

The debate among historians over how and why white Americans created a system of slave labor in the seventeenth century—and how and why they determined that people of African descent and no others should populate that system—has been a long and unusually heated one. At its center is the question of whether slavery was a result of white racism or helped to create it.

In 1950, Oscar and Mary Handlin published an influential article, "Origins of the Southern Labor System," which noted that many residents of the American colonies (and of England) lived in varying degrees of "unfreedom" in the seventeenth century, although none resembling slavery as it came to be known in America. The first Africans who came to America lived for a time in conditions not very different from those of white indentured servants. But slavery came ultimately to differ substantially from other conditions of servitude. It was permanent bondage, and it passed from one generation to the next. That it emerged in America, the Handlins argued, resulted from efforts by colonial legislatures to increase the available labor force. That it included African Americans and no others was because black people had few defenses and few defenders. Racism emerged to justify slavery; it did not cause slavery.

In 1959, Carl Degler became the first of a number of important historians to challenge the Handlins. In his essay "Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice," he argued that Africans had never been like other servants in the Chesapeake; that "the Negro was actually never treated as an equal of the white man, servant or free." Racism was strong "long before slavery had come upon the scene." It did not result from slavery, but helped cause it. Nine years later, Winthrop D. Jordan argued similarly that white racism, not economic or legal conditions, produced slavery. In *White Over Black* (1968) and other, earlier writings, Jordan argued that Europeans

had long viewed people of color—and black Africans in particular—as inferior beings appropriate for serving whites. Those attitudes migrated with white Europeans to the New World, and white racism shaped the treatment of Africans in America—and the nature of the slave labor system—from the beginning.

George Fredrickson has echoed Jordan's emphasis on the importance of racism as an independent factor reinforcing slavery; but unlike Jordan, he has argued that racism did not precede slavery. "The treatment of blacks," he wrote, "engendered a cultural and psycho-social racism that after a certain point took on a life of its own. . . ."

Racism, although the child of slavery, not only outlived its parent but grew stronger and more independent after slavery's demise."

Peter Wood's *Black Majority* (1974), a study of seventeenth-century South Carolina, moved the debate back away from racism and toward social and economic conditions. Wood demonstrated that blacks and whites often worked together on relatively equal terms in the early years of settlement. But as rice cultivation expanded, finding white laborers willing to do the arduous work became more difficult. The forcible importation of African workers, and the creation of a system of permanent bondage, was a response to a growing demand for labor and to fears among whites that without slavery a black labor force would be difficult to control.

Similarly, Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975) argued that the southern labor system was at first relatively flexible and later grew more rigid. In colonial Virginia, he claimed, white settlers did not at first intend to create a system of permanent bondage. But as the tobacco economy grew and created a high demand for cheap labor, white landowners began to feel uneasy about their dependence on a large group of dependent white workers, since such workers were difficult to recruit and control. Thus slavery was less a result of racism than of the desire of

white landowners to find a reliable and stable labor force. Racism, Morgan contended, was a result of slavery, an ideology created to justify a system that had been developed to serve other needs. And David Brion Davis, in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975), argued that while prejudice against blacks had a long history, racism as a systematic ideology was crystallized during the American Revolution—as Americans such as Thomas Jefferson struggled to explain the paradox of slavery existing in a republic committed to individual freedom.

Robin Blackburn's *The Making of New World Slavery* (1996) is perhaps the most emphatic statement of the economic underpinnings of slavery. Why, he asks, did the American colonies create a thriving slave labor system at a time when slavery had almost entirely died out in Europe? He concedes that race was a factor; Africans were "different" in appearance, culture, and religion from European colonists, and it was easier to justify enslaving them than it was to justify enslaving English, French, or Spanish workers. But the real reasons for slavery were hardheaded economic decisions by ambitious entrepreneurs, who realized very early that a slave-labor system in the labor-intensive agricultural world of the American South and the Caribbean was more profitable than a free-labor system. Slaveowning planters, he argues, not only enriched them-

