Most adults lived in two-parent households, with ties that often lasted a lifetime. But the slave community had a significantly higher number of female-headed households than among whites, and families in which grandparents, other relatives, or even non-kin assumed responsibility for raising children who had been separated from their parents. To solidify a sense of family continuity, slaves frequently named children after cousins, uncles, grandparents, and other relatives. They developed "fictive" kin relations that supplemented blood ties. Frederick Douglass recalled that on the plantation where he grew up, skilled slaves "were called 'uncles' by all the younger slaves, not because they really sustained that relationship to any, but as a mark of plantation etiquette, a mark of respect due from the younger to the older slaves." Nor did the slave family simply mirror kinship patterns among whites. Slaves, for example, did not marry their first cousins, a practice common among white southerners.

The slave family existed with the constant threat of disruption. The peopling of the Cotton Kingdom involved an immense forced migration. Between 1800 and 1860, at least one million slaves were transported from

older southern states to the plantations of the Deep South. Fear of sale pervaded slave life. "Mother, is Massa gwine to sell us tomorrow?" ran a line in a popular slave song. Slave traders gave little attention to preserving family ties. A public notice, "SALE OF SLAVES AND STOCK," announced the 1852 auction of property belonging to a recently deceased Georgia planter. It listed thirty-six individuals, ranging from an infant to a sixty-nine-year-old woman, and ended with the proviso: "SLAVES WILL BE SOLD SEPARATE, OR IN LOTS, AS BEST SUITS THE PURCHASER."

Most of the slaves sold in the interstate trade were young men and women below the age of thirty. "It is better to buy none in families," wrote one slave trader, "but to select only choice, first rate, young hands from 14 to 25 years of age (buying no children or aged negroes)." Whatever the slaves' age, sales were a human tragedy that disrupted established patterns of life almost as severely as had the original forced passage from Africa. "My dear wife," a Georgia slave wrote in 1858, "I take the pleasure of writing you these few [lines] with much regret to inform you that I am sold. . . . Give my love to my father and mother and tell them good bye for me, and if we shall not meet in this world I hope to meet in heaven. My dear wife for you and my children my pen cannot express the grief I feel to be parted from you all. I remain, your truly husband until death, Abream Scriven." In the early days of Reconstruction, thousands of freedmen and -women seeking to locate family members from whom they had been separated while in slavery would place advertisements in newspapers and solicit aid from the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency established in 1865 to offer relief to destitute southerners, promote education and health care among the freedmen, secure equal justice in southern courts, and in other ways oversee the transition from slavery to freedom.

Sale of Slaves and Stock.

The Negroes and Stock listed below, are a Prime Lot, and belong to the ESTATE OF THE LATE LUTHER MCGOWAN, and will be sold on Monday, Sept. 29th, 1852, at the Court Grounds, in Savannah, Georgia, at 100 P. M. The Negroes will be taken to the grounds two days previous to the Sale, so that they may be inspected by prospective buyers.

On account of the low prices listed below, they will be sold for cash only, and must be taken into custody within two hours after sale.

No.	Name	Age	Remarks	Price
1	Laura	27	Prime Rice Planter.	\$1,275.00
2	Violet	16	Housewife and Nursemaid.	900.00
3	Lizzie	30	Rec. Unsound.	300.00
4	Minda	27	Cotton, Prime Woman.	1,200.00
5	Adam	28	Cotton, Prime Young Man.	1,100.00
6	Abel	41	Rice Head, Ex. night Poor.	675.00
7	Taney	22	Prime Cotton Hand.	750.00
8	Fleming	39	Good Cook, Shift Kne.	400.00
9	Laney	34	Prime Cotton Man.	1,000.00
10	Sally	10	Handy in Kitchen.	675.00
11	Macoby	35	Prime Man, Hair Carpenter.	700.00
12	Dorcas Judy	25	Seamstress, Handy in House.	800.00
13	Japp	69	Blacksmith.	375.00
14	Mervada	15	Prime Cotton Boy.	750.00
15	Bila	21	Handy with Mules.	900.00
16	Theopolis	79	Rice Head, Gals. Rec.	275.00
17	Goodidge	29	Rice Head and Blacksmith.	1,375.00
18	Beatie	69	Infirm, Sew.	250.00
19	Infant	1	Strong Likely Boy	400.00
20	Samson	41	Prime Man, Good with Stock.	975.00
21	Callie May	27	Prime Woman, Rice.	1,000.00
22	Homer	14	Prime Girl, Hearing Poor.	850.00
23	Angelina	16	Prime Girl, House or Field.	1,000.00
24	Virgil	21	Prime Field Hand.	1,100.00
25	Tom	40	Rice Head, Lane. Leg.	750.00
26	Noble	11	Handy Boy.	900.00
27	Jorge Leah	55	Prime Blacksmith.	600.00
28	Booster	43	Fair Mason, Unsound.	600.00
29	Big Kate	37	Housekeeper and Nurse.	950.00
30	Melle Ann	19	Housewife, Smart Yellow Girl.	1,250.00
31	Dewona	26	Prime Rice Hand.	1,000.00
32	Coming	19	Prime Cotton Hand.	1,000.00
33	Mabel	47	Prime Cotton Hand.	800.00
34	Uncle Tim	60	Fair Hand with Mules.	600.00
35	Abn	27	Prime Cotton Hand.	1,000.00
36	Tennes	29	Prime Rice Hand and Coachman.	1,250.00

