
CHAPTER ONE

Atlantic Origins

Sullivan's Island, a flat, three-by-one-mile stretch of sand facing the Atlantic Ocean at the north entrance of Charleston Harbor in South Carolina, has had a prominent role in America's history. The island's Fort Moultrie held out against the bombardment of British warships in an early battle of the American Revolution and, 85 years later, housed guns that fired on Fort Sumter to begin the Civil War. But Sullivan's Island has a deeper and more difficult history. Through most of the eighteenth century, it was on this island's southern beach that more enslaved men, women, and children from Africa took their first steps onto American soil than anywhere else on the North American mainland. A "pest house," standing near the island's southern tip, was where many of the captive Africans stayed during a period of quarantine before being taken to Charleston for sale. Planters from around the region purchased such individuals to augment their labor supply, essential to their prosperity, but they wanted nothing to do with any infectious diseases the Africans might bring from their homeland or from nearly two months spent in the incubator-like holds of slave ships.

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What occurred in Charleston was going on, if in lesser volume and with difference in details, at other ports and in various large bays and rivers of North America, but the phenomenon was much larger still. A trans-Atlantic trading of slaves existed for over three and a half centuries along the Atlantic side of the Americas, from these mainland North American colonies down to the Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French colonies of the Caribbean, Central America, and mainland South America. All of the colonies were part of an enormous economic system that linked the four continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The system relied on European management, capital, and shipping for American production of staple goods, mostly sugar, for European consumption. By the seventeenth century, those in control of the system preferred African slaves as their labor force in the colonies.

The idea of importing labor from some distance for intensive work on export crops was an old one. Romans had done this on a grand scale two centuries before the Christian era, when slaves made up 40 percent of the population of the Italian Peninsula and gangs of enslaved men and women worked the estates of the Roman grandees. Although slavery declined as a European economic institution following the Roman Empire's collapse, populations around the Mediterranean heart of the old empire and in much of continental Europe continued to accept the Roman legal status of slaves, which considered such humans as chattel, the property of another. Much later, this would help provide a legal basis for Crusaders to enslave their captive enemies—as Muslims had been doing to Christians for some time, using their own rationale—and to sell such captives off to the agricultural enterprises that were popping up in the eastern Mediterranean after the eleventh century.

By the end of the thirteenth century, a plantation system had come into being, centered on the island of Cyprus and geared to providing sugar to a European market. Like the plantations across the Atlantic half a millennium later, these relied on

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European capital, management, and shipping. Some who worked in the cane fields were free and some were serfs, but increasingly sugar production came to be identified with slave labor. Mediterranean shippers brought in workers from the Balkans and southern Russia (people who spoke Slavic languages; thus the word “slave,” from “Slav”) along with others from Asia Minor and North Africa. Some of those purchased in North Africa had been marched across the Sahara Desert from their homes in the Western Sudan. For over two centuries the Mediterranean plantations thrived and slavery spread, first to Crete and Sicily and then to coastal Spain and Portugal. By 1450, on the eve of European expansion into the South Atlantic, slave-based sugar plantations existed in the western Mediterranean and even on nearby Atlantic islands.

Many of the men who ventured away from their European homelands after the middle of the fifteenth century and established outposts or acquired lands on both sides of the Atlantic had motives less selfless than spreading Christianity or increasing geographical knowledge. European rulers sponsored many such enterprises to garner wealth for the state, and most individuals involved had an eye out for personal gain as well. Some state-sponsored enterprises found wealth in the parts of Africa or America that held gold or silver, but most of the lands bordering the Atlantic did not possess such obvious riches. So in the coastal and insular areas the newcomers turned to export agriculture, following the existing model with sugar as the focus. Thus developed, at a slow but regular pace, an agricultural economy along the tropical Atlantic rim, first on islands off West Africa, with São Tomé becoming the leading sugar producer by the beginning of the sixteenth century, and then, by the end of that century, in northeastern Brazil. By 1640 an export economy had spread to the great sugar islands of the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean and, on a smaller scale and outside the tropics, to English tobacco-growing colonies on the North American mainland. As the Atlantic economy expanded, the plantation

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model, on a larger scale than ever before, became the accepted way of making profits from the great expanses of land.

But establishing plantations in distant territories had a hitch. Although sugar remained in great demand, the land was productive, the weather was appropriate, and the technology for processing cane existed and steadily improved, finding adequate numbers of workers to grow this labor-intensive crop became difficult. Those native to America never worked out as field workers in the way European landowners hoped they would. Once in captivity or even in close proximity to Europeans, Native Americans died rapidly from diseases long endemic to the Eurasian and African landmasses—smallpox, mumps, and measles—that the newcomers brought with them. Those who did not perish after having been enslaved proved remarkably able to resist pressures to adapt to strict work regimes, partly because they could run away relatively easily—their homes and extended families being close and their knowledge of the surroundings often superior to that of their captors.

But what about Europeans? Even with labor needs in the Americas rising sharply, Europeans were unwilling to enslave other Europeans in the same way they enslaved people they encountered off the continent. “Bonded” persons—often criminals sentenced to labor or men who willingly agreed (in a document called an indenture) to a period of labor in exchange for passage to America and, they hoped, subsequent opportunity—were not a great deal better at regimented work across the Atlantic than the Indians. White laborers fell victim to different diseases, among them the tropical scourges malaria and yellow fever. And should they run away, white servants might pass themselves off as members of the ruling society. Just as important, rising opportunities for Europeans at home, either with armies during the almost continual continental warfare of the era or in jobs paying wages that rose steadily over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, limited the number of those willing to make the arduous ocean passage for

the rigorous labor that awaited them, with only a sketchy promise of economic or social gain.

Africans, however, performed effectively, in a relative sense, as plantation workers under the regimented conditions in the Americas, and European planters soon recognized this even if they did not understand why. The African homelands of black slaves were places where Afro-Eurasian and tropical diseases were endemic. Africans who survived into adolescence had already acquired some immunity to smallpox, mumps, and measles as well as to malaria and yellow fever. So in the fresh mix of diseases up and down the Atlantic rim of the Americas, even under the harsh conditions of the plantation environment, Africans lived three to five times longer than their white counterparts. This alone made them more productive workers and, hence, better investments. Finally, Africans could not run home or be mistaken for a member of the society of planters.

None of this, of course, would have made any difference had African laborers been in short supply or too expensive for American planters to purchase. But through most of the years of the Atlantic trade, prices for Africans remained favorable in relation to the price of the crops they produced. For example, an English planter on the Caribbean island of Jamaica in 1690 had to pay £20 for a “prime” male African, direct from Guinea. That laborer could produce about five hundred pounds of sugar in a year, which the planter could sell for £20, and thus in a year recover the original cost of the slave. In short, African laborers turned out to be the best deal in economic terms, which were the only terms of interest to the landowners, shippers, financiers, and merchants involved in the plantation system.

Atlantic Africa

Slaves came to the North American mainland colonies over one of two routes. One was from the West Indies and involved

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shippers of merchandise, who topped off their cargoes with slaves as opportunities offered. A good number of ships came to the colonies so laden, especially in the earlier years of slave trading, but they brought relatively few slaves before the fledgling United States abolished the importation of slaves in 1808. The overwhelming number of slave imports, close to nine out of ten of the men, women, and children, arrived directly from Africa or a West-Indian island after a short layover following the trans-Atlantic passage. With notable exceptions, especially in the early years of settlement, these newcomers were unacculturated, raw, frightened—Chesapeake planters characterized them as “outlandish”—persons not long away from their homes in Africa.

Nearly all slaves brought to North America came from the coast and interior of West and West-Central Africa. Traders from England, one of the English North American mainland colonies, or (after 1783) the United States of America acquired and carried 97 percent of the 383,000 slaves arriving in the North American mainland over the 189 years of legal slave trading to the region,¹ and these slavers never developed close, long-standing links with merchants of just one or two specific African regions. Instead, they purchased captives at different markets along over 3,000 miles of African coastline, from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south. Certain regions supplied more captives at some times than at others, depending on population density, level of warfare, religious conflict, and environmental conditions. Conflicts in Europe that spilled onto the high seas affected when and where slavers sought cargoes. The particular market a captain visited might depend on long-standing trade relationships with a local

¹ Figures presented here of enslaved Africans disembarking in English portions of mainland North America—the United States of America after 1783—are for the entire period of legal trading to the region, to 1808. Three-quarters of these Africans (283,000 men, women, and children) arrived during the colonial period, through 1783.

merchant community, but it might depend also on intelligence of good trading at a given port.

Almost half of all enslaved persons coming to the British mainland came from one of two regions of Atlantic Africa, in nearly equal proportions: Senegambia, the coastal region beginning north of the Senegal River and ending five hundred miles south, in today's Guinea, and including the Cape Verde Islands; and West-Central Africa, which includes all of Africa's Atlantic coast south of Cape Lopez, 450 miles north of the Congo River. For Senegambia, cyclical drought, warfare across a broad hinterland, and late-eighteenth-century conflict associated with the spread of Islam lay behind this region's steady supply of slaves. Europeans identified men and women from this region as Mandingo (Mandinka), Fula (Fulbe), Wolof, Serer, Floop (Jola), Bambara, Balanta, or Papel.²

In West-Central Africa, ecological crises played a role in this region's large supply of slaves. Portuguese merchants dominated the southern part and carried most of their slaves to Brazil, but English slavers frequented ports north of the Congo and brought persons they identified as Kongo, Tio, and Matamba. As the eighteenth century progressed, more slaves came to North America from the Portuguese ports of Luanda and Benguela and were identified as Ovimbundu and Kwanza.

The Bight of Biafra—today's coastal southeastern Nigeria where the Igbo (Ibo) and Ibibio languages are spoken, and also

²Regions of Africa's Atlantic coast designated here are those used in *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: An Enhanced and On-line Database*, viewable at <http://www.slavevoyages.org>. Each of the regions has a significant hinterland. When referring to groupings of African people, it is important to recognize that the designations are Europeans' notions of who Africans were rather than necessarily the Africans' sense of it. It is not certain that Africans held the same idea of their identity as Europeans did.

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today's Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and northern Gabon—was the supplier of another 19 percent. Here, high population density and commercial relationships between English shippers and local suppliers were reasons for the volume of slave exports to English America. Other regions of supply for the mainland market included the Gold Coast (roughly today's coastal Ghana), 15 percent (Ashanti, Fanti); Sierra Leone, the region including most of today's Guinea and all of Sierra Leone, 11 percent (Susu, Mandinka, Jalonka, Temne, Mende); and the Windward Coast (on both sides of Cape Palmas, between Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast), 6 percent (Vai, Gouru, Kpelle, Kru). Two percent each came from the Bight of Benin, between the Gold Coast and the Bight of Biafra, and the Indian Ocean Islands, around the Cape of Good Hope and up the eastern side of the continent.

