
Slavery

Unit 3 Readings

Professor Joseph Carrier - American History and Culture (ENG 219)

The Origins of American Slavery

Slavery has cast a long shadow over American history. This unit's readings examine the origins and development of slavery, the economic, social, and political forces that perpetuated its existence, and the courageous individuals who fought against it. By examining the experiences of the enslaved and those who benefited from the system, as well as the eventual path to freedom, we hope to understand the impact of slavery on the fabric of American society.

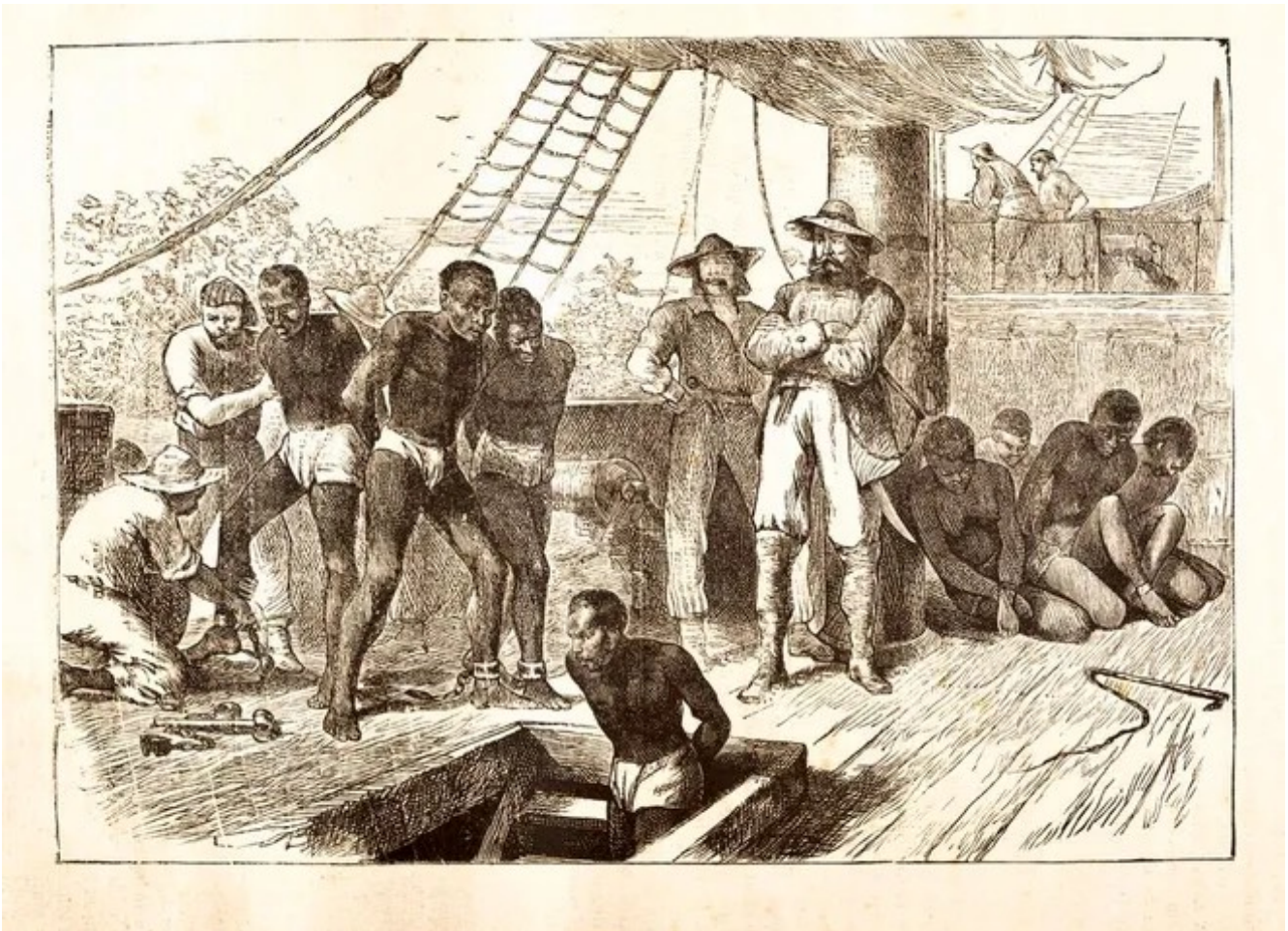


The Early History of Enslavement in America

The early history of slavery in America, from the 1600s to the 1700s, was marked by the introduction of African slaves in the early colonies, the development of the plantation system, the Middle Passage and the transatlantic slave trade, and the implementation of slave codes. Understanding this period is essential to comprehend the roots of the racial and social issues that have persisted throughout American history.

