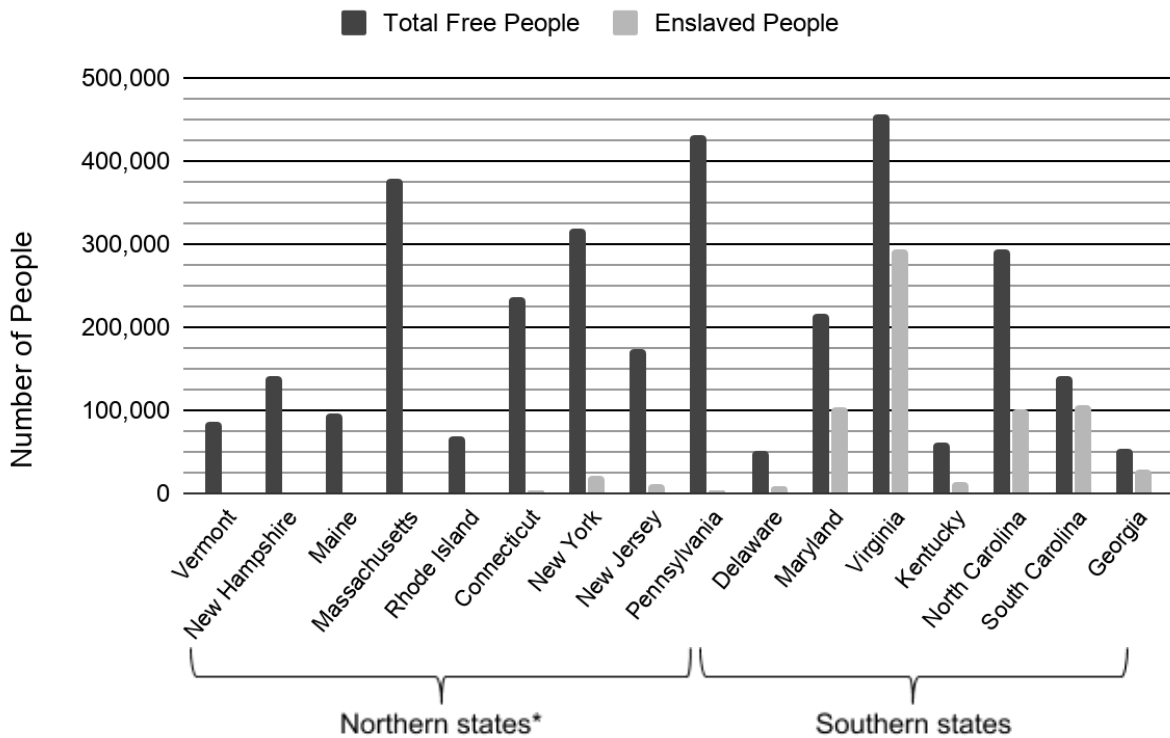


### Slavery and the 1790 Census



\*In 1790, there were enslaved people in most Northern states, but the populations for some states were too small to show on this chart.

- 1) Based on the chart, about how many people were enslaved in New York?
  - A. 1,000
  - B. 5,000
  - C. 20,000
  - D. 100,000
  
- 2) Based on the chart, which of the following statements is false?
  - A. In Maryland, there were about half as many enslaved people as there were free people.
  - B. In South Carolina, there were almost as many enslaved people as there were free people.
  - C. There were no enslaved people in the North.
  - D. Of the Northern states, New York had the most enslaved people.

- 3) The total population of Virginia in 1790 was 747,610 and the enslaved population was 292,627. Approximately what percentage of Virginia's population was enslaved?
  - A. 3%
  - B. 10%
  - C. 20%
  - D. 40%
  
- 4) In which state was a higher percentage of the population enslaved compared with Virginia?

