

# African Slave Trade

African Slave Trade, the gathering, transport, and sale of blacks from tropical Africa to other lands. The sale of blacks at commercial centers in North Africa and the Middle East lasted for thousands of years. The sale of blacks from western Africa to the New World took place from the 16th through the 19th century. This Atlantic slave trade took millions of men, women, and children to the Americas to meet labor needs there. It played an important part in the settlement of the New World and the growing prosperity of Europe but brought great misery to its victims.

## The Atlantic Slave Trade

The origins of the Atlantic slave trade lay in the pioneering Portuguese voyages of the 15th century that explored the west coast of Africa. In 1444, Portuguese sailors captured some coastal Africans and brought them back to Lisbon. A thriving slave trade soon developed in Portugal. Shipment of African slaves to America began by 1517. Spanish officials had discovered that Caribbean natives were dying off because they were unsuited for heavy labor. Africans were found to be hardier and more capable of doing heavy work. Perhaps 900,000 Africans reached America in the 16th century.

During the 17th century a large European market developed for such cash crops as sugar, cotton, coffee, and tobacco, which were grown in Brazil, the West Indies, and the English colonies of southeastern North America. As demand for plantation labor increased, the traffic in slaves swelled. The Portuguese, who were the first slavers (carriers in the slave traffic), were supplanted by the Dutch, who were in turn replaced by the English and French.

It is estimated that about 2,750,000 slaves were brought to the Americas during the 17th century and 7,000,000 during the 18th.

The Operation in Africa. European slavers did not themselves capture the Africans they transported, but bought them from native slave traders. Since ancient times, war captives, criminals, and debtors in Africa had been sold into slavery among their own people. For several centuries the western Sudanese kingdoms had been supplying slaves to Muslim North Africa on a commercial basis. When European traders first came to the Guinea coast, African masters sold them their own slaves. As the demand increased, the coastal peoples began making slave raids against peoples farther inland, aided by firearms supplied by the traders. Soon blacks belonging to a variety of tribes from Senegal south to Angola were being enslaved in great numbers.

Captured slaves were marched to the sea in single file, shackled and watched by armed African guards. Fatalities were high on the grim journey. The slaves were placed in compounds at points along the coast, where European traders arriving by ship would examine them and reject the old and infirm. The remaining captives were branded and taken on board. Payment for slaves was in goods such as textiles, firearms, knives and other hardware, and liquor.

African kingdoms such as Ashanti and Dahomey grew in power through the slave trade, because of the European goods they received. However, western Africa as a whole suffered from slave wars and the depopulation of wide areas through slave raids. Also, the Africans did not learn new productive skills from their contact with Europeans; rather, their own production of articles declined with the bringing in of European goods.

The Middle Passage. For sea captains engaged in the slave trade, the voyage across the Atlantic was the “middle passage” in a triangular trade route. An English trader, for example, would typically sail from Liverpool with goods that Africans would accept in payment for slaves. After collecting the slaves, he would transport them to the West Indies or the North American mainland and barter them for supplies such as molasses or tobacco, which he would then take back to England for sale. A successful voyage brought extremely high profits.

The middle passage was a dreadful ordeal for the slaves. They spent most of the voyage below deck, manacled and tightly packed in cramped positions. They were allowed on deck only for short periods of exercise. About one of every six died on the ocean voyage. Between the time of their capture and delivery in America, probably one slave died for each one who arrived in the New World.

At the end of the middle passage the slaves were sold to slave dealers or individual owners. American ports had slave markets where Africans were auctioned off. Until the 18th century, almost all the markets were in Brazil or the West Indies. The English mainland colonies usually bought their slaves from West Indian owners. After 1700, Charleston, South Carolina, became a busy port of call for slave ships from Africa, the largest on the mainland.

Suppression of the Trade. By about 1785, more than half the slaves sent across the Atlantic were being shipped by British sea captains. Protests by British humanitarians such as William Wilberforce grew, however, until Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807. Gradually, British diplomatic pressure forced other nations to ban the traffic officially. Foreign governments were reluctant to enforce the ban, however, and made little effort to do so.

In the United States, Congress forbade the importation of slaves after 1808, but the ban was not effectively enforced. Indeed, a thriving illegal trade developed as cotton plantations became the economic foundation of the South. The Atlantic slave trade was only truly stamped out after the American Civil War. From 1800 until the effective suppression of the trade, an estimated 4,000,000 slaves entered the Americas.

During the 350 years of the Atlantic slave trade, about 15,000,000 Africans were transported to the Americas. The West Indies became predominantly populated by blacks, while Brazil, Central America, and the southern United States acquired a substantial black population.

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