Slavery in U.S. History

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Today our topic is one of the most interesting and consequential in our nation’s history - slavery. For the first half of our nation’s existence, the economy was largely built on slave labor. Slavery was banned by the Thirteenth Amendment, at the end of the Civil War, yet its legacy shaped political policies and social and economic trends for decades to come. Even today, America is haunted by its slave-owning past. Sensational trials or events, like the beating of Rodney King or O.J. Simpson’s trial in the 1990s, focus the nation’s attention on race relations. And much attention was given in the press and in public discussion to the 2008 presidential race, since for the first time in U.S. history, there was a viable black candidate for president. Even though Barack Obama is not the descendant of an American slave, his race became an issue, both within the African American community and throughout the country at large. That in itself highlights the powerful legacy of slavery in our nation’s history. So let’s take a closer look at the history of slavery in the United States.

As we begin, it’s important to remember a few big themes when discussing slavery. First, early on in our nation’s history, slavery was seen as an institution. An institution is an established practice or custom. So, religion, marriage, and government are all institutions, and so was slavery. Secondly, it was an institution based on property rights, because slaves were legal property of their owners, just as land, buildings, livestock, and investments were considered property. A third thing to remember is that slavery was not imported into the American colonies as a full-blown institution. In fact, we'll see that it developed over a period of years by conscious decisions that were made and laws that were passed to hold Africans or those of African descent in perpetual bondage. Finally, it’s important to realize that slavery was not a uniform institution throughout America. It took different forms in different geographic regions. We’ll be examining this more closely.

Let’s start by looking at how slavery took root in the United States. We’ll begin with the thirteen original British colonies, because those are the ones that became the new United States of America. Slaves had been transported from Africa to the Portuguese and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and South America since Columbus sailed to the New World in 1492. But we’ll start our story in 1607, with the founding of Britain’s first permanent colony, Jamestown, in Virginia.

In 1619, twelve years after Jamestown was founded, a British pirate ship flying a Dutch flag arrived in Jamestown. The ship dropped off about 20 slaves that had been sold in Angola and transported on a Portuguese slave ship. The ship was on its way to Mexico when the British pirates intercepted it, took the slaves, and eventually made their way to Jamestown. The slaves were most likely Christians, because the Bantu-speaking peoples of Angola had been converted to Christianity. As Christians, British colonial planters in Jamestown would not view them as slaves. So the initial 20 Africans were probably indentured servants. Remember, in Jamestown, many white men and women entered the colony on an indenture, or contract. In return for their passage to the colony, they worked for a planter for 5 to 7 years, and then obtained their freedom.
We know one of the Angolans brought to Jamestown on the pirate ship was named Antonio. Antonio worked on a Jamestown plantation for twenty years. He found an African wife, Mary, who came into the colony later, and they began a family. In the 1640s, Antonio and Mary worked off their indenture and gained their freedom. They called themselves Anthony and Mary Johnson, and within ten years had 250 acres of their own tobacco land and some cattle and hogs. They also had two indentured black servants of their own. Both of Anthony and Mary’s sons owned farms; one son married a white woman. This reveals that racial boundaries and slave status weren’t firmly set in Virginia at this time.

In 1655, Anthony Johnson was involved in a court case concerning one of his black indentured servants, John Casor. A white neighbor complained that Anthony was holding Casor past the usual seven years of an indenture. Anthony said that there was no written contract and that he had bought Casor for lifelong service - essentially making him a slave. The court said that since Casor was purchased as a slave in Africa, anyone who bought him could have him as a slave for life. Once again, this shows early in Virginia’s history, Africans could indenture or own Africans. Racial lines and status weren’t set in stone.

But over time, beginning in the 1640s, the Virginia House of Burgesses and judges began making laws and handing down rulings that stripped blacks of rights. A chart accompanying this mini-lecture details these laws. By 1705, Virginia and Maryland had made interracial marriage illegal, punished interracial sex, instituted slavery for life by saying Negroes served their masters for life, stated that a slave mother’s children were also slaves, and ruled that Christian status no longer exempted individuals from being slaves. Anthony Johnson’s family was affected by these laws. Anthony had given 50 acres of his Virginia farm to one of his sons. A white jury ruled that because Johnson was a Negro, he was also a foreigner, and so the land had to go to a white planter.

