

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE – EXTENDED ESSAY HISTORY



COLEGIO GAZTELUETA
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EXTENDED ESSAY - HISTORY

**Did the Civil War (1861-1865)
in the United States change the social situation
of the African Americans?**

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ABSTRACT

Racial discrimination toward African Americans in the United States has been an issue since the seventeenth century with the arrival of the first slaves to the country. Despite the fact that slavery was finally abolished in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, this discrimination went further. After the Civil War and throughout much of the twentieth century, African Americans were discriminated in society in different ways.

The main focus of this monograph is, hence, to determine whether the horrific events of the Civil War did or not change the social situation of the African Americans in the United States. By change, however, we refer not only to the mere abolition of slavery in the country, but the transition and status of the Negro in American society.

Through this monograph, I am going to describe and provide a fair analysis of the situation of the African Americans in the Antebellum period, the Civil War, and after the war, in an attempt to depict a comparison between *before* and *after*, in order to determine if the change was sufficient to eliminate the ideological differences between North and South and the discrimination of the Negro.

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I. Introduction

Due to limitations of space, the scope of my investigation will begin at the onset of the nineteenth century with the “peculiar institution” of slavery through the decade after the Civil War.

The term Ante-bellum refers to the period of the history of the United States between 1789 and the Civil War. This part of history began with the creation of a Constitution and after the election of George Washington as the first president of the United States.

Using the same terms, the Post-War era refers to the years of peace and the efforts of Reconstruction.

Finally, the Civil War (1861-1865) was the conflict between opposing states of the United States roughly divided by the 36° 35' parallel (introduced with the Missouri Compromise in 1820), as well as an ideological barrier.

The years contained in these three eras were years of clash between two opposite cultures: The Old South, based on an agricultural economy, and the North, more industrialized and developed. Both parts were prosperous, but there was *something* that came separated one from the other: slavery. The usage of slavery as a potentially economical labor force in the South was the main reason for some pro-slavery, southern states to leave the Union and form the Confederacy. This separation would finally end with the Civil War. However, we can not say that the origin of the Civil War found root in the institution of slavery; although it was finally abolished, it was not one of Abraham Lincoln's goals in the war. In fact, the main reason of the conflict was the preservation of the Union.

After the reentrance of the ex-Confederate states into the Union, the discussion of what place should the African Americans occupy in society was not over.

Through this monograph, I am going to describe and provide a fair analysis of the situation of the African Americans in the Antebellum period, the Civil War, and after the war, in an attempt to depict a comparison between *before* and *after*, in order to determine if the change was sufficient to eliminate the ideological differences between North and South and the discrimination of the Negro.

II. Method of investigation

Many people have written about the issue of slavery in the United States before; but only a few have approached it by analyzing the social situation of the African Americans along their struggle.

Personally, I believe this is an interesting topic of discussion, and in this interest of mine I have found several paintings of artists from the Antebellum and postwar years so as to provide the reader with a more realistic depiction of what was happening during those years. I hope this material will be helpful in the sense of getting an additional, general idea of how the life of the Negro was.

On the United States history and struggle of the Negro I have read three books: “Breve Historia de Estados Unidos”¹ (A History of the United States), by Philip Jenkins; “The Peculiar Institution”², by Kenneth Stampp; and “A Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Plantation South”³, by Stephen Currie.

III. The Antebellum Era (1800-1860)

III. a) *The Peculiar Institution: slavery In the South*

Kenneth Stampp states at the onset of his study that “prior to the Civil War southern slavery was America’s most profound and vexatious problem. More than any other

¹ I read this book in order to get a general idea about the history of the United States, particularly emphasizing in the period between 1800 and 1900, because it is a period of constant changes in the history of the country. This way, I have obtained a wide knowledge about the political, economic, demographic, and social situation of the US during the nineteenth century. The author, Philip Jenkins, distinguished professor of History and Religion in the University of Pennsylvania, born in Gales, in spite of stating in the preface that there might be a possibility that he has inclined towards one political direction or the other, offers us a very objective glance at the history of this nation. What I am saying is that in my opinion Jenkins has distanced himself from any political ideas of his own to write this fascinating book.

