



# Facing Slavery

## 8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 7, you read about how the British colonies in North America were similar and different. One difference was that southern colonies, such as Georgia and Virginia, depended on the labor of **enslaved Africans**. In this chapter, you will learn about slavery from the point of view of West Africans.

Enslaved Africans responded to many **dilemmas**. A dilemma arises when you are forced to make a decision even though you do not like any of the choices. For hundreds of years, the slave trade forced West Africans to face dilemmas that changed their lives forever.

Beginning in the late 1400s, kingdoms and villages in West Africa had to decide whether to trade enslaved people for European guns and other goods. You will read about how difficult this decision was. Once they were enslaved, Africans had to find a way to survive in gruesome ships that took them across the Atlantic Ocean. This voyage was known as the **Middle Passage**. Finally, when Africans arrived in North America, they had to respond to their new life as slaves.

Look at the illustration below. As you learn about each dilemma that Africans faced during the slave trade, think about how each stage along the voyage took enslaved people farther and farther from their homes.

### Three Dilemmas Faced by Enslaved Africans



## 8.2 West Africa in the 1500s

The region known as West Africa lies on the continent of Africa, just above the equator. To the north is the Sahara Desert. To the west and the south is the Atlantic Ocean. Most of West Africa is covered by grassland or rain forest.

In the 1500s, people of many cultures lived in West Africa. In many ways the West Africans were alike. Most people farmed. Some were also miners, craftspeople, or traders. Caravans of camels carried gold and ivory from West Africa to countries north of the Sahara Desert. In return, West Africans received salt, cloth, and other goods.

Throughout West Africa, society was based on the family. Parents, grandparents, and cousins all lived in the same village. They owned the land together and shared their crops. They also worshipped the spirits of their ancestors, singing chants and dancing to ask the spirits to protect them. Another common tradition was storytelling. Fables, legends, and myths

helped people learn about their culture and history.

West Africans were also different in many ways. Some lived in small villages, while others lived in large cities, such as Timbuktu. Some villages and cities were part of big empires. The people of West Africa spoke many languages. Often people from different villages could not understand one another.

Most West Africans in the 1500s lived in freedom. But that was about to change as more and more slave traders from Europe arrived during that century.



Here is an illustration showing daily life in a West African village. A couple cook over a fire while other people relax or do other tasks.

### 8.3 Dilemma: The European Slave Trade in West Africa

When the European traders arrived, they saw that some people in West Africa were not as free as others. These people were servants or workers. Some of them had been captured during wars. Some had been found guilty of crimes. Some were even sold as slaves by other West Africans to Arab traders.

The Europeans called all these people “slaves.” But their lives were very different from the lives that slaves would have in North America. Many of them became part of the larger family in the village. They did not have all the rights that other people in the village had, but they could own land and farm. They could become skilled workers and earn money. Most of them could gain their freedom one day through work or marriage.

The European traders introduced a new kind of slavery. Europeans had started huge sugar and tobacco **plantations** in the **Americas**. They needed large numbers of workers on these plantations, and one way to get them was to have slaves. So traders came to West Africa offering cloth, rum, tobacco, and other goods in exchange for slaves. Many Africans became wealthy by trading slaves for goods like these.

