AFRICAN AMERICANS

A Historical Perspective

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African Americans: The Unwilling Immigrants

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Introduction

Different forces prompted immigration to the United States for each ethnic group. For the ancestors of most African Americans, the need for workers on plantations drove the immigration process. For nearly four centuries, European slave ships transported captive Africans from their homelands to the Americas. These Africans came to a land of bondage and faced a severe test of their powers of endurance.

Among African Americans the search for freedom in America has continued for generations. Given the grim circumstances of their initial experience, African Americans often escaped or migrated to parts of the nation or to other nations that seemed to offer a better life.

Africans made up a substantial percentage of the population of British colonial America and then the United States. In 1790 the first census revealed that African Americans made up more than 19 percent of the non-Indian population. The southern states, where the economy relied on enslaved laborers, had African majorities in many areas. For several decades captive Africans continued to arrive on slave ships to be sold to plantation owners or local slave merchants in such cities as Baltimore, Charleston and New Orleans.

While European immigrants were coming to America to escape political or religious persecution or to pursue a dream of economic security, Africans came involuntarily and were exploited to produce prosperity for others.

Cultural Isolation

Newly purchased enslaved Africans were not allowed to maintain existing family ties and the cultural traditions of their homelands. Most were young and strong, because the elderly and infirm would not survive the demands of plantation labor. The absence of elders often interrupted the orderly transfer of cultural values from the older to the younger generations. Moreover, American slaveholders were openly hostile toward African cultures because they believed these were "heathen," and because they knew that allowing an enslaved community to maintain its own culture would increase the risk of rebellion.

West Africa's Sophisticated Cultures

The slaveholders' view of African culture has lingered in the American mind. As the economic rewards of slaveholding grew, American planters, politicians and opinion leaders justified enslaving Africans by demeaning African culture, sometimes claiming that Africans had made no contribution to the progress of humankind.

Europeans who contacted West African communities in the mid-1440s would have known that such claims were untrue. They encountered African civilizations that rivaled any they had seen in other parts of the world. First Portuguese and, later, British, French and Dutch seafarers sailed the coast of West Africa in search of opportunities to trade with the well-developed communities there for gold, textiles, ivory and other valuable products.

Africans of the region some called the western Sudan had produced a series of empires, one succeeding the other, that stood as a testimony to their political, economic and technical sophistication. Ghana, Mali, Songhay and Bornu were the names of some of these confederations, which featured extensive trading networks and complex legal systems.

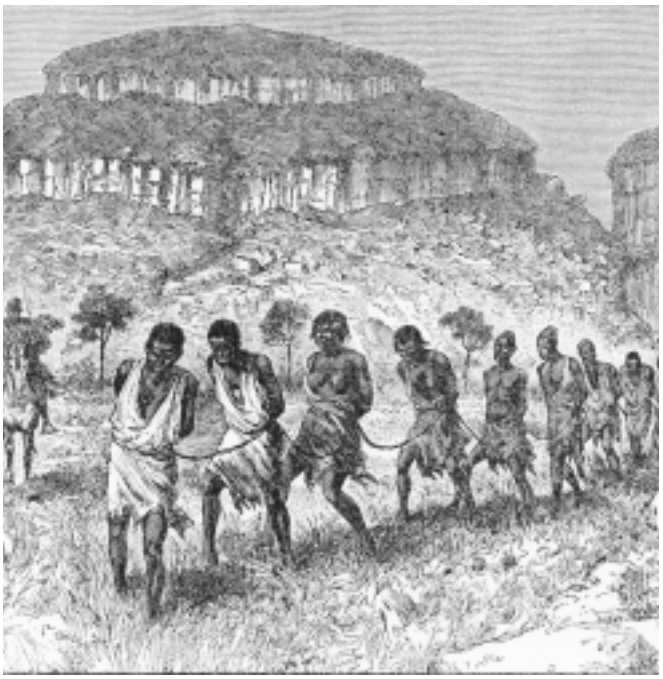
At the time of European contact, about 50 years before the voyage of Columbus, the Mali Empire had established a trading system along the Niger River through the famous university city of Timbuktu to Cairo, the Egyptian metropolis, and beyond to India and China. The Yoruba and the Hausa of Nigeria had established city-states ruled by royal families under the watchful eyes of a nobility and a court system. The cities were defended by an established militia.

