The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

The Different Regions of the English Colonies

The English colonies along the eastern coast of North America could be divided into regions based mostly on geographical conditions. These conditions—soil, climate, and access to navigable rivers—determined how the colonists survived and made their livings. The English colonies could be divided into the regions of North and South. The dividing line was the Mason-Dixon Line, named after the two surveyors who established the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland and Delaware.

The North had two regions—New England and Middle. The New England soil was rocky; its climate was cold. The inhabitants could grow enough food for themselves, but not much more. When you grew enough food for your family but not enough to sell, you were called a subsistence farmer. The New Englanders made their money by taking advantage of their access to good fishing in the ocean. They fished for cod, which they salted so it could be preserved and traded to Europe or the Caribbean colonies. They also worked in the whaling industry, which provided blubber for boiling into oil.

Besides fishing, the New England colonies—Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire—grew lots of timber, so the Northern settlers used the lumber to build ships. These ships allowed New Englanders to become worldwide traders selling wood products, oil and dried fish. Rhode Island also made rum and manufactured guns.

The middle region, made up of Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York had better soil than New England, so they could grow cash crops. Additionally, there was some early manufacturing here involving the production of glass, textiles, and paper. Thousands also worked as craftsmen—shoemakers, tailors, blacksmiths, and watchmakers. The population was more diverse than in New England because immigrants tended to settle in this region.

Though there was some manufacturing in the colonies, England, the mother country, wouldn’t let the colonists manufacture goods that competed with English goods. England wanted the colonists to buy most manufactured goods from England.
The region of the South was different from both coastal New England and the more frontier region of the Middle colonies. The southern colony of Virginia had rich fertile land that farmers used to cultivate tobacco. This crop was grown on larger plantations. Southern colonies also grew indigo and rice. Tobacco, however, brought a tremendous amount of money to Southern plantation owners. Tobacco cultivation required a vast number of laborers. One way to increase profit was to find cheap labor. The Southern plantation owner quickly chose slave labor over free labor. Decreased labor costs meant increased profit. Indentured servants were relatively cheap, but eventually they worked off their contract and could go their own way. Slaves, on the other hand, never worked off their contract. Furthermore, they had children who became slaves.

So how did the Southern farmers and plantation owners get their slaves? You need to understand the worldwide trading system that was in place (and growing!) at that time.

By the 1700s, Yankees (a term for Northerners) were trading all kinds of things. They might take their salted cod to Barbados and trade it for cane sugar. Then they'd go to Virginia to pick up tobacco. They'd take the tobacco and sugar to England and trade them for cash, guns, and English cloth. Then on to Africa, where they exchanged the guns and cloth for men, women, and children. Read that last sentence again. It’s hard to believe that people were sold into slavery, but it’s part of our history. From there it was back across the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indies, where the people were sold into slavery. This system of trade routes has historically been called the Triangular Trade, but if you really look at the routes, you’ll see that to say this system involved only three points is too simplistic.

So the phrase, Triangular Trade, makes you picture the triangle of routes between Europe, Africa, and the New World. But contrary to that simple image, the triangular slave trade that linked those three places was not a closed circuit. Asia was very much a part of this global trading system. For example, you’ve learned that the ships that went to Africa brought cloth to trade in exchange for slaves. England had wool cloth, but the Africans wanted cotton cloth. English slave traders needed a commodity that the African slave traders wanted. So England traded with India to get that cotton cloth. What did India want in exchange for the cloth? Yes, they wanted European guns, but more than that, they wanted silver. Where was silver coming from? The Spanish colonies in South America.

Besides cotton from India, another commodity from Asia proved valuable to the Europeans buying and kidnapping slaves from the coast of West Africa: cowry shells. Europeans sailed to the Maldive Islands (near India) to get these cowry shells, which served as the major currency in West Africa.
The Trade Routes

You can see that the Triangular Trade name for this trading is really misleading. In fact, if you trace a line between all the countries that were trading, you would see that this was a web of trade routes. This was a global network of trade. Here is an accurate map of what was being traded to whom and from whom, but the world map below it gives you a better idea of this early globalization.
Slavery in Africa

The European colonizers wanted African slaves to work in the sugar cane fields of the West Indies and Brazil, and to work in the tobacco and cotton fields of the Southern English colonies in North America. The Native Americans were not surviving amidst the hard conditions imposed on them. They were not immune to smallpox or malaria. The plantation owners soon realized that Africans survived the harsh conditions better than Native Americans.

How did the Europeans acquire the slaves they wanted to bring to the New World? The Africans had been captured by enemy tribesmen and sold to African slave traders. The slave traders bargained with the New England boat captain, who bought as many people as he could squeeze on his ship. Some of the captives were children who were kidnapped from their parents. Olaudah Equiano was one of those children. He was 11 in 1756, when he was captured in Benin. He was the youngest of seven children. Like many other prosperous African families, his family had slaves. (So though it’s true that Africans themselves practiced slavery, the system and condition of servitude did not parallel the inhumane conditions of North and South American slavery that was based on racism.)

Olaudah Equino’s autobiography gives us first-hand knowledge of what it was like to be captured and sold into slavery:

One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my sister were left to mind the house, two men got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and without giving us time to cry out or to make any resistance, they ran off with us to the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment and spent the night.

Olaudah and his sister were taken on a long journey, separated, and sold. He was passed from person to person, staying a month here, a few weeks there. He tried unsuccessfully to run away. Finally, he was brought to the ocean, which he had never seen before.
The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror...When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I was sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me.

Olaudah was tossed below deck, where the smell was so bad he became sick and couldn’t eat. When he refused food, he was tied down and beaten. Frightened, he was at first unable to find anyone who spoke his language. Finally he met some men who spoke the language of Benin.

I asked them if they knew how the vessel moved. They told me they could not tell; but that there was cloth put upon the masts by the help of ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water, when they liked, in order to stop the vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at his account, and really thought they were spirits.

Olaudah learned that he was being taken to the white men’s country to work.

I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate; but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this is not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw was, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less than to be treated in the same manner.
Olaudah described the scene below decks, where people were packed so closely they could hardly turn over. The smells, he said, were “loathsome.” All is a “scene of horror.”

One day, when we had a smooth sea, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together, preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped into the sea.

Olaudah was taken to Barbados in the West Indies, where he was sold. His story from there is different from most of the stories about slaves in the West Indies. Most worked and died while working on sugar cane plantations, but Equiano instead was taken on a ship where he became a seaman, eventually buying his own freedom after more than a decade as a slave.

If you are interested in reading more about Olaudah Equiano, our library has a good book called A Kidnapped Prince.