The introduction of slavery

The first recorded arrival of African slaves in British North America occurred in 1619 when a Dutch ship brought approximately 20 enslaved Africans to the English colony of Virginia. These individuals were initially treated as indentured servants, working for a fixed period in exchange for passage, room, and board. However, as the demand for labor grew in the colonies, especially in the South, the status of Africans began to change, and they became lifelong slaves.



A 19th Century engraving showing the conditions of enslaved people aboard slave ships.

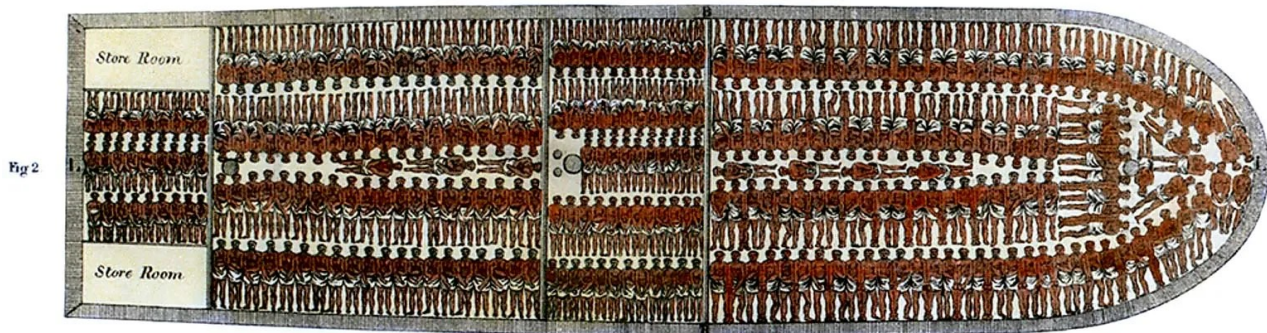
The development of the plantation system

The growth of the plantation system in the Southern colonies was a significant factor in the growth of slavery. Large-scale plantations were established to produce cash crops such as tobacco, sugar, rice, and, later, cotton. These plantations required a great deal of hard labor, and the enslavement of Africans provided the necessary workforce. Plantation owners viewed slaves as a more economical and reliable source of labor compared to paid workers or indentured servants.

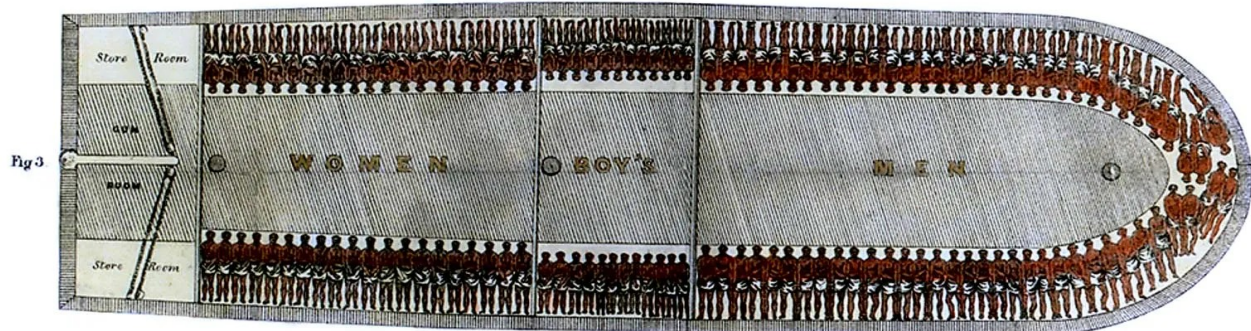


A cotton plantation on the Mississippi, lithograph by Currier & Ives, 1884. Library of Congress.

