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Antebellum Slavery in America

**Q1.**

Over the years until the 1830s, slavery had become concentrated in the South. It existed in many forms. The African Americans had been enslaved not only on farms and large plantations but also in big cities and town, inside homes and industries. Although on the face of it, slavery had a variety of forms, the underlying factors always remained the same. All the Slaves were the property of their owners. They were slaves because they were black. This status of black people as property was enforced and maintained through brute force and violence- actual use as well as the threat of use of force. Although black and white people lived in the same South, their lives were quite different.

Most prevalent was the Southern slavery in large plantations. It is interesting to know that only 25% of all Southerners had slaves. Those Whites who did not have slaves were the yeoman farmers. So, the 75% white Southerners, who did not own slaves were not practically the beneficiaries of the institution of slavery. Yet, they defended this institution because they identified with the white owners of large plantations. Some white men who did not own slaves might have resented the power and riches of slave owners, but most of them did aspire to have slaves themselves in order to join the higher ranks.

In the lower South, most of the slaves worked on plantations of cotton. The larger plantations had several hundred slaves. However, most of the plantations had about fifty or fewer than fifty slaves on the average per plantation. Although cotton was the King of all cash crops, slaves did not only work in cotton fields. They raised sugarcane, tobacco, corn, and rice as well.

Besides plantation and harvesting, there were also other kinds of labor required on farms and plantations. For instance, slaves also had to clear the land for the new harvest, cut wood, rear and slaughter livestock, repair buildings, etc. Some of them also worked as carpenters, mechanics, drivers or blacksmiths. Many other kinds of skilled labor were also practiced. Women carried the extra load of doing household chores. Cooking, taking care of children, spinning, sewing and weaving were the activities performed by slave women.

Slavery existed in several forms: forced labor, bonded labor or debt labor, sex slavery. Child slavery and domestic servitude. Forced labor was enforced on the black people against their will. In bonded labor, they were compelled to work as a way of repayment of debt. Sex slavery also existed. All the children born in a slave family were slaves by default.

Some slaves worked as domestic slaves. They performed services for the masters. They were called house servants and their work apparently seemed easier compared to that of field slaves. However, in some ways, their work was even more difficult. They remained under the radar of their masters and mistresses. They enjoyed far less privacy than field slaves. They had remained on their toes because they could be called on for duty at any time.

The relations between domestic slaves and their masters were very complex because they lived and worked in close proximity. For instance, black and white children had developed bonds of friendship in some cases. They would play together. Those white children who were raised by black nannies had become attached to them. However, these bonds were quite temporary. As the white children grew up, they began to understand the system, and learn to adjust accordingly.

The conditions in which slaves lived were pathetic. Their diet was inadequate for the heavy workload. Living in crude quarters left them vulnerable to epidemics. Domestic slaves fared a bit better in this regard than field slaves. They were given used clothes and old furniture of their masters. Moreover, they had better access to leftover food.

There was a significant number of slaves who worked in houses, factories and the docks of booming cities in the South. These slaves were regarded as urban slaves. Urban slavery was an important constituent in the institution of slavery. Cities had about ten percent of all the slaves in the South. Their work ranged from domestic labor to working in factories. In shipyards, they loaded and unloaded goods. They used to travel between the urban and rural areas in order to transport goods.

Urban slaves had relatively more opportunities to travel around the city. They lived in separate quarters and in some cities they lived on the edge of the cities. Their nature and degree of mobility were therefore different from that of field slaves.

It is interesting to know that more free black people lived in the South than there were in the North. The largest number of slaves lived in the Upper Southern states of Maryland, North Carolina, Delaware, Virginia, Tennessee, Missouri, Kentucky and the District of Columbia. The Deep South states included Arkansas, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. The Upper South had undergone a transition to wheat, which was not labor intensive. Therefore, in Upper South, slavery as an institution was not as such profitable or strong. The Deep South, however, it was much profitable and strong. Laws were harsher in the Upper South compared to the Deep South. There were parts of Deep South, where free blacks could protect their rights. As a result of depleted soil, which lowered productivity in Virginia and South Carolina, cotton planters had gradually moved towards the southwest into the states of Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, Texas, and Arkansas. This movement took place between 1790 and 1860. It had an adverse impact on the slaves. Families were disrupted. Slaves were forced to do the hard work of cleaning swamps, cutting canes and building new levees to make the territory ready for plantation.

**Q2.**

According to the federal census of 1860, there about four million slaves and nearly five hundred thousand free African Americans throughout America. Every African American, whether free or slave, was the descendant of a slave African in America. However, some free families existed in the seventeenth century. There were several ways through which African Americans had attained their freedom. Some became free as a result of the end of indentured servitude during the colonial era. Some became free as a result of the abolition of slavery in northern states. Some were freed through a deed of manumission. There were also some slaves who escaped their masters and became free. In rare cases, some Africans immigrated into America as free persons. "After the Revolution, most southern states liberalized their manumission law (Page 11)." This meant that the white masters could now directly free their slaves without first going to the court.

