

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.

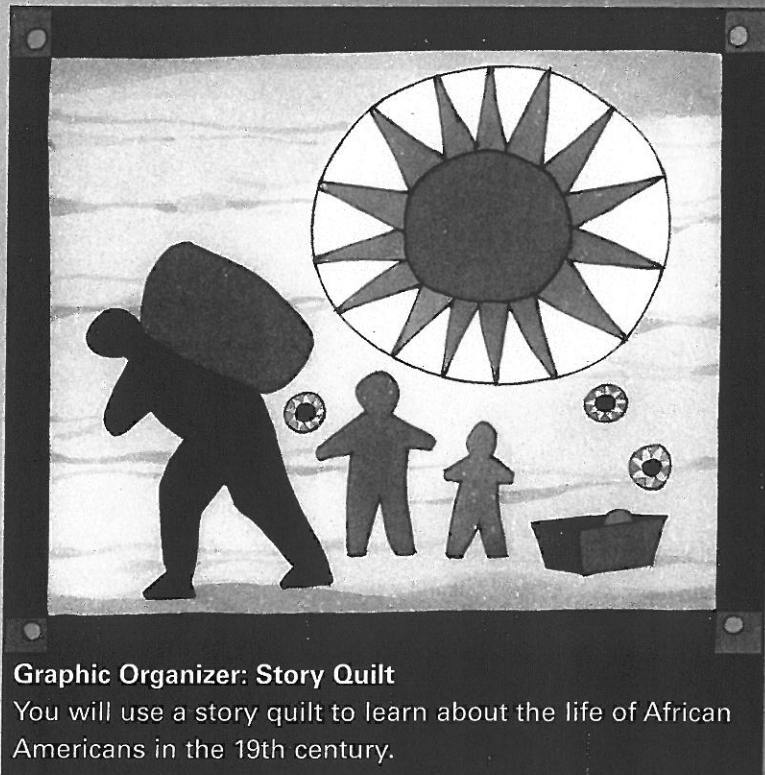
Like many slaves, Harriet Powers grew up hearing Bible stories. In her quilts, Powers used animals and figures from Africa and America to illustrate those stories, along with scenes from her life. Hidden in her images were messages of hope and freedom for slaves.

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.



Graphic Organizer: Story Quilt

You will use a story quilt to learn about the life of African Americans in the 19th century.



Free African Americans usually held low-paying jobs. The barber pictured above is one example.

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.

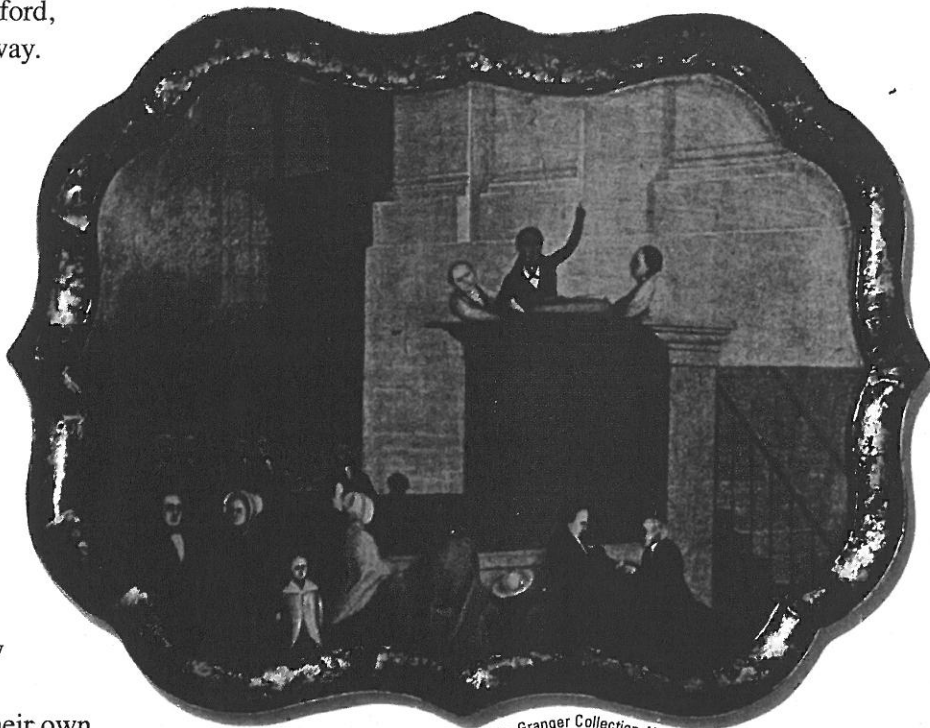
Frederick Douglass discovered how deeply rooted this racism was when he tried to join a church in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and was turned away. Douglass wrote, "I tried all the other churches in New Bedford with the same result."

