

Those Who Were Enslaved, ca. 1770–1859

For most black Americans, Harriet Tubman (ca. 1821–1913) represents the symbol of enslaved African Americans who repudiated the role her country laid upon her and vindicated her own humanity through flight. Tubman took not only herself into freedom; she also delivered some two hundred others on nineteen emancipatory trips back to the South. Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1919), one of several major African-American artists depicting Harriet Tubman, shows an armed Tubman leading a group out of Southern slavery to freedom (5.1).

While Harriet Tubman stands for the enslaved in the African-American countertradition, mainstream American culture has more often portrayed a fictional character. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851–1852), the enslaved Christian martyr Tom transcends enslavement through good works and, eventually, a fatal beating. Stowe's Tom loves his fellow slaves as much as his white owners. But subsequent staged and filmed versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* downplayed Tom's relationship with his fellow black Americans and emphasized his close relationship with whites. Over time, "Uncle Tom" came to characterize an African American who loved whites and betrayed blacks. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American popular culture reworked nineteenth-century black figures into emblems of contentment in slavery, including Uncle Tom, Topsy (another character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), and other black characters such as "Old Black Joe" of Steven Foster's treacly, pro-Southern ballad. African Americans reacted to this later version of Uncle Tom by turning his name into an insult.

Today many black Americans are looking closely at the historical meaning of the institution of slavery and the lives of the people who were enslaved. Slaves and slavery are no longer hidden as reminders of a shameful past. Rather, African Americans are

(Opposite)
5.1. Elizabeth Catlett,
"Harriet," 1975

Catlett's Harriet
Tubman exerts armed
leadership, as she
conducts several
enslaved people to
freedom.

reclaiming their enslaved ancestors and embracing them with a new understanding of the hardships they endured.

Slavery flourished throughout the British North American colonies for a century, until Vermont (1777) and Massachusetts (1783) outlawed it. The rise of cotton production halted the progress of emancipation and threatened to make American slavery permanent. More than eighty years, representing some four generations of Americans, separate the abolition of slavery in New England from the abolition of slavery in the United States as a whole. During the nineteenth century, slavery became a Southern regional institution, but one with a national reach. On the eve of the Civil War, slaves accounted for about one-third of the Southern population (half the people in the Deep South, one-third to one-fifth of the people in the Upper South).¹ American slavery was a truly American institution, for the enslaved worked from Maine to Texas. Even the Western regions in which slavery was illegal discriminated against people of African descent and tried to prohibit their entry.

The Enslaved Lay the Foundations of the American Economy

Slaves supplied the foundation of the American economy in three ways: as a basic commodity in the New England–West India trade, as the workers producing agricultural commodities for the market, and as property. The Atlantic slave trade made many an American mercantile fortune. Examples include John Brown of Rhode Island (the patron of Brown University in Providence and founder of the financial institution that would grow into the Fleet Bank–Bank of America), the donors of the first named professorship, scholarship, and library fund of Yale College, and the sugar-planter benefactor of the Harvard Law School. Slaves grew the crops that Americans exported to Great Britain and Southerners sent to the North: cotton, tobacco (in Rhode Island as well as Virginia), rice, hemp, and sugar. Slaves were also personal (or “chattel”) property that could be bought, sold, moved about, inherited, given away, insured, and used as collateral for all kinds of business transactions. As items of trade, producers of agricultural commodities, and capital, slaves fed the American and British economies and made possible the industrial revolutions of both countries.

Both the British and American industrial revolutions began with the manufacture

of textiles in mills that spun raw fiber into yarn and wove yarn into fabric. After the invention in 1793 of a cotton gin that could separate hardy, short-staple cotton from seeds, slave-produced cotton became the basic industrial fiber. The cotton that fed the mills of Lancashire and Massachusetts came from the Southern United States (Table 5.1). Just as the Atlantic slave trade enriched the eighteenth-century New England economy, so the cotton trade created its own economy of Northern as well as

Table 5.1. Southern Cotton Production, 1790–1860

Year	Southern Cotton Production (in bales)
1790	3,135
1800	73,145
1820	334,378
1860	4,800,000

Southern concerns: banks, shippers, textile manufactures, and insurance companies.² Even after the Northern states became free territory in the 1830s, slavery remained a truly national institution economically.

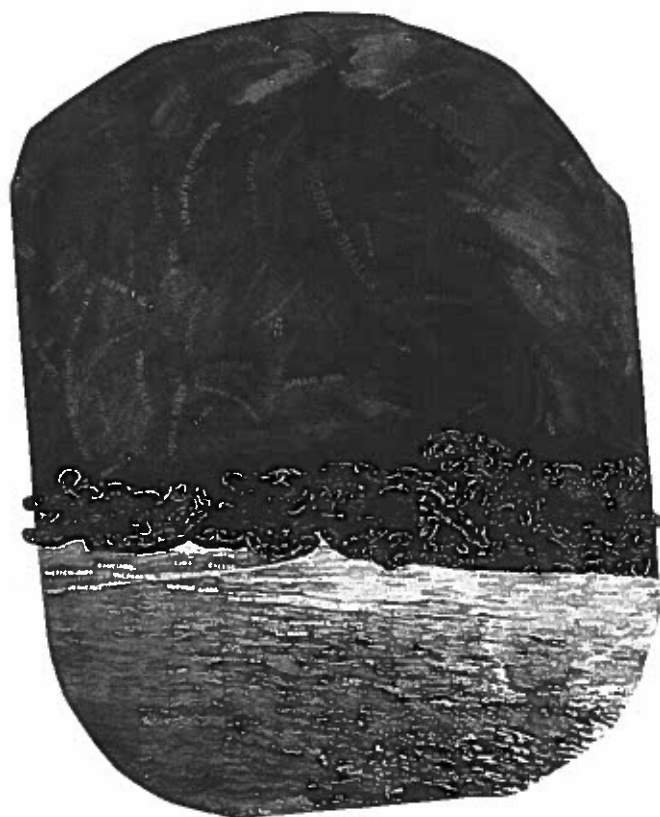
The vast majority of slave owners were white, but Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek Indians also owned slaves. Their slaves accompanied them and died beside them in 1832 on the Trail of Tears from their homes in the Deep South to Indian Territory (which became Oklahoma in 1890). A tiny handful of African Americans owned slaves, either as bound workers or as family members. (As Southern states like Virginia sought to limit the number of free African Americans, they linked emancipation with exile. Unless newly emancipated people were still owned by someone—even a family member—they would have to leave the state.)

