



BlackEconomics.org

“Never a Slave!”

A question was raised: “Once a slave, forever a slave?”

Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and maybe a million more were born into slavery—what was known as slavery—and got themselves free. Once they freed themselves, they were no longer slaves. Thinking as a slave 400 years after the first African was kidnapped, stolen, and illegally brought to this American space, is a highly unlikely possibility. Certainly, we are talking about our mental or emotional/psychological outlook—the status of slave implies mind-control in the American context. I have only seen one instance of Black men in chains and that was at a court room in downtown Kansas City. The picture of slaves and chains no longer applies in America. Whopty-do!

The historical record suggests that Black men took extreme measures, even sawed-off part of a limb, removed the shackles, and limped their way to freedom. In what became the state of Florida, while the Spanish controlled that space, escaped “slaves” came to the Florida, became Catholic and joined the militia for a period of time and in exchange became free. In addition, Florida became the destination for escaped “slaves” known as Maroons. These Maroons lived outside the boundaries of normal civilization and mirrored a similar phenomenon found in the Caribbean, in particular, Jamaica. For the times, there was a whole lot of Black folk in Florida and they had made themselves free—they never accepted the idea of “once a slave, forever a slave.” By the time of Andrew Jackson, free Blacks in Florida were a national security threat to an under 50 United States of America. When I was a student at Lincoln High School in Gainesville, Florida they never told me that the reason for the Seminole War (First or Second) was to eliminate that threat. I had to wait to learn about Maroons and Fort Mosé as a refuge for escaping “slaves” and then I connected the dots. That was long after Lincoln High.

Along the way I was taught about the Battle of the Crater at Petersburg, Virginia. Already forced to study as a part of my professional development as a combat arms officer, I was intrigued to learn about a Civil War battlefield at the edge of Petersburg and Fort Lee. At Virginia State University I read a placard claiming to tell the story of Black men at the center of the action in the Battle of the Crater. There I was trying to absorb a strange new reality—Black men as Union soldiers in the Civil War and right there in Petersburg. The usual characters were in play. Robert E. Lee for the people who would lead Trump supporters today. Ulysses S. Grant commanding the

siege of Petersburg for the Union side. But I was really having a tough time believing that an entire Black division led the assault in the Battle of the Crater.

I did not even know that there was a single Black man involved as a soldier in the American Civil War. I was thirty years old and a soldier—an officer, no less—and did not even know that Black men had participated in the Civil War—as soldiers. And while I have never been able to trace my lineage back to a Civil War veteran, I was extremely happy to learn about William Powell in my extended family, who fought in the last few months of that great Civil War. His history and legacy were influential in my forming a stronger connection with the men who fought to bring freedom to those who were imprisoned and called slaves. Unfortunately, too many American families descended from Africans are unaware of their ancestors' contributions to whatever freedom they enjoy right now.

Essentially each one of those soldiers were Negroes formerly known as slaves. I was later to find out after moving from Fort Lee to Fort Monroe in Hampton that the latter had the moniker: "Freedom's Fortress." I had the idea that maybe Fort Monroe was a place of refuge for escaping slaves. I had not really understood that Fort Lee—at the tip of Hampton in Virginia and Virginia being one of the charter members of the Confederate states—was held by Union forces during the Civil War. During the second year of that Civil War, two Black men—known by the state and by White people as slaves—went to the gates of Fort Monroe seeking freedom. They went to get theirs.

You could say that these two men were seminal to the very idea of freeing the slaves by governmental edict. The pathway to the Emancipation Proclamation began at the gates of Fort Monroe. Major General Benjamin Butler, commander of Fort Monroe was the instrument to decide what to do with these former slaves at his doorstep. Butler devised a policy invoking the notion of these "slaves" or former slaves as contraband of war, instantly elevating their status to free. Butler did so against the objections of Abraham Lincoln. But it was Butler's outside the box concept that laid the foundation for Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. But the impetus for it goes back to those two former "slaves" who decided they were not slaves and took action: Running away from their armed Confederate masters to a reluctant United States Government.

There are hundreds and thousands of anecdotal instances of folk who were labeled as slaves, who knew they were not slaves, and who chose to not accept their unlawful imprisonment nor the burden of forced labor. Many succeeded in their escape to freedom. Many others did not. Many most likely planned an escape, but never had a chance to pull the trigger. Then there were those like Nat Turner, who lived just south of Hampton and Norfolk whose vision it was to free not only themselves but every Negro in sight. We have little insight about the number of rebellions in which Whites were killed by Negroes who decidedly did not see themselves as slaves nor the White man as their master. Evidently, great care was taken to unrecord as many instances of insurrection as possible.

