



UNIT 6

John Newton and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although slavery had certainly existed since ancient times, the historical significance of the transatlantic slave trade surpassed all previous forms of slavery. This is due to the numbers of slaves captured and transported across the ocean, the effects on Africa, the results for the Americas (where most slaves landed), and the influences on the economies of many European states, particularly England. Millions of Africans were shipped to the Americas from the time the trade actively got under way in the early 1600s until it was outlawed by most nations in the early 1800s.

The effects on Africa have been much debated, but it is widely acknowledged that the slave trade encouraged warfare and dissension among African peoples and depleted the population of the continent. The trade did, however, bring Africa into a closer relationship with Europe. The millions of Africans brought to the New World left a cultural and racial heritage, especially as they outnumbered European immigrants to the New World by four times before about 1820.

The economic motives for the slave trade were great. Although the trade was risky for Europeans due to occurrences such as disease, shipwrecks, and slave rebellions, the rewards often far outweighed those hazards. Profits were as high as 300 percent for shipowners and slave traders. Slaves could be purchased in Africa for trade goods such as manufactured cloth, iron bars, beads, alcohol, tobacco, or brass bowls. Thus the trade produced an outlet for goods as well as a commodity

in return—slaves for the New World plantations.

Students frequently ask why the Africans participated in the slave trade and whether they realized the consequences of their actions upon their people. There are many interpretations of African intent. Some historians believe the Africans did not truly understand the damage the slave trade was doing to their continent. Others feel that the Africans did understand the detrimental results of the trade, but they were tempted by the goods offered by the Europeans and the high prices Europeans were willing to pay for slaves. Elaborate rituals imposed on European traders required them to buy first from the local chief or king before beginning any regular trade. A series of dues or gifts to the king was required to secure a good relationship for trade; this sometimes amounted to approximately 10 percent of the total goods sold. Clearly, the slave trade was lucrative for the African traders involved as well as for the Europeans.

Although many European states participated in the slave trade, the nation that benefited the most economically was Great Britain. To reduce the risks involved in the African trade, partnerships were formed. These partnerships purchased ships, secured experienced captains, and hired the sailors. Usually, these ventures realized huge profits.

One of the best-known Englishmen involved in the slave trade was John Newton. Newton was born in England in 1725. Through a series of misadventures and misfortunes he went to sea at a young age. At one

point his fortunes fell so low that he became a slave in Africa. He eventually became a slave trader, and then a captain of a ship that transported slaves from Sierra Leone to the Americas. Newton experienced a religious conversion while at sea. He eventually retired from slave trading and entered the Anglican priesthood. In his later life, he spoke and wrote

against the slave trade. He is probably best remembered today for writing the words to the popular hymn "Amazing Grace." Many Europeans participated in the slave trade; Newton can be viewed as only one representative of the large group that profited from the sale of human cargo.

Critical-Reading Questions

Keep these questions in mind as you read the primary-source documents.

- Who profited from the slave trade: African chiefs? Middlemen procurers? Ship captains?
- How might an African be captured or otherwise procured as a slave?
- What effect did European traders have on slavery in Africa?
- What were the risks and liabilities Europeans encountered when engaging in the slave trade?
- Was slave trading financially worth the risks involved?
- What were the effects of the slave trade on Africa?

Mock Trial

Here are the charges against John Newton (the defendant): John Newton is charged with trafficking in the enslavement and sale of Africans for monetary profit.

DOCUMENTS

Document A

Account by John Barbot, Agent for the French Royal African Company, Who Made at Least Two Voyages to the West Coast of Africa, 1678 and 1682. (Excerpt)

(From John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea*. As found in Thomas Astley and John Churchill, eds., *Collection of Voyages and Travels*. London: 1732.)

Those sold by the Blacks are for the most part prisoners of war, taken either in fight, or pursuit, or in the incursions they make into their enemies territories; others stolen away by their own countrymen; and some there are, who will sell their own children, kindred, or neighbours. This has been often seen, and to compass it, they desire the person they intend to sell, to help them in carrying something to the factory by way of trade, and when there, the person so deluded, not understanding the language, is [s]old and deliver'd up as a slave, notwithstanding all his resistance, and exclaiming against the treachery. . . .

The kings are so absolute, that upon any slight pretense of offenses committed by their subjects, they order them to be sold for slaves, without regard to rank, or possession. . . .

