Africana Studies

THE MIDDLE PASSAGE
STUDENT QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

"Were there any other races that were slave owners? Were there any other races that were enslaved?"

ENSLAVEMENT OF NATIVE AMERICANS

Early 16th Century:

- The enslavement of Native Americans began with the Spanish conquest of the Americas. In places like the Caribbean and Central and South America, Spanish colonizers enslaved large numbers of Native people, particularly in the early 1500s.

16th and 17th Centuries:

- As Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansion continued, Native Americans were enslaved across various regions. In North America, English, French, and Dutch settlers also enslaved Native Americans, although this was less widespread compared to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies.

An Indian sent into Slavery.

LATE 17TH CENTURY

High Mortality Rates Among Native Americans:

- Disease: European diseases like smallpox, influenza, and measles had devastating effects on Native American populations, causing high mortality rates. This drastically reduced their numbers and made it challenging to maintain a labor force from this group.
- Harsh Conditions: The brutal conditions and harsh treatment faced by Native Americans also contributed to high death rates among those who were enslaved.

Resistance and Rebellions:

- Native Americans frequently resisted enslavement, often successfully escaping or rebelling against their captors. Their knowledge of the land and guerrilla tactics made it difficult to control and enslave them effectively.

Economic Factors:

- Plantation Economy: European settlers in the Americas established large plantations that required substantial and sustained labor. Africans were increasingly seen as more suitable for these roles due to their perceived resistance to tropical diseases and ability to work in the harsh conditions of plantations.

Colonial Policies and Slave Trade Dynamics:

- Legislation and Policies: European colonial powers implemented laws and policies that favored the use of African labor. These policies institutionalized racial slavery and made the importation of Africans more systematic.

IRISH INDENTURED SERVITUDE

Irish indentured servitude began in the early 17th century, particularly after the Cromwellian Conquest of Ireland (1649-1653). Many Irish people were forcibly transported to the American colonies and other British territories as indentured servants. Irish indentured servitude was common from the mid-17th century through the 18th century. It was a significant labor system in the American colonies, especially in the early colonial period.

INDENTURED SERVITUDE VS. CHATTEL SLAVERY

Permanence vs. Temporality:

- Slavery: Enslavement was permanent and hereditary. Enslaved Africans and their descendants were considered property for life and had no legal rights. The system was designed to be a lifelong condition with no hope of legal freedom.
- Servitude: Indentured servitude was a temporary condition with a set end date. After serving their term, indentured servants could gain their freedom and often had opportunities to own land or start a new life.

Legal Status and Treatment:

- Slavery: Enslaved Africans were considered chattel (property) and were subject to brutal conditions and severe punishment. They had no legal recourse and were subjected to systematic abuse and exploitation.
- Servitude: Indentured servants, while facing harsh conditions, had some legal protections and the potential for eventual freedom. Their treatment was not as uniformly brutal or dehumanizing as that of enslaved Africans.

NUMBERS OF ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS (ESTIMATIONS)

12-15 million

300-500,000

tens of thousands

Enslaved Native Americans

While exact figures are not well-documented, it is estimated that tens of thousands of Native Americans were enslaved across the Americas from the 16th to 19th centuries.

Irish Indentured Servants

Approximately 300,000 to 500,000 Irish indentured servants were transported to the American colonies from the early 17th century to the early 19th century. Exact numbers are difficult to determine due to incomplete records.

Enslaved Africans

Between 12 million and 15 million Africans were forcibly transported to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. This number includes those who were shipped to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. The transatlantic slave trade lasted from the early 16th century to the mid-19th century, with the peak of the trade occurring in the 18th century.

THE 5 CIVILIZED TRIBES

The Five Civilized Tribes refer to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek (Muscogee), and Seminole nations. The Five Civilized Tribes' adoption of slavery was part of their broader assimilation into European-American agricultural and economic practices.

Ownership of enslaved Africans among these tribes reflected their adaptation to the socio-economic systems of the American South and contributed to their eventual conflicts with abolitionist movements and changes in U.S. policies.