This idea that we could be witnessing the extension of slavery right down to the year 2020 is rather curious given the historical evidence. The record says Europeans living in America caused Africans to be brought to this space against their will after acts of kidnapping. Europeans began

calling themselves White instead of English Americans and insisted on labelling Africans as slaves. They knew the Africans were not slaves, but they could not get the Africans to do all that agricultural work in that hot sun by calling them what they were—prisoners. First, the white Europeans were not at war with any principality on the continent of Africa at the time. Second, these Africans had not committed any European or White crimes in Africa and there was no justification for imprisonment. We have to assume all of these African immigrants to the American continent were kidnapped, stolen, and falsely imprisoned. By calling the Africans slaves they legalized ownership of these persons without a title or registration. Do you not remember from watching the *Lone Ranger* and *Paladin* how the good guys vilified horse thieves as the worst kind of bad guy?

Once White Americans got the “slavery” label to stick, then they could paint a picture that showed themselves in the best possible light. Surely you have heard or read of early justifications for slavery including the “benevolent master to the childlike slave” defense? You cannot underestimate the value of spinning the narrative to make the slavers—the false imprisoners—the good guys. How could the American government support the Founding Fathers’ thievery, fraud, raping, and killing of innocent African life if the news media had told the truth about the kidnapping, stealing, raping, and murder in 1776?

When Black and White people are exposed to the truth, then they all can stop feeling “less than.” White people with the power fully exploited the underlying axiom to support the exploitation of Black labor and Black bodies. Perhaps thirty miles north of Fort Monroe, the city of Gloucester lies just east of the Elizabeth River and is the site of events leading to the first codification of lifetime bondage in this space, America.

Talk about “once a slave, forever a slave” and consider the operating standard of the time. Illegal as the capture and transport of Africans to America was, once here the virtually universal mode of operation pertaining to workers was the indentured servant model. And the record indicates that Africans were treated in that way until . . .

. . .Until 1640 when three indentured servants decided to run away and not complete their term as indentured servants. Yessir. They resided in Gloucester. It was a case of the court making, not just interpreting, law. John Punch, an African in America, ran away along with two White indentured servants.¹ Once returned and as a result of trial the Whites received extended terms. But oh, Mr. Black Man. As Mr. T used to say—I pity the fool. Pity the fool who does not know or forgets that he is Black. Punch ran away with Whites but upon his return reality caught up and Punch did not get an extended term. Punch got life. The court ruling took him from indentured servant to full-time slave—a lifetime position and beyond. Based on that ruling, a few days (exaggerating) later, the law made babies born slaves at birth based on the status of the mother.

¹ For more details on John Punch, please see “The John Punch Court Decisions and the Advent of Slavery in Virginia:” <https://www.americanevolution2019.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/PDF-The-John-Punch-Court-Decisions-and-the-Advent-of-Slavery-in-Virginia-Full-Lesson.pdf> (p. 3); retrieved from the Internet on September 14, 2020.

If you are still interested, you might be asking, under what authority or what precedent did the court rule in the Punch case? Deciding to give an extended time of service to White men—of an additional year—who violated their term of service but choosing to take Punch from indentured servant to straight up slave for the exact same offense can only be explained by, “they made it up.” Only imagine if all three of the indentured servants had been White. Of course. The authorities would have had to find another pretext to “legalize” slavery in America.

Only to teach the whole world that Africans and African-descendant people were never slaves in this country—in this space now known as the United States of America. The historical record is unmistakable. Alex Haley researched it and found the space in Africa where his ancestors came from and he put it in his book, *Roots*, but we continue to act as if the book is a fairy tale.

The White men who put the transatlantic slave trade into motion kidnapped and stole the human cargo they trafficked in. At the very first point of sale, there was no bill of sale, no registration, and no title to the property. Where in the White, civilized world was the buying and selling of human beings as property, legal? These White men who operated this system were criminals in a justice system who smiled at their activities instead of prosecuting them. In many instances they were the criminal justice system. Instead of bathing in the dirty lake of self-recrimination trying to figure out if Blacks today are still slaves, we should be marshalling all of our intellectual power to cast the well-deserved blame for the crimes committed against all of the Blacks who descended from the Africans forced to immigrate here. Let the light from the lighthouse shine on them. Let every Black refuse the pain of regret and force White men to acknowledge their crimes against humanity, specifically African-descendant Black men. Yes, Black women, too, but theirs was more of the collateral damage variety and yet that does not diminish their pain.

Why make a big deal of assigning blame for crimes long unacknowledged and long unpunished?

