

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

---

## Slavery

By **Calvin Schermerhorn**, Arizona State University

Slavery in the United States was a system of labor and exploitation that underwrote national prosperity, contributed to industrial development in Britain and Europe, and was a critical component of a global capitalist system of credit and exchange. There were many different slaveries in colonial North America and bondspersons included Native Americans as well as African-descended people. Slavery in the United States shared many characteristics with slavery elsewhere in the Americas, but the political economy of the republic gave it a distinctive history. The federal republic banned the importation of foreign bondspersons in 1808, and that national prohibition led to the growth of a large African-descended enslaved population through reproduction. The experiences of enslaved Americans were conditioned by mobility and markets and characterized by family life and strains on those enslaved families.

Agricultural slavery in British North America was commercially oriented, and enslavers used enslaved workers to produce commodities like tobacco and rice that were largely exported within a British imperial framework. After American independence, slavery in the United States grew to serve another export market, mainly for cotton. Again, British capital and British customers conditioned demand for slave-produced agricultural products. As the United States expanded in the nineteenth century, it did so in the context of capitalist development and rapid expansion of the American political nation. By the mid-nineteenth century, the United States republic contained the largest population of enslaved people anywhere in the Americas. The politics of that expansion and the interest slave-based agriculture entrenched in American political institutions gave rise to a constitutional crisis that resulted in disunion and civil war. As part of its wartime strategy, the United States government committed itself to ending slavery in areas of active rebellion in 1863 and accomplished legal termination through constitutional amendment as an outcome of the Civil War in 1865.

The enslavement of African-descended people has deep roots in the English colonial system. Settlement of the eastern seaboard of North America was part of an imperial competition among European continental powers including the monarchies of France, Spain and Portugal, and the Dutch republic. By the early seventeenth century, English settlers gained a foothold on the continent, but Native American political contexts influenced the course of that settlement. English colonists demanded captives from Indians and held them as slaves or else traded them. Native Americans had taken and exchanged captives as part of their own strategies, but the introduction of European

trade goods such as firearms and textiles transformed the indigenous slave market. English and European settlers and traders bought captives and participated in Indians' networks, but captives were mainly women and children. English and European demands on Native Americans for captives, along with trading objectives and military encounters put considerable pressure on Indians to take captives to trade, retaliate, and to repopulate. In the words of one historian, the southeastern region became a "shatter zone," and Indians formed confederations for defense.<sup>1</sup>

The first or "charter generations" of enslaved people tended to inhabit an environment in which slavery was marginal. Those early bondspersons gained privileges despite their constraints. The Dutch West India Company established a trading fort at the southern end of Manhattan Island in 1626 and imported Africans they held as slaves. Most farmed and performed domestic drudgery, but many worked alongside Dutch colonists in trades and transportation. Some families won privileges and limited freedoms, and some African-descended people owned land. By the time England conquered New Netherland in 1664 the settlement was the site of the largest population of enslaved people of African descent in North America.<sup>2</sup>

The first generation of enslaved people in seventeenth-century British North America tended to be cosmopolitan in their outlooks and experience. Some spoke several languages. In both New Amsterdam and Virginia, African-descended slaves tended to be socially mobile. Visible African descent was not yet a marker of slavery, and the color line had not been firmly drawn in law or custom. Beginning in 1642, Virginia taxed African women as workers, as distinct from English women who were not taxed. By the late seventeenth century, however, colonial legislatures made slave status inheritable through the maternal line and prohibited marriages between people of African and European descent. Yet by the end of the seventeenth century, most bound laborers in the Chesapeake were English indentured servants. Slavery among people of African descent had not taken hold. South Carolina was a net exporter of captives before the Yamasee War (1715-1717). Following it, planters cultivating rice demanded African captives, usually males, who soon made up a majority of the population. Developments in the broader Atlantic basin had profound effects on the course of slavery in British North America.