selves; they created wealth that benefited all of colonial society and provided significant capital for the rapidly developing economy of England. Thus, slavery served the interests of a powerful combination of groups: planters, merchants, governments, industrialists, and consumers. Race may have been a rationale for slavery, allowing planters and traders to justify to themselves the terrible human costs of the system. But the most important reason for the system was not racism, but the pursuit of profit—and the success of the system in producing it. Slavery was not, according to Blackburn, an antiquated remnant of an older world. It was, he uncomfortably concludes, a recognizably modern labor system that, however horrible, served the needs of an emerging market economy.



### Document A

Source: Lord Dunmore's Proclamation, Virginia, 1775.

I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms, to [resort] to His MAJESTY'S STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to His MAJESTY'S Crown and Government. . . . And I do hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, ([belonging] to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY'S Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, . . .

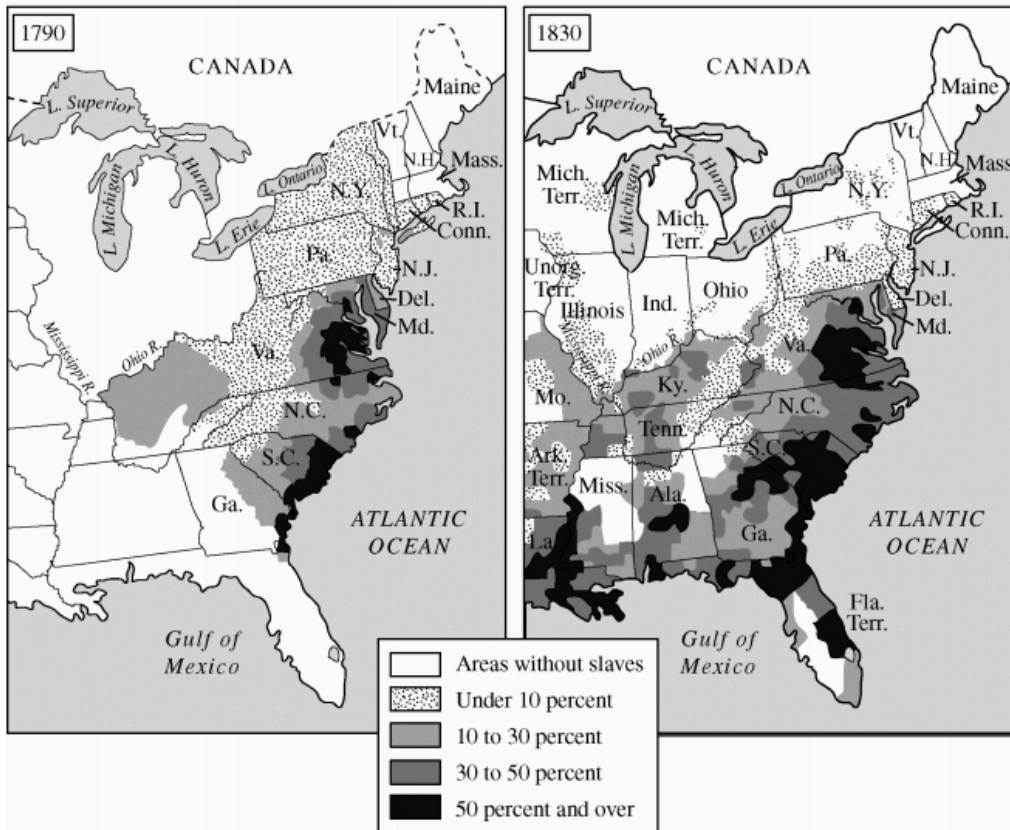
### Document B

Source: Paul Cuffe's Petition, Massachusetts, 1780.

