

never completed the trip. They died in bondage aboard ship and were thrown overboard.

From the fifteenth century, when this wellspring of flesh on Africa's western shores was first tapped, to a century ago when it was finally capped, the flow of slaves ran strong. Slaves were nearly always cheap in Africa and dear in the Caribbean islands. A captain could afford to pack his holds with black men and women, like so many spoons. He knew a certain number would die but that the price the rest would bring would more than make up for the loss of the dead.

As with the purchase, transport and sale of any commodity, economic gain was the prime reason for the trade from its beginning to its end. The New World needed labor and plenty of it, especially in the hot climes of the Caribbean. After Europeans had started settlements in the newly discovered lands across the Atlantic, they soon found that they were physically incapable of profitably working the soil in the tropical islands. The native Indians likewise were unable to do the arduous forced labor which the Europeans demanded. They died by the thousand in their unaccustomed bondage, or, seeing no reason to give up their independence to the white invader, they ran away. This proved a troublesome trait with which the Europeans found it difficult to cope since the Indians could take refuge in the forests they had grown up in.

Only a few years before the discovery of the New World, European venturers had discovered the west coast of Africa. On lands facing the Gulf of Guinea they found a country teeming with people. At first, the white men who wanted slaves sought to seize those blacks they wanted. Of course the blacks fought back or retreated into the forests. Then the Europeans discovered that there were Africans who were not averse to selling other Africans as slaves. Primitive tribal society existed in many areas of the continent, and many a victorious tribal chief willingly sold away

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

UNTIL just a few decades ago a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was an experience of suffering and peril for passenger and crew alike. One historian, thinking of the immense loss of life, especially among those who traveled to work the new lands in the early years of the western Atlantic colonies, conjectured that if the sea could be drained between Europe and Africa and the New World, the paths of the ships would be easily traced by the bones of those who died in the ocean crossing. By far the clearest trace of these old searoads would likely be found along the route of the slave ships from Africa's west coast to the West Indies.

There is no accurate count of the number of African black men who made that fearful journey in chains, but it was in the millions. By assessing the records of various slave shipping firms, the head fees paid to port officials in the New World and similar documentary evidence, historians believe that from 10 to 20 million slaves were brought westward across the Atlantic during the four centuries the trade prevailed. And it is estimated that as many as one third — from 3-3 million to nearly 7 million —

BLACK VOYAGE

cause they first baptized their slaves Christians before shipping them across the ocean.

HOW AFRICANS WERE ENSLAVED

As noted above, the first slaves taken by Europeans were captured in quick raids on coastal villages. These actions brought reprisals and resistance, however, and the next time European paid a call, they had disappointing returns. The raids were soon discouraged, and the slavers made peace with tribal chiefs. The Europeans found the coastal chieftains anxious to avoid raids on their own people and thus ready to fill the slave ships with their enemies — for a price. Thus the trade took on the rudiments of organization. The Europeans built castles and forts along the coast to make up a network of trading stations to collect and keep the slaves for the ships of nations engaged in the trade. There is little dispute, however, that the lines of supply for slaves from the interior slave markets remained predominant in the hands of black traders and chieftains throughout four centuries. Africa was not the "Dark Continent" Europeans blithely believed, but had its own businessmen who had innate acumen in financial matters. These men preferred from the start that white men stay on the coast while they managed the commerce inland. There were, of course, white men who trekked inland and out of Africa's slave merchandising centers, but there is little evidence that what business lines they established survived the deaths.

As the trade from the west coast developed, so did the supply lines and the methods of enslavement. The normal population in the lands immediately surrounding the western shores was not enough to supply the ever increasing demands of the European slave ships. Tribal wars had traditionally provided prisoners for the victors and those captives the victors didn't want, they had slain. But when the white men came to bargain, the chiefs began

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the captives of a defeated tribe — glad enough to rid himself of future troubles.

The Negro soon was found particularly able to withstand the backbreaking field labor on the New World plantations — for a while at least. And when he buckled, a replacement could be had cheaply enough.

Through the four centuries of the trade, horror was compounded upon horror for the Africans who were herded to the rivers and shores and put aboard the slave ships. The black man caught up in the man traffic knew nothing but despair and physical misery. The swirl of this commerce reached into every corner and crevice of his continent and the curse was visited upon every tribe in some manner or another. Slave caravans traveled every trail that laced the vast land together, and the coffles* of ebony flesh wound ultimately to slave pens beside one sea or another.

Slave trading existed across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean both before and after the trade across the Atlantic, and there is some evidence that it still persists in the Arab strongholds east of the Red Sea. These eastern trade routes were almost always in the hands of Asians, and Europeans were little involved. Because the impact of the trade was greatest on the Western world, the East African trade is not considered here.

Nearly all European nations were involved in the Atlantic slave trade at one time or another. Those that abstained or that participated in a minor way did so only because they were muscled out by stronger powers. The European viewed the Negro he bought and sold as no better than a beast of burden, just as well-off in America as Africa. Few had any qualms about the trade until the last years of the eighteenth century. The defenders of the trade cited the Bible as approving slavery which would be beneficial for heathens. The zealots went so far to ease their consciences as to declare their slaving efforts to be evangelical be-

* Mica fastened together in a chain.

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selling the unwanted prisoners to be carried off forever, thus answering the same purpose of eliminating their enemies. The Europeans were not hesitant in using this practice for their own ends and encouraging tribal wars to promote a supply of new slaves.

