

The Middle Passage

“If you look at the sea long enough, scenes from the past come back to life. ‘The sea is history... the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.’”¹ The Atlantic Ocean is a graveyard which holds the bodies of the enslaved Africans thrown overboard. The Atlantic Ocean is also an archive of black history; it tells the stories of all those lost in the journey to the Americas, the accounts of what happened aboard each ship, and echoes the anguish of all the words unspoken by the suffered. It was through the Middle Passage, in which the words family, neighbor, friend, wife, brother, sister, were lost.

John Newton, a slave ship captain during the 1800s, wrote in *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, "With our ships, the great object is, to be full. When the ship is there, it is thought... she should take as many as possible. The cargo of a vessel...is calculated to purchase from two hundred and twenty to two hundred and fifty slaves...the slaves lie in two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other, like books upon a shelf."² It is inherently problematic in how the ship is viewed as more of a living being in the captain's referral to it as a "she," while the enslaved Africans were reduced to simple commodities through the captain's comparison to books on a shelf. Furthermore, the very act of placing a value on a person supports dehumanization — the commodification of the enslaved Africans devalues their existence to something easily bought or traded.³ The Middle Passage converted enslaved Africans to just another piece of property for the plantation owners, "A slave without a past had no life to avenge"⁴ and "had been forced to *forget mother*,"⁵ in the sense that the only thing left was a sense of hopelessness that made the enslaved Africans forget their origins, their countries, and their freedom; through this, it was easy to create a social hierarchy with the Africans at the bottom. This concept was the justification for disregarding the enslaved Africans' lives.

The case of the *Zong* Massacre is an example of the indifference towards the lives of the enslaved Africans. During the voyage of a slave ship, the *Zong*, from Guinea in West Africa to Jamaica in the Caribbean, the ship's captain, Luke Collingwood, ordered for 132 of the 440 enslaved Africans to be thrown overboard. When the *Zong* arrived in Jamaica, the ship's co-owners, William, James, and John Gregson, filed an insurance claim pertaining to their "lost cargo."⁶ Even when criminal charges were filed against the captain, the crew, and the owners, Justice John Lee rejected such charges by contending, "What is this claim that human people have been thrown overboard? This is a case of chattels or goods. Blacks are goods and property; it is madness to accuse these well-serving honorable men of murder... The case is the same as if wood had been thrown overboard."⁷ The only factual part of what Lee said was that the Captain Collingwood murders were not put on trial, but rather the insurance value in which the crew members would receive was.⁸ Even before the *Zong* incident, the very act of having insurance in the case of "damaged goods" stripped the Africans of all identity and humanity, reducing the Africans to a price rather than identifying as a human. Among others, Lee believed that the enslaved Africans were fungible objects, readily replaced and in surplus— the continuation of this perspective in society aided the perpetuation of slavery.

Portugal and Africa maintained a stable and peaceful relationship, which caused a shift in the acquisition of enslaved Africans.⁹ The Portuguese understood not to kidnap Africans, and to encourage African merchants and kings to provide a supply of enslaved Africans as a commodity such as gold, ivory, and peppers.¹⁰ This allowed for the expansion of the Middle Passage into the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The journey to the New World lasted around 50 to 80 days depending on which ports the ships came from and were headed towards.¹¹ Most enslaved Africans came from the West Africa and Angola and were brought over to the eastern-coast of the Americas. However, the exploitation of Africans did not begin with the Middle Passage, nor did it only include the Atlantic Slave Trade. The selling of enslaved Africans crossed the Sahara Desert, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, marking the very beginning routes of the Middle Passage.¹² The infamous “Middle Passage” spanned across the Atlantic and into the New World, usually lasting more than seven weeks. Men were separated from women and held at the bow of the ship, whereas the women were held toward the stern of the ship. Throughout the course, the imprisoned Africans typically ate once or twice a day and were rarely brought onto the deck for fresh air.¹³ What lay ahead would be a long and difficult course that would eventually lead to a revolutionary change in history.

The transportation of enslaved Africans through the Middle Passage is often considered to be one of the largest forced migrations in history. Along the west coast of Africa, there were about sixty trading posts that brought in Europeans to trade their riches for human cargo. In these slave trades, the people captured were often abducted in raids or wars against their enemy African tribes.¹⁴ The kidnappings lead thousands of potentially enslaved Africans to walk many miles, shackled and starved throughout these marches.¹⁵ The ones who reached the coastal ports, which was usually only half of the amount of people the Portuguese began with, would then be directed onto ships, where another journey lay ahead.

Once aboard the ships to North America, the enslaved Africans were “crammed like loaves of bread on a shelf.”¹⁶ It was so crowded between decks there was no standing space; there was an average of six to seven feet of space and barely more than two or three feet for head space.¹⁷ The air in these tight spaces made breathing very hard and the unbearable heat offered no comfort. With hundreds of people crammed into a tight space, enslaved Africans were forced to lie on their backs as their head lay between another’s legs.¹⁸ This led to disease, as feces and urine lined the floors of the slave ships. Millions of people died during the crossing, and those who were found dead or sick were thrown overboard. When the captive Africans stepped onto North American soil, sellers automatically separated the Africans into groups based on their physical condition and appeal to buyers.¹⁹ Once sold, enslaved Africans were branded for identification.²⁰ The enslaved Africans were forced to obey their overseers and toiled on plantations and in factories throughout the New World.

