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STEVEN HAHN
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
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Steven Hahn Interview
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Slavery in American history

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STEVEN HAHN:

You know, until the middle of the 20th century slavery was not regarded as a central aspect of the American historical experience. And what we knew about slavery was a result of histories that were written by white southerners, who were for the most part apologists for slavery. Things began to change with the advent of the Civil Rights movement, with the recognition on the part of not only scholars, but a wider public, of the centrality of race, and by extension slavery and racial discrimination, in the history of the country. And so, from the middle of the 20th century on there was growing interest in African-American history, and certainly the history of enslavement. And over time, as you could imagine, we've learned many

things. Among them we've learned that slavery was not one thing. Slavery was a system that changed over time. It's had – it had its first emergence in the 17th century, and lasted, as we know, until the 13th Amendment and the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War.

STEVEN HAHN:

It changed in all sorts of important ways as it spread across the deep South. So, enslaved people were not only on plantations, which is how this story had been told, but in fact, half of enslaved men and women were on big farms or small farms. They may have been in units where there were only two, three or four slaves, even one slave. We tend to think about plantations as having 20 or more slaves. Unless you're looking at the deep South states, where a substantial amount of slaves were on plantations, elsewhere they were not. Slaves were involved in doing everything. They were growing staple crops like tobacco and rice. Eventually in the 19th century cotton became central. But in many parts of the United States where slavery remained legal, enslaved people were artisans, they were mechanics, they were domestic workers, and they grew food crops as well as made important goods for plantations and farms.

STEVEN HAHN:

The other thing that we've learned that I think is really, really important is that as the history of slavery began to attract serious scholarship, a lot of the emphasis was on repression and victimization. Over time, one of the things we learned about is how enslaved people themselves struggled to shape the relationship, to resist the power and authority of their owners, to carve out

time for themselves to build relationships, some of them involving family and children, others involving friendship and communication, so that it was an ongoing battle, some have described it as a war, which is not off base as far as that's concerned. Sometimes the struggle broke into open rebellion, more often than not it didn't, but slaves were increasingly aware of the changing political environment around them. They were aware in part because they needed to be aware.

The Haitian Revolution's influence

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STEVEN HAHN:

And so, into the 19th century, there were a number of things that shaped that political awareness. One was the Haitian Revolution, which many slaves found out about because there was a tremendous departure of enslavers and slaves from Saint-Domingue before the revolution was over. And many of them came to the United States, in ports stretching from Virginia in the North down to New Orleans in the South. And word of what had happened in Saint-Domingue, and then Haiti, which was the only successful slave revolution, rebellion, in modern history where slaves themselves overthrew the regime, defeated the armies of Britain, Spain and France, and established the second independent republic in the western hemisphere. It was part of a process of slavery coming under attack. The late 18th century saw the development of movements against the slave trade and then against slavery itself. Saint-Domingue and Haiti explodes in that context.

Resistance by the enslaved

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STEVEN HAHN:

Into the 19th century, it's clear to slaves who were paying attention and who had communication networks and were listening carefully to what was circulating among their owners, as well as themselves, that American white people might be divided, that some may have opposed slavery, and they knew that their owners regarded them as enemies, and an enemy of my enemy has got to be my friend. So, slaves were very attentive to what was going on, and by the time of the election of 1860, they knew about the Republican Party. They knew, actually, about the election of 1856, when John C. Frémont was the first candidate of the Republican Party on an anti-slavery platform. And they knew that the Republican Party, somehow or other, seemed to threaten their enslavement and might be a force that was interested in their own liberation.

STEVEN HAHN:

And so they looked very carefully when Abraham Lincoln was running for President, when the Republican Party was once again attempting to contest for national power in the United States, partly, too, because they saw that their owners were increasingly apoplectic about this, were warning about the consequences of Lincoln's election, that he would overturn the social order in the states where slavery was legal and perhaps put enslaved people on the same plane as them.

STEVEN HAHN:

Sometimes I think we have underestimated the extent to which enslaved people enacted retribution on their owners. Part of this is because of a narrative about slavery and emancipation that is more politically comfortable. I think the more we look, the more we recognize that violence is part of both sides, and it's very difficult to imagine contesting slavery. Either you can flee or you can confront. This is a story of course that Frederick Douglass tells about his confrontation with an overseer in particular where he basically stands up and demonstrates that he has a will of his own and he will not buckle to the demands or power of a white person. But there are many, many episodes, certainly, when former enslavers tried to come back to plantations that they had once owned and reclaim them, and are driven off.

STEVEN HAHN:

There is this very famous episode on a Louisiana plantation where, during the Civil War, the formerly enslaved people, because slavery was coming undone, demanded to be paid for their labor. And when the owner refused, they built a gallows on the plantation and they told the owner that they learned that they wouldn't really be free until they hanged him. And he decided that he was ready to pay them. So, there is a lot of this. There's no question that, compared to major slave rebellions, either in the United States or in the history of the western hemisphere, say, there was less violent retribution, that enslaved people were more likely to try to flee. But remember, too, that 150,000 of them enlisted in the Union Army. And they enlisted in the Union Army, not for some abstract reason, but because they were going to end slavery themselves.

STEVEN HAHN:

And one of the things that happens is that when the war ends, former enslavers are extremely upset to see so many Black people as part of the army of occupation. And they demand that the federal government withdraw them, which, by and large, the federal government does. But I think the issue is not whether on this, that, or the other plantation or farm that formerly enslaved people, or enslaved people who are leaving the plantation, or who recognize that a major change in circumstances is going to take place.

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STEVEN HAHN:

Yes, there were many episodes when there were threats and where there were acts of violence and retribution. But arming the former slaves was about recognizing that violence was going to be necessary to fully end slavery, and that they wanted to be the ones who did the work. And as you could imagine, as Black soldiers march through the states that had been in rebellion and where slavery was legal, what this meant for enslaved people, who for any one of a number of reasons had stayed put, to recognize a new social... And to see the terror that their owners were exhibiting. To recognize what an incredible change of circumstance that represented. So, you know, it did… When John Brown or Frederick Douglass recognized in the 1850s that violence was going to be necessary to overthrow slavery, they knew what was happening, and it was necessary. But it wasn't only the violence that came from white soldiers who began by trying to suppress a rebellion. It came because, beginning in the summer of 1862 and then advanced by the

Emancipation Proclamation, it came from thousands and thousands and thousands of mostly former slaves who took up arms exactly to enact retribution on their owners.

How to look at labor relations and resistance

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STEVEN HAHN:

It was a sugar plantation, and on sugar plantations women are disproportionately field laborers. And the reason for that is because sugar plantations are much more highly mechanized than cotton plantations, are because you not only have to harvest the sugar cane, but you have to grind it and you have to prepare the sugar. And a lot of the skilled work that went into doing that was performed by enslaved men. And so the balances in the fields tend toward enslaved women. And on the Magnolia Plantation, because they were aware of plantations and farms in the vicinity, some of which had been leased out to northern planters who were going to come down and try to make some money off what was going on, they had learned that Black people who were working were getting paid a wage. And so they demanded that their owner pay them a wage and their owner resisted. And they began a labor slowdown.

STEVEN HAHN:

And that didn't seem to budge the owner. And so they decided to strike, and the owners still didn't budge. And then they began to construct a gallows in

the slave quarters, which was a clear symbol to the slave owner that now things were getting serious and that they expected their demands to be met or that there were going to be very, very serious consequences. And at that point, as the enslaver saw this, he recognized that there were Union troops nearby, but he wasn't going to get any help, and that the women and men on the Magnolia Plantation were planning to carry this out. And so he decided that it would make sense to accommodate their demands and to begin to pay them. So it was a especially dramatic way in which the circumstances of war and emancipation changed the balances of power on plantations, where previously the slave owner was in clear charge.