- **Cherokee:**
  - Owned African slaves, particularly after the 1820s.
  - Slavery among the Cherokee increased as they adopted European-style agriculture and plantation systems.
  - The Cherokee Constitution of 1827 recognized slavery, reflecting its integration into Cherokee society.
- **Choctaw:**
  - Began owning African slaves in the early 19th century.
  - Slavery became more prevalent as the Choctaw adopted agricultural practices similar to those of European settlers.
  - By the 1830s, the Choctaw owned a significant number of enslaved Africans, especially in Mississippi.
- **Chickasaw:**
  - Owned African slaves primarily during the 19th century.
  - Slavery among the Chickasaw was closely linked to their economic activities, particularly in cotton cultivation.
  - Chickasaw slave ownership was similar in scale and nature to that of neighboring tribes.
- **Creek (Muscogee):**
  - Some Creek individuals and leaders owned enslaved Africans, especially in the early 19th century.
  - The practice of slavery among the Creek increased with the adoption of plantation agriculture.
  - The Creek Constitution of 1832 included provisions related to slavery.
- **Seminole:**
  - Owned African slaves, though the practice was less widespread compared to the other Four Tribes.
  - The Seminole's relationship with enslaved Africans was complex, with some enslaved people gaining freedom through integration with the Seminole community.
  - The Seminole War (1835–1842) and subsequent relocation affected the status and ownership of slaves.

THE PARTICIPATION OF AFRICANS & FREE(D) BLACKS IN SLAVERY

African Slavery

Some African leaders and individuals owned slaves, often through traditional practices and local slave trades. However, the scale was significantly smaller compared to European and American slave ownership.

Intermediary Roles

Some Africans acted as middlemen in the transatlantic slave trade, capturing and selling people to European traders, but their role as slave owners in the Americas was limited.

Free African American Slave Owners

The practice of free African Americans owning slaves was relatively rare but notable. It was more common in areas with large free Black populations, such as New Orleans and parts of the Upper South, in states like Virgina and Maryland.

- Some free African Americans purchased relatives or friends out of a desire to protect them from harsher conditions of slavery or to provide them with better living conditions.
- Others may have acquired slaves for economic reasons, using them as laborers on farms or businesses.

"*How big were the ships?*"

INFAMOUS SLAVE SHIPS
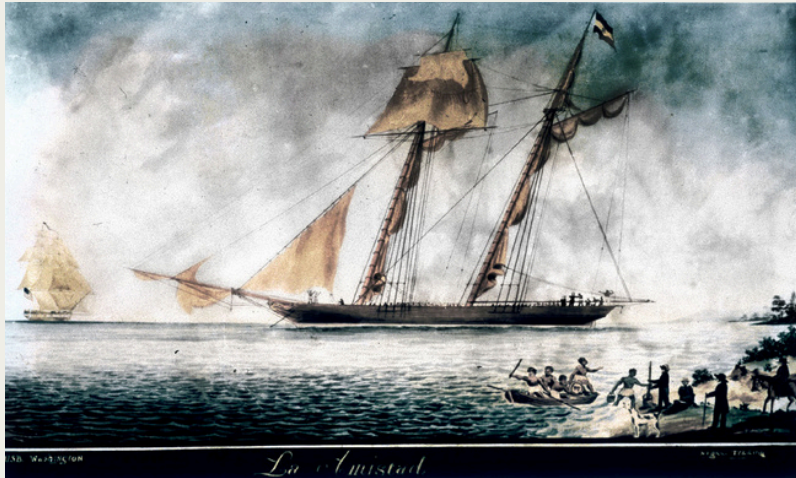
La Amistad (1839)

Originally a Spanish schooner, La Amistad became famous after a revolt by enslaved Africans on board. The ship was seized, and the legal battle that followed in the U.S. led to a landmark Supreme Court case, ultimately resulting in the freedom of the enslaved people on board.
**Length: 120 feet (approximately 36 meters) long.**

The Clotilda (1860)

