



Transatlantic Migration Patterns: The Voluntary and Involuntary Movement of People

By Burleigh Hendrickson

The first movements of large groups of people across the Atlantic Ocean had numerous causes. Migrants were escaping religious and political persecution. Imperialistic nations were competing economically. Forced migration drove convicts and enslaved laborers. Whatever the reason, migration from Africa and Eurasia to the New World increased significantly beginning in the late fifteenth century.



Migration Patterns and Early Global Economies

In the late 1400s, people began to migrate from Afro-Eurasia to the Americas. This is sometimes referred to as the transatlantic migration. Some groups chose to migrate. But many other groups were forced. The number of early transatlantic migrants was very small in comparison to migration in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But this new phenomenon changed the course of history. What factors explain the timing and direction of this new movement of people? And what caused them to travel such great distances?

Afro-Eurasian contact with the Americas was a direct result of imperial competition in Europe. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, states like Spain and Portugal built overseas empires with strong, centralized states. Europeans encountered indigenous people in the Caribbean, then North and South America. These European empires established trade ports and new networks of local consumers. They also brought religious beliefs, military technology, diseases, and often violence.

Competition between European empires drove rapid innovation and technological advancement. It also led to more encounters with new, local populations. These encounters were often violent. Native people had been isolated until this time. But now they faced empires that wanted their resources. The newcomers also brought new diseases. Smallpox wiped out millions of indigenous Americans. The loss of indigenous American population was a factor in the rise of the transatlantic migration. Three key events drove transatlantic migrations. The European Reformation, the decimation of the indigenous American population, and the development of the sugar plantation system all drove migration.

Voluntary Transatlantic Migration and the European Reformation

What makes people leave one place for another? Today, as in the past, it is often in search of work and opportunity. However, it can also be to escape ethnic or religious persecution. In other cases, people are forced into migration. This is the case for enslaved populations. But the vast majority of migrants prior to 1580 were Europeans traveling to the Americas of their own free will.

Early waves of voluntary migration to the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were driven by religious conflict in Europe. In particular, the Reformation movement in Europe drove the creation of new groups, known as Protestants. Protestant ideas spread in many parts of central and western Europe. These ideas divided communities, led to violent clashes, and displaced worshippers, some of whom fled to the Americas. For example, during a period of strict religious conformity in England in the 1630s and 1640s, 20,000 Protestants known as the Puritans fled for English colonies in the New World.

In addition to religious freedom, some Europeans chose to migrate to escape poverty. But voluntary migrants still only accounted for on average 1 in 5 migrants. Most migrants in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were captive West and Central Africans. They were forced to make the transatlantic journey, as we discuss later in this article. Voluntary migrants were always treated far better than captive Africans. But their journey to the Americas could also be very dangerous. Orphans and other poor Europeans might be sold into indentured servitude. This meant they had to work to “earn” their freedom. Others who could not find work in Europe might sell four years of labor and lodging in exchange for the cost of travel. If a migrant was lucky enough to survive the voyage, he or she had a 1 in 4 chance of dying in his first year due to disease. New surroundings meant new germs! By the late 1700s, indentured servants made up fewer and fewer of voluntary migrants.

Forced Transatlantic Migration and the Role of the Plantation System

The slave trade was gradually abolished beginning in the early 1800s. From 1580 until that time, enslaved Africans far outnumbered European migrants. Forced migration peaked from 1760 to 1820. During that time, almost 5 million

enslaved Africans were forced to make the dangerous journey!¹ This journey was also known as the “Middle Passage.” British and Portuguese slave traders brought them to the coastal regions of the Americas and to the Caribbean. Most captive Africans were enslaved in order to farm sugar cane. They were also forced to farm crops such as coffee, cotton, tobacco, and rice.

“I do not know if coffee and sugar are essential to the happiness of Europe, but I know well that these two products have accounted for the unhappiness of two great regions of the world: America has been depopulated to have land on which to plant them; Africa has been depopulated so as to have the people to cultivate them.”

