

# Slave life

By the year 1860, most white Americans were embarrassed by slavery. After the American Revolution and its promise that "all men are created equal," the states north of Maryland abolished slavery. But in the South, plantation owners depended on slaves. Growing cotton, sugar, rice, and other crops in the hot weather required the labor of many people, and relatively few whites lived there. The region's richest planters believed that without slaves their economy would be ruined. Because they could not explain how people could be slaves in a nation where all were supposed to be free, they simply called this bondage the Peculiar Institution. Northerners continued to chide Southerners, and this made them angry. Many of them felt trapped by slavery too. Their representatives in the U.S. Congress told the rest of the nation to accept the situation. While white men argued, black slaves suffered. They were paid nothing, fed little, given poor clothing, and denied an education. Their masters could beat them at any time, and they and their families could be sold. Long before the Civil War, slavery was a moral and political problem that would not go away.



Slaves who grew tired of hearing the copper bells muffled the clappers with dirt and mud.



**A SLAVE COLLAR**  
A slave could be worth several hundred dollars. If he or she escaped, it was a financial loss for the owner. If the master believed a slave was likely to run away, he sometimes kept track of the slave by locking him or her into this collar equipped with bells. As long as the master could hear the jingling of the bells, he knew his slave was close by.

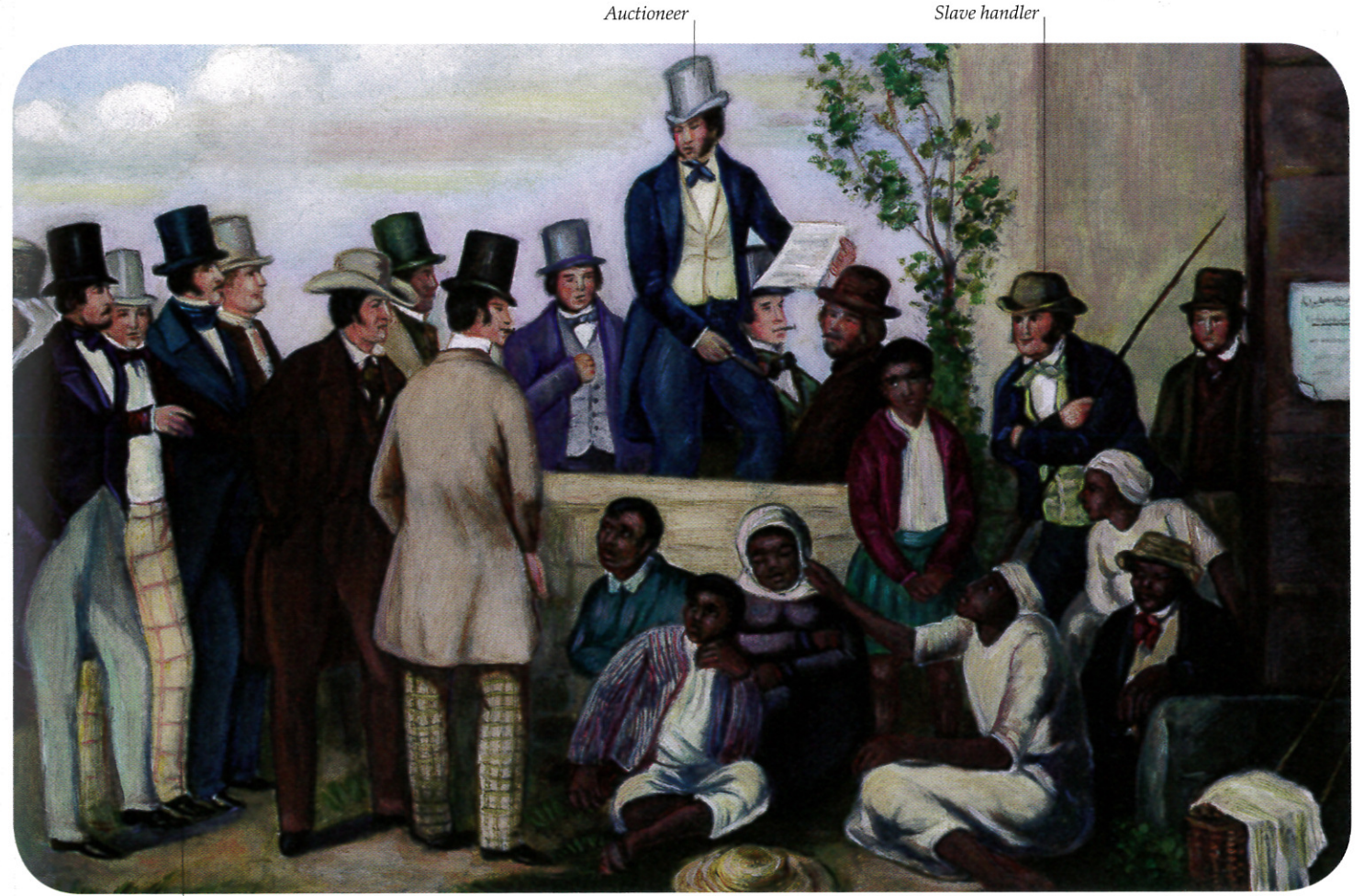
Leg iron, which prevented a slave from bending the leg

