

# 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.

## Portugal

Trafficking of human beings did not begin with the Portuguese in the 1400s. Indeed, slavery had existed throughout the world since ancient times. When the Portuguese arrived in West Africa, they found a flourishing slave trade—one that existed between the sub-Saharan African states, as well as one that existed between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. Those slaves often found their way as far as the Middle East. Recognizing the potential profit in such a trade, the Portuguese initially tried to capture Africans through raiding expeditions along the coast. Faced by tremendous opposition from the natives, the Portuguese decided to develop a trading system with the Africans in which they traded as equals. Using the Africans' already successful and time-tested trading patterns, the Portuguese soon established a thriving commerce in slaves as well as gold and ivory. By the end of the 15th century, they had built a fort on Africa's Gold Coast and been granted exclusive rights to the slave trade by the Pope. They supplied the Spanish and Portuguese settlements in Central and South America and the Caribbean with African slaves throughout the 16th century.

## Spain

Spain, which was excluded from colonizing Africa by a Papal Act of 1493 and the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, was only able to carry slaves to the colonies. By 1518 the demand for slaves in the Spanish New World was so great that King Charles I of Spain sanctioned the direct transport of slaves from Africa to the American colonies. In 1538 the Spanish government began to issue individual licenses to traders in order to supply slaves to their colonies. This process became too cumbersome, and Spain soon changed its method and instead sold the right to supply slaves to a single contractor.

## Holland

After Holland became independent of Spain in the late 16th century, it concentrated on seizing control of commercial routes to the New World. The Dutch West India Company was organized in 1621 and held a monopoly over the African trade and the trade with Dutch Colonies in the New World. Because the English were preoccupied with a civil war at home, the Dutch were able to provide a real challenge to the Portuguese. Most of the

Africans that went to the American colonies during the 17th century were taken on Dutch ships. Dutch slave traders were able to make tremendous profits before their influence declined by the end of the 17th century.

## 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 slave 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, which had a monopoly over the gold and ivory trade on the West African Coast, was established. Despite her interest in the profits that the trade could bring the country, political instability kept England's participation 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, which 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 its own, involved in the trade. The Royal African Company's monopoly was ended in 1698. From then 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 percent of the Africans who survived the Middle Passage.

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Target Notes**

