Middle Passage

How did the arrival of the Europeans affect Africa?

How did the slave trade in Africa differ from the Atlantic slave trade?

What was the “Middle Passage”?

What happened to Africans after they crossed the Atlantic?

How were slaves treated in the Americas?

Why did the Atlantic slave trade end?

After Great Britain banned the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, British warships enforced the ban. The people portrayed in this early nineteenth-century woodcut were rescued from a slave ship by the H.M.S. Undine.
They felt the sea-wind tying them into one nation of eyes and shadows and groans, in the one pain that is inconsolable, the loss of one’s shore. They had wept, not for their wives only, their fading children, but for strange, ordinary things. This one, who was a hunter wept for a sapling lance whose absent heft sang in his palm’s hollow. One, a fisherman, for an ocher river encircling his calves; one a weaver, for the straw fisherpot he had meant to repair, wilting in water. They cried for the little thing after the big thing. They cried for a broken gourd.

Derek Walcott, _Omeros_

These words of a modern black West Indian poet express the sorrow and loss the Atlantic slave trade inflicted on the enslaved Africans it tore from their homelands. This huge enterprise, which lasted for more than three centuries, brought millions of Africans 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. It was the largest forced migration in history. By the eighteenth century, the voyage across the ocean in European ships called “slavers” had become known as the “Middle Passage.” British sailors coined this innocuous phrase to describe the middle leg of a triangular journey first from England to Africa, then from Africa to the Americas, and finally from the Americas back to England. Yet today Middle Passage denotes an unbelievable descent into an earthly hell of cruelty and suffering. It was from the Middle Passage that the first African Americans emerged.

This chapter describes the Atlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage. It explores their origins both in European colonization in the Americas and in the slave trade that had existed in Africa itself for centuries. It focuses on the experience of the enslaved people whom the trade brought to America. For those who survived, the grueling journey was a prelude to servitude on huge agricultural factories called plantations. Many who became African Americans first experienced plantation life in the West Indies—the Caribbean islands—where they were prepared for lives as slaves in the Americas through a process called “seasoning.”

The European Age of Exploration and Colonization

The origins of the Atlantic slave trade and its long duration were products of Western Europe’s expansion of power that began during the fifteenth century and continued into the twentieth century. For a variety of economic, technological, and demographic reasons, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, England, and other nations sought to explore, conquer, and colonize in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Their efforts had important consequences for these areas.

Portugal took the lead during the early 1400s when its ships reached Africa’s western coast. Portuguese captains hoped to find Christian allies there against the Muslims of North Africa and spread Christianity. But they were more interested in trade with African kingdoms, as were the Spanish, Dutch, English, and French who followed them.

Even more attractive than Africa to the Portuguese and their European successors as sources of trade and wealth were India, China, Japan, and the East Indies (modern Indonesia and Malaysia). In 1487 the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias discovered the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa and thereby established that it was possible to sail around Africa to reach India and regions to its east. Ten years later Vasco da Gama initiated this route on behalf of Portuguese commerce. A similar desire to reach these eastern regions motivated the Spanish monarchy to finance Christopher Columbus’s westward voyages that began in 1492.
Columbus, who believed the earth to be much smaller than it is, hoped to reach Japan or India by sailing west, thereby opening a direct trade route between Spain and these eastern countries. Columbus’s mistake led to his accidental landfall in the Americas. In turn, that encounter led to the European conquest, settlement, and exploitation of North and South America and the Caribbean islands, where Columbus first landed. Columbus and those who followed him quickly enslaved indigenous Americans (American Indians) as laborers in fields and mines. Almost as quickly, many indigenous peoples either died of European diseases and overwork or escaped beyond the reach of European power. Consequently, European colonizers needed additional laborers. This demand for a workforce in the Americas caused the Atlantic slave trade.

The Slave Trade in Africa

Slave labor was not peculiar to the European colonies in the Americas. Slavery and slave trading had existed in all cultures for thousands of years. As Chapter 1 indicates, slave labor was common in West Africa, although it was usually less oppressive than it became in the Americas.

When Portuguese voyagers first arrived at Senegambia, Benin, and Kongo, they found a thriving commerce in slaves. These kingdoms represented the southern extremity of an extensive trade conducted by Islamic nations that involved the capture and sale of Europeans and North African Berbers as well as black people from south of the Sahara Desert. Although Arabs nurtured antiblack prejudice, race was not the major factor in this Islamic slave trade. Arab merchants and West African kings, for example, imported white slaves from Europe.

In West Africa, Sudanese horsemen conducted the Islamic slave trade. The horsemen invaded the forest region to capture people who could not effectively resist—often they belonged to stateless societies. The trade dealt mainly in women and children who as slaves were destined for lives as concubines and domestic servants in North Africa and southwest Asia. This pattern contrasted with that of the later Atlantic slave trade, which primarily sought young men for agricultural labor in the Americas. The West African men who constituted a minority of those subjected to the trans-Saharan slave trade were more likely to become soldiers than fieldworkers in such North African states as Morocco and Egypt.

The demand for slaves in Muslim countries remained high from the tenth through the fifteenth centuries because many slaves died from disease or were freed and assimilated into Arab society. The trans-Saharan slave trade therefore rivaled the extensive trade in gold across the Sahara and helped make such West African cities as Timbuktu, Walata, Jenne, and Gao wealthy. According to historian Roland Oliver, the Atlantic slave trade did not reach the proportions of the trans-Saharan slave trade until 1600 (see Figure 2–1).

The Origins of the Atlantic Slave Trade

When Portuguese ships first arrived off the Guinea Coast, their captains traded chiefly for gold, ivory, and pepper, but they also wanted slaves. As early as 1441, Antam Goncalvez of Portugal enslaved a Berber and
his West African servant and took them home as gifts for a Portuguese prince. During the following decades, Portuguese raiders captured hundreds of Africans to work as domestic servants in Portugal and Spain.

But usually the Portuguese and the other European and white Americans who succeeded them did not capture and enslave people themselves. They instead purchased slaves from African traders. This arrangement began formally in 1472 when the Portuguese merchant Ruy do Siqueira gained permission from the Oba (king) of Benin to trade for slaves, as well as for gold and ivory, within the borders of the Oba’s kingdom. Siqueira and other Portuguese found that a commercial infrastructure already existed in West Africa that could distribute European trade goods and procure slaves. The rulers of Benin, Dahomey, and other African kingdoms restricted the Europeans to a few points on the coast, and the kingdoms raided the interior to supply the Europeans with slaves.

Interethnic rivalries in West Africa led to the warfare that produced these slaves during the sixteenth century. Although Africans were initially reluctant to sell members of their own ethnic group to Europeans, they did not at first consider it wrong to sell members of their own race to foreigners. In fact, neither Africans nor Europeans had yet developed a concept of racial solidarity. However, by the eighteenth century, at least the victims of the trade believed that such solidarity should exist. Ottobah Cugoano, who had been captured and sold during that century, wrote, “I must own to the shame of my countrymen that I was first kidnapped and betrayed by [those of] my own complexion.”

