

Education

# The missing pieces of America's education

Five essays discuss what isn't being talked about in classrooms

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Dec. 16-25



(Illustration by Joan Wong for The Washington Post/Images from New York Public Library)

By **Joe Heim**

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For this project on how students learn about slavery in American schools, The Washington Post asked noted historians to write an essay on aspects of slavery that are misunderstood, poorly taught or not covered at all in the nation's classrooms. From the cruel separation of families to the resistance by enslaved people and the widespread enslavement of Native Americans, these contributions address gaps in our common knowledge about what the practice of slavery has meant for America.





In 1831, a slave rebellion was led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Va. During the insurrection, several people were killed at the site of the Whitehead house, the remnants of which are seen here. Turner was found guilty and hung. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

**Yes, there was rebellion. But smaller acts of resistance defined the daily lives of the enslaved.**

In teaching the history of American slavery accurately, it is essential to teach about African Americans' resistance to slavery. By focusing on resistance, educators reveal as false the myth that slavery was a benign institution and that enslavers were fundamentally kind. If either were true, the enslaved would not have resisted.



**Hasan Kwame Jeffries** is an associate professor of history at Ohio State University and host of the “Teaching Hard History” podcast.

Highlighting resistance also renders African Americans' humanity plain to see.

African Americans fought back because they refused to accept their lot in life. They wanted their freedom, and when that proved impossible to obtain, they endeavored to make life worth living, even under the most appalling conditions.

Rebellion was the most dramatic type of resistance to slavery. In 1800, an enslaved blacksmith named Gabriel, who lived and worked near Richmond, plotted to topple the Old Dominion's slaveholding regime. Gabriel planned to lead a group of armed rebels to Richmond to seize the state capital. Along the way, he intended to recruit fellow enslaved people and was willing to kill anyone who dared to stop them. And to invoke the spirit of the American Revolution, as well as to call out the hypocrisy of

American revolutionaries who refused to abolish slavery, he planned to carry a banner that read “Death or Liberty.”

But Gabriel’s bold bid to secure his freedom and spark a rebellion that would spread throughout the slaveholding South ended before it could really begin. A torrential rain the night of the insurrection delayed the blacksmith’s plans just long enough for the plot to be revealed by a pair of enslaved turncoats.

### **Teaching Slavery**

For this project on how slavery is taught, The Washington Post interviewed more than 100 students, teachers, administrators and historians throughout the country and sat in on middle school and high school history classes in Birmingham, Ala.; Fort Dodge, Iowa; Germantown, Md.; Concord, Mass.; Broken Arrow, Okla.; and Washington, D.C.

**TEACHING AMERICA’S TRUTH:** [Why haven’t the nation’s schools done a better job of teaching about slavery?](#)

**STUDENTS SPEAK:** [A dark legacy comes to light](#)

**QUIZ:** [How well do you know slavery?](#)

endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause.”

Gabriel and 26 others would eventually be executed. The freedom-seekers, however, showed neither regret nor remorse. “I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer had he been taken by the British and put to trial by them,” declared one of Gabriel’s compatriots. “I have adventured my life in

Rebellion, though, was not the only way that enslaved African Americans fought back. Their resistance took many forms, from highly visible attempts to flee bondage, to nearly imperceptible acts of sabotage and subterfuge. And while rebellion sought total liberation from slavery, most forms of resistance strove for something much less, for making life a bit more bearable until the Day of Jubilee finally arrived. Regardless of form or function, resistance was never-ending. As long as slavery existed, African Americans resisted.

Teaching resistance effectively requires focusing on more than a handful of highly visible and extremely dramatic attempts to secure freedom. Accordingly, teachers must push beyond rebellions. Uprisings make clear that African Americans who engaged in rebellion opposed slavery. But because insurrections were so rare, when they are taught in isolation, students are left with the impression that the vast majority of enslaved people who did not rebel accepted their bondage. Some even interpret this to mean that African Americans were complicit in their own enslavement.

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It is not enough either simply to mention one or two enslaved people who escaped to freedom. This has the same effect as narrowly focusing on rebellion. It leaves students thinking that only those who attempted to flee wanted their freedom.

Instead, teachers must spend an equal if not greater amount of time on the subtler ways that African Americans resisted, drawing students' attention to the everyday acts of defiance that were far more common than rebellion or flight.



