

## The Middle Passage

Imagine yourself walking alone one day, and you are kidnapped; a rope is placed around your neck, and you are taken away to a big fort where you are tossed in with total strangers. Given barely enough food to survive, and with all dignity removed, you spend weeks wondering when you will die. One day a strange-looking man walks in, looks you over, decides that "you'll do," and takes you to a ship. Aboard the ship are many other prisoners who, like you, are terrified and hoping to find someone they know.

You have just entered the "middle passage." The slaver (slave ship) on which you are sailing may have begun its voyage in Boston or Providence, carrying cloth, guns, or rum to Africa. After delivering its cargo of slaves to the West Indies or the South, it will take sugar or cotton back to Boston, the third leg of its trip. The ship on which you sail is average for the trade. You are crowded in the 'tween decks section (between the deck and the hold). On most 18th-century slavers, the 'tween decks is only 3'10" high, and the average space for each slave was 16" wide and 5.5' long. The crew sleeps on the deck. Food and water are stored below. The portholes are closed and bolted to prevent slaves from jumping overboard. The heat is stifling, and many on board are seasick. You are taken to the deck once or twice a day to be fed. A pasty substance, gruel, is given to you in a dipper.

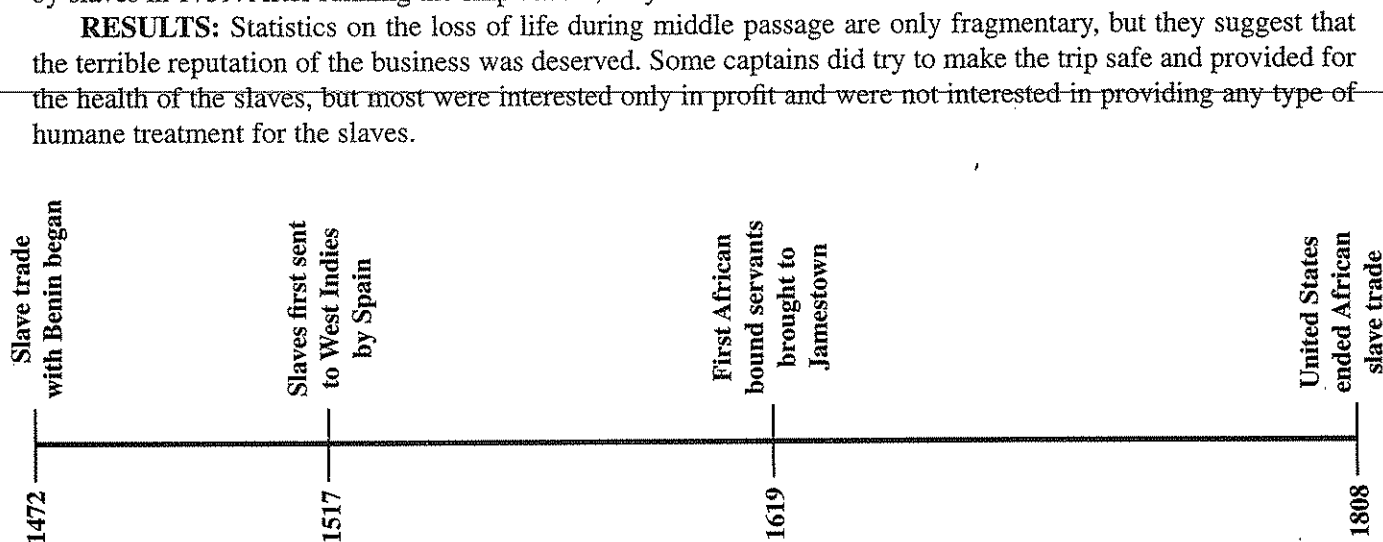


*'Tween decks area of a slaver*

It is little consolation to know that the crew is often as sick as you are, and that a higher percentage of them may die than the slaves on the voyage. Common diseases like yellow fever, dysentery, and malaria have little effect on the Africans but are fatal to the crews. Drinking stagnant water and eating the stale food make this a dangerous business for the crew as well as the passengers. Callous captains overload the slavers, expecting a high attrition. Slaves unable to communicate with each other and weak with hunger usually offer little resistance. The last two or three days at sea are often the best. Food and water rations are increased so the slaves will look healthier and bring a better price.