Until the early sixteenth century, Portuguese seafarers conducted the Atlantic slave trade on a tiny scale to satisfy a limited market for domestic servants in Portugal and Spain. Other European countries had no demand for slaves because their workforces were already too large. But the impact of Columbus’s voyages drastically changed the slave trade. The Spanish and Portuguese—followed by the Dutch, English,
and French—established colonies in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and South America. Because disease and overwork caused the number of American Indians in these regions rapidly to decline, Europeans relied on the Atlantic slave trade to replace them as a source of slave labor (see Map 2–1). As early as 1502, African slaves lived on the island of Hispaniola—modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic (see Map 2–2). During the sixteenth century, gold and silver mines in Spanish Mexico and Peru and especially sugar plantations in Portuguese Brazil produced an enormous demand for labor. Consequently, the Atlantic slave trade grew to huge and tragic proportions to meet that demand (see Table 2–1).
Growth of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Because Europe provided an insatiable market for sugar, cultivation of this crop in the Americas became extremely profitable. Sugar plantations employing slave labor spread from Portuguese-ruled Brazil to the Caribbean islands. Later the cultivation of coffee in Brazil and of tobacco, rice, and indigo in British North America added to the demand for African slaves. By 1510 Spain had joined Portugal in the enlarged Atlantic slave trade, and a new, harsher form of slavery had appeared in the Americas. Unlike slavery in Africa, Asia, and Europe, slavery in the Americas was based on race, as only Africans and American Indians were enslaved. Most of the slaves were men or boys who were employed as agricultural laborers rather than soldiers or domestic servants. They became chattel—meaning personal property—of their masters and lost their customary rights as human beings. Men and boys predominated in part because Europeans believed they were stronger laborers than women and girls.

Another factor was that West Africans preferred to have women do agricultural work and therefore tended to withhold them from the Atlantic trade.

Portugal and Spain dominated the Atlantic slave trade during the sixteenth century. They shipped about 2,000 Africans per year to their American colonies, with the most by far going to Brazil. From the beginning of the trade until its nineteenth-century abolition, about 6,500,000 of the approximately 11,328,000 Africans taken to the Americas went to Brazil and Spain’s colonies. Both the Portuguese and the Spanish monarchies granted monopolies over the trade to private companies. In Spain, this monopoly became known in 1518 as the Asiento (meaning “contract”). The profits from the slave trade were so great that by 1550 the Dutch, French, and English were becoming involved. During the early seventeenth century, the Dutch drove the Portuguese from the West African coast and became the principal European slave-trading nation. For the rest of that century, most Africans came to the Americas in Dutch ships—including a group of 20 in 1619 who until recently were considered to have been the first of their race to reach British North America.

The Dutch also shifted the center of sugar production to the West Indies. England and France followed, with the former taking control of Barbados and Jamaica and the latter taking Saint Domingue (Haiti), Guadeloupe, and Martinique. With the development of tobacco as a cash crop in Virginia and Maryland during the 1620s and with the continued expansion of sugar production in the West Indies, the demand for African
slaves grew. The result was that England and France competed with the Dutch to control the Atlantic slave trade. After a series of wars, England emerged supreme. It had driven the Dutch out of the trade by 1674. Victories over France and Spain led in 1713 to English control of the Asiento, which allowed English traders the exclusive right to supply slaves to all of Spain’s American colonies. After 1713, English ships dominated the slave trade, carrying about 20,000 slaves per year from Africa to the Americas. At the peak of the trade during the 1790s, they transported 50,000 per year.

The profits from the Atlantic slave trade, together with those from the sugar and tobacco produced in the Americas by slave labor, were invested in England and helped fund the Industrial Revolution during the eighteenth century. In turn, Africa became a market for cheap English manufactured goods (see Map 2–3). Eventually, two triangular trade systems developed. In one, traders carried English goods to West Africa and exchanged the goods for slaves. Then the traders carried the slaves to the West Indies and exchanged them for sugar, which they took back to England on the third leg of the triangle. In the other triangular trade, white Americans from Britain’s New England colonies carried rum to West Africa to trade for slaves. From Africa they took the slaves to the West Indies to exchange for sugar or molasses—sugar syrup—which they then took home to distill into rum.

The African-American Ordeal from Capture to Destination

Recent scholarship indicates that the availability of large numbers of slaves in West Africa resulted from the warfare that accompanied the formation of states in
that region. Captives suitable for enslavement were a by-product of these wars. Senegambia and nearby Sierra Leone, then Oyo, Dahomey, and Benin, became, in turn, centers of the trade. Meanwhile, on the west coast of Central Africa, slaves became available as a result of the conflict between the expanding Kingdom of Kongo and its neighbors. The European traders provided the aggressors with firearms but did not instigate the wars. Instead, they used the wars to enrich themselves.

Sometimes African armies enslaved the inhabitants of conquered towns and villages. At other times, raiding parties captured isolated families or kidnapped individuals. As warfare spread to the interior, captives had to march for hundreds of miles to the coast where European traders awaited them. The raiders tied the captives together with rope or secured them with wooden yokes about their necks. It was a shocking experience, and many captives died from hunger, exhaustion, and exposure during the journey. Others killed themselves rather than submit to their fate, and the captors killed those who resisted.

Once the captives reached the coast, those destined for the Atlantic trade went to fortified structures called factories. Portuguese traders constructed the
In this late eighteenth-century drawing, African slave traders conduct a group of bound captives from the interior of Africa toward European trading posts.

first factory at Elmina on the Guinea Coast in 1481—the Dutch captured it in 1637. Such factories contained the headquarters of the traders, warehouses for their trade goods and supplies, and dungeons or outdoor holding pens for the captives. In these pens, slave traders divided families and—as much as possible—ethnic groups to prevent rebellion. The traders stripped captives naked and inspected them for disease and physical defects. Those considered fit for purchase were branded like cattle with a hot iron bearing the symbol of a trading company.

In a rare account of such proceedings from a captive's point of view, Olaudah Equiano described during the 1780s how horrifying such treatment could be. The white slave traders, with their “horrible looks, red faces, and long hair,” appeared to be savages who acted with a “brutal cruelty” that went beyond anything their victims had previously experienced. Many of the captives feared the Europeans were cannibals who would take them to their country for food. According to historian Gary Nash, such fears were the product of deliberate European brutalization of the captives, part of an attempt to destroy the Africans’ self-respect and self-identity.

THE CROSSING
After being held in a factory for weeks or months, captives faced the frightening prospect of leaving their native land for a voyage across an ocean that many of them had never before seen. Sailors rowed them out in large canoes to slave ships offshore. One English trader recalled that during the 1690s “the negroes were so wilful and loth to leave their own country, that they often leap’d out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned.”

Once at sea, the slave ships followed the route Columbus had established during his voyages to the Americas: from the Canary Islands off West Africa to the Windward Islands in the Caribbean. Because ships taking this route enjoyed prevailing winds and westward currents, the passage normally lasted between two and three months. But the time required for the crossing varied widely. The larger ships were able to
reach the Caribbean in 40 days, but some voyages could take up to six months.

Both human and natural causes accounted for such delays. During the three centuries that the Atlantic slave trade endured, Western European nations often fought each other, and slave ships became prized targets. As early as the 1580s, English “sea dogs,” such as John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake, attacked Spanish ships to steal their human cargoes. Outright piracy peaked between 1650 and 1725 when demand for slaves in the West Indies increased. There were also such potentially disastrous natural forces as doldrums—long windless spells at sea—and hurricanes, which could destroy ships, crews, and cargoes.

