

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 5: 1820-1854)”

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By the year 1820, the republic consisted of 22 states: the original 13, plus nine more. Slavery had been mostly abolished in seven of the original thirteen – everything from Pennsylvania and New Jersey north. Slavery was legal in the other six – everything from Maryland and Delaware south. Vermont joined in 1791, and prohibited slavery. Kentucky and Tennessee were added in 1792 and 1796; both allowed slavery. Ohio joined in 1803 as a free state; Louisiana in 1812 as a slave state. Indiana in 1816 as a free state; Mississippi in 1817 as a slave state. Illinois, 1818, free; Alabama, 1819, slave. That makes 11 free states and 11 slave states – a perfect balance, which the South wanted to maintain. But tensions were rising. When Missouri applied to enter the Union as a slave state, a bitter debate erupted in Congress. In the end they compromised: Missouri would be a slave state, but there would never be any more slave states north of Missouri’s *southern* border. And Maine would enter as a free state.

In New York City, the black Methodist churches still had white pastors, because the Methodist Episcopal Church would not ordain blacks. In 1821 six of the churches decided to pull out. They formed the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church – the second denomination in America founded by blacks. But the Presbyterian Church was starting to ordain blacks to the ministry in places like Philadelphia and New York City; our democratic structure allowed for more regional variation based on local opinion.

In the state of New York, in 1826, a black mother named Isabella Baumfree escaped from slavery with her infant daughter. New York had begun abolishing slavery in 1799, but it was a gradual process that took decades. Isabella escaped a year before her servitude would have ended. She became a devout Christian and an outspoken abolitionist, and changed her name to Sojourner Truth.

Cincinnati was growing by leaps in bounds because of the steamboat industry on the Ohio River. People came flocking to the city looking for work – including large numbers of blacks from Kentucky and Virginia, both free blacks and runaway slaves. (Virginia had deported all the free blacks.) Most of them were poor and not well educated. White laborers resented the increased competition for jobs; white residents complained about the shacks where the poor blacks lived, and started saying they would only vote for city leaders who would limit the number of blacks in the city. Laws were passed making life difficult for blacks: the testimony of a black person was not legal in court; a black person could not defend himself against a charge, or bring a case against a white person; if a black owned property, he had to pay taxes to support the schools, which black children could not attend. But blacks continued to come to the city. In 1829 the situation erupted; mobs of white people attacked blacks, trying to get them to leave. Many did: more than 1000 blacks left the city and looked for someplace else to live.

What were free blacks supposed to do? Where were they supposed to go? Back to Africa? The American Colonization Society was trying to make that happen. But those efforts were a dismal failure; the transportation costs were very high; black families that had lived here for generations resented the

pressure to leave; and 50% of the blacks who did go to Africa died from disease after they got there.

In 1831, Nat Turner – a black slave and preacher in Virginia – had come to believe that God was telling him to *do something*. He acquired weapons and launched a violent rebellion. About 60 whites were killed – and about 160 blacks. In response, Southern states passed more laws prohibiting the education of slaves and free blacks, restricting their rights of assembly, and requiring a white minister to be present at all religious services. The result: widespread illiteracy among blacks, both slaves *and* free.

By this point, there were a growing number of legislators, philosophers, and even pastors in the South who were defending the institution of slavery. In 1836 James Henry Hammond, a representative from South Carolina, argued that slavery is “the greatest of all blessings which a kind Providence has bestowed upon our glorious region.... There is not a happier, more contented people on the face of the earth.... Lightly tasked, well clothed, well fed – far better than the free laborers of any country in the world ... their lives and persons protected by the law, all their sufferings alleviated by the kindest and most interested care....” There was a growing sense in the South that slavery was not a “necessary evil” but a “positive good,” ordained by God, providing benefits to the economy, to the slaveowners, *and even to the slaves themselves*. Yet if that were true, why were education and civil rights being denied to the slaves? Why were there so many revolts? Why were so many slaves trying to *escape to freedom*?

That same year, white mobs again attacked blacks in Cincinnati – and also the white people who supported them. Arkansas joined the Union as a slave state. Michigan joined the next year, a free state.

In 1837, Elijah Lovejoy, a Presbyterian pastor and abolitionist in Illinois, was shot and killed while he was defending his printing press from a white mob. The country was shocked. Many were indignant.