Teachers have to talk about how enslaved people tried to minimize the amount of energy they expended toiling in fields by slowing the pace of work, feigning illness, breaking farming implements, injuring animals and sabotaging crops. And how they took for themselves life's essentials, from food to clothing, which they consumed, shared, traded and sold.

They have to explain how enslaved artisans honed and learned skills whenever possible, from blacksmithing to dressmaking, to increase their indispensability to those who profited off their labor and to decrease their chances of being sold and separated from loved ones.

They have to discuss how enslaved people attacked their enslavers' property, burning their homes, barns and storage sheds. These were purposeful acts of economic retaliation intended to strike enslavers where it hurt the most, in their wallets and purses.

And teachers have to highlight the important cultural ways African Americans resisted. Enslaved people formed families whenever possible, marrying, bearing children and keeping those children with them as long as possible. They also held onto

African cultural traditions, such as religious worship practices, which remain visible today among their descendants.

Resistance to slavery demonstrates the harsh reality of the institution and makes clear the essential humanity of enslaved people. But these important lessons about American slavery are lost when we teach resistance too narrowly. When we focus only on dramatic rebellions or escapes and ignore the more common, mundane acts of resistance such as work slowdowns, we leave students with the false impression that African Americans did not care to be free. And nothing could be further from the truth.



A slave father sold away from his family. (Library of Congress)

**Slavery's horror included family separation, despite**

# the portrayal in some history textbooks

In the spring of 1859 at a horse racetrack outside Savannah, Ga., more than 400 enslaved people were auctioned off in the largest sale in U.S. history. They came from Maj. Pierce Butler's plantations and had spent all of their lives enslaved under one family. Two and three generations deep, the men, women and children were to be sold in family units, but that did not happen. According to one account, "the man and wife might be sold to the pine woods of North Carolina, their brothers and sisters be scattered through the cotton fields of Alabama and the rice swamps of Louisiana, while the parents might be left on the old plantation to wear out their weary lives in heavy grief, and lay their heads in far-off graves, over which their children might never weep."



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professor of history and associate dean of the graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin. **Keffrelyn D. Brown** is professor and University Distinguished Teaching Professor of cultural studies in education in curriculum and

When considering how the history of slavery is taught in kindergarten through 12th grade, most educators emphasize that families

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remained together and that slavery in the United States was unique for this reason.

History textbooks show images of the slave quarters

where men, women and children of all ages sit leisurely outside their cabins. It is a palatable way to teach this history of such an inhumane institution. However, the reality of slavery from the enslaved perspective paints a much different portrait.

Most enslaved people experienced sales and separations four to five times in their lifetime. This means that they were separated from their families more often than not. Newspaper accounts reporting on auctions listed the human property for sale in family groupings, but buyers rarely kept families intact. They purchased specific enslaved people to suit their needs and priorities.

As a historian of slavery and scholars of curriculum and instruction who also train K-12 teachers at the University of Texas at Austin, we are developing curriculum to help share this history in a way that reflects the experiences of the enslaved. How do we account for a 3-day-old infant in the market for sale without the parents? What does it mean that we find hundreds of children younger than 10 up for sale? These were the realities of slavery



and represent the history that we are helping teachers share with their students.

The selling off of husbands, wives and children was a central part of the system, and enslaved people lived in constant fear as a result. The enslaved families sold in Savannah referred to the auction as “the Weeping Time” because so many tears were shed over the two-day auction. Scholars who write about it have provided a context to this large sale, and educators can use it to teach their students about the complexities of U.S. slavery.

One of the key dilemmas teachers must navigate when teaching about U.S. slavery is acknowledging it as a dehumanizing and oppressive system that affected people’s everyday realities. It was also a system that individuals resisted and subverted as an expression of their value and humanity. It is also important to note how this history was situated within a system of anti-black racism, in which black bodies were reduced to commodities.

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Situating these histories in the classroom, however, requires teachers to consider two prevailing tensions about African American families in the context of slavery.

The first is for teachers to thoroughly explore the material interests tied to the separation of families and children. K-12 classrooms should engage in historical inquiry that explores the intersection between the institutional interests of enslaved labor and how the buying and selling of mothers, fathers and children existed in the wider industry of slavery.

