

Transatlantic Trade

The sad truth is that without complex business partnerships between African elites and European traders . . . the slave trade to the New World would have been impossible.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Ending the Slavery Blame-Game," *New York Times*, 2010

Learning Objective: Explain the causes and effects of transatlantic trade over time.

While the colonists had various reasons for settling in the Americas, such as an opportunity to practice their religious faith or an opportunity to search for wealth, the European nations that controlled the colonies looked at them to increase their power. A principal way to become stronger was through transatlantic trade.

Triangular Trade

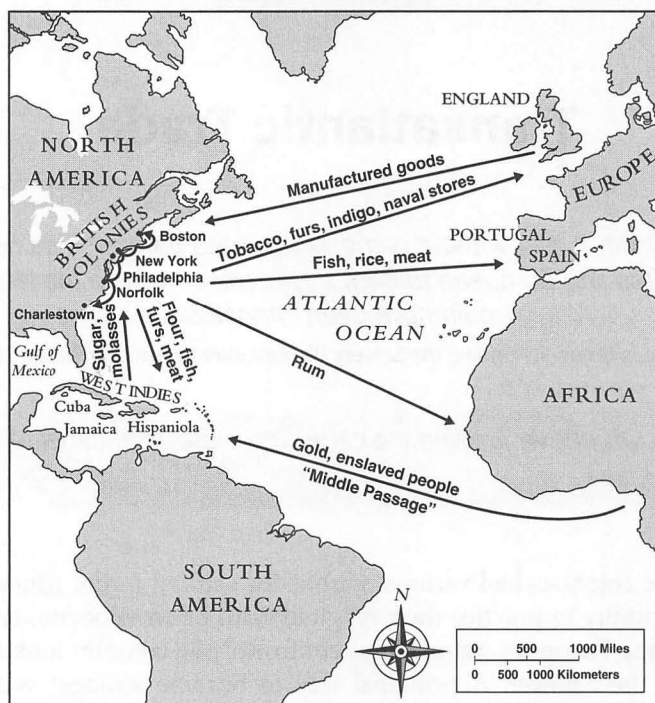
Merchant ships regularly followed a triangular, or three-part, route, that connected North America, Africa, and Europe in various ways. A typical voyage might begin in New England:

- A ship would leave a port in New England carrying rum across the Atlantic to West Africa. There the rum would be traded for hundreds of captive Africans.
- Next, the ship would set out on the horrendous Middle Passage. Those Africans who survived the voyage would be traded in the West Indies for sugarcane.
- Third, completing the last side of the triangle, the ship returned to a New England port where the sugar would be sold to be made into rum.

Variations on the route included stops in England or Spain. Every trade provided the slave-trading entrepreneur a substantial profit.

In the 17th century, English trade in enslaved Africans was first monopolized by the Royal African Company. However, by the late 17th century, the RAC could not supply as many enslaved Africans as demanded by colonial planters. Parliament ended the company's monopoly on the slave trade, and New England merchants entered the lucrative business.

COLONIAL TRIANGULAR TRADE ROUTES



Mercantilism and the Empire

Most European kingdoms in the 17th century believed in *mercantilism*, the economic theory that a country's wealth was determined by how much more it exported than it imported. Hence, governments tried to promote the sales of goods to other countries and to discourage purchases through tariffs. In a mercantilist system, colonies existed for one purpose only: to enrich the parent country. They were to provide raw materials to the parent country to promote that country's industries. Spanish and French rulers had followed mercantilist policies from the start of colonization. England began applying them after the end of the English Civil War in 1651.

Acts of Trade and Navigation England's government implemented a mercantilist policy with a series of **Navigation Acts** between 1650 and 1673, which established three rules for colonial trade:

- Trade to and from the colonies could be carried only by English or colonial-built ships, operated only by English or colonial crews.
- All goods imported into the colonies, except for some perishables, had to pass through ports in England.
- Specified or "enumerated" goods from the colonies could be exported to England only. Tobacco was the original "enumerated" good, but over the years, the list was greatly expanded.

Impact on the Colonies The Navigation Acts had mixed effects on the colonies. The acts aided New England shipbuilding, provided Chesapeake tobacco a monopoly in England, and provided English military forces to protect the colonies from any attacks by the French and Spanish. The triangular slave trade that connected the colonies and Africa was largely unaffected by increased regulations.

However, the acts also severely limited the development of the colonial economy. Since colonists could not manufacture their own goods, they had to pay high prices for manufactured goods from England. Since Chesapeake farmers could sell their crops only to England, they had to accept low prices for their crops. For example, in the 1660s, low tobacco prices that resulted from high production brought hard times to the Chesapeake colonies, Maryland and Virginia. When Virginia's House of Burgesses tried to raise tobacco prices, the merchants of London retaliated by raising their prices on goods exported to Virginia.

