

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

The Slave Trade

in a Hurry

The Atlantic crossing, and what it built

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The Whole Thing in One Page

The familiar picture is a ship in the middle of the ocean. It is accurate and far too small. The Atlantic slave trade began before the coast, in wars, raids, kidnappings, judicial sentences, debt claims and sales. It continued after the crossing, through markets, plantations, mines, workshops, kitchens, laws, mortgages and inheritances. The ship was the hinge. It joined local acts of enslavement to an ocean-wide system of property.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, traders embarked about 12.5 million captive Africans for Atlantic transport. About 10.7 million were estimated to have disembarked. Those totals are immense, but they begin late. They do not count everyone killed during capture, forced marches or coastal confinement, and no reliable global total exists for those losses. They also hide that each entry was a person whose language, obligations, skills and relationships were intelligible before traders compressed them into age, sex, price and number.

The ocean changed what could be done to that person. Distance weakened the practical force of kinship, reputation and law. A buyer in Bahia, Barbados or Saint-Domingue could not easily be confronted by a captive's relatives or political community. Removal made identities harder to verify and claims harder to enforce. European and colonial law then turned that forced isolation into hereditary, saleable status. Children could be born into the condition imposed on a parent. Human beings became labour, collateral and capital at once.

That conversion required a chain. African rulers, merchants, soldiers and brokers participated in different ways, as did European and American merchants, investors, shipowners, captains, insurers, officials and planters. Their power and responsibility were not identical. Nor was Africa one side of a bargain: sellers and captives usually belonged to different political communities, and many Africans resisted, restricted or suffered from the trade. The neat classroom triangle mistakes one possible voyage pattern for the system itself.

Plantation demand pulled the chain hardest. Sugar, coffee, tobacco, rice, cotton and other exports made coerced labour valuable across the Americas. Brazil and the Caribbean received most transatlantic arrivals. Fewer than four per cent went directly to mainland British North America and the later United States, although slavery there expanded through birth and a vast domestic trade.

The crossing was managed violence, not chaos. Captains balanced loading, speed, food, water, disease, discipline and expected sale prices. Profit gave them reasons to keep some captives alive, but it also made a level of death calculable. Captives resisted by refusing food, communicating across language barriers, attacking crews, protecting children and building new loyalties under lethal conditions.

Those actions lead to what the trade built. It built plantation colonies, fortunes, ports, fiscal systems and racial law. It reshaped African politics and populated new Black societies across the Atlantic. Enslaved people built families, religions, languages and political movements against the purposes of those who transported them. Revolt in Saint-Domingue produced independent Haiti. Testimony and organising helped make abolition possible.

Abolition ended the system in stages. It stopped neither trafficking nor slavery with one law, and emancipation rarely returned land, wages or stolen inheritances. In the British settlement, former owners received £20 million; the formerly enslaved received no compensation. The law ceased recognising people as property while much of the property made from them remained where it was.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

Open a voyage record and the imbalance appears before the history does. The ship has a name. So do its owner, captain, home port and sometimes its investors. The record may preserve tonnage, departure date, African purchasing place, American destination, crew size, insurance dispute and sale result. Hundreds of captive people may appear as two figures: embarked and disembarked. The archive can tell you more about a vessel's dimensions than about most of the human beings locked inside it.

That is not because the captives had no histories. It is because the system recorded what its operators needed to own, move and price. Learning to read this subject means learning to see both the evidence and the categories imposed upon it. A merchant's ledger is invaluable, but its precision is not neutrality. It counts a child as inventory because inventory was the legal fact the merchant required. The first reason to care is therefore intellectual: the slave trade shows how an institution can make its own description of people look like reality.

The second reason is economic. The trade connected capture to production, production to consumption and consumption to finance. Slave ships were a specialised branch of maritime commerce, but the system around them was much larger. Plantation exports supplied refineries, warehouses, textile mills, merchants, tax collectors and consumers. Credit advanced against future crops connected rural estates to metropolitan banks. Governments protected routes, chartered companies, taxed imports and fought over colonies. Some direct slaving ventures failed; the wider order could still prosper from coerced production.

This matters whenever someone asks whether slavery "built" Britain, France, Portugal, Brazil, the Caribbean or the United States. The honest answer cannot be a slogan. Direct profits from voyages, returns from plantations, customs revenue, industrial demand, regional development and inherited wealth are different measures. Historians disagree about their relative causal weight, especially in Britain's Industrial Revolution. They

agree that Atlantic slavery was not a decorative edge of the early modern economy. It organised major sectors, places and fortunes. The analytical task is to identify which connection is being claimed and whether the evidence supports it.

The third reason is political. Atlantic slavery did not rest on prejudice alone. Legislatures, courts and imperial offices decided who could be enslaved, whose child inherited that status, whether a marriage existed in law, what testimony counted, how movement was policed and what violence an owner could use. Racial ideas hardened through these decisions. The trade is a case study in how repeated administrative choices can turn a hierarchy into common sense, then pretend that the hierarchy caused the choices.

The fourth reason is geographical. Public memory often places the story between West Africa and the United States. The real map runs from Senegambia to Mozambique and from Buenos Aires to Boston, with its centre of gravity in Brazil and the Caribbean. Moving the map changes the explanation. Sugar and coffee matter more. Portuguese and Brazilian traders move to the centre. Cuba remains a major slave society deep into the nineteenth century. The Haitian Revolution stops looking peripheral and becomes one of the Atlantic world's central events.

The last reason is human, but it needs precision rather than reverence. Captive people did not enter a historical void. They carried farming knowledge, metalworking, languages, legal ideas, faiths, memories and obligations. The crossing attacked those connections without erasing them. New communities were made through care, conflict, translation and necessity. Their descendants did not inherit a culture produced by slavery as a gift from the system. They inherited what people preserved and remade despite it.

The slave trade is therefore useful for more than assigning guilt to the past. It trains you to follow a chain of responsibility, separate a ledger from a life, distinguish direct profit from structural dependence, and ask what survives when a law changes faster than a balance sheet.

The Core Ideas

The Ocean Made Dispossession Scalable

Slavery was ancient, widespread and varied long before Atlantic ships carried captive Africans west. People could be enslaved through war, punishment, debt, kidnapping or birth in societies across Africa, Europe and Asia. That fact supplies context, not an excuse. The Atlantic system did not invent human bondage. It joined existing forms of coercion to expanding American plantations, oceanic shipping and imperial law, then sustained forced migration on a scale and for a duration that changed the societies on every shore.

In many systems, an enslaved person was first an outsider. Kin, neighbours or a ruler might protect insiders, demand compensation for injury or recognise obligations that limited sale. War capture and expulsion removed some of those protections. The Atlantic multiplied the distance. Once a captive had crossed the ocean, relatives could seldom locate the buyer, bring witnesses or invoke the authority under which the person had once lived. A name could be replaced, an origin blurred and a status recast as permanent.

This did not make captives blank. Traders wanted skills, strength and reproductive capacity, and enslaved people retained knowledge and affiliations that shaped their survival. Nor did every African society define belonging in the same way. The point is narrower. Enforceable identity depends on institutions able to recognise it. Atlantic removal placed people beyond the practical reach of most institutions that could confirm who they had been and what others owed them.

Portuguese voyages in the fifteenth century show the transition. Early mariners raided coastal communities as well as buying captives. African resistance made direct seizure costly in many regions, and commerce replaced much raiding. At the same time, sugar plantations on Madeira, the Canaries, Cape Verde and São Tomé demonstrated how enslaved African labour could be combined with Atlantic shipping and export production.

When Europeans occupied American land, that working arrangement crossed with them.

The scale came from repetition rather than one conquest. No merchant had to organise the whole system. A purchaser could buy from a broker who bought from another trader who received captives from a war far inland. The ocean joined transactions whose participants knew different portions of the harm.

The sea supplied more than transport. It made repeated separation possible. A local slave market can redistribute people within a political field. An Atlantic market could send them to another jurisdiction, language and continent. Ships linked many separate acts of capture to buyers who did not need to know the captives' histories. That anonymity was useful. It reduced the practical cost of ignoring claims to freedom and allowed buyers to treat forced possession as a clean title.

Historians sometimes describe enslavement as social death: violent exclusion from recognised kinship and civic standing. The phrase captures the system's intention but can overstate its success. Captive people formed shipboard ties, found speakers of related languages, rebuilt families and asserted old and new identities. The ocean made dispossession scalable because it attacked prior claims. It did not abolish human attachment.

This is the first mechanism of the book. Capture created vulnerability. Distance weakened redress. Law converted vulnerability into alienable status. Markets then rewarded further capture. None of those steps was automatic, and each required people and institutions to keep choosing it. Together they made the Atlantic crossing a machine for turning political outsiders into property whose past could be declared irrelevant.

The Trade Was a Chain, Not a Triangle

Draw Europe, Africa and the Americas, connect them with three arrows, and the Atlantic trade appears orderly. Manufactured goods travel to Africa, enslaved people cross west, plantation produce returns to Europe. Some voyages followed that route. Many did not. Brazilian vessels sailed directly to West Central Africa and back. North American merchants traded among Atlantic ports. Captives landed in the Caribbean and were shipped again. Credit might begin in London, goods come from India, a ship leave Nantes, and the final sugar be sold in Hamburg.

The triangle survives because it is easy to draw. The better model is a chain with changing links.

At its eastern end were acts of enslavement. Captives came from wars, raids, kidnapping, punishment, debt processes and the sale of dependants or pawns. The mix differed sharply by region and period. European demand could intensify warfare and make captives more valuable without causing every conflict. African states could use slave exports to acquire imported cloth, metals, weapons or prestige goods, yet the political effects varied. Some rulers expanded. Others lost population, faced raiding or tried to restrict exports.

The statement that "Africans sold Africans" collapses that field into a racial nation that did not exist. A ruler in Dahomey, an Aro merchant network, a Kongo noble and a captive from a neighbouring community were not members of one political body merely because later buyers assigned them one colour. Sellers could knowingly profit from extreme harm without selling people they regarded as their own. Both facts matter. Political difference explains conduct; it does not cancel responsibility.

European power also varied. Forts such as Elmina could store goods, host factors and protect a coastal foothold, but a fort was not control of a continent. In many areas, European traders depended on African brokers, rulers, canoemen, interpreters and credit. They waited offshore or at coastal factories while networks carried captives from the interior. West Central

Africa supplies an important limit to this generalisation: Portuguese warfare, settlement and alliance around Angola created more direct military involvement in enslavement and export.

