

E.Q: How was the Institution of Slavery an Economic, Social and Political Issue?

(classroom sources: Newsela, Fugitive Slave Ads & the Virginia Slave Codes)

Student #1 8th Grade

The Defining Characteristics of Slavery in the New World

One defining characteristic of American slavery was that enslaved people of African descent were legally defined as property. Enslaved people of African descent were legally defined as property because laws were written that defined them this way. There were laws that let others buy or trade them as property. One law was the Virginia Slave code of 1705.. This law states that “All servants imported and brought into the Country who were not Christians in their native Country shall be accounted and be slaves.” There were also laws that said since they were property, a child that was born to an enslaved mother became property too. For example, in the Virginia Slave Codes of December 1662 Act XII it explicitly states “Negro womens children to serve According to the Condition of the Mother”. These are just a few examples of how the American legal system let owners claim an African person as their property.

The second defining characteristic of American slavery was that slavery was organized according to a racial hierarchy. At that time, American society was very strict in its ranks. White men that came from European descent were at the top of the hierarchy and enslaved people were at the bottom. Some people of African descent were free, but they didn't have all the rights of a white male. Enslaved Africans had no rights. Society was organized this way because there was a belief in the superiority of white, European males. This meant that only some people had rights and privileges, while other people had no rights or privileges. White men of European descent believed that Africans were not equal to them so therefore it was acceptable to make them slaves.

The last defining characteristic of American slavery is that slavery was motivated by economics and not just society. Enslaved Africans were used to do the most difficult jobs on the plantations. Enslaved people mashed and boiled the sugarcane, harvested the cotton and grew all the other cash crops. This labor made the slave owners very wealthy, and after a while, the white males got very used to being rich without doing any work.. Owners of enslaved Africans wanted to make more money, so they made more laws that would keep slavery going in America.

Student #2 8th Grade

The first characteristic of American slavery was that people of African descent were legally defined as property. This meant they had to work against their own will for no money because the laws said so. If they resisted they'd receive physical punishment like whipping and other forms of abuse. Some enslaved people tried to negotiate with their owners for freedom, but it was really hard because enslaved people had little to no money to buy their freedom. If the enslaved people escaped, the Fugitive Slave laws stated that the owner had the right to place newspaper advertisements looking for them. The advertisements basically had a description of the slave and a reward. If someone besides their owner gave them a job after they ran away, or helped them to run away, the Virginia slave codes said that person could be put in jail or fined. In the advertisement we analyzed, it stated "Masters of vessels, steamboats and all others are cautioned against harboring said slave against severest penalties of the law."

The second characteristic of American slavery was based on the social hierarchy of the time. . This meant that people of European descent were on top, free people of African descent were in the middle, enslaved people of African descent were in the last tier. Back then, it was believed that this inequality was acceptable because religion and science said the white race was superior. If you were black, you must automatically be enslaved or be free with very little rights. There were a lot of very specific laws that shaped the lives of African enslaved and free people but these laws depended on where they lived. For example, the Code Noir in France stated if a female slave had a child, the child would also become a slave too. This became a law in the colonies as well because the social status of slaves was inherited.

The last characteristic of American slavery was that it was motivated by economics and justified by religion and science. This characteristic was made because slavery existed in the bible, so wealthy white people believed it was justified. Some people even believed that it was God's plan to enslave Africans because most were not Christian. Also, at that time, people believed that science justified race. According to the Newsela article, there was a scientific argument that people of African descent lacked intelligence and needed to submit to white authority, but this argument was built on racial biases. Also, some medical doctors argued that freedom was damaging to the mental health of enslaved people. These ideas created the racism we have today.