The National Archives

Education Service

Slavery

How did the Abolition Acts of 1807 and 1833 affect the slave trade?

Slave sale, Charleston, South Carolina 1856
Lesson at a Glance

Suitable For: KS3

Time Period:
Empire and Industry – 1750 – 1850

Curriculum Link:
Ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain 1745-1901
  ➢ Britain’s transatlantic slave trade: its effects and its eventual abolition

Learning Objective:
To investigate the records of enslaved people
To examine how the Abolition Acts changed the slave trade

Resources needed:
Printed sources

The Slave Trade

As soon as Europeans began to settle in America, in the early 16th century, they imported enslaved Africans to work for them. As European settlement grew, so did the demand for enslaved people. Over the next 300 years more than 11 million enslaved people were transported across the Atlantic from Africa to America and the West Indies, and Britain led this trade from the mid-17th century onwards. Ports such as Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow sent out many slaving ships each year, bringing great prosperity to their owners. Many other cities also grew rich on the profits of industries which depended on slave-produced materials such as cotton, sugar and tobacco.

The campaign in Britain to abolish slavery began in the 1760s, supported by both black and white abolitionists. The battle was long and hard-fought, with pro-slavery campaigners arguing that the slave trade was important for the British economy and claiming that enslaved Africans were happy and well-treated. However the frequent rebellions by enslaved Africans and evidence of the appalling conditions endured by them during and after transportation led to growing support for the demands to abolish the slave trade. Eventually, in 1807, Parliament passed an Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which abolished the trade by Britain in enslaved peoples between Africa, the West Indies and America.

The pro-slavery campaigners had argued that with no new enslaved Africans being traded slave-owners would treat their existing slaves better. However, it was clear that enslaved people were still harshly treated and many continued to resist and rebel against their enslavement. In 1833 Parliament passed a further act to abolish slavery in the British West Indies, Canada and the Cape of Good Hope (southern Africa), meaning that it was now illegal to buy or own a person. However, slavery continued in other areas of the British Empire including the territories run by the East India Company, Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka) and St Helena. Between 1808 and 1869 the Royal Navy’s West Africa Squadron seized over 1,600 slave ships and freed about 150,000 Africans but, despite this, it is estimated that a further 1 million people were enslaved and transported throughout the 19th Century.
Background

Racism

Enslavement is both a result and a cause of racism. A belief that certain people were racially inferior allowed Europeans to set up the trade in African enslaved people in the 1520s. It encouraged whites to believe that the cruelty of the capture of enslaved people, the inhuman conditions on the slave-ships and the incredibly harsh treatment the enslaved received in the Americas were somehow justified. Source 2 is just another example of this. Enslavement has also caused racism by setting up a stereotype of black people as victims in the past.

The triangular trade

The British trade in enslaved people was a three-legged voyage: from British ports to West Africa, where enslaved people were bought with guns and other British-manufactured articles. Then came the dreaded ‘middle passage’ to the Americas, with as many enslaved people as possible were crammed below decks. The enslaved were then sold in the southern USA, the Caribbean Islands and South America, where they were used to work the plantations. Plantations were farms growing only crops that Europe wanted: tobacco, sugar, cotton. The merchant ships would load up with these products and take them back to Britain on the last leg of their journey. Profits from this trade made merchants rich as well as providing the capital (money) for many of the enterprises of the early Industrial Revolution.

Plantation life

The enslaved people were worked in gangs, made up of both men and women, driven on by the whip of the overseer. They worked for ten to twelve hours a day in the tropical sun, for six days a week. Other enslaved people worked as craftspeople, or servants. The fact that they could be bought or sold away from the plantation at any time made it very difficult to maintain normal family life. Some of the ‘runaways’ listed in Source 1 may well have just been trying to visit friends or relations who had been sold to another plantation.
African songs, games, stories and religion helped to maintain the enslaveds' belief in themselves. From the 17th century, gangs of runaways -called 'Maroons' in Jamaica – set up independent, permanent communities which resisted all efforts of the white owners and soldiers to crush them. Sometimes this broke out into open conflict, such as the Maroon Wars of 1730-1740 and 1795-6. There were also slave revolts, in Antigua in 1735, Tacky’s revolt in Jamaica in 1760, Kofi’s revolt in Guyana in 1763, in Granada in 1795-7, and so on.

Abolition

The case against enslavement had several arguments:
the moral argument: enslavement is wicked, un-Christian
the economic argument: enslavement is expensive and inefficient
the legal argument: enslavement is illegal under British law
problems in the plantations: enslaved people continued to resist enslavement and would not be suppressed

The campaign to abolish enslavement was the first popular peaceful mass protest movement of modern times. Leading white abolitionists were Granville Sharpe, who helped black people fight test cases in the courts; Thomas Clarkson, who collected evidence of the cruelty of the enslavement trade from all over Britain; and William Wilberforce, who fought for legislation in Parliament. They worked with black abolitionist campaigners, such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano. Mary Prince, who had been enslaved for part of her life, wrote an important book about her experiences which helped to influence the eventual abolition of enslavement in 1833.

Clearly, the campaign to abolish enslavement did not end in 1833. Plantation owners still used forced labour in the form of indentured workers (a worker who works for a fixed term for their transportation, board and lodgings) particularly on tobacco plantations. Being an indentured worker meant, in theory, that you should be treated fairly and that although you weren’t paid for your labour, you would be given proper food and somewhere to stay. In actual fact, indentured workers were often treated no better than enslaved workers, with beatings, and even death, a common factor.

