

Background Information

A Very Brief History

Slavery has been with humanity almost since the fall of mankind and has been found in almost every culture, on every continent, and under most religions. For millenia, slavery generally involved captives of war, payment of debt, or orphaned or abandoned children. In most cases, slaves were from one's own race and ethnic group, though captives of war often were from neighboring countries or groups. In the Bible, and in many past cultures, slaves had rights that must be protected and observed, though it was never a safe or comfortable condition.

With the discovery of the New World by Europeans, however, the status of slavery changed. Almost as soon as Europeans began moving to the Americas, they brought slaves or enslaved the native population. European slaves generally were convict labor or indentured servants who sold themselves for a set period of time (generally seven years or less) to pay their passage to America. These servants or slaves were under the complete control of their owners, but often were paid wages and knew they would be freed. Indentured servants worked in all kinds of jobs, though farm work was most common. This pattern continued until the end of the 1600s when conditions in Europe improved and fewer people were willing to sell themselves for passage. As more and more slaves were black Africans, people began to associate the race with slavery and fewer blacks were allowed the same rights and privileges that similarly situated whites were allowed. Because most slaves were black and most owners were white, black ancestry began to be seen as inferior to white ancestry.

Native Americans also were used as slaves during the early European migration, but the settlers found them not well suited to the work because they were unfamiliar with the style of agriculture, they more easily escaped because of their local connections and familiarity with the terrain, and they were very susceptible to European disease. Some estimate that 50% to 90% of Native American slaves died from disease or harsh treatment.

Africans also came to America as slaves at this time, but most were treated similarly to the European indentured servants. Many gained their freedom and became landowners and community members along with other colonialists. However, that changed as the slave population gradually shifted to primarily African. Most African slaves were sold to Europeans by other Africans and taken to Brazil or the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. This region continued to account for the vast majority of imported African slaves; within a few decades, North American slave populations were not only self-sustaining, they were rapidly growing.

Gradually, the large farming operations of the southern United States began turning to African slaves for their labor force. The divergence on slavery between the North and South accelerated shortly after the American Revolution, but it became a headlong rush after the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney. With the cotton gin, cotton could be processed for sale quickly and easily, and the market for American cotton suddenly exploded. Southern cotton growers needed cheap, abundant field labor, and they found it in the African slaves. Within a few years, the price of a strong

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man had doubled or tripled, and the number of slaves soared. From this point on, Southern plantation owners viewed their economic survival tied directly to slavery.

Legal Milestones

In 1777, Vermont becomes the first state to prohibit slavery. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania follow suit in 1780, Connecticut and Rhode Island follow in 1784, New York in 1799, New Jersey in 1804.

In 1819, the United States makes the slave trade from Africa illegal. Trading within the Americas continues.

In 1820, the Missouri Compromise was signed, forming a balance of slave and free states and providing a framework for admitting states to the Union.

In 1837, black and white women meet together in New York City for the Antislavery Convention of American Women.

The *Amistad* ship revolt and trials take place in 1839 and 1840. The Africans spend a year in prison as the courts decide whether they are slaves or free men. Eventually the U.S. Supreme Court decides all were free Africans.

The Compromise of 1850 requires the return of runaway slaves, even in free states. It also admits California as a free state and Utah and New Mexico as states able to determine their own position on slavery.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 repeals the Missouri Compromise and returns decisions on slavery to the states.

In 1957, the Supreme Court decides the *Dred Scott* case, determining the Missouri Compromise is unconstitutional and any black person whose ancestors were sold as slaves cannot become a federal citizen and cannot have the rights of a citizen.

In 1859, abolitionist John Brown raids Harper's Ferry, Virginia, hoping to incite slave rebellion, but is defeated.

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln is elected president and South Carolina secedes from the Union. Ten other states follow suit.

The Confederate States of America, composed of the seceding southern states, forms in 1861. Confederate forces attack Union soldiers at Fort Sumter, and President Lincoln sends troops to put down the rebellion. The Civil War, or the War Between the States, begins.

President Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, granting freedom to all slaves in states in rebellion against the Union.

In 1865, the United States passes the 13th Amendment, prohibiting slavery; and in 1866 the 14th Amendment defines a U.S. citizen as anyone born within the United States, thereby granting citizenship to black Americans.

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 prohibits discrimination in public facilities (except schools).

However, the Supreme Court rules in the 1883 *Civil Rights Cases*, that the Civil Rights Act and the 14th Amendment do not apply to privately owned property. This ruling leads to the Jim Crow laws in many states barring black Americans from all manner of buildings and facilities.

In 1964, Congress passes the Civil Rights Act, reversing the Supreme Court's 1883 decision and barring discrimination based on color, sex, or religion. Three years later, Thurgood Marshall is appointed the first African-American Supreme Court Justice.

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The Compromise of 1850

The Compromise of 1850 was supposed to be the answer to the slavery problem in the United States, addressing three main issues: extending slavery into the territories and new states, the slave trade, and fugitive slaves. The Compromise admitted California as a free state; organized Utah and New Mexico without addressing slavery, giving them popular sovereignty, or the right to choose for themselves; outlawed the slave trade in the District of Columbia; and strengthened the fugitive slave laws, requiring people in free states to help return fugitive slaves to their masters.

On a national level, the states issues loomed large, but on a local and personal level the fugitive slave laws had a greater impact. It is one thing to theorize about political influence and positioning, but quite another to be forced to help capture a person one believed should be free and put him back into slavery, where he will most likely be severely punished. This was especially true in border states such as Ohio, as we shall see in the novel.

The Underground Railroad

The term Underground Railroad refers to a loosely organized network of people who helped escaped slaves reach safety and freedom, most often in Canada. Though some stories portray the network as a structured system that efficiently moved fugitives north, in reality it was more a matter of sympathetic people who knew other sympathetic people willing help. The Quakers, who as a group abolished slavery amongst its members in 1776, probably were the most organized in their efforts to help fugitive slaves, but other help often was offered as circumstance allowed. However, there was localized organization, particularly among dedicated abolitionists.

The bulk of the work and risk remained with the fugitive slaves and some free blacks, who had to get through the hostile southern states to reach sympathetic helpers in the north. Both “conductors” and fugitives ran risks, however, as tempers ran hot and sometimes scruples were discarded in pursuit of runaway slaves.

Though the term Underground Railroad is not used in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe accurately portrays the nature and dangers of fugitive slaves fleeing for their freedom on the Railroad.

Religion and Slavery

As mentioned earlier, almost all religions have permitted slavery at some time, and Christianity is no different. Most Europeans claimed to adhere to the Christian faith, but most African slaves came from cultures based on animism. Early American slave owners did not want to teach their slaves Christianity, because they felt that if the slaves became fellow Christians they would have to be freed or that baptism could change their legal standing. This attitude changed during the 1700s, so that by the 1800s slave owners encouraged Christianity among their slaves, believing it made them more submissive. They often used passages from the Bible to justify slavery, and, in particular, enslavement of blacks. Slaves, themselves, began to embrace Christianity because it gave them hope in a seemingly hopeless world.

Though people used Christianity and the Bible to their own ends in enslaving blacks in the United States, there were as many, if not more, people opposing slavery as an un-Christian institution and practice. It was among Christians that the movement to educate slaves and abolish slavery first grew, and predominantly Christian nations were the first in the world to end slavery.

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