THE SLAVERS AND THEIR TECHNOLOGY

Slave ships (called slavers) varied in size but grew larger over the centuries. A ship’s tonnage determined how many slaves it could carry, with the formula being two slaves per ton. A ship of 200 tons might therefore carry 400 slaves. But captains often ignored the formula. Some kept their human cargo light, calculating that smaller loads lowered mortality and made revolt less likely. But most captains were “tight packers” who squeezed human beings together hoping that large numbers would offset increased deaths. The 120-ton Henrietta Marie, a British ship that sailed from London on its final voyage in 1699, should have been fully loaded with 240 slaves. Yet it carried 350 from West Africa when it set out for Barbados and Jamaica. Another ship designed to carry 450 slaves usually carried 600.

The slavers’ cargo space was generally only five feet high. Ships’ carpenters halved this vertical space by building shelves, so slaves might be packed above and below on planks that measured only 5.5 feet long and 1.3 feet wide. Consequently, slaves had only about 20 to 25 inches of headroom. To add to the discomfort, the crews chained male slaves together in pairs to help prevent rebellion and lodged them away from women and children.

The most frequently reproduced illustration of a slaver’s capacity for human cargo comes from the Brookes, which sailed from Liverpool, England, during the 1780s. At 300 tons, the Brookes was an exceptionally large ship for its time, and the diagrams show how tightly packed were the slaves it transported. Although those who wished to abolish the Atlantic slave trade created the diagrams, their bias does not make the diagrams less accurate. In fact, as historian James Walvin points out, the precise, unemotional renderings of the Brookes’s geometrically conceived design scarcely indicate the physical suffering it caused. The renderings do not show the constant shifting, crushing, and chafing among the human cargo caused by the movement of the ship at sea. Also, during storms the crew often neglected to feed the slaves, empty the tubs used for excrement, take slaves on deck for exercise, tend to the sick, or remove the dead.

Mortality rates were high because the crowded, unsanitary conditions encouraged seaboard epidemics. Between 1715 and 1775, slave deaths on French ships averaged 15 percent. The highest recorded mortality rate was 34 percent. By the nineteenth century, the death rate had declined to 5 percent. Overall, one-third of the Africans subjected to the trade perished between their capture and their embarkation on a slave ship. Another third died during the Middle Passage or during “seasoning” on a Caribbean island. It would have been slight consolation to the enslaved to learn that, because of the seaboard epidemics, the death rate among slaver crews was proportionally higher than their own.

As historian Marcus Rediker notes, by the eighteenth century Europeans regarded slavers as “useful machines.” The large three-masted, full-rigged vessels, with their “cast-iron cannon . . . harnessed unparalleled mobility, speed, and destructive power.” They were not only well armed to protect against those who might attempt to steal their human cargo
but also built to be durable and stable, although they rarely lasted more than ten years. By 1750 shipbuilders in Liverpool built slavers to order. The ships combined varieties of wood to produce strength, flexibility, and resistance to tropical ship worms that could bore into hulls. By 1800 they used copper sheathing to provide better protection below water. They used lattice doors, portholes, and funnels to ventilate slave quarters, which became healthier as time passed. They also maintained a special “hardware of bondage,” including iron manacles, shackles, collars, branding implements, and thumbscrews.

A SLAVE’S STORY
In his book The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, published in 1789, former slave Olaudah Equiano provides a vivid account of a West African’s capture, sale to traders, and voyage to America in 1755. Although recent evidence suggests Equiano may have been born in South Carolina rather than West Africa, scholars respect the accuracy of his account. He tells the story of a young Igbo, the dominant ethnic group in what is today southern Nigeria. African slave raiders capture him when he is ten years old and force him to march along with other captives to the Niger River or one of its tributaries, where they trade him to other Africans. His new captors take him to the coast and sell him to European slave traders whose ships sail to the West Indies.

The boy’s experience at the coastal slave factory convinces him he has entered a hell, peopled by evil spirits. The stench caused by forcing many people to live in close confinement makes him nauseated and emotionally agitated. His African and European captors try to calm him with liquor. But because he is not accustomed to alcohol, he becomes disoriented and more convinced of his impending doom. When the sailors lodge him with others below deck on the ship, he is so sick that he loses his appetite and hopes to die. Instead, because he refuses to eat, the sailors take him on deck and whip him. Later the boy witnesses the flogging of a white crewman. The man dies, and the sailors throw his body into the sea just as they disposed of dead Africans.

During the time the ship is in port awaiting a full cargo of slaves, the boy spends much time on deck. After putting to sea, however, he usually remains below deck with the other slaves where “each had scarcely room to turn himself.” There, the smells of unwashed bodies and of the toilet tubs, “into which the children often fell and were almost suffocated,” create a loathsome atmosphere. The darkness, the chafing of chains on flesh, and the shrieks and groans of the sick and disoriented provide “a scene of horror almost inconceivable.”

When slaves are allowed to get fresh air and exercise on deck, the crew strings up nets to prevent them from jumping overboard. Even so, two Africans who are chained together evade the nets and jump into the ocean, preferring drowning to staying on board. The boy shares their desperation. As the ship goes beyond sight of land, he and the other captives believe they lose “even the least glimpse of hope of [re]gaining the shore” and returning to their country. Equiano, in his first-person narrative, insisted that “many more” would have jumped overboard “if they had not been prevented by the ship’s crew.”

Attempts to keep the slaves entertained and in good humor seldom succeeded. Crews sometimes forced the slaves to dance and sing, but their songs, as slave-ship surgeon Alexander Falconbridge testified, were “melancholy lamentations, of their exile from their native country.” Depression among the Africans led to a catatonia that contemporary observers called melancholy or extreme nostalgia. Falconbridge noted that the slaves had “a strong attachment to their native country” and a “just sense of the value of liberty.” Although the traders, seeking to lessen the possibility of shipboard conspiracy and rebellion, separated individuals who spoke the same language, the boy described by Equiano manages to find adults who speak Igbo. They explain to him the purpose of the voyage, which he learns is to go to the white people’s country to labor for them rather than to be eaten by them. He does not realize that work on a West Indian island could be a death sentence.

A CAPTAIN’S STORY
John Newton, a white captain of a slave ship, who was born in London in 1725, provides another perspective on the Middle Passage. In 1745 Newton, as an indentured servant, joined the crew of a slaver bound for Sierra Leone. Indentured servants lost their freedom for a specified number of years either because they sold it or because they were being punished for debt or crime. In 1748, on the return voyage to England, Newton survived a fierce Atlantic storm and, thanking God, became an evangelical Christian. Like most people of his era, Newton saw no contradiction between his newfound faith and his participation in the enslavement and ill treatment of men, women, and children. When he became a slaver captain in 1750, he read Bible passages to his crew twice each Sunday and
CHAPTER 2

For many years historians have regarded Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), as one of the few authentic descriptions of the trade from an African point of view. Recently, however, Equiano’s African birth, if not his general accuracy, has been questioned. Vincent Carretta, author of *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2005), discovered two documents—a 1759 baptismal record and a 1777 ship muster roll—indicating that Equiano was born in South Carolina in about 1747 rather than—as Equiano claimed—in Nigeria in 1745. It appears that Equiano had not used an African name for himself before he published his autobiography. But, as several scholars have noted, an African in the Atlantic world during the eighteenth century had good reason to hide his true identity and claim to have been born in America. Even Carretta does not flatly assert that Equiano lied about his African birth. Carretta, in fact, validates Equiano’s autobiography by treating Equiano’s description of his capture, experience on the Middle Passage, and enslavement “as if it were true.”

