

Slavery existed in Washington City, known today as Washington D.C. (District of Columbia), since it first became America's capital in 1800. Slaves even helped to build the President's House (known today as the White House) - much to the regret of John and Abigail Adams (the country's second President and First Lady). In a letter which [Abigail Adams wrote to Cotton Tufts](#), on 28 November 1800, she noted that in the new town of Washington:

...The effects of Slavery are visible every where.

America used a system of chattel slavery from the 1660s to the 1860s. The various slave states had their own "slave code" and their own cases law which interpreted those codes.

Every one of the slave codes, no matter which state was involved, considered slavery to be a permanent condition. That condition was inherited via the slave's mother.

The condition also considered slaves to be property of the owner, allowing "owners" to do whatever they wished with their property. Because they were "owned," slaves couldn't own property themselves and couldn't be part of a contract.

Marriage, which is considered a contract under the law, was thus impacted by American slave codes. A slave marriage had no legal standing in the United States.

Free blacks were not as "free" as the name might imply. Slave codes also contained sections impacting them. For example, if slaves became free (because they, or someone else, purchased their freedom), they could be required to leave the state in which they lived after their emancipation.

When the District of Columbia was established in 1800 (the year John Adams was America's president), the District (which had previously been part of Maryland) was a slave-holding place where slave codes were in effect. The laws of Maryland, then a slave state, became the laws of the capital because those Maryland laws remained "good law" (as lawyers describe laws which haven't been changed).

Not only were slave codes in effect, Washington City (as the town was then known) contained slave pens where slaves were held, bought and sold.

After the District became its own entity, its slave codes were subject to change. Compared to other slave-holding areas, its rules and regulations became more moderate for black people.

D.C. slaves were no-longer forced to live under their "master's" control and could hire-out their services. Free blacks lived in the District and, by 1860 - the year Abraham Lincoln was elected President - there were about 11,131 free blacks (in addition to 3,185 slaves).

On the 16th of April, 1862, President Lincoln signed a law freeing the District's slaves and allowing compensation to their "owners." A Baltimore slave trader assessed the value of each freed slave and awarded compensation for 2,989 people who had once been held in bondage.

This image depicts the District of Columbia's Slave Code which was in effect in 1862. It was published the month before the law ended all slavery in the District.

The Library of Congress maintains this version of the *Slave Code*. Its curators tell us [something about it](#):

The manuscript volume shown with the published slave code is arranged by topic, listing relevant sections of Maryland and District of Columbia laws as well as the applicable court decisions. It is almost certainly a "practice book," produced within a law firm for the use of its attorneys and clerks, who could refer to it when drafting contracts and legal briefs.

That such a book exists indicates something of the volume and routine character of legal work surrounding transactions in human property.

Click on the image for a better view.

Credits:

Image of document, described above, compiled "By a Member of the Washington Bar" and printed in Washington, during 1862, by L. Towers & Co. The original bound manuscript is maintained by the Law Library of Congress.

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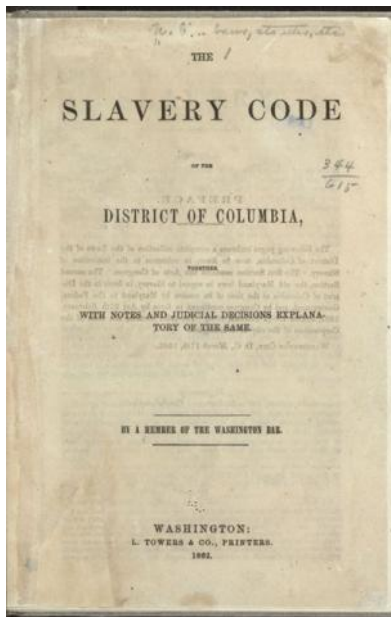
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