TELLING THE STORY: Enslavement of African People in the United States

The great American abolitionist, writer and orator Frederick Douglass once said, “Slavery is the great test question of our age and nation.” Now, 400 years after the first African people were captured, enslaved and transported to the United States, the repercussions of this horrific practice remain with us today. This Library exhibit highlights its History of Slavery Collection and, perhaps more ambitiously, to provoke community conversations about our country’s history of enslavement and its continuing aftermath.

From antiquity to modern day, enslavement has existed in one form or another. Institutionalized slavery—mostly for agricultural labor—thrived in the American English colonies and was central to the development and economic growth of the United States.

Supporters of slavery were typically enslavers themselves. Early arguments for slavery were simplistic and merely to defend against attacks made against the practice. Later arguments or rationalizations were protective, religious and racist. Slavery was an institution of power and the powerful people who protected it to protect their own profits.

Protections for slavery were embedded in America’s founding documents; enslavers

Solomon Northup
Twelve Years a Slave

Slave Ship Diagram

Olaudah Equiano - The Life of Olaudah Equiano

Cotton is King and Pro-Slavery Arguments, 1860
dominated the federal government, Supreme Court and Senate from 1787 through 1860. Laws and court cases were varied and numerous, including the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the Dred Scott decision of 1857. Former President John Quincy Adams, on the other hand, successfully argued the case defending Cinque and the Africans of the Amistad uprising.

**Resistance to enslavement** was frequent in both subtle and revolutionary ways. Captured Africans would starve themselves or jump overboard during the Middle Passage, rather than endure enslavement. Maintaining one’s original cultural practices was, in itself, a form of resistance. There were many examples of organized rebellion as well, such as those led by Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Nat Turner in 1831.

**Many creative works were written in response to slavery**, including poetry and music. Books of anti-slavery songs were published to fulfill demand for use at rallies, spirituals, marches and conventions. Some of the lyrics are based upon the anti-slavery poetry of the day.

One of the most famous anti-slavery works was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life Among the Lowly*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and was intended to evoke empathy. The South viewed the work as abolitionist snobbery.

**Additional display material in the Library’s Ring of Knowledge** highlights the local stories of individuals who were among the first settlers and builders of Buffalo, who strived for civil rights and assisted freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad.


Free & open to the public.

**Exhibit Hours:**

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*Closed on Sundays in the summer

A variety of FREE programs, including public and classroom tours are available. Visit [www.BuffaloLib.org](http://www.BuffaloLib.org) or call 716-858-8900 for details.

The Telling the Story exhibit would not have been possible without support from members of the local community and the following generous sponsors:

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