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Topic Guide: Slavery in Arkansas

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This research topic guide is best used with the Chronicling America website (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov), a Library of Congress website co-sponsored with the National Endowment for the Humanities. Chronicling America is a repository of digitized historic American newspapers from 1777-1963 and is an excellent resource for primary and secondary materials. This guide is focused on Arkansas topics but can be relevant to other states. To search in Arkansas papers, select the state in the drop-down menu. Choose the desired date range to search, then enter one or more words in the search bar and click GO.

COMMON SEARCH TERMS

- slaves
- negro
- slavery
- free black
- free negro(s)
- mulatto
- expulsion act
- free negroes
- Jim Crow law
- Emancipation Proclamation
- abolish slavery
- anti-slavery
- Mason and Dixon line
- manumission
- runaway slave
- Underground Railroad
- Ku Klux Klan
- Act to Remove Free Negroes and Mulattos
- segregation
- negro question
- plantation slave
- cotton slave
- Curtis slave
- slave auction
- slave sale
- negro sale
- abolitionist
- slave state

The first report of enslaved Black people in Arkansas Territory came from French colonists in the early 1700s. Slavery was a major part of the early economic development in Arkansas, with significant slave labor occurring on large plantations throughout the state. The use of forced labor allowed for the rapid expansion of cotton farming, which added close to \$16 million to the Arkansas economy each year. By 1860 the state was the sixth largest producer of cotton, and 25% of Arkansas's population was enslaved.

As the practice of slavery grew in the southern United States, objections to enslavement grew in the northern states. This led to the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which split the country along the Mason-Dixon line. Slavery was abolished north of the line, but states south of the line were permitted to continue the practice of slavery. As a result, Arkansas remained a slave-holding state, and the right to slavery was written into the state constitution when Arkansas achieved statehood in 1836.

Though Arkansas had a significant population of enslaved people, unlike in other states, there were no largescale slave rebellions. Instead, resistance occurred on a smaller scale. Enslaved people often ran away from enslavers, which was reported in local newspapers. Newspapers played a significant role in perpetuating slavery. In addition to reporting runaways, the newspapers of the time would print jail notices, listing runaways captured and the process to "reclaim" them. Newspapers also printed advertisements, or notices of enslaved people for sale, either by an individual, estate, or county at public auction.

In an effort to keep all Black Arkansans enslaved, the Arkansas General Assembly passed a bill in 1859 banning anyone with Black ancestry from living as a free person in Arkansas. At the time the bill was passed there were 700 free Black people residing in Arkansas. The bill stated that if they did not leave the state by 1860, they would be enslaved once more. Arkansas was the only state to pass such a law, though similar bills were considered in other slave-holding states. There are no reports of this law being enforced. However, the law did work to divide people by race rather than by free or enslaved status and forced over 500 people to flee their homes in Arkansas.

Since slavery was a major component of the Arkansas economy, many state politicians demanded the protection of slavery in the 1850s when anti-slavery sentiments were gaining popularity across the country. After the federal government failed to protect slavery sufficiently and other states began seceding from the Union, Arkansas politicians pushed to leave the Union as well. Though many Arkansans wanted to remain part of the Union, the Civil War spurred Arkansas to finally secede.

The beginning of the end for slavery in Arkansas came in 1862 when the Union army moved into the state. Union General Samuel R. Curtis issued certificates of freedom to any enslaved people who had worked against the Union army. He used his military power more than most Union generals to help fugitive slaves, which resulted in a gathering of formerly enslaved people following behind his army. As the Civil War waged, the eastern part of the state under Union control became the destination for freedom. In 1863 President Lincoln abolished slavery in the Confederacy with the Emancipation Proclamation, though the Confederates continued fighting to keep slaves. Some of the formerly enslaved men chose to join the Union army and help bring an end to slavery, which finally happened in 1865 with the Union victory (See Black Arkansans in the Military Topic Guide). After the war the 13th Amendment was enacted, abolishing slavery nationwide. Though slavery was abolished, its traces remained in the continued marginalization and segregation of Black people, codified as Jim Crow laws, and in the ideology of white supremacy, organized by the Ku Klux Klan, in Arkansas.

