

Unit 4

SLAVERY IN AMERICAN

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Chapter 1

The Black Man's African Past

A Black skin means membership in a race of men which has never created a civilization of any kind. – John Burgess, Scholar

Before doing the reading, answer the following questions, true or false. (make a chart similar to the one below on your own paper.)

Statement	True/ False	Still T/F
1. Most of Africa is jungle.		
2. Africans usually were hunters.		
3. Most Africans lived in primitive tribes.		
4. There were few if any cities in Africa 400 years ago.		
5. The Africans did not use money 400 years ago.		
6. Most Africans believed in "witch gods" 400 years ago.		
7. There was no slavery in Africa.		
8. 400 years ago, Africans did not have a written language.		
9. White people brought civilization to Africa.		
10. Religion was very important to Africans.		

Now read the story of Gustavus Vassa and the excerpts from the History textbook. Then decide if the statement is still true – and if it isn't write a true statement based on the new information you just learned. Rewrite the original statement if it was false, even if you did not agree with it.

Gustavus Vassa

Gustavus Vassa was born in Benin in West Africa. He was the youngest son of a chief. At age 11, Gustavus was captured by slave traders and was taken hundreds of miles from his home. When he arrived on the coast, he was sold to white men who put him on a slave ship. He was taken to America and sold several times. Up to this point, Vassa's story is much like that of about 10,000,000 Africans, except that Vassa survived the living hell of the slave ship. After that, his story is very unusual. Gustavus was taught to read and write and later was able to earn enough money to buy his own freedom. With the help of friends in England, he was able to find someone to publish his story. Parts of his book are printed below:

Vassa's Africa

The kingdom of Benin is divided into many districts. I was born in one of the villages furthest from the capital. The distance from the capital and sea coast must have been great. I had never heard of white men, the sea, or Europe, before I was captured.

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My people had little to do with the King of Benin. As far as I could tell, all of the government was run by chiefs or elders of my village. What happens in one village and family is pretty typical for the whole nation. Let me tell you of my life in Africa.

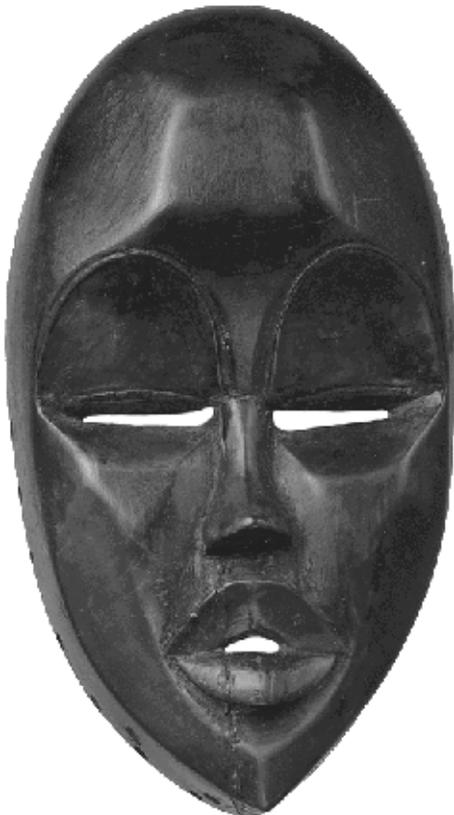
My father was one of those elders or chiefs, that I just mentioned. In our language he was called embrenche. It meant a grand person. These embrenche, or chief men, decided disputes, and punished crimes. On such times they gathered together. The trials were usually short. They followed the law of retaliation. I remember a man who was brought before my father. He was accused of kidnapping a boy. Although he was the son of a chief, he was ordered to pay back with a man or woman slave.

Economic Life in Africa

When the women are not farming with the men, they spin, weave cotton, dye it and make it into clothes. They also make many different kinds of pottery.

Our way of living was very plain. Our food were mainly cows, goats, and chickens or ducks. These meats are the main wealth of our country, and are used in trade. The flesh is usually stewed in a pan. We use spices such as pepper and salt. Our vegetables are mainly yams, beans, and Indian corn.

Our wants are few and easily supplied. We manufacture a few items, such as cloth, pottery and tools for war or farming. These we make for ourselves and do not sell. In such a state as this, money is of little use. However, we do have some small pieces of coin. They are made something like an anchor, but I do not remember any more about them. We also have markets, at which I have often gone with my mother. Here



we sometimes meet men called Cye Eboe (probably Ibo) which means red men living far away. They often bring us firearms, gunpowder, hats, beads, and dried fish. They exchange these articles for sweet – smelling woods, and our salt of wood ashes. They also carry slaves through our land. Before they are allowed to go on, the chiefs check carefully to see how they were obtained.

Our land is unusually rich and fruitful. Agriculture is our main work, and even women and children help farm. Thus we are all used to work from our earliest years. Every one contributes something for the common good. No one is idle, and we have no beggars.

Customs in Vassa's Africa

We are a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Every great event, such as a victory in battle, is celebrated in public dances. Songs and music is made that fits the occasion. The people are separated into four parts. and each has a special dance. Each pictures some interesting scene of real life, such as a great victory, a kind of work or a sad story. People are always making new dances for new events. This gives our dance a spirit which I have never seen elsewhere.

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We have simple manners and few luxuries. The dress of men and women are the same. There is generally a long piece of cloth, wrapped around the body. It is usually dyed blue, which is our favorite color. The dye is taken from a berry and is much brighter and richer than any other I have seen.

The head of a family usually eats alone. His wives and slaves also have separate tables. Before we taste food, we always wash our hands. After washing, an offering to the spirits is made by pouring a small part of the drink on the floor. Then food is put in a certain place for the spirits of our departed relatives. We never forget the dead. They watch over us and we watch over them.

We believe that there is one Creator of all things and that he lives in the sun. We believe that he controls the fates. We have never heard of a life ever—after in heaven, but there are some in my village who believe that the soul goes into another body. Those spirits that don't enter another body, such as close relatives, help guard us from the bad spirits of our enemies.¹

A Textbook History of Africa

Africa, the world's second largest continent, then included (and still does) many different social groups. Each of these groups had developed its own way of life, its own culture. There were striking differences among the groups in height, built, and color of skin. There were equally striking differences in social organization.

Long before the New World was discovered, a number of African societies - among them the West African kingdoms of Ghana, Melle, Benin and Songhay - had reached a high degree of civilization. For example, the ancient empire of Ghana, from which the modern nation of Ghana has taken its name,



Mosque at Djenne, sister city to Timbuktu

flourished for centuries. It reached the peak of its power five-hundred years before Columbus discovered America. Under the Negro King, Ask the Great, the two cities of Nenne and Timbuktu became trading and intellectual centers whose fame spread from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East. Moslem businessmen, statesmen, and scholars traveled to the cities of this African empire regularly. At the same time, scholars from the university located at Timbuktu won fame for their works. They visited and served as

professors at the universities of Fez, Tunis and Cairo.

Another example of a high level of development was the Ashanti kingdom of the Gold Coast. When the first British mission visited the Ashanti capital in 1817, the British were surprised to see the

² level of culture the Negroes had established. The British saw a well-organized society with trained soldiers and an elaborate social life, they saw the high craftsmanship of the Negroes revealed in beautifully woven silk robes and skillfully designed jewelry.

¹ Oludah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative in the Life of Oludah Equiano, or Gustavas Vasa, the African*, Dublin, 1791. pp. 3-21.

² <http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Classroom/9912/ancientmali.html> World Heritage City,

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The first European found similar conditions in the kingdom of Dahomey There roads were broad, clean, well laid out; buildings clean and neat. Law and order prevailed. Trade prospered. Taxes and customs duties were collected. A mail service was used.³

Malcolm X on African History

The U.S. History text books in Malcolm X's school days had no chapters which emphasized the many fine qualities of African culture, cities and civilization. In the following passage this famous African-American leader claims that there was a conscious decision made by whites to deny blacks of their African heritage:

They should have put it in the headlines, so they could wake black people up , And our people know that the white man knows that he didn't get us out of the jungle, he don't get us out of some place that was savage - he got us out of a place that was highly civilized in culture and in art, and then brought us down to the level that you see us today. But they are afraid to let us know what level we are on. They'll tell the Africans because they know the Africans know it, but they don't want you and me to know it.. Because the first thing you and I would start asking them is, "Well, what did you do to us?" And if you find out, then you'll want to do it to him.⁴

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. After completing the reading (having answered the T/F questions before you did the reading) state which of the original statements were false? On a separate piece of paper make and complete a table similar to the following:

Original statement	True/False	Facts that Show Original Statement False if it Was False
1.		
2.		
3. etc.		