In Hausaland the concept of a monarchy whose powers were limited by a written constitution had developed years before a similar idea took hold in parts of Europe. In some areas Africans chose not to select kings and queens. They practiced a form of democracy called "consensus of the elders," in which matters were discussed at length by elders, representing their families, until a unanimous vote was achieved.

Among the forest peoples of West Africa, the Ashanti (Asante) were the wealthiest because of the gold they

mined. Their gold found its way along the trading networks of Africa, Europe and western Asia, where it became the standard of wealth. English travelers eventually called this area the "Gold Coast." Soon this major source of gold also became a source of enslaved Africans.

Although the 1440s marked a new era in the relationship between Europe and Africa, the two had not been strangers. Some modern scholars believe that ancient Egypt was one of many ethnically and culturally related African communities extending across Africa to the Atlantic Ocean and southward to the source of the Nile River. They assert, therefore, that ancient Egypt was a thoroughly African civilization whose beliefs and world view came from African roots. Egypt spread these African ideas through its technical and cultural achievements to much of the rest of the ancient world, including the Greeks and, later, the Romans. Clearly, whether Egypt was at its apex of power or part of a foreign empire, the influence of Egyptian culture was always formidable. (Mokhtar, 1981)



Slave traders lead captive Africans to ships for passage across the Atlantic.

The Slave Trade

Despite Africa's impressive history, tragedy struck after Europeans began taking enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean. Christopher Columbus began the trade on his second voyage to the Americas, which he insisted were the Indies. His first voyage in 1492 had brought him into contact with the Arawak Indians of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (Quisqueya), today made up of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Columbus marveled that they were "so naive and free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it." Under considerable pressure to make his voyages financially profitable for his Spanish backers, especially the king and queen, Columbus attempted to solve this problem by selling the Arawaks into slavery. This trade immediately took a violent toll on the Arawaks, whose civilization disappeared in 1650, when the last Arawaks died on Hispaniola.

The Historical Role of Slavery

The trade in enslaved Europeans, Asians and Africans had begun long before Columbus established a new trading route. Black-skinned Africans were not especially numerous among the slave populations of the ancient and medieval worlds. Europeans, Arabs, western Asians and North Africans traded slaves of all colors. These enslaved people were prisoners of war, criminals, the victims of kidnapping or indigents.

Sometimes enslaved people had rights to own property and to establish legally recognized families. Slavery was not always hereditary, so children born to slaves enjoyed a nonslave status in some societies. In addition, the servant-master relationship took many forms. In Europe and Africa, serfdom sometimes replaced slavery. In this case, the serf was a possession of the lord of the manor, but could not be sold apart from the land. Although both Europeans and Africans practiced this form of servitude, many Europeans referred to African serfs as slaves. They understood the distinction between slaves and serfs in their own societies, however.

Most African societies had little use for large numbers of enslaved workers. The community or families often owned and worked the land collectively. The practice of enslaving thousands of people, thereby creating a large slave caste, was more characteristic of the Greek and Roman Empires. These European empires created some societies in which the majority were slaves.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Europeans did not think of Africans as a primary source of slaves until the fifteenth century. A key event in this shift in thinking occurred in 1455, when the pope issued a papal bull forbidding the buying or selling of enslaved people from "Christian" nations. A few years earlier, the forces of Islam had cut off western Europe's access to eastern European people for purposes of enslavement. Christian Europeans looked southward to non-Christian Africans as a source of slaves.

As Europeans established economic interests in the Americas, the demand for enslaved Africans increased. Now geography was to play an important part. The

voyage from Africa to America, which was aided by ocean currents, was about half as long as the voyage from Europe to America. Therefore, the West African coast was a convenient stopping point between western Europe and the West Indies.

The high casualty rate among the Arawak Indians enslaved by Columbus proved to be characteristic of most Native American groups enslaved by Europeans. Contact with diseases that were common in Europe, but previously nonexistent in the Americas, devastated the Native American populations. Although captive Africans who were brought to the Americas also died in large numbers, both during the Middle Passage across the Atlantic and later on the plantations of the Americas, their survival rate was better than Native Americans, and slave traders were able to replenish plantations with new enslaved Africans on a regular basis.

