

Four Essays on the relationship between the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the rise of the Industrial Revolution.

Essay #1: “The economic basis of the slave trade”.¹ by Dr Alan Rice

“Captive Africans and their descendants paid with their blood and sweat for the phenomenal expansion of human possibilities in the Atlantic world.” Robin Blackburn

Expansion in the Americas: The transatlantic slave trade transformed the Americas. Three factors combined to cause this transformation. Large amounts of land had been seized from Native Americans and were not being used. Europeans were looking for somewhere to invest their money. Very cheap labour was available in the form of enslaved Africans. The Americas became a booming new economy.

In 1510 King Ferdinand of Spain sent 200 Africans to his American colonies to work in enslavement. Throughout the sixteenth century the Spanish and Portuguese developed trade in enslaved Africans to provide a continual supply of labour for their expanding new economies. In response to demands for more African labour the Spanish Crown developed a system of licences ('Asientos') which allowed merchants from Portugal, Holland and Britain to supply them with enslaved Africans.

By the end of the sixteenth century European slave traders had transported over 200,000 people from Africa to the colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas. The Portuguese began developing their own colonies in Brazil. They soon saw that their sugar plantations needed a large number of workers and they decided enslaved Africans could best provide this labour. Within 40 years these plantations were wholly dependent on African slave labour. Many people were making enormous profits from this new economy: investors based in Europe, local plantation owners as well as slave traders. By the mid-seventeenth century the British, French and Dutch had begun to develop slave trades of their own. These were in competition with the Portuguese and went against the control that Spain had put in place through its system of licences.

The pursuit of profit: The link between sugar and slavery established in Brazil spread to the British and French colonies in the Caribbean. In colonies such as Barbados, Jamaica and Saint-Domingue (modern day Haiti) outstanding profits were made on the backs of the enslaved African labour force. From 1500 to 1860 it is estimated that around 12 million enslaved Africans were traded to the Americas (3.25 million in British ships). Profits made on these voyages were often very large. For instance, in the seventeenth century, the Royal Africa Company could buy an enslaved African with trade goods worth £3 and have that person sold for £20 in the Americas. The Royal Africa Company was able to make an average profit of 38% per voyage in the 1680s.

Although average profits on successful slave voyages from Britain in the late eighteenth century were less – at around 10% – this was still a big profit. The love of sugar that developed in Britain and other European populations meant the demand for sugar could only be met by the expansion of the slave trade to keep the plantations busy. Conditions were terrible for enslaved Africans on these plantations. At its worst (in Brazil for instance) so many enslaved workers died that whole populations needed to be replaced each decade.

¹ <http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/how-did-money-from-slavery-help-develop-greater-manchester/articles/the-economic-basis-of-the-slave-trade.html> Revealing Histories, Remembering Slavery

Slavery was the oil in the machine of these transatlantic economies. By the 1760s annual exports from the West Indies alone to Britain were worth over £3m (equivalent to around £250m today).

Individuals made large profits: for instance the merchant Thomas Leyland, three times mayor of Liverpool, made a profit of £12,000 (about £1m today) on the 1798 voyage of his ship Lottery. Plantation workers were subjected to harsh routines during the eighteenth century, such as 24 hour working during the peak harvesting period. Some of these routines were later imposed upon European workers during Europe's Industrial Revolution.

Investment in the Industrial Revolution: Professor David Richardson has discussed how 'slavery was integral to British industrialisation'. Certainly, the enormous profits made on the backs of enslaved African plantation workers provided the large sums of money needed for the rapid industrial expansion that took place in Britain. For the north-west of England, there was a development even more important than the growth of sugar plantations. This was the growth of slave-labour cotton plantations in the American South.

There was a rapid expansion of cotton production after the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin in 1793. This expansion enabled the development of a new industrial economy throughout the north-west region. The growth in the enslaved worker population in the southern states of America from less than half a million in 1789 to nearly four million in 1860 shows the importance of the transatlantic cotton trade to those states.

Britain was the most important international consumer of American cotton. By 1860 over 88% of the cotton imported into Britain came from the labour of enslaved Africans in America. Industrialists in Manchester must take significant responsibility for their part in making the system of slavery in the American South last so long.

The Caribbean Historian Eric Williams asserts: 'It was this tremendous dependence on the triangular trade that made Manchester'.

