

## SLAVES COME TO AMERICA

During the 1400's, European traders found that slaves could be bought along the African coast from tribal rulers who had taken prisoners of war. The African rulers would sell their prisoners in return for rum, cloth, guns, and iron. Between 1450 and 1865, European traders transported an estimated 10 to 15 million slaves to North and South America where they were sold to owners of sugar and cotton plantations. Trading companies from England, France, Portugal, Holland, and Denmark were earning tens of thousands of dollars on each voyage to America.



For the slaves, the voyage from Africa to America was a horrible experience. Slaves were packed so tightly into the hold of the ship that they could hardly move. Chains were sometimes put around their hands and feet. The cramped, filthy conditions made it easy for sickness to spread from one person to another. Thousands died during the ocean crossings from disease and brutal treatment by the slave traders. Some slaves even killed themselves, preferring death to their ordeal.

The slaves usually had no idea where they were being taken or what would happen to them. Most had never seen a ship before and did not understand what made it move through the water. Some of the prisoners wondered if their cruel captors would make them live forever on board the ship. Many were so frightened that they were unable to eat. Those who refused to eat were beaten. The traders wanted them to eat so that they would be strong and healthy and bring high prices when sold in America.

The Africans did not understand the white man's language and did not know what he was saying. Slaves often could not understand each other either. A slave ship usually included blacks from different parts of Africa where different languages were spoken.

Once in America, the slaves saw many things which were new to them. They had never seen brick buildings before, or houses with more than one floor. They had never seen cities or roads, or a man on horseback. Some slaves thought these white people must have magical powers. Ways of living in America were very different from ways of living in Africa.

The first slave ship arrived in America in 1619. It landed at Jamestown, Virginia, just twelve years after the first Englishmen had settled there. Hundreds of other slave ships made the long voyage from Africa to America during the 1600's and 1700's. There was a growing demand for a cheap and plentiful labor supply, especially in the Southern Colonies. Plantation owners needed large numbers of farm workers to help raise tobacco and other crops.

The number of slaves coming to America increased from several hundred per year during the 1600's to several thousand each year during the 1700's. In some of the Southern Colonies, slaves outnumbered white settlers by 2 to 1. Of the 2,500,000 people living in American colonies in 1775, 700,000 were *slaves*. The overwhelming majority lived in the South. In the northern colonies, the poor soil and climate restricted the growing of tobacco and other money crops. In the Southern Colonies, slave uprisings sometimes occurred, but harsh laws were passed to severely punish those involved in the rebellions.

### Gustavus Vassa Crosses the Atlantic

One of the few first-hand descriptions of a slave ship crossing the ocean is given in the following account by a slave named Gustavus Vassa. He was taken from the coast of Africa to the island of Barbados in the West Indies. He tells about conditions on board ship and the method by which blacks were sold into slavery.

1. The first thing I saw when I got to the coast was the sea. I also saw a slave ship which was waiting for its cargo. These filled me with so much astonishment and terror, that I still cannot fully describe my feelings at the time.
2. Once I was on the ship I saw a large furnace and a great many black people chained together. I did not doubt my fate once I saw the sadness and horror which their faces expressed. Overcome with horror and grief, I fainted on the deck.
3. I was put down under the decks, and with the terrible smells that I encountered there and the crying, I became so ill and dejected that I had neither the desire nor the ability to eat. I wished for Death to relieve me. Soon, two white men offered me food. When I refused to eat, one of them held me by the hands and laid me across the windlass. My feet were then tied and I was whipped severely....
4. Shortly after, I found some people from my own nation among those who were chained. I asked them what was to be done with us. They told me that we were to be taken to the white people's country where we would be made to work for them. I was then a bit revived and thought if it were no worse than working, my situation was not as desperate as I had first imagined. However, since the white people looked and acted so savagely, I still feared that I would be put to death.
5. I could not help expressing my fears to some of my countrymen. I asked them if the white people had a country. I thought perhaps that they lived in this hollow place. My countrymen told me that the white people came from a distant land. I then asked what made the ship go. My countrymen said that they could not tell but that there was cloth attached to the masts by ropes and that the ship went on....
6. One day two of my countrymen who were chained together jumped into the sea. They preferred death to a life of such misery. Then another followed their example. I believe that many more would have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew who were immediately alarmed. The most active of us were then put under the deck. There was much noise and confusion with the people of the ship shouting to stop the ship and go back to those who had jumped into the water. Two of the poor creatures were drowned. The other was saved but afterwards he was whipped unmercifully for having preferred death to slavery....
7. Finally, we came in sight of the island of Barbadoes. . . . Many merchants and planters now came on board. They put us into separate groups and examined us with great attention. We thought that we would be eaten by these ugly men. When we were all put down under deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us; and our bitter cries could be heard all through the night. Finally, the white people sent some slaves from the land to calm us. These slaves told us that we were not going to be eaten but would be taken to the land to work and we would see many of our country people. This report gave us ease and soon we were taken to the land where we were led immediately to the merchant's yard. There, without regard to age or sex, we were herded together like sheep. What struck me was that the houses were made of bricks, in stories, and were completely different than anything I had ever seen. I was even more astonished to see people on horseback. I did not know what this could mean. I thought that these white people were filled with magical arts.
8. In a few days we were sold in the merchant's usual manner which is as follows: On a signal given by the beat of a drum, the buyers rush into the yard where the slaves are kept. They choose the one they like best. The noise and clamour which accompany this and the eagerness visible in the

faces of the buyers serve to increase the fears of the terrified slaves.... In this manner relatives and friends are separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remember that in the ship in which I was brought over there were several brothers who were sold in different lots. It was very moving to see and hear their cries as they were parted. Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which adds fresh horrors to the wickedness of slavery.

Questions

(1) Why was Gustavus Vassa frightened when he was taken on board the slave ship?

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(2) Why do you think the white men whipped Vassa for not eating?

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(3) Why did several Africans jump overboard?

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(4) In paragraph 7, line 3, why do you think the merchants and planters examined the slaves "with great attention"?

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(5) After reaching the island of Barbados, why did the white people send slaves from the land onto the ship?

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(6) What prompted Vassa to say, "I thought that these white people were filled with magical arts"? (paragraph 7)

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(7) Briefly describe the way in which slaves were sold.

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(8) What happened to relatives and friends as a result of the slave sale?

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