Charity Fischer

Eleanor Hannah

History 101

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The History of Slavery in the United States

Slavery, while some may see it as a necessary evil for the development of the United States was a controversial and divisive topic often from the time it was practiced in the colonies right up until and after the Civil War. Even now, while some seen the necessity of it and others may accept it as a thing of the past, it still affects American society in social, cultural, and political ways.

When the Americas was first discovered it took several decades before entrepreneurs found a profitable endeavor in the land. There was mainly one that was planted and shipped regularly, this being tobacco which began in 1612 and whose previous popularity already had a wide consumer market in Europe. When the goal was profit, it was easy to see that the longest term and most cost effective solution was to force others to do the work for you and have children of their own which you would also control to your benefit for the duration of their lives. This coupled with the promise of equal rights and citizenship to English settlers, the country grew rapidly, with the slave population rising quicker than the English population. The abuse of these slaves was a natural progression for slavers who feared their slaves run for the sake of freeing themselves

By 1770, about 20% of the American population was made up of slaves and beside those who sought their own freedom there were those who sought freedom from their slavers. Abolitionism was a movement that was a main point of the First Great Awakening beginning in the 1720s and many groups saw it as. Slavery by this time had been accepted as a way of life, including slavery of Native Americans. Slavery based on the skin color was even seen their position in life. In colonial America, Life was often better for slaves in New England and some others of the Northern colonies who were able to live in cities, learn trade skills, and be a part of society while slaves in Southern plantations were oppressed heavily. Black slaves by now had carved their own identities and African-Americans and longed for the deliverance spoken of in Christianity. Their unique music and art bled its way from this time until far into the future which they at this time would not have predicted. Slavery remained a divisive topic across the colonies. Even as they fought for their freedom from England from 1776 to 1781, abolitionist questioned the hypocrisy in the statements made in the declaration of independence; “… all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” There were some slaves who were freed for the sake of fighting in the war and in this way literally fought for their freedom. England promised more rights than the patriots did to slaves who fought for their cause and many took them up on this promise and joined the war. Even Jefferson and Washington lost slaves who sought their freedom. Regardless of who they placed their loyalty on (or I they even did that) they saw this not as an opportunity of freedom from government, but as a way to seize freedom on autonomy, which many did. There were many states in post-Revolution America that abolished slavery mainly in the North.

During America’s expansion West, Free-Soilers became a voice to keeping slavery off new land. During the Industrial revolution, slavery became stricter to ensure slaves would remain such. There were rules published that gave guidelines to slave-owners which included steps such as keeping slaves illiterate and making them feel completely powerless. This indeed kept many slaves in bondage, but it did not stop all of them. Nat Turners Rebellion was a notable one for its effects on the terrified South. After which laws were enacted to keep control and autonomy from those in bondage. During the Industrial Revolution, cotton growing was more profitable than ever and meant that slaves were in higher demand than ever. With the invention of the cotton gin and other innovations that made cloth making easy to learn for the common man, cotton growers still needed slaves to grow them.

When Kansas was being populated, it became a huge issue over whether it would become a free or slave state. “Bleeding Kansas” is the name for the terrible battles fought and massacres committed between Free-Soilers and Pro-Slavers in 1854. It was made clear to people like long-time abolitionist John Brown that slavery would only end after “much bloodshed.” With tensions rising between the Free-Soilers and Pro-Slavers came the election of 1860. Lincoln, a lawyer from Illinois, had debated the issue before with a Pro-Slaver ran for president and narrowly won. The Southern states believed he would remove their ownership of their slaves on which by now they heavily depended. One state after another made statements of secession which brought all out war on the subject of the long debated issue of slavery. With the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 declaring all slaves free, the South’s hopes to become an independent nation was lost. Following the war, the South was economically destroyed. During the reconstruction those who still held control of their governments made any and every attempt to remove power from the blacks.