

AMERICANS HISTORY BOOKS FORGOT

Negroes First Came Here with the Explorers

This is the first of 10 articles describing the history of Negroes in the United States and revealing the important role that the black man has played in our history.

By **BETTY DeBOLD**
Scripps-Howard Staff Writer

Contrary to what many Americans may believe, the first Negroes in the United States did not come here directly from Africa but were brought from Europe, where Spain and Portugal already were using them as slaves by the mid-15th century. The rationalization: serving whites would convert the blacks from heathenism to Christianity.

To "further" the cause of Christianity — and European profit — Negroes accompanied early explorers and conquistadores to the New World.

A member of Christopher Columbus' crew — one Pedro Alonso Nino — is thought to have been Negro. Negroes were also with Balboa when he discovered the Pacific Ocean; with Jesuit missionaries on their early expeditions; with Cabeza de Vaca in his exploration of the Southwest; and much later with the Lewis & Clark and Fremont explorations of the West. Their feet were certainly among the first to trek what would be called America.

They were also with Cortes in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru.

Soon the vast resources discovered in this New World had to be exploited — for Christianity and European profit. That called for an abundance of labor.

Indians proved inadequate and intractable.

The Move to Slavery

By the first half of the 17th Century, landless, penniless whites — indentured servants and prisoners — were brought over from Europe. There weren't enough of them in the first place; and the number was reduced as many ran away or made legal contention for their rights.

"Perpetual servitude" was the answer. Negroes were more durable and could be purchased outright for life.

By the 18th Century the African slave trade had come into full bloom.

Dominated by the English, slavers departed from ports thruout Europe and the New England colonies, "armed" for Africa with cotton, iron bars, beads, gunpowder, whisky, brandy and rum. (Rum was so popular special distilleries were set up to cope with slave trade demands.) About \$50 to \$60 worth of such merchandise bought a healthy male.

The territory chiefly "mined" was the 3000-mile stretch from the Senegal River to the tip of Angola.



The slave ships plying the "Middle Passage" from West Africa to the New World were crowded and disease-ridden.

Another misconception nourished by many is that Africa was totally primitive and barbaric before the white man dropped by to depopulate it. To the contrary, even the early 15th Century traders noted that West Africans had advanced political and social units; legal codes; "professors" of history (tribal traditions) and science. They were quite knowledgeable of the stars. Their arts — in wood, ivory, iron and leather — were superb.

However, there were slaves at the bottom of their own social order. And fierce tribal wars soon sprang up under the stimulus of the European buyers, as natives struggled desperately to avoid being captured and sold to the slavers. Entire tribes were decimated.

The path of their transportation from Africa to the New World was known as the "Middle Passage." The phrase has become

justly infamous. Slavers were divided into two self-explanatory categories: "tight packers" and "loose packers." Large ships took as many as 1100 at a time; an average load was about 500. Even the "loose packers" overloaded.

It would be inaccurate to say the slaves were packed into the ships' holds like sardines, for there was no room to lie down. Instead, they were usually forced to sit upright — like books on a shelf — for much of the four-to-six-week voyage.

Men were chained two by two, the right wrist and ankle of one to the left limbs of another. Many woke to find themselves chained to corpses, for death and disease — especially smallpox, malnutrition and dysentery ("flux") — were rampant in the hell-hole conditions. Bodies were quickly pitched overboard.

The stench was incredible, and there are

recorded instances of youths who drowned when the lurching of the ship tossed them into tubs of the slaves' refuse.

100 Per Cent Profit

Even accounting for an average of 10 to 25 per cent loss due to these deaths, a slaver could count on getting at least 100 per cent profit on his investment. This held true thru 1861, just before the bottom dropped out of the market, so to speak. One Briton based in Cuba estimated costs this way:

Vessels & Stores	\$25,000
500 Negroes at \$50 per	25,000
Loss of 10 per cent slaves at sea	2,500
"Blood Money" (bribes to officials) at \$120 per slave	54,000
Wages to Crew	30,000
Initial Outlay	136,000
12 months interest on capital invested at 10 per cent	13,650
Total cost of expedition	150,150
Sale of 450 remaining slaves at \$1200 per	540,000
PROFIT:	389,850

Note that nearly everything cost more than the initial purchase of the slaves.

This enormous wealth gained for slavers the economic and political power to repress legislation which might have eliminated the trade earlier than it did. Officially, slave trading was outlawed in 1808 in both Britain and America; but as a pirate trade, it only increased profit.

First in the Caribbean

There are no accurate figures on how many Negroes were taken out of Africa as slaves, but one estimate gauges 18 million to 24 million were shipped out in the three centuries before the trade was outlawed. After that, buyers had to rely on the illicit "black ivory market" and, more commonly, on the "property" reproducing itself at home.

The first of these slaves were used on Caribbean tobacco, sugar and rice plantations. By the end of the 17th Century, tho, the economic emphasis shifted to the New World. Spain and Portugal were colonizing North and South America, and the British had established colonies from New England to the Carolinas.

In 1619, a Dutch slaver landed the first Negro slaves — only 20 or so — in Virginia. It was there and in the southern colonies that the elaborate system of "plantation slavery" which is most familiar to average readers evolved.

NEXT: Early colonial slavery.