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Names of heads of Families	White males 16 years and upwards	White males 16 years and upwards	White males 16 years and upwards	White males 16 years and upwards	Slaves
Abstract of the County					
Town of Otsego	563	427	608	6	8
Laughnawaga	1128	1068	1028	4	139
Pollatine	805	815	1582	10	102
Mohawk	1088	1141	2092	8	111
German Flats	354	301	630	2	20
Herkemer	406	388	722	1	8
Whites Town	689	443	749	3	7
Chemung & C	628	644	1091	1	7
Canyosharne	1648	1538	2868	6	96
Harpersfield	524	424	772		6
Chenango & C	13	12	20		
Total County Montgomery	7866	7201	13152	41	588

The count in Montgomery County, NY (1790)  
(U.S. Census Bureau)

**Why do we use the term *enslaved people* instead of *slaves*?**

We say *enslaved people* instead of *slaves* because it helps us remember that we are talking about people. For some enslaved people, being in slavery was a temporary position because they were able to escape or buy their freedom. Most people were never able to escape slavery, but they remained people first. The word *enslaved* also reminds us that people don't just become slaves. They were enslaved by other people.

The United States Census

In the town of Flatbush in Brooklyn, NY, the 1790 census surveyed heads of families in each of the five categories:

white males ≥ 16 years	white males < 16 years	white females	All other free persons	Slaves	Total
160	153	238	12	378	

Names of heads of families

Lernardus Bennet	2	3	1	—	1	
Peter Rapalje	—	1	1	—	3	
90 John Boorum	—	1	2	1	11	
Isaac Eldred	—	1	2	2	7	
Hendrick Eldred	—	1	3	2	6	
Thomas Betts	—	2	1	5	2	
Isaac Snidecker	—	2	2	2	8	
Isaac Jonwell	—	1	1	3	7	
Jacobus Rich	—	1	—	1	—	
Joseph Howard	}	5	3	7	3	
Thomas Surman						
9 William Howard						
99	<hr/>					
	Totals	17	17	25	—	48
	brought from page 8	34	30	53	2	104
	Page 9	56	82	82	7	139
	d <sup>o</sup> 10	53	24	78	3	87
	Total in the Town of Flatbush	160	153	238	12	378

5) What do you notice about the count for Flatbush?

Some households and the totals for the town of Flatbush (Brooklyn), NY (1790) (U.S. Census Bureau)

## The United States Census

As you know, a census is a count of people in an area. Another way to say census is *enumeration*, since *enumerate* means “to count.” A census worker who goes door-to-door counting people is called an *enumerator* (or someone who counts). In 1790, enumerators counted people in the original 13 states. They included the districts of Kentucky, Maine, and Vermont even though they were not states yet.

Think about how this information was collected. There was no Internet, no telephone system, and no United States Post Office. Enumerators traveled all over the states, probably by horse, visiting each household and taking notes on the people who lived there. Enumerators knew how to read and write, but many people they visited did not. The census takers interviewed the head of each household (usually considered to be a man), who told them the number of persons in each household.

Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson thought that the final count in 1790 was lower than it should have been (an *undercount*). They thought the true population of the country was more than the 3.9 million inhabitants counted in the census.

- 6) What are some possible reasons people would not have been counted in the 1790 census?

At this point it is hard to know how many people were left out of the count, but we know that many African-American, Native Americans, and other people of color were undercounted or not counted at all when the census was done early in this country’s history. Native Americans living on reservations were not counted.

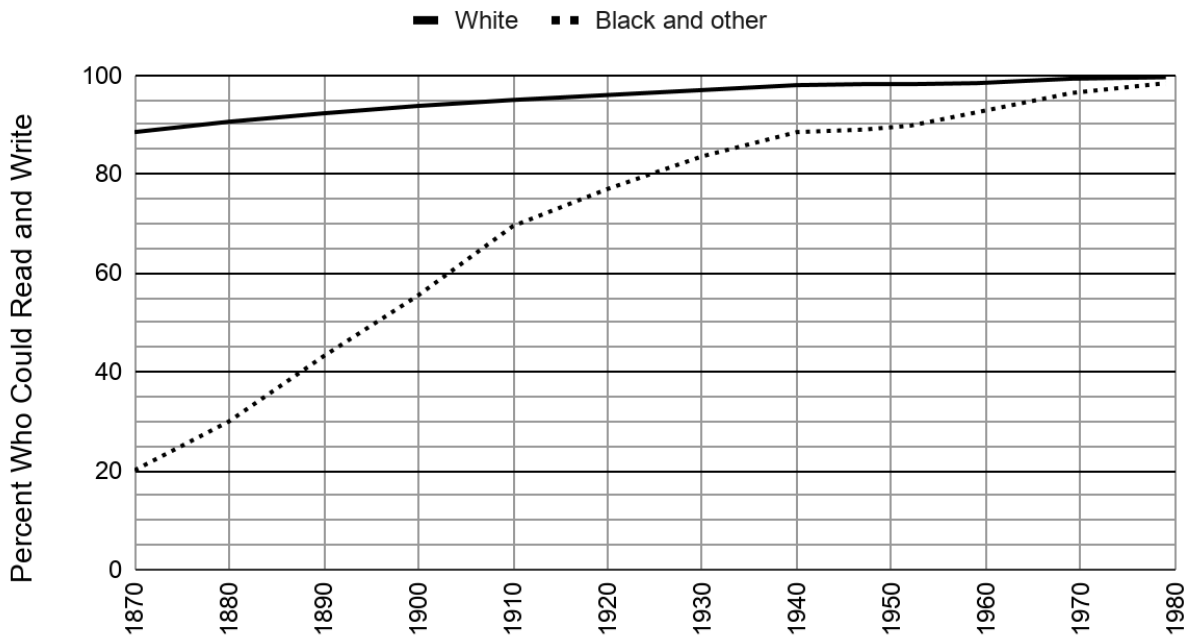
Note: When Europeans first colonized the land that is now the United States, there were different indigenous people already living on it. As Europeans took over the land, they set aside certain areas of land and forced the indigenous people to live there. The land set aside for indigenous people is called a reservation.