You can see from the accompanying figures that during the century between 1676 and the outbreak of the American Revolution, the number of slaves imported to the American colonies boomed. There are several reasons for this. First, Bacon’s Rebellion in 1675 shook up the powerful tobacco planters in Virginia. Nathaniel Bacon led a group of landless white men on a rampage against the powerful tobacco planters and government of the colony. These poorer men didn’t like the government’s policies which kept them from moving onto Indians’ lands. Many of these poor whites were indentured servants. In the wake of the rebellion, tobacco planters looked to a more stable workforce - African slaves. In addition, the British government deregulated the slave trade in 1696. Up to this time, the slave trade was a monopoly run by the king’s family. Now, any private businessman with a ship could enter into the slave trade. Importation of slaves from Africa boomed and prices of slaves dropped. The economy back home in England was improving, so fewer white men and women left in search of work in the American colonies.

These forces combined meant slavery grew rapidly in the American colonies. By the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775, there were about a half a million slaves in the 13 original colonies. The entire population of the colonies was about two and a half million, so slaves made up about one-fifth of the total. It’s important to remember that every colony had slavery, but that some colonies had more than others. Slavery never took firm root in New England, largely because it was a region whose economy was based on small family farms, whaling, fishing, shipbuilding and shipping. Slaves who did
live in New England were often used as domestic servants - as cooks, housekeepers, coachdrivers, and childcare providers. New England was the birthplace of the American Revolution, and ideas about individual liberty were strong there - so strong that slavery was viewed by many as wrong. Massachusetts outlawed slavery during the Revolution in 1781 by means of a court case brought on behalf of a slave, Elizabeth Freeman. Other northern states, like Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Rhode Island gradually phased out slavery. The Pennsylvania law said that all children born to slaves before March 1, 1780 would be slaves for life. Any child born to a slave after that date would serve 28 years of bondage and then be free. This means that there were still a handful of legal slaves in Pennsylvania well into the 1800s. And, as we saw in the last mini-lecture, when the Framers of the Constitution met in Philadelphia in 1787, they failed to ban the institution.

Although slavery slowly died out in the North, from Delaware southward it remained. But, it varied in form from place to place. In the Chesapeake region of Virginia and Maryland, tobacco planters used the *gang* system of labor. The planter or his overseer would directly monitor the slaves as they moved through the fields in groups planting, tending, or harvesting the crop. Work was from sunup to sundown and the master or overseer had a great deal of direct contact with his slaves. South Carolina and Georgia, on the other hand, grew rice and indigo on the Sea Islands and along the coastline. The swampy, malarial nature of the area was unhealthful for white owners, who often lived far removed from their fields. They used the *task* system of labor. Slaves were assigned a certain task for the day or week. Once finished with the task, they were free to hunt, fish, or grow food for themselves. Slave communities in this region tended to hold on to their African culture longer and have more autonomy.

One simple invention changed the nature of slavery altogether in the 1790s - the cotton gin. Before the 1790s, cotton wasn’t a widespread crop in the Americas. The small, sticky cotton seeds had to be removed from the tufts by hand. A single slave could clean only about a pound of cotton a day by hand. The new cotton gin combed the seeds out of the cotton; now a slave could clean about 50 pounds of cotton per day. The accompanying graph shows that cotton production soared between 1790 and 1860. At the same time, the Chesapeake region began to change. Tobacco had exhausted the soil, so planters began to increasingly practice mixed farming and switch to raising livestock. The need for slave labor was less. So slavery became entrenched in the “Cotton Belt” which stretched from South Carolina westward to East Texas by 1860.

So, what was slavery like in the Deep South in the 1850s, on the eve of the Civil War? Well, once again, slavery wasn’t any one thing - it differed depending on where the slave lived and with whom he or she lived. First, it’s important to emphasize that by the 1850s, the vast majority of Southerners owned no slaves. In 1830, about one-third of Southern whites owned slaves. By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, this was down to about a quarter of all whites. So, three out of four Southerners in 1861 didn’t own slaves. There were more slaves in 1860 than in 1830, but they were concentrated into fewer hands. A big-time planter owned at least 50 or more slaves. A middling planter owned anywhere from 20 to 50 slaves. Small-scale farmers were those who owned under 20 slaves. By 1860, 3% of all slave-owners owned a quarter of all slaves. About 10,000 powerful slave-owning families held the best land along the South’s rivers. River bottom land was often rich and the rivers provided easy transportation of the crop.
Smaller farmers often planted corn and raised livestock in upland, hillier regions. Cotton was grown for extra cash on any extra land available.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, the United States had about 31 million people. 12 million lived in the South. Of those 12 million, 4 million individuals were slaves. Ninety percent of slaves lived in rural areas and 10 percent lived in cities. Three-quarters of slaves were engaged in agriculture - the majority in cotton production, but some in rice, tobacco, hemp, or sugar cultivation. About 15 percent of slaves were domestic servants, and one in ten worked as a laborer in an industry or trade, like the lumber industry, mining, or construction. So slaves’ surroundings and work patterns varied.