2. What in general was the picture of life in Africa given in the reading as opposed to the picture reflected in the original statements. Give as many examples as you can.

3. How does Malcolm X account for the difference? Comment on his explanation, and any other explanation you may have.

³ Lewis Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation*, Harcourt Brace, 1968, p 440.

⁴Betty Shabazz and Merit Publishers, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, Pathfinder Press, Inc., New World, 1970, p 26.

Chapter 2

The Slave Trade

Suggested Student Exercises

1. Describe conditions on the slave ship.
2. Slave owners excused the slave trade as follows:

Slaves were taken from backward and primitive Africa and brought to a more advanced country. We admit there may have been some suffering. But can you blame slave traders for buying Africans when they were sold to them by other Africans? Besides, slaves were brought to a more advanced country where they would be better off.

Find facts from this chapter and the first that answers every sentence in the argument.

Gustavus Vassa is Captured

Vassa continues his story in his own words:

One day I was left alone at home with only my sister. All the others had gone out to work. Suddenly, two men and a woman got over the walls around our house and captured us both. They stuffed rags into our mouth and rushed us off into the woods before we could cry for help. Here they tied our hands and carried us until night. The next day, they made us walk for the whole day. Thus we continued to travel, sometimes on land and sometimes by water. We passed through many different countries and several nations.

At the end of six or seven months after I was kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast.

The first object that greeted my eyes when I arrived at the coast, was the sea and a slave ship. The ship was waiting for cargo. Imagine my terror when I was carried aboard the ship. I was handled and tossed to see if I was healthy. I was certain that I had entered a world of bad spirits who would kill me.

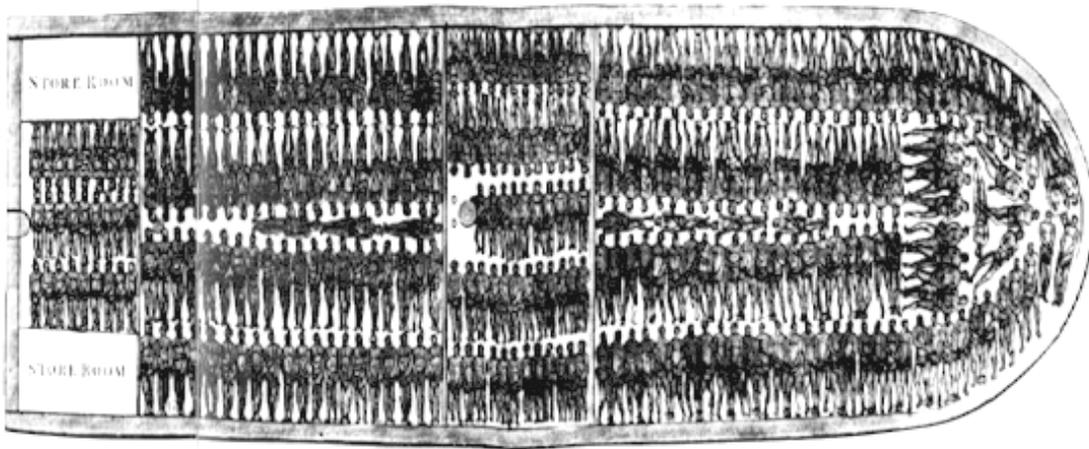
I looked around the ship and saw many black people with their faces full of sorrow. I fainted from fear and fell on the deck. When I awoke, I found some black people around me. They talked to me to cheer me up, but could not.

QuickTime™ and a
Photo - JPEG decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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Soon after this, the blacks who brought me on board went off and left me. I now thought that I would never return to my own country. I soon was put down under the decks and there smelled the worst odors I have ever smelled. I became so sick and low, that I was not able to eat. Nor did I have the slightest desire to taste anything. I now wished that my life would end. Soon, two white men offered me something to eat. I refused, and was flogged, until I finally agreed to eat something.



5

I later saw some of the slaves badly cut and whipped every hour for either trying to jump overboard or not eat. This often was done to me. The white people acted in such a savage manner, that I thought I would be put to death any minute. They were not only cruel to us blacks, but also to other whites. I saw one sailor beaten so badly that he died as a result. They threw him over the side as if he had been an animal.

The smell in the ship's hold, while we were on the coast, was so bad that it was dangerous to stay there. Some of us had been allowed to stay on the deck. Now the whole ship's cargo was forced into the hold. It was unbearable. We were crowded so close together that we hardly had room to turn around. It was so hot, that the air became unfit for breathing. This brought on sickness among the slaves. Many died. The chaffing of the chains made things worse. Women shrieked, and dying men groaned. I was brought to such a condition that they took me on deck. Here I was able to recover, but expected that I would die any moment. Every day, others were brought up on deck who already were dead.

One day two of my countrymen who were chained together jumped into the sea. Immediately, another man, followed his example. I would have followed, but was held back by the ship's crew. The boats were quickly lowered and the crew chased these slaves. They saved one from drowning and then almost beat him to death. That was the punishment for preferring death to slavery.

Landing in the Barbados

⁵ The slave ship *Brookes*, Wilberforce House, Kingston upon Hull City Museums and Art Galleries, UK

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A great shout went out when we finally sighted shore. When we pulled in, many merchants and planters came on board. They were there to look us over. Later, we were herded in the merchant's yards. On a signal, the buyers rushed into the yards. They chose which human flesh they wish to buy. In this way families and friends are separated often for ever. I remember there were several brothers who were sold to different people. I can still hear their cries at parting.⁶

A Ship's Doctor Describes the Slave Ships

The slave ships lie a mile below the town in Bonny River off the coast of Guinea. Sometimes fifteen sails meet here together. Scarce a day passes without some Negroes being purchased and carried on board.

The wretched Negroes are immediately fastened together. two and two, by handcuffs on their wrists and by irons riveted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks and placed in a space partitioned off for that purpose. They are frequently stowed so close as to admit of no other position than lying on their sides. Nor will the height between decks allow them to stand.

The diet of the Negroes while on board, consists chiefly of horsebeans boiled to the consistence of pulp.

Upon the Negroes refusing to take food, I have seen coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel and placed so near their lips as to scorch and burn them. I have also been credibly informed that a certain captain in the slave trade, poured melted lead on such of his Negroes as stubbornly refused their food.

On board some ships, the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure.

The hardships suffered by the Negroes during the passage are scarcely to be conceived. The exclusion of fresh air is the most intolerable. Whenever the sea is rough and the rain heavy it becomes necessary to shut every means by which air is admitted. The Negroes rooms very soon grow intolerably hot. The confined air produces fevers and fluxes which carry off great numbers of them. The floor of their rooms can be so covered with blood and mucus that it resembles a slaughter house. Last week by only continuing among them for about a quarter of an hour, I was so overcome with the heat, stench, and foul air that I nearly fainted: and it was only with assistance that I could get on deck...

One evening while the ship lay in Bonny River, one of the Negroes forced his way through the network on the left side of the vessel, jumped overboard and was devoured by the sharks. Circumstances of this kind are very frequent.

Very few of the Negroes can bear the loss of their liberty and the hardships they endure.⁷

⁶ Oladuah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative in the Life of Oladuah Equiano, or Gustavas Vasa, the African*, Dublin, 1791). pp. 46-53.

⁷ Martin Duberman, *In White America*, The New American Library, New York, 1965, pp. 21-22.

The Slave Trade Attacked

The main source of the slave trade is the wars which take place in Africa. The English and other Europeans have been charged with causing them. That some would do it, if they could, I doubt not. But I do not think they have the opportunity. Nor is it necessary they should. Thousands in England, wish for war, because they make money from it.

Human nature is much the same in every place. The Negroes in Africa are no better then we are. If they wish for European goods, may they then not wish to buy them from a ship? Of course, they must wish for slaves to take to market. If they don't have slaves, and think themselves strong enough to invade their neighbors, they may wish for war. And if we wish for war, how easy it is to find excuses for making war. This has been done in Europe for thousands of years.

I believe that most of the wars in Africa would stop, if Europeans stopped tempting Africans by offering goods for slaves.

I do not have enough information to be certain, but I would guess that 100,000 slaves are exported each year from all parts of Africa. Half of these are sent in British ships.

