

American Slavery: Separating Fact from Myth

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Four generations of a slave family, at Smith's Plantation, Beaufort, South Carolina, 1862. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

People think they know everything about slavery in the United States, but they don't. They think the majority of African slaves came to the American colonies, but they didn't. They say slavery lasted 400 years, but it didn't. They say all Southerners owned slaves, but they didn't. Some argue it was all a long time ago, but it wasn't.

Slavery has been in the news a lot lately. From the discovery of the auction of 272 enslaved people that enabled Georgetown University to remain in operation to the McGraw-Hill textbook controversy over calling slaves "workers from Africa" and the slavery memorial being built at the University of Virginia, Americans are having conversations about this difficult period in American history. Some of these

dialogues have been wrought with controversy and conflict, like the University of Tennessee student who challenged her professor's understanding of enslaved families.

As a scholar of slavery at the University of Texas at Austin, I welcome the public debates and connections the American people are making with history. However, there are still many misconceptions about slavery.

The goal in my courses is not to victimize one group and celebrate another. Instead, my students and I trace the history of slavery in all its forms to make sense of the origins of wealth inequality and the roots of discrimination today. The history of slavery provides vital context to modern-day conversations and counters the distorted facts, internet hoaxes and poor scholarship I caution my students against.

Myth one: The majority of African slaves came to what became the United States.

Truth: Only a little more than 300,000 African slaves, or 4 to 6 percent, came to the United States. The majority of them went to Brazil, followed by the Caribbean. A significant number of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean were "seasoned," or brutally prepared there for life as a slave, and then they were brought to America. They spent months or years recovering from the harsh realities of the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage refers to the transport of slaves from Africa, where they were forced onto boats under brutal conditions and taken across the Atlantic Ocean. After the slaves were forced to get used to their new lives, many were brought to work on plantations in America.

Myth two: Slavery lasted for 400 years.

Popular culture is full of references to 400 years of oppression. Oppression is a word describing how people with power unfairly control and treat others harshly. The idea that slavery lasted 400 years seems to come from confusion between the Transatlantic Slave Trade (1440-1888) and slavery in general. Some of the confusion is caused by the Bible, Genesis 15:13:

Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that for 400 years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.'

Lupe Fiasco is one hip-hop artist who references the 400 years. Here are lyrics from his 2011 song “All Black Everything,” which imagines a world where Africans never became slaves in the United States:

[Hook] You would never know

If you could ever be

If you never try

You would never see

Stayed in Africa

We ain’t never leave

So there were no slaves in our history

Were no slave ships, were no misery, call me crazy, or isn’t he See I fell asleep and I had a dream, it was all black everything

[Verse 1]

Uh, and we ain’t get exploited

White man ain’t feared so he did not destroy it

We ain’t work for free, see they had to employ it

Built it up together so we equally appointed

First 400 years, see we actually enjoyed it

Truth: Almost every nation has had slavery at some point, including Greek and Roman civilizations, but slavery in the United States lasted fewer than 400 years.

Most historians say slavery in America started in 1619, when 20 enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, on a Dutch ship. The end of slavery in the United States happened in 1865 — that is, when the 13th Amendment was passed. That means that slavery lasted 246 years.

Myth three: All Southerners owned slaves.

Truth: About 25 percent of all Southerners owned slaves. The fact that about 1 in 4 people in the South owned slaves is still shocking to many. This truth helps us understand modern conversations about inequality. The number also helps explain why some people think the descendants of slaves should get reparations, or, in other words, be compensated for slavery.

Take the case of Texas.

There was slavery in Texas from 1845 when it became a state to 1865 when the United States made slavery illegal. Still, the number of people impacted by wealth and income inequality is staggering. By 1860, there were 182,566 slaves in Texas. Slaveholders were about 27 percent of the population. Yet they controlled 68 percent of the positions in government and 73 percent of the wealth. Today, a small percentage of taxpayers in Texas, about 10 percent, bring home about half of the income made in the state.

Myth four: Slavery was a long time ago.

Truth: African-Americans have been free in this country for less time than they were enslaved. Do the math: Blacks have been free for 152 years, which means that most Americans are only two to three generations away from slavery. This is not that long ago.

