The Rise of American Slavery

Rome, as the saying goes, was not built in a day. Nor did slavery in America come into existence quickly. Slavery’s rise in America occurred gradually over the 17th and 18th centuries (1601-1800).

To understand slavery’s beginnings in America, one must look back to the history of human bondage in Africa. Since the beginning of time, slaves probably have labored in Africa. They helped build the pyramids in ancient Egypt, and for centuries Islamic slave traders trafficked West Africans across the desert of North Africa to supply labor shortages in countries along the southern edges of the Mediterranean Sea. This trans-Saharan slave trade was thriving and well established by the time European sea captains and traders cruised down the Atlantic coast of Africa in the 16th century [Link: PBS, Henry Louis Gates, “The Slave Kingdoms: Confronting the Legacy of the African Slave Trade,” <http://www.pbs.org/wonders/fr_e3.htm>].

The voyages of Christopher Columbus in 1492 inaugurated the trans-Atlantic slave trade that soon eclipsed the slave trade across the Sahara Desert. When the Italian explorer brought back indigenous Tainos from a Caribbean island (modern-day Dominican Republic) and presented them to his Spanish patrons, he encouraged European monarchs to establish overseas colonies that would produce sugar and other agricultural commodities that consumers back home were demanding. Europeans originally eyed the native inhabitants of these lands as laborers in the sugar fields they hoped to create. But when European diseases like measles, smallpox, and yellow fever decimated the Indians, Europeans looked to Africa to supply the growing demand for laborers. Over the next 400 years, more than ten million Africans were enslaved and forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean into colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean [Link: PBS, “Arrival of First Africans to Virginia Colony,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p263.html>].

The first Africans (20 in number) in early English America landed at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. Virginia was the first English colony in America, and tobacco was its cash crop. To attract settlers to the new colony on the Chesapeake Bay, planters and government officials relied on white indentured servants – not slaves – to harvest tobacco. Enslaved by the Spanish and sold to Virginia planters, these 20 Africans became indentured servants, completed their terms of service (usually seven years), and became free men and women. Like other Virginia servants who completed their labor contracts (indentures), these free Africans in America obtained 50 acres of land, became tobacco planters, and even obtained indentured servants of their own. First in Virginia and then on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, a free class of black farmers and planters emerged [Link: PBS, “Arrival of First Africans to Virginia Colony,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p263.html>].

The indentured servitude system in Virginia and Maryland attracted so many settlers that, before long, colonial governments in the Chesapeake could not continue giving 50 acres of land to ex-servants who had completed their indentures. By the 1670s, land was becoming so scarce

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that ex-servants had to “take a rain check” and wait for their land. Anger among landless ex-
servants ran so high that, in 1676, Nathaniel Bacon led a rebellion against Virginia’s government,
demanding that officials seize protected Indian lands and give them to white settlers. Bacon and
his followers burned Jamestown to the ground and nearly toppled Virginia’s government, but
were eventually defeated by the colony’s militia and troop reinforcements from England [Link:

To avoid another rebellion of land-hungry ex-servants, planters and Virginia officials
gradually began to shift to slave labor. After years of depending upon voluntary servitude, the
Chesapeake colonies switched to involuntary slavery based on race. This system of racial slavery,
gradually adopted in the years following Bacon’s Rebellion, implied that: to be a slave means that
you are black; and to be black means that you are a slave. Other English agricultural colonies like
North Carolina, South Carolina, and, later, Georgia also adopted racial slavery to expand the
production of tobacco, indigo, and rice.

As racial slavery spread from Virginia throughout the agricultural South after 1700, the
number of Africans entering America increased substantially and continued throughout the 18th
century. Northern colonies also enslaved Africans, but because staple crops could not grow there,
slaves never numbered more than seven percent of their population. Approximately 430,000
Africans came to North America, and the slave population grew even larger through slave births2.
Although many African Americans gained freedom after the American Revolution (1776-1783),
slavery in the United States grew even stronger after the 1790s as cotton agriculture spread into
Georgia and the new slave states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana [Link: National Archives
On the eve of the Civil War, more than 4,000,000 African Americans were enslaved in the
American South.

