

Enslaved People Emancipated Themselves Interview Thread Transcript

Eric Foner

I think we will never completely get rid of the idea that Lincoln freed the slaves, and was that four or five words, and leave it at that. But of course, the freeing of the slaves, the end of slavery in the United States was the result of many, many different groups, people, causes. If you ask, "Who freed the slaves?" You can say Lincoln, you can say Congress, with all sorts of measures against slavery. You could say slaves themselves, by fleeing to the Union lines, starting in the beginning of the war, and then enlisting in the Union Army. Without their participation, slavery would not have ended. But the answer really is all of the above.

An institution like slavery, which was, you know, sometimes we don't quite realize how big and powerful it was. It was by far the most important economic institution in the United States in 1860. The richest people in the United States were the big slave owners in the South. Slavery produced the cotton that was the main export of the United States. To end an institution, you know, it's not just a question of emancipating individual people. It's destroying a very deeply entrenched institution, and that required the action of everybody, almost. So, you know, I do not want to denigrate Lincoln's role in changing the nature of the Union war effort from preserving the Union to preserving the Union and liberating the slaves. That was a crucial change, which came with the Emancipation Proclamation.

But in and of itself, it certainly did not guarantee that slavery would end. Later, you needed a constitutional amendment, the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery everywhere in the country, including those states and regions that the Emancipation Proclamation had excluded from emancipation. So I think, you know, one has to just say, "It's very complicated how slavery ended in this country."

Until recently, I would say historians did largely ignore the contribution of African American people to the ending of slavery. But I think that has changed in the last generation, partly because of a very important project that was established at the University of Maryland, the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, which gathered together thousands of documents from the National Archives and told the story of the Civil War from the perspective of the slaves themselves. I think there's been a lot of literature lately on the role of Black soldiers, on the role of Black women in combating slavery on the plantations. So I don't think it would be fair to say that this part of the story is ignored, but it certainly gets less attention than Lincoln's own actions, or maybe the actions of Congress, the radical Republicans in Congress.

And, you know, all of these facets of the story have to be integrated into the larger picture.

Chris Bonner

One of the first things that I'm thinking about in terms of how slave owners tried to compel labor, and how enslaved people tried to sort of work against it: in cotton-producing regions, slave owners would regularly require enslaved people to pick a certain weight of cotton each day. And they would weigh it at the end of the day in order to make sure that people were as productive as they were expected to be. There are incidents or there's evidence of enslaved people putting rocks and pebbles in their bags, in order to try to increase the weight. There's evidence of enslaved people sharing the fruits of their labor, and sort of shifting some cotton from their sack to a friend's sack, or a neighbor's sack, or a family member's sack in order to try to sort of make up that kind of... any sort of deficit in their burden. So there's not just a way of seeing power imposed by slave owners, but there's also a way of seeing enslaved people sort of cultivating their own kinds of power.

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I think another way to see slave owners' controls and enslaved people sort of challenging those controls, is in the landscape of the plantation. So fundamentally slavery was about making a person be in a particular place in order to do work. And so slave owners were really anxious and really invested in trying to ensure that they knew where enslaved people were, and that they could keep them in a particular space. But enslaved people regularly sort of violated those boundaries that slave owners were trying to create or construct. And one of the practices that I think is really striking is what historians have defined as truancy, or described as truancy. Enslaved people would go to the woods and hide out for a few days or maybe even a few weeks. And then eventually they would come back to a plantation and they would be punished brutally.

So in this process, like these are not enslaved people who are getting free or enslaved people who are attacking the institution of slavery, but these are enslaved people who are finding a couple of weeks where they don't have to pick cotton, finding a couple of weeks where they don't have to worry about being abused by a slave owner. Even with the knowledge of the punishment that would come, they were willing to take the risk of leaving for a few days, or a few weeks, or even a few hours just to feel that kind of momentary liberation.

Kellie Carter Jackson

I think the myth of American history is this idea that white people get to be both the villain and the hero. And so they create this chattel slavery that is quintessentially violence. Every aspect of it is violent. It's insidious. It's egregious. It is, you know, painful, and backbreaking, and psychologically traumatic. It is all of these things. And yet they're able... I mean, I think this is really the trick of, like, white supremacy or how it dupes people into thinking that Black people deserved this: that they have not earned their humanity. That they are supposed to be subordinate. They're supposed to be in this position. And look at how kind and good and great we are, for taking them in under our wing, for housing them, for feeding them. You know, there's this idea that slavery has some sort of benefit. That it makes the country prosperous. No question there. But that it's a benefit to the enslaved people themselves.

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And nothing, nothing could be further from the truth. But I think the shaping of that narrative of "I know what's best for you," that patriarchal, paternalistic idea of how white people get to determine who deserves humanity, as though it's something that can be earned or won or accomplished, is absurd. It's absurd. It makes no sense. But these ideas still, they still have weight to this very day. This idea that Black people may or may not feel pain is a concept that has played out in the medical field up until recently. You know? And so there's not a single aspect of, you know, Black lived experiences that's not somehow curated by white violence, or oppression, or white supremacy. And I think that is the great deceit, is that slaveholders can be both good and bad. Or that it's possible to be a good slaveholder.

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The idea, I think, of a good slaveholder is actually more damaging than a violent one. Right? Because if you can accept the idea of a "good slaveholder," it will keep you from questioning the system in and of itself. Because your aspiration will not be to dismantle the institution. Your aspiration will, just be a good planter. Just be a good master. Right? And I think that's what a lot of Americans want. It's like, we don't really want to get rid of white supremacy. Just be kind. Just be nice. As though all of racism is inculcated in the inward and impolite behavior.

Edna Greene Medford

Well, we sometimes think that because the majority of African Americans did not have voting rights in the period, in the antebellum period specifically, that there was no political voice. And that's not true. Because people are able to express themselves politically in many other ways other than just by voting. And so in terms of their involvement in the abolitionist movement, they're on the anti-slavery lecture circuit, they're traveling all over the North. They're not going the South, but they're traveling all over the North campaigning against slavery. But they're doing more than that.

It's not just about ending slavery. It's about elevating their positions to that of white men and women as well. So people who are already free are pushing for that equality. So they are concerned that they can't ride on the streetcars in the same way. You know, they have to be on the outside. Even if it's inclement weather, they can't get inside of the streetcar. They can't send their children to schools in the North in many instances, in an integrated way. They don't have access to jobs, to some of the better jobs. They don't have access to decent housing in many instances. So they are pressing for those kinds of things. They're doing it in terms of speeches. Douglass, certainly, is constantly talking about those kinds of things. Not just slavery, but equal rights as well.

They're trying to make America live up to the tenets that it claims were important to the founding of the nation. You have women who were very much involved in that political movement as well. So you've got Black women writing, just as Black men are. Although we don't know a lot about them, we have to dig sometimes. But because of the scholarship in the last 10 or 15 years in women's studies, especially in women's history, we are uncovering those kinds of things.

You have Black men who are speaking from the pulpit, who had newspapers. They're publishing in newspapers. You're having people write into newspapers. There's all of this agitation going on. And in fact, since the 1830s, you have a Negro Convention Movement, where they are meeting nationally to discuss the issues that affect Black America. That's a political movement to me. They're involved in party politics. You know, the Liberty Party, for instance, where they can vote. You know, they are voting. There are very few of them who are voting, but where they can, they do. But there are all of these ways in which they are very much involved in a political movement.