In North America, the poor treatment of the enslaved Africans spread throughout the coastal colonies as well as the Caribbean. The ships landed in port cities along the Eastern United States that trafficked enslaved Africans. A list of these port cities is provided as follows:²¹

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Portsmouth, NH ● Salem, MA ● Boston, MA ● New Bedford, MA ● Providence, RI ● Bristol, RI ● Newport, RI ● Middletown, CT ● New London, CT ● New York, NY ● Perth Amboy, NJ ● Philadelphia, PA ● Annapolis, MD ● Oxford, MD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hollywood, MD ● Georgetown, Washington DC ● Fredericksburg, VA ● Richmond, VA ● Yorktown, VA ● Hampton, VA ● Jamestown, VA ● Wilmington, NC ● Charleston, SC ● Sullivan’s Island, SC ● Beaufort, SC ● Savannah, GA ● Sapelo Bay, GA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jekyll Island, GA ● Amelia Island, FL ● St. Augustine, FL ● Mosquito Inlet, FL ● Key West, FL ● Pensacola, FL ● Mobile, AL ● Biloxi, MS ● New Orleans, LA ● La Balize, LA ● Deweyville, TX ● Sabine Lake, TX ● Galveston, TX
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Enslaved Africans treated as commodities in America, and were also traded in the Caribbean, with countless ports accepting enslaved Africans south of the equator as well.

Slavery was ingrained in the history of the Caribbean, with its origin being tied to creation of the plantation economy brought about by the introduction of the farming of sugar in the region, as far back as the plantations of St Kitts in the 1640s.²² This was due to the rise of the cash crop; it became more profitable to farm one product, purely for sale and export, than to farm for personal consumption and sell the excess. As a result, farmers instituted the plantation system, where there was money to be made. Due to the requirement of vast swaths of land for the boom in this new style of farming, eyes shifted to the Caribbean. There, land was cheaper and there were less regulations. New farmers needed more hands to work their larger pieces of land, profit was of the utmost importance, farmers sought the cheapest possible means of securing workers; hence, slavery was chosen. The one-time cost of acquiring a worker was much cheaper than paying someone a regular wage. Additionally, enslaved Africans had no rights, a renewable workforce, with the children of enslaved Africans inheriting their slave status from their parents. The slave system was so profitable that nearly 350,000 enslaved Africans were transported to the Leeward Islands alone by 1810.²³ In addition, between 1662 and 1807, Great Britain transported over 3.1 million enslaved Africans through the transatlantic slave trade.²⁴

Slavery may have been an extremely profitable system in the Caribbean, but it was a very unregulated one, especially in its infancy. It was not until 1661 that any effort was made to create an order for the chaos that was the system of slavery; the 1661 Act for the Better Governing and Ordering of Negroes was the first attempt in the English Americas to come up with a legal guide for a slave society.²⁵ In fact, before the Amelioration Act was passed in 1798, which required slave owners to provide adequate living conditions for their enslaved Africans, enslaved Africans were, for the most part, extremely poorly taken care of, as owners would “simply” buy new ones when the old ones died, as a slave was seen as less than human, and could be treated as such.²⁶ But the new rules and regulation did not slow the slave system in the Caribbean, and in fact

served to streamline the system, and make it less disorganized. Slavery would continue in force, until its abolition in the British Caribbean on August 1, 1834.²⁷ It would go on for much longer in some parts of the region, such as Cuba, which only abolished it in 1886.²⁸

While there was much money, and massive profits to be made off of the work of enslaved Africans, the enslaved Africans had to get to the plantations in the Americas first. This is where the slave traders came in and made their fortunes. The average slave fetched a price of \$250 back in 1815.²⁹ Due to their value, traders worked to get the maximum possible return on a trip from Africa. There were two methods of accomplishing this: one was named loose packing, which was when captains loaded less enslaved Africans than their ships could carry, so that less died from disease; the other was called tight packing, which, as its name suggests, was when captains carried as many enslaved Africans as their ship could hold, if not more, in order to maximize profits, even though more died.³⁰ The average trip from Africa to the Caribbean was 40 days in the 17th century, and 30 days in the 18th.³¹ A revolt was staged on roughly one out of every ten voyages across the Atlantic.³² On these trips, there was little to no effort concerning hygiene and treatment of the enslaved Africans. Some ships had buckets for excrement, but because there were not enough for each slave, enslaved Africans chose to urinate and defecate where at their position rather than crawl over people to reach the buckets. The enslaved Africans were given the minimum sustenance needed to survive; slave traders offered very little food, as it was costly, however did distribute enough to drink, due to the fact that dehydration killed quickly.³³ 10 to 15 percent of enslaved Africans died en route to the New World through their subjection to the terrible conditions on the ship.³⁴