There will also be offered at this sale, twenty head of Horses and Mules with harness, along with thirty head of Prime Cattle. Slaves will be sold separate, or in lots, as best suits the purchaser. Sale will be held rain or shine.

An 1852 public notice announces the sale of thirty-six African Americans in Savannah, Georgia.

Even though the law did not recognize the right of slaves to own property, many in fact acquired possessions by selling produce raised “on their own time,” sometimes in garden plots assigned to them by their owners. “All the slaves on the place,” one Mississippi slave later recalled, “had patches of land . . . to work as their own.” On Sundays, a white visitor to Natchez observed, slaves would “leave their plantations and come into town to dispose of their produce and lay in their own little luxuries.” In Charleston and Savannah, slave women dominated trading in the official town markets. Other slaves received payments from their owners as a reward for good behavior, or to induce them to labor for longer hours than tradition had established. Slaves who accumulated property passed it on to their descendants, thus strengthening family ties. Evidence of the strong sense of property that developed in some parts of the South may be found in petitions filed by former slaves with the Southern Claims Commission, a government agency established after the war to reimburse loyal southerners for wartime property losses. “My old parents used to raise poultry and pigs etc and they gave me some,” one claimant told the commission. “That is how I got a start.” The experience of working under their own direction and of marketing produce they had grown as slaves helped to prepare African Americans for involvement in the market economy during Reconstruction.

In some ways, gender roles under slavery differed dramatically from those in the larger society. Slave men and women experienced, in a sense, the equality of powerlessness. The nineteenth century’s “cult of domesticity,” which defined the home as a woman’s proper sphere, did not apply to slave women, many of whom regularly worked in the fields and were unable to devote much time to child rearing. Slave men were not the economic providers for their families, nor could they protect their families from physical or sexual abuse by owners and overseers, or determine when and under what conditions their children worked.

In other ways, however, more conventional gender roles prevailed. When working “on their own time,” slave men chopped wood, hunted, and fished, while women washed, sewed, and assumed primary responsibility for the care of children. But whatever its structure or internal arrangements, the slave family was central to the African American community, allowing for the transmission of values, traditions, and survival strategies—in a word, of slave culture—from one generation to the next. And when freedom came for slaves, legalizing their marriages and consolidating their families were among their highest priorities.

A second pillar of slave life was religion. Slaves developed a distinctive version of Christianity that would play a crucial role in the Reconstruction era and, indeed, down to the present day. Some blacks, free and slave, had

taken part in the religious revivals of the colonial era known as the “Great Awakening,” and even more were swept into the South’s Baptist and Methodist churches during the Second Great Awakening of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As one preacher recalled of the great camp meeting that drew thousands of worshipers to Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801, no distinctions were made “as to age, sex, color, or anything of a temporary nature; old and young, male and female, black and white, had equal privilege to minister the light which they received, in whatever way the Spirit directed.” Imbued with devotion inspired by the Second Great Awakening, many owners welcomed missionaries who preached to slaves; some even built chapels on their plantations and encouraged slaves to worship there. White ministers brought by owners to preach to the slaves usually invoked biblical passages enjoining servants to obey their masters. One slave later recalled being told in a sermon “how good God was in bringing us over to this country from dark and benighted Africa and permitting us to listen to the sound of the gospel.” Especially in cities, slaves also worshiped in biracial congregations headed by white ministers, where they generally were required to sit in the back pews or upstairs.



An engraving entitled Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina, published in a British illustrated weekly during the Civil War, depicts the scene in a “rude chapel” of a Port Royal, South Carolina, plantation.