As the Caribbean became a zone of intensive commodity production using slave labor, the Eastern Seaboard became its marginal northern rim in the eighteenth century. Chesapeake planters imported Africans to cultivate tobacco, and Carolinians sold slave-grown rice. The tobacco went to England for sale, and rice typically went to feed Caribbean slave societies like Barbados. Although the Chesapeake and low-country Carolina were marginal to the booming Atlantic complex, they were transitioning from societies with slaves to slave societies. Virginia's transition accompanied political

---

<sup>1</sup> Robbie Ethridge, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of the Mississippian World, 1540-1715* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 4, passim.

<sup>2</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 28, passim.

changes as white men of all social classes were enlisted to police increasing numbers of African slaves and given increased liberties at the same time. Freedom for them was becoming conditioned by, if not premised on, black-white inequalities. Those inequalities became more pronounced as enslaved people of African descent outnumbered English settlers in many places. The Africans landed as slaves on American shores in the early eighteenth century tended not to be polyglot creoles but recent captives, including many war captives who were trained soldiers. South Carolina witnessed the stakes of holding such a volatile population in bondage in 1739 during the Stono Rebellion. The Chesapeake experienced a series of uprisings and suspected revolt conspiracies. New York underwent a slave uprising in 1712 and what English New Yorkers suspected was a wide-ranging conspiracy in 1741. As Chesapeake and South Carolina planters demanded more bound African laborers to grow their staple crops, violence against them intensified while plantations grew larger and more numerous.

British North America was on the rim of the booming Caribbean complex, and slaveholders experienced a similar kind of debt dependency. Whether in Virginia, South Carolina, or Jamaica, planters used slaves as collateral for credit as well as a labor force. That credit or debt to British merchant bankers was the financial lifeblood of their system, and enslaved people were often bought on credit repaid in shipments of export commodities. In many cases, planters had to borrow heavily to start plantations and then continue to borrow right up to the limits of their abilities in order to grow them. The violence used to compel bound workers to produce agricultural goods was often commensurate with planters' debt service, and the profits that slaveholders wrung from their bondpeople required exacting forced labor and business savvy. It also required market, environmental, and social cooperation.

A distinctive feature of slavery in British North America emerged in the early eighteenth century, and that was that enslaved children became increasingly important. Unlike the punishing canebrakes of the Caribbean, the tobacco fields of the Chesapeake and, to some extent, the agricultural enterprises in South Carolina were less lethal. By the 1720s in the Chesapeake and mid-century in South Carolina, families formed and sustained the population of enslaved people. Enslaved women's labor took on a new significance and a new tragedy: childbirth became increasingly important at the same time as the children of enslaved women inherited a lifelong legal condition of slavery. Family formation was the result of a variety of factors beyond the labor regime. The particularities of the slave trade from the Bight of Biafra in the eighteenth century, for instance, meant that ratios of males and females shipped from there to Virginia tended to be more evenly distributed. In most of the Atlantic world, male captives shipped across the ocean outnumbered females.

As the Chesapeake and low country Carolina became ever more dependent on enslaved workers, slavery declined in the middle colonies like Pennsylvania and in New England. Slavery was still marginal in the southern interior, the future cotton belt. French plans to develop a plantation economy in the lower Mississippi Valley based on Virginia had faltered amid conflict with Natchez and allied Indians, culminating in the Natchez

Rebellion of 1729, in which Africans allied with Indians against their French owners. There was a population of African-descended enslaved people in the eighteenth century, but they had established customary privileges such as *coartación*, a quasi-slavery that existed while the enslaved worked to buy manumission in installments. That practice took hold after Louisiana reverted to Spain following the Seven Years' War (1756-1763).

