



Gradual Manumission and the Federal Abolition of Slavery

A supplementary lesson to Historic Huguenot Street's online exhibit "*Never Was a Slave:*" *Jacob Wynkoop, Free and Black in 19th Century New Paltz*



Do Now:

Break down the phrase “gradual manumission:” what does it mean to do something gradually? What is manumission? Based on the definitions of these individual terms and your knowledge of American history, what do you think the practice of gradual manumission was in the United States? How do you think it related to slavery and the build up to the American Civil War?



Origins of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The Transatlantic Slave Trade first took shape in the 16th century when European empires developed more advanced and reliable seafaring technology. New ships which could travel further distances and weather greater wear and tear allowed Europeans to travel as far as West Africa, where they began the process of colonization and the enslavement of Africans.

In these early years, the Portuguese and Spanish empires were largely the ones at the helm of invading African civilizations and capturing and enslaving their inhabitants. By the 17th century, though, English, French, and Dutch investors and traders became interested in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and began their own invasions of West Africa.



Origins of Slavery in the U.S.

In the early 17th century, Dutch, French, English, and other European settlers began to colonize North America, building their own settlements on lands inhabited by indigenous peoples. These colonizers brought the practice of slavery to North America with them, extending the reach of the Transatlantic Slave Trade even further west. The first Africans to be enslaved by European settlers in North America arrived to the Virginia colony in 1619.

The map on the following slide shows the magnitude and many paths of the Transatlantic Slave Trade over time.

