

How Slavery Helped Build a World Economy

African peoples were captured and transported to the Americas to work. Most European colonial economies in the Americas from the 16th through the 19th century were dependent on enslaved African labor for their survival.

According to European colonial officials, the abundant land they had "discovered" in the Americas was useless without sufficient labor to exploit it. Slavery systems of labor exploitation were preferred, but neither European nor Native American sources proved adequate to the task.

The trans-Saharan slave trade had long supplied enslaved African labor to work on sugar plantations in the Mediterranean alongside white slaves from Russia and the Balkans. This same trade also sent as many as 10,000 slaves a year to serve owners in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Iberian Peninsula.

Having proved themselves competent workers in Europe and on nascent sugar plantations on the Madeira and Canary Islands off the coast of Africa, enslaved Africans became the labor force of choice in the Western Hemisphere—so much so that they became the overwhelming majority of the colonial populations of the Americas.

Of the 6.5 million immigrants who survived the crossing of the Atlantic and settled in the Western Hemisphere between 1492 and 1776, only 1 million were Europeans. The remaining 5.5 million were African. An average of 80 percent of these enslaved Africans—men, women, and children—were employed, mostly as field-workers. Women as well as children worked in some capacity. Only very young children (under six), the elderly, the sick, and the infirm escaped the day-to-day work routine.

More than half of the enslaved African captives in the Americas were employed on sugar plantations. Sugar developed into the leading slave-produced commodity in the Americas.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Brazil dominated the production of sugarcane. One of the earliest large-scale manufacturing industries was established to convert the juice from the sugarcane into sugar, molasses, and eventually rum, the alcoholic beverage of choice of the triangular trade.

Ironically, the profits made from the sale of these goods in Europe, as well as the trade in these commodities in Africa, were used to purchase more slaves.

During the 18th century, Saint Domingue (Haiti) surpassed Brazil as the leading sugar-producing colony. The number of slaves brought to the tiny island of Haiti equaled more than twice the number imported into the United States. The vast majority came during the 18th century to work in the expanding sugar plantation economy.

The Haitian Revolution abolished slavery there and led to the establishment of the first black republic in the Americas. It also ended Haiti's dominance of world sugar production.

Cuba assumed this position during the 19th century, and even after slavery was abolished there in 1886, sugar remained the foundation of its economy and its primary export commodity throughout the 20th century. Sugar was also produced by slave labor in the other Caribbean islands as well as in Louisiana in the United States.

During the colonial period in the United States, tobacco was the dominant slave-produced commodity. Concentrated in Virginia and Maryland, tobacco plantations utilized the largest percentage of enslaved Africans imported into the United States prior to the American Revolution. Rice and indigo plantations in South Carolina also employed enslaved African labor.

The American Revolution cost Virginia and Maryland their principal European tobacco markets, and for a brief period of time after the Revolution, the future of slavery in the United States was in jeopardy. Most of the northern states abolished it, and even Virginia debated abolition in the Virginia Assembly.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 gave slavery a new life in the United States. Between 1800 and 1860, slave-produced cotton expanded from South Carolina and Georgia to newly colonized lands west of the Mississippi. This shift of the slave economy from the upper South (Virginia and Maryland) to the lower South was accompanied by a comparable shift of the enslaved African population to the lower South and

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West.

After the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, the principal source of the expansion of slavery into the lower South was the domestic slave trade from the upper South. By 1850, 1.8 million of the 2.5 million enslaved Africans employed in agriculture in the United States were working on cotton plantations.

The vast majority of enslaved Africans employed in plantation agriculture were field hands. Even on plantations, however, they worked in other capacities. Some were domestics and worked as butlers, waiters, maids, seamstresses, and launderers. Others were assigned as carriage drivers, hostlers, and stable boys. Artisans—carpenters, stonemasons, blacksmiths, millers, coopers, spinners, and weavers—were also employed as part of plantation labor forces.

Enslaved Africans also worked in urban areas. Upward of ten percent of the enslaved African population in the United States lived in cities. Charleston, Richmond, Savannah, Mobile, New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans all had sizable slave populations. In the southern cities they totaled approximately a third of the population.

The range of slave occupations in cities was vast. Domestic servants dominated, but there were carpenters, fishermen, coopers, draymen, sailors, masons, bricklayers, blacksmiths, bakers, tailors, peddlers, painters, and porters. Although most worked directly for their owners, others were hired out to work as skilled laborers on plantations, on public works projects, and in industrial enterprises. A small percentage hired themselves out and paid their owners a percentage of their earnings.

Each plantation economy was part of a larger national and international political economy. The cotton plantation economy, for instance, is generally seen as part of the regional economy of the American South. By the 1830s, "cotton was king" indeed in the South. It was also king in the United States, which was competing for economic leadership in the global political economy. Plantation-grown cotton was the foundation of the antebellum southern economy.

But the American financial and shipping industries were also dependent on slave-produced cotton. So was the British textile industry. Cotton was not shipped directly to Europe from the South. Rather, it was shipped to New York and then transshipped to England and other centers of cotton manufacturing in the United States and Europe.

As the cotton plantation economy expanded throughout the southern region, banks and financial houses in New York supplied the loan capital and/or investment capital to purchase land and slaves.

Recruited as an inexpensive source of labor, enslaved Africans in the United States also became important economic and political capital in the American political economy. Enslaved Africans were legally a form of property—a commodity. Individually and collectively, they were frequently used as collateral in all kinds of business transactions. They were also traded for other kinds of goods and services.

The value of the investments slaveholders held in their slaves was often used to secure loans to purchase additional land or slaves. Slaves were also used to pay off outstanding debts. When calculating the value of estates, the estimated value of each slave was included. This became the source of tax revenue for local and state governments. Taxes were also levied on slave transactions.

Politically, the U.S. Constitution incorporated a feature that made enslaved Africans political capital—to the benefit of southern states. The so-called three-fifths compromise allowed the southern states to count their slaves as three-fifths of a person for purposes of calculating states' representation in the U.S. Congress. Thus the balance of power between slaveholding and non-slaveholding states turned, in part, on the three-fifths presence of enslaved Africans in the census.

Slaveholders were taxed on the same three-fifths principle, and no taxes paid on slaves supported the national treasury. In sum, the slavery system in the United States was a national system that touched the very core of its economic and political life.