



# Myth: They Were Powerless to Resist

The idea that Black people were powerless to resist their own enslavement is rooted in age-old and ugly stereotypes. In the 1830s, for example, a white actor invented the character Jim Crow, a lazy and dim-witted Black slave. Cartoonish and dehumanizing figures like this spread through American culture, allowing white people to justify slavery by casting Black people as inferior, and as contented servants. How could people like this be capable of standing up for themselves and demanding a different life?

In fact, resistance was a daily part of the lives of millions of enslaved people. As one historian wrote, “Slaves ‘naturally’ resisted their enslavement because slavery was fundamentally unnatural.”<sup>1</sup> Most people know about Harriet Tubman, the heroic Underground Railroad conductor who made as many as 19 trips from South to North and rescued hundreds of enslaved people. Many have also heard about famous rebellions, such as the one organized by Nat Turner in 1831. Turner was a passionate preacher who, after killing his enslavers and securing weapons, enlisted 75 others in an uprising that led to the death of about 55 white people.

Accounts of escape and insurgency are an inspiring part of the history of enslaved people. However, they were comparatively rare, and overshadow the more important story of Black resistance—the smaller, everyday ways in which enslaved people refused to accept their



Jim Crow

situation and imagined a better tomorrow.

Enslaved people participated in acts of defiance every day. They intentionally slowed their work and faked illness to reduce the profits of their enslavers. They broke tools, injured animals and damaged crops on plantations. They also took food, clothing and other supplies denied to them, which they used to care for their own needs and sold or traded with others.

Enslaved people resisted culturally and spiritually as well. They married, formed families and educated their children. They taught each other to read and write, and documented their experiences. They secretly kept African traditions and religious worship alive. They practiced and

mastered important work skills—like sewing and metal work—so they would have a means of survival after being freed. We don’t often think of these behaviors as resistance, but consider the strength of mind and character it took for enslaved people to believe in themselves and their futures when the country they were forced to live in considered them chattel (property).

When we fail to see all of the ways in which enslaved people fought back, we fail to see their humanity, and may even accept the idea that slavery “wasn’t that bad.” This couldn’t be further from the truth. As history professor and civil rights expert Hasan Kwame Jeffries reminds us: “Regardless of form or function, resistance was never-ending. As long as slavery existed, African Americans resisted.”<sup>2</sup>



In Savannah, Georgia, enslaved people resisted by constructing their own church—the First African Baptist Church—and building a secret passage for run-aways beneath the floorboards. Air holes were drilled into the floor and disguised by forming them into an African prayer symbol.

1 Franklin W. Knight, “Slavery,” in Colin A. Palmer, ed., *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History* (New York: Thompson/Gale, 2006), 2066.

2 Heim, Joe. “The missing pieces of America’s education.” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/08/28/historians-slavery-myths/?arc404=true>.



# Roundtable Discussion

## MYTH: THEY WERE POWERLESS TO RESIST

1 After reading about this myth in more depth, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who said, “Most enslaved people were powerless to resist slavery”?

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2 How does a focus on resistance remind us of enslaved people’s humanity?

3 Why is it limiting to focus mostly on escape and rebellion when talking about resistance?

4 What were more common forms of resistance?

5 How did enslaved people demonstrate *cultural* and *spiritual* resistance?

6 How has this reading made you think about how you have been taught about slavery in the U.S.?

SOURCES:

Gates, Henry Louis Jr. “Did African-American Slaves Rebel?” PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/did-african-american-slaves-rebel>.

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