

The true size of Africa shown as compared to regions from other continents.



# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

MEL FISHER MARITIME MUSEUM

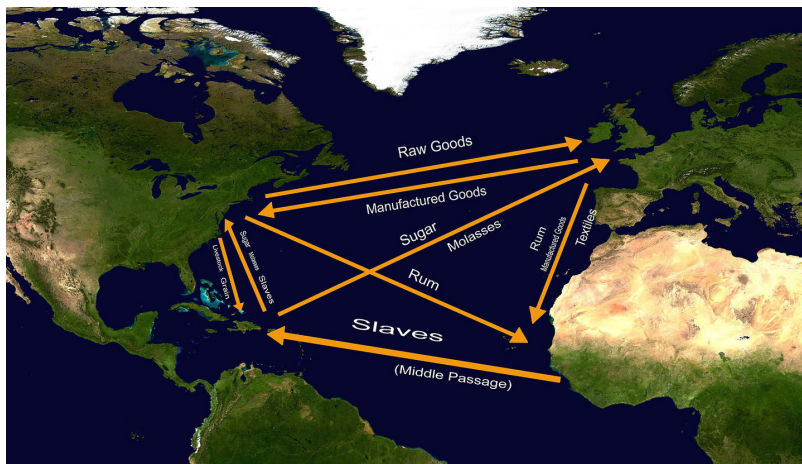
Image Source: Visual Capitalist

## THE SLAVE TRADE

Slavery has a long history. Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Vikings, Chinese, Africans, Europeans, and Indigenous Americans all frequently enslaved debtors and criminals, as well as people whose countries they had raided or conquered.

When Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, slavery was familiar to Europeans and enslaved people were among the fleet's servants and crew. Columbus had hoped to bring home a cargo of gold but, when that proved hard to find, he kidnapped Indigenous people to sell as slaves in Europe. He also expected that Indigenous people, both free and enslaved, would work for the colonies, helping to exploit the natural resources of the Americas. What the Spanish did not realize was that while they were exporting valuable cargoes such as gold, silver, and fur, they were importing European diseases, including smallpox and influenza. These were deadly to Indigenous people and whole nations were wiped out.

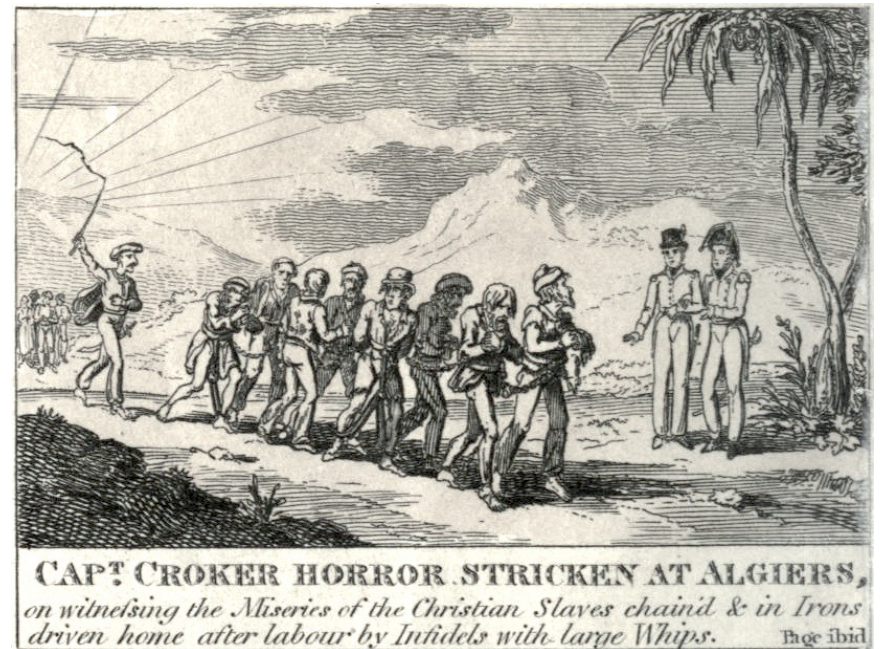
Europeans decided that they needed laborers with better immunity to their diseases. To create a new workforce, they made some of their poorest people move to the colonies, but they also bought captives from various African nations and forcibly transported them across the Atlantic. As time went on, African labor became the mainstay of labor in North and South America.



