

Christopher Hooper

African Experience in Latin America and the Caribbean – Fall 2004

History 4395, Section 05169

MW: 1:00 – 2:30pm, Room 9 AH

Professor: Dr. Philip A. Howard

The Middle Passage

Although the origins are unknown and the meaning has changed over time, The Middle Passage is a term that commonly refers to the transporting of African slaves from the West African coast, across the Atlantic sea to the Americas, aboard slave ships known as slavers. This paper will briefly outline the major phases of The Middle Passage and describe some of the treatments and conditions the enslaved Africans experienced. The bulk of the material used to explore this topic comes from the holdings of the M.D. Anderson Library located at the University of Houston's main campus. The material used for this research includes first-hand accounts (Captain Logs, seamen diaries, and slave narratives) as well as other appropriate secondary sources. After an examination of this material, it is apparent that the cruel treatment of the slaves coupled with the inhuman conditions aboard the slavers resulted in high mortality rates while causing the survivors to emerge physically weak as well as mentally terrified.

The transatlantic slave trade began around 1518 and ended sometime after the 1870's. During that time, it is estimated that 11-13 million slaves survived The Middle Passage to the Americas, while many others died in transit (Palmer, 2002: 53). "Estimates of mortality during The Middle Passage vary, but the available evidence suggests that about 40 percent of each cargo died during the sixteenth century, 15 percent during the seventeenth, and between 5 and 10 percent in later years" (Palmer, 2002: 54).

The cold-blooded state of affairs and the brutal process of The Middle Passage began on the coast of West Africa where newly enslaved Africans were held prisoners in slave factories, sometimes referred to as slave castles or barracoons. The slave factories contained slaves who had survived their capture and march from the interior of Africa (Drake, 1972: 43, 48, 49). Many of these slaves were prisoners of war from native conflicts (Conneau, 1976: 104). Some of them were common criminals (Falconbridge, 1973: 15).

Although the black traders who dealt in African slaves were careful not to reveal the circumstances under which slaves were collected, Alexander Falconbridge, a surgeon who was involved in the slave trade, had reason to believe that most of the slaves were victims of a heartless action known as kidnapping (1973: 13). He goes on to say that, "It frequently happens that those who kidnap others are themselves, in their turns, seized and sold. A negroe in the West-Indies informed me that after having been employed in kidnapping others, he had experienced this reverse. And he assured me that it was a common incident among his countrymen" (Falconbridge, 1973: 14).

Slave factories were apparently set up or sponsored by Europeans whose business it was, according to captain Thomas Phillips of the ship Hannibal, "to negotiate with the negroes and stimulate them to activity in organizing slave hunting expeditions" (Dow, 1968: 2). Regardless of how they became slaves, they were housed in these merciless factories until the slave ships arrived. It is in these slave castles where some prisoners of the trade died from injuries inflicted during their capture or disease brought on from the wet, unhealthy

environment (Palmer, 2002: 54). Adding to the despair and distress of being reduced to slavery was the widespread fear that they were being sold as food. The rumor was that white cannibals had a fondness for eating African flesh (Pierson, 1977: 147, 148).

Before being loaded onto the ships, the slaves--males and females--had their heads shaved. They were forced to strip naked and were checked by their purchasers to make sure they were in suitable condition. Captain Rich'd Drake, an African slave trader for fifty years, described how the blacks were examined head to foot, having their joints and muscles squeezed, their arms and legs twisted, their breast and groins pinched without mercy. They were then branded with the identifying marks of their owners, using hot irons (Drake, 1972: 43). "Many of the Negroes have letters cut on the breast or shoulder...whereby on the vessel's arrival to the Americas; owners could recognize their property (Hill, 1993: 37). The enslaved, naked Africans were then herded onto the slave ships under the inspiration of the whip. One can only imagine the terrible apprehension and emotional distress brought on by this brutal handling.

Slave narratives are rare, but one such slave account by Olaudah Equiano describes seeing and boarding a slave ship for the first time. "These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe...I was immediately handed and tossed up to see if I was sound by some of the crew, and I was persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me...when I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace or copper boiling and multitude of black people, of every

description, chained together, everyone of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted” (Equiano, 1999: 31).

Upon being brought aboard the slave ship, the male slaves were shackled together in pairs with handcuffs and leg irons. The right wrist and ankle of one person was connected to the left wrist and ankle of the other. After being secured in this fashion, they were sent down into the hold, where they were stored in partitioned off *apartments*. The women were not put in irons, unless they were considered troublesome. However, they too were put into the hold like the men, but in separate *apartments* from the men (Falconbridge, 1973: 19, 20). Conditions inside the holds were inhuman. Equiano states that, “I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: So that, with the loathsomeness of stench, and with my crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything” (1999: 32).

