

Free Blacks Lived in the North, Right?

by [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](#) | Originally posted on [The Root](#)

by [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](#) | Originally posted on [The Root](#)

I hope it's clear by now I love facts, especially those that surprise — even shock — us out of our assumptions. Don't get me wrong. All of us, including scholars in various fields, have so much information to assimilate on a daily basis that it is difficult to avoid shorthand in conversation. The problem arises when we simplify and thereby distort. This is especially true when it comes to the history of slavery.

Most of us know that before the American Civil War there were so-called slave states and free states. Knowing this, our minds fill in the map with logic. If such a line as “Mason-Dixon” existed (actually, there were a series of lines drawn by “compromising” Congresses throughout the first half of the 19th century), slaves must have resided below it and free black people above it, with every man, woman and child in chains trying to escape to the North just as soon as they could — following the proverbial North Star to a new life of unbounded opportunity — while those already up there remained vigilant against being kidnapped back into slavery down in the South.

Then a book comes along — a once-in-a-generation masterpiece of research and analysis — that shakes up our constellation of inherited “facts” to the point that we no longer feel comfortable assuming anything about what was so in the black past, and why it occurred. That's exactly what the great historian Ira Berlin did in his book, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (initially published in 1974, and reissued by [the New Press](#) in 2007), a book I read as a graduate student, then returned to recently, to help me understand a puzzling fact in my own family tree.

Genealogists for our [Finding Your Roots PBS series](#) told me that I had descended from three sets of fourth great-grandparents who had been freed

well before the Civil War. (Unless, like comedian [Wanda Sykes](#), you descend from a mulatto child born to a white mother, all of your African-American ancestors were once slaves; the only question is *when* they became free, which for 90 percent of us was either during the Civil War or with the ratification of the 13th Amendment following the war.) Two sets of my own ancestors (the Cliffords and the Redmans) were free people by the time of the American Revolution, and the other set, the Bruces, were freed in the will of their master in 1823.

As if this weren't surprising enough, it was another fact that drove me to re-read Ira Berlin's book about freed slaves. All of these people, and their descendants, continued to live in slave-holding Virginia, even during the Civil War. (Their part of Virginia would join the Union as the state of West Virginia in the middle of the war, but they had no way of knowing this when they decided to remain there, rather than flee.) Why didn't my great-great-great-great-grandparents run away to safety in the North, rather than remain in the Potomac Valley region of slave-holding western Virginia, about 30 miles, as a matter of fact, from where I was born? Free Negroes headed north just as soon as they could, right? Didn't my ancestors' decision to stay put in the Confederacy run counter to what we all understood about the history of slavery?

I turned to Ira Berlin's book for answers, and I was astonished to learn that my ancestors' presence in the South and their decision to stay put during the war were not as uncommon as I had imagined. And perhaps most remarkable of all is the fact that professor Berlin explained the mystery of my ancestors' (and many others') seemingly counterintuitive decisions using numbers in plain sight, including those in the 1860 U.S. Census.

In that raging year of Lincoln's election and Southern secession, there were a total of 488,070 free blacks living in the United States, about 10 percent of the entire black population. Of those, 226,152 lived in the North and 261,918 in the South, in 15 states (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, North

Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas) plus the District of Columbia. Let me break that down further: A few months before the Confederacy was born, there were 35,766 more free black people living in the slave-owning South than in the North, and removing D.C. from the equation wouldn't have shifted the result. And they stayed there during the Civil War.

Don't believe it? You can now fact-check the numbers yourself on the U.S. Census Bureau [website](#). Amazing, right? Even if, as Berlin illustrates in a companion table, 100 percent of the African Americans living in the North were free in 1860 (compared to only 6.2 percent in the South), it still is a puzzle to figure out why the majority lived below the Mason-Dixon Line. And here's the kicker: At no time before the Civil War (at least not after the first U.S. Census was taken in 1790 and future states were added) did free blacks in the North ever outnumber those in the South!

To me, learning about this aspect of African-American history was as astonishing as any of the "amazing" facts on Joel A. Rogers' original list of 100. (Rogers didn't include this one on his list, but he did claim that some of these Southern Free Negroes fought for the Confederacy, a claim that we shall examine in another column.) Despite countless stories I'd read and heard about the Underground Railroad, with abolitionists on one side and fire-eaters on the other, there was, I now knew, a more complex landscape underfoot. Black history is full of surprises and contradictions, and this is one of the most surprising and seemingly contradictory ones that I have encountered.

First things first: How did more free blacks end up living in the South? Weren't their lives a living hell? In this week's column, I plan to address those questions. Next week, I'll tackle why so many, like several generations of my own ancestors, stayed.

Luckily, Ira Berlin has the answers, and if you seek them, too, I urge you to read his book, since there's no way I can possibly capture its many

dimensions — or its brilliance — in this column. There's a reason *Slaves Without Masters* won the National History Society's Best Book Prize, and Berlin is the Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland in College Park (fitting also because Maryland was the state with the largest population of free blacks in 1860 — 83,942 — and the highest proportion of free versus enslaved blacks, with 49.1 percent free).

Who They Were and How They Got There

To understand how the South created — and acquired — its majority of free black people, you would have to travel back further in time to the Revolutionary War, when natural rights fever and military necessity (first, among the British) stimulated the first major surge of free blacks in America. Before then, there were a scant few, Berlin writes (in 1755, Maryland, the only English colony to keep track, counted 1,817; Virginia had about the same in 1782). By 1810, there were 108,265, representing “the fastest-growing element in the Southern population,” with a dramatic 89.3 percent spike between 1790 and 1800 and another 76.8 percent jump between 1800 and 1810.