Abundance of little Blacks of both sexes are also stolen away by their neighbours, when found abroad on the roads, or in the woods; or else in the Cougans, or corn-fields, at the time of the year, when their parents keep them there all day, to scare away the devouring small birds, that come to feed on the millet, in swarms. . . .

In times of dearth and famine, abundance of those people will sell themselves, for a maintenance, to prevent starving. When I first arriv'd at Goerree, in December, 1681, I could have bought a great number, at very easy rates, if I could have found provisions to subsist them; so great was the dearth then, in that part of Nigritia.

To conclude, some slaves are also brought to these Blacks, from very remote inland countries, by way of trade, and sold for things of very inconsiderable value; but these slaves are generally poor and weak, by reason of the barbarous usage they have had in traveling so far, being continually beaten, and almost famish'd; so inhuman are the Blacks to one another. . . .

Document B

An Account of Trading on the Slave Coast, c. 1700 by a Dutch Trader, Willem Bosman (Excerpt)

(From Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, Slave, and Ivory Coasts*. 2nd edition, translated from the Dutch. London: 1721, pp. 339–345. As found in David Northrup, ed., *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1994, pp. 71–72.)

The first business of one of our factors [agents] when he comes to Fida [Whydah], is to satisfy the customs of the king and the great men, which amounts to about a hundred

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pounds in Guinea value, as the goods must yield there. After which we have free license to trade, which is published throughout the whole land by the crier.

But yet before we can deal with any person, we are obliged to buy the king's whole stock of slaves at a set price, which is commonly one third or one fourth higher than ordinary; after which, we obtain free leave to deal with all his subjects, of what rank soever. But if there happen to be no stock of slaves, the factor must then resolve to run the risk of trusting the inhabitants with goods to the value of one or two hundred slaves; which commodities they send into the inland country, in order to buy with them slaves at all markets, and that sometimes two hundred miles deep in the country. For you ought to be informed, that markets of men are here kept in the same manner as those of beasts with us.

Not a few in our country fondly imagine that parents here sell their children, men their wives, and one brother the other. But those who think so, do deceive themselves; for this never happens on any other account but that of necessity, or some great crime; but most of the slaves that are offered to us, are prisoners of war, which are sold by the victors as their booty.

Document C

Observations on the Country of Africa by Captain John Adams, c. 1786–1800. (Excerpt)

(From Captain John Adams, *Sketches Taken During Ten Voyages to Africa*. London: Hurst, Robinson, n.d. 1970 reprint by Johnson Reprint Corporation, pp. 72–74.)

The climate of Africa is, therefore, unfavorable to any rapid progress being made in the civilization of its inhabitants.

That the Africans are endowed by nature with faculties as capable of receiving instruction, as the savages inhabiting any other country we are acquainted with, is at this day not to be questioned; although this climate, as before remarked, is unfavorable to either bodily or mental exertion; and the nature of their civil and religious institutions is such, as to place them in a state of extreme degradation, for Africa is a country chiefly inhabited by tyrants and slaves.

The natives of the western shores of Africa, have certainly local advantages very superior to those inhabiting the eastern shores; because they have a free and easy communication with the most enlightened nations of Europe, which the others have not; and however justly the trade in slaves, carried on by Europeans with the former, has been reprobated by enlightened men of all countries, yet it is probable that should the Africans ever become a civilized people, the foundation of their becoming so, will have been laid by the slave-trade.

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Because, when the slave-trade is abolished by all those nations who have hitherto carried it on, on the western shores of Africa, it is probable the chiefs inhabiting those parts, will direct their attention to obtaining from the soil, those products for which they can obtain in exchange such articles as they have been accustomed to receive in barter for slaves; but wherever the trade in slaves exists, the cultivation of the soil and the obtaining the natural and valuable products of the country, for sale to the Europeans, will be neglected. Man is the offspring of pleasure, although in Africa he is too often the child of misfortune; and whether there is a demand for him, as an article of merchandise or otherwise, he will continue to be propagated and reared: and so long as he continues to be an object of commerce, he will be preferred to any other, because he can be obtained without labour. Superior to bales or casks of merchandise, he possesses locomotive powers; carriages of beasts of burthen are unnecessary for his conveyance to the port of embarkation, for he is himself both the article of merchandise and the carrier. . . .

