

# An account of the slave trade on the coast of Africa

WITH COMMENTARY BY SHANE FREEMAN

Excerpted from Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: 1788).

## As you read...

### THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

The shipping of slaves from Africa to America was called the *middle passage* because it was the middle leg of the “triangle trade” from Europe to Africa to America and back again. Ships from Europe bought or traded for slaves on the West Coast of Africa, which they traded in America for goods that they then shipped back to Europe.

The middle passage could last as long as four months, depending on the weather and winds, and ships carried as many as 300 slaves each.

### ALEXANDER FALCONBRIDGE

Alexander Falconbridge served as a surgeon, or doctor, on British slave ships on four voyages between 1780 and 1787. In 1788, he wrote *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, which became an influential book in the abolitionist movement.

In 1791, he was selected by the Anti-Slavery Society to reorganize a failed settlement of freed slaves in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the western coast of Africa. But the colony was a failure, and Falconbridge died an alcoholic in 1792.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Remember that Alexander Falconbridge, despite his later work as an abolitionist, was a member of the slave ship’s crew. As surgeon (the eighteenth-century term for a ship’s doctor), he was responsible for the health of the crew and the slaves. As you read, consider the tone of each part of the narrative.

- What do we know about how Falconbridge felt about the slave trade?
- Did all ships’ surgeons feel the same way?
- Did the crew see slaves as passengers or as cargo? How can you tell?
- What does this document tell us about the triangle trade in general?

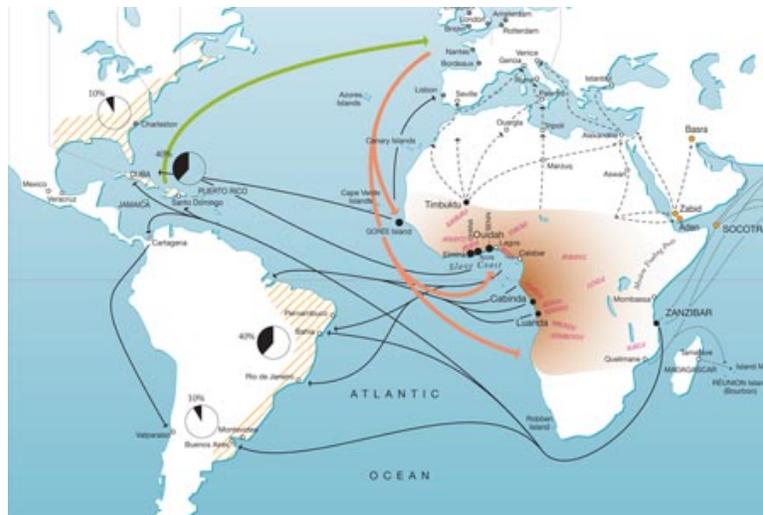


Figure 1. The "triangle trade" carried agricultural products from America to Europe, manufactured goods from Europe to Africa, and slaves from Africa to America. As this map shows, though, it more more complicated than a single triangle. The full map (in PDF format) includes a key and shows additional trade routes and the impact of the slave trade on Africa.

