The Middle Passage

Nowhere in the annals of history have a people experienced such a long and traumatic ordeal as Africans during the African slave trade. Over the nearly four centuries of the slave trade – which continued until the end of the Civil War - millions of African men, women, and children were savagely torn from their homeland, herded onto ships, and dispersed all over the so-called New World. Although there is no way to compute exactly how many people perished, it has been estimated that between thirty and sixty million Africans were subjected to this horrendous triangular trade system and that only one third – if that – of those people survived.

The triangular trade system was so named because the ship embarked from European ports, stopped in Africa to gather the captives, after which they set out for the New World to deliver their human cargo, and then returned to their port of origin. The Middle Passage was that leg of the slave trade triangle that brought the human cargo from West Africa to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. This perilous trip was the most cruel and terrifying part of the triangular trade system, and its crippling effects are still very much with us today.

To endure the Middle Passage required great physical strength, mental toughness, and spiritual resolve. Under ideal sailing conditions the trip from Africa to the Americas could be completed in little over a month, but conditions were never ideal during the Middle Passage, and the average voyage took from five to twelve weeks.

It was not atypical to see a massive school of sharks darting in and out of the wake of the ships filled with human cargo plying the Atlantic. For miles they followed the battered and moldy vessels, waiting to attack the disease-ravaged black bodies that were periodically tossed into the ocean. Except for mutiny, death was the only liberation these tormented souls could expect from the stifling, fetid hold of the ship, where they had been crammed for more than a month, and where the menace of smallpox was especially fearsome.

Pinioned in the stench between the ship’s decks, shackled two by two, the right wrist and ankle of one to the left wrist and ankle of another, the African captives struggled to breathe, struggled to find comfort on rough boards that tore at their naked bodies with each lurch of the ship. The captives’ cries of grief erupted in several different tongues; their moans and wails a common chorus of misery and hopelessness. They were human ballast (weight), abducted from family and friends, severed from a communal life that throbbed with compassion and possibility. The agony was so relentless, their deprivation so deep and terrible, that even the sky became a faded memory.

Amid their fear and anxiety they must have wondered if they would ever see a palm tree again, ever taste once more its sweet sap and brush its silky leaves. Would they ever hear the thunder of Africa and stand in the warm and gentle rains that nourished their crops? Would they know again what it felt like to run in fields overgrown with elephant grass, where golden calabashes glistened in the sun?
In the dank, crowded hold, which was about five feet high, the captives were confined in the prone position, occupying no more space than a coffin. On the larger slave ships this limited space was further constricted by a horizontal shelf or platform in the middle of it, making it possible for a second row of captives to be shelved. This practice was particularly evident on vessels captained by the dreaded “tight packers,” those slavers who chose to compensate for their anticipated losses by hauling more human cargo than specified by regulations based on the size of the ship. That is, if a ship were restricted to carrying three hundred captives and the shipping company’s contract called for two hundred and fifty, the captain would pack three hundred and fifty people on board to make up for those who would likely succumb to sickness or be killed during an uprising.

On the other hand, the captains who were “loose packers” believed that by giving the Africans a little more room, with better food and a limited amount of exercise and liberty, they would reduce the mortality rate and thereby command a better price for the captives at the end of the voyage. However, because the profits from the slave trade were so great, most of the slavers during the eighteenth century were tight packers.

John Newton, himself a slave-ship captain, witnessed this nefarious practice and reported on the captives’ cramped quarters and the heavy leg irons that linked them together: “Every morning, perhaps, more instances than one are found of the living and the dead fastened together.” After several voyages Newton quit the slave trade, became a minister and wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” with its autobiographical line “... that saved a wretch like me.”

Many of the Africans huddled in the darkness cursed their fate, while others prayed and shrieked in horror each time the hatch cover closed above, virtually entombing them. They had no idea what to expect; what cruel injustices still remained on the captors’ list of degradation. Having been stripped from their homeland, from their gods, they could only guess what bitter misfortune awaited them. Were they to be eaten or sacrificed to the gods of their captors? The weaker ones in the hold begged their chain-mates to kill them while they slept. Others slipped into severe melancholy and trances, while others simply went mad. Even for those who survived the lice, fleas, and vicious rats, there were still the violent crews waiting topside to torture the men and to rape the women. The Middle Passage, the second leg of the Atlantic slave trade, was a horrendous experience, and death followed the ships like the wind.

