



THE COUNCIL OF  
INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

# Legacies of American Slavery

*Reckoning with the Past*

## What Is a Legacy of American Slavery?

**An Essay by David Blight**

**A**merican history has never been for the faint-hearted, nor for those who seek a past that will merely please or entertain—although it may do both. The American past comes to us laden with both enlightenment and terror, with equal parts slavery and freedom, racism and humanity, guilt and responsibility, travail and triumph, unspeakable oppression and unfathomable courage. It is a turbulent, fascinating history that arrives in all shades of color, made by all manner of heroes and villains. The African American past was created by human beings who fought against American hypocrisy, who died for the American flag, and who were crushed under the weight of enslavement and racism. It was created by the many thousands lost and found in the story of slavery's rise and fall. It is a history, like most, of enormous and recurring loss, but also of victories and great change. And it is more relevant now than ever.

Because slavery is so central to the history of the United States—its origins, economic development, society, culture, politics, and law—it has left in its wake a wide array of legacies that seem ever-present yet ever-changing in our world. Sometimes the question of slavery's legacy seems out-of-focus, inaccessible, or expressed in fuzzy language. Other times the legacy of slavery and emancipation may confront us when we least expect it. In 1961, in an essay in the *New York Times* titled "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," James Baldwin observed that when Americans reflect on their history, the "words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not to wake him up." Indeed, the living meanings, surviving challenges, and sometimes seemingly intractable problems born of great events, or vast human practices and systems from the past, are what make history matter. This is why legacies matter. And that is why the Council of Independent Colleges and the Gilder Lehrman Center have launched the Legacies of American Slavery project.

The past and the present are always interconnected, no matter how old the historical issue or how current the contemporary problem. So much seems new and constantly changing in our technologically driven world. But in a sense that historians and other humanists know by instinct and training, nothing in human experience is entirely new. Frederick Douglass, the 19th-century abolitionist, left us many insights into the meaning of slavery and human exploitation, yet he also captured the promised meanings of America as well as any prose poet in our past. The late Nobel-Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison showed us over and over the footprints and danger-zones that slavery left in our culture; we recognize them in her writing and perhaps then in our own lives, institutions, and contemporary history. Today, teachers, writers, and artists are still seeking to use their insights to forge new insights for our own time.

## **WHAT IS A LEGACY?**

The great French historian, Marc Bloch—who fought in the Resistance while writing a masterpiece, *The Craft of History*, and then was murdered by the Nazis—captured the interdependence of past and present in what he called the “solidarity of the ages.” “Misunderstanding of the present,” wrote Bloch, “is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present.” Some events and historical phenomena end loudly and in vivid ruins; others seem to vanish, then re-emerge and fester in new forms for succeeding generations. History never stops happening, and hence, the idea of legacies is inherent to understanding why a sense of history matters so much. Baldwin was once asked for a definition of a “sense of history.” He paused for a few moments and then answered: “Well, you read something that you thought only happened to you, and you discovered it happened a hundred years ago to Dostoyevsky. This is a...great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks he is alone.” What better way to help young people—indeed, people of all ages—gain a sense of why history matters than to show that *whatever* happens, they are not alone.

What then is a legacy? A historical legacy can be an idea or an eternally recurring question at the root of a dream—for example, “Why is human equality so hard to achieve?” A legacy can be emotional, manifesting itself in habits of thought, assumptions, behaviors, and lasting psychological patterns of struggle, action, or expectation. A legacy can be political, emerging in voting tendencies and recurring public policy issues. A legacy can be economic, evolving in patterns of growth and access or lack of access to material goods, services, and human capital. A legacy can exist in law, in court decisions, in government policies that change when

challenged or revert to older practices in times of reaction. Legacies can be laid down and commemorated in stone, in bronze, in musical traditions, in all manner of artistic forms. Legacies can be embodied in a very literal sense, as patterns of health and disease that can be traced to past experience through medical research. A legacy might be as local as a family story passed from generation to generation, or as big as a national origin narrative. Legacies can be institutional, growing as part of organizations that exist to educate, advocate, preserve, protest, or advance a set of ideas. A legacy might take the form of an “ism” or ideology, such as abolitionism, legalism, direct action non-violence, progressivism, Afro-pessimism, conservatism, Ethiopianism, migrationism—or segregationism and white supremacy.

