

## Coming to North America: Then and Now

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### BACKGROUND - Indentured Servitude and the Origins of Slavery



When the Atlantic slave trade began in the 1440s, there was little "culture gap" between European and African societies. The assumption that Africa was a backward continent was largely invented after the slave trade was well underway, when western societies were looking for justifications for permanently enslaving blacks. In 1440, West African cities were comparable in size to those of Europe, with sophisticated systems of religion, politics, and commerce. For this exact reason, Europeans did NOT, as commonly supposed, regularly raid coastal Africa for slaves; the existing African kingdoms were too powerful to permit such deprivations. This notion that the slave trade developed when advanced Europeans swept down on helpless Africans is false. It is more correct to say that two relatively sophisticated cultures, European and African, developed a commercial partnership, in which Africans traded gold, ivory, and slaves to Europeans in exchange for guns, horses, and textiles. Thus the early history of the Atlantic slave trade could only have proceeded with the cooperation of the African kingdoms themselves.

It is important to remember though that slavery in this period differed substantially from what it would become in America before the Civil War. Slavery was not a new social phenomenon for either Europeans or Africans. Slavery had nothing to do with skin colour. Anyone could be the slave of anyone else, if they were unfortunate enough to fall into the wrong hands

Within Africa itself, slavery had existed for centuries. It was accepted, there as elsewhere, without question as a part of human organization and as just another sign and method of accumulating wealth. One became a slave by being an outsider or an infidel, by being captured in war, by transgressing the laws of one's society, or by selling oneself into bondage to make money for one's family.



For centuries, African societies had been involved in an overland slave trade that transported black slaves from West Africa across the Sahara to the Roman Empire and the Middle East. When the Portuguese made landfall on the west coast of Africa in the 1440s, then, slaves were just another commodity the Africans traded with their new European trading partners.

The Atlantic slave trade was of only minor commercial importance until European expansion to the New World created a vast shortage of labor. The Spanish needed miners to work the gold and silver deposits of South and Central America, then the Spanish, Dutch, and English needed agricultural slaves to work sugar, rice, and tobacco plantations.

This new demand for laborers dramatically changed the tempo and character of the Atlantic slave trade. Where before Africans had sold into slavery, now they went out actively to capture huge cargoes of what came to be called "black gold." Thus began the largest forced migration in

human history as over the next four centuries 12 million Africans were dragged from their homes to work the brutal plantations of the New World.

## The Journey Begins



It is impossible now to imagine what it would have been like to have been captured and sold into this new form of slavery. The first shock usually came when African slave traders attacked a village at night, setting fire to huts, killing any who resisted, and yoking the remainder together in neck braces of wood and leather. The first leg of a slave's journey took them on a forced march from the West African interior to the coast. It is not surprising that some Africans attempted to kill themselves by gorging on clay or preferred being shot to being enslaved. Once they reached the coast they suffered the indignities of being inspected, branded, and thrown into jails to await transport to the slave ship.

From there things got much worse. The horrors (see pages 139-140 for pictures) of the "middle passage" have been so often described that it is difficult now to get a fresh perspective. The sea voyage was fairly miserable regardless, taking three weeks to three months, depending on the winds. But as the African coast began to recede from view, the Africans on board tended either to give way to despair or rise up in great violence. Some attempted to jump overboard, preferring drowning or consumption by sharks to whatever awaited them. To prevent this, slave ships tended to extend netting from both sides of the ship. Other slaves either refused to eat, preferring starvation, or attempted to consume vast quantities of anything that would kill them. Such attempts were dealt with harshly. Those who didn't eat were severely flogged or had hot coals applied to their lips and their mouths pried open by a device invented for the purpose.



Of greater concern to the slave-traders, of course, was the possibility of insurrection among the slaves. To combat this, slave-traders used sadistic punishments to create an atmosphere of fear that might stifle insurrectionist tendencies. It was not beyond a slave ship captain to torture or mutilate one slave so that the others might understand what might happen if they attempted to resist.