The manacled and terrified Africans knew very little about the process in which they had been ensnared. While there were those among them who had experienced slavery in Africa, they were not prepared for this new form of captivity that dehumanized them and carted them away from their cherished homeland. Slavery in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans was comparatively benign; it was more akin to indentured servitude, where slaves sometimes even rose to positions of influence. In this respect it can be likened to the slavery of Ancient Greece and
Ancient Rome. The Africans knew nothing of the enforced chattel slavery of the invaders. Nor did they know who they were or from whence they come.

Among the European invaders, the Portuguese led the way, although their explorations came eight hundred years after the Arab slave trade began across the Sahara Desert and which later occurred with increased frequency along the coast of East Africa. For years the Portuguese mariners had heard stories about the great riches of Africa, and they began to trade with the African countries as early as 1434. During these early trading expeditions along the coast of West Africa the Portuguese were mainly interested in gold. But soon they envisioned in the African people reserves of cheap labor. Black humanity was suddenly more precious than gold. By 1482 the Portuguese had erected the fortress of Elmina Castle on the West Coast of Africa, near present-day Takoradi, Ghana, in order to stabilize the process of capture and detention of slaves.

The Portuguese were followed by the Spanish entry into the slave trade. Yet even though slaves were taken in large numbers to Spain’s New World settlements, the Spanish did not have a prominent role in the trade itself. Toward the end of the fifteenth century the English and the French entered the slave traffic. However, the first real challenge to the Portuguese was the relatively late Dutch involvement. The Dutch were ruthless in their attempts to catch up, and in twenty years they established a monopoly in the West African slave trade. This lead was not threatened until the middle of the seventeenth century, when the English and French intensified their activities. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English continued their participation in slaving on the West Coast of Africa until well into the nineteenth century, and even during the Civil War. And many of these captives were delivered to merchants in the United States.

To facilitate the capture of Africans, the Europeans devised a method of divide and conquer, pitting one African village against the other, and then taking the spoils for themselves. The Africans were soon confronted with a dilemma; either capture or be captured. To reject the guns offered by the invaders in exchange for other Africans often proved detrimental to the village because those same guns could end up in the hands of a traditional enemy, giving them a military advantage. No doubt those Africans who participated in the trade lived to regret their involvement. In a letter to the King of Portugal in 1526, King Affonso of the Congo, an African baptized and educated by white missionaries, wrote: “We cannot reckon how great the damage (of the trade) is, since the merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives... We beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, commanding your factors (buying agents) that they should not send either merchants or wares, because it is our will that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them...” King Affonso’s plea fell on deaf ears.

In contrast, the European temperament was shaped in part by a thousand-year-old feudal system, which was a form of slavery. Europeans came from societies where nature was stingy; where brother competed against brother for his breakfast, land,
and women. Europe was just emerging from the Middle Ages, a time when poverty and disease were rampant, “an age haunted by death and damnation.” The Africans had never dealt with such a fiercely competitive people, a people set on asserting its dominance at any cost.

With the establishment of numerous small forts or large castles along the West African coast, the slave trade operated smoothly for the Europeans. Without the construction of these terminals – which were often under the control of Europeans recently freed from prison dungeons and given a new lease on life – the slave trade would have been a haphazard operation. The forts and castles made it possible for captives to be conveniently warehoused until ships arrived to transport them across the sea. Of the numerous coastal slave forts, most were located in present-day Ghana, a place the Portuguese called the Gold Coast, and which eventually became the hub of the European slave trade. If a sufficient supply of captives were not available at a designated fort, it was possible to meet a contract by procuring them from others nearby. Another prominent fort located on Goree Island, off the coast of Senegal, was a central point controlled by the French.

The misery the captured people experienced in these forts or castles were exceeded only by the horrific conditions in the holds of slave vessels. To some degree, for thousands of Africans these dungeons were harbingers of the tragedy ahead. The captives were as tightly packed in the forts as they would be in the ships; at times during the early years of the trade there were as many as three hundred to five hundred captives imprisoned in a fort. And for the unruly captives who refused to obey the sting of whips, there was solitary confinement in small boxes with a hole at the top to allow the captive’s head to protrude.

After the slavers exhausted the supply of villagers around the forts, they pushed inland. Millions of Africans perished during these raids on villages and on the long marches to the forts where their movements were restrained by coffles (caravans of African slaves fastened together). Later many more of them would die in the filthy dungeons.

Each fort had a door of no return through which captives exited, leaving their beloved homeland for the last time. By the time they were herded down through that door and onto the beach, they had begun not only a journey across an ocean of despair, but on a nightmare of African family destruction.