At least an equal number are killed in war as are sent into slavery. Most of these wars are probably started to sell prisoners. What a terrible amount of blood, therefore, is crying against the nations of Europe in the slave trade. What bloody hands, we Englishmen have.⁸

The Slave Trade is Still Operating

Slave ships no longer bring hundreds of innocent victims to the New World from Africa. That horror ended in the 19th century. But the trade in human flesh is not dead by a long shot, as chronicled in the following article which appeared in the *Sydney (Australia) Morning Herald*:

Between 1.5 million and 2 million children are bought and sold every year into lives of sexual and physical exploitation. Tens of millions more are held in bonded labour, working long hours as domestic servants, farm workers and in factories to repay family debts.

"Whether it is Bangladeshi toddlers trafficked into the United Arab Emirates or Chinese children smuggled into Los Angeles by snakehead criminal gangs, there is a lucrative trade in human beings," a spokesman for the American Anti-Slavery Group, Mr. Jesse Sage, said recently. "Our global economy creates demand for cheap goods and there is no cheaper labour than slave labour."

The United Nations says that trafficking people across borders is now the fastest growing arm of international organized crime, and worth up to \$18 billion a year.

The traffickers are preying mostly on women and children, the most vulnerable victims of economic despair, luring them with promises of jobs and education and then selling them into lives of degradation and servitude as prostitutes or domestic servants.

⁸ John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, London, 1962, pp. 108-9

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"This is a truly global problem," says a report on forced labour issued last week by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). "Most countries of the world are 'sending countries', 'transit countries' or 'receiving countries', or a combination of all these."

Although no precise figures can be placed on the global slave trade because of its clandestine nature, international authorities agree that the dimension of the problem is staggering - and getting worse.⁹

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 4, 2001:

Chapter 3

Solomon Northup and Mammy Harriet

There were some 4 million slaves living in the South in 1861, the year the Civil War began. Slaves did a large number of different jobs in the South. The wealthy slave owner lived in a beautiful mansion built by slave labor. Slaves were carpenters, brick masons, cabinet makers, and gardeners. Slaves performed most of the work inside these mansions, including cooking, cleaning, mending and sewing, and caring for the children. Slaves also cut hair, dug canals, built roads and railroads, worked on riverboats, mined coal, and worked in factories.

On the plantation, where most black people lived and worked, there were two kinds of slaves. One, was the house servant, whose work was somewhat like that of a full time maid or butler. The other was the field hand who spent most of his working days hoeing, planting, and picking cotton or tobacco. The house servant's life was far better than the field hands'. In addition to his work being easier, the house servant spent time with the owner and his family. Their loyal service often earned them kind treatment from those for whom they raised children, cooked meals, and cleaned homes.

Most slaves worked in the fields on large plantations under the watchful eye of an overseer. The image we have of large plantation with gangs of slaves picking cotton was true. The only question is what was life like for these people. Was it a hard grind from morning to night with hardly a break for lunch or, was it a much more comfortable work day, with time off during the heat of the sun at noon? Once their work was completed did slaves laugh and sing in the evening, as many Southerners claimed? Or did they lie down at night so tired that they were hardly able to finish their chores, as the critics of slavery believed?



George Washington supervising his slaves

In this chapter you will read two very different descriptions of the life of slaves. Both appeared in book form, told to and written down by whites. Read each of these reports carefully. Then try to decide which story probably best described the real life experience of the 4 million slaves living at the time of the Civil War and the lives of their parents and grandparents.

Solomon Northup

Solomon Northup was a free black man before he was kidnapped and sold as a slave. He worked on plantations for twelve hard years. He was finally able to get a letter to his wife in New York. She talked to the governor of state and Solomon was freed. After returning home, Northup wrote a book with the help of an abolitionist. The book was published with the help of other abolitionists, to help inform the American public about the conditions suffered by slaves. As you read each account, try to decide whether it is probably true.

Planting, Hoeing and Picking Cotton

A plow drawn by a mule makes a hole in the center of the row. A girl carrying a seed bag around her neck, drops seeds into holes. Behind her comes a mule pulling a metal frame which covers the seed. This is how cotton is planted. It is planted in March and April. Corn is planted during February.

The hoeing season starts in April and continues to August. No sooner is a field hoed, when hoeing starts again.

During the hoeing, the overseer or driver follows the slaves on horseback. He carries a heavy whip. The fastest hoer takes first row. He is usually about five yards in front of the others. If someone passes the first man, the lead hoer is whipped. If one falls behind, or loafs for a moment, he is whipped. In fact, the lash is flying from morning until night, the whole day long.

Toward the end of August, cotton picking season begins. At this time each slave gets a sack. The sack is so large, it reaches from the chest to the ground. A strap goes around the neck and keeps sack on.

When a new picker starts work on the first day he is whipped to make him go as fast as he can. At night the cotton he picks is weighed so they know what he can do. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If he falls short, he is whipped for not working hard enough. If he picks more cotton, then he must measure up to his new ability the next day.

When the day's work is over, the baskets with cotton are carried to the gin – house. No matter how tired he may be – no matter how much he wants to sleep and rest – the slave is scared. If his weight falls short – he knows that he will suffer.

Slave's Daily Allowance

At a late hour, the slave reaches his quarters. He is sleepy and overcome with the day's toil. Then a fire must be made in cabin. The corn has to be ground, and lunch for the next day in the field must be made. All that is allowed a slave is corn and bacon, given out every Sunday morning. That is all – no tea, coffee, sugar, and hardly any salt.

When the corn is ground and the fire is made, a slice of bacon is thrown on the coal to broil. Most slaves have no knife, let alone a fork. The bacon is cut with the ax by the woodpile. The corn meal is mixed with a little water. It is then placed in the fire and baked. When it is done the ashes are scraped off and it is time for supper. By then the hour is usually midnight.

As soon as it is Light

An hour before day light the horn is blown. Then the slaves get up to prepare their breakfast, fill a drinking gourd with water, and take their lunch of cold bacon and corn cake. Then they hurry to the fields.

It is a crime, usually punished with a whipping, to be at the slave quarters after dawn. Then the fear and work of another day begin. Until the end of the day there is no such thing as rest. The slave fears he will be caught loafing during the day, he fears coming to the cotton gin-house at night, and he fears when he lies down, that he will sleep too long in the morning.¹⁰

Mammy Harriet

Mammy Harriet was a slave on Thomas Dabney's plantation. She lived in Virginia until she moved with her master to Mississippi. Mammy was a house servant, and not a field hand. After the Civil War, her former master's daughter, Susan, decided to write a book about her father. Mammy was asked to contribute her memories. The following excerpt was written down by the daughter, supposedly just the way Mammy told it:

We was Neber (Never) Hurried

When we first come to dis country, Mississippi, master made de ploughers take in de mules at 11 o'clock. An he didn't allow em back in the fields before 3 o'clock. Nobody worked in dem hours. I suppose dat was to get us used to de new country. Oh, no, we was neber hurried. Master neber once said, 'Get up and go to work.' And no overseer said it, neither. If some of de slaves did not get up when de others went out to work master neber said a word. Oh, no, we was neber hurried.

In later times our ploughers and de others worked till 12 o'clock. Then dey take in de mules and 'everybody sat down to eat and rest till 3 o'clock. Sometimes when we was all settin roun' one would say to de odder, 'Come, let's get up an' go to work. We have been settin' long 'nuff'. But master never said such a thing.

In dem days some of de people used to oversleep deyselves. We used to larf at 'em especially at Sarah, my brother Billy's daughter. Marster would neber have no horn to wake us up. When one overseer come dyar wid his horn to wake us up master soon put a stop to dat. He said, 'I do not keep hounds to be called up with horns.' Sarah was a great hand to oversleep herself, and master didn't neber let nobody call her. Nor did he call any o' de others what oversleeps dyselfs. He say, 'Don't troble them. They cannot help that. 'An' to dem he would say, 'If you don't wake up till 12 o'clock, get up and come out to work then. Don't stay home and say that you are sick, because I don't blame you.' Sometimes I would not get through giving out de buttermilk to all de little black chillun, an' dat was 'bout 11 o'clock. An I would see marster an' Sarah goin' out to de field together. An' we would all larf at Sarah. She would say, 'What are you all larafin' bout? Go along. You do like you ain't got no sense. You fools, go along.' Sometimes we larf about dat to dis day wid Sarah, an' we set an' talk bout it. You ken ask her, an' she will tell you jes' what I tell you 'bout it.

