

5 The nature of American slavery

► *Why were southerners so committed to slavery and some northerners so strongly opposed to it?*

The settlement of North America was an African as well as a European enterprise. Virtually all the Africans who 'settled' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came as enslaved people. By 1808, when the African slave trade was declared illegal, there were over a million slaves in the USA. Slavery divided Americans. It continues to divide historians.

Slavery pre-1830

In 1776 slavery existed in all the thirteen colonies. However, it was of major importance only in the South, largely because the northern climate was not suited to **plantation agriculture**. In the final decades of the eighteenth century some Protestants, especially **Quakers**, condemned slavery as a moral evil. Others thought it inconsistent with enlightened ideas that stressed liberty, equality and free enterprise. Northern states abolished slavery, some at a stroke, others gradually. In 1787, Congress passed an ordinance that kept slavery out of the North West Territory. In 1808, the USA banned the slave trade with Africa. Even some southerners regarded slavery as an evil (albeit a necessary one) and a few freed their slaves.

King Cotton ensured that slavery survived and thrived. In 1790 only 9000 bales of cotton were produced in the USA. Eli Whitney's invention of a cotton engine (or 'gin') in 1793 revolutionised southern agriculture. It enabled short-fibre cotton (the only cotton which easily grew in the South) to be quickly separated from its seed. Suddenly it became highly profitable to grow cotton and southern farmers cashed in. By the 1830s the South was producing 2 million bales per year. King Cotton soon outstripped all other plantation crops in economic importance. Such was the demand (mainly from Britain), and such were the profits, that the cotton belt spread westwards – to Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas. Cotton production needed a large amount of unskilled labour. Slave labour was ideal. Cotton and slavery, therefore, were interlinked.

Most southerners were committed to their **peculiar institution**. The Founding Fathers in 1787 had realised that they could not tamper with slavery in the South. While they had avoided using the word 'slave', they acknowledged slavery's existence. Slaves were accepted, for representation and taxation purposes, as three-fifths of a free person. Events in Haiti in the 1790s, where slaves had won their freedom, massacring most of the white population in the process, convinced most whites that slavery must be maintained as a means of social control.



KEY TERMS

Plantation agriculture

Sugar, rice, tobacco and cotton were grown on southern plantations.

Quakers Members of the Religious Society of Friends, founded in England by George Fox in the 1640s. Quakers were (and remain) committed to pacifism.

Peculiar institution

Southerners referred to slavery as their 'peculiar institution'.

KEY TERMS

Emancipation The act of setting free from slavery or bondage.

Evangelical Having a passionate belief in Christianity and a desire to share that belief with others.

KEY FIGURE

William Lloyd Garrison (1805–79)

Garrison became a prominent abolitionist and supporter of equal rights. His supporters saw him as a dedicated idealist. His critics regarded him as a self-righteous bigot.

Abolitionists

Most abolitionists in the first three decades of the nineteenth century supported gradual **emancipation**, with financial compensation for slave owners. They also believed that freed slaves should be encouraged to return to Africa. In 1822 the USA purchased Liberia, on the west coast of Africa, as a base for returning ex-slaves. However, this policy had little success. Only 10,000 African Americans had gone to Africa by 1860; in the same period the USA's slave population increased by 2 million. There were never enough funds to free and then transport more than a fraction of the slaves. Moreover, most ex-slaves had no wish to move to Liberia, which would have been as alien to them as it would have been to white Americans.

William Lloyd Garrison

In the early 1830s a new and far more strident abolitionist movement developed. This was associated with **William Lloyd Garrison** who, in 1831, launched a new abolitionist journal, *The Liberator*. Convinced that slavery was a sin, Garrison demanded (without any notion of how it could be done) immediate abolition. For the next four decades he was to be one of the leading abolitionists.

The growth of the abolitionist movement

In 1833 a militant National Anti-Slavery Society was established. This organisation soon mushroomed and by 1838 it had 250,000 members. Most of its leaders were well educated and fairly wealthy. Women played a crucial role. So too did African Americans, some of whom, like Frederick Douglass (see page 15), were ex-slaves. Helped by the new steam-driven printing press, abolitionists churned out a mass of anti-slavery literature. They also organised frequent and massive petitions to Congress. To prevent North–South division, Congress introduced the 'gag rule' in 1836, which ensured that abolitionist petitions were not discussed.

