

African Americans at Mid-Century

20.1 Introduction

By 1850, the population of the United States had grown to just over 23 million. This figure included 3.6 million African Americans. The great majority of African Americans lived in slavery. Harriet Powers, the woman who created the quilt you see here, was one of them.

Like many slaves, Harriet Powers grew up hearing Bible stories. In her quilts, Powers used animals and figures from Africa and America to illustrate those stories, along with scenes from her life. Hidden in her images were messages of hope and freedom for slaves.

Not all African Americans were slaves. By mid-century, there were about half a million free blacks as well. Many were former slaves who had escaped to freedom.

Whether African Americans lived in slavery or freedom, **racism** shaped their lives. Everywhere, whites looked down on blacks. Whites ignored the great contributions blacks made to American life. They thought of the United States as “their country.” Such racist thinking prompted African American scholar and reformer W.E.B. Du Bois to ask:

Your country? How came it to be yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we brought you our three gifts and mingled them with yours; a gift of story and song, soft, stirring melody in an...unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn [physical strength] to beat back the wilderness...and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire...the third, a gift of the Spirit.

In this chapter, you will explore the experience of African Americans at mid-century. As you read, you will learn more about the gifts that African Americans brought to America.

20.2 North and South, Slave and Free

The experiences of African Americans at mid-century depended on where they lived and whether they lived in slavery or freedom. Former slave Frederick Douglass toured the North talking to white audiences about slavery. To him, the biggest difference between slaves and free blacks was their legal status. Free blacks had some rights by law. Slaves did not.

Slaves’ Legal Status Douglass reminded his listeners that the law defined slaves as property, not human beings. Legally, slaveholders could do almost anything with their human property. They could buy and sell slaves. They could leave slaves to their children or heirs. They could give slaves away to settle a bet. But in many states, they could not set slaves free.

As property, slaves had none of the rights that free people took for granted. “In law, the slave has no wife, no children, no country, no home,” Douglass said. “He can own nothing, possess nothing, acquire nothing.”

Rural and Urban Slaves Most slaves worked on farms and plantations across the South. By 1860, there were also about 70,000 urban slaves living in towns and cities. Most were “hired out,” or sent to work in factories, mills, or workshops. The wages they earned belonged to their owners. Often urban slaves were allowed to “live out” on their own, rather than under the watchful eyes of their owners. Because of such freedom, observed Douglass, “A city slave is almost a freeman compared to a slave on a plantation.”

Free Blacks in the South About half of all free African Americans lived in the South. Most worked as laborers, craftspeople, or household servants in towns and cities.

White southerners viewed free blacks as a dangerous group that had to be controlled so that, in the words of South Carolina slaveholders, they would not create “discontent among our slaves.” Free blacks were forbidden to own guns. They could not travel freely from town to town or state to state. Blacks were not allowed to work at certain jobs. Such restrictions led Douglass to conclude, “No colored man is really free in a slaveholding state.”

Free Blacks in the North African Americans in the North lived freer lives. But blacks experienced **discrimination**, or unequal treatment, everywhere they turned. In many states, African Americans were denied the right to vote. Everywhere they had trouble finding good jobs. In the 1850s, some 87 percent of free blacks in New York held low-paying jobs. “Why should I strive hard?” asked one young African American. “What are my prospects?... No one will employ me; white boys won’t work with me.”

In addition to unequal treatment, policies of **segregation** separated blacks from whites in nearly all public places. Black children were often denied entry into public schools. Those states that did educate black children set up separate schools for that purpose. A New Yorker observed:

Even the noblest black is denied that which is free to the vilest [worst] white. The omnibus, the [railroad] car, the ballot-box, the jury box, the halls of legislation, the army, the public lands, the school, the church, the lecture room, the social circle, the [restaurant] table, are all either absolutely or virtually denied to him.

Frederick Douglass discovered how deeply rooted this racism was when he tried to join a church in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and was turned away. Douglass wrote, “I tried all the other churches in New Bedford with the same result.”

African Americans responded to discrimination by organizing to help themselves. In 1816, Richard Allen, a former slave, became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). The AME, which still exists today, quickly became a center of African American life. Allen also created organizations to improve the lives of blacks, such as the African Society for the Education of Youth.