The coast added confinement. Captives might be held in barracoons, forts or aboard vessels while a ship assembled a saleable number. Merchants inspected bodies, disputed ages and rejected people judged ill. Goods were advanced on trust, prices negotiated in local units, and debts carried across seasons. The ship's captain might be part merchant, part jailer and part credit manager. Investors at home could remain far from the violence while specifying acceptable prices, cargoes and risk.

The western links began at landing, not at a single final sale. Captives could be sold by auction, private bargain or scramble, then moved to another island or mainland port. Buyers used cash, bills of exchange or promises secured against future crops. A person might cross the Atlantic once and be traded by sea several more times. The intra-American trade redistributed hundreds of thousands beyond the route recorded as the Middle Passage.

Goods moved through chains too. Indian and European textiles were exchanged on African coasts; plantation produce could be refined in one port and consumed in another; bills might settle without specie crossing beside the cargo. Following one ship therefore cannot reveal every beneficiary of the voyage it enabled.

Responsibility therefore ran through a network. Captors, sellers, carriers, officials, planters and financiers performed different acts with unequal power. The chain model prevents two evasions at once. It stops Europeans from shifting the whole story onto African sellers, and it stops an Atlantic-centred account from treating African actors as scenery. Every link depended on choices made within a system whose strongest long-run pull came from American demand and whose ships, capital and colonial law were overwhelmingly organised by Atlantic empires and merchants.

The Middle Passage Was Managed Violence

A slave ship was a merchant vessel redesigned as a prison. Temporary platforms increased the number of people who could be confined below deck. Gratings admitted some air. Barricades separated captives from crew and often divided men from women. Shackles, weapons and watch routines answered the central problem of the voyage: a small crew had to control people who greatly outnumbered it and had every reason to resist.

Conditions varied, which is why one diagram or testimony cannot stand for every crossing. Routes from Angola to Brazil could differ in length from voyages from the Bight of Biafra to Jamaica. Winds, calm, delay on the African coast and an outbreak of disease could transform the result. Loading density changed by ship, law and market. Children, women and men were confined differently. The system was not uniform, but its purpose was.

The abolitionist plan of the *Brookes* later fixed one arrangement in public memory. It showed hundreds of bodies fitted into measured spaces under British loading rules. The image was powerful because crowding was planned. It was incomplete because no still diagram could show heat, movement, illness, fear or resistance.

Captains managed food, water, ventilation and movement to preserve saleable life at an acceptable cost. Captives were brought on deck when weather and security allowed. Crews cleaned spaces, washed bodies, treated sores and compelled movement described as exercise. These actions can look like care when removed from context. They were maintenance within forced transport. A person might be fed by the same crew that chained, beat and sold them.

Disease did much of the killing. Dysentery, smallpox, fevers, respiratory illness, dehydration and malnutrition worked through bodies already damaged by capture and coastal detention. Sanitation was primitive even by maritime standards, and crowding made contagion harder to contain. Crew members also died at high rates, especially on the African coast, but the comparison has limits. Sailors entered a brutal labour contract and retained

a recognised legal identity. Captives were held under arms and carried towards lifetime sale.

Women and girls faced a distinct field of danger. They were often less continuously shackled than adult men because crews judged them a lower revolt risk, which could expose them more directly to sexual assault. Pregnancy, menstruation and care for children created needs that shipboard regimes scarcely accommodated. Records made by male traders often conceal these experiences or register them only when they affected health and price. Silence in the ledger is not evidence of safety.

Average voyage mortality generally declined over the centuries, although it varied sharply by route and decade. Better provisioning, shorter port times and changes in shipboard management contributed. The decline did not turn the passage humane. It shows that merchants learnt to deliver a higher proportion of captives alive. Across the full trade, the gap between estimated embarkations and disembarkations is about 1.8 million people, while voyage-specific death rates ranged far above and below any average.

Profit did not oppose violence. It selected among forms of violence. Killing everyone destroyed the investment; terror, restraint, forced feeding and calculated deprivation could protect it. Some captains loaded fewer people in hope of lower mortality, while others accepted crowding because more survivors might reach market even if a larger share died. There was no stable humanitarian answer inside a calculation that treated persons as units of sale.

Captives disrupted that calculation. They refused food, attempted suicide, damaged equipment, communicated through gesture and language, and planned uprisings. Revolts were hard because crews controlled weapons and navigation, yet the threat shaped ship design and routine. Shipboard bonds could begin in shared resistance or care for the sick. The Middle Passage was managed violence, but management never meant total control.

Plantation Demand Pulled the Chain

Why did the trade grow? The immediate answer was not a European shortage of workers in general. It was the expansion of American enterprises whose owners wanted large, controllable labour forces under conditions free labourers resisted. Land seized from Indigenous peoples, Atlantic shipping, commodity demand and colonial force created opportunities. Enslavement made the labour compulsory and transferred much of the cost of reproduction and survival onto the people being worked.

Sugar was the strongest early engine. Cane had to be cut and processed quickly, mills required large fixed investments, and planters tried to keep expensive equipment working through tightly organised labour. Brazil, Barbados, Jamaica and Saint-Domingue became centres of mass importation. That is why the geography of arrivals points south of the future United States. Portuguese America and the Caribbean received most of the people who survived the crossing.

The system was larger than sugar. Enslaved people cultivated tobacco and rice, mined gold, raised livestock, loaded ships, built roads, cooked, nursed children and practised skilled trades. Coffee drove nineteenth-century expansion in Brazil, while sugar did so in Cuba. Cotton became central to the United States and British textile production, but much of its labour force grew through birth and forced movement within the United States after legal Atlantic imports ended. Commodity, place and period must stay connected.

So must demography. Sex ratios among arrivals, disease environments, work intensity, nutrition, fertility and family formation affected whether an enslaved population grew without imports. A colony that consumed lives through plantation labour depended on the Atlantic route differently from one whose owners profited from births and internal sale.

Labour regimes differed. Jamaican sugar estates often depended on continued African arrivals because mortality was high and births did not replace deaths. In much of nineteenth-century Virginia, the enslaved population grew through natural increase under conditions that remained

violent and coercive. Owners there could sell people south and west. The contrast did not make one regime benign. It changed whether wealth depended more on replacement from Africa or on treating enslaved women's children as future property.

Demand travelled through prices. A rise in the expected value of sugar or coffee could increase a planter's willingness to pay for labour. That price moved backwards along the chain, affecting shippers, coastal buyers and suppliers inland. The transmission was imperfect and delayed, but it linked consumer markets to capture without requiring a consumer to meet a captive or a planter to organise a raid.

The trade also built supporting business. Shipyards fitted vessels. Manufacturers supplied textiles, metal goods, guns, barrels and restraints. Insurers priced maritime risks, although policies and legal rules could distinguish death by natural causes, revolt or deliberate action. Merchants extended credit against future crops. Ports collected fees and states taxed imports. An unsuccessful slave voyage could ruin its investors while the wider plantation economy kept generating business for others.

This is why the economic argument requires layers. Profits from carrying captives were one flow. Profits from owning plantations were another. Customs revenue, processing, shipping, credit and industrial demand were others again. Atlantic slavery was embedded in the growth of modern commerce, but no honest calculation turns those connections into one percentage of capitalism or one switch that caused industrialisation. Plantation demand pulled the chain. It was a major engine, not a complete theory of the modern economy.

Law Made People Reproducible Property

Violence could hold a person for a day. A durable slave system needed law to decide that the holding was legitimate, transferable and inheritable.

Colonial governments supplied that framework through statutes, court decisions and daily administration. The rules differed across Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, British and later independent American jurisdictions, but they repeatedly converted force into title.

Race and slavery hardened together. Europeans carried older prejudices about religion, ancestry, civilisation and colour, and Iberian societies already had legal traditions of slavery. Yet a finished modern racial system did not precede the plantation order and then cause it from outside. Colonial law increasingly associated African descent with enslavability, restricted manumission and free status, and described inherited inequality as natural. Practice generated categories that ideology then defended.

Hereditary status was decisive. In Virginia, a 1662 statute declared that a child's free or enslaved condition followed the mother. English common law usually traced status through the father; the colony reversed the rule where slavery was concerned. The change made the children of enslaved women the property of their mothers' owners and protected white fathers from claims that might otherwise follow paternity. Sexual exploitation could therefore produce both violence and assets.

Other colonies used different legal vocabularies. France's 1685 Code Noir regulated slavery in its Caribbean colonies, required Catholic baptism and set rules for punishment, marriage and manumission while affirming ownership. Spanish and Portuguese law could provide routes to self-purchase or legal petition that were less available in some British colonies, yet access depended on local courts, money, patrons and the owner's power. A right on paper was not a general description of life.

Jurisdiction could nevertheless create openings. Escapees sometimes sought freedom by reaching territory whose law rejected an owner's claim, while owners demanded extradition or tighter policing. Such disputes reveal

that property in people was never a fact floating above government. It existed where officials agreed to recognise and enforce it.

Law reached into ordinary relationships. Enslaved marriages often lacked protection against sale. Parents could not reliably prevent children being transferred. Movement required passes. Assemblies could be restricted, testimony discounted and literacy punished. Owners delegated surveillance to overseers and patrols. Free people of colour occupied unstable positions, sometimes owning property or even enslaved people while facing special taxes, movement limits or the threat of re-enslavement.

The category of property also entered finance. Enslaved people appeared in inventories, marriage settlements, wills, mortgages and bankruptcy proceedings. They could secure loans and be divided among heirs. Appraisers assigned prices according to age, sex, health, skill and anticipated fertility. The violence of sale was therefore also a routine event in family law and credit markets. A planter did not have to be insolvent or unusually cruel to split a family. Ordinary property transfer could do it.

None of this means law controlled every encounter. Enslaved people negotiated tasks, maintained unauthorised families, traded goods, sued where courts allowed, escaped and forced owners to recognise practical limits. Legal orders changed under pressure from revolt, war, demographic change and abolition. Yet resistance operated against a baseline created by government. The slaveholder's private power was publicly made.

The deepest effect was reproductive. Once status passed by birth, the system no longer needed a new act of capture for each new person it claimed. It could reproduce property through families whose members had no legal power to refuse. Atlantic importation and hereditary slavery were therefore connected technologies. The ship supplied people across space. Law supplied ownership across time.