Historians have tried to explain why the abolitionist movement suddenly became so strong in the North in the 1830s. Some stress that it was part of a worldwide phenomenon, in which Britain in particular played an important role. British anti-slavery writings certainly had a receptive audience in the USA. (Britain abolished slavery throughout its colonies in 1833.)

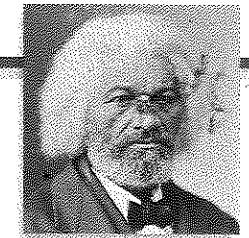
Other historians stress American roots. Mid-nineteenth-century America was a religious society and the Church had a powerful effect on most people's lives. Although Catholic Church membership was growing as a result of immigration, most Americans were Protestants: Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, Presbyterians and Episcopalians. In the early nineteenth century, there was an upsurge in **evangelical** Protestantism known as the Second Great Awakening. Evangelical preachers fired up Americans to do battle against the sins of the world, including slavery.

Frederick Douglass

1818	Born into slavery
1835	Escaped to the North
1839	Joined the abolitionist movement
1845	Published a best-selling <i>Narrative</i> of his life
1847	Founded the <i>North Star</i>
1859	Refused to join Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry (see page 80)
1889–91	US Consul General to Haiti
1895	Died

Douglass became the most famous and influential African American of his time. His mother was a slave; his

white father was his mother's owner. He learned to read and write while working as a household slave in Baltimore. After becoming a plantation field-hand, he escaped (posing as a sailor) to the North, first working in New York but then moving to Massachusetts. In 1841 he gave his first speech to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He was so successful that he was hired to conduct a regional speaking tour and quickly became a leading campaigner for abolition. In 1847 he founded his own paper, *North Star*. He was a great writer and also an inspiring speaker. 'I appear this evening as a thief and robber', Douglass told northern audiences. 'I stole this head, these limbs, this body from my master and ran off with them.'



Abolitionist problems in the North

The extent of the abolitionists' success must not be exaggerated. The movement had only limited appeal in the North. De Tocqueville commented: 'The prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists.' Many northerners, fearing a northern exodus of liberated slaves and fearful of the effect that the new crusade would have in the South, hated the abolitionists. Anti-slavery meetings (and abolitionist printing presses) were sometimes broken up by angry northerners. In 1837 Elijah Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister and newspaper editor, became the first abolitionist martyr when he was murdered by a mob in Illinois.

The abolitionists also had limited political success. Failing to win the support of either the Whig or Democrat parties, abolitionists set up their own Liberty Party. In 1840 its presidential candidate won only 7000 votes. Not all abolitionists supported the Liberty Party's creation. Many preferred to work through the existing parties. Garrison tried to ignore what he regarded as the sordid business of politics altogether, refusing to vote under the US Constitution, which he regarded as a pro-slavery document.

Abolitionists were unable to agree about other strategies. Some wanted to initiate a slave revolt. Most, realising that a revolt would be suicidal for the slaves, favoured 'moral' force and hoped to win white support in the South. A plethora of different opinions, coupled with individual feuds, resulted in a major schism in the Anti-Slavery Society in 1840.

Abolitionist problems in the South

The abolitionists had no success in winning southern white support. They were not helped by the fact that in 1831, **Nat Turner** led a slave revolt in which 55

KEY FIGURE

Nat Turner (1800–31)

A Virginian slave who had literacy and carpentry skills which gained him the respect of fellow slaves. This enabled him to organise and lead the bloodiest slave rebellion in US history.

whites (mainly women and children) were killed before the insurrection was crushed. The revolt appalled southerners, who blamed abolitionists for inciting trouble among the slaves.

Abolitionist attacks goaded southerners to extol the virtues of their peculiar institution. A clutch of southern writers now argued that slavery was a positive good rather than a necessary evil. History, religion, anthropology and economics were all used to defend slavery.