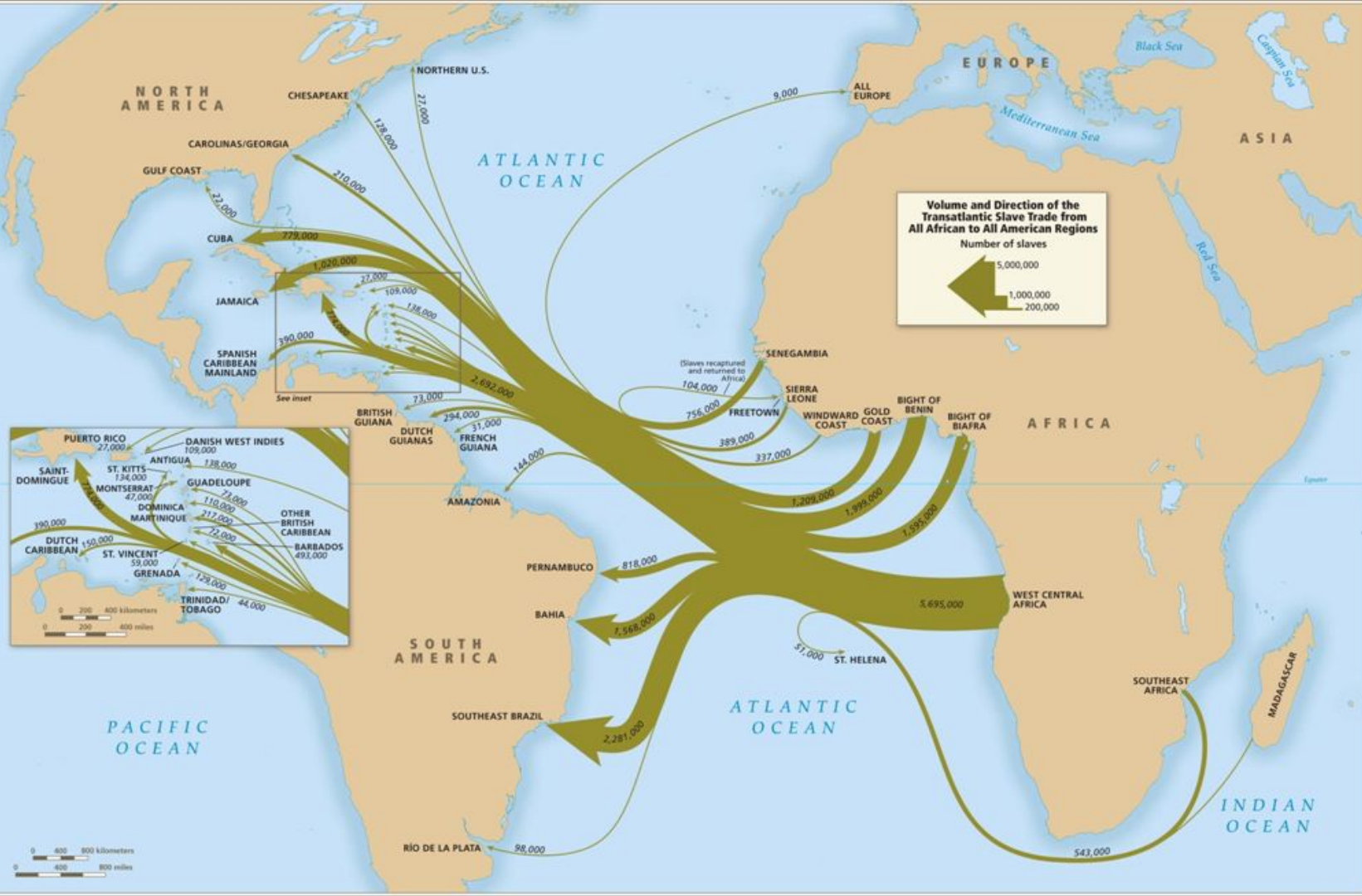


Image source:
Emory
University via
news.emory.edu



Slavery in the “Land of the Free”

Slavery was legally practiced across America until its federal abolition in 1865. Based on your knowledge of American history and the country’s founding values, do you find any irony in America’s practice of slavery for over 200 years?

Why do you think the practice wasn’t abolished sooner?



Abolition's Beginnings

By utilizing the labor of enslaved Africans from its inception, the infrastructure of colonial America was built upon the backs of those enslaved and the practice was normalized despite its inhumanity. The practice of slavery would continue for more than 200 years following the arrival of the first captured Africans in Virginia, with national abolition becoming law in 1865.

Following the American Revolution, though, activism for the cause of abolition was on the rise, in the northern states especially. In the fight for their own liberty, many Americans began to recognize the hypocrisy of enslaving and restricting the freedoms of others (something enslaved people were more than aware of, but lacked the platform to point out). Advocacy for the abolition of slavery in the north was one of the driving forces which led to many northern states adopting gradual manumission laws, and one of the impetuses for the Civil War.

Through the practice of gradual manumission, slavery was not made immediately illegal. Rather, enslaved people born after a certain date were to be freed after a certain number of years of servitude.



Gradual Manumission in Northern States

In 1780, Pennsylvania became the first U.S. state to enact gradual manumission legislation with the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. Under this act, enslaved people who were already registered to Pennsylvanian slave owners would not be freed, but any children born to them after the passage of this act would be freed following 28 years of enslavement. This act also made the importation of any enslaved people into the state illegal.

A few years later, in 1784, Connecticut and Rhode Island became the second and third states to enact gradual manumission laws. Connecticut's law allowed children born to enslaved parents to be freed by the age of 25, and Rhode Island's law allowed for girls born to enslaved parents to be freed at 18 and boys at 21.

Massachusetts, on the other hand, did not bother with the practice of gradual manumission. They immediately and completely abolished the practice of slavery in 1783.



An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1799

Following the lead of other northern states, New York passed their own gradual manumission act in 1799. Using Pennsylvania's act as a model, they issued the Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1799. The original document and its transcription can be found on the following slide.

An Act for the gradual abolition of Slavery.

Be it enacted by the people, the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, That any Child born of a Slave within this State after the fourth day of July next, shall be deemed and adjudged to be born free: Provided nevertheless that such Child shall be the servant of the legal proprietor of his or her mother, until such servant if a male shall arrive at the age of twenty eight years, and of a female at the age of twenty five years.

And be it further enacted, That such proprietor his, her, or their Heirs or Assigns shall be entitled to the service of such Child until he or she shall arrive to the age aforesaid, in the same manner as if such Child had been bound to service by the Overseers of the Poor.

And be it further enacted, That every person being an Inhabitant of this State who shall be entitled to the service of a Child born after the fourth day of July as aforesaid, shall within nine months after the birth of such Child, cause to be delivered to the Clerk of the City or Town, whencesuch person shall be an Inhabitant, a certificate in writing containing the name and addition of such master or mistress, and the name, age, and sex of every Child so born, which certificate shall be, by the said Clerk recorded in a Book to be by him for that purpose provided, which records shall be good and sufficient evidence of the age of such Child. And the Clerk of such City or Town shall receive from said person twelve Cents for every Child so registered, and if any such person neglects to make a return of every such Child as aforesaid to said Clerk within nine months after the Birth thereof, such person shall forfeit and pay Five Dollars for every such offence, to be sued for and recovered by the Clerk of the City or Town in which such person resides.

Transcription:

"An Act for the **gradual abolition** of Slavery.

Be it **enacted** by the people of the state of New York represented in Senate and Assembly, That any Child born of a slave within this State after the fourth day of July next, shall be **deemed** and **adjudged** to be born free: Provided neverthele[s] that such Child shall be the **servant** of the legal **proprietor** of his or her mother until such servant if a male shall arrive at the age of twenty eight years, and if a female at the age of twenty-five years.

And be it further enacted That such proprietor his, her, or their **Heirs** or **Als signs** shall be entitled to the service of such child until he or she shall arrive to the age aforesaid, in the same manner as if such Child had been **bound** to service by the **Overseers of the Poor**.