## The Manner in which the Slaves are procured.

Slaves captured inland and sold at "fairs" on the coast<sup>1</sup>

After permission has been obtained for *breaking trade*, as it is termed, the captains go ashore, from time to time, to examine the negroes that are exposed to sale<sup>2</sup>, and to make their purchases. The unhappy wretches thus disposed of, are bought by the black traders at fairs, which are held for that purpose<sup>3</sup>, at the distance of upwards of two hundred miles from the sea coast; and these fairs are said to be supplied from an interior part of the country. Many negroes, upon being questioned relative to the places of their nativity have asserted, that they have travelled during the revolution of several moons, (their usual method of calculating time) before they have reached the places where they were purchased by the black traders. At these fairs, which are held at uncertain periods, but generally every six weeks, several thousands are frequently exposed to sale, who had been collected from all parts of the country for a very considerable distance round. While I was upon the coast, during one of the voyages I made, the black traders brought down, in different canoes, from twelve to fifteen hundred negroes, which had been purchased at one fair. They consisted chiefly of men and boys, the women seldom exceeding a third of the whole number. From forty to two hundred negroes are generally purchased at a time by the black traders, according to the opulence of the buyer, and consist of those of all ages, from a month, to sixty years and upwards. Scarcely any age or situation is deemed an exception, the price being proportionable. Women sometimes form a part of them, who happen to be so far advanced in their pregnancy, as to be delivered during their journey from the fairs to the coast; and I have frequently seen instances of the deliveries on board ship. The slaves purchased at these fairs are only for the supply of the markets at Bonny, and Old and New Calabar.

No one exempt from being enslaved

Kidnapping of slaves

There is great reason to believe, that most of the negroes shipped off from the coast of Africa, are *kidnapped*.<sup>4</sup> But the extreme care taken by the black traders to prevent the Europeans from gaining any intelligence of their modes of proceeding; the great distance inland from whence the negroes are brought; and our ignorance of their language, (with which, very frequently, the black traders themselves are equally unacquainted) prevent our obtaining such information on this head as we could wish....

While I was in employ on board one of the slave ships, a negroe informed me, that being one evening invited to drink with some of the black traders, up on his going away, they attempted to seize him. As he was very active, he evaded their design, and got out of their hands. He was however prevented from effecting his escape by a large dog, which laid hold of him, and compelled him to submit. These creatures are kept by many of the traders for that purpose; and being trained to the inhuman sport, they appear to be much pleased with it....

It frequently happens, that those who kidnap others, are themselves, in their turns, seized and sold. A negroe in the West Indies informed me, that after having been employed in kidnapping others, he had experienced this reverse. And he assured me, that it was a common incident among his countrymen.

Conflict among African peoples over the slave trade

Continual enmity is thus fostered among the negroes of Africa, and all social intercourse between them is destroyed; which most assuredly would not be the case, had they not these opportunities of finding a ready sale for each other.<sup>5</sup>...

How slaves were sold to Europeans

When the negroes, whom the black traders have to dispose of, are shewn to the European purchasers, they first examine them relative to their age. They then minutely inspect their persons, and inquire into the state of their health; if they are afflicted with any infirmity, or are deformed, or have bad eyes or teeth; if they are lame, or weak in the joints, or distorted in the back, or of a slender make, or are narrow in the chest; in short, if they have been, or are afflicted in any manner, so as to render them incapable of much labour; if any of the foregoing defects are discovered in them, they are rejected. But if approved of, they are generally taken on board the ship the same evening.<sup>6</sup> The purchaser has liberty to return on the following morning, but not afterwards, such as upon re-examination are found exceptionable.

Rejected slaves beaten or killed

The traders frequently beat those negroes which are objected to by the captains, and use them with great severity. It matters not whether they are refused on account of age, illness, deformity, or for any other reason. At New Calabar, in particular, the traders have frequently been known to put them to death. Instances have happened at that place, that the traders, when any of their negroes have been objected to, have dropped their canoes under the stern of the vessel, and instantly beheaded them, in sight of the captain.

## Treatment of the Slaves.

The man negroes, on being brought aboard the ship, are immediately fastened together, two and two, by hand-cuffs on their wrists, and by irons rivetted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks, and placed in an apartment partitioned off for that purpose. The women likewise are placed in a separate apartment between decks, but without being ironed. And an adjoining room, on the same deck, is besides appointed for the boys. Thus are they all placed in different apartments.<sup>7</sup>

Crowded conditions on  
slave ships

But at the same time, they are infrequently stowed so close, as to admit of no other posture than lying on their sides. Neither will the height between decks, unless directly under the grating, permit them the indulgence of an erect posture; especially where there are platforms, which is generally the case. These platforms are a kind of shelf, about eight or nine feet in breadth, extending from the side of the ship towards the centre. They are placed nearly midway between the decks, at the distance of two or three feet from each deck. Upon these the negroes are stowed in the same manner as they are on the deck underneath.<sup>8</sup>