¹⁰ Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, New York, 1855, pp. 63-71

The Fourth' of July

Yes, honey, dat he did give us Fourth' July - a plenty o 'holiday - a beef, a sheep, hogs, salt and pepper, an' everything. He had a great trench dug an' a whole load o' wooden spits across, an' dey had spoons an' basted de meat. He did not miss givin' us whiskey to drink - a plenty of it, too. An' we 'vite all de colored people aroun'. De come, an' we had fine times. Our people was so good, an dy had so much. Dyara warn't sich masters no whyar. Marster mus'nt be named de same day as odder people.¹¹

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Does the dialect used in the Mammy Harriet account add an aspect of authenticity to her story?
2. Summarize the different views of slavery given in the two accounts; include specific examples on how slaves worked and were treated.
3. Explain which of the two accounts is more likely to e true. Cover the following points:
 - a. who the story is told to - do either writers have reasons to distort.
 - b. whether the story is believable - i.e. is it likely that slaves would be treated that way.
 - c. whether the story agrees with other information you have about slavery.

¹¹ Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1965, pp. 44-45.

Chapter 4

The Life Cycle of a Slave

The words ‘life cycle’ refer to a pattern almost all, human beings follow. It includes birth, relation with parents, marriage, living with wife or husband, old age and death. Slaves as well as free people experienced these five stages of the life cycle. Only, it was different for a slave because of his helplessness and dependence on the generosity of his/her owners.

Frederick Douglass was born a slave. He escaped to the North, became a leader of the abolitionist movement, and a spokesperson for African-Americans. The following, excerpted from his autobiography, universally hailed as the most powerful narrative of a former slave:

I was born in Tuckahoe, Maryland. I have no exact knowledge of my age, for I was never told of the year of my birth. Most slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs. It is the wish of most masters to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember knowing a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom could say more that it was planting time, harvesting – time, cherry – time, or fall – time. A want of information about my own birth caused me unhappiness even during childhood. The white children could tell me their ages. I could not tell why I should not have the same privilege.¹²

Children and their Mothers

Frederick Douglass continues to tell the little he knew about his mother.

I will say nothing of my father, for I never knew who he was. Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families.

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant. This was before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom in this part of Maryland to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Often, before the child has reached its twelfth month its mother is taken from it. The real mother is often hired out to some farm a long distance away from the child. It may be to prevent the child from becoming fond of his mother, and to destroy the mother’s love for her child. This is always the result.

I never saw my mother more than four or five times in my life. Each of these times the visits were very short and at night. She worked about twelve miles from my home. She made the journey to see me in the night. She had to travel the whole distance on foot after her day’s work. She was a field hand and a whipping is the penalty for not being in the field at sunrise. I do not remember ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep. Long before I waked, she was gone. Very little talk ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived. It also ended her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old.¹³

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Boston, 1845), p. 1.

¹³. loc. cit.

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In the 1930s, the government paid people to record stories told by old black people who once were slaves. The following, was one of these stories. It is about a woman who never got to keep tier babies, and what she did:

My mother told me that master owned a woman who was the mother of many children. When her babies would get about a year or two of age. he would sell them. This would break her heart. She never got to keep them. When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old, she worried about how she would have to give it up. One day she said, "I just decided I'm not going to let the Master sell this baby. He just ain't going to do it." She got up and give it something out of a mottle. Pretty soon it was dead. Course didn't nobody tell on her, or he would of beat her nearly to death.¹⁴

Children and their Fathers

Josiah Henson was a famous slave who escaped to freedom. He went to live in Canada, where he was safe from slave catchers. In his book, he tells of how he lost his father:

The first sorry thing I can remember happened while mother lived at Mr.. Newell's farm. One day the overseer tried to rape my mother. She told her husband. When the overseer tried again, my father got so mad he beat the overseer. He would have killed him, but the man promised that nothing would happen if his life was spared. Despite his promise, the overseer had my father brought to trial. Father was given 100 lashes with a whip and had his right ear cut off. I well remember how my father looked after the punishment. His head was covered with blood and his back was laced with stripes. Afterwards, my father became a different man. He became so disobedient that Mr. Newell decided to sell him. He sold father to a man in Alabama and neither my mother or I ever heard of him again.¹⁵

Getting Married

The following stories were told by people who were born before the Civil War. They lived as slaves in the South before they were freed by the 13th Amendment in 1865. These stories were recorded and written down 70 years later, in the 1930's as part of a government project designed to provide jobs.

When you married, you had to jump over a broom three times. Dat was de license. If master seen two slaves together too much he would tell 'em dey was married. Hit didn't make no difference if you wanted to or not; he would put you in de same cabin an' make you live together.

Marsa sometimes used to pick our wives fo'us. If he didn't have enough women for the men, he would wait on de side of de road til a big wagon loaded with slaves came by. Den Marsa would stop and buy you women. Was no use trying to pick one cause Marsa wasn't going to pay but so much for her. All he wanted was a young healthy one who, looked like she could have children. Den he would lead you an' de woman over to one of de cabins and stand you on de porch. He wouldn't go in. No sir. He'd stand right dere. He'd read sompin real fast out of de Bible an' finish

¹⁴ B.A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1945.

¹⁵ Josiah Hensen *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*, London, 1852, pp. 1-3.

*up wid dis verse: 'Dat you' wife – Dat you' husband – I be you' marsa – She you' missus – You married.*¹⁶

Mothers and Children

Solomon Northup was a free black man who was kidnapped into slavery. His description of his life as a farm worker was given in Chapter III. Here he describes a slave market in which a mother and child are separated.

A planter from Baton Rouge purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump and run to prove his fitness. All this time his mother, Eliza, was crying aloud. She begged the man not to buy him, unless he also bought herself and Emily (her daughter). She promised she would be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it. Eliza burst into tears. The slave auctioneer turned around to her, with his whip in his hand. He ordered her to stop the noise, or he would flog her. Unless she stopped that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman could not completely silence her. She kept begging and begging them not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy. The bargain was agreed upon and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him: embraced him: kissed him again and again; told him to remember her – all the while her tears falling in the boy's face like rain.

Freeman damned her, calling her a bawling wench, and ordered her to get to her place. and behave herself. He swore he wouldn't stand such stuff but a little longer. He would give her something to cry about, if she was not mighty careful, and she could depend upon that.

The planter from Baton Rouge with his new purchases was ready to leave.

*"Don't cry mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry:" said Randall, looking as they passed out of the door.*¹⁷

Husbands and Wives

Nor is this cruel punishment inflicted on the bare backs of the male portion of slaves only. Oh no! The slave husband must submit without a murmur, to see the form of his cherished, but wretched wife, not only exposed to the rude gaze of a beastly tyrant, but he must unresistingly see the heavy cowhide descend upon her shrinking flesh, and her manacled limbs writhe in inexpressible torture, while her piteous cries for help ring through his ears unanswered.¹⁸

Old Age

Frederick Douglass describes the suffering of his old grandmother. More than anything else in his life.. he said, the treatment of this old woman, filled him with hatred of slavery.

¹⁶ B.A. Botkin, ed., *op. cit.*, p 154.

¹⁷ Solomon Northup, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-82.

¹⁸ Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*

Her present owner found she was now of very little value to them. Her body was racked with the pain of old age. Her once active body was becoming completely helpless. So they took her to the woods where they built her a little hut and made her support herself. There she was in perfect loneliness, like being put out to die. If my poor old grandmother now lives, she lives to suffer in utter loneliness. She lives to remember and mourn the loss of her children, the loss of her grandchildren. and the loss of her great grandchildren.

Her home is empty. The children who once sang and danced in her presence. are gone. She feels her way, in the. darkness of age. for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the owl. All is gloom. The grave is at the door. My poor old grandmother in this most needful time, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a dying fire. She stands - she sits - she staggers - she falls - she groans - she dies - and there are none of her children or grandchildren present. to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. Will not a righteous God visit for these things? ¹⁹

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Do you blame the woman in the story for killing her baby; could blame be put on the slave owner; on the system of slavery? Other?
2. Note in each case how the life cycle of a slave differed from that of a free person, by citing at least one case at each stage - birth, relationships with parents, getting married, mothers and children, old age and death.

19 Frederick Douglass, op. cit., pp. 76-78.

Chapter 5

Methods of Controlling Slaves

African-Americans were not naturally born slaves. In their native land, they had been proud, free, and independent people. As slaves, many rebelled, more ran away, and most often slowed down on the job, avoided work, deliberately broke tools, or pretended not to understand commands. These forms of slave resistance, presented a real problem and ever present problem for the masters. The best way to manage slaves, therefore, was often a topic of conversation among slave owners and Southern magazines were full of advice on how to manage, handle, discipline, and break slaves. As time wore on an elaborate system of controls was developed that is partially described in this chapter. It included whippings, slave laws called slave codes, the use of religion, as well as constant punishment and intimidation. All these methods were designed to control slaves and keep them working. None of them were completely successful, but they help explain why slavery lasted for 250 years.