STEVEN HAHN:

Now, it was also an example of how there is this ongoing battle that takes place, even before the Civil War and even before slavery began to end, as enslaved women and men try to define out spaces for themselves and better circumstances for themselves, to try to control the pace of labor, to try to see if there's some kind of reward system, if they can have provision grounds, and what they can do, can they sell the provisions or not, and so on. And so it's really an ongoing struggle that, if you look at the Magnolia Plantation, you have to recognize that this does not come out of nowhere. That it's not all of a sudden that they say, "Hey, why don't we have a labor slowdown or a strike?" They didn't need anyone to tell them what to do. They knew that they had a certain amount of power because they were the ones who were doing the work in the fields, and that they may have been the ones who were doing the work at the sugar mill. So they were very conscious of being able to use that power. And of course, as all laboring people know, the possibilities for

engaging in resistance change when the political power of your employer or of someone who claims to be your owner is going to be weakened. And again, it's another case where they're very, very attuned to everything that's going on and how they have an ability to push forward in ways that would absolutely not have been the case earlier.

STEVEN HAHN:

I think this was an example of something that we need to look at much more closely. As I said, this doesn't just happen. What it does is it raises the likelihood that, especially in the sugar growing areas, that these struggles over labor are going to be carried on even more forcefully by women, because they represent the disproportionate number of people who are going to be involved. So if women organize a slowdown and then a strike, what it means is that this is something that female field hands had been doing in one of a variety of ways. The Civil War opens up the possibility of being able to raise demands that were not possible before. As enslaved people without anti-slavery abolitionists knocking on the door, they're not going to be able to demand payment, which is a complete rejection of slavery, but they are going to be able to press for other things that are important to them.

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STEVEN HAHN:

And what it means is that women, as well as men, are really important in organizing enslaved communities, and they make their own particular contributions in areas where women are not as heavily represented in the fields. They might have been engaged in other activities. But women on

cotton plantations and farms are in the fields too. And there are different gangs, if the division of labor is sufficient. But there are a variety of ways in which all sorts of people who are enslaved can work to not only resist the demands that are being placed upon them, but to try to shape the relationships in ways that are favorable to them. Now, as you could imagine, this is always very dangerous, because slave holders are very quick to put down any signs of resistance or insubordination. You don't have to count the number of whippings that take place on a plantation to know that all you need to do is see one for it to leave a very, very searing impression.

STEVEN HAHN:

So pushing back... You know, enslaved people are not going to build gallows without circumstances that suggest that they actually have the power to enact this. And it could well take place at a point, and certainly during the Haitian Revolution, as this turned into not simply a massive rebellion, but one that was really fundamentally undermining the power of slave owners. There were possibilities there that would never have been the case at other times.

STEVEN HAHN:

But again, if you study this, as you suggested, one of the things you automatically have to ask is, "What was going on before?" And it's a different view about how we should really look at labor relations and resistance. The slowdown on the Magnolia Plantation in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana was led by women. It was led by women because they were disproportionately represented in the field labor force. And it was led by women because it was

clear that women were centrally involved in trying to both resist and shape the labor regime, both under slavery and during the Civil War as slavery was being undermined.

Family life for enslaved people

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STEVEN HAHN:

And so, I think it was a really important context, and it was only possible because of long-term struggles that enslaved people engaged in to resist the power of their enslavers and to define out territory for themselves, where they could survive individually and collectively. Because slavery only recognized legally the relationship between master and slave, there was no other relationship that enslaved people could have formed that gained any kind of legal recognition. That has to do with husband and wife, that has to do with parents and children. It has to do with other kinship relationships. So, all of these, enslaved people built on their own, either with their owners turning the other cheek and recognizing that intervening was a bad idea and it was going to create a lot of disruption, or in the face of great obstacles. As you can imagine, because most slaves did not live on plantations, they oftentimes had to find mates who lived on other plantations and farms. So, not only did they have to find space for themselves where they lived, but they had to figure out ways of negotiating territories in between plantations and farms so that those relationships could develop. And as you could imagine, part of what happens is slaves begin to learn all sorts of things about what's going on within a certain perimeter. And we do know that maybe 10% of the enslaved

population had gained at least literacy, in terms of being able to read. And one of the things we know from working populations or poor folk in many, many different circumstances, is that all you needed was one person who was literate, who could then either read newspapers or broadsides, or other printed material to others, or who could circulate the meaning of those texts to their fellow enslaved people or workers, or however it was.

STEVEN HAHN:

What we do know is that many relationships between men and women who became parents involved moving from one ... Basically, the term is known as abroad wives. Usually enslaved women would remain on their plantation and farm and their spouses would come visit them. Usually the children would be with the mother. And so, to that extent, enslaved women were very, very crucial to the cultural life and to the socialization of the enslaved community. Men were more likely to be on the move, but it also meant that they had more contact with people who were outside of their particular plantations and farms, and therefore could be important receptors of information. So, this is certainly one of the things we know. We certainly know that in many places, at certain times of the year, there were activities, sometimes celebrations, that brought enslaved people from neighboring areas together.

STEVEN HAHN:

So, it was certainly possible to develop relationships beyond the bounds of particular plantations and farms. Although, one of the things that is very interesting about this is that in those areas where there were particularly

large plantations, say along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, where big rice plantations had come into being already in the 18th century, into the 19th century, you did have slave communities that could have one, maybe two hundred enslaved people on them. And then, there was always sort of suspicions of outsiders who might be enslaved as well as potentially free people. So, there's interesting community dynamics that play out, all of which is to that if we're going to understand the political sensibilities of enslaved people, we have to recognize that there is not just one type. That enslaved people developed their own views of the world, their own politics, so to speak, depending on the circumstances in which they worked, grew up, formed relationships, the crops that they grew.

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STEVEN HAHN:

One of the things we do know is that, in many places, enslaved workers were able to get provision grounds to work for themselves. This they would have the opportunity to work when they weren't in the field. So, it would be at the end of the day, if they finished early, it would be say on Sunday, where they were able to grow food for themselves, in some cases raise livestock. And so, to that extent, the experiences of slaves varied a great deal depending on where they lived and depending on what the crop culture was that they were involved in.

Lincoln's belief in free labor

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STEVEN HAHN:

Lincoln certainly embraced the ideas many white Americans did and Black Americans too, the notion of independence and there being kind of this binary, there was freedom and independence on the one side, and there was dependence and slavery on the other side. And so, when Lincoln referred to himself as something of a slave, he was talking about his own personal subordination. And to that extent, slave was a term that was widely recognized, precisely because slavery was so important in the United States and it was a part of the language of experience.

STEVEN HAHN:

And what could bring home someone's fate more powerfully, especially if they were not legally enslaved, than likening themselves to what a slave would be? Free working people, already before the Civil War, but even more powerfully after the Civil War, would use the term “wage slavery”. By that they meant that if you worked for a wage, as opposed to being an independent producer, you were in a situation of economic dependence. You were under the thumb of an employer. And unless it was regarded as a temporary situation on the road to independence, it came to be seen as being in a position of subordination. So, when you would talk about wage slavery, you would really dramatize what it meant, what that subordination could be like. And I think what Lincoln meant, he meant it ... I mean, he spoke of it, as I recall more casually ... I mean, casually and matter of factly, but to that extent, I think what he was recognizing is what the consequences of dependence were in people's own lives and their sense of possibilities.