American revolutionaries incorporated the legacy of slavery into their language of political freedom. The rights and liberties they fought for was partially the result of their close association with chattel slavery, and they used a vocabulary that reflected that experience. The strategy used to draw a color line in Virginia had matured, namely to throw open citizenship to white men regardless of birth. As Americans fought for freedom, markets for slave-grown goods closed. The War of Independence (1775-1783) disrupted trade with the West Indies and Britain, the two biggest markets for American commodities. Loss of its tobacco market sent slavery into decline in Virginia. New Englanders and several mid-Atlantic states passed abolition measures. Following independence, the creation of the United States republic involved a constitutional compromise that joined slaveholding and non-slaveholding states together in a single legal system and federal framework. At its core, the federal system protected all citizens' property interests in slaves, which was the most valuable class of assets in the country other than real estate. The Constitution forbade the closing of the foreign slave trade until 1808, and measures like the Southwest Ordinance of 1790 organized the territory south of the Ohio River as a place in which the federal government would not abolish slavery.

Slavery in the nineteenth century had national and global connections. Despite independence from Britain, southern prosperity continued to depend on British markets and credit. A transatlantic chain of credit connected merchants in New York and other northern cities to planters in the southern interior. Domestic textile manufacturers in New England relied on slave-produced cotton. Technological innovations such as cotton gins created efficiencies that boosted slaves' productivity at the turn of the nineteenth century, but like their colonial forebears slaveholders had to pay high proportions of their labor costs upfront. They needed to borrow from factors or merchants to buy slaves, and those factors and merchants drew their money from foreign merchants and, ultimately, foreign bankers. British manufacturers demanded cotton, which grew well in the southern interior as well as the West Indies, Brazil, and Bengal. Short staple cotton grown in the American South emerged as the favorite, although American planters continued to compete with counterparts in northeastern Brazil.

British and European credit moved in countermotion to American agricultural commodities. Commercial paper crossed the Atlantic and paid for American commodities in ports like Charleston or New Orleans. British and European bills circulated through American commercial channels, paying for manufactured goods in ports like Philadelphia and New York before returning for payment. Enslaved people made possible much of the profitability of the system through their unpaid labor. As cotton cultivation developed along the river bottoms of the southern interior, more and more young enslaved people found themselves separated from family on the eastern seaboard and isolated on the

cotton frontier. They faced the irony of being disconnected from family while the fruits of their labor became increasingly embedded in a North Atlantic capitalist network.

The War of 1812 (1812-1815) disrupted legal trade with Britain and caused localized disruptions of the slave regime, notably in the Chesapeake. During the war, Americans seized Indian lands in the southern interior including the Creek cession conveyed through the Treaty of Fort Jackson. When trade resumed in 1815, cotton exports surged. In response to opportunities, Americans contracted what one formerly enslaved person remembered as “Western fever” and flooded into alluvial lands in the southeast, including those ceded from Indians. The booming market of the late 1810s busted in 1819. That economic crisis mirrored a political crisis, which began in 1819 over the admission of Missouri as a state permitting slavery. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 centered on the balance of power between slaveholding and non-slaveholding interests. Congress compromised by banning the expansion of slavery north and west of Missouri’s southern border. Missouri and Maine were both admitted to the federal union with the understanding that a balance of power would remain in the U.S. Senate, which received two senators from each state regardless of population.<sup>3</sup>

While Americans vocally argued about slavery’s extension in the West, federal policies quietly encouraged the development of slave-intensive agriculture. Beginning in 1816 the federal government protected Louisiana sugar producers with a tariff without which they could not compete with West Indian sugar. Federal military roads in the South accommodated emigrating slaveholders and slave traders alike, and federally-sponsored river improvements made it easier for an emerging steamboat trade on the Mississippi and other rivers to flourish. Steamboats brought bulk commodities like cotton to market, increased the value of slaves, and were voracious consumers of wood cut in the initial stages of plantation development. Most were owned and operated by southerners who had little hesitation employing enslaved people as laborers aboard boats one scholar calls “floating engines of capitalism.” Bales of cotton were loaded at local wharves and steamed to an entrepot city like New Orleans or Mobile and put aboard merchant ships for the passage to points of sale in England or Europe, or else transshipment in financial centers like New York City or Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup>

