

Slavery

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The Start of European Involvement in the African Slave Trade

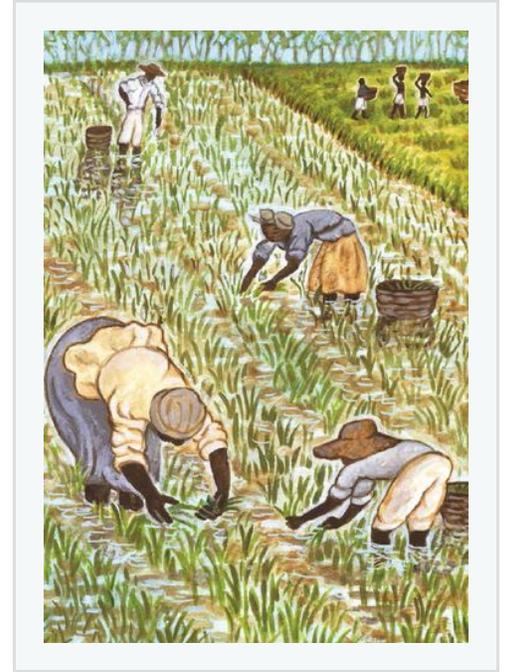
This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

There had been enslaved people for many years prior to the Age of Exploration. For centuries people throughout the world had enslaved those they had conquered. But Europeans used their power and wealth to spread the practice of slavery on a vast scale. In doing so, they dramatically changed the lives of millions of people.

Slavery was part of African life long before Europeans arrived. Muslim states in North Africa marched Africans across the Sahara to markets in the Middle East. Traders also shipped people from East Africa across the Indian Ocean to sell them into slavery. Many African cultures also practiced slavery among themselves. But among some groups, enslaved people had rights. For example, in the Ashanti kingdom of West Africa, enslaved people could own property and marry, and they got their freedom after working for a set amount of time. Most importantly, children born to Ashanti-enslaved people were not automatically also enslaved.

European involvement in the African slave trade began to grow after the year 1415 when the Portuguese seized the city of Ceuta (/she *yoo*tuh/) on the North African coast. Around that time, in the 1400s, Portuguese and Spanish explorers discovered several groups of islands in the Atlantic Ocean. Colonists quickly settled on these islands. Portugal built colonies on Madeira (/muh*deer*uh/), São Tomé (/sou/tuh*meh/), and the Azores (/ae*zorz/). Spain colonized the Canary Islands.

Spanish and Portuguese colonists realized that the land and climate in these islands would be good for growing the cash crop sugar, which was in high demand in Europe. In order for growing sugar to be a profitable business, though, huge fields of sugarcane had to be planted and harvested. This



Enslaved people were forced to work extremely hard in challenging conditions.

required lots of workers. For Spanish and Portuguese plantation owners, large numbers of enslaved people provided the needed labor. As sugar plantations sprang up, the demand for enslaved workers grew. Those enslaved workers were taken from Africa. This inhumane practice was cost-effective for the Spanish and Portuguese, and as such, slavery thrived. During the next hundred years, nearly two hundred thousand Africans were taken to become enslaved workers in parts of Europe, and to islands in the Atlantic.