The horrified slaves that were not yet restrained with shackles, realizing they would never see their country and kin again chose to jump overboard to certain death by either drowning or shark attack (Dow, 1968: 70, 74). William Bosman, another seaman involved in the African slave trade, remarks that he saw no sharks in the coastal waters of Africa’s gold coast except at the main outlets where slaves were dispatched to the Americas. He goes on to state that

the sharks will follow the slave ships across the Atlantic, waiting to feed on any slaves that enter the water (Bosman, 1967: 281, 282).

The hold, where the slaves were stored, was modified with storage platforms extending inward from the side of the ship. The modified design of the holds exacerbated and promoted unhealthy conditions for the slaves, resulting in high mortality, along with the physical weakening and psychological traumatizing of the rest. Dr. Philip Howard, from the University of Houston, described these platforms as strips of un-planed boards with no covering to protect slaves from the splinters and knots, usually having some amount of space between each board. The platforms were “Placed nearly midway between the decks, at the distance of two or three feet from each deck” (Falconbridge, 1973: 20). These storage selves made it impossible for slaves to stand while stored, much less sit upright. In fact, most captains were ‘tight packers’, storing as many slaves as possible, each of them squished together like in a can of sardines (Drake, 1972: 39, 43, 59, 89). The leg irons, handcuffs and the restricted space made it painful and difficult for slaves to turn or move while stored in the hold (Equiano, 1999: 33).

In each partitioned off *apartment* within the hold, there were three or four tubs roughly two feet by two feet that were to be used as latrines. Slaves that were not stored next to these buckets had trouble reaching them. Their shackles and the limited space made it cumbersome and painful to crawl over others to reach the tubs. Arguments and quarrels typically broke out between slaves who needed to reach the tubs and those that needed to be crawled over. Most of the

time, slaves that needed to reach the tubs were prevented from doing so. The result was that slaves would be forced to relieve themselves as they lay there (Falconbridge, 1973: 20, 21). "This becomes a fresh source of boils and disturbances...rendering the condition of the poor captive wretches still more uncomfortable" (Falconbridge, 1973: 21). Some of the excrement and urine would seep through the spaces between the plank boards, splattering on those who were unfortunate enough to be directly under the relieving slave (Munford, 1991: 308). Frequently, weak slave children would be found lying in a tub, smothered in sickness, unable to lift themselves out after having fallen in (Hill, 1993: 38).

The holds had very little ventilation usually with only five to six airports on each side of the ship. These openings were only six inches by four inches, hardly enough to allow proper ventilation (Falconbridge, 1973: 24). The amount of bodies, the lack of ventilation, and excrement created unimaginable, unsanitary conditions that were inhuman and savage. As a result, sickness and death were prevalent on every slaver. According to Equiano, "The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells and brought on a sickness among the slaves of which many died" (1999: 33).

The Africans were prone to violent bouts of seasickness that were so intense it often led to their deaths. Other common inflictions suffered by slaves

were dysentery or “bloody flux”, scurvy and the most feared, smallpox. Their lack of clothing caused a lowering of physical resistance. Chills were common from the temperature change going from deck to steamy hold. Many slaves displayed symptoms of pneumonia (Munford, 1991: 308, 309). From the sickness, the compartments of the hold would become covered in blood and human waste and mucus. Falconbridge likened it to a slaughterhouse (1973: 24, 25). Terrified Africans died and became feeble from a variety of diseases that were aggravated by the ruthless methods of their captors and the bestial conditions they suffered on board the ship.

Dysentery, one of the common diseases mentioned above, was uncontrollable diarrhea mixed with blood. The Oxford English Dictionary defines dysentery as, “A disease characterized by inflammation of the mucous membrane and glands of the large intestine, accompanied with gripping pains, and mucous and bloody evacuations” (JMR). “Flux is similarly defined as an abnormally copious flowing of blood and excrement from the bowels or other organs; a morbid or excessive discharge” (JMR). Inflicted slaves had little choice but to lay in their own filth, and those stored on the bottom of the hold were subject to the mess flowing between the spaces in the upper planks (Munford, 1991: 308). The hold could become full of shit, blood and mucus (Falconbridge, 1973: 25).

Scurvy was another common disease suffered by the slaves during The Middle Passage. A slave inflicted with scurvy would have become weak with joint pain. The first visible signs would have been the appearance of raised red

spots on the skin. Next, their gums would hemorrhage while the tissue became weak and spongy. Then, their teeth would loosen and eating would have become difficult and painful (Huskey, 1998). To combat and prevent scurvy, sailors regularly forced slaves to rinse their mouths out with vinegar (Thomas, 1997: 419).