PLAN OF LOWER DECK WITH THE STOWAGE OF 292 SLAVES
 130 OF THESE BEING STOWED UNDER THE SHELVES AS SHEWN IN FIGURE B & FIGURE 3.



PLAN SHEWING THE STOWAGE OF 130 ADDITIONAL SLAVES ROUND THE WINGS OR SIDES OF THE LOWER DECK BY MEANS OF PLATFORMS OR SHELVES
 (IN THE MANNER OF GALLERIES IN A CHURCH) THE SLAVES STOWED ON THE SHELVES AND BELOW THEM HAVE ONLY A HEIGHT OF 2 FEET 7 INCHES
 BETWEEN THE BEAMS AND FAR LESS UNDER THE BEAMS. See Fig 1.

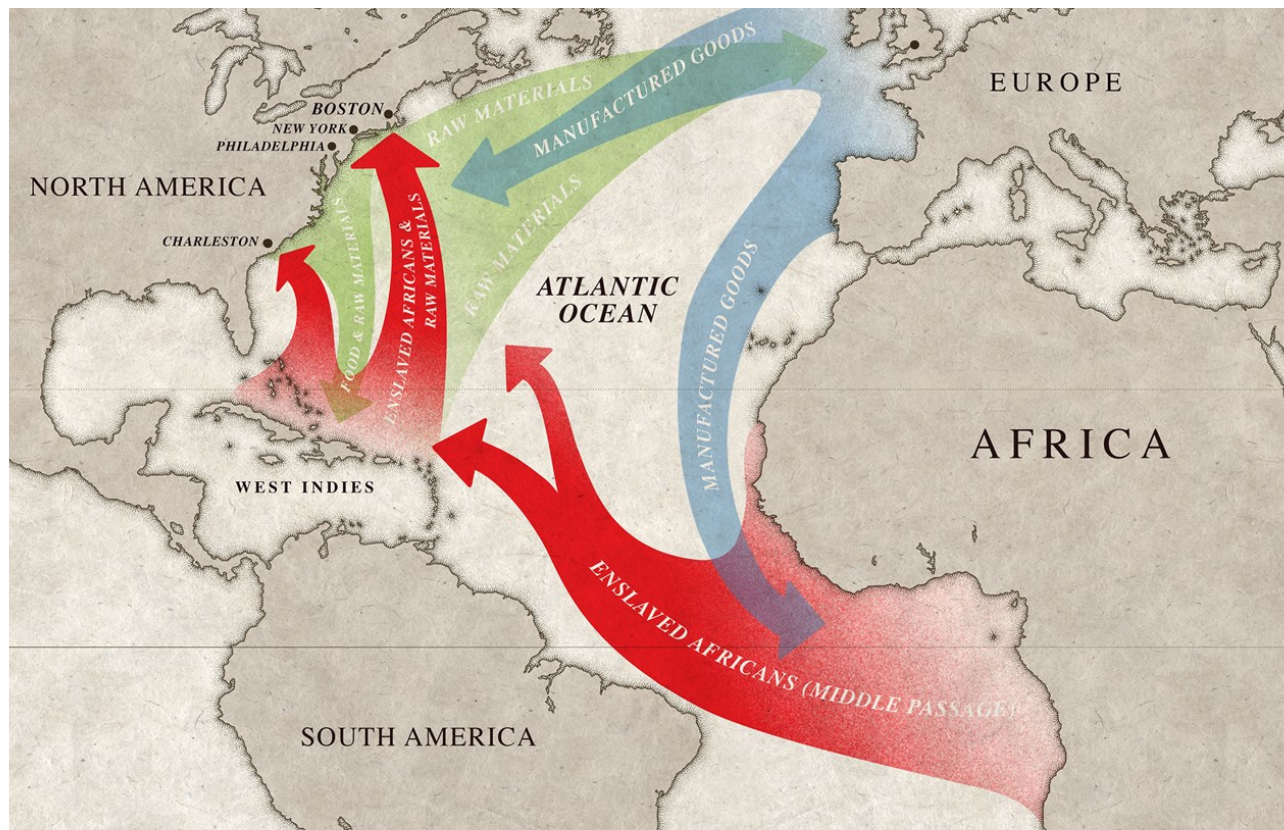


Detail of a British newspaper advertisement showing how more than 420 enslaved adults and children could be carried on board a slave ship (c. 1790).

