

African Immigration to Colonial America [Abridged]

by Ira Berlin

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African American life in the United States has been framed by migrations, forced and free. [While multiple massive movements have shaped and reshaped African American life, none was more important than the first, the so-called Middle Passage from Africa to America. This] forced migration from Africa—the transatlantic slave trade—carried black people to the Americas.

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More than any other single migration the Middle Passage has come to epitomize the experience of people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world. The nightmarish weeks and sometimes months locked in the holds of stinking slave ships speak to the traumatic loss of freedom, the degradation of enslavement, and the long years of bondage that followed. But the Middle Passage also represents the will to survive, the determination of black people not to be dehumanized by dehumanizing circumstances, and the confidence that freedom would eventually be theirs and that they would take their rightful place as a people among peoples.

The transatlantic slave trade had its beginning in the middle of the fifteenth century when Portuguese ships sailed down the West African coast. The intention was to trade for gold and spices, but the voyagers found another even more valuable commodity—human beings. Over time, the trade in men and women supplanted other commerce, and the slaves' destination changed from Europe to the Americas, where plantations growing commodities for the international market initiated the massive transfer of African peoples. In all, some eleven to twelve million Africans were forcibly carried to the Americas. Of those, roughly one-half million (or about 4.5 percent) were taken to mainland North America or what became the United States.

The first black men and women arrived in mainland North America in the sixteenth century, often accompanying European explorers. For the next century or so, they continued to trickle onto the continent in small numbers, often not from Africa itself but from Europe, the Antilles, or other parts of the Atlantic littoral. Dubbed “Atlantic Creoles” because of their connection with the ocean that linked Africa, Europe, and the Americas, many of these first arrivals spoke the language of their enslavers and were familiar with the various religions, commercial conventions, and systems of jurisprudence of the Atlantic. Entering frontier societies in which Europeans also worked in some form of bound labor (indentured servitude being the most prominent), black men and women employed their knowledge of the Atlantic world to integrate themselves into the European settlements. Much like other settlers, free and unfree, they joined churches, participated in exchange economies, and formed families.

With the advent of the plantation in mainland North America, the nature of slavery and then the slave trade changed. The beginnings of plantation production—tobacco in the Chesapeake in the late seventeenth

century and rice in the Lowcountry in the early eighteenth century—increased the level of violence, exploitation, and brutality in these regions. Slaves worked harder, propelling their owners to new, previously unimagined heights of wealth and power. As they did, slave owners expanded their plantations and demanded more and more slaves, as slaves proved to be an extraordinarily valuable form of labor. Not only were they workers, but they reproduced themselves, adding to the owners' wealth. Rather than arriving in ones and twos from the Atlantic littoral, boatloads of captives—generally drawn from the African interior—crossed the ocean. Although slavers deposited their human cargoes in ports from Providence to New Orleans, the vast majority of slaves who disembarked in mainland North America did so in the Chesapeake (largely Virginia and Maryland) and the Lowcountry (largely South Carolina, and Georgia).

Slaves imported directly from Africa—distinguished from Atlantic Creoles—first landed in the Chesapeake in large numbers during the last decades of the seventeenth century. Following the legalization of chattel bondage in the 1660s, they slowly replaced European and African indentured servants as the main source of plantation labor. Although black people never challenged white numerical dominance in the region, they achieved majorities in a few localities. For many European settlers, it seemed as if the Chesapeake would “some time or other be confirmed by the name of New Guinea.”

Just as the Chesapeake was about to become an extension of West Africa, the dynamics of black life changed dramatically. Slaves in the Chesapeake, in the words of one European observer, proved “very prolifick among themselves.” By the 1730s, births to slave women outnumbered imports, and the black population was increasing naturally. Although transatlantic slavers continued to deliver their cargoes to the great estuary, the proportion of Africans declined as the indigenous African American population increased. By mid-century, the majority of enslaved men and women in the Chesapeake had never seen Africa. At the start of the American Revolution, the first Great Migration was over in the Chesapeake. A native people began to sink deep roots in soils of mainland North America.