Historian Basil Davidson points out that, as the scramble for enslaved Africans among European powers accelerated, attempts by Africans to curtail or end the slave trade became less feasible. Among the African societies that attempted to curtail the trade was Dahomey. Like many other African nations, Dahomey was being pushed toward greater cooperation with the slave trade by the traders' "one gun, one slave" trading policy. By trading slaves, African communities could acquire the European-made guns they needed to protect themselves from slave raiders, brigands or hostile neighbors.

European slave-trading nations established trading posts (sometimes impressive castles) along the west coast of Africa. So long as they controlled these coastal spheres of influence, they were assured that the raiding parties and agents who went into the interior could bring out captives for sale. These trading posts, and the regular arrival of European ships supplied with guns for sale to Africans, created an epidemic of kidnapping and crime wherever the slave trade reached. Dahomey's army was able to break through to the so-called "slave coast" in 1727. Before then, more than 20,000 captives per year were taken from the slave coast. After Dahomey took partial control, the number taken dropped to about 5,500. Unfortunately, few other African nations or countries that tried to resist the slave trade were as successful. In the end, the major work of suppressing the trade fell to the people who had profited the most from it and who ultimately controlled it by creating the demand for slaves—the Europeans.

When the transatlantic slave trade ended in 1888, Africa had lost an estimated 50 million to 100 million people. (Davidson, 1961; Rodney, 1974) Perhaps 11 million to 15 million had landed in the Americas after the treacherous voyage in crowded, filthy slave ships. The rest died in the raids and battles or on the long journey to America. About 4 percent of the survivors landed in the British North American colonies or the United States. That group and its descendants became today's African American population.

The Peak Period

During the nearly four centuries of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, several European nations dominated and profited from the infamous traffic. An agreement with Portugal, mediated by the pope, kept Spain out of the early trade. Still, Spain needed workers for its American colonies. Portugal was able to supply enslaved people for these colonies as well as its own large colony, Brazil.

By the seventeenth century, the Dutch had joined the Portuguese as principal slave traffickers. As the slave trade reached its height during the eighteenth century, the British dominated more than half of the transatlantic trade. Finally, during the last era of the trade in the nineteenth century, wealthy Europeans living in Cuba, Brazil and North America organized the trade.

The peak period for importing enslaved people into British North America and the United States was 1741–1810. By this time the slave trade had undergone a number of transitions. After 1770 the trade was concentrated along the central and western coast of Africa. According to Philip Curtin, about 59 percent of the captives taken during this period came from West Africa. (Curtin, 1969) During the peak in the slave trade to the United States in the 1770s and 1780s, however, captives came almost entirely from central and southeastern Africa.

Philip Curtin's estimates of enslaved Africans legally entering the British North American colonies and the United States are as follows:

1701–1720	19,800
1721–1740	50,400
1741–1760	100,400
1761–1780	85,800
1781–1810	91,600

The Influence of African Cultures

The evidence indicates that the cultural heritage of African Americans in the United States is not exclusively West African. It also includes a strong influence from central and southeastern Africa. Many of the African words that have found their way into American language came from the Bantu languages of central and southern Africa.

Many historians, anthropologists, sociologists and archaeologists have examined American culture as it has developed since the introduction of Africans in 1619.

The Voluntary Coming of Africans to America

Roy S. Bryce Laporte

Conventional wisdom encourages the belief that people of African descent came to the United States as latecomers, with the only early immigrants arriving as enslaved people and becoming, through acquired status and conditioning, a confined, secluded, homogeneous and subordinate group in society. But so much of this conventional thinking is untested and perhaps untrue. Myths, mistakes or misunderstandings, the misconceptions nevertheless play a crucial role in shaping the images held about African Americans and the way they are regarded and treated in everyday life as well as in popular history. One such image ignores the fact that some came to this country knowingly, sometimes more willingly than others, in hopes of bettering their personal, political or socioeconomic condition. Despite their fears as people of color, they came from distant homelands, attracted to the unlimited possibilities promised in the lore of the American way of life.

The "Discovery" of America

Much of the distortion that exists about the African presence in the United States—or America, that land immigrants idealize as the land of opportunity, freedom and prosperity—is related to and generated by the more generally shared claims of the "discovery" of America. Almost universally and in rather dogmatic fashion, historians have credited this feat to Christopher Columbus.

Earlier and recent research supports an increasingly vocalized contention that Africans not only accompanied European explorers and colonists in their expeditions to the "New World" as crew and cargo, but also may have been in the hemisphere and have had navigational knowledge about its existence and location prior to that epoch. With an impressive battery of aids, such as archaeological findings, early navigational maps, oral historical legends and linguistic reconstructions, modern scholars and others have argued the claim of a pre-Columbian knowledge and presence of Africans in the Americas.

These scholars maintain that the Iberians and even earlier European mariners learned of the existence of such lands—and sea routes for reaching them—from their African counterparts, who even then had been engaging in transoceanic expeditions and trade with the Americas. The captain of one ship in Columbus' first voyage probably was African, and Africans were said to have participated in many of Columbus' landings.

Evidence of the pre-Columbian presence and contact includes the Negroid features of the Olmec monuments in Mexico; the resemblance in linguistic items, pyramidic structure and artistic forms or designs of Central and South America and the western Sudan; reports in early Spanish chronicles of encounters with "black" people; African artifacts in the American territory; and complementary legends on both sides of the Atlantic of visits by African merchants, dignitaries and deities.

Guyanese scholar Ivan Van Sertima located in the United States Virgin Islands a pre-Columbian dot and crescent script that has been identified as the Tifinag branch of the Libyan script that seemingly testifies to the literacy of some of the early transatlantic visitors. Even though not yet acceptable as indisputable evidence, the findings and pursuit of these studies have unearthed details and provided insight on the trade, navigational and shipbuilding sophistication of Africans prior to

A section of a dot and crescent script discovered in the United States Virgin Islands, identified as the Tifinag branch of the Libyan script and attributed to pre-Columbian visits by Africans

contact with their European conquerers and colonizers in the fifteenth century. Moreover, they heighten the probability of a pre-Columbian African presence in the Americas. (Van Sertima, 1976)

Africans with Spanish Explorers

The evidence is much more precise with regard to the early presence of Africans in North America. Africans came, established homes and built parts of this country with the Spanish explorers even before the founding of the first English colonies.

A first effort by the Spaniards, who claimed the East Coast as far north as Connecticut for the Spanish monarchy, was to establish a colony in 1526 at San Miguel de Gualdape (coast of North Carolina). Led by Lucas Vásquez de Allyón, the expedition failed after six months, partly due to Africans escaping the colony and making their homes with local Indians. After Allyón's death, the ship was remounted and the colonists returned to Hispaniola. Africans there had been replacing the dying native population as enslaved laborers at the suggestion of Dominican Friar Bartholeme de las Casas.

The friar's intervention with the Spanish monarchy on behalf of the native Taino population on the island of Hispaniola (Quisqueya), today made up of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and the subsequent importation of Africans to the island, marked the beginning of the trade in enslaved African laborers in the Americas. Of course, the world had experienced slavery before that among such groups as the Romans, the Aztecs and even the Africans themselves. Africans had been enslaved by Arabs and later by the Iberians, who earlier had been slaves and captives of the Romans and Moors. Many of those early forms of slavery, however, were not based on race and did not always constitute a trade. Their victims were sometimes prisoners of war and were not always confined to cruel, perpetual or inherited servility—as was to become true for enslaved Africans in the Americas, especially in the United States. In some cultures enslaved people became part of the captors' society and even rose to positions of leadership, but in other cultures they became human sacrifices.

From 1527 to 1539, parts of the American Southwest, particularly Arizona and New Mexico, were explored by an enslaved African, Estevanico, or Little Stephen, who served as interpreter and scout for Cabeza de Vaca but subsequently took hold of the party when natives killed its leader. Other Africans were part of the crews and expeditions of Ponce de León, Hernando de Soto and Menéndez de Avilés. Under Spanish leadership free and enslaved Africans helped build and defend San Agustín (St. Augustine, Florida). Founded in 1565, it is considered the oldest continuously occupied European community in the United States.

Even as late as the eighteenth century, Africans continued to play significant roles in the colonization of non-Anglo North America. Jean Baptiste du Sable, a Haitian *mulatto* fur trader, is credited with being the first permanent foreign resident of Chicago, and Luis Quintero and his wife were among the *mulattos* and Africans who comprised the racially mixed party commissioned to found the Mission of Los Angeles in California, then part of New Spain or Mexico.

Arrival in English Colonies

The establishment of English North America was a later development in the colonial history of the United States. Jamestown, Virginia, founded in 1607, would host the plantation as the basic mode of colonization, production, development and defense of the colonial area. Plymouth, Massachusetts, founded in 1620, would give birth to the democratic principles of representative governance and Puritanic religious and moral undertones that would come to characterize American political traditions.