The Clotilda is notorious for being the last known slave ship to bring enslaved Africans to the United States, arriving in Alabama in 1860, decades after the U.S. had banned the importation of enslaved people
Length: Approximately 86 feet (26 meters).
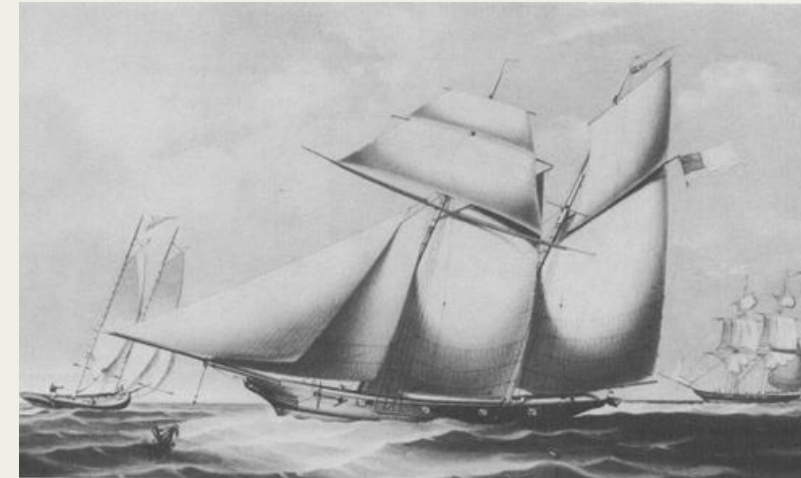
The Wanderer (1858)

The Wanderer was one of the last known ships to bring enslaved Africans to the U.S. Its illegal voyage from Africa to Georgia highlighted the persistence of the trade even after it was banned.
Length: Approximately 105 feet (32 meters).
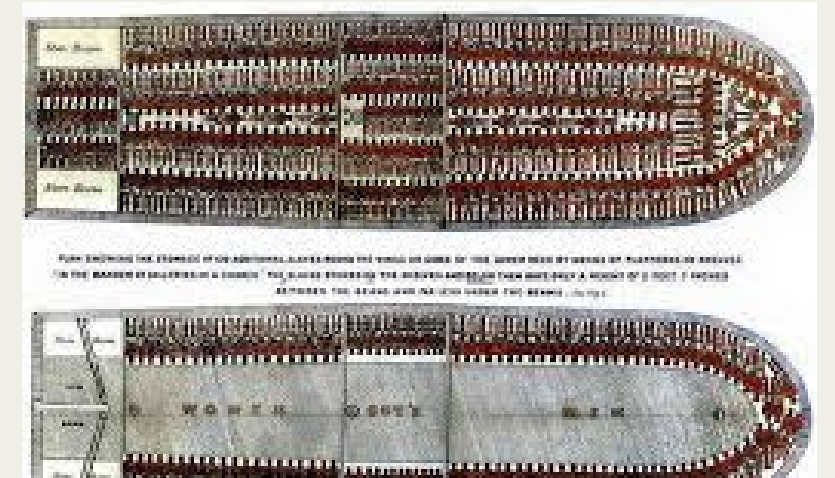
The Henrietta Marie (1700)

The Henrietta Marie was a British slave ship that sank off the coast of Florida in 1700. It was later discovered and has provided significant archaeological insights into the slave trade.
Length: Approximately 60 to 70 feet (18 to 21 meters).

"How many people were on the ships?"

Slave ships often carried between 200 to 600 enslaved Africans, plus crew members. The exact number varied depending on the size of the ship.

"Why did the Europeans decide to do this? Why couldn't they grow crops and manage plantations themselves?"

Europeans wanted to maximize profits, and enslaved labor was a way to do that without paying wages. Managing plantations required a large, cheap workforce, which they found in enslaving Africans.

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"*Why did the Europeans decide to do this? Why couldn't they grow crops and manage plantations themselves?* If they could build the ships without slave labor, why couldn't they just manage their own farms?"

"What was the African government like, and why couldn't they protect their citizens?"

Chattel Slavery

The most common form of slavery in America, where enslaved people were considered the legal property of their enslavers and could be bought, sold, or inherited. This was the dominant system in the southern U.S., particularly in agriculture.

TYPES OF CHATTEL SLAVERY *(in the U.S.)*

Plantation Slavery

A subset of chattel slavery, this involved enslaved people working on large farms (plantations) primarily cultivating crops like cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar. It was most common in the southern states and involved harsh physical labor.

