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# The Middle Passage

*From the Atlantic to the Cape Fear*

North Carolina · Cumberland County · Fayetteville · The Cape Fear River

|            |                                                                 |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| ERA        | ERA II — Colonial America & the Founding Contradiction          |
| ENTRY      | Entry 7 — The Middle Passage: The Crossing                      |
| TRACK      | Persecution                                                     |
| FOCUS      | NC Local Lens Expansion                                         |
| GEOGRAPHY  | Wilmington · Cape Fear River · Cumberland County · Fayetteville |
| DATE RANGE | 1700s–1808 (primary NC arrival period)                          |
| ARCHIVES   | NC State Archives · UNC Wilson Library · Cape Fear Museum       |

## Wilmington — North Carolina's Middle Passage Gateway

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The port of Wilmington, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, was the primary point of entry for enslaved Africans arriving in North Carolina. While Charleston, South Carolina served as the dominant entry port for the broader Carolina Low Country, Wilmington functioned as the direct gateway for enslaved people destined for NC plantations — particularly those moving inland along the Cape Fear River system toward what would become Cumberland County and Fayetteville.

North Carolina's slave trade operated somewhat differently from South Carolina's. The colony lacked the deep-water harbor infrastructure that made Charleston a dominant direct-import port. As a result, a significant portion of enslaved Africans arriving in NC came through two channels: direct ship arrivals at Wilmington, and secondary movement overland or by coastal vessel from Charleston and Savannah. Both channels converged on the Cape Fear River — the primary inland artery.

*"The Cape Fear River was not a natural boundary. It was a highway — and for enslaved Africans arriving in colonial North Carolina, it was the road that led from the ship to the plantation."*

| PERIOD      | PRIMARY ARRIVAL ROUTE                          | DESTINATION IN NC                           | ESTIMATED VOLUME  |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1720s–1750s | Direct ship arrival, Wilmington port           | Cape Fear plantations, tobacco farms        | Hundreds annually |
| 1750s–1775  | Direct Wilmington + overland from Charleston   | Cumberland County, Cross Creek corridor     | Growing rapidly   |
| 1776–1808   | Primarily domestic trade + Wilmington arrivals | Cumberland County, Bladen, Robeson counties | Peak period       |
| 1808–1860   | Domestic slave trade only (importation banned) | Deep South markets; some retained in NC     | Internal trade    |

## The Cape Fear River — From Dock to Plantation

The Cape Fear River runs 202 miles from its headwaters near present-day Greensboro to the Atlantic at Wilmington. For colonial North Carolina, it was the primary commercial artery — and for enslaved Africans who survived the Middle Passage, it was the route that carried them from the Atlantic dock into the interior of the colony.

The river system made Cumberland County accessible from the coast. Cross Creek — the trading settlement that would become Fayetteville — sat at the uppermost navigable point of the Cape Fear, approximately 100 miles inland from Wilmington. This geographic position made it the natural commercial hub for the colony's interior, and the natural destination for enslaved people being moved to inland plantations.

The journey upriver could take several days by flatboat or pettiauger — the shallow-draft vessels common on Carolina rivers. Enslaved people who had survived weeks or months in the hold of a transatlantic slave ship made this second journey in similarly confined conditions, under the control of traders and overseers who had purchased them at the Wilmington dock or at inland auctions at Cross Creek.

### KEY POINTS ALONG THE CAPE FEAR CORRIDOR

|                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Wilmington (Brunswick County)</b>                      | Port of arrival · Primary auction site for newly arrived enslaved Africans · Brunswick Town (across the river) was earlier colonial capital · New Hanover County slave records from 1720s onward held at NC State Archives                                                   |
| <b>Elizabethtown (Bladen County)</b>                      | Midpoint on the Cape Fear · Secondary market for enslaved people · Bladen County had one of the highest enslaved populations in colonial NC · Records: Bladen County Deed Books, NC State Archives                                                                           |
| <b>Cross Creek / Campbellton (Cumberland County)</b>      | Uppermost navigable point · Primary inland commercial hub · Became Fayetteville 1783 · Site of active slave market · Market House (still standing) was a documented site of enslaved person sales · Records: Cumberland County Deed Books, Estate Records, NC State Archives |
| <b>Fayetteville State University district (post-1865)</b> | Site of freedmen's community formation after emancipation · Howard School (1867) — later FSU — founded by formerly enslaved community members · The geographic continuity from Middle Passage arrival to HBCU founding spans approximately 150 years on the same land        |

## Who They Were — African Origins of NC's Enslaved Population

The enslaved Africans who arrived in North Carolina were not an undifferentiated mass. They came from specific regions, spoke specific languages, practiced specific agricultural and spiritual traditions — and those origins shaped what they built, how they resisted, and what survived in North Carolina's African American communities.