Teachers should also consider how families sought to maintain relationships within the context of a system geared to separate and dissipate the black family. For example, the institution of slavery framed what counted as a “legal” marriage and who could

officially marry. Enslaved people were generally denied this right. Yet they sought out and created loving unions, despite institutional barriers.

From this perspective, we suggest that classrooms explore the impact that slavery had on families while considering the humanity of enslaved Africans as they resisted systemic constraints to maintain hope. Teachers should use primary source documents taken from county records, estate documents and letters.

This approach alone is not just about teaching young people about slavery and its impact on families; it also helps students develop an understanding of the history of racism in the United States. Studying the case of slavery and its impact on families allows students to acquire a deeper understanding of how race and racism formed in the United States as a structural phenomenon, touching people's everyday lives.

For example, students should understand the context of the auction block — the common spectacle for separating families — not simply as a sociocultural moment where “bad men did bad things” but more as a mechanism of white racial rule. Despite the

dramatic and normalized impact of the auction block, families persisted to maintain a modicum of humanity.

The teaching of these difficult histories is an important step in educating a citizenry able to make sense of the historical antecedents of America's racial past and present. For the 400 families sold on the eve of the Civil War who shed tears and said goodbye to loved ones, part of their survival is our memory of them and our teaching this history should include that they survived and re-created family connections.



W.E.B. Du Bois addresses the World Congress of Partisans for Peace in Paris in 1949. (AP)  
(AP)

‘Extermination and  
enslavement’: The twin



# horrors of the American dawn

At the bottom of it all, I would like for children to be taught that the modern United States was built on Indian land by African labor. No mills without plantations; no railroads without reservations. After all the quantification and qualification, those two basic historical facts remain at the foundation: extermination and enslavement. That might seem harsh, but history is harsh — though not so harsh, perhaps, that we should abandon hope of changing it.



**Walter Johnson** is the Winthrop Professor of History and professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. He is the author of “Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market” and “The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States.”

The lessons I want my children to learn about the history of slavery and the Civil War are those I have learned from W.E.B. Du Bois’s “Black Reconstruction in America.” Though he does not dwell on it, Du Bois begins with the idea that the Cotton Kingdom was built on land that had been stolen from the indigenous nations of the Southeast. He goes on to describe slavery as an integral aspect of the global capitalist

economy of the 19th century: “The giant forces of water and of steam were harnessed to do the world’s work, and the black workers of America bent at the bottom of a growing pyramid of commerce and industry.” Our world was built by slaves.

For Du Bois, slavery was neither a system of simple class exploitation nor of immutable racism. It was a hybrid of capitalism and white supremacy: something new that began with the era of the slave trade and persisted to the present. In his 1920 essay, “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois suggested how the histories of capitalism and racism had been intertwined without ever being fully reducible to one another: “Ever have men striven to conceive of their victims as different from the victors, endlessly different, in soul and blood, strength and cunning, race and lineage.” Exploitation, too, was “quite as old as the world.”

But their combination in the slave trade was something new, something unprecedented, something world-making. “The imperial width of the thing — its heaven-defying audacity — marks its modern new-ness,” he wrote of the forms of capitalism and racism that emerged out of the slave trade. The racism of the present is a product of greed and arrogance.

The white working class of the new economy — the shipwrights, sailors and stevedores, and millhands — had, in Du Bois's understanding, a choice. They could make common cause with those who toiled and died on the underside of empire — the natives, the slaves, the emerging dark proletariat of the global south — or they could align themselves with their bosses and with whiteness. “Subtly had they been bribed, but effectively. Were they not lordly whites, and should they not share in the spoils and rape?” There was a different way.

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In this telling, the Civil War provided whites with a sort of second chance. Rather than a “Lost Cause,” Du Bois viewed the history of the South and the war as a sadly missed opportunity. The leaders of the Confederacy, the men over whose monuments we fight today, were in his view “men of great physical but little moral courage,” a formulation I wish my own father had been able to provide me as a way to understand my own Confederate ancestors. You can imagine a world different from that of your elders.

For Du Bois, the decisive event of the war was the “General Strike” of 4 million enslaved people — who slowed down and struck out for the North, undermining Southern civilization at its foundation. Along with the withdrawal of labor from the Confederacy, the enrollment of 200,000 black soldiers provided the Union Army a decisive advantage (on this point, Du Bois quoted no less an authority than Abraham Lincoln). American history is full of humble unsung heroes who have pointed the way to a better world.