[...]

And be it further enacted that it shall be lawful for the owner of any slave immediately after the pas[s]ing of this Act to **manumit** such slave by a certificate for that purpose under his hand and Seal

[...]"



Document Analysis

1. After what date would a child born to an enslaved person in New York State be free under the state's gradual abolition act?
2. At what age would a girl born under this act be officially freed from servitude?
3. At what age would a boy born under this act be officially freed from servitude?
4. Could an enslaved person be freed sooner than stipulated in this law? If so, how?



Tension Between the North and South

With advocacy for abolition growing and the practice becoming a reality across northern states, tensions began to develop between the north and south. Though there were plenty of northerners who opposed the abolition of slavery and wanted to keep the people they enslaved in bondage, this attitude was much more prevalent among southern enslavers. With these ideological differences forming between the two regions came an economic and cultural rift that would eventually lead to the outbreak of the Civil War.

While anyone who participated in the institution of slavery benefited from the forced, free labor of enslaved Africans, plantation owners in the south had the most lucrative operations at their disposal. Being able to cultivate, harvest, and sell cash crops such as cotton, tobacco, rice, and indigo without spending a cent on labor allowed for southern enslavers to turn a huge profit, and they did not want to sacrifice that profit for the sake of abolition and the rights of enslaved Africans. As such, they saw the successful efforts for abolition in the north as a threat to the backbone of their economy.



Tension Between the North and South

As the north industrialized and began developing an economy based around manufacturing and small farms, which could sustain itself and flourish without the labor of enslaved people, the south staunchly held onto their predominantly agrarian economic model. This refusal to change and adapt, though, deepened the division and animosity between the north and south. The south began to fear and resent what would happen if their main source of income -- the institution of slavery -- were to collapse, and their economy with it.

This fear led to the movement for states' rights in the south. Southerners believed that states should be able to function as independent political units and govern themselves without the need for federal intervention or authority.

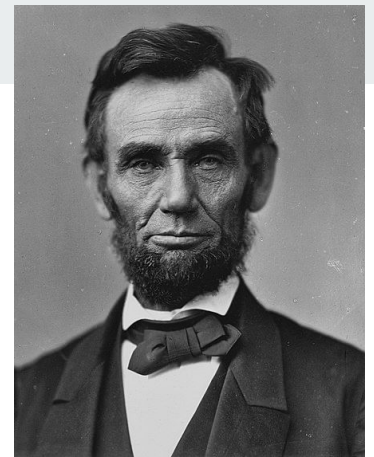


Lincoln's Election and the Creation of the Confederacy

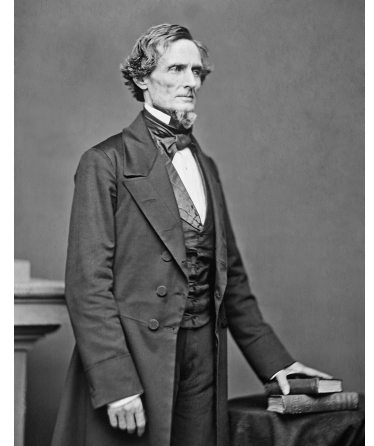
The election of Abraham Lincoln to the American presidency in 1860 was the final straw for southerners, as they did not want to exist under the authority of a president who they believed to be a threat to states' rights and the institution of slavery.

By February of 1861, seven southern states (South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Texas, Georgia, and Louisiana) had successfully seceded from the union. In February, representatives from these states met to form the Confederate States of America (C.S.A.). Jefferson Davis, a Mississippi senator, was selected to be the president of this new nation.