Although the controversy over Equiano’s birthplace may never be resolved, it is certain that he was a young slave in Virginia when a visiting British sea captain named Michael Henry Pascal purchased him in 1754. Pascal commanded a merchant ship and employed Equiano as his personal servant. Pascal also gave him the name Gustavus Vassa (after the king of Sweden), which Equiano used for the rest of his life. Pascal and Equiano traveled extensively and served together in North America during the French and Indian War of 1754–1763. As a result, both of them were with General James Wolfe in 1759 at Quebec, Canada, where the British won the decisive battle of the war. Equiano also lived in England, where he received the schooling that allowed him to work as “a shipping clerk and amateur navigator on the ship of his . . . (third) master, the Quaker Robert King of Philadelphia, trading chiefly between [North] America and the West Indies.”

In 1766 growing antislavery sentiment among Quakers led King to allow Equiano to purchase his freedom for 40 pounds sterling. This was more money than most eighteenth-century British laborers earned in a year. Thereafter, Equiano toured the Mediterranean, sailed to the Arctic and Central America, converted to Calvinism, and became a leader in the British movement against the slave trade. In 1787 he helped organize a colony for emancipated British slaves at Sierra Leone in West Africa. Just before embarking for that country, however, dissention and confusion in the enterprise cost him his position as Commissary for Stores for the Black Poor. His autobiography, which he wrote shortly thereafter, proved to be a greater contribution to the anti-slave trade cause. The book also became a major source of income for Equiano.

In April 1792 he married an Englishwoman, Susanna Cullen, with whom he had two daughters. Their marriage notice recognized him “as the champion and advocate for procuring the suppression of the slave trade.” When Equiano died on March 31, 1797, he was, according to Carretta, “probably the wealthiest and most famous person of African descent in the Atlantic world.”

Equiano is significant for his account of the Atlantic slave trade and his service in the British struggle against that trade. His extraordinary life reveals how baseless the assumption was among Europeans and persons of European descent that black people were naturally suited for slavery.

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**PROFILE: Olaudah Equiano**

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**Portrait of a Negro Man, Olaudah Equiano, 1780s (previously attributed to Joshua Reynolds) by English School (eighteenth century)**

EX 17082  Portrait of a Negro Man, Olaudah Equiano, 1780s, (previously attributed to Joshua Reynolds) by English School (18th century) Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, Devon, UK/Bridgeman Art Library.
forbade swearing. But he treated his human cargoes as harshly as any other slaver captain.

Newton was 25 when he became captain of the *Duke of Argyle*, an old 140-ton vessel that he converted into a slaver after it sailed from Liverpool on August 11, 1750. Near the Cape Verde Islands, off the coast of Senegambia, carpenters began making the alterations required for packing Africans below deck. Newton also put the ship’s guns and ammunition in order to protect against pirates or African resistance. On October 23 the *Duke of Argyle* reached Frenchman’s Bay, Sierra Leone, where Newton observed other ships from England, France, and New England anchored offshore. Two days later, Newton purchased two men and a woman from traders at the port, but he had to sail to several other ports to accumulate a full cargo. Leaving West Africa for the open sea on May 23, 1751, the ship delivered its slaves to Antigua in the West Indies on July 3.

Poor health forced Newton to retire from the slave trade in 1754. Ten years later he became an Anglican priest, and from 1779 until his death in 1807 Newton served as rector of St. Mary Woolnoth Church in London. By the late 1770s, he had repented his involvement in the slave trade and had become one of its leading opponents. Together with William Cowper—a renowned poet—Newton published the *Olney Hymns* in 1779. Among the selections included in this volume was “Amazing Grace,” which Newton wrote as a reflection on divine forgiveness for his sins. For several reasons, Newton and other religious Britons had begun to perceive an evil in the slave trade that, despite their piety, they had failed to see earlier.

**PROVISIONS FOR THE MIDDLE PASSAGE**

Slave ships left Liverpool and other European ports provisioned with food supplies for their crews. These included beans, cheese, beef, flour, and grog, a mixture of rum and water. When the ships reached the Guinea Coast in West Africa, their captains purchased pepper, palm oil, lemons, limes, yams, plantains, and coconuts. Because slaves were not accustomed to European
foods, the ships needed these staples of the African diet. Meat and fish were rare luxuries on board, and crews did not share them with slaves. In the voyage Equiano describes, crew members at one point caught far more fish than they could eat but threw what was left overboard instead of giving it to the Africans who were exercising on deck. The captives “begged and prayed for some . . . but in vain.” The sailors whipped those Africans who filched a few fish for themselves.

The crew usually fed the slaves twice per day in shifts. Cooks prepared vegetable pulps, porridge, and stews for the crew to distribute in buckets as the slaves assembled on deck during good weather or below deck during storms. At the beginning of the voyage, each slave received a wooden spoon for dipping into the buckets, which about ten individuals shared. But in the confined confusion below deck, slaves often lost their spoons. They then had to eat from the buckets with their unwashed hands, which spread disease.

Although slaver captains realized it was in their interest to feed their human cargoes well, they often skimmed on supplies to save money and make room for more slaves. Therefore, the food on a slave ship was often insufficient to prevent malnutrition and weakened immune systems among people already traumatized by separation from their families and homelands. As a result, many Africans died during the Middle Passage from diseases amid the horrid conditions that were normal aboard the slave ships. Others died from depression: they refused to eat despite the crew’s efforts to force food down their throats.

**SANITATION, DISEASE, AND DEATH**

Diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, measles, smallpox, hookworm, scurvy, and dysentery constantly threatened African cargoes and European crews during the Middle Passage. Death rates were astronomical on board the slave ships before 1750. Mortality dropped after that date because ships became faster and ships’ surgeons knew more about hygiene and diet. There were also early forms of vaccinations against smallpox, which may have been the worst killer of slaves on ships. But, even after 1750, poor sanitation led to many deaths. It is important to remember that before the early twentieth century, no civilization had developed a germ theory of disease. Physicians blamed human illnesses on poisonous atmospheres and imbalances among bodily fluids.

Usually slavers provided only three or four toilet tubs below deck for enslaved Africans to use during the Middle Passage. They had to struggle among themselves to get to the tubs, and children had a particularly difficult time. Those too ill to reach the tubs excreted where they lay, and diseases such as dysentery, which are spread by human waste, thrived. Dysentery, known by contemporaries as “the bloody flux,” vied with smallpox to kill the most slaves aboard ships. Alexander Falconbridge reported that during one dysentery epidemic, “the deck, that is, the floor of [the slaves’] rooms, was so covered with blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house. It is not in the power of human imagination, to picture to itself a situation more dreadful or disgusting.”

John Newton’s stark, unimpassioned records of slave deaths aboard the *Duke of Argyle* indicate even more about how the Atlantic slave trade devalued human life. Newton recorded deaths at sea only by number. He wrote in his journal, “Bury’d a man slave No. 84 . . . bury’d a woman slave, No. 47.” Yet Newton probably was more conscientious than other slaver captains in seeking to avoid disease. During his 1750 voyage, he noted only eleven deaths. These included ten slaves—five men, one woman, three boys, and one girl—and one crewman. Compared with the usual high mortality rates, this was an achievement.

