

Atlantic Slave Trade

Part One: Development of Slavery

Between 1440 and 1880 Europeans and North Americans exchanged merchandise for slaves along Africa's western and west central Atlantic coasts. These slaves were then transported to other locations around the Atlantic Ocean. The vast majority went to Brazil, the Caribbean, and Spanish-speaking regions of South America and Central America. Smaller numbers were taken to Atlantic islands, continental Europe, and English-speaking areas of the North American mainland. Anywhere from 9 to 12 million slaves left Africa via the Atlantic trade. What proved novel about the Atlantic slave trade was its scale. Never before had so many slaves moved from one area to another. One other unique aspect of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was that never before had any society taken large-scale steps to suppress slavery, including the use of military force.

Slavery In Africa Before The 1500s

Slavery was not unique to African societies. Various forms of human bondage existed from early times. Sumerians in Mesopotamia relied on slave labor before 3000 BC, as did the ancient Egyptians. China had slavery during the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), and the societies of classical Greece and Rome made heavy use of slave labor from the 6th century BC through the 5th century AD. The Muslim invasion that spread like a wave throughout the Mediterranean in the 600s and 700s inflicted slavery on conquered subjects who would not convert; indeed, when the Spanish pushed back the Muslims against the coastal areas of Spain in the 1300 and 1400s, they found many Christian slaves in the cities they liberated.

Most societies in sub-Saharan Africa also used captives and dependents for labor. Land in Africa tended to be plentiful, owned communally, and parceled out to families according to their needs based on the number of laborers they could marshal. To increase production, families had to invest in more workers. The quickest way was to buy slaves. Many African kingdoms established on the west coast of Africa used slave labor, and as providers of slaves for the Americas, were labeled the "slave kingdoms."

Roots Of The Atlantic Slave Trade

The Atlantic slave trade began because a great demand for labor developed on plantations spread about the Atlantic, especially in the tropics of the Western Hemisphere. Most of the plantations produced sugarcane for Europe, but planters eventually grew such other products as coffee, cocoa, rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton. The Atlantic slave trade became an integral part of an international trading system.

Spread of the Plantation System

Europeans craved cane sugar as soon as they encountered it in the 11th century during the early Crusades in the Middle East. Planting, harvesting, and processing sugar cane for export required a sizeable workforce. Because labor in the sugar fields was a strenuous and exhausting task, plantation owners used unfree labor (serfs and slaves). Planters could work them in inhuman ways, dawn to dusk, to bring in the cane before it rotted in the fields. These planters could not make similar demands on free workers. Many of these workers were feudal serfs who were legally bound to work on the land owned by their landlords. Among the earliest slaves on these plantations were Slavic peoples—the source of the words for slave in several European languages. As demand for sugar grew, the plantations spread westward, reaching Spain and Portugal by the 14th century. In addition to a large work force, access to a sugar mill (to process the sugar, crushing it out of the cane) was also a necessity, which led to sugar being concentrated in large plantations (as opposed to small individual farming families).

Portuguese sailors who ventured into the Atlantic in the 15th century enabled plantation agriculture to spread to such tropical Atlantic islands as Madeira, the Canary Islands, and Sao Tome, all of which emerged as major sugar producers. The nearest labor force for these plantations was Africa's western coast. Eventually plantation agriculture spread to the Americas: After 1550, northeast Brazil became the leading sugar-producing area, and after 1640 the leading position passed to the Caribbean. Eventually, the British colonies of mainland North America imported slaves to grow tobacco, rice, and indigo, and later, in the 1800s, cotton.

Africans as the Labor Source

New World plantation owners sought labor that was abundant and inexpensive. Native Americans were the obvious choice, but they died rapidly from such diseases as smallpox, mumps, and measles, which the Europeans introduced into the region and to which the Native Americans lacked immunity. They also could run away with ease: Their homes were usually close by, they were familiar with the land, and they knew how to survive on indigenous plants and animals. European indentured servants—criminals sentenced to labor or men obligated to work for a set time in exchange for ocean passage—also fell victim to diseases, mostly tropical malaria and yellow fever. They could also escape and easily blend in as members of the colony's white ruling class.

But Africans were different: They came from an environment where those who survived into adolescence acquired some immunity to such "Old World" diseases as smallpox, mumps, and measles, as well as to such tropical maladies as malaria and yellow fever. This meant they lived three to five times longer than white laborers under the difficult conditions on plantations, and longer still than Native Americans. Also, when Africans ran away they could neither go home nor be mistaken for members of the planters' society.