Enslavement goes on today. Look at the links on the right to find out about enslavement in the 21st century and its abolition.
This lesson offers graphic evidence of the cruelty on which enslavement was based. The Court Records from Dominica reveal all kinds of details about the way enslaved African society worked. Most of all, however, it shows the punishments meted out to enslaved people, in all its brutality. From this point the whole story of enslavement – why the enslaved were there, who ran the plantations, why they ran away – can be explored. It is also an important piece of evidence of the reasons why the abolition campaign proceeded beyond 1807 to full abolition of the institution of enslavement in 1833.

The story of enslavement often ends in 1833. But that was not the end of enslavement, even in the Americas. It was not abolished in the USA until 1863, after a bloody Civil War had been fought over the issue. It was not abolished in Brazil until 1888. Britain's high moral line about enslavement after 1833 is not often dealt with. Sources 2a, b and c reveal just how much effort Britain put into its anti-enslavement activities in several parts of the world right through the 19th century.

Sources

Illustration ZPER 34/29 – an illustration from the Illustrated London News showing a slave sale in South Carolina around 1856

Source 1 CO 71/51 – these are extracts from the court records for Dominica showing punishments for enslaved Africans

Sources 2 a, b, c FO 84/1310 – these photographs are a set showing East African enslaved people rescued by the British naval ship, HMS Daphne. HMS Daphne was often used to rescue enslaved people from slave runners after the 1833 abolition of slavery by Great Britain. Enslaved people who were rescued were often taken to a nearby island where they would then set up new colonies.

External links

Son of the South (http://www.sonofthesouth.net/slavery/index.html)

A useful site with lots of enslavement related images and resources.

Port Cities (http://www.portcities.org.uk/)

A site detailing some of the UK's main shipping ports, including their links to the enslavement trade.

Antislavery.org (http://www.antislavery.org/)

This site gives information about enslavement in the 21st Century, as well as providing resources about African enslavement.
Read Source 1.

Look at the names on the document. These enslaved people originated in Africa. Are these African names?

Who named them?

How many names do the enslaved Africans have?

Why weren’t they given surnames?

Which enslaved people are male and which are female?

Does their gender make any difference to how they were treated by the court?

Dominica had been a French possession until 1763. Which of the slaves have French names?
### Source One - Transcript

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Estate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Punishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1814 Jan[uar]y 15</td>
<td>John Pierre</td>
<td>Mr Grano</td>
<td>Attempting to return to the Runaways with Provisions &amp; having been runaway 2 Months</td>
<td>To be hanged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 &amp; 16</td>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Hillsbro' Estate</td>
<td>Exiting a Mutiny among 20 Negroes of the Estate &amp; harvesting them with provisions &amp; while runaway</td>
<td>To be hanged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hector</td>
<td>Mr Lionne</td>
<td>Runaway</td>
<td>To receive 100 lashes &amp; to be worked in chains 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Mr Grano</td>
<td></td>
<td>Receiving 30 lashes &amp; to be worked in chains 3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Dick &amp; Daniel</td>
<td>Hillsbro' Estate</td>
<td></td>
<td>To receive 100 lashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>ditto</td>
<td></td>
<td>To receive 50 lashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hetty, Penny &amp; Placide</td>
<td>ditto</td>
<td></td>
<td>To receive 40 lashes each &amp; returned to owner's attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Mr Dubocq</td>
<td>supplying Runaways with salt &amp; with provisions</td>
<td>Not guilty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pierre</td>
<td>Mr Polus Estate</td>
<td>Encouraging the Negroes upon that estates who had absconded to stay away</td>
<td>To receive 100 lashes each &amp; to be worked in chains 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Mr Bonnjean</td>
<td>Being runaway near 17 months</td>
<td>ditto</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source One - Transcript**

How did the Abolition Acts of 1807 and 1833 affect the slave trade?
How did the Abolition Acts of 1807 and 1833 affect the slave trade?

Tasks

2. Now look at the charges against the enslaved Africans in Source 1. What have most of these enslaved people been charged with?

Dominica is quite a small island. When the first census was carried out there in 1834 the population (whites and blacks) was only 14,000. What does this document tell you about the scale of resistance by runaways?

3. There are 13 enslaved Africans listed in the document. How many were hanged? How many whipped? How many discharged?

What happened to Pierre (28 January)?

Why do you think the sentences handed out were so ferocious?

What would you say about this document if you were a British abolitionist working for the total abolition of slavery?

What would you say about it if you were a defender of slavery?
How did the Abolition Acts of 1807 and 1833 affect the slave trade?

Source Two

East African enslaved people released from a dhow by HMS Daphne, 1 November 1868 (FO 84/1310)
How did the Abolition Acts of 1807 and 1833 affect the slave trade?

Having been the largest slaving nation, Britain became a determined abolitionist power after 1833, using the Royal Navy to stop ships suspected of being slavers. These photographs were taken about 1868, off the east coast of Africa. They form part of a Report from John Armstrong Challice, a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, working to abolish slavery in Zanzibar. Zanzibar did not abolish slavery until 1897.

We know very little about these pictures. Use the clues you can pick out from the photographs to suggest what they actually show.

Write a brief description of the enslaved people – age, numbers, clothing, other conditions.

These photographs were taken about 1869, in the Indian Ocean. How useful are they as evidence of the Atlantic slave trade before its abolition in 1807?

The ship on which these photographs were taken was the HMS Daphne, a British naval ship used to prevent the transportation of enslaved people. Do you think Britain had the right to act as the world’s police, stopping and searching ships of other nations? (Remember that Britain had been a large slave trading nation until 1833)