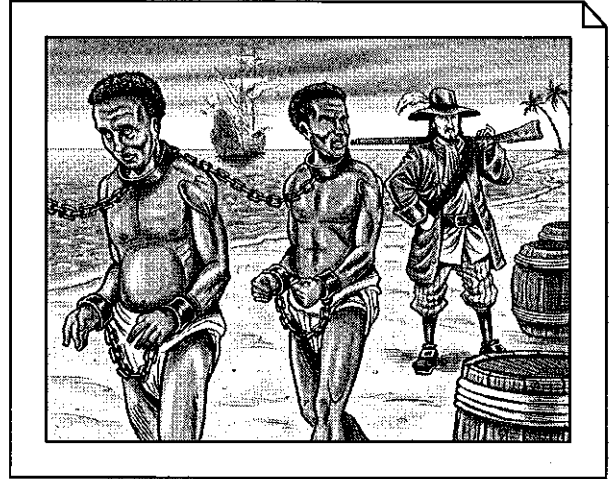


The Atlantic Slave Trade

In the 1400s, the Portuguese explored and set up trading posts along the coast of Africa. Soon after, the Dutch, English, and French set up their own ports along the African coast. European merchants traded guns, tools, and cloth for gold, ivory, and slaves. Quickly, the Europeans found slaves to be the most important item of African trade.

Slavery had existed since ancient times. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Indians, Arabs, and Aztecs enslaved defeated enemies. The word “slave” comes from the large number of Slavs taken from southern Russia in Roman times. When African kingdoms fought each other, the winner took the defeated enemies as slaves. By the 1500s, African kingdoms were selling the slaves to European traders.



Growing quickly into a profitable business, the Atlantic slave trade began in the 1500s. Sugar, coffee, and tobacco plantations in French, Dutch, and English colonies needed laborers. Workers were needed for Spanish mines and Portuguese sugar plantations. Many slaves were taken to these colonies. About 400,000 slaves were sent to Britain’s North American colonies. African traders took captives from the interior of the continent and brought them to coastal trading posts. There, the captives were exchanged for other goods, like cloth, rum, weapons, and gunpowder.

The Atlantic slave trade was one part of a trade network known as the triangular trade. On the first part of the trip, merchant ships brought manufactured goods to Africa. They traded the items, like guns and cloth, for slaves. On the second leg, called the Middle Passage, slaves were taken by ship to the West Indies in the Caribbean Sea. Merchants traded slaves for tobacco, sugar, and molasses. On the last section of the trip, the products were taken to places like Nantes, France; Bristol, England; and Salem, Massachusetts.

During the trip from Africa to the West Indies, slaves were chained below the decks of ships. The Middle Passage was a horrible time for the slaves. Hundreds were stuffed into a small vessel. Sometimes, up to half of the Africans on board died during the voyage because of harsh conditions.

In the 1500s, about 2,000 slaves were sent to the Americas each year. The peak of the Atlantic slave trade was in the 1780s. During this time, more than 80,000 Africans were sold into slavery in the Americas each year. The Atlantic slave trade was finally stopped in the 1800s. By that time, about 10 million Africans had been sold into slavery in the Americas.

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Multiple Choice

Circle the best answer, and write the letter in the box.

1. The most important item of African trade to Europeans was _____.

- A. gold
- B. ivory
- C. guns
- D. slaves

2. The Atlantic slave trade began in the _____.

- A. 1400s
- B. 1500s
- C. 1780s
- D. 1800s

3. On the _____ leg of the triangular trade voyage, merchants brought manufactured goods to Africa.

- A. first
- B. second
- C. third
- D. all of the above

4. The second leg of the triangular trade voyage was called the _____.

- A. Middle Passage
- B. African Voyage
- C. Center Channel
- D. Slave Corridor

5. Sometimes, up to half of the Africans on board a slave ship _____ during the voyage.

- A. got the bubonic plague
- B. tried to escape
- C. died from harsh conditions
- D. got seasick