Captive People Made a Black Atlantic

The trade's operators tried to separate people from the relationships that gave them protection. They did not transport one African people. Captives came from many political communities and spoke many languages. Some had been enemies before capture. A ship could confine together Muslims, Christians and followers of other religious traditions; farmers, soldiers and craftspeople; children who knew little beyond one locality and adults who had travelled widely.

Communication began under pressure. Related languages could help. So could interpreters, gesture, song, work and observation. People formed ties with those who shared a vessel, a sale or an estate. In some places, shipmate relationships became a recognised form of kinship. New identities did not replace African ones on arrival. They accumulated through repeated movement, marriage, conflict and memory.

Age and timing mattered. A recent arrival might remember a named town, lineage and political crisis. A child born in the Americas might inherit fragments through parents, shipmates, food, worship and story. Neither experience was more authentic. Both show culture being carried by people under changing constraints.

The term Black Atlantic names this world of forced connection and creative response. It includes sailors, fugitives, preachers, market women, soldiers, writers and rebels moving ideas among Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas. It must not turn suffering into a cultural origin story. Enslaved people made social and cultural life because human beings do so, not because enslavement offered a useful mixture.

Resistance ranged from small acts to wars. People slowed work, broke tools, preserved food, feigned illness, negotiated customary time, escaped and created maroon settlements. Some used colonial courts or Christian membership; others drew on African military, spiritual and political forms. These actions had different aims. A mother hiding a child from sale, a crew planning shipboard revolt and a maroon community defending territory were

not stages of one programme.

Large uprisings nevertheless exposed Atlantic connections. Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica in 1760 involved people with experience of West African warfare and unfolded within an island shaped by recent arrivals. The revolution that began in French Saint-Domingue in 1791 became the most far-reaching destruction of a slave regime in Atlantic history. Enslaved insurgents, free people of colour, French factions and foreign armies fought through changing alliances. Independence in 1804 created Haiti and overturned the assumption that plantation slavery could be secured by European power.

The routes carried argument as well as revolt. Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana used print, religious networks and personal testimony in Britain to attack the trade. Black sailors and soldiers crossed jurisdictions. News of rebellion moved among ports despite censorship. Abolitionist organisations could mobilise evidence because shipping and commerce had already built channels through which information travelled.

Culture also moved in ways the archive only partly records. Agricultural knowledge affected food production. Religious practices were reassembled under Catholic and Protestant rule. African languages shaped new creoles, naming and music. Burial, healing and kinship practices persisted or changed. The result was not one preserved African culture, nor a clean break followed by invention, but many communities formed from unequal mixtures and remembered loss.

This is the return movement in the book's causal loop. The ocean made captives easier to isolate from prior protection. The same ocean joined people facing related systems and carried their strategies between them. Traders created routes for property. Enslaved and free Black people used those routes to build relationships and politics that the property system could not contain.

Abolition Broke the Trade and Preserved the Balance Sheet

Abolition is often told as a moral discovery in Europe followed by legislation. Moral change mattered, but the sequence began inside slavery too. Captives resisted embarkation. Enslaved people escaped, petitioned, revolted and described what was being done to them. Free Black writers and organisers made slavery a political question. Religious dissenters, consumers, workers and parliamentarians joined campaigns for reasons that included conscience, faith, party conflict, imperial strategy and fear of revolt.

The Haitian Revolution changed the argument by destroying the richest French slave colony and creating a state governed by people slavery had marked for property. It terrified slaveholders and gave opponents of slavery evidence that the enslaved would not consent. It also shifted production. Sugar and coffee expanded elsewhere, including Cuba and Brazil. Revolution damaged one great slave system while markets rewarded others.

Britain prohibited its subjects from participating in the transatlantic trade in 1807. The United States ban on imports took effect in 1808. These were major breaks, not the end. Traders changed flags, forged papers, landed captives covertly and supplied places where slavery kept expanding. British naval suppression freed many people from intercepted ships, but it also extended British diplomatic and maritime power. Courts could condemn vessels while placing liberated Africans into coercive apprenticeships or military service.

The nineteenth-century trade increasingly fed Brazil and Cuba. Brazil's 1850 law was followed by effective suppression of Atlantic imports, after years in which earlier prohibitions had been widely evaded. Documented voyages continued into the 1860s. Closing the ocean route did not free those already enslaved. Cuba abolished slavery in 1886 and Brazil in 1888. In the United States, the end of legal importation was followed by a domestic trade that forced more than a million people from the Upper South towards expanding

cotton regions between 1790 and 1860.

Emancipation also came in pieces. The British Act of 1833 took effect in most covered colonies in 1834 and converted many enslaved people into apprentices required to continue labour for former owners. Protest helped end apprenticeship in 1838. Parliament provided £20 million to compensate owners for the loss of claims recognised as property. The formerly enslaved received no equivalent payment for unpaid labour, violence, separation or stolen freedom.

Compensation also made former ownership traceable. Claims named estates, beneficiaries, trustees and absentees across Britain and its colonies. The records do not measure every benefit from slavery, but they show public money converting a cancelled property right into wealth that owners could retain, invest, spend or pass on.

That settlement reveals what law can and cannot undo. Parliament could change status on a date. It could not reunite every family, return every acre, restore years of wages or erase institutions funded by slavery. Former owners could carry compensation, land and commercial connections into the next economy. Freed people entered labour markets in which those owners often retained estates, political office, housing and credit.

Abolition was still an achievement. Treating its limits as proof that nothing changed insults the people who fought for legal freedom. Ownership lost public legitimacy and enforceability across jurisdiction after jurisdiction. Families gained claims the law had denied. Political movements could attack the remaining coercion from a new baseline. The mistake is to confuse a necessary legal transformation with a settled account.

The trade had converted people into assets across an ocean. Emancipation ended their legal status as property without reversing most prior transfers. That is what the Atlantic crossing built most durably: a distribution of property, power and vulnerability whose legal foundation could be removed faster than its accumulated results. Abolition broke the machine. It did not send the balance sheet back through it.

How It Actually Works

Before the Atlantic became a system

The story starts with two older histories meeting. One was slavery. African societies used forms of dependent labour and enslavement before sustained European contact, as did societies around the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. Status, treatment and routes out of bondage differed. Some enslaved people could marry, hold property or be incorporated into a household; others faced sale, hard labour and inherited exclusion. None of this amounted to one African institution waiting to be exported.

The other history was sugar. Cultivation and processing moved west from Asia through the Islamic Mediterranean and European islands. Sugar rewarded concentrated land, mills and disciplined labour. Mediterranean producers had used enslaved and other coerced workers. Portuguese expansion down the West African coast in the fifteenth century connected that model to new sources of captive labour and to Atlantic islands suitable for plantations.

Early Portuguese voyages mixed commerce with direct violence. Raiding produced captives but also resistance and high costs. Trade with African rulers and merchants became more reliable. In 1444, a large group of captives was landed at Lagos in Portugal and divided for sale. The event did not begin African slavery or even European trafficking in Africans. It marked the development of a maritime route that could carry captives repeatedly beyond the societies from which they had been taken.

Iberian expansion did not begin with a finished racial order. Late medieval markets contained captives from Europe, North Africa, the Atlantic islands and lands south of the Sahara. Portuguese and Castilian conquests in the Canaries and Atlantic archipelagos mixed war, conversion, settlement and forced labour. Over time, repeated access to sub-Saharan African captives and the growth of plantation production narrowed that mixed field. African origin became increasingly connected to sale across the ocean, while European colonists claimed the status of settlers and masters.

The Atlantic islands supplied an intermediate scale. Madeira became a major sugar producer without depending on African slavery to the same degree as São Tomé, where plantations used large enslaved workforces and faced revolt. The contrast matters. Sugar did not require one labour system by nature. Land, population, law, supply routes and owners' power determined which labour arrangements became profitable and enforceable. America expanded the combination that allowed owners the greatest coercive reach.

The Portuguese South Atlantic

The Portuguese built forts and commercial relationships along the coast, initially seeking gold as much as people. Elmina, founded on the Gold Coast in 1482, began as a fortified gold-trading post and later became important in slave trading. On São Tomé, planters developed a sugar economy worked heavily by enslaved Africans. The island became a workshop for arrangements later expanded in Brazil: plantation land, imported capital, coerced labour and an export mill tied to ocean shipping.

After Portuguese colonisation of Brazil, sugar production grew around Pernambuco and Bahia. Ships could sail in a South Atlantic circuit between Brazilian ports and West Central Africa without completing a European triangle. This route became the largest corridor in the trade. Portuguese and Brazilian carriers transported more captives across the Atlantic than any other national grouping over the whole period.

African politics shaped supply. In Kongo, rulers adopted Christianity and maintained diplomatic relations with Portugal while contesting forms of unauthorised enslavement. King Afonso I complained in the 1520s that traders and local collaborators were seizing free subjects and even nobles. His letters show neither a kingdom innocent of slavery nor one consenting to every export. They show a ruler trying to control a commerce that was altering authority inside his state.

Farther south, Portuguese settlement and warfare in Angola produced captives through conquest, alliance and conflict. Long routes carried people

towards Luanda and Benguela. Mortality before embarkation could be severe, but records are too uneven for a trustworthy total. The crucial change was organisational: inland violence, coastal markets and Brazilian demand had become parts of a recurring transoceanic business.

The career of Njinga of Ndongo and Matamba shows why this history resists fixed roles. She negotiated with Portuguese officials, fought expansion, built a rival state and sheltered people who fled Portuguese power. She also operated within regional warfare and slave trading. Her choices were made under severe pressure but were still political choices. Describing her only as a resister hides participation; describing her only as a supplier hides the imperial violence she opposed.

West Central Africa remained the trade's largest broad source region across the long run, but that label covers shifting routes and conflicts. Captives moved towards Luanda and Benguela from different inland zones as military alliances, merchant networks and prices changed. The persistence of the corridor came from its connection to Brazilian ports, shipping and credit, not from one unchanging African supply system.

The plantation turn of the seventeenth century

The seventeenth century widened the system. Dutch forces attacked Portuguese Atlantic positions, occupied north-eastern Brazil for a time and seized Elmina. Dutch merchants and planters carried knowledge, capital and commercial links across imperial borders. English and French colonies adopted plantation sugar on Caribbean islands, especially Barbados from the 1640s, then Jamaica and Saint-Domingue on a greater scale.

Labour did not move straight from European indenture to African slavery in one decision. Planters used Indigenous captives, European servants and enslaved Africans in changing combinations. Disease, war, land seizure, servant costs, access to African captives and the advantages of permanent hereditary ownership shifted the balance. Colonial law then narrowed difference into race. By the end of the century, African descent and enslaved status had been joined far more tightly in the major plantation

colonies.

