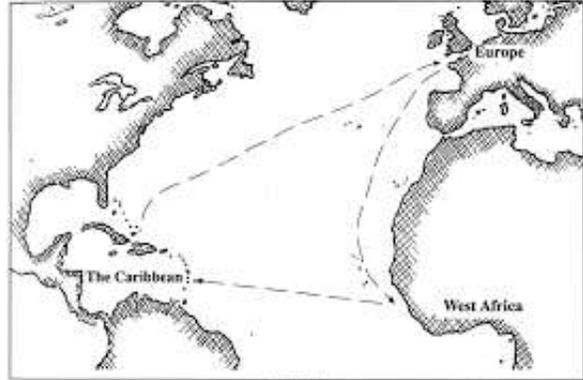


THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE

Colonists in the New World soon discovered that large tracts of land could be purchased and cultivated—yielding an abundance of crops from the rich soil. These “cash crops” such as sugarcane, tobacco, and cotton would be highly profitable if they were shipped to Europe; however, colonists need a cheap labor force to work their huge plantations. Previous to this time, Europe had established trade with the coastal region of Africa. Since African kings, warlords, and private kidnappers were willing to sell European merchants their own people as slaves, merchants began carrying vast numbers of these slaves to the colonies in the New World. As demand for colonial goods increased in Europe, demand for slaves increased in the colonies. The Transatlantic Trade Route had begun.



This triangular trade route was a profitable business for many merchant ships. Goods such as tobacco, sugar, and cotton from colonial plantations were loaded onto ships and transported to Europe and sold there for a high profit. Then the same merchants loaded up European cargo—such as textiles, rum, guns, and other manufactured goods—and shipped it down to the coast of Africa. There the goods were sold or traded for African slaves. Then they would transport these slaves back across the Atlantic to the colonies in the new world. This triangular path was repeated time and time again.

The branch of the trade triangle that transported slaves from Africa to the colonies was called the Middle Passage. The island of Barbados, home to enormous sugar plantations, was a frequent destination for the slavetraders. It is estimated that in 1645 there were only about 5,000 slaves in Barbados, but by 1684 there were 60,000 slaves on the island, which shows how slavery increased dramatically there in under fifty years. Over three centuries it is estimated that between ten and twenty million Africans were transported to the colonies in the New World.

The Middle Passage was a living horror for slaves. Typical slave ships contained several hundred slaves with about thirty crew members to supervise the slaves and sail the ship. It is estimated that fifteen percent of the transported slaves died on the voyage. Some, when they were left unsupervised above deck, committed suicide to end their suffering. The duration of the voyage varied widely from one to six months depending on weather conditions.

Slaves below the decks lived for months in conditions of squalor and indescribable horror. Disease spread and ill health was one of the biggest killers. Mortality rates were high, and death made these conditions below the decks even worse. Even though the corpses were thrown overboard, many crew members avoided going down into the hold, so the slaves who had already been dead were not always found immediately. Many of the living slaves could have been shackled to someone that was dead for hours and sometimes days.

The male captives were normally ankle-chained together in pairs to save space—while the women and children may have had somewhat more room. One historian describes the

conditions in the hold of a slave ship: "Space per slave was usually about sixteen inches wide and five and half feet long....There was no room for the Africans to stand and little room for them to sit up straight. Sometimes they were even forced to lie on their sides for months at a time. There was hardly any fresh air to breathe. It was not uncommon for a man to wake, choking from the iron collar around his neck, to find a limp, lifeless body next to him, perhaps a friend or brother or son. Later when the stench of the dead became too overwhelming, the crew would unchain the [dead] bodies and carry them topside and throw them over the side."

Slavetraders were aware that if they packed the slaves in too tightly, more of them were likely to die; however, on many occasions it was a risk they were willing to take in order to make more money from transporting a higher number of slaves.

Once the slaves arrived in the New World, they were auctioned off to the highest bidder. Plantation owners would buy the Africans who seemed strongest and best fit to work in the fields. The people buying the Africans did not worry about splitting up families, which rarely, if ever, saw each other again.

Slaves were then taken to the plantations and given small huts to live in. They had no rights to property or freedom. Most slaves worked from sunrise to sunset, up to eighteen hours a day, sometimes getting only four hours of sleep each night. In the fields, they had to plant, tend, and harvest crops such as sugarcane, tobacco and later, cotton. The slaves were given very little food to eat each day, probably less than you eat for lunch. If slaves were too slow or stopped working for any reason, they were beaten and whipped. Slaves often died while they worked and their bodies were simply pushed aside. Slaves were forced to stay with the plantation owners until they were either sold or died.

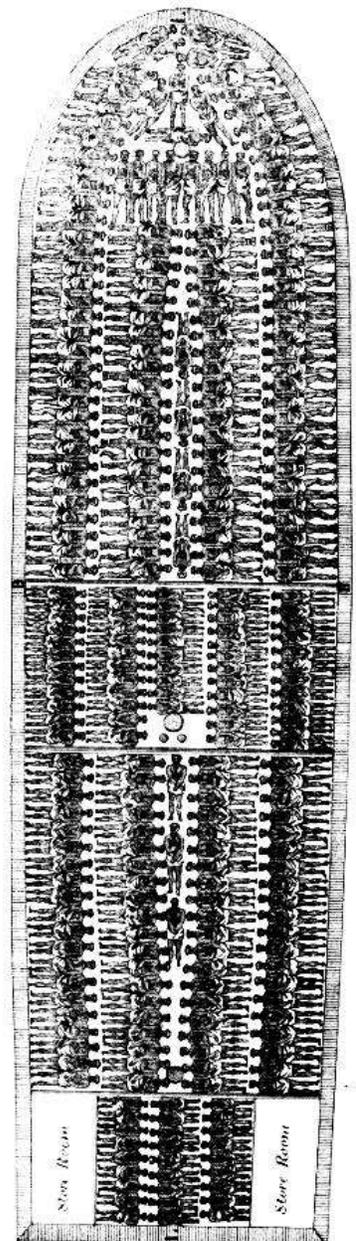


Fig 2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is incredibly cruel and inhumane about the slave trade?
2. What elements of the slave trade are most shocking or surprising to you? Explain.
3. How does this information relate to the narrative of Olaudah Equiano?
4. From the beginning many Europeans and colonists were against the practice African slavery; however, it would not be until almost 300 years later that slavery was formally ended in Europe and America. Why do you think it took so long for this change to happen?