

How Did The West African Slaves Get To The New World?

There were three main methods of obtaining slaves:

1. Raids

In the 'dead' of the night, raiders would set fire to pre-determined villages. As the villagers scrambled out of their homes in shock, the raiders would herd and collect them as if they were animals. This was the most common or popular method of obtaining slaves since it allowed them to get quite a large number of slaves in a very short time.

2. Ethnic Wars

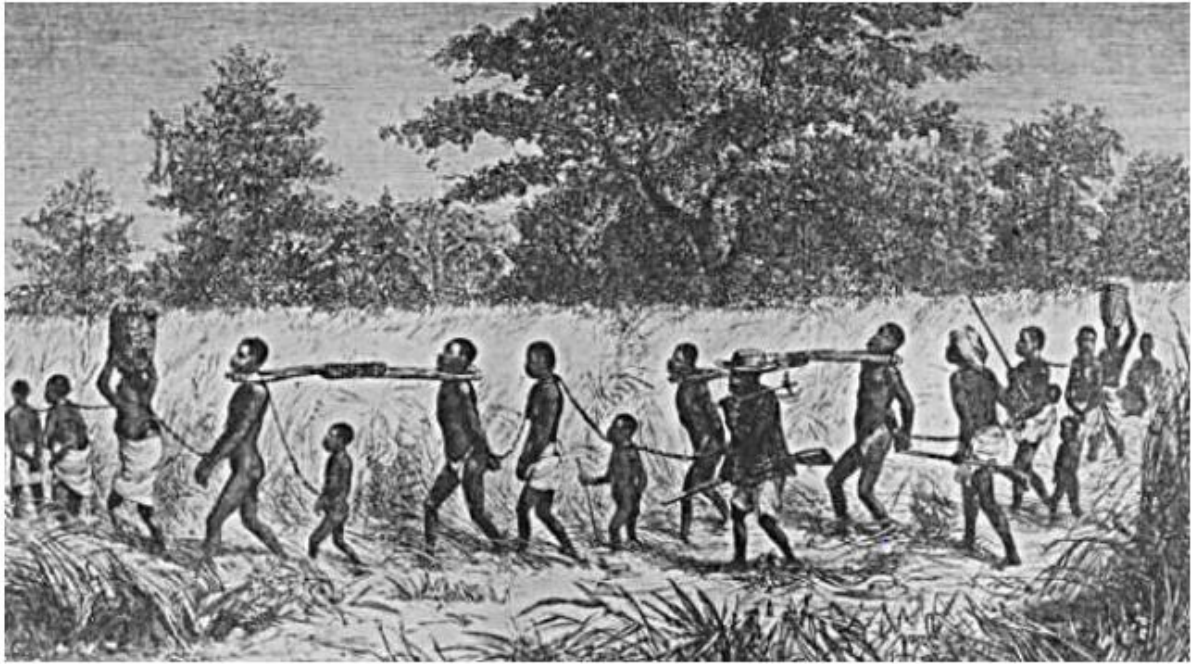
African chiefs would barter prisoners that were captured during wars with neighbouring or rival groups. It eliminated the element of insecurity since there was always the possibility that the prisoner could escape and provide vital information to his people that could ensure a successful defeat in the future.

Criminals were also disposed of this way. It saved the community the expense of incarceration while proving to be a good object lesson to 'would be' criminals. Unfortunately debtors were also sold in lieu of repayment.

The chiefs were willing to do this because slavery existed in their societies. They had no way of knowing that slavery in the West Indies was a de-humanizing and horrendous experience which could not be compared favourably with their brand of slavery.

3. Kidnapping

West Africans who strayed from their villages or who were just out late at nights ran the risk of being kidnapped and sold to slave traders. A number of persons were kidnapped and sold because of jealousy or rivalry. This includes those who were involved in love triangles or competition for political power and offices. Though this was rare, it did happen.



Captive slaves in Central Africa

The Journey to the Coast

The traders would fasten their captives in pairs with chains around their legs. They would be further secured in groups of fours, with ropes around their legs. Very often a Y shaped stick (yoke) was also fastened with the fork around their necks and the stem resting on the shoulders of the person immediately behind. Needless to say the **coffle** was well guarded by armed men.

