Chapter 69 -- The Black Experience In 1820

Dates:
1820

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Time: 1820

Shape Of The Black Population

Two Little Slave Boys

In 1820 there are 1.77 million blacks living in America, or 18.4% of the total population. Almost nine out of ten are enslaved.

Total US Population In 1820 By Race

	(000)	% Total
Total US Population	9638	100.0%
Total White	7867	81.6
Total Black	1,771	18.4
Slaves	1,538	16.0
Free	233	2.4

A mere 6.6% of all blacks live in the North, while 93.4% reside in the South.

Slave Vs. Free Black Population In 1820 By Region

	All Blacks	Slaves	Free
Total US	1,771	1,538	233
Northern States	117	19	98
Original Colonies	110	18	92
Northwest States	7	1	6
Border States	129	112	17
Original Colonies	129	112	17
New West States			
Southern States	1,334	1,265	69
Original Colonies	1,085	1,032	53
New West States	239	223	16
Territories (Est)	191	142	49

In the eight original Northern states there are just under 110,000 blacks, or 2.7% of the total census for the region. Only 18,001 are classified as slaves, and they are heavily concentrated in two states, New York and New Jersey. Just over 90,000 are freedmen.

The Black Population In The Original Northeastern States In 1820

	NY	Pa	NJ	Conn	Mass	RI	VT	NH	Total
Slaves	10,088	211	7,557	97	0	48	0	0	18,001
Free Blacks	29,275	30,202	12,460	7,870	6,740	3,554	903	786	91,790
Total	39,363	30,413	20,017	7,967	6,740	3,602	903	786	109,791
Tot Pop	1,372,812	1,049,458	277,575	275,248	523,287	83,059	235,981	244,161	4.061,581

Not counting the new westernmost territories, the population in the states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois total 783,000, with blacks accounting for less than 1% – evidence that white efforts to keep blacks out are already having an effect.

Black Population In Three New NW States: 1820

	Ohio	Ind	IL	Total
Slaves	0	190	917	1,107
Free Blacks	4,723	1,230	457	6,410
Total	4,723	1,420	1,374	7,517
Tot Pop	581,434	147,178	55,211	783.823

Meanwhile, blacks have become ubiquitous across the South.

In the original six states below the Mason-Dixon line, just over 4 out of every 10 people are slaves, on average. In South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia whites and blacks are about equal in numbers. In the two Border states of Maryland and Delaware, the ration of blacks to whites is about one in four.

The Black Population In The Southern And Border States In 1820

	Va	SC	NC	Ga	Md	Del	Total
Slaves	425,153	251,783	205,017	149,656	107,398	4,509	1,143,516
Free Blacks	23,493	13,518	14,612	1,763	3,681	12,958	70,025
Total	448,646	265,301	219,629	151,419	111,079	17,467	1,213,541
Tot Pop	938,261	502,741	638,829	340,989	407,350	72,749	2,909,919

What is most striking in the South, however, and most crucial to its economy, is the growing demand for slave labor in the West.

The "market" for these additional "bred slaves" is driven in large part by Southerners who spot the "cotton rush" early on and decide to start up new plantations

By 1820, just over 500,000 slaves have appeared in states from Kentucky to Louisiana, and this will prove to be only the start of the "rush."

Slave Population In Western States(000)

State	1790	1820	Growth
Kentucky	12.4	126.7	10x
Tennessee	0	80.0	++
Georgia	29.3	149.7	5x
Alabama	0	47.4	++
Mississippi	0	32.8	++
Louisiana	0	69.1	++
Total	41.7	505.7	12x

In the five western states below the Ohio River, nearly 3 in every 10 residents are slaves.

The Black Population In The Border And New Southern States In 1820

	Ky	Tenn	La	Ala	Miss	Total
Slaves	126,732	80,107	69,064	41,449	32,814	350,166
Free Blacks	2,759	2,737	10,476	1,001	458	17,431
Total	129,491	82,844	79,540	42,450	33,272	367,597
Tot Pop	564,317	422,823	153,407	127,901	75,448	1,343,896

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Life Of Those Enslaved In The South

Slaves in the Cotton Field

The daily life of these Southern slaves differs dramatically, depending upon their assigned role on the farm or plantation. Some serve as field hands, others as house domestics. While both exist without precious freedom or respect, their fates are unequal.

