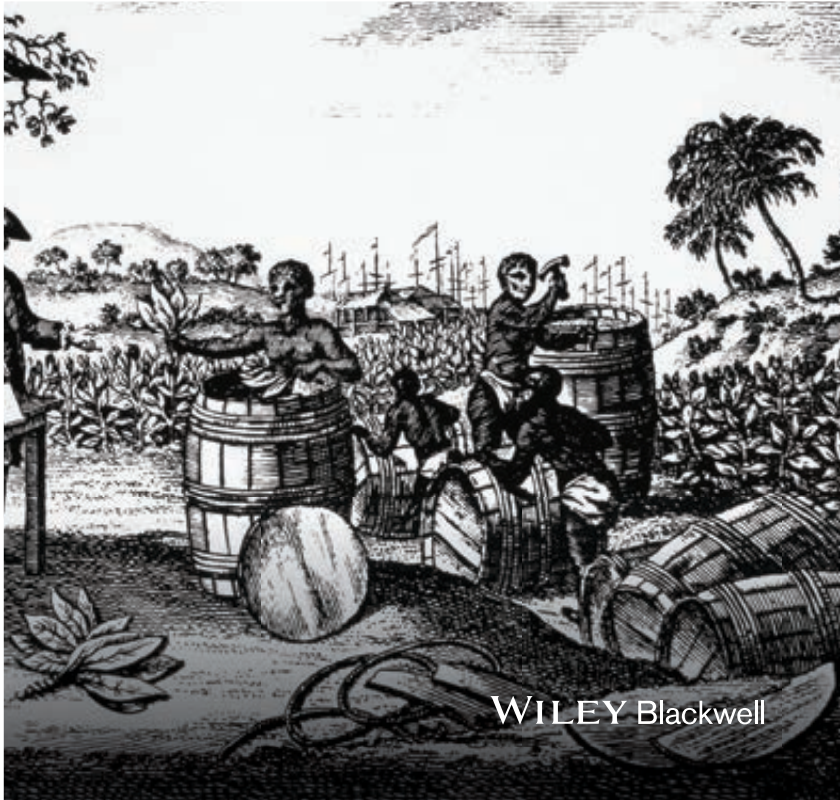


FOURTH EDITION

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE COLONIAL ERA

From African Origins through
the American Revolution

Donald R. Wright



WILEY Blackwell

African Americans in the Colonial Era

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African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins through the American Revolution

Fourth Edition

Donald R. Wright

WILEY Blackwell

This fourth edition first published 2017
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Edition history: Harlan Davidson, Inc. (1e, 1990, 2e, 2000, and 3e, 2010)

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for.

9781119133872 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Tobacco Being Exported from Jamestown, Virginia, Engraving, 1620 / Private Collection / J. T. Vintage/Bridgeman Images

Set in 11.5/14.5pt TimesLTStd by Aptara Inc., New Delhi, India

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For Doris

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An exceptional group of historians performed the careful investigation, lived with the primary sources, and wrote the studies over the last half century that make this synthesis possible. It would be a mistake for one to read this book without examining its Bibliographical Essay and noticing the wealth of outstanding historical study upon which it is based. As always, my biggest debt, by far, is to the authors of these books and articles.

As with each of the previous editions, Andrew J. Davidson was instrumental in this book's coming into being. For a quarter of a century, Andrew has given me confidence, inspiration, careful editing, and close friendship, and for these I am grateful. My wife Doris has given me these, too, and some other stuff. This book is for her.