What was life like for a slave on a large southern plantation? It should be noted that slaves toiled throughout the Americas - in the French West Indies, Portuguese Brazil, and the Spanish colonies. Slaves were materially better off in the United States than elsewhere, but still faced imaginably hard lives. They struggled to maintain the nuclear family - a father, mother, and their children - in the face of the knowledge that any of them could be sold at any time. Many owners tried to keep slave families together, but research indicates that only about three fifths of slaves lived in nuclear family units. Sale or death of a spouse left one in five slave women as the head of household or a nearly equal number of slave men and women living alone or without their families. Masters encouraged childbearing among women slaves, whether they were married or not. The average female slave in the 1850s had her first baby at age 19, two years earlier than white females. She then typically went on to have four to five more children. On average, 40 percent of slave children died before reaching adulthood. But the high fertility rates among American slaves meant that the slave population grew steadily.

And of course, slave women were property, and had no legal means of fending off the sexual advances of masters or other white men. The census of 1860 reveals that 1 of every 10 slave child was a mulatto, that is, a person of mixed white and black ancestry. Mulatto children were more likely to be born on farms with small numbers of slaves, and not on large plantations with numerous slaves. Women who worked in the master’s house as domestics were much more likely to bear mulatto children than those who worked in the fields. So, sexual access and the ratio of whites to blacks in a given area affected the likelihood or frequency of interracial sexual relations.

What was the material life of slaves like? Most American slaves lived in one-room, dirt floor cabins. They were usually allotted one coat, a pair of shoes, and two changes of clothes - shirts, pants, or dresses - per year. Field hands, both men and women worked 12 to 15 hour days, 5 ½ days a week, with Sunday off. After work, slaves ginned cotton, ground corn, or milled sugar. They also had to prepare meals, wash and mend clothing, and care for their children. The slave’s diets were comparable to that of poor whites in the early 1800s. The typical field hand received 3 ½ pounds of bacon or salted pork and 16 pounds of cornmeal per week as a food ration. They were also given sweet potatoes, peas and beans, and dairy products to round out their diets. Excavations of slave quarters reveal that slaves supplemented their diets with fish and small game like squirrels. Although slaves, overall, had a high calorie consumption, they lacked several vitamins and minerals in their diets. Records indicate that slaves suffered from maladies such as beriberi, rickets, pellagra, and kwashiorkor, all diseases that result from nutritional deficiencies.
Slavery was, indeed, an institution, and each state had written laws concerning various aspects of the institution. For example, the state of Georgia in 1848 devoted twelve pages in its collection of statute law to regulations concerning slaves and free persons of color. The laws dealt with everything from punishments for teaching slaves or free colored persons to read, which by the way, called for whipping or a fine, at the court’s discretion, to punishments of slaves for striking whites, helping other slaves to run away, or circulating literature which might incite others to run away. A slave who struck a white, on the first offense, would suffer a punishment left to the judges’ discretion. A second offense brought the death penalty. From state to state, similar laws were designed to hold black slaves in perpetual bondage. It would take a devastating Civil War to free them.

As we’ve seen, slavery developed, law by law, court ruling by court ruling, over time in the 17th century. It was a full-blown, thriving institution by the time of the American Revolution. By the early 1800s, the booming “Cotton Kingdom” had emerged, and slaves labored in various ways on different types of farms, plantations, and sometimes in towns and cities. But one thing was true of slavery in general. It was a system where the worst white man could own the best black man or woman. And ultimately that system came to be seen as wrong by an increasing number of Americans. There’s no way to paint a total picture of American slavery in a short mini-lecture, but I hope you’ve gained a few glimpses of the institution. I’d like to leave you with a few words from the black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, who wrote about his life as a slave. In 1838, at the age of 20, Douglass ran away from slavery in Maryland to a new, free life in New York. When he arrived in New York, Douglass recalled, “A new world had opened upon me. . . . Anguish and grief, like darkness and rain, may be depicted, but gladness and joy, like the rainbow, defy the skill of pen or pencil.”

I look forward to speaking with you again for our mini-lecture on the tempest that slavery wrought, the U.S. Civil War.