The slave trade continued, however, in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia. There the forced migration from Africa followed a trajectory similar to that of the Chesapeake, but it started later and continued longer. As a result, the number of Africans who entered the Lowcountry—almost 400,000—was more than double the number of Africans who came to the Chesapeake. Sullivan's Island, a tiny quarantine station in Charleston harbor, became the Ellis Island of black America.

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For much of eighteenth century, black people in South Carolina and Georgia—unlike those in Maryland and Virginia—resided in an immigrant society, more an extension of Africa than of Europe. With the slave trade open and the influx of “saltwater slaves” nearly continuous, lowland slaves had great difficulty forming families and reproducing themselves. The gender ratio among the newly arriving saltwater slaves was usually dramatically skewed, and acculturated slaves sometimes were reluctant to create families with the new arrivals. But by the middle of the eighteenth century, the black population of the Lowcountry began to reproduce itself and the number of African Americans grew, although it did so in tandem with newly arrived

Africans. If at mid-century slaves in the Chesapeake had few opportunities to converse with Africans, Africans and African Americans in the Lowcountry knew each other well.

[...]

The captives' nationality was not [chosen randomly]. Europeans slavers developed specialties, in some measure to meet the demands of their customers on both sides of the Atlantic, whose preferences and needs grew increasingly well-defined over time. Preferences on both sides of the Atlantic determined, to a considerable degree, which enslaved Africans went where and when, populating the mainland with unique combinations of African peoples and creating distinctive regional variations in the Americas. Igbo peoples constituted the majority of African slaves in Virginia and Maryland, so much so that some historians have denominated colonial Virginia as "Igbo land." A different pattern emerged in Lowcountry South Carolina and Georgia, where slaves from central Africa predominated from the beginning of large-scale importation, so that if Virginia was Igbo land, the Lowcountry might be likened to a new Angola.

But if patterns of African settlement can be discerned, they never created regional homogeneity. The general thrust of the slave trade was toward heterogeneity, throwing different people together in ways that undermined the transfer of any single culture. Mainland North America became a jumble of African nationalities. Their interaction—not their homogeneity—created new African American cultures.

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No matter their nationality, Africans shipped to the New World endured the trauma of enslavement. Captured deep in the African interior, Africans faced a long, deadly march to the coast. Traveling sometimes for months, they were passed from group to group, as many different African nations participated in the slave trade. [...] The circumstances of their travel were extraordinarily taxing. In some places, some forty percent of the slaves died between their initial capture in the interior and their arrival on the coast.

The captives then faced the nightmarish transatlantic crossing. The depths of human misery and the astounding death toll of men and women packed in the stinking hulls still remains difficult to fathom. Stripped naked and bereft of their every belonging, they boarded the ship and encountered—often for the first time—white men. Brandishing hot irons to mark their captives in the most personal way, these "white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair" left more than a physical scar. Many enslaved Africans concluded that the white men were in league with the devil, if not themselves devils. For other Africans, the trauma of having their skin seared confirmed that they were bound for the slaughterhouse to be eaten by the cannibals, who had stamped them in much the way animals were marked.

Surviving the Middle Passage was but the first of the many tests faced by the forced immigrants. Once African peoples disembarked, new anxieties compensated for whatever relief they gained from the end of the shipboard journey. Indeed the shock of arrival only repeated the trauma of African enslavement. Staggering to their feet, bodies still bent from their weeks below deck, shaking with apprehension, the captives were fitted with a new set of shackles—a painful welcome to their new homeland. The captives again confronted the auction block and the prospect of being poked and prodded by strange white men speaking strange languages,

intent on demonstrating their mastery. Marched in chains to some isolated, backwoods plantation, forced to labor long hours at unfamiliar tasks, enslaved black men and women began their lives in mainland North America. It was a grim existence, as their debilitating work regime, drafty dormitories, and bland rations invited an early death. Within months of arrival, many of the new immigrants—ridiculed as "outlandish" by their owners—were dead.

But slowly, inexorably, the survivors made the new land their own. Transplanted Africans began to master the languages of North America, learned to traverse the countryside, formed friendships, pieced together new lineages from real and fictive kin, and created a new sacred world. Their children, who knew no other land, took root in American soil and made the land that had been forced on their parents their own. Like most other Americans, they too were the children of immigrants—but immigrants of a very different kind.

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