The triangle trade in people and goods. Public Domain.



Enslaved Russians working in Spain. C. Weidetz. 1529. Nuremberg National Museum.



Captain Croker horrified by the treatment of enslaved Europeans in North Africa. Walter Croker. 1815. Wikimedia.

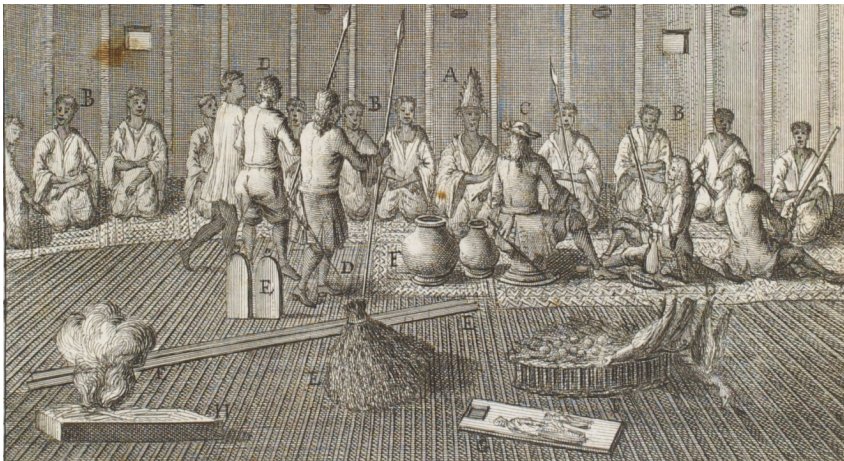
## ECONOMICS AND POLITICS

Historically, various forms of slavery were practiced on the continent of Africa. People could be enslaved as a punishment for crime, or until they repaid a debt with their labor, or when they were captured in war. Usually, enslavement was not passed on to their children.

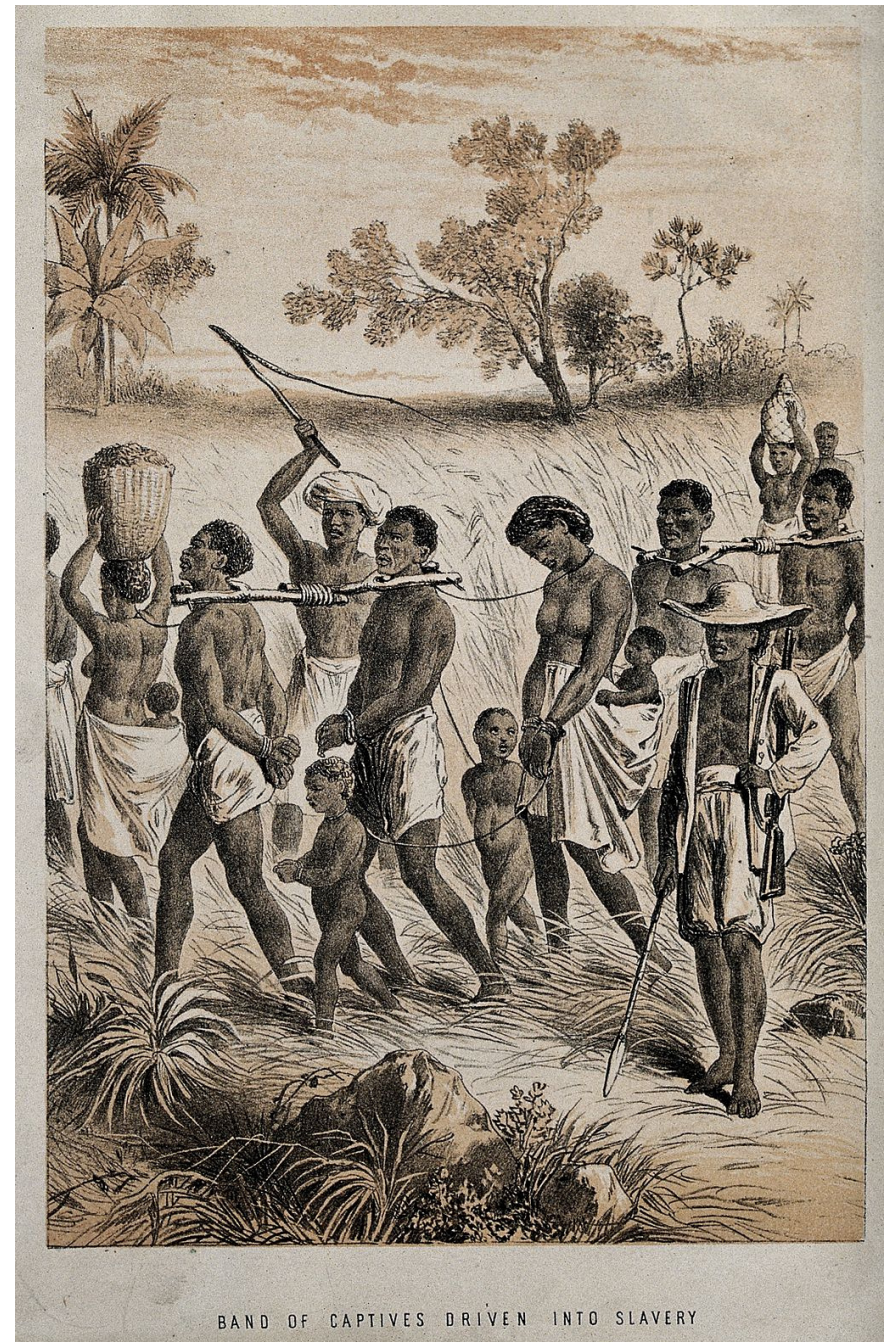
This changed with the sale of people to European merchants. After the captives crossed the Atlantic Ocean, they had no hope of returning to Africa. Not only lifelong slavery but hereditary slavery became the norm.

