

Common Myths About American Slavery

80

MYTH: “There were very few free Black people in the South.”

The 1860 census shows that 250,787 free people of color lived in the South, compared to 225,961 who lived in the rest of the country.¹

81

MYTH: “During the Civil War, Black men fought in large numbers for the Confederacy.”

No regiment of Black men fought for the Confederacy. ⁷ Black men were not legally allowed to serve as soldiers in any Confederate state. Virginia and other states authorized the use of enslaved labor for military purposes early in the war, but enslaved men were not given weapons for fighting.

82

MYTH: “Freed people always adopted the surnames of their former enslavers.”

In some cases, individuals did choose to adopt a former enslaver’s name, or a former enslaver’s name was assigned by the earliest record takers after emancipation. In other cases, enslaved families had used surnames consistently over generations during slavery, which were sometimes adopted from a former enslaver and sometimes chosen.

83

MYTH: “Slavery in the North ended long before the Civil War.”

After the American Revolution, some northern states banned slavery in their state constitutions—although this did not happen in every state, and these laws did not prevent northern industries from profiting from slavery elsewhere. In 1777, Vermont was the first state to outlaw slavery.

84

MYTH: “With some exceptions, enslaved people were treated well. They were given food, shelter, and some health care.”

Slavery is slavery regardless of how “kind” enslavers might be to the people they enslaved. The Deep South is especially known for extremely harsh conditions on large plantations where the enslaved were overworked and beaten for any offense to the enslaver.

85

MYTH: “Enslavers commonly kept families together.”

Many people experienced painful separations from family members that they were powerless to control. Mothers in particular endured wrenching separations as their children were sold to different families. Following the Civil War many newly freed people placed advertisements in newspapers, as they tried to locate family who had been sold away during slavery.¹

86

MYTH: “Slave labor was only used on plantations or rural farms.”

The labor of enslaved people was used in a variety of capacities, not just on sprawling rural farms or plantations. During the eighteenth century, enslaved labor was used in northern states in almost every sector of the economy, in shipyards, building trades, artisanal shops, and commerce.

87

MYTH: “Only the very wealthy could afford to enslave people.”

The vast majority of enslavers were not wealthy and owned less than five people.

88