INTRODUCTION

When I began writing the first edition of this book in the late 1980s, study of the lives of African Americans in slavery was out of temporal and geographical balance. Chattel slavery existed as a legal institution in this country for about two hundred years, roughly from the middle of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. Most of that time—about two-thirds of it—was the colonial period of American history. From before 1650 to after 1790, slavery was a viable institution on plantations and smaller farms around the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia and Maryland; throughout the coastal Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia; along the lower Mississippi River; and in cities and some rural areas of New England, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. In only the last fifty years of its existence in this country did slavery move into the lands of the Deep South and undergo a switch from use predominately in tobacco and rice production to that of cotton, as the institution disappeared north of the Pennsylvania–Maryland border and the Ohio River. Yet the focus of the study of American slavery—and indeed of the history of all African Americans before the Civil War—back to the

African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins through the American Revolution, Fourth Edition. Donald R. Wright.
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time of Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1918) had been on the institution as it operated in the Cotton South between 1830 and 1860. As late as the 1980s, the best-known books on slavery or slave society in America were Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (1956), John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972), and Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972), each an examination of antebellum slavery with its center in the Deep South.

Naturally, this skewed the nation's image of slavery. When considering the subject, most Americans thought of enormous plantations in Alabama or Mississippi; of black men, women, and children living in quarters resembling small villages; of slaves working in gangs picking cotton; and of their efforts to escape toward the free states in the North. All of these were concepts pertinent to the situation in the middle of the nineteenth century, but they did not reflect the lives of African Americans during the two hundred years before the Cotton Kingdom. Thus, the first edition of this book was an effort to right this imbalance by examining the experience of African Americans throughout the colonial era in all of England's mainland North American colonies.

Ten years later, when the book's second edition appeared, the imbalance was no longer so great. Not only in textbooks, which had come a long way, but also in such elaborate television productions as the six-hour *Africans in America*, which aired on PBS in 1998, the experience of persons of African descent in America's earliest centuries began to get its due. This allowed the second edition of this book to have less of a corrective tone and, following new scholarship, to emphasize how slavery differed regionally and temporally over the colonial period and to offer greater detail on the lives of the Africans and African Americans, in and out of slavery, who lived through the period.

The second edition also appeared at a time when historians were beginning to view the past through a wider lens. For early

American history, this meant placing experiences in the context of an Atlantic-centered world. Graduate students working on colonial American topics were encouraged to cast their eyes to the whole Atlantic rather than to one discrete North American colony and its “mother country” for its major influences. This produced studies offering a sense of United States history not so much as something exceptional and more as something fitting broader patterns of thought and action at the time.

Following this scholarship, the third edition (2010) emphasized the experience of African Americans in North America more as their contemporaries recognized them: as elements of a vast, vibrant, complex Atlantic world where people from four continents interacted over a period of 180 years to create an economy that fit into the grander patterns of Atlantic commerce, a society that reflected the mix of Atlantic cultures, and eventually a polity that used current European ideas to support creation of the best situation possible for those who emerged with the greatest benefits from their colonial circumstances. Those who came from Africa and their descendants, while adding greatly to the economic and cultural viability of these colonies, ended up in 1789 with the least possibility of benefit from the nation they helped bring into existence. This same circumstance existed then and long afterward in lands bordering the Atlantic.

Now, perhaps as proof of the maturation of this long line of scholarship, this fourth edition relates the story with fewer points of departure from past interpretations. With a few exceptions, books and articles published since 2009 tend to follow directions sketched out over the previous decade, adding valuable nuance and detail, indeed, but not taking study of African American history in colonial times along entirely new paths or viewing it from greatly different perspectives. If there are exceptions to this rule, one may be the recent emphasis on the commodification of Africans. For some years, a body of historians have tried to determine when and how persons born fully human in Africa became nameless parts

of cargoes arriving in American ports, where they would be marketed (as “prime field hands” or “good breeders”), sold, and resold to the highest bidders for lifetimes of toil, and even sometimes lent, leased, or used as collateral for a loan. Consideration of the consequences of seeing humans originating in Africa as commodities has offered insight into how people lived and how racial attitudes formed, at the time and long afterward. A second exception may involve a rethinking of the level of agency enslaved men and women had—argued for some time to be a significant amount—with more emphasis now on the lack of autonomy the slave system offered them in daily circumstances.