The journey to the coast was long and miserable. It could take up to three months depending on how far in the interior the slaves were taken from. Each slave had to carry his or her own small provisions. Imagine doing so in sweltering heat in addition to the discomfort of being chained! They were allowed to stop at nights to rest. You should be able to appreciate that it was more difficult and dangerous to travel at nights.

In the morning, a quick inspection was done. The weak and sick slaves were separated from the coffles and left behind to die. You can imagine that it would be almost improbable for them in their weak and wounded state to make the long journey back home to their ruined village.

How did the slave trade affect West Africa?

1. Reduction in the population. Historians estimate that by time the British slave trade was to end, some 10-15 million slaves were forcibly taken from their homeland. This obviously led to an artificial decrease in the population. It was to

be an annual decline as the slave trade gathered momentum each year until its abolition in the early 19th century (1808).

2. Families were separated. Parents were crudely snatched, leaving their precious children behind. In some cases it was the reverse. Children were taken leaving grieving parents behind.
3. Homes were literally destroyed by fire during the raids.
4. The raiders took the young and strong people. These represented the backbone of the economy- the labour force. Needless to say, production declined, particularly in the short run until they were able to start all over again.
5. There was increased distrust among neighbours and even friends.
6. Local production and crafts such as pottery and brass work decreased. Firstly, many skilled persons were taken. Secondly, with the influx of European consumer goods that were exchanged for slaves (for example pots,) there was an increase in the taste and demand for these goods. They were now viewed as better than the local products.
7. The guns and ammunition that were trade items for slaves gave extra security to one group but provided the means for them to raid another group.
8. Many African chiefs became rich from the trade. Some used the profits from the trade to expand their kingdom. One such group was Benin.
9. The trade opened up new routes in the interior of West Africa.
10. Employment was provided for a number of locals. Sadly they found jobs as cohorts with white slave raiders. Others supplied traders with food on the journey to the coast and so on.
11. Some chiefs charged taxes for the coffles to pass through their area. With this money they were able to develop their territory.
12. Other chiefs concentrated on the slave trade and the profits to be had from it rather than their political duties.

At the Coast

The weary and despondent slaves have reached the coast, but this is not their final destination or the end of their troubles. They are received by a **factor or agent**. His job is to inspect them and record the number of slaves that he has received for that day.

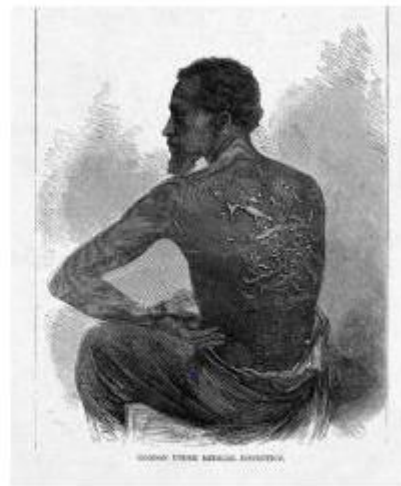
The place that they are at is called a **fort**. Four European nations owned or controlled forts on the West African coast during the days of slavery. They are of course the Dutch, French, English and the Portuguese. Remember that when the Pope divided the world into (1494) the latter received that side of the world and Brazil. They were of course, the **first European nation** to begin trading slaves to the Caribbean in 1515. Go back to your notes on the **asiento** under the topic European Settlement and Rivalry.

The newly arrived slaves are divided into two groups: those that are accepted, that is those that are deemed fit to make the long journey to the West Indies and the rejected or **mackrons**. These are those who are too sick or weak to make the journey. It may also include any old slaves that had escaped notice during the long trek to the coast.

The sound ones are branded with a hot iron, usually on the breast. This is an identifying mark especially in case of raids that often took place between the greedy European traders on the coast as well as private slave traders such as Hawkins. It also prevents the rejected ones from being mixed up with the accepted ones. If the slaver arrives before the branding occurs or the exercise is completed then it is done on the deck of the ship.

