

The Cost of Freedom

Jennifer Stoll, author

pp. 61-68.

Oshkosh Scholar, Volume I, April 2006

Copyright © 2006 University of Wisconsin Board of Regents

All rights reserved. No part of this journal may be reproduced in any form without the permission of University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Office of Grants and Faculty Development
800 Algoma Blvd.
Oshkosh, WI 54901
(920) 424-3215
www.uwosh.edu/grants

The Cost of Freedom

Jennifer Stoll, author

Dr. Michelle Kuhl, History, faculty adviser

Abstract:

Freedom came to enslaved African Americans at a high cost. The struggle of African Americans' fight for freedom started before the Civil War and trudged on. Slaves would experience limited freedoms, more prejudices, and farther hardships. Freedom with its limited advantages, proved to be a victory for the generations of those enslaved. Once attained, many former slaves were unsure of what to do with their newly acquired free status. The struggle to attain freedom came with hardships and setbacks, but freedom triumphed.

Introduction

“Long is the way, And hard, that out of hell leads up to light.”

-John Milton, English poet

“...this Day I can Adress you thank god as a free man I had a little truble in giting away But as the lord led the Children of Isrel to the land of Canon So he led me to a land Whare freedom Will rain in spite of earth and hell”

-John Brown, Former Slave (Robinson, 138)

The cost of freedom cannot be summed up nor calculated by any of today's standards. To understand freedom, one must step back into the thousands of lives lost by those who could not taste the sweet air of freedom. A freedom denied generations of enslaved African Americans, who, once discovered their freedom, found freedom to be limited, but cherished. The road leading to freedom began when the first African slaves arrived in North America in the early 1600's with the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. Two hundred years later, the Civil War proved to be one of the most pivotal fights for freedom and the abolishing of slavery known. Slavery and Southern society changed dramatically with the beginning of the war. Because of the Civil War, primarily fought in Virginia, a dramatic shift in plantation life caused slaves to feel a sense of urgency for freedom. A freedom denied them several hundred years after thousands of deaths by fatigue, malnutrition, and abuse.

The antebellum South, with its elite plantation society, functioned primarily on a slave economy. Respected historical scholar William A. Link writes, “Slavery infused the commonwealth's social and political institutions, constitutional system, and methods of agriculture, commerce and industry” (Link, 29). Link's statement illustrates how engrained slavery transmitted into all aspects of Southern society. Slavery revealed itself in every aspect of the day-to-day lives of most Southerners. Virginia, like many of the other Southern states, morphed into a slavery society. Ira Berlin, a renowned historian, writes, “...slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master-slave relationship provided a model for all social relations: husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee, teacher and student.” (Berlin, 8) Berlin's statement further illustrates the overarching theme of slavery throughout soci-

ety. All aspects of society revolved around the idea of enslavement. Dominance became expected in all relationships and all who lived in the South held a strategic place in society, below the white men.

In Virginia alone, during the antebellum period, the population of the South soared. Over a million whites, sixty-thousand free blacks, and nearly half a million slaves called Virginia home in 1860 (Jordan, 8). According to these numbers, for every two free white people, there worked one enslaved person. Prior to the Civil War, the number of white individuals massively outweighed that of the enslaved African population. However, once the war commenced, many of the men left to fight in the war. Because of this, there arose greater opportunity for the enslaved population to gain the upper hand once the men watching over them went to fight the war.

Prior to the Civil War, the white male population on plantations served as the police force throughout the South. Slave patrols convened to watch for runaway slaves and enforce the curfews and ordinances established by the white male population. After 1861, much of the male population enlisted to fight in the current war. With the absence of the white masters, slaves found more opportunities to escape the bondage of slavery and run to freedom.

