

# Example of research paper on black slave owners

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



## **Abstract**

Whether or not slaves were owned by free African Americans back when slavery was actually an institution in the United States is one of the most perplexing questions in African-American history. While some Americans might not be aware of and might not have suspected this, but truth, which will be discussed in this paper, is that black people in the country indeed purchased and sold other black people as slaves. In fact, there were black slave owners in the United State since 1654 and they continued to own slaves through the Civil War. This paper will answer many perplexing questions of about black slave owners, such as how black slave owners were involved, how many slaves were owned by them and why were they keeping other black people as slaves in the first place. Despite the complexity of these questions, and arguments between historians between historians over the motives of black slave owners, this paper will make use of supporting literature to answer these questions as accurately as possible.

### **A. Topic Question: Did “ free” blacks own black slaves in America?**

- Black slave ownership has been obscured in history.
- The number of slaves owned by black slave owners was not proportionate.

### **Thesis statement: Black slave ownership was a phenomenon as peculiar as the institution of slavery itself.**

II. Main Idea #1: Free blacks did indeed own slaves

### **A. Supporting points:**

- According to the U. S. Census of 1860, merely 1. 4% of whites owned slave at the time.

III. Main Idea #2: Why did blacks own slaves?

### **A. Supporting points:**

- There were many complex motives behind black slave ownership.
- Some Blacks owned slaves for humanitarian reasons, such as as to protect their families by keeping them as slaves.
- Many blacks owned slaves for economic reasons, in order to profit from them.

IV. Main Idea #3: Were black slave owners just like white slave owners?

### **A. Supporting point**

- Black slave owners also bid for slaves on the market like white slave owners.
- Some black slave owners inherited their slaves.
- There were also part free and part slave black families at the time.

IV. Main Idea #4: Were black slave owners different from their black slaves?

- Most free black slave owners were practically illiterate.
- Around 1860, public opinion began to turn against free blacks.
- When slavery came to an end, black slave owners were compensated for each slave they had.

V. Conclusion

- The true picture of the Old South and slavery has never been painted.

**Restate Thesis: It was indeed peculiar that blacks owned black slaves, but they were actively participating in it.**

Robert E. Lee, the brilliant American military strategist, referred to slavery as “ a moral and political evil” in a letter he wrote to his wife in 1856.

Nonetheless, his conclusion was that blacks were morally, physically and socially better off as slaves in America than they were in Africa. The black life and the world of slavery the Old South of the past have been refashioned by supporters of social equality who prevail in the world of academics and mass media. They never knew the world of slavery and their agenda prevents a balanced view of it from coming forth.

Our society is molded by agenda-selective and highly twisted presentations of history. As a result, the fact that black slaves were owned by a considerable number of free “ blacks” is more than often left out. They owned black slaves in numbers that were not even proportionate to their own representation in society. Of course, it is well-known that many persons of color were free throughout the pre-Civil War American history. What is less known is that an important minority of them, though small, owned slaves. Slavery was commonly referred to as a peculiar institution by Southern whites. Although they were referring to the institution of slavery as particular or unique, in the sense of odd, it was actually peculiar that free black people were keeping other blacks as slaves.

In 1860, slaves were owned only by a small number of whites. According to the United States census report for that year before the civil war broke out, almost 27 million whites were living in the U. S. About 8 million of those whites were living in the states where slaves were being held. According to that census, slaves were owned by no more than 380, 000 individuals

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(Bradley, 2011, p. 67). Even if all the slaves were owned by the whites, that would be the aggregate of merely 1.4% of whites in the United States at that time.

There are rare instances in history books that admit that free blacks did indeed own slaves, but they justify it by claiming that the slaves held by them were actually their family members bought from white slaveholders and they could not be legally set free from slavery. At times, this actually was the most, but in most instances, this is a misleading falsehood and records of black slave owners from that period have debunked it. In 1830 alone, 1/4th of the free blacks in South Carolina was slave masters and owned at least 10 or more slaves (Johnson and Roak, 1984, p. 64).

There were many complex motives behind free blacks owning slaves. As mentioned, they were living in a society where free black people were habitually regarded with deep suspicion, so they had bought and kept their own family members as slaves to protect them. However, a significant majority of the blacks owned slaves for the same reasons that the whites did, to profit from them and for their own prestige. For this later group, keeping slaves was a strategy to assimilate in a potentially explosive and mistrustful social atmosphere. Not only did other blacks sometimes despise these black slave owners, the white class even feared them as potential usurpers. Whether they kept slaves for commercial or humanitarian reasons, black slave owners do not easily fit the stereotype of the American slave masters in the antebellum era.