Part Two: Triangle Trade

Conduct Of The Slave Trade

The Atlantic slave trade began as a trickle in the 1440s and grew slowly through the 17th century. By 1700, 25,000 slaves, on average, were crossing the Atlantic every year. After 1700 the trade grew much more rapidly to a peak in the 1780s, when an average year saw 80,000 African slaves arrive on American shores. Then the trade fell off more slowly and after 1850 quickly declined.

The first Europeans to sail down Africa's west coast in the mid-15th century attempted to steal Africans from their homes. Several violent confrontations showed Africans' strength, however, and African boycotts proved how dependent Europeans were for such necessities as food and water. It became evident that the only practical way to obtain slaves or other commodities was to bring items the residents wanted in exchange. Within a short time, Europeans and Africans established a systematic way of trading that changed little over several centuries.

At various points along the coast, buyers and sellers met and struck deals. Europeans examined slaves; Africans looked over merchandise; and then the parties haggled to set the values of each. The assortment of the Europeans' trade goods was always an important factor. Any notion that Africans were duped into accepting trinkets of little value is incorrect. Most knew what they wanted and could hold out for good terms. Typical commodities exchanged for slaves included cloth, metals and metalware, firearms and gunpowder, spirits, silverware, coins, clothing, horses, salt, cowrie shells (very beautiful shells from certain snails), and paper. The prices Europeans paid for slaves rose steadily through the years. An English buyer could obtain a healthy slave for £5.5 worth of commodities in 1690 and £14 worth in 1760. The same slave sold in Virginia for £15 in 1690 and £45 in 1760.

Triangle Trade

The Atlantic slave trade became part of a prosperous trading cycle known as the triangular trade. In the first leg of the triangle, European merchants purchased African slaves with commodities manufactured in Europe or European colonies (such as weapons, clothing, or rum). The merchants then sold the slaves in the Caribbean and purchased such easily transportable commodities as sugar, cotton, and tobacco, to take back to Europe. Finally the merchants would sell these goods in Europe (and North American colonies). They would use the profits from these sales to purchase more goods to trade in Africa, continuing the trading cycle. The transportation of slaves from Africa has been called the "Middle Passage" because it is the middle of the three legs or sides of this triangle.

Final Destination

Slaves were not distributed evenly around the Atlantic. Roughly 40 percent of the total went to the Caribbean islands; another 38 percent went to Brazil; and Spanish America accounted for 17 percent. Only about 6 percent entered what would become the United States. Mortality factors affected the various populations' abilities to reproduce, however, so the geographical distribution of African slaves does not correspond to today's population of African descent in the western hemisphere. Slaves working on Caribbean and South American sugar plantations faced higher mortality rates as a result of harsh labor conditions and exposure to tropical diseases. As a result, slave populations in many sugar-producing areas grew steadily only because planters imported a continuous supply of new slaves from Africa. Slaves in what were the British North American colonies tended to live longer, healthier lives due to less brutal working conditions and a climate less hospitable to tropical diseases. As a result, slave populations in those areas continued to grow even after Britain and the United States abolished the importation of slaves in the early 1800s.

The Portuguese transported the greatest number of slaves in the early years of the slave trade, exercising a near monopoly well into the 17th century. Portugal had several advantages because of its early expansion into Africa and the ease of transporting slaves over the relatively short distance from Africa to the Portuguese colony of Brazil. The annexation of Portugal by Spain, from 1580 to 1640, tightened the Portuguese hold over the slave trade. Phillip II of Spain granted Portuguese merchants a monopoly on the importation of slaves to Spain's colonies in America.

Portuguese influence declined after it gained independence from Spain in 1640. This coincided with the establishment of sugar plantations in the West Indies by the British, French, and Dutch. These nations began to claim larger parts of the slave trade during the 1640s, and by the 18th century the British were the dominant slave traders.

Slaves faced a variety of experiences in the Americas, but nearly all involved heavy physical labor, poor housing, and insufficient medical care. Sugar plantations were the norm from northeastern Brazil through the Caribbean islands and plantation conditions brought the highest mortality rates. For example, British planters imported about 264,000 slaves into the Caribbean between 1640 and 1700, but high mortality rates reduced the number of slaves on the islands to about 100,000 by the time of the 1700 census. In the French colony of Saint Domingue, about 860,000 slaves arrived between 1680 and 1791, but the black population was only 480,000 in 1791. Slaves also worked mines in Peru or Mexico and labored to produce tobacco, indigo, rice, or cotton on the British North American mainland. In the few places where plantation agriculture was not profitable, they did a variety of tasks for their masters, from working as house servants to practicing a trade.

Part Three: Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Trade

African Responses to the Slave Trade

African responses to the export of slavery were mixed. King Alfonso I of Kongo wrote a letter of complaint to the Portuguese King João III, in 1526, criticizing the Portuguese for taking unlawfully enslaved captives on board their ships.

