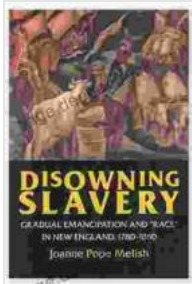


# Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England: A Journey from Oppression to Freedom, 1780-1860



## Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860 by Joanne Pope Melish

★★★★☆ 4.6 out of 5

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The abolition of slavery in the United States was a long and arduous process that began in the colonial era and culminated with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865. In New England, the process of emancipation was particularly gradual, with the first laws abolishing slavery passed in the 1780s and the last enslaved people in the region not being freed until the 1860s.

This article explores the gradual process of emancipation in New England, examining the complex interplay between legal, social, and economic factors that shaped the lives of free and enslaved people of color during this period. We will also consider the ways in which the gradual nature of New England's emancipation experience shaped the region's racial landscape in the years that followed.

## **Legal Emancipation in New England**

The legal process of emancipation in New England began with the passage of the Massachusetts Gradual Emancipation Act of 1783. This act provided that all children born to enslaved mothers after March 1, 1783, would be free at the age of 21. The act also provided that any enslaved person who had served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution would be immediately freed.

The Massachusetts Gradual Emancipation Act was followed by similar laws in other New England states. In 1784, New Hampshire passed a law providing for the gradual emancipation of all enslaved people in the state. In 1789, Connecticut passed a law providing for the gradual emancipation of all enslaved people born after March 1, 1784. And in 1797, Rhode Island passed a law providing for the gradual emancipation of all enslaved people born after March 1, 1784.

These laws marked a significant step towards the end of slavery in New England. However, they also reflected the region's gradualist approach to abolition. By providing for the gradual emancipation of enslaved people, rather than immediate emancipation, these laws ensured that the institution of slavery would continue to exist in New England for many years to come.

## **Social and Economic Factors**

In addition to legal factors, social and economic factors also played a role in the gradual emancipation of enslaved people in New England. One important factor was the changing economic landscape of the region. In the decades following the American Revolution, New England's economy shifted from one based on agriculture to one based on industry. This shift

led to a decline in the demand for enslaved labor, as industrial jobs could be performed by free workers.

Another important factor was the growing antislavery movement in New England. In the 1830s and 1840s, a number of prominent abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, emerged in New England. These abolitionists argued that slavery was a moral evil and that it should be abolished immediately. The antislavery movement helped to raise public awareness of the plight of enslaved people and to build support for emancipation.

### **The Impact of Gradual Emancipation**

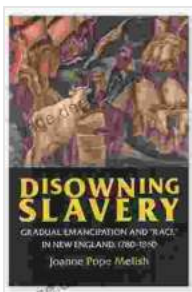
The gradual emancipation of enslaved people in New England had a number of significant impacts on the region. First, it led to a decline in the number of enslaved people in the region. In 1790, there were an estimated 6,000 enslaved people in New England. By 1860, that number had declined to less than 1,000.

Second, gradual emancipation led to the creation of a free black community in New England. These free black communities were often located in urban areas, where free black people could find work and establish their own businesses. The free black community in New England played an important role in the antislavery movement and in the fight for civil rights.

Third, gradual emancipation helped to shape the racial landscape of New England in the years that followed. The gradual nature of emancipation meant that free black people and enslaved black people continued to live side by side for many years. This led to a complex and often tense racial

dynamic in New England, as free black people sought to assert their rights and enslaved black people struggled for their freedom.

The gradual emancipation of enslaved people in New England was a long and complex process that was shaped by a variety of legal, social, and economic factors. The gradual nature of emancipation meant that free black people and enslaved black people continued to live side by side for many years, which led to a complex and often tense racial dynamic in the region. However, the gradual emancipation of enslaved people also helped to create a free black community in New England that played an important role in the antislavery movement and in the fight for civil rights.



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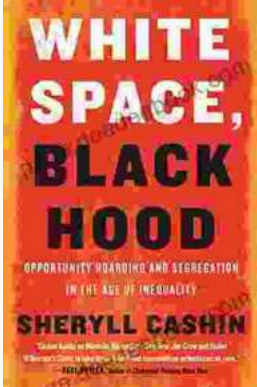
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