Image source: Wikipedia via wikipedia.org



Abraham Lincoln



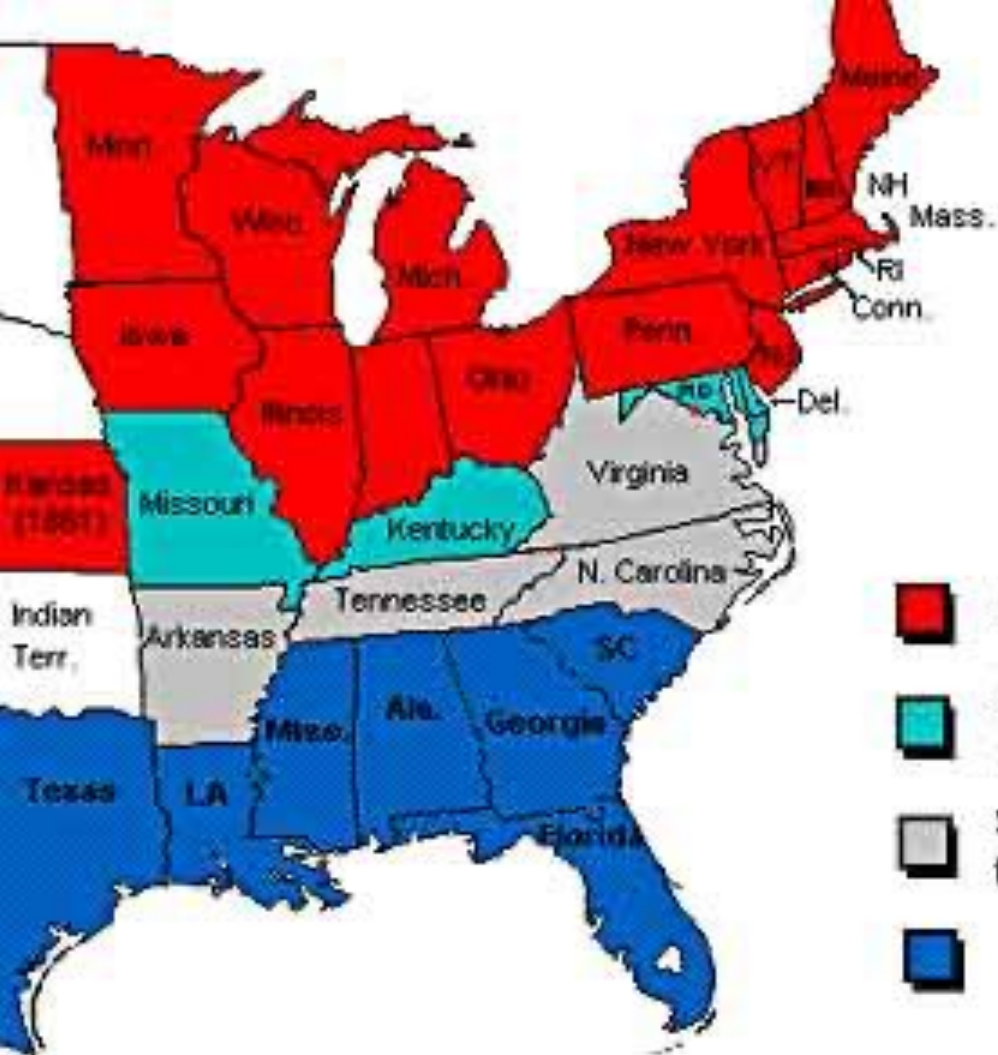
Jefferson Davis



Growth of the Confederacy

Using the United States Constitution as a model, the Confederate States drew up their own Constitution. As a part of their framework, presidents of the C.S.A. would serve their term for six years and were unable to seek reelection. Most important to the inhabitants of the Confederacy, though, was the Constitution's upholding of the practice of slavery within this new nation.

As the government of the Confederacy took shape, the nation grew with the addition of four new states: Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and Arkansas. These four states joined the Confederacy following the pivotal Battle of Fort Sumter in April of 1861.



The Progress of Secession

- Union states
- Border slave states that did not secede.
- States that seceded after the fall of Fort Sumter.
- States that seceded before the fall of Fort Sumter.



The Battle of Fort Sumter

The Battle of Fort Sumter, a conflict between a Confederate militia and the Union Army, is credited as being the battle that began the Civil War. Watch the following video from PBS to learn about the battle:

<https://www.pbs.org/video/the-civil-war-the-civil-war-fort-sumter/>



The American Civil War, 1861-1865

The Civil War was a brutal and bloody war, lasting for four years and claiming the lives of approximately 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers. Among the soldiers who fought on the side of the union were many free Black men fighting not only for the preservation of the union, but for the freedom of people still enslaved in Confederate states. Black New Paltz citizens Jacob Wynkoop and Richard Oliver were among the many Black men who fought for the cause of the Union and abolition.

The war ended on April 9, 1865 when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered at the village of the Appomattox Court House in Virginia, seeing no viable path forward for the Confederate army. As news of Lee's surrender spread, other Confederate generals followed suit.



Federal Abolition of Slavery

The Confederacy dissolved following their surrender at the Appomattox Court House and the eleven states that seceded rejoined the United States. Several months after the end of the war, on December 18, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was officially adopted and all enslaved people were freed. Though this was a huge step for the United States and formerly enslaved people, there was still a long road ahead in the fight for Black citizens' civil liberties.



Review and Reflection Questions

1. What trade network allowed for the practice of slavery to begin in North America?
2. Which region was first to begin advocating for the abolition of slavery in the U.S.?
3. What was the reason for the opposing region's aversion to abolition?
4. What was the ultimate result of these tensions?
5. Who won the Civil War?
6. What was the purpose of the 13th Amendment, which was passed following the end of the Civil War?
7. What issues do you think Black Americans would have to contend with following the 13th Amendment?