

History of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Introduction

The origins of the African Slave Trade can be traced back to the Age of Exploration in the 15th Century. Europeans had become quite addicted to the luxuries of exotic spices, silks and porcelain that could only be found in Asia. Unfortunately for them, Muslim traders had a complete monopoly over the trade routes to the Far East. Unsuccessful in the attempt to break that monopoly, they started to explore water routes that would enable them to bypass the Muslims. The Portuguese took the lead in that exploration and sent voyages down the west coast of Africa in hopes of finding a new route to the source of traded goods. On those voyages they found a new type of good- human beings.

[...]

England

English participation in the slave trade came later. It wasn't until Captain John Hawkins made several voyages to Africa in the mid-16th Century that they began to see the real benefit of participation. Despite his initial success, the English did not become fully active in the trade until the Spanish Armada was defeated and the Spanish stranglehold over the Atlantic broken.

In many European nations, the monarch had to give formal permission (a Royal Charter) for overseas trade to be considered legal. England was no different. There, merchants petitioned the King to form joint companies that would have sole rights to trade with a particular area. In 1618, the Company of Adventurers of London was established which had a monopoly over the gold and ivory trade on the West African Coast. Despite their interest in the profits that the trade could bring them, political instability kept England's participating minimal until 1692. With the restoration of the throne in that year, the king chartered the Royal African Company. The company that had the most influence and participation in the African Slave Trade was the Royal African Company. The Royal African Company jealously guarded its monopoly over the trade and successfully drove the French and Dutch out of West Africa. As the sole legal provider of slaves to the colonies, the Royal African Company established and administered trading posts on the West African coast and was authorized to seize

English ships, other than their own, involved in the trade. Eventually the Royal African Company's monopoly was ended in 1698. From that time on, private traders were allowed to operate freely in and out of Africa on the basis of a 10 percent duty on the value of their cargoes. England obtained the *Asiento* through the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht that negotiated the end of the War of Spanish Succession and gained the right to take slaves to the Spanish Colonies for 30 years. With this, England completely dominated the African Slave Trade.

As the profitability of the slave trade became more apparent, independent British merchants began to clamor for their right to participate in it. In 1750, Great Britain passed an act allowing for free and open trade in Africa.

Conclusion

By the 18th Century, European merchants controlled over 1,000 miles of the West African coast and the transatlantic slave trade that accompanied it. Between the 14th and 18th Centuries, at least 10 million African captives were transported across the Atlantic. Half of the enslaved were transported in the 18th century alone on ships owned by the Portuguese, British, and French. Brazil and the Caribbean islands took receipt of approximately 90% of the Africans who survived the Middle Passage.

Maryland Council on Economic Education, Amy Rosenkrans, Fall 2004

An Act for Extending and Improving the Trade to Africa, 1750

Whereas the Trade to and from Africa is very advantageous to Great Britain, and necessary for supplying the Plantations and Colonies thereunto belonging with a sufficient Number of Negroes at reasonable Rates; and for that Purpose the said Trade ought to be free and open to all his Majesty's Subjects: Therefore it be enacted, and it is hereby enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the Authority of the same, That it shall and may be lawful for all his Majesty's Subjects to trade and traffick to and from any Port or Place in Africa, between the Port of Sallee in South Barbary, and the Cape of Good Hope, when, and at such Times, and in such Manner, and in or with such Quantity of Goods, Wares or Mechandizes, as he or they shall think fit, without any Restraint whatsoever.

Source:

Emert, Phillis, ed. Colonial Triangular Trade: An Economy Based on Human Misery. Carlisle, Massachusetts: Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1995.

Rum

In 1770, just before the American Revolution, rum represented over four-fifths of New England's exports. About eleven million gallons of Rhode Island rum were exchanged for slaves in Africa between 1709 and 1807, with about 800,000 gallons being the annual average marketed in the last years before 1807...A specially strong "Guinea Rum" was distilled in Newport for the Africa Market. The rum trade on the coast of West Africa was by then a "virtual monopoly of New England." In 1755, Caleb Godfrey, a slave captain from Newport, Rhode Island, bought four men, three women, three girls, and one boy for 799 gallons of rum, two barrels of beef, and one barrel of pork, together with some smaller items...The Africans with whom Rhode Island captains had traded, especially along the Gold and Windward coasts, had also become addicted to North American rum, a fact which gave captains from Rhode Island a definite advantage...

The North American Colonies

"The Chesapeake became the primary tobacco producer for the world, exporting some 38 million pounds by 1700 and effectively liquidating English West Indian production. It was also the most important slave zone in continental North America, holding some 145,000 slaves (or 60 percent of the total in the thirteen colonies) by 1750. The Georgia-South Carolina region became a major rice producer on coastal plantations, with some slave-produced indigo in backland areas. The slave-based rice plantations absorbed 40,000 slaves by mid-century. By 1790 there were an impressive 698,000 slaves in what was now the United States, 94 percent of who were in the so-called southern states from Maryland south....

...But rice and tobacco would soon pale in significance to the production of cotton.

Although long-and short-staple cotton had been grown in the southern region for some time...only the introduction of mechanical cleaning of the short-staple and heavily seeded cotton in the 1790's with the cotton gin permitted cotton planting to penetrate into the interior of the county and also to become a competitive crop on the world market. Starting in the rice regions, cotton spread inland quickly, and as early as the 1830's half of the cotton was being produced in the newly settled regions of Alabama,

Mississippi, and Louisiana... By the middle of the nineteenth century this was the largest single export from the United States, more valuable than all other exports combined, and it was an overwhelmingly slave-produced crop. Moreover, U.S. cotton dominated the world market and reduced cotton production for export in most of the other American regions.”

Source:

Klein, Herbert S. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.