



## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

# Slavery & the Northern Economy

### HASAN JEFFRIES

My people are from Kelly, Georgia, which is a little more than an hour's drive east of Atlanta. There, they experienced the horror of enslavement and the joy of emancipation. My great-grandfather was born there around 1870. He was the first in my family born free on American soil, and I was born a century later a world away in Brooklyn, New York.

Growing up in Brooklyn, all of the family members I knew lived in and around New York. And while I did think about the enslavement of my ancestors, I didn't dwell on slavery itself. Just about everything I had been taught in school about the peculiar institution focused on the cotton-producing South, and every time I checked, there weren't any cotton fields in New York City.

But I began to think differently when I enrolled at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. At Morehouse, my dorm room could have easily been mistaken for a shrine to New York. Together with my roommate, who also hailed from the city, every inch of every wall was plastered with reminders of the Big Apple. There was a poster for Mo' Better Blues, a Spike Lee joint. Pendants for the Mets and the Yankees. I was the Mets fan, of course, and he was the Yankees fan. And even a New York City street sign, but don't ask us how we got that.

And much to the chagrin of my professors, I didn't confine my New York nationalism to my dorm room. I freely shared it in the classroom, including during discussions about slavery in America. I don't remember exactly what I said in my freshman history class about American slavery that day, but it was some wisecrack about slavery being basically a southern thing. I do remember exactly how Dr. Windham responded. "Brother," he said, "You got a lot to learn." And he was right.

So, I did what many people believe is impossible for New Yorkers to do: I shut up, I listened, and I learned. I learned about the practice of slavery in the North, about the critical role that the region played in maintaining the institution, first by financing the Transatlantic Slave Trade and then by fueling demand for products produced by enslaved people. I learned, and slavery was anything but a "southern thing."

At the end of my freshman year, I drove with my uncle out to Kelly, Georgia and visited the grave site of my great-grandfather for the first time. As my uncle and I stood quietly by ourselves in a dense thicket of underbrush, he began to tell me about our family's post-slavery history from Georgia to Ohio to New Jersey and to New York.

It was an extension of the lessons on slavery that Dr. Windham had taught me all year, that colonies and states like Georgia and New York were interconnected and interdependent from slavery onward.

Thinking back on it, I find it more than a little ironic that I had to go South to learn about the North.

I'm Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and this is *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*. It's a special series from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. This podcast provides an in-depth look at how to teach important aspects of the history of American slavery. In each episode, we explore a different topic, walking you through historical concepts, raising questions for discussion, suggesting useful source material, and offering practical classroom exercises.

Talking with students about slavery can be emotional and complex. This podcast is a resource for navigating those challenges, so teachers and students can develop a deeper understanding of the history and legacy of American slavery.

In this episode, we're going to confront and challenge the notion that slavery was simply a southern institution. Historian Christy Clark-Pujara will explain how commerce in the North was integral to perpetuating slavery and how the northern economy was in many ways built on its active participation in the institution. She'll share a framework for exploring these connections in the classroom, along with several rich examples. And understanding the role of slavery in the northern economy ultimately raises important questions for students about how to understand America and its economy today. I'll see you on the other side. Enjoy.

### **CHRISTY CLARK-PUJARA**

We misunderstand the institution of slavery when we only locate it on the plantation. We misunderstand the history of the United States as a whole when we do not acknowledge that the institution of slavery was national rather than regional. Moreover, when we don't acknowledge the role that northern colonists and citizens played in the maintenance of the institution of slavery, we misunderstand the institution.

Slave plantations did not exist in isolation. It's the people outside the plantation that bring the captives, that bring food, clothing, wood, and other basic necessity. It's the people outside of the plantation that transport the goods produced by captive workers. They were dependent upon the activities of people outside of the plantation for those places to thrive and exist.