It is to be presumed then, that the first approaches of the Africans towards a state of civilization and an amelioration of their condition, will be first observable in those inhabiting the western coast, and after the slave-trade has *totally ceased* to exist. Wars of aggression will become less frequent, as the principal excitement to them will have ceased to operate; and the chiefs will then find it indispensable to direct their attention to the cultivation of the soil, in order to obtain from it for barter, its natural products.

Document D

Excerpt from the Journal of John Newton, c. 1745–1754

(John Newton, *Journal of a Slave Trader*. London: Epworth Press, 1962, p. 109. As found in Edward Reynolds, *Stand the Storm: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1985, p. 34.)

I verily believe, that the far greater part of the wars, in Africa, would cease, if the Europeans would cease to tempt them, by offering goods for slaves. And though they do not bring legion into the field, their ways are bloody. I believe, the captives reserved for sale are fewer than the slain.

I have not sufficient data to warrant calculation, but I suppose, not less than one hundred thousand slaves are exported, annually, from all parts of Africa, and that more than one-half of these are exported in English bottoms.

Document E

Narrative of the Travels of Ali Eisami, As Dictated in Sierra Leone, c. 1850

(S. W. Koelle, *African Native Literature*. London: 1854, pp. 248–256. As found in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967, pp. 211–213.)

After I had been there about three years, I called a companion, saying, "Come and accompany me!" for I had a friend in the town of the name of Gubber. The youth arose, and we started together, but as we were going towards the town of Gubber, seven Fulbe waylaid us, seized us, tied our hands upon our backs, fettered us, put us in the way, and then we went till it became day. When it was day, both they and we became hungry in a hostile place, the land being the land of Ngizim. In this place we sat down, and ate the fruit of a certain tree called *ganga*, till it became dark, when they took us again, and carried us to the town of Ngololo to market. On that day some Hausa bought us, took us into a house, and put iron fetters on our feet; then, after five days, we set out, and were twenty-two days, till we arrived in Hausa. . . . After marching a fortnight, we arrived at Birnin Yauri. Here the Hausa sold us, and took their goods, whilst Borgawa bought us. The Borgawa roused us up, and when we came to their town, the man who had bought me, did not leave me alone at all; I had iron fetters around my feet, both by night and by day. After I had stayed with him seven days, he took me, and brought me to the town of Sai, where a Yoruba bought me.

The Yoruba who bought me was a son of the Katunga king; he liked me, and called me to sit down before him, and, on seeing my tattoo-marks, he said to me, "Were you the son of a king in your country?" To this I replied, "My father, as for me, I will not tell lies, because times are evil, and our Lord has given me into slavery: my father was a scholar." Then he said, "As for this youth and his father, his father must have been a fine man; I will not treat him ill," and so he kept me in his house. In this place I remained a long time, so that I understood their language. After I had been there four years, a war arose: now, all the slaves who went to the war, became free; so when the slaves heard these good news, they all ran there, and the Yoruba saw it. The friend of the man who had bought me, said to him, "If you do not sell this slave of yours, he will run away, and go to the war, so that your cowries will be lost, for this fellow has sound eyes." Then the man took hold of me, and bound me, and his three sons took me to the town of Ajashe, where white men had landed; then they took off the fetters from my feet, and carried me before them to the white people, who bought me, and put an iron around my neck. After having bought all the people, they took us, brought us to the seashore, brought a very small canoe, and transferred us one by one to the large vessel.

Document F

The Account Book of the Ship *Fortuna* Showing Costs and Profits, March 1827

(Captain Theophilus Conneau, *A Slaver's Log Book or 20 Years' Residence in Africa*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976, pp. 77-79.)

On the given day, the *Fortuna* left the river with 220 slaves. Three months after, I received information that she had landed in the Bay of Matanzas 217 slaves, which were sold at 21 ounces each by the lump. (Let me here remark it was a choice cargo.) This high price realized her owners in less than four months forty-one thousand dollars.

