

2.3 Impact of the Slave Trade



Main Idea The European slave trade involved millions of people and had lasting effects on Africa and the Americas.

Slavery existed in Africa for many years before European contact. For example, African tribal groups turned male war captives into slaves. Women and children were often incorporated into families, and the children of some slaves could be born free. When Islam came to Africa beginning in the A.D. 700s, some Muslims began to capture and sell Africans to North Africa and Southwest Asia.

European Slave Trade Begins

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to explore the African coast in the 1400s. The **trans-Atlantic slave trade**, or trading of slaves across the Atlantic Ocean, started around 1500. Enslaved people were brought to African coastal cities and held captive until sold. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and English all purchased slaves at African coastal ports.

After purchase, enslaved Africans were crowded onto large ships headed for European colonies in the Americas. This trip across the Atlantic Ocean, known as the **Middle Passage**, could take several months. About 2 million people died in the Middle Passage, many due to **malnutrition** (inadequate food or nourishment) or disease.

Once slaves arrived in the Americas, they were sold at auction, often to go to work on large farms called plantations. Sugar, tobacco, and cotton were some of the major plantation crops. European demand for these crops increased and the plantations got bigger. As the plantations grew, so did the demand for slave labor.

The **incentive**, or motivating reason, for slavery was profit. Europeans bought enslaved people in order to have a cheap and captive labor source. The plantation owners made more money because they did not have to pay the slaves.



Consequences of the Slave Trade

The trans-Atlantic slave trade lasted from the 1500s to the mid-1800s. Historians estimate that more than 12 million Africans were enslaved and shipped to the Western Hemisphere. The majority of slaves were sent to Brazil and the Caribbean.

People forced into slavery were generally young because they had a better chance of surviving the Middle Passage. Also, when they arrived at their destination, it was expected that young people would be able to work longer and harder in the fields.



The journey across the Atlantic could take up to 90 days depending on the weather. Enslaved Africans were packed onto ships and chained below deck. They were only taken above deck for brief periods. Unable to stand up or move, many Africans died where they sat.

THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

	LEFT FROM AFRICA	ARRIVED IN THE AMERICAS
1500–1600	277,506	199,285
1601–1700	1,875,631	1,522,677
1701–1800	6,494,619	5,609,869
1801–1867	3,873,580	3,370,825
TOTAL	12,521,336	10,702,656

Source: <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>

Many Africans taken were male, and many were potential leaders in their community. Families were often torn apart. These losses weakened many African communities and completely destroyed others.

Millions of people in North America, the Caribbean, and South America are descendants of enslaved Africans. These people have shaped cultures in those regions by sharing their languages, customs, and traditions. The impact of the slave trade has lasted for centuries.

Before You Move On

Summarize How did the European slave trade develop and how did it change cultures?