The nineteenth-century Southern slave-based economy created tremendous disparities of wealth and poverty. At the poor end of the spectrum, the enslaved third of the Southern population earned no wages for their work and owned no wealth. At the rich end of the spectrum, a small minority of Southern families owned any number of slaves. That minority shrank over the course of the nineteenth century: From 1830 to 1850, the percentage of white families who owned slaves dropped from 36 percent to 26 percent. Less than 10 percent of free Southerners owned enough land, slaves, and other property to make them fabulously wealthy. Of the 26 percent of white families owning slaves in 1860, only 2.7 percent owned fifty or more slaves, but these families owned 93 percent of Southern wealth and one-quarter of the slaves. Only 22 percent of American white people were Southerners in 1860, yet two-thirds of all men worth one hundred thousand dollars or more (spectacular wealth at the time) lived in the South.³ Enslaved workers produced this enormous wealth. In the half century before the Civil War, the Southern land of extreme wealth and extreme poverty was less than a low-wage economy. The South was virtually a no-wage economy.

Enslaved Laborers

Slaves worked at everything that needed to be done. As children, they began working as soon as they could be of use—in the house by about age seven, in the field by age ten. On Northern and Southern farms, slaves did agricultural work alongside their owners and other white people. In 1860, one-quarter of the enslaved worked on farms with one to nine slaves; one half of the enslaved worked on farms and plantations with ten to forty-nine slaves.⁴

Brute force and constant surveillance kept involuntary, unpaid workers on the job and steadily at work. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, owners meted out cruel punishments for unsatisfactory work or absenteeism: branding, chaining, maiming, castration, muzzling, and, most of all, whipping. In the nineteenth century, the most barbarous punishments fell out of favor, but the whips and chains remained, as captured in the mournful slavery memorial by Howardena Pindell (5.2).



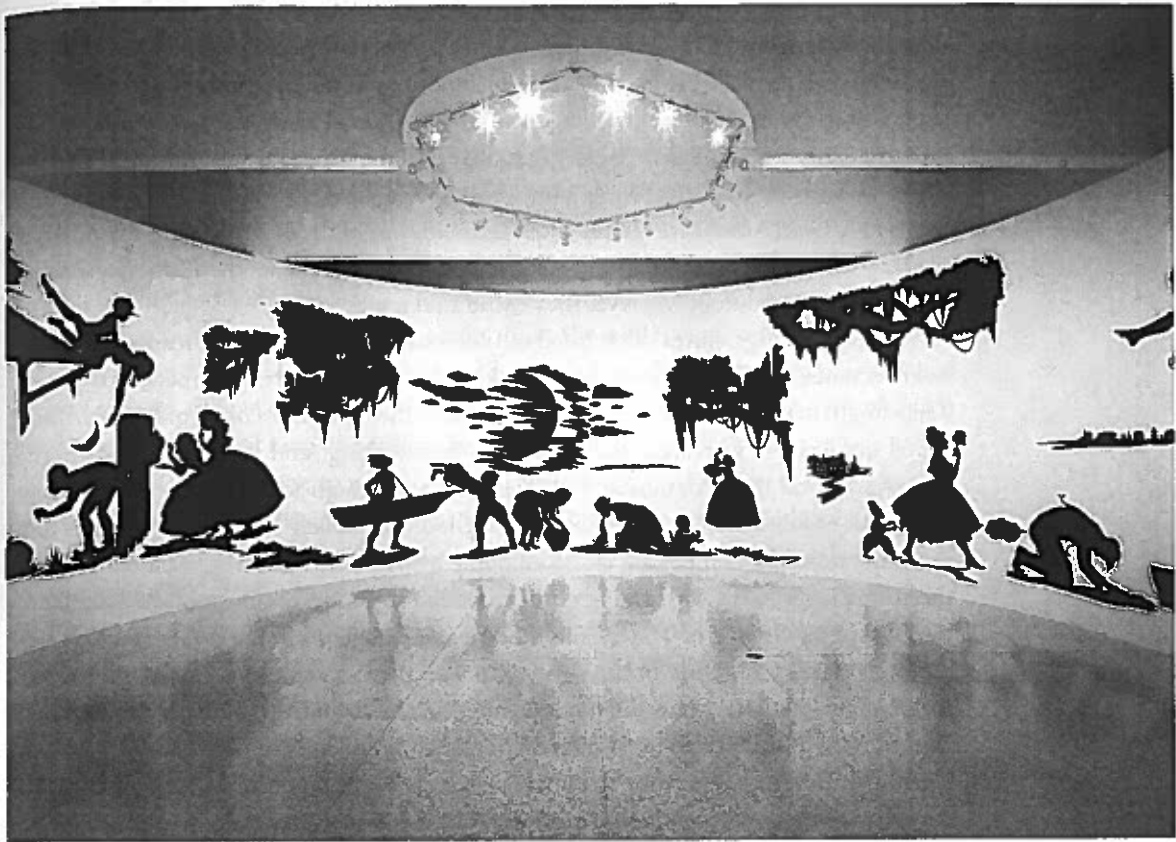
5.2. Howardena Pindell, "Ancestors: Memorial/Slavery," 1993

Pindell's memorial to the enslaved shows the names of American historical figures and friends at the top, chains and the "Middle Passage" in the center, and Africans at the bottom. The middle passage's chains separate the families.

It features reminders of the Atlantic slave trade that severs bloodlines on either side of the Atlantic.

The agricultural workday lasted about fourteen hours in summer, about ten hours in winter. Most women and children worked in both house and field, depending upon where they were needed at any particular time. Women worked double shifts: for their masters and for their own families. After a day in the fields, they came back to cook and care for their husbands and children. They also spun, wove, and sewed for their owners and for their own families. As the artist Kara Walker (b. 1969) shows in her silhouette, young children worked long and hard in conditions that were literally nauseating (5.3).

