Bronze figurine of slaves chained together in a coffle
King Nomimansa Meets Diego Gomes

In 1456, the Mandingo king Nomimansa welcomed Diego Gomes, a Portuguese ship captain and emissary, into his home. The king was curious about these light-skinned people who called themselves “Christians.” A gracious host, he presented them with generous gifts of ivory and gold. Living near the mouth of the Gambia River, the Mandingo people in the Songhai kingdom were eager to establish mutually advantageous trade arrangements like those they had forged with other foreign travelers to their coast. But Nomimansa also knew that during the previous decade, marauding Europeans had made war against Africans on offshore islands and seized some of them. So the king decided to step carefully in cultivating relations with these newcomers.

Nomimansa listened as Gomes explained how his sovereign, Prince Henry, had sent him to negotiate trade. True, the Portuguese had prospered by using the raid-and-trade tactic, Gomes admitted. But now, the captain reassured his host, they wanted peaceful, well-regulated trade. The Mandingo king agreed to deal. Gomes sealed the commercial treaty by presenting Portugal’s new trading partner with damask cloth from Flanders, huge brass pots from Germany, glass beads from Venice, and swords and knives from Spain. Nomimansa understood that his people were about to become participants in a trading network that could bring them valuable goods and luxuries in return for their gold, ivory, and salt.

But that night, King Nomimansa learned his guest’s true intentions. As Gomes tells the story, “Twenty-two people were sleeping. I herded them as if they had been cattle towards the boats.” Disobeying Henry’s instructions, Gomes seized the people of the Gambia River and forced them onto his three ships. “We captured on that day . . . nearly 650 people, and we went back to Portugal, to Lagos in the Algarve, where the prince was, and he rejoiced with us.”
Gomes's act prefigured a tragic aspect of European-African relations that would unfold for centuries to come. From the mid-fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century, European slave traders carried off huge numbers of the most able-bodied members of African societies, especially in West and Central Africa. The Africans’ fate? To toil in the new colonies European nations were founding on islands off the West African coast and in the Americas. As it turned out, ship captains who followed Gomes would not find it necessary to kidnap slaves because the Portuguese and then other Europeans found willing African trading partners to supply captives. Four years after his first meeting with King Nomimansa, Captain Gomes was trading again near the mouth of the Gambia River. But this time, he complained, “the natives used to give twelve Negroes for one horse, now they gave only six.”

This chapter describes the first encounters between the Portuguese and Africans as the former worked their way down Africa’s west coast. It examines the impact of the slave trade on both Europeans and Africans. The Europeans transformed an ancient, widespread practice into a “peculiar institution” in which skin color and African origins became the distinguishing marks of bondage. Black men, women, and children became commodities—not much different from horses or casks of tobacco. The Portuguese used slave labor first to cultivate sugar on the Atlantic islands off the coast of West Africa, creating what became known as the plantation system. Understanding how this system worked reveals insights into the experience of enslaved Africans in the Americas. A closer look at “the middle passage,” the waterborne journey to the western hemisphere that huge numbers of Africans endured, sheds additional light on African lives under slavery. Once across the Atlantic, the lives of slaves owned by Spanish explorers differed markedly from those of Africans who worked on Portuguese and English plantations. Many slaves became part of the Spanish conquest of an immense part of the western hemisphere in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

AFRICA AND EUROPE: THE FATEFUL CONNECTION

The point of no return was Cape Bojador. Beyond it lay “the green sea of darkness.” Cape Bojador, just south of the Canary Islands off West Africa’s shore, struck fear into the hearts of European and Muslim sailors riding the Atlantic Ocean current along the Saharan coast from Portugal and Spain. Ship captains dared not venture south of the Cape because they had no way of defying the prevailing wind and current to return to their point of origin. But all that changed in 1434, when the bold Portuguese ship captain Gil Eannes sailed south on “seas none had sailed before” and managed to make his way back home. How did Eannes
accomplish this feat? He modified Moorish-designed small wooden ships with lanteen (three-cornered) sails. Now he could sail into the wind and return to Portugal.

At the time of Eannes’s successful voyage, a new era of high-seas sailing had dawned. The Atlantic basin now lay open to any sailor who had the technology and nerve to navigate it. This revolution in trans-Atlantic navigation would have profound consequences for both Europeans and Africans. Most important, it cast a dark shadow over Africa that has not altogether lifted even today.

Portugal Colonizes the Atlantic Islands

Prince Henry, son of Portugal’s king João I, didn’t become known as Henry the Navigator for nothing. Politically ambitious, energetic, and experienced on the battlefield, the young monarch brimmed with both business and religious zeal. Henry sponsored improvements in navigation and energetically promoted his kingdom’s expansion into the Atlantic Ocean. In 1418, he ordered the seizure of the unoccupied Madeira Islands off the northern part of West Africa. In 1427, he took the Azores just north-west of the Madeira Islands. Several other European groups had earlier reached the Canary Islands, close to the African coast, but they did little more than trade with the people they found living there. In 1424, Henry seized the Canaries for Portugal.

During the first half of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese put down roots in these islands. At first they merely gathered treasures from the wild, such as honey and indigenous plants from which they made dyes to trade. Then they began experimenting with growing wheat and grapevines in the islands’ rich volcanic soils. Around the same time, they sent occasional raiding parties to the African coast in search of a few slaves to work the fields on these island colonies. By the 1470s, the Portuguese had sailed farther south to forge trading agreements along the coast of what is today Ghana. They also struck deals with the African kingdom of Benin, trading in exchange for the “grains of paradise”—high-quality pepper that fetched a handsome price in Europe.

The Portuguese combined their cautious, small-scale experiments on the Atlantic islands with slave raiding on the West African coast. Initially they supplied slaves to Europe, where landowners kept up a modest demand for raw labor. But as populations on the European continent boomed in the late fifteenth century, landowners had plenty of human muscle to work the fields. Demand for slaves in Europe began to drop, leaving the Portuguese with little reason to continue slave raiding in Africa. But all this shifted when the Portuguese began cultivating sugar on the Madeiras in the 1450s.