The Middle Passage and the triangular trading system

A crucial component of the slave trade was the Middle Passage, the horrifying journey enslaved Africans were forced to endure across the Atlantic Ocean. The transatlantic slave trade involved the forced transportation of millions of Africans to the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries. During the Middle Passage, slaves were tightly packed into the holds of ships, enduring inhumane conditions, disease, and death. It is estimated that approximately 12 million Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic, with a mortality rate of around 15% during the Middle Passage.

The triangular slave trade system was a complex, global network that played a central role in perpetuating the brutal institution of slavery during the 16th to 19th centuries. This trading pattern involved three major regions—Europe, Africa, and the Americas—each contributing a specific set of goods to the cycle. European merchants would bring manufactured goods, such as firearms, textiles, and alcohol, to African shores in exchange for enslaved individuals.



Map showing the primary movement of Enslaved Africans, raw materials, and manufactured goods.
Credit: Boston African American National Historic Site. United States Park Service.

These captives were then forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean: the horrible Middle Passage. Upon reaching the Americas, the enslaved were traded for valuable raw materials, such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton, which were subsequently shipped back to Europe to be processed and sold. The triangular slave trade system not only facilitated the cruel enslavement of millions of Africans but also significantly impacted the economies and societies of the participating regions.

Slave codes and the legal status of enslaved peoples

To enforce and maintain the institution of slavery, a series of slave codes and laws were enacted throughout the colonies. These codes sought to regulate the lives of enslaved people, often denying them basic human rights and severely restricting their freedoms. For instance, slaves were considered property, not people, and could be bought, sold, or inherited like any other possession. They were forbidden to learn to read and write, marry without their owner's permission, or testify in court. These codes dehumanized enslaved people and solidified the racial hierarchy that placed white Europeans at the top and enslaved Africans at the bottom.

Slavery in Early America (1787-1850)

Slavery in the Early Republic remains a contentious and pivotal period in American history, characterized by ongoing debates and events that shaped the nation's social, political, and economic landscape. The institution of slavery was always a source of political and social conflict in America, and its development was impacted by several key events, including the Constitutional debates, the impact of the cotton gin, the domestic slave trade, the emergence of the abolitionist movement, and legislative attempts to manage the spread of slavery.

Constitutional debates and the Three-Fifths Compromise

The formation of the United States Constitution in 1787 saw intense debates surrounding the role of slavery in the young nation. One of the most significant outcomes of these discussions was the Three-Fifths Compromise. This agreement allowed states to count three-fifths of their enslaved population when determining representation in the House of Representatives and the distribution of taxes. This compromise was designed to balance the interests of both slaveholding and non-slaveholding states, but it ultimately reinforced the power of Southern states in the federal government and perpetuated the dehumanization of enslaved individuals.