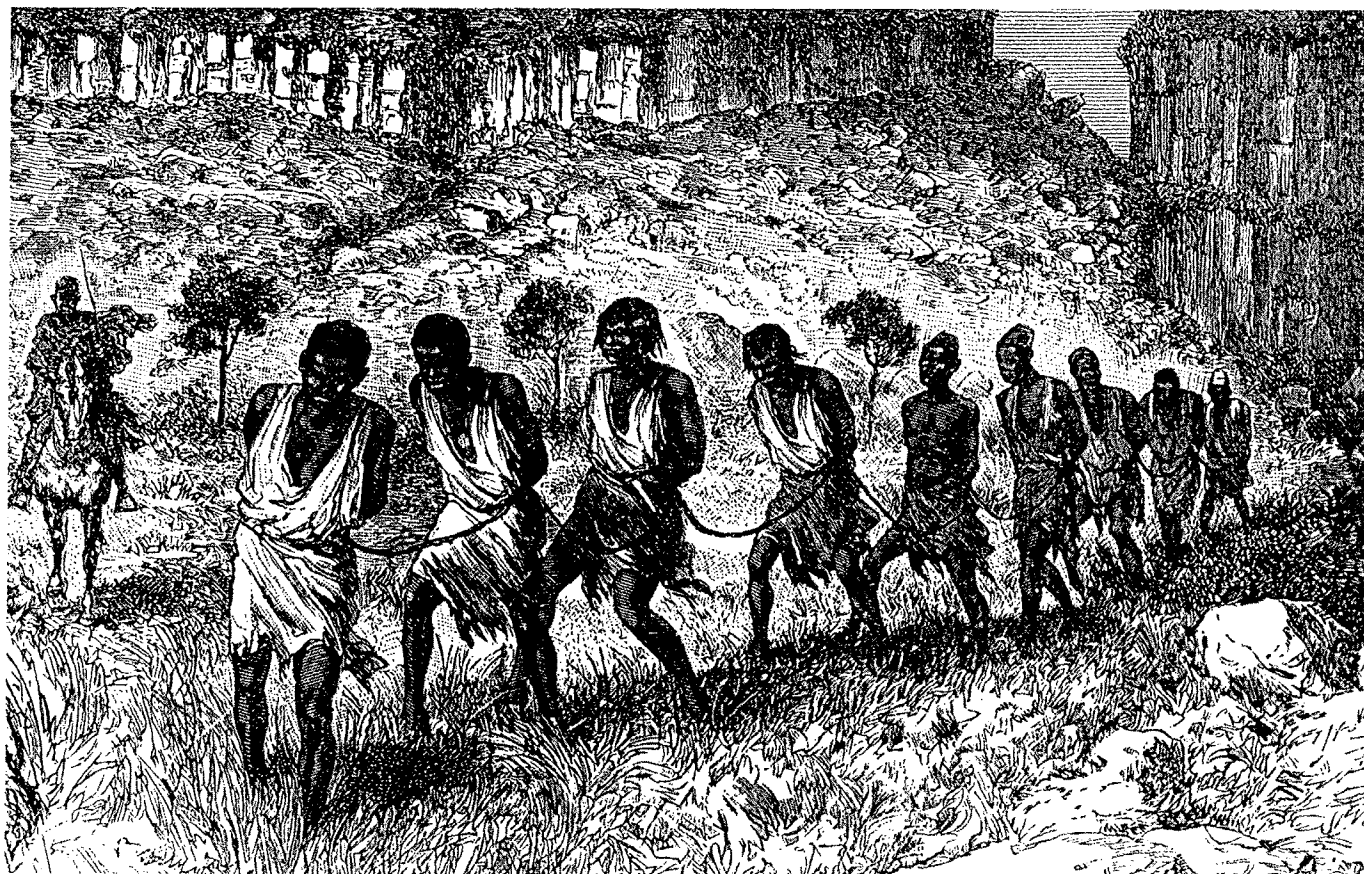
The Europeans also offered to trade guns for slaves. This kind of trade changed life in West Africa. A group that traded slaves for guns could begin to threaten its neighbors. Then the neighbors wanted their own guns, so they traded slaves for guns, too. Soon groups all over West Africa were exchanging slaves for guns.



Some West Africans, like those standing in the canoe, captured slaves. Then Europeans traded cloth, rum, guns, and other goods for the slaves.

**plantation:** a usually large area of privately owned land where crops were grown with the labor of workers or slaves who lived on the land

**Americas:** the continents of North and South America (connected by Central America), along with nearby islands, like those in the Caribbean Sea



A group of captured West Africans are marched away from their village.