Nonetheless, much of slave religion flourished outside the owner's oversight. Before the Civil War, urban free blacks established their own churches. These institutions, at which many slaves as well as free blacks worshiped, became training grounds for postwar black leadership and schools, in a sense, of self-government. At the First African Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, a committee of deacons judged and disciplined members for breaches of church rules and immoral behavior such as adultery, and settled disputes over issues such as disputed debts. The church "court" was the only place where African Americans administered justice among themselves, without the intervention of an owner or the law. Most of the leaders of the Richmond church were free blacks, but in 1848, thirty congregants petitioned for a change in the constitution of the church to allow all male members, including slaves, to vote in the selection of the pastor and deacons.

The heart of slave religion lay in the secret religious gatherings where slave ministers preached a gospel of endurance and transcendence in the face of hardship, and hope for liberation from bondage. Even though it was illegal for slaves to gather without a white person being present, every plantation had its black preacher, usually a slave with little formal education but rhetorical ability and familiarity with the Bible. A blending of African traditions and Christian belief, slave religion was practiced in "praise meetings" that were replete with shouts, dances, and frequent emotional interchanges between preacher and congregation.

Slaves adopted those parts of Christianity that spoke most directly to their own experiences and aspirations. They rejected the fundamentalist doctrine of original sin, and saw God as a personal presence in the world, who promised eventual deliverance from bondage. Central to slave Christianity was the compelling biblical story of Exodus, in which a chosen people suffers a long period of bondage only to be released through the intervention of providence. (Hence, Georgia slaves understanding General Sherman to be a divinely appointed savior.) Their preachers emphasized other biblical stories as well that depicted the weak defeating the strong or triumphing over adversity—David and Goliath, Daniel escaping from the lion's den, Jonah and the whale, Samson destroying the temple (even though he perished in the process). When they sang, "I'm bound for the land of Canaan," slaves meant not only relief from worldly toils in an after-life but also escaping to the North or, in God's time, the breaking of slavery's chains.

In the slaves' "gospel of freedom," prayers for an end to slavery were ever present. One former slave, Alice Sewell, later recalled typical secret religious gatherings: "We used to slip off in the woods in the old slave days

on Sunday evening way down in the swamps to sing and pray to our own liking. We prayed for this day of freedom. We come from four and five miles to pray together to God that if we didn't live to see it, to please let our children live to see a better day and be free." At the end of the service, Sewell continued, "we used to sing 'We walk about and shake hands, fare you well my sisters, I am going home.'"

A desire to read the Bible was one reason a number of slaves secretly, and in violation of southern law, learned to read. Others recognized in literacy an element of liberation. Frederick Douglass was one who taught himself to both read and write. "From that moment," he later wrote, he understood that knowledge was "the pathway from slavery to freedom." The thirst for education so prominent among former slaves during Reconstruction originated during slavery.

"Freedom," a black minister declared, "lived in the black heart long before freedom was born." If masters devised an elaborate ideology defending slavery as a benign, paternalist system that served the best interests of white and black alike, slaves developed their own worldview, centered on their desire for liberation. Even the most ignorant slave, observed Solomon Northup, could not "fail to observe the difference between their own condition and the meanest white man's, and to realize the injustice of laws which place it within [the owner's] power not only to appropriate the profits of their industry, but to subject them to unmediated and unprovoked punishment without remedy."

The world of most rural slaves was bounded by their local communities and kin. They became extremely familiar with the local landscape, crops, and population, and gathered with slaves from nearby farms and plantations to celebrate marriages, attend funerals, and for Christmas and Fourth of July celebrations. Most, however, had little knowledge of the larger world.

Nonetheless, slaves could not remain indifferent to the currents of thought unleashed by the American Revolution, or to the language of democracy and liberty that suffused the society around them. Slaves, as Garrison Frazier remarked during the Colloquy, appreciated that slavery was, at base, a system of coercion in which one group appropriated the labor of another. ("We raise the bread / They give us the crust," declared one slave song; another told how the slaves "make the cotton and corn / And the white folks gets the money.") Their "grapevine telegraph" brought fragments of news about national and even international events, from American presidential elections to the revolutions of 1848 in Europe. They listened to political discussions among their owners and Fourth of July orations in southern towns. They learned that African Americans in

the North lived as free men and women, not slaves, and that a conflict over slavery was disrupting national politics. Robert Smalls, later a major political leader during Reconstruction, recalled how as a boy on a South Carolina plantation he heard of Frederick Douglass from a literate slave who managed to acquire a copy of one of Douglass's speeches. Slaves adopted the nation's democratic and egalitarian rhetoric as their own. "I am in a land of liberty," wrote Joseph Taper, a Virginia slave who escaped to Canada around 1840. "Here man is as God intended he should be . . . not like the southern laws which put man, made in the image of God, on a level with brutes."