African captives found a measure of relief on the slave ships though revolts and mutinies, which were a common occurrence. One clear indication of this is the costly insurance premium the shipping companies had to pay. Lloyd’s of London, one of the world’s wealthiest insurance companies, was virtually launched by insuring slave ships. Certainly the Africans did not accept their servitude peacefully. To deter the possibility of mutiny, the captives – particularly the men - were kept chained at all times, even during the brief periods topside when they were forced to exercise by dancing and jumping, in order to protect the slavers’ investments as well as to vest mounting hostility. Africans playing banjos, and beating drums or upturned kettles
often accompanied these exercises. Even so, the potential mutiny was an event that bothered the sleep of every captain of a slave ship.

Nor did the crew rest without fear. In fact there was little rest for them at all as they faced an endless round of duties. They were lucky to survive one voyage, and rarely made a second. The conditions of their employment forced them to deny the humanity of the Africans; and all too often they began to question the value of their own humanity.

There were successful uprisings in which the Africans gained control of the ships and were able to steer them back to their homeland. A memorable mutiny was led by Joseph Cinque (sink) in 1839. Cinque and the other rebels killed the captain and took over the slaver Amistad. They were eventually captured and tried for murder and piracy on the high sea. However, in the end they were acquitted of all charges. Other revolts resulted in the loss of crewmembers as well as captives. Those who could not mutiny resorted to other forms of resistance. Women were often the most troublesome. They devise ways of making constant, loud, and unnerving noises that would drive the crews to distraction. And of course there were many who chose suicide – mainly by jumping into the shark-infested ocean – rather than allow the Europeans to determine their destiny.

But despite the miserable conditions, inadequate space and food, deadly diseases, and the violence from crewmembers, millions of African captives survived, demonstrating their strength and implacable will. In humankind’s shameful history of forced migrations, the journey of the Africans from their bountiful homeland to the slave markets of the New World is one of the most tragic. It is a story that can never be told in all its gruesome details. Of the countless number of Africans ripped from the villages of Africa – from the Senegal River to northern Angola – during the nearly four centuries of the slave trade, approximately one third of them died on the torturous march to the ships and one third died in the holding stations on both sides of the Atlantic or on the ships. It is estimated that ten to twenty million arrived in the New World alive, to be then committed to bondage. If the Atlantic were to dry up, it would reveal a scattered pathway of human bones, African bones marking the various routes of the Middle Passage.

But those who did survive multiplied, and have contributed to the creation of a new human society in the Americas and the Caribbean. It is a testament to the vitality and fortitude of the Africans that ten to twenty million lived through the heinous ordeal that many consider the greatest crime ever committed against a people in human history.
Slave narratives taken from Julies Lester’s book “To Be a Slave”. Additional information is also provided.

They took the sick and the dead and dropped them into the sea like empty wine barrels. But wine barrels did not have beating hearts, crying eyes, and screaming mouths.

I think often of those ancestors of mine whose names I do not know, whose names I will never know, those ancestors who saw people thrown into the sea like promises casually made and easily broken. It was primarily the youngest and strongest who survived the Middle Passage, that three-month-long ocean voyage from the western shores of Africa to the so-call New World. My ancestors might have been young when the slave ship left, but when it docked, they were haunted by memories of kinsmen tossed into the sea like promises never meant to be kept, and of gulls crying like mourners. They could still hear the wind wailing at the sight of black bodies bobbing in blue water like bottles carrying notes nobody would ever read.

So many Africans were thrown into the sea; sharks swam alongside slave ships, waiting for the inevitable bodies. From approximately 1518 until 1865, ships from Great Britain, Holland, Portugal, France, and the United States brought Africans to the New World to work for no money.

Millions were taken. No one knows how many millions died. Except the sharks.

Side by side they lay coffin straight, coffin narrow, coffin black.
Side by side they lay, alive, alive, oh so alive.

*It is difficult to imagine times and places long past. We must try if we are to redeem those times and ourselves. The means by which we can do this is the imagination, which gives flesh and blood and soul to part – and present. Each of those millions of Africans was/is a story, just as you and I are stories.*

Voice One: The darkness was blacker than any night. Where was my father? My mother? Did they know where I was? Why didn’t they come and get me? Did they ever know what happened to me?

Voice Two: Our bodies did what they had to do where we lay. Urine and excrement fell on me from above, and mine onto those below. The smell was a thick as hatred.

Voice Three: I was shackled by my wrists and ankles to a man on my right and one on my left. I could not stand. I could not turn over. I will never understand what I did to deserve this.

