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Slavery in America

In 1619, a ship carrying about 20 kidnapped Africans arrived in the colony of Virginia. How did this event lead to the centuries-long institution of race-based slavery in America?

When British colonists in Jamestown discovered that the soil in Virginia was perfect for cultivating tobacco, they initially relied on indentured servants from Europe to work the land. But as harsh conditions caused the population to dwindle, the colonists found a new labor force: men, women, and children from Africa. Indentured servants from Africa were kidnapped and forced to live and work in the colonies. At first, they were promised freedom and land after several years of work. But by the mid-17th century, slavery became legal in the British colonies, and the rights of all indentured servants were revoked.

In 1660, King Charles II granted the Royal African Company a charter to traffic human beings from Africa to the Americas. Slavery became part of a system known as the triangular trade. First, European ships set sail from England carrying manufactured goods, which they traded for humans on the West African coast. The second leg of the trip was known as the Middle Passage. Kidnapped Africans endured a horrific, months-long journey across the Atlantic, chained below deck in overcrowded spaces. Many people became sick or died. Once the ships reached the Americas, slave auctioneers sold the survivors to the highest bidder. Finally, cash crops cultivated by enslaved people were exported back to Europe for use in manufacturing.

The institution of slavery was rooted in White supremacy, and life for enslaved people was brutal. Many were forced to perform exhausting physical labor without adequate rest, food, or medical care. Slaveholders subjected enslaved people to severe punishments and frequently separated families. Colonists passed legislation that made it illegal for enslaved people to assemble, move freely, or even learn to read and write. They also passed laws to make slavery hereditary through the maternal line, meaning that every child born to an enslaved woman was automatically enslaved, even if their father was free.

During and after the American Revolution, some Founding Fathers believed that slavery was antithetical to the ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But by implicitly acknowledging slavery in the

Constitution, they gave their silent approval of its continuation in the United States.

By the late 18th century, the Industrial Revolution was well underway. The invention of the cotton gin increased the demand for enslaved people to work in the fields. At the same time, calls for abolition were spreading. By 1804, every Northern state had outlawed slavery, and four years later, Congress prohibited the importation of enslaved people. But this ban did nothing to stop domestic trade, and the legal doctrine protecting slavery grew even harsher. The Fugitive Slave Acts allowed and encouraged enslavers, hired agents, and ordinary citizens to recapture enslaved people who escaped, even if they made it to a free state.

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election. By that time, America's enslaved population had increased to about four million, and the concept of abolition had polarized the nation. A month later, South Carolina voted to secede from the United States. Nine other Southern states followed suit with the intention of forming a new country: the Confederate States of America, led by former Mississippi senator Jefferson Davis. Civil war between the Union and the Confederacy broke out in April 1861 and lasted for four years.

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order that freed all the enslaved people in the Confederacy. Two years later, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, which made slavery illegal. But the Civil War was still ongoing, and this news was slow to spread. It wasn't until June 19, 1865, that enslaved people living in Galveston, Texas, learned they were free. Juneteenth is celebrated every year in many states to honor formerly enslaved people and celebrate freedom.

It took nearly 250 years and the deadliest war in American history to abolish the institution of slavery. During the period of Reconstruction after the war, lawmakers made some progress toward racial equity with the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. However, Reconstruction came to an abrupt end in 1877. Many states passed laws mandating racial segregation and disenfranchising Black voters. Lynchings and other racially motivated hate crimes increased. Though slavery was legally abolished, its legacy continued and still endures today