During Reconstruction, the semi-independent institutions of the slave quarters and the distinctive beliefs slaves had developed would blossom in the emergence of black schools, churches, benevolent societies, and political institutions. Former slaves would stake a claim to the rights of American citizens they had long been denied. The social and political agenda that African Americans would articulate during Reconstruction—civil and political equality, the strengthening of the black community, and autonomy in their working lives—flowed directly out of their experience in slavery.

Before the Civil War, however, confronted by federal, state, and local authorities committed to maintaining the stability of slavery, and outnumbered by white southerners, slaves had little opportunity to express their desire for freedom through outright rebellion. Generally, resistance to slavery had to take other forms. Most common was "day-to-day resistance"—feigning illness, doing poor work, abusing animals, breaking tools. "They break and destroy more farming utensils," one planter complained, "ruin more carts, break more gates, spoil more cattle and horses, and commit more waste than five times their number of white laborers do." One overseer on a Maryland plantation complained that slaves under his direction "get much more dissatisfied every year and troublesome for they say that they ought all to be at their liberty and they think that I am the cause that they are not."

Then there were the unknown number of slaves who ran away, either to the North, to southern cities, or to isolated rural areas such as the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia or the Florida Everglades. Running away was a constant feature of slavery from its earliest days in America. Colonial and nineteenth-century newspapers were filled with advertisements for fugitive slaves. These notices described the appearance and skills of the fugitive and included such comments as "ran away without any cause," and "he has great notions of freedom." The difficulties of escape were enormous, but the number of runaways was significant enough by 1850 for southern congressmen to secure passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, which made the fed-

eral government responsible for returning escaped slaves to their masters. The passage of the law greatly exacerbated tensions between North and South. Many northerners who did not consider themselves abolitionists reacted with disgust when federal marshals entered their communities to seize fugitive slaves and return them to the South.

Most escapees were young men without wives or children; for women, escaping accompanied by a child was nearly impossible, and leaving children behind was a step that few were willing to contemplate. Some fugitives were aided by sympathetic abolitionists organized into a loose organization—the Underground Railroad. Most, like Douglass, who borrowed the papers of a free black sailor, or the light-skinned William and Ellen Craft, who impersonated a sickly owner traveling with a slave, escaped on their own initiative, with little assistance other than from free blacks or other slaves. A few courageous individuals made forays into the South to liberate slaves. The best known was Harriet Tubman. Born in Maryland in 1820, Tubman escaped to Philadelphia in 1849 and during the next decade risked her life by making numerous trips back to her state of birth to lead relatives and other slaves to freedom.

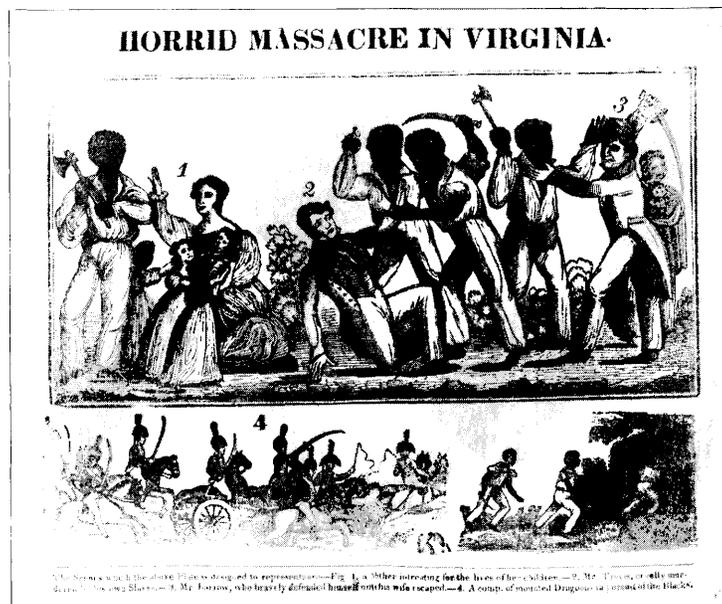
Despite enormous obstacles, slave rebellions sometimes disturbed slavery's outward face of tranquility. In 1800, Gabriel, a Virginia slave blacksmith, with his brother Martin, a preacher, devised a plan whereby armed slaves would march on Richmond, massacre most of the white population, and possibly sail to Haiti, where a slave insurrection in the 1790s had liberated the black population there. The plot was discovered, and the leaders arrested. Like other Virginians, participants in Gabriel's conspiracy spoke the language of liberty forged in the American Revolution. They even planned to carry a banner emblazoned with a version of Patrick Henry's famous slogan: DEATH OR LIBERTY.