Manchester merchants made big profits at the expense of exploited labour at home and abroad. These merchants were involved in all three sides of the triangle. They bought cotton imported from the southern slavery states of America. They provided finished cottons in exchange for enslaved Africans. They also provided clothing for the enslaved workers on the plantations. As Robin Blackburn put it: 'The pace of capitalist advance in Britain was decisively advanced by its success in creating a regime of extended private accumulation battening upon the super-exploitation of slaves in the Americas'.

Essay # 2' "Fuelling the Industrial Revolution"²: by Dr Alan Rice & Dr Emma Poulter

'The value of goods annually supplied from Manchester and the neighbourhood for Africa is about £200,000...This value of manufactures employs immediately about 18,000 of His Majesty's subjects, men, women and children...'

Samuel Taylor, Manchester manufacturer, 1788

² Ibid; <http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/how-did-money-from-slavery-help-develop-greater-manchester/articles/fuelling-the-industrial-revolution.html>

Plantation slavery created unique patterns of trade and systems of work. These patterns and systems were adapted and used during the Industrial Revolution. Indeed some historians have argued that the plantation slavery system was the engine which helped create the Industrial Revolution.

Agriculture to industry: The historian Eric Williams describes how key technologies such as James Watt's steam engine improvements (1784) were developed using profits from slave trading merchants. When fully developed, it was sugar plantation owners who used these steam engines to increase efficiency by replacing horses. The huge profits that came from plantation slavery in the Americas and the new industries that were created to process goods imported from these plantations changed Britain dramatically. It went from being an agricultural economy to an industrial one in Britain in the late eighteenth century.

Manchester: city of cotton: The effect of the growth of textile industries in Manchester (known at the time as 'Cottonopolis' that is, 'the city of cotton') can be seen in the expansion of Manchester's population from 17,000 in 1760 to 180,000 in 1830. More specifically, the biographies of slaving ship captains and traders in the north west of England provide clear evidence of the link between the wealth earned from the transatlantic slave trade and the push toward industrialisation in the whole region.

Records show that the slaving ship captain Thomas Hinde used the profits from his and his sons' dealings in the African trade to develop a fabric mill in the village of Dolphinholme in 1795. Thomas Hodgson had earlier invested the profits from his Liverpool slave trading in the Low Mill at Caton in 1784.

Many new factories opened during this time to serve the market created by the slave trade and plantation economies. These factories provided finished goods such as clothing to exchange for enslaved Africans. They also processed the range of tropical produce that came from plantations in the Americas. Clothing for enslaved Africans was manufactured in mills such as Quarry Bank near Manchester and re-exported to the Americas. This ensured that profits stayed in Lancashire. As Barrie M. Radcliffe asserts: 'Cheap cotton enabled Lancashire to conquer world markets'. Slavery therefore not only boosted the Lancashire textile industries: the trade connections made by the transatlantic slave trade between England, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean also played a crucial role in the rise of industry throughout Lancashire.

Cotton supply after abolition: Merchants found it hard to give up the huge profits they made from slavery. Even after the British government abolished the British slave trade in 1807, merchants in Manchester and Liverpool continued to supply goods to Spanish and Portuguese slave traders based in Cuba and Brazil who were active as late as the 1880s. As James Walvin asserts, 'As long as slaves were bought on the African coast... Lancashire textiles provided a means of exchange', and these markets together with trading with the Americas were crucial to the development of industrial Lancashire.

'... Every slave in a southern state is an operative for Great Britain...and if you will have cotton manufacturers, you must have them based on slave labour.'

Thomas Cooper, South Carolina 1830

ESSAY #3: “The rise of capitalism and the development of Europe,”³ by Washington Alcott

Could Britain have grown from being a mainly agricultural society to a mainly industrial society without the transatlantic slave trade?

The forced flow of people and material from Africa resulted in great wealth in Europe. The profits gained from the transatlantic slave trade and then later from the exploitation of Africa by taking direct control over the land (colonialism) were used to develop the West.