Chartered companies helped states organise the trade. The Dutch West India Company and England's Royal African Company combined commerce, forts, warships and monopoly rights. The Royal African Company, chartered in 1672, carried captives to English colonies and branded some people with company marks. Its monopoly weakened and English trade was opened to more private merchants after 1698, increasing competition and the role of ports such as Bristol and Liverpool.

Spanish America participated through the *asiento*, a contract granting suppliers the right to deliver captives to Spanish colonies. Portuguese, Dutch, French and British contractors held the privilege at different times. The arrangement shows why national flags can mislead. A British merchant might carry Africans under a contract serving Spanish imperial markets, financed through networks reaching several countries.

Barbados made the plantation transformation unusually visible. Sugar expanded from the 1640s, estates consolidated land, mills absorbed capital and planters imported growing numbers of enslaved Africans. The island's 1661 slave code organised punishment and policing around a labour force denied the protections claimed by English subjects. Similar rules travelled, with alteration, through English colonies. Law followed the plantation because owners needed coercion to function beyond one estate.

The shift changed ordinary life on both sides of the colour line. Small farmers and servants did not vanish at once, but wealth and land concentrated around sugar. Enslaved workers cut cane, fed mills, boiled juice, tended animals, built works and produced food under exhausting schedules. High mortality drove continued importation. A commercial revolution on European tables rested on a demographic regime that consumed people faster than many plantations reproduced them.

The eighteenth-century machine

More than half of all transatlantic embarkations occurred in the eighteenth century. Britain became the leading carrier during much of it, while Portugal and Brazil remained central across the longer period. Liverpool grew into Britain's dominant slaving port; Nantes led in France. Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador anchored the South Atlantic. Forts and flags mattered, but private partnerships, credit and colonial demand kept the machinery moving.

The trade's scale did not produce smooth regularity. Wars closed routes and opened others. Commodity prices altered demand. African political changes redirected capture. A ship could spend months purchasing along the coast, then cross in weeks or suffer long delay. Returns varied widely. Merchants spread risk across partnerships and voyages, but bankruptcy remained common enough to make the business a gamble for investors and a catastrophe imposed on captives.

The 1781 voyage of the *Zong* exposed the relation between killing and property. After navigational errors, sickness and an alleged water crisis, the crew threw more than 130 captive people into the sea. The owners sought insurance payment for the loss, and litigation considered whether the killings created a compensable loss of property. The case did not represent ordinary mortality or prove that insurers routinely rewarded murder. Its force lies in the legal frame: a mass killing reached court as a dispute between commercial parties.

Public campaigning made such frames visible. In 1788, Parliament passed legislation limiting the number of captives British ships could carry according to tonnage. Abolitionists then circulated a plan of the Liverpool ship *Brookes*, arranging hundreds of small human figures within measured decks. The diagram represented legal stowage, not a photograph of one sailing. Its abstraction was both its strength and limit. It allowed viewers to grasp organised crowding while repeating the system's reduction of persons to bodies in allotted space.

The African geography shifted within this peak. Senegambia, the Gold Coast, the Bights of Benin and Biafra, West Central Africa and south-eastern Africa supplied different shares at different times. A war, succession dispute or commercial blockade could redirect ships towards another port. Buyers in the Americas also attached stereotypes to supposed origins, seeking people they imagined suited to particular work or likely to rebel. Such labels mixed partial knowledge with commercial prejudice and often misidentified people whose journeys had already crossed several regions.

From purchase to sale

A European or American slaving voyage began with capital and a cargo chosen for particular African markets. Textiles were often more important than the guns and alcohol that dominate popular images, though demand varied. Copper and iron bars, beads, cowries, weapons and other goods could enter complex price bundles. Captains carried instructions but negotiated amid changing exchange rates, credit and local authority.

Purchase might occur at one major port or through several stops. Captives arrived in coffles, canoes and coastal vessels. Traders inspected teeth, limbs, skin and movement for signs affecting price. Families and companions could be separated before a ship sailed. People waited in forts, barracoons or aboard ship while the captain assembled enough captives to justify departure. Time on the coast exposed both captives and crew to illness.

Once at sea, routines followed security and sale. Adult men were often shackled in pairs and confined separately. Women and children might have more access to the deck but faced other dangers, including sexual assault. Crews rationed food and water, cleaned compartments, treated some illnesses and punished resistance. Captives developed ways to communicate, shared care and watched for opportunities. A revolt could begin before departure, near the coast or on the open ocean.

At an American port, officials and buyers inspected survivors. Sales took

several forms. An auction could offer individuals or lots. A private sale allowed bargaining. In a scramble, buyers rushed aboard or into a yard to claim people at a fixed price. Illness reduced price but did not always prevent sale. The word *seasoning* described the first period in which newly arrived Africans were forced to adapt to disease environments, food, language and labour. It made a violent process sound like preparation of timber.

Sale did not end transport. Merchants redistributed captives from Caribbean entrepôts to smaller colonies and from coastal ports into plantation interiors. Owners renamed people, assigned work and recorded them in inventories. The Atlantic crossing was therefore one passage within a longer sequence of forced movement, but it was the passage that carried a person into a new property jurisdiction from which return was least likely.

New arrivals then entered work regimes they could not read in advance. Some were sent to cane fields or mines; others to ports, households, livestock, craft work or further sale. They sought familiar language, watched established workers and learnt which gestures drew punishment. For survivors, this was another passage through disease, renaming, separation and the urgent work of finding people who might help them live.

Revolution, testimony and prohibition

Opposition grew through several channels. Quakers condemned the trade within their religious communities. Formerly enslaved writers described capture, passage and sale to reading publics. British organisers collected testimony, petitions and commercial evidence, while campaigners promoted boycotts of slave-grown sugar. Parliament heard years of argument in which economic interest, imperial rivalry and humanitarian claims were mixed.

The organised British campaign founded in 1787 turned scattered opposition into a national pressure system. Thomas Clarkson gathered ship plans, equipment and testimony; William Wilberforce carried motions in Parliament; local committees circulated petitions. Black abolitionists were not supporting witnesses at the edge of this movement. Equiano, Cugoano

and the Sons of Africa wrote, spoke, lobbied and forced readers to encounter enslaved people as political authors. Women organised associations and consumer boycotts despite exclusion from Parliament.

Enslaved resistance changed the stakes. The uprising in Saint-Domingue began in 1791 amid the French Revolution and developed through civil war, emancipation, foreign invasion and renewed French attempts to restore control. Haiti declared independence in 1804. The revolution destroyed slavery in the colony through force and demonstrated that enslaved people were makers of Atlantic politics, not evidence supplied to someone else's campaign.

The route to independence was not one uninterrupted abolitionist advance. French commissioners proclaimed emancipation in Saint-Domingue in 1793, and the National Convention abolished slavery in French colonies in 1794. Napoleon's government later restored slavery elsewhere and sent an expedition to recover control of Saint-Domingue. The attempt failed amid war and disease. Haiti emerged from a revolution whose actors changed allies and aims, but whose result destroyed legal slavery on the territory.

Britain's 1807 Act prohibited British participation in the trade, but it did not emancipate enslaved people in British colonies. The United States prohibition on importing captives took effect in 1808, the earliest date permitted by its Constitution. Enforcement was uneven and smuggling continued. In both countries, ending legal imports could coexist with expanding slave production and domestic sale.

The distinction between trade abolition and emancipation was politically useful to some supporters. Ending importation could be defended as regulation of commerce without immediately confiscating slaveholders' property. In the United States, constitutional protection delayed a federal import ban until 1808, while the domestic market remained legal. In British colonies, planters continued to own and exploit hundreds of thousands of people for more than a quarter-century after the 1807 Act.

Britain later used treaties, naval patrols and mixed commissions to suppress

trafficking. The West Africa Squadron intercepted ships and liberated captives, at considerable human and financial cost. Suppression saved people from Atlantic sale, but it was not detached from empire. British officials used abolitionist authority to press weaker states, expand coastal influence and define lawful commerce on British terms.

The long ending

The Atlantic trade did not decline in one straight line after 1808. Demand in Brazil and Cuba sustained large illegal flows. Traders adapted faster ships, false papers, concealed landing sites and networks of official protection. Captives rescued at sea could spend weeks on overcrowded prize vessels and then enter apprenticeships, military service or settlements shaped by colonial labour needs. "Liberated African" was a legal category, not a guarantee of independent life.

Brazil formally prohibited imports before 1850, but the Eusébio de Queirós Law of that year was followed by far more effective enforcement. Cuba continued to receive captives into the 1860s. The last known phase was smaller than the eighteenth-century peak but not marginal to the people caught in it. It flourished after European powers had publicly declared the traffic criminal, showing that illegality can raise risk without removing demand.

Emancipation moved on a separate timetable. Britain's 1833 Act took effect in 1834 across most of the colonies it covered, with apprenticeship delaying full freedom until 1838. French colonies abolished slavery in 1848. The United States did so through civil war and constitutional amendment in 1865. Cuba followed in 1886 and Brazil in 1888. Other Atlantic jurisdictions had their own sequences, reversals and exceptions.

The closing date depends on the question. The transatlantic traffic persisted into the 1860s. Legal slavery survived longer. Coerced labour arrangements continued after emancipation. Racial restrictions outlived them all. A chronology with one triumphant ending confuses the destruction of a route, a property status and a social hierarchy. They were connected, but they did

not disappear together.

British emancipation makes the separation concrete. The state committed £20 million to compensate former owners for the loss of claims the law had protected. Many formerly enslaved people entered compulsory apprenticeship and continued working for the same estates until that system ended in 1838. The settlement changed legal personhood while leaving plantation land and much commercial power untouched. It was freedom structured around the owner's recognised loss.

In the United States, the ocean route's closure increased the importance of birth and domestic sale. Traders assembled people in pens, marched coffles south and shipped captives along the coast to New Orleans and other markets. In Brazil and Cuba, illicit Atlantic importation supplied expanding coffee and sugar economies. These were different systems, but each demonstrates the same chronology problem: a prohibited border can redirect coercion rather than ending the demand that produced it.

How we know

The best quantitative picture comes from voyage records: port books, customs returns, shipping news, captains' logs, commercial correspondence, court cases and naval captures. *Slave Voyages* combines documented journeys with estimates for missing traffic. Its rounded totals are models built from an incomplete archive, not a census of every person. Records are strongest where states and merchants kept paperwork and weakest for smuggling, deaths before embarkation and lives after sale.

