

## SLAVERY IN THE COLONIES

The economies of colonial Maryland and Virginia depended on tobacco, and both used tobacco as a medium of exchange. In fact, King Charles I once said that Virginia was “wholly built on smoke.” The cultivation of tobacco, however, required considerably more manpower than was available in either colony. In 1619, John Rolfe, secretary and recorder of Virginia reported that “about the last of August there came to Virginia a Dutch man of war that sold us twenty negers.” (Johnson, p. 36) The Africans on the ship were indentured servants, and they were treated as such. Yet both Maryland and Virginia were in need of a more permanent source of labor: slaves. Although Massachusetts was the first colony to recognize slavery, Maryland and Virginia soon followed, with both colonies legalizing slavery during the 1660s. By 1770, every colony except North Carolina and Georgia had legalized slavery, and thereafter the slave trade quickly grew into a very profitable business for the colonies. The growing demand for slaves in the colonies fueled increasingly violent conflict among African tribes. Since some African chiefs or kings could increase their wealth by working closely with slave traders, one tribe might capture the warriors of another tribe and then sell their prisoners of war into slavery. Raiding parties might also kidnap Africans from their villages and sell them as slaves. African slaves were viewed as chattel, and because they had no government to protect them or place to hide in the British colonies, the slave trade flourished.

Triangular Trade receives its name from the shipping routes that connected Europe, Africa, the West Indies, and North America in the transatlantic commerce of slaves and manufactured goods. These routes began in England, where goods were shipped to Africa. In Africa, the goods were then traded for slaves bound for the Americas. Known as the Middle Passage, the forced voyage from the freedom of Africa to the auction blocks of the Americas was

a physical and psychological nightmare that lasted several weeks or months. Having unloaded their cargoes in the colonies, the ships returned to England laden with tobacco, sugar, cotton, rum, and other slave-produced items. This trade pattern continued with some modifications into the early nineteenth century. In order to maximize profits and offset any losses, most captains packed as many Africans as possible into the holds of their ships. During the late 1600s and throughout the 1700s, most English ships that sailed directly from Africa to the colonies carried about 200 enslaved Africans. Later slave ships could carry as many as 400 slaves with a crew of 47. Slaves were chained in pairs (the right arm and leg of one chained to the left leg and arm of another), and men and women were separated from each other. All of them were forced to lie naked on wooden planks below deck in extremely hot quarters.

At times, small groups of slaves were allowed to come on deck for exercise; some of them were forced to dance. Women and children could occasionally roam the deck, but men were allowed on deck for only a short while. Heat, limited sanitary facilities (sometimes buckets for human waste were not emptied for long periods of time), and epidemics from diseases such as smallpox and dysentery together produced an unbearable stench onboard. An outbreak of disease could devastate an entire cargo of enslaved Africans, and an estimated 15 to 20 percent of slaves probably died en route to the colonies, primarily from diseases resulting from overcrowding, spoiled food, and contaminated water. Many also died of starvation and thirst. Yet captains most feared slave mutinies, 250 of which scholars estimate took place. As a result, those slaves who were disruptive or likely to cause a mutiny were thrown overboard or shot to death. Nevertheless, although some enslaved Africans did resist, they had little means either to protect themselves or to escape. Such hopeless misery led many slaves to commit suicide by jumping overboard or by refusing to eat. Because of the stench and disease, many slave ships had to be

abandoned after about five years. Eventually ships were built especially for human cargo, with shackling irons, nets, and ropes as standard equipment. The autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who became an antislavery activist, paints a vivid portrait of the horrors of the Middle Passage: When I . . . saw . . . a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of these countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. . . . The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. . . . One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made [it] through the nettings and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were in a moment put down under the deck, and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves. However two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate, hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. Many a time we were near suffocation from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs [which served as toilets], carried off many. (From "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano...", p. 158, 159-160).