² Kenneth Stampp, a well known and respected author, explains through his study how the Institution of slavery in the United States affected the relationships of the people countrywide; in the North, South, East and West. His study focuses especially on how the institution worked; not only the proceedings, but also its origins and morals.

³ This is another view of how slavery worked and the situation of African Americans in the nineteenth century. Stephen Currie’s study takes root in the first days of the Institution. Unlike Stampp’s essay, he describes all the events in a chronological order and focuses more on the everyday life of the Institution and the legal procedures involved (laws, acts, etc.) Overall, it provided me with a deep look at the African American situation of that time.

problem, slavery nagged at the public conscience; offering no easy solution, it demanded statesmanship of uncommon vision, wisdom, and boldness.”⁴

To fully understand how slavery affected the public opinion, it is necessary to explain the origins of slavery in the United States, followed by the situation of social injustice that the creation of this “peculiar institution”⁵ created all over the country.

The first slaves were brought to America from Africa in the beginning of the 1600s. At first, nobody thought slavery would become a habit. Nevertheless, soon the Southern states realized that “the climatic and geographical characteristics of the South provided a great potential to form a successful agricultural economy. The creation of this kind of system created a great demand for labor.”⁶ This demand for labor would sometime be fulfilled by slaves.

Slavery did not start all at once. The slavery system emerged after a combination of choices, or decisions, that by the beginning of the nineteenth century were added to the Southerner way of life. The code of this way of life, the peculiar institution, did not however match with the values of the nineteenth century.

There are several reasons, or “myths”, that attempt to explain why the white man had the right to enslave the Negro.

First of all, proslavery southerners believed that, because of the physical traits of the Negroes, they were the fittest to work in the plantations, where the climatic and geographical characteristics were too harsh for the white man, who was not “strong” enough and therefore would struggle. Slavery, however, cannot be attributed to the climate properties, because every person could work in the plantations. “The use of slaves in southern agriculture was a deliberate choice.”⁷ The ante-bellum southerners decided to choose slavery for mere economical reasons, because other means of labor would be more expensive. Although some may state that the African Americans were the only ones capable of working in the plantations, this is not true, because anyone born and used to the climate of the south could do this task in a place free from diseases or other natural hazards.

Another reason that the enslavers attributed to the “moral rightness” of the bondage of the Negro was that due to its intellect and temperament, the Negro was designed for labor in the South, and so the natural slave of the white man. Finally, some believed that “Africans were barbarians who therefore needed to be subjected to rigid discipline and

⁴ Kenneth Stampp, “The Peculiar Institution, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1956, p. vii (preface)

⁵ This is the name by which the African Americans referred to slavery in the South.

⁶ Kenneth Stampp, “The Peculiar Institution, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1956, p. 4

⁷ Idem, p. 5

severe controls. Their enslavement was essential for their own good and for the preservation of the white civilization.”⁸

The difference between slavery in the United States and in other civilizations and times was that in the U.S. slaves were determined by the color of their skin and it was heritable.

The social situation of the African Americans under the system of slavery was unjust and generally harsh. Although some slaveholders were nice to their slaves, they were always working for them, and almost always painful physical punishments were executed when the slaves tried to run away or had done something “wrong”.

Another issue surrounding this institution is the reason why slavery was passed from generation to generation. Southerners who believed in this answered that the African Americans were not ready to adapt to the whites’ way of life⁹ The African Americans came from rich cultures with their own economies and ways of life.

As I have indicated before, the expansion of slavery in the South originated after the birth of the plantation system as part of an agricultural economy, a potentially successful economic system for territories that had enough land and favorable weather to grow crops such as cotton.

With the expansion of slavery, a new way of life appeared in the South for both slaves and slaveholders, which consisted basically in wealthy families who owned large amounts of land. This way of life is usually referred as life in the plantations, and it extended from the states of Florida and Texas as far north as Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri.

In the plantations, slaves were not considered regular human beings. They were property, “forced to work without pay whenever and however their masters pleased. According to the law, slaves were not fully human.”¹⁰ Considered property, it was easy to manage this institution.

