Introduction: Slavery in the North

In the United States, slavery is often thought of as a Southern institution. Many people today are unaware of the extent of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century North, particularly New England. Long thought of as the birthplace of the anti-slavery movement, New England has a more complex history of slavery and slave trading than many realize.

In the four hundred years after Columbus first sailed to the New World, some twelve million Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves. About 500,000 of these people came to mainland North America, what is now the United States. The first Africans to arrive in the colonies came in 1619, when a Dutch ship sold twenty slaves to people living in the Virginian colony of Jamestown. But slavery was not confined to the South. It existed in all thirteen American colonies and for a time in all thirteen of the first states.

The transatlantic slave trade was history's first great global industry. Ships from Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Holland, and Denmark traveled to the African coast to load their holds with people. The risks of such trade were many—storms, pirates, disease, and rebellions were common—but the profits were great. Much of the wealth of modern western nations flows, either directly or indirectly, from the trade in human cargo: slaves.

What was the Triangular Trade?

Colonial North American ships began to participate in the slave trade as early as the 1640s. Almost all of colonial America's slave ships originated in New England. Confronted with a landscape and climate unsuitable for large-scale commercial farming, New Englanders looked to the sea for their livelihood.

As a result, in the eighteenth century, New Englanders developed what came to be known as the Triangular Trade. Ships carried sugar and molasses from the plantation colonies of the Caribbean to New England where colonists distilled it into rum. Merchants then shipped this rum to Africa where it was exchanged for slaves, who were carried back to the Caribbean to produce more sugar.

Some Africans were brought back to New England. Because paid employees were often unavailable or too expensive to use profitably, many New Englanders chose to purchase enslaved Africans. Though the vast majority of the slaves were carried to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and South America, by 1755, more than thirteen thousand enslaved people were working in New England.

The slave trade became especially important to Rhode Islanders. By the middle of the eighteenth century, upwards of twenty ships per year sailed for Africa from the tiny colony, most of them from the city of Newport. Two-thirds of Rhode Island's fleet was engaged in the slave trade.

What is this reading about?

This reading will explore the effects of the slave trade and slavery in New England. It focuses especially on Rhode Island because of that colony's heavy involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Part I addresses the economy of the trade. Part II addresses slavery in New England—often forgotten or overlooked today—and the various individuals and groups that argued for its continuation or its abolition following the Revolution. The readings and activities will introduce you to prominent families and individual slaves and their owners. As a central activity you will reenact Rhode Island's debate of 1783-84 on whether to abolish slavery and the slave trade. An epilogue will explain the outcome of the actual debate.

Part I: New England and the African Slave Trade

In the United States, slavery is often thought of as a Southern institution. Many people today are unaware of the extent of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century North, particularly New England. Long thought of as the birthplace of the anti-slavery movement, New England has a more complex history of slavery and slave trading than many realize.

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Bringing Slaves to the New World

When Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, French, and English colonizers arrived in the New World, they faced significant labor shortages. To resolve their problem they captured and enslaved the local inhabitants. The first slaves in the Caribbean and South America of the sixteenth century were Native Americans.

When the supply of Native Americans proved inadequate due to high mortality from war and disease, European colonists began to import enslaved Africans. It was Africans who built the flourishing sugar industry of the Caribbean and South America. By the eighteenth century, world demand for sugar was so great and the potential profits from producing sugar were so immense that planters considered it economical to work slaves to death and then import more. Once enslaved people arrived in the Caribbean they usually lived only four to seven years.

The New England slave trade was an outgrowth of the Caribbean sugar plantation industry. Early on, Caribbean planters stopped producing food and other necessities because the production of sugar was so much more profitable. That meant that provisions had to be imported from elsewhere. New Englanders seized the opportunity, supplying Caribbean plantation colonies with a host of goods: horses, hay, beef, butter, tar, timber, salted fish, furniture, and iron. From there it was a short step for New Englanders to begin trafficking in slaves.

How did the slave trade impact the Rhode Island economy?

