Stephen B. Oates, et al., Portrait of America, complete ed., 8th ed. (Boston, New York: © Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003)

3 Black People in a White People's Country

GARY B. NASH

In 1619, a year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, a Dutch ship deposited "twenty Negars" on the wharf of Jamestown Colony, in what became Virginia. These were the first Africans to enter colonial America, but their exact status is unknown. Like Africans subsequently imported until 1660, they were probably indentured servants whose period of servitude was temporary. After 1660, however, most Africans who came to America were slaves, purchased through a heinous business operation, the international slave trade. By the eighteenth century, every English colony from Carolina to Massachusetts had enacted "slave codes," bodies of law that stripped black people of all rights and reduced them to pieces of property, or "chattel," with their children inheriting that status.

The troubling question is why the Africans were enslaved and white indentures were not. In the selection that follows, Gary B. Nash, one of the leading experts on colonial America, argues that the answer lies in a combination of racial prejudice and labor needs in early America, particularly in the southern colonies. When faced with the problem of cultivating labor-intensive crops, Nash writes, English settlers "turned to the international slave trade to fill their labor needs." That white colonists viewed Africans as uncivilized barbarians only made it easier "to fasten chains upon them." The Africans, of course, were no more barbaric than were the Native Americans. As Nash observes, the Africans had been stolen from richly complex and highly developed cultures. The English settlers, of course, knew nothing about such cultures beyond that they were neither white nor Christian and were therefore "uncivilized."

As more and more Africans were imported to the English colonies, racial fears intensified in direct proportion to the number of blacks in a given area. Such fears were worse in the southern colonies, where the extensive cultivation of labor-intensive crops necessitated the purchase of large numbers of slaves. In the northern colonies, as Nash points out, "slavery existed on a more occasional basis" because labor-intensive crops were not so widely grown there and far fewer Africans were imported. This is a crucial point. It helps explain why slavery later disappeared in the North, during and after the Revolution.

In the colonial period, meanwhile, every colony in North and South alike enacted laws that severely regulated black people and made them slaves for life. Thus from the very outset, slavery served a twofold purpose: it was both a labor system and a means of racial control in a white people's country. This "mass enslavement of Africans," Nash

points out, only reinforced racial prejudice in a vicious cycle. "Once institutionalized, slavery cast Africans into such lowly roles that the initial bias against them could only be confirmed and vastly strengthened."

To provide a fuller understanding of slavery in North America, Nash discusses the origins of African slavery itself and offers a graphic and painful portrait of the Atlantic slave trade, which involved "the largest forced migration in history" and was thus "one of the most important phenomena in the history of the modern world." Greed and profit kept the trade booming for four hundred years, with European entrepreneurs reaping fortunes at the expense of millions of human beings. The captain and crew of a slave ship, whether British, Dutch, Portuguese, or colonial American, had to be monstrously depraved and utterly inured to human suffering in order to carry out this brutal business. One such slave trader, Englishman John Newton, later repented, became a minister and an abolitionist, and wrote a hymn about his salvation, "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," popularly known as "Amazing Grace." Grace was indeed amazing, he said, to have saved "a wretch" like him.

The horrors of the middle passage, warns one historian, were "so revolting that a writer of the present day hesitates to give such details to his readers." On one slaver, said an eyewitness, "400 wretched beings" were chained and "crammed into a hold 12 yards in length . . . and only 31/2 feet in height." Because of the hold's "suffocating heat" and stench, the Africans panicked and in their torment tried in vain to escape. The next morning, the crew lifted "fifty-four crushed and mangled corpses up from the slave deck." To keep the survivors in line, the crew beat and murdered other Africans. Such atrocities were commonplace on slave ships, and the captains could not have cared less, because "insurance companies bore part of the loss, and profits were so high that heavy risks were cheerfully assumed."

Driven to madness in the rat-filled, claustrophobic bowels of the slave ships, many Africans maimed themselves or committed suicide. Others starved to death or died of some white man's disease. And the women, too many of them, were humiliated in unspeakable ways by their white captors. If the Africans somehow survived the Atlantic passage, they found themselves dumped into some fly-infested slave pen in a port of the New World. We can imagine such a group in chains on the wharves of colonial New York City or Baltimore. Sick, starving, and frightened, they had to find some way to endure the unendurable in a strange new land. That such Africans salvaged much of their heritage, transforming it into a distinctly African American heritage, was a tribute to their power "to keep on keeping on."

"Thus," writes historian Carl Degler, "began in the seventeenth century the Negro's life in America. With it commenced a moral problem for all Americans which still besets us at the close of the twentieth century." As Nash observes, the emergence of slavery in colonial America was "one of the great paradoxes in American history—the building of what some thought was to be a utopia in the wilderness upon the backs of black men and women wrenched from their African homeland and forced into a system of abject

slavery." That paradox, as we shall see, would persist through the American Revolution, the early Republic, and well into the nineteenth century, causing sectional tensions between the North and the South that finally plunged America into the most destructive war in its history.

GLOSSARY

BLACK CODES Colonial laws that legalized and enforced slavery, depriving Africans of all rights and reducing them to pieces of property.

BLACK GOLD The European expression for slaves.

DUTCH WEST INDIA COMPANY A leading "international supplier of slaves."

GONÇALVEZ, ANTAM Portuguese sea captain who made the first European landing on the west African coast south of the Sahara and brought back the first kidnapped Africans to Portugal in 1441.

