

The Slave Trade

This text is excerpted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Their explorations of the African coast had opened up new sources for people they could enslave. When Portugal's power collapsed and the Dutch took over the spice trade, they took over much of the Atlantic slave trade as well.

In 1619, a Dutch ship sailed into the mouth of the James River in the English colony of Virginia in North America and dropped anchor. On board were Dutch pirates who had been attacking other ships on the high seas. They had captured a shipload of enslaved Africans from a Spanish vessel heading for the Caribbean. Now the Dutch sailors were traveling north and needed supplies. The pirates traded these people for food. This was the first arrival of Africans in the English North American colonies. Whether these Africans became indentured servants or enslaved workers remains unclear.



Captured Africans were held in Elmina Castle on the West African coast before being transported to Europe or the Americas.

One of the trade centers the Dutch had taken from the Portuguese was Elmina on the west coast of Africa (in present-day Ghana). For years, Elmina had been a Portuguese trade center where ivory and gold were exchanged. As the slave trade increased, Elmina became one of the forts where captured Africans were imprisoned before being transported to Europe or to

the Americas. Before long, Elmina was the center of the Dutch slave trade.

By 1655, the Dutch were transporting 2,500 enslaved people across the Atlantic each year. When England seized control of New Netherland, there were five hundred Dutch-speaking Africans in the colony.



The slave trade was an important leg of the triangular trade that developed among Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

The slave trade was one side of a trading triangle. One segment of the triangle carried goods from Europe to Africa. Ships carried items such as iron, guns, gunpowder, knives, cloth, and beads. Another segment transported people from Africa to the Caribbean islands and later to the English colonies in North America. And another segment of the triangle made a return trip to Europe. These ships carried timber, tobacco, grain, sugar, and rice from the plantations of the Americas.