

Important moments in African-American history

A Triangular Slave Trade

The “triangle” in this term refers to the shipping routes between Europe, Africa and the Americas. The word “trade” is misleading as it implies something happening voluntarily, which was certainly not the case for the slaves.

Soon after colonies were established in the so-called New World, the European powers needed a cheap labor force to make the colonies profitable. These slaves were found especially in western Africa. The Portuguese and Spanish started the practice and the British soon joined in.



Slaves were either captured directly by European traders but more commonly with the help of middlemen and local chiefs. Tribes would raid each other’s villages and capture their enemies. These people were then sold to European agents who resided in Africa. When a ship arrived, the people were sold again and put on board ships headed to the Americas – South America, the West Indies and North America.

The conditions on the ships were abominable – little food and water, cramped quarters, bad treatment, rampant disease – and the traders took into account that a certain number of people would die during the voyage and be dumped into the ocean. Upon arrival, the survivors were sold for a third time, this time at auctions. In 1700 the price for an African at one of the auctions could be three times more than what the trader paid in Africa. It was a lucrative business.

Since the ship no longer had its human cargo, it could be reloaded with goods from the Americas such as cotton, tobacco and rum. These commodities were brought to Europe and sold for a profit. And once again the trade ships were reloaded with goods like guns, cloth and iron and headed back to Africa. The traders didn’t pay cash for the slaves but instead traded their wares. In 1700 £3 of cloth would buy one future slave. By 1800 the price for buying a person in Africa had increased to about £25, but the traders only got £35 when they sold him or her again in the Americas.

Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, but historians argue about the reasons for this. Was it because public opinion was becoming less favorable to the practice? Did slave resistance and rebellions play a role? Or was it really that the slave trade was becoming less profitable?

Comprehension: After reading this page, draw arrows on the map to show the main direction of the trade. Label the arrows with the names of the goods traded.

Discussion: What role could the slave trade have played in the colonization of Africa by European countries in the 19th century?

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B The Underground Railroad

In the first half of the 19th century up until the Civil War, an organized system run by abolitionists¹ existed to help southern slaves escape to freedom. The network was called the Underground Railroad and was highly secretive to protect all involved. The helpers were supposed to know as few others in the network as possible. ‘Conductors’ helped move escaped ‘passengers’ from one ‘station’ or ‘depot’ to another, which were run by ‘stationmasters’, and ‘ticket agents’ helped to coordinate travel between ‘terminals’ and stations. There is no way of knowing exactly how many slaves successfully escaped with the help of the Railroad, but historical estimates say about 100,000.



Occasionally conductors, such as the escaped slave Harriett Tubman, would go to plantations in the South to help slaves escape and lead them North, but in most cases the slaves had to master the initial escape themselves until they entered a free state. They did this by traveling at night and using common sense and perhaps the stars to guide them. But even then they were not safe and might still be captured by slave hunters and returned to their masters.

So to keep from being captured, they needed to run into friendly strangers who were sympathetic to their endeavor. These could be free Blacks, white abolitionists or a religious group such as the Quakers. However, not every person belonging to one of these groups was willing or able to help a fugitive, and aiding a runaway slave was against the law. Once initial contact was made, though, the slaves could begin traveling along one of the Underground Railroad lines. The ‘terminus’ was often Canada as only here were they safe from being captured by a slave hunter or betrayed by someone tempted by the cash rewards offered for a slave’s return.

Discussion: What other historical events are comparable to the Underground Railroad?

Reading suggestion, novel: *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

C The Emancipation Proclamation

Contrary to popular opinion, the American Civil War (also known as the War Between the States) was not initially fought over the topic of slavery. Rather, the war was begun to restore the union after seven southern states seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. There had long been discordance between the industrial North and the agricultural South as to whether slavery (described by northern politicians as a “peculiar institution”) should be allowed in the new western territories and states. However, when Abraham Lincoln of the anti-slavery Republican Party won the presidential election in 1860, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas decided that their actions must speak louder than words, and so they officially left the United States of America. The Civil War began in April 1861.

