



# The Atlantic Slave Trade

## MAIN IDEA

**CULTURAL INTERACTION** To meet their growing labor needs, Europeans enslaved millions of Africans in the Americas.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Descendants of enslaved Africans represent a significant part of the Americas' population today.

## TERMS & NAMES

- Atlantic slave trade
- triangular trade
- middle passage

**SETTING THE STAGE** Sugar plantations and tobacco farms required a large supply of workers to make them profitable for their owners. European owners had planned to use Native Americans as a source of cheap labor. But millions of Native Americans died from disease, warfare, and brutal treatment. Therefore, the Europeans in Brazil, the Caribbean, and the southern colonies of North America soon turned to Africa for workers. This demand for cheap labor resulted in the brutalities of the slave trade.

### TAKING NOTES

**Recognizing Effects** Use a diagram like the one below to list effects of the Atlantic slave trade.

#### *Consequences of the slave trade*

##### *I. in Africa*

A.

B.

##### *II. in the Americas*

A.

B.

## The Causes of African Slavery

Beginning around 1500, European colonists in the Americas who needed cheap labor began using enslaved Africans on plantations and farms.

**Slavery in Africa** Slavery had existed in Africa for centuries. In most regions, it was a relatively minor institution. The spread of Islam into Africa during the seventh century, however, ushered in an increase in slavery and the slave trade. Muslim rulers in Africa justified enslavement with the Muslim belief that non-Muslim prisoners of war could be bought and sold as slaves. As a result, between 650 and 1600, Muslims transported about 17 million Africans to the Muslim lands of North Africa and Southwest Asia.

In most African and Muslim societies, slaves had some legal rights and an opportunity for social mobility. In the Muslim world, a few slaves even occupied positions of influence and power. Some served as generals in the army. In African societies, slaves could escape their bondage in numerous ways, including marrying into the family they served.

**The Demand for Africans** The first Europeans to explore Africa were the Portuguese during the 1400s. Initially, Portuguese traders were more interested in trading for gold than for captured Africans. That changed with the colonization of the Americas, as natives began dying by the millions.

Europeans saw advantages in using Africans in the Americas. First, many Africans had been exposed to European diseases and had built up some immunity. Second, many Africans had experience in farming and could be taught plantation work. Third, Africans were less likely to escape because they did not know their way around the new land. Fourth, their skin color made it easier to catch them if they escaped and tried to live among others.

**MAIN IDEA****Analyzing Motives**

**A** What advantages did Europeans see in enslaving Africans?

In time, the buying and selling of Africans for work in the Americas—known as the **Atlantic slave trade**—became a massive enterprise. Between 1500 and 1600, nearly 300,000 Africans were transported to the Americas. During the next century, that number climbed to almost 1.3 million. By the time the Atlantic slave trade ended around 1870, Europeans had imported about 9.5 million Africans to the Americas. **A**

**Spain and Portugal Lead the Way** The Spanish took an early lead in importing Africans to the Americas. Spain moved on from the Caribbean and began to colonize the American mainland. As a result, the Spanish imported and enslaved thousands more Africans. By 1650, nearly 300,000 Africans labored throughout Spanish America on plantations and in gold and silver mines.

By this time, however, the Portuguese had surpassed the Spanish in the importation of Africans to the Americas. During the 1600s, Brazil dominated the European sugar market. As the colony's sugar industry grew, so too did European colonists' demand for cheap labor. During the 17th century, more than 40 percent of all Africans brought to the Americas went to Brazil.

## Slavery Spreads Throughout the Americas

As the other European nations established colonies in the Americas, their demand for cheap labor grew. Thus, they also began to import large numbers of Africans.

**England Dominates the Slave Trade** As England's presence in the Americas grew, it came to dominate the Atlantic slave trade. From 1690 until England abolished the slave trade in 1807, it was the leading carrier of enslaved Africans. By the time the slave trade ended, the English had transported nearly 1.7 million Africans to their colonies in the West Indies.

