

Black History Milestones

Slavery comes to North America, 1619

To satisfy the labor needs of the rapidly growing North American colonies, white European settlers turned in the early 17th century from indentured servants (mostly poorer Europeans) to a cheaper, more plentiful labor source: African slaves. Beginning around 1619, when a Dutch ship brought 20 Africans ashore at the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, slavery spread quickly through the American colonies. Though it is impossible to give accurate figures, some historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million slaves were imported to the New World during the 18th century alone, depriving the African continent of its most valuable resource — its healthiest and ablest men and women.

After the American Revolution, many colonists (particularly in the North, where slavery was relatively unimportant to the economy) began to link the oppression of black slaves to their own oppression by the British. Though leaders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson — both slaveholders from Virginia — took cautious steps towards limiting slavery in the newly independent nation, the Constitution tacitly acknowledged the institution, guaranteeing the right to repossess any “person held to service or labor” (an obvious euphemism for slavery). Many northern states had abolished slavery by the end of the 18th century, but the institution was absolutely vital to the South, where Blacks constituted a large minority of the population and the economy relied on the production of crops like tobacco and cotton. Congress outlawed the import of new slaves in 1808, but the slave population in the U.S. nearly tripled over the next 50 years, and by 1860 it had reached nearly 4 million, with more than half living in the cotton-producing states of the South.

Rise of the cotton industry, 1793

In the years immediately following the Revolutionary War, the rural South — the region where slavery had taken the strongest hold in North America — faced an economic crisis. The soil used to grow tobacco, then the leading cash crop, was exhausted, while products such as rice and indigo failed to generate much profit. As a result, the price of slaves was dropping, and the continued growth of slavery seemed in doubt. Around the same time, the mechanization of spinning and weaving had revolutionized the textile industry in England, and the demand for American cotton soon became insatiable. Production was limited, however, by the laborious process of removing the seeds from raw cotton fibers, which had to be completed by hand. In 1793, a young Yankee schoolteacher named Eli Whitney came up with a solution to the problem: The cotton gin, a simple mechanized device that efficiently removed the seeds, could be hand-powered or, on a large scale, harnessed to a horse or powered by water. The cotton gin was widely copied, and within a few years the South would transition from a dependence on the cultivation of tobacco to that of cotton. As the growth of the cotton industry led inexorably to an increased demand

for black slaves, the prospect of slave rebellion — such as the one that triumphed in Haiti in 1791 — drove slaveholders to make increased efforts to protect their property rights. Also in 1793, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which made it a federal crime to assist a slave trying to escape. Though it was difficult to enforce from state to state, especially with the growth of abolitionist feeling in the North, the law helped enshrine and legitimize slavery as an enduring American institution.

Nat Turner’s Revolt, August 1831

In August 1831, Nat Turner struck fear into the hearts of White Southerners by leading the only effective slave rebellion in U.S. history. Born on a small plantation in Southampton County, Virginia, Turner inherited a passionate hatred of slavery from his African-born mother and came to see himself as anointed by God to lead his people out of bondage. In early 1831, Turner took a solar eclipse as a sign that the time for revolution was near, and on the night of August 21, he and a small band of followers murdered his owners, the Travis family, and set off toward the town of Jerusalem, where they planned to capture an armory and gather more recruits. The group, which eventually numbered around 75 Blacks, murdered some 60 whites in two days before armed resistance from local whites and the arrival of state militia forces overwhelmed them just outside Jerusalem. Some 100 slaves, including innocent bystanders, lost their lives in the struggle. Turner escaped and spent six weeks on the lamb before he was captured, tried and hanged.

Often exaggerated reports of the insurrection — some said that hundreds of whites had been killed — sparked a wave of anxiety across the South. Several states called special emergency sessions of the legislature, and most strengthened their slave codes in order to limit the education, movement and assembly of slaves. While supporters of slavery pointed to the Turner rebellion as evidence that blacks were inherently inferior barbarians requiring an institution such as slavery to discipline them, the increased repression of southern blacks would strengthen anti-slavery feeling in the North through the 1860s and intensify the regional tensions building toward civil war.

Abolitionism and the Underground Railroad, 1831

The early abolition movement in North America was fueled both by slaves’ efforts to liberate themselves and by groups of White settlers, such as the Quakers, who opposed slavery on religious or moral grounds. Though the lofty ideals of the Revolutionary era invigorated the movement, by the late 1780s it was in decline, as the growing southern cotton industry made slavery an ever more vital part of the national economy. In the early 19th century, however, a new brand of radical abolitionism emerged in the North, partly in reaction to Congress’ passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and the tightening of slave codes in most southern states. One of its most eloquent voices was

William Lloyd Garrison, a crusading journalist from Massachusetts, who founded the abolitionist newspaper The Liberator in 1831 and became known as the most radical of America’s antislavery activists. Antislavery northerners — many of them free blacks — had begun helping fugitive slaves escape from southern plantations to the North via a loose network of safe houses as early as the 1780s. Known as the Underground Railroad, the organization gained real momentum in the 1830s and eventually helped anywhere from 40,000 to 100,000 slaves reach freedom. Harriet Tubman, its most celebrated —conductor,” was a former slave who married a free black man and escaped from Maryland to Philadelphia in 1849. On numerous risky trips south, she helped some 300 other slaves escape before serving as a scout and spy for Union forces in South Carolina during the Civil War. The success of the Underground Railroad helped spread abolitionist feelings in the North; it also undoubtedly increased sectional tensions, convincing pro-slavery southerners of their northern countrymen’s determination to defeat the institution that sustained them.