Each day the traders are kidnapping our people - children of this country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our own family. This corruption and depravity are so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated. We need in this kingdom only priests and schoolteachers, and no merchandise, unless it is wine and flour for Mass. It is our wish that this Kingdom not be a place for the trade or transport of slaves.

Many of our subjects eagerly lust after Portuguese merchandise that your subjects have brought into our domains. To satisfy this inordinate appetite, they seize many of our black free subjects.... They sell them. After having taken these prisoners [to the coast] secretly or at night..... As soon as the captives are in the hands of white men they are branded with a red-hot iron

Unfortunately for Africa, Alfonso maintained slave markets in his kingdom, where the Portuguese could purchase slaves—he was simply protesting his own people being enslaved. Certainly not every African ruler was opposed to slavery. After Britain started suppressing the trade, King Gezo of Dahomey wrote in the 1840's, "The slave trade is the ruling principle of my people. It is the source and the glory of their wealth...the mother lulls the child to sleep with notes of triumph over an enemy reduced to slavery..." And the King of Bonny (now in Nigeria) wrote, "We think this trade must go on. That is the verdict of our oracle and the priests. They say that your country, however great, can never stop a trade ordained by God himself."

Abolition Of The Atlantic Slave Trade

Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807, as did the United States in 1808. The United States, in the first year that the Constitution permitted it to, banned the importing of slaves; in previous years, it had banned the outfitting of slaving ships, as well as investing in companies that participated in that. It remained for the British, who controlled the world's most powerful fleet, to enforce antislavery trade laws, and that was difficult. The Atlantic slave trade continued, with declining numbers, through most of the 19th century. The movement of African slaves across the Atlantic did not end until slavery was outlawed everywhere in the Americas. Cuba was the last to outlaw slavery, in 1888. African nations retained slavery longer than other nations; one of Mussolini's points insisting on Italy's right to invade Ethiopia in the 1930s was

that this African nation still sanctioned slavery. After regaining control of his country, then Emperor Haile Selassie issued a proclamation outlawing it in 1942.

Immediately after the passing of the slave trade ban in 1807, British abolitionists organized to ban the practice itself. One of the leaders of this movement was William Wilberforce (the subject of a 2007 movie, *Amazing Grace*), who continually besieged Parliament with bills for the abolition of slavery. Slowly the votes piled up in its favor, and Wilberforce died three days after the Slavery Abolition Bill had been passed by the House of Commons. The bill immediately freed slaves in almost every area of the British empire (except for a few islands outside the Caribbean) under the age of 6, and those who were older, in 1838.

There are different motives put forward for the abolition of slavery. First would be humanitarian sentiments. Antislavery sentiments began to appear in Europe in the 18th century with roots in Christian religious principles (as seen especially in the First Great Awakening) and in the egalitarian philosophy that emerged during the Age of Enlightenment. By 1750 abolitionists were devoting money and time toward ending the slave trade and slavery itself. Their efforts were aided by the egalitarian ideals of the American Revolution (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799), as well as by the horrors of such bloody slave rebellions as the Haitian Slave Revolt on the French island of Haiti in 1791.

Some have argued that slavery was bound to die out, because of economic issues—that it simply wasn't as profitable as free labor, or that industrialization was making slavery obsolete (because factories tended to utilize skilled labor, working with expensive machines, which were more suitable to men getting highly paid, rather than being forced to work). First, even after slavery was outlawed in the United States, and the supply of slaves dropped considerably in the rest of the Americas, Cuba and Brazil continued to operate slave-labor sugar plantations quite profitably for decades. If it was so inefficient, one would think that the cotton plantations (operated by slave labor) would have driven their owners into bankruptcy, instead of spreading like wildfire across the American South in the early 1800s.

The argument that industrialization eliminated slavery is putting the cart before the horse. If anything, industrialism gave slavery a new lease on life, by providing profitable uses for products that could be grown on farms, by slaves. Certainly slaves were not employed in factories, but they sure were on plantations that provided the cotton that was turned into clothing, by the factories. The same could be said for factories that refined sugar and other products made on plantations. But unless people saw slavery as wrong, there is no reason to believe that plantations couldn't have continued to employ slaves well into the 1900s (and beyond, for that matter).

Reviews of Two Books Chronicling British Naval Slave Patrols in late 1800s¹

The conclusion of the treaty between the British Government and the Sultan of Zanzibar for the complete suppression of the slave trade between the island of Zanzibar and the African coast, marks an epoch in the history of civilization all the more important because it has been so tardily accomplished....It was a common occurrence when a dhow laden with negroes was chased by a British cruiser or its boats, for the Arab captain to beach his clumsy craft, preferring to run the risk of losing a large proportion of his human cargo by drowning in the breakers rather than have the whole condemned. From the frequency of these disasters it may be doubted whether there may not have been as many negroes driven to death as were rescued from prospective bondage.