Twenty-two years later, another slave conspiracy was uncovered, this time led by a free African American, Denmark Vesey of Charleston. Vesey's outlook reflected the varied sources of black ideology. He was fond of quoting the Bible to condemn slavery; he also drew on the Declaration of Independence, and carefully followed debates in Congress between 1819 and 1821 over the admission of Missouri to the Union as a slave state. The best-known slave rebel was Nat Turner, a slave preacher in Southampton County, Virginia, who in 1831 led a band that marched through the countryside and killed some sixty whites until subdued by the militia. When asked after his capture to admit that he had been "mistaken," Turner replied: "Was not Christ crucified?"

All these rebellions, and, indeed, rumors of insurrection in many other years, were greeted by widespread panic among southern whites, brutal

retribution against African Americans, and the tightening of laws and patrols policing the slave system. In the aftermath of the Turner rebellion, for example, the Virginia legislature, fearing, as one member put it, that “a Nat Turner might be in every family,” briefly debated a plan for gradual emancipation. The lawmakers decided instead to strengthen the militia and bar blacks from acting as preachers. As the sectional controversy accelerated, the South turned in upon itself. It suppressed any sign of dissent among whites and imposed new restrictions on both the slave and free black populations. The prospects for rebellion became more and more remote. The balance of power in the South would have to change dramatically before slaves could frontally challenge the system. That would not happen until the Union army entered the South during the Civil War. When it did, blacks by the tens of thousands would abandon the plantations, fatally undermining the peculiar institution.

For some decades, it appeared that slaves and free blacks were nearly the only Americans willing to challenge slavery. After the antislavery impulse spawned by the American Revolution died out, the slavery question faded from national life. Those whites willing to contemplate an end to bondage almost always coupled calls for abolition with the suggestion of



A woodcut published in an 1831 account of the Nat Turner uprising

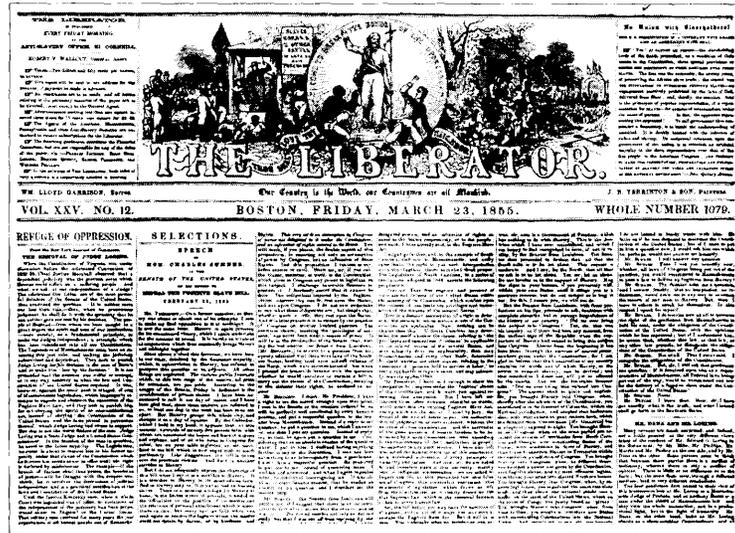
colonization—the deportation of the black population to Africa, the Caribbean, or Central America. Colonizationists accepted the premise written into the Naturalization Act of 1790 (and reaffirmed as the law of the land by the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision of 1857) that the United States was a political community of whites, and that no black person could be a citizen.

It was the rise of the abolitionist movement in the late 1820s and 1830s that put the slavery question back on the national agenda. Abolitionism was only one of the era's numerous efforts to improve American society. Reformers established organizations that worked to prevent the manufacture and sale of liquor, improve conditions in prisons, expand public education, uplift the condition of wage laborers, and reorganize society on the basis of cooperation rather than competitive individualism. Nearly all these groups worked to convert public opinion to their cause. They sent out speakers, gathered signatures on petitions, and published pamphlets.

Many of these reform movements drew their inspiration from the Second Great Awakening. God, the revivalist preachers maintained, had created man as a “free moral agent.” Sinners could not only reform themselves but also remake the world. The revivals popularized the outlook known as “perfectionism,” which saw both individuals and society at large as capable of infinite improvement. Under the impact of the revivals, older reform efforts moved in a new, radical direction. Temperance (which literally means moderation in the consumption of liquor) was transformed into a crusade to eliminate drinking entirely. Criticism of war became outright pacifism. And critics of slavery now demanded not gradual emancipation but immediate and total abolition.

Beginning with the appearance in 1829 of the free black writer David Walker's *Appeal*—a stirring call for emancipation—and the publication two years later of the first issue of *The Liberator*, edited by William Lloyd Garrison, a new, militant abolitionist movement burst onto the national scene. Walker's condemnation of slavery cited the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, but he went beyond these familiar arguments to call on blacks to take pride in the achievements of ancient African civilizations and to claim all their rights as Americans. “Tell us no more about colonization,” Walker wrote, addressing white readers, “for America is as much our country as it is yours. . . . We have enriched it with our *blood and tears*.”