Because that is the chain. The shackles and chains signifying 400 years later, “less than,” and inferior are not physical, they are not “flesh and blood” but they are the creation of principalities and powers, straight from the rulers of darkness. They are so powerful. Nearly ultimately powerful. So much so that when each Black man and woman, boy or girl can divest themselves of this mind, they can be free to let this mind abide. That will be the mind that will usher in freedom. Not “freedom of,” but “freedom from.” Freedom from any one or any entity—even the immensely powerful United States Government—from making me think that I am less than anyone on the earth. And even though some people will still be lazy and do not want anything out of life, they will not be burdened by this notion that they could not make it because they were not good enough or that Whites are just better at math than Black people.

How well did the period of truth and reconciliation work in South Africa? Well, let us make it work in America and even if White men do not get it, our young men will get it if we teach it right.

The historical record is plain. When there are no surviving documents showing ownership of a stolen car that you just bought, that, in and of itself, becomes evidence of you receiving stolen property. Yet, some folk will have trouble accepting the premise that these White men were criminals perpetrating as Founding Fathers. Why? The old, “How we doing this morning, boss?” syndrome. Part of the propaganda which told them back then over and over again that they were

slaves, extended to feeling a sense of identification with the slaver. All, a part of the tricks of the devil. You know who he is, blue-eyed or not. But also, there is the continuous stream of cultural markers that inform people of how they should think. One of the more recent examples is the movie *12 Years a Slave*. I hope you have seen the movie given that it came out in 2013. If not, then here is a synopsis taken straight off the Internet and used in high school classrooms across America.

Summary: *12 Years a Slave*

Solomon Northrup is a free black man living in upstate New York with his family in the 1840s. He is a carpenter and a talented violin player. One day, two men approach him and ask if he will accompany them and play his fiddle as they travel to Washington DC to the circus they work for. Solomon agrees. Unfortunately, he is drugged and wakes up in what he discovers is a slave pen within view of the Capitol.

Burch, a cruel slave trader, beats Solomon and tells him never to mention that he is from the North and that he was kidnapped. Solomon is cowed into submission but is inconsolable about his new situation. He and several other slaves are taken down South to Louisiana to be sold. Solomon witnessed firsthand the horror of a slave mother being separated from her children.

He is sold to William Ford, a kindly minister with a small plantation in the Great Pine Woods. Ford treats Solomon and his other slaves well. Solomon is not beaten, has a decent degree of freedom, and distinguishes himself as a hard worker. However, a local carpenter who works for Ford, Tibbeats, takes an immediate dislike to Solomon. He is an irascible, coarse, and cruel man, and it is to Solomon's great despair that Ford's pecuniary troubles lead him to sell Solomon (but with a mortgage) to Tibbeats.

Tibbeats is a terrible master. One day, he is frustrated with something that he thinks Solomon is doing wrong, and so he comes at him to whip him. Solomon feels wronged by this, grabs the whip, and beats Tibbeats mercilessly. Tibbeats runs off and Solomon realizes the extent of the wrong he has committed. Chapin, one of Ford's overseers and someone who is well aware of how awful Tibbeats is, steps in to prevent Tibbeats from killing Solomon by reminding Tibbeats of Ford's mortgage.

Tensions between Tibbeats and Solomon never return to normal, and they have another dangerous encounter where Solomon is nearly hanged. Tibbeats sells Solomon to Edwin Epps, a man who boasts of his ability to break slaves.

Epps and his wife have two plantations near Bayou Boeuf, a swampy, dense area. Epps is as cruel, vengeful, and lascivious as Ford was kind and moral. He whips his slaves for any and all reasons, and he has a particular affinity for a slave named Patsey. Mistress Ford hates that her husband pursues Patsey, and thus Patsey is often between the two of them and is beaten frequently.

On Epps's plantation, Solomon picks cotton; however, he is not skilled at it, so he is given other tasks. Sometimes he is hired out to other plantations; there are a few summers when he cuts cane down near the Gulf.

Solomon peppers his narrative with accounts of how cotton and cane are planted and harvested, what life for slaves is like—Christmas, victuals, relationships, desire to escape—and does not shy away from what a monstrous, corrupting system it is. He does not excuse masters for their behavior, but he does acknowledge that the system itself is what is so pervasive and must be eradicated to make real changes.

