

A summary of the triangular slave trade



The triangular trade

The slave trade began with Portuguese (and some Spanish) traders, capturing mainly West African (but some Central African) people, enslaving them and transporting them to the American colonies they had conquered in the 15th century.

British sailors became involved in the trade in the 16th century and their involvement increased in the 18th century when the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) gave them the right to sell enslaved people in the Spanish Empire.

The slave trade made a great deal of profit for the traders and, therefore, they often ignored the fact it was inhuman and unfair.

At least **12 million African people** were enslaved and taken to the Americas between 1532 and 1832 and at least a third of them in British ships.

For the British slave traders it was a three-legged journey called the '**triangular trade**':

- Captive West African people were exchanged for trade goods such as brandy and guns.
- Enslaved people were then taken via the '**Middle Passage**' across the Atlantic for sale in the West Indies and North America.
- Finally, a cargo of rum and sugar taken from the colonies, was taken back to the United Kingdom to sell.

Key fact

- As many as **2 million enslaved people died** during the journey via the Middle Passage.
- Journeys lasted from as little as six weeks to several months, depending on the weather.
- The ships were often too small to carry the hundreds of captives on board. People were tightly packed into cramped spaces with one person's right leg chained to the left leg of another person.
- Conditions on the ships were terrible and many died from diseases such as smallpox, scurvy and measles.

The beginning of the slave trade



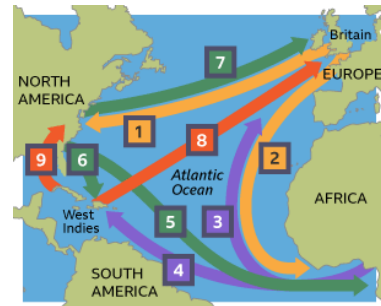
- In the 16th and 17th centuries, Portuguese traders took enslaved people from Africa to work in the Portuguese colony of Brazil and the Spanish colonies of South America. As many as 350,000 African people were taken in this way to the Americas.
- In the 16th century, English pirates started selling enslaved people to the Spanish colonies. Sir John Hawkins was the first English sea-captain to do this, starting in 1562.
- In 1625, the British captured Barbados in the West Indies and in 1655 they secured Jamaica. English slave traders started supplying enslaved African people to the English colonies.
- In 1672, the Royal African Company was set up to trade enslaved African people to the sugar *plantations* of the West Indies.
- In 1713, Spain gave British slave traders the contract, known as the Asiento, to trade 144,000 enslaved people a year to Spanish South America. This contract was part of the Treaty of Utrecht.

From 1768 to 1776, William Colhoun was a chief mate on slave ships that sailed from Glasgow to West Africa, the Carribean, and the British colonies of Maryland and Virginia. Below is one of a series of letters he wrote to his sister Betty, who was back in Glasgow. In this letter, he promises to give a young, enslaved girl to his sister as a servant.

I have a very fine girl about twelve years of age. I have had her eighteen months with me and she is very smart and will learn anything... Betty will accept her in her home...she can speak good English.

The triangular trade

After 1700, the numbers of enslaved people being transported increased greatly. Perhaps **8.5 million African people** were enslaved and taken to the Americas.



Key

1	Manufactured goods, luxuries
2	Guns, cloth, iron, beer
3	Gold, ivory, spices, hardwoods
4	Enslaved people
5	Rum, iron, gunpowder, tools
6	Fish, flour, livestock, lumber
7	Whale oil, lumber, furs, rice, silk, indigo, tobacco
8	Sugar, molasses, wood
9	Enslaved people, sugar, molasses

A British slave ship set off from Liverpool, Glasgow or Bristol, carrying trade goods and sailed to West Africa.

- Some African people were captured directly by the British traders. They ambushed and captured local people in Africa.
- Most slave ships got their enslaved people from British 'factors' who lived full-time in Africa and bought captive African people from local tribal chiefs. The chiefs would raid a rival village and sell their captured enemies as slaves.
- In 1700, an enslaved person cost about £3-worth of traded goods, e.g. cloth, guns, gunpowder and brandy.
- The enslaved people were marched to the coast in chained lines called coffles, where they were held in prisons called 'factories'.

The slave ship then sailed across the Atlantic to the West Indies – this leg of the voyage was called the '**Middle Passage**'.

- In the West Indies the enslaved people were sold at an auction called a '**scramble**'. Some were sent to '**seasoning camps**' to be trained to obey, often using brutal methods.
- The selling price of an enslaved person in the West Indies in 1700 was £20, so there was a good profit to be had, which made the risks of long journeys and possible harsh weather worthwhile.

Some ships, but not all, then loaded up with sugar and rum to sell in Britain, before making the voyage back home.