The Plantation System: A Model for Misery on the Atlantic Islands

Produced in the temperate Mediterranean world since the eighth century, sugar had long been an exotic and expensive luxury. Only the wealthiest families could afford to sweeten their diets with the precious flavoring. Yet by the mid-1400s, the demand for sugar spread. On islands hundreds of miles from the African coast, Portuguese settlers spotted an opportunity. They experimented with growing sugarcane first on the Madeiras. To their delight, the plant flourished. Now these entrepreneurs needed laborers—not a few, but many. The plantation system they established became the first of its kind. It comprised three interwoven components: large landholding, the forced labor of gangs of enslaved peoples, and a cash crop that commanded steep prices in distant places. The plantation system meshed perfectly with the emerging European notion of mercantilism, whereby overseas colonists combined land and labor to produce wealth for the benefit of their home countries.

On the Madeiras, enslaved Africans initially toiled alongside slaves procured from Russia and the Balkans...
The Portuguese had imported these light-skinned individuals because they had long experience with planting and chopping cane in the sugar fields of Cyprus and Sicily. They also knew how to extract sugar from the cane. But the Portuguese found it far cheaper to import black men and women from the nearby West African coast than from distant Mediterranean locations. Thus the forced migration of Africans started unofficially in the 1440s, when Portuguese ship captains like Diego Gomes started kidnapping them for lifelong labor on the Atlantic islands.

The successful experiment with sugar on the Madeiras revealed the value of the previously uninhabited Atlantic islands. The Portuguese began cultivating the crop on other islands they had claimed, especially São Tomé, off Angola’s coast. By 1500, the Portuguese were importing about five thousand African slaves annually, most to toil on the sugar plantations off the West African coast. Now available in huge quantities, sugar became affordable to all but the poorest. By about 1750, the saying went, even the wife of the poorest English laborer took sugar in her tea.

Pleased with their success on the Atlantic islands, the Portuguese took the next steps in leveraging their newfound assets: They launched commercial ventures farther west across the Atlantic and began using the islands as

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**MAP 2.1 Portuguese Colonization of Atlantic Islands**  The earliest European expeditions took sailors along the eastern shores of the Atlantic and onto the islands off West Africa’s coast in the mid-fifteenth century. Europeans would not venture across the Atlantic to the “strange new lands” of the Americas for a few more years.
slave-trading centers. Slave raiding could backfire if it ruined profitable trading arrangements. But slave trading offered less risky—and more lucrative—opportunities to satisfy a growing worldwide demand for captive labor.

Demand for slaves had accelerated after Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453. With the fall of the great city, Europeans lost their access to the slave markets in Russia and the Balkans. For generations, they had relied on these sources for domestic and agricultural laborers. It was precisely for these reasons that Prince Henry had sent Diego Gomes to negotiate treaties with African rulers. Though Gomes betrayed his charge—stealing rather than bartering for slaves—the Portuguese entrepreneurs who followed him chose instead to establish a purely reciprocal trade with West African leaders. Soon they struck mutually beneficial deals with several African coastal rulers.

In 1444, Gomes Eannes de Zurara, a Portuguese courtier to Prince Henry, chronicled the arrival of 235 African slaves on several ships at Lagos, Portugal. The expedition to seize Africans was led by Lanzorte de Freitas, a young officer in a company created to trade on West Africa’s coast.

What heart could be so hard as not to be pierced with piteous feeling to see that company? For some kept their heads low, and their faces bathed in tears, looking one upon another. Others stood groaning very dolorously. Looking up to the height of heaven, fixing their eyes upon it, crying out loudly, as if asking help from the Father of nature; others struck their faces with the palms of their hands, throwing themselves at full length upon the ground; while others made lamentations in the manner of a dirge, after the custom of their country. . . . But to increase their suffering still more there now arrived those who had charge of the division of the captives, and . . . then was it needful to part fathers from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from brothers. No respect was shown to either friends or relations, but each fell where his lot took him.

To read a full version of this account, please go to www.ablongman.com/carson.

In 1486, the Spanish king put his seal on a grant to Fernão Dulmo, military commander of Terceira, a small island in the Azores. The grant entitled Dulmo to all lands he could discover in the vast Atlantic Ocean—including “a great island or islands, or coastal parts of a mainland.” European adventurers had no idea where they might find such islands. Moreover, they assumed that the “mainland” referred to in the grant was faraway China, or Cathay, as they called it. Despite his determined forays throughout the Atlantic, Dulmo found nothing. But six years later, in 1492, Christopher Columbus reached what he believed were parts of Asia. Continued improvements in European navigation that for half a century had allowed colonization and trade along the African coast enabled the intrepid Genoese sailor to make his way across the entire Atlantic. In an instant, the momentum of European overseas colonization shifted from the Portuguese to the Spanish. This change redirected the course of African history.
Initiating the Atlantic Slave Trade

After 1492, Europeans began settling in the Americas (including the Caribbean), where they cultivated valuable cash crops such as sugar, coffee, tobacco, and rice. Sensing new opportunities, European merchants and investors turned their attention from the Mediterranean Sea in Old World Europe to the Atlantic Ocean in the New World. As investment capital began flowing into the plantations dotting the Americas, a far-reaching new trade network took shape and expanded throughout the Atlantic basin. The continent of Africa provided this network with the labor and agricultural expertise plantation owners in the Americas needed to sell their bounty to the merchant houses of England, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. Individuals fortunate enough to hold favored positions in this network—slave traders, shipbuilders, land speculators, and plantation owners—amassed great wealth. Almost every European nation sent ships to trade in Africa for slaves in addition to the usual gold, ivory, and other luxuries.

As Europeans launched themselves across the Atlantic, conquering and colonizing vast territories, their nearly insatiable demand for labor transformed the entire calculus of African trade. In the plantation system, colonists looked to their large tracts of land to produce crops that they could then sell for hefty profits in Europe. More than anything else, plantation owners needed human beings with strong backs. Soon they began referring to African slaves as “black laborers.”

