

The Saylor Foundation's "The Making of the Atlantic World"

For the greater period of human history, societies in the Americas had no sustained contacts with the Old World continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia. This changed in the late fifteenth century, notably with the voyages of Christopher Columbus that spanned the Atlantic Ocean.

This connection of the Americas with Europe and Africa ushered in a new era in world history and created an "Atlantic World"—that is, a connected set of societies around and within the Atlantic zone. The subsequent European conquest and settlement of the Americas had a devastating effect on Native American populations and resulted in massive population loss. As a result, European expansion in the New World involved the unparalleled replacement of indigenous populations by new ones from both Europe and Africa.

Columbus was unaware of the existence of the two American continents before he embarked on his much-celebrated voyage of exploration. Yet the fact remains that the connecting of the two great landmasses, coupled with the opening of new, permanent maritime routes around Africa and—after 1517—across the Pacific, marked a major development in world history with long-term repercussions for humans everywhere. Humans flowed across these new ocean routes as settlers, both willing and unwilling, along with technologies, culture, ideas, and organisms including domesticated animals (cattle, pigs, etc), crops (wheat, sugarcane, potatoes), diseases (syphilis, cholera, smallpox), and pests (rats, weeds). Historian Alfred W. Crosby Jr. has labeled this movement of things, goods, and species the "Columbian Exchange."

Africans played roles in this exchange as merchants, sailors, and settlers, but above all as enslaved captives. Portuguese traders had been trafficking in African slaves since 1441, when they made their first raid in West Africa, captured twelve African men, and sold them in Portugal. Many European cities soon had sizable African populations. As colonies emerged in the Atlantic producing raw materials, Africans were drawn into this system as unfree laborers.

The widespread deaths of many Native Americans encouraged Europeans to rely on African slave labor in the Americas as early as the sixteenth century. As early as 1510, Ferdinand of Spain authorized fifty African slaves to be sent from Spain to shore up the gold-mining labor force on the island of Hispaniola. By 1601, slave traders had already transported 150,000 African slaves to the territories of Spanish America. Numbers grew after this quite rapidly. These African slaves were used for a variety of tasks such as mining, domestic service, and agricultural pursuits—including sugar plantations. Some settlers recreated the sugar plantation model already established in the Canary Islands, and began to cultivate sugar on Hispaniola and then along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

Much of the unit that follows focuses on this trade in slaves and the experiences of Africans within this system. Before we turn to that, however, it's important to note that the Atlantic World would not have existed in the way it did without Africans playing many roles. They were producers of raw materials within Africa and as enslaved or otherwise unfree workers outside of the continent. They consumed many new products coming from Europe and the Americas. They traded and developed new uses for many of these products. They also participated in the cultural and intellectual development of new societies in the Americas and across the Atlantic World. Yet this is not to say that



Africa benefited from the new Atlantic trading networks in the same way as Europeans. As we will see, this was a very uneven system that worked to the detriment of Africa and Africans in a variety of ways.