Slavery did not create different classes among the enslaved (despite long-standing misconceptions such as Malcolm X's popular twentieth-century descriptions of class divisions between privileged slaves who worked in the house and oppressed slaves who



5.3. Kara Walker, "Slavery! Slavery!" 1997

Walker's silhouettes portray tortured enslaved children working in intolerable conditions and vomiting over their situation. The Spanish moss evokes the supposed romance of the Old South, as the chained young worker below struggles with his burden. The enslaved toil under a stormy moon.

worked in the fields). The enslaved worked at various jobs, all of which were unpaid. Vocational diversity did not supply the requirements for the formation of a middle class, including economic mobility, occupational mobility across generations, and the transmission of wealth from one generation to another. Even occupational mobility within a generation was severely limited, for most slaves were not so skilled or specialized that they always exercised their skill. They had no assurance whatever of being able to pass on to their children their skills or whatever favors they may have reaped from their owners.⁵ Class formation began among African Americans after emancipation, when freedom permitted their earning wages, owning property, marrying legally, and bequeathing their property to their heirs.

Only large plantations, farms with twenty or more slaves, sorted workers into household and field workers and established separate slave quarters apart from the big house.

Agricultural slaves usually had Sundays to themselves to attend church, tend their gardens, hunt for game to augment their rations, and care for their spouses and children. Household slaves were always on call, subject to never-ending working hours and close supervision. Owners controlling large workforces trained slaves as blacksmiths, cooks, grooms, carpenters, and even factory operatives. In the Tredegar iron works in Virginia, slaves worked the manufacturing jobs, which, after slavery, would pay well and be off limits to African Americans. In the thousands of farms of the North and South, enslaved workers seldom occupied their own quarters. They ate in the kitchen (often a separate little building) and slept wherever they could find a space.

In urban settings, slaves often hired out their own time, working as teamsters, household servants, hotel and tavern keepers, longshoremen, caterers, barbers, and tailors. They might live apart from their owners, to whom they paid most or all of their earnings. Hired out workers who were skilled, frugal, hardworking, and lucky might earn more than they owed their masters and manage to save enough to purchase their freedom. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818–1907), a skilled dressmaker who became Mary Todd Lincoln's traveling companion and confidante as well as dressmaker, used her business profits to purchase her own and her son's freedom. In 1868 Keckley published her memoir, *Behind the Scenes: or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*.⁶

Many slaves took pride in their ability to work hard and well, even though their efforts benefited others. Many did not, making negative incentives (close supervision reinforced by the whip) necessary to keep them at their tasks. Occasionally owners paid cash bonuses to valued workers, but payment never altered the nature of unpaid servitude. Travelers to the South invariably expressed dismay at the sorry state of the society. For newcomers to the region, the slave South appeared as an overwhelmingly rural, backward place characterized by brutality, poverty, drunkenness, illiteracy, ignorance, and inefficiency. In short, the South seemed sunk in lethargy.⁷ Much lethargy there was, for many Southerners were depressed. They had no reason to hope for a better future. It seemed always to have been so. Not only were they held and worked against their will and for nothing, they were likely to lose their spouses, parents, and children to the traffic in slaves.

The Domestic Slave Trade

A well-established commerce—the domestic slave trade—existed within the United States to buy and sell people. Statistics are fragmentary, but at the very least, the domestic slave trade ensnared one million or more of the enslaved.⁸ The domestic slave trade satisfied two economic needs: First, it allowed the division of slave owners' property, for example, to pay off debts and settle estates after a slave owner's death. Second, in the older regions of the South, especially Virginia and South Carolina, workers could be sold to farmers and planters in the newer regions in need of labor. The Atlantic slave trade from Africa became illegal in the United States in 1808, just as the boom in slave-

produced cotton began and planters put their workers to the task of clearing the forests to make farmland in the new states along the Gulf of Mexico. Slave prices fluctuated according to business cycles, rising in boom times, falling in hard times. But in general, prices increased, making the sale of people immensely profitable (Table 5.2).

Historians have hardly begun to investigate the extent to which owners bred slaves for this market.⁹ However, ex-slave testimony supplies abundant evidence that some owners coerced slaves' sexuality in the interest of profitable reproduction. Virtually all owners engaged in eugenic practices, such as rewarding women who bore children regularly and pressuring and selling women who did not. Slave women bore their first children around age nineteen, some two years earlier than the white women who owned them. Slave women continued having children every two and one-half years until they reached about age forty. (Their mistresses, who could rely on wet-nurses, nursed their children for shorter periods, and bore children closer together.)¹⁰

Regardless of the degree to which the enslaved were forced to breed, massive numbers of people were sold away from their families. The trade remained legal until general abolition in 1865, and every Southern town, including the United States capital of Washington, D.C., had at least one slave market. Abolitionists created enough of a sense of shame over the trade in human beings that the slave market in Washington was shut down as part of the Compromise of 1850; slavery and private slave sales remained legal in the District of Columbia until the middle of the Civil War.

Well over a million people were forcibly transported within the United States before emancipation in 1865. Some 45,000 people were sold away from the Upper South between 1790 and 1800, even before the traffic picked up after the end of the Atlantic slave trade. Between 1830 and 1860, some 300,000 enslaved people—men, women, and children—were sold from just the state of Virginia to owners in the Deep South and Southwest. About one-third of slaves' first marriages were broken by sale. By 1860 an enslaved child had a 30 percent chance of being sold.¹¹

Slave families could be severed without their members being sold. Slaves, particularly women and children, were often given to newlyweds as wedding presents. When younger members of slave-owning families in the Southeast moved west, they took part of their parents' workforce with them. In this way, for example, slaves from the Bennehan-Cameron plantation near Durham, North Carolina, moved to Alabama and Mississippi when Cameron sons struck out on their own. Western moves required young male workers, men of the age to be starting families of their own. Wives and children, less needed in the pioneer stage of cotton culture, stayed home in North Carolina while husbands and fathers drained swamps, cut down trees, and broke land for cotton in Alabama and Mississippi.

Slaves were also moved around according to tensions within their owners' families. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs reports that slave women who had borne her master's children were sold away in deference to her mistress's sensibilities. Jacobs added that the children of masters and their sons with slave women were

Table 5.2.
Prices for Best
Field Hands,
Selected Years,
1800–1860

Year	Price
1800	\$500
1804	\$600
1814	\$450
1819	\$850
1828	\$450
1834	\$650
1837	\$1200
1843	\$500
1847	\$750
1853	\$900
1859	\$1100
1860	\$1200

"unblushingly reared for the market. If they are girls, I have indicated plainly enough what will be their inevitable destiny."¹²

Slavery: A Dehumanizing Institution

Slaves retained their humanity thanks to the support of families and religion, which helped them resist oppression. Nonetheless, slavery was a dehumanizing institution. Assaults on the bodies and minds of the enslaved exposed them to trauma that was both physical and psychological.