Solomon's fortunes take a turn for the better when an itinerant carpenter named Bass comes to work for Epps for a time. Solomon can hear Bass talking frankly and sincerely to Epps about how he thinks slavery is a terrible system and must be eradicated. Epps only laughs and blames Bass's views on him being from Canada. Solomon comes to believe that Bass is the man to help him, so one day he begins telling him about the places he knows in Canada and upstate New York. Shocked, Bass encourages him to continue, and Solomon tells him his whole miserable tale. Bass dedicates himself to helping Solomon attain his freedom.

It is a lengthy process, but Bass is able to convey letters to people Solomon knows in the North. Eventually, Henry B. Northup is given the power to act as agent for the Governor of New York to procure Solomon and begin court proceedings against Epps. He has to work with Louisiana senators and other government officials, but they are amenable to this rectification of wrongdoing.

Northup arrives at Epps's place with a local sheriff who asks Solomon a series of questions to ensure he is telling the truth. Northup and Solomon embrace, and Solomon cannot contain his joy. The other slaves are incredulous that he had never told them.

Epps is angry that he has to relinquish Solomon, but he has no choice. Solomon returns home with Northup. A lengthy court proceeding begins against Burch, but he is not convicted of the kidnapping.

Solomon reunites with his family in a tender scene of joy and relief.

<https://www.gradesaver.com/twelve-years-a-slave/study-guide/summary>;

Retrieved from the Internet on September 14, 2020.

Check it out.

Burch is a White man. He is a criminal. Kidnapping Black men in the north and “selling” them to other White men—criminals—in the south. The book is supposed to be autobiographical. There are questions of whether Solomon Northrup actually wrote it or whether abolitionists wrote the book trying to portray themselves in a positive light. No question, however, no one can dispute the set of events Northrup claimed to have experienced in his book. Meanwhile, we do know that the United States Congress statutorily—and in the Constitution—ended the slave trade as of 1808. At

the end of the movie, Brad Pitt and n’em showed that the White people refused to convict Burch—the White man—of the crime of kidnapping. Obviously, had they done so they would have been convicting the Founding Fathers for the same crime, only in the source country/continent of Africa.

Now consider Meredith Melancon’s excerpt about New York’s personal liberty law, which saved Solomon Northrup’s life.

Before the Civil War, states across the north began passing personal liberty laws to protect their free black citizens from kidnappers. New York was one of those states. ... Lawyer Henry B. Northup, whose family had owned and later freed Northup’s father, was approached by Northup’s wife, Anne, with the letter Bass mailed to store owners Cephas Parker and William Perry. Because of the 1840 anti-kidnapping law, the state of New York provided the authority and funds to appoint Northup as the agent in the case of Solomon Northup. He was given a document signed by the governor certifying Solomon’s free status as a citizen of the state of New York. Once in Marksville, Henry B. Northup employed John P. Waddill to secure Solomon Northup’s freedom. Judge Ralph Cushman issued the order granting Northup’s freedom. The documents concerning the legal proceedings freeing Northup are still filed at the Avoyelles Parish Courthouse in Marksville.

https://www.hnoc.org/sites/default/files/lesson_plans/LessonPlan_SolomonNorthup.pdf (p. 22); Retrieved from the Internet on September 14, 2020.

This excerpt lays out the direct evidence that in 1840 White people clearly understood that what they were doing was illegal and therefore criminal. Whether inside the borders of the United States or in the various regions from which these dark-skinned people of Africa were taken, the entire system they got everybody to call slavery was an illegal scheme of kidnapping, false imprisonment, and forced labor. Two hundred forty years after that system began it ended and Reconstruction began. Numerous acts of the United States Government, including the Federal and State governments, were designed to enforce the principle of Black inferiority. This principle undergirded the system of so-called slavery but it was no less relevant as the country moved from Reconstruction to Black Codes, to terrorism inflicted by the Ku Klux Klan, then to Jim Crow, separate but equal, lynching and its immediate surrogate—state executions under a system of capital punishment targeted to Black men alleged to have raped White women. At the mid-point of the last century came a slight respite with the passage of Civil Rights legislation. The Black Lives Matter movement came in response to the resumption of lynching, this time by the cops in police uniforms as opposed to in White robes and masks. Through it all, the U.S. Government has led the psychological warfare against its Black citizens. The keynote of this psychological warfare has been the message of Black inferiority directed to Blacks as well as Whites and every other category of U.S. citizen and to the rest of the world.

Throughout the book and the movie, *12 Years a Slave*, Brad Pitt repeats and expands on the propaganda convincing Black people and White people not so much that Black people are once a slave and always a slave, but simply inferior. Herein lies the crux of the matter—Black inferiority, not White superiority, is the main tenet of American racism.