House slaves – especially those directly serving the master and mistress -- escape from the back-breaking physical labor endured

by the field hands. The women are assigned cleaning, cooking, sewing and gardening chores, along with tending to child care, as “mammy’s.” The men may act as butlers or footmen, tackle household repairs, care for horses and carriages. Both genders are often housed under their owner’s roof, have access to better clothing, diet, and medical care, and are exposed to the trappings of upscale white society and manners.

Since the grooming and behavior of house slaves can also be a reflection on the master’s wealth and magnanimity, they often become a chip in impressing visitors. Obedient and properly trained house servants signal a properly gentrified lifestyle.

On the other hand, the field hands are out of sight and often the province of hired overseers. Their measure of worth lies not in niceties, but in daily production of cotton.

A cotton crop planted around April 1 is ready to be harvested and sent to the ginning mill in July. An average field hand, bent over or crawling in the hot sun, might pick about 100 lbs. of cotton bolls a day, enough to fill up two 12-foot long “drag-along” sacks. After about 15 days of labor, the slave would have filled a standard 1500 lb. wagon, which would then be shipped to the ginning mill. After ginning, this wagon load would yield 500 lbs. of cotton fiber – or one finished “bale” – and 1000 lbs. of seed, for replanting or disposal. At a typical price of 20 cents a pound for fiber, the 500 lb. bale picked by the slave would sell for about $100 on the market.

Thomas Jones, a slave from North Carolina, captures the round-the-clock labor imposed seven days a week during the peak seasons.

> *During the planting and harvest season, we had to work early and late. The men and women were called at three o'clock ’n the morning, and were worked on the plantation till it was dark at night. After that they must prepare their food for supper and for the breakfast of the next day, and attend to other duties of their own dear homes. Parents would often have to work for their children at home, after each day's protracted toil, till the middle of the night, and then snatch a few hours' sleep’ to get strength for the heavy burdens of the next day.*

No one is spared from this toil. Pregnant women work the fields. Older children are formed into gangs of weed pickers; younger children tote water from wells to workers.

During breaks, “slave food” is carried in pails to the fields. The typical diet is loaded with starch, in the form of cornmeal, and fatback, from salted pork. Access to vegetables and fruit goes to slaves lucky enough to maintain their own small garden plots.

Any perceived lapses in the daily toil are met by the wide range of punishments open to the bully over the defenseless. On one end is the lash, administered with a whip, tearing and scarring naked backs. On the other, the more subtle indignations, from cutbacks on rations to banning the smallest traces of freedom and dignity, like church gatherings.

Slave Quarters in South Carolina

Field slaves live in dirt floor log cabins held together by clay-based mortar and vulnerable to rain in the summer and cold in the winter. Their dress is derived from flimsy "Negro cloth," worn until disintegration. Many go shoeless; others wear "Negro brogans."

Taken together, the living conditions for slaves leave them vulnerable to a host of killing diseases, including malaria, cholera, dysentery, tuberculosis and pneumonia. Mortality statistics bear this out – the death rate for slave babies and children up to age 14 being twice as high as for their white counterparts.

Thus, while plantation owners always wish to expand their "crop of slaves," the daily treatment they afford them backfires – and across the antebellum period, life expectancy at birth is only 21 years as opposed to the 42 years averaged by whites.

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Time: 1820

The Free Black Population Begins Inching Toward Respect

A Free Black Woman

In 1820 there are roughly 233,000 "free blacks" in America, scattered across the established states and the open territories to the west.

Freedom has come to them in a host of ways: military service in the War of 1812, buy-outs, manumission, "passing for white," northern laws abolishing slavery now or for new births.

Roughly two-thirds of free blacks are females, often left to fend for themselves, frequently with children in tow fathered by men who remain in slavery. The result here being a matriarchal cast to the society created.

While theoretically free, local "black codes" circumscribe their daily lives.

Failure to produce papers proving their freedom can return them directly to bondage. In the South, their homes often abut plantations, and some continue to live in slave quarters. In the North, they typically find themselves in cities, segregated into all-black neighborhoods, labeled by names like “Darktown” or “Shantytown.”

The first challenge facing these free blacks lies in simple economic survival.

Many of them, especially the women, transition from slavery into domestic servitude.

Others, especially men, try to scratch out a living as day laborers, draymen, porters and the like.

A few begin to the move up the economic ladder by acquiring special know-how and skills always in demand.

