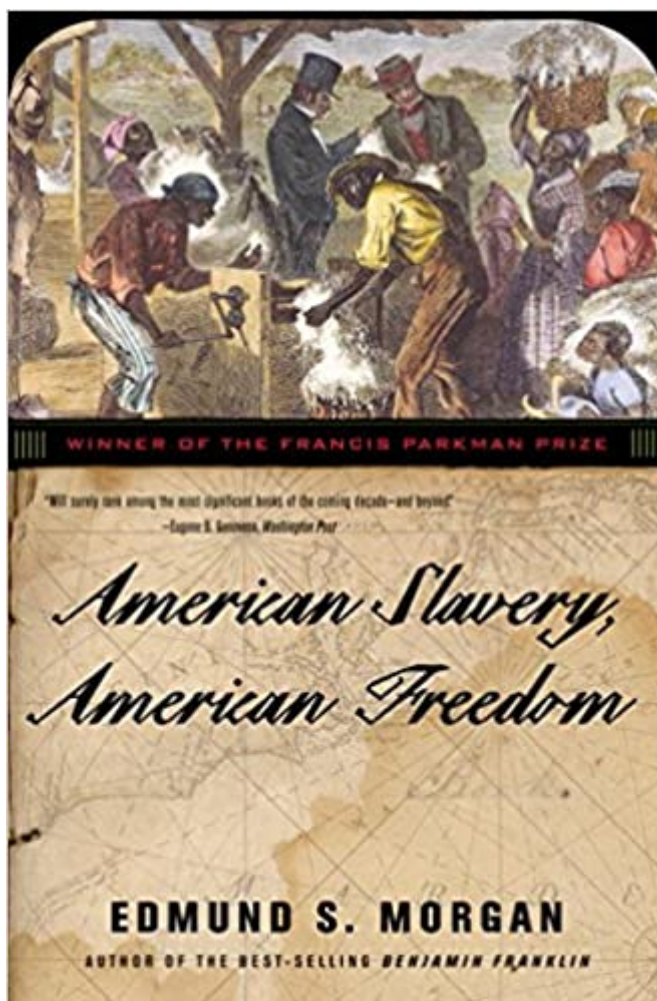


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# American Slavery, American Freedom



## Synopsis

"Thoughtful, suggestive and highly readable." •New York Times Book Review In the American Revolution, Virginians were the most eloquent spokesmen for freedom and quality. George Washington led the Americans in battle against British oppression. Thomas Jefferson led them in declaring independence. Virginians drafted not only the Declaration but also the Constitution and the Bill of Rights; they were elected to the presidency of the United States under that Constitution for thirty-two of the first thirty-six years of its existence. They were all slaveholders. In the new preface Edmund S. Morgan writes: "Human relations among us still suffer from the former enslavement of a large portion of our predecessors. The freedom of the free, the growth of freedom experienced in the American Revolution depended more than we like to admit on the enslavement of more than 20 percent of us at that time. How republican freedom came to be supported, at least in large part, by its opposite, slavery, is the subject of this book. American Slavery, American Freedom is a study of the tragic contradiction at the core of America. Morgan finds the keys to this central paradox, "the marriage of slavery and freedom," in the people and the politics of the state that was both the birthplace of the Revolution and the largest slaveholding state in the country.

## Book Information

Paperback: 464 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; Reissue edition (October 17, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 039332494X

ISBN-13: 978-0393324945

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 1.3 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 54 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #17,320 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 in Books > History > World > Slavery & Emancipation #8 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Abolition #119 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Race Relations > Discrimination & Racism

## Customer Reviews

• Profoundly important.... Every page of Morgan's book speaks of a sensitive understanding of human nature, as well as of a scrupulous attention to scholarly exactitude. • - J.H. Plumb, New York Review of Books

Edmund S. Morgan (1916–2013) was the Sterling Professor Emeritus at Yale University and the recipient of the National Humanities Medal, the Pulitzer Prize, and the American Academy's Gold Medal. The author of *The Genuine Article*; *American Slavery, American Freedom*; *Benjamin Franklin*; and *American Heroes*, among many others.