The cotton gin and the expansion of slavery

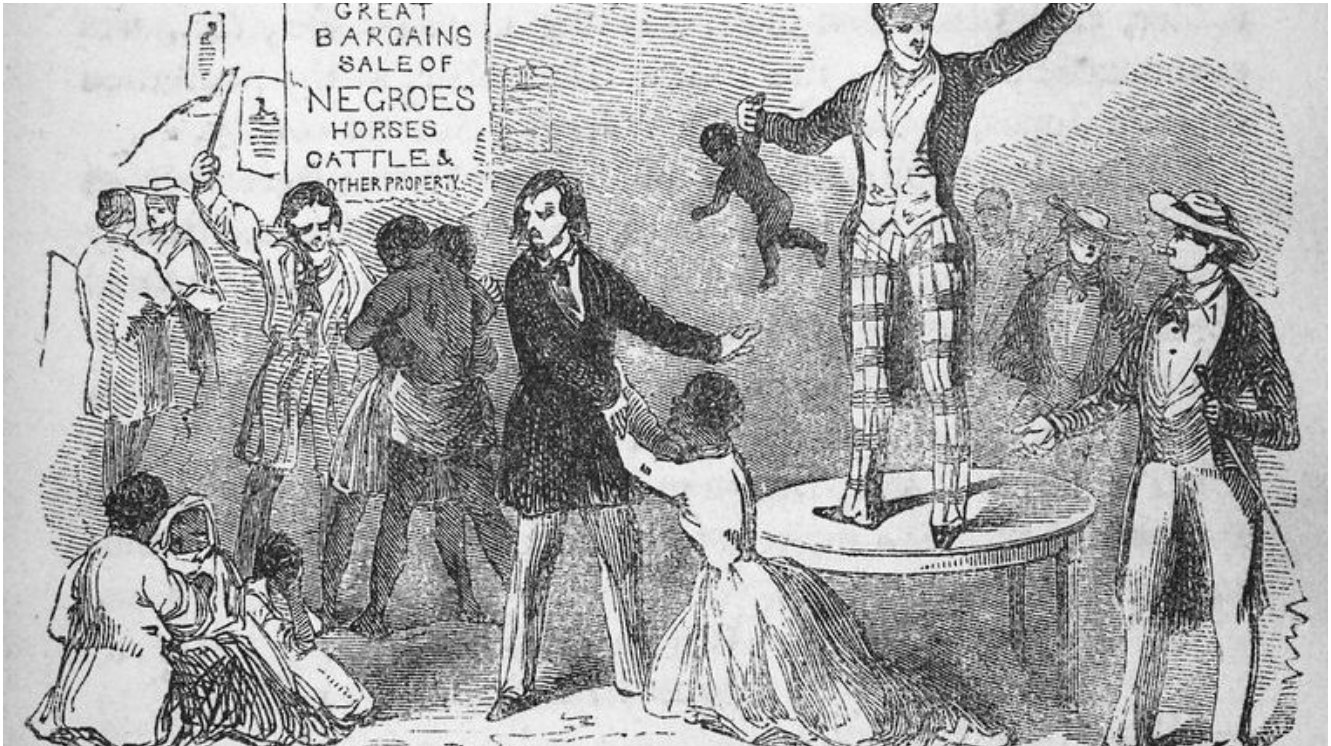


The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 by Eli Whitney had profound consequences for the expansion of slavery in the United States. By significantly reducing the time and labor required to separate cotton fibers from their seeds, the cotton gin rapidly increased the profitability of cotton production. As a result, the demand for enslaved labor grew, contributing to the entrenchment of the plantation system and the expansion of slavery into new territories.

Cotton Gin. The gin processed roughly one bale (500 pounds on average) per hour. Credit: Jarrell Plantation.

The domestic slave trade and its impact on enslaved families

The expansion of slavery led to the rise of the domestic slave trade, which saw the forced relocation of enslaved people from the Upper South to the Lower South to meet labor demands. This trade separated countless enslaved families, as individuals were torn from their loved ones and sold to distant plantations. The emotional and psychological toll of this forced migration on enslaved people cannot be overstated and remains one of the most tragic aspects of American history.



"Husbands, wives, and families sold indiscriminately to different purchasers, are violently separated; probably never to meet again." 1853. New York Public Library. Family members were often sold to different owners, meaning that they would likely never meet again.

The Abolitionist movement and early opposition to slavery

During this period, opposition to slavery also began to coalesce in the form of the abolitionist movement. Comprised of various religious groups, particularly the Quakers, and prominent individuals such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, the abolitionist movement sought to end slavery through moral suasion and direct action. The movement's influence grew with the publication of anti-slavery newspapers like "The Liberator" and the establishment of the Underground Railroad. This secret network helped enslaved people escape to freedom.

Legislative attempts to manage the spread of slavery

Despite the growing opposition to slavery, legislative attempts to manage its spread were difficult. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state while prohibiting slavery in the northern portion of the Louisiana Purchase. However, this compromise only temporarily resolved the sectional tensions between the North and the South.