Other northern blacks started their own churches, schools, and self-help organizations. In 1853, free blacks formed the National Council of Colored People to protest the unequal treatment they received. Such treatment, the council declared, “would humble the proudest, crush the energies of the strongest, and retard the progress of the swiftest.” That African Americans were neither humbled nor crushed by prejudice and discrimination was evidence of their courage and spirit.

20.3 The Economics of Slavery

As you read in Chapter 19, only wealthier planters could afford to buy slaves. The great majority of white southerners did not own slaves. Why, then, did the South remain so loyal to slavery? Part of the answer lies in the growth of the southern economy after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.

The cotton gin made cotton a hugely profitable cash crop in the South. In 1790, the South produced just 3,000 bales of cotton. By the 1850s, production had soared to more than 4 million bales a year. Cotton brought new wealth to the South. Robert Fogel, a historian who has studied the economics of slavery, wrote:

If we treat the North and South as separate nations, the South would stand as the fourth most prosperous nation of the world in 1860...more prosperous than France, Germany, Denmark, or any of the countries in Europe except England.

Whether they owned slaves or not, white southerners understood that their economy depended on cotton. They also knew that cotton planters depended on slave labor to grow their profitable crop. They dreamed that someday they would be able to buy slaves and join the powerful planter class. It mattered little to them that owning slaves became less and less likely as the demand for, and the price of, slaves rose.

High prices were both good and bad for the men and women trapped in slavery. As prices went up, slaves became more valuable to their owners. This may have encouraged slaveholders to take better care of their workers. At the same time, the rising value of their slaves made slaveholders less willing to listen to talk of ending slavery. In their eyes, freeing their slaves could only mean one thing—complete and utter financial ruin.

20.4 Working Conditions of Slaves

Slaves worked on farms of various sizes. On small farms, owners and slaves worked side by side in the fields. On large plantations, planters hired overseers to supervise their slaves. Overseers were paid to “care for nothing but to make a large crop.” To do this, they tried to get the most work possible out of slaves’ tired bodies.

About three quarters of rural slaves were field hands who toiled from dawn to dark tending crops. An English visitor described a field hand’s day:

He is called up in the morning at day break, and is seldom allowed enough time to swallow three mouthfuls of hominy [boiled corn], or hoecake [cornbread], but is immediately driven out to the field to hard labor.... About noon...he eats his dinner, and he is seldom allowed an hour for that purpose.... Then they return to severe labor, which continues until dusk.

Even then, a slave’s workday was not finished. After dark, there was still water to carry, wood to split, pigs to feed, corn to shuck, cotton to clean, and other chores to be done. One slave recalled:

I never knowed what it was to rest. I jes work all the time from morning late at night. I had to do everything.... Work in the field, chop wood, hoe corn, 'till sometime I feels like my back surely break.

Not all slaves worked in the fields. Some were skilled seamstresses, carpenters, or blacksmiths. Others worked in the master's house as cooks or servants. When asked about her work, a house slave replied:

What kind of work I did? Most everything, chile [child]. I cooked, then I was house maid, and I raised I don't know how many children.... I was always good when it come to the sick, so that was mostly my job.

No matter how hard they worked, slaves could not look forward to an easier life. Most began work at the age of six and continued until they died. As one old man put it, "Slave young, slave long."

20.5 Living Conditions of Slaves

Most masters viewed their slaves as they did their land—things to be "worn out, not improved." They provided only what was needed to keep their slaves healthy enough to work. Slaves lived crowded together in rough cabins. One recalled:

We lodged in log huts, and on bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women, and children.... We had neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners.

Slaves seldom went hungry. "Not to give a slave enough to eat," reported Frederick Douglass, "is regarded as...meanness [stinginess] even among slaveholders." Once a week, slaves received a ration of cornmeal, bacon, and molasses. Many kept gardens or hunted and fished to vary their diets. The owner described here fed his slaves well:

Marse [master] Alec had plenty for his slaves to eat. There was meat, bread, collard greens, snap beans, 'taters, peas, all sorts of dried fruit, and just lots of milk and butter.

Slaves wore clothing made of coarse homespun linen or rough "Negro cloth." Northern textile mills made this cloth especially for slave clothes. Frederick Douglass reported that a field hand received a yearly allowance of "two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers...one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes." The shoes usually fit so badly that slaves preferred going barefoot much of the time. Children too young to work received "two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day."