As the reader may with difficulty credit such enormous profit, I will give here a full statement of the fitting out of this vessel in 1827:

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| First cost of the <i>Fortuna</i> | \$3,700.00 |
| Fitting sails, carpenters' and coopers' bill | 2,500.00 |
| Provision for crew, \$765.00, ditto for slaves, \$350.00 | 1,115.00 |
| Advance to 18 men 'fore the mast @ \$50 | 900.00 |
| Ditto Captain | 100.00 |
| Ditto Mate | 80.00 |
| Ditto Second Mate | 70.00 |
| Ditto Boatswain | 70.00 |
| Ditto Cook & Steward, \$60 each | 120.00 |
| Cargo: 200 mill cigars, 500 doubloons | 10,900.00 |
| Clearance, and hush moneys | <u>200.</u> |
| Commission on the amount, 5% | \$19,755.00 |
| <i>Fortuna's</i> full cost on her voyage out | <u>987.00</u> |
| | \$20,742.00 |
| Expenses on her return: | |
| Captain's head money, \$8 a head | 1,746.00 |
| Mate's head money, \$4 a head | 873.00 |
| 2nd Mate & Boatswain, \$2 a head | 873.00 |
| Captain's wages 66 days at \$100 a month | 219.78 |
| 1st Mate's wages 66 days at \$80 a month | 175.56 |
| 2nd Mate & Boatswain wages 66 days at \$70 a month | 307.12 |
| Cook & Steward wages 66 days at \$60 a month | 264.00 |
| 18 Sailors wages 66 days at \$50 a month | <u>1,972.00</u> |
| | 27,172.46 |
| Government officers, \$8 per head | 1,736.00 |
| My commission on the 217 slaves, expenses deducted | 5,565.00 |

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| Consignees' commission 5% on the value of the slaves, \$77,469.00 | \$ 3,873.00 |
| 217 slaves dresses, \$2 each | <u>434.00</u> |
| Expenses—full amount | \$38,780.46 |
| Returns | |
| Value of vessel at auction | 3,950.00 |
| Cargo: 217 slaves at 357 dollars | <u>77,469.00</u> |
| | \$81,419.00 |
| Extra expenses, such as doctor, fresh provisions, landing, boat hire, etc. | <u>1,000.00</u> |
| | \$80,419.00 |
| Costs as above | <u>38,700.00</u> |
| Net Profit | \$41,719.00 |

The above statement is a correct valuation of the outfits, expenses, and returns of this vessel, fitted out in Havana in 1827. At that time the Government only received—I may say, clandestinely exacted—eight dollars' bonus each head. But of late years, the responsibility being greater on the Governors of Cuba, the importers of slaves have been made to pay as much as three ounces per head, besides a few dashes to smaller Government satellites.

Document G

Excerpt from the Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua, A Native of Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa

(As found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/baquaqua/baquaqua.html>. © This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It may be used freely by individuals for research, teaching, and personal use.)

It has already been stated, that when any person gives evidence of gaining an eminent position in the country, he is immediately envied, and means are taken to put him out of the way; thus when it was seen that my situation was one of trust and confidence with the king, I was of course soon singled out as a fit object of vengeance by an envious class of my countrymen, decoyed away and sold into slavery. I went to the city one day to see my mother, when I was followed by music (the drum) and called to by name, the drum beating to the measure of a song which had been composed apparently in honor of me, on account

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of, as I supposed, my elevated position with the king. This pleased me mightily, and I felt highly flattered, and was very liberal, and gave the people money and wine, they singing and gesturing the time. About a mile from my mother's house, where a strong drink called Bah-gee, was made out of the grain Har-nee; thither we repaired; and . . . I was quite intoxicated, and they persuaded me to go with them to Zar-ach-o, about one mile from Zoogoo, to visit a strange king that I had never seen before. When we arrived there, the king made much of us all, and a great feast was prepared, and plenty of drink was given to me, indeed all appeared to drink very freely.

In the morning when I arose, I found that I was a prisoner, and my companions were all gone. Oh, horror! I then discovered that I had been betrayed into the hands of my enemies, and sold for a slave. Never shall I forget my feelings on that occasion; the thoughts of my poor mother harassed me very much, and the loss of my liberty and honorable position with the king, grieved me very sorely. I lamented bitterly my folly in being so easily deceived, and was led to drown all caution in the bowl. Had it not been that my senses had been taken from me, the chance was that I should have escaped their snares, at least for that time.

Document H

Excerpt from John Newton's *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, c. 1788

(From John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*. London: 1788, pp. 98–107. As found in David Northrop, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1994, pp. 81–84.)