Accounts by Equiano, Cugoana and other formerly enslaved people recover experiences commercial files were not designed to preserve, but no single life represents the full trade. Missionary papers, African oral traditions, plantation registers, archaeology and linguistic evidence add other views. Each has silences. Owners recorded labour and value; abolitionists selected evidence to persuade; later memories changed in transmission.

The reliable method is therefore combination. Voyage totals establish scale and distribution. Local studies recover political setting. Testimony reveals

perception and action. Law shows what power authorised. Where those sources disagree, the disagreement is part of the history rather than a defect to be hidden.

What People Get Wrong

“African slavery was already there, so Europe changed little”

Slavery existed in Africa before Atlantic expansion. That observation becomes misleading when it treats every system of bondage as interchangeable and every later consequence as pre-existing. Forms of dependency ranged from household incorporation and pawnship to sale, inherited status and hard labour. They differed across places and changed over time. Atlantic demand did not arrive in an empty market, but neither did it buy from a fixed institution with fixed effects.

The new element was a durable external demand for people who could be transported beyond local political reach. Imported goods, credit and access to American markets changed the value of captives. In some regions, rulers and merchants redirected warfare and punishment towards export. In others, raiding, insecurity and population loss damaged states or pushed communities to move. West Central African wars involved local ambitions, Portuguese intervention and Brazilian demand together. No single formula fits the continent.

Pre-existence therefore answers the wrong question. The issue is not whether Europeans introduced the first enslavement. It is how oceanic purchase altered incentives, routes, scale and destinations, then joined them to hereditary racial slavery in the Americas. A system can recruit older practices and still transform them.

“Africans sold their own people”

The sentence sounds decisive because it imports a nation into a period that did not possess one. Africa was not a country and blackness was not a shared political citizenship. A merchant in Bonny, a ruler in Dahomey and a captive taken hundreds of miles inland were no more automatically “their own people” than a French prisoner and a Russian officer were one people because both were European.

That correction does not acquit sellers. African rulers, traders, soldiers and brokers could profit knowingly from captivity, separation and export. Some states built power partly through the trade. Some elites sold dependants, judicial captives or political enemies. Local responsibility is real. The error lies in using it to dissolve the larger chain or to suggest a transaction among racial equals that Europeans merely serviced.

American plantation demand made repeated purchase profitable. European and American merchants supplied the ships, much of the long-distance credit and the markets in which legal ownership became permanent and hereditary. African captors and sellers performed indispensable links under varied conditions, while other Africans resisted, restricted exports, sheltered fugitives or became victims. Responsibility becomes clearer when political position and power are specified. Race alone conceals both.

“The trade was triangular”

The triangle is a teaching diagram that escaped into explanation. It pictures a ship leaving Europe with goods, exchanging them for captives in Africa, carrying those captives to America and returning with plantation produce. Such voyages occurred. The system did not require them.

The largest long-run corridor connected Brazil directly with West Central Africa. Ships left Rio de Janeiro, Bahia or Pernambuco with trade goods, crossed to Luanda, Benguela or other ports, then returned west. New England merchants participated in northern Atlantic circuits. European textiles could be produced from Asian fibres or traded through several ports before reaching Africa. Captives landed in the Caribbean might be

re-exported to mainland colonies. Bills of exchange could settle accounts without the same vessel carrying the supposed third leg.

The triangle matters because it can place Europe at the natural top, turn Africa into a supplier and treat America as one destination. A chain or network is less tidy and more accurate. It directs attention to capture, coastal credit, ship fitting, intra-American redistribution, plantation finance and consumption. The route on a map is one part of the transaction. The institution continued wherever ownership, labour and payment were enforced.

“Most enslaved Africans went to the United States”

The United States dominates English-language memory because its slavery, Civil War and racial order have enormous documentary and political weight. It was not the main transatlantic destination. Roughly two-fifths of disembarked captives arrived in Brazil. The non-Spanish Caribbean received about another third, and Spanish American destinations took much of the remainder. Mainland British North America and the later United States received under four per cent directly.

That small Atlantic share did not make United States slavery small. Its enslaved population grew through birth under hereditary law, and the domestic market displaced well over a million people from the Upper South towards the expanding Lower South between 1790 and 1860. A person sold from Virginia to Mississippi did not cross the Atlantic, but the sale reproduced the same property logic inside a continental market.

Changing the map changes the commodities and chronology. Sugar and coffee move beside cotton. Portuguese and Brazilian carriers become central. Saint-Domingue and Haiti become indispensable. Cuba and Brazil keep the nineteenth-century illegal traffic large after British and American prohibitions. The correction matters because a United States-centred story can mistake one powerful descendant of the Atlantic system for the system itself.

“Profit gave captains a reason to protect captives”

A living captive usually fetched more than a dead one. Merchants compared mortality, captains managed provisions, and some owners rewarded lower losses. From this, it is tempting to infer that commercial self-interest supplied a rough form of welfare. It did not.

Profit operated within ownership. The question was how much food, water, space, time and crew labour would preserve enough saleable bodies at an acceptable cost. More captives could increase revenue while crowding increased disease and revolt risk. A faster departure might reduce coastal sickness but leave the vessel short of its intended cargo. A captain could order cleaning and forced movement, then use flogging, irons or guns to impose them. Maintenance and terror were parts of one calculation.

Mortality did decline over the centuries as routes, provisioning and maritime practice changed, but survival cannot be treated as humane treatment. A voyage on which nine people in ten lived still transported every survivor under armed confinement towards sale. Nor did commercial logic always restrain killing. The *Zong* case showed how insurance could place death inside a property claim, though it was an extreme dispute rather than a normal business method. Incentives work through the rights an institution recognises. Here, the recognised interest belonged to the owner.

“Slavery built capitalism by itself”

Atlantic slavery generated commodities, fortunes, customs revenue, shipping, credit demand and industrial orders. It enriched particular merchants, planters, ports and regions. Slave-grown cotton later supplied British mills; sugar fed refineries and consumers; enslaved people themselves appeared as assets in mortgages and estates. Any account of early modern Atlantic growth that treats slavery as peripheral is defective.

The stronger claim, that slavery alone caused capitalism or the Industrial Revolution, exceeds what the evidence can carry. Economic change also depended on coal, wages, agricultural productivity, technical knowledge, domestic markets, state finance, property institutions, war and many other

conditions. Historians disagree over the size and route of slavery's contribution because they measure different things: voyage profits, plantation returns, national income, capital formation, trade multipliers or regional specialisation.

The useful correction cuts both ways. Direct slave-trading profits were not the whole economic effect. A refinery, insurer or textile maker could benefit without owning a slaving vessel. Yet connection does not prove necessity. The right question is specific: which sector, place, period and mechanism depended on which coerced flow? "Built" is defensible only after its parts are named.

“Abolition settled the account”

Abolition destroyed legal powers that had organised the trade and slavery. It mattered immediately. A prohibited voyage could be seized. An owner could lose the lawful power to sell a person. A family could acquire recognised claims that slavery had denied. Treating these changes as cosmetic erases the achievement of enslaved people and abolitionists who fought for them.

The mistake is to treat legal freedom as restitution. British emancipation compensated former owners with £20 million and required many formerly enslaved people to pass through apprenticeship. It did not pay them for prior labour or transfer plantation land. Elsewhere, emancipation often left former slaveholders holding estates, credit, political office and commercial networks. Freed people negotiated wages and family life from a starting position produced by dispossession.

Nor did racial hierarchy vanish when property status did. Vagrancy laws, labour contracts, debt, segregation, disfranchisement and violence could restrict freedom under new names and different legal forms. These later systems were not slavery unchanged, and collapsing them into one timeless condition hides important victories and differences. The lasting lesson is more exact. Law can stop recognising an injustice before it redistributes the assets accumulated under it. The account remains open because the balance sheet survives the rule that made it possible.

Use It

Follow the whole chain

The slave ship is the most recognisable object in this history because it concentrates violence inside wooden walls. It can also narrow attention. Begin earlier and continue later. Ask how a person was made vulnerable, which authority recognised the capture, how the captive reached the coast, who financed the purchase, what jurisdiction received the ship, which buyer acquired the survivor and what work converted ownership into revenue.

This lens changes responsibility from a search for one culprit into a map of enabling acts. A distant investor need not wield a weapon to shape the voyage. A coastal broker need not own a plantation to connect capture to demand. A customs officer can make an illegal cargo usable by looking away. A consumer's purchase is farther from coercion than an owner's command, but the product still carries a supply history.

Chains matter beyond slavery whenever harm is divided across institutions. Distance can reduce knowledge, legal exposure and emotional friction while leaving economic direction intact. The disciplined question is not whether everyone caused the same harm. It is which link performed which function, had which alternatives and captured which benefit.

Separate people, commodities and balance sheets

Records made for trade convert unlike things into comparable entries. A plantation inventory may place people beside cattle, tools and land. A merchant account may turn a death into a loss, a surviving child into a lower-priced asset and sugar into the return that closes the voyage. The arithmetic is evidence of the institution. It is not the institution's moral truth.

Read such records on two levels at once. First, respect their technical meaning. Prices, tonnage, insurance terms and mortality counts reveal how the system worked. Then restore what the category removed. A category such as an adult woman assessed as prime may conceal a name, children, a language, an illness, a skill and a claim to freedom. Refusing the number

would throw away evidence. Accepting the number as a complete description would repeat the violence that produced it.

The distinction is useful wherever administrative categories govern people. A case, unit, headcount, risk score or labour cost may be needed for an organisation to operate. The category becomes dangerous when the convenience of measurement is mistaken for the full reality measured.

Distinguish scale, rate and distribution

Arguments about the trade often mix three questions. Scale asks how many people were moved. Rate asks what share died, survived, reproduced or returned a profit. Distribution asks where people embarked, landed and were moved again. One dramatic number cannot answer all three.

A mortality rate from an early eighteenth-century route should not become the rate for four centuries. The proportion landed in mainland North America should not be confused with the later size of its enslaved population. An aggregate of Atlantic embarkations does not include everyone killed before reaching a ship. A port's number of voyages does not equal its share of profit or its dependence on plantation goods.