Lincoln's empathy and its limits

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STEVEN HAHN:

Well, there is the very famous episode when Lincoln saw slaves being transported down the Ohio River to be sold in New Orleans and how stunning and disconcerting that was. I think that Lincoln had some empathy for enslaved people, because I think at his heart Lincoln came to believe that enslaving human beings was morally and politically wrong, and also it was undermining the potential of American prosperity over time. I think when he likened himself to a slave, it was his way, I think, of expressing some level of empathy, which is, I understand what this experience might be about because of my own personal experience of subordination and feelings of being dependent. I think, by and large, like a lot of anti-slavery white people in the United States, including those in the Republican Party, they're concerned was less empathy for slaves per se, than it was to try to restrict the power of slaveholders and to try to limit the expansion of slavery across the North American continent.

STEVEN HAHN:

Lincoln's empathy with enslaved people and certainly people of African descent more broadly, I think was pretty complicated. He developed, as we know, a relationship with Frederick Douglass during the Civil War years and came to admire Douglass. He certainly came to appreciate the enormous courage that African-Americans who enrolled, enlisted in the Union Army displayed in saving the Union and in establishing the integrity of the battle

that Lincoln saw himself involved in. So, I think it's something that, that sense of empathy developed over time, but he was also quite capable of looking Black leaders in the face and saying, "You and we are different people, and whether it's right or whether it's wrong, our races can't live together in peace and freedom." This was the expression of Lincoln the colonizationist, even if there was no clear understanding of how it was that colonization would work. His vision of the country was really a vision of the United States as a white person's republic. And it wasn't entirely clear to Lincoln or to many people who were the anti-slavery movement and in the Republican Party, at least for quite some time, what place or position African-Americans would occupy.

STEVEN HAHN:

Douglass himself marveled at the way in which Lincoln spoke to him as if he was on Lincoln's level, even when Douglass was disappointed and upset about Lincoln's resistance to moving forward on the issue of emancipation, on the issue of enlisting African-Americans in the Union Army. He also said he'd never been spoken to by a white person as if he was an equal of sorts. And I think Lincoln came to admire and appreciate not only Douglass' brilliance, but his important role as a spokesperson, as an activist. I mean, there is the scene that Douglass scholars know, in his second inauguration in 1864, when Lincoln goes out of his way to point ... I mean, Douglass was there, which itself is really a remarkable thing, given the Jim Crow nature of much of the United States at this particular point, and pointed out Frederick Douglass as somebody he admired and somebody who played an important role in the developing outcome of the Civil War. So, you certainly can see that

as an example of how Lincoln grew over the course of the Civil War and how Lincoln had an ability to truly admire people's intellectual gifts, people's political energies, people's courage, and people's increasing devotion to the cause of the war, and as it developed, the cause of abolishing slavery

Enslaved people's growing political awareness

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STEVEN HAHN:

But again, I think it's important to recognize Lincoln as a work in motion, just as the period of his presidency is a period of developing revolution. And Lincoln's own stature had to do with his ability to recognize what enslaved people saw right from the beginning, that they recognized that this was a potentially revolutionary moment. They were the only people in the United States who saw that. Everybody else wanted to make believe that slavery wasn't centrally a part of the story, that it was either putting down the rebellion in the South and restoring the Union. It was establishing the independence of this thing called The Confederacy. Neither side really wanted to involve the slaves, but the slaves understood what was going on completely differently. And to that extent, Lincoln increasingly recognized, he wouldn't have put it this way, that they were right and that their interpretation of historical events was the interpretation that was on the mark, not his or not those that he called the so-called Confederates. The key to any popular movement, whether it is of enslaved people or other people in situations of repression, is to imagine a world where they have allies as well as enemies.

One of the things we do know is that in those cases where slave rebellions took place, almost invariably, there was a sense on the part of the enslaved population that the elite was divided, and that as a result of those divisions the elite was going to be weakened and that there was a possibility that there might be people in positions of power who were interested in them. Now, whether or not this was the case, and the sense was usually wrong, nonetheless, it made it possible for people who recognized the disadvantages they had because they weren't adequately equipped, they didn't have military training, and so on and so forth, that it might be possible to mobilize them to imagine an outcome that was favorable.

STEVEN HAHN:

I think what happened in the United States, and it did really happen over time, but more dramatically in the 1850s, as the country itself, in ways that everyone could see, including because of what slave owners were saying, that the country was being ripped apart about slavery, we do know that. There was this massive battle out in Kansas, really in many ways the rehearsal for what took place beginning in 1861. And so, when the Republican Party came along, running on a platform that basically talked about the non-extension of slavery, but if you're an enslaved person, you don't really parse the differences between outright abolitionism and slavery restriction. They weren't interested in that. What they knew was that there were people competing for power in the United States who wanted a change, and who their owners were frightened of, were fearful for themselves, were fearful for their power, were fearful for their families. And so, they followed this very, very closely.

STEVEN HAHN:

And they took the representation of the anti-slavery movement and the Republican Party as meaning that they were interested in the same thing that enslaved people were interested in, which was getting rid of slavery. And then, in the election of 1860, one of the things that struck me ... When you do history, it's all about asking questions, and the questions you ask both either open things up or close things down. And for the most part, until relatively recently, we looked at the struggle of slavery from the point of view of white people who were in positions of power and the movements that they were able to organize, and the conflicts between them. As if slaves, because they were slaves and had no official standing in American civil or political life, were in a sense politically inert. But if you start asking questions and try to think that there might be a perspective that enslaved people had, then all of a sudden you become much more attuned to what might be going on.

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STEVEN HAHN:

And one of the things that struck me when I was doing my research about this in particular, was how much stuff was out there that suggested that slaves were behaving differently, that they seemed to know about Lincoln. And they had an imagined sense that Lincoln wanted to end slavery, and if he won slavery was going to be over with. Now, that of course was not Lincoln's policy, but it didn't really matter to slaves, who had their own idea of who was their ally. I mean, rather than seeing them as just responding in ways that

seem to have spontaneity, I think it's important for us to look at slaves as increasingly sophisticated political actors.

STEVEN HAHN:

I found this incredible narrative that was written by a guy named William Webb, and he was a slave who moved between Kentucky and Mississippi before the Civil War and then he published this narrative after the Civil War. And one of the things he talked about was trying to organize slaves around the election of 1856 when John C. Frémont was running and how their expectations were being elevated by the prospect of the Republican Party winning. And then, when Frémont lost, he, William Webb, talks about how slaves got together and discussed, now what do we do? And he said, some of them were in favor of rising up in rebellion and others said, "Wait four more years." Now, I read that and I thought, this is extraordinary. It wasn't simply the debate. It was that they knew everything about the cycles of American politics. They knew that there was an election of 1856, and there was going to be another one in 1860. They understood that there were these political parties, that there were parties that their owners were aligned with. They knew that the Republican Party wasn't even organized in the states where slavery was legal. And so, all of a sudden, you begin to recognize that what enslaved people are looking at is who their allies are and how they can reach out and develop those alliances. So, to some extent, they were hoping that Lincoln would win and somehow or other ... So in some places, when it became announced that Lincoln was elected president, slaves just walked off the plantations thinking that this meant that slavery was over with.

STEVEN HAHN:

Now, they had to be very, very careful, because their owners had the guns and their owners could inflict violence and their owners were not going to put up with this kind of stuff. So, all along, it was very dangerous for enslaved people to behave in what were regarded as political and therefore rebellious ways. But it helps us understand how it was that as soon as the Union Army moved into some territory in proximity to where enslaved people live, that they would be willing to take the risk and test out their understanding of what was going on politically, and little by little head to Union lines, where they thought it was possible that freedom might be there waiting for them.