Physical Trauma

By the end of the eighteenth century, branding, amputation, and other extremely brutal forms of punishment became rare as means of controlling slaves. But beating continued, causing slaves' most catastrophic physical and psychological trauma. Every ex-slave narrative includes scenes of physical torture inflicted by owners (female as well as male), overseers, and fellow slaves forced to administer their masters' punishments. The narratives also comment on the emotional pain of parents, children, and spouses, forced to watch their kin being beaten. Artists have depicted the physical torture of slavery in countless images, such as "Slave Lynching" by Claude Clark (1915–2001) (5.4). The enslaved woman's nakedness before a crowd of onlookers adds further humiliation to the physical pain of the beating.

In addition to physical injury caused by beating, slaves suffered from the chronic conditions caused by overwork, scanty rations, and insufficient clothing. Frederick Douglass recalled going barefoot and ill clothed all winter and suffering from frostbite as a child.¹³ Stealing food to stanch constant hunger earned many a slave a whipping. Years of hard work, often in swampy conditions, left their signs within slaves' bodies. The skeletons of enslaved children and adults working in eighteenth-century New York City bore the traces of lesions denoting excessive, repetitive stress. The remains found in the African burial ground in lower Manhattan indicate that about 50 percent of New York's

colonial Africans died before the age of twelve, and 30 to 40 percent of those children died in infancy. Many of the 40 percent of the skeletons in the burial ground belonged to preadolescent children and show the thickening of the skull associated with anemia and osteomalacia (weakening of the bones due to poor diet and nutrition). The skeletons' enlarged muscle attachments are attributable to the heavy loads children were forced to carry. The skeletons also show



5.4. Claude Clark, "Slave Lynching," 1946

For Clark, the meaning of slavery is vicious, as shown this public beating of a person stripped of clothing.

signs of arthritis in the neck bones and lesions on the thighbones from muscle and ligament tears, caused by carrying heavy loads.¹⁴

On large plantations slaves might benefit from the care of a medical doctor. Slave-owning families wealthy enough to pay fees for doctors' services often had their own physicians care for their slaves. Mistresses sometimes ministered to ailing slaves, and slaves with specialized knowledge of herbs, magic, and charms—often of African origin—also saw to their fellow workers' physical and mental health. Slave herbalists and magicians commanded a body of folk wisdom separate from American formal education, which was infused with scientific racism. Slaves like Henry Adams (1843–n.d.) of Georgia and Louisiana knew how to cure illness with medicine and spells. His knowledge earned him the respect of his patients, black and white.¹⁵

Psychological Trauma

Slaves and, to a certain extent, their owners paid the psychological costs of a society based on violence, obedience, and submission.¹⁶ As the slave Isabella in the Hudson River Valley, Sojourner Truth neglected her own children to work for her owners, including their children.¹⁷ “No Mommy Me (I)” by Joyce Scott (b. 1948) captures the tragedy of the neglected black child (5.5). While the mother plays with the white child in her charge, her own child, disregarded, clings to her skirt.

Slave owners placed great value on slaves' demeanor, which was to remain cheerful and submissive at all times. Above all, slaves were not to appear to be thinking for themselves or to display the anger inevitably flowing from physical violence, whether being beaten oneself or witnessing someone else's torture. The signs of this repressive regime appeared in advertisements for runaway slaves. Slaves were described as stutterers, as people who always looked down, who seemed depressed, who drank liquor excessively, who alternated between periods of withdrawal and outbursts of fierce, uncontrollable rage.¹⁸

Some slaves suffered from what is now termed post-traumatic stress syndrome, and some inflicted their pain on their kin. But every slave was



5.5. Joyce Scott, “No Mommy Me (I),” 1991

Scott's black child clinging to his mother's skirts loses out to the white child she amuses.

vulnerable psychologically, and every slave was at risk of falling victim to psychological trauma. The enslaved bore the brunt of emotional pain, but their owners did not escape unscathed.

Whites as well as blacks noticed slavery's detrimental effects on white people. Thomas Jefferson could only speak vaguely of "odious peculiarities."¹⁹ Mistresses and slaves spelled out the evils, physical and emotional: Absolute power over other people bred sadism; absolute power over other people also bred sexual abuse. The rape of slave women translated into the pain of adultery for mistresses. Harriet Jacobs, herself the sexual prey of her middle-aged master when she was less than fourteen, summed up slavery's costs to white families: "I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation."²⁰

What Slavery Cost Slaves

Slavery cost slaves income and wealth. They made no wages, although some masters paid bonuses as incentives for good work. Lacking wages, slaves could not save. Slaves had no legal right to hold property, and without wages, they were seldom able to accumulate property. As in the case of wages, some masters offered favored slaves the use of property. Sojourner Truth's parents, for instance, lived in a cottage they considered their own and kept a garden they considered theirs. But possession remained strictly contingent upon the owner's pleasure. Slaves had no rights in such property and could not pass on cottage or garden to their children. Without wages, savings, or property, Africans and their descendants could not send money back to their African villages of origin, as did millions of immigrants from Asia and Europe.

Educating slaves in or out of school was illegal in the nineteenth-century South, but not in the North and West. Nonetheless formal education remained outside the reach of most African Americans for several reasons beyond their enslavement. Few black people, slave or free, were allowed in schools; rural areas offered schooling to almost no one, for poor children of all races and ethnicities were destined for the workforce, not the schoolroom. A small minority of the enslaved did learn to read, write, and figure. Often their owners, particularly their mistresses (as in the cases of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs) helped bright slave children learn their letters. Owners also valued the assistance of slaves who could read or keep accounts. Upgrading one's skill, however, rewarded the owner far more than the slave.

Because slaves could not change employers of their own volition, they could not use the skills they acquired to better their situation by finding improved working conditions or jobs that paid more. They could not work their way up or purchase a share in their business. Closely supervised, they seldom exercised control over their working condi-

tions. Although slaves lacked unions and therefore lacked grievance procedures, they sometimes successfully appealed overseers' orders to their owners. Appeals could go no higher than the master, for masters exercised powers directly on their farms, plantations, and households and indirectly through slave patrols on the roads and other public places. In the South, local governments nearly always deferred to owners, who exercised police power over the land and people they owned.