The first Africans to be reported in the English colonies arrived on a Dutch man-of-war in Jamestown in 1619—before the landing of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts! The captain of the vessel offered them for sale with the other cargo, and, like most Europeans coming into the colonies, they were bought as indentured servants. By definition and practice, indentured servants would be freed either through purchasing their own freedom or by completing their period of indenture—at which time they were free to obtain property, marry, purchase other servants and participate in the public affairs of the colony. In 1624 the first African child born in English America was born to parents who arrived on that vessel as indentured servants, and was named after their owner, William Tucker.

With respect to Plymouth, a muster list of the village militia indicates that among the freeholders was at least one "blackamoor," as Africans were called in recognition of their non-Christian, likely Islamic, practices. The prevailing explanation, amid continued controversy, identifies him as Pierce, a formerly enslaved man from English Jamaica who returned to America via England.

Hence the earliest arrival and birth of Africans in English colonial America were not as enslaved people *per se*. Slavery became common practice later as certain products of the Americas (i.e., cotton and tobacco in the English colonies) obtained the status of profitable or cash goods in the larger world market, and the colonists found it beneficial to force larger numbers of people to work

the vastly available land cheaply, in servility and for perpetuity.

For the very reasons English colonial planters failed to institutionalize the enslavement of Native Americans and poor European recruits or prisoners, the planters may have succeeded with Africans. They were visible, accessible and different; uprooted from their homelands, traditions and cultures; and unprotected by their governments.

The Slave Trade

Whatever ambivalence may have lingered as to the legal status of Africans *vis à vis* Europeans in the English colonies rapidly began to be clarified by the courts of Virginia in 1640 by punishing African indentured servants with lifetime service. The intentional perpetuity of their enslavement was indicated by legislation in Massachusetts one year later.

By the 1660s intermarriage between Africans and Europeans was being forbidden, and several English colonies made laws bonding the children born to enslaved mothers. The subsequent entry of Africans into the United States formed part of a lucrative and dehumanizing slave trade. This trade began with the forceful or deceptive capture of natives, mostly of the West African coast, regardless of sex, status, age or size; their dreadful transportation in tightly packed vessels across the wretched Middle Passage; and then their seasoning and role as chattel in "New World" markets to European-born or *Creole* planters, miners, merchants and even missionaries.

Just prior to its final consolidation into a body of sovereign states and territories, the continental United States was comprised of colonies of several European nations and tribal lands of Native American nations. Africans were part of the population of all these colonies and even some Indian nations; many had participated in early explorations and colonization, and others were captured or became refugees there. The status of these Africans in the country at that time ranged from free to enslaved, and it may have changed from one status to the other.

The entry of the United States into the slave trade was late and, for the most part, indirect through European companies that gained a monopoly over the trade. The American slave trade drew from the remnants of cargoes from the Caribbean already subjected to selection and seasoning. This was the case of Olaudah Equiano via Barbados and of Joseph Cinque via Cuba, both of whom succeeded in fighting the system and returning to Africa. In fact, many early enslaved Africans of the northern colonies came indirectly from the Caribbean; others came to the Carolinas with their masters from Bermuda, the Bahamas and Barbados in the face of economic