Who shaped U.S. political history

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STEVEN HAHN:

I think it's really important, because you begin to recognize that the political history of the United States is much more inclusive than we often make it out to be. And that although elections and political parties and campaigns and formal political office is certainly part of this, that political struggles take place in many, many different ways. One of the things we've learned is that although women don't have voting rights, and have narrower civil rights, they did… in a whole variety of ways they were central, not only to the anti-slavery movement and trying to... I mean, they were the ones who in many ways pioneered the ways of modern politics, by going door to door and organizing people around political ends. Did they have the right to vote? No. But could they express their power in ways that would have consequence?

One of the things they managed to do in petition campaigns was pressure Congress to pass the 13th Amendment. A lot of times people don't recognize that the pressure was not only coming from enslaved people, or free people of color in the United States, who were looking to secure emancipation, but it was coming from thousands of women who had been involved in the abolitionist movement and were signing petitions, demanding that Congress take the step to make sure that the abolition of slavery was not vulnerable to being overturned.

STEVEN HAHN:

I think it also makes us aware of the many, many different things that people who are part of a society use to contest and shape relationships of power. And to that extent, you recognize that there's a relationship between what people of African descent did before emancipation, and what they did after emancipation. I got interested in this because as a graduate student I was doing a paper on reconstruction in Mississippi, and I was actually interested in changing labor relations. And it turned out that the papers of the Freedmen's Bureau had become available. And they were like five reels of labor contracts. So I was reading them, but there were also reports being issued by Freedman's Bureau agents on the ground. And after 1867, when the Reconstruction Acts made it... I mean, basically enfranchised African-Americans in the former rebellious states, I saw in these reports that planters and other white people were complaining because African-American workers on the plantations would, on a Saturday, stop work and walk 25 miles to a political meeting.

STEVEN HAHN:

Now I was sitting there reading this, and there was nothing at the time in the literature that helped me understand what was going on. Because at the time African-Americans who had been freed were understood as really politically inexperienced, likely vulnerable to manipulation, and that they really bring anything out of slavery that could contribute to the great issues that were being contested in the United States. So I read this, and I'm in an environment where it's hard to get people to go to vote. I mean, what happened this past cycle because of the turnout was really unusual, but mostly we know that even a contested presidential election, 50 to 60%, might turnout. Here, there were people in the face of double barrel shotguns, because they were being warned not to do this, walked 25 miles to go to a political meeting. It was men, it was women, it was their families, they went.

STEVEN HAHN:

And I read this and I think, oh my God, what do I do with this? Because there was nothing about the history of slavery that had been written that prepared me to understand this. I knew there was no way this could have happened in the two years since emancipation had taken place. And so it opened up the entire issue of how to explain that, in terms of political ideas, in terms of organizational experience, in terms of communication network, in terms of the relationships they were able to forge with each other.

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STEVEN HAHN:

And then what that might mean for the nature of African-American politics going forward. So, I mean, I spent the next 15 years trying to figure it out. And so to me, what it did was it changed my whole sense of what American political history was, who the political actors were, and how to understand the important changes that took place, not only in the 19th century, but would continue to take place, up to this very moment. As we are extremely well aware of – that mobilizations that take place outside the formal arenas of politics have enormous influence on what we talk about, how we talk about that, and the possibilities for change and transformation that are on the table.

Abolition v. anti-slavery

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STEVEN HAHN:

When you look at the abolitionist movement and its relationship to what we call the anti-slavery movement, you learn a lot of things, and part of it is you learn what the limitations of both of those movements were. And it was a reminder of how important what enslaved people did. Abolitionists called the morality of slavery into question. They were almost always deeply religious. They had been converted in revivals of the Second Great Awakening, or they were Quakers, who by the 19th century had come to see slavery, and any involvement with enslavement, whether it was a slave trade, owning slaves, or whatever, as a sin. And this, we associate with William Lloyd Garrison. But one of the things we're beginning to learn was William Lloyd Garrison was influenced by African-Americans, who were way ahead of him on the slavery question., Garrison was a colonizationist.

STEVEN HAHN:

And then he went to work on a newspaper in Baltimore, and learned from African-Americans. Finally, for the first time, he went from Massachusetts to a world in which slavery not only was legal, but was centrally important in terms of the power relationships. And he learned from them about the immorality of slavery, and then goes back to Massachusetts and establishes *The Liberator* and the American anti-slavery Society. And Garrison's idea, and radical abolitionists, because they didn't want simply the restriction of slavery, they wanted the abolition of slavery, and they wanted the abolition of slavery because they thought it was a sin to enslave people. But what they imagined was trying to persuade people of the sinfulness of what they were doing and therefore hoping to persuade them that they needed to act, and that they needed to end their involvement with slavery.

STEVEN HAHN:

It was called moral suasion. The problem was that most people in the states, white people in states where slavery was legal, especially those people who owned slaves, didn't have the same view of slavery's sinfulness that Garrison and other abolitionists did. From their point of view, they had been converted in revivals too. They didn't see any problem between being a good Christian and being a slave owner. Now, this is something that Frederick Douglass, if you read his first narrative as other African-Americans, who had fled slavery and got themselves involved in the anti-slavery movement, I saw, is that they emphasize the contradiction between being a good Christian and owning

slaves. And they saw it as the ultimate hypocrisy, but their owners didn't see it that way. And so this was going to be a problem for the abolitionist movement. I mean, you may feel very strongly about the immorality of slavery, but what do you do about it?

STEVEN HAHN:

At this time, there were two models that could be followed. One was the model of gradualism. We're talking about the 1830s here. When Garrison begins publishing *The Liberator*, or the anti-slavery societies begin expanding, that abolitionism, it doesn't turn into a mass movement, but it turns into a movement with chapters from New England, out into the Midwest, with anti-slavery newspapers being published that oftentimes depended very heavily on African American subscribers. But the question is, now that you moved to a position of really calling for the end of slavery, I mean, white people who had questions about slavery had been colonizationists. And this idea was, as we know, that somehow or other we would couple emancipation with the removal of the free Black population. It was more of a rhetorical point than it was something that had any kind of practical implementation. But nonetheless it did suggest that the heart of that thread of the anti-slavery movement, was racism, was to try to secure the United States as a country that was for white people, and not for anyone else.

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STEVEN HAHN:

But by the 1830s, if you were going to think about, well, how does slavery end? There were two models. One was the model that basically led to the

gradual abolition of slavery in New England, and in the middle Atlantic, which basically said that slaves born after a certain date would be free once they reached a certain age. It really dragged out emancipation over many years. It dragged it out so slowly that most northern states had to pass emancipation laws twice because there was so much ambiguity. And that way can take a long time. The other model was the Haitian Revolution, which was the violent overthrow of slavery. Now, by the 1850s there were more abolitionists, especially African-Americans, but also people like John Brown, who began thinking that the only way to end slavery was through violence. That slavery was violent, that slavery was power that depended on violence, and that the only way you got rid of it was through violent means.

STEVEN HAHN:

But up until, at that very point, an anti-slavery movement had really developed a mass space. And that was through, first, through a variety of third parties, like the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party, but finally, through the Republican Party, which was not about slavery as being a sin, it was not about abolishing slavery where it existed. Because Lincoln, like other Republicans, believed that the federal government did not have the constitutional authority to abolish slavery where it was legal in the states. And so the only thing that they could do was restrict slavery from expanding into federal territories in the trans-Mississippi west. And they also embraced the idea of colonization, which Lincoln hung on to for a very long time, even through the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. So you had an anti-slavery movement, which was about restricting slavery somehow, thinking that if slavery was restricted, eventually it would collapse from

within. And you had an abolitionist movement that, rhetorically, saw a slavery as a sin and immoral, and slavery had to be abolished everywhere, but they had no plan on how you did it. So when the Civil War broke out, there was really nothing on the table, and so part of what turned it into a revolutionary situation was that because slaves acted and forced the federal government to deal with the issue, even though they didn't want to, that all of a sudden the question was, what do you do? And what sort of power the federal government had to deal with the questions that enslaved people demanded that they address.

