

Slavery by the Numbers

Legal Status of Slaves and Blacks

By the end of the seventeenth century, the status of blacks -- slave or free -- tended to follow the status of their mothers. Generally, "white" persons were not slaves but Native and African Americans could be. One odd case was the offspring of a free white woman and a slave: the law often bound these people to servitude for thirty-one years. Conversion to Christianity could set a slave free in the early colonial period, but this practice quickly disappeared.

Skin Color and Status

Southern law largely identified skin color with status. Those who appeared African or of African descent were generally presumed to be slaves. Virginia was the only state to pass a statute that actually classified people by race: essentially, it considered those with one quarter or more black ancestry as black. Other states used informal tests in addition to visual inspection: one-quarter, one-eighth, or one-sixteenth black ancestry might categorize a person as black.

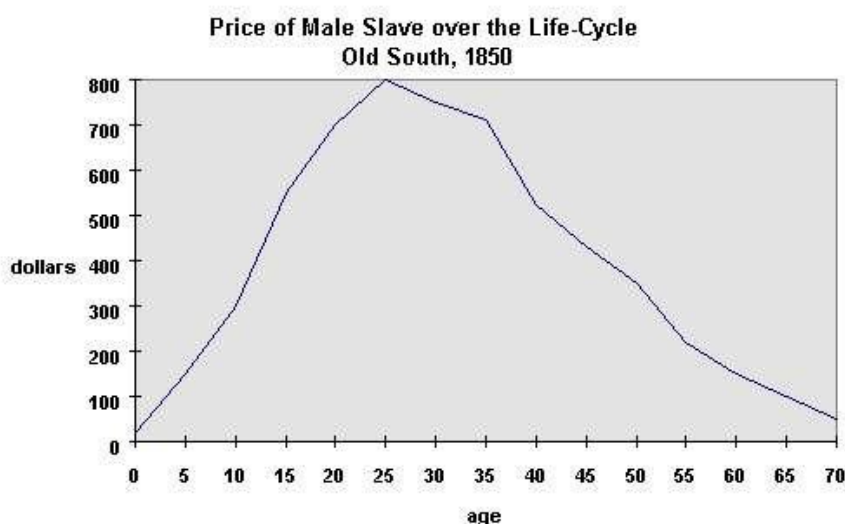
Even if blacks proved their freedom, they enjoyed little higher status than slaves except, to some extent, in Louisiana. Many Southern states forbade free persons of color from becoming preachers, selling certain goods, tending bar, staying out past a certain time of night, or owning dogs, among other things. Federal law denied black persons citizenship under the *Dred Scott* decision (1857). In this case, Chief Justice Roger Taney also determined that visiting a free state did not free a slave who returned to a slave state, nor did traveling to a free territory ensure emancipation.

Determinants of Slave Prices

The prices paid for slaves reflected two economic factors: the characteristics of the slave and the conditions of the market. Important individual features included age, sex, childbearing capacity (for females), physical condition, temperament, and skill level. In addition, the supply of slaves, demand for products produced by slaves, and seasonal factors helped determine market conditions and therefore prices.

Age and Price

Prices for both male and female slaves tended to follow similar life-cycle patterns. In the U.S. South, infant slaves sold for a positive price because masters expected them to live long enough to make the initial costs of raising them worthwhile. Prices rose through puberty as productivity and experience increased. In nineteenth-century New Orleans, for example, prices peaked at about age 22 for females and age 25 for males. Girls cost more than boys up to their mid-teens. The genders then switched places in terms of value. In the Old South, boys aged 14 sold for 71 percent of the price of 27-year-old men, whereas girls aged 14 sold for 65 percent of the price of 27-year-old men. After the peak age, prices declined slowly for a time, then fell off rapidly as the aging process caused productivity to fall. Compared to full-grown men, women were worth 80 to 90 percent as much. One characteristic in particular set some females apart: their ability to bear children. Fertile females commanded a premium. The mother-child link also proved important for pricing in a different way: people sometimes paid more for intact families.



