

The shock of enslavement



African rulers began enslaving and selling their own people to Europe and other countries long before there was such a large demand for slaves in the early 1600s. Enslavement started out as punishment for crimes, but soon became a booming business for African rulers. English colonists who had a need for cheap labor decided to tap into the slave trade to find affordable plantation workers. Africans were taken against their will, tortured, and dehumanized in preparation for their journey into slavery.

Africans of all social ranks ended up on slave ships. Some had been village leaders; some already slaves in Africa, members of chiefs' families and the educated elite. They were kidnapped, separated from their families, branded like cattle, and made to march in chains to the coast where they would be confined in cages until there were enough of them to fill a ship. The slaves then boarded canoes to be ferried to the ships.

Many became desperate and decided to jump overboard and drown rather than be carried off to an unknown destination. The voyage from Africa to North America was a six- to eight-week-long ocean voyage called the Middle Passage. Men were wedged below decks in spaces about 6 feet long, 16 inches wide, and 30 inches high. Women and children were packed even more tightly. The slaves were forced to stay below decks most of the time where the smell of vomit, blood, and other body fluids grew rancid.

Some slaves went insane from the cooped up conditions, and hearing shrieks and groans of pain or dying. Others refused to eat. On many voyages, between 5 and 20 percent of the slaves died from disease and other causes. Those who survived the horrifying voyage endured the humiliation of being

sold. Buyers generally preferred males and often looked for slaves from certain African ethnic groups, believing that some Africans would work harder than others.

The process often involved being looked over for signs of disease, including being poked and prodded. Many terrified Africans thought they were going to be eaten. Being a slave in early American times would have been a horrible way to live. But that seems mild compared to the actual process of becoming a slave and enduring the horrific voyage overseas to America. We can only hope that time has healed some of the pain and suffering caused to all generations and races that have been enslaved throughout the years.

Works Cited

David Goldfield –[et al.]--(2009) The American Journey: a history of the United States, p. 68-71 The Wikimedia Foundation (2010) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Passage