The one-third to one-half of White men who devoutly believe that Black people are inferior have long since adapted to the requirement to keep Americans—Black and White—believing in the inferiority of Black people. They are not focused on having people believe Blacks are still slaves any more than they believe terrorizing Black people by hanging is the appropriate lynching for 2020. These men realized straight lynching by rope is bad PR. They have long since transitioned to lynching by cop.

Clearly, America would be a failure if it chose to have Black people as slaves instead of consumers. For now, the economic benefit of Black people in 2020 is as low-end consumers. Slaves do not make money. American elites are getting rich off of low-end consumers. Virtually every dime of transfer payments in the form of Medicare, Medicaid, or AFDC, ends up in the hands of people who are already rich. Central to having those low-end consumers—disproportionately Black—is the necessity of having those people to believe they are less than. The government—and Rush Limbaugh—teach White people and Black people every day that Black people are inherently inferior to White people. Black people will buy—consume—disproportionately more perfume, deodorant, and cologne—because they are inferior to White people. Oh, it goes all the way back to Thomas Jefferson, who while at the same time he was molesting a child slave who happened to be his dead wife’s sister announced to the world that Black people were inferior because they were Black, and—they stink. More money for you know who.

Pontificating about the possibility that Blacks today are still slaves or even have a slave mentality is futile when the controlling issue is that White men who have their hands on the levers of this system are working real hard to have all of America—Black, White, Latino, Asian, and Icelanders believing that Black is inferior.

The latest trick is to get Blacks talking about “White privilege.” If Blacks could have a renewing of our minds, then pretty soon we would be exercising “White privilege.” Oh, and we would not ask anybody to give us White privilege. We would just take it. Crazy, but White privilege is available to anyone in America. I believe in White privilege. I’m gon’ always get me some of that.

Now turn back to *12 Years a Slave*:

Burch, a cruel slave trader, beats Solomon and tells him never to mention that he is from the North and that he was kidnapped. Solomon is cowed into submission but is inconsolable about his new situation. He and several other slaves are taken down South to Louisiana to be sold. Solomon witnessed firsthand the horror of a slave mother being separated from her children.

Op. cit. (Gradesaver.com).

The paragraph above points out the crimes committed by the White man, Burch. It would be quite disingenuous to gloss over Northrup’s seemingly unwitting complicity with White men. Northrup enabled Burch and his partner. Brothers! We have to recognize that a war is going on. Yes, the more famous Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was more than a half century after the initial Fugitive slave law. Northrup should have been more than well aware that White men were likely to pull a scheme to make him, a free Black man, a slave. What made him think he could trust two strange

White men in a business deal? Maybe he was motivated by the same views held by people who encourage their Black sons to be compliant when the police make a traffic stop for no reason.

Another important point about the *12 Years a Slave* movie is that it is a fine example of the continued exploitation of Black folk by White men. Even before that, we have this question: Why does Brad Pittman want to tell this story? There are thousands of stories of Black men and women who successfully escaped their imprisonment. And, they did not need the help of a White man, Canadian or not.

Brad Pitt made a ton of money off this film. According to Wikipedia, *12 Years a Slave* produced the following economic returns:

12 Years a Slave earned \$187.7 million, including \$56.7 million in the United States. During its opening limited release in the United States, *12 Years a Slave* debuted with a weekend total of \$923,715 on 19 screens for a \$48,617 per-screen average. The following weekend, the film entered the top ten after expanding to 123 theatres and grossing an additional \$2.1 million. It continued to improve into its third weekend, grossing \$4.6 million at 410 locations. The film release was expanded to over 1,100 locations on November 8, 2013. In 2014, *12 Years a Slave* was the 10th most-illegally downloaded movie, with 23.653 million such downloads, according to *Variety*.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/12_Years_a_Slave_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/12_Years_a_Slave_(film)); Retrieved from the Internet on September 14, 2020.

Pitt made a film about slavery, told the most unrepresentative story that could be told, representing himself, a White man, as the hero. Also, he made sure no Americans of African descent would make any money off this film.

Look at the budget for the movie: \$20-22 million. I am estimating that if Denzel Washington or even Jamie Foxx were to play the role of Northrup, then they would have demanded almost that amount to star in the movie. Brad Pitt had no problem casting himself in the movie—as a Canadian not an American—but chose to not have a single Black American involved in the primary jobs in a film about slavery??? He refused to deal with his own contemporaries—Blacks—as equals.

The key takeaway from all of this is that Black Americans must get our own minds right. An unprecedented renewing of our minds is in order. We require a new way of thinking that does not allow thinking like the White man who has corrupted the story from the very beginning. We should think that we have never been and shall never be slaves.

Lindsey “Rob” Robinson
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