Sugar Production in Brazil

The demand for sugar led to the cultivation of the crop in the Atlantic islands and in the Americas.
For almost four centuries after Columbus’s voyages to the Americas, European colonizers transported Africans out of their homelands in the largest forced migration in human history. Estimates vary widely, but the number of Africans hauled across the Atlantic who survived the trip probably reached more than 10 million. Several million more perished during the forced marches from the African interior to coastal trading forts or during the ocean voyage west to the Americas.

In Angola, beginning in 1491, the Portuguese used their considerable military might to capture and enslave Africans. Elsewhere in Africa, local rulers controlled the process of raiding for slaves, marching captives to the coast, and selling bondspeople to European merchants and ship captains. Coastal political authorities extracted taxes and tolls from the Europeans according to African law and custom. Not every African ruler engaged in the Atlantic slave trade. For example, those governing the region between today’s northern Liberia and the Ivory Coast traded with Europeans eager to obtain ivory and pepper, but they declined to enter the slave business. In all, over a period of four centuries, the leaders of some two hundred African societies participated in the trade.

Why did some African leaders engage in the slave raiding and selling process? In part, the answer lies in the long history of slave trading among a variety of peoples in West and Central Africa. Human beings’ tendency to mistreat those perceived as different from themselves also offers some insight into this question. These African leaders saw nothing unnatural about participating in a slave trade with people of outside societies because they had been doing so for centuries. Black rulers and their agents didn’t think of themselves as Africans capturing and selling other Africans. Rather, they viewed themselves as raiding members of outside—and thus inferior—societies. In many cases, peoples from different societies saw one another as enemies. There was no unified African identity. For example, the people of Mali or Benin did not identify themselves as Africans any more than the people of France or Portugal identified themselves as Europeans.

Thus Africans felt no moral distaste for the practice of capturing and selling slaves. Indeed, as early as the 650s, they had been selling captives to Muslim slave traders. These entrepreneurs then transported the hapless men and women in caravans across the Sahara to slave markets around the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Estimates suggest that as many enslaved Africans went east by land between the 1650s and 1800 as went west by water from the 1490s to 1800.

The circumstances of slaves sold in Muslim lands differed markedly from those sold in the New World. Because most Muslim societies had large peasant populations, they didn’t need numerous additional bodies to work the land. Rather, Muslims wanted slaves who could serve as porters, soldiers, concubines, cooks, and personal attendants. Therefore Muslim masters valued their slaves for the personal services they provided rather than exploiting them to boost farmland production. For this reason, slave traders sent roughly two captured African women each for every man—the reverse of the gender ratio for slaves sent across the Atlantic for labor in the plantation system.

Other differences distinguished Africans’ experience as slaves to Muslims as opposed to Europeans in the Americas. Whereas their masters in the Americas viewed slaves as nonhuman possessions, Muslim masters saw bondsmen and women as people, albeit people they treated harshly. In the east, slaves had some rights. Some had the right to embrace the religion of their captors, while others were obliged to convert on the pain of death. Equally important, Muslim masters freed more of their slaves than owners in the Americas did. Once they gained their freedom, many Africans living in Muslim society had the same rights as non-Africans and blended into the general population. Finally, Islam emphasized a universal community that transcended race, so former African slaves who had embraced the faith found it easier to feel united spiritually with other Muslims.

The African rulers who negotiated the first trade treaties with Europeans could not have predicted the damage that these new partnerships would ultimately do to their own kingdoms. One example from the Atlantic slave trade reveals some of the difficulties the business presented its African participants. By the early 1500s, when the Portuguese began growing sugar on the island of São Tomé, they turned eagerly to their Kongo trading partners for slaves to toil in the sugarcane fields. By this time, Portuguese Catholic missionaries had already reached the court of Kongo king Mani-Kongo. The monarch proved receptive to their

| TABLE 2.1 Number of Enslaved Africans in the Americas, 1500–1800 |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Dutch colonies  | 490,000          |
| Spanish colonies| 70,000           |
| French colonies | 1,550,000        |
| English colonies| 1,950,000        |
| (West Indies)   | 1,523,000        |
| (North America) | 427,000          |
| Portuguese colonies | 3,647,000     |
| Total           | 10,557,000       |
religious message, even allowing his son to be baptized with the Christian name Afonso I. In this spirit of cordiality, the Europeans and Africans confined their bartering to coastal fortresses. There, slaves (most of them captured in the interior by the Kongo or their subject tribes) were sold on terms agreeable to the Kongo rulers. In return for gold, ivory, and slaves, Kongo merchants received Portuguese guns, knives, horses, bars of iron, brass pots and tankards, glass, beads, rum, and textiles.

Before long, Kongo degenerated into a maelstrom of conflict. By 1526, Portuguese merchants from São Tomé were urging village chiefs to declare war on each other and supplying them with guns. King Afonso asked the Portuguese king to ban slave trading in Kongo. “Merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and sons of our noblemen,” he wrote. “So great is the corruption and licentiousness that our country is becoming completely depopulated.” But Afonso’s request fell on deaf ears. Trapped in a web of guns, slaves, and power, the beleaguered ruler could not find a way out. In 1540, he wrote, “No other king in all these parts esteems Portuguese goods so much or treats the Portuguese as well as we do.” Unable to extricate themselves from the European agreements they had made, the king and his successors continued the slave raiding that devastated Africa’s heartlands. By the early seventeenth century, rebels throughout Kongo’s provinces rose up, igniting a civil war that crippled the kingdom.

Sugar and Slavery

The African slave trade would never have become more than a minor commerce without the burgeoning labor shortage created by Europeans’ overseas expansion and the intensifying hunger for sugar. Were it not for Europe’s colonization of the Americas, the early slave trade that brought limited numbers of African slaves to southern Europe and the Atlantic islands might have ceased and been remembered simply as a short-lived phenomenon stemming from early European contacts with Africa. Sugar changed all that. When the Spanish and Portuguese stepped up their colo-
nizing in the Caribbean and South America during the sixteenth century, they quickly learned that sugarcane grew just as easily in these lands as it did in the Atlantic islands. Once the newcomers had subdued the native peoples they encountered, they moved to transplant the plantation system they had installed on the Atlantic islands. Now demand for slaves came from the Caribbean and South America.