As with prior editions, this book integrates into the narrative ideas and perspectives from recent scholarship. Of the books and articles noted in this book’s Bibliographical Essay—which, by necessity, is more selective than its earlier versions—103 have been published over the past decade. Collectively, these publications continue to aid our understanding that the African-American experience in Colonial America was not in most ways exceptional, but instead fit with the experiences of Africans and persons of African descent living up and down the African and American sides of the Atlantic.

Some ideas continue to deserve the emphasis placed upon them in the book’s initial edition. One is simply that a wide variety of experiences characterized the lives of blacks between the time of their existence in Africa and their living as African Americans in the United States near the end of the eighteenth century—experiences that, again, differed considerably over time and across space. Where possible, this study emphasizes their temporal and geographical variety. Still more than before, it directs attention to the fact that it was a broader Atlantic context, rather than only a North American one, in which colonial African-American history took shape.

Another idea still worth emphasizing is that blacks in West Africa through the slave trade years and blacks in America

through colonial times were different sorts of people than older, racist, or romantic portrayals led people to believe. These African and African-American men and women were neither perpetual candidates for the objective case, always being done unto and never doing, nor all a bunch of wily calculators, constantly thinking, whether out of necessity or revenge, of ways to dupe their masters. They were normal human beings with a range of personal qualities who made rational decisions under varied and difficult circumstances. Simply recognizing this enables one to appreciate that blacks had a hand in many of the good things, and some of the bad things, that happened to them and to others throughout their history. Certainly, as we approach the end of the second term of the first African American elected to the presidency of the United States, it is more appropriate than ever to step away from stereotypes, exaggerations, and oversights so we can emphasize black humanity and agency, and to turn away from efforts to make either whites or blacks into heroes or villains so we can work toward developing a clearer picture of the human interaction, albeit in unequal circumstances, that forged and shaped American life and society, as it existed then and as it exists today.

Two more somewhat-related ideas come from recent scholarship. One is that both the character of individual black men and women and the nature of African-American culture in its various forms around the North American mainland were far more complex than previously recognized. The other is that race was an important determinant for the experience of blacks in Colonial America, but only one of many. The more we consider these matters, the more it becomes apparent that an overriding focus on race was more characteristic of the thinking of wealthy white men than it was of common folk, of whatever physical makeup, and women. That we have emphasized the importance of race in colonial African-American history may speak more about American society today than American society over two centuries ago.

Finally, the book's conclusion has not changed over the twenty-six years of its existence. It is that through the long period of the evolution of slavery and black society in the colonial period, the course for much of the subsequent history of African Americans was set. By 1790 the basic American institutions and attitudes concerning slavery and racism were established, and by that time forces were in motion that would lead to the expansion of slavery, the struggle that would fuel sectionalism and help bring on the Civil War, and the rapid move toward second-class citizenship for African Americans following slavery's end in 1865. Also, by 1790 the most important elements of African-American culture—family, religion, a spirit of resistance, and a host of truly distinctive ways of living—already underlay a stable black community. From this base, African-American community and culture would evolve through the next two centuries, over which time they would provide black Americans a group identity and help them cope with a hostile world. Thus, in the broadest sense, the colonial era encompassed the truly formative years of the African-American experience.

Atlantic Origins

Sullivan’s Island, a flat, three-by-one-mile stretch of sand facing the Atlantic Ocean at the north entrance of Charleston Harbor in South Carolina, has had a prominent role in America’s history. The island’s Fort Moultrie held out against the bombardment of British warships in an early battle of the American Revolution and, 85 years later, housed guns that fired on Fort Sumter to begin the Civil War. But Sullivan’s Island has a deeper and more difficult history. Through most of the eighteenth century, it was on this island’s southern beach that more enslaved men, women, and children from Africa took their first steps onto American soil than anywhere else on the North American mainland. A “pest house,” standing near the island’s southern tip, was where many of the captive Africans stayed during a period of quarantine before being taken to Charleston for sale. Planters from around the region purchased such individuals to augment their labor supply, essential to their prosperity, but they wanted nothing to do with any infectious diseases the Africans might bring from their homeland or from nearly two months spent in the incubator-like holds of slave ships.