Accumulation of human  
waste

In each of the apartments are placed three or four large buckets, of a conical form, being near two feet in diameter at the bottom, and only one foot at the top, and in depth about twenty-eight inches, to which, when necessary, the negroes have recourse<sup>9</sup>. It often happens, that those who are placed at a distance from the buckets, in endeavouring to get to them, tumble over their companions in consequence of their being shackled. These accidents, although unavoidable, are productive of continual quarrels, in which some of them are always bruised. In this distressed situation, unable to proceed, and prevented from getting to the tubs, they desist from the attempt; and as the necessities of nature are not to be repelled, ease themselves as they lie. This becomes a fresh source of broils and disturbances and tends to render the condition of the poor captive wretches still more uncomfortable. The nuisance arising from these circumstances is not infrequently increased by the tubs being much too small for the purpose intended, and their being usually emptied but once every day. The rule for doing this, however, varies in different ships, according to the attention paid to the health and convenience of the slaves by the captain.

Opportunities for fresh  
air

About eight o'clock in the morning the negroes are generally brought upon deck.<sup>10</sup> Their irons being examined, a long chain, which is locked to a ring-bolt, is run through the rings of the shackles of the men, and then locked to another ring-bolt, fixed also in the deck. By this means fifty or sixty, and sometimes more, are fastened to one chain, in order to prevent them from rising, or endeavouring to escape. If the weather proves favourable, they are permitted to remain in that situation till four or five in the afternoon, when they are disengaged from the chain, and sent down....

Food and water

They are commonly fed twice a day, about eight o'clock in the morning and four in the afternoon. On most ships they are only fed with their *own food* once a day.<sup>11</sup> Their food is served up to them in tubs, about the size of a small water bucket. They are placed round these tubs in companies of ten to each tub, out of which they feed themselves with wooden spoons. These they soon lose, and when they are not allowed others, they feed themselves with their hands. In favourable weather they are fed upon deck, but in bad weather their food is given them below. Numberless quarrels take place among them during their meals; more especially when they are put upon short allowance, which frequently happens, if the passage from the coast of Guinea to the West-India islands, proves of unusual length. In that case the weak are obliged to be content with a very scanty portion. Their allowance of water is about half a pint each at every meal. It is handed round in a bucket, and given to each negroe in a pannekin; a small utensil with a strait handle, somewhat similar to a sauce-boat. However, when the ships approach the islands with a favourable breeze, they are no longer restricted.

Threats to those refusing  
to eat

Upon the negroes refusing to take sustenance, I have seen coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel, and placed so near their lips, as to scorch and burn them. And this has

been accompanied with threats, of forcing them to swallow the coals, if they any longer persisted in refusing to eat. These means have generally had the desired effect. I have also been credibly informed, that a certain captain in the slave trade, poured melted lead on such of the negroes as obstinately refused their food.<sup>12</sup>

Forced exercise

Exercise being deemed necessary for the preservation of their health, they are sometimes obliged to dance, when the weather will permit their coming on deck. If they go about it reluctantly, or do not move with agility, they are flogged; a person standing by them all the time with a cat-o'-nine-tails in his hand for that purpose. Their musick, upon these occasions, consists of a drum, sometimes with only one head; and when that is worn out, they do not scruple to make use of the bottom of one of the tubs before described. The poor wretches are frequently compelled to sing also; but when they do so, their songs are generally, as may naturally be expected, melancholy lamentations of their exile from their native country....

Treatment of women

On board some ships the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. And some of them have been known to take the inconstancy of their paramours so much to heart as to leap overboard and drown themselves.<sup>13</sup> The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure and sometimes are guilty of such excesses as disgrace human nature....