Most African slave traders lived in countries on the coast of West Africa. They bought captives from inland nations, whose culture and language were often very different from their own. Frequently these were enemy nations, and the traders felt no sympathy for their captives. Instead, they exchanged them for European goods that would make life better for their own people, such as cloth, beads, iron, and guns.

In the Americas, the captives would be resold for nearly four times their original price. That profit would be used to purchase luxury products like indigo, sugar, and tobacco that could be shipped to Europe and sold for yet another profit. For several centuries, this system fueled world-wide economic expansion but it also condemned millions of people to a lifetime of enslavement.



French trader Jean Barbot meets King Sestro, West Africa. 1681.  
Creative Commons.



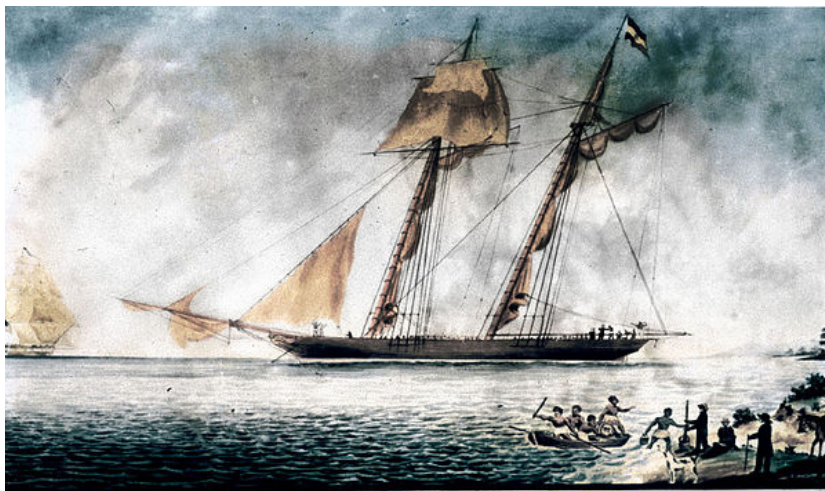
Captives being taken to a slave market in Africa. 1874. Wikipedia.

## SLAVE SHIPS

Slave ships were rarely built for that purpose. Instead, merchant ships were adapted to carry large numbers of people in very tight quarters. For the voyage between Africa and the Americas, known as the “Middle Passage,” deep shelves, were constructed inside the ships’ hold to increase the number of people who could be crammed below deck with just enough space to lie down. Overcrowding in the hot and unsanitary conditions led to outbreaks of disease, and the captives were often not given enough to eat or drink to stay healthy. Between 15% and 30% of African captives died on each Atlantic voyage.

Slave merchants preferred small, sleek ships that sailed faster and required fewer sailors. Also, it took less time to fill the hold with human cargo. Less time on the African Coast and at sea meant less time for diseases to spread or rations to run out. This could make a big difference in the number of Africans who survived the Middle Passage and increased the merchants’ profit.

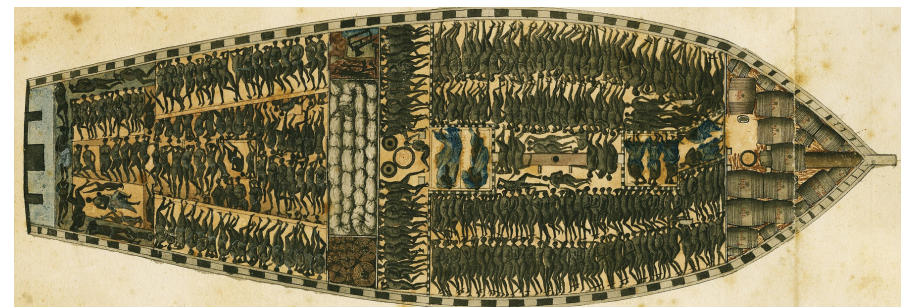
Rebellions aboard ships were common and slave ship crews feared their captives. They built temporary barriers to keep themselves safe from their prisoners. Crew members were armed with swords and guns and kept their prisoners chained together for much, if not all, of the voyage.



Rebels from *La Amistad* landing successfully on Long Island. 1839. Creative Commons.



European traders buying captives aboard the *Marie Seraphique*, 1773. Wikipedia.



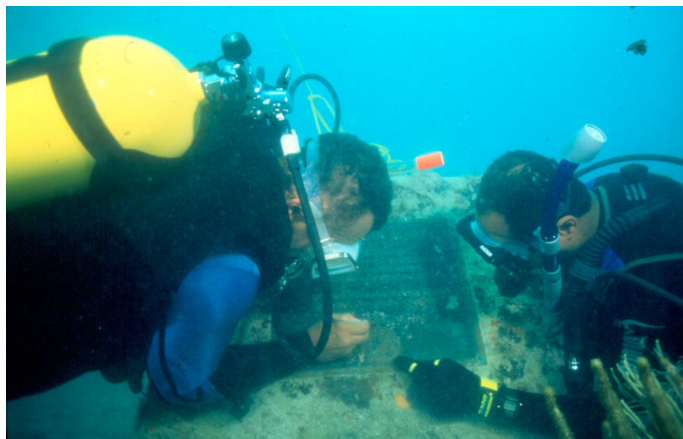
Slave deck of the *Marie Seraphique*. 1773. Wikipedia.

## THE HENRIETTA MARIE

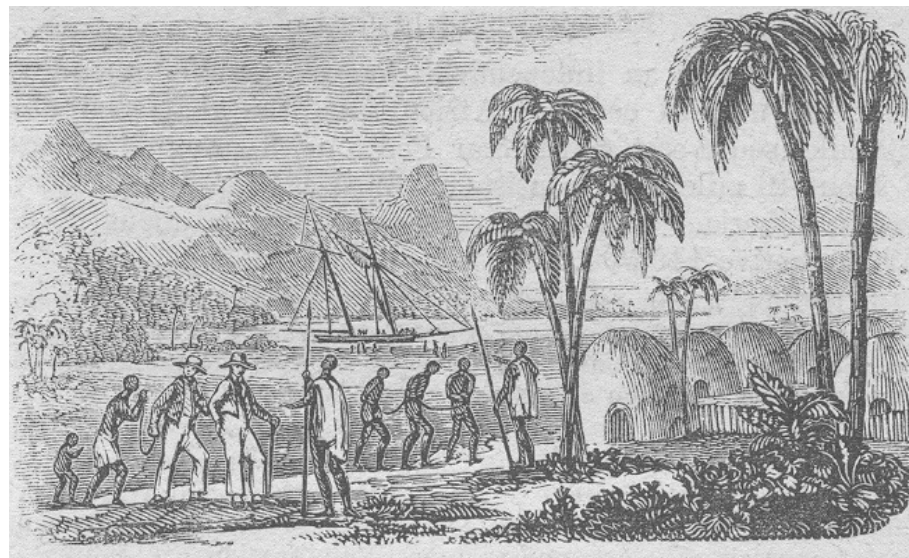
Thousands of slave ships made successful voyages, but sailing was dangerous. Many ships sank. One of these was the *Henrietta Marie*, which was a small ship owned by a group of businessmen living in London, England. In 1699, it carried a cargo of iron and copper bars, pewter ware, cloth, glass beads, felt hats, and brandy. On the west coast of Africa, the captain traded these for almost 200 captives, and sailed to Barbados. There, the captain sold the Africans to local plantation owners and purchased a cargo of sugar. The ship returned to London, where the sugar fetched a high price.

In 1700, the ship made a second voyage. This time the captives were sold in Jamaica. Soon after leaving there, it vanished. After six months, a court determined that its captain and crew had drowned, and the cargo had been lost at sea.

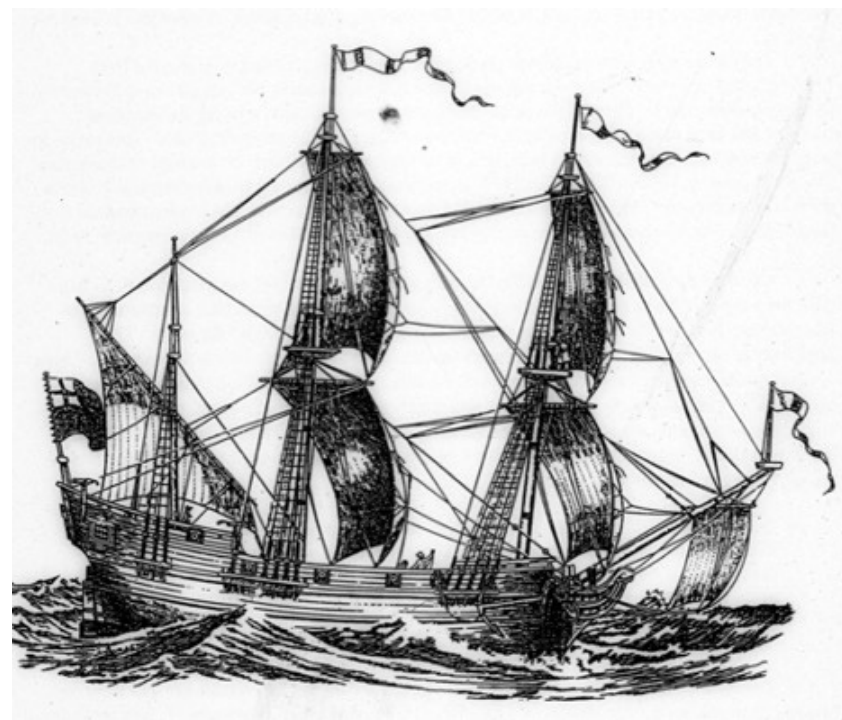
The wreck of the *Henrietta Marie* was discovered in 1972, in the Straits of Florida, 35 miles from Key West. It is the only slave ship that sank on an actual slaving voyage that has been discovered in North American waters and it has been extensively studied by archaeologists and historians from the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum. The National Association of Black Scuba Divers has placed a monument on the wreck site to commemorate the lives of those who endured the Middle Passage.



National Association of Black Scuba Divers members cleaning the Middle Passage Monument at the *Henrietta Marie* site. 1998. MFMM Archive.



Sale of captives in Sierra Leone. 1810. MFMM Archive.



Depiction of the slave ship, *Henrietta Marie*. Peter Copeland. 1995. MFMM Archive.

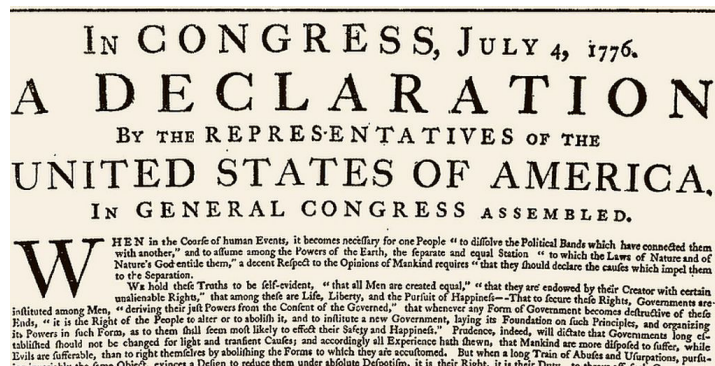
## LEGAL CHANGES

In British colonies during the early 1600s, most Africans were treated as indentured servants. They were either released after seven years or allowed to buy their freedom. Soon there were many Free Blacks who owned land, opened businesses, participated in the judicial system, and, in some colonies, were able to vote.