This lens is a defence against numerical theatre. Before comparing figures, check the denominator, dates, geography and unit. Ask whether the source counts documented voyages or estimates missing ones, arrivals or departures, persons or transactions, direct trade or the wider slave economy. The figures remain horrifying without false precision. Accuracy does not weaken the moral case. It prevents an avoidable error from carrying more weight than the evidence.

Ask what the law made transferable

Violence seized people, but law stabilised the seizure. Colonial governments defined ownership, inheritance, sale, testimony, punishment, movement and family status. Those decisions let one person's coercion survive a change of owner and pass into a bank, court or will. The most revealing question is therefore not whether law was present. It is what law allowed to move between strangers.

Hereditary status transferred a claim across generations. A mortgage transferred it into credit. Compensation transferred a terminated claim into public debt. Pass systems and patrols made private ownership enforceable across public space. Even where enslaved people gained limited rights to petition, marry or buy freedom, those rights existed inside an order that began by recognising another person's property claim.

Transferability is a powerful lens for other institutions. When an asset, licence, data set or obligation changes hands, ask which rights travel with it and which affected people cannot object. Institutions become durable when private advantage can be sold, inherited or financed while the original act that created it disappears from view.

Read the archive against its purpose

The archive of the slave trade is abundant and radically uneven. Ships, owners, captains and ports left paperwork because states taxed them, merchants settled accounts and courts resolved disputes. Captive people appear where commerce needed a number or where resistance disturbed the record. The result can make the operators seem active and the enslaved passive even when the silence was produced by exclusion from writing, preservation and legal standing.

Do not solve this by treating every silence as permission to invent. Read laterally. Compare voyage data with testimony, African political history, plantation registers, court petitions, archaeology, language and oral memory. Notice when a name survives because a person escaped, sued, wrote, was baptised, accused or sold. Each source opens one field and

closes another.

The lens applies to any history written from institutional records. Archives preserve what power had reason and capacity to record. Their gaps are patterned, but a patterned gap is not a fact about one missing life. Good reconstruction presses sources beyond their intended purpose without forcing them to say what they cannot establish.

Trace where costs and assets went

The trade distributed benefits and damage in different directions. A merchant could receive profit in Liverpool while a family absorbed loss inland from the African coast. A planter held land and crop revenue while an enslaved worker bore labour, punishment and separation. A government received customs income and later used public money to compensate owners. Time widened the split: assets could be inherited, while names and claims disappeared from the ledger.

This lens avoids two weak arguments. One says that because a whole national economy did not depend on slave-trading profits, slavery built little. The other finds any connection and treats every later fortune as a direct product of one voyage. Follow identifiable transfers. Which estate, firm, port, tax stream, building or debt was connected to which activity? How long did the asset remain? Who carried the uncompensated cost?

The method cannot turn history into a perfect account. Wealth changes form, firms merge, fortunes dissipate and descendants are not identical to ancestors. It can still reveal when a reform stops a practice but leaves ownership, land and bargaining power largely intact.

The limits

These lenses clarify structure; they do not produce one universal verdict. The Atlantic trade varied over more than three centuries and across many African and American societies. A model built from British ships cannot stand for Brazilian carriers, and one plantation cannot represent Saint-Domingue, Virginia and Bahia. Quantitative reconstruction is strongest for ocean voyages and weaker for capture, inland movement and illegal traffic. Testimony restores human perception but never makes one narrator typical of millions.

Causal language also needs restraint. Slavery shaped Atlantic capitalism, state power, racial thought and modern wealth, but no serious history can assign every later inequality to one origin. People and institutions changed after emancipation. New laws and choices created new harms. Continuity is not sameness.

The subject also resists emotional shortcuts. Horror does not remove the need to distinguish evidence, and precision does not neutralise horror. The aim is neither a purified national story nor inherited personal guilt. It is an accurate account of powers exercised, benefits retained, resistance made and losses that law did not repay.

The one thing to keep

Keep the ship, but never leave it at sea.

Look back from its hold towards war, kidnapping, punishment, debt, brokers, forts and forced marches. Look forward towards sale, plantation labour, commodities, mortgages, inheritance, revolt and emancipation. The Middle Passage matters because it joined those worlds. It carried people beyond the practical protection of former communities and into legal systems prepared to make that removal hereditary.

Then notice the reversal. The same ocean that helped owners erase prior claims also connected captives and descendants across ports, islands and empires. People rebuilt kinship, carried news, escaped, wrote, fought and

made political movements through routes designed for property. Abolition stopped the legal chain in stages. It did not automatically return what the chain had accumulated.

What should be permanently different is your sense of where an institution lives. It does not live only at the site of visible cruelty. It lives in the ordinary links that make cruelty transferable, financeable and distant. To understand what the Atlantic crossing built, follow the person one way and the asset the other.

Terms

Atlantic slave trade

The forced maritime transport of captive Africans to the Americas and Atlantic islands, from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The term includes the commercial and political system around the crossing.

Enslavement

The process by which a person was captured, condemned, sold or born into coercive status. Using the process word keeps attention on acts and institutions rather than treating slavery as natural identity.

Chattel slavery

A legal order in which people could be owned, transferred and inherited as movable property. Atlantic slavery became chattel-based, racialised and hereditary, though its local rules varied.

Middle Passage

The Atlantic crossing made by captive Africans aboard slave ships. It was the central maritime leg of a longer forced journey beginning with capture and often continuing after American sale.

Coffle

A group of captives fastened or guarded together during overland movement towards a market or coast. Coffles reveal that forced transport and mortality began well before ocean embarkation.

Barracoon

An enclosure used to confine captives near a trading point or coast. Waiting could last weeks or months while merchants assembled cargoes, negotiated prices and exposed prisoners to disease.

Factory

In early modern trade, a commercial post staffed by factors, not a manufacturing plant. Coastal factories stored goods, managed credit and negotiated purchases, sometimes within forts controlled by chartered companies.

Factor

A merchant's resident agent authorised to buy, sell, keep accounts and extend credit. Factors connected distant investors to local brokers and translated commercial instructions into transactions on the coast.

Slave ship

A merchant vessel adapted for armed confinement through platforms, barricades, gratings and shackles. Its design balanced loading, surveillance, ventilation and revolt control around the sale of human beings.

Tight packing

A loading strategy associated with carrying more captives in less space on the assumption that greater numbers could offset higher sickness or mortality. Practice varied and the simple label can overstate deliberate uniformity.

Loose packing

A strategy associated with carrying fewer captives to reduce crowding and preserve sale value. It did not mean humane treatment, since every person remained confined, coerced and destined for sale.

Triangular trade

The classroom model linking European goods, African captives and American produce in three legs. Some voyages fitted it, but direct South Atlantic routes and multi-port networks make it an incomplete system map.

Asiento

A Spanish imperial contract granting a person or company the right to supply captives to Spanish America. It often placed Portuguese, Dutch, French or British merchants inside Spanish colonial commerce.

Royal African Company

An English chartered company founded in 1672 with monopoly privileges in African trade. It combined investors, forts, officials and shipping, and transported large numbers of captives to English colonies.

Pawnship

A system in which a person was pledged as security for debt or obligation. Pawnship was not identical to chattel slavery, but commercial pressure could turn temporary dependency into sale and export.

Plantation complex

The linked system of large-scale export cultivation, mills, coerced labour, credit, shipping and distant consumption. Sugar supplied its clearest early form, followed by coffee, tobacco, rice and cotton.

Gang labour

A plantation work regime in which supervised groups performed coordinated tasks at an imposed pace. It was strongly associated with sugar and cotton and made discipline visible through overseers and field organisation.

Task system

A regime assigning a defined amount of work, after which an enslaved worker might use remaining time. Common in some rice and urban settings, it allowed limited autonomy without removing ownership.

Seasoning

The coercive period after arrival during which newly transported Africans were forced into unfamiliar disease environments, languages, food and labour. The commercial term disguises high mortality, punishment and adaptation under compulsion.

Partus sequitur ventrem

The rule that a child's legal status followed that of the mother. Adopted in English colonies, it made enslaved status hereditary and converted enslaved women's reproduction into new property claims.

Slave code

A body of laws regulating ownership, punishment, movement, assembly, testimony and manumission. Codes differed by empire and colony, but each used public authority to support slaveholders' private power.

Manumission

The legal release of an enslaved person by an owner, purchase, will or authorised process. Its availability varied and could create free communities without challenging the institution that made freedom exceptional.

Maroon

A person who escaped slavery, or a community formed by fugitives and their descendants. Maroon societies ranged from small refuges to durable polities able to negotiate or fight colonial governments.

Creolisation

The formation of new languages, practices and identities through sustained contact under unequal conditions. In slave societies it describes creative social change without implying that coercion erased African continuities.

Diaspora

A population dispersed from an ancestral region while retaining, remaking or debating connections across distance. The African diaspora was produced by several migrations, with Atlantic enslavement a major forced component.

Black Atlantic

A concept for the connected world made by African-descended people across Africa, Europe and the Americas. It highlights movement, politics and culture while requiring care not to aestheticise forced dispersal.

Abolition

The ending of a legally authorised practice, commonly the slave trade or slavery. Trade abolition, emancipation and the destruction of later coercive restrictions occurred on different dates and through different struggles.

Emancipation

The legal ending of enslaved status for a person or population. Emancipation changed enforceable rights, but its settlements often left land, capital and political power with former owners.

Apprenticeship

The compulsory labour regime imposed on many formerly enslaved people after British emancipation in 1834. Presented as preparation for freedom, it preserved planter control until resistance helped end it in 1838.

Legitimate commerce

Nineteenth-century language for African exports such as palm oil that were promoted as alternatives to slave trading. The term reflected abolitionist aims and imperial assumptions, and did not guarantee free labour.

Go Deeper

David Eltis, David Richardson and Philip Misevich, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*

Begin here for the map and the scale. The expanded 2026 edition uses hundreds of maps to show embarkation regions, destinations, carrying nations, voyage duration, mortality and abolition across three and a half centuries. It is the clearest way to correct the mental map in which every ship leaves one West African coast for the United States. An atlas cannot restore individual lives, and its apparent precision still rests on surviving records and estimates. Read it with that limitation visible. Keep the legends and methodological notes beside the maps: they teach the difference between documented voyages, estimated totals and the geographic confidence each claim deserves.

Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*

Read Smallwood for the book this one can only compress: how Atlantic commerce tried to turn people with social histories into saleable units. Her focus on the Gold Coast, the ship and the market makes the mechanism of commodification painfully exact without treating captives as passive material. The prose is scholarly and conceptually demanding. It rewards slow reading because it keeps economic procedure beside the human destruction hidden inside terms such as cargo, mortality and delivery. Its Gold Coast concentration is a strength, not a claim to represent every African embarkation region; compare its mechanism with the atlas before generalising it across the trade.