Free African Americans existed the Southern states as well. Sometimes, slaveholders would free their slaves. For instance, some concubines or their children would be freed because the heirs of the slaveholders didn't want slaves. Some were allowed to buy freedom. In the first Great Awakening, the Baptists and evangelists encouraged white American to free their slaves. They preached the message that all men were equal.

The lives of free black people varied from place to place the United States. Many rural free blacks tended to migrate to cities over time. The migration happened in the North as well as South. On chief reason for migration to cities was the pull factor of the job opportunities. In the South, many free black people had churches of their own well as schools for education. Some of these schools were secret. In the North also, cities offered more employment opportunities. For instance, free black people had more access to education in Boston. This immigration to cities had subjected these free black people to prejudice and bias. Churches were the hubs of economic, social and intellectual activities of free blacks.

Before 1776, there were very few free Africans in the Southern colonies of Britain. The Lower South never attracted many free blacks. But the mass migration of free rural Africans to cities resulted in the swift growth of their communities in cities. For example, there were large communities of black people in Richmond and Petersburg (Virginia), Charleston (South Carolina), Raleigh (North Carolina), and Savanah (Georgia). The South had two distinct groups of free blacks: those in the Upper South and those in the Deep South. Those in the Upper South were numerous. Free black people in the Lower South were more urban and educated. They were comparatively wealthy. They generally had white fathers. Despite these differences with Upper South, the laws to regulate the Southern blacks were generally similar because the several southern states borrowed these laws from one another.

Several Northern states such as New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, etc., had introduced gradual emancipation. There existed black churches, aid societies, and association. Some institutions were also led by women. Churches were very important because they also served the purpose of schools and meetings were held there too. The first antislavery society was established by the Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet in 1775 (Page 109). Benjamin Franklin became its present and it was renamed Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1787. Such societies also appeared in other states such as in Delaware in 1788 and Maryland in 1789 (Page 109).

In the Deep South, there was a deliberate attempt at expelling free blacks. The Southerners felt insecure and intended to either expel them or convert their status from free to slaves. Free slaves were considered evil and a threat to the institution of slavery. Therefore the intention was to show to the slaves that there were no incentives in being free. Consequently, free blacks were victimized. More strict legislations were introduced. Most free people were thus forced to leave. In Florida, such laws were introduced that prohibited public gatherings and carrying firearms. Their right to testify and access to the jury was denied.

Although the population of free blacks was significant in the Deep South, they often opted to migrate to the North. They found more opportunities in the North. The migration had shrunk their population in the 19th century. Since talented free black people migrated to the North for opportunities, South was being drained of free black leaders. This difference in the distribution persisted until the Civil War.

Free blacks were barred from many occupations including medicine and law. Access to education was denied. Free black females were in a more disadvantaged position than free black males. For instance, boys could become apprentices to barbers and carpenters, girls were confined to household i.e. cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. One highly skilled job the women did was teaching.

Hoping for freedom, free blacks signed petitions and also joined the army during the American Revolution. Although their hopes were shattered after independence, they fought on both the Confederate and Union sides during the Civil War. Those who fought on the side of the Confederate wanted toleration and acceptance from the white neighbors.

Compared to slaves, free blacks remained outspoken about the injustices. However, their activism depended on where they lived. Free Southerners lived under suppressive laws. They were unable to move or assemble. It was very difficult for them to organize their communities. The free blacks in the North enjoyed a greater degree of freedom.

Some black people owned lands, businesses, and homes. They also paid taxes. IN some Northern cities, they were granted their rights to vote as well for brief periods. There was a small number of black freemen who even owned slaves. In Louisiana, South Carolina and Virginia, for instance, a few free blacks owned slave-holding plantations.

Churches had become the hubs of social, political and economic activities. Blacks were active in print as well. One journal named *Freedom’s Journal* was a newspaper owned by black. It appeared in 1827 and is considered the first black-owned newspaper. This paper aimed at attacking the institution of slavery and combating discrimination and racism against them. Some of the free blacks also became conductors on the so-called underground-railroad which was a route for the escape of the slaves. Some of the most prominent people of color include Richard Allen, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and David Walker. They made their contributions by writing, speaking and organizing for the rights of both free and enslaved black compatriots. The American Colonization Society helped many freed blacks to return to Africa in thousands. On the other hand, many black people considered themselves American and rather than escaping to Africa, focused on securing their rights within the United States.