## 8.4 The European Slave Trade in West Africa: What Happened?

West Africans responded to the demand for slaves in different ways.

A few West Africans refused to take part in the slave trade. But it was hard to resist the Europeans. One West African king said that he would not even let slaves be marched through his country. The Europeans tried to bribe him, but he still refused. Then the Europeans got another group of West Africans to go to war against the king. Many of his people were captured and sold as slaves.

Other West Africans tried to find slaves outside their own community. For example, the king of the Congo made war against his neighbors and sold the people he captured to the slave traders. More often, a group from one West African village raided another village. Armed with guns, the raiders captured men, women, and children. Sometimes children were kidnapped while the adults were out farming.

Some West African groups did not raid other villages. Instead, they traded people who were already slaves, such as prisoners they had captured during wars. These groups did not want to be part of the slave trade, but they had little choice. Their neighbors who did trade slaves were becoming richer and more powerful, and they might try to capture them and sell them as slaves.



## 8.5 Dilemma: The Middle Passage

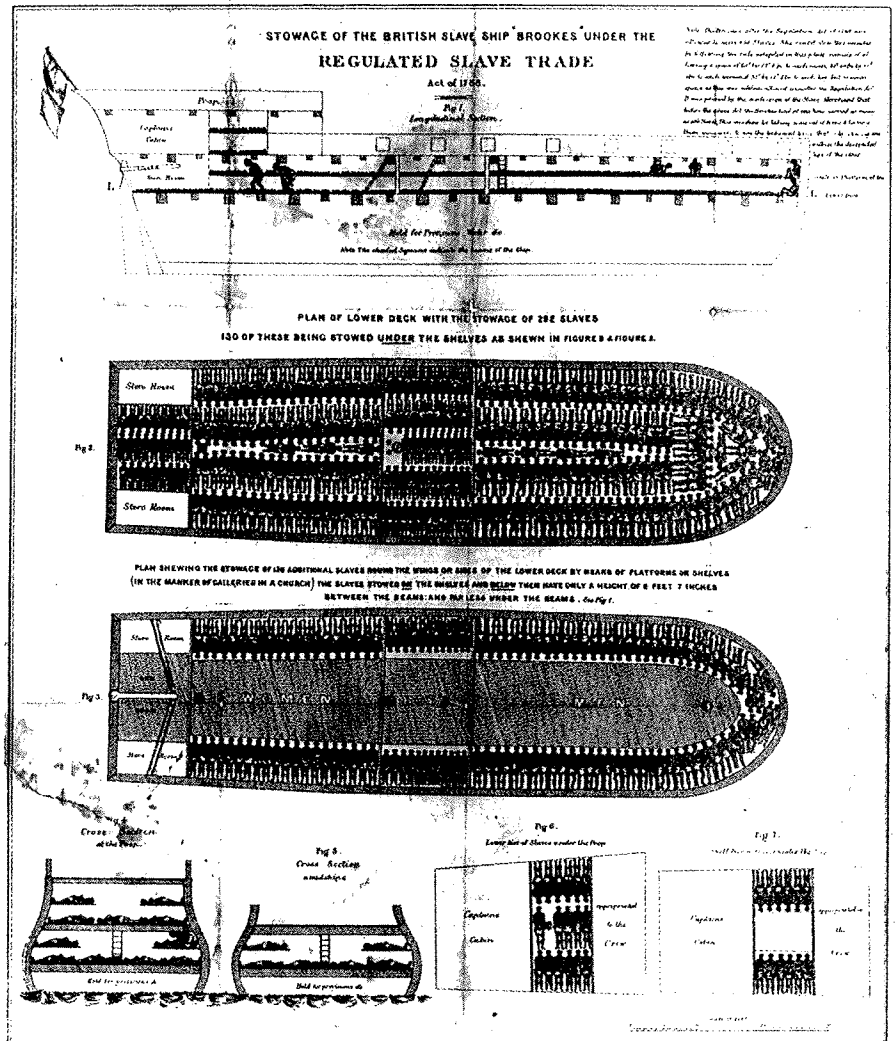
Millions of West Africans were taken into slavery. These enslaved Africans faced a long and terrible journey. First they were put in chains and marched hundreds of miles to the coast. Many died along the way. Others suffered injuries and died after reaching the coast. The survivors were marked with hot branding irons and loaded on slave ships for the voyage to America.

