

Slavery and Abolition

When the Church was organized in 1830, there were two million slaves in the United States—about one-sixth of the country’s total population. For three centuries, women and men had been kidnapped or taken as war captives in Africa and shipped across the Atlantic, and European Americans came up with various justifications for enslaving them and their posterity. In 1808, the United States banned the transatlantic slave trade, but the status of slaves already in the country and their descendants was a matter of continuing debate.

Slavery was gradually abolished in the Northern States in the late 1700s and early 1800s, including in the early Latter-day Saint centers of New York and Ohio. In the Southern States, including Missouri, slavery and the domestic slave trade continued. Many Americans supported slavery. Of those who opposed it, some focused on limiting the spread of slavery, some hoped to see it gradually end, and some—an outspoken few known as abolitionists—called for a more immediate and unconditional end to slavery. Because the exaggeration of racial differences was common in early American social, scientific, and religious thought, even many abolitionists advocated returning black Americans to Africa rather than integrating them into American society.

Though most early Latter-day Saint converts were from the Northern States and were opposed to slavery, slavery affected Church history in a number of ways. In 1832, Latter-day Saints who had settled in Missouri were attacked by their neighbors, who accused them of “tampering with our slaves, and endeavoring to sow dissensions and raise seditions amongst them.” That winter, Joseph Smith received a revelation that a war would begin over the slave question and that slaves would “rise up against their masters.” The next year, concerns that free black Saints would gather to Missouri was the spark that ignited further violence against the Saints and led to their expulsion from Jackson County.

In the mid-1830s, the Saints tried to distance themselves from the controversy over slavery. Missionaries were instructed not to teach enslaved men and women without the permission of their masters. The Church’s newspaper published several articles critical of the growing abolitionist movement. After the Saints had been driven from Missouri and had settled in Illinois, however, Joseph Smith gradually became more outspoken in his opposition to slavery. He asked how the United States could claim that “all men are created equal” while “two or three millions of people are held as slaves for life, because the spirit in them is covered with a darker skin than ours.” As a U.S. presidential candidate in 1844, Joseph called for the federal government to end slavery within six years by raising money to compensate former slaveholders.

By the time the Saints migrated to Utah, there were both free and enslaved black members of the Church. Green Flake, Hark Lay, and Oscar Crosby, members of the vanguard 1847 pioneer company, were enslaved to Mormon families at the time of their pioneer journey. In 1852, Church leaders serving in Utah’s legislature debated what to do about black slavery in Utah Territory. Brigham Young and Orson Spencer spoke in favor of legalizing and regulating slavery, allowing enslaved men and women to be brought to the territory but prohibiting the enslavement of their descendants and requiring their consent before any move. This approach would guarantee the

eventual end of slavery in the territory. Apostle Orson Pratt gave an impassioned speech against any compromise with the practice of slavery: “[To] bind the African because he is different from us in color,” he said, “[is] enough to cause the angels in heaven to blush.” Young and Spencer’s position prevailed, and the legislature authorized a form of black slavery that demanded humane treatment and required access to education.

During the 1850s, there were about 100 black slaves in Utah. In 1861, the Civil War broke out in the United States over the question of slavery, as Joseph Smith had prophesied. On June 19, 1862, the United States Congress ended slavery in U.S. territories, including Utah. The next year, U.S. president Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that the U.S. government no longer recognized slavery in the rebelling Southern States. After the war, a constitutional amendment prohibited slavery throughout the United States.

Church Resources

“Letter to Oliver Cowdery, circa 9 April 1836,” Historical Introduction, in Brent M. Rogers, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Christian K. Heimburger, Max H Parkin, Alexander L. Baugh, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838*. Vol. 5 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 231–36.

Joseph Smith’s Views on the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States (Salt Lake City: Jos. Hyrum Parry, 1898).

Jonathan A. Stapley and Amy Thiriot, “‘In My Father’s House Are Many Mansions’: Green Flake’s Legacy of Faith,” *Pioneers in Every Land* series, Feb. 19, 2014, history.lds.org.

“Race and the Priesthood,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, topics.lds.org.

Bibliography

The following publications provide further information about this topic. By referring or linking you to these resources, we do not endorse or guarantee the content or the views of the authors.

David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

William Mulligan and Maurice Bric, eds., *A Global History of Anti-slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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