Despite the feeble condition of the passengers and a lack of a common language, there are times when the slaves revolt. The usual rebellion is by giving up and dying, either through self-starvation or jumping overboard. To prevent slaves from starving themselves, a funnel is heated and pressed against their lips; when the lips open, food is poured in. The crew will grab anyone attempting to jump. Many simply quit living (suicidal melancholy), and their bodies are tossed overboard to the sharks. There are 55 documented occasions when slaves revolted and hundreds of references to others. A good example was when the undermanned crew of the *Perfect* was overwhelmed by slaves in 1759. After running the ship ashore, they looted and burned it.

**RESULTS:** Statistics on the loss of life during middle passage are only fragmentary, but they suggest that the terrible reputation of the business was deserved. Some captains did try to make the trip safe and provided for the health of the slaves, but most were interested only in profit and were not interested in providing any type of humane treatment for the slaves.



## Slaves Make a Life for Themselves

The picture of slavery is one blurred by the passing of time; all of the masters and slaves are gone. No effort was made to record the words of slaves until the 1930s when most had died, and those old enough to remember were in their 80s and 90s. Few slaves wrote about their experiences; eloquent writers like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown were the exceptions.

To understand life in slavery, the modern person has to remember that both master and slave were humans and, like anyone else, personalities varied. Some masters tried to treat slaves well. George Washington freed his slaves in his will; Thomas Jefferson's slaves lived in brick cottages; Jefferson Davis's slaves governed themselves with slave-run trial courts.

Harsh slaveowners also existed. They half-starved their slaves, worked them hard, whipped them often, treated them worse than cattle, and enjoyed making life miserable. When a master was cruel, his slaves had no legal protection from his brutal treatment.

Plantation slaves often had little contact with their masters. Their supervisors were drivers and overseers. *Drivers* were slaves who were made into bosses by their master, so they were in a bad situation. Go easy on the workers, and if the work was not done, the driver would be flogged; if he was too hard on the workers, the driver made enemies among his fellow slaves. *Overseers* were whites who took orders from the master. A few were good managers, but most were not.

Even in the best of circumstances, slaves were property and could be bought, sold, lent, or rented out. Their opportunities to learn and achieve were very limited. They had little personal incentive to work hard; slavery offered little room for promotions.

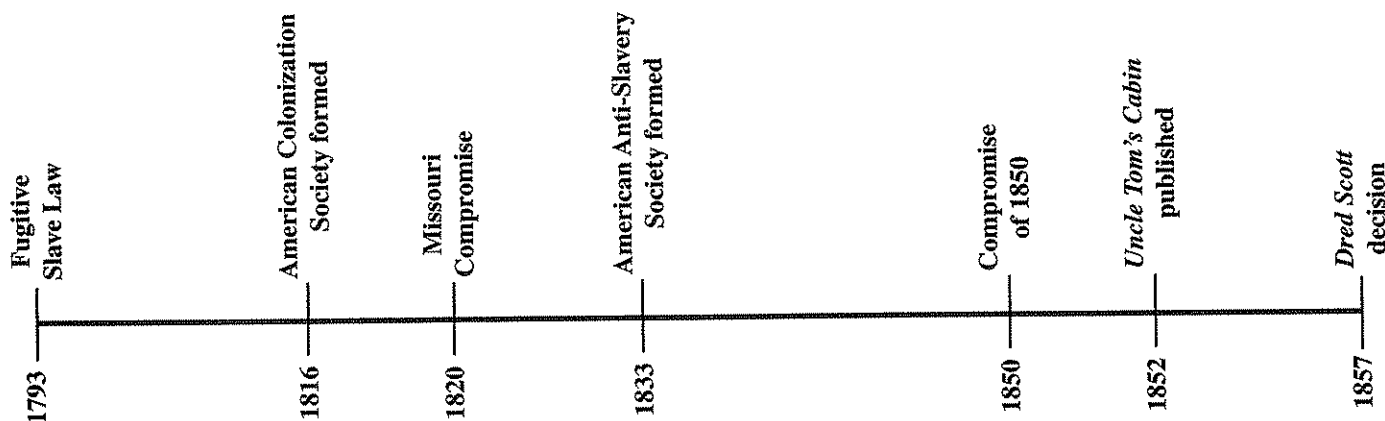
How did slaves survive the uncertainty and the danger of harsh treatment? They made the best of a bad situation. When masters allowed them to grow gardens, they sold surplus food to whites. During holidays, they worked for pay. They found pleasure in family and friends in the evening.

