**A History of the Trade**

**An Era of Forced Migration**

Between the early 1500s and 1867, at least 12.5 million men, women and children were deported from Africa to be enslaved in the Americas. While close to two million died during the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, 10.7 million reached destinations which included most Caribbean islands; all the countries of South and Central America, Mexico, and the United States. Theirs was a massive forced migration. Between 1492 and 1820, out of every five persons who reached the New World, four were African; only one out of five was European.

The brutal deportation of millions of Africans was a terrible demographic, social, political, economic and cultural loss for the continent of Africa. In fact, this massive loss contributed to the continent’s weakening. For the victimized individuals, families and communities, it was a horrific experience. In contrast, three centuries of African enslavement brought immense benefit to the economic development of the Americas and Western Europe. This massive influx of free labor laid the foundations for the modern capitalist world.

**African Strategies**

Faced with destructive raids, wars and kidnapping, Africans devised numerous strategies to protect and defend themselves from the slave trade, and to attack it. They abandoned vulnerable areas and relocated in hard-to-reach places. They surrounded their towns with ramparts and ditches covered with spikes. They built villages behind dunes or close to the sea or the woods to escape raids more easily. They posted sentinels and organized militias and work teams for protection. Some populations killed indiscriminately anyone who ventured close to their territory so as to discourage any incursion. Young men attacked caravans and slave pens to free the captives; and burned down slave ships and Europeans’ warehouses.

In some regions of Africa, as a French trader wrote in 1785, as soon as the locals approached the European boats, “the crew is ordered to take up arms, the cannons are aimed, and the fuses are lighted . . . One must, without any hesitation, shoot at them and not spare them. The loss of the vessel and the life of the crew are at stake.” And when everything else had failed and whenever feasible, relatives pooled resources to buy back the freedom of loved ones held on the coast; and captives revolted in the barracoons (slave pens).

The fortification of the forts and barracoons dotting the African coast attested to the Europeans’ anxiety. They had to protect themselves, an official explained, “from the foreign vessels and from the Negroes living in the country.”

While traders and rulers participated in the slave trade for personal gains, some Africans engaged in it in order to acquire firearms or iron bars with which they forged the weapons and tools necessary to defend themselves—and sometimes, to attack the raiders and slavers.

**Demography of African Slavery**

Most captives who entered the Atlantic world were prisoners of war and refugees. Others were victims of kidnapping. A minority was condemned to enslavement for a variety of alleged crimes. The vast majority of captives (65%) were males; 21% were children under fifteen years of age. Almost half the captives (5.7 million) originated in West Central Africa (Congo/Angola). Two million people were transported from the Gulf of Benin (Benin/Western Nigeria), 1.6 million from the Gulf of Biafra (eastern Nigeria/Cameroon), 1.4 million from the area that stretched from Senegal to the Ivory Coast, and 1.2 million from the Gold Coast (Ghana). More than half a million captives originated in Madagascar and Mozambique in eastern Africa.

**The Middle Passage**

The journey across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas—often called “The Middle Passage”—was a horrendous experience. As they climbed aboard the ships, men, women and children were forced to shed their clothes. They were transported naked on rough planks and the men were systematically shackled. Men, women, and children were held in different parts of the ships’ holds.

Mahommah Baquaqua, who was born in Benin and deported to Brazil, related his awful experience:

“We were thrust into the hold of the vessel in a state of nudity, the males being crammed on one side and the females on the other; the hold was so low that we could not stand up, but were obliged to crouch upon the floor or sit down; day and night were the same to us, sleep being denied as from the confined position of our bodies, and we became desperate through suffering and fatigue. Oh! the loathsomeness and filth of that horrible place will never be effaced from my memory”.