The lands of West and West-Central Africa's Atlantic zone are among the continent's most livable. The population, if light by comparison to recent times, seems generally to have been substantial back through the centuries. At the heart of the region are the rain forests of the Guinea Coast and Congo River basin. Here, proximity to the equator keeps the land under the influence of tropical convergence zones that generate regular and often bountiful rainfall. Vegetation is lush; palms and hardwoods abound, overshadowing smaller plants that compete for sunlight filtering through the canopy of leaves. As one moves away from the equator, rainfall diminishes, as does plant life. North of the Guinea Coast, forests give way gradually to wooded savanna, the ground cover becoming less dense going northward. Across the central belt of West Africa stretch the enormous sky and seemingly endless horizons that make up the broad reaches of the Western Sudan. For British colonials, it was "miles and miles of bloody Africa." Most of the population here sustains itself through farming and herding. Farther north still, rolling grasslands peppered with trees

become drier until vegetation grows sparse. North African Arabs called this dry zone the *Sahel*, the southern “shore” of the Sahara Desert. It holds a small population of herders who move their animals with the rainfall.

Similarly, to the south the Congo forests blend into the southern savannas, and even into desert below Angola. Rains come to both savanna areas seasonally, through their respective summer months, when vegetation takes on new life and crops thrive. Human life is not so healthy during the rains, however, for disease-spreading mosquitoes come out in profusion, using standing water for breeding. Back through time it was in the dry season, when crops were in and lands dried out, that the savannas saw more travel, long-distance trade, and warfare.

Any broad discussion of the lives of Africans prior to their enslavement and shipment to America has to misrepresent the way things were. Individual and localized African societies differed greatly to begin with, and they changed over time. More and more, too, we are finding out how the centuries-long procurement of captives for the Atlantic trade fundamentally altered the way people lived across vast regions inland from the ocean. The peoples of West and West-Central Africa spoke several hundred mutually unintelligible languages and practiced social customs that, in some extremes, were as different from one another as they were from those of Europeans. Furthermore, the English colonies of North America imported Africans for nearly two hundred years, and African societies changed as much over this time as did the American society the slaves entered—or perhaps, because of all of the slave capturing, even more. Life in, say, Angola in 1600 was different in many ways from life in Senegal at the same time, just as it was different from life in Angola in 1800. So the task of describing the “African background” of African Americans seems even more difficult than describing life in America from 1607 to 1790.

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Africa in the Era of Atlantic Trade, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Still, Africans from the slave-trading area exhibited some elements of cultural homogeneity through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as they did before and after. Most identified primarily with family and descent groups. An extended family,

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occupying a section of a village, lived and worked together. West Africans, with the exception of the Akan of the Gold Coast, traced descent through the male side of the family, while West-Central and Central Africans followed matrilineal descent. Most practiced polygyny, men exhibiting their wealth and status with the number of their wives and size of their families. Security lay in kinsmen, sometimes distant, upon whom one's family could rely in times of need, and in stores of food or animals on the hoof. Although larger centers for trade existed, particularly in some of the interior river towns, small villages were common throughout the whole region.

The vast majority of these African men and women also relied on one of two basic modes of subsistence: pastoralism or agriculture. Herdsmen kept cattle, sheep, or goats on the northern and southern extremes of the Atlantic slave-gathering area, where rainfall was insufficient for growing crops. Farmers of the savannas grew rice, millet, sorghum, or maize—the latter introduced from the Americas by the Portuguese before 1540. Those of the more heavily wooded areas nearer the equator grew yams and manioc (another import from across the Atlantic) or harvested bananas, plantains, or palm products. Some of these distinctions are not so important when one considers that Senegalese millet farmers, Nigerian yam farmers, and Angolan maize farmers used similar methods of cultivation, mostly variations of slash-and-burn with hand tools, or that herders often lived in symbiotic relationships with farmers, exchanging products from their animals, including dung for fuel and fertilizer, for food for themselves and their livestock.

Students of African-American history have been among those pointing out cultural principles and assumptions that most West and West-Central Africans shared. Mechal Sobel in *The World They Made Together* (1987) calls attention to common African concepts of space, time, home, and the afterlife; Philip D. Morgan in *Slave Counterpoint* (1998) mentions shared assumptions of work, personal interaction, and aesthetic expression. These

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authors note the commonalities in the broad range of African cultures to show the basis for the African-American subculture that would come into existence in America—and Sobel argues there is much from these African ways that entered into American culture generally.

Still, it is important to note that in many parts of Atlantic Africa, local identity and different languages tempered any sense of broad unity. Maps showing language families spanning vast stretches of the savannas and forests fail to give a complete picture of black Africa's linguistic diversity, and political differences were often greater, a fact that the existence of large conquest states or "empires" of earlier or later times often masks. In no sense did black Africans identify themselves as members of a "tribe" and thus take their place in a large sociopolitical realm of "tribal Africa." Colonial officials, early anthropologists, museum curators, and others inclined to use European taxonomies to bring understanding to the people they encountered—and thus give cartographers the kind of information they needed to construct "tribal" maps—created that false sense, and it is one that dies hard.

Individual allegiances were normally to the extended family and the village. Sometimes they carried more broadly, and nebulously, to a descent group or clan. In places there also was strong identification with, and attachment to, a social class, as with the vaunted *ceddo* warriors in Senegambia. When in need of protection from enemies or when conquered and forced, families, villages, and clans developed identities with a larger political unit—a state or even an empire. Indeed, increased raiding that accompanied the quest for slaves to meet the growing Atlantic demand brought persons in some areas to seek protection through greater political organization. Certainly, relations existed among and across political and language boundaries. Long-distance traders moved among people, religions and secret societies spread and provided a commonality across large areas, and momentous historical events united Africans at various times. But most frequently,

blacks from West and West-Central Africa had a restricted definition of their own group. In general, outlooks were local. “We” included the people of the lineage, the village, the small political unit. “They” included everyone else.

Among many of the societies of West and West-Central Africa, slavery had long been an established social and economic institution. There is no longer any real doubt concerning slavery’s importance in much of precolonial Africa: in some regions of West Africa in the nineteenth century, slaves, or persons subservient to and dependent on others, made up from two-thirds to three-quarters of the population. Why this was the case and what slavery in precolonial African societies was like are questions that have perplexed outside observers for a long time.

As with other societies, a critical element in Africans’ reliance on slavery was the need for labor. Parts of Africa had productive land, indeed, but because of high infant and child mortality, coupled with occasional food scarcity caused by droughts and pestilence, African people often had difficulty simply maintaining the size of their existing population, let alone having it grow so as to have more people to work more land. Of course, for a typical family, having sons marry and then waiting for the offspring of the marriage to mature was one way to obtain more family members and workers, and this they did, explaining at least partly the widespread African proclivity to have large numbers of children. But this was not cheap, as the young man’s family typically had to pay the woman’s family a brideprice—the exchange of wealth that was part of most African marital relationships, symbolic of mutual obligations and integral to the maintenance of the extended kinship network that held together society—and, with perhaps half of all children born dying before age five, it might never pay. Even under the best circumstances, it took years to rear productive offspring. But a family could also invest in a slave, who could be put to work almost immediately in productive ways to help the family and thus bring a rapid return on the investment.

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Who owned or sought to acquire slaves? Simply put, all in the appropriate classes with sufficient means and desire to preserve or increase their wealth, status, and power. Farming families obtained slaves to step up crop production; herding families used slaves to help manage and tend the livestock. Rulers and others with means owned slaves to perform their routine work, guard their courts or homesteads, grow their crops, tend their animals, weave cloth, mine ores, and more. When societies required armies for protection or to launch offensive raids, rulers obtained slaves to make them soldiers of the state. Traders used slaves to provide food for them and their families, freeing them to indulge in commerce and in some places to raid for slaves. Persons specializing in religious work kept slaves to produce food while they conducted religious training or performed any of a variety of supernatural activities for their clientele. Although slavery in Africa differed from the chattel slavery that existed in the Americas, it is difficult to point out the differences between the two systems because slavery in Atlantic Africa was different from one place or circumstance to another.

One thing that seems to have varied less than others was the role prescribed for women. Indeed, women made up the majority of slaves in some regions of West and West-Central Africa, and sometimes they brought a higher price than men, especially if headed for the trans-Saharan market. This stemmed from the obvious reasons that women could produce useful offspring and were coveted by men who had concubines or large harems, but also from the fact that in many ways women proved to be the main producers in African societies. Women also were more easily assimilated into a new society and less likely to escape from it.

An important difference between the household slavery that existed in West and West-Central Africa and the chattel slavery that would exist in colonial America is that enslaved men and women in Africa never lost society's recognition as human beings, whereas those in the latter, from early on, were regarded primarily as commodities. Slaves associated with an African family often

performed the same variety of tasks as other family members, though sometimes individuals specialized in a single craft, such as weaving. Over several generations, and increasingly with marriage and childbirth, slaves might become recognized members of the household, no longer liable for sale and forced relocation. Slaves of royal lineage might serve in offices of state, as soldiers or administrators, and become important personages. This is not to say, however, that slaves and their descendants ever ceased entirely being outsiders, making them vulnerable to exploitation by the insiders, the original family members, when the latter deemed such action in their interest. Slaves' fortunes might rise and fall with the wealth and position of the family, but they would never entirely lose their status as persons other than kin.

As in other places, slaves in Africa were most often obtained initially by more or less violent means. Warfare—including formal engagements between opposing forces and less formal raids, banditry, and kidnapping—was the most common method. (“It is inaccurate to think that Africans enslaved their brothers,” writes Paul E. Lovejoy in *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 3rd ed. (2011). “Rather, Africans enslaved their enemies.”) The Bambara wars along the upper Niger in the first half of the eighteenth century supplied prisoners for European vessels visiting Senegambia ports at the time, for example, just as wars related to the expansion of Islam did for the same ports and for Sierra Leone over the half-century that followed. But in Old Calabar, in the Bight of Biafra, “The great Bulk of [slaves],” according to English sailor William James, were not taken as prisoners in formal warfare, but “in piratical Excursions, or by Treachery and Surprise.” Even wars not fought explicitly to garner slaves often bore such results, for prisoners were usually enslaved and sold or put to work locally to help defray the costs of waging the war. If ransom was out of the question, there were other considerations. Boys could be trained as future soldiers; girls and women could be made concubines; and slaves of either sex could be given

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as gifts to elders in charge of religious shrines. But captives were not of greatest value in any capacity near their place of capture. Those close to home were likely to escape. Wise captors thus sold away prisoners quickly when no pressing needs existed for their labor. And even if the local need for labor was strong, it was often better to sell off local captives and buy slaves from some distance away. For these reasons, African armies often had a following of merchants eager to buy prisoners at low prices and then march them to distant markets where they would bring a better price.

Less violent methods of enslaving people involved condemnation through judicial or religious proceedings for civil crimes or religious wrongdoing. West Africans did not put people in jail for long periods; instead, they relied on physical punishment or enslavement. As Atlantic slaving grew heavy, slavery probably became a more common punishment for an increasing number of offenses—adultery, kidnapping, witchcraft, and theft. Even enslavement for indebtedness seems to have occurred more frequently as time went on. And, finally, there is evidence of individuals voluntarily enslaving their offspring, or even themselves, because they could not feed or otherwise take care of their families. The Scottish surgeon and explorer Mungo Park encountered a Mandinka ruler west of the Niger River in 1796, who had purchased a woman's son. "Observe that boy," said the man as he pointed to a five-year-old child. "[H]is mother has sold him to me for forty days' provision for herself and the rest of her family. I have bought another boy in the same manner."