Music was a relief for them. Slaves made musical instruments from whatever was available. They liked to dance, sing, and play the banjo, drums, or fiddle. When he was interested in a girl, a young man tried to impress her by bringing presents and winning her mother's approval. Sometimes, a dignified marriage performed by a minister would follow; other times, they jumped over a broomstick together. Although the odds were against them, many slaves took their role as husband, wife, or parent seriously.

**RESULTS:** What slaves could and could not do was limited by the type of master they had. When the master understood that happy workers were more productive, slaves lived better; if the master felt harsh discipline was the only way to treat them, their lives were miserable. Regardless, slaves found ways to adjust to their situations.



*The Fiddler*



## Slavery as a Social and Legal System

The English colonists of North America knew they needed helpers to build their homes and work in them. They also needed help to plow and harvest their land. There were a variety of sources of this labor. *Indentured servants* gave four to seven years of labor just to pay for their transportation to America. *Apprentices* were orphans or children of poor parents who were given to a farmer or tradesman to be trained; they would be freed when they reached a specified age. *Convicts* were released from English prisons and sent to America; from 1750 to 1770, 10,000 were sent to Maryland alone. Eventually, many of these servants became fully accepted citizens of the colony.

Having had no experience with slavery, North American colonists moved cautiously. First, Africans were “bound servants,” then “servants for life,” and eventually, they were “slaves.” Few Africans came to North America before the 1660s; most were being sent to Brazil and the West Indies. Virginia had only 300 African servants in 1650. However, three important changes occurred to increase the numbers.

First, the Company of Royal Adventurers was formed in 1663 and was to supply a minimum of 3,000 slaves annually to the American colonists. Led by the Duke of York, brother of the king of England, it was so influential that a new coin for the African slave trade was struck. Called the “guinea,” its value equaled the pound sterling. Not only did these slave traders have money, but they had high connections.

Second, the overproduction of sugar in the West Indies resulted in soil depletion. As crops dropped and a demand for slaves increased on the mainland, West Indian planters sold off surplus workers to Americans.

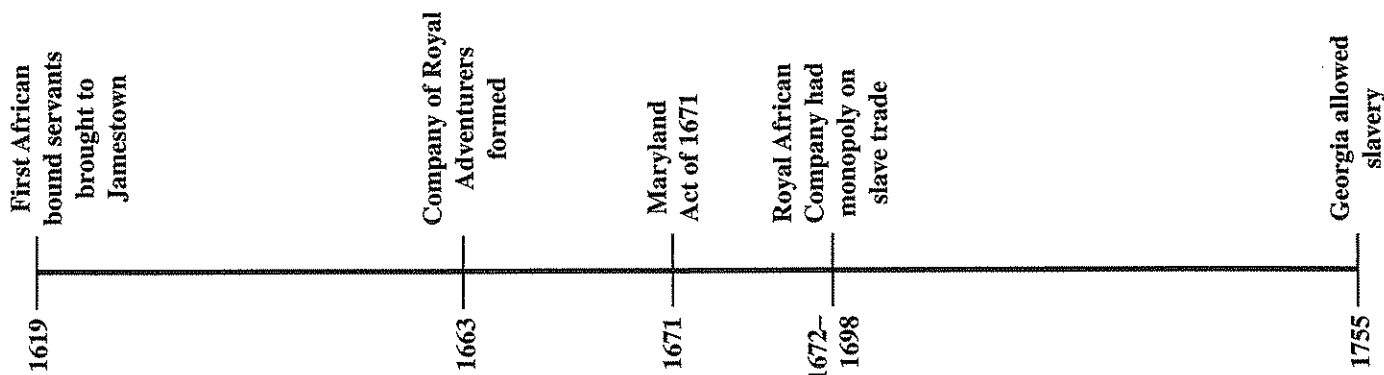
Third, a higher percentage of female slaves came to North America than to the West Indies and Brazil. This increased the percentage of slaves who were American born. Owners could see obvious possibilities of workers replacing workers through natural means, and they encouraged slave marriages.