—J.H. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1773)

The Portuguese established early sugar colonies on the coast of Brazil. The Spanish did the same in Cuba. The British built wealthy plantations on islands like Jamaica and Antigua. This led the French to establish the most profitable of them all in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti). Cutting sugar cane was physically difficult. Much of the indigenous American people had been wiped out by disease or displaced. Plantation owners looking for workers turned to enslaved African men. European convicts and prisoners of war could also avoid death sentences by migrating. Women and children were more likely to be sent to North America as domestic servants or for less intense crop production like tobacco. Yet even in these instances, they were still outnumbered by men 2.5 to 1.

Whether they landed in the West Indies or in mainland American colonies, West and Central Africans were forced to form new communities. Their only free time to socialize was in the evening or on Sundays. They might journey as far as 4-5 miles by foot to meet up with Africans who spoke their language. Eventually, Creole (mixed) communities emerged. Second-generation enslaved Africans found ways to better communicate. To do this, they combined African and European cultures and languages. But fears of rebellion led slave-owners to restrict the movement of enslaved Africans. It was often forbidden for large groups to gather. The male-heavy ratios and restrictions on immigrants also made it challenging to have families. Yet, despite these challenges, racial mixing did occur. So enslaved women were often charged with child-rearing in addition to their work duties.



Illustration from the late eighteenth century by William Blake, “Europe Supported By Africa and America,” depicting enslaved populations supporting Europe. By William Blake, public domain.

¹ Note: In total, over 12 million enslaved Africans set sail from Africa to the Americas from the early sixteenth century through the nineteenth century. Ten million survived the horrific journey across the Middle Passage. Statistics compiled from Eltis, David, et al. *Slave Voyages*. Emory University, 2019, version 2.2.10, www.slavevoyages.org.

Dangerous ocean routes and brutal working conditions led to high mortality (death) rates among enslaved Africans. This, in turn, led to even greater demand for enslaved laborers. William Blake's illustration above shows the networks between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The Americas supplied the fertile land for profitable commodities (products) like sugar and coffee. Africa provided the enslaved labor to cultivate the crops. Europe made money from the production, distribution, and use of these products.



Illustration of enslaved African laborers cutting sugar cane in British Antigua, 1823. By William Clark, public domain.

By the 1800s, transatlantic migration had greatly reduced the price of sugar. European artisans and factory workers could now afford to put sugar in their coffee and tea. This was a ritual that had previously been reserved for the wealthy. Africa and America provided the labor and land for the sugar that fueled Europe's working classes. The image above shows African and American contributions to the new European industrial economy and consumer habits. The nineteenth century saw the creation in Europe of new communities of industrial workers. But the slave trade severed communities in West and Central Africa. And new multi-cultural communities emerged in the New World.

The Abolition of the Slave Trade and New Patterns of Voluntary Migration

The abolition of the slave trade significantly changed transatlantic migration. Nations began to outlaw or strictly limit the slave trade in the early 1800s. Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807. Other nations soon followed. Staple crop and industrial activities took off in the mid-1800s. Plantation owners and industrialists searching for laborers turned to voluntary workers. Increasingly they found these workers among European and Asian migrants.

Forced migration far outweighed voluntary migration from 1600 to 1800. Of those who were forced into migration (enslaved Africans, as well as European convicts and prisoners of war), most were men. Most were sent to tropical regions to farm sugar cane. The slave trade was gradually abolished. Over the course of the nineteenth century, voluntary migrants from Europe and Asia came to outnumber forced African migrants. Transatlantic migrants traveled across the ocean for different reasons. Many were enslaved and forced to migrate for labor. Some chose to migrate to escape religious persecution or find economic opportunity. Whether they were forced to migrate or migrated by choice, they faced harsh conditions and discrimination in the New World.

Sources

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Image credits

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