Like Walker, the new generation of abolitionists insisted that blacks were Americans, entitled to all the rights of free citizens. It was their anti-colonization position as much as their attack on slavery that won them widespread support among northern free blacks. Indeed, the first national black convention, held in Philadelphia in 1817, was convened explicitly to



The masthead of The Liberator

repudiate the doctrines of the American Colonization Society, founded a few months earlier by a group of prominent political and social figures from both North and South, and to claim all the rights of citizenship for African Americans. “We have no wish to separate from our present homes,” the convention’s resolutions declared. In the years that followed, a number of black organizations removed the word *African* from their names, hoping to eliminate a possible reason for American-born blacks’ being deported from the land of their birth.

The abolitionist movement engaged the energies of thousands of northern women, who circulated petitions, distributed literature, and, in some cases, broke with the prevailing assumption that they should remain in the “private” sphere by delivering public lectures on the evils of slavery. Some of these women found in abolitionist doctrines a challenge to their own subordinate status in American society. “Since I engaged in the investigation of the rights of the slave,” wrote Angelina Grimké, the daughter of a South Carolina slaveowner who converted to Quakerism and abolitionism while living in Philadelphia, “I have necessarily been led to a better understanding of my own; for I have found the Anti-Slavery cause to be . . . the school in which human rights are more fully investigated, and better understood and taught, than in any other [reform] enterprise. . . . Here we are led to examine why human beings have any rights. . . . Now it

naturally occurred to me, that if rights were founded in moral being, then the circumstance of sex could not give to man higher rights and responsibilities, than to woman.” Abolitionist women such as Grimké and her sister, Sarah, helped launch the long struggle for equal rights for American women.

Thus, the contest over slavery gave new meaning to such core ideas of American political culture as personal liberty, political community, and the rights attached to American citizenship. The abolitionists put forward notions widely condemned in the 1830s, but that three decades later would be incorporated into the laws and constitutional amendments of the Reconstruction era—that any person born in the United States should be entitled to American citizenship and that all citizens should be accorded equal rights before the law, regardless of race.

In contrast to the official definition of nationhood bounded by race, abolitionists insisted on the “Americanness” of slaves and free blacks. Lydia Maria Child’s popular 1833 treatise, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, insisted that blacks were fellow countrymen, not foreigners or a permanently inferior caste. They should no more be considered Africans than whites were Englishmen. Thus, the movement challenged not only southern slavery, but the racial proscription that confined free blacks in the North to second-class status. (Between 1800 and 1860, every free state that entered the Union, with the sole exception of Maine, restricted suffrage to white males, and New York and Pennsylvania, home to significant free black communities, took away the voting rights that African Americans had once enjoyed.)

Many white abolitionists shared, to some degree, the racial prejudices of their era. But what is remarkable is how many were able to rise above them. “While the word ‘white’ is on the statute-book of Massachusetts,” declared Edmund Quincy, an active associate of William Lloyd Garrison, “Massachusetts is a slave state.” Abolitionists’ battles for northern blacks’ right to vote, to enjoy access to education and public accommodation, and to serve in the militia achieved only a few successes, such as the integration of the Massachusetts public schools, ordered by the legislature in 1855. But these campaigns helped to lay the legal and political groundwork for the campaigns for equal rights that were central to the politics of Reconstruction.

Most adamant in contending that the struggle against slavery required a redefinition of the nation as a whole were black members of the abolitionist crusade. “He who has endured the cruel pangs of slavery,” wrote Douglass in 1847, “is the man to advocate liberty.” Black abolitionists developed an understanding of freedom that went well beyond the usage of their white contemporaries. “The real battleground between liberty and slavery,”

wrote black editor Samuel Cornish, "is prejudice against color." More than white abolitionists, as well, black abolitionists identified the widespread poverty of the free black population as a consequence of slavery, and insisted that freedom meant some form of economic autonomy. It must be part of the "great work" of the antislavery crusade, insisted Charles L. Reason, "to abolish not only chattel slavery, but that other kind of slavery, which, for generation after generation, dooms an oppressed people to a condition of dependence and pauperism." Dozens of black abolitionists would move south after the Civil War to take part in Reconstruction, bringing with them the experience of long years of struggle for equal rights and economic opportunity.