However, not in all cases did opportunity of freedom arise. Plantation owners kept their slaves busy so incidences of runaway slaves would not multiply. Virginia ex-slave William I. Johnson, Jr. attests to the rigors of plantation life by citing, "We were worked hard. They kept us busy" (Jordan, 27). William Johnson's quote illustrates the police action instituted on plantations following the beginning of the Civil War. A police action kept slaves working long hours to ensure that attempts at freedom would not be made because slave insurrection came to be feared by most of the Southern population. Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., author of *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*, writes, "The everyday lives of slaves in wartime Virginia at first seemed unchanged. They labored on, hopeful yet alert, while their masters anxiously watched for any changes in their demeanor" (Jordan, 27). Jordan states that early on, slaveholders kept a close watch on their slaves because insurrection seemed eminent by the slaves. Jordan's quote also illustrates that slaves understood the meaning of the war. Having the war so close to home gave the slaves a sense of hope and jubilation, although life on the plantation deteriorated rapidly. The sense of freedom felt closer every day the war waged on.

Within the first nine months of war, changes revealed themselves in the winter months on the plantations. As the war progressed, clothing and shoes became more of a sacred commodity. Conditions deteriorated exponentially; slaves could be seen nearly naked working in the fields. Most slaves went without the basic necessities of clothes and shoes. The health of the slaves often suffered as a result of malnutrition. Frostbite became extremely common in terms of occurrence because shoes were not provided to the slaves. Slaves could commonly be seen with mangled, scared and disfigured feet and lower extremities because protection was not provided them. Because of this, frostbite took its toll. Along with the scarcity of clothes came the scarcity of food and medicine as well. In their narratives, slaves frequently recall being hungry and weary of rest (Jordan, 28-30).

As the war raged on, slaves relied more heavily on their spirituality to shepherd them and superannuate on. Slaves sang spiritual songs as a means of fostering

religious and devotional unity and guidance. A popular song of Caroline County slaves reads:

Bending knees a-aching
Body racked with pain
I wished I was a child of God
I'd get home by and by (Allen, 31)

In this song, slaves sang about the backbreaking work they endured. In the final two lines of this stanza, slaves wish to be taken away by God so they will be rid of the burden of slavery. To them, death seemed like a reward and a resting because death alleviated the worldly burden of slavery. Death of any kind appealed more to slaves than a life without freedom. Austin Steward, a Virginia slave, remembered working days beginning at sun up, eating a piece of bread, working until noon, receiving another meager meal, then working until darkness (Jordan, 33). Mister Steward's account proved to be common throughout Virginia plantation society and the South. Slaves had the most basic of necessities denied them, and looked to death as their only comfort because freedom appeared utterly unattainable.

Plantations served several purposes throughout the war. Jordan writes, "Plantations were a combination of labor camps, radical indoctrination barracks, and Christianization bureaus" (Jordan, 33). This quote illustrates the versatility adopted by nineteenth century plantations. They not only served to house labor forces, but also served to indoctrinate slave society. By indoctrinating slave society, the status quo remained intact. When slaves began to question the status quo, insurrections and unrest would break out causing a shift in the balance of plantation power. White southerners feared what would become of their society once the slaves seized their liberty. The winds of change began to blow through the South as the North began to gain the upper hand as well as the accumulation of volunteers.

Many slaves seized the opportunity to gain their liberty by seeking refuge with the nearby Union army encampments. As the Union army grew closer, especially in Virginia, more slaves attempted to flee to the Union army for safety and guidance. Overseers developed six cardinal rules for plantations to quell runaway slaves during the war. Slaves had more of their rights infringed because plantation owners feared the instability that would ensue once their working class gained more freedoms. The rules set up by plantation owners included things such as: no leaving on personal business without a pass, no selling anything without a pass, fighting is forbidden, slaves must report to their overseers the activities of those encountered, no insulting language to one another, and everyone working on the plantation answered to the overseer and should be dressed in their finest come Sunday (Jordan, 36). Overseers set up rules such as these to further control the actions of the slaves. Because of this, they felt the heavy hand of slavery come down upon them once again. The only answer came in the form of drastic actions toward freedom.