The hardships and inconveniences suffered by the negroes during the passage, are scarcely to be enumerated or conceived. They are far more violently affected by the sea-sickness, than the Europeans. It frequently terminates in death, especially among the women.<sup>14</sup> But the exclusion of the fresh air is among the most intolerable.... The confined air, rendered noxious by the effluvia exhaled from their bodies, and by being repeatedly breathed, soon produces fevers and fluxes, which generally carries off great numbers of them.

Lack of fresh air and  
widespread disease

During the voyages I made, I was frequently a witness to the fatal effects of this exclusion of the fresh air. I will give one instance, as it serves to convey some idea, though a very faint one, of the sufferings of those unhappy beings whom we wantonly drag from their native country, and doom to perpetual labour and captivity. Some wet and blowing weather having occasioned the port-holes to be shut, and the grating to be covered, fluxes and fevers among the negroes ensued. While they were in this situation, I frequently went down among them, till at length their apartments became so extremely hot, as to be only sufferable for a very short time. But the excessive heat was not the only thing that rendered their situation intolerable. The deck, that is, the floor of their rooms, was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house. It is not in the power of the human imagination, to picture to itself a situation more dreadful or disgusting. Numbers of the slaves having fainted, they were carried upon deck, where several of them died, and the rest were, with great difficulty, restored. It had nearly proved fatal to me also. The climate was too warm to admit the wearing of any clothing but a shirt, and that I had pulled off before I went down; notwithstanding which, by only continuing among them for about a quarter of an hour, I was so overcome with the heat, stench, and foul air, that I had nearly fainted; and it was not without assistance, that I could get upon deck. The consequence was, that I soon after fell sick of the same disorder, from which I did not recover for several months....

Frequent deaths

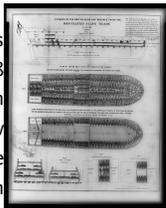
The surgeon, upon going between decks, in the morning, to examine the situation of the slaves, frequently finds several dead; and among the men, sometimes a dead and living

negroe fastened by their irons together. When this is the case, they are brought upon the deck, and being laid on the grating, the living negroe is disengaged, and the dead one thrown overboard<sup>15</sup>....

Attempts to escape

As very few of the Negroes can so far brook the loss of their liberty and the hardships they endure, they are ever on the watch to take advantage of the least negligence in their oppressors. Insurrections are frequently the consequence; which are seldom expressed without much bloodshed. Sometimes these are successful and the whole ship's company is cut off. They are likewise always ready to seize every opportunity for committing some acts of desperation to free themselves from their miserable state and notwithstanding the restraints which are laid, they often succeed.

Figure 2. This 1788 illustration shows how slaves were stowed on board the British slave ship Brookes.



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## On the web

### The Middle Passage

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p277.html>

From the PBS site "Africans in America."

### Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Americas

<http://www.mariner.org/captivepassage/index.html>

From the Mariner's Museum.

### Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database

<http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>

From Emory University, this site provides a database of the names of enslaved Africans and the ships that brought them, as well as lesson plans, essays, and images. A treasure trove of information for those who want to explore the slave trade in more depth.

### Parliament and the British Slave Trade, 1600–1807

<http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/slavetrade/index.html>

An online exhibit commemorating the bicentennial of the abolition of the British Slave Trade.

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## Notes

1. The headers in this column are taken from Falconbridge's book or have been added to help you skim this page.
2. It was the captain's responsibility to manage the trade and sale of slaves at the trading posts. It was also common practice for the ship's surgeon (doctor) examine the slaves before sale to remove any who were deformed or unfit for labor.
3. The people selling the slaves to Europeans were also West Africans. Selling slaves was a profitable business for coastal towns. They purchased slaves captured inland and resold them on the coast to European traders.