Shackle

**TOOLS OF CRUELTY**  
This photograph was circulated throughout the North by antislavery activists. The man in it is a former slave who posed in shackles and an iron slave collar for a Union army officer during the Civil War. A paddle used for beating slaves lay on the ground behind him.

**AT WORK IN THE FIELDS**  
These cotton field hands labor under the supervision of a mounted overseer, a white manager of slaves who was employed by the owner of the plantation. Overseers were also expected to control and discipline slaves. The cruelty of some of them inspired the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe to create the villain Simon Legree, a character in her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Slave child. There was no one to care for young slaves, so they spent time in the fields from birth.



Auctioneer

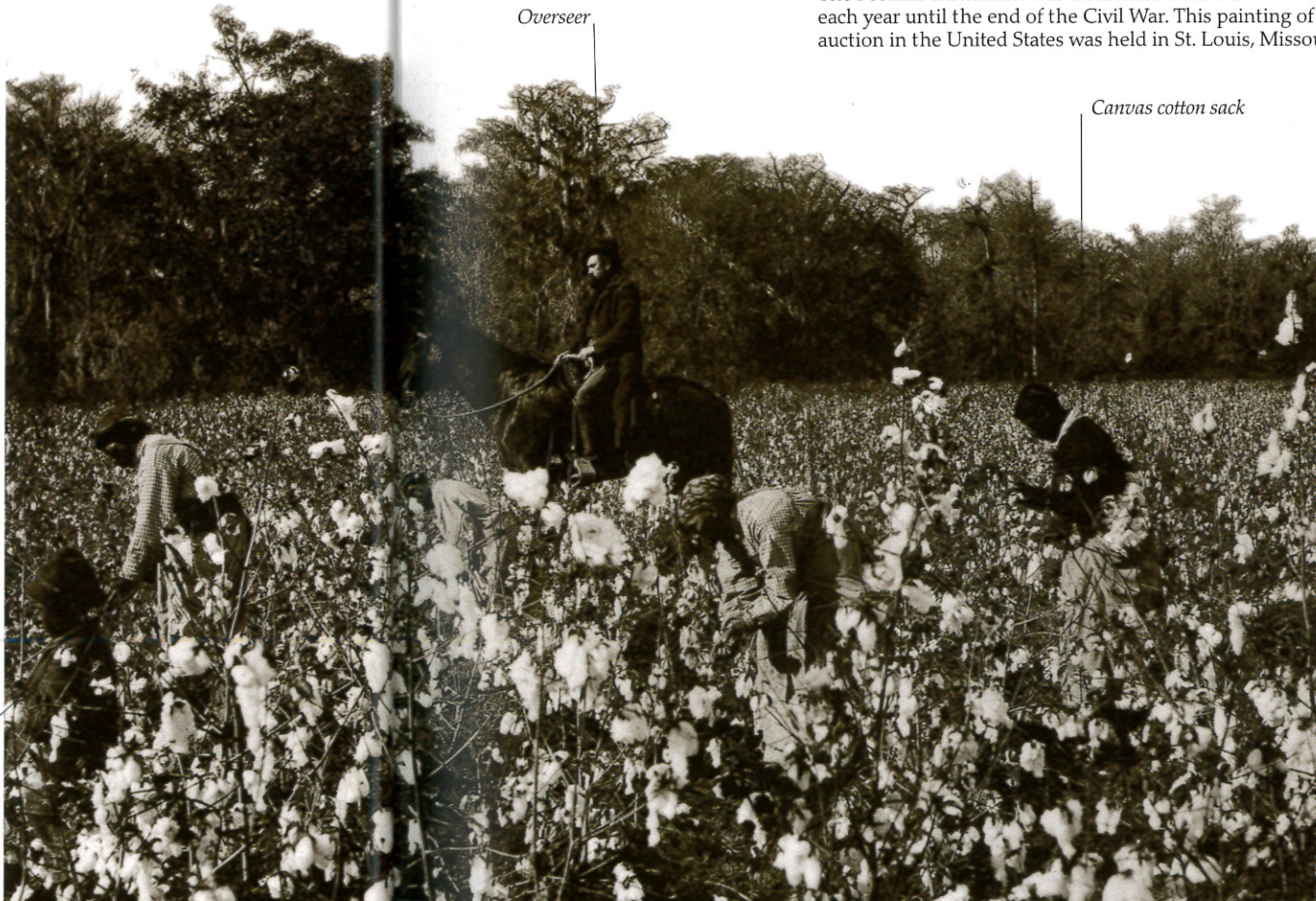
Slave handler

Slave buyer

**SLAVES FOR SALE**  
The Peculiar Institution was a business. Millions of dollars were made and spent on the sales of human beings each year until the end of the Civil