

## The Abolition of the Slave Trade

The transatlantic slave trade grew considerably from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, during which time it is estimated that anywhere from twelve to thirteen million enslaved Africans were shipped across the Atlantic. The majority of European powers during this period—including the Dutch, the Spanish, and the English—participated in the slave trade directly or contributed to it by possessing slave colonies. By the eighteenth century the British emerged as the predominant slave-trading power in the New World. All parts of the British Empire participated in and benefited from slavery—from the ships that carried enslaved Africans to the British colonies in the New World to the British citizens who consumed the luxury goods (such as sugar and tobacco) that were produced by slave labor in the colonies. This would change drastically by the beginning of the nineteenth century, when both England and the newly formed United States both officially banned the transatlantic slave trade.

The United States Constitution of 1783 prohibited the banning of the transatlantic slave trade for at least 25 years. In the spring of 1807, President Jefferson signed Congress's Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, which banned the importation of any new slaves into the United States. The bill went into effect January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1808—the earliest possible date according to the restrictions imposed by the Constitution. Three weeks after Jefferson signed the bill banning the transatlantic slave trade, the British House of Lords passed a similar act outlawing the slave trade. The Slave Trade Act, which went into effect in May 1807, abolished the transatlantic slave trade throughout the British Empire.

Even though the transatlantic slave trade was abolished throughout the British Empire and in the United States, slavery itself continued to exist throughout the British Empire and thrived in the United States throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Slavery had already been outlawed in England as early as 1772, but it continued to remain legal throughout the majority of the British Empire until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. In the United States slavery continued until the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, following the Civil War. The abolition of the slave trade, although unsuccessful in ending the institution of slavery itself, established abolition as one of the major reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States and England.

The factors behind the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and later, of slavery itself, continue to be debated by scholars today. An older explanation, dating back to the nineteenth century, accredits the rise and success of abolition to growing moral or humanitarian efforts. Another interpretation, dating from the middle of the twentieth century, considers the economic factors involved in eliminating the slave trade and slavery. Scholars who emphasize economic factors argue that it became more profitable to get rid of the slave trade than to continue it. This relates to another economic argument that emphasizes the growing trend, in England and in the industrial northern United States, of dignifying free labor. As England and the northern US became more industrialized, they overwhelmingly used free labor in the factories. This led to a movement on both sides of the Atlantic that elevated the work of free labor and sought to bring dignity to those involved in it. Today most scholars believe that abolition emerged due to a combination of all of these factors.