What role ships’ surgeons—general practitioners in modern terminology—played in preventing or inadvertently encouraging deaths aboard slave ships is difficult to determine. Some of them were outright frauds. Even the best were limited by the primitive medical knowledge that existed between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Captains rewarded the surgeons with “head money” for the number of healthy slaves who arrived in the Americas, but the surgeons could also be blamed for deaths at sea that reduced the value of the human cargo.

Many surgeons recognized that African remedies were more likely than European medications to alleviate the slaves’ illnesses. The surgeons collected herbs and foods along the Guinea Coast. They learned African nursing techniques, which they found more effective in treating onboard diseases than European procedures. What the surgeons did not understand and regarded as superstition was the holistic nature of African medicine. African healers maintained that body, mind, and spirit were interconnected elements of the totality of a person’s well-being.

The enslaved Africans were often just as dumb-founded by the beliefs and actions of their captors. They thought they had entered a world of bad spirits when they boarded a slaver, and they attempted to counteract the spirits with rituals from their homeland. John Newton noted that during one voyage he feared slaves had tried to poison the ship’s drinking water. He was relieved to discover that they were only
VOICES

THE JOURNAL OF A DUTCH SLAVER

The following account of slave trading on the West African coast is from a journal kept on the Dutch slaver St. Jan between March and November 1659. Although written from a European point of view, it describes the conditions Africans faced on such ships.

We weighed anchor, by the order of the Hon’ble Director, Johan Valckenborch, and the Hon’ble Director, Jasper van Heussen to proceed on our voyage to Rio Reael [on the Guinea Coast] to trade for slaves for the hon’ble company.

March 8. Saturday. Arrived with our ship before Ardra, to take on board the surgeon’s mate and a supply of tamarinds for refreshment for the slaves; sailed again next day on our voyage to Rio Reael.

17. Arrived at Rio Reael in front of a village called Bany, where we found the company’s yacht, named the Vrede, which was sent out to assist us to trade for slaves.

In April. Nothing was done except to trade for slaves.

May 6. One of our seamen died. . . .

22. Again weighed anchor and ran out of Rio Reael accompanied by the yacht Vrede; purchased there two hundred and nineteen head of slaves, men, women, boys and girls, and set our course for the high land of Ambosius, for the purpose of procuring food there for the slaves, as nothing was to be had at Rio Reael.

June 29. Sunday. Again resolved to proceed on our voyage, as there also but little food was to be had for the slaves in consequence of the great rains which fell every day, and because many of the slaves were suffering from the bloody flux in consequence of the bad provisions we were supplied with at El Mina. . . .

RESISTANCE AND REVOLT AT SEA

Although Newton ridiculed African religion, he was relieved that the slaves were not planning to poison the crew or mutiny. Because many enslaved Africans refused to accept their fate, slaver captains had to be vigilant. Uprisings were common, and Newton himself put down a potentially serious one aboard the Duke of Argyle. Twenty men had broken their chains below deck but were apprehended before they could assault the crew.

Most such rebellions took place while a ship prepared to set sail, the African coast was in sight, and the slaves could still hope to return home. But some revolts occurred on the open sea, where it was unlikely the Africans, even if their revolt succeeded, could return to their homes or regain their freedom. Both sorts of revolt indicate that not even capture, forced march to the coast, imprisonment, branding, and sale
could break the spirit of many captives. These Africans preferred to face death rather than accept bondage.

John Atkins, an English slaver surgeon who made many voyages between Africa and the Americas during the 1720s, noted that although the threat of revolt diminished on the high seas, it never disappeared:

When we are slaved and out at sea, it is commonly imagined that the Negroes['] Ignorance of Navigation, will always be a Safeguard [against revolt]; yet, as many of them think themselves bought to eat, and more, that Death will send them into their own Country, there has not been wanting Examples of rising and killing a Ship’s Company, distant from Land, though not so often as on the Coast: But once or twice is enough to shew, a Master’s Care and Diligence should never be over till the Delivery of them.

Later in the eighteenth century, a historian used the prevalence of revolt to justify the harsh treatment of Africans on slave ships. Edward Long wrote that "the many acts of violence they [the slaves] have committed by murdering whole crews and destroying ships when they had it left in their power to do so, have made this rigour wholly chargeable on their own bloody and malicious disposition, which calls for the same confinement as if they were wolves or wild boars."

Failed slave mutineers could expect harsh punishment, although profit margins influenced sentences. Atkins chronicled how the captain of the Robert, which sailed from Bristol, England, punished the ringleaders, who were worth more, less harshly than their followers who were not as valuable. Atkins related that

Captain Harding, weighing the Stoutness and Worth of the two [ringleaders], did, as in other Countries they do by Rogues of Dignity, whip and scarify them only; while three others, Abettors, but not Actors, nor of Strength for it, he sentenced to cruel Deaths, making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of them killed. The Woman [who had helped in the revolt] he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp’d and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves, till she died.

Other slaves resisted their captors by drowning or starving themselves. Thomas Phillips, captain of the slaver Hannibal during the 1690s, commented, “We had about 12 negroes did wilfully drown themselves and others starved themselves to death; for ‘tis their belief that when they die they return home to their own country and friends again.” As previously indicated, captains used nets to prevent deliberate drowning. To deal with self-imposed starvation, they used hot coals or a metal device called a speculum oris to force individuals to open their mouths for feeding.

CRUELTY

The Atlantic slave trade required more capital than any other maritime commerce during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The investments for the ships, the exceptionally large crews they employed, the navigational equipment, the armaments, the purchase of slaves in Africa, and the supplies of food and water needed to feed hundreds of passengers were phenomenal. The aim was to carry as many Africans in healthy condition to the Americas as possible in order to make the large profits that justified such expenditures. Yet, as we have indicated, conditions aboard the vessels were abysmal.

Scholars have debated how much deliberate cruelty the enslaved Africans suffered from ships’ crews. The West Indian historian Eric Williams asserts that the horrors of the Middle Passage have been exaggerated. Many writers, Williams contends, are led astray by the writings of those who, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sought to abolish the slave trade. In his view—and that of other historians—the difficulties of the Middle Passage were similar to those of European indentured servants who suffered high mortality rates on the voyage to America.

From this perspective the primary cause of death at sea on all ships carrying passengers across the Atlantic to the Americas was epidemic disease, against which medical practitioners had few tools before the twentieth century. Contributing factors included inadequate means of preserving food from spoilage and failure to prevent freshwater from becoming contaminated during the long ocean crossing. According to Williams, overcrowding by slavers was only a secondary cause for the high mortality rates.

Such observations help place conditions aboard the slave ships in a broader perspective. Cruelty and suffering are, to some degree, historically relative in that practices acceptable in the past are now considered inhumane. Yet cruelty aboard slavers must also be placed in a cultural context. Cultures distinguish between what constitutes acceptable behavior to their own people on the one hand and to strangers on the other. For Europeans, Africans were cultural strangers, and what became normal in the Atlantic slave trade was in fact exceptionally cruel compared to how Europeans treated each other. Slaves below deck received only one-half the space allocated on board to European soldiers, free emigrants, indentured servants, and convicts. Europeans regarded slavery itself as a condition suitable only for non-Christians. And as strangers, Africans were subject to brutalization by European crew members who often cared little about the physical and emotional damage they inflicted.
Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, known to Europeans as Job ben Solomon, was one of the many West Africans caught up in the Atlantic slave trade. But his experience was far from typical. Because he had family connections, was literate in Arabic, and used his aristocratic personality to gain favor among Europeans, Diallo was able to escape enslavement and return to his native land. His story reveals much about the bonds of wealth and class in the Atlantic world during the early eighteenth century.