*The African slave trade was already over a hundred years old when the Dutch ship landed twenty Africans at the Jamestown colony in 1619. Portugal had introduced Africans to Europe in the early sixteenth century. The slave trade soon extended into England and Spain and to their colonies in the New World of the Americas when*
it was discovered. Africans accompanied Spanish explorers on their journeys to the New World. There were thirty blacks with Balboa when he discovered the Pacific Ocean; blacks accompanied Pizarro to Peru, Coronado to New Mexico, Narvaez and Cabeza de Vaca in their explorations of what is now Arizona and New Mexico. Blacks also accompanied the French explorers to Canada and the Mississippi River valley. Thus blacks were a part of the New World long before the Mayflower, even before the settling of Jamestown in 1607.

Yet even with the existence of a slave trade and the early presence of blacks in what was to become the United States, slavery was not introduced immediately. The English colonists were in great need of labor to help settle their new colonies. At first they tried to use the Indians. This proved impossible. The Indians came from a society and a way of life that was relatively uncomplicated. This background did not prepare them for the disciplined and complex way of life and work necessary for the plantation system. They also proved to be very susceptible to the diseases of the colonists. Everywhere Indian labor was used; it proved to be highly unsuccessful.

England then tried sending poor whites, prisoners, and debtors from England and Ireland to the American colonies. Men, women and children were often kidnapped and sent to America to work. These whites were held in indentured servants for seven years and then released. This soon created the need for a continual supply of people to work. Another disadvantage was simply the fact that a white indentured servant could run away, and because he was white, he could go to another place, change his name, and have no fear of being caught.

Gradually the English colonists turned to Africans as the ideal solution. Because they were black, it would be difficult for them to run away and escape detection. Too, they could be bought outright and held for as long as they lived. And finally, the supply was inexhaustible. Eighteen years after the first Africans came to the Jamestown colony, the first American-built slave ship sailed from Marblehead, Massachusetts. Its name was the Desire. The slave ships sailed to the west coast of Africa, and there the captains of the slave vessels went about their job of loading the ships with blacks to bring to America.

Granny Judith said that in Africa they had very few pretty things, and that they had no red colors in cloth at all. Some strangers with pale faces come one day and dropped a small piece of red flannel down on the ground. All the black folks grabbed for it. Then a larger piece was dropped a little further on, and on until the river was reached. Then a large piece was dropped in the river and on the other side. They was led on, each one trying to get a piece as it was dropped. Finally, when the ship was reached, they dropped large pieces on the plank and up into the ship till they got as many blacks on board as they wanted. Then the gate was chained up and they could not get back. That is the way Granny Judith say they got her to America.

Richard Jones, Botkin, p57

The capture of Africans was usually much more difficult than this. When the slave trade began, West Africa had a highly developed civilization, with complex economic
and political institutions. It was because of their sophisticated civilization that they could be used so easily in the rapidly growing economy of America.

Generally the slave trade was carried out in one of three ways. The first and easiest was simply to lie in wait until somebody came by, and then capture him. This method soon gave way to an alliance between white slave traders and black African tribal chiefs. The African chief would make war on another tribe for the purpose of capturing as many people as possible. He would turn them over to the white slave traders I exchange for various items the chief wanted – tobacco, guns, ammunition, liquor. This arrangement evolved into a more complicated one in which one African chief would align with another chief, who would agree to sell some of his own tribesmen, or others he had captured in a battle. He would be paid in goods for these soon-to-be slaves by the first African chief, who in turn would sell them to a white slave trader.

Charles Ball, a slave in the early nineteenth century, came into contact with many Africans who had been brought to America. His own grandfather had come from Africa, and as a child Ball had heard many stories about Africa from him. In his autobiography he recorded the story of one slave who was brought from Africa to America.

... we were alarmed one morning, just at the break of day, by the horrible uproar caused by mingled shouts of men, and blows given with heavy sticks, upon large wooden drums. The village was surrounded by enemies, who attacked us with clubs, long wooden spears, and bows and arrows. After fighting for more than an hour, those who were not fortunate enough to run away were made prisoners. It was not the object of our enemies to kill; they wished to take us alive and sell us as slaves. I was knocked down by a heavy blow of a club, and when I recovered from the stupor that followed, I found myself tied fast with the long rope I had brought from the desert...

We were immediately led away from this village, through the forest, and were compelled to travel all day as fast as we could walk ... We traveled three weeks in the woods – sometimes without any path at all – and arrived one day at a large river with a rapid current. Here we were forced to help our conquerors to roll a great number of dead trees into the water from a vast pile that had been thrown together by high floods.

