

continued from the last page

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: THE TRANSATLANTIC ENSLAVEMENT TRADE

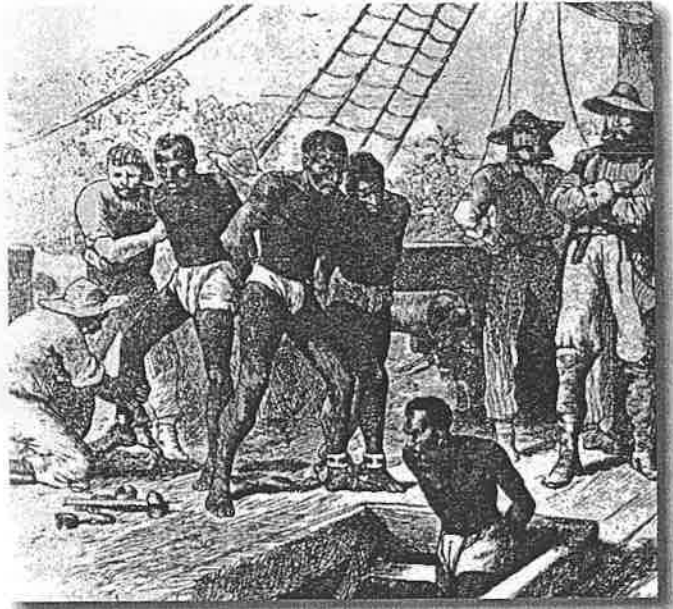
The Slave Trade began after Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal sailed from Portugal to the western coast of Africa in 1440. A short time later, Portuguese sailors began taking Africans from the coast to Europe to sell and use them as slaves. This trade was so lucrative that they almost immediately they built a factory, sometimes called a castle, to hold the Africans. They named the factory El Mina.

In the 1500s, Catholic Bishop Bartholomew La Casas issued the Asiento, an edict, giving Spain the right to export captured Africans to the Americas further hastening the Transatlantic Slave Trade. After La Casas, who died in 1566, observed the consequences of his decision, he sorely regretted it. But by then, Portuguese and Spanish sailors had already discovered the business of capturing Africans along their coastlines and then transporting them to other countries as free labor. Europeans and residents of the colonies and of the United States believed that Africans were particularly suitable for hard work because they were immune to European diseases. They were mostly healthy and strong, and most came from agrarian societies in Africa where modes of production varied. This inhumane system provided free labor for slaveholders in Europe and especially in the Americas where they profited from sugar cane, indigo, cotton and tobacco sales.

The Asiento caused jealousy among European nations. Each country involved in the slave trade scrambled to capture the rights to it. In 1713, Britain and Spain agreed to share the Asiento.



By the nineteenth-century European nations began to prohibit the slave trade. For example Britain prohibited the importation of captured Africans on March 25, 1807, and the United States finally prohibited slaveholders from importing slaves on January 1, 1808. Constitutional Convention delegates made the prohibition part of the United States Constitution in 1787, yet it did not take effect until twenty years later. Nonetheless citizens of the United States as well as other



countries continued engaging in slavery. The *Clotilde* was the last slave ship to arrive in the states in 1861 in Mobile Bay, Alabama. The practice of owning Africans and their African American offspring in the Americas lasted well over 400 years until 1868 when Portugal finally emancipated enslaved people in Brazil.

Transporting African captives from Africa to the Americas and the returning to Europe came to be called the Transatlantic Slave or Triangular Slave Trade. Slavers formed a triangle on the voyage from Africa to the Americas and back to Europe.

Who Started the Triangular Slave Trade?

When the Portuguese first sailed down the Atlantic coast of Africa around the middle of the 15th century, their main interest was to acquire gold. Later the Portuguese interests in Africa moved away from gold to slaves. For hundreds of years, Portugal, Spain, France, Holland, Britain and even citizens of the United States captured and transported Africans. Some of the Africans were goldsmiths, blacksmiths and other artisans, priests, agriculturalists, as well as merchants. Many of them were children torn away from their parents and families. Some were adherents of traditional African religions others were adherents of Islam. Kidnapped with his seven year old sister when he was eleven years old in the 1750s, it was Olaudah Equiano who challenged the practice saying:

Oh, you nominal Christians might not an African ask you learn from your God who says unto you, "Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you." Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed for your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations rendered more dear by their separation from each other and thus

continued from the last page



prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress and adds fresh horrors to the wretchedness of slavery.

Many families on both sides of the Atlantic acquired their wealth from engaging in the Slave Trade. The trade was a source of wealth for the Europeans and for those in British colonies and American states. The British abolished slavery in 1834 and the United States abolished slavery in 1865 with the passage of 13th Amendment to the Constitution.

Why Did the Trade Begin?

Europeans lacked a work force in their newly acquired territories. In most cases indigenous inhabitants died from diseases early settlers brought over from Europe. Since Africans were familiar with tropical climates and tropical diseases, they provided an excellent work force for the Europeans. Slaves were needed for mines and for work on sugar cane and cotton plantations. Enslaved Africans were imported to three main places: 42% went to the Caribbean islands, about 38% to Brazil, and about 5% to North America, the longest distance from Africa.

Was Slavery New to Africa?