The tribal chiefs also had the power, frequently exercised, to sell individual tribesmen into slavery for punishment of a real or trumped-up crime. Many husbands accused their wives of adultery to be rid of them in order to acquire others. Impoverished families sold their children to either buy food if their crops failed, or to reestablish themselves when hard times came. Kidnapping also was a widespread practice of native gangs who sought to fill slave coffles.

Europeans defended the practices used in enslaving Africans by arguing that they provided a reprieve for persons who would either have been slain as losers in tribal conflicts or punished in a land that lived by harsh rules. The white men maintained they were drawing off an excess population which would have starved anyway in a land that seemed to teem with a surplus of black bodies.

THE STATE OF AFRICAN CULTURE DURING
THE SLAVE TRADE

From its discovery, Africa was depicted as a continent of savages engaged in constant bloodletting and cannibalism that shocked European morals. The image that the average European had drawn for him of the African continent generally omitted any distinction between one area and its people and those of another. The white man rarely thought of Africa as being inhabited by anyone other than bloodthirsty savages from one end to the other. The image, which prevails even today, was patently untrue, and the high state of cultural development among the tribes attests to this. That horrible human sacrifices in the hundreds,

and some said in the thousands, did occur in regions of Dahomey probably occurred as witnesses said. But the temperament of these ferocious people was in striking contrast to the hospitable, agrarian-oriented people who lived tranquil lives elsewhere. This book is not intended to elaborate on this point, but to note that at the time the following eyewitness accounts were written there was virtually no thought or consideration given to revising the traditional view of Africa.

West African cultures reached high levels of development in certain areas, as did other cultures in different parts of the continent. Some tribes had a distinct architecture and forms of republican government. Agriculture and husbandry had been well developed and complex economic and legal systems were in existence.

But there were obvious gaps. There was no written language to speak of and the technology of many tribes was little beyond that of the Iron Age. There was a wide diversity of spoken languages and the hundreds of dialects made it difficult for tribes, even of the same region, to communicate freely. Invaders, of whatever color, found it easy to divide them and set one tribe against another. The refusal of tribes to join in a common cause except under force was an important factor leading to their enslavement. This disunity has lasted through the years and is still one of the foremost concerns of thinking African statesmen who today are seeking to unite their continent.

WHERE THE SLAVES WERE CAPTURED

Although hardly a port in all of Africa escaped the visit of a slave ship at some point in history, the bulk of the slaves shipped in the Atlantic trade came from the Guinea Coast, described generally as that stretch from Cape Verde, Africa's westernmost tip, southward and around to the Congo. As the coastline became

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better known, ship captains named certain sections for the commodities likely to be traded there, such as the Grain Coast, in the vicinity of what is now Liberia; the Ivory Coast, immediately to the east; the Gold Coast; and the Slave Coast, now made up of the nations of Dahomey, Togo and Nigeria.

The thousands of miles of coastline facing the Gulf of Guinea are characterized by low-lying sandy beaches broken by small sluggish rivers that seep from jungles and swamps. The mouths of the rivers are blocked partially by treacherous sandbars where many ships met their end. There are few good harbors anywhere along the coast.

The climate was insufferably humid and unsuited for Europeans. It was no idle observation that the Guinea Coast was "the white man's grave." Most of the men who manned the slave factories* and trading settlements were the outcasts or the destitute of Europe. Few ever left the coast alive. The story of one such trader, identified only as Nics. Owen, is given later to show something of the embittered loneliness which he experienced in a life he could not escape, despite his longings to return home a rich man.

Explorations inland were rare, and most were disastrous. Transportation in the interior until recent years never progressed beyond a canoe on a steaming shallow river filled with alligators, or a swinging hammock borne by porters along the foot trails that crisscrossed the country. White men tended to stay on the coast. There they tried to live as they had lived in Europe. They often ate heavy foods and drank too much liquor in the sweltering climate. Far from home and in a primitive place, the white man, according to one visitor to the Guinea Coast in the late eighteenth century, "indulged every human passion with utter freedom, whether it be confirmed drunkenness or unrestrained intercourse

* A station where slaves were brought for trade. The station agent was called a factor.

with Negro girls. They knew that the deadly climate was likely to claim them eventually."

THE START OF THE ATLANTIC TRADE

The beginning of the slave trade across the Atlantic is generally dated from about 1433 when Prince Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese monarch, sent his sea captains venturing down the African coast. Until these explorations, seamen had believed the ocean ended in a swirling abyss not far past Cape Bojador, on the coast just below the Canary Islands. The Portuguese sailed a little farther down the coast on each voyage until they finally passed the hot western desert sands of the Sahara and found a lush tropical country. In 1442, a Portuguese skipper brought back ten Negroes as slaves from the vicinity of Rio de Oro. Prince Henry actually discouraged the commerce in black flesh, but was unable to stop his captains from indulging in it for long. By the 1480's, the Portuguese had built a fort on the Gold Coast and established slave trading lines there.

By the time Columbus sailed across the Atlantic, Negro slaves were fairly common in Lisbon and some historians think Columbus carried several with him to the New World. The black man, though an enslaved participant, also accompanied Balboa, Cortez and other Spanish conquistadores into the uncharted lands of the Western Hemisphere. There were Negro slaves in Florida from the time of the founding of Saint Augustine in 1565. Their descendants were freed three centuries later with the Confederate surrender at Appomattox.

The first African Negroes to be imported as slaves specifically for colonial labor were brought to the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean about 1501 to work mines there when the Spaniards had been unsuccessful in forcing the Indians to work. The governor of the Spanish colonies at first banned Negro slave imports,