When we think of slavery as simply a southern institution rather than a national one, the erasure or marginalization of the northern black experience and the centrality of the business of slavery to the northern economy allows for a dangerous fiction that the North has no history of racism to overcome. It also feeds into a false narrative that black people were not part of the founding of the northern colonies, and they were.

We think that the North has no need to redress institutional racism or work toward reconciliation. In other words, that contemporary racial disparities are not grounded in history but are rather a reflection of poor personal choices, or even worse, innate inferiority. So understanding, *fully* understanding, how and why the institution of slavery is central to understanding American history, shapes how we see ourselves today.

The business of slavery is all economic activity that was directly related to the maintenance of

slaveholding in the Americas, specifically the buying and selling of people, foods, and goods that made plantations possible. How did enslaved people get brought to the plantation? How were they fed? How were they clothed? Where did the seeds come from? Where did the money come from to invest in those places? Where do the products leave from, and how do they leave? So, understanding that the plantation didn't exist in isolation, the business of slavery was essential to the institution of slavery.

Our understanding of slavery has grown tremendously in the last several decades, but our understanding has been dominated by a few particular visions of enslaved people, particularly the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and people toiling under the threat of the lash in the hot sun. These depictions are accurate. However, they are not solitary. Enslaved people labored in small households throughout the Northeast. Enslaved people labored on docks. Enslaved people labored on slave ships.

Examining the business of slavery allows for a fuller picture of the economic systems that sustained and maintained race-based slavery throughout the Americas. It was the business of slavery that allowed New England to become an economic powerhouse without ever producing a single staple or cash crop. Furthermore, enslaved and free black people called the northern colonies and states "home," and the history of those places, remain incomplete without a full accounting of the experiences of black people in those places.

Without a full accounting of the role that enslaved and free black people played and the centrality of the business of slavery in the founding, the maintenance, and the economic ascent of the United States, objections to righting the wrongs of the nation's past will remain. Whether it is affirmative action at our institutions of higher education or addressing racial disparities in mass incarceration, we must remember that our interpretations of the past shape who we think of as worthy contributing members of our nation.

In many ways, slavery, the stalled emancipation process, and circumscribed black freedom cast people of African descent as apart from the nation, even though their labors were central to its creation. A lack of understanding of how race-based slavery and its legacies marginalized an entire race of people for centuries serves to further ostracize people of African descent today.

So, I'm going to give three examples of the business of slavery in the North. The first is the West Indian trade. The second is the Atlantic Slave Trade. And the final example is going to be about the modern economy in the 19th century and the textile industry, particularly around the commodity of cotton.

First, the West Indian Trade. Sugar production forever changed the Western diet and waistline. The first plantations in the Americas began operating in the 17th century, and in the Americas, sugar was cultivated in the Caribbean. As the demand for sugar grew and becomes insatiable, just as it is now, these plantations would become increasingly dependent on northern American colonists. Most of the land in the Caribbean is going to be used for sugar production, so they imported all of their food and their necessities, and New England farmers and merchants acted as the grocers and the big box stores for the West Indian sugar plantations.

There's this constant demand for sugar, and so all the arable land is being used for sugar. That means you

need to import all of your food. It means you need to import wood, because you have to boil sugar at the end of the production process. It means that you import candles, because these sugar mills are running 24 hours a day, and you also need candles to light your home. It means that you are importing clothing. It means you're importing all the basic necessities of life.

And New Englanders provided those necessities. So, New Englanders supplied enslavers in the West Indies—"the West Indies" and "the Caribbean" are used interchangeably—with captive laborers, with livestock, with dairy products, with fish, with candles and lumber. So, the plantations cannot run without these imports from the outside, because plantations do not exist in isolation.

In return, New Englanders received molasses, which is a by-product of sugar production (it's the runoff), which they distilled into rum. Rum becomes a major export out of New England. In Rhode Island, it's the number one export. In the city of Newport alone, there were 16 distilleries. And in the 18th century, rum becomes its own form of currency. Then and now, liquor always has a market.

