

Telling the Story:

Enslavement of African People in the United States

Today's Terminology

Enslaved vs. Slave: Today, most historians speak of “enslaved people” instead of “slaves.” This language separates a person's identity from his/her circumstance.

Enslaver vs. Owner/Master: The usage of “owner” or “master” empowers the enslaver and dehumanizes the enslaved person reducing him/her to a commodity rather than a person who has had slavery imposed upon him or her.

Using the terms enslaved and enslaver, are subtle but powerful ways of affirming that slavery was forced upon that person, rather than an inherent condition.

Freedom Seeker vs. Fugitive: The term “fugitive” evokes the image of a law breaker requiring capture and punishment, and was used to assert that the law was on the side of slaveholding society. “Freedom seeker” illuminates what is in the hearts and minds of those acting to make freedom a reality.

Glossary

Abolition: Abolition or the abolitionist movement was the societal and political effort to end the institution of slavery.

Antebellum: Existing before a war, especially the United States Civil War.

Emancipation: The liberation of one or more enslaved persons from slavery.

Indentured Servant: A person who, by contract, agrees to work to fulfill a legal obligation, such as discharge of a debt or, as in early colonial times, transportation across the Atlantic, food and shelter. Upon completion of a specified period of time, indentured servants were given their freedom.

Manumission: Freeing of one or more enslaved persons from slavery by the enslaver, rather than by government action.

Middle Passage: The forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean, so called Middle Passage because it was one leg of the triangular trade route. Goods from Europe, such as weapons, tools and cloth were taken to Africa, Africans were taken to be sold into slavery in the Americas and West Indies, and raw goods such as sugar, tobacco and cotton were taken back to Europe. The cruelty and disregard of human suffering during the Middle Passage exacted a terrible toll physically and emotionally on the abducted Africans.

Repatriation: Repatriation is the return of someone to their own country. In the early 19th century, the American Colonization Society was formed with the idea of repatriating, or resettling freed blacks in Africa.

Underground Railroad : The Underground Railroad was a term used to describe the network of people, secret routes and safe houses used by freedom seekers on their way to the northern states and Canada. The people who helped guide freedom seekers were known as “conductors” and the private homes, churches and other safe places were known as “stations” or “depots.” The Underground Railroad operated from the late 18th century until the U.S. Civil War.

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Key Concepts

1. Slavery, which was practiced by Europeans prior to their arrival in the Americas, was important to all of the colonial powers and existed in all of the European North American colonies.
2. Slavery and the slave trade were central to the development and growth of the economy across British North America and later, the United States.
3. Protections for slavery were embedded in the founding documents; enslavers dominated the federal government, Supreme Court and Senate from 1787 through 1860.
4. “Slavery was an institution of power,” designed to create profit for the enslavers and break the will of the enslaved and was a relentless quest for profit abetted by racism.
5. Enslaved people resisted the efforts of their enslavers to reduce them to commodities in both revolutionary and everyday ways.
6. The experience of slavery varied depending on time, location, crop, labor performed, size of slaveholding and gender.
7. Slavery was the central cause of the Civil War.
8. Slavery shaped the fundamental beliefs of Americans about race and whiteness, and white supremacy was both a product and legacy of slavery.
9. Enslaved and free people of African descent had a profound impact on American culture, producing leaders and literary, artistic and folk traditions that continue to influence the nation.
10. By knowing how to read and interpret the sources that tell the story of American slavery, we gain insight into some of what enslaving and enslaved Americans aspired to, created, thought and desired.

(Key Concepts from *Teaching Tolerance*, A project of the Southern Poverty Law Center)