African societies that regularly acquired slaves were also accustomed to trading them. In fact, export of slaves from black Africa had roots far deeper than the earliest individuals exported via the Atlantic. Various groups across West Africa sold slaves into the trade that led to and across the Sahara to North Africa, around the Mediterranean, and even beyond. The trans-Saharan slave trade out of black Africa lasted longer than the Atlantic trade, from before A.D. 700 to the eve of the twentieth century;

over this time, it was the means of exporting between 8 and 10 million people. The volume of the Atlantic slave trade did not surpass that of the trans-Saharan routes until the seventeenth century. For about the same length of time, Central Africans sold captives eastward toward the Indian Ocean for transportation north and east across that body of water to Arabia and Persia. All of this, in combination with the Atlantic trade, is what historians recognize as the African Diaspora—the movement of peoples from their sub-Saharan African homes to permanent locations in lands covering half the world.

So the onset of the Atlantic slave trade did not signal something new for the men, women, and children living in West and West-Central Africa. Once foreign demand for slave labor appeared along the Atlantic coast, Africans already had institutions in place to provide slaves in exchange for commodities they wanted. Little was different about trading slaves coastward instead of inland beyond the eventual buyers and their destination. Europeans via the Atlantic even brought most of the same products that Africans had long received in exchange for slaves: cloth, decorative items, metal ware, horses, and weapons. What would prove novel about the Atlantic trade, however, was its scale. No other exporting of slaves, at any time or place before or since, came close to the massive, involuntary movement of people out of West and West-Central Africa to the Americas over the three and one-half centuries following 1500.

The Atlantic Trade

The enterprise that brought African men and women to the Western Hemisphere, and after 1619 specifically to areas of the North American mainland under English control, was the Atlantic slave trade. It was an undertaking of massive proportions in terms of duration, area, and numbers of people involved. In its fullest sense, it began shortly before 1450 with the export of enslaved Africans

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to continental Europe and sugar plantations on the Atlantic islands off Africa, and lasted until after the middle of the nineteenth century. Over the course of more than four centuries, it caused the greatest intercontinental migration in world history to that time—more Africans than Europeans arrived in the Americas prior to the late nineteenth century—and it affected people and the destiny of their offspring on all lands bordering the Atlantic.

For many years, estimates of the number of Africans transported across the Atlantic varied widely. All agreed it was hard to determine. “The short answer is that nobody knows or ever will know,” wrote Basil Davidson in *Black Mother* (1961). “[E]ither the necessary records are missing or they were never made. The best one can do is to construct an estimate from confused and incomplete data.” Davidson’s estimate was 15 million. But in 1969 Philip D. Curtin, a historian familiar with shipping records in the Atlantic trade, produced a monumental work, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, which began by showing the shoddy chains of evidence for previous estimates and then attempted to determine the volume of the trade based on existing records. He offered a total of 9,216,100 slaves imported into the Americas, which meant that, based on an average mortality rate during the Atlantic crossing of 15 percent (and figuring in a small number of slaves taken to continental Europe or Atlantic Islands), approximately 11 million captive men, women, and children were taken from Africa over the years of Atlantic slaving. Debate generated by Curtin’s lowering of accepted estimates lasted for several decades, producing a slight upward revision of his figures.

This was the background for a project, launched in the late 1980s, to bring together data on slaving voyages gathered by a dozen or so researchers into one grand dataset that could provide the most complete understanding of Atlantic slaving. When it was first published in 1999, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1562–1867: A Database CD-ROM*, contained information on 27,233 slave voyages, or about 70 percent of all those undertaken. Then,

between 2001 and 2005, more data were included covering under-represented voyages to Latin America, and in 2006 Emory University received funding to provide public access, though a website, to the continually expanding dataset, which at last count contained records of 34,948 vessels that left Africa bound for the Americas with slaves, an estimated 81 percent of all such voyages that occurred between 1514 and 1866.

So we now state with confidence that 12.5 million captive men, women, and children embarked on slave ships from sub-Saharan Africa and that 10.7 million of these arrived at a port in the Americas. Annual averages of slaves crossing the Atlantic grew from 3,000 in the last quarter of the sixteenth century to 72,000 over the last quarter of the eighteenth century. No enterprise of such proportion could have existed through casual contact or chance capture. The Atlantic slave trade was carefully planned and organized big business.

Study of the Atlantic slave trade can involve more numbers and percentages than one might wish, but the numbers and percentages have their role. They are important for putting segments of the trade in temporal and spatial perspective. Only a small portion of the Atlantic trade brought captives to the English North American mainland. Of all the Africans who crossed the Atlantic as part of the slave trade, slightly over 4 percent of the total (over 100,000 fewer than entered the 166-square-mile Caribbean island of Barbados) came to the mainland colonies. A recent study, which factors in more transshipments from other colonies, puts the figure for mainland slave imports between 1619 and 1807 at 453,000. However, in such decades as the 1730s, when slave trading to the North American mainland was especially heavy, that trade accounted for over 12 percent of the total, and it was more than one-fourth of the slave trading conducted by the English at the time. In fact, through several decades on either side of 1750, the British mainland colonies vied with Barbados for second place, always behind Jamaica as England's leading slave market.

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From 1650 to after 1800, demand for slaves varied at ports along America's Atlantic and Gulf seaboard, from Salem in the Massachusetts Bay Colony down through Savannah in Georgia and around the northern Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans. The two largest and steadiest markets were the Chesapeake Bay, which touched the coasts of Virginia and Maryland, and coastal South Carolina and Georgia. The Chesapeake was the earliest big market. On average, more than 160 slaves entered there each year of the 1660s, a number that jumped to 500 per year by the 1690s and then to nearly 1,600 each year between 1701 and 1770. South Carolina did not begin importing persons directly from Africa in any number until after 1700, but once it began to do so, it quickly became the mainland colonies' largest importer—at that time and eventually for all time. By the 1730s South Carolina was importing more than 2,500 slaves each year. Demand for workers in neighboring Georgia appeared after 1755, but Georgia relied strictly on the re-export trade from the West Indies for its slaves until 1766, when the first vessel arrived in Savannah from the African coast. Thereafter, direct and much larger shipments became the norm.

The other two mainland market areas were the northern port cities—Philadelphia, New York, Providence, Boston, and Salem—and the northern Gulf of Mexico, primarily New Orleans. The northern cities provided a steadier market: between 1730 and 1770, nearly 22,000 slaves entered Pennsylvania, New York, or one of the New England colonies from Africa, which was almost one-third as many as entered the Chesapeake over the same period. The northern Gulf market was more sporadic. Most of its 11,000 slave imports before 1790 arrived in either the 1720s (6,400) or 1780s (2,250), with most in the later period, when Spain ruled Louisiana, coming from one or another Caribbean island.

The first persons of African descent to set foot on land that would become the United States did so long before the English so much as thought of establishing American colonies. Ira Berlin in *Many Thousands Gone* (1998) identifies “Atlantic creoles,”

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persons of mixed African, European, and eventually American ancestry, as products of the intercultural experience that occurred with the waxing Atlantic commerce. Atlantic creoles emerged first around European outposts along Africa's west coast, but they soon gravitated to Iberian ports and then accompanied the earliest European explorers and settlers of the Americas. "Familiar with the commerce of the Atlantic," Berlin writes, "fluent in its new languages, and intimate with its trade and cultures, they were cosmopolitan in its fullest sense."

Blacks accompanied such noted Spanish explorers as Ponce de León and Hernando de Soto, serving as everything from cultural broker to soldier to scout; one African, the celebrated Estévan, survived Pánfilo de Narváez's ill-fated 1528 expedition in Florida and with the other survivors embarked on an eight-year trek across the continent to the Pacific Coast, picking up native languages and negotiating for his small party along the way. By this time, enslaved Africans were being taken to Spanish possessions in the Caribbean and South America. Once Spain established a military outpost at St. Augustine in Florida in 1565, blacks worked on fortifications and participated in garrisoning the fort.

Atlantic creoles arrived soon after the English settled Jamestown, too. A Dutch ship brought the first Africans to the English North American mainland in 1619. In January 1620, Jamestown tobacco planter John Rolfe described the event in a letter to Sir Edwin Sandys: "About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of Warr of the burden of a 160 tunnes arrived at Point-Comfort. ... He brought not any thing but 20 and odd Negroes, wch the Governor and Cape Marchant bought for victualle."

Dutch merchants never played a significant role in the mainland slave trade, however. English-owned and operated vessels carried the lion's share of slaves to British North America. Bristol, Liverpool, and London were the major English ports where ship owners outfitted their vessels for the trans-Atlantic venture, with Liverpool gaining ascendancy over the others after 1740. Also

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entering into the trafficking of slaves, especially after the middle of the eighteenth century, were colonial merchants. At various times, Boston, Newport, New York, and Charleston were chief ports for outfitting slavers. Over the quarter century before the American Revolution, 10 percent of slaves sold into the British mainland arrived in vessels that had departed from a mainland port.

Historians once believed that many, perhaps even most, of the captives imported into British mainland North America were “seasoned” slaves—that is, men and women coming from one of the islands in the Caribbean, where they already had made it through the difficult adjustment to a new environment and learned enough English and enough of what was required of them to get by and serve their owners efficiently. We now know that this was not so. Such importation of Caribbean slaves that occurred—mostly before 1700, and not topping 15 percent of the total—was less the result of the preference of the mainland planters for seasoned workers and more a function of the mainland market being insufficiently strong to draw vessels with larger numbers of captives directly from Africa. In fact, buyers in Virginia, Maryland, and South Carolina soon realized that the only reason why island planters wanted to sell slaves who had adapted to the environment and plantation routine was because the captive workers had proved to be recalcitrant or rebellious, sent away “for their Roguery.” Experienced mainland buyers preferred persons straight from Africa, though, as Gregory E. O’Malley emphasizes in *Final Passages* (2014), smaller markets in North America had a hard time drawing large shipments of Africans, and thus “straight from Africa” might actually include a stop in another colonial market for a partial sale before moving on. Thus, for the eighteenth century, most slaves imported into Virginia and Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia arrived on a ship directly from Africa. Almost none of these men and women were Atlantic creoles.

In addition to English and colonial merchants, French entrepreneurs brought a smaller number of slaves to the North

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American mainland. Employees of the *Compagnie des Indes* imported 612 Africans into the French colony of Louisiana in the summer of 1719, and over the following decade brought in over 7,000 more, nearly all of them directly from Africa. The importation of slaves into Louisiana practically ceased from 1731 through the years of the American Revolution.

The magnitude of the African trade into the Atlantic world makes it impossible to describe how it operated in simple generalities. Trading differed along the African and American coasts; operations often were different a few hundred miles apart. Ease of procuring captives or methods of doing so could change from one year to the next, let alone over half a century or more, and various African and American ports matured as slave markets at different times. In *The Diligent* (2002), Robert Harms takes the reader on a single slaving voyage in 1731–1732 and shows how, at various ports on Africa’s Atlantic coast, the vessel and its crew passed in and out of different “worlds,” each affected by local and international political and economic circumstances. Yet, through the centuries and across the boundaries of cultural areas, broad modes of operation persisted from shortly after the opening of the trade through the eighteenth century.

