

## 'The end of slavery led to hunger and death for millions of black Americans': Extraordinary claims in new book

- President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation gifted freedom to four million black Americans in 1863
- Former slaves struggled to begin their free life and up to one million died or got sick
- Challenges the accepted wisdom of the Unionist North being sympathetic to the cause of freed slaves
- Whole families returned to work on the plantations they had escaped because there was no work and no food

By [James Nye](#)

**PUBLISHED:** 20:05 EST, 16 June 2012

in the United States led to anarchy and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of black Americans claims a new revisionist history of the Civil War.

Instead of a granting former slaves a glorious moment of freedom, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation condemned millions to a life of disease and hunger says historian Jim Downs in his new book, 'Sick from Freedom'.

Scouring through obscure records, Professor Downs has revealed that freed slaves were subject to outbreaks of cholera and smallpox as they attempted to start new lives for themselves and that thousands starved to death.



**Slave Family In Cotton Field near Savannah, Georgia in 1860: A new book has shed new light on the struggles of freed slaves in the U.S. after the end of the Civil War**

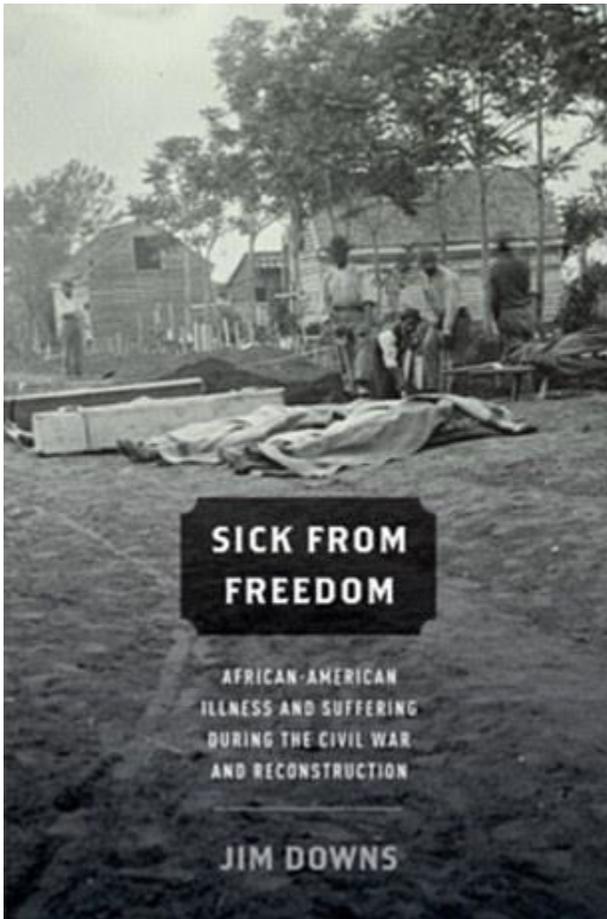
Writing about the period of 1862 to 1870, Professor Downs claims that one million of the four million slaves former slaves freed by Lincoln's 1863 executive order died or got sick.

This number includes at least 60,000 who lost their lives in a smallpox epidemic that started in Washington and spread to the south as black Americans left their former slave-masters in order to find work.

More...

- [Stunning pictures of men and women who were born into slavery and photographed more than seventy years after being freed](#)
- [The 'white' slave children of New Orleans: Images of pale mixed-race slaves used to drum up sympathy among wealthy donors in 1860s](#)

Calling this 'the largest biological crisis of the 19th century', Downs states that this tragedy has failed to be acknowledged because it does not match with the rosy view of the Civil War being a fight between the Unionist North and Confederate South for God-given rights.



---

**Professor Jim Downs new revisionist history of the Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation claims that a million black Americans suffered hunger and died following the end of slavery**

---

'The freed people we want to see are the ones with all their belongings on the wagon, heading towards freedom,' said David W. Blight, a professor of history at Yale to the [New York Times](#).

'But the truth is, for every person making it there may have been one falling by the way.'

As the anniversary of President Lincoln's order approaches, Mr. Downs, 39, is part of new school of thought re-addressing commonly held beliefs about the history of emancipation.

'We're getting ready to celebrate 150 years of the movement from slavery to freedom,' said Professor Downs to the [New York Times](#).

'But hundreds of thousands of people did not survive that movement.'

In fact in the years following 1863, the public health problems that freed slaves experienced attempting to set up their own homes, getting jobs and feeding their families seemed so

intense that some historical observers wondered whether all black Americans might die.

In 1863, one white religious figure wrote, 'Like his brother the Indian of the forest, he must melt away and disappear forever from the midst of us.'

While the accepted view is that the Unionist North was sympathetic to the plight of all southern slaves, Professor Downs feels that there was in fact an element of turning a blind eye to the problems the newly freed people experienced.

'In the 19th century people did not want to talk about it,' said Professor Downs to the [Observer](#).

'Some did not care and abolitionist, when they saw so many freed people dying, feared that it proved true what some people said: that slaves were not able to exist on their own.'



Harriet Tubman (far left), was an American abolitionist and she is photographed with a group of slaves she helped escape in the 19th century



A family of former slaves outside their ramshackle house in Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1865



**A group of freed slaves gather on the plantation of Confederate General Thomas F. Drayton in Hilton Head, South Carolina, during the Union occupation of the property in 1862**



**Professor Jim Downs has written 'Sick from Freedom' which takes a fresh look at the continued racism which freed black Americans encountered in the U.S. in the years following the end of the Civil War**

Professor Downs paints a desperate picture of freed families staggering away from southern plantations and finding themselves in Union run 'contraband camps' struggling for food and living in unsanitary conditions.

His book points out the irony that these camps were sometimes no better than the freed slaves previous living conditions and that the only way out was to offer to return to the same plantations from which they had escaped.

In 'Sick from Freedom' Professor Downs recounts the tragic story of one former slave, Joseph Miller, who arrived at a union camp in Kentucky with his wife and four children in 1864 and watched them all die within months, before he died in 1865.

During his research, Professor Downs discovered the horrific conditions within what were essentially refugee camps dotted around the south.

A military official with the Union army wrote that life for the former slaves was so appalling that they were: 'dying by scores - that sometimes 30 per day die and are carried out by wagon-loads without coffins, and thrown promiscuously, like brutes, into a trench.'

Not wishing to cast aspersions on the Emancipation Proclamation, for which Professor Downs still holds its true moral value, he nonetheless wants to bring a fuller picture to the public.

'I've been alone with these people in the archives,' said Professor Downs. 'I have a responsibility to tell their stories.'

Read more:

- [the Guardian: How the end of slavery led to starvation and death for millions of black Americans](#)
- [Sick From Freedom, by Jim Downs, About Freed Slaves](#)



Fugitive slaves in Virginia in about 1863. Photograph: Andrew J. Russell/Medford Historical Society Collection/CORBIS

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2160484/The-end-slavery-led-hunger-death-millions-black-Americans-Extraordinary-claims-new-book.html#ixzz1y5oLQ1fJ>



# Learn True History

