

The Dutch in the Atlantic slave trade

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Slavery and slave trade are as old as recorded history. The transatlantic slave trade, the largest forced migration in history, started at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Until the mid-seventeenth century Spanish America and Portuguese Brazil were the major slave markets for European slave traders. The Dutch participation in the transatlantic slave trade started in the 1630s and ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century. During that period the Dutch shipped 600,000 Africans to the colonies in the New World, approximately 5 percent of all Africans who were transported by European slave traders to the Americas.

Initially the Dutch were against slavery which was considered to be a catholic heresy. This antislavery point of view can be easily explained. Dutch seafarers first ventured across the Atlantic without the intention of enslaving anyone. They were mainly interested in the trade in Atlantic products like salt, sugar, wax and dye wood. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, the Dutch established small plantation colonies on the coast of Guyana, the area between the Orinoco and Amazon rivers. Most of this early settlements were populated with Dutch colonists and a few indigenous slaves.

The Dutch embraced the slave trade and slavery on a large scale for the first time in Brazil. In 1630 Dutch forces of the West India Company (WIC) conquered Recife and from there extended Dutch control over the sugar-rich provinces of northeast Brazil. The WIC's directors determined that the colony could only make a profit if they succeeded in acquiring a sufficient supply of slaves to Brazil to work on the sugar plantations. After pacification of the conquered area and the resumption of the sugar production, the Dutch energetically entered the Atlantic slave trade. The WIC shipped around 25,500 slaves from the Gulf of Guinea and Angola to Brazil between 1636 and 1651. Most of the slaves were sold on the slave market in Recife to Portuguese planters and owners of sugar mills. After the fall of Dutch Brazil in 1654 the remaining Dutch and Jewish colonists departed, taking their slaves with them to the Caribbean, including areas not under Dutch control, where they helped spur the spread of the plantation system generally and sugar culture particularly.

The loss of Brazil started a new phase in the history of the Dutch slave trade and slavery. The WIC seized Curacao from the Spanish in 1634. Strategically located north of nowadays Venezuela with a superb deep-water port at Willemstad, the island would develop in little more than a decade into an important transit port for slaves destined for sale in the Spanish colonies. During the third quarter of the seventeenth century the Dutch carried more slaves to the Americas than did the Portuguese. The slave trade of the WIC through Curacao grew rapidly, making the Dutch one of the most important European slave traders in the Atlantic area in the second half of the seventeenth century. Between 1650 and 1700 an estimated 50,000 slaves passed through Curacao to Spain's colonies on the mainland. After the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713), the English became the most important slave suppliers for the Spanish colonists, and, as a consequence, Curacao's stature in the American slave market plummeted. From the 1680s, however, the Dutch plantation colonies on the coast of Guyana became the major markets for African slaves.

Since the end of the seventeenth century an increasing part of the Dutch slave trade was driven by interlopers from the province of Zeeland. Between 1680 and 1730 almost half of the Dutch slave voyages to the Americas was organized by interlopers. The decade of the 1730s was a transitional period in the Dutch slave trade. During that period the WIC lost its monopoly and the slave trade was taken over by private Dutch traders, mainly from the cities of Middelburg and Flushing in the province of Zeeland. The largest private company which was involved in the slave trade was the Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie (MCC). The

MCC organized 113 slave voyages from the city of Middelburg. Between 1730 and 1800 Dutch private slave traders organized approximately 770 voyages. During that period 250,000 Africans were shipped to the Dutch colonies in the Americas.