The Horror of Slavery

Before 1865, millions of men, women, and children were enslaved in the United States.

There are things in history that are so shameful, just thinking about them can be difficult. But it’s important, because thinking about them is a way to prevent them from happening again.

Slavery is one of those things. The United States was founded on principles of equality and freedom—something called inalienable rights. These are rights that belong to every human being, regardless of who they are or where they are from. But for nearly a century, these rights were not extended to every American.

In the 1800s, millions of black people were enslaved in the South. They were forced to live their entire lives laboring for “masters” who bought and sold them as if they were property. Harvesting crops, cooking, and cleaning were among the jobs these men, women, and children were forced to do. Most slaves worked on plantations, large farms that grew crops such as cotton and corn. Slaves received no payment for their work while many plantation owners amassed considerable wealth.

Not all Americans supported slavery, however. It was a divisive issue and one of the main causes of the Civil War. Slavery was finally ended in 1865 after the war.

Now imagine if you had been enslaved. What might your life have been like? Read on to find out.

Your Life as a Slave

You were born into slavery, but you never knew your parents. You were sold and separated from them when you were young. (If you feel isolated and dependent, slaveholders believe, you will be less likely to run away or rebel.) At the age of 3, you were forced to join a “trash gang,” a group of children who sweep, carry water to the field hands, pick weeds, and tend farm animals. You were lucky to have survived to that age. Because slaves are seldom given nutritious food, clean water, or medical care, many—especially infants and young children—die from preventable diseases.

Around the time you turned 11, you became a field hand. Now you do backbreaking work in the fields from dawn to dusk. That you are still young makes no difference; even children and the elderly must work these grueling hours. You live in a small, leaky stick house with a dirt floor that you share with 10 others. You do not have a bed or a pillow. In the summer, it is stiflingly hot. In winter, it is painfully cold.

You will never be allowed to vote or go to school or learn how to read and write. You cannot go anywhere without a written pass. You must do as you are told or you will be punished, and you can be punished for the slightest infraction. If your hoe breaks, if you appear sad about your plight, or if you simply look at someone the wrong way, it could mean trouble for you. Whipping is a common punishment. It is not illegal to physically abuse a slave; in fact, you have no rights under the law at all. No matter what is done to you, you cannot call the police or take someone to court.

Maybe you long to run away. But do you know how dangerous that is? If you are caught, you could be beaten or killed. Even if you make it north to the states that do not practice slavery, you could still be caught and sent home.

A few of you will try.

Even fewer will make it.●
This famous photograph shows a man named Gordon who, during the Civil War, escaped enslavement on a plantation in Mississippi by rubbing himself with onions to throw off the bloodhounds sent to track him. He was taken in by the Union Army. This photograph, showing the scars Gordon carried from being whipped on the plantation, was first circulated in 1863.

"The overseer had written his character on the living parchment of most of their backs."

—former slave Frederick Douglass, referring to fellow slaves