African slaves were also brought to what is now the United States. In all, nearly 400,000 Africans were sold to Britain's North American colonies. Once in North America, however, the slave population steadily grew. By 1830, roughly 2 million slaves toiled in the United States.

## History *in* Depth

### Slavery

Slavery probably began with the development of farming about 10,000 years ago. Farmers used prisoners of war to work for them.

Slavery has existed in societies around the world. People were enslaved in civilizations from Egypt to China to India. The picture at the right shows slaves working in a Roman coal mine.

Race was not always a factor in slavery. Often, slaves were captured prisoners of war, or people of a different nationality or religion.

However, the slavery that developed in the Americas was based largely on race. Europeans viewed black people as naturally inferior. Because of this, slavery in the Americas was hereditary.



**African Cooperation and Resistance** Many African rulers and merchants played a willing role in the Atlantic slave trade. Most European traders, rather than travel inland, waited in ports along the coasts of Africa. African merchants, with the help of local rulers, captured Africans to be enslaved. They then delivered them to the Europeans in exchange for gold, guns, and other goods. **B**

As the slave trade grew, some African rulers voiced their opposition to the practice. Nonetheless, the slave trade steadily grew. Lured by its profits, many African rulers continued to participate. African merchants developed new trade routes to avoid rulers who refused to cooperate.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Analyzing Issues**

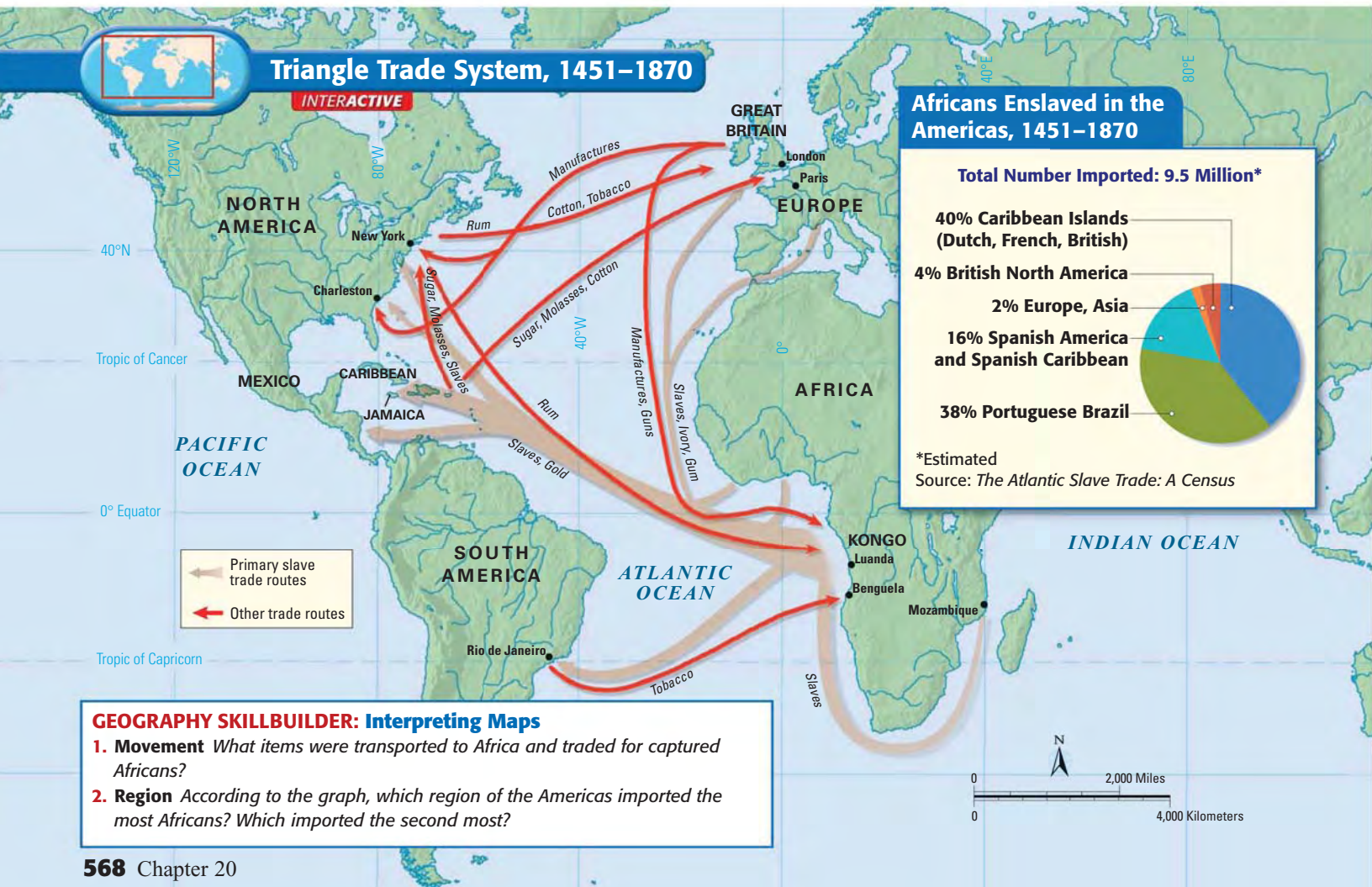
**B** Why did many African rulers participate in the Atlantic slave trade?

