



# 10 Myths about Slavery in the United States

The history of slavery in what would become the United States did not begin with African enslavement. In many regions, the earliest American colonists initially enslaved local indigenous people. Widespread enslavement of African and African-descended individuals took hold in the 1630s. Gradually, the labor of indentured servants—utilized extensively across the colonies during this period—was replaced with the labor of enslaved Africans.<sup>1</sup> The experience of enslavement throughout American history was complex and varied.

After many years of genealogical research on enslaved ancestors, I have noted that our Research Services clients frequently ask questions based on some common myths regarding slavery in America. This article presents ten of these myths and counters them with facts. A clear understanding of the past, rooted in available historical evidence, is essential to navigating genealogical records and appreciating the historical context of our ancestors' lives. Historically grounded knowledge about slavery and the experiences of enslaved and enslaving individuals also broadens and deepens our understanding of American history.

*Below:* D. B. Woodbury, photographer, "Arrival of Negro family in the lines," U.S., January 1, 1863. Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/2018671495](https://www.loc.gov/item/2018671495). *Opposite above:* "Uncle Moreau [Omar ibn Said]," a Muslim scholar born in Africa and enslaved in North Carolina, ca. 1850. Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American Collection. James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. *Opposite below:* "Picking cotton on a Georgia Plantation," ca. 1858. Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/2002698525](https://www.loc.gov/item/2002698525).



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**MYTH #1** “Freedpeople always adopted the surnames of their former enslavers.”

The adoption of post-emancipation surnames is a complicated issue. In some cases, individuals did choose to adopt a former enslaver’s name, or a former enslaver’s name was assigned by the earliest record takers after emancipation. In other cases, enslaved families had used surnames consistently over generations during slavery, only some of which were the surnames of a former enslaver. For some people who were not allowed to use surnames during slavery, choosing a surname after emancipation was a powerful way to exercise their new freedom and forge their own paths for themselves and their descendants. This practice was extended beyond surnames to first names. Frequently, when I piece together a family with enslaved roots, it becomes apparent that first names were chosen to create a legacy, with a name passed down through generations. In some cases, nicknames or secret names known only within a family were used to create and maintain connections, even if family members were split apart.<sup>2</sup>



**MYTH #2** “Slavery—and enslaved people’s lives—looked relatively the same across American history, regardless of time or place.”

Enslaved people’s experiences were extraordinarily diverse and differed dramatically depending on many factors, including where one was enslaved (geographic region, urban vs. rural, coastal vs. interior, etc.), when one was enslaved, how one was enslaved (born into slavery, sold or stolen into slavery, separated from one’s relatives), family composition and family history, type of labor (domestic work, trades/artisan work, field work and crop cultivated, conditions, etc.), and the circumstances of one’s enslaver (material resources, number of enslaved peoples, access to education or travel).

Moreover, the U.S. system of racial slavery developed over time. Both free and enslaved Africans arrived in Spanish Florida in the early 1500s, a century before the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia. The history of Africans in colonial North America is not synonymous with slavery. In the colonial period, a wide range of labor systems coexisted, including indentured servitude, slavery, and, in some regions,

indigenous slavery that predated arrival of Africans. During this period, people of African descent were sometimes enslaved, other times free or indentured. The racialization of slave labor took place over the seventeenth century but was not fully established until the eighteenth century, developing differently in different regions. In the southern United States, historian Ira Berlin describes a shift from a “society with slaves” to a “slave society.”<sup>3</sup>

By the time the United States was established, the system of “chattel slavery” relegated all enslaved people to the legal status of property, and very few laws granted any rights to the people enslaved. Laws in all “slave states” allowed enslaved people to be assaulted, abused, sold away from loved ones, and denied access to their children. The enslaved were also prevented from gathering, traveling, testifying in court, worshipping, and reading—among other prohibitions. Those who resisted, fought back, or tried to escape could be punished at the discretion of the enslaver.<sup>4</sup>

**MYTH #3** “Most enslaved Africans were sent directly to the United States. The United States was the center of the Atlantic slave trade.”

Throughout the duration of legal slavery in what became the United States, between 1525 and 1866, 12.5 million Africans were transported out of Africa, with 10.7 million surviving the overseas voyages to land in North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Of those 10.7 million, however, only about 388,000 people were shipped directly to North America—a small percentage of the total slave trade to the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

Many enslaved Africans were brought first to the Caribbean before being brought into the United States. The New England economy had a direct relationship to slave labor in the Caribbean. Due to this connection, if one is able to trace a family back generations through slavery, the research may bring one first to Haiti, Jamaica, Barbados, and the other islands of the Caribbean before going back to Africa.<sup>6</sup> An act of Congress in 1800 made it illegal for the United States to engage in the slave trade with other nations. By 1808, the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves took effect, and the legal trafficking of slaves from Africa to the United States then ceased.