MACKRONS Africans considered too old or too infirm to make good slaves.

MIDDLE PASSAGE The route across the Atlantic from the African coast to the New World.

ROYAL AFRICAN COMPANY An English joint stock company chartered by the Crown to carry slaves to the English colonies.

SEQUEIRA, RUY DO The Portuguese captain who began the European slave trade in 1472.

The African slave trade, which began in the late fifteenth century and continued for the next 400 years, is one of the most important phenomena in the history of the modern world. Involving the largest forced migration in history, the slave trade and slavery were crucially important in building the colonial empires of European nations and in generating the wealth that later produced the Industrial Revolution. But often overlooked in the attention given to the economic importance of the slave trade and slavery is the cultural diffusion that took place when ten million Africans were brought to the western hemisphere. Six out of every seven persons who crossed the Atlantic to take up life in the New World in the 300 years before the American Revolution were African slaves. As a result, in most parts of the colonized territories slavery "defined the context within which transferred European traditions would grow and change." As slaves, Africans were Europeanized; but at the same time they Africanized the culture of Europeans in the Americas. This was an inevitable part of the convergence of these two broad groups of people, who met each other an ocean away from their original homelands. In addition, the slave trade created the lines of communicatiou for the movement of crops, agricultural techniques, diseases, and medical knowledge between Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America*, 3e, © 1992, pp. 144–161, 208–225. Reprinted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

Just as they were late in colonizing the New World, the English lagged far behind their Spanish and Portuguese competitors in making contact with the west coast of Africa, in entering the Atlantic slave trade, and in establishing African slaves as the backbone of the labor force in their overseas plantations. And among the English colonists in the New World, those on the mainland of North America were a half century or more behind those in the Caribbean in converting their plantation economies to slave labor. By 1670, for example, some 200,000 slaves labored in Portuguese Brazil and about 30,000 cultivated sugar in English Barbados; but in Virginia only 2,000 worked in the tobacco fields. Cultural interaction of Europeans and Africans did not begin in North America on a large scale until more than a century after it had begun in the southerly parts of the hemisphere. Much that occurred as the two cultures met in the Iberian colonies was later repeated in the Anglo-African interaction; and yet the patterns of acculturation were markedly different in North and South America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Atlantic Slave Trade

A half century before Columbus crossed the Atlantic, a Portuguese sea captain, Antam Gonçalvez, made the first European landing on the west African coast south of the Sahara. What he might have seen, had he been able to travel the length and breadth of Africa, was a continent of extraordinary variation in geography and culture. Little he might have seen would have caused him to believe that African peoples were naturally inferior or that they had failed to develop over time as had the peoples of Europe. This notion of "backwardness" and cultural impoverishment was the myth perpetuated after the slave trade had transported millions of Africans to the Western Hemisphere. It was a myth which served to justify the cruelties of the slave trade and to assuage the guilt of Europeans involved in the largest forced dislocation of people in history.

The peoples of Africa may have numbered more than 50 million in the late fifteenth century when Europeans began making extensive contact with the continent. They lived in widely varied ecological zones—in vast deserts, in grasslands, and in great forests and woodlands. As in Europe, most people farmed the land and struggled to subdue the forces of nature in order to sustain life. That the African population had increased so rapidly in the 2,000 years before European arrival suggests the sophistication of the African agricultural methods. Part of this skill in farming derived from skill in iron production, which had begun in present-day Nigeria about 500 B.C. It was this ability to fashion iron implements that triggered the new farming techniques necessary to sustain larger populations. With large populations came greater specialization of tasks and thus additional technical improvements. Small groups of related families made contact with other kinship groups and over time evolved into larger and more complicated societies. The pattern was similar to what had occurred in other parts of the world—in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere—when the "agricultural revolution" occurred.

Recent studies of "pre-contact" African history have showed that the "culture gap" between European and African societies when the two peoples met was not as large as previously imagined. By the time Europeans reached the coast of West Africa a number of extraordinary empires had been forged in the area. The first, apparently, was the Kingdom of Ghana, which embraced the immense territory between the Sahara Desert and the Gulf of Guinea and from the Niger River to the Atlantic Ocean between the fifth and tenth centuries. Extensive urban settlement, advanced architecture, elaborate art, and a highly complex political organization evolved during this time. From the eighth to the sixteenth centuries, it was the western Sudan that supplied most of

the gold for the Western world. Invasion from the north by the Moors weakened the Kingdom of Ghana, which in time gave way to the Empire of Mali. At the center of the Mali Empire was the city of Timbuktu, noted for its extensive wealth and its Islamic university where a faculty as distinguished as any in Europe was gathered.

Lesser kingdoms such as the kingdoms of Kongo, Zimbabwe, and Benin had also been in the process of growth and cultural change for centuries before Europeans reached Africa. Their inhabitants were skilled in metal working, weaving, ceramics, architecture, and aesthetic expression. Many of their towns rivaled European cities in size. Many communities of West Africa had highly complex religious rites, well-organized regional trade, codes of law, and complex political organization.

Of course, cultural development in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, proceeded at varying rates. Ecological conditions had a large effect on this. Where good soil, adequate rainfall, and abundance of minerals were present, as in coastal West Africa, population growth and cultural elaboration were relatively rapid. Where inhospitable desert or nearly impenetrable forest held forth, social systems remained small and changed at a crawl. Contact with other cultures also brought rapid change, whereas isolation impeded cultural change. The Kingdom of Ghana bloomed in western Sudan partly because of the trading contacts with Arabs who had conquered the area in the ninth century. Cultural change began to accelerate in Swahili societies facing the Indian Ocean after trading contacts were initiated with the Eastern world in the ninth century. Thus, as a leading African historian has put it, "the cultural history of Africa is . . . one of greatly unequal development among peoples who, for definable reasons such as these, entered recognizably similar stages of institutional change at different times."

