



Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade

Equal Justice Initiative



SLAVERY IN AMERICA

Beginning in the seventeenth century, millions of African people were kidnapped, enslaved, and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas under horrific conditions that frequently resulted in starvation and death. Nearly two million people died at sea during the agonizing journey.

As American slavery evolved, an elaborate and enduring mythology about the inferiority of black people was created to legitimate, perpetuate, and defend slavery. This mythology survived slavery's formal abolition following the Civil War.

In the South, where the enslavement of black people was widely embraced, resistance to ending slavery persisted for another century following the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Today, 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, very little has been done to address the legacy of slavery and its meaning in contemporary life.

“Taken on board ship, the naked Africans were shackled together on bare wooden boards in the hold, and packed so tightly that they could not sit upright. During the dreaded Mid-Passage (a trip of from three weeks to more than three months) . . . [t]he foul and poisonous air of the hold, extreme heat, men lying for hours in their own defecation, with blood and mucus covering the floor, caused a great deal of sickness. Mortality from undernourishment and disease was about 16 percent. The first few weeks of the trip was the most traumatic experience for the Africans. A number of them went insane and many became so despondent that they gave up the will to live. . . . Often they committed suicide, by drowning or refusing food or medicine, rather than accept their enslavement.”

JOHN W. BLASSINGAME, *THE SLAVE COMMUNITY* 7 (1979).

Imprisoned men at Maula Prison in Malawi are forced to sleep “like the enslaved on a slave ship.” (Joao Silva/The New York Times/Redux.)



Though the reality of American slavery was often brutal, barbaric, and violent, the myth of black people's racial inferiority developed and persisted as a common justification for the system's continuation.

Slavery deprived the enslaved person of any legal rights or autonomy and granted the slaveowner complete power over the black men, women, and children legally recognized as his property.

Enslaved African children taken aboard HMS Daphne, November 1868. (The National Archives of the UK: ref. FO 84/1310 (b).)





The racialized caste system of American slavery was unique in many respects from the forms of slavery that existed in other parts of the world. In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, for example, slavery was a class category or form of indentured servitude – an “accident” of individual status that could befall anyone and could be overcome after a completed term of labor or assimilation into the dominant culture.

American slavery began as such a system. When the first Africans were brought to the British colonies in 1619 on a ship that docked in Jamestown, Virginia, they held the legal status of “servant.” But as the region’s economic system became increasingly dependent on forced labor, and as racial prejudice became more ingrained in the social culture, the institution of American slavery developed as a permanent, hereditary status centrally tied to race.

Opposite: Many enslaved and orphaned children were abandoned during the turmoil of the Civil War. (George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film.)



Opposite: An enslaved man, Private Gordon, was beaten so frequently that the multiple whippings left graphic scars depicted in this 1863 photograph. (Donated by Corbis.)

Enslaved people suffered extreme physical violence as punishment for running away, failing to complete assigned tasks, visiting a spouse living on another plantation, learning to read, arguing with whites, working too slowly, possessing anti-slavery materials, or trying to prevent the sale of their relatives.

Enslaved people who have just escaped from a Virginia plantation in 1862. (Library of Congress.)



The Domestic Slave Trade

In 1808, the United States Congress banned the importation of slaves from Africa. At the same time, the high price of cotton and the development of the cotton gin caused the demand for slave labor to skyrocket in the Lower South. The Domestic Slave Trade grew to meet this demand. Over the next fifty years, slave traders forcibly transferred hundreds of thousands of enslaved people from the Upper South to Alabama and the Lower South. Between 1808 and 1860, the enslaved population of Alabama grew from less than 40,000 to more than 435,000. Alabama had one of the largest slave populations in America at the start of the Civil War.

Slave Transportation to Montgomery

In order to meet the high demand for slaves in Alabama in the early 1800s, slave traders chained African Americans together in coffles and forced them to march hundreds of miles from the Upper South to the Lower South, including Montgomery. The overland transportation of enslaved people by foot was slow and expensive. By the 1840s, slave traders began to take advantage of two new modes of transportation: the steamboat and the railroad. Steamboats carried slaves from Mobile and New Orleans up the Alabama River to Montgomery. Rail routes constructed with slave labor connected Montgomery's train station to West Point, Georgia, and lines extending to the Upper South. Hundreds of enslaved people began arriving by rail and by boat each day in Montgomery, turning the city into a principal slave trading center in Alabama. Enslaved people who arrived at the riverfront or at the train station were paraded up Commerce Street to be sold in the city's slave markets.

Downtown Montgomery, Alabama



The Montgomery Slave Trade

Montgomery had grown into one of the most prominent slave trading communities in Alabama by 1860. At the start of the Civil War, the city had a larger slave population than Mobile, New Orleans, or Natchez, Mississippi. Montgomery attracted a growing number of major slave traders whose presence dominated the city's geography and economy. The Montgomery probate office granted at least 164 licenses to slave traders operating in the city from 1848 to 1860. Slave trader's offices were located primarily along Commerce Street and Market Street (now Dexter Avenue). Over time, Montgomery became one of the most important and conspicuous slave trading communities in the United States. After the Alabama legislature banned free black people from residing in the state in 1833, enslavement was the only legally authorized status for African Americans in Montgomery.

(Courtesy of The New York Public Library, www.nypl.org.) (Opposite: Equal Justice Initiative photo.)