The first recorded New England slave voyage sailed from the city of Boston, Massachusetts in 1644. By the 1670s, Massachusetts traders were regularly carrying slaves between Africa and the Caribbean. Rhode Islanders entered the trade in about 1700. Over the next century, more than 60 percent of the North American ships involved in the African slave trade were based in Rhode Island. However, as a proportion of the transatlantic trade as a whole, the Rhode Island slave trade was quite modest. In all, perhaps one hundred thousand Africans were carried to the New World in Rhode Island ships.

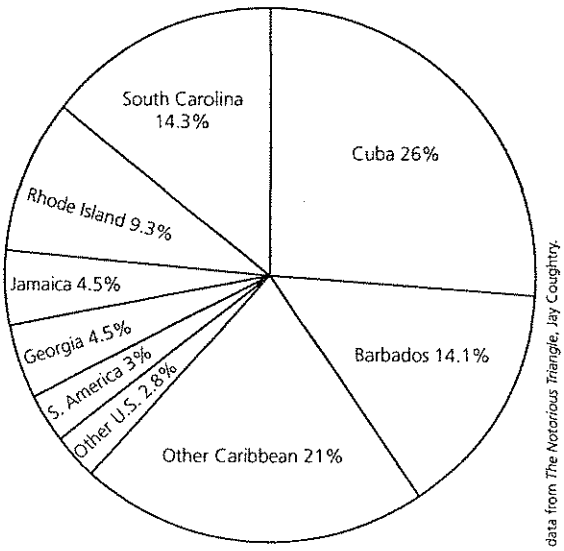
In a small colony like Rhode Island, the slave trade became a crucial economic engine. The trade brought great wealth to some merchants and investors and created jobs for thousands of others. In addition to the sailors employed in the trade, many people worked in industries dependent on the slave trade, from rope making to iron forging, from candle manufacturing to carpentry. Distilling provides perhaps the best example. By the 1760s, the Rhode Island city of Newport alone boasted nearly two dozen distilleries, transforming Caribbean molasses into rum.

What were the risks for merchants in the slave trade?

Slave trading entailed financial risks for merchants and investors. Many slaves did not survive the voyage across the Atlantic. Even though merchants could sometimes purchase insurance on slave cargoes, an accident or epidemic could wipe out their investment. But if slaves arrived in good health, the profits could be spectacular. Slaves sold in the Caribbean for about eight to ten times their purchase price in Africa. New Englanders invested in slave voyages much as people invest in the stock market today. Even average working people could buy shares for very little money and thus try to build up their wealth.

In addition to financial risk, the slave trade involved considerable physical risk to the captains and crews. Voyages lasted approximately

Destinations for slaves on Rhode Island ships, 1700-1807



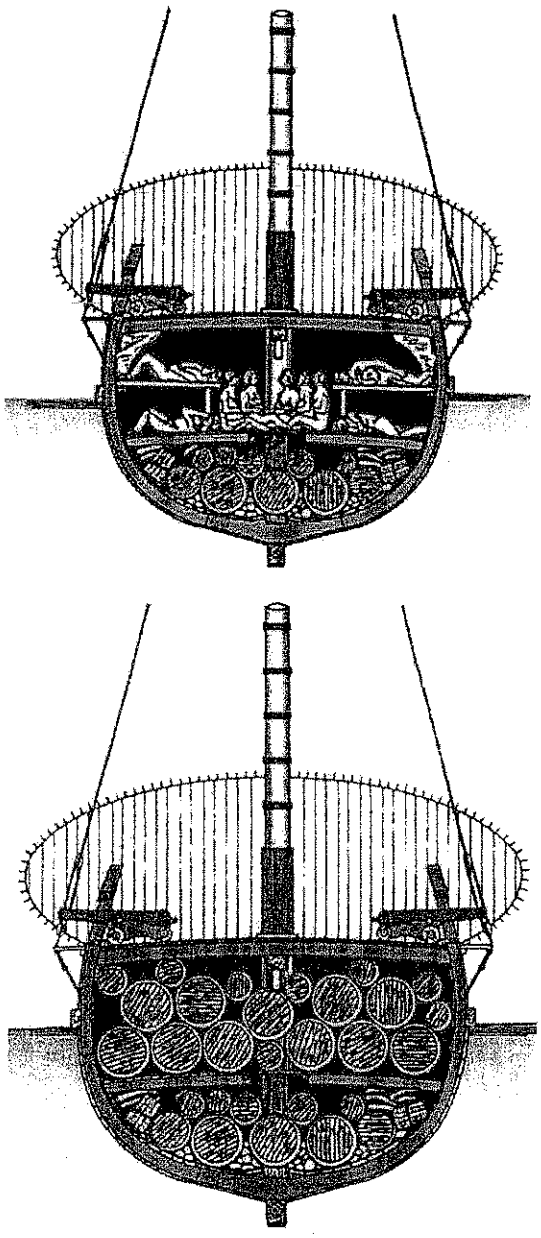
data from *The Notorious Triangle*, Jay Coughtry.