The Union army and federal government become potential political allies for enslaved people

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STEVEN HAHN:

Somewhere between four and five hundred thousand slaves were behind Union lines in the very latter part of the war. And 180,000 people of African descent ended up in the Union Army and Union armed forces, 150,000 of whom started the war as enslaved people. It was a process of – I regard it as a rebellion. Because if before the Civil War, a plantation with 35 slaves all of a sudden saw those slaves flee, it would be regarded as one of the biggest slave rebellions that ever took place in American history. Somehow or other during the Civil War, we don't see it the same way. And I think it really has to do with the investment of a lot of observers and scholars in playing down the rebelliousness of enslaved people and playing up their devotion to the Union, and their “rational behavior”.

STEVEN HAHN:

When I've written about this, I've tried to emphasize what I think is a true rebellion against their owners who did not look kindly upon what they did. And one of the dangers for enslaved people leaving their plantations and farms, and heading to Union lines – because we know at the very beginning, the fugitives, if you want to call them, or rebels you want to call them, were overwhelmingly young and overwhelmingly male. And what this meant, it's not surprising that they were the ones who might be better positioned to navigate their way from where they were enslaved to Union lines, but it also meant that they left behind friends and families who might be subject to punishment because of what they did. This was something that was familiar to enslaved people, because when individual slaves might've resisted enslavement, in all sorts of ways, including by running away, that one of the ways in which slave owners addressed this was letting everyone have it.

STEVEN HAHN:

So it was very risky business. And I think what you're looking at is a process by which enslaved people increasingly looked to the federal government and the Union army as a political ally. And as the federal policy itself began to change, because at the beginning, a lot of the leeway was left to individual commanders in the Union Army, some of whom were in the anti-slavery movement, some of whom were Democrats, and the last thing they wanted to see happen was to have this war turn in to a struggle against slavery. So there were those who were trying to facilitate that shift, and those who had no

interest at all in moving in that direction. Little by little, as they began to show up, and as the federal government had to deal with, now what do we do? And as the war went on, in a way that suggested that there was no clear end in sight, that there were people who had been in the Union Army, whose terms of enlistment were running out, and they weren't necessarily signing up again, that there was a real manpower need. And over time it became clear that slavery was a source of strength for the Confederacy, at least potentially, because slaves were used to grow crops, to build fortifications and so on, and that unless the federal government moved against slavery, their prospects of winning the war were becoming less and less promising.

STEVEN HAHN:

They also worried about foreign countries, like England and France, recognizing the Confederacy and potentially lending them military support. For the time being, England and France were neutral in the struggle. But as the war kind of went on and on and on, with no clear end in sight, something had to be done. Now, one of the things that does happen is that you do have abolitionist military commanders who think, why aren't we organizing slaves? Why aren't we arming the slaves, basically.

01:00:33:00

STEVEN HAHN:

In South Carolina, there was a general named David Hunter, and he began organizing a slave unit until it was shut down by the Lincoln administration. This kind of stuff is happening in a variety of places. So that it's clear to those who were part of the anti-slavery movement or who were abolitionists

themselves – they share the view of enslaved people, that this is a turning point, that this is the moment when you have to act, because if you don't act now, you're never going to get emancipation. And this was – something we have to recognize is that we tend to have a view of history as kind of moving inexorably in a certain kind of direction. And therefore once the Civil War started, it was obvious that slavery would end somehow. Fact of the matter was, that there was every reason to think that that would not happen at all. If you look at what was going on from the beginning, Lincoln said, "No, this isn't about slavery." The Confederacy had no interest in putting slavery in the middle of this. This was about their own power or state rights, or the right of rebellion. However, they wanted to see it.

STEVEN HAHN:

Little, little, little, little, little, little, it begins to develop in an incremental way, certainly at that particular time. So the possibility of arming the slaves is raised in a whole variety of ways. It's also raised by free Black leaders of color, like Douglass, who also recognize that now we have encountered the moment and we have to do this. And they also recognized that enlisting African-Americans in the struggle was not only going to be central to ending slavery, but it was also going to be important in making the case for civil and political equality. We have to remember that up until this moment, African-Americans could not serve in the United States Army, and they could not serve in the state militias. Now, that doesn't mean that they didn't participate in America's wars, but not in a formal way. And the reason for that was that white people recognized that there was a relationship between military service and political rights.

STEVEN HAHN:

Military service was the emblem of manhood. This was understood in the 19th century as the essence of civil and political authority. And if enslaved people, or if any Black people, who of course had the mark of slavery because they were Black, if they could participate formally in the militias or in the United States Army, they would really have good claims to make the case, as they were trying to do in the decades, leading to the Civil War, to get civil and political rights. So the argument was not simply to get African-Americans on the side of the Union. It was not simply because African-Americans in the fight would help tip the balances against slavery. It was also because African-American enrollment in the United States Army was going to be an important basis for arguments that not only should slavery end, but African-Americans ought to have the same rights as anybody else.

Enslaved people punished for seeking freedom

01:04:12:00

STEVEN HAHN:

It depended on the slaveholder, but oftentimes, I mean, one case in particular, a slaveholder got up in front of the slaves with a double barrel shotgun and said, if any of them went off to the Union side and tried to sign up in the Union army, that he would line them up along a creek and shoot them all. There was the corporal punishment that was inflicted. There were some who were going to try to sell slaves if they could. I mean, there continued to be a

slave market through much of the Civil War, even as it was becoming increasingly clear that the status of enslavement itself was being called into question. Communities could be broken up, parents and children could be separated, and of course, other kinds of rights, as the slaves understood them, but privileges as the owners understood them, which allowed for visiting, which allowed for taking care of family concerns, could be restricted. And especially corporal punishment, whipping or murdering slaves who show the ingratitude or rebelliousness of joining the enemy of their owner.

STEVEN HAHN:

I mean, there is this amazing case in the lower Mississippi Valley in a place called Davis Bend, where Jefferson Davis and his brother, Joseph Davis, and several other adamant secessionists have big plantations. And Joseph Davis, believe it or not, was inspired by Robert Dale Owen, the kind of a utopian socialists of the early 19th century, and he tried to create what he thought was an ideal slave community. And when he fled, because the Union army was coming, not only did all the slaves stay, and they would continue to farm the land on their own, but they ransacked his mansion. So it was clear that the slaves on his plantation didn't really understand what he was doing in quite the same way. There are all these encounters that suddenly make it possible. The veil is pulled back. And in cases where enslaved people felt it necessary to go through the theater of submission, now, because everything, the political landscape, was entirely being transformed, the veil is removed and enslaved people can present themselves for who they are, much to the shock and anger, sometimes rage, of people who claimed to be their owners.

The story of the escaped slave, Harry Jarvis

01:07:23:00

STEVEN HAHN:

Harry Jarvis grew up in the Chesapeake. And what he said was that once Lincoln was elected, his owner got a turn meaner than he'd ever been, and was coming down on the slaves on his plantation, was using his gun. And Jarvis decided that this was not a good place for him to be. So he escaped. And he laid out in the woods and he was able to do this because other enslaved people brought him food, and they brought him intelligence about what was going on. At that point, the Union had established a foothold at Fortress Monroe in Virginia, which was across Chesapeake Bay. And at a certain point, because he had gotten this intelligence and because he was able to sustain himself, he actually took a canoe and paddled himself 35 miles across the Bay to get to Fortress Monroe. At which point, there was no policy on the part of the federal government or on the part of Benjamin Butler, who was the commander of Fortress Monroe, about slaves who might be seeking entrance into their lines.

