Great Events from History

The 18th Century

1701-1800
18th century

EXPANSION OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Benefiting from the complicity of European nations, the Atlantic slave trade expanded dramatically during the eighteenth century. This development set the stage for the mass transportation of Africans to the Americas, with more than 70 percent of all slaves arriving in the New World after 1700. Although an antislavery movement emerged in the late eighteenth century, economic influences obstructed its effectiveness.

LOCAL: West Africa; New World colonies
CATEGORIES: Trade and commerce; economics; social issues and reform; colonization

KEY FIGURES
John Hawkins (1532-1595), the first Englishman to trade in slaves between West Africa and the West Indies
Charles Pinckney (1757-1824), adviser to George Washington and a powerful political figure who argued that slavery was necessary in the colonies
William Wilberforce (1759-1833), leader of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade

SUMMARY OF EVENT
Portugal, which established the Atlantic slave trade in the mid-fifteenth century and remained its dominant force until the beginning of the eighteenth century, enslaved thousands of Africans for work on sugar plantations in Brazil. Operating on a limited scale initially, the trade increased after Christopher Columbus made his voyage in 1492 and opened the New World to Europeans. Beginning in the 1550’s, the Spanish transported Africans into their Central American and South American colonies. The French and the Dutch entered the trade in the 1650’s to provide workers for their holdings in the Caribbean.

In 1562, British admiral John Hawkins inaugurated the British slave trade by profitably transporting African captives during a three-year period (through 1565) to Caribbean colonies claimed and ruled by the Spanish. Because of Spain’s objections to this encroachment on its territory, England remained on the sidelines for another century. In the mid-1600’s the demand for labor in Britain’s Caribbean and North American colonies prompted British investors to enter the trade. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, England ruled the slave market, with both British seamen and those from the New England colonies pursuing the lucrative business. Great Britain and other European countries transported approximately three million Africans to the New World during the 1600’s. The next century saw that number double. It is estimated that eleven million Africans were enslaved and transported to the Americas and the Caribbean during the entire course of the slave trade.

The leaders of the various nations considered slaves essential to the expansion of their far-flung colonies, which produced profitable and popular commodities such as sugar, coffee, and tobacco. Charles Pinckney, a prominent politician, slaveholder, and close associate of George Washington, summed up his belief in the economic necessity of slavery by calling African slaves raw materials that were essential for planters to cultivate their land. Others involved in the trade justified the practice by arguing that slavery figured in the divine plan. By “rescuing” Africans from savagery and converting them to Christianity, they believed they were doing God’s work.

Considering the competitive nature of the trade, an endless series of disputes and clashes took place on the high seas and at various ports when one nation would accuse another of infringing on its territory. By winning the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) they fought against France, the British gained several French colonies in the Caribbean. Earlier, Great Britain faced the brutal First Maroon War in Jamaica when the British attempted to take the colony from Spain in 1730. The asiento de negros, established by the Spanish in the 1600’s, added to the complications. The asiento was essentially a license issued for a fee to supply slaves to a specific colony, but it was not always a guarantee against disputes. Slave uprisings and rebellions in Saint Vincent, Grenada, and Saint Domingue (which became Haiti in 1804) caused additional problems. Africa, too, faced upheavals brought by the slave trade. The unceasing demand for captives led to skirmishes between the coastal Africans who profited from the trade and those who lived in central Africa, the area from which most of the slaves were drawn.

Much has been recorded about the horrific conditions on what is known as the Middle Passage—the lengthy sea journey between Africa’s west coast and the Americas. Even though the human “cargo” was extremely valuable, the captives faced poor sanitary conditions, little if any medical attention, and inadequate types and amounts of food. As a result, many died during the first
DEALING IN SLAVES

Dutch West India Company employee William Bosman, the company’s chief factor, or European agent, at Elmina along the Guinea Coast in West Africa in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, documented slave dealing. Slave dealing and trading included the cooperation of local African chiefs, who would receive customs duty in exchange for giving the Europeans the right to buy slaves. The language here clearly evokes the “commodity” status of the African captives.