The slave trade seems to have begun officially in 1472 when a Portuguese captain, Ruy do Sequeira, reached the coast of Benin and was conducted to the king's court, where he received royal permission to trade for gold, ivory, and slaves. So far as the Africans were concerned, the trade represented no strikingly new economic activity since they had long been involved in regional and long-distance trade across their continent. This was simply the opening of contacts with a new and more distant commercial partner. This is important to note because often it has been maintained that European powers raided the African coasts for slaves, marching into the interior and kidnapping hundreds of thousands of helpless and hapless victims. In actuality, the early slave trade involved a reciprocal relationship between European purchasers and African sellers, with the Portuguese monopolizing trade along the coastlands of tropical Africa for the first century after contact was made. Trading itself was confined to coastal strongholds where slaves, most of them captured in the interior by other Africans, were sold on terms set by the African sellers. In return for gold, ivory, and slaves, African slave merchants received European guns, bars of iron and copper, brass pots and tankards, beads, rum and textiles. They occupied an economic role not unlike that of the Iroquois middlemen in the fur trade with Europeans.

Slavery was not a new social phenomenon for either Europeans or Africans. For centuries African societies had been involved in an overland slave trade that transported black slaves from West Africa across the Sahara Desert to Roman Europe and the Middle East. But this was an occasional rather than a systematic trade, and it was designed to provide the trading nations of the Mediterranean with soldiers, household servants, and artisans rather than mass agricultural labor. Within Africa itself, a variety of unfree statuses had also existed for centuries, but they involved personal service, often for a limited period . . . rather than lifelong, degraded, agricultural labor. Slavery of a similar sort had long existed in Europe, mostly as the result of Christians enslaving Moslems and Moslems enslaving Christians during centuries of religious wars. One became a slave by being an

"outsider" or an "infidel," by being captured in war, by voluntarily selling oneself into slavery to obtain money for one's family, or by committing certain heinous crimes. The rights of slaves were restricted and their opportunities for upward movement were severely circumscribed, but they were regarded nevertheless as members of society, enjoying protection under the law and entitled to certain rights, including education, marriage, and parenthood. Most important, the status of a slave was not irrevocable and was not automatically passed on to his or her children.

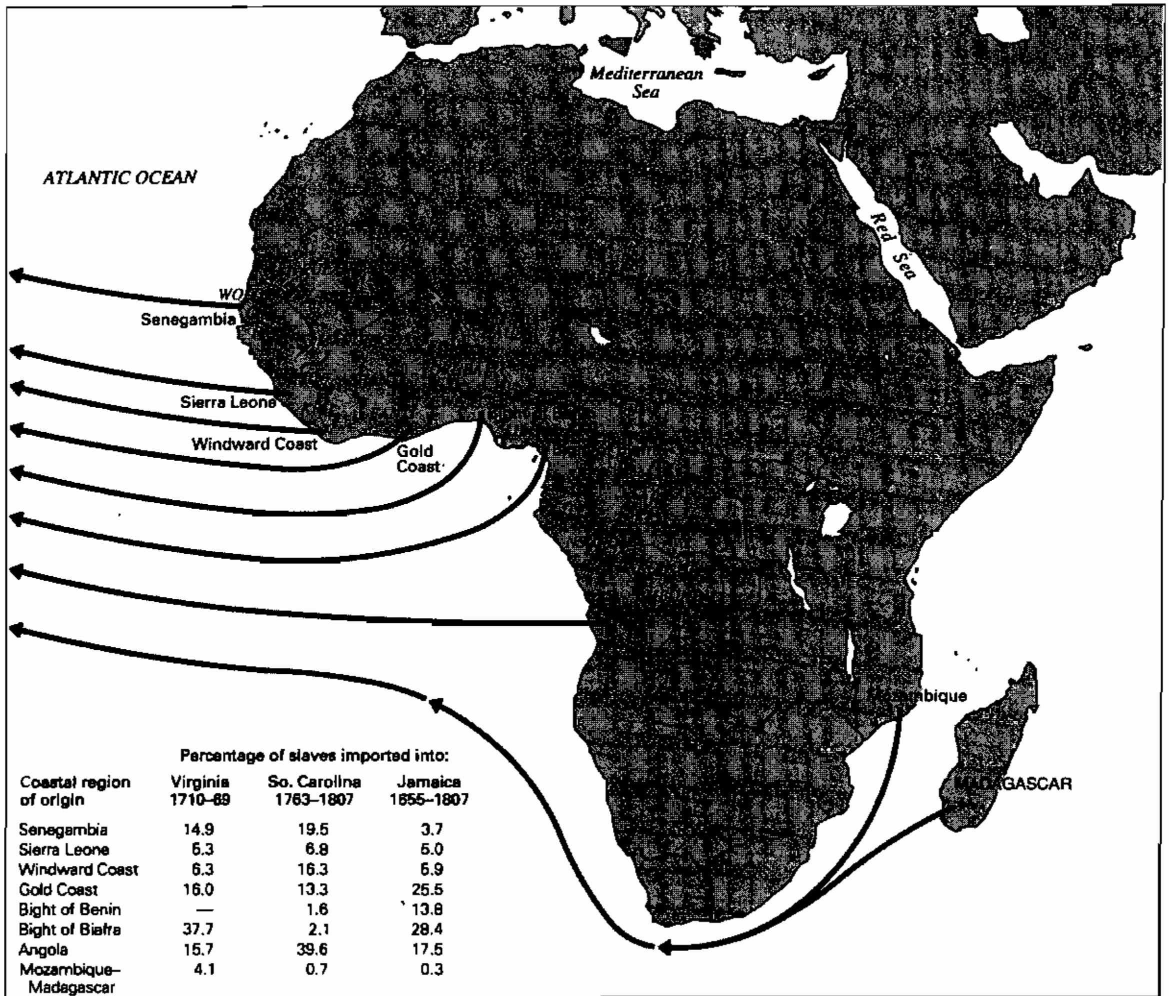
Thus we find that slavery flourished in ancient Greece and Rome, in the Aztec and Inca empires, in African societies, in early modern Russia and eastern Europe, in the Middle East, and in the Mediterranean world. It had gradually died out in Western Europe by the fourteenth century, although the status of serf was not too different in social reality from that of the slave. It is important to note that in all these regions slavery and serfdom had nothing to do with racial characteristics.