Slavery was not new to Africa; forms of slavery existed in Africa before the Europeans arrived. People were temporarily enslaved as punishment for a crime, payment for a debt, or as prisoners of war. Africans had two types of unfree persons—domestics and trade “slaves.” The domestic slaves were members of the community. Domestic slaves were debtors or those who committed a crime. Once their payment or penalty was paid, they could rise to any position in the community. An African village was often composed

of grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins. Therefore domestic slaves were kin and not mistreated. Trade slaves were prisoners of war and not part of the community and even kept apart from the community.

What Was the Triangular Trade?

The Transatlantic Slave Trade is often described as the Triangular Trade. The Transatlantic Slave Trade consisted of three journeys:

1. The first stage of the Triangular Trade involved taking manufactured goods from Europe to Africa. These goods were exchanged for Africans.
2. The second stage of the Triangular Trade (*the middle passage*) involved shipping the Africans to the Americas to work on plantations.
3. The third, and final, stage of the Triangular Trade involved the return to Europe with the produce from the plantations: cotton, sugar, tobacco, indigo, molasses, rum and money.

What Were the Points of Departure?

European traders built Cape Coast Castle in the 17th century. It became a departure point for the British slave trade. While waiting for transportation across the Atlantic, several hundred captured Africans were shackled and locked into the castle’s dungeons. This location was only one of many that served as the last look enslaved Africans would have of their homeland. By 1816 a clause in the Treaty of Ghent authorized Britain and the United States to post squadrons off the African coast to prevent slaving. However, privateer ships slipped through and still were able to illegally pirate Africans away.



President Barack Obama paid homage to the victims of slavery at the infamous “*Door of No Return*” at the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, West Africa. He and his family went to Africa during the first year of his presidency to meet with several African leaders.

How Did the Europeans Obtain the Slaves?

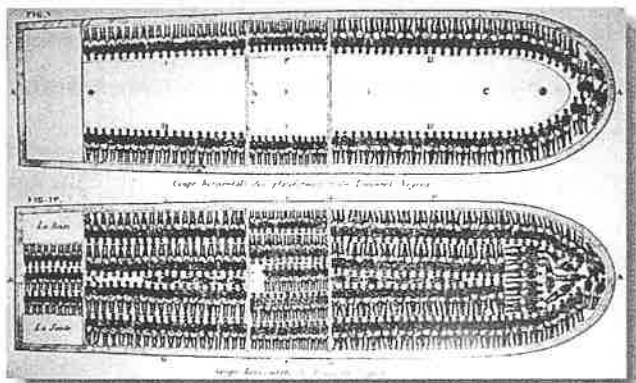
Some Africans were kidnapped from along the west coast of Africa and some were captured and sold to slave merchants by other Africans who usually were not members of the captive's ethnic group. There are over one thousand ethnic groups in Africa. Many Africans captured and imported west were from the Yoruba, Fon, Akan, Kongo, Fulani, Mandinka, Mandingo, the Angola, Wolof and Ibo ethnic groups as well as others. After slaveholders discovered the capabilities of certain African groups, they began to request members of particular groups for specific occupations.

NOTE: For viewing an accurate account of the slave trade, see *Roots - Episode 2*, a television production available on DVD.

What Were Conditions for the Slaves?

Some captured Africans were brought from the interior of Africa to the holding places. When slavers arrived the "cargo" of Africans were rowed out to ships to travel to the Americas. Many did not even make it to the African coast. The march from the interior to the coast was often several hundred miles and they were cuffed together at their necks and handcuffed. Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo, who was captured as a younger child shared that the march to the coast was so long that he learned six different languages. According to one source in a PBS documentary about the Middle Passage (see reference on next page), "Of the roughly 20 million people who were taken from their home and sold into slavery, half didn't complete the journey to the African coast, most dying along the way."

Conditions on the slave ships were horrific. The trip, over 4,000 miles, from Africa to Brazil could last from one to three months depending on the ship. Ships going to Africa would enter the trade winds that flow east to west. They would usually leave in April to catch the westerly trade winds and return by October to catch the easterly ones.



The enslaved people were branded with hot irons and shackled together with chains and then packed tightly in the slave ship quarters. The captives were introduced to new diseases and infection during the trip across the Atlantic Ocean. There was little room for ventilation or to turn oneself and usually there was no place designated for human waste. So the stench of the urine, fecal waste, perspiration and vomit that resulted made it very difficult to even breathe. During stormy weather, the portholes that provided some ventilation had to be closed and further worsened conditions. Although the captives were usually rationed one meal a day, many suffered from malnutrition long before they reached the new territories. Some committed suicide by jumping overboard, some tried mutinies, some tried to starve themselves, but measures were taken to protect the "precious cargo" which made it increasingly difficult for these things to occur. It is reported that when the ships arrived to the American port, the stench could be smelled before the ship ever landed.

What Was the Survival Rate for the People Who Crossed the Middle Passage?

The number of Africans who came to the America's is not easily determined. Some estimate that around 12 million people were taken forcibly from the African continent. Others suggested that ten to twenty percent of the captives who began the journey lost their lives during the journey across the Atlantic.

What Is a Diaspora?

A Diaspora (*di - as - po - ra*) is a scattering of languages, culture, or people: a dispersion of people, language, or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place. People were taken from Africa – the African Diaspora. Today, populations are also being forced to leave their homelands because of war and religious reasons.