

12.5 Million

The Scale of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and What the Number Conceals (1500–1900)

CONTENT NOTE: This entry documents the scale of mass enslavement, forced transport, and systematic dehumanization across four centuries.

Track	Persecution
Era	ERA II — Colonial America & the Founding Contradiction (1600–1776)
Lens	Secular & Political
Content Warning	Yes — mass enslavement, dehumanization, death
NC Connection	Yes — Senegambian enslaved people in NC; Slave Voyages database connection
Research Status	Needs citation review
Paired Entry	Entry 9B — They Were Not Numbers

12.5 million people were forcibly transported from Africa across the Atlantic between approximately 1500 and 1900. Of these, an estimated 1.8 million died during the crossing. The survivors were sold, worked, bred, bought, sold again, and in most cases worked until they died. The number 12.5 million is not a measure of victims. It is a measure of a crime against humanity prosecuted across four centuries by the governments, commercial institutions, and legal systems of every major European power and the United States. Each of the 12.5 million was a specific person with a specific name, origin, family, and history. The number conceals all of that. This entry is about what the number conceals.

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What 12.5 million means in historical context

The Slave Voyages database — developed by scholars at Emory University and now maintained as an open-access digital archive at slavevoyages.org — documents approximately 36,000 individual slave trading voyages and the names, origins, ages, and fates of hundreds of thousands of individual enslaved people where records survive. Of the estimated 12.5 million people embarked, approximately 10.7 million survived the crossing and were disembarked in the Americas. The largest receiving regions were Brazil (approximately 4.9 million), the British Caribbean (approximately 2.3 million), the Spanish Americas (approximately 1.3 million), and British North America / the United States (approximately 400,000). The relatively small number transported directly to North America reflects the domestic reproduction of the enslaved population — the only major slaveholding society in the Americas that did not require continuous importation to maintain its enslaved population.

The peak period of the trade was the 18th century, when approximately 6 million people were transported — nearly half the total. The trade continued after the British abolition in 1807 and the American prohibition in 1808, conducted illegally by Portuguese, Brazilian, Spanish, and American vessels through the 1860s. The last documented slave ship to arrive in the United States, the *Clotilda*, delivered 110 enslaved Africans to Alabama in 1860 — 52 years after the legal prohibition.

WHAT THE NUMBER CONCEALS

Names, skills, languages, and the deliberate erasure of identity

Behind the 12.5 million figure are approximately 12.5 million individual human beings, each with a name given by a mother in a specific place, a language, a set of skills, a family structure, and a history. The records of the slave trade were built to track cargo, not people. Ship manifests recorded age, sex, and price. Plantation inventories listed first names alongside livestock. The machinery of the trade required that the people moving through it be counted and not known. But the Slave Voyages database, through painstaking archival research, has recovered the African names of approximately 91,000 individuals — names that reveal specific ethnic and regional origins, naming traditions tied to day of birth, and family connections that the trade attempted to erase.

"Behind the number are 12.5 million individual human beings. The number was designed to make them invisible. The archive was designed to bring them back."

NC LOCAL LENS · CUMBERLAND COUNTY

Enslaved people in Cumberland County appear in colonial-era estate records and deed books by first name from the earliest settlement period. Names following African naming conventions — Cuffee, Quash, Mingo, Phoebe — are traceable through the African Names Database and Slave Voyages records to specific West African naming traditions. The Cumberland County Register of Deeds holds deed-of-sale records for enslaved people transacted in the Fayetteville area that constitute primary-source genealogical records for African American families researching their ancestry. The Slave Voyages database (slavevoyages.org) is a direct genealogical resource for Cumberland County descendants.

CITATIONS · CHICAGO STYLE

- 1 Eltis, David, and David Richardson, eds. *Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 2 *Slave Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. Emory University, 2008–present. <https://www.slavevoyages.org>

Primary Source · Digital archive — open access

- 3 Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 4 Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

PAIRED CONTRIBUTION ENTRY

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| 9B | They Were Not Numbers: Identity, Name, and Cultural Survival Across the Transatlantic Slave Trade |
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