At first, the Spanish and Portuguese looked to the native peoples of the Americas as an obvious source of forced gang labor. In some areas, such as Mexico and Brazil, the newcomers coerced local men and women into working on plantations and in mines. But diseases to which native Americans were not immune—such as smallpox, influenza, and scarlet fever—soon devastated the local populations. Far more familiar with their surroundings than their white captors, slaves who survived these plagues often escaped and ran back to their villages.

Now in need of a new source of labor, the Europeans turned their attention to the huge supply of labor available in Africa. Whereas they previously traded with Africans, they now began trading in Africans. By the mid-1500s in Portuguese Brazil, and by the early 1600s on island...
throughout the Caribbean, enslaved Africans were hacking out sugar plantations from tropical forest. By the mid-eighteenth century, about nine out of every ten West Africans captured for export across the Atlantic went to labor in New World sugarcane fields. After finding gold and silver mines in Mexico and Peru, the Spanish stepped up their purchase of African laborers. After successfully introducing additional cash crops—coffee, tobacco, rice, and indigo—the Spanish and Portuguese sent thousands of ships to the West African coast and packed them with slaves. Dutch, French, and English vessels followed. Hardly anyone would have disagreed with one seventeenth-century Englishman who called African slaves “the strength and the sinews of this western world.”

Once established on a large scale, the Atlantic slave trade transformed slave recruitment in Africa. At first, African leaders had sold criminals or prisoners of war. But the intensifying demand for workers in the New World presented irresistible new opportunities. Now African kings waged war against their neighbors to secure sufficient quantities of the “black gold” for which the Europeans paid so handsomely. European guns perpetuated this shift. By 1730, Europeans were providing about 180,000 arms a year to African slave traders. The availability of guns enabled unscrupulous traders to kidnap slaves and set up paramilitary organizations throughout Africa. Eager to maintain their lucrative commercial relations with European powers, some African rulers declined to stop the kidnapping and organized violence. In several cases, their decision cost them their kingdoms. Others used the situation to strengthen their own militaries.

As the demand for African slaves multiplied in the eighteenth century, the armies and agents of coastal and interior kings repeatedly invaded the hinterlands of western and central Africa. At least half of the slaves transported to English North America came from the part of western Africa that lies between the Senegal and Niger rivers and the Gulf of Biafra. Most of the others were enslaved in Angola, on the west coast of central Africa. By the end of the eighteenth century, slaving had devastated these regions’ populations.

### European Competition for the Slave Trade

For Europeans, the slave trade generated immense profits. Even as early as 1550, one chronicler asserted that “slaves are something that is always valuable and will triple your investment.” As a result, European nations warred incessantly for trading advantages on the West African coast during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The coastal forts, the focal points of the trade, became key strategic targets in the European wars of empire. For example, the major Portuguese slaving fort at Elmina on the Gold Coast, first constructed in 1481, was captured a century and a half later by the Dutch and then by the English. The primary fort on the Guinea coast, started by Swedish traders, passed through the hands of the Danish, the English, and the Dutch between 1632 and 1664. As demand for slaves in the Americas exploded after 1650, European competition for trading rights on the West African coast stiffened. By the end of the century, European diplomats were negotiating to gain for their home countries the sole right to supply European plantations in the Americas with their annual quotas of slaves.

Not until the last third of the seventeenth century did the English become major players in the slave trade dominated by the Portuguese. Sponsored by Queen Elizabeth I, John Hawkins made the first English slave-trading voyage to West Africa in 1562. Horning in on what the Portuguese regarded as their exclusive right to form trading alliances with African rulers, Hawkins snared a shipful of captives, carried

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**African slaves are “the strength and the sinews of this western world.”**

—Seventeenth-century Englishman

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### TABLE 2.2 African Slaves Exported Across the Atlantic, 1520–1870

The figures in this table represent current estimates of the number of Africans delivered to European colonies on the West African coast for transport to the Americas. By a recent estimate, about 920,000 of these died during the sea voyage across the Atlantic. The number of Africans who died during capture, the march to the coast, long confinement on the coast, and the ocean crossing probably reached several million. When the Islamic slave trade is included, some estimates place the number of Africans taken from the continent, or the number who died in Africa after capture, as high as 40 million. However, we can never know the total with certainty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1520–1600</td>
<td>367,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1601–1700</td>
<td>1,868,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1701–1800</td>
<td>6,133,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801–1870</td>
<td>3,330,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11,698,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

them across the Atlantic to Spanish colonizers, and returned home with a fat profit for his queen. Thereafter the English gave priority to supplying the Spanish colonies with slaves.

But the English wouldn't secure their grip on the profitable trade for another century. In 1663 Charles II, recently restored to the English throne, granted a charter to the Royal Adventurers to Africa—a joint-stock company headed by the king's brother, the Duke of York. Superseded by the Royal Africa Company in 1672, these organizations enjoyed the exclusive right to carry slaves to England's overseas colonies. For thirty-four years after 1663, each slave transported across the Atlantic bore the brand “DY” for the Duke of York. The duke himself ascended the throne in 1685. In 1698, individual merchants eager to jump into the fray pressured Parliament to break the Royal Africa Company's monopoly. Thrown open to individual entrepreneurs, the English slave trade ballooned—from about 5,000–6,000 slaves carried out of Africa a year in the 1680s to more than 20,000 a year in the early 1700s. By the 1790s, England became the foremost slave-trading nation in all of Europe.

Though European conduct of the Atlantic slave trade was more the product of economic opportunity than racial attitude, racist sentiment soon began to build. Coming to regard black Africans as an inferior species enabled Europeans to rationalize their brutal traffic in human beings. Ethnocentrism was not unknown in Africa. The people of one kingdom might view those of a rival state as inferior and thus feel entitled to make war against them and deliver thousands of captives to European slave traders for a tidy profit.

