

The Triangular Trade

A typical slave trading arrangement followed a triangular pattern. On the first leg of the journey, a ship called a slaver was loaded with salt, cloth, weapons, hardware, beads, and rum. It sailed from a port in Europe to a port in Africa, usually one along the western coast. There, the ship's captain traded the cargo for Africans who had been enslaved. On the second leg of the journey, the grueling "middle passage" that lasted 10 or more weeks, the Africans were loaded into the slaver's hold and shipped across the Atlantic. Often in chains, they were packed so tightly that they could not even lie down. Once in the New World, Africans were either sold immediately to plantation owners or placed in stockades to be auctioned off when the demand was greater. To conclude the triangular trade, exotic plantation products such as sugar, molasses, tobacco, and rum were loaded into the slaver's now empty hold and shipped to Europe to be sold.

The Numbers Game

The number of human beings victimized by the slave trade was very high. Although estimates vary, at least 10 million Africans were supplied to plantations in the Western Hemisphere over a 400-year period, not counting the ones that died along the way-- according to estimates, 15 to 25 of every 100 people loaded onto the ships. The greatest numbers were carried to the Caribbean and to Brazil, where the largest plantations were located. Smaller numbers were sent to British North America and Spanish Middle America. Not until the early nineteenth century did the slave trade begin to diminish, thanks partly to growing sentiment against the traffic in human beings and partly to the fact that the technology of the Industrial Revolution was making slavery obsolete. The trade was made illegal in the United States and in Britain's colonies in 1807. In 1833 the British parliament passed a law abolishing slavery in all British territories. Britain tried to force other nations to follow its example by posting British warships to patrol the coasts of Africa and to seize slavers and free their human cargoes. But many slavers continued to slip through the British blockade. The slave trade did not completely end until the New World countries passed laws freeing their own slaves, as did the United States in 1865 and Brazil in 1888.

What part do the colonies play in the mercantilism game?

Was triangular a product of mercantilism or a cause of mercantilism?