While the U.S. was not the center of the international slave trade, the participation of the United States in the domestic slave trade greatly expanded after the American Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase, resulting in the dramatic growth of the enslaved population.<sup>7</sup>

**MYTH #4** “Slavery in the North ended decades before the Civil War.”

After the American Revolution, some northern states banned slavery in their state constitutions—although this did not happen in every state, and these laws did not prevent northern industries from profiting from slavery elsewhere. In 1777, Vermont was the first state to abolish slavery. Massachusetts followed in 1783, after the Quock Walker case successfully established that his enslavement was inconsistent with the state constitution.<sup>8</sup> Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania all instituted acts that provided for gradual abolition. These incremental measures continued slavery for people who were already enslaved or who were born to enslaved people for varying terms—generally twenty years or more—depending on the state. These laws extended slavery in some northern states well into the nineteenth century. All residents only became officially free in New York in 1827, in Connecticut in 1848, and in New Hampshire in 1865, when the thirteenth amendment was ratified.<sup>9</sup>



# \$150 REWARD

Ran away from the subscriber, on Wednesday, July 11, Negro Man, Nace Dorsey. He is about 5 feet 11 inches in height--may be 6 feet--large and muscular, black, and with a few grey hairs. Is about 40 years old.

I will give the above reward for his apprehension and delivery to me in Charles County, Maryland.

**A. JACKSON SMOOT.**

July 15, 1860.



PRESENTED TO  
MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
BY BIRBY.

*Opposite:* Thomas Clay, "Cutting the Sugar-Cane," *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua*, 1823. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. *Left:* Broadside advertisement, Charles County, Maryland, July 15, 1860. Missouri Historical Society, [mohistory.org/collections/item/D01359](http://mohistory.org/collections/item/D01359). *Below:* "Sale in New York," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division. The New York Public Library, [digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-bc51-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99](http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-bc51-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99).

## For Sale,

A LIKELY, HEALTHY, YOUNG  
NEGRO WENCH,

BETWEEN fifteen and sixteen Years old :  
She has been used to the Farming Bu-  
siness. Sold for want of Employ.—Enquire at  
No. 81, William-street,  
New-York, March 30, 1789.

### MYTH #5 "Enslaved people were never listed or named on records prior to 1865."

It can be a challenge to locate enslaved ancestors by name in records prior to 1865, but several types of record sets offer such opportunities. Court records or records created due to slave laws may include information on individuals and families. Although enslaved people across the United States were relegated to the status of human property, some limited avenues existed for these individuals to argue for their rights in court. For example, a 1778 Virginia law banning the importation of slaves from outside the state allowed some enslaved persons who could prove that their enslavers had broken this law to make a case for their freedom. Some lawsuits contended that enslaved people born to free mothers should also be free.<sup>10</sup> In Massachusetts, court cases such as *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* and *Commonwealth v. Jennison* (representing the interests of Quock Walker) used the state's new constitution to argue for

freedom. Rulings for enslaved people in both of these cases ultimately ended slavery in the state.<sup>11</sup>

Because some enslaved individuals can be found listed by name in probates, deeds, and account records under the enslaver's name, researching enslaved ancestors also requires researching enslaver families. For instance, enslaved people were commonly included in doweries or left to wives and daughters in wills, so records that name women of enslaver families may reveal records that include the names of the people they enslaved.

The names of enslaved people can also be found in records of resistance such as "runaway ads"—advertisements placed in newspapers searching for individuals who had escaped their enslavement. Likewise, post-emancipation newspaper ads seeking family members might reveal information about an individual's life during slavery.



**MYTH #6** "There were very few free Black people in the South."

Statistics from the first federal census in 1790 through the 1830 census reveal that about 56% of the total U.S. population of free Black people lived in the South. This percentage dropped only slightly to 52% in the South in 1860. Prior to emancipation, then, a slight majority of the country's free African Americans lived in southern states.<sup>12</sup> The multitude of laws in the antebellum South aimed at restricting the rights of free people of color suggests the significance of the free Black population at the time.<sup>13</sup> For example, an 1806 Virginia law stated that any freed person of color who remained in Virginia for more than a year would forfeit their right to freedom and could be sold by the Overseer of the Poor for the benefit of the parish. Free individuals could petition the state to remain longer than a year, but the state clearly did not consider the potential magnitude of the number of petitions they would receive. By 1837, the General Assembly changed the law so petitions could go to local courts.<sup>14</sup>

**MYTH #7** "Enslavers commonly kept families together."

Because enslaved people were legally the movable property of their enslavers, they could be bought and sold at will. Not all enslaved people experienced separations, but many did. Approximately one in three enslaved individuals were separated from immediate family members by the U.S. domestic slave trade. Many of these separations occurred across state lines, with an estimated 200,000 people being sold or moved from the Upper South to the Lower South and West each year between 1820 and 1860.<sup>15</sup>