At first Europeans thought of these captives as heathen savages, and deserving of their fate. Notions of African “backwardness” and cultural impoverishment soon became prevalent as the slave trade became so extensive that Europeans needed to justify it. In time, Europeans began to gauge how “human” a person was not by his or her religion or cultural background but by his or her race as evidenced by skin color. These notions of Africans as ignorant heathens in turn led to the belief that they were better off toiling in the sugar, rice, and tobacco fields of the Americas than living where they were born. In the Americas, Europeans believed, the

![Plan of Cape Coast Castle](image-url)
black “savages” could be “civilized” through exposure to Christianity and European culture.

THE TRAUMA OF ENSLAVEMENT

“The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast [in about 1755],” wrote Olaudah Equiano, “was the sea, and a slave-ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo.” The eleven-year-old Equiano had arrived at the old slave fort at Calabar, which still stands. One of Benin’s most accomplished chroniclers, he was about to endure the so-called middle passage across the Atlantic. This journey constituted the second leg of the three-part transit that for captives began in the African interior and concluded with the march to a final destination after they were purchased as slaves in the Americas.

Born in a village in a “charming fruitful vale,” Equiano regarded his homeland as “the most considerable” of a vari-

MAP 2.2  English Slave Trade  This map appeared in a pamphlet promoting the English slave trade. The pamphlet author described the British empire in gushing terms as “a magnificent superstructure of American commerce and naval power on an African foundation.” The Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra, and the Bight of Benin—all on West Africa’s coast—became major slave-trading centers for English traders.
ety of kingdoms in the “part of Africa known by the name of Guinea.” His story echoes the experiences of millions of Africans who were born in West and Central Africa—the ancestral homelands of most of today’s African Americans.

What happened to Equiano after he reached the African coast became almost a blur to the youngster. Some thirty-five years later, when he published his autobiography, he confessed that he was “yet at a loss to describe” the horror that unfolded before him. “When I was carried on board, I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me.” Frightened by their long hair, their strange language, and their bleached skin, the Ibo youth concluded that “if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country.”

Nobody has discovered who painted this handsome picture of Olaudah Equiano, completed probably when he was in his forties. Equiano saw nine editions of his *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* published in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, and Norwich before he died in March 1797. After his death, enterprising printers republished his *Narrative* in many cities. Today, Equiano’s *Narrative* is republished every several years, is read by thousands of people, and has won widespread recognition as the most compelling first-person story of enslavement and liberation from the pen of an African American or Afro-Briton. Equiano was enslaved a few decades after the map shown on page 28 was drawn, but this map accurately depicts the region where he first saw the slave ship that took him to Barbados and then Virginia.
On board the slave ship, matters took an even worse turn. “The stench of the hold [below decks] while we were on the [African] coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for fresh air; but now that the whole ship’s cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. . . . The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate,” Equiano continued, “added to the number in the ship which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This . . . produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness amongst the slaves of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers.”

The Middle Passage: A Floating Hell

Equiano’s account of his capture and the stupefying trip across the Atlantic is the most vivid of the few to survive Africans’ centuries-long diaspora. Many enslaved blacks would have told stories different from Equiano’s, for each experience was unique. But most who reached the shores of the Americas didn’t live long enough to record their experiences. On average, they died just seven years after arriving. So Equiano’s story, covering fifty-three years, has assumed a place in historical literature far greater than he could have hoped for. Yet even his account cannot fully convey the agony and demoralization of the forced march to the west coast of Africa, the subsequent loading of captives onto wooden-hulled ships, and the miserable journey across the ocean.

European slave traders preferred young men over women because they knew that buyers on the other side of the Atlantic valued physical strength over everything else. Most captives were in their teens, twenties, and thirties. Only about 10 percent were under ten years of age or elderly.

Once captured, slaves were marched to the sea in “coffers,” or trains, or brought by large canoes down the rivers

First Person

Slave Ship Captain Explains Bargaining for Slaves

Employed by the English Royal African Company, Welshman John Phillips commanded the slave ship Hannibal, one of the largest ships in the trade. In 1693, he reached the coast of West Africa, where he traded guns, gunpowder, and cloth for slaves and gold. After delivering the slaves to Barbados and St. Thomas (two English sugar islands in the Caribbean), Phillips loaded his ship with sugar for the return trip to London. Here he describes his purchase of seven hundred slaves.

Our factory [trading post] stands low near the marshes . . . , ’tis compassed round with a mud-wall about six foot high . . . within which is a large yard . . . The king’s slaves, if he had any, were first offered to sale . . . . Our surgeon examin’d them . . . to see they were sound of wind and limb, making them jump, stretch out their arms swiftly, looking in their mouths to judge of their age . . . but our greatest care of all is to buy none that are pox’d [diseased], lest they should infect the rest aboard . . . . Our surgeon is forced to examine the privities of both men and women [for signs of venereal disease]. When we had selected from the rest such as we liked, we agreed what goods to pay for them . . . how much of each sort of merchandise we were to give for a man, woman, child. . . . Then we mark’d the slaves . . . in the breast, or shoulder, with a hot iron having the letter of the ship’s name on it, the place before being anointed with a little palm oil, which caused but little pain, the mark being usually well in four or five days, appearing very plain and white after.

—From Captive Passage, 59.
For a full version of this account, please go to www.ablongman.com/carson.
that emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. A Scotsman, Mungo Park, described the coffle he marched with for 550 miles through Gambia in the 1790s. According to Park, seventy-three men, women, and children were tied together by the neck with leather thongs. Several captives attempted to commit suicide by eating clay. Another was abandoned after being badly stung by bees. Still others died of exhaustion and starvation. After two months, depleted by thirst, hunger, and exposure, the prisoners reached the coast. There their captors herded them into fortified enclosures called barracoons.

The anger, bewilderment, and desolation Africans experienced during the forced march, the first leg of the 5,000-mile journey, only worsened when they arrived at the slave ships. “As the slaves come down to Fida from the inland country,” wrote one slave trader, “they are put into a booth or prison built for that purpose, near the beach . . . and when the Europeans are to receive them, they are brought out into a large plain, where the [ships’] surgeons examine every part of every one of them, to the smallest member, men and women, being all stark naked.”