STEVEN HAHN:

And by Harry Jarvis' lights, he shows up and he wants to enlist. And Benjamin Butler says, "It's not a Black man's war." And Jarvis says, “Well, it's going to be a Black man's war before this is over." Now, he is admitted into the lines and he's put to work as early fugitives were. And what he sees in the short time he's there, is that slaveowners can show up and ask for the slaves who had

escaped to Fortress Monroe to be given back to them. And he saw one case in which they were, and Jarvis decides, I know what's going to happen, my owner's going to show up, and I'm getting out of here.

STEVEN HAHN:

So he basically leaves. He gets employment on a vessel and he is sailing around, including into the Caribbean. And two years later he gets back to Massachusetts and, as he says, he finds out that he was right all along. And he signs up with the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and gets involved in the military fight against slavery. Now, this is just sort of such a great case of enslaved people being way out ahead of anybody else about the political significance of what is going on. And when he says to Butler – who I might add, is a Democrat who had voted for John Breckenridge in 1860, so, I mean Breckenridge was someone who effectively is the Southern wing of the Democratic party – but now he is a commander in the Union Army. And he eventually comes up with a “contraband” policy, which admits enslaved people who could be put to work, rather than left to work on Confederate fortifications, which is what Butler was concerned about. But it was clear that Jarvis had a completely different understanding about what he was doing. He was basically going over there and saying, "I'm offering myself up. I think you're my ally. And I want to fight for you." And Butler says, "Wait a second. That's not what's going on." And Jarvis says, "That is what's going on." But he's going to have to find another way to take up his time until things have finally changed. And he comes back to see that what he had predicted was, in fact, the case.

Refuting the myth of Black support for the Confederacy

01:11:30:00

STEVEN HAHN:

Early on in the war, there was a free Black military unit called the Louisiana Native Guards, who very briefly allied with the Confederacy until the Union Army showed up, and they switched sides. Elsewhere, there were enslaved people who were taken by their owners into army camps with them because they expected to be waited on by – I mean, that's what slavery was, right? You can take your slave wherever you go, and there's no question that enslaved people were impressed forcibly, sent out to build fortifications, to work in a variety of Confederate operations, some of which were in army camps. Of this there is no doubt. But I have never seen any evidence of people who were enslaved joining the Confederate side. There were some Black people who did. There is a case of a Black slave owner in South Carolina whose son actually signs up for the Confederate Army, but they were free and they were in very unusual circumstances. But the argument about Black support for the Confederacy is just, I mean, it's imagined.

STEVEN HAHN:

Now there was a discussion among Confederates about whether they should try to enroll enslaved people in their army. And there were some, including Robert E. Lee for a time, who was an advocate. But then that raised the question of, "Then what do we do?" Is it possible that you can arm the slaves, feel secure that they're not going to turn the guns on you, and then send them

back to slavery if the war ends on favorable terms? Everybody recognized that there was no way of doing this without some kind of commitment to emancipation, which of course then undermines the whole reason of organizing the Confederacy, seceding from the Union, and fighting in this war to begin with.

STEVEN HAHN:

Now at the very, very end, they pass a bill that is designed to recruit some African-Americans, but the war ends before – with no promise of freedom, I should add – but the war ends before there's any way of seeing if this might have worked or produced any soldiers. I doubt it. Look, there were enslaved people who didn't want to join the Union side. There were enslaved people who had learned that those who fled to Union lines were badly treated, were exploited, if they were women, they might have been sexually violated. News and information spread widely. And so some decided either to stay put or to struggle on their own plantations and farms to undermine slavery as they knew it, and to find out new relationships that might be more complementary to a world of freedom. So, this is a very complicated story. And the Union side also tried to impress Black men to join the Union Army. And there were cases where they fled. So they didn't want to do that. And because they weren't really sure whether these Union soldiers were really on their side, and then they would hear things to suggest that maybe that wasn't the case. So, as you can imagine, enslaved people, women as well as men, were all ears, because there was so much at stake in what they decided to do. But as far as Black support for the Confederacy, I know there's been a lot of efforts to come up with it, but I haven't seen it. And I know the documents for the Civil War period pretty well. And there's just nothing there.

Understanding enslavement through narratives, memoirs, interviews and other historical documents

02:15:54:00

STEVEN HAHN:

There once was a time where we thought that there was almost nothing available to us that came from enslaved people themselves. And little by little – again this is a matter of asking new questions – we became aware of all sorts of sources. One of the most important sources was of narratives and memoirs that were written by people who had been enslaved but who had fled their enslavement and managed to find, in one of a number of ways, the space to get involved in the anti-slavery movement, and, in contributing to that movement, to write about their own experiences under slavery. There are many, many narratives and memoirs written by women as well as men, that offer us a kind of vantage point into what life might've been like.

STEVEN HAHN:

There's also a huge number of interviews that were done in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration, the WPA, during the New Deal, which went out to interview all sorts of Americans, but including people who had an experience with slavery. Now you can imagine by the 1930s, you're looking at people who are both very old and probably experienced slavery as children, and therefore oftentimes what they tell us of slavery was less their own experience than the talk and stories that formerly enslaved people kind of pass down over time. We then find all sorts of other records that were left to

us, sometimes by slaveholders who are writing about how their farms and plantations are run, what enslaved people on them do, complaints about the behavior of people who were enslaved, runaway slave notices where we can learn a lot about what slaves looked like, what they wore, if they spoke other languages, because you can imagine a slaveholder who wants to get the slave back has to give as detailed a description as possible. And that has been very useful.

STEVEN HAHN:

One of the greatest collections of sources about slavery are the records that were generated by the Civil War itself and by the early Reconstruction period. One of the things that happens is not only the military records tell us about enslaved people who came within Union lines or may have signed up to fight against their owners, but a whole variety of northerners who go south with the American Missionary Association, with other reform associations, with the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, which was organized by the Lincoln administration to try to figure out what the federal government needed to do to supervise the transition from slavery to freedom. And so they're going to go down... They want to understand, do enslaved people respond to monetary incentives? Do they understand private property? What is their sexuality? Did they take marriage seriously? Do they understand parenting? Are they Christian or not? And so they interview all the... It's really fascinating. It's also interesting to recognize the kind of bar that they saw. It was really important for enslaved people to demonstrate that they were good Christians, that they were living in nuclear families, that they understood sexual propriety. And it also helps us understand what the expectations were.

And sometimes these white interviewers are stunned about what actually the slaves know and what sort of relationships they've already established, and their own sophistication about how the economy works, how the political world works, and their own interpretations of Christianity and their senses of faith.

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STEVEN HAHN:

So, these are things that build pictures for us. And as you can imagine, like any sort of historical research, but especially research that focuses on people who are not literate in ways that are familiar to us... It doesn't mean they're not literate. It doesn't mean that they don't have important ways of communicating. It's our problem, not their problem, that they have not left us things that we have been trained to use. But what we have are always pieces of pictures that we try to put together, and that for any sort of observer or historian, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. And so we need to make a variety of imaginative leaps, and we would hope that we learn enough about our subjects that they help us make those leaps. That they give us clues to how the pieces fit together.