When the African slave trade began in the second half of the fifteenth century, it served to fill labor shortages in the economies of its European initiators and their commercial partners. Between 1450 and 1505 Portugal brought about 40,000 African slaves to Europe and the Atlantic islands—the Madeiras and Canaries. But the need for slave labor lessened in Europe as European populations themselves began to grow beginning late in the fifteenth century. It is possible, therefore, that were it not for the colonization of the New World the early slave trade might have ceased after a century or more and be remembered simply as a short-lived incident stemming from early European contacts with Africa.

With the discovery of the New World by Europeans the course of history changed momentously. Once Europeans found the gold and silver mines of Mexico and Peru, and later, when they discovered a new form of gold in the production of sugar, coffee, and tobacco, their demand for human labor grew astonishingly. At first Indians seemed to be the obvious source of labor, and in some areas Spaniards and Portuguese were able to coerce native populations into agricultural and mining labor. But European diseases ravaged native populations, and often it was found that Indians, far more at home in their environment than white colonizers, were difficult to subjugate. Indentured white labor from the mother country was another way of meeting the demand for labor, but this source, it soon became apparent, was far too limited. It was to Africa that colonizing Europeans ultimately resorted. Formerly a new source of trade, the continent now became transformed in the European view into the repository of vast supplies of human labor—"black gold."

From the late fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, almost four hundred years, Europeans transported Africans out of their ancestral homelands to fill the labor needs in their colonies of North and South America and the Caribbean. The most recent estimates place the numbers who reached the shores of the New World at about ten to eleven million people, although many million more lost their lives while being marched from the interior to the coastal trading forts or during the "middle passage" across the Atlantic. Even before the English arrived on the Chesapeake in 1607 several hundred thousand slaves had been transported to the Caribbean and South American colonies of Spain and Portugal. Before the slave trade was outlawed in the nineteenth century far more Africans than Europeans had crossed the Atlantic Ocean and taken up life in the New World. Black slaves, as one eighteenth-century Englishman put it, became "the strength and the sinews of this western world."

Once established on a large scale, the Atlantic slave trade dramatically altered the pattern of slave recruitment in Africa. For about a century after Gonçalvez brought back the first kidnapped Africans to Portugal in 1441, the slave trade was relatively slight. The slaves whom other Africans sold to Europeans were drawn from a small minority of the



Coastal region of origin	Percentage of slaves imported into: Virginia 1710–69	So. Carolina 1763–1807	Jamaica 1655–1807
Senegambia	14.9	19.5	3.7
Sierra Leone	5.3	6.8	5.0
Windward Coast	6.3	16.3	5.9
Gold Coast	16.0	13.3	25.5
Bight of Benin	—	1.6	13.8
Bight of Biafra	37.7	2.1	28.4
Angola	15.7	39.6	17.5
Mozambique–Madagascar	4.1	0.7	0.3

(Source: Philip D. Curtin, The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census, *pp. 157, 160. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.)*

population and for the most part were individuals captured in occasional war or whose criminal acts had cost them their rights of citizenship. For Europeans the African slave trade provided for modest labor needs, just as the Black Sea slave trade had done before it was shut off by the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. Even in the New World plantations, slaves were not in great demand for many decades after "discovery."

More than anything else it was sugar that transformed the African slave trade. Produced in the Mediterranean world since the eighth century, sugar was for centuries a costly item confined to sweetening the diet of the rich. By the mid-1400s its popularity was growing and the center of production had shifted to the Portuguese Madeira Islands, off the northwest coast of Africa. Here for the first time an expanding European nation established an overseas

plantation society based on slave labor. From the Madeiras the cultivation of sugar spread to Portuguese Brazil in the late sixteenth century and then to the tiny specks of land dotting the Caribbean in the first half of the seventeenth century. By this time Europeans were developing an almost insatiable taste for sweetness. Sugar—regarded by nutritionists today as a "drug food"—became one of the first luxuries that was transformed into a necessary item in the diets of the masses of Europe. The wife of the poorest English laborer took sugar in her tea by 1750 it was said. "Together with other plantation products such as coffee, rum, and tobacco," writes Sidney Mintz, "sugar formed part of a complex of 'proletarian hunger-killers,' and played a crucial role in the linked contribution that Caribbean slaves, Indian peasants, and European urban proletarians were able to make to the growth of western civilization."

