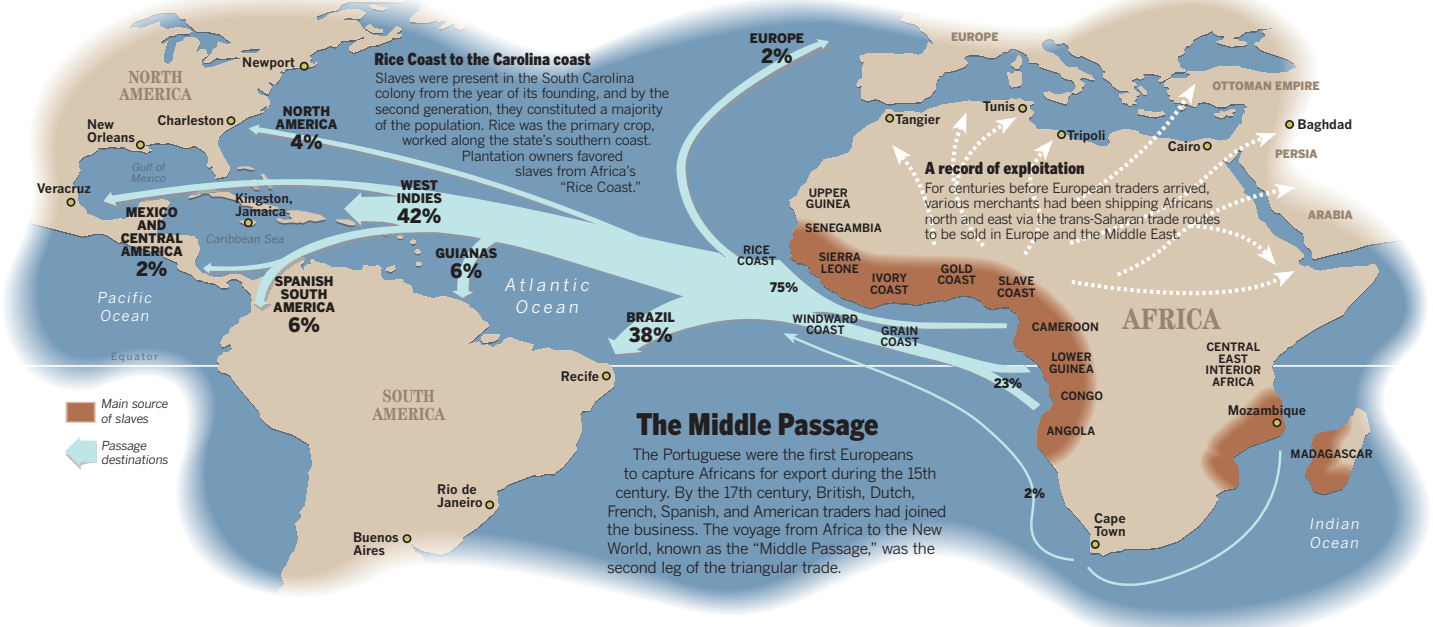


Dealing African slaves

In 1756, an African girl later named Priscilla was taken from Sierra Leone aboard the Newport sloop *Hare* and sold in Charleston, South Carolina. She became one of nearly a half million Africans brought to the North

American colonies — 40 percent of whom landed in Charleston. Trading in slaves and rum was a lucrative business, especially for the Rhode Island merchants who rose to dominate the market.



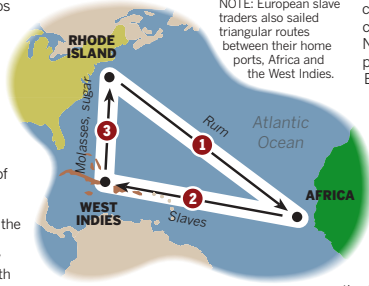
Partners in profit

By the colonial era, Rhode Island ships had established a market for local goods, including lumber, fish and livestock, with the West Indies in exchange for sugar and molasses. But it was an emerging market for slaves to support the plantation system in the Caribbean that lured Rhode Islanders into the so-called "triangular trade" with Africa and the West Indies.

By 1750, Newport and Bristol had overtaken Boston as the major slave market in the American colonies. In 1981, historian Jay Coughtry counted 934 ships that left Rhode Island ports for the west coast of Africa. In his *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807*, Coughtry said Rhode Island merchants controlled between 60% and 90% of the American trade in African slaves. More recently, historian David Eltis has argued that number is closer to 50 percent.

Here is the typical slave trade circuit of Rhode Island ships:

1. Rhode Island rum was bartered along the African coast for black slaves. loaded as many captives as was physically possible onto their ships. Disease and death were common.
2. The slaves were sold at auctions in the West Indies or in Charleston, South Carolina, and other southern colonies.
3. Traders returned home with sugar and molasses for local distillers to produce more rum for later shipments to Africa. Black slaves not sold



were often put to work aboard merchant ships. Others were brought back to Rhode Island to perform domestic services at merchants' mansions or sold to South County plantations.

Beginning in the 1760s, Britain passed a series of laws restricting the sugar and molasses trade. Rhode Island, which now relied on maritime trade for its prosperity, responded by smuggling such goods past British enforcement ships. In 1772, British customs ship the *Gaspee* ran aground while chasing a suspected smuggler ship up Narragansett Bay. A group of colonists, led by prominent Providence slave merchant John Brown and Capt. Abraham Whipple, burned the stranded British ship in one of the most violent acts of colonial resistance before the outbreak of the American Revolution.

In 1774, the General Assembly passed a law banning the importation of slaves, and 10 years later a gradual emancipation act was adopted. By 1787, Rhode Island had become the first state to prohibit the African slave trade. Rhode Island traders responded by moving their ships to Connecticut ports.

Abolitionists pressured Congress to adopt the Slave Trade Act of 1794, which prohibited ships destined to transport slaves to any foreign country from outfitting in American ports; amendments followed in 1800 and 1803. Rhode Island participation in illegal African commerce ended with passage of the federal Anti-Slave Trade Act of 1807, signed by President Thomas Jefferson.

The human toll

Most scholars say between 10 to 12 million slaves crossed the Atlantic Ocean from the 16th through the 19th centuries. They also say that at least 2 million captives died on the voyage from Africa. Most of the survivors "went to the sugar colonies, where they were literally worked to death," says Brown University professor Jim Campbell. About 5 percent — around 500,000 — went to the colonies in North America.

SOURCES: *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, by Paul E. Lovejoy, 2000; *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807*, by Jay Coughtry, 1981; *The Gullah: Rice, Slavery and One Sierra Leone-American Connection*, by Joseph A. Opala, 1987; Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers; University of Rhode Island's Office of Marine Programs; The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society; Rhode Island Economic Development Corp.

African slaves delivered, by century:

