

People not Numbers:

Putting 12 Million into Personal Terms

Over almost four centuries, at least twelve million men, women, and children were forcibly transported from their African homelands to the Americas, changing forever the face and character of the modern world. The slave trade was brutal and horrific, and the enslavement of Africans represented one of the longest and most sustained assaults on the life and dignity of human beings in history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Between 1492 and 1776, an estimated 6.5 million people migrated to and settled in the Western Hemisphere. More than five out of six were Africans. Although victimized and exploited, they created a new, largely African, Creole society and their forced migration resulted in the emergence of the so-called Black Atlantic.

At the same time, the impact of these forced migrations was overwhelming negative for Africa. The continent experienced the loss of a significant part of its able-bodied population, which played a part in the social and political weakening of its societies that left them open, in the nineteenth century, to colonial domination and exploitation.

THEMES: slave trade, population, migration, statistics

OBJECTIVES

Students, following this activity, will understand:

- 1) The migration and settlement patterns of peoples in the Americas.
- 2) Elements of African slavery during the colonial period in North America (e.g. relocation of Africans to the Caribbean and North America and “the Middle Passage”).

MATERIALS (printed and copied for each student)

- “The Transatlantic Slave Trade” and “The Domestic Slave Trade” essays
- Magnets, tape, or push-pins to affix lists to chalkboards, walls, or bulletin boards
- Clock, stop-watch, or timer
- Calculator (optional)

ACTIVITY: PUTTING IT IN PERSPECTIVE

Part 1: Comparing Scale (15 min.):

Ask the class how many students are in the classroom when there are no absences. Record the number on the chalkboard. If the number is in dispute, write the range for the largest and smallest number (i.e. 28 to 32). Then, ask how many students are in the entire school when there are no absences and record that number range. Finally, ask how many pupils are in the entire school system in their district and record the number range.

Ask students to hypothesize why certainty over numbers usually decreases as the number of people in question increases (in other words, the range for the class is probably narrower than the range for the school or district). Ask students if they think it matters that the school or school system treats them as individuals rather than numbers. If so, why?

Explain that students face a similar problem with statistics in history. When historians turn people into numbers, students are responsible for making the effort to turn the numbers back into people again. If they do not, they lose the essence of the peoples' lives—something students would not appreciate if it happened to them.

Part 2: Applying the Lesson (25 min.)

Ask students if they have ever thought about what the number “12 million” represents or if they have ever seen “12 million” of anything.

Ask them to take out a sheet of paper and pencil. Explain that they will have five minutes to list the names of as many friends, family members, schoolmates, and acquaintances in the community (neighbors, teammates, associates in church or scouting, merchants or service providers, etc.) as they can.

Reassure them that they do not have to spell the names perfectly, but they should list names as completely and correctly as possible (first and last names!). Once students are ready, set the clock and tell them to begin writing. At your call or the sound of the timer, all students should put down their pencils.

Ask students to review their lists to make certain there are no repetitions. Have them count how many names they have, and write the total on the top of their sheets. Collect the sheets and compute the grand total of names listed by the class.

Divide the number “12 million” (12,000,000) by the class total. Explain that this would be the number of days they would have to write the same number of names—but entirely new names—each and every day, to record 12 million names in all. Expressed mathematically, the formula is: $12,000,000 \div x = y$ (number of days.) Divide number of days (**y**) by:

- a. 180 (or the state-mandated number of attendance days for your school district) to calculate how many school years would be necessary to complete the list.
- b. 365 to calculate how many solar years would be necessary to complete the list.

Ask students to read the overview from the narrative, “Transatlantic Slave Trade,” and as they read post their lists around the classroom.

Part 3: Concluding Discussion (10 min.)

The colonial archaeologist, Ivor Noël Hume once observed, “Whenever we turn people into numbers and back again, we invariably lose something, and what we lose is life.”

Ask them: “As you study the Atlantic slave trade, what can you do to help yourself remember that these were people rather than numbers?”

Credits and Resources:

This lesson plan comes from educational resources developed for “In Motion: The African-American Experience,” (<http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm>) developed by the New York Public Library and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

For more information about the Atlantic slave trade, see David Northrup (ed.), *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002); John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World: 1400-1800* (Cambridge, 1998); and Philip Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade* (University of Wisconsin, 1972).

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Over the course of more than three and a half centuries, the forcible transportation of at least twelve million men, women, and children from their African homelands to the Americas changed forever the face and character of the modern world. The slave trade was brutal and horrific, and the enslavement of Africans was cruel, exploitative, and dehumanizing. Together, it represents one of the longest and most sustained assaults on the very life, integrity, and dignity of human beings in history.

In the Americas, besides the considerable riches their free labor created for others, the importation and subsequent enslavement of Africans was the principal way the islands and continents were re-peopled following the disastrous decline in indigenous populations. Between 1492 and 1776, an estimated 6.5 million people migrated to and settled in the Western Hemisphere. More than five out of six were Africans. Although victimized and exploited, they created a new, largely African, Creole society and their forced migration resulted in the emergence of the so-called Black Atlantic.

The transatlantic slave trade laid the foundation for modern capitalism and generated immense wealth for business enterprises in America and Europe. The trade contributed to the industrialization of northwestern Europe and created a single Atlantic world that included western Europe, western Africa, the Caribbean islands, and the mainlands of North and South America.

On the other hand, the overwhelming impact on Africa of its involvement in the creation of this modern world was negative. The continent experienced the loss of a significant part of its able-bodied population, which played a part in the social and political weakening of its societies that left them open, in the nineteenth century, to colonial domination and exploitation.