Most horrendous, of all, however, were conditions in the hold where the slaves spent most of their hours. "Under the decks," remembered Olaudah Equiano, "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 [and I] wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me."

Slavery is at its base an economic system--an exploitative one, to be sure--but economic nonetheless. As such, it depends for its character and form on the economic circumstances to which it is adapted. In those places where slaves were employed as artisans and domestics, the system tended not to be as brutal. In those areas where slaves were employed in high numbers on arduous and repetitive agricultural tasks, the system could be very brutal. In the malarial rice swamps of South Carolina, for instance, where blacks outnumbered whites, labor had to be coerced and slaves had to be brutally controlled for fear of insurrection. This gave slavery a

different character than it had in the Old World, where slaves were seen more as members of the household and given certain legal protections and privileges.

## Trans-Atlantic Passage: The People and the Pain

### Lesson Overview



This lesson will give students the chance to explore the people involved in the Atlantic Slave Trade, which resulted in the enslavement of 12-13 million Africans between the early 1400s and the late 1800s. Using the **Atlantic Slave Trade map** (page 138) as a starting point, the lesson will focus on those who were directly involved in the Trans-Atlantic Passage. The class will be divided into pairs to research the roles listed below. Pretending that everyone involved spoke the English language, student pairs will write a short dialogue between the person that they have researched and a slave affected by that person's actions. In this dialogue, they will attempt to describe the point of view and emotions of BOTH persons. Students will also have an opportunity to explore artwork and literature related to the role that they are researching. This lesson is applicable at many grade levels, with each level delving into the subject at a depth that is developmentally appropriate.

### Curriculum Connections

1. Students will assess the impact of European exploration on African slaves in the following ways:
  - Examine the reasons for slavery in the New World; e.g., cotton, sugar, tobacco.
  - Trace the beginnings of the slave trade in the Americas.
  - Investigate the transportation of African slaves to the Americas, i.e. triangular trade routes and the middle passage.
  - Students will compare and contrast the founding and organization of Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires to northern European trading empires as follows:
    - Assess the expansion of Portugal and Spain into Africa, India, and Southwest Asia.
    - Examine the political and military conflict between the Spanish, Portuguese, and the peoples of the New World.
    - Assess the impacts of the exchange of ideas and goods on the New and Old Worlds.
    - Investigate French, Dutch, and English merchants' impact on European overseas expansion.
  
2. Students will also:
  - Identify and describe selected periods or movements of historical change within and across cultures.
  - Identify and summarize specific examples of international trade throughout history, such as the Roman Era; European, African, and Asian trade routes; mercantilism; and post-Cold War economic unions.

## Time required

Two hours, as follows:

- Part 1: 30 minutes--Anticipatory Set
- Part 2: 60 minutes--Group Division, research, and writing of short piece
- Part 3: 30 minutes--Presentation of group pieces / Discussion

Note: You may extend the lesson time by having students participate in the extension activities. Or, you may shorten the lesson time by specifying the research materials students should use.

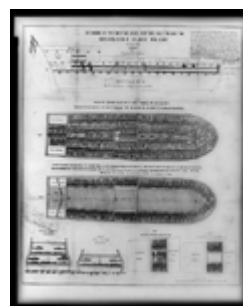
## Materials

- Copy of *Slave Dancer* by Paula Fox (not completely necessary as excerpt is included)
- Paper and pencil
- Access to or printed copies of web pages at the following web sites (you may decide whether students should access the information themselves online or whether you will provide student pairs print-outs from the websites):
  - <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16647>
  - <http://www.SlaveryinAmerica.org>
  - <http://www.africanhistory.about.com>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia>
  - [http://www.historyonthenet.com/Search/search.php?zoom\\_query=slavery&zoom\\_per\\_page=10&zoom\\_and=1&zoom\\_sort=0](http://www.historyonthenet.com/Search/search.php?zoom_query=slavery&zoom_per_page=10&zoom_and=1&zoom_sort=0)