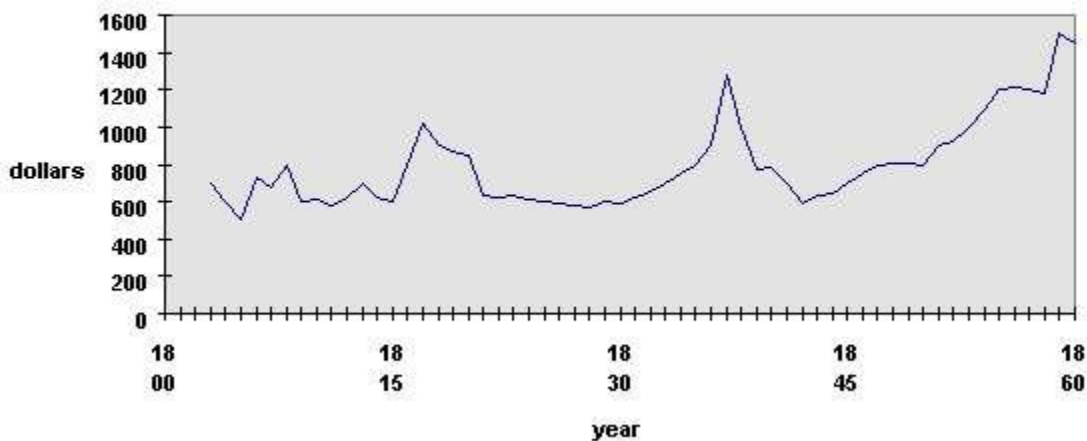
Other Characteristics and Price of Slaves

Skills, physical traits, mental capabilities, and other qualities also helped determine a slave's price. Skilled workers sold for premiums of 40-55 percent whereas crippled and chronically ill slaves sold for deep discounts. Slaves who proved troublesome -- runaways, thieves, layabouts, drunks, slow learners, and the like -- also sold for lower prices. Taller slaves cost more, perhaps because height acts as a proxy for healthiness. In New Orleans, light-skinned females (who enjoyed greater popularity as concubines) sold for a 5 percent premium.

Expectations and Prices

One additional demand factor loomed large in determining slave prices: the expectation of continued legal slavery. As the American Civil War progressed, prices dropped dramatically because people could not be sure that slavery would survive. In New Orleans, prime male slaves sold on average for \$1381 in 1861 and for \$1116 in 1862. Burgeoning inflation meant that real prices fell considerably more. By war's end, slaves sold for a small fraction of their 1860 price.

Price of Prime Male Slave, New Orleans, 1800-1860



Source: Data supplied by Stanley Engerman and reported in Walton and Rockoff (1994).

Slavery in the North

Colonial slavery had a slow start, particularly in the North. The proportion there never got much above 5 percent of the total population. Scholars have speculated as to why, without coming to a definite conclusion. Some surmise that indentured servants were fundamentally better suited to the Northern climate, crops, and tasks at hand; some claim that anti-slavery sentiment provided the explanation. At the time of the American Revolution, fewer than 10 percent of the half million slaves in the thirteen colonies resided in the North, working primarily in agriculture. New York had the greatest number, with just over 20,000. New Jersey had close to 12,000 slaves. Vermont was the first Northern region to abolish slavery when it became an independent republic in 1777. Most of the original Northern colonies implemented a process of gradual emancipation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, requiring the children of slave mothers to remain in servitude for a set period, typically 28 years. Other regions above the Mason-Dixon line ended slavery upon statehood early in the nineteenth century -- Ohio in 1803 and Indiana in 1816, for instance.

Slavery in the South

Throughout colonial and antebellum history, U.S. slaves lived primarily in the South. Slaves comprised less than a tenth of the total Southern population in 1680 but grew to a third by 1790. At that date, 293,000 slaves lived in Virginia alone, making up 42 percent of all slaves in the U.S. at the time. South Carolina, North Carolina, and Maryland each had over 100,000 slaves. After the American Revolution, the Southern slave population exploded, reaching about 1.1 million in 1810 and over 3.9 million in 1860.

