

Slavery and the Making of America

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Review

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Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E. *Slavery and the Making of America*. Oxford University Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 019517903X

Steal away

Slavery's American journey

In the summer of 1791, French aristocrat Frantois RenΘ de Chateaubriand arrived at the Chesapeake Bay, eagerly anticipating touring the young American republic. But his initial impressions were dashed as he approached a farm: [A] little African girl . . . practically naked and singularly beautiful, opened the gate to us like a young Night. It was a slave who welcomed me to the soil of liberty. Slavery was like that in America--complex, contradictory, and color bound.

Publishers as a matter of course offer a plethora of African-American-related books during Black History Month, yet few will have the riveting impact of **Slavery and The Making of America**, the companion book to the public television series that premiered during February 2005. Chronicling the period 1453-1896, with brief commentaries on relevant 20th century events, it begins with an overview of slavery scholarship and interpretation on pages eight through ten supplemented by a profound observation on page 11: The history of slavery is central to the history of the United States, and so this is also a story about the values and events that shaped American society.

Slavery is as old as civilization itself, dating to at least 2900 BCE in Mesopotamia, the earliest known written slave records. It was a system based on avarice, violence, power, and dehumanization. The first chapter, The African Roots of Colonial America, not only examines European culpability and moral indifference during the growth and expansion of the African slave trade and the Black Diaspora but that of native Africans. Although it makes for heartbreaking and chilling reading, slavery's distinctive development and racist implications in

British North America, which received about six percent of these involuntary colonists of the transatlantic slave trade, contributed to the establishment of American democracy. Some scholars believe as many as 15 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean during the Middle Passage in the largest forced intercontinental migration in human history; of these, approximately 3 million died in transit. The peak of the Atlantic slave trade occurred in the 18th century when approximately 100,000 slaves arrived annually. Slaves became the linchpins of the new global economy, as colonialism and capitalism needed them to make sugar, cotton, tobacco, and other cash crops and industries profitable in the Americas.

Chapter 2, *Slavery: From the Revolution to the Cotton Kingdom*, is perhaps history not readily familiar to a majority of its readers; some may cringe at the rhetorical hypocrisy of the American Revolution's demands for liberty while tolerating black hereditary bondage. Whites did not intend the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence to include blacks in the blessings of the new American democracy. Nevertheless, before and long after the outbreak of hostilities slaves and free blacks, exhibiting an increasingly audacious desire for freedom, sought inclusion as equals. Ironically, it was the establishment of so-called egalitarian republics in the Western Hemisphere that contributed to slavery's revitalization and greatest expansion by the first half of the 19th century. The next chapter, Chapter 3, *Westward Expansion, Antislavery, and Resistance*, continues the authors' meticulous sifting of facts in new perspectives, especially concerning public and private efforts to convince or compel free blacks to emigrate to Africa under the auspices of colonization societies. The activities of black sea captain Paul Cuffe, who favored colonization, and free blacks who preferred to remain in America, are recounted on pages 87-91; for better or worse, the latter school of thought prevailed. This chapter graphically quotes white travelers Edward Abdy and George Featherstonhaugh on involuntary servitude's exploitative aspect as the colonial south uniquely evolved into a Cotton Kingdom South that vociferously defended its Peculiar Institution.

In Chapter 4, *Troublesome Property: The Many Forms of Slave Resistance*, black resistance individually and collectively, aggressively and passively, are detailed. Legendary runaways and freedom fighters such as Henry Box' Brown, Ellen Craft, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman appear as expected but so too do lesser-known heroes including Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima, a West African Muslim who regained his freedom in 1829 after 40 years of enslavement. On pages 132-141, the alliance of black and white abolitionists and the covert

assistance of black northerners to resolute fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad are emphasized. Slavery's final years are detailed in the aptly titled Chapter 5, *A Hard-Won Freedom: From Civil War Contraband to Emancipation*. African Americans had more at stake in the war's outcome than any other ethnic group. The authors follow recent scholarship by focusing on what blacks did, said, and accomplished during the war rather than as passive spectators waiting for the Union Army and Abraham Lincoln to liberate them; in point of fact, he is characterized as the master of symbolic expression on page 205.

The sixth and last chapter, *Creating Freedom During and After the War*, which continues coverage of the Civil War, is among its best yet most disheartening. Amongst the republic's most loyal populace in winning the victory and destroying slavery, black folk assumed they had proven the falseness of racism as they embarked on a new future of freedom. But the difficulties of life in the Reconstruction South nearly crushed the freedpeople's spirit during those tumultuous first years of freedom as vengeful ex-Confederates tried to restore slavery in all but name. African Americans fiercely resisted attempts to convert them into a permanent caste of second-class disenfranchised peons, fighting back with words and bullets while asserting their constitutional right to live in America in peace and equality. At the time, they seemingly waged bold but foredoomed battles as a racial minority oppressed by a rabid, racially prejudiced majority unwilling to accept them as political equals. Reverend Dr. J.W. Horton, an elected member of the state constitutional convention, was among several blacks shot dead by an armed white mob of civilians and policemen during the 1866 New Orleans Riot on pages 218-219. Perhaps Reverend Horton was an ancestor of the authors; doubtless many African Americans have similar tales of their forebears' struggles and setbacks but who nonetheless bequeathed a praiseworthy heritage, albeit a bloodstained one.

This edifying addition to African-American historiography offers a procession of noteworthy personages: Olaudah Equiano, author of one of the first autobiographical narratives published in England by an African-born slave; Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley, a West African slave girl who eventually became mistress of her own Florida plantation and whose grandson was elected to the state senate during Reconstruction; South Carolina's Robert Smalls, Civil War naval hero and postwar congressman, and others. Refreshingly, it also quotes from almost forgotten contemporary sources such as antislavery newspaper *The Principia* and the *Weekly Anglo-African Magazine*, a black newspaper; likewise, black Union regiments such as the Louisiana Native Guard are mentioned, not

just the 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry made famous by the 1989 motion picture *Glory*. It compares favorably to similar new classics: Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (1998), tracing the evolution of black culture through the Revolution, and, Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith, *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery* (1998), a somewhat polemical interpretation.

An absorbing and indexed narrative totaling 260 pages of six chapters averaging 35 pages and accompanied by endnotes, a concise chronology, sources for further reading, and web sites, this highly recommended study is appropriate for scholars and the general public and as a supplementary textbook for high school and university-level courses on black, Southern or women's studies. For subsequent editions, a complete listing of each chapter's sidebars of excerpts from select documents (pages 22-23, 52-53, 73, 94, 150, 165, 208, 228), perhaps in an expanded table of contents, would enhance its utility, particularly for teachers.

Profusely illustrated with maps and poignant photographs, stimulatingly and authoritatively written, the Professors Horton have done well in weaving this historical tapestry of angst, strength, and triumph. The title fittingly says it all: Slavery made America.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., an associate professor and research archivist at the University of Virginia's Special Collections Department, is the author of three books including Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia (University of Virginia Press, 1995). He most recently contributed to Virginia's Civil War (2005), and was a historical advisor for the 2003 motion picture Gods & Generals.