

New England and the African Slave Trade

In the United States, slavery is often thought of as a Southern institution. Many people today are unaware of the extent of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century North, particularly New England. Long thought of as the birthplace of the anti-slavery movement, New England has a more complex history of slavery and slave trading than many realize.

In the four hundred years after Columbus first sailed to the New World, some twelve million Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves. About 500,000 of these people came to mainland North America, what is now the United States. The first Africans to arrive in the colonies came in 1619, when a Dutch ship sold twenty slaves to people living in the Virginian colony of Jamestown. But slavery was not confined to the South. It existed in all thirteen American colonies and for a time in all thirteen of the first states. The transatlantic slave trade was history's first great global industry. Ships from Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Holland, and Denmark traveled to the African coast to load their holds with people. The risks of such trade were many—storms, pirates, disease, and rebellions were common—but the profits were great. Much of the wealth of modern western nations flows, either directly or indirectly, from the trade in human cargo: slaves.

Colonial North American ships began to participate in the slave trade as early as the 1640s. Almost all of colonial America's slave ships originated in New England. Confronted with a landscape and climate unsuitable for large-scale commercial farming, New Englanders looked to the sea for their livelihood.

As a result, in the eighteenth century, New Englanders developed what came to be known as the Triangular Trade. Ships carried sugar and molasses from the plantation colonies of the Caribbean to New England where colonists distilled it into rum. Merchants then shipped this rum to

Africa where it was exchanged for slaves, who were carried back to the Caribbean to produce more sugar.

Some Africans were brought back to New England. Because paid employees were often unavailable or too expensive to use profitably, many New Englanders chose to purchase enslaved Africans. Though the vast majority of the slaves were carried to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and South America, by 1755, more than thirteen thousand enslaved people were working in New England.

The first recorded New England slave voyage sailed from the city of Boston, Massachusetts in 1644. By the 1670s, Massachusetts traders were regularly carrying slaves between Africa and the Caribbean. Rhode Islanders entered the trade in about 1700. By the middle of the eighteenth century, upwards of twenty ships per year sailed for Africa from the tiny colony, most of them from the city of Newport. Two-thirds of Rhode Island's fleet was engaged in the slave trade. Over the next century, more than 60 percent of the North American ships involved in the African slave trade were based in Rhode Island.

As a proportion of the transatlantic trade as a whole, the Rhode Island slave trade was quite modest. In all, perhaps one hundred thousand Africans were carried to the New World in Rhode Island ships. However, in a small colony like Rhode Island, the slave trade became a crucial economic engine. The trade brought great wealth to some merchants and investors and created jobs for thousands of others. In addition to the sailors employed in the trade, many people worked in industries dependent on the slave trade, from rope making to iron forging, from candle manufacturing to carpentry. Distilling provides perhaps the best example. By the 1760s, the Rhode Island city of Newport alone boasted nearly two dozen distilleries, transforming Caribbean molasses into rum.

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