4. This statement seems obvious to the modern reader, but Europeans in the eighteenth century assumed that the slaves they purchased had been thrown out of African societies. From early contact with West Africa, they learned that slaves were criminals and prisoners of war, and that the debt of these undesirable people could be purchased by slave traders and worked off by the slaves in Europe or America. As the demand for slaves increased — and slave traders' profits climbed — it became less important to Europeans where their slaves came from. The “black traders” protected their secrets, though, for fear of losing their position to Europeans who might want to trade more directly in inland markets.
5. West African societies competed for land and resources long before the slave trade began worsening their problems. Falconbridge, though, is typical in trying to blame African problems solely on the slave trade. Slave traders rarely sold members of their own communities, and outsiders hired for kidnappings were just as likely to be sold as slaves as their victims.
6. Trading companies usually branded newly purchased slaves, after which the ship's crew packed as many slaves as possible into the cargo hold. One reason for removing sick, aged, or deformed slaves was to prevent “spoilage” of cargo — the spread of sickness that in crowded conditions could lead to the death of many valuable slaves.
7. Captains and crews had real reason to fear slave rebellions aboard ship. Separating slaves made them easier to control during the voyage.
8. Ships' captains went so far as to publish cargo plans that showed the best way to store slaves on a slave ship — suggesting that they considered slaves no different from any other kind of cargo, a commodity to be bought and sold.
9. Toilet buckets were common on the lower decks of passenger ships in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sailors used the “beak head,” the very front of a ship, since the winds push a sailing vessel from the back or at an angle from the rear side. Untrained passengers, though, are unsafe on the deck of a ship. They don't know where to go or when to stay out of the way.

You can imagine that closed up on the dark decks of a ship, chained to another person, with the ship rocking back and forth, it was difficult to do something as simple as using a toilet.

10. This likely wouldn't have happened if the sea were rough or if there were any sign of a storm.
11. Ships' officers carefully monitored and rationed food to the crew during any voyage. To save money and weight on a heavily burdened ship, the captain bought cheap food, and the crew fed slaves only a minimum of food and water. This also kept slaves weak, which helped to prevent rebellion.
12. A slave refusing to eat was threatening suicide, which to a ship's captain meant the loss of valuable cargo and profits.

As horrible and extreme as this punishment was, sailors disobeying orders might not have fared much better. Naval justice was very harsh, because onboard a sailing ship, open disobedience could lead to chaos and shipwreck. European navies used confinement, starvation, and lashing as shipboard punishments until the 1900s. These kinds of punishments were performed in full view of the crew to warn everyone else of the consequences of disobedience. Harsh punishment of slaves had the same goal.

13. Read this sentence closely — it was not the sailors but the enslaved women who jumped overboard. In African society, polygamy was common, but polygamy was still a bonded

marriage. It is possible that enslaved women who engaged in intercourse with the crew may have assumed some measure of a relationship, including a promise of freedom, and that when they realized they had been deceived they committed suicide rather than face the disgrace.

14. Seasickness is common among people new to sailing vessels. The vomiting involved can lead to dehydration, malnutrition, and a breakdown of the immune system. In addition, the hot, dark, and damp conditions below deck on a slave ship were a perfect breeding ground for infectious diseases. When people with bacterial or viral infections vomit, they expose everyone around them to the same infection. One person with a cough could “spoil” the cargo of a slave ship. The cramped conditions of these ships made illness a very dangerous problem.
15. So many dead slaves were thrown overboard during the middle passage that by the middle of the eighteenth century, sharks congregated along the route taken by slave ships.

## About the author

### **SHANE FREEMAN**

Shane Freeman teaches eighth-grade North Carolina and U.S. History at Reidsville Middle School in Reidsville, North Carolina. He has worked for the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources at Roanoke Island Festival Park as Lead Historic Interpreter and Historic Researcher.

Shane holds a Masters degree in American history and African history from West Virginia University. He has written extensively on the transition of land ownership from native populations to European powers, and the historic reconstruction of ancient cultures.

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### **Figure 2 (page 6)**

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