The combination of physical violence and the requirement to remain cheerful before one's owners bred habits of deceit and anger that turned against oneself and one's own family. Child and spouse abuse were constant dangers in Southern families. One of the most famous works of the late nineteenth-century black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) commemorates the need to conceal emotions: "We Wear the Mask."

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties. . . .²¹

Powerlessness inspired solidarity in many of the enslaved, but others reacted to their extreme vulnerability with nihilism. They became cold, calculating tricksters looking out only for themselves, even at the cost of fellow slaves' welfare. The fugitive slave author and abolitionist William Wells Brown (ca. 1814–1884) said, "twenty-one years in slavery had taught me that there were traitors even among colored people."²² Knowing that desperation bred traitors, many slaves found it difficult to place their trust in others.

The poorest and most vulnerable of workers, the enslaved provided a handy target for insult. Working people of every race often appeared in political analyses as shiftless, idle, childlike, and oversexed. Intellectuals in Europe and the Americas focused their most demeaning stereotypes about the working class on black people. In the nineteenth century, when intellectuals believed that race determined the individual's inherent capacities, those adjectives were applied to the enslaved as though they were characteristics of their race.²³

Slaves without networks of support had difficulty going against the grain of the culture in which they lived. Although many managed to think for themselves, take pride in their abilities, and value themselves as persons, many others gave up the fight and lapsed into what Harriet Jacobs called "degradation"—depression, opportunism, desperation, and apathy. The enslaved who continued to believe in themselves in the face of physical and psychological insult were blessed with extraordinarily strong egos.

The Value System That Slaves Took from Slavery

Slavery took away more than it offered, but slaves developed precious strengths within an inhuman system. Slaves created alternatives to the ideology of the culture in which

they were enslaved. Black people's counterideology included a strong communitarian identity based in mutual aid. This sense of race solidarity ran counter to American individualism. In a less racialized culture, this solidarity might have been called class consciousness. In the United States, where identity began with race, slaves' solidarity became race consciousness. The feeling of belonging to a black community came more easily to those living in their own neighborhoods, the slave quarters of large plantations. Those living on farms, where they were constantly outnumbered by white people, had to work harder to create and maintain a supportive black community.

Slaves rejected prevailing conventions regarding racial inferiority and superiority. As the people who did all the work for those who owned them, African Americans knew that if any race was inferior, it was white people—owners who needed other people to do everything for them. The realization that the culture around them included gross misrepresentations of truth allowed the enslaved to resist the truisms and conventions of American life. This ability to think critically allowed slaves to see exploitation behind pretty surfaces and attractive words, such as "liberty" and "democracy." This lack of sentimentality later came to be called a blues and then a hip-hop sensibility.

Family and Religion as Protection Against Dehumanization

The two foundations of positive black identity were family and religion, both of which African Americans defined in defiance of the norms of the larger society. Black families countered much of the litany of inferiority in the larger society by prizing family members instead of insulting them. Black families gave their members an identity other than slave. In families, slaves acknowledged their value as human beings. Friends, usually also African-American, but sometimes nonblack, offered comfort in a hard world.

Black religion reinterpreted Protestant Christianity to emphasize the God of Daniel, the avenging God who would bring about the second coming of Christ and damn the sinners, that is, the slaveholders. Slaves regarded white religion with a critical eye. The ex-slave narrator Charles Ball cited his African grandfather, who had arrived in Maryland in 1730. Ball's grandfather always insisted that American Christianity was "altogether false, and indeed, no religion at all."²⁴ In 1829 David Walker castigated white Americans for religious hypocrisy. African Americans were strong Christians, as black artists have shown. But they distinguished their religion from the religion of their owners, which they viewed as phony.

Slave religion created an original American musical genre, spirituals. Spirituals consoled people in misery by reminding them of a better place after death, a place "over Jordan," where they would no longer be overworked, unpaid, despised workers. Black artists entitled their paintings with the names of spirituals, for example, William H. Johnson's "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and Malkia Roberts's "My Lord, What a Morning."²⁵ The loss of family members to sale, death, and other causes encouraged African Americans to form families from non-biological kin. Unrelated adults adopted orphans; working adults shared child rearing. Good friends and supporters became non-kin ("play") brothers and

sisters, people whose relationship surpassed friendship and became like family. Slaves did not always judge one another harshly for what might appear to be moral lapses: women who bore children outside established relationships or with the master were not usually castigated or expelled from the community. Black people were well aware of prevailing power relations and cherished all children, even those born of shame, abuse, or weakness.

With women in the workforce as well as men, slaves developed gender roles that were relatively egalitarian compared to those of other Americans. This accommodation did not arise easily, for men found it difficult to recognize women as equals. Nonetheless, slave families formed around the reality of two parents working for others. Women at work—including married women and mothers—never seemed abnormal in the communities of slaves. Ex-slave women as well as men looking back at their lives in slavery recalled with pride their ability to work hard and expertly.²⁶

During their enslavement, African Americans created value systems that critiqued and countered those of mainstream American society. Slaves valued each other as people, not simply as units of labor or property of value. As the poorest people in the society, they rejected white people's materialism and other aspects of American ideology that prized wealth above humanity. Slaves' ability to create identity outside American convention persisted as long as convention devalued African Americans as a people.

Undermining Slavery

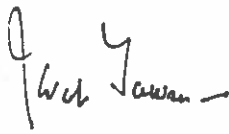
By themselves, black people were never able to destroy slavery as an institution, but they constantly struggled against being enslaved. In 1755, in Charleston, South Carolina, a slave woman was burned at the stake for poisoning her master.²⁷ Poisoning remained one of masters' fears as long as they extracted involuntary labor from their cooks. Individual acts of rebellion occurred continually. But the master class feared slave insurrection the most.

Conspiracies and Insurrections

Some twenty-five conspiracies and insurrections took place in British North America before the American Revolution.²⁸ They included the 1712 slave revolt in New York City, in which Africans and Native Americans armed with hatchets, guns, knives, and hoes killed nine white people, and the rebellion in Stono, South Carolina, in 1739, in which several dozen slaves killed an unknown number of whites. (South Carolina, like other Southern colonies and states, hushed up information on slave conspiracies and rebellions whenever possible.) In 1741 a slave conspiracy was uncovered in New York City before it came to fruition.