"Racism became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the republican ideology that enabled Virginians to lead the nation." writes Edmund S. Morgan in 1975, and ends this book with the rhetorical question: "Is America still colonial Virginia writ large?" These are deeply disturbing questions - questions one is compelled to ponder as one reads this lucid and dispassionate presentation of the how primitive accumulation in Virginia at the beginning of the 17th century was replaced a century later by an orderly and opulent society based on slavery. The answer to such questions is not made easy by the realisation that the only other successful republican experiment - the Athenian democracy - blossomed too on a bed of slavery. Do these questions matter today? Have we not moved on from racism? I'm afraid not. Again the voice of Morgan: "In the republican way of thinking, zeal for liberty and equality could go hand in hand with contempt for the poor and plans for enslaving them." Sounds eerily familiar? Just as today's language used to describe terrorist threats is redolent of the rhetoric that once surrounded the lynching of black bodies. Racism (albeit globalised) is re-visiting the land today, and so are republican virtues and values. The book is long, and in some ways, too detailed. Morgan delights in the telling particular, and at times one wishes he would not linger on some specifics. But this has a purpose. He wants to show the imperceptible and surreptitious mechanisms by which a society acquires its ugly and immoral traits until they become so natural as to be invisible. Step by step, event by event, law by law a construction emerges that would have horrified its founders. Yet, at the time, it seemed the logical, and the right thing to do. A strong point in Morgan's narrative is the links he highlights between the developments in Virginia and the Britain's commercial interests, migration policies, population growth and control, state revenue, and political history or thought. One can better appreciate the import of Virginia for Britain and the mother country's fixation and fascination for the North American colonies. Brash and brutal, Virginian slavery stood openly as godmother at the foundation of the American Republic. Other aspects of slavery also contributed significantly - but as they were indirect, they remained veiled and are hardly recognised even today. New England benefited greatly from its cod trade to the Caribbean, where the product that was found to be unfit for European markets was fed to the slaves, thus freeing up land that otherwise would have been used to sustain

them. When will we get a total picture of slavery's import for America's economic foundations?

Morgan adds understanding through scholarship. His footnotes are extensive and accurate. He surprises with a correlation between the poor of England and Virginia's negro slaves.

Very interesting and fascinating thesis; i.e., the acceptance of slavery was essential to the lower class whites accepting the freedom that the privileged class allowed them to have. After all, someone was lower than the lowest white man and even he could aspire to owning 50 acres and perhaps buy a slave or two, and one day be able to vote. Slavery of the Blacks secured the privilege of the Whites. Additionally, the author provides an interesting history of the class tensions among Whites\_ a tension lessened somewhat by slavery.

I read this in a whole day, it was so gripping. There is an enormous amount of information here, but it somehow succeeds in keeping one focused on the highlights. Don't be scared by its girth; this is actually a pretty lean exposition. From the way nullification worked out, one has a tendency to put the slavery "fault" into the shoes of South Carolina, but it was in Virginia that it all took its start, including the early guidance of the republic. And that is an issue that deserves ventilation.

Scholarly book, a bit hard to read as scholars have to prove their point. BUT you will get the point and it is disgusting to see the evil that men's minds can do. Please Nazi era move over. To think of buying 5 slaves because only 3 will live to spring planting, or to balance the eco. odds of indentured service will release a useless population on the land at some point vs. a slave= the gift that keeps on giving= profit, profit, profit. Cold blooded law making. Have we improved? Reading book-April 1865 has helped a little.

This comprehensive history of early Virginia persuasively argues that slavery and racism contributed to the American notions of freedom and democracy for those not enslaved. Although first published in 1975, one would never guess that just from reading it. Morgan's argument emerges from such a careful reading and analysis of primary sources that it remains as important today as it was a quarter century ago. The book also provides valuable insights into many subjects other than slavery, including economic and political relations between Virginia and England, early interactions with Native Americans, and changing colonial and British notions of labor and class. Highly recommended on any of these issues.

If you think you know and understand the early years of English colonialism in the New World, this very detailed history of the Virginia Colony will challenge your previous assumptions. From the 1620s to 1680s, life in Virginia was miserable and brief for most of the people who chose to immigrate to get rich and all who were indentured or enslaved to work for them.

Morgan's brilliant. The book is brilliant. The ideas are brilliant. Perhaps a little too much idolatry of Jefferson. I wonder if he still feels this way today, knowing what we now do about Jefferson - the hypocrisy between his stated ideals and his personal life.

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