Black abolitionists, and free blacks generally, repudiated the nation's self-definition as a land of liberty. Indeed, to counter what they viewed as the hypocrisy of Independence Day celebrations, they developed an alternative calendar of celebrations, centered on August 1, the anniversary of emancipation in the British West Indies in 1833. (This carried the disturbing implication that Britain, not the United States, now represented liberty on the world stage.) But even as they condemned the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaimed belief in freedom yet daily committed "practices more shocking and bloody" than any other, in Douglass's words, abolitionists laid claim to the founders' legacy. By abolishing slavery, Douglass proclaimed, the United States could reinvigorate the promise of the Declaration of Independence and recapture the country's original mission as an asylum of liberty. In his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass claimed as forebears not only the founding fathers but slave rebels such as Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. In their desire for freedom, he seemed to argue, the slaves were truer to the nation's underlying principles than the white Americans who annually celebrated the Fourth of July.

The abolitionists never constituted more than a small portion of the northern population. Indeed, in the 1830s, their activities were greeted with as much hostility in the free states as in the slave South. Initially, abolitionist meetings were broken up by mobs, a number of their presses were destroyed, and Congress refused to receive their petitions. Slowly, however, the abolitionists succeeded in shattering the conspiracy of silence that sought to preserve national unity (and the profits derived from slave labor) by excluding slavery from political debate.

Since the Constitutional Convention, slavery had occasionally emerged as a point of contention in American politics. Generally, it became a political issue when territorial acquisitions raised the question of whether the peculiar institution would be permitted to continue its westward expansion,



This print depicts a July 1835 nighttime anti-abolitionist raid on the Charleston, South Carolina, post office. The crowd broke into the building, removed antislavery mail, and burned it in the street.

thus affecting both the balance of power between North and South and the prospects for free citizens migrating to new lands. Missouri's request to be admitted to the Union as a slave state had inspired a controversy that was settled by the Missouri Compromise in 1821, which barred slavery from expanding into most of the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase territory. In the 1840s, as a result of the Mexican-American War, a vast new area was added to the United States, and the question of slavery's status again came to the fore. The lead was taken by politicians speaking the language of "free soil" for settlers desiring to move to the West, rather than the moral vocabulary of the abolition movement. But the growing desire among northerners to restrict slavery's expansion reflected how abolitionist petitions, speeches, and publications had begun to affect public opinion.

Once again, compromise settled the slavery issue. In 1850, Congress admitted California as a free state, decreed that local inhabitants could decide whether or not to permit slavery in the rest of the land recently acquired from Mexico, and enacted a stringent new fugitive slave law that made the federal government, not the states, responsible for apprehending and returning runaways. Harriet A. Jacobs, one of the few female slaves to

publish a narrative of her experiences, recalled how the new law inspired “a reign of terror to the colored population” of the North, who feared that, even if born free, they might be improperly swept up by its draconian provisions, which did not allow the accused fugitive to testify in his or her own behalf. In New York City, “many families, who had lived in the city for twenty years, fled from it now,” while others, such as Jacobs herself, “seldom ventured into the streets.” Several thousand northern blacks sought safety in Canada. The sight of so many refugees seeking liberty in a foreign land cast an ironic light on the familiar image of the United States as an asylum for freedom. Some African American leaders, such as Martin R. Delany, later dubbed the “father” of black nationalism, concluded that the black population should emigrate en masse, to find a homeland in Africa or the Caribbean where they could become part of “the ruling element of the country” and enjoy the equality that seemed ever more remote in the United States.

The political peace ushered in by the Compromise of 1850 lasted exactly four years. When Congress in 1854 approved the Kansas-Nebraska Act, repealing the Missouri Compromise and opening a vast new area in the nation’s heartland to slavery, party lines shattered and a new organization, the Republican Party, rose to prominence on a platform of stopping



POLICE CONVEYING SIMS TO THE VESSEL.

The two men mentioned in this paper, as will be observed by the reader, refer to the late subject of the fugitive slave, Sims, a man who is still in every one's mouth, and at the present of the city and the attention of the public to have been recalled for, but such are the means of the almost frantic efforts of leetled jobsters and used frantic to bring about an opinion with to greatly their followers, and those of filian and thorough knowledge of their import

It was decidedly requisite and necessary that posse officers of the law should attend the fugitive slave, and officially deliver him up to his rightful owner and master, in the city of

Fearing resistance from abolitionists, on April 15, 1851, three hundred armed Boston police and federal marshals escorted fugitive slave Thomas Sims to a Navy ship that returned him to slavery in Georgia.

slavery’s expansion once and for all. In the new party, belief in the superiority of the “free labor” system of the North and the incompatibility of “free society” and “slave society” coalesced into a comprehensive worldview. Republicans saw slavery’s expansion as an obstacle to progress, opportunity, and democracy.