TABLE 1
Population of the Original Thirteen Colonies, selected years by type

1750	1750	1790	1790	1790	1810	1810	1810	1860	1860	1860	State
White	Black	White	Free	Slave	White	Free	Slave	White	Free	Slave	
			Nonwhite			Nonwhite			Nonwhite		
108,270	3,010	232,236	2,771	2,648	255,179	6,453	310	451,504	8,643	-	Connecticut
27,208	1,496	46,310	3,899	8,887	55,361	13,136	4,177	90,589	19,829	1,798	Delaware
4,200	1,000	52,886	398	29,264	145,414	1,801	105,218	591,550	3,538	462,198	Georgia
97,623	43,450	208,649	8,043	103,036	235,117	33,927	111,502	515,918	83,942	87,189	Maryland
183,925	4,075	373,187	5,369	-	465,303	6,737	-	1,221,432	9,634	-	Massachusetts
26,955	550	141,112	630	157	182,690	970	-	325,579	494	-	New Hampshire
66,039	5,354	169,954	2,762	11,423	226,868	7,843	10,851	646,699	25,318	-	New Jersey
65,682	11,014	314,366	4,682	21,193	918,699	25,333	15,017	3,831,590	49,145	-	New York
53,184	19,800	289,181	5,041	100,783	376,410	10,266	168,824	629,942	31,621	331,059	North Carolina
116,794	2,872	317,479	6,531	3,707	786,804	22,492	795	2,849,259	56,956	-	Pennsylvania
29,879	3,347	64,670	3,484	958	73,214	3,609	108	170,649	3,971	-	Rhode Island
25,000	39,000	140,178	1,801	107,094	214,196	4,554	196,365	291,300	10,002	402,406	South Carolina
129,581	101,452	442,117	12,866	292,627	551,534	30,570	392,518	1,047,299	58,154	490,865	Virginia
934,340	236,420	2,792,325	58,277	681,777	4,486,789	167,691	1,005,685	12,663,310	361,247	1,775,515	United States

Source: Historical Statistics of the U.S. (1970), Franklin (1988).

TABLE 2
Population of the South 1790-1860 by type

Year	White	Free Nonwhite	Slave
1790	1,240,454	32,523	654,121
1800	1,691,892	61,575	851,532
1810	2,118,144	97,284	1,103,700
1820	2,867,454	130,487	1,509,904
1830	3,614,600	175,074	1,983,860
1840	4,601,873	207,214	2,481,390
1850	6,184,477	235,821	3,200,364
1860	8,036,700	253,082	3,950,511

Source: Historical Statistics of the U.S. (1970).

Slave Ownership Patterns

Despite their numbers, slaves typically comprised a minority of the local population. Only in antebellum South Carolina and Mississippi did slaves outnumber free persons. Most Southerners owned no slaves and most slaves lived in small groups rather than on large plantations. Less than one-quarter of white Southerners held slaves, with half of these holding fewer than five and fewer than 1 percent owning more than one hundred. In 1860, the average number of slaves residing together was about ten.

TABLE 3

Slaves as a Percent of the Total Population - selected years, by Southern state

	1750	1790	1810	1860
State	Black/total population	Slave/total population	Slave/total population	Slave/total population
Alabama				45.12
Arkansas				25.52
Delaware	5.21	15.04	5.75	1.60
Florida				43.97
Georgia	19.23	35.45	41.68	43.72
Kentucky		16.87	19.82	19.51
Louisiana				46.85
Maryland	30.80	32.23	29.30	12.69
Mississippi				55.18
Missouri				9.72
North Carolina	27.13	25.51	30.39	33.35
South Carolina	60.94	43.00	47.30	57.18
Tennessee			17.02	24.84
Texas				30.22
Virginia	43.91	39.14	40.27	30.75
Overall	37.97	33.95	33.25	32.27

Sources: Historical Statistics of the United States (1970), Franklin (1988).

TABLE 4

Holdings of Southern Slave-owners: (by states, 1860)

State	Total	Held 1	Held 2	Held 3	Held 4	Held 5	Held 1-5	Held 100-	Held 500+
	slaveholders	slave	slaves	Slaves	slaves	slaves	slaves	499 slaves	slaves
AL	33,730	5,607	3,663	2,805	2,329	1,986	16,390	344	-
AR	11,481	2,339	1,503	1,070	894	730	6,536	65	1
DE	587	237	114	74	51	34	510	-	-
FL	5,152	863	568	437	365	285	2,518	47	-
GA	41,084	6,713	4,335	3,482	2,984	2,543	20,057	211	8
KY	38,645	9,306	5,430	4,009	3,281	2,694	24,720	7	-
LA	22,033	4,092	2,573	2,034	1,536	1,310	11,545	543	4
MD	13,783	4,119	1,952	1,279	1,023	815	9,188	16	-
MS	30,943	4,856	3,201	2,503	2,129	1,809	14,498	315	1
MO	24,320	6,893	3,754	2,773	2,243	1,686	17,349	4	-
NC	34,658	6,440	4,017	3,068	2,546	2,245	18,316	133	-
SC	26,701	3,763	2,533	1,990	1,731	1,541	11,558	441	8
TN	36,844	7,820	4,738	3,609	3,012	2,536	21,715	47	-
TX	21,878	4,593	2,874	2,093	1,782	1,439	12,781	54	-
VA	52,128	11,085	5,989	4,474	3,807	3,233	28,588	114	-
TOTAL	393,967	78,726	47,244	35,700	29,713	24,886	216,269	2,341	22

Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States* (1970).