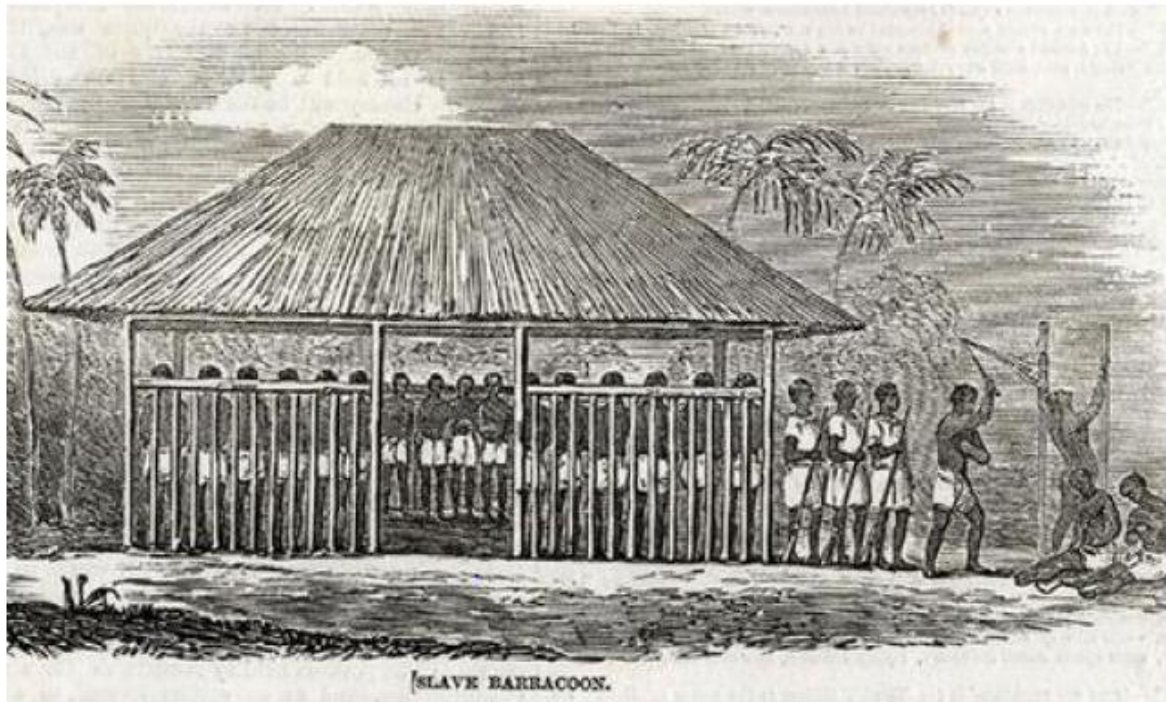


Branding of a slave



A branded slave

The slaves are kept or housed in **barracoons**. These are small huts built for that purpose. Of course they are constantly watched by guards who are also on the alert for intruders.



A slave baracoon

The ship can now be sighted in the near distance. What happens next?

The agent or factor collects the consumer goods, such as pots, pans and mirrors that the ship has carried from Europe. They will be used as exchange goods to get more slaves for when the ship returns. The ship itself has been prepared for the journey to the Caribbean. Box like shelves- **150 cm long and 50 cm wide** have been stacked together across the whole length of the hull.

The slaves are examined before they embark the ship. This is usually done by the ship's surgeon. The slaves are packed on these shelves with the iron shackles around their ankles. Again for added security, they are chained to the person next to them by loops that joined to his or her shackles. The men were placed at the back while the women and younger ones were placed in the fore section. The crewmen collected and carried necessary supplies to the ship. These include:

- (a) Water and food supplies such as yam, rice and a few fruits to stave off scurvy disease.
- (b) Equipment such as feeding bowls
- (c) Instruments such as chisels, whips etc.,
- (d) Weapons- guns, knives etc.