Trading slaves into the Atlantic world was always part of a larger body of exchange. Persons in Europe fitting out vessels for Atlantic trading did so for economic gain and did not limit their considerations of profit to human cargo, making enslaved humans but one African export commodity among a variety of trade goods. Until after 1650, Europeans exported from Africa a combination of other commodities in greater amounts (by value) than slaves, including gold especially. Around 1700, however, slaves became the principal African export into the Atlantic, and remained so until after 1850.

From the beginning, Europeans realized they were not seeking slaves from a vast, undeveloped wilderness where savages spent days in idleness and nights in levity. That white traders believed

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such misinformation is a notion that arose long after the fact—during the wave of pseudoscientific racism of the late nineteenth century. The western coast of Africa was the outward edge of a commercial network of considerable size and scope that had thrived in one or another form since long before Europeans came nipping at the waterside with commodities to exchange. Long-distance trading was an occupational specialty that West and West-Central Africans held in high regard. The Atlantic hinterland of black Africa contained a grid of trade routes dotted with commercial settlements. These formed a network that permitted traders to travel widely among communities where they could employ local associates as their aides and agents. Taxes and tolls, plus access to valued goods, kept village and clan heads or rulers of states amenable to the enterprise. For hundreds of years before the coastwise trade in slaves, itinerant merchants had funneled gold, kola nuts, and slaves to the port cities of the Sahel for transport northward across the great Sahara. In return they had carried goods from North Africa, including salt, metal ware and glassware, and figs and dates, back from the desert's southern edge to locales across the western savannas and into the coastal forests. Central Africans had traded copper, hides, and ivory toward the west coast for palm cloth, palm oil, and salt. Once demand for slaves and other products—some of which, such as foodstuffs, were ancillary to the slave trade—became evident along the coastal periphery of the commercial network, it did not take long for the traders to extend operations to the sailing ships and then the newly sprouting European outposts at the mouths of rivers and on Atlantic beaches and islands. Thus, fairly rapidly, a commercial system was in place to supply products Europeans wanted and to distribute goods Africans desired in exchange.

Great temporal and regional variance characterized African products in European demand. At different times, Europeans sought gold, gum, hides, ivory, and beeswax from Senegambia; gold and peppers from Sierra Leone; gold from the Gold Coast;

palm products from the Niger Delta; and copper, ivory, and dye-woods from the Congo basin. In addition, along all of Africa's Atlantic coast, Europeans obtained African products, for instance kola nuts or palm cloth, to exchange elsewhere on the coast for other locally produced commodities. But all along the 3,500-mile coastline, slaves were in fairly constant and growing demand after 1650. In some areas, Angola for example, slaves were almost always the principal item the Europeans wanted.

Africans were equally careful in designating the products they wanted in exchange.³ Meeting their varied and changing demands was a necessity for the ship captain who wanted to obtain slaves at a good price. The ships that sailed down the Guinea Coast thus had to serve as something akin to floating hardware, drygoods, and fashion stores with spirits in the cellar, and fitting out these ships with the proper variety of goods, often imported from distant parts of the globe, was the largest expense of the total voyage, averaging more than the costs of the ship and its crew. Items of apparel and personal decoration made up almost half of all imports, with preferences shifting from beads to cloth and sometimes including semiprecious stones. As nearly everywhere today, dress and personal decoration were important ways that Africans displayed their wealth or indicated their social status. In addition, cloth was an important element in payment of brideprice. European traders needed to keep current on preferred types and styles.

³It remains necessary to expose what one-third of a century ago Philip D. Curtin referred to, in *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (1975), as “the gewgaw myth”: “that Africans foolishly bought articles of adornment or luxuries that served no basic human need, and in return for a basic resource—human beings.” Stanley B. Alpern points out, in “What Africans Got for Their Slaves: A Master List of European Trade Goods” in *History in Africa: A Journal of Method*, 22 (1995), that ideas about Africa being “a dumping ground for European rubbish ... ignore that business acumen of African merchants who ... knew good commodities from bad, and how to play off one European trader against another to their own profit.” Along the West African coast during the years of the Atlantic trade, writes Alpern, “it was, indeed, a seller's market.”

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Africans in many locales also wanted metals and metal ware—these constituted another third of all imports. Spirits, normally in the form of brandy or rum, also were in demand. (Following a visit to the Gambia River in 1764, the French scholar Abbé Demanet wrote, “Without iron and alcohol one cannot live there, much less trade.”) Horses (which, because of sleeping sickness, bred with difficulty in areas infested with the tsetse fly) for cavalry use, cutlery, firearms, and gunpowder were also in greater or lesser demand, depending, in some areas, on regional hostilities. But variety remained the key: an inventory by Dutch traders in 1728 revealed 218 types of merchandise stored at Elmina Castle, a fort on the Gold Coast, for use in the acquisition of slaves.

Whether exporting or importing, it was the mesh of the organized commercial networks, commonly at locations under control of African polities that used profits from the trade to keep order and support a preferred lifestyle, that made possible the magnitude of the exchange. It is obvious that without European shipping and demand for labor in the New World, the Atlantic slave trade could not have taken place. It is less obvious, mostly because of old and incorrect notions of African incapacity or the related lack of knowledge of Africa and its history, that without the existing commercial operations in the hinterland of Africa’s Atlantic coast and without sufficient African demand for European products, the supply of slaves could never have reached the massive proportions that it did.

The first Europeans to sail down Africa’s northwest coast were the Portuguese. They were the vanguard of what would be, in African eyes, a steady and growing line of men with sharp noses, straight hair, and light skin who wedded a capitalist economic system, with special desire to invest in long-distance trade, to advanced maritime technology, and it was they who dominated foreign trade with black Africa for the first two centuries of European contact. The earliest encounters Portuguese had with coastal-dwelling Africans below the Sahara taught them lessons

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about cross-cultural trading they would not forget for centuries and would pass along to others. In the 1440s, Portuguese “adventurers” along the Atlantic coasts of Morocco and Mauritania began going ashore, taking people by surprise and sending them back to Lisbon. Below the Sahara, where populations were larger, surprise was harder to effect. In 1446, Nuno Tristão sailed into the Gambia River in search of “prisoners” for the pleasure of his patron, Dom Henrique (the often-noted “Henry the Navigator”). With twenty-two armed men in two boats, Tristão was closing in on a settlement along the riverbank when eighty Africans in many more, much larger vessels gave chase and rained poisoned arrows on the intruders. Tristão lost three-quarters of his crew; the survivors were fortunate to make it back to Lisbon to tell their story.

This did not have to recur often before Europeans in their ships, far from home and few in number, realized what should have been obvious from the beginning: that Africans were not going to wait passively until the next vessel full of marauders arrived to fall upon their dwindling numbers; that Africans were not different from others in their interest in and willingness to exchange commodities, including human beings (for the most part strangers), for products they needed or wanted; and that Atlantic sailors could, therefore, more easily and safely acquire slaves by trade than by capture. Only nine years after Tristão’s voyage, a Portuguese chronicler wrote that activities in the Gambia River now “involved trade and mercantile dealings more than fortitude and exercise of arms.” Eventually it would become still more apparent to European traders that African groups were powerful and did not want Europeans raiding or doing much else on land in their vicinities without their permission. “No European nation can feel safe on the Coast,” wrote a Dutch factor on the Gold Coast in 1702, “unless the surrounding Natives are on its side.” In addition, it soon became clear (though not accurately understood that the agents of death were diseases endemic to the tropics) that Europeans could not live long enough in tropical Africa, generally speaking, to be able

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to maintain an effective raiding force over the long term. Thus, within a few decades of Portuguese contact with black Africa, a broad pattern of European-African trade came into being that, with minor changes, would be the standard way of obtaining slaves from north of the Senegal River to south of Angola until the last years of the Atlantic trade.

Important to the development and operation of this commercial exchange were persons of mixed African and European ancestry—true creoles—who became adept at operating among buyers of one culture and sellers of another. According to Toby Green in *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (2012), a process of “creolisation” developed on the Cape Verde Islands, four hundred miles off continental Africa’s westernmost point, soon after Portuguese and Genoese adventurers settled there in the 1460s. The European men brought slaves from the mainland to the islands for work and produced offspring with captive women. Within a few generations, such persons of mixed ancestry and their descendants, speaking a creole language and practicing a mixed African and European culture, spread to the mainland and served as intermediaries in the coastal trade. By the early sixteenth century, the Cape Verdes and the coast of Western Africa, in Green’s words, served as “an early indication of just how far the process of creolisation and slavery would be connected in the Atlantic world.”

With rare exceptions, Europeans stayed close to the waterside, leaving to Africans or long-established creoles the conduct of their own political and military affairs. Actually, they had little choice. Africans were insistent on controlling access to the interior. Any white person who marched inland or went far upriver usually paid dearly for that temerity. For that matter, Europeans had their hands full just manning outposts because of their overwhelming loss of life to disease. Death rates varied, but before the use of quinine to temper malaria (after about 1850), European mortality rates in tropical Africa ranged from 250 to 750 per thousand

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per year. In some locales over certain years, it was worse. “The stench of decay and death was everywhere,” writes Joseph C. Miller of the eighteenth-century trading port of Luanda, Angola, in *Way of Death* (1988). “Only the fortunate left alive.”

Following the model of the successful Dutch and English East India companies, European governments first tried conducting slaving through the granting of monopolies to private, joint-stock companies. In the ideal, a single company would carry out its nation’s African trade, using its inordinately large profits from the monopoly to offset high startup costs and those of maintaining fortified outposts on Africa’s Atlantic coast. England attempted two such ventures, first with the Company of Royal Adventurers for nine years after 1663, and then with the better-known and somewhat more successful Royal African Company from 1672 through the end of the century. But by early in the eighteenth century, it was clear that the state-sanctioned monopolies could not continue. There were too many “interlopers” trading with anyone out of gunshot of company forts, too many Africans willing to exchange merchandise without regard to nationality, and too many politically powerful planters across the Atlantic wanting to pay bottom prices for workers, regardless of who delivered them. The Royal African Company’s loss of royal political backing at home hurried its end, but it came at a time when exclusive trade for any nation’s carriers was losing out in a move toward more liberal, less-regulated economic policies. After 1700, independent shippers carried the bulk of the trade, and the competition grew fierce with the rising demand for slaves in the New World.

The end of monopolies did not mean the end of European outposts or “factories” on West Africa’s small islands, riverbanks, or ocean beaches, however. Masters of vessels from Europe needed persons on the spot with knowledge of local conditions and customs, and residents of the outposts, sometimes having marital and social ties to important African families in the region, sold their services as cross-cultural brokers. It was the original intention also

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of several European nations to have places along the coast where products, gold especially, could be obtained from African sellers and then protected from local raiders or pirates until a vessel from its nation arrived to convey the commodity wherever necessary. Once slave trading eclipsed the trade of other commodities, the forts' focus was reoriented to the human traffic. Many believed it would be in the ship captain's interest (thus prompting him to pay a hefty markup) to be able to show up; purchase slaves on hand ("bulked," it was called); obtain food, water, and firewood; and be off within a short time for American markets. This was based on the correct notion that waiting to load slaves not yet arrived from the interior or coasting along from market to market in search of a cargo was profitless downtime for the slavers—while crew and captives still had to be fed at the owner's expense. It was based, too, on the knowledge that time spent on the coast meant time spent in a disease environment where crew and human cargo were liable to sicken and die. In an extreme situation in the mid-eighteenth century, a ship slaving in Loango Bay north of the Congo River needed nine months in port to acquire 348 slaves. By the time the vessel was ready to sail, eighty-three of the Africans on board had died.

