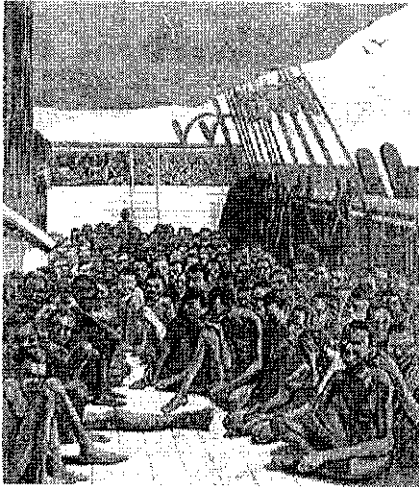


# Atlantic Slave Trade: Middle Passage

## Introduction



*She had taken in, on the coast of Africa, three hundred and thirty-six males, and two hundred and twenty-six females, making in all five hundred and sixty-two, and had been out seventeen days. The slaves were all enclosed under grated hatchways, between decks. The space was so low that they sat between each other's legs, and were stowed so close together that there was no possibility of their lying down, or at all changing their position, by night or day. As they belonged to, and were shipped on account of different individuals, they were all branded, like sheep, with the owners' marks, of different forms. These were impressed under their breasts, or on their arms, and, as the mate informed me, with perfect indifference, 'Queimados pelo ferro quente, -- burnt with red-hot iron.' Over the hatchway stood a ferocious looking fellow, with a scourge of many twisted thongs in his hand, who was the slave-driver of the ship; and whenever he heard the slightest noise below, he shook it over them, and seemed eager to exercise it. As soon as the poor creatures saw us looking down at them, their dark and melancholy visages brightened up.*

*They perceived something of sympathy and kindness in our looks, which they had not been accustomed to, and feeling, instinctively, that we were friends, they immediately began to shout and clap their hands. One or two had picked up a few Portuguese words, and cried out, 'Viva ! viva !' The women were particularly excited. They all held up their arms, and when we bent down and shook hands with them, they could not contain their delight; they endeavored to scramble upon their knees, stretching up to kiss our hands, and we understood that they knew we had come to liberate them. Some, however, hung down their heads, in apparently hopeless dejection; some were greatly emaciated, and some, particularly children, seemed dying. But the circumstance which struck us most forcibly, was how it was possible for such a number of human beings to exist, packed up and wedged together as tight as they could cram, in low cells, three feet high, the greater part of which, except that immediately under the grated hatchway, was shut out from light, or air, and this when the thermometer, exposed to the open sky, was standing, in the shade on our deck, at 89°. The space between decks was divided into two compartments, three feet three inches high; the size of one was sixteen feet by eighteen, and of the other forty by twenty-one; into the first were crammed the women and girls; into the second the men and boys. Two hundred and twenty-six fellow creatures were thus thrust into one space two hundred and eighty-eight feet square, and three hundred and thirty-six into another space eight hundred feet square, giving to the whole an average of twenty-three inches, and to each of the women not more than thirteen inches, although many of them were pregnant. We also found manacles, and fetters of different kinds; but it appears that they had all been taken off before we boarded. The heat of these horrid places was so great, and the odor so offensive, that it was quite impossible to*

enter there, even had there been room. They were measured, as above, when the slaves left them. The officers insisted that the poor suffering creatures should be admitted on deck, to get air and water. This was opposed by the mate of the slaver, who, from a feeling that they deserved it, declared that they would murder them all. The officers, however, persisted, and the poor beings were all turned up together. It is impossible to conceive the effect of this eruption; five hundred and seven fellow creatures, of all ages and sexes, some children, some adults, some old men and women, all in a state of total nudity, scrambling out together to taste the luxury of a little fresh air and water.

They came swarming up, like bees from the aperture of a hive, till the whole deck was crowded to suffocation, from stem to stern; so that it was impossible to imagine where they could all have come from, or how they could all have been stowed away. On looking into the places where they had been crammed, there were found some children, next to the side of the ship, in the places most remote from light and air; they were lying nearly in a torpid state, after the rest had turned out. The little creatures seemed indifferent as to life or death, and when they were carried on deck, many of them could not stand.

After enjoying for a short time the unusual luxury of air, some water was brought; it was then that the extent of their sufferings was exposed in a fearful manner. They all rushed like maniacs towards it. No entreaties, or threats, or blows could restrain them; they shrieked, and struggled, and fought with one another for a drop of this precious liquid, as if they grew rabid at the sight of it. There is nothing from which slaves, in the mid-passage, suffer so much, as want of water. It is sometimes usual to take out casks filled with sea-water as ballast, and when the slaves are received on board, to start the casks, and refill them with fresh. On one occasion, a ship from Bahia neglected to change the contents of the casks, and on the mid-passage found, to their horror, that they were filled with nothing but salt water. All the slaves on board perished! We could judge of the extent of their sufferings from the afflicting sight we now saw.

When the poor creatures were ordered down again, several of them came and pressed their heads against our knees, with looks of the greatest anguish, at the prospect of returning to the horrid place of suffering below.

From *Notices of Brazil* (1820)

quoted in Rufus W. Clark, *The African Slave Trade*  
Boston: American tract society, [c1860], pp. 27-30

1. The first sentence states, "She had taken in, on the coast of Africa, three hundred and thirty-six males, and two hundred and twenty-six females, making in all five hundred and sixty-two, and had been out seventeen days. Who is she in this sentence?"
2. Describe the conditions the slaves are placed in.
3. Does the author seem sympathetic to the conditions the slaves are placed in? Explain.
4. In what way are the slaves compared to sheep by the author?
5. According to the author, what was the slave's biggest want?
6. Why do you think the author continually refers to the slaves as creatures?
7. What can we as a society do to prevent atrocities like this from ever happening again?