In 1838 a group of Catholic priests in Maryland decided to get out of the slave-owning business. They sold 272 slaves to the Deep South and donated the proceeds to Georgetown College, a Catholic school in Washington, DC, that was burdened by financial problems. That money saved the college and helped transform it into Georgetown University. But at what cost? Those slaves could have been *freed*.

Frederick Bailey, a young slave on a Maryland plantation, escaped in 1838. He had taught himself to read, and had taught other slaves on his plantation how to read the New Testament. He had also been beaten repeatedly with a whip. At the age of 20, with assistance from his girlfriend, a free black woman, he escaped by train, wearing a sailor’s uniform and carrying false papers. He changed his name to Frederick Douglass. He became a preacher in the AME Zion Church, and an abolitionist. A few years later he wrote a book about his life as a slave, which became a bestseller in the North.

In 1841, St. Augustine Catholic Church in New Orleans was founded – the first black *Catholic* church in America. And there was a *third* round of white riots targeting black people in Cincinnati.

In 1844 a Methodist bishop came under fire for owning slaves. The Methodist stance against slavery had softened over time as the denomination grew, but there was still an expectation that clergy should not own slaves. The bishop was asked to step down from his office. The denomination split as a result. The southern churches left and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

In 1845, the Baptist Foreign Mission Board refused to appoint a slaveowner as a missionary. The Southern Baptists pulled out and formed their own denomination – the Southern Baptist Convention.

In 1845 Texas and Florida joined the Union as slave states. Iowa and Wisconsin joined, as free.

In 1849 a slave girl, about 17 years old, escaped from a Maryland plantation. She had been beaten and whipped throughout her childhood. Once she was hit in the head with a metal weight. She had scars and seizures for the rest of her life. As a child, her mom had told her many Bible stories. She escaped to Pennsylvania on the Underground Railroad, 90 miles by foot. Her name was Harriet Tubman.

In 1850, Congress adopted yet another Fugitive Slave Act. This was part of a large compromise that also brought California into the Union as a free state – with the stipulation that one of California’s senators had to support slavery. Southerners *needed* to maintain that balance of power in the Senate.

Harriet Beecher Stowe – an educated white woman from a religious family – could no longer keep silent. She had lived in Cincinnati during two of the riots; she had witnessed the injustice blacks were experiencing. She wrote a book describing the horrors of slavery, based on real accounts from both slaves and slaveowners: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The book had a *huge* impact, opening Americans’ eyes to the horrors of the slave experience. Only one book sold more copies in the 19th century: the Bible.

Tubman also decided it was time to act. With help from some abolitionists, she began making clandestine trips back to Maryland to lead slaves to freedom. She made about 13 trips, rescued about 70 slaves, and helped many more. People called her “Moses” – guiding people to the Promised Land.

In 1853, a slave named Anthony Burns escaped from a Virginia plantation and made his way to Boston, where he got a job. The following year he was caught and arrested. Abolitionists tried to free him. There were protests and demonstrations. Federal troops were called in. A huge crowd watched as Burns was put on ship heading back to Virginia, in chains. Many Northerners were outraged. A merchant named Amos Adams Lawrence said: “We went to bed one night old fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs and waked up stark mad Abolitionists.” A whole ton of people had witnessed injustice against a black man – and they were *furious*. Kind of like ... what happened six weeks ago.

In 1854, Frederick Douglass gave a speech honoring the Fourth of July. He praised the American ideal of freedom – but told his white audience that “The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine.” Just last weekend, Douglass’s young descendants were featured in an online video, in which they read excerpts from that speech.

By 1854, Kansas and Nebraska were ready to be organized. According to the terms of the Missouri Compromise, both of those territories would become free states. The South would lose the balance of power in Congress. But there was also a desire to create a trans-continental railroad, and without the support of the South, there weren’t enough votes. So there was another compromise. The railroad would be built. Kansas and Nebraska could *choose* whether they would be slave or free. This effectively repealed the terms of the Missouri Compromise, and further angered people in the North. It also angered a respected lawyer in Illinois. He gave a three-hour speech in Peoria, a detailed argument against slavery, which he called a “monstrous injustice.” His name ... was Abraham Lincoln.

Christians were everywhere in the growing conflict. Many wanted to end slavery. Many defended it. Many owned slaves. And many *were* slaves, laboring under the hot sun in the cotton, sugar, and tobacco plantations, uneducated, illiterate, often beaten ... and singing: “*Let my people go!*”

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