## A Forced Journey

After being captured, African men and women were shipped to the Americas as part of a profitable trade network. Along the way, millions of Africans died.

**The Triangular Trade** Africans transported to the Americas were part of a transatlantic trading network known as the **triangular trade**. Over one trade route, Europeans transported manufactured goods to the west coast of Africa. There, traders exchanged these goods for captured Africans. The Africans were then transported across the Atlantic and sold in the West Indies. Merchants bought sugar, coffee, and tobacco in the West Indies and sailed to Europe with these products.

On another triangular route, merchants carried rum and other goods from the New England colonies to Africa. There they exchanged their merchandise for Africans. The traders transported the Africans to the West Indies and sold them for sugar and molasses. They then sold these goods to rum producers in New England.



**GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps**

- 1. Movement** What items were transported to Africa and traded for captured Africans?
- 2. Region** According to the graph, which region of the Americas imported the most Africans? Which imported the second most?

## > Analyzing Primary Sources

### The Horrors of the Middle Passage

One African, Olaudah Equiano, recalled the inhumane conditions on his trip from West Africa to the West Indies at age 12 in 1762.

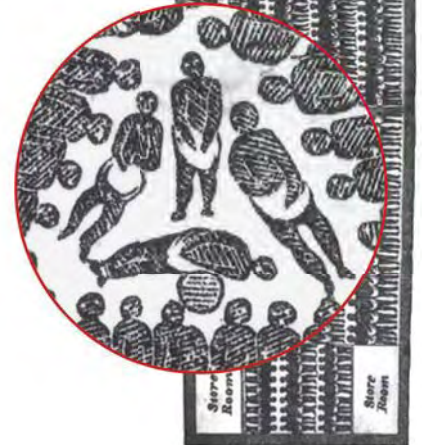
#### PRIMARY SOURCE

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation [greeting] in my nostrils as I never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat . . . but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across . . . the windlass, while the other flogged me severely.

**OLAUDAH EQUIANO**, quoted in  
*Eyewitness: The Negro in American History*



This diagram of a British slave ship shows how slave traders packed Africans onto slave ships in the hold below decks for the brutal middle passage.



#### DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS

- 1. Making Inferences** *Why might the white men have forced Equiano to eat?*
- 2. Drawing Conclusions** *What does the diagram of the slave ship suggest about conditions on board?*

Various other transatlantic routes existed. The “triangular” trade encompassed a network of trade routes crisscrossing the northern and southern colonies, the West Indies, England, Europe, and Africa. The network carried a variety of traded goods.