What occurred in Charleston was going on, if in lesser volume and with difference in details, at other ports and in various large bays and rivers of North America, but the phenomenon was much larger still. A trans-Atlantic trading of slaves existed for over three and a half centuries along the Atlantic side of the Americas, from these mainland North American colonies down to the Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French colonies of the Caribbean, Central America, and mainland South America. All of the colonies were part of an enormous economic system that linked the four continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The system relied on European management, capital, and shipping for American production of staple goods, mostly sugar, for European consumption. By the seventeenth century, those in control of the system preferred African slaves as their labor force in the colonies.

The idea of importing labor from some distance for intensive work on export crops was an old one. Romans had done this on a grand scale two centuries before the Christian era, when slaves made up 40 percent of the population of the Italian Peninsula and gangs of enslaved men and women worked the estates of the Roman grandees. Although slavery declined as a European economic institution following the Roman Empire's collapse, populations around the Mediterranean heart of the old empire and in much of continental Europe continued to accept the Roman legal status of slaves, which considered such humans as chattel, the property of another. Much later, this would help provide a legal basis for Crusaders to enslave their captive enemies—as Muslims had been doing to Christians for some time, using their own rationale—and to sell such captives off to the agricultural enterprises that were popping up in the eastern Mediterranean after the eleventh century.

By the end of the thirteenth century, a plantation system had come into being, centered on the island of Cyprus and geared to providing sugar to a European market. Like the plantations across the Atlantic half a millennium later, these relied on

European capital, management, and shipping. Some who worked in the cane fields were free and some were serfs, but increasingly sugar production came to be identified with slave labor. Mediterranean shippers brought in workers from the Balkans and southern Russia (people who spoke Slavic languages; thus the word “slave,” from “Slav”) along with others from Asia Minor and North Africa. Some of those purchased in North Africa had been marched across the Sahara Desert from their homes in the Western Sudan. For over two centuries the Mediterranean plantations thrived and slavery spread, first to Crete and Sicily and then to coastal Spain and Portugal. By 1450, on the eve of European expansion into the South Atlantic, slave-based sugar plantations existed in the western Mediterranean and even on nearby Atlantic islands.

Many of the men who ventured away from their European homelands after the middle of the fifteenth century and established outposts or acquired lands on both sides of the Atlantic had motives less selfless than spreading Christianity or increasing geographical knowledge. European rulers sponsored many such enterprises to garner wealth for the state, and most individuals involved had an eye out for personal gain as well. Some state-sponsored enterprises found wealth in the parts of Africa or America that held gold or silver, but most of the lands bordering the Atlantic did not possess such obvious riches. So in the coastal and insular areas the newcomers turned to export agriculture, following the existing model with sugar as the focus. Thus developed, at a slow but regular pace, an agricultural economy along the tropical Atlantic rim, first on islands off West Africa, with São Tomé becoming the leading sugar producer by the beginning of the sixteenth century, and then, by the end of that century, in northeastern Brazil. By 1640 an export economy had spread to the great sugar islands of the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean and, on a smaller scale and outside the tropics, to English tobacco-growing colonies on the North American mainland. As the Atlantic economy expanded, the plantation

model, on a larger scale than ever before, became the accepted way of making profits from the great expanses of land.

But establishing plantations in distant territories had a hitch. Although sugar remained in great demand, the land was productive, the weather was appropriate, and the technology for processing cane existed and steadily improved, finding adequate numbers of workers to grow this labor-intensive crop became difficult. Those native to America never worked out as field workers in the way European landowners hoped they would. Once in captivity or even in close proximity to Europeans, Native Americans died rapidly from diseases long endemic to the Eurasian and African landmasses—smallpox, mumps, and measles—that the newcomers brought with them. Those who did not perish after having been enslaved proved remarkably able to resist pressures to adapt to strict work regimes, partly because they could run away relatively easily—their homes and extended families being close and their knowledge of the surroundings often superior to that of their captors.

