



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN: 2349-9753

## THE ROLE OF SLAVERY IN AMERICAN ECONOMY DURING AMERICAN FRONTIER ERA

M. Sreenivasulu

(Author is a teacher of English literature, language and Indian Classical music. He is an ardent Carnatic vocalist)

[doi: https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.63.79](https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.63.79)

### ABSTRACT



American literature and life bears the experience of going through the tumultuous challenges during the beginning days of forming the colonies in New England. The pilgrim forefathers avoiding the prosecution ventured on to the promised land crossing the Atlantic.

The Life was not easy on the new continent. The land is fret with unforeseen dangers, impregnated with threats from aboriginals and wilderness of the nature including deadly life severing diseases. Mark Twain's Mississippi regional novels, Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn can disclose some of the tendencies and vagaries those were pertinent during the times of Frontier. The Colonies were established, the religion was spread across the continent, the aboriginals were rooted out from their own lands and villages. The feet of the colonizer laid on the land. American Dream was carved out to guide the progeny the course of life they need to take in order to have their lives to be called as successful ones. The definition of success in terms of American dream was equaled with having a own estate, a good fertile agriculture land, a big family, a good number of SLAVES to toil on soil, the American Dream which replicated in the economic growth of the land demanded induction of men and women who can work tirelessly without expecting any goodness from the owner--then the slavery would only be the option. American land has become a great market for slavery who were being forcefully abducted from African continent. My paper would endeavor to discuss the importance of African slaves in building the American economy which unfortunately claimed as the god sent prosperity, a claim much inhuman than the slavery itself.

**Keywords:** *Slavery, American Frontier, Manifest Destiny, American Dream, Necessary Evil, Slave hunting, Boston Massacre*



### THE BEGINNINGS OF THE EVIL- THE SLAVERY

Slavery in America started in the year of 1619. The first person who did bring slaves to America was White Lion, he brought twenty men from Africa as slaves to be sold in James Town, Virginia. American settlers preferred to employ the slaves because of cheap labor and ownership rights. The first colonies in Massachusetts bay, Virginia, James Town required huge workforce to build the agrarian business. The white work force was of no use as it was very dismal in strength and permanent ownership was not possible. Manifest destiny, the belief that the America was given to the settlers as a divine gift to make life worthy to be lived with dignity and prosperity spreading the religion among the aboriginals. It directed the Americans to spread the 'virtue' on alien land so that their duty be fulfilled. Thomas Jefferson's expansionism enflamed the tendencies of encroachment of land and resources who were hitherto in the hands of the Red Indians. During the times of Wild West, American expansionism reached its peak after receiving initial set back in the hands of nature and aboriginals. American Frontier is the term which designates the geographical entity and experiential existence in the early American history. It was the testing time for the British migrants, the pilgrim forefathers in the hands of nature red in tooth and claw. Life threatening assaults from native tribes, attacks from wild animals, deaths from infectious diseases dwindled the number of pilgrim forefathers who descended on American continent. Yet life went on and challenges were overcome. Slaves were brought in large numbers from Africa and they were auctioned off in open markets as it was with cattle. It was estimated that African land was bereft of working men because all the able men were transported to America as slaves to be sold in local slave markets.



(Slave Auction Block, Green Hill Plantation, Virginia)

### THE CONDITION OF AGRICULTURE AND TRADE DURING THE FRONTIER ERA

Indeed, Native American are the first farmers on the Western hemisphere and in North America<sup>ii</sup>. During the colonial era in America the major agriculture was plantation. The rich grabbed the land and planted various cash crops like cotton, rubber, tea, coffee, tobacco besides substantial food crops. The major challenge was to clean up the land to make it suitable to be tilled. It was a strenuous job demands hard physical labor. The colonies grew food crops like barley, peas and maize to sustain the livelihood. The region of black soil in America bestowed the colonists with the most suitable land for growing cotton. Cotton was much in demand both in America and in Europe including England. The industrial revolution in Europe created a big market for America in Europe where quick money can be made easily by selling the agricultural products which were produced with the labor of enslaved Africans. Peasant Revolution was a possibility in England during fourteenth century but not possible in American of Seventeenth or Eighteenth century as education and political realization was not made as a possibility for African slaves. Initially shifting cultivation was practiced in frontier regions as the virgin soil promised good yield, but instead of replenishing the land with nutrients for re cultivation the farmers used to move toward farther places to clear them for farming. The Second wave settlers used to purchase the abandoned land and started to renovate and refurbish it with manure and necessary ingredients so as to use it effectively to grow crops. The



agricultural tools and equipments were not sophisticated enough to meet the new demands of farming, it resulted in incessant hard labor throughout the year.