Two other major conspiracies came to light in the early nineteenth-century South. In August 1800 Gabriel (ca. 1775–1800) organized a thousand slaves, who began to march on Richmond, Virginia. The Governor called out the militia and routed the insurgents. In 1822 Denmark Vesey (ca. 1767–1822), a free carpenter in Charleston,





5.6. Jacob Lawrence, "Cinqué Aboard the *Amistad*," 1991
Lawrence's illustration of Clarke's book stresses Cinqué's use of arms in hand-to-hand combat against his white captors.

South Carolina, sought assistance from revolutionaries in Haiti as he organized an attack on Charleston for July 14, Bastille Day, the revolutionary national day of France. But Vesey's plan, an attack that would involve thousands of slaves, was revealed before it occurred.²⁹ Vesey and his lieutenants were hanged after a trial in which they refused to reveal their secrets.

In 1839 Africans being transported illegally from Cuba seized their ship, the *Amistad*, and tried to return to Africa. Landing on Long Island, New York, they were captured by the United States Coast Guard and taken to Connecticut for trial. The case of the *Amistad* mutineers reached the United States Supreme Court, which freed them. The leader, known as Cinqué (ca. 1817–n.d.), went to Sierra Leone in 1842. In 1939 Hale A. Woodruff (1900–1980) painted the "Mutiny Aboard the *Amistad*" mural at Talladega College in Alabama. Jacob Lawrence created the 1992 frontispiece of *The Middle Passage—Our Holocaust!* by the historian John Henrik Clarke (1915–1998). Lawrence stresses the hand-to-hand combat of the *Amistad* Africans' struggle against their captors (5.6).

The most deadly American slave revolt occurred in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831, organized by the literate slave preacher and visionary Nat Turner (1800–1831). Turner's visions revealed that God designated him as the liberator of the enslaved through the shedding of white people's blood. Before they were caught, Turner and his accomplices killed fifty-nine white people in two days. In retaliation for Turner's revolt, enraged whites carried out a pogrom against African Americans in Virginia and neighboring North Carolina, terrorizing the black population through searches and seizures, beatings, and rapes.³⁰

The most famous insurrectionists—Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, Cinqué, and Nat Turner—became heroes to black people and gave new meaning to the word "bad." In black vernacular, "bad" designated a person of strength and bravery, a good person. Coincidentally such a person was one whom white people saw as dangerous, as a bad person.

Running Away

Organizers of major conspiracies were relatively few, but many slaves ran away to escape whippings, sale, or other misfortune.³¹ Most remained near home, sometimes taking ref-

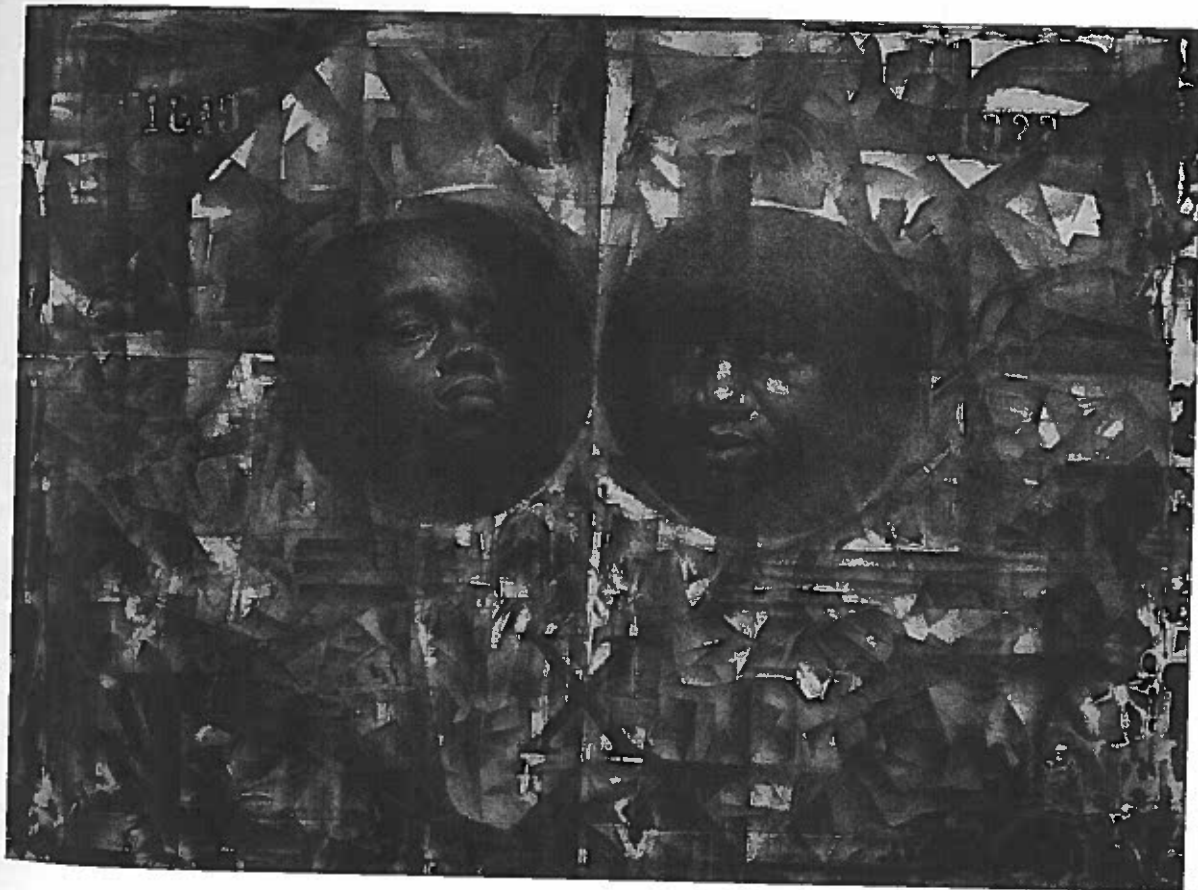
uge with neighboring free blacks. But others spent relatively long periods in wild places like the Great Dismal Swamp on the border between Virginia and North Carolina.

