

# Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America

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Today most Americans, black and white, identify slavery with cotton, the deep South, and the African-American church. But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, after almost two hundred years of African-American life in mainland North America, few slaves grew cotton, lived in the deep South, or embraced Christianity. *Many Thousands Gone* traces the evolution of black society from the first arrivals in the early seventeenth century through the Revolution. In telling their story, Ira Berlin, a leading historian of southern and African-American life, reintegrates slaves into the history of the American working class and into the tapestry of our nation.

Laboring as field hands on tobacco and rice plantations, as skilled artisans in port cities, or soldiers along the frontier, generation after generation of African Americans struggled to create a world of their own in circumstances not of their own making. In a panoramic view that stretches from the North to the Chesapeake Bay and Carolina lowcountry to the Mississippi Valley, *Many Thousands Gone* reveals the diverse forms that slavery and freedom assumed before cotton was king. We witness the transformation that occurred as the first generations of creole slaves--who worked alongside their owners, free blacks, and indentured whites--gave way to the plantation generations, whose back-breaking labor was the sole engine of their society and whose physical and linguistic isolation sustained African traditions on American soil.

As the nature of the slaves' labor changed with place and time, so did the relationship between slave and master, and between slave and society. In this fresh and vivid interpretation, Berlin demonstrates that the meaning of slavery and of race itself was continually renegotiated and redefined, as the nation lurched toward political and economic independence and grappled with the Enlightenment ideals that had inspired its birth.

When Americans look at slavery, they conjure up images of tired black bodies picking cotton from sunup to sundown under Southern skies. That image is partly true, but, as the noted history professor Ira Berlin details, the lives of slaves in America's racist system were complex and diverse. "Viewing slavery through the perspective of what slaves did most of the time," Berlin writes, "provides a means to draw some fundamental distinctions and find some essential commonalities among the various experiences of North America."

Berlin reveals the color-caste codes of the Afro-Creoles of the Chesapeake, the survival of African culture in the South Carolina-Georgia-Florida coastal area, and the intermingling of Africans with French and Spanish in the Mississippi Delta area. He weaves a woeful and wondrous tale of the mores, occupations, conflicts, wars, and rebellions that made up the ongoing relationships between masters and slaves. *Many Thousands Gone* is an excellent companion to Philip D. Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint*, revealing the influence the "peculiar institution" of slavery had on those of African and European descent alike. --Eugene Holley Jr.

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#### Other Books

Hopes and Expectations. Describes in rich detail African American daily life among free blacks in the North in the 1860s. Based on a treasure trove of more than two hundred personal letters written in the 1860s, Hopes and Expectations tells the story of three young African Americans in the North. Living on Maryland's eastern shore, schoolteacher Rebecca Primus sent "home weeklies" to her parents in Hartford and also corresponded with friend Addie Brown, a domestic worker back home. Addie wrote voluminously to Rebecca, lamenting their separation and describing her struggle to achieve a semblance of security and stability. Around the same time, Rebecca's brother, Nelson, began writing home about his new life in Boston, as he set out to make a name and a career for himself as an artist. The letters describe their daily lives and touch on race, class, gender, religion, and politics, offering rare entry into individual black lives at that time. Through extensive archival research, Barbara J. Beeching also shows how the story of the Primus family intersects with changes over time in Hartford's black community and the country. Newspapers and census tracts, as well as probate, land, court, and vital records help her trace an arc of local black fortunes between 1830 and 1880. Seeking full equality, blacks sought refinement and respectability through home ownership, literacy, and social gains. One of the many paradoxes Beeching uncovers is that just as the Civil War was tearing the nation apart, a recognizable black middle class was emerging in Hartford. It is a story of individuals, family, and community, of expectation and disappointment, loss and endurance, change and continuity. "This is a powerful book and a truly important story. Beeching provides a richly detailed survey of life in Connecticut, the political and racial climates at various historical moments, and the web of intraracial and interracial networks that informed the Primus family experiences. Multifaceted and thoroughly absorbing, Hopes and Expectations will reintroduce people to a New England that they thought they knew." Lois Brown, author of Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution

10. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone : The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), 95, 188. 11. Asher, *An Autobiography*, 1. 12. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone* , 188. 13. Leon F. Litwack, *North ...*"