. . . by Reason of long bondage and hard Slavery we have been deprived of enjoying the profits of our labor or the advantage of inheriting estates from our parents as our neighbors the white people do . . . & yet . . . we are not allowed the privilege of freemen of the State having no vote or influence in the election of those that tax us . . . yet many of our Color (as is well known) have cheerfully entered the field of battle in the defense of the Common cause and that (as we conceive) against a similar exertion of power (in regard to taxation) too well known to need a recital in this place.

### Document C

SLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES



### Document D

Source: Negro Methodist Meeting in Philadelphia, 1790s.



### Document E

Source: Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, Philadelphia, 1794.

There is much gratitude due from our color towards the white people, very many of them are instruments in the hand of God for our good, even such as have held us in captivity, are now pleading our cause with earnestness and zeal; . . . much depends upon us for the help of our color more than we are aware; if we are lazy and idle, the enemies of freedom plead it as a cause why we ought not to be free, and say we are better in a state of servitude, and that giving us our liberty would be an injury to us, and by such conduct we strengthen the bands of oppression, and keep many in bondage who are more worthy than ourselves.

### Document F

Source: Venture Smith's *Narrative*, 1798.

I asked my master one time if he would consent to have me purchase my freedom. He replied that he would. I was then very happy, knowing that I was at that time able to pay part of the purchase money by means of the money which I had some time buried. . . . What was wanting in redeeming myself, my master agreed to wait on me for, until I could procure it for him. . . . There was continually some interest accruing on my master's note to my friend, the free negro man above named, which I received, and with some besides, which I got by fishing, I laid out in land adjoining my old master Stanton's. By cultivating this land with the greatest diligence and economy, at times when my master did not require my labor, in two years I had laid up ten pounds.

### Document G

Source: The Confessions of "Ben," a conspirator in Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion, 1800.

. . . Mr. Prosser's Gabriel wished to bring on the business as soon as possible. Gilbert said the summer was almost over, and he wished them to enter upon the business before the weather got too cold. Gabriel proposed that the subject should be referred to his brother Martin to decide upon. Martin said there was this expression in the Bible, delays breed danger; at this time, he said, the country was at peace, the soldiers were discharged, and the arms all put away; there was no patrolling in the country, and that before he would any longer bear what he had borne, he would turn out and fight with his stick . . . I read in my Bible where God says if we will worship Him we should have peace in all our land; five of you shall conquer a hundred, and a hundred a thousand of our enemies . . .

### Document H

Source: Letter to ministers from the Vermont Colonization Society, 1820.

The Managers of the Vermont Colonization Society . . . proposed to the Inhabitants of this State, a general contribution [of] . . . one cent only, from each inhabitant of the State. . . . By promoting this contribution, you will give efficient aid to a Society, whose benevolent object is, by establishing colonies on the coast of Africa, to open a door for the gradual emancipation of the slaves in our own country, to impose an effectual barrier against the continuance of the slave trade, and ultimately to extend the blessings of civilization, and of the christian religion, throughout the vast and hitherto benighted regions of Africa.

### Document I

Source: David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, 1829.

For my own part, I am glad Mr. Jefferson has advanced his positions for your sake; for you will either have to contradict or confirm him by your own actions, and not by what our friends have said or done for us; for those things are other men's labors, and do not satisfy the Americans, who are waiting for us to prove to them ourselves that we are MEN, before they will be willing to admit the fact; for I pledge you my sacred word of honor, that Mr. Jefferson's remarks respecting us, have sunk deep into the hearts of millions of the whites, and never will be removed this side of eternity.—For how can they, when we are confirming him every day, by our *groveling submissions* and *treachery*?

Remember Americans, that we must and shall be free and enlightened as you are, will you wait until we shall, under God, obtain our liberty by the crushing arm of power? Will it not be dreadful for you? I speak, Americans, for your good. We must and shall be free I say, in spite of you. You may do your best to keep us in wretchedness and misery, to enrich you and your children; but God will deliver us from you. And woe, woe, will be to you if we have to obtain our freedom by fighting.