BICENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY
ABOLITION OF
THE SLAVE TRADE ACT

GOVERNMENT OF BERMUDA
Ministry of Culture and Social Rehabilitation
Department of Community and Cultural Affairs

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25 March, 2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. For the Africans captured and forced through "The Door of No Return" – the gateway leading to the ships at slave houses such as the one on Gorée Island, Senegal – their transatlantic journey signified the beginning of a crushing bondage that would last for generations.

The trade was a forced journey for these millions of Africans, many of whom did not survive the crossing of the Middle Passage. Many things happened during the course of this journey to cripple the body and assault the mind. But the limbo dance, said to have originated in the cramped conditions of the slave ship, offers a metaphor of African strength – of how to bend without breaking.

William Wilberforce, a British abolitionist, is to be remembered for his significant role in leading the charge to abolish the trade of enslaved Africans in the British Parliament with support from Thomas Clarkson and Sir Charles Middleton.

But we must especially acknowledge the role of the Africans and people of African descent who fought and died to end this inhumane practise. This included the people of Haiti, the Maroons of Jamaica, and fighters in Brazil's Palmares: Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny, Cudjoe, Zumbi, and countless others.

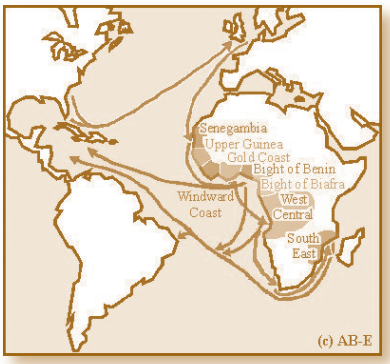
On this significant anniversary, the Department of Community and Cultural Affairs encourages you to read and learn about this very important part of our collective history.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

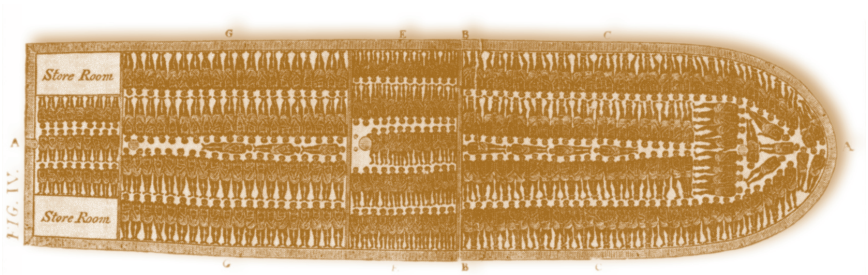
Christopher Columbus's infamous journey in 1492 began the process of the European colonization of the Americas. The Americas represented a new beginning for early European explorers – an opportunity to escape religious persecution, an opportunity for adventure, and an opportunity to improve their financial fortunes.

When these European explorers realized the fertile promise that American and Caribbean land offered, the process of colonization began. Part of this process involved the working of the land to cultivate tropical crops that were

in great demand in Europe. Labour was needed, and at first the Europeans looked to subjugate the indigenous people of the Americas on the basis of fictitious theories of their supposed "savagery". The Amerindians resisted and fought against enslavement, and by the mid 1500s, Europeans began to look elsewhere for labour for a few primary reasons. Firstly, Amerindians lacked immunity to European diseases and were decimated by illnesses such as smallpox. Secondly, the indigenous people were also killed by warfare with the European colonisers. Thirdly, in the face of the conquistadors' torture of Amerindians, a Spanish priest named Bartolomé de las Casas argued that the Spanish should convert the Amerindian. He suggested Africans should be brought to the Americas and used as slaves instead.



European enslavement of Africans began with the Portuguese in the mid 1400s. What we now refer to as the triangular trade began under the circumstances explained above and was regularised by the end of the sixteenth century[1]. The Spanish, Portuguese, British, French, Dutch, and others traded European goods with African kings and merchants in exchange



for human beings. These enslaved Africans were loaded into the cramped and filthy conditions of the slave ships. They travelled through the dreaded Middle Passage to the Americas. Some put the estimated mortality rate during this journey at about 12.5%, or 2.5 million people during the four centuries of the trade[2]. Others suggest the mortality rate was sometimes higher than 30%, depending on the route[3]. The enslaved Africans were then sold to European plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas. The goods, primarily sugar, rum, and tobacco, were in turn sold in Europe. These goods were the result of their forced labour.

Although numbers are very difficult to calculate, one estimate by Lovejoy suggests that more than 11 million Africans were sold as part of the transatlantic slave trade[4]. This is likely a conservative figure since some place that number as high as 28 million[5].

Unlike the African version of slavery, which was similar to indentured servitude, the European version that occurred in the Americas was brutal, dehumanising, and deadly. A number of people of African descent such as Bermuda's Mary Prince, America's Frederick Douglass, Nigeria's/Britain's Olaudah Equiano and others wrote, fought, and spoke against the horrors of the institution. The books, pamphlets and speeches made by these freedom-fighters supported efforts by white abolitionists.