The regularization of the slave trade brought about by the vast new demand for a New World labor supply and by a reciprocally higher demand in Africa for European trade goods, especially bar iron and textiles, changed the problem of obtaining slaves. Criminals and "outsiders" in sufficient number to satisfy the growing European demand in the seventeenth century could not be found. Therefore African kings resorted to warfare against their neighbors as a way of obtaining "black gold" with which to trade. European guns abetted the process. Thus, the spread of kidnapping and organized violence in Africa became a part of maintaining commercial relations with European powers.

In the forcible recruitment of slaves, adult males were consistently preferred over women and children. Primarily this represented the preference of New World plantation owners for male field laborers. But it also reflected the decision of vanquished African villagers to yield up more men than women to raiding parties because women were the chief agriculturalists in their society and, in matrilineal and matrilocal kinship systems, were too valuable to be spared.

For the Europeans the slave trade itself became an immensely profitable enterprise. In the several centuries of intensive slave trading that followed the establishment of New World sugar plantations, European nations warred constantly for trading advantages on the West African coast. The coastal forts, the focal points of the trade, became key strategic targets in the wars of empire. The great Portuguese slaving fort at Elmina on the Gold Coast, begun in 1481, was captured a century and a half later by the Dutch. The primary fort on the Guinea coast, started by the Swedes, passed through the hands of the Danes, the English, and the Dutch between 1652 and 1664. As the demand for slaves in the Americas rose sharply in the second half of the seventeenth century, European competition for trading rights on the West African coast grew intense. By the end of the century monopolies for supplying European plantations in the New World with their annual quotas of slaves became a major issue of European diplomacy. The Dutch were the primary victors in the battle for the West African slave coast. Hence, for most of the century a majority of slaves who were fed into the expanding New World markets found themselves crossing the Atlantic in Dutch ships.

Not until the last third of the seventeenth century were the English of any importance in the slave trade. Major English attempts to break into the profitable trade began only in 1663, when Charles II, recently restored to the English throne, granted a charter to the Royal Adventurers to Africa, a joint-stock company headed by the king's brother, the Duke of York. Superseded by the Royal African Company in 1672, these companies enjoyed the exclusive right to carry slaves to England's overseas plantations. For thirty-four years after 1663 each of the slaves they brought across the Atlantic bore the brand "*DY*" for the Duke of York, who himself became king in 1685. In 1698 the Royal African Company's monopoly was broken due to the pressure on Parliament by individual merchants who demanded their rights as Englishmen to participate in the lucrative

trade. Thrown open to individual entrepreneurs, the English slave trade grew enormously. In the 1680s the Royal African Company had transported about 5,000 to 6,000 slaves annually (though interlopers brought in thousands more). In the first decade of free trade the annual average rose above 20,000. English involvement in the trade increased for the remainder of the eighteenth century until by the 1790s England had become the foremost slave-trading nation in Europe.