The Andrew Jackson administration accelerated the process of slavery’s development with a constellation of policies. Jackson’s rhetoric of limited government and democracy serving the common citizen obscured his administration’s commitment to use federal power actively to develop the cotton South. The Jackson administration spent more on internal improvements than all previous administrations combined and focused on improving harbors that served international trade. Jackson vetoed the re-charter of the Second Bank of the United States, and in its place a surge in state banking helped to monetize the lower South and supply credit to agriculturalists. The Jackson

---

<sup>3</sup> Henry Goings, *Rambles of a Runaway from Southern Slavery*, eds., Calvin Schermerhorn, Michael Plunkett, and Edward Gaynor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Gudmestad, *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 155.

administration negotiated an end to reciprocal duties and inspections on US and British ships. That policy lowered shipping costs and gave the South a comparative advantage worth much more than a protective tariff.

When Jackson took office in 1829, much of the Black Belt, a fertile crescent running through Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, was still occupied by Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Cherokee owners. The Jackson administration worked to clear Indians from those lands on which cotton grew best. The removal of Native Americans had been encouraged ever since the Thomas Jefferson administration and had been policy in the John Quincy Adams administration. But Jackson made it a top priority. Congress passed Jackson's aggressive Indian Removal Act of 1830, which along with treaties backed by the threat and use of force compelled tens of thousands of Indians to vacate the lower South — lands that soon became plantations. Some Native Americans owned enslaved people and cultivated lands much as did their white neighbors, and the Trail of Tears included the forced migration of enslaved people belonging to Indian owners. The federal government's enforced relocation of enslaved people to Indian Territory decided the question of slavery extension in the West, even if most Americans were not paying attention. As Indians were forced to vacate, planters and slave traders relocated hundreds of thousands of African-descended Americans to perform the heavy labor of building plantations and the myriad other tasks that built the cotton kingdom.

Because of the ban that fell on foreign bondspersons in 1808, slaveholders participating in the bonanza in cotton migrated with and increasingly purchased bondspersons from the Chesapeake and Carolinas. Seaboard South slaveholders by then owned bondspersons who were part of old American families and held them in greater numbers than they could profitably employ. The great forced migration or "Second Middle Passage" carried over a million enslaved people across state lines from the founding of the republic to the onset of civil war. Between 1790 and 1820, about 175,000 bondspersons crossed state lines, compared with 155,000 in the 1820s. In the boom years of the 1830s, when the combination of federal policies designed to aid agriculturalists worked hand-in-glove with a rising market for agricultural products, 285,000 enslaved Americans crossed state lines. Following the panic of 1837, cotton crash of 1839, and the hard times of the early 1840s, that process slowed. In the 1840s, 184,000 crossed state lines before the interstate slave trade surged again in the 1850s, with 251,000 bondspersons forced across state lines. Between 1800 and 1860, the geographic center of slavery traveled 600 miles to the south and west from Petersburg, Virginia, to the western border of Georgia. Some areas that had been net importers of slaves in the early nineteenth century became net exporters after midcentury.<sup>5</sup>

Enslaved Americans lived in the shadow of an agricultural revolution that tore at the fabric of family and community life. As waves of resettlement tore generation from generation, the enslaved substituted and reformed ties as best they could. Enslaved Americans developed their own understandings of those ordeals, and when dynamic and

---

<sup>5</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 168.

vigorous evangelical Protestant Christianity washed over the country in the early nineteenth century, it bathed them in the gospel message as well. A core of enslaved people had already been Christian and others had ancestors who practiced Islam on American shores. Most African-descended Americans would become Christian following Emancipation, but like other Americans in the early nineteenth century, African-descended bondspersons responded to the energetic message of salvation through Jesus Christ. To many enslaved people, the Christian gospels carried special meaning because of its theology of divine justice that upends the social order. Others took the biblical book of Exodus as both sacred history and prophesy.