The separation from family was agonizing. On the ship that took him to Cuba, a young man recalled, “All cried very much at going away from their home and friends, some of them saying they would kill themselves.” Suffering from thirst and hunger, captives lived in appalling conditions. Scurvy, dysentery and smallpox were rampant, and the mortality rate was about 20 percent. People were routinely brutalized, “When any one of us became refractory,” Baquaqua recalled, “his flesh was cut with a knife, and pepper or vinegar was rubbed in to make him peaceable.” Despite the use of shackles, whips, cannons, firearms, and repression that often took sadistic forms, acts of resistance and attacks are estimated to have taken place aboard 10% of the ships – that is, on more than 3,500 ships. A ship captain revealed that when men had revolted on his ship, they asked him “what business [I] had to carry them from their country. They had wives and children, whom they wanted to be with.” Revolts resulted in the estimated deaths of 100,000Africans; and 18% of the costs incurred on slave ships were due to security measures.

The crossing lasted an average of seventy days. The Middle Passage was so brutal that upon arrival, Baquaqua stressed, “I felt thankful to Providence that I was once more permitted to breathe pure air, the thought of which almost absorbed every other. I cared but little then that I was a slave, having escaped the ship was all I thought about.”

**The Americas**

The Transatlantic slave trade spanned 366 years. In 1501, Africans arriving from Spain – where they had first been enslaved – were introduced into the island of Hispaniola (Haiti/Dominican Republic). The last slave ship sailed into Cuba in 1867.

Of the 10.7 million African captives who survived the voyage to the New World, 95% disembarked in the Caribbean and South America. Brazil received almost half: 4.9 million. The British Caribbean received 2.4 million Africans. (Jamaica alone received 1.02 million.) The Spanish colonies received 1.3 million, with 779,000 of those disembarking in Cuba. About 390,000 Africans (less than 4% of the total arrivals) landed in what became the United States – which means that Barbados received more Africans (493,000) and that almost twice as many arrived in St. Domingue than arrived in what is now the US.

Only in the United States did the enslaved population increase through births. Everywhere else, it decreased or stagnated – being augmented only through continued arrivals of Africans. For example, while French St. Domingue (which became Haiti in 1804) had received nearly 774,000 Africans over a period of 288 years, by the eve of the revolution of 1790, its black population had dwindled to 500,000. By comparison, the 390,000 Africans brought into the United States over 234 years had given rise to a population of 4.5 million African Americans by 1860. Several factors explain this disparity. Undoubtedly, one was that the US had a more temperate climate. However, one major reason was the difference in crops enslaved persons were expected to cultivate. In the United States, the main agricultural products were cotton, rice, tobacco, and indigo, while Brazil and the Caribbean were the largest producers of sugar. Sugar’s cultivation and transformation were exceedingly grueling tasks. Sugar workers had a very short lifespan, and deaths largely exceeded births. When the French, fleeing the revolution in St. Domingue, settled in Louisiana and developed sugar plantations there, the demography of the state changed. Soon it paralleled that of the Caribbean, with high mortality rates and low birth rates.

By the beginning of the 19th century, people born in Africa still comprised a majority of the enslaved populations in many countries of the Western Hemisphere; but they had become a small minority in the United States.

**The United States**

The forced migration of Africans to the United States occurred in two major regions and in two distinct waves. Close to 33% (128,000 persons) landed in the Chesapeake area of Virginia and Maryland; their arrivals crested between 1720 and 1740. A little over 54% arrived in South Carolina (187,000) and Georgia (21,000). The peak of the migration occurred between 1801 and 1810. About 7% of the Africans landed in the North; less than 6% landed in the Gulf States.

Of the Africans arriving in the US, nine out of ten came from one of five regions. The most numerous, 92, 280 (23.8%) hailed from Angola, Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in West Central Africa. They formed the largest African group in South Carolina. People from Senegambia (Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali) were almost as numerous: 91,600 (23.6%). They were more or less equally represented in the Chesapeake and the South Carolina/Georgia. The Gulf of Biafra was the place of origin of 64,800 individuals (16.7%), and 58,000 of them were concentrated in the Chesapeake. About 56,300 (14.5%) men, women and children arrived from the Gold Coast (Ghana,) and close to 45,000 from Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Knowing the geographic origin of the Africans gives important clues as to the cultures and religions they brought and what socio-cultural and religious features they adapted and developed. For example, Brazil and Cuba received numerous Yoruba from the Gulf of Benin, particularly in the 19th century. As a result, both countries have developed some strongly Yoruba-influenced cultures and religions. However, few people from that area (only 2.4%) arrived in the US. As a result, the Bantu (Angola/Congo) and Igbo (Nigeria) influences have been more relevant to North American culture and religion.

