

SLAVERY IN AMERICA

For a long time in this country, slavery was accepted. George Washington, this nation's first president, owned over 200 slaves. Thomas Jefferson, who in the Declaration of Independence wrote "All men are created equal . . ." had over 180 slaves. In fact, eight of the first twelve presidents were slave owners.

From the beginning, some Americans thought that slavery was wrong. Slowly, others began to change their minds about slavery, too. Most of the people who were opposed to slavery lived in the northern half of the nation. Many people in the South supported slavery. That was because in the South, a plantation's success or failure might depend on the slaves who worked there.

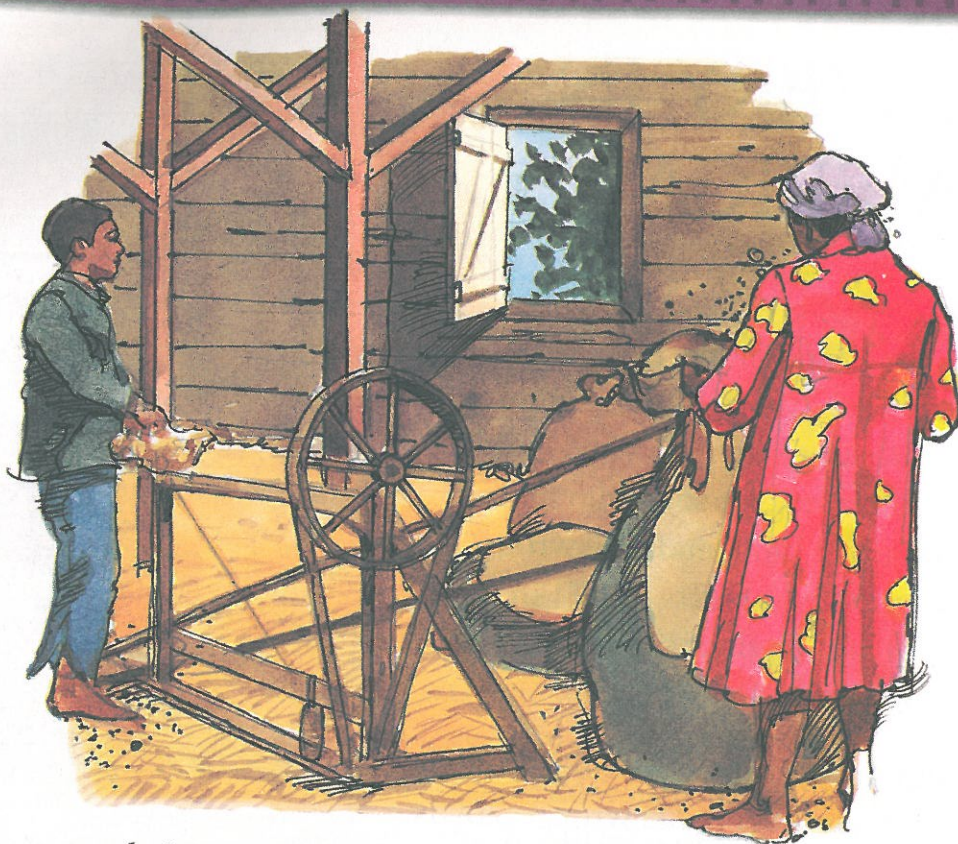
Slavery North and South

The rocky soil of New England did not encourage great big farms. So, New England farmers could, with the help of their families, farm their own fields. They had little use for slaves. In addition, many mills and factories were being built in the North. That meant fewer northerners were making their living by farming.

It was different in the South. There, giant farms called plantations grew up. One reason was the fertile soil. Another reason was the presence of many rivers.



This poster shows the abolitionists' ideas about the meaning of the Declaration of Independence.



These rivers made it easy to ship southern goods to market. Plus, the South had a longer growing season than the North, since it has a short winter.

Some of the crops grown on southern plantations needed a great deal of care. Tobacco especially took a lot of work. The plants are tender and had to be planted one by one. They needed to be kept clean of bugs and cut back and weeded.

Even when the tobacco was harvested, the work was not finished. The plants had to be hung and dried. Then, the workers stripped off the leaves and packed them up for sale.

The southern farmer needed help farming his many acres of tender crops. The least expensive year-round help he could get was a slave.