Because of such theologies of liberation, slaveholders were ambivalent about bondspersons' religious lives. Some encouraged progress in the faith, which reflected their own religious commitments. Some responded more cynically and attempted to take from religious texts tools of social control. Others saw a potential rebel in the shadow of each African-descended preacher. Uprisings such as the Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822 and the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831, both of which centered on black preachers, seemed to confirm white fears that African-descended ministers were preaching earthly insurrection rather than heavenly salvation.

Whether or not they became Christian, most enslaved people who were moved about the landscape were isolated or re-isolated according to slaveholders' designs. In fact, the constant movement and intergenerational theft that characterized enslaved mobility tended to sever family and neighborhood ties and, in consequence, erode cultural continuity. Instead of relying on the accumulated knowledge of a community, neighborhood, or family, relentless mobility made bondspersons especially dependent on slaveholders' connections and contexts. Some responded by running away. Most runaways were young adult males, although mothers ran away to see children. Most ran away only temporarily, to visit loved ones or protest working conditions. Over time, an escape network called the Underground Railroad operated to funnel bondspersons through a series of safe houses to northern cities and, especially after 1850, to Canada, where many resettled and agitated for an end of slavery. Since the Underground Railroad was clandestine, it is difficult to know the numbers of enslaved people freed, but the total was perhaps 100,000. Yet that was a small trickle against a mighty tide of involuntary movements.

Growing up and coming to age in a nation that hungered for black labor, enslaved people were driven relentlessly to toil in fields and factories. The daily ordeals of American slavery was one of hard work and degradation, their bodies weakened by fatigue and hunger, wracked by chronic illnesses and injury, and in the case of women of childbearing age, strained by near constant pregnancy, nursing, and childcare. Enslavers demanded young, strong workers, and they also prized fertility. Despite relying on African-descended Americans for the backbone of their labor force, enslavers parted spouses and children from parents when it was in their financial interest to do so, which profoundly altered the lives of those separated or orphaned. Even though enslaved people

worked hard to repair the damage done to their families and friendships, few escaped the human costs of the surging agricultural complex and the frenetic pace of production.

Nearly all bondspersons shared the common experience of relentless work, but the kinds of work differed across geographic space, whether scrubbing floors and doing laundry for middle class urban householders, growing wheat and corn in the piedmont, rice in the low-country, sugar along the Gulf Coast, or cotton in the southern interior. Some bondspersons in cities like Richmond worked in factories processing tobacco; others fired railroad locomotives, served passengers on river boats, or were employed as sailors or cooks aboard merchant ships. In agricultural settings, day-to-day life involved more than growing the South's staple crops. Besides constructing and maintaining miles of fence and outbuildings, tending owners' livestock, splitting firewood, and performing a near endless assortment of chores associated with nineteenth-century agricultural enterprises, enslaved people grew a wide range of crops. Even intensive cotton and sugar plantations grew foodstuffs, especially in alternating seasons. After a day sowing, weeding, chopping, or picking cotton, slaves would also often tend to their own garden patches where they would raise vegetables, keep chickens and small livestock, and sometimes even produce commodities on marginal land. In many corners of the South, enslaved people became small property owners, accumulating small amounts of wealth by peddling extra eggs, homemade cakes, and home-grown produce to neighbors. A few even sold small crops of cotton or tobacco back to their owners, some of whom occasionally found themselves in perpetual debt to their slaves. Other owners, however, promoted slaves' productive activities as a way to shift some of the burden of support from owners to the owned. Nevertheless, slaves' home enterprises produced some advantages. In creating informal economies, enslaved people developed their own concepts of property, and in rare cases, earned enough from their entrepreneurial and agricultural activities to finance their own freedom or that of a loved one.

Enslaved people could do little, however, to slow the rushing tide of forced migration and its calamitous consequences in their own lives. Those uprooted and moved faced the ordeal of travel, whether chained or tied together for a long march to the southern interior or the saltwater passage from a seaboard port to the Gulf South or lower Mississippi Valley. Miseries multiplied for the newly-arrived. Most soon found themselves hard at work in their new homes, creating cotton and sugar economies one field and furrow at a time. The earliest arrivals faced the arduous work of cutting wood for steamboats and carving plantations from forests. Later arrivals had to keep up with the feverish pace of agricultural work.