When these slaves come to Fida [in present-day Dahomey], they are put in Prison all together, and when we treat concerning buying them, they are all brought together in a large Plain; where by our Chirurgeons [surgeons], whose Providence it is, they are thoroughly examined, even to the smallest Member, and that naked too both Men and Women, without the least Distinction or Modesty. Those which are approved as good are set on one side; and the lame or faulty are set by as Invalides, which are here called Mackrons... The Invalides and the Maimed being thrown out... the remainder are numbered, and it is entered who delivered them. In the meanwhile, a burning Iron with the Arms or Name of the Companies, lies in the Fire; with which ours are marked on the Breast... but we yet take all possible care that they are not burned too hard, especially the Women who are more tender then the Men.

We are seldom long detained in the buying of these Slaves, because their price is established, the Women being... cheaper than the Men... When we have agreed with the Owners of the Slaves, they are returned to their Prison.


The Eighteenth Century

houses passed a law ending the transportation of slaves from Africa to the Caribbean and North American colonies. This act, which was influenced in part by economic circumstances, caused ripples throughout the European community, and one by one other nations followed suit. In the next few years most European nations abolished slavery as well, and, in 1833, the British parliament halted the practice throughout its global empire. The slave trade continued on a limited scale until Brazil and Cuba were pressured during the 1860’s into banning the importation of slaves.

Significance

The expansion of the slave trade marked a significant point in world history, but the stain it left did not miraculously vanish with its demise beginning in the early nineteenth century. The practice had long-lasting effects on both the slaves and their “masters.” The immediate impact was economic. Because the wealth Great Britain and other European nations gained through their colonial ventures relied on slave labor, abolition deprived plantation owners of their most vital resource. As a result, various forms of slavery and slave trading continued not only in the United States, where it was not abolished until 1863, but in other regions as well.

From the outset, African slaves had not been docile in their captivity. Uprisings took place in the 1700’s, and the resistance continued into the nineteenth century, with bands of runaway and freed slaves sabotaging plantations. At the same time, the freed slaves who wanted to settle and take advantage of the prosperity they had helped create found themselves outcasts and lived in conditions little different from enslavement. Although slavery had faded into the past, it was replaced by racism—a new form of bondage that was to have lasting consequences.

Africa’s role in the slave trade helped to determine the continent’s destiny. Through alliance with Great Britain and European countries, the coastal slave traders inadvertently opened up Africa to colonial exploitation. Once the overseas scramble for the continent succeeded, the

phase of their bondage. In some instances, the slave traders threw the sick overboard to prevent the spread of disease. One ship’s physician described how the deck, where hundreds of slaves were chained, was covered with blood, mucus, and excrement—a scene he found so repugnant that it lay beyond human imagination. After arriving in a foreign port, the dejected and frightened survivors faced humiliating auctions, where prospective buyers judged the survivors as if they were livestock.

Although England captured the market in the 1700’s, it would also lead the movement to end slave trading. Initial efforts concentrated on ending the trade, not slavery itself, even though that remained the ultimate goal of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (formed in 1787). Two years later, William Wilberforce joined the society. He was influenced by John Newton, a former slave trader who had experienced a dramatic conversion that led him into the ministry and into the abolition movement.

After years of urging the British parliament to abolish the trade, Wilberforce finally succeeded: In 1807 both
empire builders no longer transported Africans into bondage but enslaved them on their own land.
—Robert Ross

FURTHER READING
———. *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora*. London: Cassell, 2000. Walvin stresses Great Britain’s crucial role not only in the slave trade but in the abolition movement as well. Points out that slavery laid the economic foundations of the modern world and continues to exert influence on racial attitudes.


RELATED ARTICLES in *Great Lives from History: The Eighteenth Century, 1701-1800*: Benjamin Banneker; Joseph Boulogne; Olaudah Equiano; Benjamin Franklin; First Earl of Mansfield; Nanny; Guillaume-Thomas Raynal; Benjamin Rush; Samuel Sewall; Granville Sharp; Toussaint Louverture; George Washington; Phillis Wheatley; William Wilberforce.