For some enslaved Africans, the Middle Passage was temporarily interrupted in the West Indies, where they would undergo a process called “seasoning” or “breaking in.” During this process, slaves were frequently and harshly flogged, sometimes with a paddle but more often with a whip that had a lead ball sewn on its end. They were also forced to learn how to speak a new language, eat new foods, and obey white masters. Here slaves learned what to expect in the colonies. Brutal and intense, the seasoning process could last as long as four years, after which enslaved Africans were shipped to mainland British colonies in order to be sold. While the slave trade resulted in the economic stagnation and destruction of many African tribes, it greatly benefited both England and the colonies. Since slavery created thousands of jobs (in shipbuilding, shipping, etc.), helped to spur the growth of cities (such as London, Liverpool, New York, and Boston), and created profits for investment, some tried to justify its abuses. For example, James H. Hammond, a slave owner who later became governor of South Carolina, once said that slavery was “the greatest of all the great blessings which a kind Providence has bestowed on our glorious region.” (Miller, p. 134) Many others like Hammond ignored or refused to respond to the horrors associated with the Middle Passage. Between 1690 and 1770, as many as 100,000 Africans were brought into the Chesapeake (Maryland and Virginia) region. The cotton they harvested supplied English and French companies with both the product and the profits necessary for initiating the industrial revolution.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 would make cotton the most profitable crop in the country, and the growing demand for labor required direct importation of slaves into the South. At the same time, the slave trade expanded to include its own brisk internal slave trading business. Both businesses were abusive, but each brought in large sums of money for the owners of slave pens and the captains of slave ships. For instance, a solidly built slave ship that carried

300 to 400 slaves and that had cost the owner about \$35,000, could make between \$30,000 and \$100,000 per trip. By the late-17th century, southern colonists, including Marylanders, had become dependent on slave labor, and by 1800, almost one million slaves lived mainly in the cotton belt of the southern states. In 1808, a federal law went into effect that prohibited the importation of new slaves into the United States. Although this law was poorly enforced for several years, it became increasingly evident that both slave trading and the horrors of the Middle Passage were coming to an end.

## **TRIANGLE TRADE**

Triangular Trade for European governments, like that of Great Britain, liked the economic benefits of owning colonies in North and South America and having open access to the raw materials that the colonies possessed. They soon found that slave labor was useful for the exploitation of raw materials. A trade route, shaped much like a triangle, emerged between Europe, Africa, and the colonies of North and South America. On the first leg of the trade route, European goods such as alcohol, firearms, and textiles were shipped to West Africa. Once in West Africa, those goods were exchanged for enslaved Africans, who were then shipped to the Caribbean, South America, or North America in what became known as the “Middle Passage.” Those Africans who survived the voyage were traded for sugar, tobacco, rice, cotton, and rum. These products were loaded onto ships that sailed to Europe. Once back in Europe, the trade began all over again.

## **WHAT IT WAS LIKE FROM SOMEONE WHO WAS THERE**

Captured! . . . I was born, in the year 1745, in a charming fruitful vale, named Essaka. . . .

\* My father was one of [the] elders or chiefs . . . As I was the youngest of the sons, I became, of

course, the greatest favorite with my mother, and was always with her; and she used to take particular pains to form my mind. . . . In this way I grew up till I was turned the age of eleven, when an end was put to my happiness in the following manner . . . One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night. We were then unbound, but were unable to take any food . . . The next morning we left the house, and continued traveling all the day. For a long time we had kept the woods, but at last we came into a road which I believed I knew. I had now some hopes of being delivered; for we had advanced but a little way before I discovered some people at a distance, on which I began to cry out for their assistance: but my cries had no other effect than to make them tie me faster and stop my mouth, and then they put me into a large sack.

## **THE VOYAGE**

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was . . . waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up . . . When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless to the deck and fainted. . . . I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon 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, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands . . . and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. . . . The stench of the hold . . . 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 the 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, 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 among the slaves, of which many died . . . This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains . . . and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated.

## **SOLD**

We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up together like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age. . . . We were not many days in the merchant's custody before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: — On a signal given, (as the beat of a drum) 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, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, 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.