⁸ Idem, p. 11

⁹ Kenneth Stampp determines this belief a fallacy, as we can see from the following quote: “the idea that Negroes needed to be civilized by a slow evolutionary process, during which they would gradually acquire and transmit to their descendents the white man’s patterns of social behavior, contains two fallacies... the first generation of Negroes born in America in the seventeenth century was just as well prepared for freedom as the generation that was emancipated in the 1860’s. The adaptation to the white man’s culture involved a process of education, not one of biological evolution... the second fallacy results from a total misapprehension of the Negro’s African background.” (Idem, p.12).

¹⁰ Stephen Currie, “A Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Plantation South”, Thomson Gale, Luncent Library of Black History, 2005, p. 7.

It is very important to understand, however, that not all the southerners welcomed the institution. Some of them even encouraged slaves in nearby plantations to runaway to the North. These individuals were few, but sometimes made a huge difference, although were considered by other Southerners as a threat to the institution and were exposed to violence or social discrimination.

Eastman Johnson. *Negro Life at the South*, 1859



I chose this painting for two reasons: Eastman Johnson (1824-1906) was an American artist who witnessed the events of the nineteenth century first hand. Also, he addresses the place of the African Americans before the Civil War by including most of the facts of the Negro life in the South. As Bruce Robertson states in his essay, “it is a home that incorporates virtually every available trope of family life: courtship and marriage, motherhood, training the young, listening to the old. Most astonishingly, the white visitor is marginalized, inverting the motif used in Mount’s *Power of Music*, Johnson’s painting

depicts a black man playing and his white audience listening.”¹¹ Hence, Eastman Johnson’s painting fully represents the life of the Negro in the Southern states.

There are several subtopics by which we can analyze this painting. There is the spiritual significance. As we can see, one of the Negroes in the setting is playing the banjo, a traditional African American music instrument. At the same time, a woman is teaching a young child to dance. Also, three more people are being amused by the sound of the music; a young lady sitting on the ground in front of the musician, and another woman and a child, who are listening to the man playing from the window.

The spiritual significance of this painting is, therefore, the idea that all these traditions from the African heritage kept the past culture alive. This way, the African Americans would not forget about their past and the unjust present situation

We can see from this painting the importance of the family. Family for the Negro was sacred, it was the last thing they had. That kept them together and they would believe in something. A father and a mother would raise their children in their own way, they would teach them about their past and the social injustice that they were suffering. This is the main reason why slave traders would separate the families before selling slaves to masters. They believed that a separated family would cause less trouble. Furthermore, marriage between African Americans was illegal.

Finally, there is another important representation in this painting. The white woman entering the backyard through a door and the one talking to one of the slaves depict two common ways of managing the peculiar institution. One of them was to keep an eye on them; this is making sure they were not planning any revolt or talking about their injustice. This way, the white woman talking to a Negro while she is sewing kept the slave entertained and kept him from thinking about other things.

At the same time, however, the white women, who did not take part in the family economy, and therefore did not work, are taking care of the slaves. As an excuse for the bondage of the Negro, they were “teaching them to become civilized”.

¹¹ Bruce Robertson, “American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life (1765-1915)”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 70.

William Sydney Mount. *The Power of Music*, 1847



In this case, I chose the artist William Sidney Mount (1807-1868) because he raises a question that has to do with what I explained regarding the excuses for the bondage of the Negro. In his painting, he leaves the viewers with a question, as Bruce Robertson states in his essay: “The image proved difficult to read. Was it depicting the black man as lazy and easily seduced by the charms of music, or was it dignifying him?”¹²

Thus, he is asking the viewer to think about the morality of the institution: Does the viewer see the painting as a representation of the laziness of the Negro (and therefore he is accepting one of the reasons of slavery) or as a picture that dignifies him?

¹² Bruce Robertson, “American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life (1765-1915), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 68.

Finally, the situation suggests another injustice. The Negro is not allowed in closed places with the whites.