But in a place like Rhode Island, the connections were even more salient, and I'll just give you an example of what I mean. Local slave labor played a key role in the growth of commerce. Moreover, the abundant plantations of the West Indies provided farmers and merchants with a market for their slave-produced products. And so, farmers in the Narragansett country (this is the southern half of Rhode Island), put thousands of enslaved men, women, and children to work producing foodstuffs and raising livestock for the West Indian Trade. So, you have enslaved people in southern Rhode Island growing foodstuffs for enslaved people in the West Indies.

Merchants in Newport and Providence transported local agriculture, especially livestock and cheese, to the sugar plantations in the West Indies in exchange for molasses. The same merchants then brought back molasses to Rhode Island and sold it to local distillers, who then used it to make rum, the colony's number one export. And so, this bilateral trade was the cornerstone of the economy in Rhode Island.

Now I'd like to move on to the Atlantic Slave Trade, which complemented the West Indian Trade. I'll start with the story of a slave ship. In 1773, the sloop *Adventure* sailed out of Newport, Rhode Island. The ship was owned by Christopher and George Champlin. In addition to the captain and officers, there were 11 sailors aboard the ship.

The bulk of the departing cargo consisted of local products. The *Adventure* was outfitted with handcuffs and shackles made by local blacksmiths, 26 gallons of vinegar, pork, beef, sugar, molasses, wine, beans, tobacco, butter, bread and flour. This food was to feed the crew and enslaved people on the return voyage.

But the vast majority of the cargo space was reserved for locally distilled rum: 24,380 gallons of rum, which was enough to purchase several dozen enslaved captives. Enslaved women cost an average of 190 gallons, and men averaged 220 gallons. The *Adventure* reached Africa in five weeks. It took the captain four months of cruising along the coast to acquire 62 slaves along with rice, pepper, palm oil and gold dust. Fifty-eight captives survived, and they were sold in Grenada for between 35 and 39 pounds.

The ship's owners received a 5% return on their investment. Such voyages were common in Rhode

Island. Slave trading voyages produced profits from 2-10%. Most voyages yielded returns of 5 or 6%. And while these profit margins may seem low by contemporary investment standards, investments in the Atlantic Slave Trade were less risky and more liquid and needed less time to garner returns than all other forms of possible investment in the 18th century.

But it isn't just the transfer of captives from point A to point B. The Atlantic Slave Trade creates a whole other economy within itself and especially in relation to the bilateral trade between the northern colonies and the West Indies. It's important that we think about the wider implications of West Indian and Atlantic slave trades.

Shipbuilders, sailors, caulkers, cell makers, carpenters, blacksmiths, painters, stevedores were all employed by the West Indian and Atlantic slave trades. Coopers made barrels that stored the rum, which was exchanged for enslaved people who were sold throughout the Americas. Clerks, scribes and warehouse overseers conducted the business of the trade. Outfitting even the smallest ship required a small army of tradesmen.

African slave trading voyages also required additional crew to control and manage the human captives, usually twice as many than a commodities trade. Merchants, many of whom were slave traders, paid significant taxes to the cities for public works. For example, the duties collected on the purchase and sale of enslaved people in Rhode Island were used to pave the streets of Newport. So, whether or not you owned a slave, you benefited from the business of slavery.

In the classroom, I've given my students the bare-bones information about the sloop *Adventure*, and then I ask them, "What else can we learn about how the economy and society functioned in order for this transaction to have taken place?" And for the most part, students get it almost immediately. Well, they say, "Well, somebody had to build the ship." Okay, so, we got ship builders and carpenters. And they're like, "Well, someone had to load the ship. And where did they get the stuff from that was on the ship?" So that's local farmers. And then they think about, "Well, where did we get the rum from?" Well, the rum came from local distilleries.

