

Chapter 26 -- The Plight Of America's Slaves



Dates:
1619-1790

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Time: 1619 and Forward

Jefferson Offers The Stereotypical View Of Blacks Among The White Population



By 1790 native Africans have lived among white Americans for well over 150 years. They have begun as slaves, both North and South. But the practice has gradually withered away in the North and the total black population there has leveled off at around 67,000, with some 27,000 living as “manumitted” or free men. Not so in the South, where upwards of 650,000 slaves are critical to the economic prosperity of the region.

Despite these different outcomes, what is common among white men both North and South is a stereotypical view of all blacks as an inferior “sub-species” to be contained and controlled and feared.

In a 1785 book, Notes on the State of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson offers his general views on the Africans, how they differ from white men, and why the two races will never be reconciled.

Thomas Jefferson: Plantation Owner
(1743-1826)

In memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid;

They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.

Black men prefer white women over their own, just as orangutans prefer black women over their own.

They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour.

Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them.

Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved.

In imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.

Apart from their lack of respect for property laws, which is understandable, there are...numerous instances of the most rigid integrity, of benevolence, gratitude, and unshaken fidelity.

Jefferson goes on to wonder what could explain the differences between himself and the over 100 African slaves who surround him daily at his Monticello plantation.

In the end, all he can conclude is that, perhaps, the blacks represent a different species from the whites.

I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind...

This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.

Herein lies the basis for much of the anti-black racism that infects the white population, both South and North.

It argues that the Africans are “a distinct race” and “inferior in both body and mind.”

In other words, sub-human beings.

By no means created equal.

And incapable of ever rising beyond their present station.

The “American Dream” is for white men, not for the blacks.

So saith the man who will serve as America’s third president.

Time: 1619 and Forward

The Life Of Slaves In The South



Four Slave Boys

While white American are striving to get ahead in 1790, slaves are simply trying to survive.

Their recorded testimonials tell of hard lives marked by back-breaking labor, gnawing hunger, physical punishment and constant fear of being uprooted from the solace offered by their families and fellow captives.

In 1790, one in every four North Carolinians are slaves. Their reflections speak for themselves.

Moses Grandy of Camden, NC:

Daily life for a slave in North Carolina was incredibly difficult. Slaves, especially those in the field, worked from sunrise until sunset. Even small children and the elderly were not exempt from these long work hours. Slaves were generally allowed a day off on Sunday, and on infrequent holidays such as Christmas or the Fourth of July.

I was next with Mr. Enoch Sawyer of Camden county: my business was to keep ferry, and do other odd work. It was cruel living; we had not near enough of either victuals or clothes; I was half-starved for half my time. I have often ground the husks of Indian corn over again in a hand-mill, for the chance of getting something to eat out of it, which the former grinding had left. In severe frosts, I was compelled to go into the fields and woods to work, with my naked feet cracked and bleeding from extreme cold: to warm them, I used to rouse an ox or hog, and stand on the place where it had lain. I was at that place three years, and very long years they seemed to me.

Moses Roper of Caswell, NC:

At this time I was quite a small boy, and was sold to Mr. Hodge, a negro trader. Here I began to enter into hardships. After travelling several hundred miles, Mr. Hodge sold me to Mr. Gooch, the cotton planter, Cashaw county, South Carolina; he purchased me at a town called Liberty Hill, about three miles from his home. As soon as he got home, he immediately put me on his cotton plantation to work, and put me under overseers, gave me allowance of meat and bread with the other slaves, which was not half enough for me to live upon, and very laborious work. Here my heart was almost broke with grief at leaving my fellow slaves. Mr. Gooch did not mind my grief, for he flogged me nearly every day, and very severely.

Harriet Jacobs of Edenton, NC:

Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence? ...I did not reason thus when I was a young girl. Youth will be youth. I loved, and I indulged the hope that the dark clouds around me would turn out a bright lining. I forgot that in the land of my birth the shadows are too dense for light to penetrate.

There was in the neighborhood a young colored carpenter; a free born man. We had been well acquainted in childhood, and frequently met together afterwards. We became mutually attached, and he proposed to marry me. I loved him with all the ardor of a young girl's first love. But when I reflected that I was a slave, and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage of such, my heart sank within me. My lover wanted to buy me; but I knew that Dr. Flint was too willful and arbitrary a man to consent to that arrangement.

James Curry of Person County, NC:

During their few hours of free time, most slaves performed their own personal work. The diet supplied by slaveholders was generally poor, and slaves often supplemented it by tending small plots of land or fishing. Many slave owners did not provide adequate clothing, and slave mothers often worked to clothe their families at night after long days of labor. One visitor to colonial North Carolina wrote that slaveholders rarely gave their slaves meat or fish, and that he witnessed many slaves wearing only rags. Although there were exceptions, the prevailing attitude among slave owners was to allot their slaves the bare minimum of food and clothing; anything beyond that was up to the slaves to acquire during their very limited time away from work.

In the following spring, my master bought about one hundred yards of coarse tow and cotton, which he distributed among the slaves. After this, he provided no clothing for any of his slaves, except that I have known him in a few instances to give a pair of thoroughly worn-out pantaloons to one. They worked in the night upon their little patches of ground, raising tobacco and food for hogs, which they were allowed to keep, and thus obtained clothes for themselves. These patches of ground were little spots, they were allowed to clear in the woods, or cultivate upon the barrens, and after they got them nicely cleared, and under good cultivation, the master took them away, and the next year they must take other uncultivated spots for themselves.