But not all, or even most, of the coastal forts and factories held many slaves for shipment, largely because of the impracticality and expense of doing so.⁴ Rare was the outpost that produced its

⁴ On the H-Africa discussion network (<http://www.h-net.org/~africa/>: search Gorée), one can read arguments about the French outpost on Gorée Island off Cape Verde. As most European outposts, the one on Gorée never held—or bulked, or even transhipped—nearly as many slaves as some contend. The "House of Slaves" on the island in particular, now a UNESCO World Heritage site, built originally in the mid-1770s, was not as portrayed to visitors (including a pope and a United States president). Over the last third of the twentieth century, a story of its former importance in the slave trade has grown—some would say "has been manufactured"—and it has become a symbol of that horrible traffic. The site's caretaker has claimed that between 20 million and 40 million slaves passed through the House of Slaves and exited its "Door of No Return"—with 5 million of them ending up in the United States.

own food; most purchased grain, fish, and meat from neighboring Africans. This meant there was little work for slaves to engage in while awaiting shipment, and holding slaves on hand meant increased demand for food and water, which might prompt local suppliers of both to raise prices and create the need for a body of auxiliaries to keep an eye on and tend to the captives. African merchants and rulers usually had ways to put slaves to work, in agricultural production if it was the right time of year, until slavers arrived. Sometimes they held slaves until enough slaving vessels arrived to provide competition and drive up prices. Thus, it is largely a myth that the European forts on Africa's Atlantic islands and beaches housed vast numbers of slaves in dungeon-like enclosures before their loading aboard vessels for the voyage to the Americas. Only the largest forts on the Gold Coast did so, and then in greater or lesser quantity at different periods.

From Saint Louis, at the mouth of the Senegal River, to Benguela on the Angola Coast, whether under English, French, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, or Portuguese flags, the outposts were similar in operation if not in form. They might be large, walled castles like the English Royal African Company's center for operations at Cape Coast on the Gold Coast; they might be smaller stone forts like James Fort on a little island twenty-five miles up the Gambia River; or they might be thatched-roof dwellings along a high-surfed Guinea beach. Most were fortified to protect against attacks from pirates or national enemies by sea, and from African enemies or thieves by land. The typical fort housed a small number of agents, a larger force of garrisoned soldiers, and, typically in greatest number, a body of African auxiliaries. Referred to as "castle slaves" or *gromettos*, from a Portuguese word for a sailor's slave, these last were normally captives from somewhere else along the coast (and so less inclined to run home) who accomplished most of the grueling manual labor: gathering firewood, fetching water, cleaning, and rowing boats. The compound also contained a warehouse for trade goods and a store for food and water. Residents of the forts usually had to pay Africans

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for occupancy of their territory as well as for food, water, and firewood. Once the outposts were established and manned, African merchants from the near and more distant interior brought slaves and other commodities for exchange. Sometimes, in West-Central Africa especially, caravans left a particular outpost for the interior laden with trade goods obtained on credit, charged specifically to return with slaves. In all locations the residents of European outposts worked at keeping good relations with Africans, regularly giving gifts to and entertaining visiting merchants and local potentates. Their job was to grease the wheels of trade and tap into the commercial intelligence of the hinterland.

Around the European outposts developed commercial communities whose influence spread up rivers as far as fair-sized vessels could navigate, along neighboring Atlantic beaches, and to smaller outposts short distances away. In these communities were groups of people, sometimes whole families and sometimes larger groups that included aides of chiefs and rulers, who served as intermediaries—cultural as well as commercial brokers—between European shippers and African sellers. A number of these were the offspring of more or less formal unions between European men (who normally came to the coast, fathered a child or children, and died or returned to Europe) and African women. With attachment to each cultural milieu, these Afro-Europeans were in some places the key links in the chain of production, transportation, and acquisition of slaves on the coast. In a few areas where Portuguese influence was considerable—south of the Gambia River, for instance, or south of the Congo in Angola—Afro-Portuguese communities of long duration controlled trade and used their commercial positions to influence local politics. Individual members of this group spread around the Atlantic rim of all four continents and helped facilitate trade.

Not all slavers chose to sail to government-subsidized or company-affiliated outposts, where the most thoroughly integrated commercial communities existed. Some visited reputed slaving

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locations along the coast and carried on less formal dealings ship-board. The appearance of a vessel anchored off the coast might bring out one or several traders in longboats to talk with captains about slaving prospects or to deal for slaves on hand. These traders were sometimes Europeans, sometimes Africans, and sometimes Afro-Europeans, individuals or small groups who had struck out on their own to make a profit in the thriving commerce. Some of these traders were dirt poor, barely scratching out an existence, without capital, trade goods, or credit worthy of note. Others were heads of businesses that dated back generations and were masters or mistresses of organized “trading houses” who had connections, often through marriage, with important African political and commercial leaders and with traders from the established ports in Europe, had their own stores of goods and foodstuffs, secured credit from European shipboard traders, and in turn advanced credit to Africans and other Afro-European traders.

Along the coast of Sierra Leone in the middle of the eighteenth century, one could encounter persons at both extremes of prosperity. Near the Sherbro region was Irishman Nicholas Owen, who ventured to Africa to recover his family’s lost fortune. Of his operation, Owen admitted, “if any of the blacks comes I buy their commodities at as cheap a rate as I can, which enables me to trade aboard the ships once or twice a month, which just keeps me from sinking in the principle stock.” But from Owen’s location a slaver did not have to sail far to encounter one of his rivals, the mulatto Henry Tucker, a man who had traveled in Europe and lived “in the English manner.” Tucker had six wives and many children who participated in his operations. He even maintained his own fields with slave labor to grow provisions for slave ships. Owen writes enviously of his wealthy competitor:

His strength consists of his own slaves and their children, who have built a town about him and serve as his gremetos upon all occasions. This man bears the character of a fair trader among the Europeans, but to the contrary among

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the blacks. His riches set him above the kings and his numerous people above being surprised by war; almost all the blacks owe him money, which brings a dread of being stopt upon that account, so that he is esteemed and feared by all who have the misfortune to be in his power.

Meshing with the European system in the vicinity of the outposts and ports was an African economic network of equal complexity. Throughout the hinterland of sub-Saharan Africa's Atlantic coast, there developed, over time, slave-gathering, delivery, and marketing systems that were organized, systematic, efficient, and competitive. These systems were integrated with the movement of other goods to the coast and with the dispersal of European wares brought in exchange. If no two systems were alike, they fell within general patterns of operation according to region and time of trade.

Across the western savannas, from Senegambia to Lake Chad and as far south as the central Gold Coast, slave caravans tended to be under the control of specialized Muslim African merchants. These politically neutral international traders, themselves slave owners and users, relied on personal connections and a sense of occupational solidarity throughout the dispersed communities of the trading network to ease the movement of their caravans and get the most from their trade. When Englishman Richard Jobson was trading far up the Gambia River in 1620, he dealt with such an African trader, who appealed to Jobson's feeling for fellow merchants. "In our time of trading together," Jobson writes,

if it were his owne goods he bartered for, he would tell us, this is for my self, and you must deale better with me, than either with the Kings of the Country or any others, because I am as you are, a Julietto, which signifies a Merchant, that goes from place to place, neither do I, as the Kings of our Country do which is to eate, and drinke, and lye still at home among their women, but I seeke abroad as you doe.

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Caravans of hundreds of persons and scores of pack animals trekked across West Africa's savannas. Islamic religious wars along the upper Senegal River and in the Futa Jalon highlands to the south, and secular warfare among the Bambara of the upper Niger, provided captives for such caravans at different times in the eighteenth century. Terry Alford in *Prince among Slaves* (2007) provides a rare glimpse of the experience of one such captive, Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima, son of the ruler of Timbo in Futa Jalon (in today's Guinea). Early in 1788, at age twenty-six, Ibrahima mistakenly led his father's cavalry into an ambush and was captured and sold to slave traders. "They made me go barefoot one hundred miles," Ibrahima later remembered, eventually to the middle Gambia River, where the caravan leader sold Ibrahima and his other captives to the master of a London brig.

The caravan leader was responsible for making arrangements—dispensation of credit especially, but also supplies of food and water, protection, and local trading. Agents in towns along the way lent assistance. Such aid was vital to the success of a large caravan, in which problems of provisioning might rival those of a small army and which encountered local officials charging variable tariffs and tolls. When known agents were not available, caravan leaders relied on West Africa's centuries-old custom of hospitality and reciprocity, the "landlord-stranger relationship." Under such tacit agreements, a villager of means saw to arranging for providing the caravan's needs, and in return the caravan leader, on departing, would give gifts commensurate with the services rendered.

When large caravans neared the coast, leaders exercised options on where to proceed for the sale of slaves. Prices offered, goods available, and local political circumstances affected decisions concerning routes to take or markets to seek. Through most years of the trade, slaves from the Muslim network were marched all the way to the Atlantic ports in Senegambia, as was Ibrahima, and they began reaching coastal markets between Guinea and

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Ivory Coast directly, without sales through middlemen, after 1720.

In the early years, Muslim merchants also brought slaves to the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin. After the mid-seventeenth century, however, strong African states gained control of trade between the Gold Coast and the Niger Delta, and another pattern of slave marketing arose there. Early slaving in this region brought new military technology—firearms to the Gold Coast and horses to the savanna hinterland of the Bight of Benin—and that technology enabled states to arise. Asante and Oyo were the most powerful and thus are best known, but other states existed at various times and became tributary to or incorporated into the larger entities. These states had the military power to prevent Muslim traders from penetrating their northern limits and to contain Europeans in their coastal outposts. In between, they controlled slave procurement and marketing, favoring their own traders and restricting foreign and local merchants. For a time one of these states, Dahomey, even limited exchange on its coast to a single state agent, the Yovogon at Wydah.

Throughout the interior of the Bight of Benin, inland marketing centers existed where merchants met with representatives of outlying chiefs who had acquired slaves in a variety of ways—purchase, capture, tribute payment, or gift. After making sure their own labor supplies were adequate, chiefs exchanged slaves for luxury goods or military equipment, especially horses, that might help them capture more slaves. In larger markets, special brokers fed slaves and provided them shelter before sale. Once the merchants acquired slaves, some marched them directly to the coast, using them as porters to carry leather goods, textiles, foodstuffs, or other items to exchange in regional trade. Others moved only a short way before selling their slaves, who then underwent passage through a chain of traders with smaller caravans generally heading coastward. On the edge of communities lining major routes of slave movement were *zangos*, resting places where merchants and

their slaves and pack animals could get food, water, and shelter. Once on the coast, merchants exchanged slaves and other trade items for goods to take back into the interior. The traders might retain some slaves to use as porters on the return.

