

Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage

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Greenwood Press (2007)

From the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, Europe's imperial powers transported between 9 and 15 million Africans to the Americas. This process, known as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, formed part of the larger process of European expansion during the same period. European imperialism and the slave labor that propelled it have left an indelible mark on western and indeed, world history.

The term Middle Passage constituted one leg of what has been called the "triangular trade," a phrase most associated with the British. This trade pattern consisted of three voyages: one from Europe (or later, the Americas) to Africa with manufactured goods and alcohol, the second from Africa to the Americas with slaves, and the third from the Americas to Europe, with bills of exchange and trade commodities. The Middle Passage refers to the second part of the journey, undertaken by slaves, captains, and crews, that brought slaves from the coast of Africa to the Americas.

Throughout the history of the African slave trade, participants and observers published memoirs and exposés recounting the details of the trans-Atlantic crossing. Yet the Middle Passage has been the subject of interest to the general population only since the late-eighteenth century abolitionist campaigns called attention to the horrors associated with the trade. Although interest in the Middle Passage waned in the mid-nineteenth century with abolition, in the last thirty years, scholars have produced a sizeable body of work on the subject. Their contributions to this field of inquiry are reflected in this volume.