

HISTORY

IN

GRACE ABOUNDING

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

What Is Slavery?

We were all ranked together. . . . Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being.

—Frederick Douglass

The above quotation offers some sense of the dehumanizing effects of slavery, a practice that is older than human civilization and that continues in some parts of the world to this day, despite its extreme barbarity. Slavery in the United States had its own particular characteristics, but all forms of slavery are the same in that one group of people essentially exercises unrestricted control over another.

One of the most conspicuous aspects of slavery is its sheer physical brutality. As Douglass pointed out in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, even when slave “masters” began their careers with relatively generous natures, they themselves became dehumanized—the institution made them increasingly cruel. Speaking of one of his “mistresses,” Mrs. Hughes, Douglass wrote that under slavery’s influence, “the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.” Why? Because absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Of course, people do not remain in bondage of their own free will, and so they have to be forced. The desire of slave owners to maintain their dominance gave rise to a multitude of dreadful torture devices and perverse practices. The whip was the most common tool of the master or overseer; its shrill crack echoed in the ears of victims and witnesses for years afterward. Whipping left the skin permanently scarred and sometimes led to death.

Physical punishment was but one of the tortures inflicted upon slaves. The mere memory of a severe beating (or witnessing the beating of another) haunted the enslaved for the rest of their lives, dulled their emotions and senses, and sometimes left them mere shells of human beings. Constant hard labor, lack of decent food, and poor living conditions also had emotional, physical, and spiritual impacts. Then there was separation from family and friends and uncertainty as to what hardship the next day might bring. Given the toll that slavery usually took on its victims, it is altogether an astonishing testament to the human spirit that so many could endure its worst and still emerge strong, free, and rational.

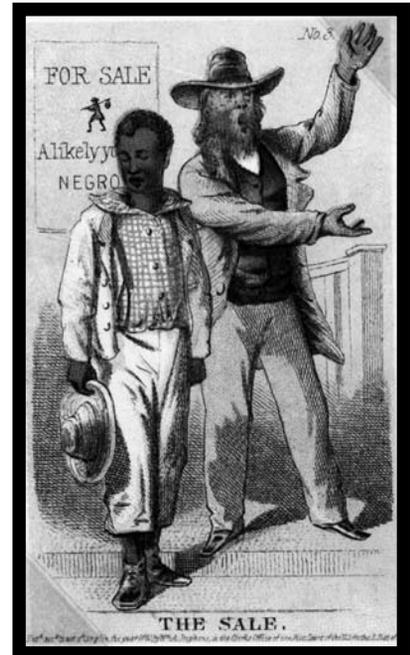
The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Slavery began in the Western Hemisphere in the early 1500s, as soon as Spanish adventurers began combing the New World for its expected caches of gold, silver, and other riches. Early Spanish settlers in the Caribbean and South America exploited native Arawak and Carib Indian populations in order to satisfy their labor needs, and these groups were rapidly annihilated by disease and hardship. By the early 1520s, the Spanish turned to Africa, where Portuguese traders had long before established ties to existing slave markets along that continent's western coast.

Large-scale transatlantic shipment of African slaves increased sharply in the late sixteenth century with the development of sugar and tobacco plantations in Brazil, Jamaica, and St. Domingue.¹ Later, Cuba was also home to an immense plantation system, as were other parts of the British and French West Indies. Through the mid-1800s, however, Brazil would prove to be by far the single largest importer of African slaves, absorbing more than 60 percent of all forced migrants from Africa to the Western Hemisphere.

