Adapted from the Forward to

Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People

to Freedom

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Slavery is when one person, known as a “master,” owns another person. From 1619 to 1865, Africans and their descendants, their children and grandchildren, were forced to be slaves in the United States. Slavery was based solely on skin color. As property, slaves in the United States had no rights. A person born a slave was a slave for life and was forced to work long hours at sometimes dangerous tasks. Slaves who disobeyed could be severely punished. Slaves could be sold by one master to another. Such sales often separated slave families forever. Many states did not allow slaves to learn to read and write. Slaves had almost no chance of improving their lives.

In 1820, there were more than 1 million slaves in the United States. By 1861, at least 4 million people were slaves. Slaves found hope in sermons and stories from the Bible. Their songs, called spirituals, sometimes contained secret messages to help them escape from their masters. Thousands of slaves ran away using a support system of special helpers and hideaways known as the Underground Railroad.