But, as the transatlantic slave trade continued, the number of enslaved Africans grew. Colonists became afraid of uprisings and revolts. To assert control, they declared enslaved Africans to be personal property and restricted the rights of Free Blacks.

When the Thirteen Colonies declared independence from Britain in 1776, they decided to create new laws. The Declaration of Independence states that "All men are created equal," but lawmakers from different colonies hotly debated slavery. Some insisted slavery was an essential part of the economy, others believed it was morally wrong. In order to unite the colonies against the British, they all finally agreed that independence had to come first, and slavery might be abolished later.

When the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed in 1808, more than 350,000 Africans had been imported into North America. That same year, over one million of their descendants were already enslaved in the young nation, with little hope of ever becoming free. It took the Civil War to bring freedom to everyone.



Detail from the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.  
National Archives.



Presenting the Declaration of Independence to be signed.  
John Trumbull. 1817–1818. Wikimedia.



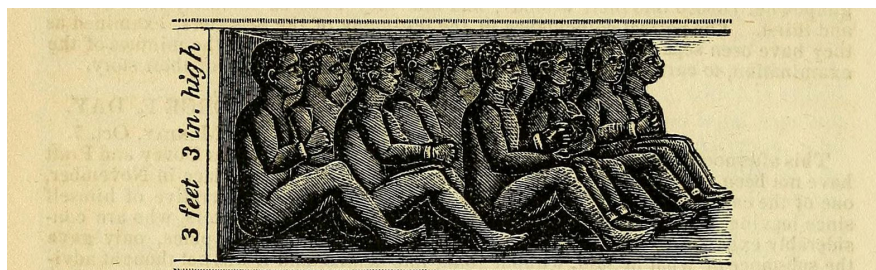
African American soldier who fought for the Union in the Civil War,  
with his family. 1863. Library of Congress.

## PIRATES AND SLAVERY

England, the United States, and Spain had all banned the transatlantic slave trade by 1820, but Cuba and Brazil still imported enslaved laborers from Africa to work on sugar plantations. Since the trade was now illegal, pirates took it over, smuggling human cargoes across the Atlantic Ocean.

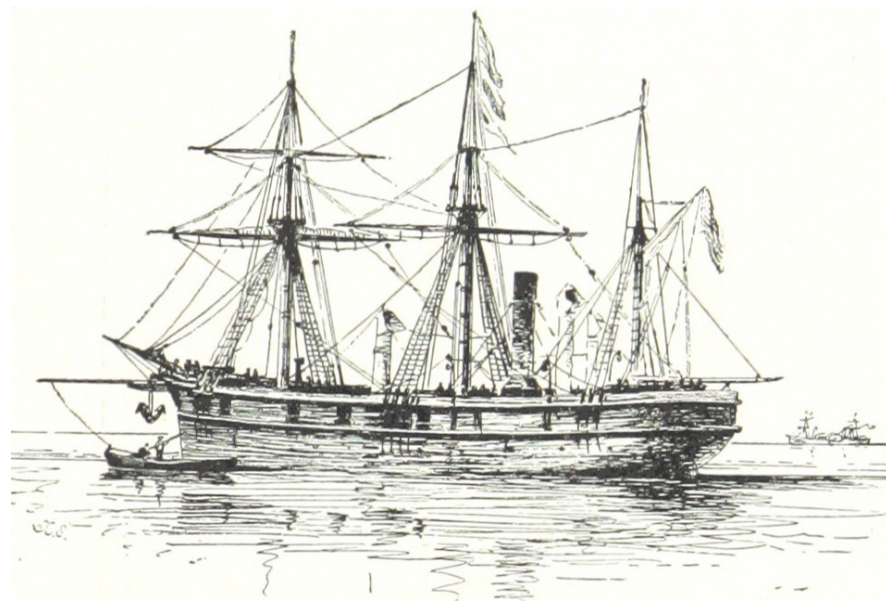
The US and British Navies organized special squadrons to hunt the pirates and return their cargo of captives to Africa. In 1827, the British Navy schooner *HMS Nimble* spotted the Cuban pirate ship *Guerrero* as it sailed through the Bahamas. *Guerrero* had a crew of 90, with nearly 600 Africans crammed below deck. *Guerrero* fled to avoid capture and *HMS Nimble* gave chase. A gun battle started. In the chaos, both ships struck the Florida Reef and began to sink. Wreckers (people who always went to the aid of wrecked ships) saved the crews and all but 41 of the Africans. That evening, however, some of the pirates attacked the rescuers, stole two of their ships, and escaped to Cuba with 400 of the Africans.