## The Lesson

### Anticipatory Set

1. As you begin the lesson, consider dimming the lights to simulate not only the darkness in the holding area of a slave ship, but also the figurative darkness of this historical event. Share with students these two images from the [slaveryinamerica.org](http://www.slaveryinamerica.org) Image Gallery (pages 138-139). Then, tell the students that these were two ways slaves were arranged as "cargo" in the hold of the ship.
2. Next, share the story line of *Slave Dancer* by Paula Fox with the class. You should then read to them the following passage from the book, in which young Jessie, who has lost



the pipe he uses to "dance" the slaves for exercise on their voyage across the Atlantic, is ordered into the hold to find it:

*"You'll climb down as I want you to," he said. "And you'll look here and there until you find your pipe. After that, we can get on with things." As he spoke, he slowly brought me back to the deck. I caught sight of a black face turned up toward the light. The man blinked his eyes, but there was no surprise written on his face. He had only looked up to see what was to befall him next. I went down the rope knowing my boots would strike living bodies. There was not an inch of space for them to move to.*

*I sank down among them as though I had been dropped into the sea. I heard groans, the shifting of shackles, the damp sliding whisper of sweating arms and legs as the slaves tried desperately to curl themselves even tighter. I did not know my eyes were shut until fingers brushed my cheeks. I saw a man's face not a foot from my own. I saw every line, every ridge, a small scar next to one eyebrow, the inflamed lids of his eyes. He was trying to force his knees closer to his chin, to gather himself up like a ball on top of the cask upon which he lived. I saw how ash-coloured his knees were, how his swollen calves narrowed nearly to bone down where the shackles had cut his ankles, how the metal had cut red trails into his flesh.*

*All around me, bodies shifted in exhausted movement. I was a stone cast into a stream, making circles that widened all the way to the limits of the space that contained nearly forty people.*

*Suddenly I felt myself dropping, and I heard the wooden thunk of the two casks, which I had, somehow, been straddling. Now I was wedged between them, my chin pressed against my chest. I could barely draw breath, and what breath I drew was horrible, like a solid substance, like suet, that did not free my lungs but drowned them in the taste of rancid rot. I tried to bend back my head, and I caught a blurred glimpse of Stout's face in the white sunlight above. With what I was sure was the last effort of my life, I heaved up the upper part of my body, but my legs had no leverage. I sank down. I began to choke.*

3. Initiate a discussion about how it would have felt to be forced into Jessie's situation. Then, shift the focus to how it would have felt to be one of the *slaves* in the hold of the ship. Point out that the voyage to America took 40–60 days, depending on the weather. Ask students what questions they think the slaves would have asked the ship's captain if they had been able to do so. Write down some of these questions as they suggest them. Tell them that these types of questions will be the basis of their research assignment.
4. You may also choose to read a poem about slavery or an excerpt from a book other than the one provided from *Slave Dancer*. Students can find such examples at these web pages:
  - <http://www2.bc.edu/~richarad/asp/atln.html>
  - <http://www2.bc.edu/~richarad/asp.html>
  - <http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C0E01>
  - <http://www.poets.org/exh/Exhibit.cfm?prmID=7>

## Procedures

### Pair Assignment, research, and writing of short dialogues:

1. Have students study the map on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade so they can see the big picture. You can initiate discussion by looking at the start points and destinations. You also can generate further discussion about European holdings or negotiations with local tribes by looking more closely at the West African Slave Ports. (page 141)
2. Divide students into pairs. Then, have each pair research one of the four roles listed below and, working together, write a short dialogue that might have taken place between the captured African and the other party if both had been able to speak English. You can guide students to resources listed underneath each role to aid them in creating their pieces. If the groups do not have ready access to the Internet, you may decide to print the necessary information for students.
3. The African, who was also a Slave Trader and who captured other Africans as slaves and took them to the African coast:
  1. <http://africanhistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa080601a.htm>
- Those who ran the forts:
  2. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p272.html>
  3. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p260.html>
- The Captain of the Ship:
  4. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1i3002.html>
  5. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p275.html>
  6. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h280.html>
- The Slave Trader in America:
  7. [http://www.historyonthenet.com/Slave\\_Trade/slave\\_auction.htm](http://www.historyonthenet.com/Slave_Trade/slave_auction.htm)
  8. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h304.html>

