

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. European diseases wiped out much of the Native American population, causing colonists to look for a new labor force.
2. Europeans enslaved millions of Africans and sent them to work in their colonies.
3. Slaves in the Americas created a distinct culture.

The Big Idea

Europeans forced millions of African slaves to work in their colonies.

Key Terms and People

immune, p. 58

Middle Passage, p. 59

African Diaspora, p. 60



Use the graphic organizer online to take notes on the beginnings of slavery in the Americas.

Beginnings of Slavery in the Americas

If YOU were there...

You are an enslaved African living in North America. Your family is all that you have. You help each other, and your family provides some relief from the forced labor and harsh life on the plantation. Still, you long for your freedom. A fellow slave has told you of a plan to escape.

Will you stay with your family or try to flee?

BUILDING BACKGROUND European settlers in the Americas relied on support from their home countries to establish trade and provide protection. In return, the colonies were expected to produce money for the home country. Many colonies did this through plantations, mines, and other ventures that required a large labor force.

The Need for a New Labor Force

European diseases had a devastating effect on the Native American population. Measles, smallpox, and typhus were common in Europe. As a result, most adult Europeans were **immune, or had a natural resistance**, to them. Native Americans, however, had never been exposed to such diseases and had no immunity to them. As a result, many Native Americans became terribly sick after their first encounters with Europeans. Millions of them died in the years after Columbus reached the New World.

No one knows exactly how many Native Americans died from European diseases, but the loss of life was staggering. Spanish author Fernández de Oviedo reported in 1548 about the destruction of the Native Americans of Hispaniola. He reported that, of the estimated 1 million Indians who had lived on the island in 1492, “there are not now believed to be at the present time . . . five hundred persons [left].” In North America the Native American population north of Mexico was about 10 million when Columbus arrived. This

number would drop to less than a million. The drop in the native population played a major role in the emerging need for an alternative labor force.

Plantation agriculture was a mainstay of the colonial economic **structure**. Spain and Portugal established sugar plantations that relied on large numbers of native laborers. In the 1600s English tobacco farmers in North America also needed workers for their plantations. With a lack of Native American workers, they, too, needed another source of labor. Plantation owners in both North and South America wanted a cheap work force.

Some colonists, including Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas, suggested using enslaved Africans as workers. Africans had already developed immunity to European diseases. The colonists soon agreed that slaves from West Africa could be the solution to their labor needs.

READING CHECK Analyzing How did disease contribute to the slave trade?

The Slave Trade

In 1510 the Spanish government legalized the sale of slaves in its colonies. The first full cargo ship of Africans arrived in the Americas eight years later. Over the next century, more than a million enslaved Africans were brought to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World. The Dutch and English also became active in the slave trade.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

structure the way something is set up or organized

Middle Passage

Enslavement was a horrible experience for the slaves. Most enslaved people had been captured in the interior of Africa, often by Africans who profited from selling slaves to Europeans. The captives were chained around the neck and then marched to the coast. This journey could be as long as 1,000 miles.

The **Middle Passage** was the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean that enslaved Africans were forced to endure. Africans were packed like cargo in the lower decks of the slave ships. The slaves were chained together and crammed

Primary Source

LETTER

King Afonso to King Joao III

King Afonso of the African nation of Kongo wrote a letter to the king of Portugal in 1526 asking him to do what he could to stop the practice of taking African slaves.

Sir, Your Highness should know how our Kingdom is being lost in so many ways . . . [M]erchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieved and men of bad conscience grab them . . . [T]hey grab them and get them to be sold; and so great, Sir, is the corruption and licentiousness [law breaking] that our country is being completely depopulated, and Your Highness should not agree with this nor accept it as in your service. And to avoid it we need from those



(your) Kingdoms no more than some priests and a few people to teach in schools, and no other goods except wine and flour for the holy sacrament [religious service].

—King Afonso of Kongo,

letter to the king of Portugal, 1526

ANALYSIS SKILL

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

1. Why does Afonso ask the Portuguese king to help stop the slave trade?
2. What does Afonso request from the king?