

Telling the Story:

Enslavement of African People in the United States

Today's Terminology

Enslaved vs. Slave: Today, most historians speak of “enslaved people” instead of “slaves.” This language separates a person's identity from his/her circumstance.

Enslaver vs. Owner/Master: The usage of “owner” or “master” empowers the enslaver and dehumanizes the enslaved person reducing him/her to a commodity rather than a person who has had slavery imposed upon him or her.

Using the terms enslaved and enslaver, are subtle but powerful ways of affirming that slavery was forced upon that person, rather than an inherent condition.

Freedom Seeker vs. Fugitive: The term “fugitive” evokes the image of a law breaker requiring capture and punishment, and was used to assert that the law was on the side of slaveholding society. “Freedom seeker” illuminates what is in the hearts and minds of those acting to make freedom a reality.

Glossary

Abolition: Abolition or the abolitionist movement was the societal and political effort to end the institution of slavery.

Antebellum: Existing before a war, especially the United States Civil War.

Emancipation: The liberation of one or more enslaved persons from slavery.

Indentured Servant: A person who, by contract, agrees to work to fulfill a legal obligation, such as discharge of a debt or, as in early colonial times, transportation across the Atlantic, food and shelter. Upon completion of a specified period of time, indentured servants were given their freedom.

Manumission: Freeing of one or more enslaved persons from slavery by the enslaver, rather than by government action.

Middle Passage: The forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean, so called Middle Passage because it was one leg of the triangular trade route. Goods from Europe, such as weapons, tools and cloth were taken to Africa, Africans were taken to be sold into slavery in the Americas and West Indies, and raw goods such as sugar, tobacco and cotton were taken back to Europe. The cruelty and disregard of human suffering during the Middle Passage exacted a terrible toll physically and emotionally on the abducted Africans.

Repatriation: Repatriation is the return of someone to their own country. In the early 19th century, the American Colonization Society was formed with the idea of repatriating, or resettling freed blacks in Africa.

Underground Railroad : The Underground Railroad was a term used to describe the network of people, secret routes and safe houses used by freedom seekers on their way to the northern states and Canada. The people who helped guide freedom seekers were known as “conductors” and the private homes, churches and other safe places were known as “stations” or “depots.” The Underground Railroad operated from the late 18th century until the U.S. Civil War.

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Key Concepts

1. Slavery, which was practiced by Europeans prior to their arrival in the Americas, was important to all of the colonial powers and existed in all of the European North American colonies.
2. Slavery and the slave trade were central to the development and growth of the economy across British North America and later, the United States.
3. Protections for slavery were embedded in the founding documents; enslavers dominated the federal government, Supreme Court and Senate from 1787 through 1860.
4. "Slavery was an institution of power," designed to create profit for the enslavers and break the will of the enslaved and was a relentless quest for profit abetted by racism.
5. Enslaved people resisted the efforts of their enslavers to reduce them to commodities in both revolutionary and everyday ways.
6. The experience of slavery varied depending on time, location, crop, labor performed, size of slaveholding and gender.
7. Slavery was the central cause of the Civil War.
8. Slavery shaped the fundamental beliefs of Americans about race and whiteness, and white supremacy was both a product and legacy of slavery.
9. Enslaved and free people of African descent had a profound impact on American culture, producing leaders and literary, artistic and folk traditions that continue to influence the nation.
10. By knowing how to read and interpret the sources that tell the story of American slavery, we gain insight into some of what enslaving and enslaved Americans aspired to, created, thought and desired.

(Key Concepts from *Teaching Tolerance*, A project of the Southern Poverty Law Center)



The Vocabulary of Freedom

Slave. Master. Among the many rocks we can turn over to see the dark side of our country's racist past and present, the very words we use to tell the story of our history are ones that are hiding in plain sight. Language holds power, and our beliefs and prejudices are embedded in it; we must look more closely at the words used to describe the institution of slavery in America.

We talk about the institution of slavery with a set of words that have been used to identify the parts and the whole of the institution, and these words still carry the vestiges of white supremacy and power. Words such as "slavery," "master," "slave," "fugitive," and "plantation" are used with complacency. They've become innocuous and no longer fully demonstrate the scope and tragic impact of our history.

In identifying the system as a whole, "slavery" is the word that is still used today. The word lacks specificity; it fails to show the roots and the extent of the institution as something intentionally designed by specific people, and fails to acknowledge the social, economic, and political supports that allowed the system to thrive and flourish. In replacing "slavery" with "the institution of slavery," we actively acknowledge that slavery was a system with far-reaching roots.

Also important to reevaluate is the use of "master" and "slave" in our lexicon. With the word "slave," we deny the humanity of the enslaved person; with "enslaved person," we recognize their enslaved state as imposed on them and not intrinsic to their identity as a human being. With the word "master," we assume the power of the enslaver as intrinsic, without acknowledging the enslaver's complicity and active participation in upholding and perpetuating the violent oppression of fellow human beings.

Even the language of describing an enslaved person seeking freedom – "fugitive" – is deeply problematic. The word "fugitive" reinforces the stereotype of Black criminality and takes autonomy away from the enslaved person, without acknowledging the agency of the individual and the immorality of the legal structure that supported enslavement. Additionally, it completely ignores the bravery of the enslaved individual who, in choosing to seek freedom, risked everything. In changing our use of 'fugitive' to 'freedom seeker,' we recognize the agency of the individual and the bravery of their decision to seek freedom.

