Excerpt from African American History
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Triangular Trade & The Middle Passage

From the 1500s through the 1800s, millions of African slaves arrived in North America via the process known as triangular trade. What was triangular trade? What role did the Middle Passage play in this process?

Triangular trade is a system of trade which mutually benefits three different locations. The most well-known example of triangular trade is that which existed between Europe, the Americas, and Africa from the 16th Century up through the 19th Century.

Ships would depart from Europe and arrive in Africa with guns, ammunition, cloth, copper, and other manufactured goods. These items would be traded to African tribal chiefs in exchange for slaves. The slaves would then be loaded onto ships and taken to the Americas. The slaves would be traded for molasses, sugar, rum, tobacco, hemp, and other cash crops that were produced by use of slave labor. These goods would be taken to Europe and sold. Revenue from these sales was used to purchase items that could be exchanged for more slaves in Africa. This cycle repeated itself thousands of times over the course of three hundred years.

The second portion of this trade route, the journey that brought Africans from their native continent to the Americas, became known as the Middle Passage. African kings, warlords, and chiefs would capture other Africans from opposing tribes. They would then exchange these captives for guns, ammunition, cloth, and other goods. The future slaves would be loaded onto boats and shipped out for the Americas.

The ships were almost always overcrowded, and captives received only small amounts of food and water (usually one meal a day). Due to the deplorable living conditions and close quarters, diseases were common. Outbreaks of smallpox, syphilis, and measles spread quickly. Starvation, poor nutrition, and lack of drinkable water also led to conditions such as dysentery and scurvy.

Many captives did not survive the journey. Some died from disease, some died due to starvation, and many simply lost the will to live and jumped overboard (or perhaps jumped in the hopes of escaping). Bodies of the departed were thrown into the sea. These deaths were so common that the routes of the ships altered the migration paths of sharks because the animals knew there would be a plentiful supply of food in the area.

Not all slaves came to the Americas peacefully. There were many reported cases of attempted uprisings amongst the captives as they tried to overthrow the crew of the ship. These mutinies were rarely successful. In 1839, slaves aboard the Amistad were able to gain control of their ship just off the coast of Cuba. This highly-publicized incident became influential in the Abolitionist Movement in the United States. However, most slave-uprisings aboard ship did not succeed. Those who started the uprising were apprehended and eliminated to serve as an example to the others.

Upon arriving in the Americas, the captives would be sold as slaves, either in Brazil, on an island in the Caribbean, or in the southeastern portion of what is today the United States. It has been estimated that somewhere between 9 million to 12 million Africans arrived in the Americas via the Middle Passage.
Multiple Choice: Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.

1. ______ Which of the following correctly identifies the types of items being brought from Europe to Africa?
   a. slaves were being brought to Africa from Europe
   b. guns, ammunition, cloth, copper, and other manufactured goods
   c. molasses, sugar, rum, tobacco, hemp, and other cash crops
   d. tomatoes, apples, oranges, potatoes, lettuce, and other produce

2. ______ Which of the following best describes how Africans became slaves?
   a. Most were captured by European slave hunters who sold them to traders.
   b. Many were tricked into volunteering, believing they would only be indentured servants for a short time.
   c. Most were captured by African kings, warlords, and chiefs from opposing tribes.
   d. Many purchased tickets for a boat ride, but had no idea what their true destination was.

3. ______ Which of the following most accurately describes living conditions aboard a slave ship?
   a. The crew took good care of the slaves because healthy slaves were worth more than those in poor health.
   b. Treatment aboard a ship could vary greatly depending on the crew. Some were very concerned about the well-being of their passengers, others were horrible.
   c. Captives were given three meals a day and plenty of water. These regulations were established by the Maritime Passenger Act of 1642.
   d. The ships were overcrowded with only small amounts of food and water. Starvation was common and diseases spread quickly.

4. ______ Which of the following best summarizes what usually happened when a slave uprising occurred aboard a ship?
   a. The uprising would not succeed and those who started it would be eliminated.
   b. Many uprisings were successful, and the slave ship would never arrive.
   c. The uprising would not be successful and all slaves onboard would be eliminated.
   d. The boat would be turned around and the captives were returned to Africa.

5. ______ Which of the following is the best estimate of how many Africans arrived in the Americas via the Middle Passage?
   a. 1 to 2 million
   b. 4 to 5 million
   c. 9 to 12 million
   d. 25 to 30 million

Vocabulary: Match each word with its correct definition. Consider how the word is used in the lesson. This might help you define each term. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.

a. mutual
b. apprehend
c. native
d. deplorable
e. mutiny

6. ______ to take into custody; arrest by legal warrant or authority

7. ______ worthy of reproach; wretched; very bad

8. ______ revolt or rebellion against authority, especially onboard a ship

9. ______ held in common; shared

10. ______ the environment in which a person was born
Guided Reading: Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.

1. Triangular trade is a system of trade which mutually benefits __________________ different locations.

2. Ships would depart from Europe and arrive in __________________ with guns, ammunition, cloth, copper, and other manufactured goods.

3. Slaves would be loaded into ships and taken to the ____________________.

4. Slaves would be traded for ________________________, sugar, rum, tobacco, hemp, and other cash crops.

5. The portion of this trade route that brought Africans from their native continent to the Americas became known as the ____________________________.

6. Outbreaks of smallpox, syphilis, and _______________________ spread quickly.

7. Starvation, poor nutrition, and lack of drinkable water also led to conditions such as dysentery and ________________________.

8. Some died from disease, some died due to ________________________, and others simply lost the will to live and jumped overboard.

9. There were many reported cases of attempted ______________________ amongst the captives as they tried to overthrow the crew of the ship.

10. Upon arriving in the Americas, the captives would be sold as ____________, either in Brazil, on an island in the Caribbean, or in what is today the southern United States.
Summarize: Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!

1. Who captured Africans from opposing tribes and sold them into slavery?

2. What was the route that brought Africans to the Americas known as?

3. When was the triangular trade between Africa, Europe, and the Americas most active?

4. Where were the Africans sold into slavery?

5. Why did the Middle Passage attract so many sharks?

6. How did the events aboard the *Amistad* become significant? (Why did these events become important?)

7. Imagine you are a captive on board a slave ship sailing to the Americas. Would you jump overboard and attempt to swim to freedom, try to encourage others to start an uprising, or wait and see what the future holds? Explain your answer as thoroughly as possible, citing textual evidence from the lesson if necessary.
Answer Key:

**Triangular Trade & The Middle Passage:**

**Multiple Choice:**

1) B  
2) C  
3) D  
4) A  
5) C

**Vocabulary:**

6) B  
7) D  
8) E  
9) A  
10) C

**Guided Reading:**

1) Three  
2) Africa  
3) Americas  
4) Molasses  
5) Middle Passage  
6) Measles  
7) Scurvy  
8) Starvation  
9) Uprisings  
10) Slaves

**Summarize:**

1. African kings, warlords, and chiefs captured Africans from opposing tribes.  
2. This route became known as the Middle Passage.  
3. This trade was most common from the 16th Century through the 19th Century.  
4. The Africans were sold into slavery on one of the Caribbean islands, or the Southern United States.  
5. This became common because the sharks knew there would be a plentiful supply of food.  
6. It became influential in the abolitionist movement in the United States.

**Student Response:**

7. Student answers will vary.