A Slave is Whipped

A famous Northern architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, made three trips through the South. His purpose was to learn through personal observation how slaves were treated. Olmsted wrote several books describing what he found. His reports are often cited as the most objective description of life in the South because they seem to be related without bias. Paradoxically, he characterizes the beating described in the following selection as 'the worst case of punishment that I saw in the South.' and as 'not unusual.' It occurred while the writer was accompanying the overseer on a routine inspection tour of the plantation.

We had twice crossed a gully that and at its bottom a thicket of brushwood. We were crossing it the third time, when the overseer suddenly stopped his horse. "What's that?" he yelled, "Hallo! Who are you there!"

It was a girl lying down at the bottom of the gully, trying to hide herself from us.

"Who are you there?"

"Sam's Sall, sir."

"What are you hiding there for?" The girl half rose but gave no answer.

"Have you been here all day?"

"No, sir."

"How did you get here?" The girl made no reply. "Where have you been all day?" We could not understand the answer.

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After some more questions. she said that her father had locked her up by accident and then went out in the morning.

'How did you manage to get out.?'"

'Pushed a plank out, sir, and crawled out.'"

The overseer looked at the girl and then said, "That won't do, come out here." The girl arose at once, and walked towards him. She was about eighteen years of age. A bunch of keys hung from her waist. He saw them and said, "Ah, your father locked you in, but you have the keys." After a moment of thought she said that these were the keys of some other locks. Her father had the door key.

The overseer might have found out if her story was true or false in two minutes. He could have gone off to talk to the girl's father who was working in the next field. But the overseer had already made up his mind that the girl was lying.

"That won't do," he said, "get down on your knees." The girl knelt on the ground. He got off of his horse and struck her thirty or forty blows across the shoulders with his whip. At every stroke the girl winced and yelled, "Yes, sir" or "Ah, Sir!" or "Please, sir" but did not groan or scream. Finally he stopped and said, "now tell me the truth." The girl repeated the same story. "You have not got enough yet," he said. "Pull up your clothes -- lie down." The girl drew her dress under her shoulders and lay down on the grass with her face toward the overseer. He continued to hit her with the raw -- hide whip. across her naked thighs. with as much strength as before. She now shrunk away from him. screaming, "Oh, don't sir!" "oh please stop, master, please, sir", "oh, God, master. Do stop!, oh, God, Master"

I glanced again at the overseer. His face was grim and business like. He did not seem angry or excited.

"Was it necessary to punish her so severely?"

"Oh yes, sir." he said, laughing. "If I hadn't punished her so hard. she would have done the same thing tomorrow. The next day half the people on the plantation would have followed her example. Oh, you have no idea how lazy these blacks are. You northern people don't know anything about it. They would never work at all if they were not afraid of being whipped." ²⁰

Slave Codes

Slave codes were rules made for slaves which were the law of the state. Every Southern state had a set of slaves codes. Often one state would copy the laws passed by another, so the slave codes were usually quite similar all over the South. The following is quoted from the Louisiana Slave Code of 1852:

- I. The slave owes to his master and all his family total respect and absolute obedience. He must instantly obey all orders he receives from them.
2. No slave can own anything of his own without the consent of his master. No slave can sell anything he has made without his master's consent.

²⁰ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country*, New York, 1860, pp. 83-84.

3. No slave can be a witness in any case against a white person.
14. Slaves shall always be considered real estate, and may be mortgage according to the rules of law.
- 19.No slave shall be allowed off of his plantation without written permission from his master.
29. If a slave willfully strikes a white person to cause shedding of blood, the slave shall be punished with death.
149. Any person who teaches a slave to read and write shall be imprisoned for no less than one month or more than 12 months. ²¹

A Sermon Preached to Slaves

The following sermon was preached to slaves by a minister of God. It was considered so good that it was printed in a magazine to give other masters ideas of the kind of religion slaves should get.

I have just shown you the chief duties you owe to your great master in heaven. I will now tell you your duties to your masters and mistresses here upon earth.

You must have one rule that you must always have in your minds that is - serve your master as if he were GOD himself. Poor creatures! You don't consider that when you are idle and neglect your master's business, and whatever faults you are guilty of - these are faults against God himself. If you steal from your master, you are stealing from God himself. If you tell lies to your master, you are telling lies to God himself. When you steal and waste your masters goods, when you are saucy and wise, when you are stubborn or sullen, you are sinning not only against your master, but also against your master in Heaven.

From this rule - that all ye do unto your master ye do unto GOD himself, there are several other rules which I will, teach you

1. *You are to be obedient to your master in all things.*
2. *You are not to be eye - servants. Eye-servants are those who will work hard and seem busy when they think they are being watched. When their master's 'back is turned, they are idle and don't do their work.*
3. *You are to be faithful and honest to your masters - not wasting their goods - but showing all good in all things.*
4. *You are to serve your masters with cheerfulness, reverence and humility. You are to do your masters service with good will. You should serve him as you would God, from the heart, without any sauciness or answering back. ²²*

Frederick Douglass and Master Hopkins

²¹ Gilbert Osofsky, *The Burden of Race*, New York, Harper and Row, 1967, pp. 15-17.

²² Gilbert Osofsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40.

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Frederick Douglass tells how his master controlled his slaves:

Mr. Hopkins could always find some excuse for whipping a slave. A mere look, word, or motion – a mistake, or accident – are all, things for which a slave could be whipped. Does a slave look unhappy? It is said that he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out. Does he speak loudly when spoken to by his master? Then he is getting high-minded. and should be taken down a peg. Does he forget to pull off his hat in the presence of a white person? Then he lacks respect. and should be whipped for it. Does he ever dare find excuses when told he did something wrong? Then he is guilty of impudence - one of the greatest crimes of which a slave can be guilty. Does he ever dare to suggest a different way of doing things from that pointed out by his master? Then he is indeed getting above himself: and nothing less than a flogging will do for him. Does he, while ploughing, break a plow - or, while hoeing, break a hoe? It is owing to carelessness, and for it a slave must always be whipped. ²³

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Do you think the overseer in the story, 'A Slave is Whipped', "had" to beat the girl? If he had to beat her, what does this tell us about slavery?
2. List four different slave codes and explain the reason Southerners might have thought them necessary.
3. Explain two different ways that masters tried to "brainwash" slaves.
4. What do the ways used to control slaves tell us about slavery as an institution?

²³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Boston, 1845, pp. 111-12

Chapter 6

Responses to Slavery: Spirituals and Stories

While the masters were doing everything in their power to control slaves, what were the slaves thinking? We have very little direct evidence, but we do have a record of songs and stories the slaves sang and told. They tell us a good deal about how the slaves viewed their condition.

The songs you are about to read (with one exception) are known as 'Negro Spirituals'. They were song by slaves and later written down, and are still song today. Most of them refer to the experience of the Hebrew people in captivity in Egypt and Babylon and were taken from the Old Testament of the Bible. But it is clear to see that the slaves saw a parallel between their situation as slaves and that of the Hebrew people.

We Raise the Wheat (not a spiritual)

We raise the wheat,
We bake the bread,
They give us the corn;
They give us the crust;
We sift the meal,
They give us the skin,
And that's the way
They take us in.

We skim the pot
They give us the liquor,
And say that's good enough for them.

The big bee flies high,
The little bee makes the honey.
The black folks makes the cotton
And the white folks get the money.

Go Down, Moses

(Note: Moses led the Hebrew people out of their captivity in Egypt. The Pharaoh was the King of Egypt)

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.

When Israel was in
Egypt land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they
could not stand
Let my people go.

Go down Moses,
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
"Let my people go."

"Thus saith the Lord,"
bold Moses said,
"Let my people go;
If not I'll smite your
first-born dead
Let my people go."

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
"Let my people go!"

Swing Low - Sweet Chariot

(Note: the Jordan River was the border of Israel, the home of the Hebrew people)

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming forth to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming forth to carry me home

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

Nobody Knows the_

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Gory, Hallelujah!

Sometimes I'm up,
sometimes I'm down,
Oh, yes, Lord!
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground,
Oh, Yes, Lord!
Although you see me
going along, so.
Oh, yes, Lord!
I have my troubles here below,

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel

(note: Daniel was thrown into a den with a lion who did not eat him because Daniel had helped the lion)

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Then why not every man?

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,
Jonah from the belly of the whale
The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
Then why not every man?