Disruptions to family units also occurred within state lines, and a distance of just a few miles could prevent families from seeing each other if their mobility was restricted. Parents endured wrenching separations as their children (often while nursing babies or toddlers) were sold to new owners. (After the Civil War many freedpeople placed advertisements in newspapers, attempting to locate family members who had been sold away during slavery and to restore their family units.<sup>16</sup>) Enslavers and overseers also used

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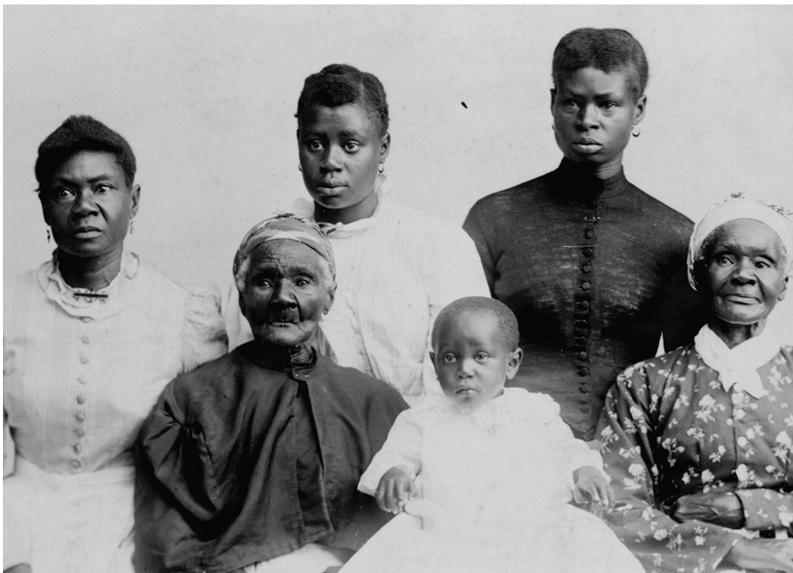
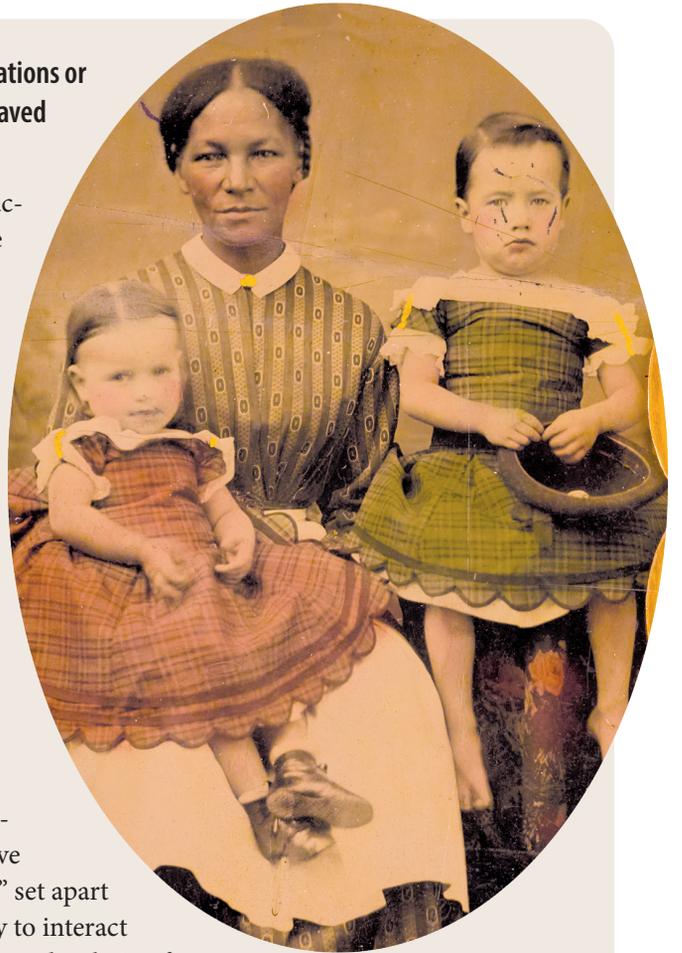




**MYTH #9** “Slave labor was only used on large southern plantations or rural farms, and most enslavers owned large numbers of enslaved people.”

