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Fact Check: What Percentage Of White Southerners Owned Slaves?

Written by Ann Brown

5-6 minutes



No.	States.	Population.	Slave Population.	Total.	Per Cent of S.
1	South Carolina	301,271	141,541	703,812	5
2	Mississippi	351,709	135,696	701,396	5
3	Louisiana	316,382	139,070	709,290	4
4	Alabama	291,062	135,132	964,296	4
5	Florida	78,388	69,753	140,139	1
6	Georgia	95,109	102,232	1,057,329	4
7	North Carolina	661,586	24,081	992,667	3
8	Virginia	1,105,192	40,887	1,596,079	3
9	Texas	124,175	10,682	602,132	3
10	Arkansas	324,192	1,104	135,127	2
11	Tennessee	834,192	5,784	1,109,817	2

Fact Check: What percentage of white Southerners actually owned slaves? Reparations activist Dr. Sandy Darity helps to set the record straight. Image: The Belle Brezing Photographic Collection, 2003AV1, Special Collections, University of Kentucky. Kentuckiana Digital Library via University of Kentucky

When it comes to reparations, one of the consistent arguments against them is that there were actually not very many white slave owners in the U.S. Recently, reparations activist and Duke professor William Sandy Darity disputed this on Twitter.

He posted, one “lie circulating that only 1% of white southerners owned slaves. #FHTE In 1860, 1% of white southern families owned 200 or more human beings, but in states of the Confederacy, at least 20% owned at least one and in Ms and SC ran as high as fifty percent.”

Darity cited a chart and research by U.S. civil war expert Al Mackey to back up his statement. Others have refuted Darity’s claim, denying that slaves enriched their white owners.

Greg @lbianconx360 replied to Darity’s tweet, “Yes- but in the case of SC, most of these were not large plantations like in Gone with the Wind on the coast, but were smaller farms. The owners were not getting rich. They were fighting for survival as cotton and tobacco prices were on a roller coaster.”

According to Mackey, the 1 percent figure is misleading and needs to be understood.

Mackey is an educator, a retired U. S. Air Force officer and a former human resources manager with a global company. He has become an expert on the U.S. Civil War and writes a blog called “[Student of the American Civil War.](#)”

“For generations historians have been almost unanimous in emphasizing that Black slaves were owned by a surprisingly small minority of whites,” Mackey wrote. But this figure mainly comes from the research of American historian Allan Nevins (1890 – 1971). In the 1850 census, of the 6,184,477 white folk in the slave States, only 347,525 were listed as owners, found Nevin. In the 1860 Census, which is on the eve of the Civil War, there were 393,975 slave owners in the United States out of a total population of 31,183,582, or 1.26 percent of the population. But this is not a true picture, wrote Mackey. The figure is

the population of the entire U.S. At the time, there were 33 states in the Union, 15 were slave states and 18 were free states.

Looking just at the slave states then, there were 393,975 slave owners in the slave states out of a population of 12,240,293. So this means that 3.22 percent of the population of the 15 slave states were slave owners.

“But we have to remember that only free people owned slaves, and that the total population of the slave states included enslaved people themselves, so we have to adjust our numbers to reflect only free people. Therefore, the 393,975 slave owners were out of a free population of 8,289,782, or 4.75 percent of the free population of the slave states being slave owners,” Mackey wrote.

The confederacy’s 11 states had 316,632 slave owners out of a free population of 5,582,222. This equals 5.67 percent of the free population of the confederacy were slave owners.

“That, however, does not tell us the extent of slave ownership. To better understand the extent of slavery’s impact, we need to realize a slave owner was the one person in a family who legally owned slaves. That person was usually the patriarch. There would be a spouse and sons and daughters who directly benefited from the family’s slave ownership and who stood to inherit enslaved people,” wrote Mackey.

So, according to the Census of 1860, 30.8 percent of the free families in the confederacy owned slaves. That means that every third white person in those states had a direct commitment to slavery.

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That is a lot of slave owners.

The free labor these slaves provided and how the slave owners profited financially from slavery are just some of the reasons why [#ADOS](#) continues to fight for reparations for Native Black Americans.