Trouble I've Seen

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory, Hallelujah!

One day when I was walking along,
Oh, yes, Lord!
The elements opened and His love came
down,
Oh, yes, Lord!

I never shall forget that day,
Oh, yes, Lord!
When Jesus washed my sins away,
Oh, yes, Lord!

Oh, yes, Lord!

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows my sorrow.

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory, Hallelujah!

Stories Told By Slaves

'High John de Conquer' was a slave who always seemed to get the best of his master. There were hundreds of High John stories. One is told here. What does the story tell about the slaves who tell it.

Possum

Old Massa loved roasted young pigs, and had them often for dinner. Old John loved them too, but Massa never allowed the slaves to eat any at all. John got tired of that. He took to stopping by the pigpen when he had a strong taste for pigmeat, and getting himself one, and taking it on down to his cabin and cooking it.

Massa began to miss his pigs, and made up his mind to see who was taking them. John keeps taking pigs, and one night Massa walked him down, and saw John kill the pig. Massa went back to the big house and waited till he figured John had it dressed and cooking. Then he went on down to the quarters and knocked on John's door.

"Who's dat?" John called out big and bold.

"It's me, John," Massa told him. "I want to come in."

"Naw, naw, Massa. You don't want to come into no old slave cabin. Youse too fine a man for that.

"I tell you, I want to come in, John!"

So John had to open the door and let Massa in. John had seasoned that pig down, and it was stinking pretty! John knowed old Massa couldn't help but smell it. Massa talked on about crops and hound dogs and one thing and another, and the pot with the pig in it was hanging over the fire in the chimney and kicking up. The smell got better and better.

Way after while, Massa said, "John, whats cooking in dat pot?"

Nothing but a little old weasly possum, Massa."

Get a plate and give me some of it, John. I am hungry."

"Aw, naw, Massa, you ain't hungry."

"Now, John, I don't mean to argue with you another minute. You give me some of that in the pot, or I mean to have the hide of o your back tomorrow morning. Give it to me."

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So John got up and went and went to the pot. He lifted the lid and looked at Massa and told him, "Well Massa, I put this thing ain't here a possum, but it come out a pig, it ain't no fault of mine."

Old Massa didn't want to laugh, but he did before he caught himself. He took the plate of browned down pig and ate it up. He never said nothing, but he gave John and all the other house servants roast pig at the big house after that.²⁴

Malitis

The following story is based on one of the recordings of former slaves made during the 1930's. Like the High John story, it is about how the slaves tricked the master to get pig meat.

Some of them slaves was so poorly thin they would kinda rustle against each other like corn stalks a drying in the hot winds. But they get even one hog killing time, and it was funny, too.

There was seven hogs, fat and ready to fall hog killing time. Just the day before Old Master told off they was to be killed, somethin happen to all them porkers. One of the filed boys found them and come a telling the master; The hogs all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter.

When the master gets to where the hogs is laying, they's a lot of Negroes standing around sorrow eyed at the wasted meat. The master asks: "Whats the illness with them?"

"Malitis," they tells him and they acts like they don't want to touch the hogs. Master says to dress them anyway for they ain't any more meat on the place.

He says to keep all the meat for the slave families, but thats because he is afraid to eat it hisself account of the hogs got militis.

Now the master never knew that long before the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins one of the strongest Negroes got up. He skitted down to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog tween the eyes with the mallet, malitis set in pretty quick. But it was an uncommon disease, even with hungry Negroes around all the time.²⁵

Suggested Student Exercises

1. Explain what the slaves were saying about their own lives by:
 - a. Taking each song separately, and state what is meant by each important phrase.
 - b. Summarizing the stories and telling the real moral of each.

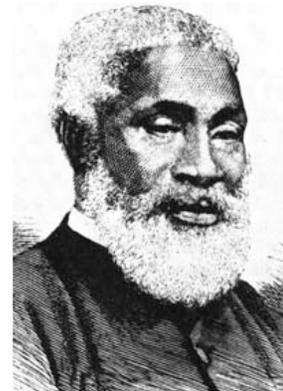
²⁴ Quoted in, Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, ed., *The Book of Black Folklore*, New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1965),

²⁵ B.A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1945, pp. 4-5.

Chapter 7

Three Responses to Slavery: Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth

Every slave responded differently to the fact he/she was owned by another person and did not have his/her freedom. The two slaves you will be reading about in this chapter had very different responses. One decided to do what he had promised -- even though it meant returning to slavery. The other fought back against his master. Read both stories and decide -- which of the two was more to be admired?



Josiah Henson

Josiah Henson: The Slave Who Kept His Promise

His master trusted him to take a group of 21 slaves from Maryland to Kentucky. Josiah Henson had given his solemn promise that he would complete this mission for his master. But he had a chance to escape to freedom. What should he do? In the following reading Josiah Henson described his dilemma and the difficulty it caused him:

My master had money problems which led to a lawsuit from his brother-in-law. He was charged with dishonest management. The lawsuit caused my master's ruin. He saw no way out but to escape to another state.

My master came to my cabin. He told me he was ruined and ask for advise. He said he had but one hope and that depended on me. He begged me to promise to do what he advised. I was afraid the sheriff would take every one who belonged to him and we would all be separated. Some of the slaves might be sold to Georgia or Louisiana. I therefore promised my master I would do all I could to save him. He told me I must take the slaves to his brother in Kentucky. He said that this was the only means by which he could be saved. The result was that I agreed. There were eighteen Negroes, besides my wife and two children, to transport nearly 1,000 miles.

We started in the month of February, 1825. My master gave me a small amount of money and some food. I bought a one-horse wagon to carry them.

The trip over land went well. When we arrived at Wheeling, West Virginia I sold the horse and wagon. With the money I bought a boat and floated down the Ohio River without any trouble.

There was one great temptation I had to resist. In Cincinnati, Ohio the colored people gathered around us, and urged us to remain with them. They used all arguments to get us to leave our master.

I had always wanted to be free, but only by purchasing myself from my master. The idea of running away was not one that I had considered. I had an idea of honor on the subject which I would not have broken even for freedom. Every cent I had ever called my own, had been kept for this great purpose. Now I might free my family my companions, and myself at one stroke.

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*But I had promised my master to take his property to Kentucky. This, and this only, I planned to do. I left Cincinnati before night, and camped a few miles below the city. I had often had painful doubts as to carrying so many people into slavery again, but I acted as I thought at the time was right.*²⁶

Frederick Douglass and the Slave Breaker



Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was the most famous slave to escape from slavery. After coming North he played a major part in the movement to end slavery, and became the chief national spokesperson for all African-Americans. He also wrote a book about his experiences as a slave -- parts of which you already read. In this reading Douglass talks about his most important act as a slave -- fighting back against his master. He was sixteen years old at the time of this incident. As you read the story -- think about why he was sent to the slave breaker, why the slave breaker sent him out to gather wood with two unbroken oxen, whether there was magic power in a root that supposedly kept him from being punished, and what Douglass meant when he said at the end he was no longer a slave in fact. You will also be asked whether you admire Douglass more than Henson.

Mr. Covey, the Slave Breaker

I lived with master Thomas for nine months. During this time he had given me a number of severe beatings. They had not served their purpose. He decided to put me out to be broken. For this purpose he rented me for one year to a man named Edward Covey. Mr. Covey had a very high reputation for breaking slaves. He was so good at it that some slave owners lent Mr. Covey their slaves for one year for the sake of the training which he forced on them.

I left Mr. Thomas's house and went to live with Mr. Covey on the 1st of January, 1833. I was now, for the first time in my life a field hand.

The Oxen

Mr. Covey sent me very early in the month of January to the woods. He told me to get a load of wood and gave me a team of unbroken (not trained) oxen. I had never driven oxen before. Before I got far into the woods, the oxen took flight and started running. They upset the cart, dashing it with great force against a tree. How I escaped death I do not know. I was entirely alone in the thick wood, the cart was upset and shattered, and the oxen were entangled. After a long spell I got my cart righted.

On my return, I told Mr. Covey what had happened. He then went to a tree with his axe, cut three large switches, and ordered me to take off my clothes. He then lashed me till he had worn out his switches, leaving scars for a long time after.

²⁶ Josiah Henson *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*, (London, 1852),

My Life with Covey

During the next six months of the year scarce a week passed without his whipping me. My awkwardness was almost always his excuse for whipping. We were worked fully up to the point of collapse.

Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. My spirit was crushed; my mind became a blank. The dark night of slavery closed in upon me.

