

The Transatlantic slave trade

The slave trade began with Portuguese (and some Spanish) traders, taking mainly West African (but some Central African) slaves 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 slaves in the Spanish Empire. The slave trade made a great deal of profit for those who sold and exchanged slaves. Therefore, they often ignored the fact it was inhuman and unfair. At least 12 million Africans were taken to the Americas as slaves 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':

West African slaves were exchanged for trade goods such as brandy and guns.

Slaves 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 England to sell.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Portuguese traders took slaves from Africa to work in the Portuguese colony of Brazil and the Spanish colonies of South America. As many as 350,000 Africans were taken in this way as slaves to the Americas.

In the 16th century, English pirates started selling slaves 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 African slaves to the English colonies.

In 1672, the Royal African Company was set up to trade African slaves 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 slaves a year to Spanish South America. This contract was part of the Treaty of Utrecht.

A British slave ship set off from Liverpool, Glasgow or Bristol, carrying trade goods and sailed to West Africa. Some slaves were captured directly by the British traders.

Most slave ships got their slaves from British 'factors', who lived full-time in Africa and bought slaves from local tribal chiefs. The chiefs would raid a rival village and sell their captured enemies as slaves.

The slaves were marched to the coast in chained lines, 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 slaves were sold at an auction and then trained to obey, often using brutal methods.

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



The slave trade was huge – British ships transported 2.6 million slaves. It has been estimated overall, about 12 million Africans were captured to be taken to the Americas as slaves.

At the end of the 18th century, public opinion began to turn against the slave trade and there was resistance to the slave trade:

Some African rulers refused to sell slaves to the traders. Occasionally villages attacked British slave ships and set the slaves free.

Sometimes slaves mutinied on board ships. The most famous case was the Amistad in 1839. There were many slave rebellions. The most famous slave leader was Toussaint l'Ouverture, who led a successful slave revolution in French Saint Domingue in 1791. In Jamaica, runaway slaves formed 'Maroon' communities that fought against the British soldiers.

In Britain, slaves 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 role of William Wilberforce in the abolition of slavery

The campaigners boycotted sugar, wrote letters and presented petitions.

Thomas Clarkson went on a speaking tour, showing people chains and irons and a model of a slave ship.

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 slaves 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.