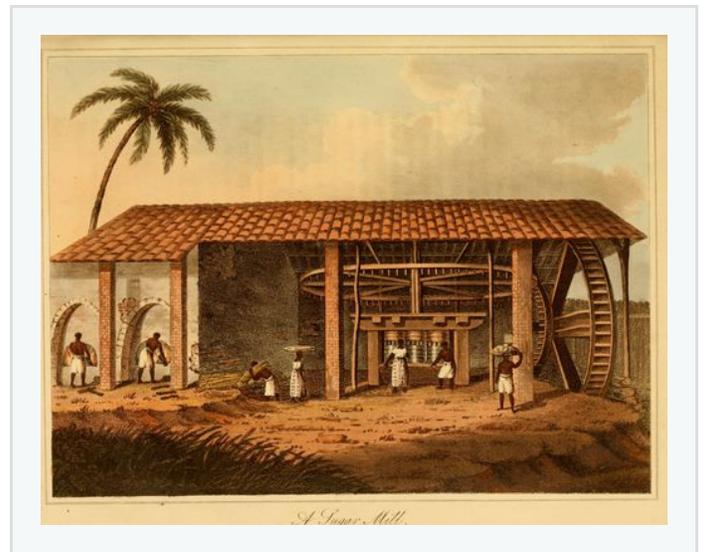
Early Slavery in the Americas

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

After Columbus came upon the islands of the Caribbean Sea, the Spanish quickly colonized the region. Spanish colonies throughout the Americas were established to benefit Spain. In Mexico and Peru, the Spanish gathered vast amounts of gold and silver. They used indigenous people to work in the mines.

The islands of the Caribbean were not rich in mineral wealth. The land and climate, however, were well-suited for growing sugar and other crops. Experts from the Canary Islands came to Hispaniola and other islands to help the Spanish set up sugar plantations. These plantations needed an inexpensive labor force. At first, plantation owners planned to use local people to work on the plantations. But disease and war, which had largely been brought to the islands by the Europeans, killed many indigenous people. As had been the case elsewhere, in the Azores and the Canary Islands, enslaved people from Africa provided a cost-effective answer. However, this practice was incredibly inhumane, and caused much suffering.

The Spanish were not the only Europeans who thought of this solution. Portuguese colonists found that sugar was well-suited to the coastal regions of Brazil. They imported people to use as enslaved labor to grow sugarcane there. In the 1600s, England colonized several islands in the Caribbean, including Jamaica and St. Kitts. British planters, too, turned to enslaved people from Africa to work on their sugar plantations. Sugar made the planters rich. And over time, the sugar growers created another business that could make people rich—trading human beings across the Atlantic.



sugar plantation in Brazil

The Slave Trade

This text is excerpted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Their explorations of the African coast had opened up new sources for people they could enslave. When Portugal's power collapsed and the Dutch took over the spice trade, they took over much of the Atlantic slave trade as well.

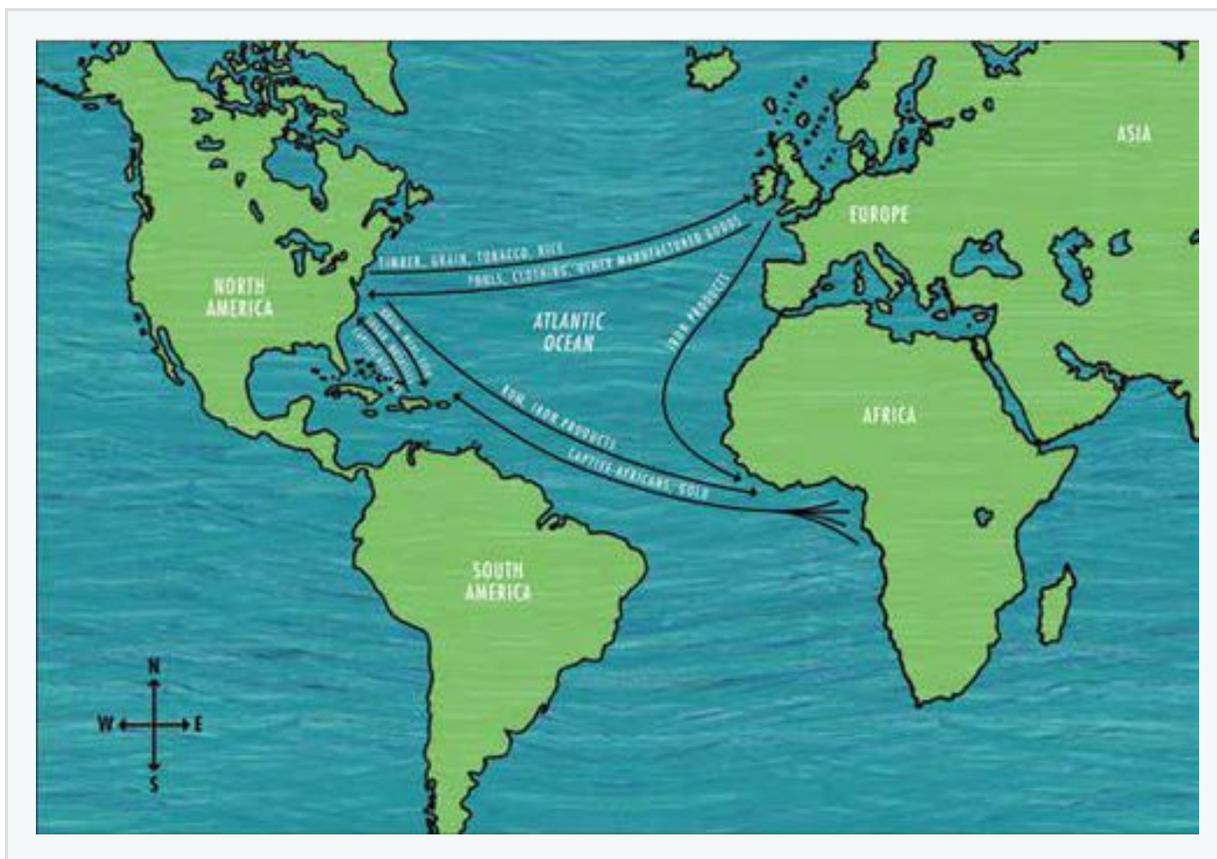
In 1619, a Dutch ship sailed into the mouth of the James River in the English colony of Virginia in North America and dropped anchor. On board were Dutch pirates who had been attacking other ships on the high seas. They had captured a shipload of enslaved Africans from a Spanish vessel heading for the Caribbean. Now the Dutch sailors were traveling north and needed supplies. The pirates traded these people for food. This was the first arrival of Africans in the English North American colonies. Whether these Africans became indentured servants or enslaved workers remains unclear.

