

## Forgotten Step Toward Freedom

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WE Americans live in a society awash in historical celebrations. The last few years have witnessed commemorations of the bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase (2003) and the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II (2005). Looming on the horizon are the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth (2009) and the sesquicentennial of the outbreak of the Civil War (2011). But one significant milestone has gone strangely unnoticed: the 200th anniversary of Jan. 1, 1808, when the importation of slaves into the United States was prohibited.

This neglect stands in striking contrast to the many scholarly and public events in Britain that marked the 2007 bicentennial of that country's banning of the slave trade. There were historical conferences, museum exhibits, even a high-budget film, "Amazing Grace," about William Wilberforce, the leader of the parliamentary crusade that resulted in abolition.

What explains this divergence? Throughout the 1780s, the horrors of the Middle Passage were widely publicized on both sides of the Atlantic and by 1792 the British Parliament stood on the verge of banning the trade. But when war broke out with revolutionary France, the idea was shelved. Final prohibition came in 1807 and it proved a major step toward the abolition of slavery in the empire.

The British campaign against the African slave trade not only launched the modern concern for human rights as an international principle, but today offers a usable past for a society increasingly aware of its multiracial character. It remains a historic chapter of which Britons of all origins can be proud.

In the United States, however, slavery not only survived the end of the African trade but embarked on an era of unprecedented expansion. Americans have had to look elsewhere for memories that ameliorate our racial discontents, which helps explain our recent focus on the 19th-century Underground Railroad as an example (widely commemorated and often exaggerated) of blacks and whites working together in a common cause.

Nonetheless, the abolition of the slave trade to the United States is well worth remembering. Only a small fraction (perhaps 5 percent) of the estimated 11 million Africans brought to the New World in the four centuries of the slave trade were destined for the area that became the United States. But in the Colonial era, Southern planters regularly purchased imported slaves, and merchants in New York and New England profited handsomely from the trade.

The American Revolution threw the slave trade and slavery itself into crisis. In the run-up to war, Congress banned the importation of slaves as part of a broader nonimportation policy. During the War of Independence, tens of thousands of slaves escaped to British lines. Many accompanied the British out of the country when peace arrived.

Inspired by the ideals of the Revolution, most of the newly independent American states banned the slave trade. But importation resumed to South Carolina and Georgia, which had been occupied by the British during the war and lost the largest number of slaves.

The slave trade was a major source of disagreement at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. South Carolina's delegates were determined to protect slavery, and they had a powerful impact on the final document. They originated the three-fifths clause (giving the South extra representation in Congress by counting part of its slave population) and threatened disunion if the slave trade were banned, as other states demanded.

The result was a compromise barring Congress from prohibiting the importation of slaves until 1808. Some Anti-Federalists, as opponents of ratification were called, cited the slave trade clause as a reason why the Constitution should be rejected, claiming it brought shame upon the new nation.

The outbreak of the slave revolution in Haiti in the early 1790s sent shock waves of fear throughout the American South and led to new state laws barring the importation of slaves. But in 1803, as cotton cultivation spread, South Carolina reopened the trade. The Legislature of the newly acquired Louisiana Territory also allowed the importation of slaves. From 1803 to 1808, between 75,000 and 100,000 Africans entered the United States.

By this time, the international slave trade was widely recognized as a crime against humanity. In 1807, Congress prohibited the importation of slaves from abroad, to take effect the next New Year's Day, the first date allowed by the Constitution.

For years thereafter, free African-Americans celebrated Jan. 1 as an alternative to July 4, when, in their view, patriotic orators hypocritically proclaimed the slave-owning United States a land of liberty.

It is easy to understand, however, why the trade's abolition appears so anticlimactic. Banning American participation in the slave trade did not end the shipment of Africans to the Western Hemisphere. Some three million more slaves were brought to Brazil and Spanish America before the trade finally ended. With Southerners dominating the federal government for most of the period before the Civil War, enforcement was lax and the smuggling of slaves into the United States continued.

Those who hoped that ending American participation in the slave trade would weaken or destroy slavery were acutely disappointed. In the United States, unlike the West Indies, the slave population grew by natural increase. This was not because American owners were especially humane, but because most of the South lies outside the tropical environment where diseases like yellow fever and malaria exacted a huge toll on whites and blacks alike.

As slavery expanded into the Deep South, a flourishing internal slave trade replaced importation from Africa. Between 1808 and 1860, the economies of older states like Virginia came increasingly to rely on the sale of slaves to the cotton fields of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. But demand far outstripped supply, and the price of slaves rose inexorably, placing ownership outside the reach of poorer Southerners.

Let us imagine that the African slave trade had continued in a legal and open manner well into the 19th century. It is plausible to assume that hundreds of thousands if not millions of Africans would have been brought into the country.

This most likely would have resulted in the "democratization" of slavery as prices fell and more and more whites could afford to purchase slaves, along with a further increase in Southern political power thanks to the Constitution's three-fifths clause. These were the very reasons advanced by South Carolina's political leaders when they tried, unsuccessfully, to reopen the African slave trade in the 1850s.

More slaves would also have meant heightened fear of revolt and ever more stringent controls on the slave population. It would have reinforced Southerners' demands to annex to the United States areas suitable for plantation slavery in the Caribbean and Central America. Had the importation of slaves continued

unchecked, the United States could well have become the hemispheric slave-based empire of which many Southerners dreamed. Jan. 1, 1808, is worth commemorating not only for what it directly accomplished, but for helping to save the United States from a history even more terrible than the Civil War that eventually rid our country of slavery.

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