Europeans called this voyage the *Middle Passage* because it was the second stage of slave trade. The first stage was the capture and movement of slaves to the African coast. The third stage was the movement of slaves from American ports to the plantations. The Middle Passage took from 5 to 12 weeks, and sometimes longer.

For the slaves, the trip was a nightmare. They were allowed little exercise. Pairs of men were chained together at the ankle and wrist. There was too little space between the ship's decks to sit up or to stand. Often men, women, and children were packed so closely together that they could barely move. Many were covered with sores from lying on the rough floorboards.

The smell and the heat inside the ships were unbearable, and the ships were crawling with lice, fleas, and rats. So many people got sick that the decks were covered with blood and mucus (liquid from the noses of sick people). Sharks followed the ships, feeding on the dead who were thrown overboard.

No one knows how many West Africans made the Middle Passage, but the number was probably at least 10 to 15 million. Between 10 and 20 percent of them died during the voyage. Many others wished that they could die rather than suffer the horror of the voyage and the unknown life ahead.



This diagram shows the inhumane, crowded conditions on slave ships.

## 8.6 The Middle Passage: What Happened?

Many of the Africans on the slave ships had never seen white skin before. Some thought that the white men would boil and eat them. None of them knew where they were going or what would happen to them. They reacted in different ways to their terrifying situation.

Some slaves tried to kill themselves by refusing to eat or by jumping off the ship. But losing slaves meant losing

money, so the ships' captains tried to keep them alive. They whipped slaves who refused to eat and forced their jaws open or burned their lips with hot coals. When slaves jumped overboard, the ship's crew went after them in rowboats. Those who were caught were brought back and whipped.

Some slaves tried to revolt, attacking the crew with knives or pieces of iron and wood they tore off the ship. But the white men had guns, and sometimes other slave ships came to help. Once in a while the slaves did win. A slave named Joseph Cinque led a revolt on the ship *Amistad* in 1839. The slaves killed the captain and took over the ship. But most slaves



Enslaved Africans sometimes rebelled on slave ships. Here, crew members are stopping a rebellion.

who rebelled were forced to give up.

Many slaves tried to save their energy and just survive the journey. Some were too sick to resist. Others chose not to. One slave told how he found out that he was going to the Americas to work. He wrote that he felt relieved, and thought that his situation was not so terrible if he would only be forced to work. But for many West Africans, life in the Americas was even worse than the Middle Passage.



## 8.7 Dilemma: Arrival in America

When a slave ship arrived in the American colonies, the West Africans were sold to white plantation owners. Sometimes slaves were sold at “scrambles,” where the price was the same for each slave. All the slaves were herded into a large yard. When the gate was opened, buyers rushed in and grabbed the slaves they wanted.

In other cases, slaves were sold at **slave auctions**. The slaves stood on a stand called an *auction block* while buyers bid against each other. One by one the slaves were sold. Parents were sold separately from children, husbands from wives, and brothers from sisters. Often they never saw each other again.

The first year on the plantation was called the “breaking in” or “seasoning” period. The slaves were given new names and were shouted at by an **overseer** in a language they didn’t understand. The overseer gave them tools that they had never seen before. When the slaves did not understand what they were supposed to do, or when they resisted, they were whipped, burned, or even killed.