Still, the number of runaway slaves began to soar. Armstead Robinson, a slavery scholar, asserts that since the beginning of the war, large numbers of runaway slaves sought refuge in the Union army camps. "Determined to claim the[ir] freedom," runaway slaves "believed the Union armies [had] brought them" (Robinson, 138). Slaves such as John Brown sought the Union army because the Northern encampments were seen as a gateway to a long desired freedom. In a letter to his wife, Brown writes:

My Dear Wife it is with grate joy I take to let you know Whare I am i am in Safety in the 14th Regiment of Brooklyn this Day I can Adress you thank god as a free man I had a little truble in giting away But as the lord led the Children of Isrel to the land of Canon So he led me to a land Whare freedom Will rain in spite of earth and hell Dear you must make your Self content i am free from al the Slavers Lash...(Berlin, 29-37).

Brown explains to his wife how he attained his freedom and the rapture he felt once he did. The amount of joy and celebration cannot be measured, only felt by those who read the words of those who gained their much desired freedom. The hell of slavery had been escaped and the vision of freedom could now be touched.

While the main focus on the plantation began to shift in the early years of the war, slaves played a pivotal role in the overthrow and escape from slavery. Once slaves began running to the North, the undermining of the Confederacy began. Union army officials encouraged slave rebellions and promised the Confederate army that the Union army would aid slave insurrections (Berlin, 141). These slave insurrections would again throw off the balance of power on plantations. When the balance of power began to shift, slaves gained the upper hand and freedom became more attainable. Once this happened, slaves ran away to fight for the Union army.

African American enlistment played a pivotal role in the Civil War. At first, former slaves dug ditches and acted as cooks and spies for the Union army. Black Union soldiers would go between enemy lines carrying messages and clarifying the location of the Rebel army. African Americans could travel easily between enemy lines because the Confederates believed that the African Americans belonged to someone else. Former slaves also learned a few tricks of bribery to ensure their safety and freedom. As a general rule, black spies would keep chewing tobacco on their person to offer it to a suspicious Confederate. Confederate soldiers, once pacified with chewing tobacco, cared less about the states of the African Americans and cared more for the luxury of chewing tobacco. African American soldiers took full advantage of the deprivation of the Confederate army. African Americans, however, remained suspicious of all whites because they felt that any moment they would be returned back into the shackles of slavery. Former slaves felt that trust could never fully be given to any whites. For hundreds of years, the wrong comment at the wrong time would bring the wrath of the lash (Berlin, 143).

Once enlisted in the Union army, slaves still felt racial discrimination based on their skin color. Along with receiving jobs, such as cooking and manual labor, similar to slavery, former slaves felt the harsh reality once again. Freedom did not guarantee joy, jubilation, and peace. Instead, freedom proved to be more uncertain than enslavement. African Americans did not expect to be treated as they had in enslavement. Beatings, whippings, and abuse still could be seen on the backs of slaves. Instead of a master inflicting their cruelty, it came from their liberators. The Union army would beat the former slaves as a form of punishment and discrimination. Racial prejudices found themselves in the nicknames and terms used to refer to the African Americans because not all of those fighting for the Union believed in the emancipation of African Americans (Jordan, 142). Because not all agreed with the idea that African Americans should be granted their freedom, freedom was limited by the Northern army.

Slaves in the Southern states found some solace when then President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Ira Berlin writes, in *Free at Last*, “The promise of freedom announced by the Emancipation Proclamation was a beacon that reached deep into the Confederacy. Outposts controlled by Union forces, like Fort Monroe in southeastern Virginia, drew fugitive slaves from hundreds of miles away” (Berlin, 147). The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Lincoln to free slaves in the rebellious states, recognized that the enslaved persons could fight for the Union army. Captain Charles Wilder recruited slaves in the Fort Monroe army to bolster the Union army numbers while in Virginia. Once informed of the opportunities the Union Army had to offer, fugitive slaves from miles around came to fight for the cause of freedom. When questioned, Captain Wilder said that more than 10,000 new recruits had come under his control (Berlin, 107). New recruits of this sort could be seen whenever the Union army marched into Southern territory. Massive numbers of former slaves would seek refuge in the arms of the Union army to protect them from the perils and atrocities of hundreds of years of oppression. Once word got out that the Union army was within a few miles, slaves could be seen running to seek the shelter of their liberators.