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, edited by Vincent Carretta

Equiano offers a life moving through enslavement, maritime labour, commerce, freedom, religion and abolitionist print. The revised Penguin edition supplies letters, notes and the context needed to read a crafted eighteenth-century argument rather than a transparent transcript. Historians have disputed whether Equiano was born in Africa, as he stated, or in South Carolina, as two records suggest. That debate matters to the opening scenes, but it does not erase his documented enslavement, seafaring, authorship or political work. Read the editorial material before the narrative, then watch how Equiano uses commercial knowledge and Christian language to turn an Atlantic career against the trade that formed it.

John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*

Thornton restores African states, economies, military systems and cultures to a story too often written from European decks. His argument that Africans were active makers of the Atlantic world corrects the picture of a continent acted upon from outside, though readers should keep unequal power and the difference between sellers and captives in view. The second edition extends the account into the eighteenth century. It is the strongest next step for understanding why African agency and European responsibility are not competing explanations. Thornton can sound more confident about African commercial autonomy than later work in some regions; use that tension to ask where exchange remained negotiated and where Atlantic demand narrowed the available choices.

Notes and Sources

The book uses *Atlantic slave trade* for the forced maritime traffic from Africa to Atlantic islands and the Americas. It uses *enslaved person* where the human subject matters and retains historical terms such as *slave ship*, *slave code* and *slave trade* where they name institutions, records or established fields of study. Regional labels such as Gold Coast, Bight of Benin and Bight of Biafra are historical trading geographies rather than timeless ethnic or political units.

Quantitative claims are rounded because the central totals are estimates built from surviving voyage records and statistical reconstruction. A documented voyage is not the same thing as a complete count of the people carried, and neither measure captures everyone killed during capture, inland transport or confinement before embarkation. Destination shares refer to transatlantic disembarkation, not the later size of enslaved populations or subsequent forced movement within the Americas.

The Whole Thing in One Page

Embarkation and disembarkation totals. The estimates of about 12.5 million captives embarked and about 10.7 million disembarked follow the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database at SlaveVoyages and the updated *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* by David Eltis, David Richardson and Philip Misevich. The figures cover estimated Atlantic departures and arrivals from 1501 to 1866. They are not a count of all deaths produced by the trade. Joseph C. Miller's work on Angola demonstrates why losses during capture, marches and coastal detention cannot be recovered as one dependable global number.

The crossing as a hinge. The argument that the ocean connected local acts of capture to distant, inheritable property draws especially on Stephanie Smallwood's account of commodification, John Thornton and Paul Lovejoy on African political and social systems, Jennifer Morgan on gender and hereditary property, and Robin Blackburn on the plantation order. The hinge is an organising synthesis, not a claim that distance alone created slavery.

Destination correction. SlaveVoyages and the atlas place roughly two-fifths of disembarkations in Brazil and most of the remainder in the Caribbean and Spanish America. The formulation that under four per cent went directly to mainland British North America and the later United States follows the same voyage estimates. It does not minimise United States slavery, whose population expanded through birth and whose domestic trade later forced more than a million people south and west.

Compensation. The £20 million British compensation settlement went to people whose ownership claims were cancelled, not to the formerly enslaved. The amount and recipients are established by the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, the compensation records and the Legacies of British Slavery database. The government financed the package through a combination of public funds and borrowing; the text therefore says that Parliament provided or committed £20 million rather than claiming that the whole sum was borrowed.

Why You Should Care

The archive's categories. Voyage databases, port books, insurance cases and plantation records are unusually rich evidence for ships, owners, cargoes and prices. Smallwood, Marisa Fuentes and Sowande' Mustakeem show how those records also reduce captive people to the categories commerce and government required. The book does not infer that an unrecorded experience did or did not occur merely because the archive is silent.

Economic layers. The distinction among slave-voyage profits, plantation returns, customs receipts, processing, shipping, credit and industrial demand follows the long debate opened by Eric Williams and developed by Seymour Drescher, Joseph Inikori, Kenneth Morgan and Robin Blackburn. Their disagreements concern causal weight, timing and measurement. The manuscript retains the common ground that slavery organised major Atlantic sectors while rejecting a single percentage contribution to capitalism or industrialisation.

Law and racialisation. Jennifer Morgan, Sue Peabody and Keila Grinberg, and comparative studies of Atlantic slave law support the account of race and hereditary slavery hardening together through statutes, courts and administration. This does not imply that racial prejudice began in colonial America or that every empire used identical rules.

Black Atlantic geography. The relocation of the story towards Brazil, the Caribbean and West Central Africa follows the distribution shown by *Slave Voyages* and the atlas. Paul Gilroy supplies the term *Black Atlantic*; Thornton, Anne Bailey and others provide the historical grounding needed to keep African political and cultural agency visible.

The Core Ideas

Older slaveries and Atlantic transformation. Thornton and Lovejoy establish the diversity of African slavery, pawnship and dependent labour before and during Atlantic expansion. Blackburn and David Eltis trace the connection among Iberian expansion, Atlantic islands, plantation production and transoceanic transport. The manuscript treats pre-existing slavery as a condition the Atlantic trade transformed, not as proof that Europe changed nothing.

Social death and its limits. Orlando Patterson's comparative concept of social death identifies slavery's attack on recognised kinship, honour and civic belonging. Smallwood makes forced removal central to Atlantic commodification. The manuscript narrows the concept by showing shipboard ties, family rebuilding, cultural continuity and political action, none of which fit an account of complete social erasure.

African political agency and constraint. Thornton, Lovejoy, Miller, Linda Heywood and Randy Sparks support the emphasis on rulers, merchants, brokers, soldiers, canoemen and interpreters acting within distinct political systems. European traders often depended on African commercial authority at the coast. Portuguese warfare and settlement in Angola form an important counterexample to any universal claim of European passivity. Agency identifies action and choice; it does not imply equal power or shared responsibility.

Goods and credit. Studies of the African trade show that textiles, including Asian and European cloth, were often central exchange goods alongside metals, beads, currencies, alcohol and weapons. The mix varied by coast and decade. The text avoids a universal guns-for-people model and does not assume that the same goods, prices or credit terms applied across Africa.

Chain rather than triangle. Eltis, Richardson and Misevich map direct South Atlantic routes, national carriers and changing destinations. Gregory O'Malley reconstructs forced redistribution within the Americas. These

studies support a network model in which one vessel's itinerary cannot represent all finance, goods, sales and subsequent movement.

Shipboard architecture and control. Smallwood, Mustakeem, Marcus Rediker and Herbert Klein support the account of platforms, barricades, shackling, provisioning, disease, discipline and resistance. Conditions varied by route, period, ship and captain. The book uses no single vessel as an average and does not convert a dramatic testimony into a universal mortality rate.

The *Brookes* plan. Cheryl Finley traces the abolitionist image's production, circulation and afterlife. Early versions presented the ship's regulated capacity as 454, while surviving prints and later variants differ in the number of figures shown. It was a diagram of authorised stowage, not a photograph of one voyage or a complete representation of shipboard life. The body retains no precise capacity figure because the image circulated in more than one version and its main evidential function is spatial.

Mortality. *Slave Voyages* supplies the aggregate difference between embarkations and disembarkations. Klein and later quantitative work show a broad decline in average voyage mortality over the long period alongside large variation by route, decade, duration, disease and management. The text therefore states the trend without assigning one rate to four centuries.

Gendered violence. Mustakeem, Fuentes and Jennifer Morgan support the account of sexual violence, reproduction, pregnancy, care and the different confinement of women, girls, men and boys. Ship records understate experiences that did not affect sale, discipline or litigation, so the text describes the evidential silence rather than inventing a frequency.

Plantation demand. Blackburn, Richard Dunn, Kenneth Morgan and Eltis support the connection among seized land, export crops, mills, credit and coerced labour. Sugar was the strongest early plantation engine, while tobacco, rice, mining, coffee and cotton mattered in different places and periods. The manuscript keeps commodity, region and date together rather than treating every plantation economy as a sugar island.

Jamaica and Virginia. Dunn's comparison demonstrates setting-specific demographic regimes. Many Jamaican sugar estates relied on continuing African importation amid high mortality, while the enslaved population of Virginia grew by natural increase and became a source for forced sale within the United States. This contrast concerns reproduction and trade, not a ranking of humane treatment.

Law, birth and property. Virginia's December 1662 statute made a child's status follow the mother. Jennifer Morgan shows the rule's connection to sex, reproduction and property. Peabody and Grinberg supply comparative legal documents from the Atlantic world, including the Code Noir and Iberian traditions. The manuscript uses Virginia as one concrete jurisdiction and does not call its rule the first or universal model.

Finance and inheritance. Plantation inventories, mortgages, wills and compensation claims document enslaved people being valued and transferred as assets. Walter Johnson, Jennifer Morgan and the Legacies of British Slavery project inform this treatment. The presence of enslaved people in finance does not establish that every bank, mortgage or national asset derived from slavery.

Black Atlantic formation. Gilroy supplies the broad interpretive frame; Thornton, Bailey and Smallwood show the movement and remaking of African identities under coercion. The term is used to describe connected politics and culture, not to turn forced dispersal into a creative benefit bestowed by slavery.

Resistance. Vincent Brown's study of Tacky's Revolt, Laurent Dubois on the Haitian Revolution and Manisha Sinha on abolition support the range from work resistance and escape to organised war and political writing. Different actions had different purposes. The manuscript does not force every act into one conscious abolitionist programme.

Abolition and incomplete restitution. Christopher Leslie Brown and Sinha establish the religious, political, Black, popular and parliamentary components of abolition. Drescher shows why declining profitability is not a

sufficient explanation for the British decision. The compensation records and Catherine Hall and her co-authors show how cancelled ownership claims could be converted into retained wealth.

How It Actually Works

The 1444 Lagos sale. Contemporary Portuguese chronicles describe a large public division and sale of captives at Lagos. Eltis and Blackburn place the event within expanding fifteenth-century raiding and trade. It is used as a landmark in route formation, not as the first European enslavement of Africans or the beginning of slavery.

Atlantic island laboratories. Blackburn and Eltis distinguish Madeira, the Canaries, Cape Verde and Sao Tome rather than presenting one identical island model. Madeira's sugar economy used enslaved labour but differed from the large enslaved workforce and rebellions of Sao Tome. The manuscript treats the islands as intermediate experiments, not as a completed blueprint transferred unchanged to America.