The increase in numbers and the changing status from “bound servant” to “slave” required that new laws be written. For example, did *conversion to Christianity* free them from slavery? Maryland’s Act of 1671 said it did not. Was the *punishment for crime* the same for a slave as a free man? Virginia put much tougher penalties on slaves for committing crimes than it did on whites. When a *child was born*, did it receive the status of the father or mother? Colonists ruled that it was the mother’s child and inherited her status of slave. How should *slave revolts* be discouraged? South Carolina allowed any white to search any slave for offensive weapons. Should slaves be allowed to *congregate*? Georgia said that no more than seven could be present at one place, unless a white was with them. On the question of whether slaves should be allowed to *read and write*, Georgia said they must not. Could slaves *testify* in a trial where the defendant was white? New York said no.

**RESULTS:** Slavery did not begin with a single flourish of a pen. It slowly began to take form, with one colony borrowing rules and regulations from others. It was never quite uniform, but it could be said that it was never equal or just in its treatment of slaves accused of any crime.



Slave Auction



## Slaves Find Power in Religion

Karl Marx called religion “the opiate of the masses,” and some slave-owners tried to use it that way—to make slaves docile and more concerned about the heaven to come than about their suffering on Earth. Other masters introduced their slaves to Christianity as part of their obligation to bring the world to Christ. There were still other owners who saw potential harm in slave religion and did not want their slaves in church or at evangelistic meetings. In religion, slaves found the hope and power denied them everywhere else. There was a God above their master—one who would someday even the score for the suffering the slave had endured.

Southern churches often had slave members. Seated in the balcony, or in the back if there was no balcony, slaves sometimes attended services with their masters. On plantations, the master might bring a white minister to preach a special message to the slaves. The usual topics would be the need to obey, not to steal chickens, proper morality, or church doctrine. As emotional religious revivals, like the one at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, swept the South, masters and slaves attended and “got religion” together.

White ministers might speak to the slaves, but it was the slave preachers who commanded the attention of the congregation. They were slaves, too, and under the watchful eye of the master. If they spoke too boldly in worship services in the slave quarter, they were subject to a flogging, so care was taken not to offend the master or overseer who stood at the door. However, informal services away from scrutiny took place around campfires in the woods at night.

Hymns that pleased whites did not always appeal to the African-Americans, so they developed their own. They became totally involved in the beat, clapping hands, keeping time with their feet, and tossing their heads. Slaves created new words to songs as they went along. In the singing and chanting, they experienced a freedom that slavery denied them.

The most common song of the slave was the *spiritual*. Most of these songs expressed a hidden meaning that was clear enough to slaves but was hidden from white observers. “Go down, Moses ... tell ole pharaoh, let my people go,” could easily have substituted “master” for “pharaoh.” Slaves being sold away from family and friends sang, “When we all meet in heaven, there is no parting there.” In “O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,” it was perhaps the North, not Canaan, that they were thinking about. The “day of jubilee,” so often sung about in spirituals, was about the day slavery ended and not when life ended.

**RESULTS:** Facing lives of endless toil and with no assurance that anything would ever improve in their lives, slaves found in religion the promise that God cared and would give them their just reward at the end of life. In the meantime, Jesus was by their side suffering with them.



Religious revival