Once the surgeons had completed their examinations, the bargaining process began. Negotiating the purchase price of slaves proved a complicated, capricious affair. African sellers were wily barterers. “The natives have a splendid mental capacity with much judgment and shrewd and ready apprehension,” wrote one slave ship captain. “They have so good a memory that it is beyond comprehension, and although they cannot read or write, they are admirably well-organized in their trading and never get mixed up.” African sellers drove hard bargains for the trade goods they wanted; for example, they demanded thirteen bars of iron for a male slave and nine bars and two brass rings for a female. Often the bargaining dragged on for days as sellers held out for the best price. In addition to slaves, they sold the provisions (such as yams and other foods) that the slaves and ship crews would consume during the fifty to eighty days it took to cross the ocean.

### Death and Survival Aboard Ship

Once the bargaining had ended, the slaves were ferried in large canoes, manned by local Africans, to the ships waiting...
The men Negroes, on being brought aboard the ship, are immediately fastened together, two and two, by hand-cuffs on their wrists, and by irons riveted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks, and placed in an apartment partitioned off for that purpose. The women likewise are placed in a separate apartment between decks, but without being ironed. . . . The place allotted for the sick Negroes is under the half deck, where they lie on the bare planks. By this means, those who are emaciated, frequently have their skin, and even their flesh, entirely rubbed off, by the motion of the ship, from the prominent parts of the shoulders, elbows, and hips, so as to render the bones in those parts quite bare. And some of them, by constantly lying in the blood and mucus, that had flowed from those afflicted with the flux (diarrhea), and which . . . is generally so violent as to prevent their being kept clean, have their flesh much sooner rubbed off, than those who have only to contend with the mere friction of the ship. The excruciating pain which the poor sufferers feel from being obliged to continue in such a dreadful situation, frequently for several weeks, in case they happen to live so long, is not to be conceived or described. Few, indeed, are ever able to withstand the fatal effects of it. The utmost skill of the surgeon is here ineffectual.

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of hell.” In part, this fear stemmed from the widespread belief among Africans that they would encounter white “savages” on the other side of the ocean who would eat them. “I was persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits,” wrote Equiano, “and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke . . . united to confirm me in this belief.”

The fear that inspired suicide while still on African soil lessened on the “middle passage,” but the chance of death by disease or privation increased. Even on the better ships, the shackled Africans found it impossible to walk unless their captors dragged them on deck for exercise. On the worst ships, they could barely turn over in the holds. “They had not so much room as a man in his coffin,” testified one ship’s surgeon. “This wretched situation,” Equiano wrote in his narrative, “was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole scene of horror almost inconceivable.”

Even though it was to the advantage of the ship captains to deliver sellable slaves on the other side of the Atlantic, few stocked their ships properly. They assumed that many of the captives would die anyway during the ocean crossing. Pitiful rations led to undernourishment, confinement below decks in leg irons spread disease, and the impossibility of basic hygiene eroded the Africans’ self-respect. Equiano described how he was “put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat.” But “refusing to eat, one [sailor] held me fast . . . while the others flogged me severely.” Many slaves like Equiano tried to starve themselves to death. To keep them alive, the ship’s crew used tortures such as applying hot coals to force the Africans’ lips open. When this did not work, the crew employed an instrument, the speculum oris (mouth opener), to wrench apart the jaws of a stubborn slave.

Dehydration imperiled the captives as well. On one ship, the captain provided just one coconut shell filled with water with each meal—which amounted to less than two pints of liquid a day. On many ships, the slaves had even less water. As their sodium and potassium levels dropped, they lost weight, grew listless, and fell into a dazed state. The slavers called this condition “melancholy.
and believed it set in as slaves willed themselves to die. But some perceptive observers, such as the port physician in Charleston, South Carolina, knew otherwise. After inspecting the inhabitants of incoming slave ships, he opined that “it is a wonder any escape [the malnutrition and dehydration] with life.”

For enslaved African women, the middle passage had one additional terror and humiliation. Slavers of all European nations separated African men and women during the ocean crossing, in part because they feared the women would incite the men to mutiny. But the arrangement also gave sailors access to their female captives, whom they regarded as fair sexual prey. They brought women above decks often only to rape them. Equiano had “even known them [sailors] to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old.” A British surgeon on one slave ship described the captain’s repeated rape of the African women. Said another observer, “It frequently happens that the Negroes on being purchased by Europeans become raving mad and many of them die in that state, particularly women.”

Desperate for deliverance from this living hell, some enslaved Africans plotted mutiny. Experienced English ship captains tried to prevent conspiracy by obtaining their human cargo from different regions along the African coast. They knew that captives from the same area, speaking the same language, were the most likely to mutiny. To stifle insurrection, ship captains also used stark brutality to squelch any attempts at rebellion. If they identified leaders of a planned uprising, they flogged them to death or dismembered them in full view of the others to send a warning. John Atkins, aboard an English slave vessel in 1721, described how the captain “whipped and scarified” several plotters and sentenced others “to cruel deaths, making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of them killed.” The captain hoisted one female resistor up by the thumbs, then “whipp’d and slashed her with knives, before the other slaves, till she died.”

Sale in the Americas

Probably not more than two of every three captured Africans lived to see the Americas. Those who survived were psychologically numb and physically depleted. But stumbling ashore, they had to endure yet another horror: being sold as chattel to a European master and then transported to a new place of residence. For Equiano, this final stage proved as devastating as the physical agony of the crossing. In Barbados, a slave-based English sugar colony in the West Indies, he trembled as merchants and planters clambered...
aboard ship. He believed that “we should be eaten by these ugly men, as they appeared to us.” But the merchants informed the slaves that they “were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people.” Taken ashore, Equiano shrank in terror as “the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best.” The noise and clamour with which this is attended, . . . serve not a little to increase the apprehensions of the terrified Africans. . . . In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again.”