The Road to the Civil War (1850-1860)

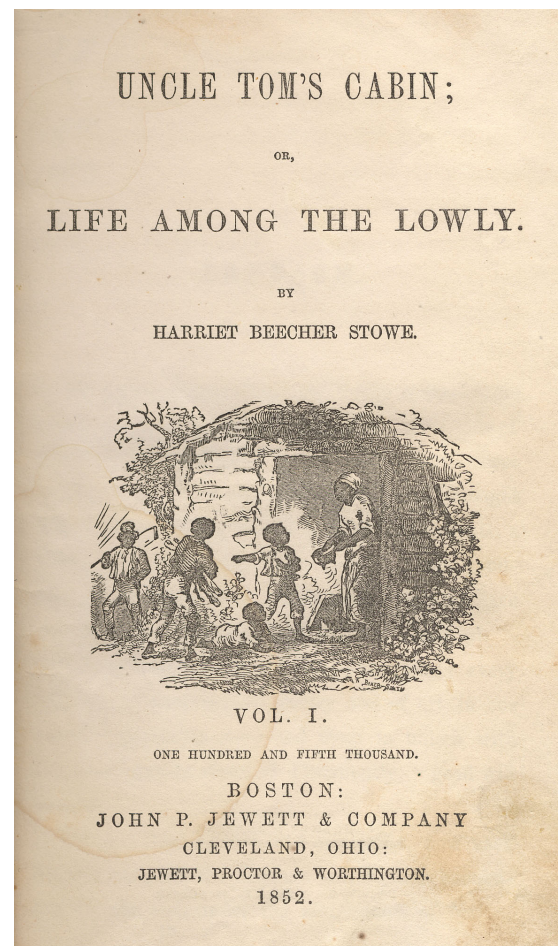
The period leading up to the Civil War was characterized by escalating tensions, divisive events, and contentious legislation surrounding the issue of slavery. The regional animosities, fueled by opposing views on slavery, ultimately led to Southern states' secession and the Civil War, a conflict that would determine the future of the United States.

Escalating tensions between pro- and anti-slavery factions

Throughout the 1850s, tensions between pro- and anti-slavery factions in the United States intensified. In the North, the abolitionist movement gained momentum. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin" depicted the horror of slavery in vivid detail, especially its impact on women and children, and galvanized public sentiment against slavery. In contrast, the South remained staunchly committed to the institution of slavery, viewing it as essential to their economic and social order. These opposing positions exacerbated regional animosities and fueled a growing divide between the two sections of the country.

Impact of key events and legislation on national division

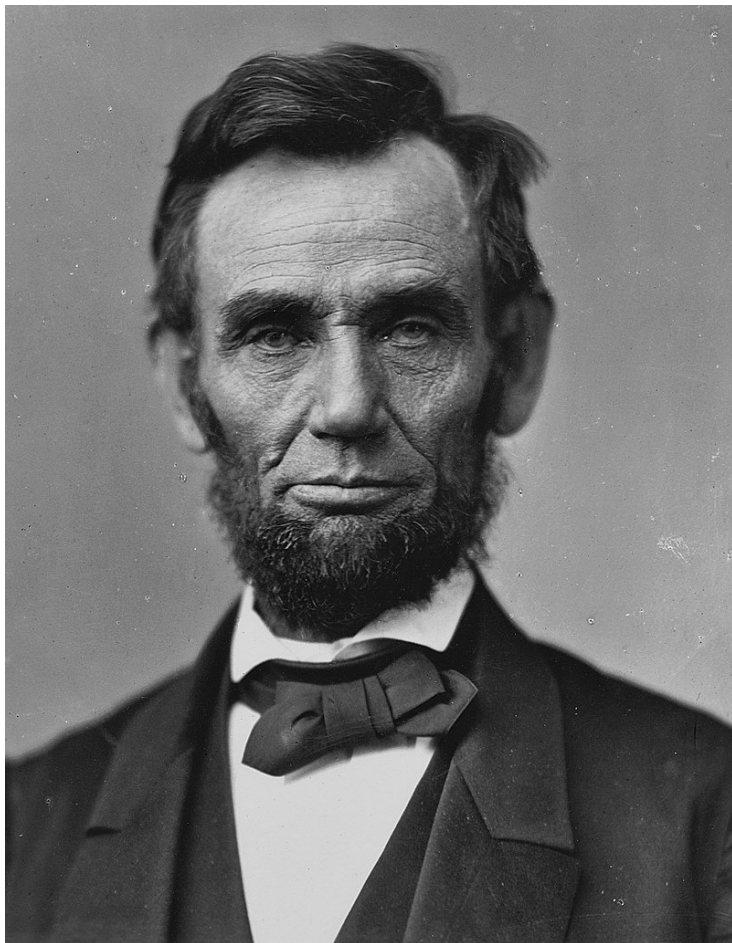
Several key events and pieces of legislation further deepened the national division over slavery. The Compromise of 1850, which included the highly controversial Fugitive Slave Act, was another attempt to address the issue of slavery.



