

When Humans Became Inhumane

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In this illustration, a slave ship sights an English cruiser. Images: Big History Project

Europeans discovered the New World in 1492. The Americas were a rich land with many natural resources. The Europeans hoped it would make them rich.

At first, Europeans bought and sold goods. For example, they bought silver, tea, and fur and then resold them in Europe to make more money.

Soon they wanted more. They wanted to produce the goods. In this way they could make even more money. Instead of buying tobacco and sugar, the Europeans could grow them. These products were very expensive back in Europe.

Growing crops such as tobacco and sugar required many workers. The Europeans first forced Native Americans to work. But there were not enough Native Americans left. Many of them had died from diseases brought by the Europeans.

Why Africa?

The Europeans turned to Africa to find more cheap workers. Why did they want Africans? Why not European workers?

Historian David Eltis answers that question. He wrote *A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*. Here's his view, summarized:

There weren't enough Europeans in the New World to work on farms and in mines. European convicts and prisoners were sent to the New World, but not in large numbers.

Europeans wanted tropical fruits and vegetables and precious metals. Slavery was the only way they could get access to these things.

The Atlantic slave trade began in 1519. The Portuguese began to enslave African people and send them to the Americas.

The slave trade continued until the early 1800s. European countries began to outlaw slavery when their citizens became outraged by it.

The chart below shows how many slaves arrived at different ports in the New World. "Region of disembarkation" is where the slaves ended up if they survived the long, terrible journey.

This table shows that about 2,700,000 African slaves were brought to the New World between 1519 and 1800.

We can see that most of the slaves went to a very small place: the island of St. Domingue. Today this island is home to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In those days, the island produced a lot of sugar.

Volume of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade
by Region of Disembarkation
1519 to 1800

Dates	British Mainland/ North America	Barbados	Guianas	French Windwards	St. Domingue	Spanish-American Mainland (incl. Brazil)	Dutch Caribbean
1519 to 1600	1,400	25,400		2,000		151,600	2,000
1601 to 1650	900		63,200	6,200	6,500	187,700	38,800
1651 to 1675	9,800	82,300	27,800	16,600	4,800	7,000	26,000
1701 to 1725	37,400	91,800	24,400	30,100	44,500	30,000	30,500
1726 to 1750	96,800	73,600	83,600	66,800	144,900	12,700	10,200
1751 to 1775	166,900	120,900	111,900	63,700	247,500	5,000	15,300
1776 to 1800	24,400	28,500	71,200	41,200	345,800	10,200	6,900
TOTAL	337,600	422,500	382,100	228,600	794,000	404,200	129,700

"White Over Black"

Slaves in the Caribbean islands were forced to work long hours in the heat. They were not given enough food. They were beaten by their Portuguese and Spanish masters. In fact, one of the first revolutions of the 1700s began in Haiti.

The chart also shows us that the Spanish and Portuguese imported hundreds of thousands of slaves. Most of them were brought to South America between 1519 and 1650. After this, the Europeans brought over fewer slaves.

The 13 Colonies and the young United States used slaves as well. Slavery there was quite terrible.

Surprisingly, slavery developed alongside the ideas that inspired the American Revolution (1775-1783): life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The American revolutionaries were English subjects. This might have been part of the reason.

Historian Winthrop Jordan argues that the English had strong beliefs about race and color. Their beliefs allowed them to keep slaves while talking about freedom. In his famous book, *White Over Black*, Jordan presents these ideas:

_In England, blackness had powerful meanings. Englishmen used the idea of blackness to stand for negative ideas. This was before they were even aware that some men were black-skinned. _

The Oxford English Dictionary before the 1500s had these meanings for the word "black": dirty, foul, atrocious, horrible, wicked.

_The first meetings between Englishmen and Africans came in West Africa and Congo, where people have very dark skin. One of the whitest countries on Earth suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest. _

A huge trade network

Enslaving Africans began as a way to make money. But racist ideas kept it alive for more than 200 years.

Slavery created a huge trade network across the Atlantic Ocean. Many slaves and natural resources moved back and forth. Europeans used the profits from this network to create settlements in the New World. Then the settlements made them even richer.

Slave traders became more efficient at their evil work. They wanted to make as much money as possible. This meant moving the most slaves at the lowest price.

The image at right shows how slave traders crammed human bodies onto a ship. They also show the chains slave traders used during the long journey. Crossing the Atlantic took six to 12 weeks.

We know that Britain finally outlawed the slave trade in 1833. The image was printed about 10 years before that. This could mean the people who built the ship wanted to show others how to transport slaves efficiently. Or it's possible that it was used by people against slavery. They might have printed it to show how horrible the slave trade was.

There is no doubt that the Atlantic slave trade was evil. This evil allowed Europeans to begin producing new goods and sell them. It allowed Europeans to get rich.

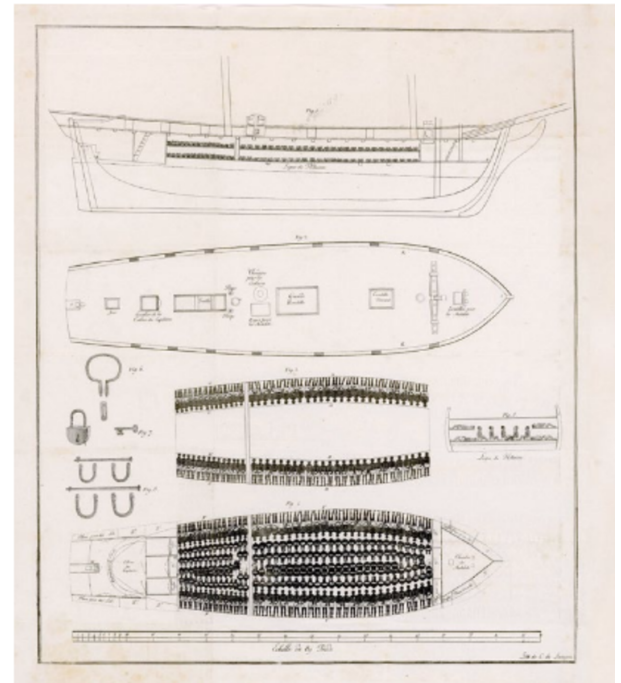


Illustration of the French slave ship the "Vigilante" from the nineteenth century.