American slavery was created as a labor system, but the decision to enslave Africans was
racially motivated. The United States became a slaveholding republic in which blacks were owned
by others. As human property, slaves had their life and work dictated by their masters, who
perpetuated these inequities for generations. Slavery in America became so widespread that, in
the end, only a Civil War could end it.

2 See Table 2.1 in Nash, Ibid., p. 32.
Fisk University, Jubilee Singers
Biography [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/singers/index.html]

The American Missionary Association (AMA) in 1866 established the Fisk School to educate newly freed slaves in Tennessee, but within a year the school faced closure because of financial debt. George White, Fisk’s treasurer and choir director, decided in 1871 to raise money by taking nine of his best students on a musical tour.

Almost ready to quit after early audiences displayed little enthusiasm for their music, the talented singers decided to give a concert made up entirely of “slave songs” – songs they had learned as slaves or from their enslaved relatives. This music moved audience members to tears and opened wallets to support Fisk’s educational mission. From that point on, the Jubilee Singers performed only arrangements of slave songs. They toured American and European cities, singing to enthusiastic crowds that included President Ulysses S. Grant and Queen Victoria of England.

Though some members left the group due to exhaustion and disillusionment with race relations in America, the reconfigured Jubilee Singers maintained a grueling schedule of musical performances and fund raising for Fisk University.

Questions to consider:
1. How important was education to newly-freed slaves after the Civil War? Why?
2. What were slave songs and why did audiences respond so enthusiastically after hearing them?

Individual Members, Fisk University, Jubilee Singers

Ella Shepherd, soprano, piano accompanist, and Assistant Director (1851-1914)
Biography [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/singers/peopleevents/pande04.html]
Ella Shepherd’s mother, a former slave, came close to drowning herself and her young daughter, but an older slave woman stopped the despairing mother. Ella’s father later purchased Ella’s freedom, taking her to Ohio where she learned to read and write and play the piano. When the Fisk School started, Ella went there to become a teacher. Because of her musical talent, she became the assistant director and pianist for the group that became the Jubilee Singers.

Thomas Rutling, tenor (1854-1915)
Biography [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/singers/peopleevents/pande03.html]
A former house slave, Thomas Rutling was born in Tennessee in 1854. When the Union army captured his owner during the Civil War, 11 year-old Thomas and his brother left for Nashville. There Thomas learned to read and write and was among the first students in the new Fisk School. After the original Jubilee Singers disbanded, he remained in Europe rather than return to the difficulties black Americans still faced at home.

Maggie Porter, soprano (1853-1942)
Biography [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/singers/peopleevents/pande02.html]
Maggie Porter was born a slave and, like Thomas Rutling, gained her freedom during the Civil War. Once freed, 12 year-old Maggie started school and became a member of Fisk’s first year class. She was teaching in a country school when George White invited her to return to Fisk as one of his touring singers. After the original Jubilee Singers disbanded, Maggie remained in Germany for many years before returning to America.
Other members of the original Jubilee Singers:

**Benjamin Holmes** (1846-1877). Formerly a slave, Benjamin Holmes secretly taught himself to read. At age 23, he was a deacon in the Fisk University chapel. He contracted tuberculosis while a member of the first group of Jubilee Singers and died a few years later.

**Jennie Jackson**, soprano. Jenny Jackson was the granddaughter of the slave who had served as Andrew Jackson’s body servant, or guard.

**Isaac Dickerson**, baritone (1850-?). A former slave, Isaac Dickerson was a confederate general’s valet during the Civil War.

**Minne Tate**, contralto. Minne Tate was born to free black parents who encouraged her education. She was only 14 when she joined the group.

**Green Evans** (1848-?). A former slave, Green enrolled at Fisk after teaching young children for several years.

**Eliza Walker** A former slave, Eliza Walker enrolled at Fisk after her father secured her freedom.

Questions to consider:
1. How many of these Jubilee Singers had been slaves before enrolling at Fisk?
2. Why did ex-slaves value education so much?
3. How did the Jubilee Singers learn “slave songs?”
4. Did freedom change how they sang? Explain.