Diallo was born in about 1701 at the village of Marsa located in the eastern Senegambian region of Bondu. His father, the imam of the local mosque and village head, taught him Arabic and the Koran when he was a child and prepared him to become a merchant. That Samba Geladio Jegi, the future king of the nearby kingdom of Futa Toro, was a fellow student suggests the standing of Diallo’s family. Diallo, following Muslim and West African custom, had two wives. He married the first of them when he was fifteen and she was eleven, the second when he was 28.

In February 1730, Diallo was on his way to the Gambia River to sell two slaves to an English trader when he was himself captured by Mandingo warriors and sold as well. Although the English slaver captain was willing to ransom Diallo, his ship sailed before Diallo’s father could send the money. As a result, Diallo was shipped with other Africans to Annapolis, Maryland, and delivered to Vachell Denton, factor for William Hunt, a London merchant. Shortly thereafter, Diallo was sold to a Mr. Tolsey, who operated a tobacco plantation on Maryland’s eastern shore.

Although Diallo was “about five feet ten inches high... and naturally of a good constitution,” his “religious abstinence” and the difficulties he had experienced during the Middle Passage unsuited him for fieldwork. Therefore, Tolsey assigned him to tending cattle. In June 1731, however, after a young white boy repeatedly interrupted his prayers, Diallo escaped to Dover, Delaware, where he was apprehended and jailed. There, Thomas Bluett, who published in 1734 an account of Diallo’s adventures, discovered that Diallo was literate in Arabic, pious in his religious devotions, and—according to Bluett’s stereotypical notions—“no common slave.” Bluett provided this information to Tolsey, who on Diallo’s return allowed him a quiet place to pray and permitted him to write a letter in Arabic to his father.

The letter reached James Oglethorpe, the director of England’s slave-trading Royal African Company, who arranged to purchase Diallo from Tolsey and in March 1733 transport him by ship to England. Accompanied by Bluett, Diallo learned during the long voyage to speak, read, and write English. In London, Bluett contacted several well-to-do gentlemen who raised 60 pounds to secure Diallo’s freedom and, with the aid of the Royal African Company, return him to Senegambia. Before he left England in July 1734, Diallo had an audience with King George II, met with the entire royal family, dined with members of the nobility, and received expensive gifts.

Diallo’s wives and children greeted him on his return to his village, but much had changed during his absence. Futa Toro had conquered Bondu, and as a result Diallo’s family had suffered economically. In addition, the slave trade in Senegambia had intensified and Morocco had begun to interfere militarily in the region. Grateful to his English friends, Diallo used his influence in these difficult circumstances to help the Royal African Company hold its share of the trade in slaves and gold until the company disbanded in 1752. Able to differentiate between his fortunes and those of others, he retained commercial ties to the British until his death in 1773.

**DYSENTERY (OR THE BLOODY FLUX)**

*Alexander Falconbridge (d. 1792) served as ship’s surgeon on four British slavers between 1780 and 1787. In 1788 he became an opponent of the trade and published An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa. Here he describes in gruesome detail conditions in slave quarters during a dysentery epidemic that he mistakenly attributes to stale air and heat.*

Some wet and blowing weather having occasioned the port-holes to be shut, and the grating to be covered, fluxes and fevers among the Negroes ensued. While they were in this situation, my profession requiring it, I frequently went down among them, till at length their apartments became so extremely hot, as to be only sufferable for a very short time. . . . It is not in the power of the human imagination, to picture to itself a situation more dreadful or disgusting. Numbers of the slaves having fainted, they were carried upon deck, where several of them died, and the rest were, with great difficulty, restored. It had nearly proved fatal to me also. The climate was too warm to admit the wearing of any clothing but a shirt, and that I had pulled off before I went down; notwithstanding which, by only continuing among them for about a quarter of an hour, I was so overcome with the heat, stench, and foul air, that I had nearly fainted; and it was not without assistance, that I could get upon deck. The consequence was, that I soon after fell sick of the same disorder, from which I did not recover for several months. . . .

The place allotted for the sick Negroes is under the half deck, where they lie on the bare planks. By this means, those who are emaciated, frequently have their skin, and even their flesh, entirely rubbed off, by the motion of the ship, from the prominent parts of the shoulders, elbows, and hips, so as to render the bones in those parts quite bare. And some of them, by constantly lying in the blood and mucus, that had flowed from those afflicted with the flux, and which . . . is generally so violent as to prevent their being kept clean, have their flesh much sooner rubbed off, than those who have only to contend with the mere friction of the ship. The excruciating pain which the poor sufferers feel from being obliged to continue in such a dreadful situation, frequently for several weeks, in case they happen to live so long, is not to be conceived or described. Few, indeed, are ever able to withstand the fatal effects of it. The utmost skill of the surgeon is here ineffectual. . . .

The surgeon, upon going between decks, in the morning, to examine the situation of the slaves, frequently finds several dead; and among the men, sometimes a dead and living Negroe fastened by their irons together. When this is the case, they are brought upon the deck, and being laid on the grating, the living Negroe is disengaged, and the dead one thrown overboard. . . .

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**AFRICAN WOMEN ON SLAVE SHIPS**

For similar reasons, African women did not enjoy the same protection against unwanted sexual attention from European men that European women received. Consequently, sailors during long voyages attempted to sate their sexual appetites with enslaved women. African women caught in the Atlantic enslaved trade were worth half the price of African men in Caribbean markets, and as a result, captains took fewer of them on board their vessels. Perhaps because the women were less valuable commodities, crew members felt they had license to abuse them sexually. The separate below-deck compartments for women on slave ships also made them easier targets than they otherwise might have been.

Historian Barbara Bush speculates that the horrid experience of the Middle Passage may have influenced black women’s attitudes toward sexuality and procreation. This, in turn, may help explain why slave populations in the Caribbean and Latin America failed to reproduce themselves: exhaustion, terror, and disgust can depress sex drives.

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**Landing and Sale in the West Indies**

As a slaver neared the West Indies, the crew prepared its human cargo for landing and sale. They allowed the slaves to shave, wash with freshwater, and exercise. Those bound for the larger Caribbean islands or for the British colonies of southern North America often received some weeks of rest in the eastern-most islands of the West Indies. French slave traders typically rested their slave passengers on *Martinique*. The English preferred Barbados. Sale to white plantation owners followed. Then began a period of what the planters called “seasoning,” up to two years of acculturating slaves and breaking them in to plantation routines.

The process of landing and sale that ended the Middle Passage was often as protracted as the events that

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*Could slave traders have avoided the suffering described in this passage?*

*What impact would such suffering have had on those who survived it?*

began it in Africa. After anchoring at one of the Lesser Antilles Islands—Barbados, St. Kitts, or Antigua—English slaver captains haggled with the agents of local planters over numbers and prices. They then determined whether to sell all their slaves at their first port of call, sell some of them, sail to another island, or sail to such North American ports as Charleston, Williamsport, or Baltimore. If the market looked good in the first port, the captain might still take a week or more to sell his cargo. The captain of the James, who landed at Barbados in 1676, just as the cultivation of cane sugar there was becoming extremely profitable, sold most of his slaves in three days. "May Thursday 25th . . . sold 163 slaves. May Friday 26th. We sold 70 slaves. May Saturday 27th. Sold 110 slaves," he recorded in his journal.