And the decisive role of African American people in their own liberation provided the white working class with a world-historical opportunity: the chance to join with black workers in a struggle against the barons of land and labor who controlled and exploited them both. The history of the South and the United States descends from that missed opportunity: from the triumph of caste — Du Bois termed it the “wages of whiteness” — over the beckoning possibility of a broader emancipation. “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again to slavery.” We must reject privileges, shortcuts and entitlements in favor of a commitment to humility, justice and generosity.

The world was made this way; it might have been another way; indeed, it might still be.





A drawing from about 1820 shows enslaved people passing by the U.S. Capitol in Washington. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

# Enslaved people toiled on plantations. They also built America's cities.

In the United States, our understanding of slavery is overly focused on the plantation cultures of the 19th-century South. Representations of slavery, enslaved people and slave owners from the time period when “cotton was king” in the 30 to 40 years preceding the Civil War have dominated the written history of U.S. slavery and preoccupied the imagination of cultural producers in the post-Civil War era.



**Leslie M. Harris** is a professor of history at Northwestern University. She is the author of “In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863” and the co-editor of “Slavery and Freedom in Savannah.”

It is true that the vast majority of the 4 million people enslaved on the eve of the Civil War worked on cotton plantations and other

rural locations. Emphasis on this obscures another significant reality of slavery in North America: Enslaved labor was also critical to urban areas and had been since the first enslaved people of African descent arrived on the continent.

Before the Revolutionary War, enslaved African labor was critical to the construction and survival of cities from Boston to New Orleans. Even in Georgia, the only colony founded to be free from slavery, Europeans used enslaved labor to build Savannah, the colony's first port. By 1750, Georgia had repealed its official ban on slavery, and the Savannah port built by slaves became a hub in the Atlantic slave trade. New York and Rhode Island vied to be the capital of the North American slave trade; by the early 18th century, Newport and Providence, R.I., had outdone New York as the main North American suppliers of slaves to the Southern colonies and the Caribbean.

And in all urban and rural settlements, enslaved people provided labor beyond agriculture. Enslaved men joined European armies in providing military aid, worked the docks loading and unloading ships, and learned skilled labor alongside European family members and indentured servants, ranging from blacksmithing to carpentry to tailoring and beyond. Enslaved women and children provided domestic labor and marketed home-produced goods.

As slavery gradually ended in Northern cities after the Revolutionary War, newly free black men and women were most often excluded from the jobs they held as slaves. But in the South,

whites continued to employ enslaved (and free) black people in a wide range of urban jobs.

**“Enslaved labor was also critical to urban areas and had been since the first enslaved people of African descent arrived on the continent.”**

— Leslie M. Harris

Because of the cultural and economic capital slavery brought, whites in the antebellum South aspired to own slaves; they didn't want to do their labor. As a result, enslaved people could be found in every part of the urban economy. Enslaved men of African descent occupied skilled jobs in Southern cities in greater numbers than free black men did in the North.

Enslaved black women worked as domestics, seamstresses and cooks for enslavers. Southern cities also served as centers for

trading in enslaved people and slave-produced goods. Southern ports along the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Coast made money shipping slaves throughout the South and slave-produced goods to the Northern states and Europe. New Orleans vied with New York for the position of leading port in the nation in the 19th century.

Smaller inland cities such as St. Louis, Memphis, Natchez, Miss., and others served a similar process for overland trade. Many cities large and small served as governmental and judicial centers in which whites established and adjudicated the laws of slavery.

Why is it important to recognize that urban areas contained slavery, too? One reason is to understand the expansiveness and possibilities of this system of labor, which is as old as human history. Even more important, however, is the necessity to realize that people of African descent were capable of working at any form of labor.

For the first century after the end of slavery, the majority of white society worked assiduously to prevent blacks from moving beyond a limited range of jobs. Part of that work was to present stereotypes of blacks as innately unfit for urban life and urban jobs. Whites used such stereotypes to exclude blacks from the full



range of employment, housing and education opportunities. At worst, black people in urban areas were subject to racial terrorism through mob violence and their presence was criminalized through over-policing. As we move through the second century after emancipation, we still struggle with the meaning of black labor and black people in urban areas.