III. b) The North and Slavery

The institution of slavery did not only exist in the Southern plantations. The first generations of slaves had been on both the North and the South, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century “there were still 30.000 slaves in the northern states.”¹³ However, the trade of slavery finished in 1808.

We should not forget, however, that the North had always been more vulnerable to slavery. As a more developed territory, many people rejected slavery, and the abolitionist segment of the population grew. Also, by the mid-eighteenth century the number of slaves had been reduced. Personally I think that the vulnerability towards the institution in the North was originated for two reasons: The slaves in the North were not a powerful labor force, and the cultural values were changing as time passed.

The North has usually been known at this time for the emergence of abolitionism (we should not forget, however, that these activists also existed in the South).

“Abolitionists varied in their approach and their goals, but they shared a desire to eliminate slavery not just in the territories, but wherever it existed.”¹⁴ However, while the abolitionists that traveled to the South in order to help the slaves gave them a welcoming and just image of the Northern states, this was not completely true; as freed African Americans began to settle in the cities, antipathy emerged. This situation of racial discrimination took place especially in those parts of the north populated with people somehow linked to the South¹⁵.

III. c) Countdown to war

By the 1830s, “white southerners no longer questioned any aspect of slavery, at least not in public... Though the majority of northerners opposed slavery in the abstract, their opposition did not run very deep. Hardly any northerners considered blacks –slave or free- to be their equals.”¹⁶ This would be finally evident after the Civil War was over

¹³ Philip Jenkins, “Breve Historia de Estados Unidos”, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2005, p. 120

¹⁴ Stephen Currie, “A Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the South”, Thomson Gale, Luncet Library of Black History, p. 84

¹⁵ Philip Jenkins gets to the same conclusion, and then he adds examples of the hostility toward northern abolitionists.

¹⁶ Stephen Currie, “A Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Plantation South”, Thomson Gale, p. 86

when the ex-slaves tried to adapt in new territories. Also, most of the northern citizens did not think it was “their business to tell the southern states how to run their affairs.”¹⁷

Despite this sense of individual freedom, the once-low voices of the abolitionists became louder when the issue of slavery was to be extended to the new territories in the West. “The situation of the slaves declined due to the fear of insurrections, which was perceived as a need of vigilance and closer control.”¹⁸ This meant more in quantity and graver punishments were executed for smaller “offenses”. It is true, however, that many African Americans decided to leave the plantations in search of social justice in the North or in Canada. Also, some of these “runaways” returned to the South to help those in bondage follow his steps or to organize insurrections with the motivating help of northern abolitionists. “Many masters stopped allowing slaves to congregate, even for religious meetings. Slaveholders feared that the slaves would seize every opportunity to plot a rebellion”¹⁹.

By the 1830s the tension between proslavery states and abolitionists had increased, yet it would not be until 1850 that the federal government started making decisions addressing the slavery issue (see Table 1).

The South could not get rid of the institution. “Moreover, slavery in the ante-bellum South was not purely or exclusively an economic institution: it was also part of a social pattern made venerable by long tradition and much philosophizing.”²⁰ This clearly explains why the Southerners would not abolish slavery in their territories. The institution, as Kenneth Stampp stated, was something that had been instilled in the Southern values generation after generation. We can say, hence, that the South was living in the past. It was by the mid-eighteenth century the biggest cotton producer in the world; while some people might think that this could promote change, it only bettered the individual southerner’s pockets. As Rhett Butler says in “Gone With The Wind”, “the cost of living in the past is dying right in front of us.”²¹

By 1850 there were about 440.000 freed African Americans.²² At this point when the abolitionists were being heard, the survival of the institution was threatened. However, “the survival of slavery was assured while it kept being the business of the own states... but the real danger lied on what the federal government did.”²³ When this happened, then, the institution would be coming to an end.

¹⁷ Idem, p. 87

¹⁸ Philip Jenkins, “Breve Historia de Estados Unidos”, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2005, p. 121

¹⁹ Paul Boyer, “The American Nation”, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1998, p. 275

²⁰ Kenneth Stampp, “The Peculiar Institution, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1956, p. 385

²¹ “Gone With The Wind” (Victor Flemming, 1939)

²² Philip Jenkins, “Breve Historia de Estados Unidos”, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2005, p. 164.