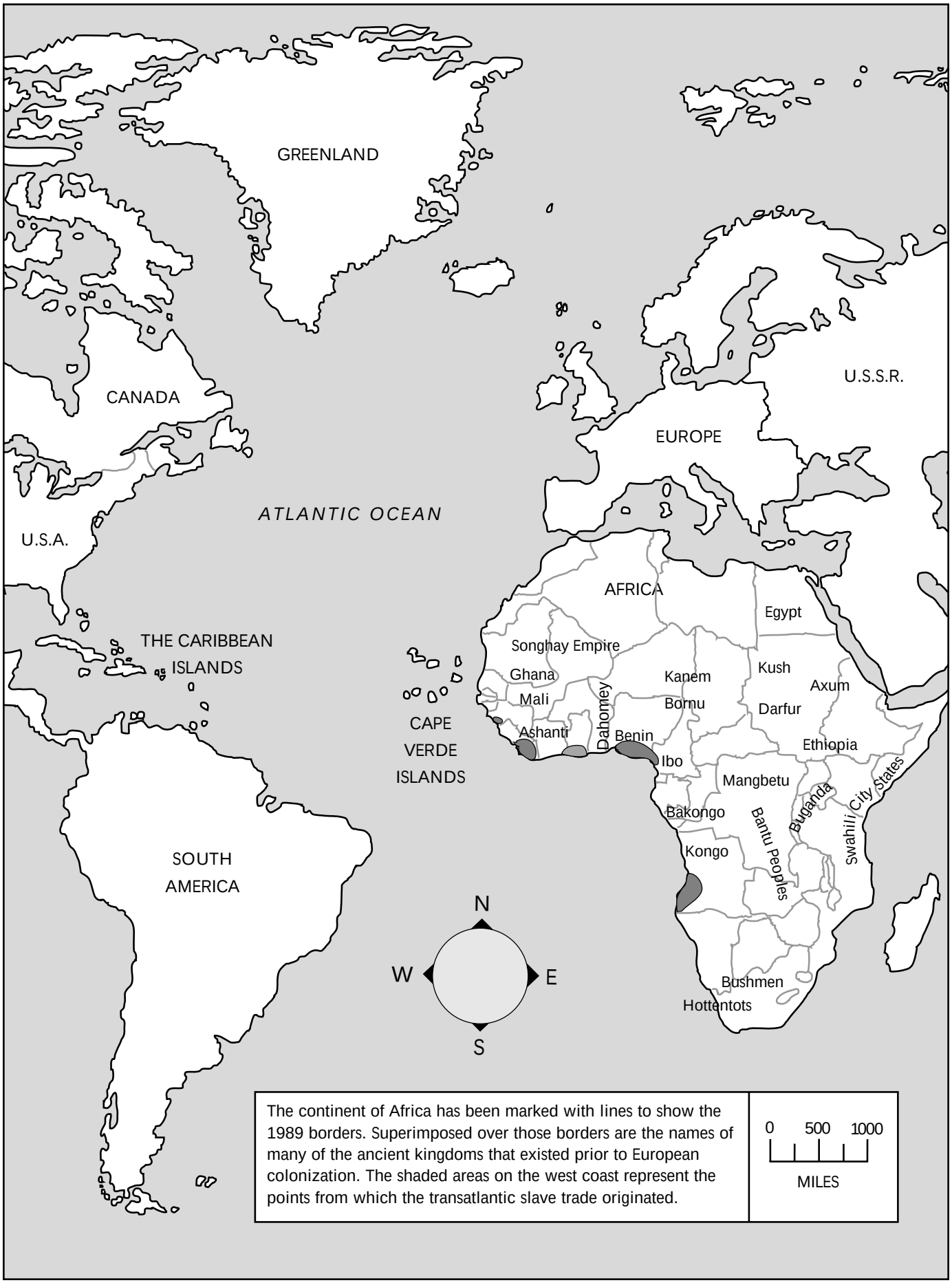
Joseph Cinque

crises. Still others came to the Louisiana territory, Puerto Rico, New Orleans and even New York City as an aftermath of the Haitian Revolution and Napoleonic War.

Because direct involvement of American slavers came later, European slave traders drew their captives from deeper in the interior, southwestern and even eastern parts of Africa. With United States independence, slavery began to wane in the northern states, and by 1807 the United States and England had discontinued legal slave trafficking and were intercepting the cargoes of the other European slave ships on their way to American ports. These ships continued to carry enslaved Africans to Cuba and Brazil up through the late 1800s. The "legal" importation of enslaved Africans into the United States can be placed at about 1,107,500 between 1640 and 1800 based on Deerr's estimates. (Curtin, 1969)

Ironically, the ban on trading in enslaved Africans was instituted around the same time that the cotton gin increased the competitiveness of American cotton on the world market. Therefore, the smaller farms and plantations of the "Old South" began to yield to the larger plantations in the "Deep South" and Texas, where a larger labor force was needed. Hence, while northern manumission of Africans characterized the period following independence, internal breeding and illegal slave trading emerged as common practices in the South.

An estimated 527,000 illegal enslaved Africans plus numerous free persons from Africa are believed to have



The continent of Africa has been marked with lines to show the 1989 borders. Superimposed over those borders are the names of many of the ancient kingdoms that existed prior to European colonization. The shaded areas on the west coast represent the points from which the transatlantic slave trade originated.