Over this same period, families who owned slaves have benefitted from all the money generated by slavery. Most slave-owning families were white. African-Americans were forced to work for free, and their families were not able to benefit from the profits. Segregation, which is the separation of people according to race, and other forms of discrimination, helped continue differences in wealth between whites and blacks.

Slaves were bought and sold just like we sell cars and cattle today.

Enslaved people were valued at every stage of their lives. Slaveholders examined women for their ability to have children. As the slaves grew up, enslavers assessed their value through a rating system that measured the value of their work.

For example, Guy and Andrew, high-rated slaves sold at the largest auction in U.S. history in 1859, had different prices. Guy cost \$1,280. But Andrew was missing an eye, so he sold for \$240 less. A reporter from the New York Tribune noted at the time “that the market value of the right eye in the Southern country is \$240.” By today’s standards, Andrew and Guy would be worth about \$33,000 to \$40,000.

Slavery was a very diverse economic institution, one that extracted unpaid labor out of people in various settings — from small farms and large plantations to urban universities. This diversity, or variety, was also reflected in their prices. And enslaved people understood they were treated as commodities, valuable objects that can be bought and sold.

“I was sold away from mammy at 3 years old,” recalled Harriett Hill of Georgia. She shared this years later during an interview in the 1930s with the Works Progress Administration. Even though Harriet Hill was too little to remember her price when she was 3, she remembered being sold for \$1,400 at age 9 or 10: “I never could forget it.”

Slavery is a major part of American popular culture. But for 40 years, the television miniseries “Roots” was the most popular visual representation of slavery, other than a handful of independent films.

Today, slavery is front and center. Just think about programs like the “Slave Dwelling Project,” where kids spend the night in slave cabins. “Saturday Night Live” has produced comedy skits that reference slavery. In 2016, A&E and History released the reimaged miniseries “Roots: The Saga of an American Family.” Steve McQueen’s “12 Years a Slave” was a box office success in 2013. Actress Azia Mira Dungey made headlines with the popular web series called “Ask a Slave.” Television network WGN America broadcast a show about runaway slaves and abolitionists called “The Underground.” With less than one year of operation, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History, which devotes several galleries to the history of slavery, has had more than 1 million visitors.

The elephant that sits at the center of our history is coming into focus. American slavery happened. We are still living with its consequences. I believe we are finally ready to face it, learn about it and acknowledge its significance to American history.

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Quiz

- 1 HOW does the author convey the historical significance of people being sold as merchandise?
 - (A) by illustrating how slaves were sold at different prices and how these costs varied based on the slave's physical appearance and ability
 - (B) by describing the range of settings and scale of slave sales to illustrate how ubiquitous the practice of rating and selling humans as goods was
 - (C) by highlighting a three-year-old girl's detailed personal story recalling her experience of being sold as a slave
 - (D) by detailing the rating system that was used to determine the value of a slave

- 2 HOW does the author develop her own perspective in the article?
 - (A) by using vivid details and anecdotes to describe why slavery in America ended 152 years ago
 - (B) by using sarcastic remarks to describe individuals who believe they are experts on American slavery
 - (C) by using aggressive language and phrases to convey why the opposing side incorrectly describes slavery
 - (D) by using logical reasoning and evidence to clarify important aspects of slavery in America

- 3 Which of the following pieces of evidence is MOST relevant to the author's MAIN argument?
 - (A) After the slaves were forced to get used to their new lives, many were brought to work on plantations in America.
 - (B) The end of slavery in the United States happened in 1865 — that is, when the 13th Amendment was passed.
 - (C) Over this same period, families who owned slaves have benefited from all the money generated by slavery.
 - (D) Do the math: Blacks have been free for 152 years, which means that most Americans are only two to three generations away from slavery.

- 4 HOW do some families of slaves justify their desire for reparations?
- (A) Slave-owning families became disproportionately wealthy compared to slaves, but this wealth was built from slave labor.
 - (B) Slaves were never compensated for their work, so families of slave owners are obligated to pay descendants of slaves today by giving up land.
 - (C) Slave owners unjustly purchased people and treated them as objects, which is both inhumane and immoral.
 - (D) Slave owners were over-represented in government because of their wealth and influence, even after slavery was outlawed.