

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Longest Memory* is set in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century on a slave plantation in Virginia. To understand the events of the novel it is important to understand some of the history of slaves in America.

### ***Slavery in America***

Slavery began in America around 1619 when African slaves were brought to Virginia to assist with the production of tobacco crops. Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, slavery expanded across the American colonies (what we now know as the States), especially in the south where tobacco, rice, indigo and cotton plantations were prevalent. It is estimated that between 6 and 7 million African slaves were brought to America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There were fewer slaves in the northern colonies as their economy relied more heavily on industry rather than agriculture and many northern colonists saw the link between the oppression of slaves and their own oppression by the British. Slavery was abolished in the northern colonies between 1774 and 1804, yet it remained vital in the south. It was not until January 1<sup>st</sup> 1863 that slavery was abolished in all states of America, when it was declared by President Abraham Lincoln.

The system of slavery was designed to keep slaves completely dependent on their owners. Slaves were not permitted to learn how to read or write and their movement was strictly monitored and restricted. Those who behaved could be rewarded with favours, while those who misbehaved were severely punished. Marriages could occur between slaves, although they were not legally recognised, and it was common for slaves to have large families. However, plantation owners would not hesitate to separate or divide families with the sale of individuals.

Slaves could be purchased and sold by plantation owners as if they were property. Any children born to slaves also became the property of the plantation owner. Slaves could not own anything. When slaves committed crimes, such as stealing food or trying to escape they were subjected to harsh punishments. In Virginia the law also stated that it was not a crime for a white person to kill a slave.

### ***The American Civil War***

The American Civil War, from 1861 – 1865, was a conflict between the southern (Confederate) states of America and the northern (Union) states. One of the key issues of the civil war was the keeping of slaves by the Confederates. While *The Longest Memory* is set approximately 50 years prior to the American Civil War, the growing tensions between the northern and southern states is becoming apparent, especially in Lydia's reflections and the chapter that contains editorial pieces from *The Virginian* newspaper.