The illustration "Spaniards Enslaving the Indians" is part of the 1891 book "Indian Horrors or Massacres of the Red Men" by Henry Davenport Northrop. (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group/Getty Images) (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group/Getty Images)

# The other slavery: Native Americans also faced a vast and degrading system of bondage

The very word “slavery” brings to mind African men, women and children stuffed in the hold of a ship or white-aproned maids bustling in an antebellum home. History books and movies reinforce the notion that slaves were black Africans imported into the New World. Yet Native Americans were subjected to a parallel system of bondage that, like the enslavement of Africans, was terrible, degrading and vast — and most Americans today are not aware of it or don’t learn about it at school.



**Andrés Reséndez** is professor of Mexican history at the University of California at Davis and author of “The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America.”

Between 2.5 million and 5 million Native Americans were enslaved throughout the Western Hemisphere in the centuries between the arrival of Columbus and the late 19th century, when the system declined markedly (but did not disappear entirely). In contrast to

the enslavement of Africans, which included a large percentage of adult males, the majority of enslaved Native Americans were women and children.

In Colonial times, the Carolinas were a major Indian slaving ground. New Englanders captured rebellious Indians and shipped them to work on plantations in the Caribbean. And French colonists in eastern Canada took thousands of Indians captive from the interior around the Great Lakes region.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, however, the traffic of Native Americans on the Eastern Seaboard was replaced and overshadowed almost entirely by Africans. Not surprisingly, Americans living east of the Mississippi River lost awareness of earlier forms of Native American bondage. When they spoke or wrote about slavery in the 19th century, they invariably meant African slavery.

Yet Indian slavery continued to thrive in the West and even expanded during the tumultuous 19th century. The best evidence comes from letters and diaries of westbound Americans.

California may have entered the United States as a “free-soil” state, but American settlers soon discovered that the buying and

selling of Indians had long been a common occurrence in the Golden State. As early as 1846, the first American commander of San Francisco acknowledged that “certain persons have been and still are imprisoning and holding to service Indians against their will” and warned that “the Indian population must not be regarded in the light of slaves.”

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— Andrés Reséndez

James S. Calhoun had never set foot in New Mexico until he was appointed Indian agent in Santa Fe in April 1849. Calhoun had grown up in the South and did not expect to find slavery in New

Mexico. As Indian agent, however, he became amazed by the segmentation of the Indian slave market. “The value of the captives depends upon age, sex, beauty, and usefulness,” Calhoun wrote, “good looking females, not having passed the ‘sear and yellow leaf’ are valued from \$50 to \$150 each; males, as they may be useful, one-half less, never more.”

The Spanish Crown forbade Indian slavery as early as 1542, the Mexican republic granted citizenship rights to all Natives born within the country in the 1820s, and the U.S. Congress passed the 13th Amendment prohibiting both “slavery” and “involuntary servitude,” a formulation that opened the possibility of liberation of all Native Americans held in bondage. Yet Indian slavery persisted.

One of the most striking aspects of this other slavery is that, because it had no legal basis, it was extremely difficult to extinguish. Forms of Indian slavery continued in the United States and elsewhere in the hemisphere through the end of the 19th century and in remote areas, even later. Disguised as debt peonage or penal service, this other slavery — invisible and often posing as legal work — is the direct forerunner of the types of slavery practiced today.

According to the latest estimate of the Walk Free Foundation, an international human rights organization based in Australia, 40 million people in 167 countries live in some form of “modern-day” slavery. It is forbidden all over the world, yet not a single region of our globe has been spared from this scourge. Slavery continues to thrive because its beneficiaries resort to legal subterfuge to compel people to work, under the threat of violence, and offering absurdly low or no compensation.

The 400-year experience of Native Americans with this other slavery makes clear there is nothing new about this.

**ABOUT THE PROJECT:** The articles in this project examine the lessons students are learning about slavery, obstacles faced by teachers in teaching this difficult subject, the right age to introduce hard concepts about slavery to young students and how teachers connect the history of slavery to 21st-century racism and white supremacy. Our focus is on public schools because teaching choices are made by elected policymakers and school officials who determine curriculum and whose decisions are implemented by administrators and teachers whose salaries are publicly funded. Design by Tyler Rimmel. Photo editing by Mark Miller. Edited by Stephen Smith. [Find other stories from the project here.](#)