Dred Scott case, March 6, 1857

On March 6, 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in Scott v. Sanford, delivering a resounding victory to southern supporters of slavery and arousing the ire of northern abolitionists. During the 1830s, the owner of a slave named Dred Scott had taken him from the slave state of Missouri to the Wisconsin territory and Illinois, where slavery was outlawed, according to the terms of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Upon his return to Missouri, Scott sued for his freedom on the basis that his temporary removal to free soil had made him legally free. The case went to the Supreme Court, where Chief Justice Roger B. Taney and the majority eventually ruled that Scott was a slave and not a citizen, and thus had no legal rights to sue. According to the Court, Congress had no constitutional power to deprive persons of their property rights when dealing with slaves in the territories. The verdict effectively declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, ruling that all territories were open to slavery and could exclude it only when they became states. While much of the South rejoiced, seeing the verdict as a clear victory for the slave system, antislavery northerners were furious. One of the most prominent abolitionists, Frederick Douglass, was cautiously optimistic, however, wisely predicting that —This very attempt to blot out forever the hopes of an enslaved people may be one necessary link in the chain of events preparatory to the complete overthrow of the whole slave system.”

John Brown’s raid, October 16, 1859

A native of Connecticut, John Brown struggled to support his large family and moved restlessly from state to state throughout his life, becoming a passionate opponent of slavery along the way. After assisting in the Underground Railroad out of Missouri and engaging in the bloody struggle between pro- and anti-slavery forces in Kansas in the 1850s, Brown grew anxious to strike a more extreme blow for

the cause. On the night of October 16, 1859, he led a small band of less than 50 men in a raid against the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. Their aim was to capture enough ammunition to lead a large operation against Virginia’s slaveholders. Brown’s men, including several blacks, captured and held the arsenal until federal and state governments sent troops and were able to overpower them.

John Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859; his trial riveted the nation, and he emerged as an eloquent voice against the injustice of slavery and a martyr to the abolitionist cause. Just as Brown’s courage turned thousands of previously indifferent northerners against slavery, his violent actions convinced slave owners in the South beyond doubt that abolitionists would go to any lengths to destroy the “peculiar institution.” Rumors spread of other planned insurrections, and the South reverted to a semi-war status. Only the election of the anti-slavery Republican Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860 remained before the southern states would begin severing ties with the Union, sparking the bloodiest conflict in American history.

Civil War and emancipation, 1861

In the spring of 1861, the bitter sectional conflicts that had been intensifying between North and South over the course of four decades erupted into civil war, with 11 southern states seceding from the Union and forming the Confederate States of America. Though President Abraham Lincoln’s antislavery views were well established, and his election as the nation’s first Republican president had been the catalyst that pushed the first southern states to secede in late 1860, the Civil War at its outset was not a war to abolish slavery. Lincoln sought first and foremost to preserve the Union, and he knew that few people even in the North — let alone the border slave states still loyal to Washington — would have supported a war against slavery in 1861.

By the summer of 1862, however, Lincoln had come to believe he could not avoid the slavery question much longer. Five days after the bloody Union victory at Antietam in September, he issued a preliminary emancipation proclamation; on January 1, 1863, he made it official that — slaves within any state, or designated part of a State, in rebellion, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” Lincoln justified his decision as a wartime measure, and as such he did not go so far as to free the slaves in the border states loyal to the Union, an omission that angered many abolitionists. By freeing some 3 million Black slaves in the rebel states, the Emancipation Proclamation deprived the Confederacy of the bulk of its labor forces and put international public opinion strongly on the Union side. Some 186,000 black soldiers would join the Union Army by the time the war ended in 1865, and 38,000 lost their lives. The total number of dead at war’s end was 620,000 (out of a population of some 35 million), making it the costliest conflict in American history.

400 Sleeping Bags distributed at Detroit’s Dove Academy

All 440 K-8 students at Dove Academy were recently told to go to bed — early.

Detroit-based Sweet Dreamzzz, partnering with Prudential Protective Services and Fifth Third Bank, taught each child the value of a good night’s sleep and gave every student a very nice sleep kit.

That kit includes a nightshirt, socks, toothbrush, toothpaste, sleep activity book, crayons, a stuffed animal and more. The organizations also joined together to present each child with a new sleep-

ing bag.

Students in grades K-3 studied sleep in their classrooms throughout the morning. Grades 4 and 5 had an assembly at 9 a.m., while grades 6-8 gathered at 10 a.m.

“Studies show how important sleep is for children,” Dove Academy Principal Frank Nardelli said. “Our students were psyched to receive their sleep kits. They were probably all asleep that night by 8 or 9 p.m.”

“Sweet Dreamzzz promotes healthy habits. The fact that Prudential Protective Services, our security

company, and Fifth-Third Bank have joined in to provide every child with a sleeping bag shows their dedication to the city’s children and their academic success,” Nardelli said.

According to WebMD, children up to 6 years old should get 10-12 hours of sleep each night. Those ages 7-12 should sleep 10 or 11 hours, and youth 12 through 18 need 8 or 9 hours.

A National Sleep Foundation survey has found that only 1 of 5 teens gets enough sleep. Lack of sleep diminishes their focus and

concentration in school, while also making them more prone to depression, heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

Dove Academy is a charter public school, located at 8210 Rolayt Street, off Van Dyke and Outer Drive. As a charter school, it is tuition free and open to all families. Dove is the first Michigan “No Excuses University School,” earning national recognition because its students meet select academic performance standards and are taught to have a passion for college.

Sweet Dreamzzz is a 501(c)(3). Its program, “Rest. Educate. Motivate. (REM),” is a partnership with the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research and Dr. Monica Tracey from Wayne State University. To date, it has helped more than 28,000 children. With nearly 50 percent of Detroit children living below poverty (2004), Sweet Dreamzzz wants to ensure all of them have a warm, comfortable night’s sleep and understand its importance.