Although the Union army possessed prejudices, this phenomenon could be found throughout the United States. Although many Americas did not agree with slavery or owned slaves, the vast majority of people living during this period felt slavery offered a caste system for the United States (Jordan, 152-154). With this caste system came what many felt striated the working population giving a hierarchy for the lower classes. In giving a hierarchy for the lower classes, social status became easily identifiable. Slavery allowed a social security for those who felt the need for a caste system. Slaves and free blacks rested on the bottom of the social hierarchy, followed by poor whites who aspired to be one of the plantation elite, then middle class whites, followed by slave owning or rich elites. Many of the aspirations held by the poor whites cemented the disjointed system of class. Many of the poor whites aspired to or envied the life of the plantation owning upper crust of the South. These aspirations explain why the Confederacy had such high enlistment rates. Poor Southern whites felt that fighting and winning the war seemed to be the only method of class security. As long as the African American class remained on the bottom of the social scale, one's place in society remained clear at all times.

Slaves did not have to run away in all cases. Several slave accounts speak of abandonment. Many slave holders abandoned their slaves in order to find refuge for themselves from enemy camps. A Union soldier traveling through New Orleans accounts that the families vacated the premises and left the slaves to fend for themselves. The same soldier also recalls the miserable condition and starvation that befell the slaves left to fend for themselves. The soldier recounts the horrid condition in which the slave quarters appeared upon his arrival. The soldier writes, “The condition of the Negro cabins, no floors, no chimneys, built of pickets without regard to Comfort or Convenience, and their venerable appearance Confirms the Stories of cruelty related by the old Negroes...”(Berlin, 111). Union soldiers such as this one could not believe the sights they saw upon their arrival to the Southern plantations. Conditions such as these appeared all over the Southern countryside. Real-life horror stories told by Negroes cemented themselves once the Union soldiers saw for themselves the truth behind the agony.

As the end of the war drew closer, the refuted freedom of the enslaved population could no longer be denied. In a last-ditch effort to save the Confederacy, the Rebel army began offering freedom to the families of slaves who enlisted with the Rebel army. The Confederate army forced other African Americans to fight for the Rebel army. Near the end of the war, enlistments in the Confederacy began to drop off dramatically. The South could not support the man power needed to defeat the Union army. African Americans, even if free or emancipated, risked being forced into the Confederate army. Forcing African Americans to fight proved to be another form of slavery instituted by the South. The Confederacy would not set free the class they depended on the most (Jordan, 397). The South felt that it could not change their ways of enslavement because they depended so heavily upon it.

Back on the plantations, not all slaves knew that freedom drew closer. As the defeated Confederacy returned from four years of war, many of the enslaved population remained clueless to their newly liberated status. Some Southern masters had no intention of obeying the terms of surrender given on April 9, 1865, in Appomattox, Virginia. Slave holders felt it beneath them to free their slaves and refused to adhere to the conditions of surrender. Slavery existed no longer. However, because of the chaos of Reconstruction, the fate of the South remained uncertain. Many slaveholders across Virginia, as well as the rest of the South, refused to give up their racial hierarchy and labor force. Slave holders did not inform their slaves of their freedom. Many kept their slaves ignorant before the war, and the same remained true following the end of the war. Plantations could not let go of the social and working class system they used for generations. Slavery appeared to be the only way of life. Therefore, enslavement must continue. Slaves did not know of freedom for months or years in some cases (Berlin, 209) (Jordan, Audio recording). Former slaves account that they remember overhearing of their emancipation from other slaves. Oftentimes, slaves would overhear their masters speaking to one another about emancipation and that is how freedom became known. Once one slave knew, word spread throughout the plantation. Former slaves rejoiced upon their newfound freedom. However, few knew what to do with their newly liberated status.