The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was established in Britain in 1787. This group was supported by individuals such as Thomas Clarkson and religious groups such as the Quakers. Anglican MP William Wilberforce was chosen as the person to campaign against slavery in the British Parliament. This led to the signing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act on the 25th of March 1807. This made the traffic in human beings illegal under British law. The Slavery Abolition Act was not signed until the 23rd of August 1833 leading to the 1st of August 1834

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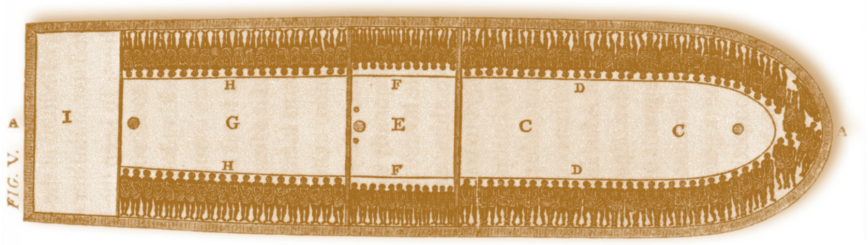


emancipation of enslaved people in the British Empire, including Bermuda. These slaves were indentured to their former owners until this final system was outlawed in 1838.

Commemorating The Anniversary

Listed below are just a few of the events occurring worldwide. For the full calendar of official events commemorating the bicentennial in the United Kingdom, please visit *http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/494/7F/slavery_calendar.pdf*

22 March – 13 May: British Museum installation based on the Brookes slave ship

24 March: Walk of Witness: The Archbishops of Canterbury and York

Branding Slaves

lead a march in apology for the Church of England's role in the slave trade: London

27 March: Set All Free: Commemoration service, Westminster Abbey

23 May: International Lecture on the Slave Trade: St. Kitts

23 May – 23 Sept: "The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament, and People" exhibition: British Parliament

3 June – 11 July: The Sankofa March: March of the Abolitionists linking London, Bristol and Liverpool

23 August: UNESCO International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition

23 August: Grand Freedom Concert and Knowledge Fair: St. Kitts

2-8 December Conference on 'Discourses of Resistance, Abolition and Black Liberation in Montego Bay and Accompong, St. Elizabeth': Jamaica

RESOURCES

To learn more about the trade of enslaved Africans, please explore the following resources:

Virtual Visit of Gorée Island, House of Slaves, Dakar, Senegal
http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/en/visit.shtml

The Dark: An Interactive Site Exploring the Stories of 18th Century Virtual Ghosts of the Slave Trade
http://www.thedark.net/

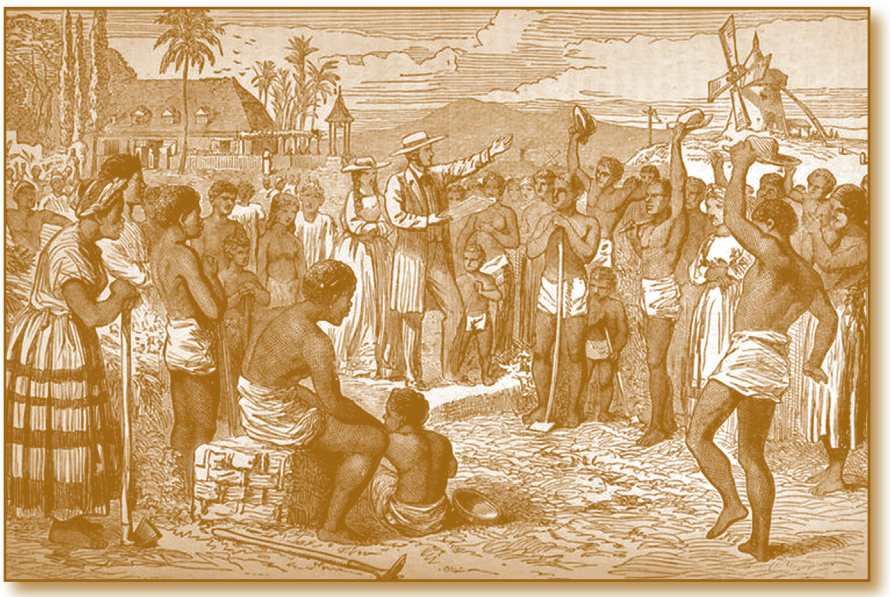
Slave Trade Bibliography: National Library of Jamaica
http://www.nlj.org.jm/abolition.htm

Anti-Slavery International: Today's Fight for Tomorrow's Freedom
http://www.antislavery.org/

Curtin, Philip D, ed. *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade.* **Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967.**

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano: Written by Himself.* **Bedford / St. Martin's, 2006.**

Slave Auction



Slaves receiving the news of their emancipation.

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James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution.* **Vintage Books, 1963.**

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Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince.* **Echo Library, 2006.**

Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.* **London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972.**

Shepard, Verene and Hilary McD. Beckles, Eds. *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World.* **Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000.**

Smith, James E. *Slavery in Bermuda.* **1st ed. New York: Vantage Press, 1976.**

Williams, Eric. *Capitalism and Slavery.* **North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.**

[1]"European Voyages of Exploration: The Sugar and Slave Trades". http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/eurvoya/Trade.html. Retrieved 14 February 2007.
[2]Meltzer, Milton. ***Slavery: A World History***. Da Capo Press, 1993.
[3]"European Voyages of Exploration: The Sugar and Slave Trades". http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/eurvoya/Trade.html. Retrieved 14 February 2007.
[4]Lovejoy, Paul E. ***Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa***. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
[5]Housden, Tom. "Focus on the Slave Trade". ***BBC News***. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1523100.stm. Retrieved 16 February 2007.

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