Abolition

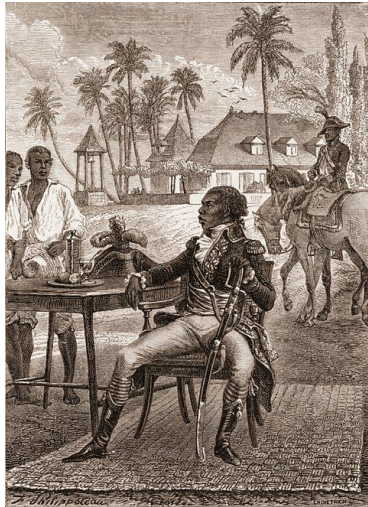


Figure caption,
Toussaint l'Ouverture

At the end of the 18th century, public opinion began to turn against the slave trade.

- Some African rulers refused to sell enslaved people to the traders. Occasionally African villages attacked British slave ships and set the captives free.
- Sometimes enslaved people mutinied on board ships. The most famous case was the *Amistad* in 1839, where enslaved African people took control of the slave ship. Put on trial in the United States, the enslaved people won their freedom.
- There were many rebellions by enslaved people. The most famous leader was **Toussaint l'Ouverture**, who led a successful revolution to liberate the West Indies territory of Saint Domingue from French control in 1791.
- In Jamaica, runaway enslaved people formed 'Maroon' communities that fought against the British soldiers.
- In Britain, enslaved people, like James Somerset (or Somersett), frequently ran away from their masters. When he was recaptured, he and his friends contested his case in the courts.

In 1787, the **Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade** was set up. **William Wilberforce** represented the committee in Parliament.

- The campaigners boycotted sugar, wrote letters and presented petitions.
- **Thomas Clarkson** went on a speaking tour, showing his audiences the chains and irons used by slavers to keep their captives restrained, and also models of a slave ship.
- Other campaigners published leaflets describing conditions on the Middle Passage, and giving details of atrocities such as the *Zong* incident (1781). The captain of the slave ship *Zong* had thrown

133 enslaved people overboard so that he could claim insurance money.

- British Africans such as **Olaudah Equiano** formed the 'Sons of Africa' and campaigned against the slave trade.

There is some evidence that the slave trade was becoming less profitable – the price of **buying** enslaved people in Africa was rising, reaching £25 in 1800, but the price for **selling** in the Americas had not risen as quickly and was only £35 in 1800.

It is a matter of contention amongst historians as to which of these factors most contributed to the eventual abolition of the slave trade:

- Was resistance from enslaved people themselves significant enough to stop such a lucrative business?
- Was it the significance of key figures at home?
- Or was it the fact that it was becoming less profitable and this convinced slave traders to stop trading and the government to introduce laws banning it?

1. **Who were the first European traders to engage in the transatlantic slave trade?**

- a) British
- b) Portuguese
- c) Dutch
- d) French

Answer: b) Portuguese

2. **What was the main destination of enslaved Africans taken by Portuguese traders in the 16th and 17th centuries?**

- a) North America
- b) The Caribbean
- c) Brazil and Spanish South America
- d) West Africa

Answer: c) Brazil and Spanish South America

3. **What was the name of the three-part journey used by British slave traders?**

- a) The Slave Route
- b) The Triangular Trade
- c) The Middle Passage
- d) The Atlantic Loop

Answer: b) The Triangular Trade

4. **What was the first leg of the Triangular Trade?**

- a) Transporting enslaved Africans to the Americas
- b) Bringing goods from Britain to West Africa
- c) Shipping sugar and rum to Britain
- d) Enslaved people being marched to the coast

Answer: b) Bringing goods from Britain to West Africa

5. **What was the Middle Passage?**

- a) The route from Africa to the Americas
- b) The final stage of the Triangular Trade
- c) The route enslaved people took to escape captivity

d) The journey from the Caribbean to Britain

Answer: a) The route from Africa to the Americas

6. **How were most enslaved people obtained by British traders?**

a) By raiding African villages themselves

b) By purchasing captives from local tribal chiefs

c) By freeing them from African prisons

d) By recruiting voluntary laborers

Answer: b) By purchasing captives from local tribal chiefs

7. **Which of the following was NOT a major British port involved in the slave trade?**

a) Liverpool

b) Glasgow

c) Bristol

d) Edinburgh

Answer: d) Edinburgh

8. **What was a key argument for the abolition of the slave trade?**

a) It was no longer profitable

b) Sugar plantations no longer needed labor

c) Britain lost its colonies

d) European wars made trade difficult

Answer: a) It was no longer profitable

9. **What organization was formed in 1787 to fight against the slave trade?**

a) Sons of Africa

b) Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade

c) The Underground Railroad

d) The Royal African Company

Answer: b) Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade

10. **How many enslaved Africans are estimated to have died during the Middle Passage?**

a) 500,000

b) 1 million

c) 2 million

d) 5 million

Answer: c) 2 million