²³ Idem, p. 168.

As we can see in the table, the government had started addressing the issue of slavery in 1850. The decisions that were made only helped to widen the difference between North and South. Finally, with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1861, southern states began to secede and the war would follow.

Act	Goal	Result
Compromise of 1850	Banned slavery in CA.	For the North, it did not do enough to stop the spread of slavery. For the South, it did too much.
Fugitive Slave Act	Part of the Compromise of 1850. Runaway slaves must be returned to their masters.	Created hostility toward the south because most northerners preferred to aid the runaways.
Kansas-Nebraska Act	The people of the newly organized territories could choose whether to hold slavery.	The North found it impossible to accept: it could lead the southerners to ask for the same treat in other states.
Dred Scott Decision	The decision of the Supreme Court to enslave a slave who had lived in a free territory, after the death of his master.	Northerners found it unjust, while southerners applauded the decision.

Table 1. The ways by which the federal government addressed the issue of slavery²⁴

IV. The Civil War (1861-1865)

Although many people think that slavery was the root of the Civil War, this is not completely true. It was just one of the issues that separated the North and South ideologically. There are several ways I can prove this and show how even in a war that was supposed to be fought for the African Americans' freedom and rights, social injustice remained.

First, at first "Lincoln portrayed the war simply as a battle to preserve the Union, not an attempt to eliminate slavery throughout the South...freeing the slaves was important only if it helped fulfill the greater goal."²⁵ He repeated again and again that he would address the slavery issue depending on the effects that they produced regarding the protection of the Union.

²⁴ Based on: Philip Jenkins, "A Brief History of the United States", Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 2005, p. 171-178; and Stephen Currie, "A Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Plantation South", Lucent Library of Black History, 2005, p. 87-91

²⁵ Stephen Currie: "A Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Plantation South", Thomson Gale, Lucent Library of Black History, p. 93-94.

Secondly, free African Americans in the North did not really fight in the Union. Instead, they were stationed behind doing other kind of services. The African American units were not supplied with proper or enough supplies and were not called to fight.

Therefore, I should come to the conclusion that the slaves where used as a tool to preserve the Union, and hence, it was a war for the preservation of the unity of the white people.

By the end of the war, the Southerners would not accept the fact that they were about to loose this war. If one thing still remained from the days of the economic boom they experienced (it came to an end right after the war began), it was the pride of their tradition: “Heads were high, but hearts were heavy.”²⁶ As the southerners’ way of life was gone with the wind, they were still trying to convince themselves that they would escape defeat. Though the outcome of the war was clear, the war on what they believed in was not over.

However, they would realize that what they believed in was about to disappear, with the new Amendments to the Constitution that were introduced after the end of the Civil War.

Theodor Kaufmann, *On to liberty*, 1867



²⁶ “Gone With The Wind” (Victor Fleming, 1936)

Theodor Kauffman (1814-1887) depicts in his painting the transition from the life on the plantations to the land of freedom. As we can see, the African Americans are running away from the darkened woods, the institution of slavery, towards the brightened and clear Union troops, which represent the civilized world, freedom. This is the southern civilization was in the middle of its decline.

V. The Post-bellum era

Although with the end of war came the end of slavery (13th Amendment), the suffrage of the Negro was not over yet. At this point (I am talking about the period from 1865 until 1875), thousands of ex-slaves migrated North and West, although some of them stayed in the South. If there was anything that the migrating slaves shared in common, it was the eagerness to find a better life without discrimination. The Negro was ready to settle, but as we will see, he would be challenged in several ways; by the law, the people, and the land.

The first clash was the one that occurred in the South. This society built up by tradition had to face now the reality. This was not an easy task, as Booker T. Washington states in his essay, “when the South tried to use its new freed labor on its new industrial possibilities, it went to the problem full of the ideals of slavery. In the first place it was perfectly natural for a land which had said for generations that free Negro labor was an impossibility, and free Negro citizens unthinkable, to cherish a very distinct idea that the way to get along with the emancipated Negro was to make him a slave in fact if not in name... these labor codes therefore attempted to reestablish slavery without a slave trade.”²⁷ These codes consisted in lowered wages and worse working conditions, among other injustices.