twelve months and disease on the slave ships was frequent. Smallpox, dysentery, yellow fever, and typhus were common. Slave uprisings were also an ever-present threat, especially when ships were close to the African coast.

What was the Middle Passage?

Life for enslaved people on the slave ships—who, unlike the sailors, had not made the choice to be there—was incomparably harder. The voyage from the African coast across the Atlantic is known as the Middle Passage. At least 10 percent and as much as 20 percent of slaves—about two million people overall—died on the Middle Passage. High seas and bad weather meant portholes and gratings were covered, leaving little fresh air for those who were confined below deck. Women and children sometimes remained unchained but most men endured the voyage chained to each other and to the ship. While some ships included slop buckets, many slaves were forced to lie in their own waste.

Slave traders calculated the most efficient way to pack their holds. The spaces in which slaves were kept measured between three and four feet high—barely enough to sit upright. Girl slaves were typically allotted an area of four feet, six inches in length by twelve inches



Courtesy of the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum. Used with permission.

A cross-section of the British ship the Henrietta Marie, first with slaves to be sold in the Caribbean, then with casks of goods to be brought to North America.

of width. Boys would typically have five feet by fourteen inches. Adult men and women had slightly more space. Some slaves killed themselves rather than endure the terrible suffering. Others organized mutinies, a few of which succeeded.

"The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time.... It became absolutely pestilential. 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.... 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."

—Olaudah Equiano, an enslaved person from Benin, in his autobiography of 1789

How did New Englanders view slavery and the slave trade?

Although it might be hard for us to believe today, most English colonists viewed slave trading as a respectable business. Governors of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, judges from Massachusetts, the president of Yale University, and prominent members of the clergy all participated in the trade.

As for slavery itself, most whites did not regard it as a moral problem. By and large, most colonial New Englanders believed in a hierarchical society, one in which some people had power and some did not. They accepted servitude as normal, and they expected servants and slaves to be obedient to their masters in the same way that they expected children to be obedient to parents.

Colonial New Englanders also justified slavery in religious terms. They believed that their religion was the only valid religion in the world and that all who did not accept it would go to hell. Many slave traders argued that enslaving Africans was actually a blessing to them, since it introduced them to Christianity. They thought that by removing Africans from their "heathen" land, they were actually ensuring their eternal salvation.