Time: 1790

Black Churches Emerge As Beacons Of Hope



A Later Day Black Preacher

Standing from sun-up to sun-down in bug and worm infested dirt or mud or ankle deep water to cultivate rice, tobacco or cotton becomes the lot of the southern slaves. It is punishing labor and intensely monotonous. It is marked by fear at any moment of the lash, delivered by a displeased or arbitrarily sadistic overseer. It is also endless. The only way out is death, and death is all around, in the faces of young and old, men and women and children, all accelerated by meager rations, run-down living quarters and flimsy attire.

In the presence of this despair, slaves turn for survival to any small shreds of resistance and hope they can muster.

In the fields, they rely on “shouts,” spontaneous chants, cadenced to signal unity and spur perseverance. At times these “shouts” also include carefully hidden and shared “codes” of mockery or protest.

But for true hope, the slaves turn mostly to their church services, the once-a-week occasions where white masters set aside commerce and encourage the Africans to seek Christian salvation.

The Sabbath gives the slave’s a chance to reflect on their fate, and arm themselves to carry on.

In form, the slave’s worship is an amalgam of traditions brought over from Africa mixed with rituals borrowed from the white man’s church.

It is also intensely evangelical in character.

White masters who, often sanctimoniously, take it upon themselves to attend the slave services, to offer sermons or read from the Bible, tend to express dismay over what they encounter.

After the sermon they formed a ring, and with coats off sung, clapped their hands and stomped their feet in a most ridiculous and heathenish way. I requested the pastor to go and stop their dancing. At his request, they stopped their dancing and clapping of hands, but remained singing and rocking their bodies to and fro. This they did for about fifteen minutes.

The field “shouts” are transformed here into what will become known as “Negro Spirituals” – which give voice to the suffering endured by the slaves, along with their hope for a better future, reunited with lost kin, transported to a better place.

That place is most typically a metaphorical “home.”

Oh yes, I want to go home...where dere’s no whips a crackin...I want to go home.

Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home...to carry me home.

Delivery of these spirituals reaches into the soul of the congregation, beginning with a slow and mournful pace, only to shift into rapid fire repetitions, signaling a movement from despair to the strength needed to carry on.

Thus black churches are born in America, in “shouts” across the fields of cotton and in “spirituals” sung around campfires on the Sabbath.

They call upon God to witness their fate and to help them find a way through it.

First to survive another day; then to persevere in their remarkable journey toward freedom and equality.

Time: 1790

Slavery Continues To Wither Away In The North



Old Tom

By 1790, six Northern states have banned slavery.

Dates Of Northern States Bans On Slavery

Year	State	Terms
1777	Vermont	Constitution bans immediately
1780	Penn	Current slaves kept for life, but their children are free
1783	NH	Current gradually freed; children born free
1783	Mass	All freed immediately
1784	Conn	All 25+ years old and new borns freed immediately
1784	RI	All freed immediately
1799	NY	Current freed in 1827; children born free
1804	NJ	Current slaves kept for life, but their children are free

The result is that only 40,086 slaves remain, with 80% of them in New York and New Jersey.

The Black Population In The Original Northeastern States In 1790

	NY	Pa	NJ	Conn	Mass	RI	VT	NH	Total
Slaves	21,193	3,707	11,423	2,648	0	958	0	157	40,086
Free Blacks	4,785	6,567	2,762	2,924	5,463	3,397	271	631	26,800
Total	25,978	10,274	14,185	5,572	5,463	4,355	271	788	66,886
Tot Pop	340,120	434,373	184,139	237,846	378,787	68,825	85,425	141,885	1,871,400

The journey of the roughly 2,700 slaves still remaining in Connecticut is fairly typical of the region.

The slave population in the state reaches a high point of about 6,500 people by 1774, with Puritans justifying the practice based on various Biblical verses, and on the notion that captivity enabled blacks to learn about Christianity.

To control these slaves, the state passes “Black Codes” in 1730 that outline a series of “whipping offenses:” being outside after 9PM without a signed pass; drinking liquor or selling goods without written permission; disturbing the peace or threatening a white person.

The Puritans tend to treat their slaves in a paternalistic fashion. Many act as household servants rather than field hands, and they are allowed to attend church services with their owners, albeit sitting in segregated pews. Some black children are also allowed to attend local schools.

While voluntary “manumission” occurs from time to time, the formal movement away from slavery begins in Connecticut in 1774 with a ban on the importation of Africans, in response to complaints from white laborers looking for work. When the war with England breaks out in 1776, some blacks join the Continental Army, fight in integrated units, and gain their freedom as a result of their service. Others find ways to accumulate the money needed to purchase freedom from their owners.

Then, in 1784, a Connecticut state law grants freedom at age 25 years to all future newborn slaves, and by the 1820 census, only 97 slaves are remaining.

Time: Antebellum Period

Sidebar: A Sampling Of “Negro Spirituals”

I WANT TO GO HOME.

*“Dere’s no rain to wet you,
O, yes, I want to go home.
Dere’s no sun to burn you,
O, yes, I want to go home ;
O, push along, believers,
O, yes, &c.
Dere’s no hard trials,
O, yes, &c.
Dere’s no whips a-crackin’,
O, yes, &c.
My brudder on de wayside,
O, yes, &c.
O, push along, my brudder,
O, yes, &c.
Where dere’s no stormy weather,
O, yes, &c.
Dere’s no tribulation,
O, yes, &c.”*

HAIL MARY.

*“One more valiant soldier here,
One more valiant soldier here,
One more valiant soldier here,
To help me bear de cross.
O hail, Mary, hail !
Hail!, Mary, hail !
Hail!, Mary, hail !
To help me bear de cross*

SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT

*Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.*

*I looked over Jordan, and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.*