'The colonial system was the spinal cord of the commercial capitalism of the mercantile epoch.' Eric Williams

Capitalist economies: So what is capitalism? A basic explanation would say that it is an economic system where those things that make money, like land, factories, communications, and transportation systems, are owned by private businesses and corporations which trade in a ‘free market’ of competition. This system uses the investment of money, or ‘capital’, to produce profits. It leads to a small upper class of people having the most wealth and the growth of large corporations. This leads to economic inequality between rich and poor, which governments try to reduce by various social schemes, regulations and activities. It is different to the system in the Middle Ages, usually called feudalism, where control of land and the workers who were bonded to that land was the key to making wealth.

In other words, capitalism is the system that allows rich people to invest their money in projects and make (or lose!) even more money. It allows anybody who is rich enough to do this. The historian Eric Williams argued that a huge amount of money was made by Europeans from their network of colonies, and their plantations of sugar, cotton and tobacco. This wealth – sometimes called ‘capital’ – had to be invested somewhere. It was used to pay for the industrialisation of Europe. So the transatlantic slave trade and plantation wealth were the major causes of the growth of capitalism in Europe.

Royal Africa Company monopoly: At the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade era, the British government did not allow rich individuals to try to make profits from the trade. The only company that transported enslaved people was the British government’s own, it was called The Royal Africa Company. Established in 1672, this Royal Company transported an average of 5,000 enslaved Africans a year between 1680 and 1686.

Then in 1698 the law changed. It became legal for other British merchants to trade enslaved Africans as a 'fundamental and natural right'. The number of enslaved Africans transported increased dramatically from 1698.

One port, Bristol, shipped 160,950 Africans from 1698 to 1707. In 1760, 146 slave ships with a capacity for 36,000 enslaved people sailed from British ports, while in 1771 that number had increased to 190 ships with a capacity for 47,000 enslaved Africans.

³ *ibid*; <http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/how-did-money-from-slavery-help-develop-greater-manchester/articles/the-rise-of-capitalism-and-the-development-of-europe.html>

Exploitation for profit: The 'upper' or 'capitalist' class in Europe used their control of international trade to ensure that Africa specialised in exporting captives, and right through the 1600s and 1700s, and for most of the 1800s, Europeans continued to make super profits from the exploitation of African natural resources and African labour. These profits continued to be re-invested in Western Europe into areas such as shipping, insurance, the formation of companies, capitalist agriculture, technology and the manufacture of machinery, including James Watt's invention and production of the steam engine.

Technological developments were funded with transatlantic slave trade money. James Watt expressed eternal gratitude to the West Indian slave owners who directly financed his famous steam engine. Their money allowed him to take his designs from the drawing-board to the factory. The financial effects of the transatlantic slave trade were wide-ranging. For instance, the French St Malo fishing industry was revived by the opening up of markets in the French plantations flourishing using enslaved Africans; while the Portuguese in Europe depended heavily on dyes like indigo brought from Africa.

Trading in enslaved Africans also speeded up Europe's technological development. For example, the evolution of European shipbuilding from the 1500s to the 1800s was a logical consequence of their monopoly of sea commerce in that period.

Port cities and industrial towns: The transatlantic slave trade directly led to the rise of many sea-port towns, notably Bristol and Liverpool in Britain, Nantes and Bordeaux in France, and Seville in Spain. Towns that were manufacturing centres often grew in places connected to these ports. And it was in these manufacturing centres that the 'Industrial Revolution' took place. In England, Manchester was the first centre of the Industrial Revolution. The growth of Manchester happened on the back of the growth of Liverpool. And why did Liverpool grow? It was where so many slave trading ships set off from, at one time the largest slaving ship port in the world.

Banking and insurance: Eric Williams cited several examples of great personal wealth, derived from trading and exploiting enslaved Africans. For instance, David and Alexander Barclay made vast amounts of money from the transatlantic slave trade in 1756. They later used this money to set up Barclays Bank. The famous Lloyds of London is another banking organisation with its roots in transatlantic slave trading. Slave trading profits allowed it to grow from being a small London coffee house to become one of the world's largest banking and insurance houses.

European expansion: It was not just in Britain that such profits and connections existed. During the 1700s the West Indies accounted for 20% of France's external trade – much more than that for the whole of Africa in the present century. The Portuguese made enormous profits from the transatlantic slave trade. Perhaps unfortunately for Portugal, much of this money passed rapidly out of Portuguese hands into the hands of the more developed Western European nations. These more developed nations supplied Portugal with loans, ships and trade goods. Germany was one of these countries, along with Britain, Holland and France.