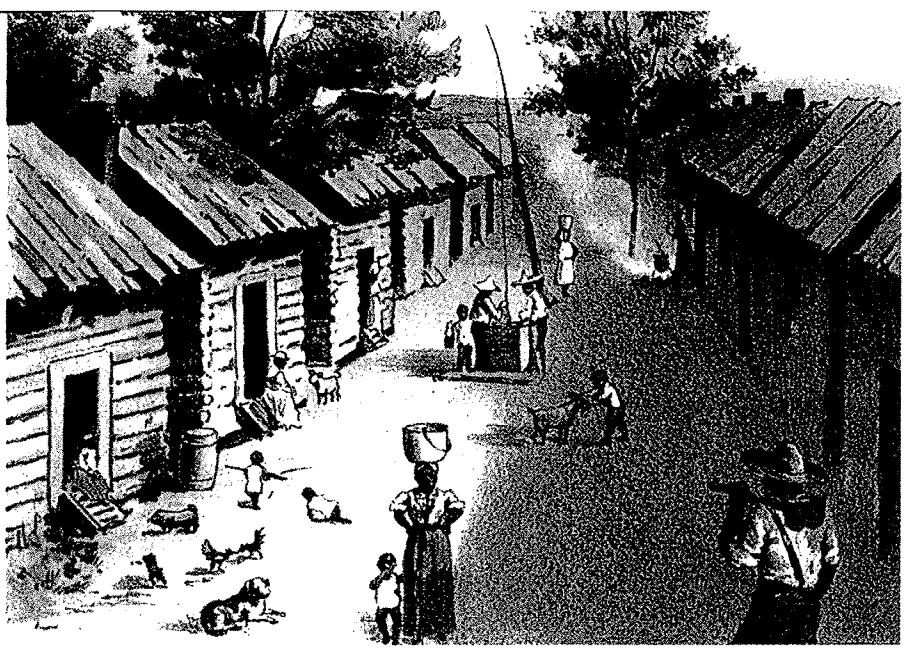
Most slaves worked in the fields. They often worked 16 hours a day planting and picking crops. Sometimes they had to walk for an hour just to get to the fields. There was a short meal break at noon and another in the evening. Then the slaves walked back to their cabins. Often eight or more people lived in one small cabin with a dirt floor. Sometimes all they had for a bed was a bundle of straw with some rags for a blanket.

Slaves worked long hours in the field planting and picking crops. Here, slaves work in a cotton field. Notice the overseer on the horse at left.

**slave auction:** A sale in which slaves were sold to buyers who bid (offered prices) for them. Usually a slave was sold to the person making the highest bid.

**overseer:** A person who was put in charge of the work of slaves. The overseer had great power over the slaves and could punish them for disobeying him.

Most slaves lived in cabins like these. Often seven or eight slaves lived in a single small cabin.



## 8.8 Arrival in America: What Happened?

Slaves reacted to their new life on the plantation in a number of ways.

Sometimes slaves tried to run away. Runaways usually hid in nearby woods and tried to make their way to freedom. Sometimes they banded together. In 1739, a group of about 80 runaway slaves in South Carolina seized guns from a warehouse and started on a march to freedom. But white owners with guns caught up with them, and, in the battle that followed, 44 of the runaways were killed. Most slaves who ran away were caught and punished. One man who hid from his owner was tied to a ladder by his wrists until he died.

Slaves resisted in other ways, too. One way was to “play dumb” and pretend not to understand what they were asked to do. Another way was to pretend to be too sick or hurt to work. Slaves sometimes broke tools or set buildings on fire. A few slaves hanged themselves. They believed that when they died they would return home to West Africa.

Many slaves worked hard and did what they were told. They hoped that their masters would make them house servants or skilled workers. In the “big house,” where the master’s family lived, slaves worked as cooks, gardeners, coachmen, and personal servants. They ate the leftovers from the master’s table and wore the family’s old clothing. Some slaves were taught to be carpenters or weavers. Sometimes they were even paid for extra work on Sundays and holidays. They hoped to earn enough money to buy their freedom, but very few slaves became free in this way.