But what about Europeans? Even with labor needs in the Americas rising sharply, Europeans were unwilling to enslave other Europeans in the same way they enslaved people they encountered off the continent. “Bonded” persons—often criminals sentenced to labor or men who willingly agreed (in a document called an indenture) to a period of labor in exchange for passage to America and, they hoped, subsequent opportunity—were not a great deal better at regimented work across the Atlantic than the Indians. White laborers fell victim to different diseases, among them the tropical scourges malaria and yellow fever. And should they run away, white servants might pass themselves off as members of the ruling society. Just as important, rising opportunities for Europeans at home, either with armies during the almost continual continental warfare of the era or in jobs paying wages that rose steadily over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, limited the number of those willing to make the arduous ocean passage for

the rigorous labor that awaited them, with only a sketchy promise of economic or social gain.

Africans, however, performed effectively, in a relative sense, as plantation workers under the regimented conditions in the Americas, and European planters soon recognized this even if they did not understand why. The African homelands of black slaves were places where Afro-Eurasian and tropical diseases were endemic. Africans who survived into adolescence had already acquired some immunity to smallpox, mumps, and measles as well as to malaria and yellow fever. So in the fresh mix of diseases up and down the Atlantic rim of the Americas, even under the harsh conditions of the plantation environment, Africans lived three to five times longer than their white counterparts. This alone made them more productive workers and, hence, better investments. Finally, Africans could not run home or be mistaken for a member of the society of planters.

None of this, of course, would have made any difference had African laborers been in short supply or too expensive for American planters to purchase. But through most of the years of the Atlantic trade, prices for Africans remained favorable in relation to the price of the crops they produced. For example, an English planter on the Caribbean island of Jamaica in 1690 had to pay £20 for a “prime” male African, direct from Guinea. That laborer could produce about five hundred pounds of sugar in a year, which the planter could sell for £20, and thus in a year recover the original cost of the slave. In short, African laborers turned out to be the best deal in economic terms, which were the only terms of interest to the landowners, shippers, financiers, and merchants involved in the plantation system.

Atlantic Africa

Slaves came to the North American mainland colonies over one of two routes. One was from the West Indies and involved

shippers of merchandise, who topped off their cargoes with slaves as opportunities offered. A good number of ships came to the colonies so laden, especially in the earlier years of slave trading, but they brought relatively few slaves before the fledgling United States abolished the importation of slaves in 1808. The overwhelming number of slave imports, close to nine out of ten of the men, women, and children, arrived directly from Africa or a West-Indian island after a short layover following the trans-Atlantic passage. With notable exceptions, especially in the early years of settlement, these newcomers were unacculturated, raw, frightened—Chesapeake planters characterized them as “outlandish”—persons not long away from their homes in Africa.

Nearly all slaves brought to North America came from the coast and interior of West and West-Central Africa. Traders from England, one of the English North American mainland colonies, or (after 1783) the United States of America acquired and carried 97 percent of the 383,000 slaves arriving in the North American mainland over the 189 years of legal slave trading to the region,¹ and these slavers never developed close, long-standing links with merchants of just one or two specific African regions. Instead, they purchased captives at different markets along over 3,000 miles of African coastline, from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south. Certain regions supplied more captives at some times than at others, depending on population density, level of warfare, religious conflict, and environmental conditions. Conflicts in Europe that spilled onto the high seas affected when and where slavers sought cargoes. The particular market a captain visited might depend on long-standing trade relationships with a local

¹ Figures presented here of enslaved Africans disembarking in English portions of mainland North America—the United States of America after 1783—are for the entire period of legal trading to the region, to 1808. Three-quarters of these Africans (283,000 men, women, and children) arrived during the colonial period, through 1783.

merchant community, but it might depend also on intelligence of good trading at a given port.

