

Name _____ Date _____

Slavery in America

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

In the early 1600s, British colonists in Jamestown discovered that the soil in Virginia was perfect for growing tobacco. Tobacco was a newly popular luxury throughout Europe, and demand was extremely high. At first, colonists and White indentured servants worked the land. Conditions were harsh, and the mortality rate was high. Indentured servants could work their way to freedom, but very few survived long enough. With a dwindling labor force, a ship carrying indentured servants arrived in Jamestown in 1619. On board was a group of White Europeans and kidnapped Africans. Although both Black and White servants had been promised freedom and land after several years of work, only the White servants had come to Virginia voluntarily. The arrival of this ship marked the beginning of a long legacy of race-based slavery in America.

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During the 17th century, the rights of African indentured servants were revoked as slavery became legal in the British colonies. In 1660, King Charles II granted the Royal African Company a charter to traffic humans from Africa to the Americas. The route used by such companies became known as the triangular slave trade. Slave ships from England carried goods like cloth, guns, and ironware to the West African coast. There they would trade these goods for men, women, and children, who were transported to the Caribbean or the Americas. This leg of the trip, the second of the three, was known as the Middle Passage. During the months-long journey, kidnapped Africans were subject to horrific conditions. They were chained and forced into filthy, overcrowded spaces below deck without enough room to stand. Disease spread quickly, and death was common. Upon arrival at the port, enslaved Africans were sold to the highest bidder at slave auctions. The final leg of the triangle was the exportation of crops like tobacco and cotton from the Americas to Europe as a result of labor by enslaved people.

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3. b'

By the late 1700s, overfarming had depleted the land used to grow tobacco in the Southern US. The South faced an economic crisis, and the need for labor by enslaved people seemed likely to decrease. Around this time, the textile industry in England was booming. Demand for cotton, a crop that grows in the South, was extremely high. At the time, cotton was difficult to produce. Production was limited by how hard it was to remove seeds from cotton fibers by hand. This changed in 1793 with the invention of the cotton gin, a mechanized device that removed seeds quickly. Southern plantation owners rushed to transition from tobacco production to cotton production, rebuilding the Southern economy and reinforcing the demand for labor by enslaved people.

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After the American Revolution, calls for abolishing slavery spread throughout the North. Despite momentum toward abolition in 1787, slavery is implicitly acknowledged in the US Constitution with what is known as the Three-Fifths Compromise. The text does not mention slavery explicitly, but rather that state population will be calculated by adding to the whole Number of free Persons...three fifths of all other Persons. The other Persons is widely understood to refer to enslaved people. State population determined how a state would be taxed, as well as the number of Congressional representatives it would have. In exchange for higher tax payments, the South received additional seats in Congress. Though many Founding Fathers believed slavery was incompatible with their commitment to liberty, historians note that this compromise served as a silent approval of its continuation. By 1804, every Northern state had outlawed slavery. Still, many Northern businessmen grew rich as a result of investments in Southern plantations, while Northern banks financed the purchase of plantation land.

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The US Constitution also put an end date on international slave trade. Without mentioning slavery explicitly, the clause promised that the importation of people would not be banned until 1808. In the meantime, a tax would be placed on each person imported before that date. When January 1, 1808, arrived, international slave trade was officially banned with the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves. Notably, the act did nothing to stop or slow down the trade of enslaved people within the United States. By 1860, the population of enslaved people in the US had nearly tripled to about four million.

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Over the course of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, many laws surrounding the institution of slavery were enacted and modified. In 1662, Virginia adopted a law that stated any child born in the colony would take on the status of their mother. Whether the father was an enslaved man or a White enslaver, her child would be born into slavery. Uprisings involving enslaved people were often met with severe legislation. In reaction to the Stono Rebellion, an attempted armed march to freedom in Florida by enslaved men in 1739, South Carolina passed the Negro Act of 1740. This law revoked what little rights enslaved people had. The law made it illegal for enslaved people to assemble, earn money, or learn to read or write. It also restricted their ability to move freely and allowed enslavers to kill enslaved people they considered rebellious. Furthermore, it instituted a 10-year pause on importing Africans for fear of another uprising.

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The Fugitive Slave Acts were a pair of laws that made the capture and return of runaway enslaved people legal. The first Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1793, allowing enslavers and hired agents to recapture enslaved people who had escaped even if they made it to a free state. This law was met with much resistance in Northern states. It was rarely enforced and ultimately fueled abolitionist activity. Reliance on networks of safe houses increased as abolitionists sought to help runaway enslaved people escape. In 1850, a far harsher Fugitive Slave Act was passed. It included penalties for federal marshals who neglected to enforce the law and encouraged citizens to assist with the capture of enslaved people who had run away. This updated law made escape attempts even more dangerous. Vindictive and brutal slave patrols policed the South, incentivized by rewards for the capture of runaway enslaved people. Once again, the act was met with criticism and action in Northern states as the Underground Railroad peaked between 1850 and 1860.

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On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Two years later, on January 31, 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, officially abolishing slavery. News spread slowly throughout the South. This left formerly enslaved Black people to figure out their new place in society with little or no assistance. Many were forced to make a deal with their former enslavers to begin working for pay; others migrated to different states in an attempt to reunite with family. Slavery was legally over, but racism and discrimination were far from finished. In the years following the Civil War, during an era known as Reconstruction, the federal government made an effort to improve the social status and civil rights of Black people. Some progress was made, but the backlash to this progress was severe. Within 15 years, Black Americans in the South saw their civil rights rolled back yet again as the Jim Crow era began.

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