

Slavery and Cotton in Tennessee

Essential Question: How did the expansion of cotton agriculture impact slavery in Tennessee?

While each enslaved person's life experience was unique, legally enslaved people were all considered to be the property of their enslavers. As property, enslaved people could be bought, sold, used as collateral on a loan or bequeathed in a will. The law did not recognize the marriages of enslaved people and did little to prevent children from being sold away from their parents. The law also determined that a child's status as an enslaved person or free person followed that of his or her mother. In other words, the child of an enslaved woman was always an enslaved person even if his or her father was free. Tennessee enslaved people were not supposed to own weapons, sell anything or leave their enslaver's land without explicit permission. Tennessee law also made it illegal for enslaved people to earn money to buy their freedom and after 1831 required any person freed to leave the state within a year or face severe penalties including being returned to slavery.¹

In reality, while some of these laws were consistently enforced, others were mostly ignored or inconsistently enforced. For example, by the 1840s it was common practice for enslaved people living in cities to "buy their time." In this arrangement, the enslaved person was able to hire himself or herself out for wages. A portion of the wages went to the enslaver and the rest belonged to the enslaved person.² Over time, many enslaved people were able to use the money they earned to buy their freedom and the freedom of

¹ William Lloyd Imes, "The Legal Status of Free Negroes and enslaved persons in Tennessee." *The Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 3 (1919): Pg. 88. JSTOR database.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/2713777?seq=3#page_scan_tab_contents accessed 6 July 2018.

² Ibid.

their family members. For example, Sally Thomas established a very successful business as a laundress in Nashville in the 1830s. She was eventually able to purchase her own freedom and that of her three sons.³ Generally speaking, enslaved people who lived in urban areas had more opportunities to live and work independently from their enslavers than enslaved people who lived in rural areas. Additionally, enslaved people who possessed a special skill such as blacksmithing also had a better chance of earning their freedom. Sally Thomas was well known for her ability to launder expensive fabrics which made her business popular with wealthy clients.⁴

Support for slavery was not universal. In 1815, Quaker Charles Osburn founded The Tennessee Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves at the Lost Creek Meeting House in Jefferson County. Elihu Embree, a fellow Quaker, joined the society and in 1820 began publishing *The Emancipator*, the nation's first publication devoted to the antislavery cause.⁵ Six years later, Francis Wright, a wealthy Englishwoman, began the Nashoba colony in West Tennessee. Nashoba was one of many utopian communities created in this era. Wright intended Nashoba as a social experiment to show that formerly enslaved people and white settlers could live and work together. The colony experienced financial and other difficulties and by 1827 the white residents had left. Wright paid for the remaining Black residents to immigrate to Haiti.⁶ Similarly, Virginia Hill purchased 2,000 acres of land in present day Clay County in 1830. She then freed the people she enslaved, gave them the land and moved away. The community took

³ "Sally Thomas." Tennessee4me. Tennessee State Museum. http://www.tn4me.org/sapage.cfm/sa_id/172/era_id/4/major_id/21/minor_id/62/a_id/174 accessed 6 July 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Elihu Embree." Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture. 1st edition. 1998.

⁶ "Nashoba." Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture. 1st edition. 1998.

the name Free Hill and served as a refuge for enslaved people fleeing slavery prior to the Civil War.⁷

As plantation agriculture grew in Middle and West Tennessee, attitudes towards slavery changed. Increasingly, free Blacks were seen as a threat to the system of slavery. It was believed that free people as well as Northerner agitators encouraged disobedience or outright rebellion.⁸ In 1835, Amos Dresser, a Bible salesman from Ohio, was publicly whipped and expelled from Nashville after he was found with antislavery literature. This came just one year after the best efforts of Tennessee's antislavery societies failed to have an amendment in favor of gradual emancipation added to the 1834 state constitution.⁹ Tennessee's antislavery societies, which were mostly based in East Tennessee, faded away after the defeat. Some leaders, like Benjamin Lundy and John Rankin moved north to continue their work. Others, like the Quaker inhabitants of Friendsville, secretly assisted enslaved people who ran away seeking freedom in the north.

By the 1850s most of Tennessee's Black population were enslaved agricultural workers living in Middle and West Tennessee. In Middle Tennessee, tobacco was the most important crop. In 1860, enslaved workers on the Wessyngton plantation produced 250,000 pounds of dark-fired tobacco.¹⁰ At Wessyngton enslaved people were allowed to grow their own plots of tobacco that they worked on Sundays and in the evenings. They were given one third of the price that their enslaver George Washington received for the tobacco in a system similar to sharecropping.¹¹ However, this system was the

⁷ "Free Hill ." Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture. 1st edition. 1998.

⁸ Bergeron, Ash and Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*, 120-124.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John F. Baker, *The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation*. (New York: Atria Books, 2009) 81.