Farther east and south, inland of the Bight of Biafra where the Ijaw, Igbo, and Ibibio lived, a private system of marketing control prevailed. Absence of centralized states here did not lessen the ability of African traders to produce slaves for export. A few decades into the eighteenth century, captains sailing out of Liverpool and Bristol began focusing on several Biafran ports that, lacking resident Europeans, depended on ship-based trade and the building of commercial relations with the Africans. At this last activity, Liverpool merchants became especially adept. What developed in response to the growing demand were clan-based commercial associations—Europeans called them “trading houses”—that competed to acquire slaves from the interior and for markets at such ports as Bonny and Old Calabar. These associations often were tied to religious shrines. Over time one group, the Aro, won almost complete control of slave procurement and delivery. By the mid-eighteenth century, regular Aro markets operated across a web of trading routes; in some places, Aro associations organized mercenary forces to conduct slave raids northward toward the Benue River valley.

Elaborate, institutionalized, social, and commercial relationships between English and African merchants made possible the efficient slaving operations. When European captains came to the Biafran coast, they visited port towns near the mouths of rivers and extended credit in trade goods to one of the local, English- or Creole-speaking trading houses. These families sent armed parties in enormous canoes up the rivers to the Aro markets, where they exchanged the goods the English merchants had advanced them for slaves; then they returned with the captives to the coastal towns. Guaranteeing a return on the advanced goods were either human pawns, relatives of the trading families whom the English

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captains detained until the families repaid the debts in slaves, or long-standing relationships of trust between known shippers and local political-commercial authorities. In Old Calabar, the local male secret society, the *Ekpe*, became an agency of local government to regulate commerce and collect debts.⁵

Below the Bight of Biafra, along the Atlantic coast from roughly the equator to the Cape of Good Hope (but in practical terms to about the northern border of today's Namibia), an area referred to for convenience as "West-Central Africa," indigenous states on the one hand and the Portuguese centered in Luanda on the other tried mightily to control trade, but competition from private African traders made long-term monopoly impossible. Thus, prices remained low. Within this structure developed a network of perhaps unequaled efficiency that in the eighteenth century delivered for export nearly 2.4 million captives, 400,000 of them to English or North American shippers.

North of the Congo River were three major harbors, Loango Bay, Malomba, and Cabinda, where, particularly after 1680,

⁵ An episode involving African brothers trading in Old Calabar, discussed in Randy L. Sparks's *The Two Princes of Calabar* (2004), shows how commercial operations and human relationships around the Atlantic rim were far more complex than most have imagined. As part of a dispute between African merchants from two towns in 1767, the master of an English ship (in concert with five other English captains in the port) captured Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, brothers of the "grandee" of one of the towns; took them with 334 other captives across the Atlantic; and sold them on the Caribbean island of Dominica. From that point, their command of the English language and knowledge of English ways helped them to get to England (after running away twice, via Virginia), where they argued effectively in English courts to gain their freedom. Taken to Bristol by an experienced slave trader who had known their family in Old Calabar, the brothers attended school, received religious instruction, and were baptized Methodists by Charles Wesley, brother of the religion's founder. Eventually, in late 1774, after expressing "kindest love" to the Wesleys, they returned to Old Calabar aboard a vessel going there to acquire slaves. Once there, the brothers were responsible for bringing the first Christian missionaries to the town. However, Little Ephraim apparently also returned to trading slaves. "[H]e had little choice," writes Sparks, "given the economic importance of the trade to Old Calabar and his position in the family."

masters of English, Dutch, and French ships met with representatives of the Vili kingdom to acquire slaves. Ship captains had to obtain licenses to trade and construct temporary shelters for the Africans they would acquire. Royal officials negotiated customs fees and supervised brokers who helped sellers and buyers agree on prices. From these ports to the interior was a Vili trade diaspora. Rulers organized guarded caravans that ventured to markets several hundred miles away bearing salt, palm oil, and cloth. Merchants from farther inland brought slaves and ivory to these markets for exchange.

In contrast to Vili control of the coast north of the Congo, Portuguese crown officials, almost all Afro-Portuguese, dominated slave acquisition and marketing for several hundred miles into the interior to the south of the great river. For half a century after 1650, governors and *capitães mores* (captain-majors) based in Luanda exploited and abused the nearby populations. These officials provided recognition to African chiefs and then charged them tribute in slaves; they raided more distant African settlements for slaves, hiring their own soldiers for such work in violation of orders from Lisbon; and they granted sanction to private raiding parties organized by Afro-Portuguese entrepreneurs. Around the beginning of the eighteenth century, government-organized slave raiding diminished, and private Portuguese, Afro-Portuguese, and African merchants took over. As happened farther up the coast, these traders left Luanda or Benguela with trade goods advanced them by commercial firms on the coast and headed for one of several major interior trading centers. There, they exchanged their goods for captives and brought them back to the port for holding. As demand on the coast increased, slaving markets developed in the near and far interior; the system of the coastal region reproduced itself in stages toward the interior, bringing African states to send their own agents farther inland to markets and fairs that drew slaves from their own hinterlands. By the end of the eighteenth century, slaves were coming to the Angola

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coast from beyond the upper Kasai River, seven hundred miles away.

The variety of marketing systems that existed between Senegambia and Angola affected how European merchants acquired slaves but meant little to the men, women, and children who were the products of the systems. The hardships Africans encountered from the time of enslavement to the point of sale are frequently overlooked because of the absence of evidence and the traditional, if understandable, emphasis on the horrors of slaves' shipboard experience between Africa and America. In fact, the voyages to the New World averaged one to two months, whereas six months to a year often elapsed between the time a slave was captured and the time he or she boarded a European slaving vessel for the Atlantic crossing. Even eighteenth-century British abolitionists, who focused their attack on the evils of the ocean passage to America, argued that over two-thirds of the mortality associated with the slave trade occurred in Africa. Returning from explorations on the Niger River toward the Senegambian Atlantic coast in 1797, Mungo Park fell in with a slave caravan. Some of the slaves had been taken in raids and held for three years before their sale. Once on the march, Park writes, the slaves

are commonly secured, by putting the right leg of one, and the left of another, into the same pair of fetters. By supporting the fetters with a string, they can walk, very slowly. Every four slaves are likewise fastened together by the necks, with a strong rope of twisted thongs; and in the night, an additional pair of fetters is put on their hands, and sometimes a light iron chain passed round their necks.

Shelter for slaves was normally like that provided for pack animals—a stockaded area of bare ground. The men and women on the march ate local fare. Maize, millet, or yams were staples, depending on location. Any cooked food the slaves consumed they prepared themselves. The caravans were largely self-contained, with the slaves forced to carry items to meet the caravan's needs.

On the march to the coast following his capture near his home in Guinea, six-year-old Broteer Furro had to carry on his head a twenty-five-pound stone for grinding the caravan's grain. Most slaves were forced to enhance the traders' profits by carrying trade goods as well, men sometimes having to tote fifty pounds of goods and women thirty.

Another difficult time for slaves was the period of waiting in port, which averaged three months. Food was scarce in some seasons. Caravan leaders, buyers, sellers, and ship captains were all eager to skimp on supplies to reduce overhead. Where possible, merchants rented slaves to local people for work, especially during planting or harvesting season.

Overlooked for many years were the epidemiological difficulties that slaves experienced when marched from one African disease environment to another. Men and women living in the savannas contracted sleeping sickness in the forests; those reared in drier or higher areas caught malaria or yellow fever in the wetter lowlands; and different strains of influenza and other diseases often lurked in regions even closer to their original homes. Death rates varied across the slave-trading area and through time; they are impossible to estimate with accuracy. It is clear, however, that the African man, woman, or child presented for sale to a ship captain for conveyance to the New World was already a survivor.

The Slaving Voyage

By the time English planters began importing large numbers of slaves directly from Africa into mainland North America, the Atlantic trade had been in operation for over two centuries. Enough word had passed through the shipyards and docks of Liverpool and London from experienced traders to make English captains wise to the business. Within broad parameters, they knew where to go along the African coast, what types of trade goods to take, and how to get by under usual conditions. Although they

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always hoped for good winds and rapid transactions, they knew it would take three or four months to reach the farthest slave marts in Angola with necessary stops to take on fresh water and supplies; they knew loading was unpredictable but that having to linger at one or more ports over several months to procure slaves in small bunches, as well as to secure provisions for them, was likely; and with decent winds, they figured on another ten weeks in the Atlantic crossing to North America, though less if departing from Senegambia and more if leaving from below the equator. They were also aware of other factors. The healthiest time of year for Europeans to sail close to Africa's tropical shores north of the equator was during the English winter months, and vice versa for lands south of the line. They knew how disease could decimate a ship's crew and its human cargo. Finally, they knew that the market for slaves in Virginia or South Carolina was greatest, and prices highest, during the cropping season of late April into early November. All of this required plans, which always were open to disruption from the vagaries of slave supply, the availability of food and water, adequate winds, and more. Nonetheless, records show how good their plans were: fewer than 1 percent of all slave ships entering the Chesapeake in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century arrived between November and April, and only 9 percent entering South Carolina did so over those same months.

In *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), Markus Rediker calls the slave ship "a strange and potent combination of war machine, mobile prison, and factory," the last because it "produced" human laborers whose market value more than doubled with the ocean's crossing. The vessels the English used for slaving came in all sizes and shapes. To show the extremes, Rediker contrasts a small, eleven-ton sloop, fitting out in Bristol in 1787 for a voyage to take on thirty slaves, with a massive, 566-ton ship built in Liverpool in 1797 to carry seven hundred. In the heaviest slaving times of the eighteenth century, the typical vessel landing

captives onto the North American mainland was one of “middling size,” in the neighborhood of 200 tons, with a carrying capacity of over three hundred slaves. Over time, the tendency was to have larger and faster ships. Slaving vessels differed from others in having more decks, some of them temporary platforms that carpenters built for the specific purpose of carrying people in the prone position, as well as side ports, grated bulkheads, and lattice hatches, all fashioned to direct fresh air into the lower decks. Most “slavers” also had a high barricade across the middle of the main deck, used to keep the captive women and children separated from the men and to serve as a fortification behind which the crew could defend itself in the event of a slave insurrection. In addition to equipment particular to the slaving voyage—shackling irons and ropes, nets to prevent escape overboard when near land—the slaver had to carry a large number of casks for food and potable water. One ship with 404 slaves and a crew of forty-seven left Africa with 6.5 tons of food, and the English slaver *Brookes*, on a late-eighteenth-century voyage carrying six hundred Africans and forty-five sailors, carried 34,000 gallons of water. More space had to be allotted for iron or copper kettles and firewood for cooking.

Crews aboard slave ships were larger than normal, usually one member for every seven to ten slaves, because feeding and controlling the captives posed special tasks and risks not associated with inanimate cargo. For sailors, African duty was more dangerous and, consequently, less popular than any other. Paid little and often crimped or taken from jail for service, the crew members of a slaver were generally hard men, victims themselves of the economic system that employed them. Exceptions were the captain, often the son of a man with a commercial background and often possessing a stake in the slaving venture; the ship’s surgeon, present as much to assure the purchase of healthy men and women in Africa as to maintain their health aboard ship; and various artisans: carpenters to build the extra decks, coopers to

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maintain water barrels, and iron workers to keep the cuffs and restraints in working order. It is wrong to think of these crews as Europeans only. African men, and sometimes women, joined ships at different spots around the Atlantic.