STEVEN HAHN:

And so more and more... In the early Reconstruction period, there's an enormous amount of documentation on the ground about the transition from slavery to freedom or to other relationships that are not formally involving enslavement, where we get firsthand testimony. There was... The Union Army went into the southern states to try to figure out if there were white

Unionists who supported the Union side and lost property, so that they could get compensation. And, in the process, they interviewed formerly enslaved people and discovered that they had accumulated property, that they had their own systems of inheritance. Now, admittedly, the property was much more limited, but it was not necessarily unimportant. And so all of a sudden you use federal records and it raises questions about, "Well, how did they get that?" And, "What did it mean to them?" And, "How did they pass it down?" It's called the Southern Claims Commission.

STEVEN HAHN:

And all of a sudden you've got another window, even though it's after slavery ends, you have another window onto a world of enslavement, because they're telling us about how they organized their communities beforehand. So, I know for myself, when I spent many years trying to write about African-American politics under slavery and freedom, that there was so much stuff that – and I loved doing it, I couldn't really, it was hard to stop. Because it wasn't about there was nothing there; it was, there was too much there once you're interested in looking at the problem. Back in the 1930s, when W. E. B. Du Bois wrote his masterful *Black Reconstruction*, he has a last chapter called "The Propaganda of History." At that particular time, the predominant interpretation of Reconstruction was kind of the birth of a nation. It was sympathetic to the South. It was sympathetic to the Ku Klux Klan. It was about the overreach on the part of the federal government. And it was about the complete illegitimacy of trying to empower former slaves and giving them the vote and giving them civil rights and giving them the possibility of engaging in politics on the ground. Du Bois wrote an entirely different book.

But in “The Propaganda of History” he was reminding us that all of the basis of his new interpretation was in the national archives. It was available to anyone who wanted to see it. And so what he was telling us, too, is that people tell the stories as they want to tell their stories, and those who really want to find out, they don't have to make it up. It's in the documents. All you have to do is go there and read them. And you can tell the story in a fullness that hadn't been told before.

Curating the national narratives of slavery

01:24:59:00

STEVEN HAHN:

It's hard to believe, when we think about mobilizations that are taking place now around issues of connections with slavery, the nation's own hypocrisy, that for the first half of the 20th century the story of American history was laid out in which slavery was hardly mentioned. It was a sidebar, in part because it was an embarrassment, but in part because no one really thought it was important or a central story that needed to be told. This began to change in the 1950s and then into the 1960s, to a large extent because of the Civil Rights movement and the issues about race, racial discrimination, the importance of African-Americans as leaders and as grassroots activists, that raised all sorts of issues for historians on how the story of the United States needed to be told. Now, at the beginning the emphasis was more on victimization, recognizing the enormous power that slaveholders had. But, little by little, that emphasis began to change, and we became more and more interested in what slaves did, how they pushed back, how they created

communities on their own, how they developed family life, how they developed networks of communication and how they began to define themselves in relationship to those who were oppressing them and to a larger world around them. We've also learned that slavery itself has a complex history. We know that African descendants to – slavery first takes roots in the 17th century. For the first couple of centuries of enslavement, it is really along the southeast coast of the United States. Of course, every colony in the United States had slaves. Slavery was legal there up until the time of the American Revolution, and for well after it in many places.

STEVEN HAHN:

So slaves were involved doing many different things. They were growing tobacco, they were growing food crops, they were growing rice. Some of them were on large plantations. Most of them were not on big plantations. Then slavery in the 19th century moves out across the Deep South. This is part of the so-called cotton boom, where many slaves are living on plantations. Not all slaves are. Slaves in the Upper South, where cotton is really not being grown, are more likely to be on farms rather than on plantations. And there might be situations in which enslaved people have more contact with people of African descent who have managed to get their freedom. In the southern states at the time of The Civil War, there were about 4 million people who were enslaved, but 250,000 people of African descent were free. So part of what we've learned about the story of slavery and of African-American history is that slavery is not one thing, that slavery is experienced by enslaved people in many different ways.

STEVEN HAHN:

Sometimes the gender balance on plantations and farms varies. It raises possibilities about how families can develop, whether men and women can find mates for themselves. Where they live, or whether they need to move around much more, what it means to live on plantations where they're growing a particular kind of crop and what sort of labor regimes are possible. And it has to do with their proximity to information, their knowledge of not only what's going on in the economy and their contributions to it – because certainly one of the things you realize is that enslaved people were well aware of the wealth that they were creating (not only for their owners, but were creating for other people, and the importance of slavery in the economic growth of the entire country) – but their access to other forms of information, a lot of which is political, what is going on in the country, what political parties exist, how the institution of slavery is being discussed.

00:29:36:00

STEVEN HAHN:

And certainly after the Haitian Revolution, when refugees from first Saint-Domingue and then Haiti begin to leave, and about 10,000 of them come to the United States, whether as far north as Philadelphia and far south and west as New Orleans, that the populations change and information about what happened there. So all of a sudden, as the 19th century dawns, you had this very contradictory situation. Slavery is expanding in the United States, as it is expanding in other parts of the Western hemisphere. And yet at the same time, slavery is coming under attack by people who are organized. Some of them are organized in abolitionist societies, and some of them are organized

as enslaved people or free people of color in places like Saint-Domingue and have risen up and literally not fled slavery, but overthrown the system.

And so by the 19th century, more and more enslaved people understand that there are divisions among powerful people in the white population. Some of them are strongly in support of slavery and benefit directly, but there are some others who are raising questions about the wisdom, the morality, the politics, and the economics of slavery, and people who might be their allies. And so that is the situation as the antebellum period comes to a conclusion.

A critical assessment of Lincoln's position on slavery

01:31:18:00

STEVEN HAHN:

I think it's both. I think he was being pushed, but he was also leading because as we know people in positions of power like the President can do all sorts of things to push back and to deflect and to lead in different directions. I think initially Lincoln pushed back. Lincoln was worried that focusing on the issue of slavery would undermine the unity of the cause that it would repel potential allies in states like Kentucky or Maryland or Delaware where slavery was still legal, but had not decided to join the Confederacy, and that were militarily significant because of logistical and other reasons. And so when either enslaved people or some of his own officers wanted to leave in another direction, initially Lincoln pushed back, he pushed back for any one of a number of reasons, but certainly the political circumstances were important. But over time, for a variety of reasons… I mean, one of the things that's interesting to think about is that the war dragged on for a long time in

ways that no one could have anticipated at the beginning. If the war had ended quickly, either way, either with the Union quickly suppressing the Confederate rebellion or somehow, or rather the rebellion managing to extract its independence or an armistice, nothing would have happened. So it was in some ways the bloodbath that the war turned into that enabled those who were pushing for something else to have increasing influence and increasing power, and to make it clear to Lincoln, who was most interested in suppressing the rebellion and in re-establishing the Union, recognizing that the only way he could do that was by fundamentally changing the power relationships that existed in the United States.

STEVEN HAHN:

It was not something he was prepared to do in 1861 when he became President. And, little by little, he moved to a situation of almost inevitability. When he issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September of 1862, he was still giving the rebellious states a number of months to put down their arms and to rejoin the Union. In which case it would not have gone into effect. Now, he didn't really expect that to happen, but it's an example of, sort of, the incrementalism that is going on.

STEVEN HAHN:

There's no question that what is so important about Abraham Lincoln, and why it is that you can fill the whole libraries with studies – and you will continue to find them, is precisely his ability to struggle intellectually and politically, and to move. Now, like most people in positions of leadership who

are wrestling with large questions of power, large questions of belonging, they're usually not ready to move quickly. And that's why the great changes that take place in almost every society are generated by people who are out of positions of power, but who are placing demands that are increasingly formidable on those who are in positions of power. I think Lincoln demonstrated that he was able to move, he was able to change, but that there were a lot of things that remained in place. To give you an example, in 1863 he met with a number of tribal leaders about the destiny of native peoples, and, related to that, the destiny of the trans-Mississippi West. There had already been a massive Sioux uprising in the area we call Minnesota, that had been suppressed, and it ended up being the largest mass execution in American history. Initially, the Union army commanders wanted to execute about 300.