War. This painting of a slave auction was made in 1852. The last public slave auction in the United States was held in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1865.

Overseer

Canvas cotton sack

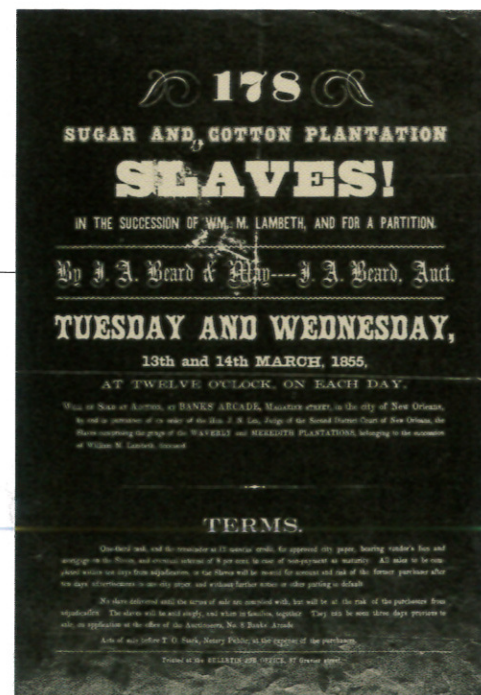


**KING COTTON**  
These are picked bolls of raw cotton. Until their tangled fibers are combed out and their seeds are removed, they cannot be woven into fabric. Slaves did these chores by hand until 1793. In that year, twenty-eight-year-old Eli Whitney of New England invented the cotton gin, a hand-cranked machine that combed and seeded cotton in large quantities. This made cotton the "king" of the Southern economy, allowed white planters to amass fortunes — and created a need for tens of thousands of slaves to work the cotton fields.



Cotton boll

Auctioning slaves was a specialty for some of the auctioneering professionals.



**ADVERTISING A SLAVE AUCTION**  
Slaves were sold at auctions. Before one of them was held, advertisements such as this one were circulated. They described the men and women who were being put up for sale.