Traditionally, we have referred to the sites where enslaved people labored as "plantations." This word, benign and neutral, ignores the reality that these sites were in truth enforced labor camps. Both before and after the Civil War, many southerners used the word to conjure up the institution of slavery as a benign, even beneficial institution. The reality is that on plantations, enslaved people endured horrific working conditions and savage violence. Enslavers frequently treated those they had enslaved as capital, even investments, to be bought and sold at will. As we know from the many testimonies left by enslaved people, enslavers constantly broke up families and other deep personal relationships in

order to maximize their profit and establish generational wealth through inheritance packages with no regard for the welfare of those they enslaved.

The vocabulary that has been used to identify and describe the institution of slavery in the United States does not paint a full and just picture of the institution. The same words that were used to describe the institution when it was still functioning are used today, but it is time to change a vocabulary that obfuscates the reality of this brutal system of terrorism and is detrimental to the legacy of the enslaved people who suffered under it. The Vocabulary of Freedom, in ensuring that the institution of slavery is seen clearly for what it was and holds oppressors accountable, is a path forward toward a more perfect democracy, greater acceptance, love, and an anti-racist community.

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WHY WE USE “ENSLAVED”

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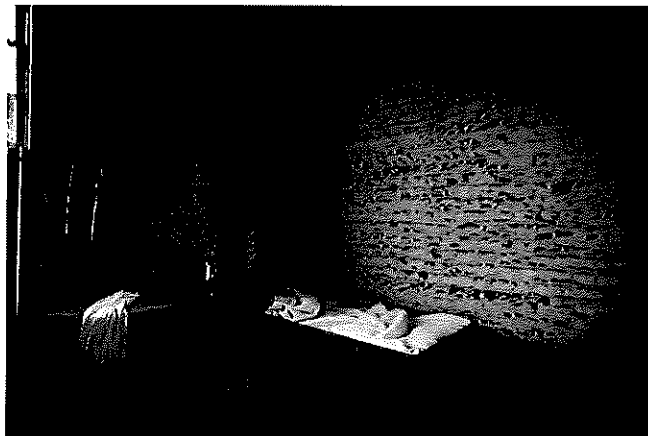
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by Shannon Browning-Mullis, Curator of History and Decorative Arts

There is a text panel in the Orientation Gallery at the Owens-Thomas House & Slave Quarters that reads, “Words have Power. They express meanings, ideas, and relationships. They impact how we relate to the past and one another. As we share this history, we strive to use words that are empathetic to those whose history has been marginalized. For example, we use phrases like enslaved woman, rather than slave. The noun slave implies that she was, at her core, a slave. The adjective enslaved reveals that though in bondage, bondage was not her core existence. Furthermore, she was enslaved by the actions of another. Therefore, we use terms like enslaver, rather than master, to indicate one’s effort to exert power over another. You may hear other phrases like slave labor camp or escapee, rather than plantation or runaway. These reinforce the idea of people’s humanity rather than the conditions forced upon them.”



Why, then, does the sign in front of the building where enslaved people slept still say, “Slave Quarters”? Well, as the panel says, words really do have power, so we’ve debated this one at length. It is important to acknowledge humanity where it exists, assign agency when it was present, and keep language useable and understandable. At the end of the day, the correct terminology would probably be “living quarters for the enslaved people,” but that is quite a mouthful. In this same vein, I am most comfortable using the phrase “enslaved or free people of African descent” rather than “enslaved

or free African Americans,” because to call a person American implies citizenship and its corresponding rights, which people of African descent did not have during the period of enslavement. Unfortunately, this phrase is also rather unwieldy.

At the end of the day, I suppose that the most important factor is that the quarters themselves were not enslaved. They were living quarters for people in a condition of enslavement, who were at the time referred to as slaves. In the same vein, we don’t say the “enslaved trade,” because the trade of people and goods across the Atlantic was not enslaved. It was the transfer of people who had been enslaved.

Complicated, I know. The most important thing to remember when you talk about language is not the specific word you use, but rather that you have carefully and thoughtfully chosen that word to be as precise and humanizing as possible. Language evolves. We constantly shift the way we talk about particular topics. Through that evolution, our motivation remains constant: to examine the past and the people who lived through it honestly and with all the integrity we can muster.

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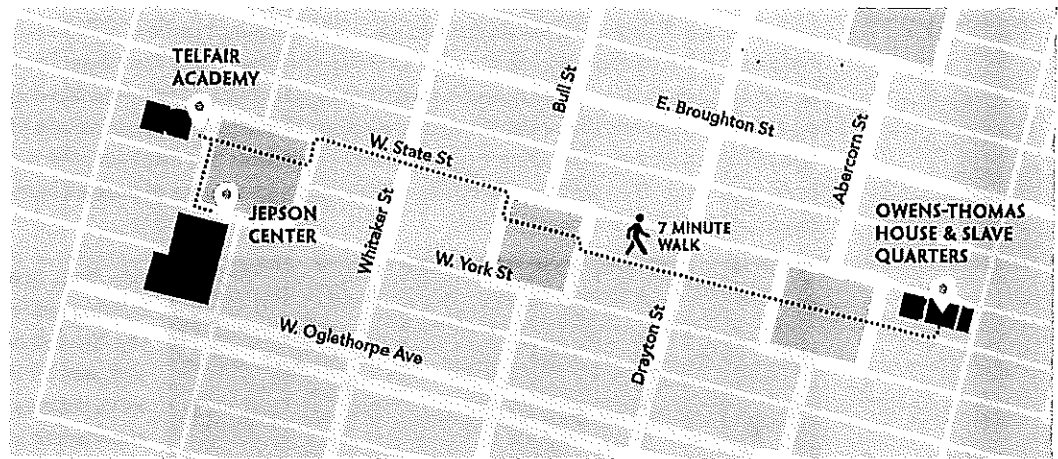
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