And then they begin to start to understand that an entire economy was caught up on that ship, from tradesmen to distillers to merchants to farmers. And then they start thinking about, "Okay, who's on that ship, and what kind of food are they eating, and is this a food they're familiar with?" And then they get sold to a place that they know nothing about to do work they've never done before. And then that ship comes back home to Rhode Island to do it all over again.

Something that a student pointed out to me once was that he tended to think about a profession like a blacksmith in a rather benign way. These ships are outfitted with dozens and dozens of shackles, and when you examine how the sloop *Adventure* made its money, shackles become incredibly important. That's how you kept the people bound, who were later sold.

So I give them the bare-bones and then ask them, "What does it tell us about our society? What does this tell us about our economy?" And they also get the social component of it, that this is a place where holding certain people as property is normative, acknowledged and respected. Slave traders were not

maligned. They were elites. And so, it tells us a lot about how a society functioned.

There was slave labor in the North from the colonial period through the American Revolution. Slaveholding was socially acceptable, legally sanctioned, and widely practiced in the North. But after the American Revolution, slavery as an institution, slaveholding as a practice, begins to fall apart in the North. Slavery dies out in these places. The primary reason is the business of slavery was always more important in the North than slave labor itself. And most northerners are opposed to slavery's expansion, not its existence.

Moving onto the modern economy and cotton in the 19th century and how it transforms the U.S. economy, really is the engine behind the U.S. economic ascent in the 19th century, making the U.S. an economic powerhouse in the world. The history of slavery isn't something that we cannot connect with. In fact, I'm willing to bet that every person listening has a direct connection to slavery that they just don't know about.

So just to give you an example, if you own a pair of jeans, if you've ever worn a pair of jeans, if you've ever bought a pair of jeans, you are intimately connected to the history of slavery in this country. Levi Strauss buys its patent from a textile mill in Rhode Island after the American Civil War. The mill was no longer manufacturing slave clothing, but the patent that was bought was a patent that had manufactured slave clothing. It was called "Negro cloth." It was a coarse cotton-wool material made especially to minimize the cost of clothing enslaved people in the American South. It was tough, it was durable, it washed well, and it was designed for enslaved people on America's plantations.

Enslaved African Americans in the southern United States produced the bulk of the world's cotton and almost all of the cotton consumed by the U.S. textile industry during the Antebellum era. Northerners, especially New Yorkers, were buying, selling and shipping it. By 1860, cotton represented more than half of all of U.S. exports, and Lower Manhattan was populated with cotton brokers, bankers, merchants, shippers, auctioneers and insurers who profited from that export.

Only New York banks were big enough to extend massive lines of credit to plantation owners so they could buy seed, farming equipment and people. New York was also home to the water and rail transportation companies that shipped cotton from the South to the North. When we think about the Industrial Revolution, when we think about public investment in rail lines and shipping industry, we often don't think about it in conjunction with the institution of slavery. But it was the institution of slavery and cotton that was the impetus for it all.

Over the 19th century, the textile industry transformed northern towns. By 1852, the industry employed 14% of the labor force, and by 1860, New England was home to 472 cotton mills. These textile factories were often the sole employers in towns throughout the region, and they were a direct link between northern advancement and wealth and southern slavery.

Textile mills are just one example. Manufacturing plants throughout the North and in New England in particular that produced farming implements, who were they selling those farming implements to? Southern plantation owners, to be used by enslaved people. Factories that produced shoes were often

making shoes for enslaved people who wore them out in the fields. So, the manufacturing industry as it existed in the 19th century was directly connected to the American plantation.

Rhode Island again provides a salient example of the connection between northern investment and southern slaveholding. Between 1800 and 1860, more than 80 Negro cloth mills opened in Rhode Island. 22 Rhode Island towns and cities manufactured Negro cloth for over 60 years. More than 80 Rhode Island families owned part of a Negro cloth mill at some point in the 19th century. By mid-century, 79% of all Rhode Island textile mills manufactured slave clothing. In the famed low mills, about a third of all textiles produced were destined for southern markets, plantations in particular.