The labor of enslaved people was used in a variety of capacities, not just on sprawling rural plantations or farms. The 1850 and 1860 Federal Slave Schedules—lists of enslaved people created in addition to the general federal census—provide extensive evidence on this point. Searching these records for any major city in the South will return thousands of entries of enslaved people working in urban households and industries. During the eighteenth century, enslaved labor was used in northern states in almost every sector of the economy—in shipyards, building trades, artisanal shops, and commerce. Many enslavers had only one or two enslaved people in their households, and enslaver and enslaved likely worked alongside each other on smaller properties or in a specialized trade, such as in blacksmithing.<sup>20</sup>

Many enslavers were not wealthy and enslaved fewer than five people. In these cases, enslaved people were much more likely to live in the same house as their enslavers—perhaps in the attic or a back room, but still in relative proximity. Large plantations generally had “slave quarters” set apart from the main house. Enslaved people were also less likely to interact with enslavers due to a plantation-based hierarchy that created a chain of command with overseers as intermediaries between the enslaver and the labor on their plantations. A planter’s interaction with the daily workings of the plantation was much more indirect; a planter was likely to have more knowledge of the accounting books than the daily labor. In this respect, the relationship between enslaver and enslaved was more direct in smaller homes or industries, given the higher likelihood that the two would work alongside one other.<sup>21</sup>



**MYTH #10** “Most African Americans in the U.S. today are not descended from enslaved people.”

The vast majority of people of African descent in the United States today are descended from enslaved ancestors—whether they were enslaved in the U.S., Caribbean, or Latin America. The demographics of the United States just before the end of slavery present a compelling case for why most Americans of African descent have enslaved ancestry, if their

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*Top:* African American woman, probably enslaved, with a girl and a boy from a Petersburg, Virginia, family, ca. 1860. Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/2021650590](https://loc.gov/item/2021650590). *Above:* R. W. Harrison, photographer, “Six Generations,” Selma, Alabama, ca. 1893. Library of Congress, [loc.gov/resource/cph.3c04928](https://loc.gov/resource/cph.3c04928).

forebears were here prior to emancipation. In 1860, enslaved people represented about 13% of the total U.S. population, while free Blacks comprised about 1.5%. Of the African American population, 89% were enslaved and 11% were free.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, even those people of color who were free by 1860 would likely have had some enslaved ancestors, since very few Africans came to the Americas as free people and maintained that status. Each decade leading to emancipation did see the number of free people of color grow in both the North and the South. Prior to the Civil War, with some family members gaining their freedom and others still enslaved, many families had relatives who were enslaved and some who were free.<sup>23</sup>

While all the complexities of slavery in the United States cannot be examined in a single article, dismantling these myths increases our historical knowledge and brings us closer to the experiences of Americans who lived through this era. Countless scholars have studied slavery using a variety of methods and approaches, and I encourage readers to continue to explore this crucial topic. ♦

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> For some examples, see Meaghan E. H. Siekman, "Slave Surnames," *Vita Brevis* blog, May 26, 2021, vitabrevis.americanancestors.org/2021/05/slave-surnames.
- <sup>3</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 8–9.
- <sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> "Summary Statistics," Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, at [Slavevoyages.org](http://Slavevoyages.org).
- <sup>6</sup> See Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> See Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> "Instructions to the Jury in the Quock Walker Case, Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. Nathaniel Jennison (1783)," National Constitution Center website, [constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library](http://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library); search for "Quock Walker."
- <sup>9</sup> For more information about gradual emancipation acts in northern states, see Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1890* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Amherst, Mass.: Bright Leaf, 2019); and Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).
- <sup>10</sup> See the "Freedom Suits" collection at Library of Virginia, "Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative," [lva-virginia.libguides.com/virginia-untold](http://lva-virginia.libguides.com/virginia-untold).
- <sup>11</sup> Original court records are in the custody of the Supreme Judicial Court, Division of Archives and Records Preservation. Information about the Quock Walker cases is available at The Long Road to Justice: The African American Experience in the Massachusetts Courts, [longroadtojustice.org/topics/slavery/quock-walker.php](http://longroadtojustice.org/topics/slavery/quock-walker.php).
- <sup>12</sup> Erin Bradford, "Free African American Population in the U.S.: 1790–1860," from the University of Virginia Library, [ncpedia.org/sites/default/files/census\\_stats\\_1790-1860.pdf](http://ncpedia.org/sites/default/files/census_stats_1790-1860.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> See Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).
- <sup>14</sup> See A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race & the American Legal Process, the Colonial Period*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5.
- <sup>16</sup> See Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.
- <sup>18</sup> Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 80–87.
- <sup>19</sup> Warren M. Billings, "The Law of Servants and Slaves in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99:1 (January 1991), 45–62.
- <sup>20</sup> See Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), especially 177–194.
- <sup>21</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* [note 3], 76–77.
- <sup>22</sup> "Data Analysis: African Americans on the Eve of the Civil War," in Patrick Rael, *Black Activism in the Antebellum North: A Lesson Plan* (Brunswick, Me.: Bowdoin College, 2005), [bowdoin.edu/~prael/lesson/tables.htm](http://bowdoin.edu/~prael/lesson/tables.htm).
- <sup>23</sup> See Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019).