¹ People who were in favor of abolishing (doing away with) slavery

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It wasn't until 18 months later that President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, effectively making the abolition of slavery one of the aims of the war. The preliminary proclamation set an ultimatum for the Confederacy: if the Southern states didn't terminate their rebellion and rejoin the Union by January 1, 1863, then the Proclamation would go into effect and slavery would be abolished in the states which had joined the rebellion. That meant slavery would still be legal in northern states as well as in border slave states and Confederate states controlled by the Union army as they were not in rebellion. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued as a means of weakening the Confederacy because the rebellious states relied heavily on slave labor to support their war efforts.

President Lincoln considered the Emancipation Proclamation the crowning achievement of his presidency. He said that if indeed his name were to be remembered, he would want it to be in connection with this act. However, it wasn't until the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified on December 18, 1865, that slavery was officially abolished in the entire United States of America.

Discussion: What difficulties faced these slaves who had suddenly been granted freedom?

D Brown vs. Board of Education

Despite the Thirteenth, Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth Amendments (1870), which abolished slavery, strengthened the legal rights of newly freed slaves and further strengthened their voting rights, respectively, segregation and discrimination were far from eradicated in the United States, especially in the South. State laws were enacted that, for example, prohibited blacks from riding the same buses, going to the same schools or using the same public facilities as whites. These were referred to as Jim Crow Laws.

In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, numerous court cases involving segregation and discrimination against blacks made their way to the Supreme Court of the United States. In each case the Court upheld the legality of these Jim Crow laws.

In 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed and fought for racial equality. Many of their early attempts at influencing legislation to protect African Americans were unsuccessful.



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It wasn't until the 1930s that this organization began making legal headway in abolishing unconstitutional state laws regarding education. They won numerous cases against universities which had tried to exclude black students and paved the way for a landmark ruling.

However, it wasn't until 1954 that this groundbreaking case was won. The case *Brown vs. Board of Education* addressed the issue of state-sponsored segregation in public schools. A young girl in Topeka, Kansas, had been denied the right to attend any of the all-white elementary schools in Topeka. The NAACP lawyer, Thurgood Marshall, argued the case before the Supreme Court. His main argument was that it was impossible for separate schools for blacks and whites to be equal. He also argued, for example, that segregated schools gave black children a feeling of inferiority.

The court's decision read, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

One year later the court devised a plan for how desegregation was to be implemented "with all deliberate speed." This plan was well intentioned and it did achieve some integration, but local and state governments still found ways to disregard it and blatantly disobey.

On a side note, the lawyer who argued this famous case, Thurgood Marshall, became the first black Supreme Court justice when he was appointed to the country's highest court 13 years later by President Johnson.

Research: Find out about "The Little Rock Nine".

Discussion: In the United States how much money a school district has available depends on how much tax money it receives from residents and businesses. How can this lead to schools still being inherently unequal today?

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Group task: Work on the following tasks in expert groups and present your findings to the other groups.

E March on Washington, 1963



1. Find out if this was the first March on Washington.
2. Who organized the march and what were its aims?
3. Explain the circumstances around Martin Luther King's speech at the event.
4. What do you think are the most moving and memorable passages from his speech?
5. What did the march achieve?

F Bloody Sunday



1. Find out where, when and why this tragedy took place in Selma, Alabama.
2. Imagine you were one of the marchers. Give a short first-hand account of the events on the bridge.
3. What did the march achieve?
4. Today the bridge is still named after a white supremacist. Debate whether the name should be changed or not.

G Black Lives Matter



1. Read about the origins of this movement and give a short overview.
2. One of the founders has called it "the civil rights movement of our generation". Do you agree?
3. Is the slogan BLM discriminatory to other ethnic groups/minorities?
4. Other spin-offs have emerged: All Lives Matter, Brown Lives Matter (referring to Hispanics), Blue Lives Matter (referring to the police force). What's your opinion on other groups "borrowing" the slogan?

A Discussion

Due to the slave trade, there were continuous wars on the African continent as tribes took advantage of each other to supply the slave traders with human cargo. As a result, generations of young Africans were shipped to the Americas leaving decimated populations behind. On account of this deep-seated division among the tribes, the Africans were not in a position to fight off colonial powers in the 19th century.