It has been said, and Capt. Colomb thinks with much exaggeration, that "the whole of the negro population of Eastern Africa are liable to capture and sale." "The exceptions," he adds, "omitting Egyptian territory, are the Somali tribes, who inhabit the country about Cape Guardafui and cohabit the coast line much farther south, who are not lawfully held in bondage by Mohammedans, and few of mixed races who live under the protections of the Portuguese flag. The remaining population, at the mercy of the Arab or negro sportsmen, sell themselves, are shot down, netted, speared, bought, or kidnapped, with the intervention of any game laws or regulation for the preserving of the breeds." The horrors of this traffic in the interior of Africa have never yet been, from the nature of the case can never be adequately described or fully appreciated; but the statement of Dr. Livingstone and other explorers give glimpses quite sufficient to indicate the horrible cruelties with which the traffic is accompanied. The persons by whom it is carried on are for the most part Arabs, subjects to the Sultan of Zanzibar. These slave dealers start for the interior, armed and provided with articles for the bartering of slaves, such as beads and cotton cloths. When they have penetrated the country far enough for their purpose they incite the natives to war upon each other, and finally assist one side or the other. Their support invariably decided the struggle, and the captives, either by force or purchase, become their property, the price in the latter case being a few yards of cotton cloth. In these conditions thousands are killed or mortally wounded, whole villages are burned, and large extents of country devastated. The younger negroes, whether male or female, are generally preferred by the slave-dealers, but whole tribes are sometime swept away in raids. Having obtained a sufficient number of slaves, to give a wide margin for heavy losses on the return, the slave dealers start for the coast. The slaves march in gangs, the males with their necks in heavy forked sticks, which at night are fastened to the ground or lashed together so as to make escape impossible. The women and children are held with thongs. Any attempt at escaping is

¹ Two book reviews on British attempts to stop the slave trade; entitled "The East African Slave Trade," published: July 28, 1873, by the New York Times.

punished with death; any who may become sick on the way are left behind to die, and the remnant arrive at their destination in the greatest miserable destitution. The horrors of this march to the coast in their way quite equal those of the fearful "middle passage" across the Atlantic, as it was in the days of the slave traffic.

The number of negroes which these dhows carry varies greatly. One of 80 to 100 tons will carry from 100 to 150 slaves, and as many as 420 have been taken in two vessels measuring in the aggregate but 340 tons. Comfort for the living cargo is, of course, not at all aimed at by the masters of these dhows, but Capt. Colomb does not coincide with those who make much of the fearful sufferings which the slaves endure on the voyage from Kilwa to Zanzibar. The master of the craft, he says, submits to much the same discomfort as his involuntary passengers, and in confirmation of this he quotes the official statement of the Resident of the Persian Gulf, who, as long ago as 1844, wrote: "The treatment of the African slaves is at no time either severe or cruel. During the sea voyage they are not bound or kept under particular restraint. Rice, dates, and fish in sufficient quantities form their food, and a coarse cloth round the middle of the body constitutes their only clothing." If disease, want, and crowding come together, however, the suffering must be as intense as it is possible to conceive.

It would be premature to conclude that with the ratification of this treaty all traffic in slaves through Zanzibar will at once and forever cease. As long ago as 1865 a most comprehensive treaty was concluded between the British Government and the Queen of Madagascar. Under it the Queen engaged to do all in her power to suppress the trade in slaves. She gave her formal consent to the searching by British cruisers of any Malagash or Arab vessels suspected of being engaged in the slave trade, whether under sail or at anchor in the waters of Madagascar; and, further, she agreed that if such vessels or their crews should prove to be engaged in the slave trade, that the cruisers of her Britannic Majesty might deal with them as if they had been caught in a piratical undertaking. More than this, slaves must not even be landed from beyond sea in Madagascar, and if brought in surreptitiously or otherwise they must be surrendered to the British Government. No more ample powers could be asked or given than these, and if the Queen of Madagascar had been sincere in the concessions, and co-operated cordially in carrying them out, the prosecution of the slave trade within her territory would, of course, be an impossibility. In point of fact, however, Capt. Colomb thinks that the import of slaves into Madagascar from the mainland still amounts to many thousands annually. Some such result is likely to follow at Zanzibar, at least for a short time to come. The Sultan, however, is more susceptible to the influences and demands of civilization than his semi-savage contemporary, and it is to be hoped that the provisions of the treaty just signed shall be sincere, cordial, and thoroughly effective.