



# Slavery in the United States: Stubborn Myths in Brief

## 1 Slavery was mainly a problem in the South.

**MYTH:** Slavery existed in the North as well. For example, New Jersey's enslaved population was more than 12,000 in 1800, and there were hundreds of enslaved people in New Jersey at the end of the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Many of those who did not own enslaved people profited from business, banking and other economic activities centered on slavery. Slavery was a national problem.

## 2 Many supporters of slavery didn't know better—it was a different time.

**MYTH:** For centuries, many people understood and fought against the immorality of slavery. Many of those who participated in the enslavement of others acknowledged its evils, but did so anyway for convenience and financial gain. Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, wrote in the first draft of the Declaration of Independence that slavery was a "cruel war against nature itself." That passage was ultimately struck.

## 3 Though most enslaved people suffered, many were treated well and were content.

**MYTH:** The ownership of human beings as personal property is inherently an abuse. It is a fundamental contradiction to be enslaved and treated well. Do you think any enslaved person could have been truly happy about their situation?

## 4 Most enslaved people were powerless to resist slavery.

**MYTH:** Enslaved people rebelled in large and small ways every day—by escaping to freedom, learning to read, leading revolts, writing about their experiences, joining abolition movements, engaging in work slow-downs and other forms of sabotage, educating their children and more.

## 5 Technically, the Civil War was fought over issues including states' rights and taxation.

**MYTH:** Slavery was the core issue—every state that seceded from the Union notes slavery as the main reason in its secession documents.<sup>2</sup>

## 6 While slavery was horrible, Black people have had freedom for most of our country's history.

**MYTH:** Slavery existed in what is today the United States for more than 300 years;<sup>3</sup> emancipation occurred a little more than 150 years ago. Since that time, structural racism has continued to severely limit opportunities for Black Americans.

## 7 In the United States, only Black people were enslaved.

**MYTH:** Native American people were also enslaved in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>4</sup>

## 8 The Civil War and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment put an end to slavery in the United States.

**MYTH:** Today, hundreds of thousands of people are subjected to forced labor and other forms of "modern slavery" in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Globally, human trafficking and slavery remain grave present-day problems.

1 Hennelly, Robert. "Secret history of a northern slave state: How slavery was written into New Jersey's DNA. *Salon*, JULY 29, 2015. [https://www.salon.com/2015/07/29/secret\\_history\\_of\\_a\\_northern\\_slave\\_state\\_how\\_slavery\\_was\\_written\\_into\\_new\\_jerseys\\_dna](https://www.salon.com/2015/07/29/secret_history_of_a_northern_slave_state_how_slavery_was_written_into_new_jerseys_dna).

2 Pierce, John. "The Reasons for Secession." American Battlefield Trust. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/reasons-secession>.

3 Ponti, Crystal. "America's History of Slavery Began Long Before Jamestown." History.com, August 26, 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619>.

4 Onion, Rebecca. "America's Other Original Sin." *Slate*, January 18, 2016. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/cover\\_story/2016/01/native\\_american\\_slavery\\_historians\\_uncover\\_a\\_chilling\\_chapter\\_in\\_u\\_s\\_history.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/01/native_american_slavery_historians_uncover_a_chilling_chapter_in_u_s_history.html).

5 Helmore, Edward. "Over 400,000 people living in 'modern slavery' in US, report finds. *The Guardian*, July 19, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/19/us-modern-slavery-report-global-slavery-index>.