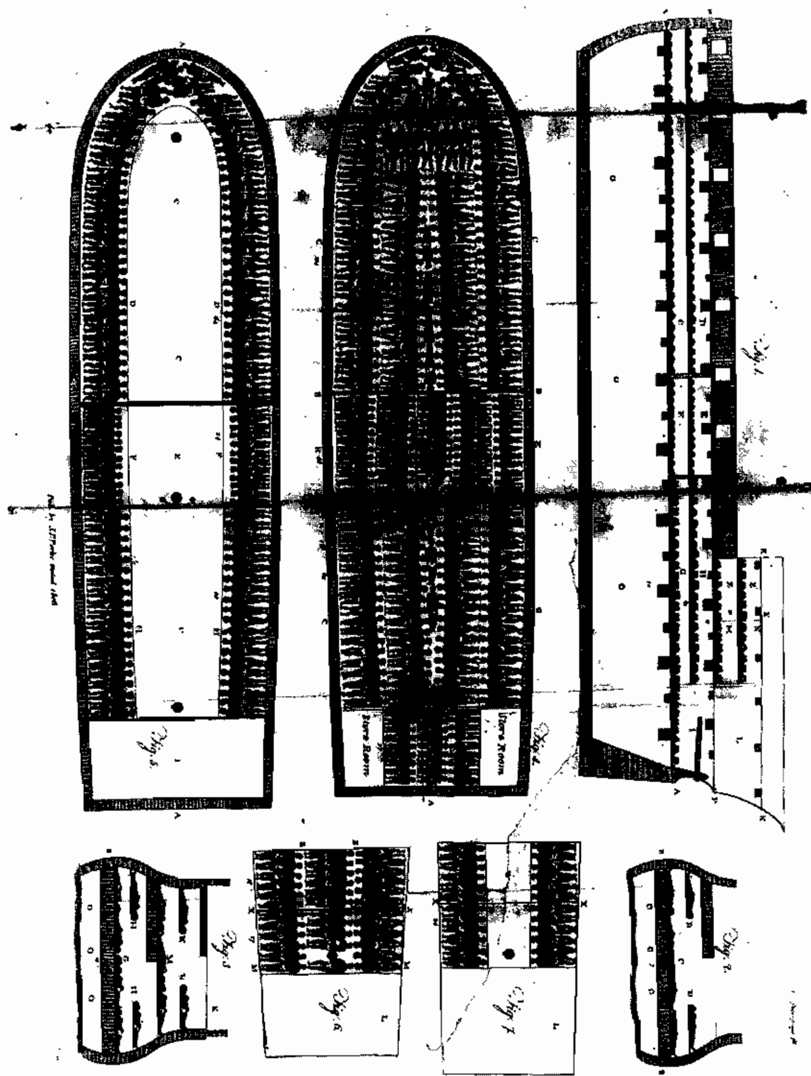
Capture and Transport of Slaves

No accounts of the initial enslavement of Africans, no matter how vivid, can quite convey the pain and demoralization that must have accompanied the forced march to the west coast of Africa and the subsequent loading aboard ships of those who had fallen captive to the African suppliers of the European slave traders. As the demand for African slaves doubled and redoubled in the eighteenth century, the hinterlands of western and central Sudan were invaded again and again by the armies and agents of both coastal and interior kings. Perhaps 75 percent of the slaves transported to English North America came from the part of western Africa that lies between the Senegal and Niger rivers and the Gulf of Biafra, and most of the others were enslaved in Angola on the west coast of Central Africa. Slaving activities in these areas were responsible for considerable depopulation of the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Once captured, slaves were marched to the sea in "coffles," or trains. A Scotsman, Mungo Park, described the coffle he marched with for 550 miles through Gambia at the end of the eighteenth century. It consisted of 73 men, women, and children tied together by the neck with leather thongs. Several captives attempted to commit suicide by eating clay, another was abandoned after being badly stung by bees; still others died of exhaustion and hunger. After two months the coffle reached the coast, many of its members physically depleted by thirst, hunger, and exposure, where they were herded into fortified enclosures called barracoons.

The anger, bewilderment, and desolation that accompanied the forced march, the first leg of the 5,000-mile journey to the New World, was only increased by the actual transfer of slaves to European ship captains, who carried their human cargo in small wooden ships to the Americas. "As the slaves come down to Fida from the inland country," wrote one European trader in the late seventeenth century, "they are put into a booth or prison, built for that purpose, near the beach . . . and when the Europeans are to receive them, they are brought out into a large plain, where the [ships'] surgeons examine every part of every one of them, to the smallest member, men and women being all stark naked. Such as are allowed good and sound, are set on one side, and the others by themselves; which slaves so rejected are called Mackrons, being above 35 years of age, or defective in their lips, eyes, or teeth, or grown grey; or that have the venereal disease, or any other imperfection." Such dehumanizing treatment was part of the commercial process by which "merchandise" was selected and bargained for. But it was also part of the psychological process that attempted to strip away self-respect and self-identity from the Africans.

Cruelty followed cruelty. After purchase, each slave was branded with a hot iron signifying the company, whether Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, or Dutch, that had purchased him or her. Thus were members of "preliterate" societies first introduced to the alphabetic symbols of "advanced" cultures. "The branded slaves," one account related, "are returned to their former booths" where they were imprisoned until a full human cargo could be assembled. The next psychological wrench came with the ferrying of



The international slave trade was such an unspeakably brutal business—especially the trip across the Atlantic—that even southern slaveholders were anxious to outlaw it. Above is a diagram of a slave ship, showing arrangement and padlocks. In recounting a single night on such a ship, an eyewitness wrote of "400 wretched beings . . . crammed into a hold 12 yards in length . . . and only 3½ feet in height." He described how "the suffocating heat of the hold" drove the Negroes to panic in their attempts to escape to the upper air. The next day, he saw fifty-four "crushed and mangled corpses" lifted up from the slave deck. (Courtesy of The New York Public Library, The Arents Collection.)

slaves, in large canoes, to the waiting ships at anchor in the harbor. An English captain described the desperation of slaves who were about to lose touch with their ancestral land and embark upon a vast ocean that many had never previously seen. "The Negroes are so wilful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap'd out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats, which pursued them; they having a more dreadful apprehension of Barbadoes than we can have of hell." Part of this fear was the common belief that on the other side of the ocean Africans would be eaten by the white savages.

The kind of fear that inspired suicide while still on African soil was prevalent as well on the second leg of the voyage—the "middle passage" from the West African coast to the New World. Conditions aboard ship were miserable, although it was to the advantage of the ship captains to deliver as many slaves as possible on the other side of the Atlantic. The preservation rather than the destruction of life was the main object, but brutality was systematic, both in pitching overboard any slaves who fell sick on the voyage and in punishing offenders with almost sadistic intensity as a way of creating a climate of fear that would stifle insurrectionist tendencies. John Atkins, aboard an English slaver in 1721, described how the captain "whipped and scarified" several plotters of rebellion and sentenced others "to cruel deaths, making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of them killed. The Woman he hoisted up by the thumbs, whipp'd and slashed her with Knives, before the other slaves, till she died." Though the naval architects of Europe competed to produce the most efficient ships for carrying human cargoes to the New World, the mortality on board, for both black slaves below decks and white sailors above, was extremely high, averaging between 10 and 20 percent on each voyage.