While slaves were poorly housed and clothed compared to most white southerners, they were more likely to receive medical care. Slaveholders often hired doctors to treat sick or injured slaves. Given doctors' limited medical knowledge, this care probably did little to improve the health of slaves.

20.6 Controlling Slaves

Slavery was a system of forced labor. To make this system work, slaveholders had to keep their slaves firmly under control. Some slaveholders used harsh punishments—beating, whipping, branding, and other forms of torture—to maintain that control. But punishments often backfired on slaveholders. A slave who had been badly whipped might not be able to work for some time. Harsh punishments were also likely to make slaves feel more resentful and rebellious.

Slaveholders preferred to control their workforce by making slaves feel totally dependent on their masters. Owners encouraged such dependence by treating their slaves like grown-up children. They also kept their workers as ignorant as possible about the world beyond the plantation. Frederick Douglass's master said that a slave "should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as it is told to do."

Slaves who failed to learn this lesson were sometimes sent to slavebreakers. Such men were experts at turning independent, spirited African Americans into humble, obedient slaves. When he was 16, Douglass was sent to a slavebreaker named Edward Covey.

Covey's method consisted of equal parts violence, fear, and overwork. Soon after Douglass arrived on Covey's farm, he received his first whipping. After that, he was beaten so often that "aching bones and a sore back were my constant companions."

Covey's ability to instill fear in his slaves was as effective as his whippings. They never knew when he might be watching them. "He would creep and crawl in ditches and gullies," Douglass recalled, to spy on his workers.

Finally, Covey worked his slaves beyond endurance. Wrote Douglass:

We worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow too hard for us to work in the field....The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first got there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me.... I was broken in body, soul, and spirit....The dark night of slavery closed in upon me.

20.7 Resistance to Slavery

Despite the efforts of slaveholders to crush their spirits, slaves found countless ways to resist slavery. As former slave Harriet Jacobs wrote after escaping to freedom, “My master had power and law on his side. I had a determined will. There is power in each.”

Day-to-Day Resistance For most slaves, resistance took the form of quiet acts of rebellion. Field hands pulled down fences, broke tools, and worked so sloppily that they damaged crops. House slaves sneaked food out of the master’s kitchen.

Slaves pretended to be dumb, clumsy, sick, or insane to escape work. One slave avoided working for years by claiming to be nearly blind, only to regain his sight once freed.

Resistance turned deadly when house servants slipped poison into the master’s food. So many slaves set fire to their owners’ homes and barns that the American Fire Insurance Company refused to insure property in the South.

Open Defiance Quiet resistance sometimes flared into open defiance. When pushed too hard, slaves refused to work, rejected orders, or struck back violently. Owners often described slaves who reacted in this way as “insolent” [disrespectful] or “unmanageable.”

Frederick Douglass reached his breaking point one day when the slavebreaker Covey began to beat him for no particular reason. Rather than take the blows, as he had so many times before, Douglass fought back. He wrestled Covey to the ground, holding him “so firmly by the throat that his blood followed my nails.” For Douglass, this moment was “the turning point in my career as a slave.”

My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

Covey knew this and never laid a hand on Douglass again.

Running Away Some slaves tried to escape by running away to freedom in the North. The risks were enormous. Slaveholders hired professional slave catchers and their packs of howling bloodhounds to hunt down runaway slaves. If caught, a runaway risked being mauled by dogs, brutally whipped, or even killed. Still, Douglass and countless other slaves took the risk.

Slaves found many ways to escape bondage. Some walked to freedom in the North, hiding by day and traveling at night when they could follow the North Star. Others traveled north by boat or train, using forged identity cards and clever disguises to get past watchful slave patrols. A few runaways mailed themselves to freedom in boxes or coffins.

Thousands of runaways escaped to free states and to Canada with the help of the Underground Railroad, a secret network of free blacks and sympathetic whites. The members of the Underground Railroad provided transportation and “safe houses” where runaways could hide. A number of guides, or “conductors,” risked their lives to help escaping slaves travel the “freedom train.” One of the most successful was Harriet Tubman. Having escaped slavery herself, Tubman courageously returned to the South more than a dozen times between 1850 and 1860, guiding more than 200 men, women, and children to freedom.