Smallpox was yet another common disease that, like the rest, was exacerbated by the cruel and inhuman experiences, which killed many Africans and caused many more to become physically pathetic and emotionally terrified. "The eruption of smallpox is preceded by a continued fever, pain in the back, itching in the nose, and terrors in sleep" (Razi, 2000). Then comes a pricking felt all over the body followed by "a pain in the throat and chest, with pain and heaviness of the head; inquietude, distress of mind, nausea, and anxiety. Next come the lesions which ulcerate soon after formation" (Razi, 2000). One person with smallpox could wipe out everyone on the ship. Usually, at the first sign of scabs a slave would be thrown overboard to be devoured by the sharks that seemed to follow slave ships "as if they smelt the sickness" (Drake, 1972: 49).

The nightmare for the slaves got worse in periods of stormy weather. In rough seas or rainy weather, it was necessary to close the airports to prevent the hold from being flooded and the victims could be locked below deck for days (Munford, 1991: 305). Without fresh air or ventilation, the hold became intolerably hot (Falconbridge, 1973: 24). Falconbridge reported that, "The confined air, rendered noxious by effluvia exhaled from their bodies, and by being repeatedly breathed, soon produces fevers and fluxes, which generally

carries off great numbers of them” (1973: 24). Upon going below deck during a storm to check on the slaves he says, “I was so overcome with the heat, stench and foul air that I had nearly fainted, and it was not without assistance, that I could get upon deck” (1973: 25).

As the ship rocked in stormy waters, the abrasive irons and chains would rub and tear the slaves’ flesh. The ship’s rolling motion might cause the skin over their elbows, hips or shoulder blades to be worn away to the bone (Falconbridge, 1973: 28). “And some of them, by constantly lying in the blood and mucus, that had flowed from those afflicted with the flux...have their flesh much sooner rubbed off than those who have only to contend with the mere friction of the ship” (Falconbridge, 1973: 28). “The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered it a scene of horror almost inconceivable” (Equiano, 1999: 33). It is no wonder that some slaves went “raving mad, and screech like wild beast” (Drake, 1972: 50).

In times of good weather, the slaves were brought up from the hold onto the main deck. It is here that they endured a pitiless process of feeding and exercise, but first they were secured like beasts with chains. Falconbridge reports, “About eight o’clock in the morning the Negroes are generally brought upon deck. Their irons being examined, a long chain, which is locked to a ring-bolt, fixed in the deck, is run through the rings of the shackles of the men, and then locked to another ring-bolt, fixed also in the deck. By this means fifty or sixty, and four times more, are fastened to one chain, in order to prevent them from rising, or endeavoring to escape. If the weather proves favorable, they are

permitted to remain in that situation till four or five in the afternoon, when they are disengaged from the chain, and sent down” (Falconbridge, 1973: 21).

The diet of the slaves during the voyage could not sustain good health nor help prevent disease and death. Slaves were fed twice a day—at eight in the morning and at four in the afternoon. Groups of ten would be given one bucket of food, which they ate out of with their hands. The food was terrible and the worst was horse beans. Horse beans were the cheapest food you could get in Europe at the time. They were boiled into a pulp served with a pepper laced “slabber-sauce”. According to Falconbridge, “Most of the slaves have such an aversion to the horse beans, that unless they are narrowly watched, when fed upon deck, they will throw them overboard or in each others faces when they quarrel” (1973: 22). Therefore, slaves were not getting the balanced nutrition they needed and they became unhealthy, weak and even more susceptible to diseases.

Some slaves lost the desire to eat as Equiano explained that the loathsome, intolerable stench from the hold made him become “so sick and low” that he was not able to eat, nor did he have the least desire to taste anything (1999: 32). He goes on to say that he was “flogged severely for not eating” (1999: 32). Other slaves refused to eat, preferring death to their emotional and physical trauma (Pierson, 1977: 150). However, captains had barbaric and ironhanded ways of getting these none-eating slaves to submit to a meal. If a severe flogging did not inspire them to eat, they would burn their lips with hot coals, even threatening to force the burning coals down their throats. There have

even been reports of a captain who poured melted lead onto slaves who refused to eat (Falconbridge, 1973: 23). Eventually, captains would employ the use of a speculum oris in order to force feed resistant slave. The speculum oris had wooden dividers that were forced into the slaves' mouth and a mechanism was turned causing the jaws to be cranked open. The food was then shoved down their throats through a funnel (Thomas, 1997: 420).

With each meal, they were given one cup of water. It was handed to them in a small utensil that resembled a sauce-boat (Falconbridge, 1973: 22). Hill recounts, "The great physical suffering of all seems to be a raging, unquenchable thirst" (1993: 30). Indeed, with only two cups of water per day coupled with the sweating, puking, and diarrhea, the slaves suffered tremendously from dehydration. It has been estimated that a third of the slave deaths during The Middle Passage were attributed directly and indirectly to dehydration (Thomas, 1997: 423).