There were other sources besides manumissions (formal acts of emancipation by slaveowners), to be sure, including an increase in runaways and immigrants. Among the immigrants were free blacks fleeing the West Indies (often with their own slaves) during the 1791 slave revolt against the French in Saint-Dominique, which became the independent Republic of Haiti in 1804. In part because of that revolt, another important surge in the Southern free black population occurred when Napoleon Bonaparte, exhausted and in need of cash from France's defeat by the slaves, sold his country's vast Louisiana territory to the Americans under its slave-owning president, Thomas Jefferson, in 1803. With it, the U.S. acquired thousands of “free people of color,” many of whom had sprung from sexual unions between French and Spanish colonists and black slaves.

Still another group of free people of color (originally from Saint-Dominique)

emigrated to New Orleans from Cuba in 1809, in the upheavals of the Napoleonic wars, doubling the size of the black population there. While the rate of growth among Southern free blacks would slow across nearly every decade leading up to the Civil War (the growth rate was a mere 10 percent between 1850 and 1860), by 1810 the South had a free black population that was there to say.

So who were they?

The short answer is they lived as far as they could from what we know as the *Gone With the Wind* South. As Berlin shows in a demographic profile as concise as it is clear, free blacks in the South largely resided in cities — the bigger the better, because that's where the jobs were (in 1860, 72.7 percent of urban free blacks lived in Southern cities of 10,000 or more). They were predominantly female (52.6 percent of free blacks in the South were women in 1860), because, according to Berlin, free black men had a greater tendency to move out of the region. They also were older than the average slave, because they often had to wait to earn or buy their freedom, or, in not uncommon cases, be “dumped” by their owners as weak or infirm (in 1860, 20 percent of free blacks were over the age of 40 compared to 15 percent of slaves and whites). Free blacks also were lighter in color (40.8 percent of Southern free blacks in 1860 reported mixed racial ancestry versus 10.4 percent of slaves); not surprisingly, slaves with their master's blood were more likely to be favored by him and, as Berlin shows, favored slaves were more likely to be freed.

Two Souths

Here's where the monolith falls apart, however. As critical as Berlin's findings about the North and South was his revelation that the South really consisted of “two Souths”: an Upper and a Lower, distinguished, among other things, by their histories, geographies and outlooks.

The Upper South (think Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina and

later Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee and D.C.) had been marked by its earlier history of manumission following the Revolution; it also had a more negative outlook about slavery's future as a result of its increasingly inhospitable soil (for more on this, see Amazing Fact, [“What Was the Second Middle Passage?”](#)).

The Lower South (think Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas), by contrast, had never embraced manumission fever, and because there was still so much money to be made off the cotton trade (see Amazing Fact, [“Why Was Cotton King?”](#)), it never wavered in its commitment to the slave economy.

Consequently, there were two broad groups of Southern free blacks, Berlin writes. Not only did the vast majority live in the Upper South (224,963 in 1860 versus 36,955 in the Lower South in 1860), they were on average darker-skinned and more rural than their Lower South counterparts. By contrast, free blacks in the Lower South were fewer in number, lighter-skinned and more urban, creating a much more pronounced three-caste system and within it various gradations of blackness, including mulattoes (those who would be called biracial today), quadroons (those with one black grandparent) and octoroons (those with one black great-grandparent).

According to Berlin, “throughout the South, a light skin was the freeman’s distinguishing characteristic,” and “[t]he slaveholder’s increasingly selective liberation of favored bondsmen and the difficulties slaves had running away or purchasing their liberty meant that free Negroes were generally more skilled, literate, and well connected with whites than the mass of slaves.” This was especially true in the Lower South, where some free blacks even owned slaves — among them were Andrew Durnford of Louisiana, who, says Berlin, had “some seventy-five slaves” working on his sugar plantation.

Jim Crow: The Prequel

I hope I’m not giving you the wrong impression about free black life in the

antebellum South, because life for them there was “no crystal stair,” to [quote](#) Langston Hughes. Laws, especially in the Upper South, reflected whites’ suspicion (very often hatred) of free blacks, and there were repeated attempts to deport them, to register them, to jail the indolent and tax and extort the wage-earner, to disenfranchise the free black caste altogether from voting or testifying in court against whites. To leave little doubt, as Berlin quotes the saying at the time, that “even the lowest whites [could] threaten free Negroes ... with ‘a good nigger beating.’”

This created perverse incentives for free blacks to try hard to distinguish themselves from slaves, sometimes even to “[pass](#)” (pdf) out of the “black” caste as “white” if they could. Throughout the region, repressive laws helped create the conditions for a vast underclass that for most free blacks meant living along a very thin line between slavery and freedom, debt and dependency, poverty and pride. In fact, many of those same laws would lay the groundwork for what would follow after the Civil War and Reconstruction during the Jim Crow era.

By the 1850s, Berlin reveals, only Delaware, Missouri and Arkansas still allowed legal manumission of free blacks, and Arkansas, on the eve of secession, threatened its small population of free blacks with an impossible choice: self-deport (where have we heard that [before?](#)) or be re-enslaved. The result: Across the South in the antebellum period, there were “quasi-free” blacks who had been illegally freed without papers or prospects. Add to them those who passed as white or were kidnapped back into bondage, and it begins to make even the clearest of census numbers seem shaky.

So under those conditions, why would any free black remain in the South? Next week’s article in our series will address what impelled my ancestors and so many others to stay put on the eve of the Civil War. Until then, remember to be careful what you say shorthand in conversation. As I told an audience in Charlotte, N.C., last month, what was true for the ancient Greeks remains true for those conducting genealogical research today: “Know thyself.”

*Fifty of the 100 Amazing Facts will be published on The African Americans:
Many Rivers to Cross website. [Read all 100 Facts on The Root.](#)*