

How long has slavery existed for history essay



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Slavery existed in Africa long before Europeans and Americans started importing them. They were an important part of the economy on the African continent and was a common part of tribal life there. It wasn't until 1636, nearly a century after the Portuguese began bringing slaves to Europe, that they were first imported into the colonies in what is now the United States. By this time the Europeans had extensive networks in Africa which allowed them to barter and buy slaves in much the same way that other goods for export were purchased. Slavery as an institution was perfectly acceptable in African society and flourished due to their participation in the system. Once it grew to be a lucrative industry, black traders in Africa would go on slave-hunting expeditions, often hundreds of miles from the trading ports. They would then bring the people that they enslaved to markets and fairs to sell to the Europeans and Americans.

As slavery became a lucrative business it was vulnerable to corruption and greed. Slaves who were brought to America faced a fate that was much different from their counterparts who remained in Africa. Traditionally in Africa slaves were owned by masters of the same race and were criminals or were taken in the course of tribal wars. By and large they lived in very similar conditions to those of their master, who often worked right alongside them. Slavery in America had a very different face. When slaves were brought here they were not treated as human beings, but rather as animals. They were packed onto crowded and disease ridden ships and once arriving on American shores they often lived in squalid conditions on plantations where they were forced to perform back breaking labor while the plantation

owners sat idle. In this country slaves were seen as inferior solely on the basis of their race.

By 1807, nearly 200 years since the first slaves arrived on American shores, attitudes toward the slave trade had begun to shift. In this year the United States and England outlawed the international slave trade. However this didn't bring an end to slavery altogether and attitudes toward it varied greatly between the industrial north and the south, who's economic interests relied more heavily on slave labor. While illegal trade continued after 1807, a unique phenomena began in America that wasn't seen anywhere else in the slave trading world. In the early 1800's slaveholders began acquiring equal numbers of women and men to replenish their populations "naturally", thus giving rise to the domestic slave trade in the southern states. Despite this change which had the potential to make slavery a more sustainable and economical industry opposition toward slavery was continuing to grow. It took several more decades but slavery finally officially ended with the final ratification of the 13th Amendment in December of 1865.

The Reconstruction Era and the Rise of Jim Crow

While slavery had officially ended, the African American struggle for equality was far from over. Now legally free, former slaves struggled to survive in a culture that still thought of them as second class citizens. After a brief period of federal protection from 1865 to 1877 racism once again became institutionalized with the passage of Jim Crow laws. Jim Crow laws were instituted at the state and federal level starting in 1876 and continuing until 1965. During this long and complicated period of time African Americans saw their rights and hopes for equality stripped away little by little.

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In the years after reconstruction Democrats began to win back elected seats in the South, often through intimidation and violence. As they gained more power they worked to enact laws that would keep blacks from being able to fully participate in society. The first laws passed in the Jim Crow era focused on preventing African Americans from voting and participating in elections. The results of these new restrictions meant that blacks were no longer being represented in local, state, and federal government and fewer blacks were able to get elected to office themselves. With so little political power, laws that further discriminated against them were passed with relative ease. Jim Crow laws intruded into almost every aspect of public life, creating separation between blacks and whites in most public places including restaurants, bathrooms, and government facilities. They also regulated private life in many states, barring interracial marriage, interracial cohabitation, and child custody amongst other things.

After nearly 200 years of slavery racism in America was deep seated. Generations of Americans saw African Americans as inferior and as second class citizens. Following the emancipation of the slaves many felt that society as they knew it was under attack. Enacting the Jim Crow laws began as a reaction to this imagined threat. They are seen by many people now as the result of fear on the part of whites at that time. By giving blacks their freedom they were putting their hold on power in jeopardy. By enacting laws that ultimately prevented blacks from obtaining equal education and attaining positions of power within society whites were able to keep a grasp on their control of the country.

Jim Crow laws may have dictated how whites and blacks interacted for almost a century but they were not without opposition. One of the most famous challenges to these laws came from a man named Homer Plessy. In collaboration with an anti-Jim Crow group he sought to challenge the law by attempting to sit in a whites only train car leaving New Orleans. He was asked to leave the car but refused and was subsequently arrested. This resulted in a court case (Plessy v. Ferguson) challenging the constitutionality of separate but equal policies. It went all the way to the supreme court where Plessy and his cohorts lost their case. Despite challenges such as Plessy v. Ferguson Jim Crow laws would remain in effect until 1965 when the Civil Rights Movement finally brought about the most dramatic stride in attaining equal status for African Americans with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act in 1965.

The End of Segregation and the Civil Rights Era

Throughout the Jim Crow era there was pressure to achieve greater equality between blacks and whites mainly through litigation. This push for desegregation began to heighten in the mid 1950's when civil rights activists began to employ more direct forms of protest. Mass protests, civil disobedience, and continued legal challenges to segregation laws helped to propel the United States toward a new era of equality.

There were many factors that led to the start of the civil rights movement starting in the early 1900's. An important contributing factor was the migration of African Americans from rural areas in the south to urban and industrial centers throughout the country. This migration was spurred primarily by higher wage jobs and the promise of better social conditions

including the right to vote. In the north blacks were able to attain more prominent positions in the community, positions which offered them opportunities to advance the civil rights cause in many areas of the country. Even African Americans in the South began to move to urban centers where they were better able to organize against segregation.

By the mid 1950's significant changes were beginning to come about. Plessy v. Ferguson was overturned, along with another case regarding segregation in schools. Perhaps the most famous ruling of the Civil Rights Era was Brown v. Board of Education. This ruling not only brought about the desegregation of schools but also spurred the end of segregation as an institution. As the 1960's were ushered in widespread protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience brought about massive changes. Schools from elementary to universities were integrated, voting rights were restored, and discrimination in housing, employment, and other institutions was outlawed.

Though the gains made were significant, they did not come without opposition, struggle, and setbacks. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 were major blows, however the groundwork they helped to lay ultimately led to the continued success of the movement. In addition to these losses civil rights activists and the African American population as a whole continued to suffer injustices at the hand of whites in power. From 1963 through 1970 there was a rash of race riots throughout the country. African Americans often encountered fierce opposition and racism from politicians, police, and an increasing number of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Despite this opposition the cause for

equality and racial justice forged ahead continuing to make progress right up until the present.