No one bought Equiano; he was too young and weak. So he was shipped off to North America, where many “refuse” (damaged) slaves eked out their days in perpetual labor. Far up a river emptying into the Chesapeake Bay, the owner of a small plantation in Virginia purchased the boy. There, torn from all that was familiar to him, he had “now totally lost the small remains of comfort I had enjoyed in conversing with my countrymen; the women too, who used to wash and take care of me, were all gone different ways, and I never saw one of them afterwards.” Isolated in Virginia, Equiano remembered being “exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state I was constantly grieving and pining, and wishing for death rather than anything else.”

From capture in Africa to arrival at the plantation, farm, or city home of a European master may have averaged six months. During this time the African was completely cut off from everything that was familiar—family, home, community life. The body was tortured, the spirit shocked and seared. Now the African had to learn a new language, adjust to a new diet, adapt to a new climate and physical environment, and master new work routines. Most important, he or she had to find a way to live in a state of bondage intended to drag on forever. But for many, “forever” proved short. Every fourth African arriving on American soil died within just four years.

**AFRICANS IN NORTH AMERICA**

“We commended ourselves to God Our Lord and made our escape. . . . As we traveled that day, in considerable fear that the Indians would follow us, we saw some smoke and, toward the end of the day, reached it, where we espied an Indian who, when he saw us coming toward him, fled without waiting for our arrival. We sent the black after him and when the Indian saw that he was alone, he waited for him.” With these words, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish conquistador, told the story of his epic escape from enslavement by Florida Indians in the 1530s and the start of a five-year journey through the southern reaches of North America. The “black” he referred to was Estévan, also called Esteban, Estevanico, and sometimes “the black Arabian.” “The black,” continued de Vaca, “told [the Indian] that we were looking for the people who were making the smoke. He replied that . . . he would guide us to them; and so we followed him and he ran to tell the people that we were coming; at sunset, . . . we reached them . . . and there indicated that they were happy to have our company; and so they took us to their houses and lodged Dorantes [de Vaca’s compatriot] and the black in the house of one medicine man.”

This encounter among Spanish explorers, a black Arabian, and native Americans in the forests of Florida occurred in 1534. Fifty years later, the English would make their first attempt to plant a colony in North America. Nearly a century later, the young Equiano would labor in the fields and houses of Virginia. The incident de Vaca describes shows cultures converged and the definitions of race blurred in this early era in North American history.

**Africans and the Spanish Conquest**

Estévan was the product of three cultures coming together along the western edge of the Atlantic. He embodied the beginning of a long process by which the notion of race first emerged in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The Spanish referred to him as “a black,” “a Moor,” or “an Arabian.” But these words merely described his skin color (dark), his religion (Islam), and his homeland (Morocco). De Vaca never called him a slave—though he was owned by André Dorantes. Nor did de Vaca ever suggest that Estévan was inferior, primitive, or savage. Rather, de Vaca’s account describes how four men—three Spanish and one African—became the first non-natives to penetrate the vast interior of North America. What mattered in this strange and often hostile land was not Estévan’s blackness or even his slave status. It was his linguistic abilities, his fortitude, and his cleverness as a guide between. Estévan was an Atlantic Creole—a man who originated in one land bordering the Atlantic who became a new man in the process of the cultural, linguistic, and social braiding occurring throughout the Atlantic world. His own and companions counted on him to help them navigate the challenges of their daunting journey.

Seventy-five years before the English first tried to establish colonies in North America, Africans had been in the Americas. By 1580, some 45,000 of them had arrived in the
Spanish colonies in Florida and present-day New Mexico. Africans had also come to South America. About 13,000 had been shipped to Brazil, where Portuguese entrepreneurs had set up huge sugar and coffee plantations.

Many Spanish explorers and settlers came to the Americas with enslaved Africans who had valued, essential skills, such as the ability to soldier and to negotiate with native peoples. For example, two Africans with Hispanicized names—Juan Garrido and Juan González—were on Juan Ponce de León’s expedition to explore and seize Puerto Rico in 1508. Garrido and González obtained their freedom and stayed on in Puerto Rico to mine gold. Some Africans also aided the Spanish in slaving raids against the Caribs on the islands of Guadalupe, Dominica, and Santa Cruz. In 1513, when Vasco Nuñez de Balboa became the first European to cross the Isthmus of Panama and see the Pacific Ocean, he had thirty Africans with him. Africans also accompanied Hernán Cortés during his siege of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (in modern-day Mexico) in 1521. Cortés’s entourage included Garrido, who later became a gold miner, landowner, and caretaker of one of the conquered city’s aqueducts. He also served as gatekeeper of the Mexico City cabildo (city hall). Likewise, Africans participated in Francisco Pizarro’s conquest of the Incas in Peru in 1532. Later, when local Indians murdered Pizarro, Africans carried his body to the Catholic cathedral that the Spanish had built in Lima. Some historians have claimed that one of Columbus’s mariners, Pedro Alonso Nino, was an African, though this is disputed.

Africans in Early Spanish North America

As early as 1513, when the Spanish first set foot ashore on what would become the United States, they had African slaves with them. As he had in Puerto Rico, Ponce de León included Juan Garrido and Juan González, as well as African scouts and ship handlers, in his expedition to Florida. In 1521, they returned with de León to Florida to help stake Spain’s claim to the entire eastern coast of North America.
To make good on this claim, some six hundred Spanish settlers—led by Lucas Vásquez de Ayllón and accompanied by many black slaves—tried to plant a permanent colony in La Florida (as the Spanish called it) in 1526. The group settled near present-day Sapelo Sound in Georgia. When starvation, disease, and a leadership crisis beset the expedition and Guale Indians attacked, some Africans fled and joined the Guale tribe. They married Guales, started families, and began the mixing of Africans and native Americans that would continue in North America for centuries.

In 1528, Estévan arrived in Florida with his Spanish master as part of Pánfilo de Narváez’s expedition. There, the five hundred Spanish and Africans settled near the swamplands of Tampa Bay. The colony fared as poorly as the one at Sapelo Sound had; only four members survived. These included de Vaca (whose account of the group’s five-year, 2,500-mile odyssey across the continent would make him famous) as well as Estévan. A nearby tribe of native Americans enslaved the four survivors. During his captivity among the Indians, Estévan became a linguist, healer, guide, and negotiator.