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.

discrimination unequal treatment based on a person's race, gender, religion, place of birth, or other arbitrary characteristic

segregation the social separation of groups of people, especially by race



The Granger Collection, New York

Lemuel Haynes, shown here preaching from a pulpit, fought at Lexington during the Revolutionary War. He was the first African American minister of a white congregation.

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.

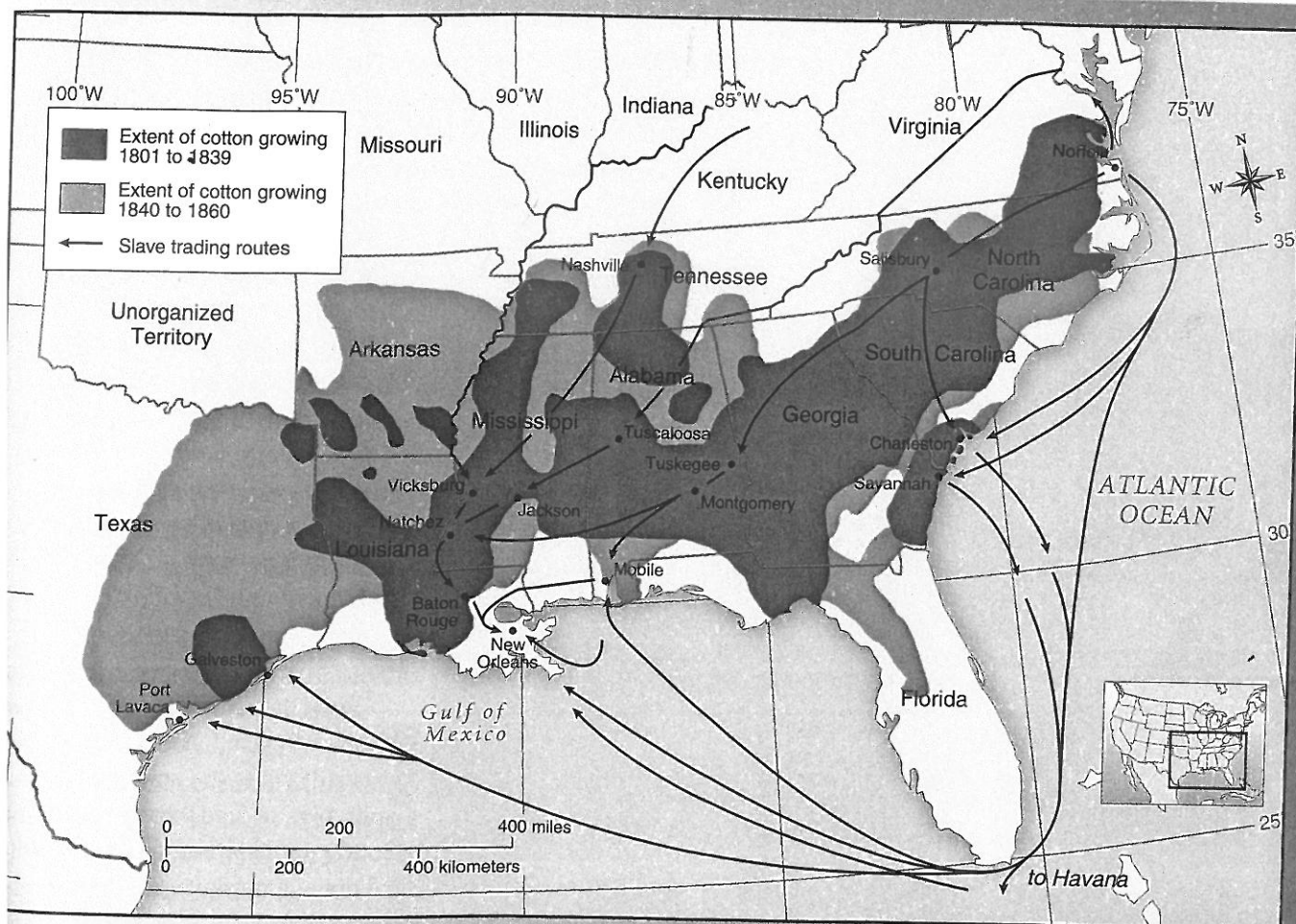
High prices were both good and bad for the men and women trapped in slavery. As prices went up, slaves became more valuable to their owners. This may have encouraged slaveholders to take better care of their workers. At the same time, the rising value of their slaves made slaveholders less willing to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

Cotton was the South's most valuable export. Most southerners knew that their economy depended upon slave labor to grow and harvest this crop.



Geography Challenge

The Slave System, 1801–1860



What does this map show?

How did the size of the area where cotton was grown change between 1801 and 1860?

Did the production of cotton increase or decrease between 1801 and 1860?

What effect do you think this had on the use of slavery?

What invention accounts for the changes you can see on this map?

How might these changes have affected slaves? How might these changes have affected the economy of the South? Were these changes good or bad?

Why do you think so?