That Africans frequently attempted suicide and mutiny during the ocean crossing provides evidence that even the extraordinary force used in capturing, branding, selling, and transporting them from one continent to another was not enough to make the captives submit tamely to their fate. An eighteenth-century historian of slavery, attempting to justify the terroristic devices employed by slavers, argued that "the many acts of violence they [the slaves] have committed by murdering whole crews and destroying ships when they had it in their power to do so have made these rigors wholly chargeable on their own bloody and malicious disposition which calls for the same confinement as if they were wolves or wild boars." The modern reader can detect in this characterization of enslaved Africans clear proof that submissiveness was not a trait of those who were forcibly carried to the New World. So great was this resistance that special techniques of torture had to be devised to cope with the thousands of slaves who were determined to starve themselves to death on the middle passage rather than reach the New World in chains. Brutal whippings and hot coals applied to the lips were frequently used to open the mouths of recalcitrant slaves. When this did not suffice, a special instrument, the *speculum oris,* or mouth opener, was employed to wrench apart the jaws of a resistant slave.

Taking into consideration the mortality involved in the capture, the forced march to the coast, and the middle passage, probably not more than one in two captured Africans lived to see the New World. Many of those who did must have been psychologically numbed as well as physically depleted by the experience. But one further step remained in the process of enslavement—the auctioning to a New World master and transportation to his place of residence. All in all, the relocation of any African brought westward across the Atlantic may have averaged about six months from the time of capture to the time of arrival at the plantation of a European slave master. During this protracted personal crisis, the slave was completely cut off from most that was familiar—family, wider kinship relationships, community life, and other forms of social and psychological security. Still

facing these victims of the European demand for cheap labor was adaptation to a new physical environment, a new language, new work routines, and, most important, a life in which bondage for themselves and their offspring was unending.

The Development of Slavery in the English Colonies

Even though they were long familiar with Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese use of African slave labor, English colonists did not turn immediately to Africa to solve the problem of cultivating labor-intensive crops. When they did, it could have caused little surprise, for in enslaving Africans the English were merely copying their European rivals in attempting to fill the colonial labor gap. No doubt the stereotype of Africans as uncivilized made it easier for the English to fasten chains upon them. But the central fact remains that the English were in the New World, like the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and French, to make a fortune as well as to build religious and political havens. Given the long hostility they had borne toward Indians and their experience in enslaving them, any scruples the English might have had about enslaving Africans quickly dissipated.

Making it all the more natural to employ Africans as a slave labor force in the mainland colonies was the precedent that English planters had set on their Caribbean sugar islands. In Barbados, Jamaica, and the Leeward Islands (Antigua, Monserrat, Nevis, and St. Christopher) Englishmen in the second and third quarters of the seventeenth century learned to copy their European rivals in employing Africans in the sugar fields and, through extraordinary repression, in molding them into a slave labor force. By 1680, when there were not more than 7,000 slaves in mainland North America and the institution of slavery was not yet unalterably fixed, upwards of 65,000 Africans toiled on sugar plantations in the English West Indies. Trade and communication were extensive between the Caribbean and mainland colonists, so settlers in North America had intimate knowledge concerning the potentiality of slave labor.

It is not surprising, then, that the North American colonists turned to the international slave trade to fill their labor needs. Africans were simply the most available people in the world for those seeking a bound labor force and possessed of the power to obtain it. What is surprising, in fact, is that the North American colonists did not turn to slavery more quickly than they did. For more than a half century in Virginia and Maryland it was primarily the white indentured servant and not the African slave who labored in the tobacco fields. Moreover, those blacks who were imported before about 1660 were held in various degrees of servitude, most for limited periods and a few for life.

The transformation of the labor force in the Southern colonies, from one in which many white and a relatively small number of black indentured servants labored together to one in which black slaves served for a lifetime and composed the bulk of unfree labor, came only in the last third of the seventeenth century in Virginia and Maryland and in the first third of the eighteenth century in North Carolina and South Carolina. The reasons for this shift to a slave-based agricultural economy in the South are twofold. First, English entry into the African slave trade gave the Southern planter an opportunity to purchase slaves more readily and more cheaply than before. Cheap labor was what every tobacco or rice planter sought, and when the price of slave labor dipped below that of indentured labor, the demand for black slaves increased. Also, the supply of white servants from England began to dry up in the late seventeenth century, and those who did cross the Atlantic were spread among a growing number of colonies. Thus, in the late seventeenth century the number of Africans imported into the Chesapeake colonies began to grow and the flow of white indentured servants diminished

to a trickle. As late as 1671 slaves made up less than 5 percent of Virginia's population and were outnumbered at least three to one by white indentured servants. In Maryland the situation was much the same. But within a generation, by about 1700, they represented one-fifth of the population and probably a majority of the labor force. A Maryland census of 1707 tabulated 3,003 white bound laborers and 4,657 black slaves. Five years later the slave population had almost doubled. Within another generation white indentured servants were declining rapidly in number, and in all the Southern colonies African slaves made up the backbone of the agricultural work force. "These two words, *Negro* and *slave,*" wrote one Virginian, had "by custom grown Homogenous and Convertible."

To the north, in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, where English colonists had settled only in the last third of the seventeenth century, slavery existed on a more occasional basis, since labor-intensive crops were not as extensively grown in these areas and the cold winters brought farming to a halt. New York was an exception and shows how a cultural preference could alter labor patterns that were usually determined by ecological factors. During the period before 1664 when the colony was Dutch, slaveholding had been practiced extensively, encouraged in part by the Dutch West India Company, one of the chief international suppliers of slaves. The population of New York remained largely Dutch for the remainder of the century, and the English who slowly filtered in saw no reason not to imitate Dutch slave owners. Thus New York became the largest importer of slaves north of Maryland. In the mid-eighteenth century, the areas of original settlement around New York and Albany remained slaveholding societies with about 20 percent of the population composed of slaves and 30 to 40 percent of the white householders owning human property.