Plantations were factories in the fields. Sugar masters demanded around-the-clock work during the harvest, when possible, followed by perilous work crushing the cane and boiling the juice. Because of the physically demanding nature of the work slaves performed on American's sugar estates, sex ratios remained far out of balance. Men, planters believed, swung the heavy cane knives more effectively than did women. As a consequence, sugar plantations were characterized by disproportionately more men than women, fewer families, and birth rates that lagged behind those of other regions, where



despite the trauma of forced migration, strangers gradually came to be friends, married, and bore new generations of babies. The South became “a landscape of sexual violence,” and would-be planter paternalists became fathers of offspring they refused to recognize as their own.<sup>6</sup>

Most enslaved people were children who met adversities with resiliency and developed shrewd interpersonal skills despite a shortened or nonexistent childhood. Despite high fertility, life expectancies were short, and an enslaved person could expect chronic ill health. Infant mortality was close to twenty percent and life expectancy at birth was little more than thirty years. A raft of diseases showed up in childhood and continued into adulthood. Some of it was from poor sanitation in living quarters including undercooked or tainted meat, open latrines, and filthy cooking or drinking water. Diseases like cholera, dysentery, and yellow fever baffled medical authorities, and healthcare for bondpeople was minimal. In many neighborhoods, bondpersons favored folk medicine and herbal remedies, including for family planning, and such treatments often were more efficacious than physicians’ remedies, which were framed by racist understandings of health that saw African-descended people as physiologically and psychologically distinct from European-descended people.

As the early federal republic expanded into a continental empire, the extensions of slavery exacerbated the regional divisions at the heart of the Constitution. By the 1840s, aggressive territorial expansion beyond the Mississippi River raised these tensions to the threshold of threatened disunion. The catalyst for that crisis of union was the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Mexican American War that resulted from annexation (1846-48). Texas had won nominal independence from Mexico in 1836 and was a slaveholding republic. At the same time, most of what Texans claimed as theirs was actually Comanche territory, and the Comanches also had a thriving trade in captives. To European-descended people, Texas was a land of vast opportunity, attracting refugees from political turmoil in Europe, from debts, and aspiring cattle ranchers and cotton planters. So many Americans fled obligations in the wake of the panic of 1837, that in the words of one historian, “Independent Texas became a new nation of deadbeats.” Many arrived with African-descended bondpeople. Cotton grew well along the plains of rivers such as the Brazos.

When Texas joined the federal union in 1845, however, the question of slavery extension and southerners’ preponderance of power in the national legislature divided Americans according to region. The two-political party system of Whigs and Democrats had contained those divisions, but during the U.S.-Mexican War, a funding measure known as the Wilmot Proviso began to divide Americans regardless of party. The Wilmot Proviso was a rider on a war funding bill requiring that slavery be abolished in all

---

<sup>6</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 170.

territory ceded from Mexico. The war itself was also unpopular, and opponents charged that it was a war of choice fought for the expansion of slavery.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the 1840s, the geopolitics of slavery was dividing Americans regardless of political affiliation, and in 1850 Congress again compromised in an effort to keep southern states from seceding from the federal union. The Compromise of 1850 was supposed to save the union and put to rest questions of slavery's extension. It did neither, instead deepening divisions over the issue. One flashpoint was the Fugitive Slave Act, which federalized slave recapture and eliminated the rights of African-descended people accused of being fugitive slaves, penalizing any citizen who did not aid in the recapture of fugitives. Northerners who thought slavery was an issue localized in the South suddenly found themselves responsible for its maintenance. Southerners who claimed to have a states-rights view of the Constitution were in the position of demanding aggressive federal protections for their slave property.