Rebellion At times, resistance erupted into violent rebellion. Slave revolts occurred in cities, on plantations, and even on ships at sea. Fear of slave uprisings haunted slaveholders. Planters, wrote one visitor to the South, “never lie down to sleep without...loaded pistols at their sides.”

In 1822 authorities in Charleston, South Carolina, learned that Denmark Vesey, a free black, was preparing to lead a sizable revolt of slaves. Vesey, along with more than 30 slaves, was arrested and hanged.

Nine years later, in 1831, a slave named Nat Turner led a bloody uprising in Virginia. Armed with axes and guns, Turner and his followers set out to kill every white person they could find. Before their reign of terror ended two days later, at least 57 people had been hacked to death.

Denmark Vesey's and Nat Turner's rebellions panicked white southerners. In response, southern states passed strict slave codes that tightened owners' control of their slaves and provided for harsher punishment of slaves by authorities. As one frightened Virginian remarked, "A Nat Turner might be in any family."

20.8 Slave Families and Communities

Slavery made community and family life difficult. Legally, slave families did not exist. No southern state recognized slave marriages. Legal control of slave children rested not with their parents, but with their masters. Owners could break up slave families at any time by selling a father, a mother, or a child to someone else. Along with being whipped, slaves most feared being sold away from their loved ones.

Most slaves grew up in families headed by a father and mother. Unable to marry legally, slaves created their own weddings that often involved the tradition of jumping over a broomstick. As one recalled:

The preacher would say to the man, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" He says, "Yes." "Well, jump the broom." After he jumped, the preacher would say the same to the woman. When she jumped, the preacher said, "I pronounce you man and wife."

Caring for children was never easy. Frederick Douglass's mother "snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done." Still, parents found time to teach their children the lessons they would need to survive.

Silence around whites was one such lesson. Elijah Marrs recalled that "Mothers were necessarily compelled to be severe on their children to keep them from talking too much." Obedience was another lesson. William Webb's mother taught him "not to rebel against the men who were treating me like some dumb brute, making me work and refusing to let me learn."

Parents also taught their children other essential lessons about caring, kindness, pride, and hope. They taught them to respect themselves and other members of the slave community, especially older slaves. "There is not to be found, among any people," wrote Douglass, "a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders."

These were the lessons that helped slaves, under the most difficult conditions, to create loving families and close communities. In doing so, they met the most basic of human needs—the need for a place to feel loved, respected, and safe.

20.9 Leisure Time Activities

*Come day,
Go day,
God send Sunday.*

These simple words capture the weariness of slaves. They toiled all week in fields that seemed to stretch "from one end of the earth to the other." But, on Saturday night and Sunday, their time was their own.

Saturday nights were a time for social events, like corn-husking or pea-shelling parties, that combined work and fun. One slave recalled:

I've seen many a corn huskin' at ole Major's farm when the corn would be piled as high as the house. Two sets of men would start huskin' from opposite sides of the heap. It would keep one man busy just getting the husks out of the way, and the corn would be thrown over the husker's head and filling the air like birds. The women usually had a quilting at those times, so they were pert and happy.

A quilting bee was one of the rare times when slave women could gather to work and talk. In those few precious hours, they were free to express themselves with needle and cloth. The quilts they created were not only beautiful, but very much needed as bedding for their families. Looking at a sunburst quilt she had sewn, one woman exclaimed, "It's poetry, ain't it?"

When the sewing was done, men joined the party for a "quilting feast" and dancing. Slaves made music out of almost anything. "Stretch cow-hides over cheese-boxes and you had tambourines," one former slave recalled. "Saw bones from a cow, knock them together and call it a drum. Or use broom straw on fiddle-strings and you had your entire band."

Sunday was a day for religion and recreation. Slaves spent their Sundays going to church, eating, hunting, fishing, dancing, singing, gambling, telling tales, naming babies, playing games, drinking whiskey, and visiting with friends. In

New Orleans, hundreds of slaves gathered on Sunday afternoons in a public space known as “Congo Square” to dance, sing, and talk. All of these activities helped African Americans forget the sorrows of slavery.

20.10 Slave Churches

Many slaveholders encouraged their slaves to attend church on Sunday. Some read the Bible to their workers and prayed with them. Owners and white ministers preached the same message: “If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master.”

