

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."

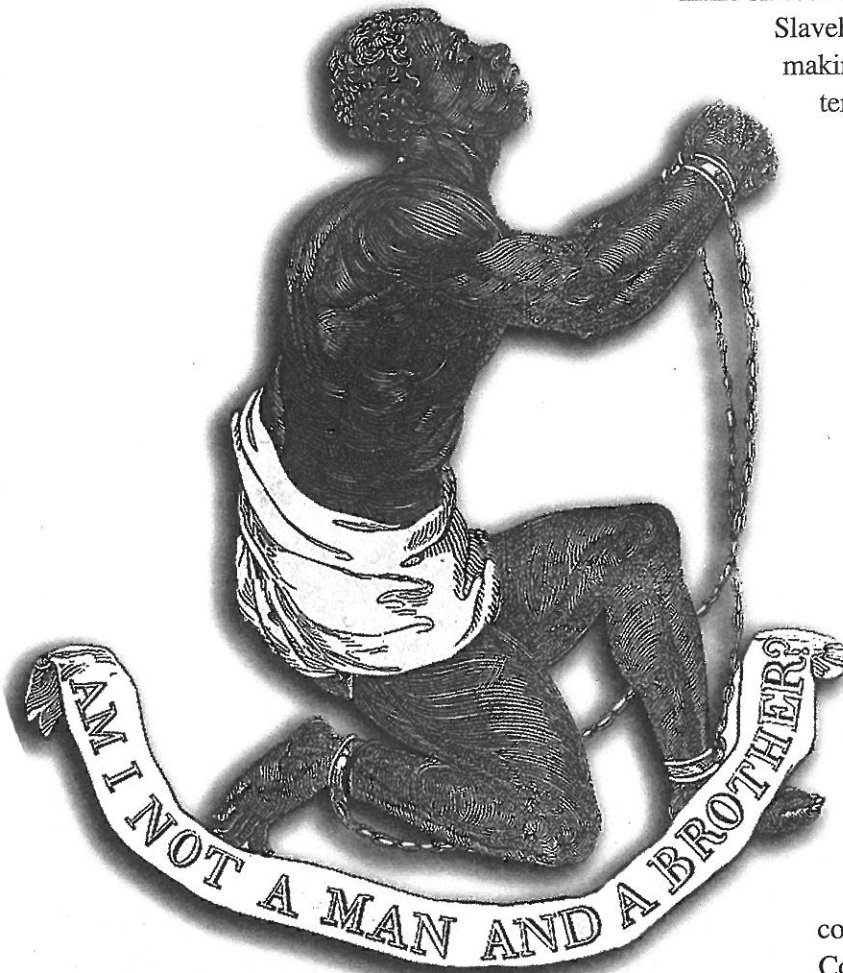
Slaves who failed to learn this lesson were sometimes sent to slavebreakers. Such men were experts at turning independent, spirited African Americans into humble, obedient slaves. When he was 16, Douglass was sent to a slavebreaker named Edward Covey.

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.

Beating, or whipping, was slave owners' most common way of controlling their workers. However, most slave owners avoided savage beatings because injured slaves could not work, and lash marks reduced their resale value.



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."

The bloodiest slave uprising in the South was organized by Nat Turner, a black preacher, in 1831. This wood engraving, entitled *Nat Turner and His Confederates in Conference*, shows Turner leaning on a pole, speaking to his companions.



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.



Slaves used many methods to try to escape bondage. Henry Brown, pictured above, shipped himself to freedom in a crate.

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."