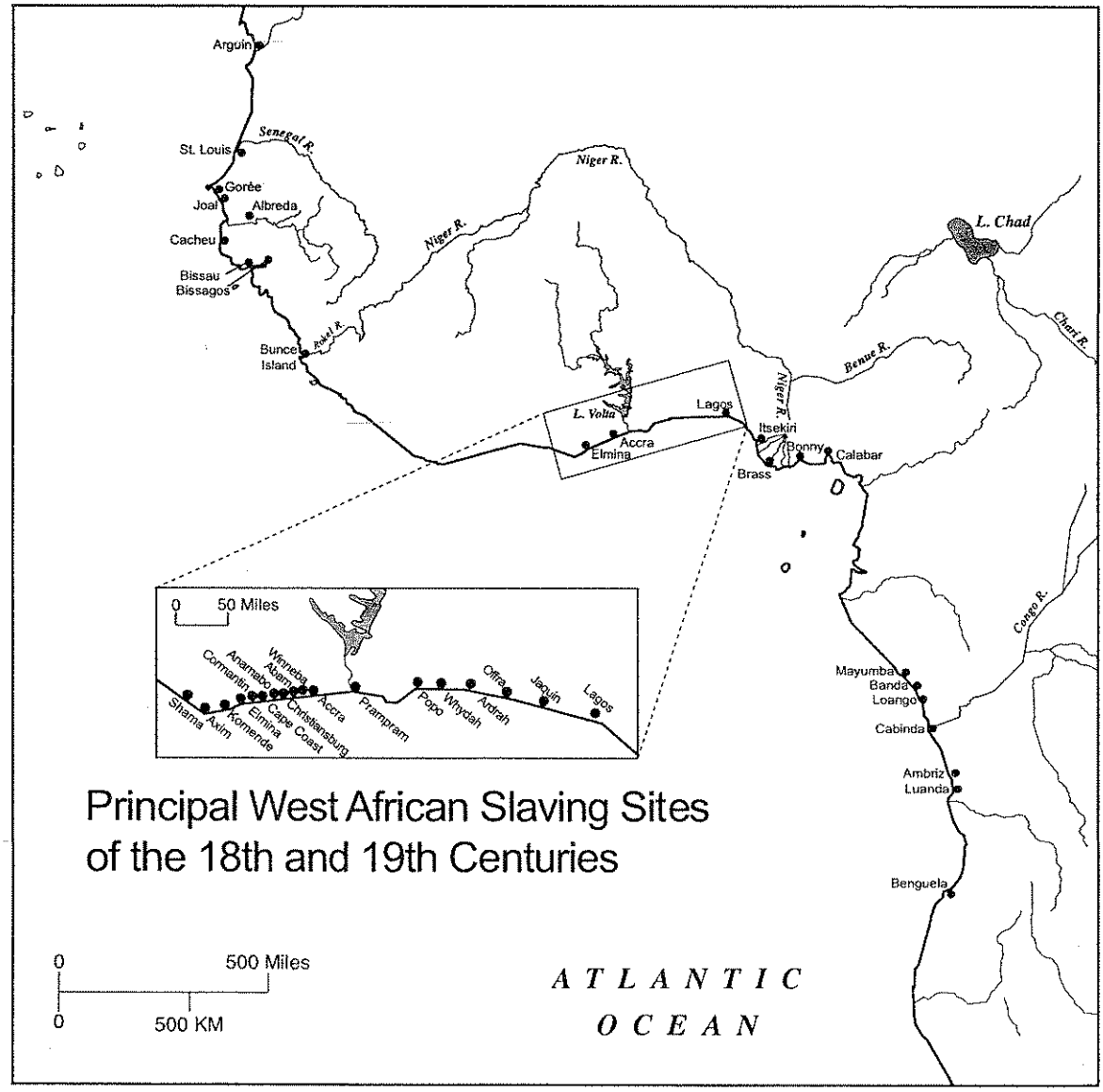


Image courtesy of V. Estabrook.

"An overruling Providence has been pleased to bring to this land of freedom another cargo of benighted heathen, to enjoy the blessing of a Gospel dispensation."

—A Newport slave trader

Another argument addressed the warfare and violence of the African continent. Although warfare actually increased as a result of slave trading, many merchants saw their actions as removing Africans from the dangers of war. Some felt that their actions could be characterized as charitable or beneficial to the Africans they purchased.

Few slave traders saw hypocrisy in their arguments. Many traders saw the combination of saving bodies and souls and of benefiting the home economy as a perfect match. For those who did feel queasy about their participation in the slave trade, the economic benefits mostly outweighed their discomfort until the late 1700s.

An Account of a Slave's Capture

The narrative of Venture Smith, which he told to a school teacher in 1798, offers one of the only first-person accounts of an enslaved person's experiences from West Africa to New England. Smith was born in what is now the country of Guinea, where his father named him Broteer. His father was prince of the Dukandarra people, so Smith's early years were spent in wealth and comfort. Smith had two brothers and three step-siblings. When Smith was about seven years old, his father's territory was attacked by an enemy group, a group which had attacked others nearby as well. Here are selections from Smith's account of his capture and sale.