Make sure that students know their dialogues should represent the emotions of BOTH parties involved in these historical episodes. Remind them that those who acted upon the Africans had their own realities, which justified, in their minds, their actions. Although this behavior is unacceptable by today's standards, students must understand that those acting upon Africans did not believe they were acting unsuitably. Equally or more important, students must also be able to identify with the Africans who were acted upon, in the hope that they will never instigate or condone any similar occurrence themselves.

### **Presentation of Dialogues/Discussion:**

At the end of the allotted time for creating the dialogues, reconvene the class. In chronological order, ask pairs to present their pieces. Following the presentations, have the class discuss what they've heard and their feelings about the material.



### **Assessment**

Use the rubric (on page 137) to grade the assignment. You may give additional points for extra work students do, as suggested in the Interdisciplinary Links and Extension Activities section below.

### **Interdisciplinary Links and Extension Activities**

- A number of activities, of which the following are just a sampling, would lend themselves nicely to study of the Trans-Atlantic Passage. The Teacher Guide section of the PBS "Africans in America" web site <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia> is an excellent source teachers can use to generate further ideas.
- **Mathematics:** Many activities could be designed to look at the number of slaves per ship. Using discussions, students could explore the decision many slave ship captains made to pack their ships heavily with slaves to make up for those who would die. Conversely, the decision to carry a heavy load of slaves also led to more deaths than would have occurred if captains ensured that their "cargo" was treated more humanely. Students could explore mileage charts on maps showing the Triangular Trade Route.
- **Art:** Students could research individual photographs and paintings, as well as collections with a wide variety of material at the sites below:
  - <http://gropius.lib.virginia.edu/Slavery>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h322.html>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h297.html>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h296.html>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h321.html>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h290.html>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h287.html>
  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h280.html>

### **Poetry:**

Students could explore poetry about the slave trade at the PBS web page: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h296.html> or by going to the poetry links listed in the "Anticipatory Set" section.

### Rubric for Grading Pieces Presented to the Class

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Level 4</b>	<b>Level 3</b>	<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Level 1</b>
<b>Roles</b>	Described the roles of each participant accurately with great detail	Described the roles of each participant with good accuracy and with good detail	Described the roles of each participant with some accuracy and with some detail	Described the roles of each participant with minimal accuracy and with minimal detail
<b>Event</b>	Described the events accurately with great detail	Described the events with good accuracy and with good detail	Described the events with some accuracy and with some detail	Described the events with minimal accuracy and with minimal detail
<b>Location</b>	Described and identified the locations accurately with great detail	Described and identified the locations with good accuracy and with good detail	Described and identified the locations with some accuracy and with some detail	Described and identified the locations with minimal accuracy and with minimal detail
<b>Emotions</b>	Described and identified the emotions of slaves accurately with great detail	Described and identified the emotions of slaves with good accuracy and with good detail	Described and identified the emotions of slaves with some accuracy and with some detail	Described and identified the emotions of slaves with minimal accuracy and with minimal detail
<b>Total Points</b>	<b>4 Points</b>	<b>3 Points</b>	<b>2 Points</b>	<b>1 Points</b>







This map shows the various slave holding points in Western African used by European traders around 1750. These African points of embarkation included port towns, forts, and castles that changed hands among European powers and African powers frequently in the 400 years of the slave trade. The greatest numbers of enslaved persons taken from Africa came from the Congo region. Out of these ports came 10 to 15 million African captives. Before the 1830s, almost four times as many Africans came to the Americas as European migrants, and almost all of them left from the points indicated on this map.