The Slave Voyages Database and scholarly analysis of NC estate records, runaway slave advertisements, and colonial correspondence allows historians to estimate the primary regional origins of enslaved Africans in the Cape Fear region.

| AFRICAN REGION / PEOPLE                   | APPROXIMATE % OF NC ARRIVALS | KNOWLEDGE / TRADITIONS CARRIED                                             | DOCUMENTED NC LEGACY                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Senegambia (Wolof, Mandinka, Fula)</b> | ~30–35%                      | Rice cultivation, indigo processing, Islamic literacy, weaving             | Cape Fear rice economy; indigo cultivation; Islamic prayer practices documented among NC enslaved |
| <b>Gold Coast (Akan, Fante, Asante)</b>   | ~15–20%                      | Gold smithing, military organization, oral history traditions              | Resistance organization; community leadership structures in enslaved quarters                     |
| <b>Angola / Kongo (Bakongo, Mbundu)</b>   | ~20–25%                      | Bakongo cosmogram, healing traditions, ironworking, agricultural knowledge | Ring shout ceremonies; Hoodoo/conjure practices; spiritual tradition continuity in NC             |
| <b>Bight of Benin (Yoruba, Fon, Ewe)</b>  | ~10–15%                      | Sophisticated theological systems, divination, botanical medicine          | Herbal medical knowledge; spiritual naming traditions; resistance networks                        |
| <b>Bight of Biafra (Igbo, Ibibio)</b>     | ~10–15%                      | Yam cultivation, democratic governance traditions, storytelling            | Community governance in enslaved quarters; oral narrative traditions                              |
| <b>Sierra Leone / Windward Coast</b>      | ~5–10%                       | Rice cultivation (especially inland flooding techniques), fishing          | Reinforces Senegambian rice knowledge in Cape Fear Low Country                                    |

Note: Percentages are scholarly estimates based on Slave Voyages Database regional data for Carolina colonies cross-referenced with NC estate records and runaway advertisements. Exact figures are not available — the trade did not record African regional origins as a matter of routine documentation.

## Cumberland County — Enslaved Population Data

The growth of the enslaved population in Cumberland County tracks directly with the expansion of plantation agriculture along the Cape Fear corridor. The numbers below are drawn from colonial and federal census records, county tax lists, and estate inventories held at the NC State Archives.

| YEAR                       | CUMBERLAND CO. ENSLAVED POPULATION | % OF TOTAL CO. POPULATION | CONTEXT                                                                          |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1755 (est.)                | ~400–600                           | ~25–30%                   | Cross Creek established as trading hub; plantation system taking hold            |
| 1790 (1st U.S. Census)     | ~1,590                             | ~28%                      | Post-Revolution; domestic slave trade active; Fayetteville chartered 1783        |
| 1800                       | ~2,200                             | ~29%                      | Cotton gin (1793) accelerates demand; Cape Fear plantations expanding            |
| 1820                       | ~3,800                             | ~31%                      | Post-1808 importation ban; domestic trade moves enslaved people from Upper South |
| 1840                       | ~5,200                             | ~33%                      | Naval stores (tar, pitch, turpentine) industry; timber economy expanding         |
| 1860 (last pre-war census) | ~6,800                             | ~35%                      | Peak antebellum enslaved population; Civil War imminent                          |

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau historical census data; NC State Archives Cumberland County tax lists; Fayetteville Observer historical records; Cecelski, David S. *The Waterman's Song* (UNC Press, 2001).

*Every person counted in that table survived the Middle Passage, or was born to someone who did. The census recorded their number. It did not record their names, their origins, their skills, or what they carried across the Atlantic. Those things survived anyway.*

## The Market House — Where the Middle Passage Ended in Fayetteville

The Market House standing at the center of Fayetteville's downtown today was built in 1838 on the site of the earlier State House, which burned in the great Fayetteville fire of 1831. It served multiple civic functions: market stalls occupied the open ground floor, the town hall met in the upper story, and the building anchored Fayetteville's commercial life.

It was also a documented site of enslaved person sales. The practice of selling enslaved people at or near the Market House was consistent with the use of market spaces across the antebellum South as sites of human commerce. Enslaved people who had arrived through the Wilmington port and moved up the Cape Fear River entered the Cumberland County market system through sites like this one.

The Market House's dual identity — civic landmark and site of enslavement — is at the center of an ongoing public debate in Fayetteville that remains unresolved as of 2026. In 2020, the Fayetteville City Council voted to recognize the building's history of enslaved person sales. Calls for the building's removal, reinterpretation, or designation as a site of conscience continue. This is an active Living Record entry.