Of course, freedom was a crucial prerequisite for owning slaves. At the time of the 1830 census, almost one out of eight black Americans was a free

person of color, whether by birthright, having been set or, or having purchased his or her freedom. Regardless of the improved legal status of the free people of color, many of the same difficulties that were experienced by slaves were also experienced by them. The laws were different depending on period and region, but generally, free blacks of the antebellum era did not possess the right to bear arms, to testify against whites in a court of law, and to vote. Often, they were also denied credit, dispatched to separate churches, prevented from setting up permanent homes, and were even restricted from having licenses to sell liquor. According to John Hope Franklin, the renowned historian, they lived in a state of “quasi-freedom.” Often, the free blacks and the black slaves did not trust each other very much. It was rare for free blacks to express open sympathy for slaves. Most free blacks were extremely and jealously protective of the few privileges they had procured. Generally, the higher these free blacks rose, the more advantages they hoped to procure and protect. Although racial equality might have been embraced by some free people of color, but most of them exploited those at the bottom by using their intermediate status. In *Slaves Without Masters*, Ira Berlin writes that such tensions not only divided the free blacks from the whites, it also divided them from each other as well. Like white slave owners, black slave owners at times bid for their slaves on the open market. However, many of the free blacks had inherited their slaves from family members or white neighbors rather than seeking to obtain slaves. When slaves were inherited, those slaves usually seemed to have been born as a result of an illegitimate and a secret sexual liaison. For instance, a white slave owner from Cumberland County, Virginia by the

name of Henry Lipscomb willed several slaves, who were perhaps his own illegitimate children, to a black family with the same last name as his. Similarly, in 1821 a free woman of color Priscilla Ivey inherited several slaves from a white man and willed them to her children after keeping them as slaves for 35 years.

As mentioned, free black slave owner were not always keep slaves for humanitarian reasons. Slaves were often obtained by means that only a cruel slave owner like the fictional Simon Legree could be deemed worthy of. Like their white slave owners, black slave owners also advertised if any of their slaves ran away. Black slave owners like Sarah Johnson and Eliza McNellage, both of Charleston, South Carolina had lost their slave servants and either placed an advertisement in a local paper or offer a reward to whoever found and returned them. Some black slave owners mixed more humanitarian motives and personal economic interest together. Often, black slave owners willed their slave family to another family member on the condition that those slaves would be set free upon the death of the said family member. Slaves were also used as collateral for a loan, under the stipulation that the slave be exposed for sale if the outstanding debt was not repaid.

During that time, there were also black families that were part free and part slave, and they encountered legal complications that were practically the equivalent of Byzantine. In many cases, allotting or dispensing justice would be difficult and distressing. For instance, if a slave married a slave, was later freed, then purchased his wife, and freed her too. Regardless of whether the freed slave had children with his wife before or after freeing her, those

children would not be recognized as legal heirs to any of his property because his marriage with his wife would be regarded as a “fiction” in a court of law. They had gotten married while they were still slaves, and slaves at the time were not permitted to make legally binding contracts, such as that of marriage.

They had gotten married while they were still slaves, and slaves at the time were not permitted to make legally binding contracts, such as that of marriage. Urban slave owners were involved in various occupations, for instance, they were blacksmiths, barbers, grocers, livery stable men, mechanics, and even prostitutes. In the large cities of Louisiana and South Carolina, a powerful mulatto caste developed that comprised of lighter-skinned people of color who did their best to separate themselves from the slaves who worked in the plantations, whom they considered low in status. Among them were slave owners who had accumulated significant commercial power, and they would parlay it into educational advancement and social acceptance.

In 1860, there were almost four and a half million blacks in the U. S. Out of these; less than 4 million of them were residing in the southern states where slaves were being held. Out of the blacks living in the South, more than 2.5 million of them were not slaves. Out of these, more than 10,500 were residing in New Orleans. It has also been recorded that slaves were owned by more than 28% of the free in New Orleans, which amounts to more than 3,000 free blacks in the country. Returning to the above figures, in comparison to the 1.4% of whites in the U. S. and the fewer than 4.8% of whites in the South, this 2.8% is indeed impressive. The statistics reveal that



freedom turned blacks into slave masters to quite a disproportionate extent. Mostly, one to five slaves were owned by slave owners of the time, whether black or white. Usually, and unlike the propaganda that many have been led to believe, black and white slave masters ate and worked together, whether in the field, in a house, or in a workshop. There were also fewer slave magnates who were limited to the top 1% and owned at least 50 or more slaves. In 1860, up to or even more than 60 slaves were owned by at least six blacks in Louisiana. A sugar cane plantation owner actually owned a little over 150 slaves, which was the largest number of slaves owned at the time. Another black slave magnate and a sugar planter in Louisiana, with an estate worth over \$260, 000 dollars back in 1860, owned more than 100 slaves (Mills, 1977, p. 128). On the other hand, southern white men had a mean wealth of a little over \$3, 970 that year (Soltow, 1975, p. 85).