Self-taught skills such as barbering, hairstyling, sewing and tailoring become popular occupations among free blacks. Some wrangle apprenticeships, and find work as blacksmiths, saddlers, carpenters, masons, butchers or shoemakers. Access to professional or white collar jobs, however, is sharply limited by historical prohibitions against teaching them to read, write or master numbers.

Despite all of these hurdles, blacks who have escaped enslavement begin to inch their way into the white dominated social structure they encounter. Men like Prince Hall, Paul Cuffee and James Forten demonstrate the talent and tenaciousness to achieve economic success and work on behalf of others in the black community.

Black churches in particular provide a refuge from daily oppressions and a place to advance survival skills.

Indeed. the gradual movement toward “coloured citizenship” will be shaped inside Thomas Paul’s Boston church, the 1819 African Methodist Episcopal Church founded in Philadelphia by Reverend Richard Allen, Samuel Cornish’s First Colored Presbyterian Church of New York (1821), the African-American Church of Charleston (1822), the First Black Baptist Church of New Orleans (1826) and others.

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Time: 1820

The Roll Call Of Black Abolitionists In 1820

Among the early black fighters for freedom and citizenship, three notables – Prince Hall, Paul Cuffee, and Absalom Jones, have passed from the scene by 1820.

Early Black Abolitionists Who Have Passed By 1820

	Death	**At Age**
Prince Hall	December 4, 1807	72
Paul Cuffee	September 9, 1817	58
Reverend Absalom Jones	February 13, 1818	72

But James Forten remains, as does the Reverend Thomas Paul – and they are about to be joined by a next generation of reformers who will advance the cause in the decades ahead.

Early Black Abolitionists Still Alive In 1820

	Age In 1820
James Forten	56
Reverend Thomas Paul	47
Austin Steward	27
Thomas Dalton	26
Reverend Samuel Cornish	25
Reverend Theodor Wright	23
Sojourner Truth	23
David Walker	22

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Time: 1820

Sidebar: Old Fanny, Uncle Abraham And The Lott Family Of Brooklyn

Old Fanny and her mistress,
Aunt Lizzie (Mrs. Nicholls)

One destiny for slaves freed in the North lay in ongoing servitude to their former owners – and such was the case with "Old Fanny" and "Uncle Abraham" of the Lott household in Brooklyn.

The Lott family migrates from Holland to New York around 1630. At the time, slave ownership is widespread among the Dutch, with blacks originally comprising about 20% of the state's population. In New York city over half of all residents own at least one slave, and the Lott family owns twelve, according to the 1790 census records.

In 1800 Hendrick I. Lott (1760-1840) builds a 22 room home on 245 acres of farmland in the Flatlands (Brooklyn) and moves in with his wife, Mary Brownjohn, daughter of a prominent family also from New York city. One of their offspring, a son, Johannes, marries Gashe Bergen in 1817, and fathers seven children. One is Henry DeWitt Lott (b. 1820), another, Eliza Lott (b.1828).

At some point, Henry Lott comes to own the slave Abraham, while Eliza owns Fanny.

And at some point, Abraham weds Fanny, and they have at least one child, a daughter, Fannie Lew, who is owned by Elsie (Ray) Lott.

When slavery finally withers away around 1830 in New York, Abraham and Fanny transition from slaves to "coloured servants" of Henry and Eliza.

A trip into New York City by Eliza probably prompts the photograph above, taken by Fredericks & O'Neill of 5th Avenue, of an aging "Old Fanny," standing beside the seated "Lizzie." By the time it is taken, "Uncle Abraham," whose photo originates at Isley's Studio

in Jersey City, has presumably passed away.

The Lott property remains a NYC landmark to this day, and restoration work shows that the slave quarters were well hidden within the building through a trap door in the kitchen. Artifacts found in this space include candle drippings, a mortared-over oven, a cloth pouch, oyster shell and corncobs, the latter arranged in a starburst pattern suggesting that they were used as part of West African religious rituals.

Conjecture also has it that a secret 6'x12' room concealed behind a closet on the second floor of the Lott house may have been used in the 1840's by run-away slaves moving north along the Underground Railroad.

Over 150 years have passed since Aunt Lizzie and "Old Fanny" posed for the camera, on their visit to NYC. But there they are, captured in time, forever symbolizing a limbo-like moment where some black people in America were no longer slaves, but not nearly all the way free and equal.