

Race relations in the early republic

[History](#)



Module History and Political Science: Race Relations in the Early Republic

How did race relations in the United States change between 1785 and 1817 as slavery expanded along with white Americans' movement into new western territories? Most of the Revolutionary leaders living in America between 1785 and 1817 tried to present themselves as people who had anti-slavery attitudes. However, this was not true in most cases. The urgency of the revolutionary war allowed for the subject of slavery to be stalled. However, as soon as the war was won, the issue of slavery again became a concern of the society. Egalitarianism, which is the belief in the fact that all men are equal, gained a lot of support in mainstream Colonist American society during the revolutionary war. When fighting the British, wealthy military men had esteemed and fought alongside the soldiers of other races in the attempt to win liberty for the American colonies. When the revolutionary war was won, the colonists insisted that any person who was ready to work hard would have a fair chance of living a good life in the new nation. Moreover, even though this was the position assumed by the young American government, it was not supported by actual facts. In truth, Black Americans and Native Americans were still perceived as slaves and savages. Some esteemed American statesmen even considered Native Americans to be more human than African Americans, as evidenced by Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Marquis de Chastellux, where the Jefferson stated that "North American Indians had an intelligence that could be compared with that of Whites if it was sufficiently developed, but that the Black man had not even come close to achieving that state" (Hewitt and Lawson 251). Even though Jefferson claimed to detest the practice of slavery, his words still show that he felt that Black people were inferior to all other races and could not be

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incorporated into the mainstream society for a long time to come. Jefferson even went so far as to state that American Indians were more ‘mentally advanced’ than Black Americans. Jefferson was not alone in propagating these beliefs. Even in 1800, there were many scientists with suppositions about the differences between the mental capacities of the different races on the earth. This only intensified the American society’s belief that slavery, though reprehensible in some way, was an important system that served a purpose in the society. The writings of Meriwether Lewis, who was appointed by President Thomas Jefferson to lead a historical expedition, show that American Indian tribes also did not fare well under the rule of the colonists. Lewis’ journal shows that the government patronized American Indian tribes and coerced them into signing away their lands. In one entry, Lewis states, “the American Indian tribes would only decimate each other if they were given guns” (Hewitt and Lawson 252). Lewis often made speeches and supplied fake certificates to American Indian chieftains to solicit their support in using their land. Indeed, it could be said that the only fault of the American Indians was to be too trusting. It would seem that American Indians escaped the fate of Black slaves in America only to be decimated in large numbers with the support of the government. It is a well known fact that numerous tribes were wiped out from diseases brought by the colonists, as well as through wars for their land. Black slaves, however, survived this fate for the most part, but lived lives that were unbearable. There were numerous resistance attempts staged by slaves in the 1800s. One of the most famous was started by a slave named Gabriel, who was the property of some Thomas Henry Prosser. Gabriel’s brother, Solomon, would later testify that Gabriel’s only objective was “to attack the institution of slavery in all

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the states where it was practiced and nothing more” (Hewitt and Lawson 253). Solomon would be executed soon after giving his testimony. However, the desperation of the freed slaves would see free Black Americans make serious efforts to live in places where they could truly be regarded as free men. Slavery between 1785 and 1817 actually seems to have increased to include all American social groups. Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States, posted an advertisement calling for the apprehension of a slave of his. In his advertisement, he stated that “... the slave is likely to flee to Detroit, via Ohio and Kentucky. Anyone who apprehends him will receive a reward from me” (Hewitt and Lawson 254). This shows that slavery was no longer even frowned upon in the highest echelons of society. This whole sale acceptance of the degradation and mistreatment of the members of one race resulted in free Blacks deciding to establish a free country that would be run by freed slaves in Africa. The Northern city, Philadelphia, had the biggest number of freed slaves. James Forten, one of the leaders of this group, proposed that a nation in Western Africa should be established to provide a haven for free Black Americans. He stated in his speech to the freed men of Philadelphia, “ the final eradication of slavery in America will take place under the protection and guidance of an impartial God (Hewitt and Lawson 257). However, he believed that it was imperative to start plans for free Black Americans to live as a redeemed and respectable nation. Work Cited Hewitt, Nancy, and Steven Lawson. *Exploring American Histories: A Brief Survey with Sources, Combined Volume*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013. Print.