**The Middle Passage** The voyage that brought captured Africans to the West Indies and later to North and South America was known as the **middle passage**. It was considered the middle leg of the transatlantic trade triangle. Sickening cruelty characterized this journey. In African ports, European traders packed Africans into the dark holds of large ships. On board, Africans endured whippings and beatings from merchants, as well as diseases that swept through the vessel. Numerous Africans died from disease or physical abuse aboard the slave ships. Many others committed suicide by drowning. Scholars estimate that roughly 20 percent of the Africans aboard each slave ship perished during the brutal trip.

## Slavery in the Americas

Africans who survived their ocean voyage faced a difficult life in the Americas. Forced to work in a strange land, enslaved Africans coped in a variety of ways.

**A Harsh Life** Upon arriving in the Americas, captured Africans usually were auctioned off to the highest bidder. After being sold, slaves worked in mines or fields or as domestic servants. Slaves lived a grueling existence. Many lived on little food in small, dreary huts. They worked long days and suffered beatings. In much of the Americas, slavery was a lifelong condition, as well as a hereditary one.

**Resistance and Rebellion** To cope with the horrors of slavery, Africans developed a way of life based on their cultural heritage. They kept alive such things as their musical traditions as well as the stories of their ancestors.

Slaves also found ways to resist. They made themselves less productive by breaking tools, uprooting plants, and working slowly. Thousands also ran away.

Some slaves pushed their resistance to open revolt. As early as 1522, about 20 slaves on Hispaniola attacked and killed several Spanish colonists. Larger revolts occurred throughout Spanish settlements during the 16th century.

Occasional uprisings also occurred in Brazil, the West Indies, and North America. In 1739, a group of slaves in South Carolina led an uprising known as the Stono Rebellion. Uprisings continued into the 1800s.

## Consequences of the Slave Trade

The Atlantic slave trade had a profound impact on both Africa and the Americas. In Africa, numerous cultures lost generations of their fittest members—their young and able—to European traders and plantation owners. In addition, countless African families were torn apart. Many of them were never reunited. The slave trade devastated African societies in another way: by introducing guns into the continent.

While they were unwilling participants in the growth of the colonies, African slaves contributed greatly to the economic and cultural development of the Americas. Their greatest contribution was their labor. Without their back-breaking work, colonies such as those on Haiti and Barbados may not have survived. In addition to their muscle, enslaved Africans brought their expertise, especially in agriculture. They also brought their culture. Their art, music, religion, and food continue to influence American societies.

The influx of so many Africans to the Americas also has left its mark on the very population itself. From the United States to Brazil, many of the nations of the Western Hemisphere today have substantial African-American populations. Many Latin American countries have sizable mixed-race populations.

As the next section explains, Africans were not the only cargo transported across the Atlantic during the colonization of the Americas. The settlement of the Americas brought many different items from Europe, Asia, and Africa to North and South America. It also introduced items from the Americas to the rest of the world.

### SECTION

### 3

### ASSESSMENT

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Atlantic slave trade
- triangular trade
- middle passage

#### USING YOUR NOTES

2. What seems to have been the most important consequence? Explain.

*Consequences of the slave trade*

*I. in Africa*

*A.*

*B.*

*II. in the Americas*

*A.*

*B.*

#### MAIN IDEAS

3. What effect did the spread of Islam have on the slave trade?

4. How did enslaved Africans resist their bondage?

5. How did African slaves contribute to the development of the Americas?

#### CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. **COMPARING AND CONTRASTING** How was slavery in the Americas different from slavery in Africa?

7. **SYNTHESIZING** What does the percentage of enslaved Africans imported to the Caribbean Islands and Brazil suggest about the racial makeup of these areas?

8. **MAKING INFERENCES** Why do you think the slave trade flourished for so long?

9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **CULTURAL INTERACTION** Imagine you are an African ruler. Write a **letter** to a European leader in which you try to convince him or her to stop participating in the slave trade.

#### CONNECT TO TODAY MAKING A MAP

Research which of the original 13 colonies had the greatest numbers of slaves in the late 18th century. Then make a **map** of the colonies in which you show the numbers for each state.