B Discussion

- Aiding Jews and other persecuted minorities in Nazi Germany
- Pacifists seeking refuge in Canada to avoid being drafted for the war in Vietnam
- Refugees being “led” by human traffickers
- Refugees being offered sanctuary in churches
- East Germans seeking to leave for the West and being aided by friends or relatives.

C Discussion

They still faced discrimination because not all whites supported abolition.

They were still treated unfairly and as inferior.

Many slaves had few skills and little or no formal education. This made it difficult for them to find work other than on plantations, sometimes working for their former masters, who kept them impoverished. Due to their lack of education, it was easy for them to be exploited all over again. They were never compensated for their enslavement and so had little or no money to buy land, for example.

Later black churches offered support, but it would take years before they were established and able to assist former slaves.

Southerners had lost the war and their way of life. These changes provided the perfect breeding ground for supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. For many blacks who didn't or couldn't leave the South, a new kind of horror began – segregation and violent prejudice.


D Task

In Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 the governor used the state National Guard to keep black students from going to a high school that he believed should still be all white. It wasn't until President Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock that the students were able to enter Central High School escorted by armed guards. This group of students became known as the “Little Rock Nine”.

D Discussion

If a school is located in a low-income district with little industry, for example, the local government has less money to run its schools. Often African-American and other minorities live in these low-income areas, such as the inner cities, and hence the public education they receive is often of lower quality compared to wealthier areas.

E March on Washington

1. This was not the first March on Washington. A first mass protest march was planned in 1941 but then canceled. In 1957 there were about 25,000 demonstrators in Washington to remember the third anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education.
2. A. Philip Randolph (who had originally organized the 1941 march) and Martin Luther King organized the 1963 march together. The aims were fair treatment and equal opportunities on the job market (Randolph), and to win support for the Civil Rights Act and equality (King).
3. Martin Luther King was scheduled to be the last speaker at the event, which also included musical performances by big names of the time. All of the other speakers wanted to speak earlier, assuming that the reporters wouldn't stay around the whole day. King was given four minutes but ended up talking for 16. Sometime during his speech, King put aside his script and improvised after a gospel star on stage encouraged him to "tell 'em about the dream!" This improvised part of his speech has gone down in history as one of the greatest of all time.
4. See for example the transcript of the speech at:
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom> 
5. The march was successful in that it put pressure on President Kennedy and Congress to move forward on civil rights issues.

F Bloody Sunday

1. In February 1965 a young African-American man was killed by state troopers at a demonstration for voters' rights. Three weeks later a group of about 600 activists for voting rights planned to walk from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery to present their case to the governor and to commemorate the young man's death. After marching peacefully through downtown Selma and halfway across the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River, the activists were confronted with armed state troopers, sheriff's deputies and civilians. After crossing the bridge, the peaceful marchers were then attacked and beaten. Fifty of them were hospitalized.
3. Because TV cameras were at the scene, the confrontation was shown that same evening on national TV. So one "achievement" of Bloody Sunday was that it increased the nation's awareness of racism. Two weeks later the march from Selma to Montgomery did take place, with Martin Luther King leading it. These events also put pressure on Congress and President Johnson so that in August the Voting Rights Act became law.

G Black Lives Matter

1. This grassroots activist group was founded by three African-American women in 2013 after a white police officer, George Zimmerman, was found not guilty for the murder of a young black man, Trayvon Martin. The members of the BLM movement raise awareness of violence and oppression against black communities by individuals or the state through protest marches and demonstrations.
2. Yes, I agree. I enjoy my civil rights as a white person, but there are still millions of people who are denied civil rights in practice even though on paper they reflect the law of the land. The violence that people of color experience proves that discrimination still exists and needs to be countered.
No, I don't agree. I think the focus is limited to the United States even though they say they have chapters around the world. And I think it's still too early to say it's the movement for a whole generation. First we need to see what they achieve.
3. I don't think it's discriminatory, but it does exclude other groups.
Yes, I think it is. It sounds like black lives are more important to them than other lives.
4. I think that good slogans are borrowed and altered all the time. I prefer the slogan "All Lives Matter" because it emphasizes that we are all equally valuable. It's interesting that a similar slogan has been used to refer to the police force because they are the main reason that the movement was founded in the first place. But everyone deserves to be protected and valued.