MONTGOMERY'S SLAVE MARKETS

The city's slave market was at the Artesian Basin (Court Square). Slaves of all ages were auctioned, along with land and livestock, standing in line to be inspected. Public posters advertised sales and included gender, approximate age, first name (slaves did not have last names), skill, price, complexion and owner's name. In the 1850s, able field hands brought \$1,500; skilled artisans \$3,000. In 1859, the city had seven auctioneers and four slave depots: one at Market Street (Dexter Avenue) and Lawrence, another at the corner of Perry and Monroe, and two on Market between Lawrence and McDonough.

MONTGOMERY AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION AND PRODUCTION FOUNDATION
ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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Warehouses Used in the Slave Trade

Commerce Street was central to the operation of Montgomery's slave trade. Enslaved people were marched in chains up the street from the riverfront and railroad station to the slave auction site or to local slave depots. Warehouses were critical to the city's slave trade. Slave traders confined enslaved people in warehouses until they could be sold during slave auctions. At 122 Commerce Street was a very large warehouse owned by John Murphy, who provided support to slave traders in the city and built the Murphy House on Bibb Street. The Commerce Street warehouse was used in the 1850s by slave traders like H.W. Farley, who advertised the sale of enslaved children, such as a boy "about fourteen, very likely and sprightly." The warehouse remained in the hands of owners involved in the slave trade until the end of the Civil War.

Montgomery's Slave Depots

Montgomery slave traders operated depots where enslaved men, women, and children were confined. The slave depots functioned as active trading sites and as detention facilities where the enslaved were held captive until they were auctioned at Court Square. The city had four major slave depots. Three of the depots lined Market Street (now Dexter Avenue) between Lawrence and McDonough and were owned by Mason Harwell, S.N. Brown, and E. Barnard & Co. In 1859, Montgomery had as many slave depots as it did hotels and banks. The slave trade continued to thrive in Montgomery even during the Civil War. As late as 1864, Thomas L. Frazer opened a new slave depot on Market Street and sold boys and girls "of all descriptions."

During the last twenty years of American slavery, no slave market was more central or conspicuous than the one in Montgomery, Alabama.

*Court Square in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, looking down Commerce Street.
(Ala. Dep't. Archives and History, Montgomery, Ala.)*



Montgomery's Slave Traders

Vast plantations with large slave populations emerged in Alabama's Black Belt beginning in 1820. Montgomery's proximity to the Black Belt made the city a center for slave trading in Alabama. From the river, down Commerce Street to Market Street, slave traders worked next door to shop owners and other business establishments. E. Barnard & Co. operated at 88 Commerce Street. Mason Harwell, one of Montgomery's most active slave traders, kept an office at 21 Market Street (now Dexter Avenue). On a single day, Harwell sold hundreds of enslaved men, women, and children alongside livestock. Across the South, slave traders were generally among the wealthiest and most influential citizens in their communities.

Illustration of Montgomery's slave market published in 1861. (Donated by Corbis.) Opposite: Several slave depots could be found in downtown Montgomery advertising people for sale. (Ala. Dep't. Archives and History, Montgomery, Ala.)



E. BARNARD & CO., SLAVE DEPOT, MONTGOMERY, ALA.

A few doors above Montgomery Hall.



WILL KEEP CONSTANTLY ON HAND
MECHANICS, FIELD HANDS,
Cooks, Washers and Ironers,
AND GENERAL HOUSE SERVANTS.

Particular attention paid to Buying and selling Slaves on
Commission.

REFERENCES:

Lee & Norton, John H. Murphy, F. M. Gilmer, Jr., Montgomery, Ala.;
E. E. Brown, Macon, Ga.; J. S. Riggs, Charleston, S. C.; Harrison & Pitts,
Columbus, Ga.

W. H. WARE,

IMPORTER AND DEALER IN



Crockery, China,

AND

GLASS WARE,

Wood and Willow Ware, Plated Castors, Forks, &c.

FINE TABLE CUTLERY,

HOUSE FURNISHING GOODS,

41 MARKET STREET,

FOUR DOORS ABOVE THE MADISON HOUSE.



MONTGOMERY'S SLAVE MARKETS

The city's slave market was at the infamous First Street Square. Slaves of all ages were auctioned, along with land and livestock, standing in line to be inspected. Public auctions advertised sales and meetings drawn spectators and, first some buyers who had been lost to the city, still being, nonetheless, and buyers came. In 1850, when their hands brought \$1,000, initial estimates \$2,000. In 1850, the city had seven auctioneers and four slave depots, one at Market Street, Howard Avenue and Lawrence, another at the corner of Perry and Morgan, and one on Market between Lawrence and Montgomery.

Slavery in America traumatized and devastated millions of people. It created narratives about racial difference that still persist today. It also fostered bigotry and racial discrimination from which we have yet to fully recover. In learning more about slavery, we can learn more about ourselves, our past, and hopefully, our future. By strengthening our understanding of racial history, we can create a different, healthier discourse about race in America that can lead to new and more effective solutions.

EJI's Race and Poverty Project

The Equal Justice Initiative is a private, non-profit organization that provides legal assistance to the poor, the incarcerated, the condemned, children prosecuted as adults in the criminal justice system, and communities marginalized by bias, discrimination, or poverty.

Our project on race and poverty examines today's issues through the lens of America's racial history. The legacy of slavery, racial terror, and legally supported abuse of racial minorities in the United States is not well understood. We believe that civil and human rights are often compromised by our failure to confront our history with greater clarity and thoughtfulness.

This report is designed as one of several tools for learning more about racial history. Additional materials on the legacy of racial injustice, and information about the work of EJI, can be found at **www.eji.org**.



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