These trees, being dry and light, floated high out of the water; and when several of them were fastened together with the tough branches of young trees, (they) formed a raft, upon which we all placed ourselves, and descended the river for three days, when we came in sight of what appeared to me the most wonderful object in the world; this was a large ship at anchor in the river. When our raft came near the ship, the white people – for such they were on board – assisted to take us on the deck and the logs were suffered to float down the river.
I had never seen white people before and they appeared to me the ugliest creatures in the world. The persons who brought us down the river received payment for us of the people in the ship, in various articles, of which I remember that a keg or liquor, and some yards of blue and red cotton cloth were the principal.

Ball, p 158-159

... he (the ships doctor) made the most of the room, and wedged them in. They had not so much room as a man in his coffin, either in length or breadth. It was impossible for them to turn or shift with any degree of ease. He had often occasion to go from one side of their room to the other, in which case he always took off his shoes, but could not avoid pinching them; he has the marks on his feet where they bit and scratched him. In every voyage when the ship was full they complained of heat and want of air. Confinement in this situation was so injurious that he has known them go down apparently in good health at night and found dead in the morning. On his last voyage he opened a stout man who so died. He found the contents of the thorax and abdomen healthy, and therefore concludes he died of suffocation in the night.

Evidence on the Slave Trade, p 47

*Others died because they took their own lives rather than live as slaves.*

At the time we came into this ship, she was full of black people, who were all confined in a dark and low place, in irons. The women were in irons as well as the men.

About twenty persons were seized in our village at the time I was and amongst these were three children so young that they were not able to walk or to eat any hard substance. The mothers of these children had brought them all the way with them and had them in their arms when we were taken on board this ship.

When they put us in irons to be sent to our place of confinement in the ship, the men who fastened the irons on these mothers took the children out of their hands and threw them over the side of the ship into the water. When this was done, two of the women leaped overboard after the children – the third was already confined by a chain to another woman and could not get into the water, but in struggling to disengage herself, she broke her arm and died a few days after of fever. One of the two women who were in the river was carried down by the weight of her irons before she could be rescued; but the other was taken up by some men in a boat and brought on board. This woman threw herself overboard one night when we were at sea.

The weather was very hot whilst we lay in the river and many of us died every day; but the number brought on board greatly exceeded those who died, and at the end of two weeks, the place in which we were confined was so full that no one could lie down; and we were obliged to sit all the time, for the room was not high enough for us to stand. When our prison could hold no more, the ship sailed down the river;
and on the night of the second night after she sailed, I heard the roaring of the ocean as it dashed against her sides.

After we had been at sea some days, the irons were removed from the women and they were permitted to go upon deck; but whenever the wind blew high, they were driven down amongst us.

We had nothing to eat but yams, which were thrown amongst us at random – and of these we had scarcely enough to support life. More than one third of us died on the passage and when we arrived at Charleston, I was not able to stand. It was more than a week after I left the ship before I could straighten my limbs.

Ball, p. 159-190

... the man had not taken his food and refused taking any. Mild means were then used to divert him from his resolution, as well as promises that he should have anything he wished for; but he still refused to eat. They then whipped him, but this also was ineffectual. He always kept his teeth so fast that it was impossible to get anything down ... In this state he was four or five days, when he was brought up as dead to be thrown overboard; but Mr. Wilson, finding life still existing, repeated his endeavors though in vain, and two days afterwards he was brought up again in the same state as before. He then seemed to wish to get up. The crew assisted him and brought him aft to the fireplace, when in a feeble voice in his own tongue he asked for water, which was given him. Upon this they began to have hopes of dissuading him from his design, but he again shut his teen as fast as ever, and resolved to die, and on the ninth day from his first refusal he died.

Evidence on the Slave Trade, p. 52

It is estimated that some fifty million people were taken from the continent during the years of the slave trade. These fifty million were, of course, the youngest, the strongest, those most capable of bringing great profit, first to the slave trader, and later to the slave owner. These Africans were scattered throughout South America, the islands of the West Indies, and the United States. Africa’s citizens became the laboring backbone of much of the western hemisphere.

Slavery differed from country to country. But it was in the United States that a system of slavery evolved that was more cruel and total than almost any other system of slavery devised by one group of men against another. No other country where blacks were enslaved destroyed African culture to the extent that it was destroyed here. Today there still exist, in South America and Caribbean Islands, African religions, music, and language, which came over on the slave ships. Only fragments of Africa remain among the blacks of the United States.

The slavery instituted by the founders of America has few comparisons for its far-reaching cruelty.