One of the trade centers the Dutch had taken from the Portuguese was Elmina on the west coast of Africa (in present-day Ghana). For years, Elmina had been a Portuguese trade center where ivory and gold were exchanged. As the slave trade increased, Elmina became one of the forts where captured Africans were imprisoned before being transported to Europe or to the Americas. Before long, Elmina was the center of the Dutch slave trade.

By 1655, the Dutch were transporting 2,500 enslaved people across the Atlantic each year. When England seized control of New Netherland, there were five hundred Dutch-speaking Africans in the colony.



Captured Africans were held in Elmina Castle on the West African coast before being transported to Europe or the Americas.



The slave trade was an important leg of the triangular trade that developed among Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

The slave trade was one side of a trading triangle. One segment of the triangle carried goods from Europe to Africa. Ships carried items such as iron, guns, gunpowder, knives, cloth, and beads. Another segment transported people from Africa to the Caribbean islands and later to the English colonies in North America. And another segment of the triangle made a return trip to Europe. These ships carried timber, tobacco, grain, sugar, and rice from the plantations of the Americas.

The Middle Passage

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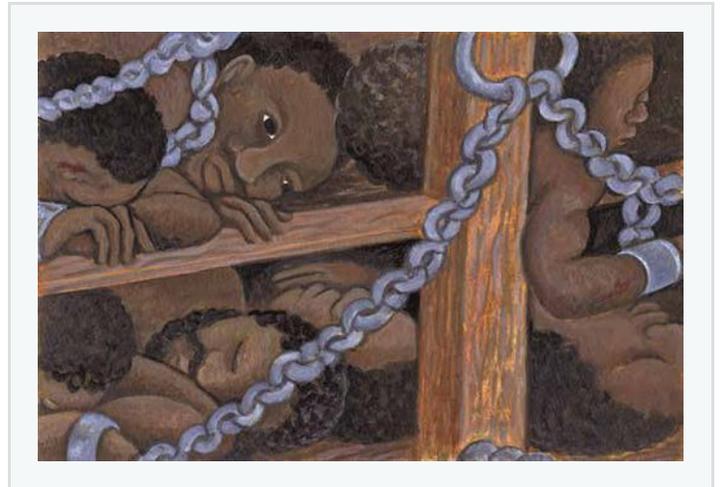
During the 1500s and 1600s, Europeans were establishing colonies throughout the Americas. As sugar plantations began to thrive there as a way for European colonists to make money, the demand for enslaved labor grew. Europeans filled this demand with enslaved people from Africa through the slave trade.