Runaway slaves numbered in the thousands, and their absences disrupted their owners' work routines. Southern newspapers routinely carried advertisements for the capture of runaways, describing the persons and offering rewards. Because these descriptions often mentioned scars, they testified to the brutality of the institution runaways were trying to escape.

Running away was the heroic means of making oneself free, for manumission implied the person being freed had given his or her owners extraordinary service, such as revealing the existence of an insurrectionary plot. Famous fugitive slaves such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and William and Ellen Craft wrote stories of their enslavement and escape. (The Crafts had escaped through the use of a ruse depending

5.7. Charles White, "Wanted Poster Series," 1970

White shows twentieth-century black people as nineteenth-century fugitive slaves stressing the similarity of their situations. His dates—1619 and 19??—indicate his conviction that the black situation has not changed. The X in the middle stands for the lost African names and identities.



upon the existence of enslaved people who were for all intents and purposes white. Ellen Craft (1826–1891) pretended to be a young white man, while her darker skinned husband William (1824–1900) pretended to be his/her slave.) Fugitive slaves created a genre of original American literature, the ex-slave narrative, which numbered in the hundreds of published autobiographies.

The visual artist Charles White (1918–1979) commemorated those who sought freedom by running away from their owners. In his “Wanted Poster Series,” White embeds cameo images of a mother and child against the background of a slave auction poster. In the top left-hand corner White writes “1619,” in the top right-hand corner, “19??” (5.7).

Ann Tanksley (b. 1934) painted “Running to Freedom” to show fugitives making their way through a dangerous, confusing forest in nighttime (5.8). Here running away is not for the weakened of body or soul.

The thousands of slaves seeking permanent rather than temporary freedom had to travel very long distances. They left their families and their work sites and set out for the land of the free, in Northern and Western states and in Canada. Volunteers helped them along the route known as the Underground Railroad.

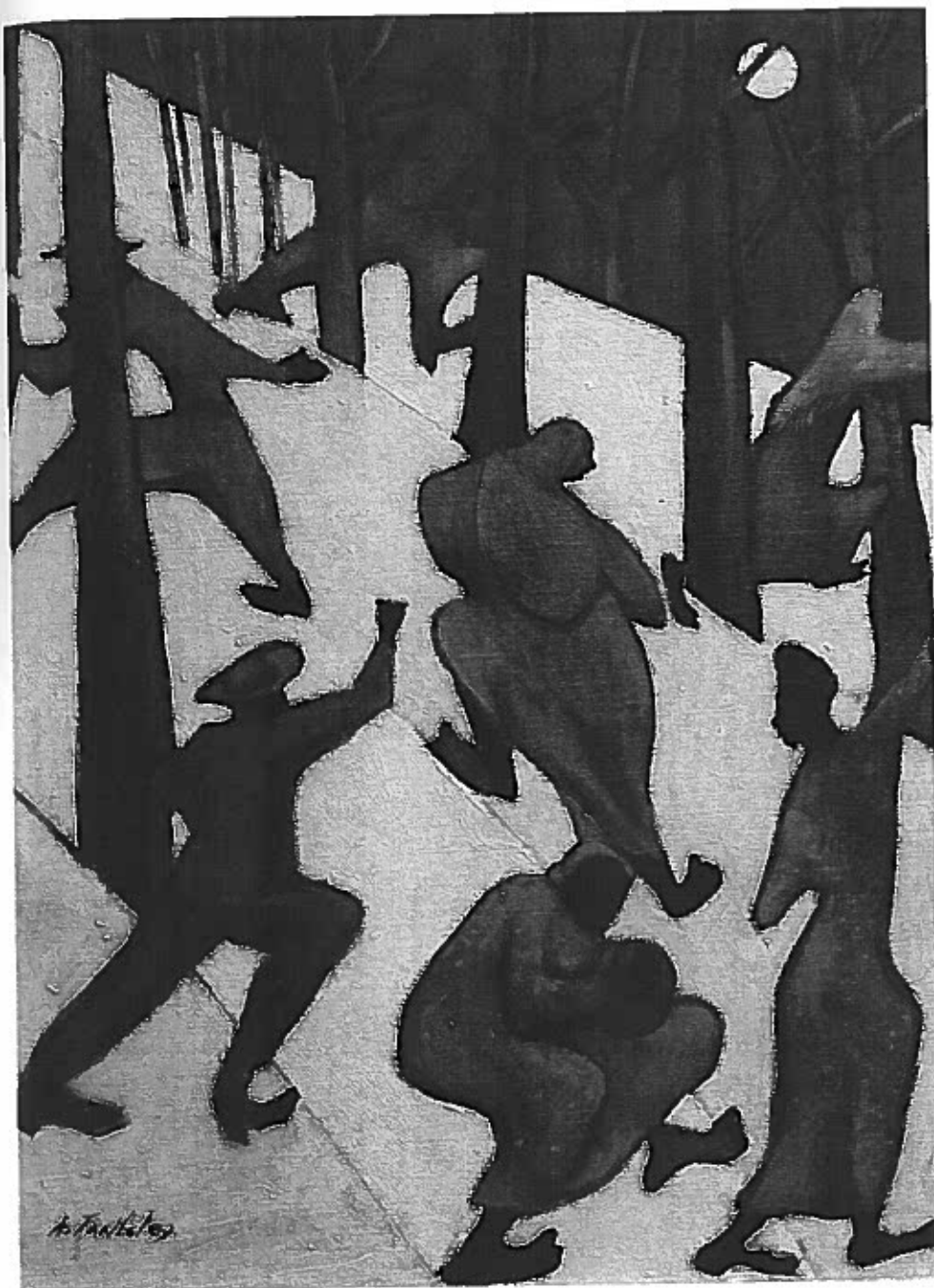
The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was not an actual, physical railroad with steel rails and trains. Rather, it consisted of a largely informal network of some 3,200 people of all races in the North and West who helped fugitive slaves make their way to freedom.³² The safest and best-organized networks existed in Pennsylvania, where William Still headed the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee; in New York, where David Ruggles (1810–1849) headed the New York City Vigilance Committee; and in Ohio, where the white Quaker, Levi Coffin, helped people arriving in Cincinnati. In the Southern and Border States, Quakers and other church people afforded fugitives refuge. Black churches and free African Americans offered the most dependable shelter to those on the run. The Underground Railroad network reached as far north as Michigan and up into Canada.

