

Geography In The News™



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GEOGRAPHY OF THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Scholars continue to examine the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade between Africa and the New World, one of the world's most dynamic, yet tragic, forced intercontinental migrations.

Slavery has long been part of human history as stronger societies subjugated weaker groups to lives of servitude. Ancient Egypt exercised slavery more than 5,000 years ago. The greatest period of slavery involved Black Africans systematically sold into slavery in Africa and sent to the New World between the 1400s and the 1800s.

Prior to Portuguese exploration of coastal sub-Saharan Africa in the 15th century, African societies were well organized internally. Up to this point, slavery involving Black Africans had been largely disorganized and piecemeal. The Arabs participated in the slave trade, as they advanced Islam southward through parts of the Sahara and along Africa's east coast.

Portuguese ships under the direction of Prince Henry the Navigator began seeking passage around southern Africa. Although the initial purpose was to bypass Arab control of the land routes from China through the Middle East, the Portuguese also recognized the potential value of slave trade. By the 17th century, trade in African slaves to the New World had reached its height, as the English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and

North Americans followed the Portuguese (and Brazilians) into trafficking.

The dominant market for African slaves was in the New World, where the demand for labor far exceeded the number of recent European immigrants and Native American Indians. Europeans wanted land of their own and could not be enslaved, although many were conscripted as indentured servants. Native American populations dwindled as European diseases ravaged their numbers. The demand for African slaves expanded exponentially, as sugar, cotton, rice and indigo plantations and mining operations expanded from North America through the Caribbean, Middle America and Brazil.

The source areas of Black African slaves involved Black African societies that captured and enslaved people from interior villages, took them to coastal location and forced them into holding areas. They then sold the slaves to European slave traders, who transported them to the New World and sold them in slave markets. From there, the slaves were purchased and resold to merchants and plantation owners.

By the time the trade ceased in the early 1800s, as many as 10 to 12 million Africans had been transported to and sold into slavery in the New World. As many as one-third to one-half more died during confinement and transportation.

World, plantation owners who bought and worked the slaves and American and European merchants who bought, transported and sold the items produced by the slaves.

The largest source of African slaves was from West Central Africa accounting for more than 4 million, or 41 percent of the total slave trade between 1650 and 1900 (Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 2000).

New World distribution included African slaves sent to: Brazil (4 million or 35 percent), Spanish Empire (2.5 million, 22 percent), British West Indies (2 million, 18 percent), French West Indies (1.6 million, 14 percent), British North America and the United States (500,000, 4.4 percent), Dutch West Indies (500,000, 4.4 percent), Europe and other islands (200,000, 2 percent) and Danish West Indies (28,000, 0.2 percent).

Slavery and the dependency of the U.S. South on labor-intensive agriculture divided the country and precipitated the Civil War from 1860 through 1865. Slavery officially ended with the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution on Dec. 6, 1865, and President Lincoln's pronouncement of the Emancipation Proclamation supported the permanent abolition of slavery.

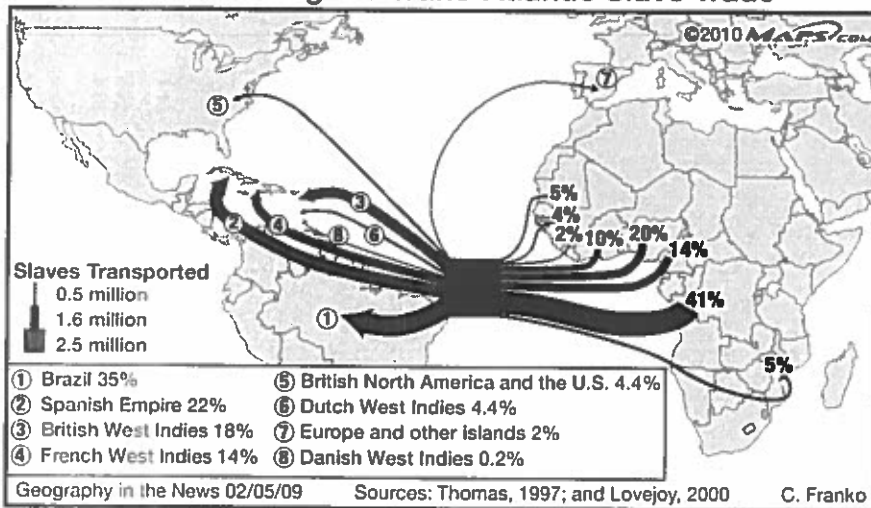
Throughout its existence, the United States has assembled people from around the world: Czechs, Scots, Irish, Italians, Poles, Russians, Germans, Jews, Mexicans, Cubans, Iraqis, Indians, Chinese, Africans, Vietnamese and Swedes, as well as other ethnic groups.

Although much work remains, the country has witnessed great strides in cultural and racial assimilation. It is important for all of us to understand the history and geography of the seminal events that led us to the present cultural composition of our nation. Ours is a nation of many colors, ethnicities, cultures and religions, composing a diversity that makes our country unique.

And that is *Geography in the News™*. February 5, 2010.

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Remembering the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade



Sources: <http://africanhistory.about.com/od/slavery/tp/TransAtlantic001.htm>;
Thomas, Hugh, *The Slave Trade*, Simon and Schuster, 1997; and Lovejoy, Paul E.,
Transformations in Slavery, Cambridge University Press, 2000

Sometimes called the "triangular trade," all merchants involved in slavery found it profitable. These included Black Africans who participated in the initial stages of enslavement, slave traders who profited from the transport and sale of slaves in the New