### THE ROLE OF AFRICAN SLAVES IN MAKING THE AMERICAN DREAM A REALITY

The American dream emphasizes the importance of prosperity in one's life. There has been the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement<sup>iii</sup>. It tries to encourage its citizens to create wealth and value with the help of democracy, liberty and equality. But it was not on lines with California Dream where wealth creation seems to be an overnight affair by discovering a big chunk of gold. The American dream can only be realized with the intensity of physical work and intellectual sagacity. In the agrarian economy like early America wealth creation was a possibility with manual labor only. The slaves who were brought from Africa had to live on the farm lands which they till, they had to work round the clock, there were no holidays to be enjoyed. The draconic fugitive law forbade any other citizen to possess the slaves owned by a settler even on humanitarian grounds. Slaves were the backbone of American growth in those days of settlements. Slavery, particularly the cotton slavery that existed from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the Civil War, was a thoroughly modern business, one that was continuously changing to maximize profits.<sup>iv</sup>

The Mississippi river valley which was once infested with wild animals and poisonous snakes, started to produce the millionaires in America. The South was producing seventy five percent of the total world's cotton. The reason for the prosperity was in the hands of African slaves who were toiling in the hard fields sparing no excuse. The price of a slave in a slave market was around \$1200 to \$1500<sup>v</sup> but the wealth they created was not less than in millions of dollars.



(African slaves bringing the cotton yield to warehouse)

According to the research work, '*Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*', which was edited by Sven Beckert, the Laird Bell Professor of History at Harvard University and visiting professor at HBS, as well as Seth Rockman, Associate Professor of History at Brown University, in contrary to popular belief, more than half of the nation's exports in the first six decades of the 19th century consisted of raw cotton, almost all of it grown by slaves. It was an absolute impossibility to achieve that much growth without the active participation of the slaves in agricultural frame work of America. The wealth created, if it is, by the master and the slave, then both of them would become stake holders on it. But the reality was entirely opposite to it. Slaves even though the owner dies could not own the land which they tilled throughout their lives without claiming any wages for their labor.

### CONCLUSION

The eradication of slavery is celebrated in the following lines by William Cullen Bryant as if the scourge is no more and human tears which could not melt the stony heart now achieved freedom for the eyes which they did bear.

*'O THOU great Wrong, that, through  
the slow-paced years,  
Didst hold thy millions fettered, and  
didst wield  
The scourge that drove the laborer to  
the field,  
And turn a stony gaze on human tears,  
Thy cruel reign is o'er;  
Thy bondmen crouch no more<sup>vii</sup>*



But the real question is whether America, now the super power, can acknowledge the fact that its pillars were laid deep by the people who are mostly non native Americans? If they fail recognize the history of humanity will not forgive it. Before geographical boundaries are drawn and walls are built, America needs to ponder over the reality of strength of its existence as economic super power of the globe.

---

i

<http://memory.loc.gov/pnp/habshaer/va/va0200/va0279/photos/160052pv.jpg>

<sup>ii</sup> Hurt, Douglas R(2002). American Agriculture: A Brief History. Purdue University Press. New York

<sup>iii</sup> Adams, James Truslow(2012). The Epic of America. Transaction Publishers. New Brunswick and London

<sup>iv</sup>

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/8/16/20806069/slavery-economy-capitalism-violence-cotton-edward-baptist>

<sup>v</sup> Bailey, C Anne(2017). The Weeping Time : The Largest Slave Auction in America. Cambridge University Press. New York

<sup>vi</sup> Getty Images. Bettmann Archives

<sup>vii</sup> Bryant, William Cullen

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boyer, Paul S(2012). American History A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press. New York

Kolchin, Peter(2003). American Slavery 1619-1877. Straus and Giroux Press. New York

Cullen, Jim(2004). The American Dream : A Short History of an Idea that Shaped the Nation. Oxford University Press. New York

Taylor, Alan(2002). American Colonies: The Settling of North America. Penguin Books Publication. Dublin

Matson, Cathey D(2006). The Economy of Early America. Pennsylvania State University Press. US

Shannon, Fred Albert(1977). The Farmer's Last Frontier M E Sharpe Press. New York.