For the sake of method, I could wish to consider the African trade,—first, with regard to the effect it has upon our own people; and secondly, as it concerns the blacks, or, as they are more contemptuously styled, the negro slaves, whom we purchase upon the coast. But these two topics are so interwoven together, that it will not be easy to keep them exactly separate.

1. The first point I shall mention is surely of political importance, if the lives of our fellow-subjects be so; and if a rapid loss of seamen deserves the attention of a maritime people. This loss, in the African trade, is truly alarming. I admit, that many of them are cut off in their first voyage, and consequently, before they can properly rank as seamen; though they would have been seamen if they had lived. But the neighborhood of our seaports is continually drained of men and boys to supply the places of those who die abroad; and if they are not all seamen, they are all our brethren and countrymen, subjects of the British government. . . .

. . . the fact, however, is sure, that a great number of our seamen perish in the slave trade. Few ships, comparatively, are either blown up, or totally cut off; but some are. Of the rest, I have known some that have lost half their people, and some a larger proportion. I am

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far from saying, that it is always, or even often, thus; but, I believe I shall state the matter sufficiently low, if I suppose, that at least one-fifth part of those who go from England to the coast of Africa, in ships which trade for slaves, never return from thence. . . .

2. There is a second, which either is, or ought to be, deemed of importance, considered in a political light; I mean, the dreadful effects of this trade upon the minds of those who are engaged in it. There are, doubtless, exceptions; and I would willingly except myself. But in general, I know of no method of getting money, not even that of robbing for it upon the highway, which has so direct a tendency to efface the moral sense, to rob the heart of every gentle and humane disposition, and to harden it, like steel, against all impressions of sensibility.

Document I

The King of Asante Argues for the Slave Trade, c. 1820 (As Recounted in an Interview with a Representative of the British Government)

(From Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Asantee*. London: 1824, pp. 162–164. As found in David Northrup, ed., *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1994, pp. 93–94.)

Taking up one of my observations, he remarked, “the white men who go to council with your master, and pray to the great God for him, do not understand my country, or they would not say the slave trade was bad. But if they think it bad now, why did they think it good before. Is not your law an old law, the same as the Crammo [Muslim] law? Do you not both serve the same God, only you have different fashions and customs? Crammos [Muslims] are strong people in fetische, and they say the law is good, because the great God made the book; so they buy slaves, and teach them good things, which they knew not before. This makes every body love the Crammos, and they go every where up and down, and the people give them food when they want it. Then these men come all the way from the great water [the river Niger], and from Manding, and Dagomba, and Killinga; they stop and trade for slaves, and then go home. If the great king would like to restore this trade, it would be good for the white men and for me too, because Ashantee is a country for war, and the people are strong; so if you talk that palaver [conference] for me properly, in the white country, if you go there, I will give you plenty of gold, and I will make you richer than all the white men.”

I urged the impossibility of the king’s request, promising, however, to record his sentiments faithfully. “Well then,” said the king, “you must put down in my master’s book all I shall say, and then he will look to it, now he is my friend. And when he sees what is true, he will surely restore that trade. I cannot make war to catch slaves in the bush, like a thief. My ancestors never did so. But if I fight a king, and kill him when he is insolent, then certainly I must have his gold, and his slaves, and the people are mine too. Do not the white kings act like this? Because I hear the old men say, that before I conquered Fantee and killed the

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Braffoes and the kings, that white men came in great ships, and fought and killed many people; and then they took the gold and slaves to the white country: and sometimes they fought together. That is all the same as these black countries. The great God and the fetische made war for strong men every where, because then they can pay plenty of gold and proper sacrifice. When I fought Gaman, I did not make war for slaves, but because Dinkera (the king) sent me an arrogant message and killed my people, and refused to pay me gold as his father did. Then my fetische made me strong like my ancestors, and I killed Dinkera, and took his gold, and brought more than 20,000 slaves to Coomassy. Some of these people being bad men, I washed my stool in their blood for the fetische. But then some were good people, and these I sold or gave to my captains: many, moreover, died, because this country does not grow too much corn like Sarem, and what can I do? Unless I kill or sell them, they will grow strong and kill my people. Now you must tell my master that these slaves can work for him, and if he wants 10,000 he can have them. And if he wants fine handsome girls and women to give his captains, I can send him great numbers."