**Q3.**

Slave life was different at different places depending on many factors. “The waning of revolutionary humanitarianism and the rise of a more intense racism among white people were less tangible forces than cotton production and the Louisiana Purchase, but they were just as important in strengthening slavery. They also made life more difficult for free African Americans (Page 119)”. On the fields, life meant working from dawn to dusk, six days a week. Plantation slaves used to live small shacks with very modest furniture. The food they were given was usually not sufficient. There was cruel overseer appointed to supervise the slave labor. The overseers would aim at getting the most work out of their slaves. The slaves working the houses of their landlords as domestic slaves were relatively better placed. They lived in relatively better quarters and received better food than the field slaves. Sometimes they were also allowed to travel with their families.

The heat and humidity of the South were unhealthy and adversely affected the plantation slaves. Slaves were highly susceptible to diseases because of unsanitary conditions. Insufficient nutrition and continuous hard work took a further toll on their health. There were no proper medical facilities and slaves were forced to work despite being ill. Slaves working on rice were the most disadvantaged because they had to work while standing in water for hours. Malaria was rampant in such slaves and child mortality was soaring high.

Enslaved people were under a constant threat of sale. So, even if their current master was kind, they knew that any kind tension or financial loss will result in their auction. Selling of slaves was also practiced to punish the slaves. This would result in the separation of slave families. Even if they were not sold, the threat of separation from their loved ones would constantly linger.

The practice and threat of sexual exploitation of slave women also existed. No safeguards against this practice existed. Women had no choice, and even if they agreed to the situation, deep in their hearts, they hated the situation. This widespread practice had deeply hurt the dignity of slave men as well.

In order to maintain discipline in plantations, drivers or overseers were appointed. They punished the slaves for not working or being late. Those slaves who were caught after running were also severely punished. The punishments were extremely harsh. Whipping, mutilation, torture or being sold in the auction were used a deterrence against slaves. Sometimes slaves were even murdered. There were some exceptions as well, but generally, the slaves were harshly subjugated.

In addition to these harsh practices, there were extremely harsh laws throughout the South. These laws were called the Slave Codes. Although the laws varied from state to state, the goal was to keep slaves as property. Slaves could not testify, enter contracts, leave without permission, keep arms, organize and gather, read anti-slavery literature, or travel freely. The killing of a slave did not constitute murder and rapes of slave women were not considered the same as the rape of a white woman. Laws would become even stricter if there was a rebellion. In order to enforce the Slave Codes, patrols were constituted. These patrols would terrorize, torture and even kill black slaves.

Although most of the slaves were on the plantation, a considerable number also lived in urban areas. Some also worked in rural factories. In Southern cities, they formed nearly 20% of the total population. Those living in cities worked as domestic slaves, also called domestics. Those who skilled worked as carpenters, bakers, blacksmiths, and shoemakers. Urban slaves enjoyed more freedom than their rural brethren. It was the increased contact among the free black people that promoted thinking about slavery in new ways.

In order to resist unfair treatment, the slaves had invented many ways. They would slow the pace of their work, damage the machinery, destroy crops, excuse sickness, and so on. Some even fought with their masters or overseers. Some indulged in stealing livestock, food or other valuables.

One of the ways to resist was by forming communities with the plantations. Slaves would marry and have children. They would work hard to keep the family intact. In their quarters, they were able to evolve their own distinct underground culture. Some also practiced gathering in the evenings and having sessions of storytelling, singing, and making covert plans.

In these quarters, the slaves would also pass on their acquired skills to their adolescents. For example, hunting, finishing, use of herbal medicines and gathering wild food was taught to the youngsters in order to supplement their poor diet. The adults would also teach their children how to hide feelings and escape punishment. Some would also preach their children that they were superior to their white masters who were useless and lazy human-beings. Some of the slaves formed maroon communities in forests or mountains. Others escaped to the North.

There were many slaves who had turned to religion for peace and inspiration. Both Christianity and Islam were practiced. There were African elements in their religion. Most Christian slaves rejected the brand of Christianity practiced by their masters as it allowed slavery. In their secret meetings, they would speak about the New Testament which, according to them, promised the day of deliverance. They also took inspiration from the Old Testament and the story of Moses who emancipated his people. Indeed these religious beliefs and notions had helped the African American to resist slavery.

**Solved MCQs**

1. **D**
2. **B**
3. **D**
4. **A**
5. **D**
6. **C**
7. **D**
8. **C**
9. **E**
10. **D**
11. **E**
12. **E**
13. **D**
14. **B**
15. **C**
16. **B**
17. **E**
18. **D**
19. **E**
20. **A**
21. **B**
22. **B**
23. **B**
24. **D**
25. **A**
26. **E**
27. **E**
28. **E**
29. **D**
30. **E**
31. **B**
32. **B**
33. **C**
34. **B**
35. **A**
36. **B**
37. **B**
38. **D**
39. **E**
40. **E**
41. **C**
42. **E**