In 1854, the divisive question of slavery expansion took a new direction in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. It proposed to let citizens on the prairies of Kansas decide for themselves whether to adopt a state constitution permitting or outlawing slavery. Instead of arguing about slavery in the national legislature, the measure endorsed popular sovereignty, which led to fighting and competing constitutions in the Kansas territory. Violence spilled over into neighboring Missouri. Militant outsiders on both the pro- and antislavery side sent insurgents, and localized fighting would smolder for a decade. The Kansas-Nebraska Act effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise and was a catalyst for political realignment. A new, exclusively northern antislavery party, the Republicans, made tremendous gains in states and in Congress beginning in 1854.

Despite the divisive political atmosphere, slaveholding southerners were enjoying another cotton boom in the 1850s, and the region showed every sign of commercial vitality. Railroad construction mushroomed, connecting inland sites of production to ports. More and more of the slave South was linked by steam transportation. Enslaved people were put to work building railroads and to staff trains. Over a quarter million enslaved people were moved across state lines in the 1850s while the slave population grew by nearly one million souls. The slave population grew most rapidly in the lower South, but upper South slaveholders had an interest in selling bondspersons and deploying them locally. As prices for slaves rose, slaveholders everywhere clung to their enslaved property. River improvements opened more land to cotton cultivation for what seemed like an insatiable market. White southerners became more stridently proslavery and pro-slavery-expansion, even to the point of supporting annexation of Cuba and other Latin American territory and reopening the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yet the political climate and events like the abortive 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry and subsequent trial and execution of John Brown further strained political ties of union.

---

<sup>7</sup> Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A Nation of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of America's Financial Disasters* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 121.

Political divisions over slavery in the trans-Mississippi West in the 1850s culminated in political realignment along sectional lines. The Republicans became the majority party in 1856, with virtually no southern constituency. Politicians continued to attempt to bridge a widening chasm. In 1857, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, that an American enslaved anywhere in the United States was enslaved everywhere, and that African-descended people had no constitutional rights as citizens. The decision further inflamed antislavery citizens and failed to mollify white southerners who were increasingly defensive about their shrinking political clout as the population of the northern regions grew rapidly, in large measure because of immigration. That crisis of union reached a breaking point when a Republican, Abraham Lincoln, was elected president in 1860 without southern support.

The geopolitics of slavery under the Constitution led to disunion and to civil war. In the winter of 1860-61, the states of the lower South dissolved their ties with the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. The Civil War began in April, 1861, when the Confederate army attacked and took Fort Sumter, South Carolina. In response, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion, and several upper South states that had previously declined to secede did so and joined the Confederacy.

As war widened, enslaved people seized opportunities to free themselves, whether by running off in the absence of owners and overseers or by the approach of the Union army and navy. Initially, the Civil War was a war for and against political union, and as in peacetime, authorities viewed slaves as versatile and valuable war assets. Confederates enrolled enslaved people as laborers, cooks, and performers of other tasks like building fortifications. Virginia and North Carolina instituted an impressment regime. In an irony of slavery in a Confederacy founded using states' rights rhetoric, some Virginia and North Carolina slave owners surrendered control to state officials working for the Confederate War Department and Engineer Bureau. Early in the war, the United States also treated enslaved people as property captured in war. Contrabands, as they were called, performed some of the same drudgery that Confederates enlisted slaves to perform. The policy was sanctioned under the First Confiscation Act of 1861 and made confiscated slaves the property of the federal government. The Lincoln administration countermanded the orders of one general in 1862 who construed his authority as federal slave owner to emancipate slaves taken as contraband in his departments.

But enslaved people proved to be useful to the war effort in other ways and on their own terms. Through disobedience, work slowdowns, and quiet acts of rebellion, enslaved people far from battlefields helped to undermine the Confederate war effort. Others were actively involved. Union expeditionary forces invading the Confederacy relied on scouts among the enslaved. In Union-occupied ports and cities, African-descended people were often the most reliable loyalists. In some areas, participants in the Underground Railroad intensified their efforts to smuggle slaves out of the South or to reunite families parted by sales or removals. In some locales, those who had freed

themselves traveled great distances looking for work, some even traveling south following news of opportunities.

