

Example of the nature and impact of slavery throughout colonial and antebellum am...

[Philosophy](#), [Freedom](#)



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Introduction

The social consequences of slavery in both the colonial and antebellum America were profoundly immense. This essay reviews the nature and impact of slavery throughout the Colonial and Antebellum America in accordance with the information contained in the historical primary sources detailed in Eric Foner’s *Voices of Freedom*. The four primary sources reviewed in this essay include *Colloquy with Colored Ministries*, *Mississippi Black Code*, *Sharecropping Contract* and *the Composite Nation*. All the documents in Foner’s book are documents of considerable length containing words spoken or written by the American men and women enmeshed inside America’s dark history of slavery and colonialism. The sources touch on the theme of freedom in the very words of the well-known American historical figures and ordinary countrymen and women.

Primary Sources and the Consequences Slavery

Starting off with the “ *Colloquy with Colored Ministries*” document of 1865, it is recounted that twenty leaders of the local black American community met

with General William Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton in Savannah. 1 This colloquy is recognized for offering a rare insight into the ideas and inspirations of African-Americans regarding the dawn of freedom from slavery. It was after this meeting that Sherman issued the Special Field Order 15 to set apart Sea Islands and other large portions of land along the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina for the settlement of black slaves. 2 The people also received broken down mules that were of use to the army. This shows that the government recognized the people's need of land after the war. Frazier, a Baptist minister, lobbied for the rights of African-Americans living in Savannah stating that the only way they could be productive and profitable was to through farming.

Having been slaves on plantations owned by white people throughout the colonial period, farming was what the former slaves knew and could do best. This indicates that as much as slavery was detrimental to the lives of the Americans, they still came out of it with advanced farming skills that would then help them build the American economy from agricultural produce. For this reason, the people had to receive land from their government, although this land would be taken away from them. Further, the colloquy reveals Frazier's utterances regarding the war, emphasizing that the reason for the fighting was to first of restore the unity of all states, and then fight for the abolishment of slavery. It is observable that thousands were willing to sacrifice their all to help the government of the United States and uphold the right of President Lincoln to run office and exercise that right over the entire United States. The goal of this war was to return the rebellious states back into union and later on fight for the rights and freedom of the slaves. 3 It is

noticeable that the fight for the freedom of slaves became part of the war because the rebel states highly valued the slaves for their usefulness in their farms.

A review of the ' Mississippi Black Code" primary source of 1865 reveals the history of racism right from the time of Reconstruction of America. In this document, it is evident that racial discrimination was still rampant even after the end of slavery, the government of the country was dominated by whites. Besides, only white people had the right to vote. The document highlights one of the first laws that the new governments passed was the Black Code. The code were meant to control the lives of former slaves by granting them certain rights such as limited access to courts, property ownership and legalized marriage. 4 However, being former slaves, black Americans were not allowed to testify in whites-only cases in courts of law or serve in the state militia or juries. 5 This is an indication that racism between whites and blacks in America started at the times of slavery and colonialism.

The Black Code also contains the declaration that the laborers who did not sign annual labor contracts should be arrested and hired to white land owners. This move was in response to the demands made by the planters that the freed people be directed to work on the plantations. 6 As such, the Black Code was an indication of how the whites in the South would take the advantage of regulating black people in case the federal government gave them the free hand to do this. However, they indiscriminately violated the principles of free labor to such an extent that they discredited the policy on Reconstruction initiated by the northern Republicans. 7 Further analysis of

the Black Code shows that the law was extremely partial in illegalizing the assembly of black people alone or black people and white people who had not lawful business or employment. Any black person violating this code was subject to fine and imprisonment at the court's discretion. As for civil rights, blacks were allowed to intermarry and own property, but they could not testify in court cases with an only white dispute (there had to be black people involved for them to witness). These provisions in the code stand out as evidence of the limitation of the freedom of the freed slaves.

Another important document in Foner's book is the "Sharecropping Contract" of 1866. This document gives a clear picture of the land ownership among the slaves. Only a few former slaves were able to acquire their own farms in the following the Civil War in the South, despite the widespread yearning for land. As a result, most former slaves ended up as sharecroppers who had to work on white-owned farms so that they could get a share of the crop when each season ended. ⁸ This was a sort of compromise between the immense desire of the black people to be independent from the control of the whites, and the desires of the planters to have a disciplined workforce. To some extent, therefore, black people continued to be under the control of the whites.

The sharecropping contract represented thousands of people who originated in the Shelby County of Tennessee, each of whom signed the contract with an X because they were all illiterate. ⁹ Just like other post-war contracts, the contract accorded the planter supervisory rights over his employees. The example of the sharecropping contracts highlighted in this document was

the agreement between Thomas Ross who signed a contract with the Freedmen allowing them to plant and raise crops in his Rosstown Plantation. 10 Later on, sharecropping contracts afforded greater autonomy for the sharecroppers in that families could rent portions of land where they would work with their own directions, and then divide up the crop with the land's owner when the year ended. Following the falling of cotton prices after the Civil War, however, it proved difficult for the workers to benefit from the system of sharecropping contracts.

Fredrick Douglas' " The Composite Nation" written in 1869 is another primary source of importance in describing the nature and impact of the American slavery. This document has information on the Asian-Americans who did not fully share in the process of expanding the rights by the Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction. 11 This is an indication that the Asians faced deeply entrenched prejudice, particularly in the West Coast of America, which was the residence of most Asian immigrants. When Charles Sumner, the radical Republican senator of Massachusetts, made a move to allow the Asians to acquire the status of naturalized citizens, Oregon and California senators vociferously objected this move, leading to defeat of the proposal.

Following the failure of the first attempt to naturalize Asians as American citizens, Fredrick Douglas, another advocate for equal treatment of Asian-Americans, compiled the extraordinary speech known as the " Composite Nation." He delivered this speech in 1869 in Boston where he sternly condemned the discrimination against Asians and called for the granting of

all the rights that were enjoyed by other Americans. 12 This included the right to vote. However, Douglas' all-embracing vision of a country comprised of people from all races and national origins, enjoying similar rights was too radical at that time. 13 This idea later on came to win popularity and greater acceptance during the twentieth century. In closing his remarks on the vision of a " Composite Nation," Douglas asserted that America should be led by the principles of liberty, justice and perfect equality among all humans. This reflected the grandeur and greatness of the future of America.

Conclusion

This work has revised the nature and impact of slavery on colonial and antebellum America against the background of the primary sources found in Eric Foner's *Voices of Freedom* book. The first primary source reviewed in this essay is the " Colloquy with Colored Ministries" in which there is evidence that American land was entirely occupied by white colonialists who enslaved African-Americans during the war. Frazier fought for the rights of blacks to own land. The second document is the " Mississippi Black Code", which epitomized the high level of racial discrimination against African-Americans during and after slavery. The " Sharecropping Contracts" document shows how the scarcity of land and denial of rights to own land forced the slaves to work for white planters so that they could get a share of the crop to cater for their families' needs. Lastly, this discussion reviews the " Composite Nation" speech made by Douglas to petition for equal rights for all Americans including Asian-Americans. Concisely, the primary sources

from Foner's book are a direct reflection of the devastating consequences that slavery had on America.

Bibliography

Foner, Eric. *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2011.