And finally, we might understand legacy as that which is left over—the living residue—in any society once the scholars have written their books, the clergy have preached sermons, schools have created curricula and taught the youth, politicians have made narratives out of a useable past, journalists have crafted all the first drafts of history, parents have instructed their children in mores and folkways, and museums have mounted exhibitions. A legacy is any story, in whatever form or medium it takes life, about which we argue or over which we contend for control or power. We breathe in and breathe out legacies from the past in our public and private lives every day.

## **LEGACIES OF AMERICAN SLAVERY**

In the United States, we live amidst the legacies of a wide variety of historical experiences tied to race, slavery, the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction. And we live in a global historical moment in which the *idea* of the legacies of slavery seems to be everywhere in the mainstream media and popular culture. In the past year and a half, to pick just four examples:

- A mainstream Hollywood studio released a biography of abolitionist Harriet Tubman.
- The UNESCO Slave Route Project published an international guide called *Legacies of Slavery: A Resource Book for Managers of Sites and Itineraries of Memory*.
- A new memorial dedicated to the history of lynching opened in Montgomery, Alabama, as part of the Equal Justice Initiative. The founder, Bryan Stevenson, is determined to make Americans confront the legacy of the worst elements of racial violence. He explained his goals for the museum in a 2017 TED talk titled, “We Live with the Legacy of Slavery.”

- In August 2019, the *New York Times* published a special issue devoted to “The 1619 Project,” with an introductory essay by lead editor Nikole Hannah-Jones that forthrightly argues for reframing American history around a new vision of “founding” at the point Africans first arrived in what is now the United States in the early 17th century. “No aspect of the country that would be formed here,” she contends, “has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed.”

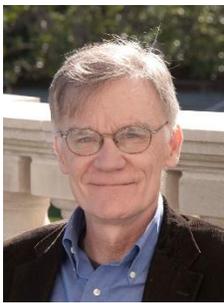
Numerous other papers and magazines have also taken up the problem of the “legacies” of slavery by this very name. It has become one of the most widely discussed questions on America’s ubiquitous digital media platforms. Indeed, one can hope that somewhere in the cyber world, in academia, or in a polling firm a team of people are at work cataloguing all these current and future efforts to bring some specificity, precision, and clarity to the search for discernable legacies of American slavery.

The *New York Times’s* “1619 Project” contains essays and fascinating vignettes by activists (like Stevenson), historians, and contemporary artists who were tasked with writing imaginative pieces on various legacies of American slavery: the racial wealth gap, mass incarceration, the changing character of American democracy, racial ideas embedded in medical practice, and the many genres of black music that owe their roots to slave songs. In tone and substance, the “1619 Project” offers a compelling challenge to American historical memory, as well as a great deal of food for thought and debate. As scholars who work for traditional colleges and universities engage these debates—as part of CIC’s Legacies of American Slavery project or in other settings—it would be wise to do so with a sense of humility about who owns or controls the past or the present. Both past and present will never stay still, and no one’s righteousness necessarily leads directly to truth and wisdom.

In 1869, Frederick Douglass addressed one of the last annual meetings of the American Antislavery Society, then celebrating the passage of the 15th Amendment, which guaranteed the right to vote for black men (by many seen as a final act of Reconstruction). Douglass left a warning as useful now as it was then to thinking about legacies. He acknowledged all the abolitionists’ victories and the fact that their “opponents” seemed in “full retreat.” “But slavery is not honestly dead ... it did not die honestly,” he said.

Douglass’s words apply to our current racial and constitutional condition as well as his own. “Had [slavery’s] death come of moral conviction instead of political and military necessity; had it come in obedience to the enlightenment of the American people; had it come at the call of the humanity ... of the slaveholder, as well as the rest of our fellow citizens, slavery might be

looked upon as honestly dead.” The former slave was reminding his country that slavery died in all-out war, crushed by military might and the changed minds of some, but not of many others. It had died only against tremendous, bloody resistance. It did not die suddenly because Americans awoke one day and decided to vote slavery out of existence. This warning, delivered at the peak of Reconstruction’s triumph, fits as well our current historical moment. Racism—like the constitutional persuasions sometimes practiced, wittingly or not, to defend it—never dies honestly. History is never so easy and it never stops happening. With this sobering awareness we will study the idea of legacies of the most difficult aspects of our past because we have to.



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