- 7) What are some reasons why people from these specific groups would not have been included in the count?

We don't really know the percentage of people who were able to read and write in the United States in 1790. The enumerators didn't ask about the ability to read and write in the first census. We do know the percentage of people who knew how to read in later years because a question about literacy was included in the census starting in 1870, just seven years after the Emancipation Proclamation<sup>1</sup> and five years after the end of the Civil War.

The graph below, based on data from the Census Bureau, shows the percentage of people who could read and write in any language, at different times in our nation's history. *Literacy* means the ability to read and write. A *literacy rate* is the percentage of people in a group who can read and write.

Literacy Rates in the United States (1870-1980)



8) What do you notice?

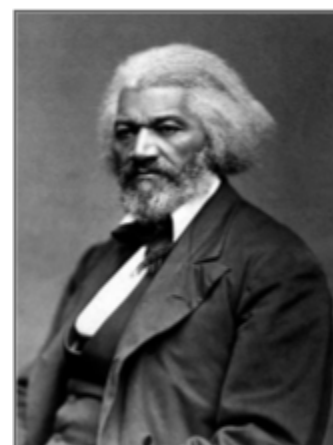
<sup>1</sup> In 1863, during the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln freed more than 3.5 million enslaved African-Americans in the southern Confederate states at war with the North. People enslaved in other states were freed by the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865.

What it means to be *literate* has changed over time. In 1870, if you knew how to sign your name, you were considered literate. Over time, the definition of literacy has changed. In modern surveys, people are asked, “Can you read a newspaper? Can you write a letter? Can you write a short statement about your everyday life?” The answers to these questions indicate whether someone is literate.<sup>2</sup> Many people believe that the modern definition of literacy should include the ability to use numbers to understand the world (*numeracy*) and the ability to use computers to communicate and do research (*computer literacy*).

9) About what percentage of white people were literate in 1870?

10) About what percentage of Black people were literate in 1870?

During the era of slavery in the United States, the education of African-Americans, enslaved and free, was forbidden. Many Southern states had anti-literacy laws that made it illegal to teach an African-American person to read and write. Literacy was seen as a threat to slavery. Amazingly, many enslaved people risked violence and death and educated each other in secret. For example, the famous abolitionist<sup>3</sup>, Frederick Douglass, learned to read secretly as a child and eventually became a well-known author and leader against slavery.<sup>4</sup>



“Knowledge makes a man unfit to be a slave.”  
- Frederick Douglass

As you can see in the chart on the previous page, African-American people devoted themselves to education after the Civil War and achieved near universal literacy by 1980.

11) Complete the table.

Year	% of Black and other		% of white	
	Literate	Non-literate	Literate	Non-literate
1870	20%	80%	88%	12%
1920	77%		96%	
1979	98.4%		99.6%	

<sup>2</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/how-is-literacy-measured>

<sup>3</sup> An *abolitionist* is a person who believes that a practice should be *abolished* or ended. Abolitionists in the early United States believed that slavery should be abolished.

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_during\\_the\\_slave\\_period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_during_the_slave_period)