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Slave Ships

At the end of the 14th Century many Europeans started to transport African Americans into Europe to become servants for the wealthy. However, Europe was not the only continent that was purchasing slaves. By the 17th century, America had the demand for slaves and the slave trade over became popular over the Atlantic.

Between the 14th and 17th Centuries nearly 15 million African Americans were transported to America. It was during this time that African Americans were treated as wild animals and were not considered to be human. The slave ships era was the time when African Americans lost everything including their identity and pride.

Once aboard the ships, the slaves, often referred to as Negroes, realized they were being transported from their homeland or Africa. "Captains of slave ships were known as either "loose packers" or "tight packers", depending upon how many slaves they crammed into the space they had. Most ships, especially those of the later 18th century, were "tight packers", carrying a huge quantity of slaves who were often forced to lie in spaces smaller than that of a grave, or in some cases stacked spoon-fashion on top of one another" ("Hell Below Deck").

Violence was often brought on before the slaves entered the ship as they were whipped or beaten with any hard object. Each slave would be naked as they were being whipped to reiterate that they were no longer human and they were property of the white man. After being admitted onto the ship, some slaves would jump over board to die at sea and save themselves from a life of pain and suffering from the white man.

Shackles around their wrists and ankles chained slaves together two by two. They were packed together like cows in a cattle car. There were at least 600 slaves to a ship when a ship would only hold about three to four hundred slaves. After living like this for many months slaves would often be paralyzed and would not be able to work.

Many of the men and women on the ship were branded with their owner's marks on them. Slaves would live in their own waste and, there was no room for a slave to get up and go to the bathroom. If a slave was lucky, he may have a window where he could go to the bathroom, or they had to defecate in their own living space, which made the slaves live in their own feces and urine. While living under these grimy conditions, slaves would often contract diseases such as small pox and dysentery. Most slaves would contract dysentery because of the contaminated food (if they even ate food) and the

water supplies (and if they got water). It was very common to find slaves covered in lice. Since there was little or no ventilation aboard the ships some slaves would die of suffocation due to the tightly packed decks. Other diseases were spread as well after slaves would pass away if their bodies were not removed. Although to avoid sickness, the captains would often throw the bodies over board.

Suicide attempts were made daily by slaves to stop their suffering. Strangling, self-starvation, and throwing themselves overboard would be the most common way of suicide attempts. Sailors would decapitate slaves in order to show them that they will be headless in their way home after death. Slaves that did survive the slave ships were often ineffective workers. Since the beatings and torcher that the slaves were so brutal the slaves would be unable produce work. Hot tar would be poured in the crevices of the slave's body before entering America. Slave owners did not want slaves that looked neaten or malnourished, there for slave captains would inflict more pain upon the slaves so that they could make more money, and to please their new owners the white man.

Sailors would often make the slaves active with an activity called dance. The sailors would crack whips at the slave's feet and the dead bodies to make the slaves jump and move around in order to avoid getting whipped. The slaves were naked which caused the whippings to be more brutal. During the dance the slaves would still be shackled together and their skin off their ankles and wrists would often peel away.

Transportation of African Americans was compared to going to hell. Slaves were tortured and were treated as if they were wild animals. Disease, sickness, and death were problems that the slaves faced daily. Many slaves lost their lives, and families were torn apart as result of the slave trade and slave ships. Slave ships were only part of the tragedy that African Americans witnessed in the 17th century.

Work Cited

"Hell Below Deck: Life on the Slave Ships." 8 May 2004
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