Although the unbelievably vast public welfare structures of a later age were not envisioned by the lawmakers of the time, stipulations, such as requiring the testimony of a slave owner to the good character of a slave or evidence of a slave's ability to honestly gain a livelihood in order to be set free, became law so that slaves who could potentially become a burden on the general public could not be set free by their owners. What is intriguing is that instances where free blacks specifically requested to be permitted to be held as slaves just because they were not able to gain a livelihood has been reported in modern accounts of life under slavery at that time (Johnson and Roak, 1984).

Most free blacks were as illiterate as the slaves were at that time. However, some black slave owners along the lower Mississippi obtained more than just

an elementary education and left diaries and letters that provide enthralling glimpses into their lives. In certain states, free blacks were being denied property rights due to the uproar among the slaves in the North to be set free. In 1860, free blacks were formally forbidden by the North Carolina legislature from further buying or hiring slaves for any length of time, or from having slaves bound as apprentices. Public opinion began to turn against free blacks and they were being refused the liberty to leave South Carolina. By the eve of the Civil, it was becoming apparent that even the wealthy mulatto caste had begun to feel under threat.

In the Deep South, the mulatto caste that owned lands was apprehensive about proving that they were still loyal to the cause. In December 1860, some of these black slave owners announced their loyalties by writing a joint letter to the New Orleans Daily Delta newspaper's editor. In this letter, they wrote that, “[t]he free colored population [of Louisiana] love their home, their property, their own slaves [] are ready to shed blood for [Louisiana's] defense. They have no sympathy for abolitionism; no love for the North, but they have plenty for Louisiana” (Davis, 2012, p. 6).

Thus, both commercial black slave owners and their white counterparts were struck with an equal blow by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

However, where black slave owners were compensated for their losses, even those with humanitarian motives profited, as a result, the people who had been protecting their family members received a windfall. For instance, in the District of Columbia, the Proclamation resulted in the abolition of slavery in 1862, Robert Gunnell separate sums of \$300 for eighteen people in all, including his wife, children, and grandchildren (“ Page: popular science”).

It is an odd and peculiar irony of American history that black people had owned slaves, one that has led to a lot of different types of theories, much of it indefensible. For instance, it would be a mistake to think that the entire institution was turned upside down by black slave owners, since only people of color could be owned by even the most powerful black slave owners, not whites. Although in the colonial era it was common for whites to be hired as contracted servants, no one held them as slaves. It is true that white laborers were at times hired by people of color for temporary work.

According to a Virginia statute from 1670, “[n]o negro or Indian, though baptized and enjoying their own freedom, shall be capable of any such purchase of Christians, but yet not debarred from buying any of their own nation” (Hurd, 2009, p. 233). This statute suggests that blacks could only conceive to hold white slaves or servants in the early years of colonial Virginia. The whole social foundation of slavery would have been undermined had such a practice endured, as it was already resting on the oppression of people of color.

Over the years, numerous apologizes have been offered on behalf of the black slave owners and none of them have been convincing enough. In one such argument by historian Luther Porter Jackson, the 1830 census figures are claimed to have been inflated because some of those who appear on the census were not black slave owners, they were just people of colors who had hired slaves. Regardless, it is not sound enough to claim that people who hired these slaves from their owners were not profiting participants in the peculiar institution of slavery.

It has duly been noted that many black slave owners had humanitarian

motives behind holding slaves, but it is also apparent that not all family members treated their slaves with much compassion. It is even more difficult to rationalize whether slave owners had humanitarian motives in the Northern states since there were barely any legal difficulties when it came to setting slaves free. When the story of black slave owners is examined in all its variety, one gets powerful evidence that slavery was merely as complex an institution for the blacks, as they struggled with economic forces and social realities, as it for the whites.

Many of the mind molders of the nation have probably never painted a picture of the Old South as true as was illustrated above. Evolutionary changes were taking place in the structure of the American South, and these unlike what historians have been leading generations of Americans to believe, these changes were far greater. Had they done so, perhaps this economically nonviable and obsolete institution of slavery would have vanished sooner than later, and this would have perhaps spared the nation from great traumas from which it has not really recovered. The fact remains, there were indeed black slave owners during the time when slavery was actually an institution, and they were actively participating in it, regardless of their motives and situations.

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