Often, captains and crew had to do more to prepare slaves for sale than allow them to clean themselves and exercise. The ravages of cruelty, confinement, and disease could not be easily remedied. According to legend, young African men and women arrived in the Americas with gray hair, and captains used dye to hide such indications of age before the slaves went to market. Slaves were also required to oil their bodies to conceal blemishes, rashes, and bruises. Ships' surgeons used hemp to plug the anuses of those suffering from dysentery to block the bloody discharge the disease caused.

The humiliation continued as the slaves went to market. Once again they suffered close physical inspection from potential buyers, which—according to Equiano—caused "much dread and trembling among us" and "bitter cries." Unless a single purchaser agreed to buy an entire cargo of slaves, auctions took place either on deck or in sale yards on shore. However, some captains employed "the scramble." In these barbaric spectacles, the captain established standard prices for men, women, and children; herded the Africans together in a corral; and then allowed buyers to rush pell-mell among them to grab and rope together the slaves they desired.

### Seasoning

**Seasoning** followed sale. On Barbados, Jamaica, and other Caribbean islands, planters divided slaves into three categories: Creoles (slaves born in the Americas), old Africans (those who had lived in the Americas for some time), and new Africans (those who had just survived the Middle Passage). Creole slaves were worth three times the value of unseasoned new Africans, whom planters and Creole slaves called "salt-water Negroes" or "Guinea-birds." Seasoning began the process of making new Africans more like Creoles.

In the West Indies, this process involved not only an apprenticeship in the work routines of the sugar plantations on the islands. It also prepared many slaves for resale to North American planters, who preferred "seasoned" slaves to "unbroken" ones who came directly from Africa. In fact, most of the Africans who ended up in the British colonies of North America before 1720 had gone first to the West Indies. By that date, the demand for slave labor in the islands had become so great that they could spare fewer slaves for resale to the North American market. Thereafter, as a result, slave imports into the tobacco-, rice-, and later cotton-growing regions of the American South came directly from Africa and had to be seasoned by their American masters. But many slaves still came to North America from the Caribbean, to which they had been brought from Africa or where they had been born.

In either case, seasoning was a disciplinary process intended to modify the behavior and attitude of slaves and make them effective laborers. As part of this
process, the slaves’ new masters gave them new names: Christian names, generic African names, or names from classical Greece and Rome (such as Jupiter, Achilles, or Plato).

The seasoning process also involved learning European languages. Masters in the Spanish Caribbean were especially thorough teachers. Consequently, although Spanish-speaking African slaves and their descendants retained African words, they could be easily understood by any Spanish-speaking person. In the French and English Caribbean islands and in parts of North America, however, slave society produced Creole dialects that in grammar, vocabulary, and intonation had distinctive African linguistic features. These Africanized versions of French and English, including the Gullah dialect still prevalent on South Carolina’s sea islands and the Creole most Haitians speak today, were difficult to understand for those who spoke more standardized dialects.

During seasoning, masters or overseers broke slaves into plantation work by assigning them to one of several work gangs. The strongest men joined the first or “great gang,” which did the heavy fieldwork of planting and harvesting. The second gang, including women and older men, did lighter fieldwork, such as weeding. The third gang, composed of children, worked shorter hours and performed such tasks as bringing food and water to the field gangs. Other slaves became domestic servants. New Africans served apprenticeships with old Africans from their same ethnic group or with Creoles.

Some planters looked for cargoes of young people, anticipating that they might be more easily acculturated than older Africans. One West Indian master in 1792 recorded his hopes for a group of children: “From the late Guinea sales, I have purchased altogether twenty boys and girls, from ten to thirteen years old.” He emphasized that “it is the practice, on bringing them to the estate, to distribute them in the huts of Creole blacks, under their direction and care, who are to feed them, train them to work, and teach them their new language.”

Planters had to rely on old Africans and Creoles to train new recruits because white people were a minority in the Caribbean. Later, a similar demographic pattern developed in parts of the cotton-producing American South. In both regions, therefore, African custom shaped the cooperative labor of slaves in gangs. But the use of old Africans and Creoles as instructors and the appropriation of African styles of labor should not suggest leniency. Although the plantation overseers, who ran day-to-day operations, could be white, of mixed race, or black, they invariably imposed strict discipline. Drivers, who directed the work gangs, were almost always black. But they carried whips and frequently punished those who worked too slowly or showed disrespect. Planters assigned recalcitrant new Africans to the strictest overseers and drivers.

Planters housed slaves undergoing seasoning with the old Africans and Creoles who were instructing them. The instructors regarded such additions to their households as economic opportunities because the new Africans provided extra labor on the small plots of land that West Indian planters often allocated to slaves. Slaves could sell surplus root vegetables, peas, and fruit from their gardens and save to purchase freedom for themselves or others. Additional workers helped produce larger surpluses to sell at

Slaves in this nineteenth-century painting are preparing a field for cultivation on the island of Antigua, a British possession in the West Indies. As had been the case in earlier centuries, the men and women work in gangs under the direction of a white overseer who carries a whip.
local markets, thereby reducing the time required to accumulate a purchase price.

New Africans also benefited from this arrangement. They learned how to build houses in their new land and how to cultivate vegetables to supplement the food the planter provided. Even though many Africans brought building skills and agricultural knowledge with them to the Americas, old Africans and Creoles helped teach them how to adapt their skills and knowledge to a new climate, topography, building materials, and social organization.

The End of the Journey: Masters and Slaves in the Americas

By what criteria did planters assess the successful seasoning of new Africans? The first criterion was survival. Already weakened and traumatized by the Middle Passage, many Africans did not survive seasoning. Historian James Walvin estimates that one-third died during their first three years in the West Indies. African men died at a greater rate than African women, perhaps because they did the more arduous fieldwork.

A second criterion was that the Africans had to adapt to new foods and a new climate. The foods included salted codfish traded to the West Indies by New England merchants, Indian corn (maize), and varieties of squash not available in West Africa. The Caribbean islands, like West Africa, were tropical, but North America was much cooler. Even within the West Indies, an African was unlikely to find a climate exactly like the one he or she had left behind.

A third criterion was learning a new language. Planters did not require slaves to speak the local language, which could be English, French, Spanish, Danish, or Dutch, fluently. But slaves had to speak a creole dialect well enough to obey commands. A final criterion was psychological. When new Africans ceased to be suicidal, planters assumed they had accepted their status and their separation from their homeland.

It would have suited the planters if their slaves had met all these criteria. Yet that would have required the Africans to have been thoroughly desocialized by the Middle Passage, and they were not. As traumatic as that voyage was—for all the shock of capture, separation from loved ones, and efforts to dehumanize them—most Africans who entered plantation society in the Americas had not been stripped of their memories or their culture. When their ties to their villages and families were broken, they created bonds with shipmates that simulated blood relationships. Such bonds became the basis of new extended families. So similar were these new synthetic families to those that had existed in West Africa that slaves considered sexual relations among shipmates and former shipmates incestuous.
As this suggests, African slaves did not lose all their culture during the Middle Passage and seasoning in the Americas. Their value system never totally replicated that of the plantation. Despite their ordeal, the Africans who survived the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas were resilient. Seasoning did modify their behavior. Yet the claim that it obliterated African Americans’ cultural roots is incorrect. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits in 1941 raised questions about this issue that still shape debate about the African-American experience.