**Abolition of the Slave Trade**

Revolutionary France abolished the slave trade and slavery in 1794, after being prodded by the slave revolution in St Domingue. However, Napoleon Bonaparte reinstated both in 1802. Not until 1831 was French slave trade outlawed definitively. Great Britain abolished her international slave trade on March 21, 1807.

During the first half of the 19th century, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, and Cuba all passed abolition laws. Yet, these laws were often ignored, and an illegal slave trade continued. At least another 7,000 ships brought 1.5 million Africans across the Pacific, mostly to Brazil and Cuba. Close to 2,000 slave ships were intercepted (80 percent by the British Navy) and 190,000 Africans –called re-captives or “Liberated Africans”—were relocated in Sierra Leone, the Bahamas, Trinidad, and Brazil, while others were secretly sold to Cuban plantations.

The United States Constitution of 1783 stated that the international slave trade could not be banned before 1808. On March 3, 1807, President Thomas Jefferson signed an act “to prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States.” This act took effect on January 1, 1808. However, the slave trade continued illicitly in the US while planters in the Deep South, eager to get manpower for their developing cotton plantations, clamored for its official re-establishment. In late spring of 1860, the last slave ship, the *Clotilda*, left Whydah, Benin, with 110 young people from Benin and Nigeria on board. She landed in Mobile, Alabama, on July 8th of that year.

Despite the abject conditions in which they reached the New World and the dreadful enslavement imposed upon them, Africans and their descendants showed remarkable courage, resilience, dynamism, and resourcefulness. This new people, born in pain, of various ethnicities and identities, created new cultures, new religions, new languages, and new artistic expressions that continue to enrich the world.

**Digging Deeper**

Would you like to know more about the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade? Here are some suggestions for digging deeper into this topic.

**Books**

Curtin, Philip D., ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives of West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1997.

Diouf, Sylviane A. Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Diouf, Sylviane A., ed. *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003.

Eltis, David and David Richardson. *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. *African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

Smallwood, Stephanie E. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

**Links**

**The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database**  
Database of 35,000 slave voyages. Detailed information on each voyage; essays, timeline, images and maps. Database of 67,000 Africans freed from slave ships  
[http://www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org/)

**The Abolition of the Slave Trade: The Forgotten Story**

Site of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library: essays, illustrations, 115 books and articles, timeline and seven maps.

<http://abolition.nypl.org/>

**In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience**

Site of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library. Essays, books, articles, 8,000 illustrations, and maps on 13 migrations including the transatlantic slave trade.

<http://www.inmotionaame.org>

**The Middle Passage**  
Illustrations by Tom Feelings  
<http://www.juneteenth.com/middlep.htm>

**Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua**

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/baquaqua/menu.html>

***Illustrations from Digital Gallery, NYPL*** [**http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm**](http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm)

1257417: town with protective walls

1259570: fortresses

1245744: town in the mountains

1105149: Fort and barracoon at Elmina, Ghana

1228961: same at Cape Coast, Ghana

1167911: [Interior of Slave ship, Vigilante.](http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucID=343642&imageID=1167911&word=slave%20trade&s=1&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&lWord=&lField=&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&total=367&num=0&imgs=20&pNum=&pos=2)

807777: Slave trade and interior of slave ship.

1153175: inside a slave ship

1129925: restraints used on slave ships

1240236: rendition of the hold of a slave ship

1150350: throwing captives overboard

Slave revolt on ship : <http://abolition.nypl.org/images/african_resistance/3/145>

1167915: newspaper notice advertising a sale of newly arrived Africans

1244152: Liberated Africans in Gambia

807897: Slave ship seized during the illegal slave trade

807909: Capture of a slave ship

1103883: Cudjo Lewis, last survivor of the *Clotilda*, the last slave ship to the US

1103884: Kazuma was on the last slave ship, the *Clotilda*

***The following image is not NYPL.***

Slave revolts onboard ship : <http://www.inmotionaame.org/gallery/detail.cfm?migration=1&topic=99&id=340515&page=8&type=image>

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