- All the great civilisations in the past, it was claimed, had been based on slavery.
- The Bible seemed to sanction bondage. At no point did Christ actually condemn slavery.
- Black people were depicted as an inferior species, incapable of taking responsibility for themselves.
- Protected by paternalistic slaveholders, they were better off than most working men in northern factories or freed people in Haiti or Africa.

As well as vigorously defending slavery in print and vocally, southerners took action against abolitionists. Abolitionist literature was excluded from most southern states. In some states, the penalty for circulating 'incendiary' literature among black people was death. Those suspected of having abolitionist sympathies were driven out, often after being physically assaulted. The white South, slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike, was united in its resistance to abolitionism.

The abolitionist crusade, therefore, had little impact on the slaves; indeed it may have made their position worse as many states now placed new restrictions on slaves. Nevertheless, if the abolitionists did little in the short term to help the slaves, they did a great deal to heighten sectional animosity. They stirred the consciences of a growing number of northerners and kept slavery in the forefront of public attention. Southerners, while exaggerating the extent of support for abolitionism, correctly sensed that more and more northerners were opposed to slavery.

The nature of slavery

Historians continue to debate the nature of the peculiar institution. They have a considerable number of sources with which to work: plantation records, census returns, newspapers, diaries, travellers' accounts and political speeches. Unfortunately, there is limited evidence from the slaves themselves, few of whom were literate. The best accounts of what it was like to experience slavery were written by fugitive slaves, some of whom became leading abolitionists. Such men and women were probably not typical slaves. While there are large numbers of reminiscences resulting from interviews with ex-slaves, conducted in the 1930s, these accounts are flawed by the fact that those who provided their recollections had only experienced slavery as children.

Statistical evidence

The census returns of 1850 and 1860 provide a starting point for trying to understand the nature of slavery.

- In 1860 there were nearly 4 million slaves (compared to some 8 million white people) in the fifteen southern states. They were concentrated mainly in the lower South. Slaves outnumbered whites in South Carolina.
- In 1850, one in three white southern families owned slaves. By 1860, as a result of the rising cost of slaves, one family in four were slave owners. The decline in the number of slave owners worried some southern politicians, who believed that the South would be more united if every white family owned a slave and thus had a vested interest in slavery.
- In 1860, 50 per cent of slave owners owned no more than five slaves. Over 50 per cent of slaves lived on plantations with over twenty slaves. Thus the 'typical' slaveholder did not own the 'typical' slave.
- Most slaves were held by about 10,000 families.
- Fifty-five per cent of slaves worked in cotton production, ten per cent in tobacco and ten per cent in sugar, rice and hemp, while fifteen per cent were domestic servants.
- About ten per cent of slaves lived in towns or worked in a variety of industries.

Free black people

By 1860 there were about 250,000 free black people in the South. Many of these were of mixed race and had been given their freedom by their white fathers. Southern free blacks had to carry documentation proving their freedom at all times or risk the danger of being enslaved. They had no political rights and their legal status was precarious. Job opportunities were also limited.

Some 200,000 blacks lived in the North. Northern blacks usually had the worst jobs and **segregation** was the norm in most aspects of life. Only three states allowed blacks to vote on terms of parity with whites in 1860. Some northern states tried to exclude blacks altogether. However, a number of politicians in the decades before the Civil War worked to expand black rights. By 1861 northern blacks had more rights than at any time in the previous 30 years.

The impact of slavery on the southern economy

Economists and politicians in the mid-nineteenth century debated whether slavery was economically profitable. Historians have continued the debate. Much depends on defining just who slavery was profitable for. Few historians claim that slavery was profitable for the slave. Slave owners obviously believed that it was profitable to buy slaves or they would not have done so. Slaveholding enabled planters to increase their cotton acreage and hence their profits.

KEY TERM

Segregation The system whereby blacks and whites are separated from each other (for example, in schools and housing) on grounds of race.