¹¹ Ibid., 113.

exception, not the rule. Most enslaved people worked long hours in the enslaver's fields with little or no time for themselves. Enslaved people were subject to harsh punishments including whippings and being sold away from friends and family members. Despite these potential punishments, enslaved people found many ways to resist. For example, Robert Cartmell often complained that on a cold day the people he enslaved spent more time standing around a fire than baling cotton.¹²

Following Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1794, slavery and cotton production increased throughout the Deep South. West Tennessee became a center of cotton production after the Jackson Purchase of 1819 opened the land to white settlers. The Chickasaw sold all their lands in Tennessee and Kentucky for 300,000 dollars.¹³ John Overton, along with partners James Winchester and Andrew Jackson, began to develop a settlement in the area. Winchester's sons laid out the town's streets in a grid pattern based on that of Philadelphia.¹⁴ Winchester referred to the Mississippi as America's Nile and suggested that the new town be named for one of ancient Egypt's most famous cities, Memphis.¹⁵ Despite its lofty name, many people continued to refer to the settlement as Chickasaw Bluffs. Memphis' growth was slow in the early years due to a number of factors. First, just as development was beginning in the region, a depression struck. Secondly, settlers either had to buy land from those who held the original land claims from North Carolina or simply squat on the land and risk losing it in the future.¹⁶ The popular perception of Memphis as unhealthy also kept the population

¹² "Slavery." Tennessee4me. Tennessee State Museum. http://www.tn4me.org/minor_cat.cfm/minor_id/62/major_id/21/era_id/4 accessed 6 July 2018.

¹³ John Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press. 2001). 248.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

low. The impression of ill health was seemingly verified by periodic outbreaks of dengue fever, malaria, smallpox and yellow fever.¹⁷ Lastly, a sandbar near the port made docking difficult. Memphis' fortunes began to change in 1832 when the Chickasaw treaties cleared northern Mississippi of American Indians and opened new lands to cotton growers.

Cotton grown on the lands near Memphis was of the highest quality and consistently fetched higher prices than cotton grown in other parts of the state.¹⁸ Tennessee cotton was transported to textile factories in the north using steamboats. The clear connection between the "Lords of the Lash" or enslavers and the "Lords of the Loom, or northern factory owners was noted by Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner in an 1848 speech.¹⁹ Other crops grew equally well in the fertile soil of the region including tobacco, corn and wheat. In 1842, authorities in Memphis finally gained the upper hand over the Mississippi riverboat men who had long ignored wharf taxes. With an orderly system for controlling trade in place, the town experienced a boom in trade and population.²⁰ Memphis became an important center for the cotton trade and a major trading center for enslaved people. By 1857 Memphis had 12 slave trading companies. The largest, Bolton, Dickens & Co. had annual profits of \$96,000.²¹ Nathan Bedford Forrest, the future Confederate general, was another person who grew wealthy by trading enslaved people in Memphis.

¹⁷ Ibid., 258.

¹⁸ Ibid., 265.

¹⁹ Charles Sumner, "Speech for Union Among Men of All Parties Against the Slave Power, and the Extension of Slavery in a Mass Convention at Worcester, June 28, 1848," in *Orations and Speeches*, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AAT1053.0001.001>, 257.

²⁰ Ibid., 265.

²¹ Hannah, Spurrison, "Profitability and Slave Treatment in West Tennessee." *Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies*, 14 August 2008, https://www.amesplantation.org/sites/411/uploaded/files/Profitability_and_Slave_Treatment_in_West_Tennessee.pdf 23.

Nashville also had a large slave trading district which stretched from Fourth Avenue North and Charlotte to the Public Square.²² The area included not only the slave trading firms but also related businesses such as insurance firms which offered policies on “ House servants, farm hands, steamboat firemen, cabin boys etc” and promised that policies would be issued and “losses promptly adjusted at the Nashville agency.”²³ Banks also played a key role in the trade by offering favorable loans for the purchase of enslaved people. Nashville served as a transportation hub that connected Virginia and Maryland with the Deep South via the Natchez Trace. Enslaved people were often forced to walk from their homes in the Upper South to the slave markets of Mississippi through Tennessee. This internal or domestic trade in enslaved people is often referred to as the Second Middle Passage.²⁴ The sale of enslaved people and the sale of the products they labored to produce played a key role in Tennessee’s economy in the 19th century.

²² Steven Hale, “Nashville Is Starting to Face Its History of Slavery,” *Nashville Scene*, 4 April 2018, https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/nashville-is-starting-to-face-its-history-of-slavery/article_a53a8389-a689-510e-9154-0c0b0b66b227.html Accessed 07 July 2021.

²³ “The Enslaved in Nashville.” *North Nashville Heritage Project*, Tennessee State University, <https://www.tnstate.edu/nnhp/slavery.aspx> Accessed 07 July 2021 see images of advertisements linked from the article.

²⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr. “What was the Second Middle Passage?” *The African Americans : Many Rivers to Cross*, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-was-the-2nd-middle-passage/> Accessed 07 July 2021.

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Use information from the reading to complete the graphic organizer below.



List 3 ways that the increase in cotton production impacted Tennessee.



Describe the actions of 2 people who opposed slavery



Write 1 sentence that summarizes the main idea of this article.
