

Ira Berlin Is Dead at 77; Groundbreaking Historian of Slavery

By [Neil Genzlinger](#)

June 8, 2018

Ira Berlin, a historian whose research and acclaimed books helped reveal the complexities of American slavery and its aftermath, died on Tuesday in Washington. He was 77.

The cause was complications of multiple myeloma, his son, Richard, said.

In books like “Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South” (1974) and “Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America” (1998), Dr. Berlin, a longtime professor at the University of Maryland, upended simplistic notions of how slavery was practiced and what happened after it ended.

His masterpiece was “Many Thousands Gone,” Joshua D. Rothman, history department chairman at the University of Alabama, said by email. It recounted the first two centuries of slavery in North America and stressed “how the institution varied and was experienced differently by enslaved people over time and across space,” Professor Rothman said.

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