

What is chattel slavery and how did it dehumanize Black people?

From the 17th–19th centuries, 12.5 million¹ enslaved Africans were brought from Central and West Africa to the Americas. The colonial system of slavery—which was practiced in all of the original 13 British colonies—is referred to as *chattel slavery*. In this system, enslaved people were the personal property of their owners for life, a source of labor or a commodity that could be willed, traded or sold like livestock or furniture.

Enslaved people were exploited as unpaid labor to build the British colonies and the new American nation. Enslaved labor cleared forests, raised bridges and built ships and mansions, including the White House. It was common to see enslaved Africans toiling in port cities, factories and on large plantations and modest farms.

Enslavers had complete control over the bodies and lives of those they enslaved, as well as their children. Enslaved people could be bought and sold at any time, for any reason. Families were, therefore, often wrenched apart as enslaved people were transferred to the highest bidder. Most enslaved people were trapped in bondage until they died.

Though white supremacy buttressed the institution of slavery, financial gain was its architect. Chattel slavery was one of the most profitable institutions in history, delivering phenomenal wealth and social and political power to certain segments of U.S. society. By 1860, “the nearly 4 million American slaves were worth some \$3.5 billion, making them the largest single financial asset in the entire U.S. economy, worth more than all manufacturing and railroads combined.”²

Slavery predominated in the South, where the plantocracy built southern economies on the backs of enslaved labor as they endured punishing work in the cotton, sugar and tobacco fields. Prior to the Civil War, there were more millionaires in Mississippi than in any other part of the U.S.³ Though all Northern states passed legislation to abolish slavery by 1804,⁴ the region remained complicit in slavery: Northern factories processed products cultivated by enslaved people, Northern timber was used for barrels to transport southern crops, Northern financial firms invested in Southern enterprises and Northern insurance companies insured enslaved people. Slavery, and its various tentacles, commodified Black bodies in every fathomable way, in every region and at every stage of their lives.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared freedom for the enslaved people of the Confederacy—3.1 million of the 4 million enslaved people in the U.S. at that time. Slavery was finally abolished nationwide with the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. In writing about the 300-year period in which Europeans, and then Americans, violently and unreluctantly subordinated Black and indigenous peoples to their unrestrained greed and power, the columnist Matthew Desmond observed: “Given the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above.”⁵

1 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “How Many Slaves Landed in the US?” PBS.com, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/how-many-slaves-landed-in-the-us>.

2 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Slavery Made America,” *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/slavery-made-america/373288>.

3 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Slavery Made America.”

4 Christopher Klein, “Deeper Roots of Northern Slavery Unearthed,” History.com, February 5, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/deeper-roots-of-northern-slavery-unearthed>.

5 Matthew Desmond, “In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>.