

WHICH U.S. PRESIDENTS OWNED SLAVES?

Note: This website was inspired by Andrew Levy's 2001 article "The Anti-Jefferson," about Robert Carter III, who freed more slaves than any other slaveholder in American history. Levy has written a book about Carter, [The First Emancipator](#). I recommend it to anyone interested in the history of slavery or the American character. Details are available in the [bibliography](#).

How many presidents owned slaves? It ought to be a simple question but a search on the web produces a lot of contradictory answers. One reason is that there are really two questions: **1.** How many presidents owned slaves **during their lives?** **2.** How many presidents owned slaves **while they were president?** In the table below I attempt to answer both questions. I have also included selected quotations from the presidents and relevant actions they took. Anything in *this font* refers to something the president did while serving as president. Anything in **this font** refers to an activity of a member of the president's family, rather than the president himself. I would appreciate hearing of any mistakes or omissions so that I can correct them. revised 1/11 (thanks to **Damon Cannon** and **John Winn McGlothlin** for improvements.) - [Rob Lopresti](#)

Of the first five presidents, **four** owned slaves. All **four** of these owned slaves while they were president.

Of the next five presidents (#6-10), **four** owned slaves. Only **two** of them owned slaves while they were president.

Of the next five presidents (#11-15), **two** owned slaves. Both of these **two** owned slaves while they were president.

Of the next three presidents (#16-18) **two** owned slaves. **neither** of them owned slaves while serving as president.

The last president to own slaves while in office was the twelfth president, **Zachary Taylor** (1849-1850).

The last president to own slaves at all was the eighteenth president, **Ulysses S. Grant** (1869-1877).

So **twelve** of our presidents owned slaves and **eight** of them owned slaves while serving as president.

Were they just "Men of their time?"	Ranking the Presidents
The Slave-owners in Your Wallet	Bibliography (Citations)

President	Dates	State	Did he own slaves?	Quotations and Actions
1. George Washington	1789-1797	VA	<p>Yes.When GW took over Mount Vernon at age 22 there were 18 slaves. When he married he gained control of 200 more which technically belonged to the estate of his wife's first husband. By 1786 he owned 216 slaves. (Flexner,p114)</p> <p><i>While GW was serving as president in Philadelphia a Pennsylvania law was passed freeing slaves whose owners had been citizens of the state for six months. GW sent his two most valuable slaves home, telling them it was for his wife's convenience.(Wilkins,p76)</i></p> <p><i>In 1796 Oney (or Ona) Judge ran away to New Hampshire.She was one of GW's slaves - Martha's personal servant. President GW asked the Treasury Secretary and a customs agent for help in getting her back, by force, if necessary - but she never returned.(Wilkins. P82. also: Gerson)</i></p> <p><i>When GW left the presidency he apparently left some house slaves behind in Philadelphia, knowing that under state law they would be quietly freed by having spent a certain amount of time in Pennsylvania. (Flexner)</i></p> <p>When he died in 1799 his will called for his manservant William Lee to be freed immediately, and given a pension. The other slaves were to be freed when his widow died. Martha chose to free them two years later. According to Abigail Adams this was because MW feared her life might</p>	<p>1786: "I can only say that no man living wishes more sincerely than I do to see the abolition of (slavery)... But when slaves who are happy & content to remain with their present masters, are tampered with & seduced to leave them... it introduces more evils than it can cure."(Hirschfield,p187)</p> <p>click here for more</p>

			<p>be in danger, since her death meant freedom for the slaves. (Hirschfield p 214)</p> <p>Neither GW nor MW could legally free the dower slaves which still belonged to the Custis estate.</p>	
2. John Adams	1797-1801	Mass	<p>No.</p> <p>JA's cousin Samuel Adams apparently received a slave named Surry as a gift in 1765. Some sources say she remained a slave; others say Samuel freed her immediately. In any case she stayed on as Samuel's family cook for several decades - even after slavery was outlawed in Massachusetts by a bill Samuel introduced.</p> <p>(Lewis) (thanks to Jim Farrell for a correction)</p>	<p>1820: "I shudder when I think of the calamities which slavery is likely to produce in this country. You would think me mad if I were to describe my anticipations. If the gangrene is not stopped I can see nothing but insurrection of the blacks against the whites." (Smith,p 138)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
3. Thomas Jefferson	1801-1809	VA	<p>Yes. TJ inherited many slaves. His wife brought a dowry of more than 100 slaves, and he purchased many more throughout his life. At some points he was one of the largest slaveowners in Virginia.</p> <p>In 1790 TJ gave his newly married daughter and her husband 1000 acres of land and 25 slaves.(Miller)</p> <p>In 1798 TJ owned 141 slaves, many of them elderly. Two years later he owned 93. (Bigelow,p537.)</p> <p>One of TJ's slaves was Sally Hemings, allegedly the half-sister of his deceased wife. During TJ's presidency a rumor appeared in print that she was his mistress. TJ denied this story, which was also passed on as Hemings</p>	<p>1776: (King George III) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms against us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with</p>