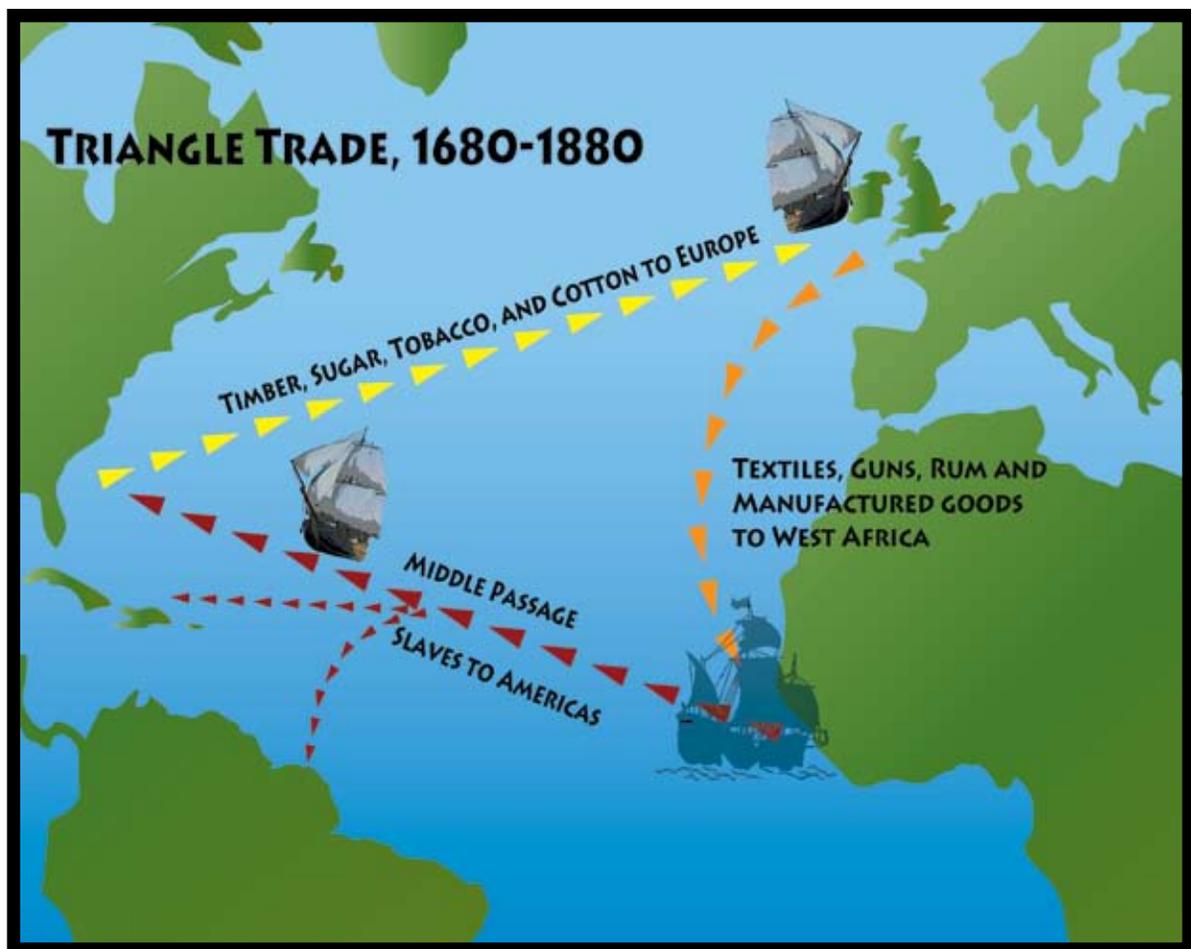
Slave traders developed a route known as the **Triangle Trade**, wherein African slaves were traded in the Americas for raw materials (sugar, molasses, timber, and later, tobacco and cotton), which in turn were shipped to Europe for consumption or processed into manufactured goods. These goods were used to purchase more slaves in Africa, completing the triangle and beginning the process anew. (See map on the next page.)

Many slaves were prisoners of war or victims of raids perpetrated by rival tribes (and sometimes Portuguese traders), who swapped their human commodities for textiles, guns, and other European goods. By the end of the transatlantic slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century, as many as 12 million Africans had been sold into slavery and transported to the Western Hemisphere. Of these, approximately 10 million survived the wretched journey across the Atlantic.



The Sale, by Henry Louis Stephens, circa 1863, Library of Congress. LC-USZ62-41837.

