

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

On Slavery

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.” The following passages provide examples both of how slaves themselves felt about slavery and of how slavery’s apologists defended that system.

IN OPPOSITION TO SLAVERY

Henry Bibb, who escaped from slavery with his family, in a letter to his former master, 1844

I thank God that I am not property now, but am regarded as a man like yourself, and although I live far north, I am enjoying a comfortable living by my own industry. . . .

You may perhaps think hard of us for running away from slavery, but as for myself, I have but one apology to make for it, which is this: I have only to regret that I did not start at an early period. I might have been free long before I was. But you had it in your power to have kept me there much longer than you did. I think it is very probable that I should have been a toiling slave on your property today, if you had treated me differently.

To be compelled to stand by and see you whip and lash my wife without mercy, when I could afford her no protection, not even by offering myself to suffer the lash in her place, was more than I felt it to be the duty of a slave husband to endure [when] the way was open to Canada. My infant child was also frequently flogged by Mrs. Gatewood for crying. This kind of treatment was what drove me from home and family to seek a better home for them.

Manifesto of the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1833

We further maintain that no man has a right to enslave or imbrute his brother—to hold or acknowledge him, for one moment, as a piece of merchandise—to keep back his hire by fraud—or to brutalize his mind by denying him the means of intellectual, social, and moral improvement.

The right to enjoy liberty is inalienable. To invade it is to usurp the prerogative of Jehovah.

Every man has a right to his own body—to the products of his own labor—to the protection of law—and to the common advantages of society. It is piracy to buy or steal a native African and subject him to servitude. Surely, the sin is as great to enslave an American as an African.

Captain Basil Hall, Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828

The gentlemen of the South sometimes assert that the slave population are rather happier than the laboring classes in the northern parts of their own Union, and much better off than the peasantry of England. There is no good purpose served by advancing such pretensions.

A slave is merely a pauper. . . . That the slaves, taken in the aggregate, are better fed than many individual poor families . . . may be true; but this holds as well in the case of cattle, and the fact proves no more in the one case than in the other, for it is obvious enough that both cattle and slaves are fed with the same view—the mere maintenance of their physical force. . . .

So long as men, women, and children are kept in ignorance under the positive mandate of the law—and are driven to the fields to work like cattle—so long as husbands and wives, and mothers and children, are liable to be sold, and actually are sold every day, to separate masters—and so long as no slave can select his place of residence, his taskmaster, or his occupation, or can give testimony in a court of justice, or legally hold any property, or exercise by inherent birthright any of the other functions of a reasonable creature—it certainly is very impolitic . . . in the gentlemen of a country where the population are so circumstanced, to force the rest of the world upon such comparisons.