On the first leg of their three-part journey, often called the Triangular Trade, European ships brought manufactured goods to Africa; on the second, they transported African men, women, and children to the Americas; and on the third leg, they exported the sugar, rum, cotton, and tobacco produced by the enslaved labor force to Europe. There was also a direct trade between Brazil and Angola that did not include the European leg.

Well over 30,000 voyages from Africa to the Americas have been documented. The Traders referred to the Africa-Americas part of the voyage as the “Middle Passage” and could last from one to three months. Based on regulations, ships could transport only about 350 people, but some carried more than 800 men, women, and children. Branded, stripped naked for the duration of the voyage, lying down amidst filth, enduring almost unbearable heat, compelled by the lash to dance on deck to straighten their limbs, all captives went through a frightening, incredibly brutal and dehumanizing experience.

Some people tried to starve themselves to death, but the crew forced them to take food by whipping them, torturing them with hot coals, or forcing their mouths open by using special instruments or by breaking their teeth.

The personal identity of the captives was denied. Women and boys were often used for the pleasure of the crew. Ottobah Cugoano, who endured the Middle Passage in the eighteenth century, recalled: “it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take the African women and lie upon their bodies.”

Mortality brought about by malnutrition, dysentery, smallpox, and other diseases was very high. On average, 20 percent of slaves on a ship died from various epidemics or committed suicide. Venture Smith, describing his ordeal, wrote: “After an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox, which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbados: but when we reached it, there were found out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive.” It was not unusual for captains and crew to toss the sick overboard, and some even disposed of an entire cargo for insurance purposes.

On board slave ships, in the midst of their oppression, Africans, who were often as much strangers to each other as to their European captors, forged the first links with their new American identities. Relationships established during the Middle Passage frequently resulted in revolts and other forms of resistance that bound the enslaved together in new social and political alliances. Ottobah Cugoano described the attempted revolt organized on the ship that took him from the Gold Coast to Grenada: “when we found ourselves at last taken away, death was more preferable than life; and a plan was concerted amongst us, that we might burn and blow up the ship, and to perish all together in the flames It was the women and boys which were to burn the ship, with the approbation and groans of the rest; though that was prevented, the discovery was likewise a cruel bloody scene.”

The special relations created on a ship could last a lifetime and were regarded by the deported Africans, torn from their loved ones, as strongly as kinship. They had special names for those who had shared their ordeal. They were called *bâtiments* in Creole (from the French for ship), *sippi* in Surinam (from ship), and shipmate in Jamaica.

Far from wiping out all traces of their cultural, social, and personal past, the Middle Passage experience provided Africans with opportunities to draw on their collective heritage to make themselves a new people.

The Domestic Slave Trade

The domestic slave trade, the relocation of slaves within the United States, did not begin, as is often assumed, with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. It began half a century earlier in the 1760s, and overlapped with the trade from Africa. It was extensive even between 1787 and 1807, a period in which more Africans were forced to these shores than in any other two decades in North American history. The domestic trade continued into the 1860s and displaced some 1.2 million men, women, and children, the vast majority of whom were born in America. Almost twice as many African-American, in other words, were redistributed throughout the South as entered North America from the transatlantic trade.

During the century of this domestic trade, roughly equal numbers of males and females were sold away. The exception was the Louisiana sugar plantations, whose population made up some 6 percent of the nation's enslaved population. Importation to New Orleans, where many sugar planters bought their workers, was about 58 percent male.. The exhausting labor in the cane fields took an exceptionally heavy toll on the laborers' health, and the demands of the sugar planters meant that the southern Louisiana market tended to import particularly strong workers.

The shortage of women in their childbearing years due to the gender imbalance in purchasing practice made the region unique in North America for having a marked excess of slave deaths over births.

Speculators preferred to purchase what they termed "young and likely Negroes" –mainly teenagers and young adults. They wanted men with the immediate ability to perform hard labor and the potential for a long work career. If they bought women, they preferred them young, with many years of childbearing ahead of them.

Only about 5 percent of the males and 6 percent of the females sold were over thirty. Documentary evidence shows that with the exception of Louisiana, males between ten and twenty-nine years old comprised 72 percent of the trade but only 43 percent of the United States' total enslaved population. Children under ten made up about 18 percent of the trade and most, especially the under-eights, were sold together with their mothers.

To be "sold down the river" was one of the most dreaded prospects of the enslaved population. Some destinations, particularly the Louisiana sugar plantations, had especially grim reputations. But it was the destruction of family that made the domestic slave trade so terrifying. Francis Fedric, who was born in Virginia and sold away in Kentucky, recalled the scene:

"Men and women down on their knees begging to be purchased to go with their wives or husbands, ... children crying and imploring not to have their parents sent away from them; but all their beseeching and tears were of no avail. They were ruthlessly separated, most of them for ever."

The experience of separation was traumatic. Traders bought selectively, without regard to family, picking individuals they thought would be the most profitable. Bills of sale show that

they almost never bought husbands and wives together, and such records also indicate that the trade would have disrupted one in five marriages of all slaves in the selling states.

As well as spouses being separated by the domestic slave trade, one-third of the children under fourteen were separated from one or both of their parents. John Brown from Virginia was about ten when he endured the misery of being sent to Georgia, far from his mother:

"Finney agreed to purchase me by the pound. . . . A rope was brought, both ends of which were tied together, so that it formed a large noose or loop. This was hitched over the hook of the stilyard, and I was seated in the loop. After I had been weighed, there was a deduction made for the rope. I do not recollect what I weighed, but the price I was sold for amounted to three hundred and ten dollars. Within five minutes after, Finney paid the money, and I was marched off. I looked round and saw my poor mother stretching out her hands after me. She ran up, and overtook us, but Finney, who was behind me, and between me and my mother, would not let her approach, though she begged and prayed to be allowed to kiss me for the last time, and bid me good bye. "