*HMS Nimble*, with the remaining Africans, sailed to Key West. Although they were technically free, the US government leased the Africans as laborers to a plantation in North Florida. Eventually, they were fully liberated and taken to Liberia, a colony established by the US in West Africa for liberated slaves.



[The above engraving shows the position as described by Cingue and his companions, in which they were confined on board the slaver, during their passage from Africa. The space between the decks represented in the engraving is three feet three inches, being an actual measurement from a slave vessel. The space in the vessel that brought the Amistad captives to Havana was, according to their statement, somewhat larger, being about four feet between the decks.]

Captives confined below deck in a small slave ship.  
1840. New York Public Library.



USS Mohawk of the anti-slavery squadron. 1862. Library of Congress.



EXECUTION OF GORDON THE SLAVE-TRADER, NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 21, 1862.—[SEE PAGE 110.]

Execution of Nathaniel Gordon, pirate and slave trader. 1862. Wikimedia.

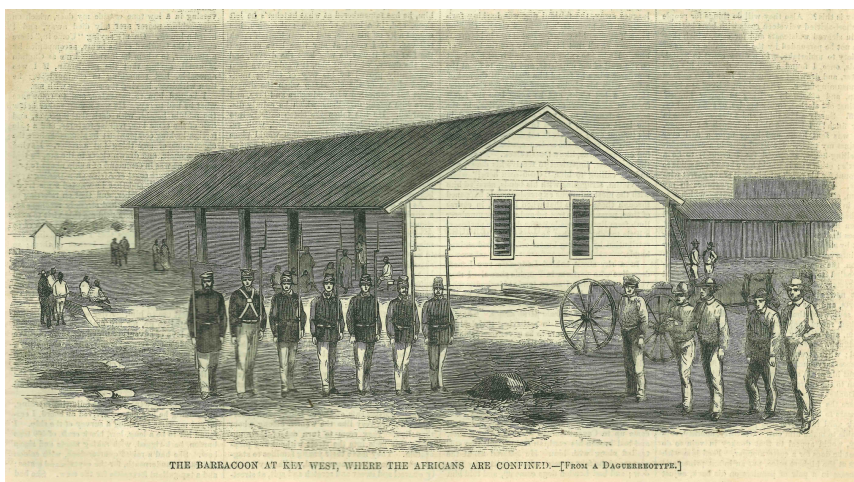
## AFRICAN CEMETERY

In the spring of 1860, the US Navy's anti-slavery squadron seized three vessels on their way to sell their human cargoes in Cuba. They brought the ships and captives to Key West.

The slave ship *Wildfire* carried people from the Congo River Basin. Aboard the *William*, the captives were from different areas but most of them were children. All were starving and sick. A third ship, the *Bogota*, carried men and women from the Bight of Benin. Most were prisoners of war, sold to the slavers by the King of Dahomey.

There had been many deaths during the Middle Passage but 1,432 Africans walked off these ships. They were legally free, but many were ill or dying. Their arrival almost overwhelmed Key West, whose population was less than 3,000, but temporary housing and a hospital were quickly built. Despite this, 295 Africans died and remain buried on the southern shore of the island. Three months after they arrived, the US government sent the survivors to the West African colony of Liberia.