¹ **St. Domingue.** Modern Hispaniola, the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic



The Triangle Trade. Slaves were bartered for, purchased, or captured in West Africa and brought to the Americas. Raw materials and other commodities were purchased in the Americas and brought back to Europe. Finished goods such as textiles and guns were then taken to West Africa for bartering.

Known commonly as the **Middle Passage**, the trip from Africa to the Americas lasted anywhere from a few weeks to months depending on the point of embarkation and the final destination. Most slave ships were relatively small merchant vessels that transported one hundred to three hundred slaves, but large ships capable of carrying as many as one thousand slaves were not unusual. Violent mutiny was a constant threat aboard any slave ship, and history records hundreds of such events. Crews took every precaution to prevent uprisings and visited swift and severe punishment on rebellious slaves.

The conditions aboard a slave vessel—especially one of the very large ones—are virtually unimaginable for modern minds. Slaves were usually kept in the cargo hold, where chains were available for the unruly, if not for the entire population. Traders often modified their cargo holds in order to use every inch of space, allowing perhaps four feet of headroom for the slaves. Thus slaves led a nightmarish existence in the dark, stuffy cargo holds, awash in human waste, blood, and general misery. As the journey wore on, supplies on board the ships dwindled, and sickness became rampant, resulting in increased death rates among slaves and crew alike.

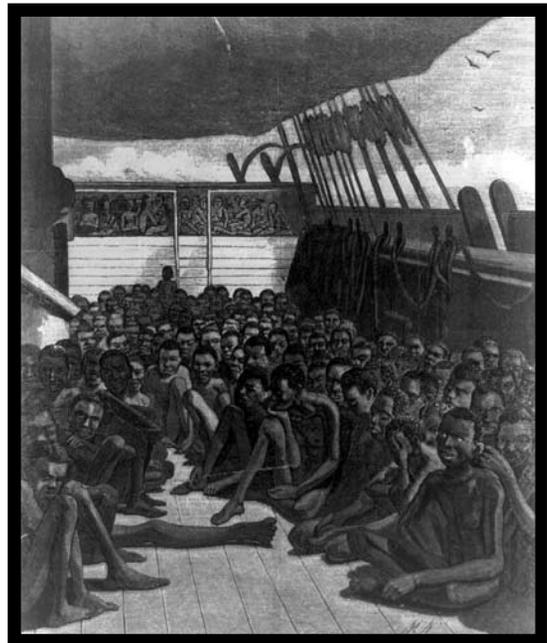
Slavery in the English Colonies and United States

The English colonies, and later the United States, imported only about 5 percent of all African slaves. Early on, the English relied on indentured servants in colonies like Virginia and Barbados. These were usually young men who agreed to work (essentially as slaves) for several years in return for passage, housing, and food. As riches from the New World were transferred overseas, the economies and opportunities in Europe improved, and the pool of willing indentured servants dried up. This development, together with a soaring worldwide demand for sugar and cotton, caused planters in the English colonies to follow the lead of their counterparts in the Caribbean and South America to meet their labor needs.

The typical landowner in North America also differed fundamentally from his counterparts in Brazil, Cuba, and St. Domingue. Normally, an English settler did not come to the New World intent on making quick riches and returning to Europe to live out his days as an absentee landlord. Instead, the English colonist made his new home in the Americas and had an interest in making sure that his slaves were in relatively good health. By comparison, landowners further south often had little direct contact with their plantations and cared little for the slave population as long as profits remained high. Even in the English colonies, however, and in the southern United States thereafter, privation was common.

The aftermath of the American Revolutionary War (1775–83) brought the beginning of the Abolitionist Movement, as well as the seeds of division that would eventually lead to the Civil War. The Revolution sparked new ways of thinking among Americans, many of whom were uncomfortable with the presence of human bondage in a nation that proclaimed to the rest of the world that “all men are created equal.”

Slavery was abolished or gradually phased out in the northern states during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In New York, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, laws were passed whereby slaves would be freed within a certain number of years or once they reached a certain age. Furthermore, significant antislavery measures were enacted by Congress, including the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which prohibited slavery in northwestern territories, and a law in 1808 that finally put an end to the importation of African slaves.