		<p>family tradition. The youngest of Heming's six children (and the only one whose paternity can be traced through DNA) definitely descended from the Jefferson line, presumably either through TJ, his brother Randolph, or one of Randolph's sons. TJ was in the vicinity of SH during each period of conception.(See Miller, p148-176:.) For a discussion of the DNA issue see: http://tinyurl.com/ckfkk2 and: http://jeffersondna.com</p> <p>TJ freed one of Heming's children and allowed another to run away unpursued. Both of them were light enough to successfully pass for White. (See Miller, p165.)</p> <p>TJ freed five slaves in his will, all members of the Hemings family. Sally was not among them. 130 slaves were sold when TJ's estate was auctioned off. (See Stanton 94-96.) TJ's daughter Martha freed Sally Hemings years later. (See Miller, p168.)</p> <p>When when Jefferson's estate was auctioned off at his death that 130 slaves were sold</p>	<p>crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.” -from TJ's draft of the Declaration of Independence.This paragraph was voted down by the Congressional Congress.(Jefferson, 1984. p 22.)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
<p>4. James Madison</p>	<p>1809-1817</p>	<p>VA</p> <p>Yes. JM grew up in a slave-owning family and owned slaves all his life.</p> <p>In 1833 JM sold several of his farms but not his slaves. A year later he sold 16 slaves to a relative - with their permission. (Brant, p637)</p> <p>He did not free his slaves in his will. (Brant p640)</p>	<p>1819: "A general emancipation of slaves ought to be 1. gradual. 2. equitable & satisfactory to the individuals immediately concerned. 3. consistent with the existing & durable prejudices of the nation... To be consistent with existing and probably unalterable prejudices in the U.S. freed blacks ought to be permanently removed beyond the region occupied by or allotted to a White population." (Madison, <u>Writings</u>,p729)</p> <p>click here for more</p>

5. James Monroe	1817-1825	VA	<p>Yes. JM inherited a slave named Ralph. When he owned the farm Highland he owned 30 to 40 slaves. (<i>James Monroe and Slavery</i>)</p>	<p>1801: "We perceive an existing evil which commenced under our Colonial System, with which we are not properly chargeable, or if at all not in the present degree, and we acknowledge the extreme difficulty of remedying it."(Monroe, 1903.v3, p 292-294.)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
6. John Quincy Adams	1825-1829	Mass	<p>No.</p>	<p>1841: "What can I do for the cause of God and man, for the progress of human emancipation, for the suppression of the African slave-trade? Yet my conscience presses me on; let me but die upon the breach."(Adams, p 519)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
7. Andrew Jackson	1829-1837	SC	<p>Yes. AJ bought his first slave, a young woman, in 1788. By 1794 his business included slave trading and he had purchased at least 16 slaves.(Remini,p.37, 55)</p> <p>In the 1820s Jackson owned about 160 slaves.(James,p31)</p> <p>He did not free his slaves in his will.</p>	<p>1822: "As far as lenity can be extended to these unfortunate creatures I wish you to do so; subordination must be obtained first, and then good treatment."(James,p31)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
8. Martin Van Buren	1837-1841	NY	<p>Yes, but not while he was president. When MVB was young his father owned six slaves. (Cole,p13)</p> <p>His only slave, Tom, ran away in 1814 (approx.). When Tom was found 8 years later, MVB offered him for sale to the finder for \$50. (Cole,p110)</p>	<p><i>1837: "Before the election I declared that:)I must go into the Presidential chair the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia against the wishes of the slaveholding States, and also with a determination equally decided to resist the slightest interference with it in the States where it exists."</i> (Van Buren)</p> <p>click here for more click here for more</p>
9. William Henry Harrison	1841	VA		

			<p>Yes, but not while he was president.</p> <p>WHH's father and grandfather owned many slaves. WHH took seven of them with him to the Northwest Territory in 1800 where slavery was illegal. They then became indentured servants on terms undistinguishable from slavery. (Clanin, p1, and Cleaves,p47)</p> <p>1801: WHH purchase a runaway slave and later freed him. He stayed on for many years as a servant. (Cleaves,p351)</p> <p>1804: WHH was appointed Governor of Indiana territory, which was "free soil." He attempted to have slavery made legal there, but generally followed the law by keeping Blacks as indentured servants who were free after about a decade of service. (Cleaves,p351)</p>	<p>1820: "We cannot emancipate the slaves of the other states without their consent... (except) by producing a convulsion which would undo us all. We must wait the slow but certain progress of those good principles which are everywhere gaining ground, and which assuredly will ultimately prevail." (Cleaves,p254)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
10. John Tyler	1841-1845	VA	Yes.	<p>1838: "(God) works most inscrutably to the understandings of men; - the negro is torn from Africa, a barbarian, ignorant and idolatrous; he is restored civilized, enlightened, and a Christian." (Tyler.P569)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
11. James K. Polk	1845-1849	NC	Yes. In 1832 he had fifteen slaves.	<p>1830: "A slave dreads the punishment of stripes (i.e. whipping) more than he does imprisonment, and that description of punishment has, besides, a beneficial effect upon his fellow-slaves." (Sellers,p186)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
12. Zachary Taylor	1849-1850	VA		<p>1847: "So far as slavery is concerned, we of the south must throw ourselves</p>