Almost half of all enslaved persons coming to the British mainland came from one of two regions of Atlantic Africa, in nearly equal proportions: Senegambia, the coastal region beginning north of the Senegal River and ending five hundred miles south, in today's Guinea, and including the Cape Verde Islands; and West-Central Africa, which includes all of Africa's Atlantic coast south of Cape Lopez, 450 miles north of the Congo River. For Senegambia, cyclical drought, warfare across a broad hinterland, and late-eighteenth-century conflict associated with the spread of Islam lay behind this region's steady supply of slaves. Europeans identified men and women from this region as Mandingo (Mandinka), Fula (Fulbe), Wolof, Serer, Floop (Jola), Bambara, Balanta, or Papel.²

In West-Central Africa, ecological crises played a role in this region's large supply of slaves. Portuguese merchants dominated the southern part and carried most of their slaves to Brazil, but English slavers frequented ports north of the Congo and brought persons they identified as Kongo, Tio, and Matamba. As the eighteenth century progressed, more slaves came to North America from the Portuguese ports of Luanda and Benguela and were identified as Ovimbundu and Kwanza.

The Bight of Biafra—today's coastal southeastern Nigeria where the Igbo (Ibo) and Ibibio languages are spoken, and also

²Regions of Africa's Atlantic coast designated here are those used in *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: An Enhanced and On-line Database*, viewable at <http://www.slavevoyages.org>. Each of the regions has a significant hinterland. When referring to groupings of African people, it is important to recognize that the designations are Europeans' notions of who Africans were rather than necessarily the Africans' sense of it. It is not certain that Africans held the same idea of their identity as Europeans did.

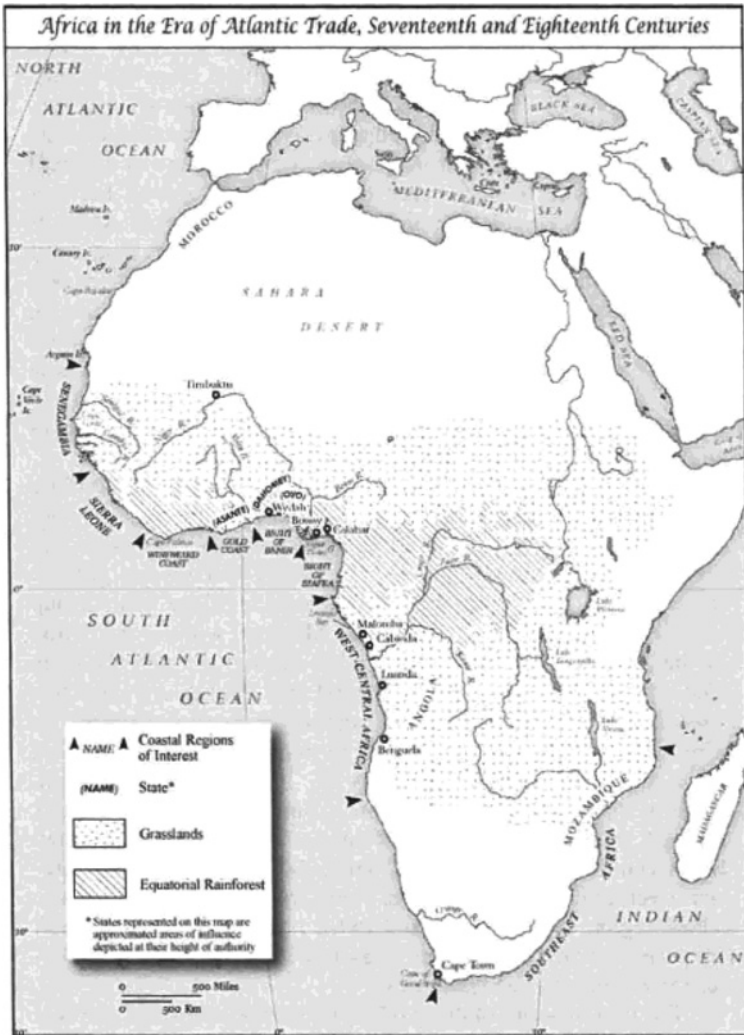
today's Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and northern Gabon—was the supplier of another 19 percent. Here, high population density and commercial relationships between English shippers and local suppliers were reasons for the volume of slave exports to English America. Other regions of supply for the mainland market included the Gold Coast (roughly today's coastal Ghana), 15 percent (Ashanti, Fanti); Sierra Leone, the region including most of today's Guinea and all of Sierra Leone, 11 percent (Susu, Mandinka, Jalonka, Temne, Mende); and the Windward Coast (on both sides of Cape Palmas, between Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast), 6 percent (Vai, Gouru, Kpelle, Kru). Two percent each came from the Bight of Benin, between the Gold Coast and the Bight of Biafra, and the Indian Ocean Islands, around the Cape of Good Hope and up the eastern side of the continent.