Besides trading with Great Britain, colonists also continued to trade with American Indians for furs, food, and other goods. This created ongoing contact between settlers and the indigenous population, leading to cultural exchanges, particularly along the western frontier of the colonies. For example, some Indians adopted Christianity and some colonial men married Indian women. While intermarriage was uncommon, the resulting couple almost always lived in the Indian rather than the settler community. The famous marriage between Pocahontas and John Rolfe in Virginia was a rare exception of an Indian-settler couple who lived in Jamestown.

Enforcement of the Acts While the theory of **mercantilism** called for strict enforcement of trade regulations, the practice was quite different. England was normally very lax in enforcing regulations, a policy known as **salutary neglect**. Several factors made enforcement difficult:

- The Atlantic Ocean separated the British government from the colonies, so exerting any authority from London over its distant possessions was challenging.
- England faced larger problems than regulating trade. Between 1642 and 1763, it was in constant turmoil. It went through the English Civil War, a revolution that replaced the monarch, and four wars with France.
- Britain's colonial agents were often corrupt. As a result, colonial merchants could evade regulations easily with well-placed bribes to those in charge of enforcing regulations.

In retrospect, regulation might not have been necessary. Because of their close economic and cultural ties, England and its colonies were natural trading partners. The colonies had abundant natural resources that they probably would have sold mostly to the English with or without regulation.

The Dominion of New England

Occasionally, though, the crown would attempt to overcome resistance to its trade laws. In 1684, it revoked the charter of Massachusetts Bay because it had been the center of smuggling activity. Whatever economic advantages this and other efforts brought England were offset by their harm to English-colonial relations. Colonists resented the regulatory laws imposed by the government in London. Especially in New England, colonists defied the acts by smuggling goods from other countries.

A New King A new king, James II, succeeded to the throne in 1685. He was determined to increase royal control over the colonies by combining them into larger administrative units and doing away with representative assemblies. In 1686, he combined New York, New Jersey, and the various New England colonies into the **Dominion of New England**. **Sir Edmund Andros** was sent from England to serve as governor of the dominion. The new governor made himself instantly unpopular by levying taxes, limiting town meetings, and revoking land titles.

Overthrow of the King James II did not remain in power for long as his attempts at asserting his powers led to an uprising. The **Glorious Revolution** of 1688 succeeded in deposing James and replacing him with William and Mary. James's fall from power brought the Dominion of New England to an end, and the colonies again operated under separate charters.

Ongoing Trade Tensions

After the Glorious Revolution, mercantilist policies remained in force, but the efforts to enforce them were never sustained enough to be effective. Until 1763, salutary neglect and colonial resistance to regulation continued. Regulation of trade, while not the only source of friction, would remain the fundamental problem between the colonists and England.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain what brought about transatlantic trade and what its long-term impact was.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Royal Authority (WOR)

triangular trade
mercantilism
Navigation Acts

Dominion of New England
Sir Edmund Andros
Glorious Revolution

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–2 refer to the following excerpt.

“Whereas the welfare and prosperity of Your Majesty’s sugar colonies in America are of the greatest consequence and importance to trade, navigation, and strength of this Kingdom. . . .

There shall be raised, levied, collected, and paid into and for the use of His Majesty, His Heirs, and Successors upon all rum or spirits of produce or manufacture of any colonies or plantations in America, not in the possession or under the dominion of His Majesty . . . which at any time or times within or during the continuance of this act shall be imported or brought into any of the colonies or plantations in America . . . the sum of 9d [9 pennies].”

Molasses Act of 1733

1. The intentions of the English government in passing the Molasses Act were most similar to the intentions motivating which of the following?
 - (A) Theocratic laws passed by the Puritan leaders of New England
 - (B) Ordinances passed by Virginia’s governors during the 17th century
 - (C) Regulations imposed by the Dominion of New England
 - (D) Actions by colonial customs officials during the period of salutary neglect
2. The immediate response to the action described in the excerpt was most likely an increase in
 - (A) sugar production in France’s colonies in the West Indies
 - (B) rum production in Spain’s colonies in the West Indies
 - (C) smuggling by New England merchants
 - (D) trade between England and its colonies

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

1. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
 - (a) Briefly describe ONE specific historical benefit the colonies received under British mercantilism in the period from 1607 to 1754.
 - (b) Briefly describe ONE specific historical disadvantage the colonies had under British mercantilism in the period from 1607 to 1754.
 - (c) Briefly describe ONE specific historical action the colonies took in response to British mercantilism in the period from 1607 to 1754.