			<p>Yes. ZT's father owned 26 slaves in 1800. (Hamilton,p30)</p> <p>In 1847 ZT owned more than 100 slaves. (Hamilton,p18)</p> <p>ZT supposedly never sold a slave. (Hamilton.P31)</p>	<p>on the constitution and defend our rights under it to the last, and when arguments will no longer suffice, we will appeal to the sword, if necessary.” (Hamilton. p45)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
13. Millard Fillmore	1850-1853	NY	No.	<p><i>1850: “God knows that I detest slavery, but it is an existing evil, for which we are not responsible, and we must endure it, and give it such protection as is guaranteed by the constitution, till we can get rid of it without destroying the last hope of free government in the world.” (Rayback,p162)</i></p> <p>click here for more</p>
14. Franklin Pierce	1853-1857	NH	No.	<p>1838: “The citizen of New Hampshire is no more responsible, morally or politically for the existence and continuance of this domestic institution (slavery) in Virginia or Maryland, than he would be for the existence of any similar institutions in France or Persia. Why? Because these are matters over which the States...retained the sole and exclusive control, and for which they are alone responsible... It is admitted that domestic slavery exists here (Washington, DC) in its mildest form. That part of the population are bound together by friendship and the nearer relations of life. They are attached to the families in which they have lived from childhood. They are comfortably provided for, and apparently contented.” (<u>Congressional Globe</u> 1838. v6n1 p54)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
15. James Buchanan	1857-1861	PA	<p>Technically no. While running for the senate from Pennsylvania JB discovered that his</p>	<p>1836: "The natural tendency of their publications is to produce dissatisfaction and revolt among the slaves, and to incite their wild passions to vengeance... Many a</p>

			<p>sister's husband owned two slaves in Virginia. JB purchased them, immediately converting them to his indentured servants. Daphne Cook, aged 22, was indentured for seven years. Ann Cook, age 5, was indentured for 23 years. (Klein,p100.)</p> <p>JB was the only president who never married. For more than a decade he shared a home with Senator William Rufus King of Alabama, leading to speculation, then and now, that they were homosexuals. King was a slaveowner and some historians think his influence was the reason JB was more pro-South and pro-slavery than the typical Pennsylvania politician. ("The Other Buchanan Controversy.")</p>	<p>mother clasps her infant to her bosom when she retires to rest, under dreadful apprehensions that she may be aroused from her slumbers by the savage yells of the slaves by whom she is surrounded. These are the works of the abolitionists." (Curtis v1 p317)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
16. Abraham Lincoln	1861-1865	KY	No.	<p><i>1865: "I have always thought that all men should be free; but if any should be slaves it should be first those who desire it for themselves, and secondly those who desire it for others. Whenever I hear any one arguing for slavery I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally."</i> (Lincoln, 1953, v8, p360-1)</p> <p>click here for more</p>
17. Andrew Johnson	1865-1869	NC	<p>Yes, but not while he was president. AJ bought his first slave, a manservant named Sam, in 1837. He eventually owned 8. (Thomas, p87)</p> <p>AJ owned slaves at the beginning of the Civil War. He said that some of them came back voluntarily after being confiscated by the Confederates, and these he treated as freemen. (Johnson, v6, p 549.)</p>	<p><i>1865: "You tell me, friends, of the liberation of the colored people of the South. But have you thought of the millions of Southern white people who have been liberated by the war?"</i> (Thomas, p347)</p> <p>click here for more</p>

			If he didn't free all of his individually he certainly freed them in 1864 when, as military governor of Tennessee, he proclaimed freedom for all slaves in the state. (Johnson, p.xxxvii)	
18. Ulysses S. Grant	1869-1877	OH	Yes. The only evidence that USG owned slaves is a document he signed in 1859 freeing one, William Jones. However, Grant certainly had some control over and use of slaves his father-in-law gave his wife. (Simon, p347)	1885: "The (South) was burdened with an institution abhorrent to all civilized people not brought up under it, and one which degraded labor, kept it in ignorance and enervated the governing class... Soon the slaves would have outnumbered the masters, and, not being in sympathy with them, would have risen in their might and exterminated them. The war was expensive to the South, as well as to the North, both in blood and treasure, but it was worth all it cost." (Grant, 1885, v1, p507-8) click here for more

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