



African-American History

The history of blacks in America is unique. No other group to come here from another continent has been torn away from its roots and harshly subjected to the institution of slavery. And slavery divided the American people more than any other issue of its time.



The “peculiar institution,” as it was called, was debated at all levels of society and government – core to complex and interlocking philosophical, social, economic, and political views. It was an issue that

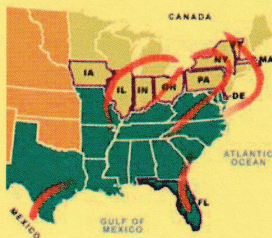
proved too difficult to resolve by legislation, eventually tearing the nation in two.

The movement of freedom-seeking slaves functioned from the founding of the Republic, through the bloodletting of the Civil War, involving not only single individuals, but entire communities, and with the central focus always being the intense struggle for freedom.

This quest led to an illegal, yet effective, fugitive network still hailed as one of American history’s most mysterious phenomena – the Underground Railroad.

With its “conductors,” “stations,” “routes,” “packages,” and “passengers,” it came to symbolize a struggle against oppression.

Blacks also participated in many actions of the Civil War on both sides, either as enlisted soldiers and sailors, or often as body servants, following their masters into battle. After issue of the Emancipation Proclamation, early use of Federal black troops in combat came quickly – at Port Hudson and Millikens Bend, Louisiana – where the troops fought valiantly. These proving grounds



demonstrated the black man's willingness and ability to fight, and the troops were repeatedly cited for heroic conduct in battle.

Following the surrender of Vicksburg in July 1863, black refugees flooded the city, overwhelming Union occupying forces, and often ending up starving and sick. Gradually, however, Federal authorities were able to alleviate some of the suffering and hardships, establishing one of the first Freedmen's Bureau's offices in the nation. This agency created land and labor policies for black freedmen and provided the first vestiges of formal education for blacks – an effort that became the one enduring legacy of the Bureau.



Even though the Bureau, and the era of Reconstruction in general, is now considered to have failed in its purpose of establishing equality for the freed slaves, many of its aspects, particularly the relief efforts, saved many from starvation and began a resettlement and rebuilding process for countless refugees.

Through the pride and appreciation of their heritage and the many achievements of fellow blacks, African-Americans have been able to grasp their hard-won freedoms and take their rightful place in the citizenry of this country, enhancing the greatness and growth of the nation.

For more in-depth information on black history in the Vicksburg area, please inquire about the publication, *"Glimpses of the African-American Experience,"* available at the Visitor Center information desk.



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