

## The Atlantic Slave Trade, Part 1

European contact during the latter part of the fifteenth century along the West African coast resulted in significant changes in sub-Saharan Africa starting about 1500. The most significant change was the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, which affected the African people by changing their lifestyles in many ways.

Prior to 1500, the West Africans had faced an empty ocean; the Africans had not built ships and had not sailed across the ocean. They were content remaining on their continent, toiling their land, and hunting game. This changed, however, when the Por-

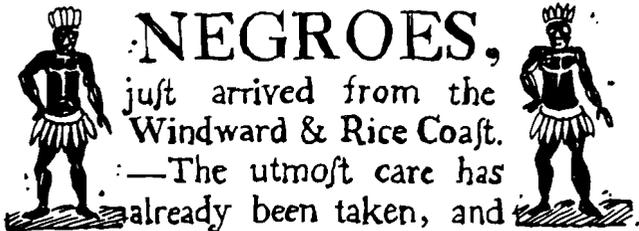
portuguese started to sail along the West African coast. The Portuguese started to trade with the West Africans along the coast. They traded with several chiefdoms and states along the Guinea coast, most notably with the Wolof state at the mouth of the Senegal River, with the Akan states of the central region, as well as with chiefdoms and states along the Niger and Congo Rivers, such as Benin and the Kongo empire. Trade consisted of exchanging gold, ivory, and a small number of slaves. Slave trade was minor during that time. At first, the Portuguese formed trading partnerships with the West Africans, and the trade relations were friendly. But the discovery of the Americas was to change this relationship.

The Americas, most specifically Central and South America, were discovered in the 1400s by the Spanish and Portuguese. The Spanish and Portuguese began to operate large plantations and mines in these newly-discovered regions with the use of the native people as slave labor. However, the native Indians were not used to hard labor like the Europeans wanted, and they started dying in alarming numbers. Eventually there were not many natives left to work the plantations and the mines. The Spanish and Portuguese found what seemed to be the perfect solution in about 1500 in Africa.

In 1510, the sale of Africans in the Americas was legalized by the Spanish crown. In 1518, the first cargo of Africans sailed in a Spanish ship from Guinea to America. So began the West Atlantic Slave Trade. It was to last two and a half centuries, and about 10 to 12 million Africans were carried across—about two million Africans died on the way. The slave trade was to become disastrous for the Africans.

The question to ask now is: Why Africa? Why did it happen so easily? First, slave trade was not uncommon and strange within Africa. For centuries, slaves were traded with the Muslims of North and East Africa. Slaves were usually prisoners of war or those people punished for a crime. They were seen and used like servile people. They were used in the household or military services. However, the African economy was not a slave-based

**TO BE SOLD** on board the  
*Ship Bance Island*, on tuesday the 6th  
of *May* next, at *Ashley-Ferry*; a choice  
cargo of about 250 fine healthy



**NEGROES,**  
just arrived from the  
*Windward & Rice Coast*.  
—The utmost care has  
already been taken, and  
shall be continued, to keep them free from  
the least danger of being infected with the  
**SMALL-POX**, no boat having been on  
board, and all other communication with  
people from *Charles-Town* prevented.

*Austin, Laurens, & Appleby.*

*N.B.* Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the  
**SMALL-POX** in their own Country.

economy. The slaves were like wageless workers, and if they wanted, they could work for themselves, free from obligations. In short, the African slaves were more like serfs. Hence, trading in slaves was neither uncommon nor strange for the Africans. In fact, the early sale of African slaves did not depart drastically from the previous practices of the Africans themselves. The only difference was the transportation of slaves across the ocean.

Second, the Africans were many, and they were skilled farmers and miners, hence they were very valuable as labor, not only for the Europeans but also for the Africans. When the European demand for slaves rose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this trade dealt purely with captives of war. As a result, different African coastal federations rose who joined hands with the European merchants in exploiting their own people and acted as middlemen in the slave trade. These Africans did not realize the negative consequences of their actions; they were thinking of the short-term profit from the sale of the slaves. To procure and capture the slaves for the Europeans, these African federations would make war on their neighbors. In return, European goods were exchanged, such as firearms, tobacco, alcohol, and cotton. The slave trade could only survive through warfare and violence. The Africans were caught up in a vicious circle: the need for captives for the Europeans increased the need for firearms, and the increased availability of firearms increased warfare and violence among the African nations.

The high point of slavery occurred between 1650 and 1850. Slavery was inhumane. The slaves were treated like cattle, and tests were done on them to ensure their strength. On their journey to the Americas, the slaves were crammed and chained below the decks. Then the slaving ship would proceed slowly across the ocean, hoping only 10 to 15 percent of the cargo of slaves would die.

The Portuguese were the principal carriers of the slave trade until the 1640s, when the Dutch, French, and British entered the trade.

Indigenous African slavery began to decline at the end of the nineteenth century, beginning in 1874 and ending in 1928. This was partly as a result of British and French abolitionists fighting to make an end to slavery. Also, by this time, European interests were changing and demand for slave labor diminished. The Europeans now went in search of raw materials, prestige, and military gain as the Industrial Revolution swept through Europe.

**Slave Exports from Africa** (from Robert July, *A History of the African People*, 5th ed., 1998, p. 173):

period	volume
1450–1600	367,000
1601–1700	1,868,000
1701–1800	6,133,000
1801–1900	3,330,000
Total	11,698,000

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Challenges

1. What was the Atlantic Slave Trade?

---

---

2. What event brought on the beginning of the Atlantic Slave Trade?

---

---

3. How many Africans were exported to the Americas between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

---

---

4. Which century experienced the largest export of slaves from Africa?

---

---

5. Who were the primary carriers throughout the history of the slave trade?

---

---

6. Was the Atlantic Slave Trade the first of any kind of slave trade occurring in Africa? If not, where did slave trade occur?

---

---

7. How were some Africans involved in the slave trade?

---

---

8. What goods did the Europeans exchange for slaves?

---

---

9. Between which two dates did the Atlantic Slave Trade thrive?

---

---

10. What were the reasons that brought the slave trade to an end by the early twentieth century?

---

---

---

---