SOURCE C

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. 22nd, 1852, at the Fair Grounds, in Savannah, Georgia, at 1:00 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	Lunesta	27	Prime Rice Plauter,	\$1,275.00
2	Violet	16	Housework and Nursmaid,	900.00
3	Lizzie	30	Rice, 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 Hand, Eyesight Poor.	675.00
7	Taney	22	Prime Cotton Hand,	950.00
8	Flementina	39	Good Cook, Stiff Knee,	400.00
9	Laney	34	Prime Cotton Man,	1,000.00
10	Sally	10	Handy in Kitchen,	675.00
11	Maccabey	35	Prime Man, Fair Carpenter,	980.00
12	Dorcas Judy	25	Seamstress, Handy in House,	800.00
13	Happy	60	Blacksmith,	575.00
14	Mowden	15	Prime Cotton Boy,	700.00
15	Billa	21	Handy with Mules,	900.00
16	Theopolis	39	Rice Hand, Gets Fits,	575.00
17	Coolidge	29	Rice Hand and Blacksmith,	1,275.00
18	Bessie	69	Infirm, Sews,	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	Honey	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 Hand, Lame Leg,	750.00
26	Noble	11	Handy Boy,	900.00
27	Judge Lesh	55	Prime Blacksmith,	800.00
28	Booster	43	Fair Mason, Unsound,	600.00
29	Big Kate	37	Housekeeper and Nurse,	950.00
30	Melie Ann	19	Housework, Smart Yellow Girl,	1,250.00
31	Deacon	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	Abe	27	Prime Cotton Hand,	1,000.00
36	Tennes	29	Prime Rice Hand and Cocahman,	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.

A notice of a slave sale from 1852.

A more interesting debate is the extent to which the economy of the South gained or lost by slavery. In 1857 a southerner, Hilton Rowan Helper, published an influential book, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, in which he argued that slavery was responsible for the South's economic decline. Since the Civil War a number of historians (for example, Ulrich Phillips) have followed Helper's line. Arguably, slavery did not fully utilise the potential skills of the labour force. It helped to bring manual labour into disrepute among whites, thus helping to undermine the work ethic. It is also possible to claim that slaves were a poor investment and that southern capital would have been better spent on manufacturing and transport. Slavery may have imposed a certain rigidity on the southern mind, ensuring that the South opposed industrialisation and remained dependent on cotton.

A clutch of historians, including Kenneth Stampp, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, have argued (persuasively) that slavery was an efficient form of economic organisation which did not deter the growth of the southern economy. Given that slave prices doubled in the 1850s, investors in slaves received returns similar to those who invested in industry. The fact that the South lagged behind the North in industrial development can be seen as a sign of its economic health. The South was making so much money that it had no incentive to industrialise. From 1840 to 1860, the increase in per capita income in the South exceeded the rate of increase in the rest of the USA. This was largely due to cotton. Given that southern plantations grew cotton more efficiently than any other area in the world, the South faced no immediate threat to its world dominance. Arguably, the planters were entrepreneurial businessmen, obsessed with economic advancement. Fogel and Engerman have claimed that southern slave agriculture, as a result of specialisation, careful management and economies of scale, was 35 per cent more efficient than small-scale family farming.

The future of slavery

Some historians have argued that once cotton prices fell, as surely they must have, then slavery would have withered away and died of its own accord. If this is correct, the bloodletting of the Civil War was unnecessary. However, in 1860 there was still a worldwide demand for cotton and thus no valid economic reason for believing slavery was about to die out. Moreover, slavery was not simply an economic institution. It was also a system of social control. It kept blacks in their place and ensured white supremacy. Even the poorest, non-slaveholding whites felt they had a vested interest in preserving slavery: it kept them off the bottom of the social heap. Southerners feared that an end to slavery would result in economic collapse, social disintegration and race war. Thus, slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike were committed to the peculiar institution, so committed that (ultimately) they were prepared to secede from the Union and wage a terrible war in an effort to maintain it. Given this commitment, it is difficult to see how slavery would have withered away without the Civil War.

KEY TERM

Secede To leave or quit.

How useful is Source C for historians studying the nature of slavery?