Herskovits asked, “What discussions of world view might not have taken place in the long hours when [Creole] teacher and [new African] pupil were together, reversing their roles when matters only dimly sensed by the American-born slave were explained [by his pupil] in terms of African conventions he had never analyzed?” How many African beliefs and methods of coping with life and the supernatural were retained and transmitted by such private discussions? How much did African cultural elements, such as dance, song, folklore, moral values, and etiquette, offset the impulse to accept European values?

The Ending of the Atlantic Slave Trade

The cruelties associated with the Atlantic slave trade contributed to its abolition in the early nineteenth century. During the late 1700s, English abolitionists led by Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and Granville Sharp began a religiously oriented moral crusade against slavery and the slave trade. Because the English had dominated the Atlantic trade since 1713, Britain’s growing antipathy became crucial to the trade’s destruction. But it is debatable whether moral outrage alone prompted this humanitarian effort. By the late 1700s, England’s industrializing economy was less dependent on the slave trade and the entire plantation system than it had been previously. To maintain its prosperity, England needed raw materials and markets for its manufactured goods. Slowly but surely its ruling classes realized it was more profitable to invest in industry and other forms of trade and to leave Africans in Africa.

So morals and economic self-interest combined when Britain abolished the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and tried to enforce that abolition on other nations through a naval patrol off the African coast. The following year, the U.S. Congress joined in outlawing the Atlantic trade. Although American, Brazilian, and Spanish slavers defied these prohibitions for years, the forced migration from Africa to the Americas
dropped to a tiny percentage of what it had been at its peak. Ironically, the coastal kingdoms of Guinea and western Central Africa fought most fiercely to keep the trade going because their economies had become dependent on it. This persistence gave the English, French, Belgians, and Portuguese an excuse to establish colonial empires in Africa during the nineteenth century in the name of suppressing the slave trade.

CONCLUSION

Over more than three centuries, the Atlantic slave trade brought more than eleven million Africans to the Americas. Several million died in transit. Of those who survived, most came between 1701 and 1810, when more Africans than Europeans reached the New World. Most Africans went to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil. Only 500,000 went to the British colonies of North America, either directly or after seasoning in the West Indies. From them have come the nearly 40 million African Americans alive today.

This chapter has described the great forced migration across the Atlantic that brought Africans into slavery in the Americas. We still have much to learn about the origins of the trade, its relationship to the earlier trans-Saharan trade, and its involvement with state formation in West and western Central Africa. Historians continue to debate how cruel the trade was, the ability of transplanted Africans to preserve their cultural heritage, and why Britain abolished the trade in the early nineteenth century.

We are fortunate that a few Africans who experienced the Middle Passage recorded their testimony. Otherwise, we would find its horror even more difficult to comprehend. Even more important, however, is that so many survived the horrible experience of the Atlantic slave trade and carried on. Their struggle testifies to the human spirit that is at the center of the African-American experience.

RECOMMENDED READING


**ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**THE SLAVE TRADE IN AFRICA**


**THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE**


**THE WEST INDIES**


**RETRACING THE ODYSSEY**

The Henrietta Marie. [http://www.historical-museum.org/exhibits/hm/henmarie.htm](http://www.historical-museum.org/exhibits/hm/henmarie.htm). This is a slave ship placed on traveling display by the Museum of Southern Florida in Miami. The *Henrietta Marie* sank in 1701 after delivering slaves to Jamaica.


**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How did the Atlantic slave trade reflect the times during which it existed?

2. Think about Olaudah Equiano’s experience as a young boy captured by traders and brought to a slave ship. What new and strange things did he encounter? How did he explain these things to himself? What kept him from descending into despair?

3. How could John Newton reconcile his Christian faith with his career as a slave-ship captain?

4. What human and natural variables could prolong the Middle Passage across the Atlantic? How could delay make the voyage more dangerous for slaves and crew?

5. How could Africans resist the dehumanizing forces of the Middle Passage and seasoning and use their African cultures to build black cultures in the New World?
Connections

www.myhistorylab.com
Review what you’ve learned in this chapter and explore the many documents, images, research tools, and activities for this chapter to learn more about African-American history.

READ
- Christopher Columbus, from The Journal of Christopher Columbus (1492)
- England Asserts Her Dominion through Legislation in 1660
- A Slave Tells of His Capture in Africa in 1798
- An African Captive Tells the Story of Crossing the Atlantic in a Slave Ship in 1789
- A Slave Ship Surgeon Writes about the Slave Trade in 1788
- Congress Prohibits Importation of Slaves (1807)

LISTEN
- I Just Come from the Fountain by Michael LaRue

RESEARCH
Consider these questions in a short research paper.
Why was the history of slavery repressed for so long? Why has interest in the subject grown in the past quarter of a century?

EXPLORE
- What Is Columbus’s Legacy?
- From Triangular Trade to an Atlantic System: Rethinking the Links That Created the Atlantic World
- Atlantic Connections: Sugar, Smallpox, and Slavery
- The Atlantic and Islamic Slave Trades
- Exploring America: Racism in American History
The voyage to the slavery began with captured Africans shackled together at the neck, forced to march to factories where they were held in dungeons or outdoor holding pens. Many captives died from hunger, exhaustion, and exposure. Others killed themselves rather than submit to their fate or were killed if they resisted. Families and ethnic groups were divided. Once considered fit for purchase, captives were branded like cattle with a hot iron bearing the symbol of a trading company. Those sent to the Atlantic slave trade continued the journey in the cargo space of slave ships that were only five feet high. Packed above and below ship planks that measured only 5.5 feet long and 16 inches wide, slaves had very little headroom. Male slaves were chained together in pairs. Many captains carried more slaves than a ship was built to handle, squeezing human beings together to offset high death rates by carrying more slaves. During storms the crew often neglected to feed the slaves, empty the tubs used for excrement, take slaves on deck for exercise, tend to the sick, or remove the dead.

These diagrams show how slaves were crowded below deck on slave ships with little or no room between them.

Slaves were housed in prison-type pens once they arrived in America until they could be sold at market. This photo shows the interior view of one such pen in Alexandria, Virginia, used in the 1800s.

Fort San Sebastían in Ghana where slaves were imprisoned while awaiting transport.
The first step of the voyage from Africa was called a slave coffle, a line of slaves chained together after being captured by slave traders. The captors took the slaves to slave factories on the African coast where they were put on board ships bound for the Americas.

Tools of bondage and humiliation included iron harnesses and branding irons. At right, slave traders brand a slave with the symbol of the trading company that bought and would eventually sell her.

Slaves were sold to auction houses such as this one.

The arrival of slaves for sale or auction was often advertised in handbills or printed notices, beginning the experience of being viewed and treated as little more than a commodity.

Just Imported and to be Sold,
By Robert Ellis and John Ryan
A PARCEL of fine young Healthy, Negro Slaves, Boys and Girls, and are to be Sold very reasonable. They may be seen at said Ellis’s House in Water Street.
N.B. Three or four Months Credit will be given on good Security, or an Advance of Twenty Shilings made in each Slave on present Payment.