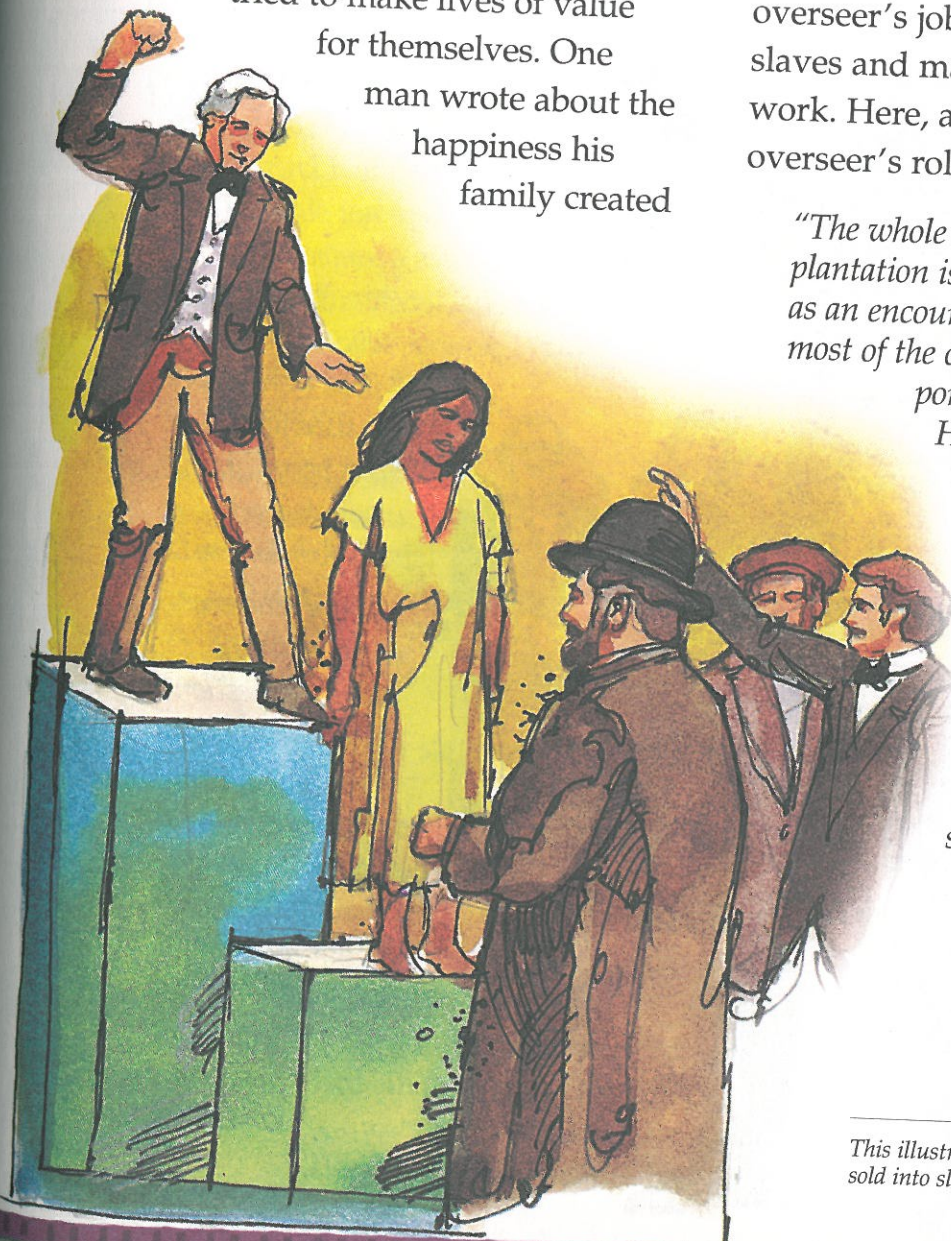
What It Meant to Be a Slave

Southern slave owners did everything they could to control their slaves. For example, slaves could not marry without their owners' permission. Slaves couldn't learn to read or write. Slaves couldn't own property. Sometimes, they couldn't even name their own children—an owner would choose the baby's name instead.

Of all the terrible things about slavery, perhaps the most terrible was that a slave was considered

property. That meant a slave could be sold. Children could be sold away from their mothers and fathers. Husbands could be sold away from their wives and families. Many slaves were allowed to live with their families. However, knowing that at any time this could change was one of slavery's tortures.

Despite their treatment, slaves tried to make lives of value for themselves. One man wrote about the happiness his family created



during their days of slavery. Of course, he remembered the "miry cabins, frosted feet, weary toil under the blazing sun, curses and blows." But he also remembered "jolly Christmas times," "extra meat at holiday times," and "midnight-visits to apple-orchards."

Some owners did not do the day-to-day work of the plantation. They left that up to overseers. It was the overseer's job to watch over the slaves and make sure they did their work. Here, a visitor describes an overseer's role on a plantation:

"The whole management of the plantation is left to the overseer, who as an encouragement to make the most of the crops, has a certain portion as his wages. . . .

He drives and whips them [the slaves] about, and works them beyond their strength, and sometimes till they expire [die]; he feels no loss in their death, he knows the plantation must be supplied. . . ."

This illustration shows a woman being sold into slavery.

Frederick Douglass Questions Slavery

Frederick Douglass was a slave. When he was about 21 years old, though, he disguised himself as a sailor and escaped to the North.

Frederick became a writer and published the story of his life. He also started a newspaper in Rochester, New York. He called his

Frederick Douglass talks to people about slavery.

newspaper the *North Star*, because runaway slaves followed the *North Star* on their way north to freedom.

Here is how Frederick Douglass felt about slavery:

Why Am I a Slave?

By some means I learned . . . that "God, up in the sky," made everybody; and that he made white people to be masters and mistresses, and black people to be slaves.

I found that there were puzzling exceptions to this theory of slavery on both sides, and in the middle. I knew of blacks who were not slaves; I knew of whites who were not slaveholders; and I knew of persons who were nearly white, who were slaves.

Color, therefore, was a very unsatisfactory basis for slavery.

Once, however, engaged in the inquiry [question], I was not very long in finding out the true solution of the matter. It was not color, but crime, not God, but man, that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery; nor was I long in finding out another important truth, viz [namely]: what man can make, man can unmake.