The Slave Deck of the Bark Wildfire, Brought into Key West on April 30, 1860 Wood engraving illustration from *Harper's Weekly*, June 2, 1860.

Unit 3 Introduction



Richmond, Va. Barges with African Americans on the Canal; ruined buildings beyond. June, 1865. Photograph. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-cwpt-04079.

UP FROM BONDAGE, 1866–1939

The American Civil War left more than 600,000 dead soldiers in its wake and transformed the nation. For 4 million African Americans, the end of the war meant the beginning of the slow march to equal rights and freedom. The war destroyed the old plantation economy and devastated cities in the South. In the North, by contrast, the war actually spurred industrial growth, and though

families would long mourn their lost sons and fathers, the northern economy flourished during and after the war. Naturally, many African Americans in the South were eager to seek new lives in the prosperous North, but the political, social, and economic conditions around the country made it difficult for many people to start again.

In the South, the end of the war marked the start of the period known as **Reconstruction**.¹ Much of the South was occupied and governed by Federal troops. Emancipated African Americans sought assistance from the newly formed **Freedmen's Bureau** and hoped to find jobs in the North. Many others stayed behind, near the crumbling plantations, perhaps to receive their "forty acres and a mule," under a program administered by the Freedmen's Bureau. There was hope for the future, but uncertainty was really the order of the day.

Social conditions deteriorated once the euphoria of war's end had passed: political momentum was lost with Lincoln's assassination; the next president, the ill-fated Andrew Johnson, was actually sympathetic to the defeated rebels, who in turn transformed the South into a nightmarish place for black Americans; next came eight tumultuous, fruitless years with the able general

¹ **Reconstruction.** This and many other key terms from the post-Civil War, Jim Crow, and early Civil Rights eras will be detailed in the essay on page 222 and the glossary on page 224.

but poor president Ulysses S. Grant at the helm of the executive branch; these were followed by the contentious election of Rutherford B. Hayes, who forged the disastrous **Compromise of 1877**, effectively trading the hopes and rights of millions of American citizens for his seat in the Oval Office. By the late 1800s, many African Americans—whether they had moved north or remained in the South—were seriously questioning whether they had truly been emancipated.

The last three decades of the nineteenth century were a troubled time in the African-American story. The Ku Klux Klan initiated its brutal, depraved reign of terror. Blacks were deprived of their voting rights, exploited by politicians, and ignored or abused by the legal system. **Jim Crow laws** and the doctrine of **separate but equal** public facilities created for the newly emancipated a status as second-class citizens and deferred their dreams.

But all the injustice and racism could not undo the essential liberties set forth by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Armed with these rights and little else, black activists and leaders, along with their allies in government, the press, and the business world, used the mandates of Congress and the Supreme Court to their advantage. Political activists, writers, artists, scholars, philosophers, educators, entrepreneurs, and entertainers of this era gradually lighted the way for their counterparts in the second half of the twentieth century.



Couple in Raccoon Coats, 1925. This well-to-do couple was ready for a night on the town in Harlem, exactly 60 years after the end of the Civil War. Photograph by James VanDerZee.

Nearly ninety percent of African Americans remained in the South until the early 1900s. The outbreak of the First World War (1914–18) created incredible for labor the industrial North; at the same time, the infestation of the beetle known as the **boll weevil** devastated cotton crops upon which the South's economy was fully dependent, even in the early twentieth century. The war and the boll weevil were mixed blessings: farmers in the South experienced the deepest imaginable poverty, but opportunities abounded in cities like New York, Detroit, and Chicago—cities to which African Americans moved by the hundreds of thousands between 1914 and the 1940s in what soon came to be known as the **Great Migration**.

A new story now unfolds: from the ruins of war, along the trail of the newly freed refugees and the millions migrating toward new lives, to the glitter of **Harlem Renaissance** nights and the troubles of the **Great Depression**—Unit 3 of *Grace Abounding* presents some of the finest literature to emerge in America during this period of constant change and ongoing struggle, when a people became divided once again, and artists searched for their own souls and those of their people.