The news of freedom caused slaves to rejoice with happiness, jubilation, and relief. Problems arose once slaves understood what freedom meant. As a general trend, they did not know where to turn once freedom became known to them. Some slaves stayed on the plantation and worked as sharecroppers, while others went out on their own. Sharecropping turned out to be another form of slavery. Former slaves relied solely on their former owners for survival. The institution of sharecropping required them to work their former master's land and pay him with the crop yield from that harvest season. However, sharecropping kept the African American population at the lowest level of social standing. While white land owners remained in control over the actions of the lower class, a new form of social slavery developed from sharecropping. Many slaves remember having the same problems they endured during the pangs of slavery. In the system of sharecropping, sharecroppers would grow a crop on someone else's land and pay them back out of the following season's harvest. Sharecropping tied African Americans to the land and enslavement masked itself in this newly titled system of sharecropping. Other former slaves expected the Union army to take care of them once liberated (Berlin, 209) (Jordan, Audio recording).

Upon striking out on their own, former slaves found it difficult to make their own way. Slaves found it hard to accept that the Union army would not take care of their needs as their slave master had done. Oftentimes, ex-slaves looked for someone to clothe and feed them, or for the army to provide a means for them to survive. Lack of support severely disappointed the former slaves. Most former slaves also could not tolerate the conditions left by the Union army. In attempt to help the freed slaves, some members of the Union army received dispatches to erect housing in some areas of Virginia as a means for homes for the former slaves. The freedmen commented on the status of these dwellings and often found these establishments mean, cold, and twig-like in structure. These structures offered little or no protection from the elements, and left its inhabitants vulnerable to the harsh climate changes of the Chesapeake region. Former slaves found their living conditions to be the same or worse than those during their enslavement. Conditions scarcely improved for the former slaves to the Confederacy, however freedom triumphed (Berlin, 209) (Jordan, Audio recording).

Slavery in the South, as well as Virginia, witnessed some of the roughest conditions and obstacles to freedom. Virginia slaves and all Southern slaves alike had to use the war to their advantage in order to achieve freedom. Slaves sought out the refuge of the Union army to protect them and save them from the terrors of an institution of abuse. The war proved to be a trying process that broke apart families, moved loved ones, and displaced thousands. But nothing proved as harsh as the debacles of slavery. Once freedom was won, many former slaves did not know what should be done. Many slaves relied on former masters to help them make a way for themselves. However, sharecropping proved more harmful than helpful. Generations of slaves had been denied the simple freedoms most of us today take for granted. Thousands of slaves dreamed only of the freedoms denied. After two hundred years of bitter oppression, slaves and abolitionists insighted enough uproar to cause a dramatic shift in the status quo of Southern plantation life. Freedom for African Americans came a high price. Generations endured the slaver's lash, beatings, sexual and emotional abuse, and years of enslavement in the hopes that the future progeny could enjoy the brighter, pristine light of freedom. The true cost of freedom cannot be summed up, nor comprehended by those of us living today. Only the thousands whose stories live on to give us a glimpse into their lives of hellish enslavement so that future generations may understand the centuries of struggle and appreciate the taste of freedom's sweet air.

References

- Berlin, Ira, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, and Joseph P. Reidy, eds. *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*. New York: The New Press, 1992.
- Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Berlin, Ira , Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds. *Remembering Slavery*. New York: The New Press, 1998.
- Jordan, Jr. , Ervin L. *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*. Charlottesville , Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1995.
- Link, William A. *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Milton, John . 2515. John Milton. 1608-1674. *John Bartlett, comp 1919. Familiar Quotations, 10th ed*. Bartleby.com, Great Books online.
<http://www.bartleby.com/100/173.50.html> (19 November 2005).
- Robinson, Armstead L. *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865* . Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2005.