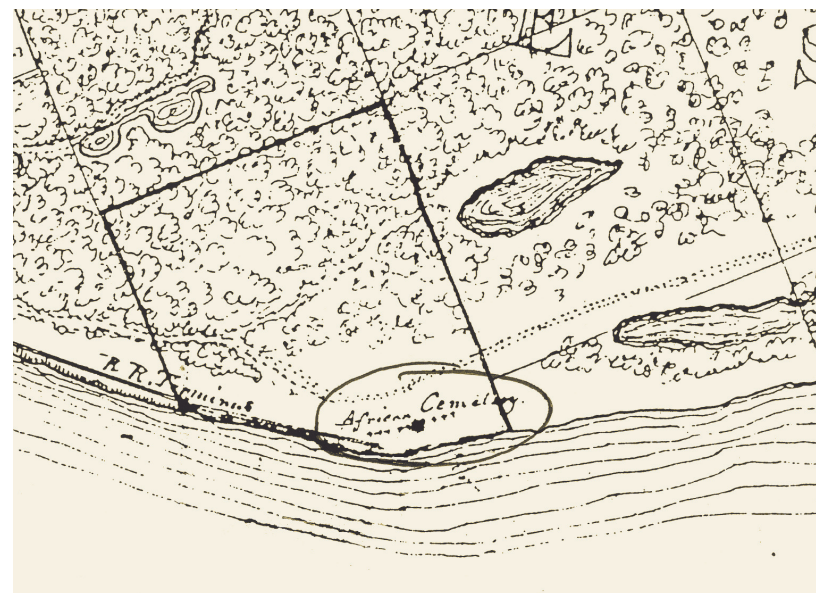
The African Cemetery at Key West was forgotten until an archaeological team, led by the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum, located 15 of the graves. Eventually, nearly 200 more graves were found, and a memorial was built.



Barracks in Key West where captives were temporarily housed. 1860. MFMM Archive.



People coming ashore in Key West from the slave ship, *William*. 1860. MFMM Archive.



Map showing the African Cemetery in Key West. 1861. Monroe County Archives.

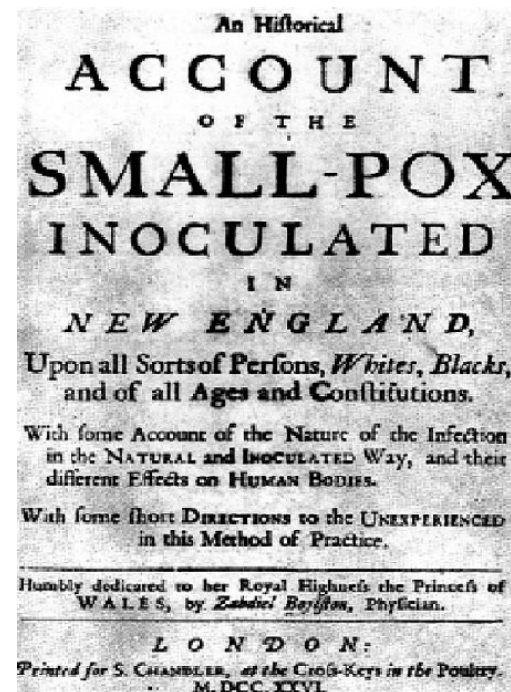


## CULTURAL DIASPORA

A diaspora is a group of people who have left their ancestral home and settled in other countries. Sometimes they move in hopes of building a better life, sometimes they flee persecution. In the case of the transatlantic slave trade, generations of West Africans became part of the largest forced migration in the history of the world.

Because the Africans were treated as cargo, precise shipping records were often kept. From these documents, we know that more than 35,000 slaving voyages took place between 1501-1866. Over 12 million African people were taken to South America, North America, and the Caribbean.

None of them were allowed to bring any possessions, not even a change of clothes. But what they did bring were their skills, traditions, memories, and indomitable spirit. Not only did their unpaid labor contribute to slave owners' wealth in the Americas and Europe, but they brought new expertise. They taught colonists how to farm rice and introduced them to African cooking. They shared African medical treatments—not just the use of herbs but even inoculation against diseases like smallpox. They made musical instruments, such as banjo and gourd drums, and invented new types of music—ragtime, the blues, gospel, jazz, and even rock and roll were created by blending European and African rhythms and tones. The diaspora spread African influence around the world.



Pamphlet written by Zabdiel Boylston. 1730. Public Domain.



Slaves unloading rice barges at a South Carolinian rice plantation. Scribner's Monthly. 1874. MFMM Archive.



Enslaved Africans performing a "Stick Dance." 1780. Colonial Williamsburg.