As well as in the South, in the North people were now against the African Americans taking over their jobs. There was a shortage of labor in the North, and a second clash between the white and the Negro occurred.

However, an attempt to change the situation of injustice in general was made by the government with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment (not as important as the Thirteenth but very significant in the future of the nation). It granted the African Americans the right to vote. This was not fully accepted countrywide. In the South, for example, the black codes emerged soon. African Americans were required to pass

²⁷ The Negro in the South; His Economic Progress in Relation to His Moral and Religious Development; Being the William Levi Bull Lectures for the Year 1907: Electronic Edition. Washington, Booker T., 1856-1915 and W.E.B. DuBois (William Edward Burghardt) 1868-1963. Found at: [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/washdubo/washington.html>], p. 86-87.

literacy tests. What the Fourteenth Amendment had not been able to accomplish, however, it was now done by the Fifteenth, “which went to the root of the matter by putting local political power into the hands of the freedmen”²⁸, and this was the big difference, as African Americans would soon start introducing legislation to protect their rights. Nevertheless, the political power of these was very weak. As Peter Kolchin states, “the unifying feature of the freed people’s behavior during the postwar years was their determination to... demonstrate to themselves and others that they were really free.”²⁹ This is they wanted to show themselves what they were capable of, a fight that would not finish until the second half of the twentieth century.

In the West freedmen found a safe place, free from the burden of discrimination. The government also tried to aid the ex-slaves with the Freedmen’s Bureau, which provided them with supplies, employment, health, and education. Although they had some rights, they were always considered a lower cast in society. In fact, regarding to civil rights, the furthest they went by the end of the century was the “separate but equal” legislation.³⁰

Overall, we can say that, despite all the efforts of the government to make it easier to the Negro to adapt, the African Americans would not find it easy. In my concern, the main reason for this is that the country was left after the war with terrible memories that would influence the decisions and opinions made about what place the Negro should take in society. At this point people were more vulnerable to big changes and where confused about the participation of the Negro in society, something new to them.

Richard Norris Brooke. A Pastoral Visit, 1881.

Richard Norris Brook (1847-1920) depicts in his painting the life of the African Americans once settled in the North and South, East and West. The breadwinner is at home with his family because he has no job, as he is competing against other workers. As we have seen, the country’s economy at this time was not favorable for the Negro, and neither was discrimination over. When it came to jobs, even people in the North who had before opposed the institution discriminated the African Americans, keeping them from having the same rights or opportunities.

At the same time, the Negro is dignified. Although he has no job (I assume), he is with is loved ones and is receiving a visit. Kauffman probably used this visit to dignify the family, as they are learning from a wise man.

²⁸ Idem, p. 88

²⁹ Peter Kolchin, “American Slavery”, Penguin Books, 1995, p.217.

³⁰ Introduced by the Jim Crow Laws in 1876 and 1965.



VI. Conclusion

As I stated in the introduction, the focus of this study is the social situation of the Negro throughout the nineteenth century in order to make a fair judgment on whether the Civil War changed in a better sense the situation of the African Americans.

First of all, we have seen that the social situation of the African Americans both in the Ante-bellum and Post-bellum period was harsh. Although slavery was abolished after the war, black codes existed, which limited the rights of the African Americans, preventing them from participating in politics, social life, and jobs.

Also, we have learnt that the origin of the war was not the issue of slavery, but the preservation of the Union: If Abraham Lincoln had not cared about the Union, a war would not have happened probably.

However, as a result of the war, slavery was abolished, which was an essentially important step to continue the fight for the civil rights of the Negro,

Nevertheless, the social status of the Negro did not change significantly with the Civil War. Thus, we should answer the question presented in this essay as no. The Civil War (1861-1865) did change the social situation of the Negro, but not in a very significant way.

3.91 words

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