Not surprisingly, this was not a popular lesson among slaves. “Dat ole white preacher just was telling us slaves to be good to our marsters,” recalled Cornelius Garner. “We ain’t kerr’d a bit ’bout dat stuff he was telling us ’cause we wanted to sing, pray, and serve God in our own way.”

Instead, slaves created their own “invisible church” that brought together African roots and American needs. This invisible church met in slave quarters or secret forest clearings known as “hush arbors.” One slave reported that

When [slaves] go round singing, “Steal Away to Jesus” that mean there going to be a religious meeting that night. The masters...didn’t like them religious meetings, so us naturally slips off at night, down in the bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.

Rather than teach about obedience, black preachers told the story of Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt. Black worshipers sang spirituals that expressed their desire for freedom and faith in a better world to come. A black preacher wrote:

The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation [stopping] about half an hour.... The old house partook of their ecstasy; it rang with their jubilant shouts, and shook in all its joints.

Whites sometimes criticized the “enthusiasm” of black worshipers, saying they lacked true religious feeling. Many slaves, however, believed that it was their masters who lacked such feeling. “You see,” explained one man, “religion needs a little motion—specially if you gwine [going to] feel de spirit.”

Religion helped slaves bear their suffering and still find joy in life. In their prayers and spirituals, they gave voice to their deepest longings, their greatest sorrows, and their highest hopes.

20.11 African American Culture

Africans arrived in the United States speaking many languages and following many cultural traditions. To survive, they had to learn a new language—English—and adopt a new way of life. Yet they did not forget their African roots. Across the South, slaves combined their old traditions and new realities to create a distinctive African American culture.

You can see this combining of cultures in Harriet Powers’ story quilt. In square after square, Powers used African and American animals to illustrate Bible stories that she learned as a slave on a Georgia plantation. The doves in her quilt are symbols of a slave’s yearning for freedom. As one spiritual said with sad longing, “Had I the wings of a dove, I’d fly away and be at rest.”

You can also hear this combining of cultures in the songs and spirituals sung by slaves. These songs throb with the rhythms and harmonies of Africa. But they speak about the realities of slavery. Slaves sang about faith, love, work, and the kindness and cruelty of masters. They also expressed their **oppression**, as in this song recorded by Frederick Douglass:

*We raise the wheat, dey gib [they give] us the corn;
We bake the bread, dey gib us the cruss;
We sif the meal, dey gib us the huss;
We peel the meat, dey gib us the skin;
And dat’s the way dey takes us in.*

Slave dances were based on African traditions as well. Dancing helped slaves to escape their cares, express their feelings, and refresh their spirits. According to one former slave, good dancers “could play a tune with their feet, dancing largely to an inward music, a music that was felt, but not heard.”

African legends and folktales survived in the stories and jokes told by slaves. For example, Br’er Rabbit, the sly hero of many slave tales, was based on the African trickster Shulo the Hare. In these stories, the small but clever brother rabbit

always managed to outwit larger, but duller, brother bear or brother fox—just as slaves hoped to outwit their more powerful masters.

20.12 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned what life was like for African Americans during the 19th century. You looked at a story quilt made by a slave that gave you clues, or messages, about slavery.

African Americans had a great impact on the development of American life. The economy of the South was built on the labor of African American slaves. Some African Americans lived in freedom in both the North and South, but nowhere could they escape racism and discrimination.

Those who lived in slavery worked endlessly, either in the fields or as servants in the master's house. Most lived in simple, dirt-floor cabins with only straw and rags for beds. Many slaves lived in daily fear of harsh punishments. Their biggest fear was the threat of family members being sold to other farms. Many slaves learned to rebel in small ways. They might break a tool on purpose or pretend to be lame or blind. Some slaves fought back openly when the oppression became too much to bear. At great risk, many tried to run away. Some slaveholders would rather kill runaways than allow them to escape.

Slaves were encouraged to attend church, and Sunday was a day of rest for everyone. Slaves spent Saturday nights at social events and worshiped in their own secret churches on Sundays. They prayed and sang spirituals to help themselves find joy and hope in their hard lives.

In the next chapter, you will read about how different views on slavery in the North and the South threatened to divide the nation.