Africans typically passed through several stages in their journey into slavery. First, they were captured, sometimes by European slavers but usually during wars among African tribes. Next they were marched to a seaport such as Elmina. There they were packed into ships for the journey across the Atlantic. Those who survived the journey were sold at the slave market in a seaport in the Americas and transported to plantations.

The trip across the Atlantic Ocean was known as the Middle Passage. It was a terrible, dehumanizing experience. Slave ships usually carried between 150 and six hundred Africans. Enslaved people were treated like cargo, not people. They were chained on platforms. Each person had a space about six feet long and sixteen inches wide. Because they were chained in place, they could not even turn over.

As the ships passed through tropical latitudes, temperatures in the hold would rise to over one hundred degrees. Enslaved people were fed small amounts of rice and water twice a day.

The trip across the ocean took between two and four months depending on the weather and the destination. Illness and death were common occurrences. With people packed in close quarters, disease spread easily. Historians estimate that about fifteen percent of enslaved people did not survive the journey. The Atlantic slave trade lasted nearly three hundred years. In that time, European slave traders made approximately fifty-four thousand voyages across the Atlantic.



The Middle Passage was a harsh experience that many did not survive.

The Growth of Slavery in the North American Colonies

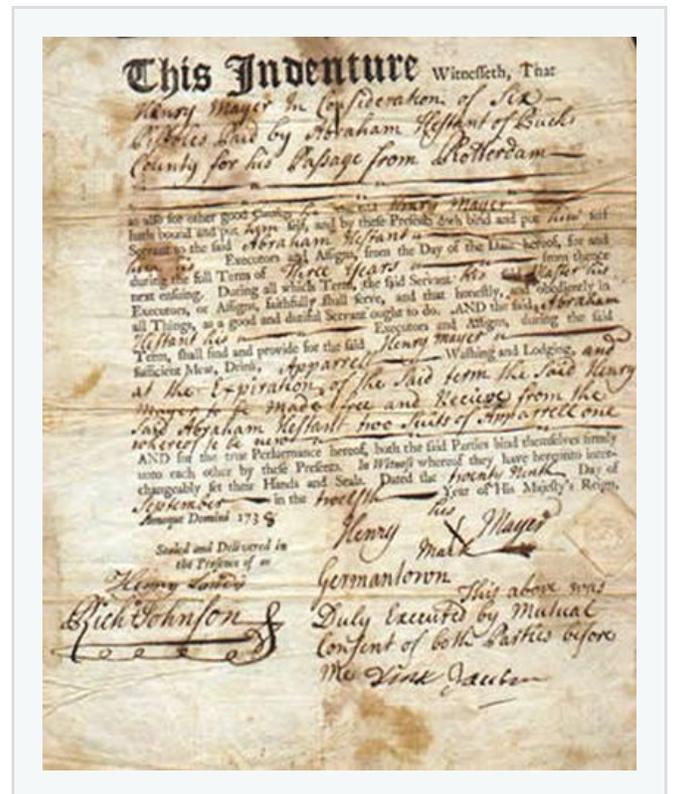
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During the 1500s and 1600s, Europeans were establishing colonies throughout the Americas. As sugar plantations began to thrive there as a way for European colonists to make money, the demand for enslaved labor grew. Many Europeans filled this demand with enslaved people from Africa through the slave trade.

In the colonies of North America, the demand for enslaved people came later in the slave trade. The Pilgrims and Puritans settled the colonies in the Northeast where the soil was not very good and the winters were cold. These conditions were not ideal for growing cash crops, so there was no need for a large labor force. Even so, slavery did exist on a small scale in these northern colonies.