The lands of West and West-Central Africa's Atlantic zone are among the continent's most livable. The population, if light by comparison to recent times, seems generally to have been substantial back through the centuries. At the heart of the region are the rain forests of the Guinea Coast and Congo River basin. Here, proximity to the equator keeps the land under the influence of tropical convergence zones that generate regular and often bountiful rainfall. Vegetation is lush; palms and hardwoods abound, overshadowing smaller plants that compete for sunlight filtering through the canopy of leaves. As one moves away from the equator, rainfall diminishes, as does plant life. North of the Guinea Coast, forests give way gradually to wooded savanna, the ground cover becoming less dense going northward. Across the central belt of West Africa stretch the enormous sky and seemingly endless horizons that make up the broad reaches of the Western Sudan. For British colonials, it was "miles and miles of bloody Africa." Most of the population here sustains itself through farming and herding. Farther north still, rolling grasslands peppered with trees

become drier until vegetation grows sparse. North African Arabs called this dry zone the *Sahel*, the southern “shore” of the Sahara Desert. It holds a small population of herders who move their animals with the rainfall.

Similarly, to the south the Congo forests blend into the southern savannas, and even into desert below Angola. Rains come to both savanna areas seasonally, through their respective summer months, when vegetation takes on new life and crops thrive. Human life is not so healthy during the rains, however, for disease-spreading mosquitoes come out in profusion, using standing water for breeding. Back through time it was in the dry season, when crops were in and lands dried out, that the savannas saw more travel, long-distance trade, and warfare.

Any broad discussion of the lives of Africans prior to their enslavement and shipment to America has to misrepresent the way things were. Individual and localized African societies differed greatly to begin with, and they changed over time. More and more, too, we are finding out how the centuries-long procurement of captives for the Atlantic trade fundamentally altered the way people lived across vast regions inland from the ocean. The peoples of West and West-Central Africa spoke several hundred mutually unintelligible languages and practiced social customs that, in some extremes, were as different from one another as they were from those of Europeans. Furthermore, the English colonies of North America imported Africans for nearly two hundred years, and African societies changed as much over this time as did the American society the slaves entered—or perhaps, because of all of the slave capturing, even more. Life in, say, Angola in 1600 was different in many ways from life in Senegal at the same time, just as it was different from life in Angola in 1800. So the task of describing the “African background” of African Americans seems even more difficult than describing life in America from 1607 to 1790.



Africa in the Era of Atlantic Trade, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Still, Africans from the slave-trading area exhibited some elements of cultural homogeneity through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as they did before and after. Most identified primarily with family and descent groups. An extended family,

occupying a section of a village, lived and worked together. West Africans, with the exception of the Akan of the Gold Coast, traced descent through the male side of the family, while West-Central and Central Africans followed matrilineal descent. Most practiced polygyny, men exhibiting their wealth and status with the number of their wives and size of their families. Security lay in kinsmen, sometimes distant, upon whom one's family could rely in times of need, and in stores of food or animals on the hoof. Although larger centers for trade existed, particularly in some of the interior river towns, small villages were common throughout the whole region.