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1783</b>         | Cross Creek and Campbellton merge — chartered as Fayetteville. Market commerce, including enslaved person sales, established at town center.                     |
| <b>1831</b>         | Great Fayetteville Fire destroys the original State House and surrounding structures.                                                                            |
| <b>1838</b>         | Current Market House constructed. Open ground-floor market stalls. Enslaved person sales documented at this site through Civil War.                              |
| <b>1865</b>         | Sherman's Army marches through Fayetteville. Arsenal destroyed. Enslaved people in Cumberland County enter freedom.                                              |
| <b>1867</b>         | Howard School (later Fayetteville State University) founded two blocks from the Market House by formerly enslaved community members.                             |
| <b>2020</b>         | Fayetteville City Council votes to acknowledge the Market House's history as a site of enslaved person sales. Designation debate begins.                         |
| <b>2020–Present</b> | Market House designation remains unresolved. Living Record status. Community debate ongoing over historical interpretation and physical future of the structure. |

## The Land Before the Plantations — Tuscarora Dispossession & the Cape Fear Region

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The Middle Passage did not deliver enslaved Africans to empty land. The Cape Fear region had been home to sovereign Indigenous nations for thousands of years before European colonization. Understanding the Middle Passage's NC chapter requires understanding what was destroyed to make room for the plantation system that required it.

### **Tuscarora Nation**

Sovereign people of eastern NC and Virginia. Sophisticated agricultural, diplomatic, and governance systems. The Tuscarora War (1711–1715) — triggered by European land encroachment and the kidnapping of Tuscarora people for sale as slaves in South Carolina — ended in Tuscarora defeat. Mass enslavement followed, with surviving Tuscarora people sold into the Atlantic slave trade or forced to migrate north to join the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Their dispossession opened the Cape Fear corridor to colonial plantation agriculture — and to the enslaved African labor that agriculture required.

### **Cape Fear, Waccamaw & Coharie Peoples**

Indigenous peoples of the immediate Cumberland County region. First contact with European settlers in the 1660s–1680s. Disease, warfare, and dispossession reduced populations catastrophically. By the time Cross Creek was established as a trading hub in the mid-1700s, Indigenous presence in the immediate area had been largely eliminated by colonial expansion.

### **Lumbee Tribe of NC**

The Lumbee people of the Lumber River region — approximately 40 miles southeast of Fayetteville — represent the largest Indigenous nation east of the Mississippi without federal recognition. Their history of racial survival under Jim Crow — resisting classification as either Black or white — is a distinct Two Americas story running parallel to the Middle Passage narrative in the same geographic region.

## Archives, Records & Research Resources — NC

The documentary record of the Middle Passage's NC chapter is fragmentary — by design. Colonial and antebellum law did not require detailed documentation of enslaved people's African origins, languages, or family connections. What survives does so in estate inventories, deed books, runaway advertisements, church records, and the ledgers of slave traders. The following archives hold the primary NC record.

|                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>NC State Archives<br/>(Raleigh, NC)</b>                       | Cumberland County Deed Books · Estate Inventories · County Court Minutes · Colonial Records of NC (40 volumes) · Slave Records collection · Tax lists with enslaved person enumeration        | <a href="http://archives.ncdcr.gov">archives.ncdcr.gov</a>             |
| <b>UNC Wilson Library<br/>Southern Historical<br/>Collection</b> | Plantation records · Slaveholder correspondence · Runaway slave advertisements · Cape Fear region family papers                                                                               | <a href="http://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu">finding-aids.lib.unc.edu</a> |
| <b>Cape Fear Museum<br/>(Wilmington, NC)</b>                     | Regional history collections · Wilmington port records · Lower Cape Fear slave trade documentation                                                                                            | <a href="http://capefearmuseum.com">capefearmuseum.com</a>             |
| <b>FSU Chesnutt Library<br/>(Fayetteville, NC)</b>               | African American history of Cumberland County · Reconstruction-era records · Freedmen's Bureau documents for NC                                                                               | <a href="http://library.uncfsu.edu">library.uncfsu.edu</a>             |
| <b>Slave Voyages<br/>Database (Emory<br/>University)</b>         | Searchable database of ~36,000 transatlantic slave trade voyages · Can filter by destination port (search: Wilmington, NC; Charleston, SC) · African origin region data by destination colony | <a href="http://slavevoyages.org">slavevoyages.org</a>                 |
| <b>Freedmen's Bureau<br/>Online (National<br/>Archives)</b>      | Post-Civil War records of formerly enslaved people in NC · Labor contracts · Marriage records · Ration records for Cumberland County                                                          | <a href="http://freedmensbureau.com">freedmensbureau.com</a>           |

## SECTION 8

# Primary & Scholarly Sources

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### PRIMARY SOURCES

- "Colonial Records of North Carolina." 40 volumes. NC State Archives, Raleigh. Includes legislative records, governor correspondence, and slave trade documentation.
- "Cumberland County Deed Books, 1754–1865." NC State Archives, Raleigh. Contains transactions recording the sale of enslaved people in Cumberland County.
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### NC-SPECIFIC SCHOLARLY SOURCES

- Cecelski, David S. *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001.
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- Watson, Alan D. *Wilmington, North Carolina, to 1861*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003.

### BROADER MIDDLE PASSAGE SOURCES

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- Gomez, Michael A. *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998.