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STEVEN HAHN:

Lincoln kind of whittled it down, but there were still almost 40 who were executed. Which is an interesting response to rebellion on the part of native people that was not exacted on the Confederacy once they were forced to surrender. But he sits in his office and he basically says to them a version of what he had said to Black people. He said, "You and we are different races. And whether we like it or not, this is the way it is," as a way of justifying colonization. He kind of says the same to them. He calls white people palefaces. He calls them red brethren, but he says something really powerful at the end. He says, "In this huge territory that is owned and inhabited by people in the United States, there is only room for one national family, not two, not any more." Meaning there's no room for you. And I think this is still

part of his view about where the Republic was likely to go. Although, little by little, he came to recognize, partly because African-Americans were much more central to the economic life of the country – I mean, you couldn't put them on reservations, because they were relatively few in number and they were not that consequential, but this was something that was still part of his thinking, it's why he gave up colonization pretty late in the game. I mean, the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation still talked about colonization. It didn't in the final Emancipation Proclamation. And it does remind you of the limits of his ability to conceptualize a country that actually was multi-racial. I don't think he was there.

STEVEN HAHN:

Where he was moving was not simply in the direction of emancipation without compensation, enacted by the federal government, which he had claimed at the beginning it did not have the power to do. So that's huge. I mean, I don't think there's any other case in American history where the property basis of an entire class is expropriated the way in which it was during the Civil War. And he also believed that all people were entitled to the fruits of their labor. He believed that free labor should be national. It should be within the borders of the United States. It should be that's the way it was. There should be no alternative to that. Little by little, he seemed to think that some people of African descent – maybe soldiers, maybe others who took a leadership role during the war, those who might've had property, those who might've been literate and had some education – maybe they should gain political rights. Certainly in the last speech before he was assassinated, he kind of intimated that. But remember, even in his first reconstruction plan, he

insisted that slavery be ended, but he did not insist that there be any civil or political rights for people who had been enslaved. And even in The 13th Amendment, which was passed while he was still alive, there's really no provision for the status of African-Americans beyond the end of slavery. So it's very fuzzy, as far as that goes.

The view of emancipation from different lenses

01:40:04:00

STEVEN HAHN:

When The Civil War began, neither the Union side nor the Confederate rebellion wanted slavery to have a central place in what was going on. The Union side were interested in restoring the Union and suppressing the rebellion. The Confederate side was interested in establishing its independence, if that was possible, or certainly the federal government would recognize their political status. The only people who recognized from the beginning that this was a struggle over slavery, its past and its future, were people who were enslaved, because they were very well aware of the struggles that were going on in the country. They were very well aware of the fact that there were people in the United States who wanted slavery limited or ended, and their interpretation was that they had allies. And therefore they were ready to respond to any event or set of events that confirmed their interpretation.

STEVEN HAHN:

And when the Union Army invaded the South, their view was that the intention of the federal government was to defeat their owners and therefore to undermine slavery. And, as a result, they responded, and by responding they put slavery on the table in a way that neither side wanted to see it. And therefore it became a central aspect of the war and of American history because of what they did. They responded in a number of different ways, but most powerfully, they responded by resisting the authority of their owners, fleeing if they could to Union lines, eventually taking up arms to serve in the Union Army and to defeat their owners and to ensure that slavery ended.

How the courage of Black soldiers influenced Lincoln

01:42:13:00

STEVEN HAHN:

When the enslaved people, who made up about 80% of the Black soldiers in the Union Army, at least people who had begun the war in a status of enslavement… It was a very precarious situation. To begin with, African-Americans had been excluded from the United States Army and from the state militias, from the founding of the Republic. They were excluded on racial grounds and they were excluded because military service was seen as the basis of citizenship and white Americans did not want Black people to be in a position to make those claims. But one of the great problems was not only the experience of racism in the Union Army, because among other things, they were paid less than one half of what white soldiers were paid. But because of the response of the Confederate rebels, military service, Black soldiers were regarded as slaves in rebellion. Therefore they were subject

either to execution or they were subject to re-enslavement. And therefore the stakes for African-Americans who served in the Union Army was even more profound than was true for any other soldiers. Even so, they fought with a great ferocity. They fought in ways that enabled the Union Army, that was facing a manpower problem in 1863, to keep its forces in the field and to keep the enormous pressure on the Confederate rebels. So, in many ways, Black soldiers who faced daunting prospects turn the military tide of the war as they did the political tide of the war.

STEVEN HAHN:

There's no question that Lincoln recognized not only what Black manpower did and what Black courage did because he was... Lincoln was a hands-on commander. I mean, he was watching all the time. I mean, obviously given the limitations of communication compared to what we have, it was slower and he was frustrated, but he knew what was going on. And he recognized who was carrying out his wishes, which was to force the unconditional surrender of the Confederates rather than an armistice, or trying to not inflict that kind of damage. And so he wanted to see those who were pushing in that direction. And it was clear to him that this is actually that this was exactly how Black troops understood the meaning of the war: that it had to be fought to the end, it had to be fought to end slavery, because they knew as well as anyone that history can move backwards and that they had to make sure that history moved forward.

STEVEN HAHN:

And precisely for that reason, I think, when he fashioned his first reconstruction plan, he did it really with a view to end the war as fast as possible. And it's clear he was not taking full account of the Black contribution to how the war would turn out. But certainly after that, in the last months and year of his presidency, it was clear that he was beginning to recognize that African-Americans had acted in a way that really changed what the war was going to be about and whether the war could be won. And I think that's why he began to contemplate extending political rights, at least in a limited way. Now, obviously we have no idea what would have happened once the war was over and how he was going to supervise the reconstruction that was already underway. But it certainly suggests an openness that Andrew Johnson did not have, to the possibility of African-Americans being part of the body politic of the United States.

STEVEN HAHN:

I think he felt the debt to African-Americans. He recognized the role that they had played. Certainly he had a special relationship with Frederick Douglass, who he admired and listened to, even if he didn't always agree or respond in ways that Douglass would have liked, but Douglass made an impact. It was there. And so I think that he recognized the debt. I don't think he had really developed a way of understanding or devising a way to repay that debt beyond the end of slavery.

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STEVEN HAHN:

No. When slavery ended in the United States, it didn't end gradually. I mean, it ended very forcefully, dramatically in one sweep. There was no compensation to the owners, and they were counting on it and they continued to count on it once the war ended. So I think he saw that as part of his deed. When he thought he was going to lose the election of 1864, he was focused on trying to negotiate so that he could make sure that what had been done to overturn slavery wouldn't be rolled back.

So I think there's no question that he was increasing... I mean, he was absolutely committed, once the Emancipation Proclamation came down, to devoting what happened during the war to ending slavery. It had to be ended. And that was part of his first reconstruction plan. If you wanted to be readmitted to the Union, you had to rewrite your constitution and eliminate slavery. That was the sine qua non. After that, I don't think he had developed a plan. I don't think he had envisioned a pathway out. You can make an argument in any one of a number of directions that he was headed that way, or that he had actually reached the limits of what he was prepared to do. And it raises interesting questions about what would have happened if he had not been assassinated. And I know when I'm asked that question, "What would the story be like if Lincoln had lived?" My response is always, "We really don't know, but I feel quite confident that we would think less of him."

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