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The South and the Slavery Controversy, 1793–1860

Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.

Abraham Lincoln, 1865

Prologue: In slavery, the southerners had a bear by the tail: to hang on was embarrassing; to let go would be costly and seemingly dangerous. So situated, they put the best face they could on their "peculiar institution" and freely quoted the Bible to defend an archaic practice that both God and Jesus had tolerated, if not sanctioned. The abolitionists, especially the Garrisonians, harped on the evils of slavery; the white southerners stressed its benefits. The truth lay somewhere between. Certainly most slaveowners were not sadists. Self-interest, if not humanity, was a strong though not infallible deterrent to mayhem. Yet slavery was a grave moral offense, especially in a "free" society, even if the slaves did sometimes preserve their dignity and if some masters were kind. The slaves were seldom beaten to death, and as a rule, families were not needlessly separated. Slaves were discouraged from learning to read and encouraged to embrace the Christian religion, which is often the solace of the oppressed. Despite the manifest immorality of slavery, countless northerners, with a financial stake in slave-grown cotton, deplored the boat-rocking tactics of the abolitionists.

A. The Face of Slavery

1. A Slave Boy Learns a Lesson (c. 1827)

The amazing Frederick Douglass, sired by an unknown white father, was born in Maryland to a slave woman. He learned to read and write; after suffering much cruel usage, he escaped to the North, where, despite mobbings and beatings, he became a leading abolitionist orator and journalist. A commanding figure of a man, he raised black regiments during the Civil War, and in 1889 became U.S. minister to

1Frederick Douglass et al., Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (Hartford, Conn.: Park, 1882), pp. 94–97.
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the republic of Haiti. He showed impartiality in his two marriages: his first wife, he quipped, was the color of his mother and his second (despite a storm of criticism) was that of his father. From the following passage in his autobiography, ascertain why slaveholders were willing to have their slaves know the Bible but not read it.

The frequent hearing of my mistress reading the Bible aloud—for she often read aloud when her husband was absent—awakened my curiosity in respect to this mystery of reading, and roused in me the desire to learn. Up to this time I had known nothing whatever of this wonderful art, and my ignorance and inexperience of what it could do for me, as well as my confidence in my mistress, emboldened me to ask her to teach me to read.

With an unconsciousness and inexperience equal to my own, she readily consented, and in an incredibly short time, by her kind assistance, I had mastered the alphabet and could spell words of three or four letters. My mistress seemed almost as proud of my progress as if I had been her own child, and supposing that her husband would be as well pleased, she made no secret of what she was doing for me. Indeed, she exultingly told him of the aptness of her pupil, and of her intention to persevere in teaching me, as she felt her duty to do, at least to read the Bible.

Master Hugh was astounded beyond measure, and probably for the first time proceeded to unfold to his wife the true philosophy of the slave system, and the peculiar rules necessary in the nature of the case to be observed in the management of human chattels. Of course, he forbade her to give me any further instruction, telling her in the first place that to do so was unlawful, as it was also unsafe. "For," said he, "if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible, it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he'll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself."

2. A Former Slave Exposes Slavery (1850)

Flogged without effect by his master, Douglass was hired out for one year to a notorious "slave breaker," who also professed to be a devout Methodist. Worked almost to death in all kinds of weather, allowed five minutes or less for meals, and brutally whipped about once a week, Douglass admitted that "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me—in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died out; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed to a brute!" In this abolitionist speech in Rochester, New York, Douglass spoke from bitter experience. In what respects were the nonphysical abuses of slaves worse than the physical ones? Where was the system most unjust?