As the number of slaves increased, legal codes for strictly controlling their activities were fashioned in each of the colonies. To a large extent these "black codes" were borrowed from the law books of the English West Indies. Bit by bit they deprived the African immigrant—and a small number of Indian slaves as well—of rights enjoyed by others in the society, including indentured servants. Gradually they reduced the slave, in the eyes of society and the law, from a human being to a piece of chattel property. In this process of dehumanization nothing was more important than the practice of hereditary life-time service. Once servitude became perpetual, relieved only by death, then the stripping away of all other rights followed as a matter of course. When the condition of the slave parent was passed on to the child, then slavery had been extended to the womb. At that point the institution became totally fixed so far as the slave was concerned.

Thus, with the passage of time, Africans in North America had to adapt to a more and more circumscribed world. Earlier in the seventeenth century they had been treated much as indentured servants, bound to labor for a specified period of years but thereafter free to work for themselves, hire out their labor, buy land, move as they pleased, and, if they wished, hold slaves themselves. But, by the 1640s, Virginia was forbidding blacks the use of firearms. In the 1660s marriages between white women and black slaves were being described as "shameful Matches" and "the Disgrace of our Nation"; during the next few decades interracial fornication became subject to unusually severe punishment and interracial marriage was banned.

These discriminatory steps were slight, however, in comparison with the stripping away of rights that began toward the end of the century. In rapid succession slaves lost their right to testify before a court; to engage in any kind of commercial activity, either as buyer or seller; to hold property; to participate in the political process; to congregate in public places with more than two or three of their fellows; to travel without permission; and to engage in legal marriage or parenthood. In some colonies legislatures even prohibited the right to education and religion, for they thought these might encourage the germ of freedom

in slaves. More and more steps were taken to contain them tightly in a legal system that made no allowance for their education, welfare, or future advancement. The restraints on the slave owner's freedom to deal with slaves in any way he or she saw fit were gradually cast away. Early in the eighteenth century many colonies passed laws forbidding the manumission of slaves by individual owners. This was a step designed to squelch the strivings of slaves for freedom and to discourage those who had been freed from helping fellow Africans to gain their liberty.

The movement to annul all the slave's rights had both pragmatic and psychological dimensions. The greater the proportion of slaves in the population, the greater the danger to white society, for every colonist knew that when he purchased a man or woman in chains he had bought a potential insurrectionist. The larger the specter of black revolt, the greater the effort of white society to neutralize it by further restricting the rights and activities of slaves. Thus, following a black revolt in 1712 that took the lives of nine whites and wounded others, the New York legislature passed a slave code that rivaled those of the Southern colonies. Throughout the Southern colonies the obsessive fear of slave insurrection ushered in institutionalized violence as the means of ensuring social stability. Allied to this need for greater and greater control was the psychological compulsion to dehumanize slaves by taking from them the rights that connoted their humanity. It was far easier to rationalize the merciless exploitation of those who had been defined by law as something less than human. "The planters," wrote an Englishman in eighteenth-century Jamaica, "do not want to be told that their Negroes are human creatures. If they believe them to be of human kind, they cannot regard them . . . as no better than dogs or horses."

Thus occurred one of the great paradoxes in American history—the building of what some thought was to be a utopia in the wilderness upon the backs of black men and women wrenched from their African homeland and forced into a system of abject slavery. America was imagined as a liberating and regenerating force, it has been pointed out, but became the scene of a "grotesque inconsistency." In the land heralded for freedom and individual opportunity, the practice of slavery, unknown for centuries in the mother country, was reinstituted. Following other parts of the New World, North America became the scene of "a disturbing retrogression from the course of historical progress."

The mass enslavement of Africans profoundly affected white racial prejudice. Once institutionalized, slavery cast Africans into such lowly roles that the initial bias against them could only be confirmed and vastly strengthened. Initially unfavorable impressions of Africans had coincided with labor needs to bring about their mass enslavement. But it required slavery itself to harden the negative racial feelings into a deep and almost unshakable prejudice that continued to grow for centuries. The colonizers had devised a labor system that kept the African in the Americas at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid. Irrevocably caught in the web of perpetual servitude, the slave was allowed no further opportunity to prove the white stereotype wrong. Socially and legally defined as less than people, kept in a degraded and debased position, virtually without power in their relationships with white society, Afro-Americans became a truly servile, ignoble, degraded people in the eyes of the Europeans. This was used as further reason to keep them in slavery, for it was argued that they were worth nothing better and were incapable of occupying any higher role. In this long evolution of racial attitudes in America, nothing was of greater importance than the enslavement of Africans.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 How did conditions in the New World transform the traditional character of the slave trade? Why?

What crop had a particular effect, and why did it become so important in international trade?

2 What effects did the sudden growth of the slave trade in the seventeenth century have on conditions in Europe and in Africa? What had African culture been like before the seventeenth century? How had it compared with European culture?

3 Describe the conditions of the Atlantic slave trade. What was the purpose of physical cruelty in the slave trade? What do you think it would have been like to be an African stolen from his or her native land and taken across the middle passage? What might be the physical and psychological effects of such an experience?

4 By what process did black slavery gradually become established in the British North American colonies? How were the colonies unusual in this? Why did it develop less in the North than in the southern colonies? Why was New York an exception?

5 How does Gary Nash believe that slavery and racial prejudice influenced each other? What are the implications of his conclusions for the subsequent history of America up to the present day?