Once the enslaved Africans reached the Americas, their living conditions were harsh. However, the restrictions imposed on enslaved peoples were not purely physical; slavery in the New World affected hope, identity, and self-expression within the enslaved Africans. Though slave owners stifled the enslaved Africans' thoughts and emotions, enslaved Africans were still able to maintain aspects of their indigenous cultures through literature, art, and religion. Many enslaved Africans focused heavily on folk tales in order to preserve their cultures, distract from reality, and allow the enslaved to live vicariously through fictional characters. In folktales like the Brer Rabbit adventures, the enslaved Africans were able to create new worlds, in which their oppressors no longer had the upper hand.³⁵ Additionally, many enslaved Africans found solace in manufacturing crafts, like the banjo.³⁶ This helped the enslaved Africans to maintain high hopes and exercise their creativity. The produced quilts were used as bedding and panels for enslaved Africans to share their stories and memories. These quilts were also essential to the Underground Railroad, as they enabled enslaved Africans to communicate with each other through hidden messages engraved in the quilts.³⁷

Another means of communication that was vital to slave culture was language. However, utilizing this basic form of communication proved to be difficult, as many enslaved Africans from a multitude of different regions were forced to cooperate in one setting. This assimilation of enslaved Africans into colonial American culture led to the establishment of new languages, and to the introduction of indigenous languages and slang to North America.³⁸ Different dialects included Sea Chantey--a work song accommodating slave labor on merchant labor vessels--and Gullah language--an English-based creole language.³⁹ All of these languages acted as the melting pot of languages, allowing enslaved Africans to blend English with their native tongues and to speak

amongst each other. Religion served as an additional platform for cultural expression. Plantation owners were adamant about ridding their land of heathens and imposing Christianity on their enslaved Africans; however, enslaved Africans were able to incorporate aspects of their religions into Christian values. There were always opportunities to preach to other enslaved Africans and sing their own hymns, which were indigenous to the various African regions. In addition, methods such as ring shouts were employed in order to contact the spirits from their homelands.⁴⁰

The Transatlantic slave trade system heavily impacted America economically, politically, and socially. From the 16th to 19th centuries, America was economically dependent upon slavery. A large portion of the subjugated Africans in the Americas worked on sugar plantations producing an abundance of sugar--the most prosperous and financially beneficial commodity manufactured by enslaved Africans in the New World.⁴¹ The production of cotton-- as well as other raw materials like tobacco, chocolate, and coffee-- were prominent in the southern region of America. Since many of these commodities were essential to motivating and fueling the average worker, the Triangular Slave Trade paved way for the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century.⁴²

Though slavery laid the foundation for America's prosperous economy in its entirety, it hindered economic growth in the South. The Southern slave system "impeded the development of industry and cities and contributed to high debts, soil exhaustion, and a lack of technological innovation."⁴³ Since the South's primary focus was limited to the production and distribution of materials to locals and factories in the North, its economy did not reap the benefits of international trade. This contributed to a smaller working operation in the South than in factories in the North; the South had approximately 110,000 workers whereas the North employed nearly 1.3 million workers in the mid 19th century. Additionally, "Northern factories manufactured nine-tenths of the industrial goods produced in the United States."⁴⁴ While slavery was eventually abolished in 1865, the slave institution helped shape the nation's economic and political state.

For the survivors of the Middle Passage, the conditions for enslaved Africans on land were similarly poor. The selling process disrupted families, took children from the hands of their mothers, and permanently separated spouses. Disrupting these families helped hinder the enslaved Africans' hope and identities, and therefore perpetuated the institution of slavery. In the mindset of slave owners, if every fragment of hope was shattered and every string connecting the enslaved Africans to their old homes was detached, then the enslaved Africans would work without the distraction of their pasts. Frederick Douglass, a famous abolitionist, even supported the theory that "slave-owners purposefully separated children from their parents in order to blunt the development of affection between them."⁴⁶

Disregarding the internal affliction caused by these harsh conditions, the physical toll of slavery was debilitating. Many enslaved Africans toiled in plantations beneath the grueling sun for up to 18 hours a day, under the constant surveillance of overseers.⁴⁷ When the plantation workers could squeeze a few hours of sleep in, the workers would sleep on the floor, with only the protection of one moldy, coarse blanket.⁴⁸ The only people who were excused from manual labor were children under the age of six, incapacitated elderly, and handicapped people.⁴⁹ The enslaved Africans were often denied basic human necessities such as adequate food and water rations. Domestic enslaved Africans who worked in plantation homes were given

slightly more rights than average plantation workers, like better food and living conditions.⁵⁰ However, all enslaved Africans were extremely susceptible to repulsive and sometimes fatal diseases, like convulsions, blindness, and tetany. “Diarrhea, dysentery, whooping cough, and respiratory diseases as well as worms pushed the infant and early childhood death rate of slaves to twice that experienced by white infants and children.”⁵¹ Enslaved Africans were faced with difficult and even fatal conditions throughout their lives.

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