The look and feel of a city like New York was transformed by those who were invested in cotton, invested in the business of slavery. The now-infamous Lehman brothers began as cotton brokers. The first Morgan fortune was made by Charles Morgan, who was a steamship captain and merchant whose shipping line dominated the Gulf coastline transporting enslaved captives from the Upper South to the Deep South.

So, enslaved people were sold by the tens of thousands and then the hundreds of thousands—the estimate is over a million enslaved people—were sold from the Upper South, the Chesapeake, so Virginia, Maryland, Delaware to the New South or the Deep South to grow cotton in places like Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. Some of them walked through forced migrations. Others went by water. Charles Morgan transported people by water from the Upper South to New Orleans to Galveston, Texas. That's how the Morgan fortune was first built.

You also have people like Alexander Stewart, who was a cotton merchant who opened the United States' first department store in New York City in 1848. New York remains a fashion capital of the world, and its first department store was opened with investments in slave-picked cotton.

When I teach these connections and the bright lines start showing up for students, what most really begin to grapple with is the understanding that the sin of slavery is national, that whether or not you ever owned a slave, you benefited from slavery if you live and function in this country. And that is a difficult pill for many of my students to swallow, that we all have benefited from slavery because the United States became what it was through the exploitation of millions of people of African descent. To understand that when people say, "Slavery built the United States," that it's not hyperbole or just something you say to be sensational, but just a reflection of the truth, and what that means for racial disparities today.

But then the next thing I see is a realization that people of African descent are an essential part of this place, that it's not an add-on. I teach African American history classes, and what I am most trying to do is to get students to understand that African American history isn't an additive. It's central to understanding American history. You don't know who you are as an American unless you know the story of slavery.

So history at its best is not about the past; it's about the present and how we function in the present. And when students begin to understand that slavery is central to the history of the United States, current conflicts and debates about race in this country will have real meaning to them, because they'll understand that the stakes are not about what's happening right now but what's been happening since

1607 and why we have such racial disparities and divides. These are not a function of the last 50 years or 100 years. They're a function of hundreds of years. And if we are going to really understand who we are as a nation—who contributed, who built, who belongs, who's a part of it—we have to reckon with this history.

The most common response I get from students is, “Why didn't I know this? Why don't we talk about these things?” And the fact of the matter is, our students are going to have to exist and function in an increasingly multiracial, multi-country and global world, and we do them a grave disservice when we let our discomfort in talking about race shape how we teach and what we teach. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our students, and we owe it to our nation to tell the most complete, honest picture of how we got to where we are.

They turn on the news. They see the headlines. We have an opportunity to provide them with the proper context to understand that. And more importantly, we can provide them with the proper context to act differently, to speak differently, to get involved in local politics, to get involved with local initiatives and community service.

A lot is at stake. This is not academic. It's not just about changing what's in a history book. It's about how we function in the world, how we talk to each other, how we interact with people we work with, how we include or exclude groups of people in our neighborhood. It's about our very humanity.

### HASAN JEFFRIES

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*Teaching Hard History* is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance with special thanks to the University of Wisconsin Press. They're the publishers of a valuable collection of essays called *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*. In each episode, we're featuring a different scholar to talk about material from a chapter they authored in that collection. We've also adapted their recommendations into a set of teaching materials available at [Tolerance.org](http://Tolerance.org). These materials include over 100 primary sources, sample units, and a detailed framework for teaching about the history of American slavery.

Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, providing free resources to educators who work with children from kindergarten through high school. You can find those resources online at [Tolerance.org](http://Tolerance.org).

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And if you like what we're doing, please share it with your friends and colleagues and consider taking a minute to review and rate us on iTunes. We appreciate the feedback, and it helps us get more visibility

among potential listeners.

I'm Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, associate professor of history at the Ohio State University and your host. You've been listening to *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*.