Statistics on fugitive slaves are hard to come by, but one estimate sets the number passing through Philadelphia before the Civil War at nine thousand.³³ Although this number was not enough to threaten slavery seriously as an economic institution, it sufficed to deny the pro-slavery claim that child-like African Americans were happy as slaves. After the strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, troops had to be called out in 1851 and 1854 to wrench fugitives from black and white abolitionists in Boston. Such a use of armed governmental force further polarized the opponents and supporters of slavery.

Harriet Tubman, Moses of Her People

The best-known guide to freedom was Harriet Tubman, the mythic heroine of the slave era. Enslaved on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Tubman was a physically strong worker who seized her own freedom in 1849 as she was about to be sold away from her husband and family. Her route of escape took her to Philadelphia, where she worked to finance her



5.8. Ann Tanksley, "Running to Freedom," 1987

The fugitives in Tanksley's painting grope their way through trackless woods in darkness. The light-colored ground may indicate snow and the nearness of free territory.



5.9. Jacob Lawrence, "Harriet Tubman Series No. 10," 1938-1939

Lawrence shows Tubman making her way to freedom through a very dark night, an immense sky indicating the vastness of the land to be crossed.

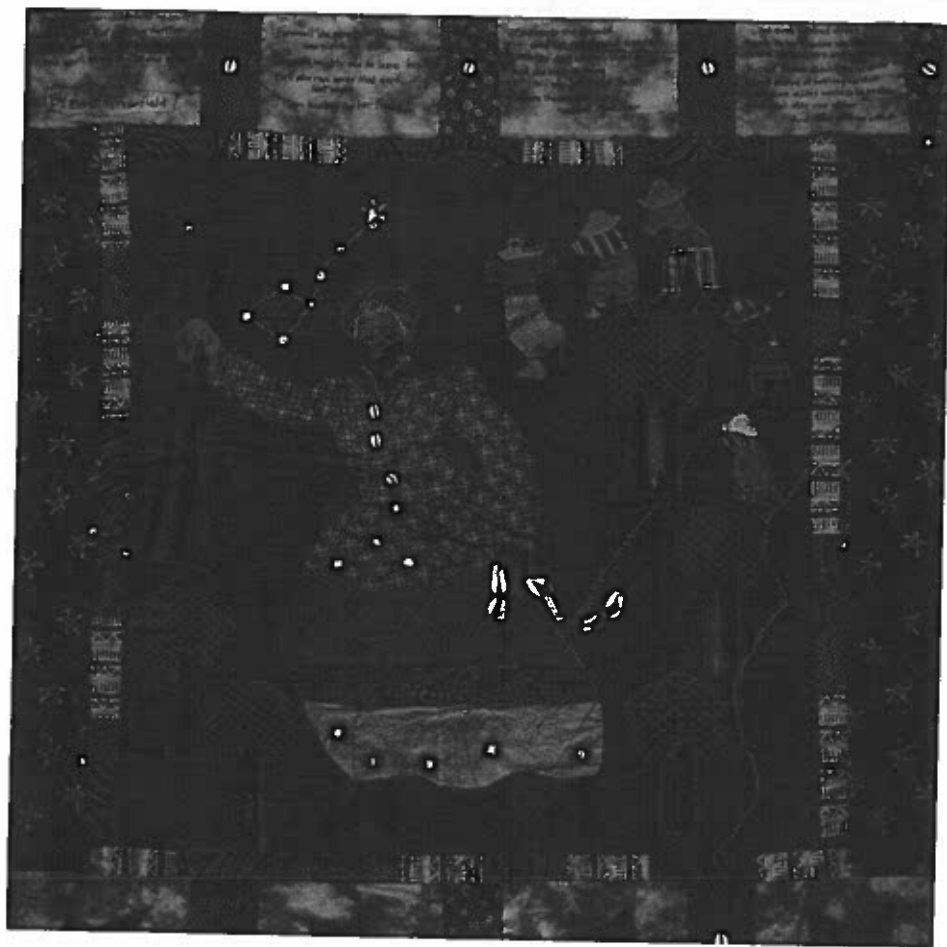


5.10. John T. Biggers, "Harriet Tubman and Her Underground Railroad," 1952

In Biggers's rendition, Tubman leads hundreds of suffering slaves, a mighty army of fugitives, to freedom. In the left foreground he shows a man bound to the cross of cotton. On the right, a naked woman embodies the sexual abuse of enslavement.

return to Maryland for her sister. Tubman went back to Maryland some nineteen times, so often that planters offered a \$40,000 bounty for her capture. By the time she made her last rescue in 1860, Tubman had earned the name "Moses of Her People."³⁴

Tubman is one of the historical figures that black artists depict most often. Jacob Lawrence's "Harriet Tubman Series No. 10," created early in his artistic career, traced Tubman's life from her enslavement in Maryland to her delivery of her fellow slaves to freedom (5.9). Like other fugitives, Lawrence's Tubman takes her bearing from the nighttime North Star of the Big Dipper.



5.11. Charlotte Lewis, "The Harriet Tubman Quilt," 1996

Surrounded by strips of African cloth, Lewis's Tubman leads a few people off beneath a poem in Tubman's honor.

John T. Biggers, "Harriet Tubman and Her Underground Railroad" (5.10), stresses the magnitude of Tubman's achievement by setting her at the head of a column of hundreds. They flee gruesome Southern cotton fields, the symbolic backdrop to American slavery. (Maryland, however, lay too far North for cotton and was actually a land of wheat and tobacco.)

"The Harriet Tubman Quilt" (5.11) by African-American quilter Charlotte Lewis (n.d.–ca. 2000) shows Tubman carrying a gun and the chains she has sundered. It is still nighttime, and the North Star and the Big Dipper show the way out of slavery. Strips of Ghanaian Kente cloth frame Tubman and her followers.

Conclusion

By the time Harriet Tubman had led some two hundred people out of slavery in the 1850s, masses of white as well as black Americans recognized the evils inherent in the institution of slavery. Yet slaves were so fundamental a part of the American economy, especially the Southern economy, that it took armed conflict to set them legally free. The Civil War of 1861–1865 and the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution ended two and a half centuries of involuntary servitude for the 91 percent of African Americans living in the half of the United States built on enslaved labor.