Title-page illustration by Hammatt Billings for Uncle Tom's Cabin. Shows characters of Chloe, Mose, Pete, Baby, Tom. Abraham Lincoln said this book started the Civil War.

The Fugitive Slave Act forced Northern states to return escaped slaves to their owners in the South, further infuriating abolitionists and leading to more protests. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 allowed territories to decide the issue of slavery through popular sovereignty. This led to the violent conflict known as "Bleeding Kansas," as pro- and anti-slavery forces clashed in the region. The Dred Scott v. Sandford Supreme Court decision of 1857 declared that African Americans were not citizens and that Congress had no authority to regulate slavery in the territories. All of these legal and political setbacks further stoked the tensions between the North and the South.

The role of slavery in the presidential election of 1860



This portrait of Abraham Lincoln, taken on November 8, 1863, is believed by many to be the best photograph ever taken of him. Lincoln's character was difficult to capture in pictures, but Alexander Gardner's picture captures his penetrating gaze.

The presidential election of 1860 was a critical turning point in the sectional crisis, with slavery playing a central role in the political contest. The Republican Party, which had a platform committed to halting the spread of slavery, nominated Abraham Lincoln as their candidate. Lincoln's victory, despite not receiving any electoral votes from Southern states, was seen as a direct threat to the interests of the slaveholding South. His election signaled to many Southerners that their way of life was under attack and that the balance of power in the federal government had shifted irreversibly against them.

In response to Lincoln's election, several Southern states seceded from the Union, leading to the formation of the Confederate States of America. This act of secession represented a culmination of decades of growing animosity and mistrust between the North and the South, with slavery at the heart of the divide.

Emancipation and the Civil War (1861-1865)

In April 1861, the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, marked the beginning of the Civil War. This devastating conflict would ultimately determine the fate of the United States and the institution of slavery. This section examines the role of enslaved people in the war effort, the Emancipation Proclamation and its effects, and the passage of the 13th Amendment, which marked the end of slavery in the United States.