Between meals, and sometimes at night, the slaves were forced to dance and sing as a form of cruel exercise or sadistic entertainment. "The men could only jump up and rattle their chains" (Dow, 1968: 195). The women were free from irons and could dance about more easily. If the slaves danced reluctantly, or the least bit sloppy, they were whipped for inspiration (Falconbridge, 1973: 23). The whip that drove the unwilling and weak to dance was called a cat-o-nine-tails. It had nine separate appendages of log line, each with several knots (Falconbridge, 1973: 40). Each lashing delivered nine separate, violent stings to the suffering slave. The cat-o-nine-tails followed the slaves everywhere and was

present at all times. The disheartened slaves were also forced by the cracking of the whip to sing. As to be expected, most of their songs were filled with the sorrow and despair of being torn from their country and kin. Grief typically filled their distressing eyes with tears during their coerced crooning (Dow, 1968: 195). This cruel treatment, if not encouraging death, undoubtedly helped to physically weaken and mentally terrify the slaves.

The women may not have had to suffer in irons but they were subject to other evil-minded and unsparing treatments. Captains, officers and crew could be sexual predators and the powerless female slaves were their victims (Falconbridge, 1973: 23, 24). If they did not consent, they were severely beaten (Equiano, 1999: 74). Furthermore, Equiano comments that he knew of child rapes: "I have known our mates commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practiced to such a scandalous excess" (Equiano, 1999: 74). In another account by James Arnold, a surgeon aboard Captain Joseph Williams ship the *Ruby*, describes his captain's victimization of young female slaves. "It was his general practice on the receipt of a women slave—especially a young one—to send for her to come to his cabin so that he might lie with her. Sometimes they would refuse to comply with his desires and would be severely beaten by him and sent below...there was one girl that he retained for some time as his favorite and kept her in his cabin" (Dow, 1968: 191).

The Middle Passage ended with the slave's arriving in the Americas. Upon the site of land, the weakened, traumatized slaves were no longer restricted to their limited rations of food and water, if there was no shortage (Falconbridge, 1973: 23). Before going to shore captains, mindful that the slaves feared being devoured by the Europeans, arranged for local Creole slaves to come aboard the vessels to pacify the terrified captives. Equiano recalls, "There was much dread and trembling among us, and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from these apprehensions...The white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people" (1999: 35).

Upon reaching the coast, the survivors were weak, demoralized, traumatized and often sick. Those who suffered from dysentery or other diseases were stored in barracoons or huts located on the shore (Thomas, 1997: 432, 434). They either died there or were sold cheaply to Jews, surgeons and other speculators. These purchasers tried to revive the sick to a condition where they could be used or resold at a profit. The slaves that were carried ashore and sold in a dying state seldom survived for very long (Falconbridge, 1973: 33).

Slaves that were weak, but not deathly sick, were fed and cleaned before being marched to the merchants' yard to await the grim treatment of the auction (Thomas, 1997: 432). Drake reported what an auction entailed, "The Dutch maids walked around inspecting the naked Africans as if it was a common thing. The auctioneer sat on a high chair at one end of the room, and the slaves stood

on a stool in front of him. The darkies were obliged to go through every sort of motion. It seemed at times as if their arms would be pulled out of joint or their jaws cracked by some of the Dutch boors. One dame was not satisfied until she forced a wench to screech by squeezing her breast cruelly” (Drake, 1972: 45).

Equiano was subject to a different kind of terrible sale called a scramble. In a scramble, each slave is priced the same and the slave-desperate buyers were allowed to purchase all they could claim. Upon a given signal, or time, the purchasers would race into the holding pen and grab or lay claim to the best and healthiest. Sometimes they would encircle whole groupings with a rope. Determined to get the best, arguments and fights would break out between the competitive purchasers (Falconbridge, 1973: 34).

The greedy, brutish, madhouse of the scramble was just another stress for the poor slaves. Equiano states that, “The noise and clamor with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little to increase the apprehension of the terrified Africans” (1999: 35, 36). For the women, already having been preyed upon during the voyage, the fear must have run much deeper. “The women, in particular, clang to each other in agonies fiercely to be conceived, shrieking through excess of terror, at the savage manner in which their brutal purchasers rushed upon and seized them” (Falconbridge, 1973: 35).

Thus, the formerly free Africans who survived the cruel and inhuman process known as The Middle Passage began a lifetime of servitude in the Americas.

To summarize, the transportation of African slaves from the West coast of Africa, across the Atlantic, to the Americas during the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries has come to be known as The Middle Passage. It involved the unwilling separation of peoples from their home and family, forcing them into a mandatory deportation, reducing their status to that of mere human cargo, exposing them to a cramped disease filled environment, limiting them of basic life giving substance, subjecting them to wrenching sexual abuse and much more. This paper gives the reader an idea about the cruel methods and inhuman conditions of The Middle Passage that left many enslaved Africans dead and caused many more to emerge physically weak and mentally terrified.

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