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U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts**



SALEM, SUGAR AND SLAVES

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∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS
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Some of Salem's earliest non-European trading contacts were with the West Indies, places such as Barbados, Nevis and St. Kitts. Supplying British colonial plantations with dried fish, foodstuffs, horses and farm animals, and the products of New England's forests in exchange for molasses, sugar, cotton, salt and a host of other tropical products formed the major portion of Salem's overseas trade prior to the American Revolution.

Beginning with Columbus's second voyage to the New World in 1493, when he introduced sugar cane from the Canary Islands to the Caribbean, European development of the West Indies became an investor's dream, an international nightmare, the indigenous population's death sentence, and the black man's hell on earth.

The most lucrative products of West Indian plantations were molasses and sugar. Sugar had been known in the Old World for centuries, and there was great demand for it. Vast fortunes could be made on these goods; the bottom line was maximum profit with minimum expenditure for labor. Unfortunately, the production of these commodities (and other agricultural products) was highly labor intensive. The European settlers found that they could not efficiently work the plantations without a cheap labor source, so the importation of African slaves provided the solution.

In 1625, 40 English settlers and a few Africans arrived at Barbados, making it the earliest British settlement in the West Indies. The proportion of African slaves to the white population soon increased dramatically. Between 1680 and 1700, some 300,000 African slaves were imported into the British plantations, and between 1700 and 1786, another 610,000 went to Jamaica alone. Transportation of slaves to the West Indies and the adjacent coasts of South and Central America was practiced by other nations, particularly France and Portugal. Although actual figures are not possible to ascertain in most instances, and counting the people

who died on the passage across the Atlantic, the number of Africans carried to the West Indies and surrounding areas must have been astronomical. From the early 1500s until 1886, when full emancipation was acknowledged in Cuba, African slaves and their descendants struggled to gain economic, political, and social recognition.

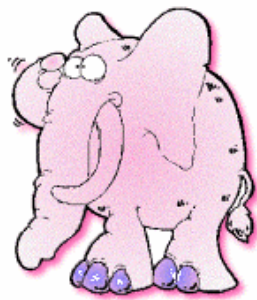
The Spanish had been in the area from the beginning, and the French and Dutch wasted no time making claims in the area. For more than 400 years, possession of the West Indian colonies was of critical importance to the European powers, both as a source of wealth and as a strategic military presence. The West Indies quickly became a main focal point of conflicts between the European powers, with economic competition, combined with deep-seated religious hatreds, driving an exceptionally brutal form of warfare. Legitimate privateering frequently degenerated into outright piracy during the sporadic interludes of peace between the parent nations. Vessels from the North American colonies were caught up in the turmoil as they were continuously engaged in both legal commerce and illicit trade in restricted commodities, with the smuggling of tea, firearms and munitions among the most blatant offences.

Vicious subjugation of the slave populations was driven by fear of open rebellion and the mass murder that ensued. The first major success by slaves in the fight for freedom was the expulsion of the French occupation forces from Haiti in 1804. It is estimated that about 200,000 Africans and mulattos were victims of the unrest in Haiti between 1791 and 1804.

Prior to the American Revolution, Salem's economy was heavily based on her active fishing industry, which served to feed the huge slave populations of the British West Indian plantations. This, and other products required by plantation communities, was generally exchanged for huge quantities of transshipped Spanish and Portuguese wines, molasses (used at home for the production of

rum), and sugar. These products were in demand in the colonies, as well as in England. Salem's shipping served as a pipeline for the flow of goods within England's Atlantic commercial empire.

Once the former American colonies lost the advantage of being part of the British trading network in 1783, the West Indies trade was greatly diminished. Now Salem vessels reached out past the Cape of Good Hope to China and the East Indies. The emphasis shifted from the sweetness of West Indian sugar with its history of blood and bondage to the tang of pepper and spices from the far side of the world.



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