

The Triangular Trade

How Three Continents Were Bound Into a System of Profit Built on African Lives (1600–1808)

CONTENT NOTE: This entry documents the systematic enslavement, transport, and forced labor of African people across three centuries.

Track	Persecution
Era	ERA I — Papal Authorization & Transatlantic Foundation (1452–1600)
Lens	Secular & Political
Content Warning	Yes — enslavement, mass death, forced labor
NC Connection	Yes — Cape Fear plantation economy; Senegambian labor knowledge
Research Status	Needs citation review
Paired Entry	Entry 6B — What They Carried

The triangular trade was not a metaphor. It was a system — a three-legged commercial circuit connecting Europe, Africa, and the Americas that ran for more than three centuries, generated the capital that financed the Industrial Revolution, and moved an estimated 12.5 million African people across the Atlantic under conditions deliberately designed to maximize cargo survival at the lowest possible cost. It was the largest forced migration in human history, and it was profitable.

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Three legs, one circuit of extraction

Leg One ran from European ports — Bristol, Liverpool, Nantes, Amsterdam, Lisbon — to the West African coast, carrying manufactured goods: textiles, firearms, iron bars, copper, rum, and cowrie shells. These goods were exchanged for enslaved African people, either purchased from African traders and rulers or seized directly through raiding. Leg Two — the Middle Passage — carried enslaved Africans across the Atlantic to the colonies of the Caribbean, Brazil, and North America, where they were sold. Leg Three carried colonial commodities — sugar, tobacco, cotton, rice, indigo, and rum, produced by enslaved labor — back to European ports for sale. Each leg was profitable. The system as a whole generated the capital accumulation that financed European industrial development.

The slave trade was not a side transaction of European commerce. Eric Williams demonstrated in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) that the profits of the slave trade and slave-produced commodities directly capitalized the British industrial revolution — the banks, the insurance companies (Lloyd's of London insured slave ships), the manufacturing firms, and the port infrastructure of Bristol and Liverpool were all built on the triangular trade's returns.

IMPACT ON AFRICA

Demographic destruction and political destabilization

The triangular trade removed an estimated 12.5 million people from Africa over approximately 350 years, with peak volume in the 18th century. Beyond the raw demographic loss, the trade destabilized West and Central African political structures by creating incentives for African rulers to wage war against neighboring peoples to capture enslaved people for sale. The gun-slave cycle — in which European firearms were exchanged for enslaved people, which were then used to capture more enslaved people, which funded more firearms — militarized West African political culture and redirected state resources toward raiding rather than production. The Dahomey Kingdom, the Ashanti Empire, and smaller coastal polities became major suppliers to the Atlantic trade, reorganizing their political economies around captive production.

"The slave trade was not the consequence of African backwardness. It was the cause of a significant portion of it." — Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, 1972

THE NORTH CAROLINA CONNECTION

Cape Fear plantation economy built on triangular trade infrastructure

The Cape Fear Valley plantation economy — the economic foundation of colonial Cumberland County and Fayetteville — was a direct product of the triangular trade. Enslaved Senegambian people brought to the Cape Fear region carried wet-rice cultivation and indigo processing expertise developed over centuries in West Africa. The rice and indigo they produced entered the same Atlantic commodity circuits that the triangular trade had created. The wealth generated by African knowledge and African labor compounded through the merchant infrastructure of Cross Creek and Campbellton into the economic base that made Fayetteville a regional commercial center.

Enslaved Senegambian people brought to the Cape Fear region brought wet-rice and indigo expertise that built the colonial plantation economy of Cumberland County. The triangular trade's commodity circuits connected Cape Fear agricultural production directly to Atlantic markets. The wealth extracted from enslaved African labor in Cumberland County was the downstream product of the same system the triangular trade established.

CITATIONS · CHICAGO STYLE

- 1 Williams, Eric. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 2 Eltis, David. *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 3 Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1972.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 4 Carney, Judith Ann. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

PAIRED CONTRIBUTION ENTRY

6B What They Carried: African Knowledge, Culture, and Identity Across the Atlantic

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