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Slaveholding Presidents

How many of our presidents owned slaves?

There are two ways of interpreting your question. Either: How many presidents owned slaves at some point in their lives? Or: How many presidents owned slaves while serving as chief executive? Many books get the answers to these questions wrong, and when I speak on the presidents and ask these two questions, audiences invariably low-ball the answer to both.

George Washington, depicted here at his Mount Vernon estate, owned between 250 and 350 slaves.

It comes as a shock to most Americans' sensibilities that more than one in four U.S. presidents were slaveholder: 12 owned slaves at some point in their lives. Significantly, 8 presidents owned slaves while living in the Executive Mansion. Put another way, for 50 of the first 60 years of the new republic, the president was a slaveholder.

Following is the number of slaves each of the 12 slaveholding presidents owned. (CAPS indicate the president owned slaves while serving as the chief executive):[1]

- GEORGE WASHINGTON (between 250-350 slaves)
- THOMAS JEFFERSON (about 200)
- JAMES MADISON (more than 100)
- JAMES MONROE (about 75)
- ANDREW JACKSON (fewer than 200)
- Martin Van Buren (one)
- William Henry Harrison (eleven)
- JOHN TYLER (about 70)
- JAMES POLK (about 25)
- ZACHARY TAYLOR (fewer than 150)
- Andrew Johnson (probably eight)
- Ulysses S. Grant (probably five)

It's a commonplace that Abraham Lincoln never trafficked in slaves, much less owned them -- indeed, he "freed the slaves." But here's the shocker: Although the slave trade had been abolished in the District of Columbia in 1850, slaves inhabited the capital for another 15 years -- till the end of the Civil War. Dwell on that thought: Lincoln fought the Civil War in a slave city -- the Great Emancipator inhabited a White House staffed by slaves.

A number of presidents benefited electorally from "the peculiar institution," especially the four earliest presidents from the then-largest slave state, Virginia. To understand why, one must go back to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, when Southern delegates argued that black slaves should be counted as complete persons, while Northern delegates didn't want them counted at all since they were not citizens and couldn't vote. To get over this hurdle and create a unified nation (their highest priority), the delegates decided to negotiate: the North proposed counting black slaves as half a person, and the South countered with three-quarters, so they compromised at three-fifths.

The "three-fifths" clause in the Constitution (Article I, section 2) was all about determining a state's representation in Congress. That meant southern states collectively gained an advantage that often provided the margin of victory in close elections. In his book *Negro President*, Garry Wills points out that the slave states always had one-third more seats in Congress than their free population justified. This was decisive in the Election of 1800 in which Thomas Jefferson beat out northern rivals John Adams and Aaron Burr in the House of Representatives

Also, three key Southerners -- George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison -- finagled locating the national capital, Washington, DC, in slave territory. The capital started out in New York City, in a free state, then moved to Philadelphia. But in Philadelphia a slave-owner could only keep a slave for six months before freeing him, unless he was temporarily sent into slave territory, which was inconvenient to the owner. So the founders set aside land around a slave town, Alexandria, Virginia, to serve as the capital of the new nation.

Historian David Brion David summarized:

> *Even most history books fail to convey the extent that the American government was dominated by slaveholders and proslavery interests between the inaugurations of Presidents Washington and Lincoln. Partly because of the clause in the Constitution that gave the South added political representation for three-fifths of its slave population, Southern slaveholding presidents governed the nation for roughly 50 of those 72 years. And four of the six Northern presidents in that span catered to Southern proslavery policies. For example, Martin Van Buren, who came from a New York slaveholding family, sought to undermine the nation's judicial process and send the captives from the slave ship Amistad back to Cuba -- and certain death. Millard Fillmore, also from New York, signed the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which enforced return of escaped slaves even from free states.*
>
> *From the start, America's foreign policy favored slaveholding interests, and administrations refused to cooperate with efforts by Britain to suppress the international slave trade, even though the United States had defined the African slave trade in 1820 as piracy, a capital crime. The one exception to this proslavery stand was the support John Adams's administration gave to Toussaint L'Ouverture during the Haitian Revolution -- both to help the slaves gain freedom and to expel the French.*[2]

One final point. Most historians argue that the biggest challenge the founders failed to confront was the existence of slavery on American soil. Our earliest presidents struggled to find solutions. The most radical proposal in the early days of the republic was to ship slaves and other blacks back to Africa. Jefferson was keen on the idea, believing that blacks would eventually have to be removed from the U.S. or else whites would live in perpetual dread that the slaves would rise up in rebellion. Such fears prompted a later president, James Monroe, to support the creation of the American Colonization Society (founded 1816-1817).

The Society was not just well-intentioned. It raised money, acquired lands in what is present-day Liberia, and supported passage of emancipated slaves, former indentured servants, and free blacks across the Atlantic to the west coast of Africa. The Society named the major settlement in the colony Monrovia in honor of our nation's fifth president.

(*Question from Sherry B. of Belchertown, MA*)

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[1] Sources: Garry Wills; Rob Lopresti at http://www.nas.com/~lopresti/ps.htm

[2] http://www.racematters.org/legacyofsouthscivilwarwin.htm