"They then came to us in the reeds, and the very first salute I had from them was a violent blow on the head with the fore part of a gun, and at the same time a grasp round the neck. I then had a rope put about my neck, as had all the women in the thicket with me, and were immediately led to my father, who was likewise pinioned and haltered for leading.....

"The enemy had remarkable success in destroying the country wherever they went. For as far as they had penetrated they laid the habitations waste and captured the people. The distance they had now brought me was about four hundred miles. All the march I had very hard tasks imposed on me, which I must perform on pain of punishment. I was obliged to carry on my head a large flat stone used for grinding our corn, weighing, as I should suppose, as much as twenty-five pounds; besides victuals, mat and cooking utensils. Though I was pretty large and stout of my age, yet these burdens were very grievous to me, being only six years and a half old....

"All of us were then put into the castle and kept for market. On a certain time, I and other prisoners were put on board a canoe, under our master, and rowed away to a vessel belonging to Rhode Island, commanded by Captain Collingwood, and the mate, Thomas Mumford. While we were going to the vessel, our master told us to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture. Thus I came by my name. All the slaves that were bought for that vessel's cargo were two hundred and sixty."

Why did West African merchants participate in the trade?

The west coast of Africa, the source of most American slaves, was culturally and linguistically diverse. There were also notable distinctions in religious practices. Some groups practiced Islam, while others practiced traditional religions. As in other areas of the world, Africans could also be distinguished by their occupations and their differing roles in their societies.

Because of this diversity, it is hard to generalize about experiences with slavery, though a broad overview can help to explain why some Africans sold other Africans into slavery. Slavery existed in Africa before Europeans began to travel there, though the institution was generally less harsh than New World slavery. In Africa, slaves were often prisoners of war captured from enemies, who were either eventually ransomed back to their families or sold to others. Frequently, enslaved people were allowed to earn money or own land, or even to marry locals. Over the course of generations, enslaved Africans and their descendants were often able to assimilate into their new societies.

When Europeans suggested trading merchandise for slaves, the concept in Africa was not new. Kings or chiefs often traded their prisoners to Europeans in exchange for luxury goods or for guns and other weapons. Over the course of the slave trade Europeans sold approximately twenty million guns to Africans. These guns made leaders more powerful, and gave them an advantage over neighboring groups. Groups who did not possess guns were more likely to fall victim to ones who did, so

guns became essential to survival. Europeans recognized that the influx of guns to the continent of Africa increased warfare and thus the number of prisoners of war available for sale. Once trading of this kind began, there was no easy way for Africans to stop it.

While many European merchants traded luxury items and guns for slaves, American colonists introduced rum to Africa in 1723. New England slave traders became known as "rum men," providing African leaders with rum and other goods in exchange for captives.

The slave trade enriched African kingdoms and communities that had developed advanced methods of warfare, but destroyed many smaller populations that fell victim to conquest. Many of those victims ended up on slave ships.

Triangular Trade Statistics

Timeline for a typical slave voyage from Rhode Island:

Sept. 1, 1764	Leave Rhode Island with rum for Africa
Nov. 1, 1764	Arrive on coast of West Africa and begin to trade
Dec. 1, 1764	Leave Africa with slaves for the West Indies
Jan. 15, 1765	Arrive in Caribbean and spend two months trading
March 15, 1765	Leave Caribbean with molasses and sugar for Rhode Island
May 1, 1765	Arrive in Rhode Island after eight months

Cargo used for trade on a typical voyage:

From Rhode Island to Africa	From Africa to Caribbean	From Caribbean to Rhode Island
about 17,000 gallons of rum	slaves elephants tusks gold dust camwood (used to make red dye)	paper money molasses sugar a few slaves

Arms on board on a typical voyage:

7 swivel guns
1 cask of powder
40 handcuffs
40 shackles
3 chains
2 pairs pistols
8 small arms
15 cutlasses (swords)
1 dozen padlocks
1 pair blunderbusses (a type of gun)