Urban Slavery

Enslaved people in cities and towns worked as domestic servants, artisans, or laborers for wealthy families or businesses. They performed tasks such as cooking, cleaning, blacksmithing, or carpentry, and often lived in close proximity to their enslavers.

Household Slavery

Enslaved individuals worked within homes performing domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. This occurred in both rural and urban areas, with enslaved people living alongside their enslavers.

PLANTATION SLAVE QUARTERS

URBAN SLAVERY

Urban slavery in America began in the colonial period, in the 17th century, alongside the establishment of slavery in rural areas. As cities like New York, Charleston, and Savannah developed, enslaved people were brought into these urban centers to work as domestic servants, artisans, and laborers for wealthy families, businesses, and local governments. Urban slavery grew as cities expanded in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in the South, where the demand for skilled labor and household services in cities increased.

By the early 19th century, urban slavery was firmly established in southern cities. However, the rise of plantation agriculture in rural areas remained the dominant form of slavery in the U.S. Eventually, urban slavery began to decline before the Civil War, as Northern cities gradually abolished slavery and Southern cities became more reliant on rural labor from plantations.

OWENS-THOMAS HOUSE & SLAVE QUARTERS

124 Abercorn St., Savannah, GA 31401

The Owens-Thomas House is a historic home and museum located in Savannah, Georgia. Built in 1819, the house was originally designed by English architect William Jay and reflects the wealth and social structure of the period. Today, the museum not only showcases the elegant interiors and lifestyle of the wealthy Owens family but also explores the lives of the enslaved people who lived and worked there. The house features preserved slave quarters, offering insight into the harsh realities of slavery in the urban South.

GEORGE WELSHMAN OWENS

George Welshman Owens was a prominent lawyer, politician, and plantation owner in Savannah, Georgia, during the 19th century. He purchased the Owens-Thomas House in 1830 for $10,000. Owens was a wealthy man who profited from his law practice, political career, and the labor of enslaved people. He served as the mayor of Savannah from 1832-1834 and was later elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Owens owned several plantations and enslaved around 400 individuals across his properties. At the Owens-Thomas House, he enslaved between 9 and 15 people, who were forced to work in various domestic roles. These enslaved individuals worked as cooks, maids, butlers, and stable hands, maintaining the house and serving the Owens family. Their labor was essential to running the household, but they lived in cramped, harsh conditions in the carriage house and slave quarters on the property. Despite their integral role in the household, they endured the oppressive conditions common to enslaved life in the South.

URBAN SLAVERY VS. PLANTATION SLAVERY

The enslaved individuals at the Owens-Thomas House in Savannah, Georgia, experienced a different form of enslavement compared to those on rural plantations. Urban slavery, like that at the Owens-Thomas House, differed from plantation slavery in several ways:

1. **Work and Roles:** Enslaved people on the Owens property worked primarily as domestic servants—cooks, maids, butlers, and stable hands—performing household tasks for the Owens family. In contrast, enslaved people on plantations often labored in the fields, cultivating crops like cotton, tobacco, or rice under harsher physical conditions.
2. **Living Conditions:** At the Owens-Thomas House, the enslaved people lived in slave quarters attached to the carriage house. While still cramped and uncomfortable, these urban quarters were more integrated into the household's daily life compared to the often remote, isolated slave cabins on plantations.

URBAN SLAVERY VS. PLANTATION SLAVERY

3. Interaction with the City: Enslaved people in urban environments, like those in the Owens-Thomas House, had more exposure to free Black people and the broader community of Savannah. They may have been hired out for labor or sent on errands in the city, which could provide slight opportunities for interaction with others and access to limited freedoms not available to enslaved people on isolated plantations.

4. Tasks and Skills: The types of skills needed for urban slavery were different. Enslaved people at the Owens-Thomas House needed to be proficient in tasks such as fine cooking, sewing, and maintaining an upper-class household, requiring specialized skills that were less common on plantations.

Though these differences existed, it is important to note that the enslaved people at the Owens-Thomas House, like all enslaved individuals, were still subjected to the dehumanizing and brutal institution of slavery. The relative differences in work or environment did not change the fundamental reality of their lack of freedom and exploitation.