Captains usually stuck to one of two modes of trade along the African Coast: on ship or on shore. Depending on the necessities of the location, however, most traded both ways. Good harbors, roadsteads, or river estuaries that appeared relatively free of disease brought buyers to shore. Rough surf, seasonal unhealthiness, or merchants willing to come to the ships led to shipboard transactions.

Shippers coming south from Europe found they had to deal, sometimes extensively, with local African political authorities. Those who wanted to take advantage of established outposts and the enterprise of the surrounding communities had to satisfy local African officials with payments of custom before trading could begin, sometimes proving onerous in cost and time. In the Gambia River, slavers coughed up goods simply for the right to trade and lost time in what today one might call “red tape.” Captain Charles Heatly, master of an English slaver in the 1660s, described the procedure:

When a ship arrives in the River Gambia she comes to an anchor at Gillo-free Port, in the Kingdom of Barra, opposite James Fort on James’ Island. ... You send your boat on shore to acquaint the Alkaide or Mayor of the town of your arrival; he in common returns with the boat, and receives from you an anchorage-money. Ten gallons of liquor for the king, value 30s., and two iron bars for himself, value 7s., and perhaps presents, a few bottles of wine, beer, cyder, etc. He immediately despatches messengers with the liquor as above to the king, informing him that such vessel is arrived, and only wants to pay his Customs, intending to proceed up the river. The king consults his councillors for a proper day to receive the same, and sends word to the alkaide accordingly. After a detention of four, five, six and seven days, he sends his people to receive his Custom, 140 bars in merchandise, amount sterling on an average £16.

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If slaves were on hand or not far away, the slaver could procure them and then decide whether to wait there for more or sail to another location. Most frequently, masters waited. This was not always a huge gamble, intelligence of such activity being good, and at big markets caravans arrived regularly. News of the approach of large numbers of slaves traveled fast. Commanders at outposts or captains themselves could send word inland of desirable trade goods on board or the immediate demand for slaves on the coast in hopes of luring African traders to the factories or ships. Caravan leaders were usually aware of relative demand and competitive prices. At ports where captains advanced goods and held pawns, they waited for the return on their business dealing.

At times during the trade's heyday, competition at markets on the coast grew keen. A vessel that sailed to the coast north of the Congo in 1742 found fourteen European ships there, and it took four months to purchase a cargo of 362 slaves. Many simply failed to get a full load and crossed the Atlantic with a partial cargo. On the ship Harms writes about, it took three months of trading at Jakin, on the Slave Coast, to fill the *Diligent's* hold with 256 captive men, women, and children.

Despite everything from the cost of trade goods and transportation to customs duties, broker fees, food costs, and markups by middlemen, slaves remained a good value for European buyers. Average prices rose steadily from the early years of the trade. In the 1680s, one healthy adult slave cost a buyer in the Gambia River £5.47, which rose to £9.43 in the 1720s, £10.05 in the 1740s, £14.10 in the 1760s, and £20.95 in the 1780s. Profit is evident in prices paid for slaves in the American market. A healthy adult slave in Virginia in 1690 brought £15, and in 1760, £45.

At the point of sale, the buyer, usually in the company of a surgeon or an experienced hand, examined the available slaves. It was here that the African man or woman, someone's son or daughter and in most cases onetime member of a family living in a village, was judged as a commodity by the potential purchasers. Parties

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typically figured the value of the captive humanity in a standard unit of labor, “one good slave,” which was originally one young male slave between eighteen and twenty-five years old and in good health. Slaves below this standard in terms of gender, age, or health counted as a fraction.

With the assistance of a multilingual broker, foreign buyer and African seller bargained until they agreed on a price for the lot of the people for sale. Bargaining was usually in a fictitious currency: they dickered in “bars” (from the original iron bars imported into West Africa) from Senegambia to the Ivory Coast, in “trade ounces” (based on an ounce of gold dust) on the Gold Coast, and in “manilas” (bracelet-like pieces of brass), cowry shells, and cloth currency elsewhere. The currencies fluctuated, and separate rates of exchange existed for different exports, usually depending on the deal the individuals struck. But the bargaining was not as simple as the buyer agreeing to provide so much cloth, for example, for so many slaves. African merchants were interested in an assortment of goods they could resell, and the shipper having the proper mix of imports saw the value of each rise accordingly. No merchant with just a few commodities to exchange could expect a good deal on slaves. A typical assortment of goods exchanged for 180 Africans in the Gambia River in 1740–1741 included 1,178 silver coins, 164 guns, 119 gallons of rum, 1,140 lbs. of gunpowder, 150 pieces of linen, 430 iron bars, 92 cutlasses, 450 gunflints, 66 lbs. of carnelian beads, 2,556 lbs. of salt, 63 pieces of Indian textile, 4,391 lbs. of glass beads, 219 yards of woolen cloth, 35 lbs. of lead balls, 288 lbs. of crystal, 102 brass pans, 662 lbs. of pewterware, 71 pairs of pistols, 37 lbs. of cowry shells, 30 pieces of Manchester textiles, 398 lbs. of fringe, 47 reams of paper, and 2 copper rods.

The meeting of African captive with European shipper was fraught with trauma for the former. Notwithstanding the shock of initial enslavement, forced removal to the coast, and holding (and perhaps working) on the spot for several months, the person

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now confronted frightening new forces: an alien group occupying the strange construction of a sailing ship, afloat on the saltwater expanse of the unfamiliar Atlantic Ocean. Miller in *Way of Death* describes the experience at port towns along the Angola coast:

All the slaves trembled in terror at meeting the white cannibals of the cities, the first Europeans whom many of the slaves would have seen. They feared the whites' intention of converting Africans' brains into cheese or rending the fat of African bodies into cooking oil, as well as burning their bones into gunpowder. They clearly regarded the towns as places of certain death, as indeed they became for many, if not for the reasons slaves feared.

The psychological effect of the entire experience on the captive cannot be measured, but some witnesses described a continued state of depression as the norm for Africans through much of the time following their enslavement. Surgeons on board slaving vessels noted "a gloomy pensiveness" on Africans' visages. Such mental states likely had adverse effects on their abilities to ward off illness, and in a number of cases the men and women committed suicide.

Not all slaves boarded a vessel at once. A person sent aboard just prior to departure for the Americas might be joining captives, some possibly obtained in another port, who had been on the ship for weeks. The treatment the Africans received at initial boarding did not lessen their sense of trauma. Some masters had crews wash and shave slaves, ostensibly for reasons of health. Shackles were common for all slaves while close to shore and for adult men even longer. When a vessel was in sight of land, an experienced captain would gird it with nets to prevent escapes overboard.

As with most topics relating to the Atlantic slave trade, assessing the voyage from the African coast to ports in America, the so-called middle passage, is difficult to do in a fair, accurate way. No more than a handful of the African men and women who experienced the trip left records, and those who did were atypical. Some voiced or wrote their accounts in an effort to end the slave trade.

Englishmen who left written accounts of their experiences as masters or crewmen on slavers, or who testified before parliamentary committees investigating the traffic, usually did so with an end in mind: some wanted to justify slaving, so they likely underplayed the horrors of life on board ship; others wanted to have Parliament outlaw the trade, so they emphasized the worst parts of the slaving voyage. Moreover, when considering the raw inhumanity of it all, it is not easy to examine the middle passage and weigh its effects dispassionately. Recent studies focusing on the statistical evaluation of thousands of voyages aid one in doing so. These show that efforts toward more or less humane treatment of the captives mattered little in the way the uprooted Africans coped. Random influences, or at least factors largely beyond the control of even the most experienced captains, had the greatest effect on slave health and mortality between Africa and the Americas.

In demographic terms, two times as many African males as females crossed the Atlantic from Africa to North America during the colonial period; one in five was a child; few approached middle age. Students of the trade long thought the larger number of adult men was a result solely of planter preferences in the Americas, but recent studies show it as a much more complicated matter that involved both supply and demand. “Much of the recent literature has suggested that African and European demand dovetailed in the sense that Africans wished to retain females (for labor and procreation) and Europeans desired males for plantation work,” writes David Eltis in *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (2000), but he added, “If this was the case, the fit was not smooth.” Fairly early in the period of American plantation growth, planters broke from European custom and worked African (though not European) women alongside men, thus enhancing women’s economic value while not always altering buyers’ preferences. Africans in some regions—Senegambia and Angola, for example—simply offered more men for sale than women, while in the Bight of Biafra and the Gold Coast, there were many more women for sale. Young

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children and older adults were simply less economical for Africans to sell: they cost as much to enslave and transport, yet they brought lower prices because of their inability to work as productively as adults. But when ships on Africa's coast had trouble filling their holds with the prescribed number of "prime-age" men and women, and children or older adults were available, captains acquired what they could. In the end, Eltis writes, as with so much in the cross-cultural, slave-trading process, "the actual ratio of men, women, and children traded was a compromise."

Once at sea, the slave ship was a place where the horrors of the captives' experience were confined and concentrated. Africans simply had little room—between five and seven square feet of deck space per person. This was less than half the space accorded contemporary European shipboard convicts (like those who made the voyage to Australia, for example), emigrants (like those indentured servants settling the same colonies), or soldiers (like those the English hauled over to fight in the American Revolution). Slave decks were usually four or five feet high, but sometimes lower, and the space was confining. One person sold off a slave ship in Charleston remembered, "It was more than a week after I left the ship before I could straighten my limbs." Captains allowed the Africans to remain topside through much of the day as weather permitted. It was better for them, cooler with fresher air and more room to move, and it enabled crews to go below and swab out. Most men remained connected to one another with leg irons fastened to chains running along the deck. In spite of such fettering, slaves were encouraged to be active. On occasion, captains forced adult men to perform the least popular tasks needed to keep the ship afloat and on the move. "Coerced by threats and kicks, if occasionally enticed with the promise of more food and momentary release from irons," writes W. Jeffrey Bolster in *Black Jacks* (1997), "Africans aboard ship hauled halyards and manned windlasses. They pumped eternally, the most onerous of sailors' tasks."

However counterintuitive it may be, on some English Royal African Company ships in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, selected Africans served as guardians to help control, and even discipline, their fellow captives. “We have some 30 or 40 gold coast negroes,” wrote Captain Thomas Phillips of the slaver *Hannibal* in 1694, “which we buy, and are procur’d there by our factors, to make guardians and overseers of the *Whidaw* negroes, and sleep among them to keep them from quarrelling; and in order, as well as to give us notice, if they can discover any caballing or plotting among them, which trust they will discharge with great diligence.” This was a cost-cutting measure, since roughly one-fifth the cost of the middle passage for shippers went for measures to protect against revolt. Women, as well as men, took on this guardian role. In return, the guardians benefited from better treatment—absence of shackles and freedom of movement aboard ship, for instance—and more food and water than their fellow captives.