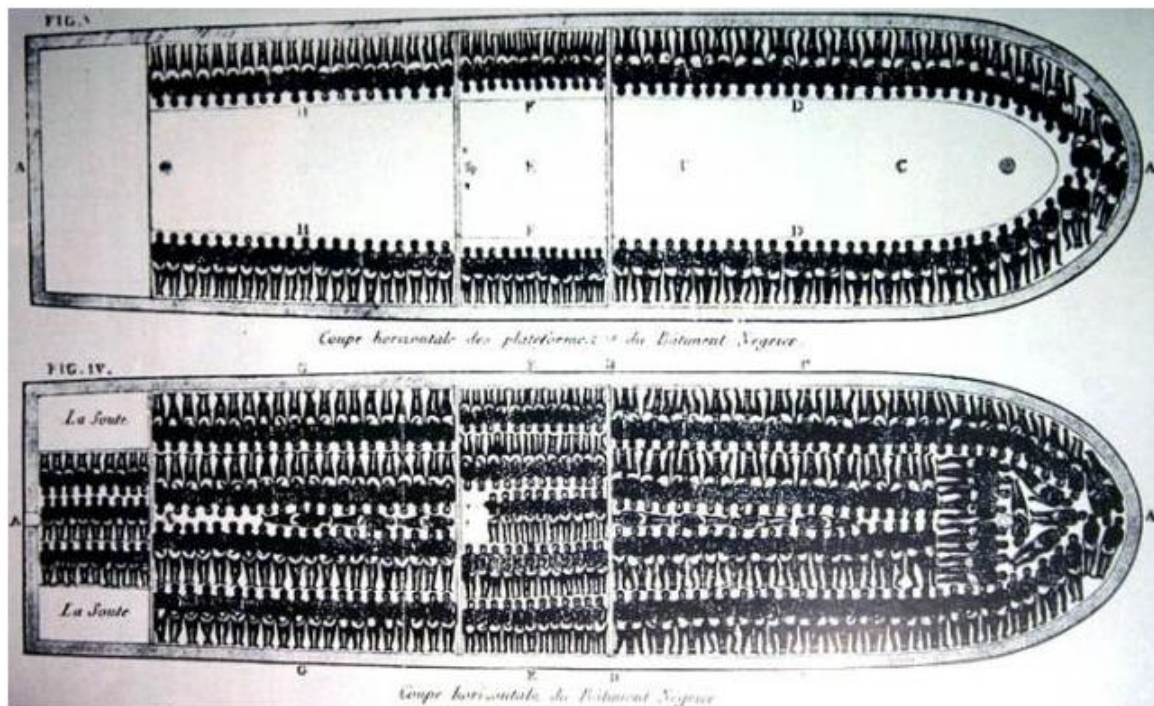
The Middle Passage

The journey from West Africa to the New World: (Caribbean) is known as the **Middle Passage**. It is called that because it is the second or middle of a three legged journey as the diagram illustrates. The journey lasts anywhere between six to twelve weeks. The minimum of six is achieved if there are no raids from **pirates** or **rival slave traders** or natural disasters such as hurricanes or if the ship does not need to stop at some small island for fresh supplies such as water or food. Clearly then the maximum of twelve weeks is used if any of these events occur.

What was it like on the slaver during the Middle Passage?

Let us concern ourselves with the cargo- the slaves. It was uncomfortable, unbearable and horrible. The slaves found the situation frightening and depressing. It made them feel sad, angry and lonely. Why was this so?

1. They were chained for most of the journey. They got cramps in their legs and various other parts of their body. Depending on the type of captain that they had, they might have been allowed on deck say once per week for some exercise. While this helped the cramping in the muscles some slaves used it as a way of escape by jumping overboard to their death. Of course they believed that their souls would go straight back to Africa, so it didn't matter to them. Anything was better than the horrific situation they were going through presently added to the fear of the unknown future. And if the present was an indication of the future then they had good reasons to feel so afraid.



The tight, cramped grouping of slaves on board a typical slave ship

As a result of this experience of losing slaves, the captains kept them chained while on deck. Some of the crew members would force them to jump around by whipping them. That only added to the fear and horror of the poor captives.



Slave chains



Slave cuffs

2. They had to perform their body functions right where they were so there was a horrible stench in the ship. Having to lie in this 'mess' meant that some of them got sores all over their bodies. At different intervals, a crew member would use a bucket of water mixed with vinegar, for its disinfectant quality, to wash out below deck.

