American History

Stories of

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

—Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776. That document called for the liberty and equality of all people in the young United States. But it said nothing about slavery. The cruel system persisted in the South until the Civil War ended in 1865.

What was it like to grow up in slavery? Children were often separated from their parents and forced into hard labor at a young age. They could not go to school. They could not enjoy the games and merriment of the white children around them.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, more than one billion people were kidnapped from Africa and brought to America in chains. Those who survived the harrowing sea journey became the parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of children born into slavery.

In the 19th century, a growing movement led by abolitionists caught hold, mainly in the North. More and more whites came to recognize the suffering of fellow humans in chains. Countless hearts and minds were won over by slave narratives—the heartbreaking stories of slaves written in their own words.

In these excerpts, three former slaves describe their lives before they escaped to freedom.

—Suzanne McCabe
Josiah Henson was born in Maryland in 1789. Sold three times before he turned 18, he later escaped to Canada with his wife and four children. There, Henson taught successful farming practices to other former slaves. His autobiography, *The Life of Josiah Henson*, was published in 1849.

My earliest employments were to carry buckets of water to the men at work and to hold a horse-plow, used for weeding between the rows of corn. As I grew older and taller, I was entrusted with the care of master’s saddle horse. Then a hoe was put into my hands, and I was soon required to do the day’s work of a man. It was not long before I could do it, at least as well as my associates in misery. . . .

The principal food of those upon my master’s plantation consisted of cornmeal and salt herrings, to which was added in summer a little buttermilk and the few vegetables which each might raise for himself and his family on the little piece of ground (called a truck patch) which was assigned to him for the purpose. . . .

We lodged in log huts, and on the bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, 10 or a dozen persons—men, women, and children. All ideas of refinement and decency were, of course, out of the question. . . . Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners and boxed in with boards; a single blanket the only covering. Our favorite way of sleeping, however, was on a plank: our heads raised on an old jacket and our feet toasting before the smouldering fire. The wind whistled, and the rain and snow blew in through the cracks. The damp earth soaked in the moisture till the floor was miry as a pigsty. Such were our houses. In these wretched hovels were we penned at night, and fed by day; here were the children born and the sick neglected.

**Words to Know**
- **abolitionist**: a reformer who works to end slavery.
- **fugitive**: someone who flees
William Wells Brown

William Wells Brown was born into slavery in Kentucky in 1814. After escaping, he became a well-known abolitionist. Brown wrote the first novel and the first play published by an African-American. This is from Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, published in 1847.

My master owned about 40 slaves, 25 of whom were field hands... He had a large farm, the principal productions of which were tobacco and hemp [a plant that yields fiber used for rope].

Field hands were summoned to their [unpaid] toil every morning at 4 o'clock, by the ringing of a bell. They were allowed half an hour to eat their breakfast and get to the field. At half past 4, a horn was blown by the overseer, which was the signal to commence work. Everyone that was not on the spot at the time had to receive 10 lashes from the negro-whip, with which the overseer always went armed.

I was a house servant—a situation preferable to that of a field hand, as I was better fed, better clothed, and not obliged to rise at the ringing of the bell, but about half an hour after. I have often laid and heard the crack of the whip, and the screams of the slave.

My mother was a field hand, and one morning was 10 or 15 minutes behind the others in getting into the field. As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. She cried, "Oh! pray—Oh! pray—Oh! pray"—these are generally the words of slaves, when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any farther. The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud. After giving her 10 lashes, the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed, and found no consolation but in my tears.

Web Watch: Slave Narratives
docsouth.unc.edu/neh
Hiring-day at the South takes place on the 1st of January... At the appointed hour, the grounds are thronged with men, women, and children, waiting, like criminals, to hear their doom pronounced. The slave is sure to know who is the most humane, or cruel master, within 40 miles of him.

It is easy to find out, on that day, who clothes and feeds his slaves well; for he is surrounded by a crowd begging, “Please, massa, hire me this year. I will work very hard, massa.” If a slave is unwilling to go with his new master, he is whipped, or locked up in jail, until he consents to go... Should he chance to change his mind... woe unto him if he is caught! The whip is used till the blood flows at his feet; and his stiffened limbs are put in chains, to be dragged in the field for days and days....

To the slave mother, New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies.

Think About It

Born a slave, Frederick Douglass became the leading spokesperson for African-Americans in the 1800s. Write a brief essay describing what Douglass meant by this statement: “No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.”
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