Ideas of hygiene on ships were primitive. Captains made an effort to guard food and water from contamination and to isolate the sickest slaves, but sanitary facilities were inadequate under the best of conditions, and bilges quickly grew foul. The worst times were when bad weather forced people below for long periods. In tropical and subtropical waters the temperature could become stifling, augmented, as it was, by the heat and sweat given off by the confined humanity. Grates and canvas airfoils admitted fresh air, but below decks could be downright fetid. Alexander Falconbridge, a surgeon on slave ships, tells of one such occasion:

Some wet and blowing weather having occasioned port-holes to be shut and the grating to be covered, fluxes and fevers among the negroes ensued. While they were in this situation, I frequently went down among them till at length their rooms became so extremely hot as to be only bearable for a very short time. But the excessive heat was not the only thing that rendered their situation intolerable. The deck, that is, the floor of their rooms, was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house.

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Whether one could actually smell a slaver before sighting it, as was said, depended on wind speed and direction, but the idea suggests the unpleasant and unhealthy conditions on board. Dr. Alexander Garden, the Charleston port physician who was often the first person to come on board a slaver upon its arrival from the Atlantic crossing, encountered the “Filth, putrid Air, putrid Dysenteries” and remarked, “it is a wonder any escaped with Life.”

Captains normally brought along food from Europe—beans, biscuits, and barley being the most accepted and easily stored—and they purchased food for the crossing on the African coast. What the slaves ate depended in part on where they left Africa. Millet and rice were staples for vessels leaving the less-forested coasts of Senegambia and Angola. Maize was standard fare for Gold-Coast departures, and it was yams from the Niger Delta to the Congo River. Because rice was stored more easily than yams, however, and was plentiful between the Gambia River and Sierra Leone, argues Edda Fields-Black in *Deep Roots* (2008), English masters increasingly stopped off along this “Rice Coast” to fill up with provisions before sailing to the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra, or beyond. All of these items, sometimes in combination, often got cooked with peppers, palm oil, or bits of salted meat or fish. “Three meals a day” is a modern convention. Slaves normally ate twice, morning and evening, in small groups out of communal tubs. Captive women often were commandeered for help with food preparation. Whatever was fixed usually turned out to be a soup or stew-like concoction without much variety. Each African on board consumed daily, on average, about 2,000 calories.

Daily intake of water was more immediately important. Each person received about a pint of water with a meal, which, even augmented by the food’s liquid, was not enough to meet normal bodily needs, let alone the enhanced requirements of persons confined in the heat and humidity below decks and likely suffering from diarrhea. Dehydration was thus an enormous problem for the men and women on board. It produced the condition that the British termed “fixed melancholy” and the Portuguese knew as

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banzo—the sunken eyes, weakness, emaciation, apathy, inability to eat, and delirium that accompanied water and electrolyte loss and the ensuing fall of blood pressure—that slaves often exhibited before their death.

Old ideas about the density of slaves on board—“tight packing” or “loose packing”—and the length of the trans-Atlantic voyage having great effect on mortality, however logical they appear, are simply inaccurate. Figures from the trans-Atlantic slave-trade database show that mortality rates did not increase with the number of slaves on board or the number of days in transit. The primary variable associated with middle-passage mortality was the ship’s point of departure from Africa’s coast. Vessels that departed from the Bight of Biafra had the highest mortality rate; those from the Loango Coast, south of Biafra, were among the lowest. Why this was the case is puzzling, but the individual’s health at embarkation seems to have been critical. Such uncontrollable factors as the length of the march to the port; regional epidemics, drought, or famine; or strength of demand on the coast (prompting Africans to sell weaker persons when prices were higher) affected health and, consequently, mortality on the voyage.

Mortality rates on the middle passage between Africa and North America prior to 1783 were higher than for the rest of trans-Atlantic slaving voyages at the same time: 18.2 percent versus 16.1 percent. A factor behind this difference is that ships from Great Britain and Britain’s North American mainland colonies carried nearly 97 percent of the slaves disembarked onto the mainland over the period, and these ships had higher mortality rates on their voyages than such other big participants as Portugal and The Netherlands. In any event, these are astronomical figures given that slaves on Atlantic vessels were almost all of prime age—older adolescents and young adults—and thus not at all likely to die over a two-month period under normal circumstances.

Yet, the simple percentage figure is misleading for consideration of the typical slaving voyage, for most individual slave vessels

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crossing the Atlantic had a lower mortality rate. Captains wanted it so. If they were paid according to the profit of the voyage, which was tied to sales, they strove to keep slave deaths at a minimum. The average is skewed upward by a small number of vessels that experienced astronomical mortality, often because of an uncontrollable epidemic of measles or smallpox on board. It is skewed, too, by the results of perils at sea that were common to all at the time: shipwrecks, sinkings, pirate attacks. Shipboard slave revolts occurred on about 10 percent of all slaving voyages and typically resulted in the deaths of 10 percent of the captives on board.

Middle-passage mortality declined generally through the eighteenth century, but, again, that of ships bringing slaves to Britain's mainland colonies was consistently higher than the average and did not decline as much. The apparent reasons for the general reduced mortality were new ship configurations that allowed vessels to carry more water and catch more from rainfall, and innovative methods of producing fresh water by boiling and evaporating seawater. Reducing dehydration of the men and women on board meant lower death rates. And, in addition to learning more about preventing smallpox, after the 1760s captains discovered they could prevent scurvy by feeding people citrus fruits.

The very human question remains of how the captive men, women, and children involved in the trans-Atlantic passage of fifty or sixty or seventy days endured all the hardships it brought them. In *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (2007), Stephanie E. Smallwood credits "anomalous intimacies" the captives shared. Sometimes all that two individuals had in common were their circumstance of detachment and their fear of what was to come. African captives "continued to function as ... persons possessing independent will and agency," Smallwood writes:

Women who exhausted themselves to death in their futile efforts to attend to the needs of their infants; captives who helped care for one another

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when disease invariably struck; and strangers who facilitated communication between speakers of mutually unintelligible languages ... demonstrated the determination required to live as a human being rather than exist as an object aboard the slave ship at sea.

Dangers of the voyage were not over with landfall. Africans long inured to a host of diseases endemic to their tropical homeland were once again thrust into a new disease environment, one with new foods and different water as well. Some ports required several weeks' quarantine of arriving slaves, and it took days or weeks to arrange for sale. This was always a time of further slave mortality. In colonial Virginia between 1710 and 1718, for example, over 5 percent of the captive Africans died between the time they reached America and their sale and dispersal. Half a century later, South Carolina's governor complained about the "large number of dead negroes, whose bodies have been thrown into the river [and] are drove upon the marsh opposite Charles Town." For that matter, the entire first year and more in America was precarious for African immigrants: perhaps one-fourth of all newly arrived slaves in the Chesapeake and one-third of those arriving in the Low Country died before that initial year was out. "My new Hands are all down in their Seasoning Except one," complained Virginia planter Robert "King" Carter, who kept close tabs on his recently purchased slaves. "I must wait with Patience till they recover their strength before I can send them to a distant quarter."

Crews used several days to a week immediately after arrival to prepare the slaves for sale. "[T]he American slave market was as compelling a theatrical stage as any to be found in Renaissance England," writes Smallwood, "for here, where the commodification of Africans bore fruit in the sale of their bodies for profit, packaging and the power of illusion held sway." Lean, tired, raw, discouraged, demoralized men, women, and children had to be "convincingly fashioned into slaves—the human machinery that would plant and harvest the crops of sugar, rice, and tobacco that

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drove the colonial American economy.” This fashioning involved “feeding up” the poorly nourished slaves with starchy foods that would be their plantation fare and sprucing up their physical appearance: shaving heads to remove lice-infested hair, bathing them, and then rubbing their bodies with oil to hide wounds and defects and to give them luster.

The sale of slaves worked differently in various ports. In the Chesapeake, owners of large plantations in the region were the central figures in most economic dealings; buying and selling slaves was no exception. Captains of vessels entering the Chesapeake with lists of prominent planters who might serve as middlemen cast around for the best deal. Commissions of 7 or 8 percent were common. The planters evaluated buyers’ credit, helped obtain return cargoes, arranged for provisions, and sometimes made deals for leasing slaves. They carried out transactions shipboard, where the Africans remained quartered, or on nearby wharves. After the middle of the eighteenth century—perhaps as profits from investing one’s time in agricultural pursuits were proving less promising—some planters would buy lots of slaves from a ship’s master and then march them around to settlements and crossroads, reselling them in small bunches. All of this took time: on average, it was two months between arrival and final sales for slavers entering the Chesapeake.

It was different for slave ships going to Charleston, where 43 percent of all slaves brought from Africa to mainland North America in the colonial period arrived. Here, African men and women were sold more rapidly and in larger lots than those arriving up the coast. Many South Carolina planters had financial interest in local merchant firms, and ship captains who called regularly could establish relations with one or another of these firms for everything from slave acquisition in Africa to marketing in America. Eighteen such firms did 60 percent of Charleston’s slaving business. Individual merchant houses might at one time have a consignment of several hundred slaves to sell. They did the advertising

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and most often sold the slaves at public auction for cash or commodities. Some provided credit for needy buyers. If the market was not promising, the firm might hold the Africans until prospects improved, but costs of food and shelter had to be weighed in the decision. Through it all—quarantine, advertising, auctioning—things happened quickly in Charleston, twelve days being the average time between ship's arrival and final sale.

New York and Boston were sites of fewer slave imports, and in smaller loads, than more southerly regions of the mainland, and this affected methods of sale: many took place on board the importing vessels as they were moored at a wharf, but in Boston there was a regular, bustling market for African men and women in taverns, at public auctions, and even in homes across metropolitan Boston. Most advertisements for New York slave sales between 1749 and 1765 appeared for three weeks or longer in newspapers, suggesting low demand or protracted bargaining. Possibly because New Yorkers feared revolt from fresh, adult arrivals, especially after a suspected slave conspiracy in 1741, or because a big part of the urban market was for domestics rather than field hands, a June 16, 1760, ad in the *New York Mercury* for “likely Negro Boys and Girls, from 9 to 12 years of age” apparently brought buyers.

From one of the points of entry, buyers transported slaves across an increasingly wide part of the colonies' Atlantic hinterland. From Charleston, large numbers of slaves moved into Georgia after 1750, smaller numbers went to North Carolina, and coasting vessels carried slaves northward to other colonies. This movement tended to be swift, since the sooner an African man or woman arrived on a farm or plantation, the sooner his or her new owner could begin to recoup the investment with profit from the person's labor.

Arrival on a plantation or a small farm in America meant part of a test for the Africans was completed. Being alive was a victory in itself. From the time of enslavement in Africa, through passage

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to the coast, across the Atlantic, and to a location of some permanence in America, perhaps half of all the victimized Africans died. But now the black men, women, and children had to do more than survive—they had to learn to get by and eventually to acculturate to necessary degrees in a new land under radically different circumstances. Above all, the newest forced immigrants to America had to learn to perform work as their owners directed, for the vast Atlantic slaving system brought them to the colonies as a commodity of labor. This fact would play the biggest role in directing the lives of the slaves and their offspring in the new land for generations to come.