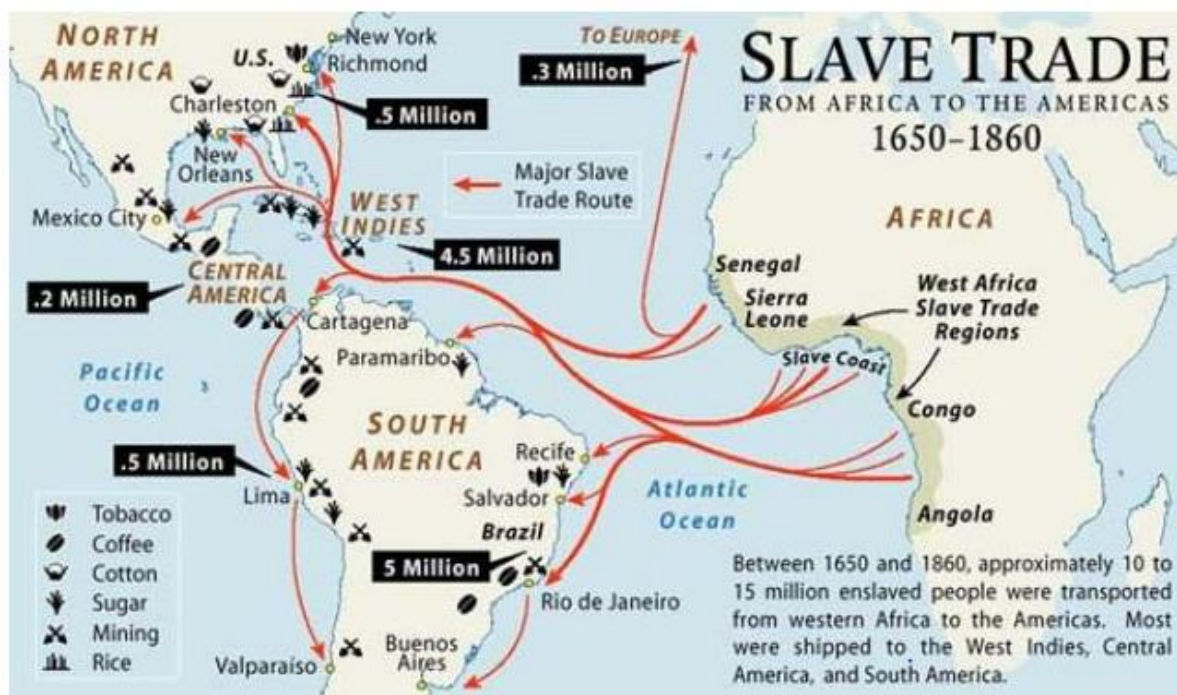
3. The cries and screams of the slaves jarred each other's nerves but what could you do? There was so much despair to go around.
4. Because they were kept below deck, their eyes got accustomed to the darkness but this meant that they suffered from temporary blindness when the sun first hit their eyes.
5. Slaves who, as a means of protest, refused to eat had their teeth knocked out with chisels and the food forced down their throats.
6. Women slaves were often raped by the thoughtless crewmen.
7. Slaves who died during the night or even day were not removed until the crew came to feed the slaves.
8. Both crew and slaves alike were in danger of catching diseases from each other. In fact the Middle Passage has often been termed the '**nursery of seamen**' because the mortality rate was fairly high among them as well.
9. At times food supplies may be inadequate for both crew and slaves and they would have to suffer the hunger until fresh supplies were had.

Arrival in the Caribbean

After such a long and horrible trip the terrified slaves have arrived at their final destination. What happens next? They are to be sold to anxious plantation owners who have gathered at the dock (usually) awaiting the slaver's arrival. There would have been an ad posted some days earlier notifying them of the ship's expected arrival day.

There were two main methods of sale: **Scramble and the Auction**. The best slaves are sold by auction. They are paraded and inspected like animals by the auctioneer who handles the bidding. The enslaved that showed any signs of unhealthiness were sold by the scramble method. At the sound of a gun, the planters/buyers would rush on deck of the ship and grab as many slaves as they wished to buy and then haggle and bargain and name their price while the poor terrified and confused slave looked on in total bewilderment.

Both groups of slaves would now be on their way to the plantation.



A map showing the slave trade routes