

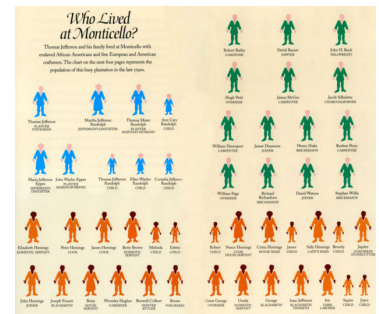
Jefferson and Slavery

Reading Level: Elementary School

Jefferson's Slaves

About eighty slaves lived and worked at Monticello. They plowed the fields, planted the wheat, and drove the wagons. They cared for the hogs and cows. Household slaves fixed food for Thomas Jefferson and his family. They washed his clothes and cared for his children. The lives of Jefferson and his family were linked with the lives of his enslaved workers.

By law, Jefferson's slaves were his property. That meant he could buy and sell them. He could give them away. He could hire them out to other farmers. Slaves who didn't obey were punished. And Jefferson granted freedom to only seven slaves.



Page 1 of a graphical chart of the free and enslaved community at in the 1790s.

Jefferson's Views on Slavery

Jefferson lived during a time when slaves were used in many countries. By the time he was twenty-one, slaves had been in America for about 145 years. They made up over half the population of Virginia. Jefferson owned slaves throughout his lifetime. But he also felt that slavery was a “crime” and he was against the slave trade.

Jefferson was one of the few people who spoke out against slavery and had a plan to end it. He believed that slavery had caused fear and anger between whites and blacks. He didn't think they could live together. He felt that freed slaves would have to move to another country. But Jefferson never fought to make his plan a reality. He felt that freeing them would not be a simple task. He became more and more silent on the issue.

Still Jefferson wrote the words “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence. Then how could Jefferson own slaves? Historians have come up with many reasons.

All *White* Men are Created Equal

During Jefferson's time, few people believed in equal rights. America was made up of leaders, who were wealthy white men. Jefferson did believe in equal rights, but *only* for adult *white men*. That left out African Americans and women, too.

Plantation Life

Jefferson was a 'planter.' He owned and lived on a large plantation. It was made up of four farms and had 5,000 acres. He needed large numbers of workers to run the farms. Slaves were workers who did not have to be paid.

Like most planters, Jefferson grew a "cash crop." The crop was sold to make money. Jefferson grew tobacco and wheat as cash crops. Many workers were needed to plant and harvest cash crops. Slaves could be forced to work long hours in the tobacco and wheat fields.



In the 1790s, Jefferson began growing wheat and other grains at Monticello instead of tobacco.

Laws

The first African slaves were brought to the colonies in 1619. Slavery and the slave trade were allowed by law. At the time of the Revolutionary War, there were many slaves in the colonies. They made up one fifth of the total population.

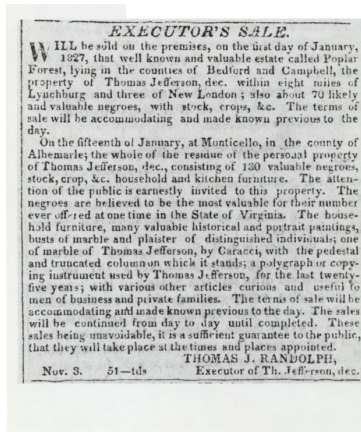
Today slavery is against the law. But during Jefferson's time slavery was not against the law. Many people in the South owned slaves and used them on their plantations.

Untruths

Like many people during the time, Jefferson believed 'untruths' about African Americans. Jefferson believed that God had given Africans the same rights as other men. But he was not sure the slaves would know how to use these rights. Jefferson worked every day with smart and skillful African Americans. Yet his belief in these 'untruths' did not change.

The Question Still Remains

In his will, George Washington granted freedom to his slaves after he



Jefferson's grandson ran this ad announcing the public sale of Monticello and other personal property including "130 valuable negroes."

died. By 1804, all the northern states had set dates for ending slavery in their own states. But Thomas Jefferson freed only seven slaves. Why didn't he free the rest in his will?

Thomas Jefferson was often in debt. That meant he owed money to many people. When he died in 1826, he owed more than \$100,000. (Today that would equal about two million dollars!) Jefferson's slaves were worth a lot of money. When Jefferson died, Monticello's slaves were sold instead of freed. Their sale made money to pay off some of Jefferson's debt.

During the sale, slave families were sold to different people. Peter Fossett was eleven years old when he was sold at the sale. Later he recalled that he was "born and reared as free, not knowing I was a slave, then suddenly . . . put upon an auction block and sold to strangers." Jefferson wrote "all men are created equal." But sadly, he never allowed the many slaves who lived and worked at Monticello to be equal or free.

