

# Slavery & the Civil War

## ***How Did the Use of Slaves Begin?***

The Slave Trade to English settlements in the New World began in 1619 when about 20 Africans were sold by a Dutch trader in Jamestown, Virginia. Initially, Slavery in the Colonies was Indentured Servitude, after a 21 year maximum, the slave was freed. But, by 1663, Virginia and Maryland had laws stating that “all Negro and other slaves, and all Negroes to be hereafter imported, shall serve “durante vita”, the rest of their lives.” Children born to slaves also became the slave-owner's property.

By 1715, there were 23000 slaves in Virginia and similar numbers in Maryland and the Carolinas. There were fewer in the New England colonies, but these Colonies were heavily involved in the trade, as slave ships were built in their shipyards. Also, New England rum was traded for African slaves, who were then sold in the West Indies to buy molasses to make the rum.

Also, the South was primarily agrarian. The landed gentry relied on poor, landless whites and on black slaves, 40% of the population were slaves. Tobacco, rice and sugar-cane were the staple crops in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

1793 saw the invention of the “cotton gin”, a machine which removed cotton lint from the seeds allowing each to produce 300-1000 pounds of cotton to be produced daily. It was this that dramatically increased the South's dependence on cotton and by 1795, 8000 tons per year was being exported. 1800-1860 saw the spread of cotton fields all across the South, which led to an ever-greater demand for field labourers, and the institution of slavery became entrenched.

## ***How many Slaves & in what Conditions?***

At least 1 million Africans travelled to North America before the trade was outlawed in 1808. 2-4% died on the journey, making the survivors even more valuable. Most were bought by Southern plantation owners. About 10000 each owned over 50 slaves (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson each owned about 250).

In 1860 a strong field-hand cost \$1800. So much money was spent on slaves that owners could not invest in machinery that would reduce the dependency they had on slaves. Slaves were used for domestic, mechanical, agricultural purposes and some were trained as carpenters and millwrights as well as field hands. These last were so valuable and so necessary that they were often given better food and shelter. However, they also suffered the worst working conditions and the harshest treatment.

Slaves were treated as property, with no personal rights. Total obedience to their master and his family was demanded. They worked long hours daily, up till nightfall, but were not usually worked on Saturday afternoons or Sundays, except when require by harvests when they would be worked 16-18 hours per day, 7 days per week.

Slave families had a single room log cabin, with sometimes a small piece of ground for growing vegetables. They ate in a common dining-room, and children too young to work would be put inot nurseries. Food consisted of a weekly ration of corn, with a small amount of bacon or salt pork, supplemented sometimes by other vegetables such as yams.

Slaves could be punished on the word of any white and could be sold at any time. Splitting families by such sales was commonplace. Women faced sexual abuse. No slave had legal rights, they could not testify against whites. Reading and writing were prohibited. The master's permission was required for marriage and divorce.

## ***Was the North All Anti-slavery?***

The answer is definitely “no”, although many Northerners did embrace the anti-slavery movement. In 1817, the American Colonization Society was founded to send free blacks from the USA to the colony of Liberia in west Africa. Though largely unsuccessful, the Society's efforts helped to promote anti-slavery ideals.

At the start of the 1860s, less than 1% of the North's population was black. They were commonly segregated and lived in sub-standard conditions. Several States, including Lincoln's Illinois, had passed “Black Laws” that discouraged/prevented black people from settling within their borders. Only 4 States allowed blacks to vote, and none allowed blacks to sit on juries. “The negroes are a race apart, in both the North and the South” was the observation of one foreign visitor.

The Abolitionists attracted only a small following. Northerners may have opposed Slavery on principle but few wanted millions of freed slaves mixing with white society and competing for white jobs. A New York merchant wrote, “it is not a matter of principle with us, it is a matter of business necessity.”

## ***Was Slavery a Major Contributor to the War?***

Yes and no. The Civil War was not about Slavery per se, but more the fact that the Southern States had seceded/withdrawn from the Union. Nevertheless, those States did so to maintain their independence and a self-proclaimed right to own slaves.

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln's “Emancipation Declaration” made it clear that unless the Confederate States returned to the Union by January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863, their slaves would be “forever free”.

To begin with, Abraham Lincoln had no desire to abolish slavery. He and other Northerners went to war to re-unite the Union, and not because of slavery. But by the summer of 1862 he was ready to change his mind because the war was not going well for the North and he wanted freed slaves to join the Union's forces to make up for the shortage of volunteers. Secondly, the South would lose many labourers and affecting food production and the production of war materials. Thirdly, this proclamation would win the support of European countries, and they would not therefore support the Confederate States.

The Emancipation Declaration did not end slavery because it could not be enforced. Also, thousands of Union soldiers threatened to desert because they had not enlisted to free slaves. But it was a turning point. In the final two years of the war 300,000 blacks joined the Union Army, and Europe ended any move to support the Confederacy. The war ended in April 1865 and Lincoln was assassinated a few days later, but on December 18<sup>th</sup> that year the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution was ratified and Slavery became illegal.