I Go to Master Thomas's

On one of the hottest days of August I broke down. My strength failed me, and I fainted. When Covey heard what happened, he took up a hickory stick and gave me a heavy blow on the head. It made a large wound, and the blood ran freely. He now left me to my fate. I decided to go to my old master and enter a complaint. I arrived, covered with blood, at my master's store after walking seven miles. I humbly asked my master to protect me. I told him that Mr. Covey would surely kill me. Master Thomas said I belonged to Mr. Covey and must go back to him.

I Fight My Covey

That next day on the way back I met Sandy Jenkins, a slave I knew. I told him my troubles, and he told me I must go to a part of the woods where there was a certain root. If I would take some of it with me, carrying it always on my right side, it would be impossible for Mr. Covey or any other white man, to whip me. I first rejected the idea, but Sandy insisted, so I took it to please him.

I immediately started for home. Upon entering the yard gate, out came Mr. Covey on his way to church. He spoke to me very kindly. This made me begin to think there was something in the root which Sandy gave me.

All went well till Monday morning. I was called to feed the horses. Mr. Covey entered the stable, and caught hold of my legs and was about tying me with a rope. I gave a sudden spring and we went sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, but at this moment I decided to fight! I grabbed Mr. Covey by the throat, and as I did so, I rose. He held on me, and I to him.

We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey finally let me go saying he would not have whipped me as much had I not resisted. The truth was he had not whipped me at all. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid weight of his finger upon me.

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It relit the fires of freedom. It revived within me a sense of my own manhood. My long-crushed spirit rose, fear departed and bold hope took its place. I now promised myself, that, however, long I might remain a slave in form; the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.²⁷

²⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1968, pp. 71-83.

Ain't I A Woman?

Former slave, Sojourner Truth, delivered the following famous and often quoted speech in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio



Sojourner Truth

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.²⁸

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. In the Josiah story, explain a. what Henson promised, and why he made the promise; b. what pressure there was on Henson not to keep his promise; and, c. whether Henson made the right decision.
2. In Frederick Douglass's story, explain a. whether the purpose of the slave breaker was to teach Douglass to work in the fields; b. why Covey sent Douglass out with the unbroken oxen; c. whether the root really worked; and, d. whether Douglass was right in saying that he was no longer a slave in fact.

²⁸ Internet Modern History Sourcebook

3. Who did you admire more - Douglass or Henson? Why? In your answer refer to the idea that slaves were supposed to believe they should be slaves and to the spirit of Sojourner Truth.

Appendix

Douglass later tried to explain why Covey did not report him for raising his hand against a white man. His actions were against the law in all southern states. Douglass's explanation was that had Covey reported him, Covey's reputation as a slave breaker would have been destroyed. Douglass did not claim that the root had any magic power.



Harriet Beecher

Not long after Henson settled in Kentucky with his old master, the master stole the money Henson had been saving to buy his own freedom. This convinced Henson to strike out for himself, and he ran away, escaping to Canada. There he was visited by an American abolitionist, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe wrote the famous anti-slave classic, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is said that the character of Uncle Tom, and obedient and loyal slave, was modeled after Josiah Henson. The term, "Uncle Tom" is used to today among some African-Americans to describe a black person who does everything whites want him to do without regard to the interests of his own race.

Chapter 8

Responses to Slavery: Nat Turner's Rebellion

The previous chapters you have read of efforts of Southerners to break the spirits of their slaves. Despite these efforts there were over 250 slave rebellions in the South. Two of these rebellions, one lead by Denmark Vesey and the other by Nat Turner either lasted for a long time, or were so well organized, that it is important to tell the tales of this heroic resistance to slavery.

Before the Turner rebellion, a free African-American by the name of Denmark Vesey planned a major uprising in Charleston, South Carolina for 1822. Vesey was a brilliant man who learned several languages and hated slavery. He had won money in a lottery that he used to buy freedom. He then worked for 22 years as a carpenter, and became a respected and a wealthy citizen.

Vesey had a lot of free time to plot his slave rebellion. He and others recruited somewhere between 2,000 and 9,000 slaves. The men were divided into 8 companies -- six of who were to attack guard houses, arsenals and powder store houses. Charleston and the surrounding area would be set on fire -- thousands of whites would be killed. Some say Vesey planned to escape by ship to Haiti

The Vesey rebellion was betrayed by a faithful house slave. When the full extent of the plot became known -- white Charleston shuttered. But the leaders of the rebellion went to their death without revealing important details of this major slave conspiracy.

Nat Turner, was a slave preacher so convincing he once converted a white overseer. In contrast to Vesey, Turner only involved six in his scheme and it was simple enough. Go from one house to another, starting with Turner's mild master, Travis -- and kill all whites. Only a non-slave owning family was spared.

The following account of the Turner rebellion comes from Turner's "confession". The confession was taken by Turner's lawyer, Thomas Gray. Gray read it in court and entered a plea of innocence for his client. He said that Turner did not "feel guilty." With such a half-hearted defense accompanied by widespread abhorrence to his actions, Turner was condemned to death and hung six days later -- on November 12, 1831.

Turner's Confession

Since the beginning of 1830, I have been living with Mr. Joseph Travis. He was a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me. In fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment of me.

On the 20th of August, it was agreed between the slaves Henry, Hark, and myself to prepare a dinner for the men we expected the next day. There we were to prepare the plan for our uprising, for we had not yet settled on one. Hark on the following morning brought a pig and Henry brought brandy. They and three others prepared a dinner in the woods, where I joined them about three o'clock.

I greeted them on coming up and noticed Will who had not been one of us before. I ask him how came he here. He answered his life was worth no more than the others', and his freedom was as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would or lose his life. This was good enough to put him in full confidence. It was quickly agreed we should start at home (Mr. Travis's)

*on that night. We would spare neither age nor sex until we gathered sufficient force and had armed and equipped ourselves. ***

At the Travis's

We stayed at the feast, until about two hours in the night. Then we went to the house. Realizing the alarm might wake the neighborhood, we decided to enter the house secretly and murder the family while they lay asleep. Hark got a ladder and set it against the chimney. I climbed up and lifted a window, entered and came down stairs. I unbarred the door and removed the guns from their places. It was then decided that I must be the first to spill blood. Armed with a hatchet and accompanied by Will, I entered my master's chamber. It being dark, I could not give a death blow. The hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife. It was his last word. Will laid him dead with one blow of his axe. Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed. The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment for not one of them awoke. There was a little infant sleeping in a cradle that was forgotten. After we left the house and gone some distance, Henry and Will returned and killed it. Then I marched the slaves

over to the Francis' house about 600 yards away. Sam and Will went to the door and knocked. Mr. Francis asked who was there. Sam replied it was him and that he had a letter. When he came to the door my men seized him and killed him with repeated blows to the head.

The Rebellion Ends

After several scenes like the above, Turner was joined by other slaves. Soon his forces numbered between fifty or sixty men. They marched to the town of Jerusalem, hoping to get guns at the armory. Afterwards, they planned to hide in a huge swamp not far away, and conduct raids to free other slaves. These plans, however, could not be carried out. Turner explained what happened:

We were on the road leading to Jerusalem about three miles away. When reaching the gate of the Parker place, it was suggested to me to call there. I remained at the gate on the road with seven or eight. The others went across the field to the house, about a half mile off. After waiting for some time, we were met by a party of white men who had pursued our blood-stained track. They had fired on the crew at the gate. Immediately, on discovering the whites, I ordered my men to halt and form ranks. The white men, eighteen in number, approached us and fired. I then ordered my men to fire and rush on them. When we approached to within fifty yards, they fired and then retreated. We chased and overtook some of them who we left for dead. After two-hundred yards, we discovered that they had met another party.

* *according to another account, Turner told his followers, "ours is not a war for robbery not to satisfy our passions, it is a struggle for freedom." (George William's, History of the Negro Race in America from 1619-1880, New York, 1883, Vol. II, pp. 87-88.*

As I saw them reloading and others coming up, with several of my bravest men wounded, the others became scared and ran. The white men heard us and fired several times. Hark had his horse shot out from under him. I caught him another as it was running by me. Five or six of my men were wounded, but none left on the field. Finding myself defeated, I decided to attack Jerusalem from the rear. After proceeding for a short distance, I learned that the rest of my force were scattered in every direction. I was unable to collect a sufficient force to proceed to Jerusalem. ²⁹



Nat Turner captured

This event ended the armed attack. Now the planters were reinforced with Federal troops. They took over 48 black prisoners. Turner managed to escape capture for six weeks. He was finally discovered in his hiding place by a faithful slave.