In the South, the situation was different. Plantation owners who lived in the southern colonies grew tobacco to export to Europe. They needed many workers to run these plantations. To find a supply of workers, plantation owners began paying for indentured servants to come to the colonies from Europe. In return, the servants agreed to work for a certain number of years. At the end of a certain amount of time, they were granted their freedom.

A steady supply of workers could be brought from the home country, but it didn't work out very well. It was hard to keep the workers alive. The hot weather, high humidity, and swampy water were perfect conditions for breeding disease. Even those indentured servants who became accustomed to the new climate did not live very long. The work was very hard, and the conditions were very bad. Many servants did not survive long enough to fulfill their contracts. It was necessary to keep paying for servants to cross



indentured servant certificate

the ocean.

Despite these problems, when the plantations first got started, the owners were glad to pay for indentured servants instead of enslaved people.

In time, the use of indentured servants became less attractive to the plantation owners. Little by little, the plantations moved away from the coast, where disease had been a big problem. Servants were living longer. They ate better and could avoid bad drinking water. Healthy servants started living long enough to fulfill their contracts. Plantation owners started having to pay out more in “freedom dues.”

Freedom dues were what a servant received for completing his or her contract. According to the contract, an indentured servant was given food, clothing, money, and some livestock. Those who were given land could finish their contracts and start farming next door.

Before long, buying an enslaved workforce from Africa became more profitable and efficient than hiring indentured servants. Slavery spread in the 1700s. Millions of acres were planted with tobacco. Planters also introduced a new cash crop, rice, which needed lots of labor to plant and harvest. In the late 1700s and 1800s, cotton became a third cash crop grown in the American South. Indigo and cotton cultivation also relied on the labor of enslaved people.

Plantation Life

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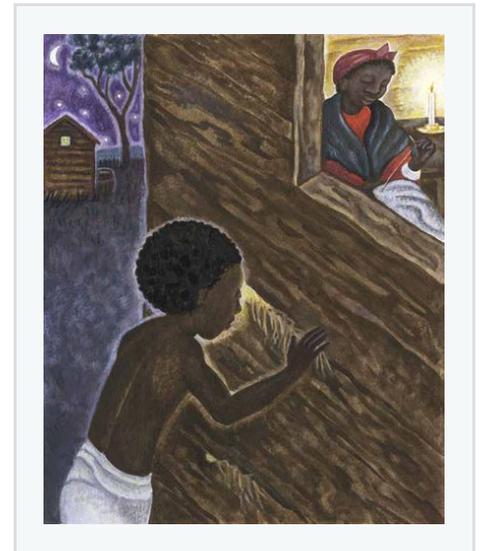
As Europeans colonized the Americas, they began establishing plantations. Cash crops could be grown on these plantations, then sold or traded. However, plantation work required a lot of hard labor. Settlers in the English colonies of North America turned to the slave trade to fill that demand for hard labor with enslaved people from Africa.

The life of an enslaved person was very hard. People were sold as slaves at a market where owners bid against each other. Slaveholders bought the people they thought would work best for them. Families were frequently broken up; children were separated from their parents, and husbands from wives.

On the plantation, enslaved people had no freedom. They had to do what their masters told them to do and could not travel anywhere without permission. They could not testify in court, so an owner could mistreat an enslaved person and get away with it. Many colonies also had laws that made it illegal to teach enslaved people to read or write.

Enslaved people worked from dawn to nightfall, with an hour off midday in the heat. The work was hard. They worked in the cotton, rice, indigo, and tobacco fields. They chopped wood, built fences, cleared roads, and dug wells. All the while, they were watched by a person called an overseer. Other enslaved people worked in the master's house, performing tasks such as cooking and cleaning.

Not all Africans in the colonies were enslaved. Some managed to gain their freedom. A few slaveholders even gave freedom to their enslaved workers. Free Africans in the colonies made their living as farmers and crafts workers. After the American Revolution, slavery was abolished in most of the northern states. But slavery spread in the American South, where it survived until the end of the Civil War in the mid-nineteenth century.



Slaveholders sometimes separated children from their parents.