The role of enslaved people in the war effort

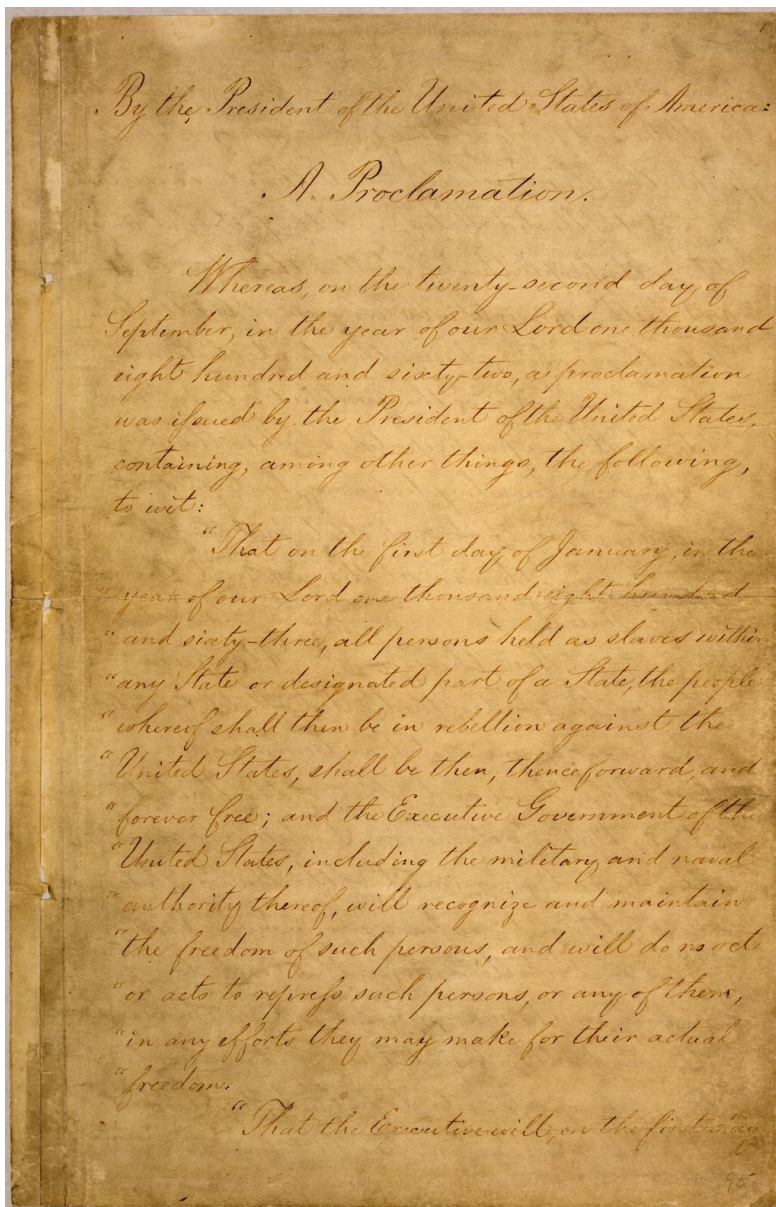
Enslaved people played a significant role in the Civil War, contributing to the war effort on both sides of the conflict. In the Confederacy, enslaved individuals were forced to labor on fortifications, factories, and plantations to support the Southern war effort. As the Union army advanced into Confederate territory, thousands of enslaved people sought refuge behind Union lines, where they provided valuable information about Confederate positions and infrastructure. The Union army began to recruit African American soldiers. By the end of the war, nearly 200,000 Black men had served in the United States Colored Troops, fighting bravely for their own freedom and the cause of emancipation.



Poster recruiting African American troops to fight in the Civil War. *Come and Join Us Brothers*, by the Supervisory Committee For Recruiting Colored Regiments, Philadelphia. (1865)

The Emancipation Proclamation and its effects

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, was a pivotal event in the Civil War. Although it did not immediately free all enslaved people, it declared that those held in bondage within the rebelling states "shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." This proclamation transformed the war from a conflict over preserving the Union into a struggle for the abolition of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation had several significant effects: it provided a moral boost for the Union cause, it encouraged enslaved people to flee to Union lines and contribute to the war effort, and it dissuaded foreign powers, particularly Great Britain and France, from supporting the Confederacy, as they were now fighting for a cause explicitly linked to the perpetuation of slavery.



Original handwritten text of the Emancipation Proclamation. On September 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which stated that slaves in those states or parts of states still in rebellion as of January 1, 1863, would be free.

The 13th Amendment and the abolition of slavery

The ultimate abolition of slavery in the United States was achieved with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 6, 1865. This amendment declared that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude...shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." The passage of the 13th Amendment was built upon the foundation laid by the Emancipation Proclamation, legally abolishing slavery throughout the entire country and providing the basis for the eventual extension of civil rights to African Americans.



Enslaved African Americans hoe and plow the earth and cut piles of sweet potatoes on a South Carolina plantation, circa 1862-3. Library of Congress.

Conclusion

The abolition of slavery marked a crucial step towards realizing the promise of freedom and equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. This monumental achievement, born out of the strife and sacrifices of the Civil War, signaled a new era in American history as the nation sought to reconcile its founding principles with the reality of a deeply divided society. Though the struggle for racial justice would persist, the end of slavery served as a turning point in the pursuit of a more just and equitable nation. By understanding the complexities of this transformative period, we gain invaluable insights into the ongoing quest for social progress and the enduring resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.