SOME SIGNIFICANT DATES

- 1723 First record of enslaved Black people in Arkansas Territory.
- 1793 Fugitive Slave Act passed by Congress, allowing local governments and citizens to capture and return escaped slaves and penalize any who helped people escape.
- 1803 Louisiana Purchase of land by the United States, including what eventually becomes Arkansas.
- 1820 Missouri Compromise allows slavery to continue below the 36°30' parallel, the Mason-Dixon Line, which includes Arkansas.
- 1836 Arkansas becomes a state and uses its constitution to support slavery.
- 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, part of the Compromise of 1850, passed by Congress stating that slaves be returned to their enslavers, even if the slave was in a free state, and punishing anyone who helped them escape. Also stating that the federal government was responsible for the process of finding, returning, and trying escaped slaves.
- 1859 Act 151 to Remove Free Negroes and Mulattos from the State/Negro Expulsion Act is passed in Arkansas.
- 1861 Civil War begins.
- 1862 Union General Samuel R. Curtis issues freedom to slaves who had been used against the Union army. Many formerly enslaved people fled to the Union side for freedom and protection.
- 1863 Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln that all enslaved people under the Confederacy were freed.
- 1865 Civil War ends and the 13th Amendment is adopted, abolishing slavery in the United States.

SELECT ARTICLES FROM CHRONICLING AMERICA

- "Fugitive Slave Bill" *Southern Shield* June 29, 1850, Image 2, Column 1
- "Sheriff and Jailor's Notice" *Southern Shield* February 26, 1853, Image 4, Column 4
- "An Act to Remove the Free Negroes and Mulattoes from this State" *Arkansas True Democrat* February 23, 1859, Image 2, Column 5-6
- "Black Republicanism" and "Mr. Bell's Anti-Slavery Record" *Arkansas True Democrat* September 15, 1860, Image 1, Column 1, 2-4
- "'By order of Gen. Curtis, twenty-eight slaves...'" *Arkansas True Democrat* July 17, 1862, Image 1, Column 5
- "Lincoln's Proclamation" *True Democrat* October 8, 1862, Image 1, Column 2
- "One Hundred Years: The Production and Price of Cotton During That Period" *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic* September 5, 1895, Image 3, Column 1
- "Historic Line Marked" *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic* February 1, 1901, Image 5, Column 3
- "Dr. Brough on Negro Question" *The Nevada County Picayune* March 16, 1916, Image 7, Column 3-5

RELEVANT EDUCATION AND LESSON PLANS

Arkansas State Archives: Slave Narratives Oral History Lesson Plan:
<https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/lesson-plans/12/>

Arkansas State Archives: Reconstruction Lesson Plan:
<https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/lesson-plans/4/>

Arkansas State Archives: Desegregation in Arkansas Lesson Plan:
<https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/lesson-plans/1/>

Arkansas State Archives: African American Resource Guide:
<https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/resource-guides/1/>

Central Arkansas Library System: Life in Territorial Arkansas Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/106>

Central Arkansas Library System: Slavery in Arkansas Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/29>

Central Arkansas Library System: Race Relations in Arkansas: Secession & the Civil War Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/124/rec/3>

Central Arkansas Library System: Emancipation Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/101/rec/14>

Central Arkansas Library System: Race Relations in Arkansas: Reconstruction Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/21/rec/4>

Central Arkansas Library System: Arkansas and Reconstruction Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/24/rec/6>

Central Arkansas Library System: Jim Crow is Here Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/129/rec/1>

Central Arkansas Library System: Jim Crow and the Poll Tax Lesson Plan:
<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/lessonplans/id/105/rec/15>

Chronicling America: Fugitive Slave Ads Research Guide:
<https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-fugitive-slave-ads>

Chronicling America: Slavery and Abolition Research Guide:
<https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-slavery-abolition>

Chronicling America: Harriet Tubman Research Guide:
<https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-harriet-tubman>

Chronicling America: Emancipation Proclamation Research Guide:
<https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-emancipation-proclamation>

Library of Congress: Slavery in America Resource Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/slavery-in-america>

Library of Congress: Finding Ancestors in the Anti-Slavery Movement and Underground Railroad Research Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/finding-antislavery-ancestors>

RELEVANT EDUCATION AND LESSON PLANS CONTINUED

Library of Congress: African American Women Authors of the Civil War Era Resource Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/african-american-women-civil-war/introduction>

Library of Congress: Emancipation Proclamation Research Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/emancipation-proclamation>

Library of Congress: 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution Research Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/13th-amendment>

Chronicling America: Plessy v. Ferguson (Jim Crow Laws) Research Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-plessy-ferguson>

Library of Congress: Plessy v. Ferguson Research Guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/plessy-ferguson>

Find more of our topic guides at <https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/adnp/>.

Further information about this topic can be found in the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, courtesy of the Central Arkansas Library System at <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>.

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Historic newspapers sometimes contain offensive content including attitudes, language and biases that are outdated and harmful. This topic guide is meant to be a useful resource to navigate historic papers and may contain outdated terms used only for the purpose of historic research. These opinions do not reflect the views of the Arkansas State Archives.