No one expressed this vision more eloquently than Abraham Lincoln. Having served a number of terms in the Illinois legislature and two years in Congress in the 1840s, Lincoln had retired from active political involvement in 1849. He was swept back into politics by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. His career illustrated how much northern public opinion had changed regarding slavery and race, and how far it still had to go.

Lincoln was not an advocate of immediate emancipation. He revered the Union and the Constitution and was willing to compromise with the South to preserve them. His speeches combined the moral fervor of the abolitionists with the respect for order and the Constitution of more conservative northerners. “I hate it,” he said in 1854 of the prospect of slavery’s expansion, “because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity.” If slavery were allowed to expand, he warned, the “love of liberty” would be extinguished and with it America’s special mission to be a symbol of democracy for the entire world.

Lincoln once remarked that he “hated slavery, I think as much as any abolitionist.” Yet he shared many of the era’s racial prejudices, affirming in 1858 that he did not favor blacks’ voting or holding office in Illinois, and frequently speaking of colonizing African Americans outside the country. In this, he represented the mainstream of northern opinion, by now convinced that slavery posed a threat to “free society,” but still convinced of the inherent inferiority of African Americans. Only during the Civil War, under the impact of the disintegration of slavery and the service of black soldiers in the Union army, would Lincoln begin to envision the United States of the future as a biracial society.

Nonetheless, Lincoln maintained that slavery violated the essential premises of American life—personal liberty, political democracy, and the opportunity to rise in the social scale. “I want every man to have the chance,” he proclaimed, “and I believe a black man is entitled to it, in which he can better his condition.” Like Garrison Frazier in the Colloquy with General Sherman several years later, Lincoln declared that the slave was, in essence, a laborer illegitimately deprived of the fruits of his labor.

Blacks, Lincoln added, might not be equal to whites in all respects, but in their "natural right" to the fruits of their labor, they were "my equal and the equal of all others."

The rise of the Republican Party greatly heightened sectional tensions. These were further exacerbated in October 1859, when the abolitionist John Brown led a band of twenty-two men in an assault on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. A deeply religious man long associated with the abolitionist cause, Brown had been persuaded by reading the Old Testament that God intended to inflict His punishment on a society blighted by the sin of slaveholding. He himself would be the instrument of divine wrath, by sparking a slave insurrection that would sweep away the peculiar institution.

Militarily, Brown's plot made little sense. Most of his men were killed or captured, and Brown himself, convicted of treason against Virginia, was executed. More significant was the response to his raid. In the South, Brown inspired a reaction bordering on hysteria, even though not a single slave (of whom, in fact, there were very few in the vicinity of Harpers Ferry) had joined him. In the North, Brown became a martyr, a symbol of selfless devotion to a moral cause. To blacks, especially, he long remained a hero. One black woman, Frances Ellen Watkins, wrote to Brown before his execution, "Your martyr grave will be a sacred altar upon which



A recently discovered daguerreotype portrait taken in 1847 by African American photographer Augustus Washington shows John Brown before he grew his famous beard.

men will record their vows of undying hatred to that system which tramples on man and bids defiance to God." The response to Brown's actions suggested that more and more Americans had come to believe that the slavery question would never be settled except through violence.

A little less than a year after Brown's execution, Abraham Lincoln was elected the nation's first Republican president. In the eyes of many white southerners, Lincoln's victory placed their future at the mercy of a party avowedly hostile to their region's values and interests. Those who advocated se-

cession feared that Lincoln's election heralded a fundamental shift in national power, in which the slaveholding states, which had dominated American politics since the adoption of the Constitution, would henceforth find themselves in a shrinking minority. Lincoln had not received a single vote in most of the South. His victory demonstrated that a united North now possessed the power to determine the nation's future. During the late 1850s, southern leaders had bent every effort to strengthen the bonds of slavery. "Slavery is our king," declared a South Carolina politician in 1860. "Slavery is our truth, slavery is our divine right." Rather than accept minority status in a nation governed by their opponents, Deep South political leaders boldly struck for their region's independence.

In the wake of Lincoln's election, seven states of the Deep South seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. South Carolina's "Declaration of the Immediate Causes of Secession" placed fear for the future of slavery at the center of the crisis: experience, it proclaimed, had shown "that slaveholding states cannot be safe in subjection to non-slaveholding states." On April 12, 1861, Confederate batteries fired on Fort Sumter, an enclave of Union control in Charleston Harbor, inaugurating the Civil War. At the outset, President Lincoln insisted that the administration's aim was to preserve the Union, not to abolish slavery. To the slaves, however, the outbreak of war heralded the long-awaited day of Jubilee. Acting on this conviction, African Americans now took actions that propelled a reluctant white America down the path to emancipation.