One day, the four survivors of the Spanish settlement managed to escape. They fled Florida and headed west. As they journeyed, Estévan negotiated with the hostile Indians they encountered. In the course of the men’s arduous travels, his status as the slave of a Spanish adventurer all but dissolved. Padding crude boats across the Gulf of Mexico, the tiny group shipwrecked on the Texas coast and took refuge among merciful natives. They recuperated for some time, then plunged into the Texas interior in 1534, heading west from present-day Galveston. Following Indian guides for the next two years, the travelers came to be regarded as holy men who possessed the power to heal. Indians in Spanish New Mexico described them as “four great doctors, one of them black, the other three white, who gave blessings [and] healed the sick.” On one occasion, Indians gave Estévan a sacred gourd rattle—a rare honor. Making their way southwest across the continent, the foursome eventually met with Spanish settlers in Mexico. Evidence suggests that they may have reached the Pacific Ocean in 1536.

In 1539, Estévan joined a new Spanish expedition. Departing from Mexico City and heading north into Spanish New Mexico, the group blazed a trail for Francisco Vásquez de Coronado’s expedition of 1540. In what would later be Arizona, the Spanish selected Estévan to forge ahead into Zuni country with Indian guides in search of the fabled seven gold-filled cities of Cíbola. His gift for acquiring native languages and his long experience with the peoples living in the vast territory north of New Spain made him the logical choice. Estévan became the first outsider to penetrate the vast Colorado Plateau. Unfortunately for him and his group, the Zuni saw him as an intruder and killed him.

In the same year that Estévan set out in advance of Coronado, Hernando de Soto made a further attempt to settle La Florida. Like every other Spanish expedition, this one included free and enslaved Africans. One slave helped a headwoman from an Indian tribe on the South Carolina coast to escape her Spanish captors. The two married and then headed back to her village near present-day Camden, South Carolina. De Soto, for his part, launched an ill-fated attempt to plunder the country of the Creeks, native people living in Florida. Hoping to repeat his success in silver-rich Peru—where he had helped defeat the Incas eight years before—de Soto instead perished at the hands of the Indians. Half of his soldiers and the accompanying Africans died as well. Those who survived limped back to Mexico “dressed only in animal skins.”

Late in the sixteenth century, the Spanish—again accompanied by free and enslaved Africans—finally established a secure presence in La Florida. When French Huguenots (Protestants) planted a small rival colony near present-day Jacksonville in 1606, the Spanish sent Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, captain general of the Spanish fleets in the West Indies, to crush them. Avilés quickly identified a talented free mulatto (part European and part African) named Louis living with the Calusa tribe south of St. Augustine. He came to depend on Louis to negotiate with the native people. Avilés found other Africans living with Indian tribes as well. Many of them had fled their European masters to find freedom and shelter in local Indian communities.

Life in La Florida was harsh for Spaniards and Africans alike. But the scarcity of capable workers and skilled linguists gave enslaved Africans a higher status and a greater degree of freedom than they would have after the English set up colonies in North America. By the time the English had mounted their Jamestown expedition in 1606, about one hundred African slaves and a small number of free blacks, many of them married to Indians or Spaniards, lived in La Florida.

The role of Africans on these grueling expeditions through mapless territory gave slavery a distinct character in the early Spanish settlements. The slaves did much of the back-breaking work as laborers in fields, on supply trains, and in fort and church construction. But they also
served as soldiers, guides, and linguists. Along the west coast, Africans were a significant fraction of settlers in Mexico’s northern frontier, including what would become the American Southwest, and there they also served in a variety of roles. On both the east and west coasts, Africans forged sexual unions and raised children with native Americans and with Spanish people. This genetic blending blurred the definition of slavery. Officially, the Spanish regarded purity of lineage as the entitlement to elite status and ranked people on a social scale according to their ancestry. But pure lineage meant little on the frontiers of New Spain. There, Spanish, native Americans, and Africans intermingled so much that traditional social categories broke down. A person’s value to the community mattered far more than his or her “race.” By the early 1700s, one observer of New Spain’s northern frontier remarked that “practically all those who wish to be considered Spaniards are people of mixed blood.”

**CONCLUSION**

When Diego Gomes first reached the coast of West Africa in 1456 to arrange treaties of commerce with African rulers, he unwittingly formed links between Europeans and Africans that would lock the two in a shameful embrace. Struggling to establish plantations on the islands off Africa’s coast, the Portuguese began depending on enslaved Africans to produce highly profitable sugar. By the end of the 1400s, the Portuguese had extended the plantation system to the other side of the ocean. Europe, Africa, and the Americas were now bound together in a vast, Atlantic-wide system of trade and cultural exchange. The system would exert a disastrous impact on the peoples of Africa—not only those left behind but also those who survived the brutal journey to the Americas.

From the mid-fifteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, Europeans tore millions of Africans from their ancestral homelands and shipped them to the Atlantic islands and the Americas to labor in their colonies. No account of the enslavement of Africans can quite convey the demoralization and agony that accompanied the forced march to the coast of Africa and the subsequent loading aboard of the unfortunate captives. One historian has called it “the most traumatizing mass human migration in modern history.”

Africans who ended up in North America met with profoundly different experiences—depending on who owned them, when they arrived on the coast, and where they ended up living. In the 1500s, only a few thousand Africans arrived in the Americas in chains. Many of them assumed roles based on their valuable skills, not on their “race.” Moreover, they raised families with native American and with Spanish partners, contributing to a blending of cultures that would powerfully shape the New World. But during the 1600s, the trickle of Africans across the Atlantic burgeoned into a steady stream. By the time Equiano arrived in the mid-eighteenth-century, it was a torrent. With increasing numbers, the English entry into the Atlantic slave trade, and English challenges to the footholds established by Spain, France, and the Netherlands in North America came changing attitudes toward Africans and changes in the practice of slavery itself.

**FURTHER READING**


