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Slavery built the Old South of the United States

**By the BBC's Rob Watson**

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On the outskirts of Charleston in South Carolina, on a thousand acres of steamy wooded land stands majestic Drayton Hall.

It is just one of many plantations built by the sweat of West African slaves.

But slaves didn't just build plantations. As Drayton Hall's director, historian, George McDaniel points out, until its abolition in 1865, slavery helped turn a colonial backwater into a major economic power.

"The contribution of African Americans to the economy of America, inclusive of the Old South, was tremendous. The plantation society of the Old South was based on slave labour."

"The industry that developed in the North, the cotton mills in the 19th Century, as well as much of the industry in England itself, was grounded in slavery and forced labour," he said.

"It would be impossible to extract from history the results of African American slavery," he added.

“  
The case for reparations is one of repair. Simply said, it is a repairing of people for the injustices for the injuries done to them over an extended period of time  
”

Kalanji Olesgun,  
National Coalition of  
Blacks for Reparations in  
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## Repayment for injustices

Now almost 140 years since the end of slavery many African Americans believe there is a debt to be paid.

Kalanji Olesegun, a founding member of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, says the arguments are simple and compelling.

"The case for reparations is one of repair. Simply said, it is a repairing of people for the injustices for the injuries done to them over an extended period of time," he said.

In downtown Charleston's Morris Brown African Methodist Churches, it is a packed house as usual for Sunday service.

The lesson of the day is the need for perseverance and faith.

Historically, black churches and their leaders have always been on the frontlines of the civil rights movement, and Morris Brown's Reverend Joseph Darby is ready to mobilise again for the cause of reparations.

"A part of this nation was built on the sweat and blood of an involuntary nature of a good number of its citizens. It was wrong because of it there was an emotional cost, there was a financial cost, there was a psychological cost that people of colour of this nation are still paying a cost for," he said.

### Black experience

Just down the road in one of the city's best hotels, it is the annual banquet of the Charleston Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People or NAACP.

It is the biggest and oldest black organisation in America and it fully supports the cause of reparations.

The President of the Charleston Branch Dorothy Scott told me you really have to be black and to have experienced the pain of racism to understand why many African Americans feel so strongly about the need for reparations.

She has actually picked cotton, and she remembers the whites-only signs.

“ A part of this nation was built on the sweat and blood of an involuntary nature of a good number of its citizens. ”

Reverend Joseph Darby



Part of an advertisement promoting a slave sale (Image: American Antiquarian Society)

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"When we are constantly reminded of that particularly through things like our educational system, our justice system, you can understand the passion of blacks," she said.

In a courthouse basement, genealogist Gwendolen Midlowe-Hall pores over the records of a long-dead slave owner. She finds an interesting record that lists of prices of cattle and slaves on the same page.

Though she isn't working directly on the case for reparations, she says her research may well prove helpful to the cause.

Some people, including attorneys, have argued against reparations because they say that few records exist of slave ownership.

"This is very far from the truth. There are probably more documents about slaves than there are about free people because slaves were property and treated like property, and people keep track of their property," she said.

### **Hope and scepticism**

It is all very encouraging for lawyers working for reparations like civil rights attorney Alexander Pires.

Though it is not clear when or how the reparations issue will be taken to court, Mr Pires is in little doubt who should benefit should the case for damages ever succeed.

"The types of relief that would be most appropriate have to do with the future of black children: Education, health and housing," he said.

He said that black children should have equal access to the bounty of America, adding: "It's just not that way now."

In a run-down black neighbourhood just a few blocks from Charleston's picture perfect downtown, a group of young African Americans are playing ball and hanging out.

They seem stunned at the idea of reparations, but are ready to spend. "I want some money for a cell phone," one said.

Another said that the money should go to education or possibly back to Africa.

But another said: "They can't give us enough money to make up for slavery, but if they want to do something, give it to the youth."

Their scepticism about the chances of ever seeing any money is profound, their attitude resigned.

“  
Is every family in  
America with any degree  
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”  
John Sargentich  
constitutional law expert

## Obstacles

The obstacles to reparations are massive.

For starters, slavery was after all legal at the time. Then there are practical concerns, such as who exactly would be entitled to reparations.

"This is a terrifically important and difficult question," said John Sargentich, an expert on constitutional law.

"Is every family in America with any degree of African-American heritage going to be entitled? ... Are they going to have to prove that great grandparents were slaves?" he asked.

“  
Do I owe an apology?  
My ancestors had slaves.  
I can't apologise for  
those people, and what  
they were doing was  
legal when they did it

”  
Michael Givens, Sons of  
Confederate Veterans

Then there is the question of who would pay the reparations.

If they have any say in the matter, certainly not southern white people, like Michael Givens, who believes there is no shame in the past and no need to make amends.

"Do I owe an apology? My ancestors had slaves. I can't apologise for those people, and what they were doing was legal when they did it," said Mr Given.

And if some white people do not want to pay, not all black people want to receive. Black Conservative radio DJ Ed Buggs says black people don't need any more of the victim mentality.

"Racism is alive and well. But let's say tomorrow we get a big fat check do you think that it will go away? Absolutely not," Mr Buggs said.

## Racial divide

Back at Charleston's Drayton Hall, the tour is ending with a history of slavery and its cruelty. The effect on the tour group is fascinating.

First there is the reaction of two white women from Philadelphia:

"I don't think that they need to be paid for something that was done 2-300 years ago," one of the women said.

From a young black couple comes a completely different view:

"You take a tour of Drayton Hall, and you see all the construction and the finery. As they say, it was free labour, forced labour," a black man on the tour said.

Should there be reparations? Yes, he said.

In Charleston, mainly white visitors ride the ubiquitous horse and buggies along cobbled streets to marvel at the architectural

splendour of this city, where the majority of African slaves first set foot on American soil.

And therein really lies the problem of reparations. While for most white people, slavery is for tour guides and history books, for many black people it remains a terrible sin that still has to be atoned for.

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