Elmina and the Gold Coast. Elmina was founded by Portugal in 1482 as a fortified gold-trading post and became important to later slave trading. Thornton and the atlas support the change in function. The fort's presence did not give Europeans territorial command over the Gold Coast.

Kongo and Afonso I. Afonso's letters in the 1520s protested unauthorised seizure and export, including the capture of free people and nobles. Thornton and Heywood provide the political context. The letters do not prove that Kongo rejected slavery or all slave exports; they show a ruler contesting who could be enslaved and who controlled the trade.

Njinga. Heywood's biography supports the account of Njinga's diplomacy, warfare, state-building, sheltering of fugitives and involvement in regional slave trading. The evidence resists a clean label of either anti-slavery heroine or Portuguese collaborator. The text makes no claim that she controlled every form of enslavement within Ndongo or Matamba.

South Atlantic scale. SlaveVoyages and the atlas establish West Central

Africa to Brazil as the largest broad corridor and Portuguese or Brazilian carriers as the largest national grouping over the trade's duration. Carrier flag, African source region and American destination are separate measures and are not interchanged.

The plantation turn. Blackburn, Dunn and Eltis support the expansion of plantation sugar in Barbados from the 1640s, followed by larger systems in Jamaica and Saint-Domingue. The transition involved Indigenous slavery, European servants and enslaved Africans in changing proportions. The body rejects a one-date replacement story.

Companies, monopoly and the *asiento*. The Royal African Company was chartered in 1672, and the statutory opening of English African trade after 1698 weakened its monopoly. Klein and Blackburn support the commercial chronology. The *asiento* was a Spanish imperial supply contract held at different times by foreign merchants or companies; it did not transfer sovereignty over Spanish colonies.

The Barbados code. The 1661 Barbados statute organised slaveholding, punishment and policing in a colony undergoing rapid plantation expansion. Comparative legal histories trace its influence on later English colonial codes. Influence does not mean exact copying, and the manuscript avoids calling it the first slave code in the Atlantic.

Eighteenth-century peak. SlaveVoyages estimates place more than half of transatlantic embarkations in the eighteenth century. Britain led carriage during much of that century, while Portuguese and Brazilian traffic remained larger across the full chronology. Port leadership is period-specific: Liverpool became Britain's dominant slaving port, and Nantes was France's leading port.

The *Zong*. James Walvin reconstructs the 1781 killings and the 1783 insurance litigation. More than 130 captives were thrown overboard after navigational error, disease and a disputed water crisis. The case reached court as a commercial dispute, but it was an extreme episode and does not prove that deliberate killing for insurance was routine.

Purchase and inspection. Smallwood, Miller, Rediker and the voyage literature support the sequence of commercial cargo, coastal credit, inspection, confinement and assembly of captives. The precise practice differed by coast. The manuscript does not imply that every captive passed through a European fort or that European merchants personally conducted every inspection.

Shipboard routine and resistance. Smallwood, Mustakeem and Rediker establish gendered confinement, rationing, cleaning, forced movement, punishment and revolt planning. Terms such as *exercise* and *seasoning* are retained as commercial or managerial language whose apparent neutrality requires explanation.

The abolition movement. Christopher Leslie Brown, Sinha and primary writings by Equiano and Cugoana support the account of Quakers, Black organisers, women, consumers, local committees, Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce. The campaign founded in 1787 is a British organisational landmark, not the origin of resistance to slavery.

Haiti. Dubois and Ada Ferrer support the chronology from the 1791 uprising through French emancipation in 1793, metropolitan abolition in 1794, Napoleon's restoration of slavery elsewhere, the failed expedition and Haitian independence in 1804. The revolution involved changing factions and aims. Its result in Saint-Domingue was the destruction of the colonial slave regime and an independent Haiti.

British and United States prohibitions. The British Act received royal assent in 1807 and prohibited British participation in the trade. The United States Act passed in 1807 and took effect on 1 January 1808, the earliest federal prohibition date allowed by the Constitution. Neither measure emancipated people already enslaved, and smuggling and domestic trade continued.

Naval suppression. British treaties, naval patrols and mixed commissions intercepted trafficking during the nineteenth century. The records demonstrate both rescue from Atlantic sale and coercive aftermaths for

some liberated Africans. The text follows the scholarship in treating suppression as humanitarian action entangled with British imperial power, not as one motive cancelling the other.

Brazil, Cuba and the 1860s. SlaveVoyages, Klein and Ferrer support the continued nineteenth-century traffic towards Brazil and Cuba. Brazil's Eusébio de Queirós Law of 1850 was followed by effective suppression of imports; Cuba continued to receive illegal landings into the 1860s. The book avoids naming one uncontested final voyage because documentation, attempted voyages and successful landings produce different endpoints.

Emancipation dates. British emancipation began in most covered colonies in 1834, with compulsory apprenticeship ending in 1838. France abolished colonial slavery in 1848. United States constitutional abolition followed the Civil War in 1865. Cuba ended slavery in 1886 and Brazil in 1888. Each date names a legal change, not an instant end to coercion or racial hierarchy.

How we know. SlaveVoyages explains the relation between documented voyages and estimates. Smallwood, Fuentes and Mustakeem show the selection effects in commercial and legal archives. Equiano and Cugoano supply indispensable first-person and political evidence but cannot represent millions of experiences. The method described in the book combines aggregate, local, legal, material and testimonial evidence while preserving disagreement.

What People Get Wrong

Pre-existing African slavery. Thornton and Lovejoy reject both an empty-market story and the claim that Atlantic commerce merely continued an unchanged African institution. The effects differed by region, and European demand interacted with local warfare, punishment, debt and political ambition.

“Their own people.” The correction rests on political rather than racial identity. African sellers could bear direct responsibility for capture and sale while captives came from distinct communities or enemy polities. This does

not remove cases in which dependants or subjects were sold, and it does not assign identical power to every participant.

The triangle. The atlas and O'Malley demonstrate direct Brazil-Africa routes, multi-port circuits and intra-American redistribution. The triangle remains useful for some voyages and for showing linked commodities. It fails when promoted from route example to complete institutional map.

United States share. The roughly two-fifths, one-third and under-four-per-cent formulations are rounded destination estimates. They describe direct disembarkations from Africa. Walter Johnson and O'Malley support the separate importance of United States domestic and coastal trading.

Profit and protection. Quantitative studies show that merchants monitored mortality and that average rates changed over time. Smallwood, Mustakeem and the *Zong* scholarship demonstrate why this cannot be translated into welfare. Commercial maintenance occurred within armed confinement and ownership.

Capitalism and slavery. Williams, Drescher, Inikori, Blackburn and Kenneth Morgan disagree over mechanisms and causal weight. The manuscript deliberately rejects both peripheralisation and monocausality. Claims about one port, industry, firm or trade flow cannot silently become claims about an entire national economy.

Abolition and the account. Legislation changed legal status and enforceability, which was a material victory. The British compensation and apprenticeship settlement shows why emancipation was not the same as restitution. Hall and the Legacies of British Slavery database support tracing particular ownership claims; they do not prove that every later fortune or institution derives from one compensated estate.

Use It

Following chains. The chain lens is an analytical tool derived from the book's evidence. It distinguishes acts, alternatives, power and benefits rather than distributing equal blame. Applying it to modern institutions requires new evidence and cannot be done by analogy alone.

Reading commercial categories. Fuentes and Smallwood support reading records both for their technical information and against their reduction of people to property. The phrase *adult woman assessed as prime* in the body is explicitly a description of a commercial category, not a quotation from one identified record.

Scale, rate and distribution. SlaveVoyages separates embarkations, disembarkations, voyage counts, routes and estimated missing traffic. The distinctions in the body are methodological safeguards against combining incompatible denominators or time periods.

Transferability. Statutes, mortgages, wills and compensation claims show how law allowed ownership claims to survive changes of holder and form. The extension to other institutions is a lens for asking questions, not a claim that all transferable assets resemble property in people.

Tracing assets. The Legacies of British Slavery database and Hall and colleagues permit specific links among claims, beneficiaries, estates and later activities. Wealth can dissipate, divide or change form, so the text rejects automatic conclusions about descendants or present institutions.

Setting-specific evidence. Dunn's Jamaica and Virginia comparison is retained precisely because it demonstrates variation. The limits section makes clear that one plantation, British fleet or testimony cannot stand for the Atlantic system.

Terms

Legal and commercial vocabulary. Definitions of *asiento*, *factory*, *factor*, *partus sequitur ventrem*, *manumission* and *apprenticeship* follow the legal and commercial usage of the period. They are concise guides, not complete accounts of regional variation.

Packing language. *Tight packing* and *loose packing* name tendencies discussed in the scholarship, not two uniform operating manuals followed by every captain. Both remained strategies of forced confinement.

Plantation labour. *Gang labour* and *task system* describe contrasting labour organisations associated with particular crops and regions. Estates could mix practices, and neither term captures domestic, maritime, urban or skilled work in full.

Culture and dispersal. *Creolisation*, *diaspora* and *Black Atlantic* are analytical terms with substantial debates behind them. The definitions stress making and connection while guarding against the suggestion that forced migration was culturally beneficial.

Legitimate commerce. Nineteenth-century abolitionists and imperial officials used this phrase for exports promoted as alternatives to slave trading, including palm oil. The label did not prove that production relied on free labour or that European commercial pressure had become non-coercive.

Go Deeper

The atlas. The recommended edition is David Eltis, David Richardson and Philip Misevich, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, Yale University Press, 2026. It is the expanded edition published on 17 March 2026 and incorporates current SlaveVoyages data, additional maps of African origins and intra-American movement, and revised supporting material.

Smallwood. Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, Harvard University Press, 2007, is recommended for its close reconstruction of commodification through the

Gold Coast and Atlantic passage. Its regional concentration is stated in the recommendation.

Equiano. The edition is Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, edited by Vincent Carretta, revised edition, Penguin Classics, 2003. Carretta's biographical research identified two records suggesting a South Carolina birthplace, while Equiano described an African childhood. The recommendation discloses the dispute without treating it as settled or as grounds to discard the documented life and political work.

Thornton. John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, second edition, Cambridge University Press, 1998, is recommended for African political, economic and cultural agency. The note warns that later scholarship has challenged the degree of commercial autonomy assigned to some regions.

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