

Slavery Overview *by William Gaddis*

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

Slavery is the oldest continuous labor system in human history. The process of owning and exploiting another person’s labor has been practiced for thousands of years in every civilization and continues in many societies around the world today. In the American experience, slavery among the Native-Americans was ubiquitous though productive chattel slavery, or the process of owning a person and their offspring as property, began almost immediately after European discovery of the so-called New World by the Spanish and Portugese who imported African slaves to labor in agriculture and mining operations. In recent years, it has been argued that Anglo-American slavery began in 1619 with the porting of a Dutch ship at Jamestown carrying twenty slaves. In fact, evidence indicates that the Africans sold at Jamestown were bought as indentured servants and were not perpetually enslaved, though the records are unclear. In 1641, Massachusetts became the first English colony to codify slavery as a matter of law. In the years following, other colonies passed their own laws regulating master-slave relations.

Because of climate and geography, slavery dramatically expanded in the Southern colonies which became heavy agriculture producers, specifically in staple crops—or labor intensive cash crops—such as tobacco, sugar, rice and indigo. Plantation agriculture in the South and Caribbean were exceedingly profitable and required large volumes of labor. Over a three hundred year period, approximately twelve million Africans were transported to the colonial New World, around 400,000 came to the North American continent. Because its climate was not conducive to large agriculture production, New England became a commercial shipping society and the center of the Triangular Trade, or the process of shipping molasses from the Caribbean to New England for distillation into rum and then shipping the rum to Africa to trade to the west African Slave Kingdoms for slaves who were then transported to the Caribbean. Sadly, tens of thousands died in the cruel trans-Atlantic passage.

Life for slaves could be short and cruel in the 17th and 18th century. Some masters were brutal taskmasters who viewed their slaves as laboring commodities and nothing more. Other masters maintained a traditional, nearly familial, paternalistic relationship with their slaves with established obligations of humane care and protection. Over time, European and African cultures intertwined, creating shared customs and interrelations particularly as the European populations expanded into frontier areas on smaller farms with lower slave populations. Language, customs, food and music blended forming the nucleus of what we would recognize as Southern culture. The living conditions of the average frontier slave on a small farm was in many ways little different than that of their master who labored next to them—master and slave depended upon each other to survive. In the 1740s and 50s, the “Great Awakening” of religious revival swept through the colonies. This Christian revival had an impact on master-slave relations with many masters converting their slaves out of concern for their spiritual well-being and coming to view their obligations to their slaves as a moral Christian obligation.

When war erupted between the colonists and British crown, master-slave relations in many areas were strained. In an effort to destabilize the American economy and social structure, the British government offered freedom to any American slave willing to enter British lines or serve the crown. Because of the longer and more sustained occupations and troop presence of crown forces in the northeast, the smaller slave economy was rapidly disrupted. When the war ended, many people argued that a slave system was incompatible with a republican system built on liberty. Others saw the slave population as a demographic threat to Anglo hegemony and an emerging free labor commercial economy. As a result, the northeastern states began a

gradual process of emancipation. Some slaves were freed after a set age or date, many were simply sold to the agricultural states further south. Emancipation and colonization societies emerged all over the country. In the early 19th century the majority of those societies were centered in the South. The institution may well have ended in the South in the early 19th century but for two things: First, Eli Whitney's "cotton gin" in 1794 made the production of cotton profitable and fueled the expansion of mass cotton farming, requiring ever more laborers to meet the demands of global textile manufacturing, and second, the political tensions between the commercial northeast and the agricultural South helped to, over time, entrench the institution. As the country moved westward, slavery became a divisive political issue on the political chessboard. The emerging West was economically agricultural but generally opposed to the institution of slavery and outright hostile to blacks in their new states with many banning their entry. Northern politicians fearful of losing power to a West/South political block, inserted slavery into the national political conversation to divide this potential agricultural political force and alienate the South from the West. The plan worked and the South was gradually isolated and marginalized politically.

Even though slavery became politically entrenched in the South due to national power politics and sectional competition, the institution continued to evolve. Unlike the North and West who were genuinely hostile to blacks—free or slave—Southern slave society saw blacks as an integral yet subordinate part of their society. The Old South was fully integrated and segregation, which was common outside of the South (Jim Crow laws originated in New England), was unheard of. Blacks and whites intermingled in their daily and public lives much to the horror of visiting Northerners. The children of wealthy plantation owners were wet-nursed by black nannies, grew up with slave children who were often their closest friends, and more often than not entrusted the daily operation of their farms to experienced slaves who quite often served as overseers and "gang" drivers. Records demonstrate that the average slave farm worker had a higher standard of living than the average urban free white Northern industrial worker, ate a healthier diet and had a similar infant mortality rate and life-expectancy. It is important to note that the slave population naturally increased from the 400,000 imported to more than four million by 1865. Beyond agriculture, many slaves were trained as carpenters, artisans, blacksmiths and even engineers. By the middle of the 19th century, many local traditions of not breaking slave marriages through sale or forbidding abuse and cruelty began to appear within the organic law of some states, in a legal sense separating the slave as a person with rights from the slave's labor which was the property of the master. This seems unusual by today's standards, but demonstrated the ever-changing nature of slavery and the likelihood that, if left unmolested, the institution would have eventually evolved out of existence.

When the Southern states seceded from the Union and were subjected to total war by the Lincoln administration, the slave population assumed almost total responsibility for operating the Southern economy which allowed the Confederacy to draw on the service of nearly their entire white male population for military service. Even with constant attempts by the Lincoln administration to entice slaves to abandon their homes or rebel against their masters, during the four long years of war there were no slave insurrections or rebellions and only a small minority left their homes. Thousands of slaves served as teamsters, cooks, laborers and soldiers in Confederate armies. After the war and emancipation, many returned to the homes of their former masters. Because of mutual need for survival, it is likely that relations between the Southern white and newly freed black population would have developed in a friendly manner after the war but for the divide and conquer political and economic policies forced upon the South during Reconstruction by a vindictive federal government which created resentment and unnecessary political, economic and racial competition that lasted for generations.

Recommended Reading

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