



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

By Ira Berlin

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

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.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

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.*

#### From Publishers Weekly

The history of slavery in North America is not as simple, clear-cut or tidy as is often believed. That is the message of this impeccably presented history of American slavery from 1619, when John Rolfe brought "twenty Negars" to the Jamestown colony, to the 1820s, when the spirit of emancipation began to take hold in the North. Berlin, a history professor at the University of Maryland, shows how at different times and at different places, slavery was a very different thing. He makes a great distinction, for example, between slave societies such as the Carolina low country in the 17th century (in which both the economy and the social structure was built upon slavery) and societies with slaves (the lower Mississippi of the same era) where slavery was only part of a more complex structure. He shows how slavery was different for those born in the West Indies, Africa and North America, and for those serving in urban settings (which encouraged a certain entrepreneurial spirit) and in rural. These distinctions have continuing resonance, as Berlin shows that once a society with slaves became a slave society, all blacks—free or not—could come to be regarded as slaves: in short, how an economic system became racism. Although the prose is serviceable more than anything else, the book holds many surprises gleaned from the facts, whether in its portrait of New York as a major slave city or its descriptions of free enterprise at work among slaves. The economic and historical research presented here is impressive. But what gives the book an additional dimension is its deftly employed social insights.

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#### From Library Journal

Recently, there has been a spate of books on the issue of slavery. Drawing on tapes made by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s and 1940s, *Remembering Slavery* (LJ 9/1/98) records the history of slavery as told by ex-slaves. This powerful document was edited partly by Berlin, a prominent historian on the subject, whose *Many Thousands Gone*, offers "an imaginative, detailed account of American slavery from its origins at the beginning of the 17th century through the revolution" (LJ 9/15/98). Johnson and Smith's book, which accompanies a PBS series, has been marred by controversy—Smith was fired from the *Boston Globe* for fabricating stories. But the book remains both an "easy-to-read history of American slavery" (LJ 9/15/98) and an imaginative rethinking of history: fiction writer Johnson integrates a dozen short stories into the text. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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