The vast majority of these African men and women also relied on one of two basic modes of subsistence: pastoralism or agriculture. Herdsmen kept cattle, sheep, or goats on the northern and southern extremes of the Atlantic slave-gathering area, where rainfall was insufficient for growing crops. Farmers of the savannas grew rice, millet, sorghum, or maize—the latter introduced from the Americas by the Portuguese before 1540. Those of the more heavily wooded areas nearer the equator grew yams and manioc (another import from across the Atlantic) or harvested bananas, plantains, or palm products. Some of these distinctions are not so important when one considers that Senegalese millet farmers, Nigerian yam farmers, and Angolan maize farmers used similar methods of cultivation, mostly variations of slash-and-burn with hand tools, or that herders often lived in symbiotic relationships with farmers, exchanging products from their animals, including dung for fuel and fertilizer, for food for themselves and their livestock.

Students of African-American history have been among those pointing out cultural principles and assumptions that most West and West-Central Africans shared. Mechal Sobel in *The World They Made Together* (1987) calls attention to common African concepts of space, time, home, and the afterlife; Philip D. Morgan in *Slave Counterpoint* (1998) mentions shared assumptions of work, personal interaction, and aesthetic expression. These

authors note the commonalities in the broad range of African cultures to show the basis for the African-American subculture that would come into existence in America—and Sobel argues there is much from these African ways that entered into American culture generally.

Still, it is important to note that in many parts of Atlantic Africa, local identity and different languages tempered any sense of broad unity. Maps showing language families spanning vast stretches of the savannas and forests fail to give a complete picture of black Africa's linguistic diversity, and political differences were often greater, a fact that the existence of large conquest states or "empires" of earlier or later times often masks. In no sense did black Africans identify themselves as members of a "tribe" and thus take their place in a large sociopolitical realm of "tribal Africa." Colonial officials, early anthropologists, museum curators, and others inclined to use European taxonomies to bring understanding to the people they encountered—and thus give cartographers the kind of information they needed to construct "tribal" maps—created that false sense, and it is one that dies hard.

Individual allegiances were normally to the extended family and the village. Sometimes they carried more broadly, and nebulously, to a descent group or clan. In places there also was strong identification with, and attachment to, a social class, as with the vaunted *ceddo* warriors in Senegambia. When in need of protection from enemies or when conquered and forced, families, villages, and clans developed identities with a larger political unit—a state or even an empire. Indeed, increased raiding that accompanied the quest for slaves to meet the growing Atlantic demand brought persons in some areas to seek protection through greater political organization. Certainly, relations existed among and across political and language boundaries. Long-distance traders moved among people, religions and secret societies spread and provided a commonality across large areas, and momentous historical events united Africans at various times. But most frequently,

blacks from West and West-Central Africa had a restricted definition of their own group. In general, outlooks were local. “We” included the people of the lineage, the village, the small political unit. “They” included everyone else.

Among many of the societies of West and West-Central Africa, slavery had long been an established social and economic institution. There is no longer any real doubt concerning slavery’s importance in much of precolonial Africa: in some regions of West Africa in the nineteenth century, slaves, or persons subservient to and dependent on others, made up from two-thirds to three-quarters of the population. Why this was the case and what slavery in precolonial African societies was like are questions that have perplexed outside observers for a long time.

As with other societies, a critical element in Africans’ reliance on slavery was the need for labor. Parts of Africa had productive land, indeed, but because of high infant and child mortality, coupled with occasional food scarcity caused by droughts and pestilence, African people often had difficulty simply maintaining the size of their existing population, let alone having it grow so as to have more people to work more land. Of course, for a typical family, having sons marry and then waiting for the offspring of the marriage to mature was one way to obtain more family members and workers, and this they did, explaining at least partly the widespread African proclivity to have large numbers of children. But this was not cheap, as the young man’s family typically had to pay the woman’s family a brideprice—the exchange of wealth that was part of most African marital relationships, symbolic of mutual obligations and integral to the maintenance of the extended kinship network that held together society—and, with perhaps half of all children born dying before age five, it might never pay. Even under the best circumstances, it took years to rear productive offspring. But a family could also invest in a slave, who could be put to work almost immediately in productive ways to help the family and thus bring a rapid return on the investment.