Slavery was unraveling, and as warfare intensified the course of emancipation changed. In the words of one historian, “Military service became the surest solvent of slavery.” The Union capitalized on former slaves’ loyalty and the willingness to fight. By 1863 the Lincoln administration extended its military strategies to disabling the Confederacy by offering emancipation to its slaves. The Union army organized the United States Colored Troops, which enrolled, trained, and deployed African-descended soldiers serving in segregated regiments under white officers. By war’s end, the Union army and navy enrolled some 200,000 African-descended soldiers and sailors, whose accomplishments on the battlefield were as distinguished as those of any American soldiers. Some black regiments had the distinction of returning from a campaign with more soldiers than they had starting out. As Union forces advanced, they recruited enslaved men for the army and sent women, children, and the elderly to so-called contraband camps.<sup>8</sup>

Yet freedom had a tragic side. Emancipation brought with it a plague of unintended consequences. Contraband camps were refugee camps, which tended to be crowded hives of disease, death, discomfort, and corruption. Localities with large populations of refugee freed-people were often overwhelmed, lacking resources, and with little sanitation or supplies for the newly-liberated. Epidemics of yellow fever, cholera, and smallpox broke out, both during the war and afterward, which tore through a population that was displaced. Some starved or became victims of violent crimes. In other cases corrupt officials stole supplies and resold them on a black market. By and large there were few opportunities for work, and displaced former slaves often had few marketable skills. Many were elderly and chronically ill or disabled. Mothers of children received little support beyond the goodwill of fellow refugees. Failure was common enough in the nineteenth century, and even life for poor whites was often a daily ordeal of scraping by.

Despite a small compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia, slavery in the rebellious states ended by force of arms and, finally, by constitutional amendment in the reunited federal republic. A war for union ended as a war for union and the death of slavery. Emancipation freed four million African-descended enslaved people and extinguished the nation’s second most valuable type of property after land itself. The jubilee of American emancipation was tempered by the realities that settled in on formerly enslaved people in the wake of Confederate surrender.

The South was devastated as well as defeated, and formerly enslaved people were again seen as a labor solution. It needed investment and rebuilding, and cotton remained the prime agricultural commodity. But the slave labor force was now free and disinclined to return to work in the fields of former owners. In many areas, with the help of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands, or the Freedmen’s Bureau, the

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 256.

formerly enslaved were put back to work. The Bureau enforced work contracts that bound formerly enslaved people to work for former owners under arrangements that resembled relationships of master and slave. Alternatives were grim and included charges of vagrancy for which jail and another regime of compulsory labor. In other agricultural areas, former slaves without capital borrowed against future earnings to start their own farms. Many became tenant farmers who rented land for cash or else sharecropped or paid rents and advances of tools, food, and seeds with shares of the harvest. Sharecropping sunk farmers in a cycle of debt to the owner, debt which often became intergenerational.

Freedom did, however, bring profound social changes. African-descended Americans quickly transitioned to households centered on families. They hungered for education for their children and led an exodus from white-controlled congregations, in both cases founding their own schools and churches. Family members scattered by owners reunited with one another, even though those reunifications were often strained by the years and distances spent apart. Some parlayed ingenuity and hard work into property ownership, especially in the upper South and border areas away from the centers of cotton and other intensive staple crop production. In many areas of the South, formerly enslaved people organized politically and joined the Republican Party, even in the face of resurgent violence from terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. They built social, political, and financial capital and continued a struggle for uplift and equality unfinished by slavery's legal termination.

In the broader context of American and North Atlantic history, slavery in the United States grew from a satellite of the British West Indies to a central component of the national economy and of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain. The labor and reproduction of African-descended families were central to the development of the political economy of the American South and the larger federal republic. The peculiarity of slavery in the United States inhered in the fact that slavery became identified with African ancestry and citizenship with European ancestry, which had profound ramifications for the development of the United States after formal emancipation in 1865.

\*\*\*\*