Reactions to the Turner Rebellion

A black woman reported:

At the time of the old prophet Nat, the colored folks was afraid to pray loud; for the whites threatened to punish them dreadfully, if the least noise was heard. The patrols was low drunken whites. In Nat's time, if they heard any of the colored folks praying, or singing a hymn, they would fall upon 'em and abuse 'em and sometimes kill 'em., afro master or missies could get to 'em. The brightest and the best was killed in Nat's time. The whites always suspect such ones.

In Nat's time, the patrols would tie up the free colored people, flog 'em, and try to make 'em lie against one another, and often killed them before anybody could interfere. One day the sheriff heard a patroller boasting how many Niger's he had killed ³⁰

A white Southerner Writes to a Friend in the North:

This rebellion has alarmed my wife as to really endanger her health, and I have not slept without worrying for three months. Our nights are sometimes spent listening to noises. A corn song, a hog

²⁹ Quoted in Nat Turner, "The Confessions of Nat Turner," told to Thomas R. Gray, reprinted in Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*, Grove Press, Inc., New York 1966, pp. 150-51

³⁰ Herbert Aptheker, *op. cit.*

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*call, has often caused nervous terror, and a cat in the dining room will banish sleep for the night. There has been and still is panic in all this country.*³¹

John Brown is inspired

*Nat Turner, with fifty men, held Virginia five weeks. The same number, well organized and armed, can shake the system (slavery) out of the state.*³²

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Using what you know about both, contrast the Turner and the Vesey rebellions.
- 2.. Comment on the following quote, attributed to Nat Turner: "ours is not a war for robbery not to satisfy our passions, it is a struggle for freedom." [In responding, cover at least two of the following: a. the purpose of the revolt, b. whether there was a less violent way of accomplishing the same ends, c what happened as a result of the rebellion.]

³¹ Herbert Aptheker, *op. cit*

³² Herbert Aptheker, *op. cit*.

Chapter 9

Compensation for Slavery

Suppose someone stole your freedom and that of your family, as well as their money, time, and the results of all of their hard work. Imagine that this did not only happen to you but to millions of people just like yourself. Would you believe that someone should have to pay for this crime, even if it happened 200 years ago? Should the people who benefited from this theft and still benefit from it be the ones who have to do something to compensate you and your family for their losses?

Suppose your family committed some great crime hundreds of years ago. Suppose that your family is still benefiting from the riches accumulated from that theft. Do you think that they should do something to compensate the family of the victims?

The preceding suppositions raise some of the same issues that have been debated recently by scholars, politicians, and students of American history. Based on a book by Randall Robinson, *The Debt*, the argument has been made that the combined loss to African-Americans due to slavery is in excess of 1.4 trillion dollars, and that Americans owe some kind of compensation to those whose ancestors suffered from slavery and the racism and discrimination which still exists. They cite the fact that Nazi victims of genocide and American victims of Japanese internment during World War II have been repaid in part for their suffering. Similarly, the argument goes, victims of this ugly period in American history should be compensated in some form.

On the other side of the debate, opponents of compensation argue that none of those who suffered from slavery are alive today, and none of the individuals who enslaved them are reachable. It would be unfair, the argument goes, to punish people just because their skin is white in order to make up for something done hundreds of years ago to someone whose skin is black.

Read the following excerpts from people who have taken a stand on this debate over compensation for slavery and decide for yourself with whom you agree.

DeWayne Wickham: Today's Blacks too Distant from Slavery? Think Again	Chris Wolski: Slavery Compensation Itself Rests on Racism
<p>You cannot measure the devastating impact of slavery without taking into account the damage done to African-Americans by its awful progeny. This unbroken chain of legal discrimination (which didn't end until the 1960s, when a series of laws passed by Congress outlawed most forms of de jure racial bias) has touched the lives of most of this nation's current generation of African-Americans.</p>	<p>The suit filed against the U.S. government and big corporations demanding "compensation" for the descendents of slaves is grotesque and should be dismissed without a hearing, said an Ayn Rand Institute Fellow.</p> <p>"Slavery was evil, but America atoned for it during the Civil War—a war that produced more than 600,000 casualties and ended slavery 135</p>

³³ DeWayne Wickham *USA Today*

Few people doubt the harm slavery did, but opponents of reparations question whether any of the guilty parties are still around.

Well, how about the federal government? From the U.S. Constitution's "three-fifth's clause," to the Fugitive Slave and the Kansas-Nebraska acts, the federal government played the central role in maintaining, policing and expanding slavery. It gave legal standing to slavery and later turned a blind eye to the laws that Southern states enacted to maintain African-Americans in a state of neo slavery.

In protecting slavery – arguably this country's greatest generator of wealth during the first half of the 19th century – the federal government made it possible for many families and companies to reap substantial financial benefits from the misery heaped upon slaves and the generations of dispossessed African-Americans that the Jim Crow period produced.

Some newspapers that are still around today profited from ads they once ran on the buying and selling of slaves or the apprehension of runaway slaves. More than a few people whose family's wealth is rooted in the antebellum economy and benefited from the enslavement of millions of Africans are well off today because of this connection. It's likely that some of this ill-gotten gain has been used to capitalize businesses or endow universities. Some insurance companies, such as Aetna, that insured slaveholders against the loss of their human property benefited from slavery.

They all owe much to the descendants of slaves. This debt should be paid in some fashion to all African-Americans regardless of the mix of their bloodlines. Miscegenation was a spoil of slavery. White slave owners routinely had their way with black women. The linear successors of these offsprings are the most obvious proof of the cruelty inflicted upon slave families.³³

years ago," said Robert W. Tracinski, whose editorials appear weekly in *Capitalism Magazine*. "For the descendents of black slaves to make demands for special privileges, compensation, and apologies from current Americans – who had nothing to do with slavery – is an ugly moral inversion that makes Americans who happen to be white guilty because of their skin color."

Tracinski said that the only standard that can be used to justify such an approach is *racism* – the idea that each member of the race is responsible for and can be blamed for the actions of every other member, that we are all just interchangeable cells of the racial collective.

"The proposed compensation consists of punishing random whites and 'white-owned' businesses because they're white in order to reward random blacks because they're black," said Tracinski. "The result of this approach is not racial harmony or a color-blind society, but racial warfare. Given the premise of racial collectivism, an injustice committed against any past or present member of your racial group entitles you to retaliate against any past or present member of the perpetrator's racial group. Individual justice is thrown out, replaced by racial vendettas.

"The only alternative to this kind of racial balkanization is to reject the notion of racial collectivism altogether and embrace the opposite principle: individualism. An individual should not be judged as representative of his racial group. He should be judged – and rewarded or punished – based on his ideas and actions. And he certainly must not be forced to pay for crimes committed by others, merely because those others have the same skin color.³⁴

³⁴ CAPITALISMMAGAZINE.COM, January 6, 2001

Results of a Poll on Compensation

Below are the results of a month long informal poll conducted by *Black Voices* with their readership on the issue of reparations.

Question:

In the past, the United States has paid reparations to other minority groups such as Japanese Americans. With this in mind do you think the country should pay reparations to African Americans.

Answers

Yes I do. Reparations for African American has been a long time in coming – 730 Votes, 75.4 %.

No, what's past is past and we should move forward instead of backwards, 64 Votes – 6.6 %.

No. I'm for the idea but I don't see any blacks living today can claim reparations for slavery – 117 Votes, 12.0 %:

I don't know enough about the issue yet to make a decision – 57 Votes, 5.8 %.

Question

How much do you think each individual should receive?

Answers

\$100 - \$1000 – 64 Votes, 10.1 %.

\$1000 - \$5000 – 73 Votes, 11.5 %.

92 Votes, 14.6 %: \$5000 - \$10,000

over \$10,000 – 401 Votes, 63.6 %.

Question:

How do think any reparations should be split amongst African Americans?

Answers

219 Votes, 37.5 %: Age should be the first determining factor (oldest to youngest), followed by economic standing (poorest to richest).

54 Votes, 9.2 %: Economic standing should be considered first, then age.

310 Votes, 53.1 %: It should be dispersed evenly.³⁵

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. State the problem and summarize the argument on both sides of the compensation debate.
2. Take a position on one side or the other of the debate.
3. If compensation were to be granted for slavery, should it take the form of:

- a. Direct payments to African-Americans based on financial need

³⁵ *Black Voices* <http://www.blackvoices.com/feature/reparations/main.html>

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- b. Support for programs such as low income housing and free college or trade school tuition for needy African-Americans
- c. Other