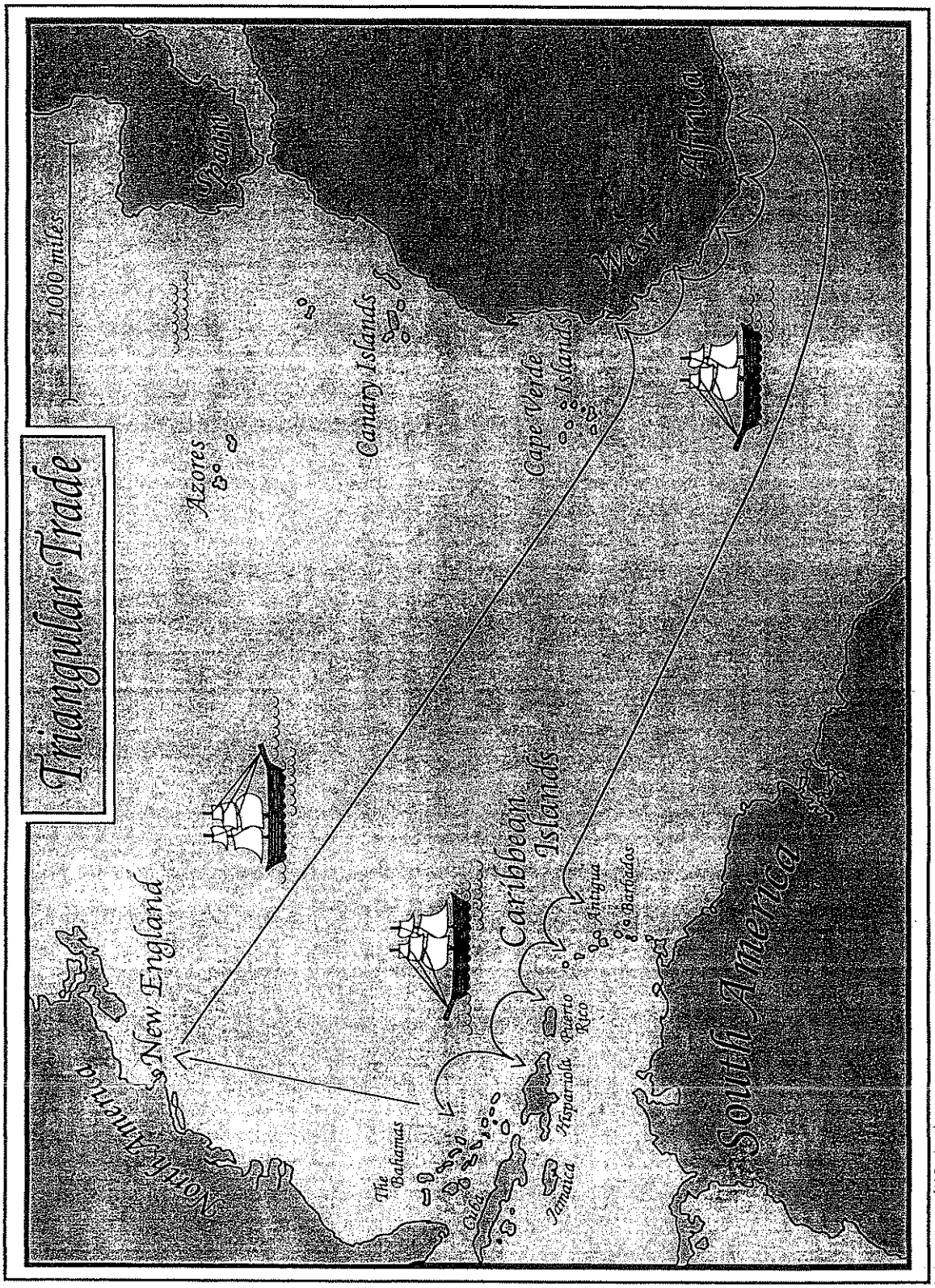


Image courtesy of V. Estabrook.