The transatlantic slave trade had a huge 'ripple effect' in terms of trade within Europe and beyond. Brazilian dyewoods, for example, were re-exported from Portugal into the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Baltic, and passed into the continental cloth industry of the 1600s. According to Eric Williams, by the middle of the 18th century there was hardly any British town of any size that was not in some way connected to the transatlantic slave trade or colonial rule. Thus, the accumulation of wealth (or 'capital') in Britain that helped to fuel the Industrial Revolution was made on the back of the transatlantic slave trade.

Essay #4: NORTHERN PROFITS from SLAVERY

The effects of the New England slave trade were momentous. It was one of the foundations of New England's economic structure; it created a wealthy class of slave-trading merchants, while the profits derived from this commerce stimulated cultural development and philanthropy. --**Lorenzo Johnston Greene, "The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776,"** p.319.

Whether it was officially encouraged, as in New York and New Jersey, or not, as in Pennsylvania, the slave trade flourished in colonial Northern ports. But New England was by far the leading slave merchant of the American colonies.

The first systematic venture from New England to Africa was undertaken in 1644 by an association of Boston traders, who sent three ships in quest of gold dust and black slaves. One vessel returned the following year with a cargo of wine, salt, sugar, and tobacco, which it had picked up in Barbados in exchange for slaves. But the other two ran into European warships off the African coast and barely escaped in one piece. Their fate was a good example of why Americans stayed out of the slave trade in the 17th century. Slave voyages were profitable, but Puritan merchants lacked the resources, financial and physical, to compete with the vast, armed, quasi-independent European chartered corporations that were battling to monopolize the trade in black slaves on the west coast of Africa. The superpowers in this struggle were the Dutch West India Company and the English Royal African Company. The Boston slavers avoided this by making the longer trip to the east coast of Africa, and by 1676 the Massachusetts ships were going to Madagascar for slaves. Boston merchants were selling these slaves in Virginia by 1678. But on the whole, in the 17th century New Englanders merely dabbled in the slave trade.

Then, around 1700, the picture changed. First the British got the upper hand on the Dutch and drove them from many of their New World colonies, weakening their demand for slaves and their power to control the trade in Africa. Then the Royal African Company's monopoly on African coastal slave trade was revoked by Parliament in 1696. Finally, the *Assiento* and the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) gave the British a contract to supply Spanish America with 4,800 slaves a year. This combination of events dangled slave gold in front of the New England slave traders, and they pounced. Within a few years, the famous "Triangle Trade" and its notorious "Middle Passage" were in place.

Rhode Islanders had begun including slaves among their cargo in a small way as far back as 1709. But the trade began in earnest there in the 1730s. Despite a late start, Rhode Island soon surpassed Massachusetts as the chief colonial carrier. After the Revolution, Rhode Island merchants had no serious American competitors. They controlled between 60 and 90 percent of the U.S. trade in African slaves. Rhode Island had excellent harbors, poor soil, and it lacked easy access to the Newfoundland fisheries. In slave trading, it found its natural calling. William Ellery, prominent Newport merchant, wrote in 1791, "An Ethiopian could as soon change his skin as a Newport merchant could be induced to change so lucrative a trade as that in slaves for the slow profits of any manufactory." [1]

Boston and Newport were the chief slave ports, but nearly all the New England towns -- Salem, Providence, Middletown, New London -- had a hand in it. In 1740, slaving interests in Newport owned or managed 150 vessels engaged in all manner of trading. In Rhode Island colony, as much as two-thirds of the merchant fleet and a similar fraction of sailors were engaged in slave traffic. The colonial governments of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania all, at various times, derived money from the slave trade by levying duties on black imports. Tariffs on slave import in Rhode Island in 1717 and 1729 were used to repair roads and bridges.

The 1750 revocation of the *Assiento* dramatically changed the slave trade yet again. The system that had been set up to stock Spanish America with thousands of Africans now needed another market. Slave ships began to steer northward. From 1750 to 1770, African slaves flooded the Northern docks. Merchants from Philadelphia, New York, and Perth Amboy began to ship large lots (100 or more) in a single trip. As a result, wholesale prices of slaves in New York fell 50% in six years.

On the eve of the Revolution, the slave trade "formed the very basis of the economic life of New England." [2] It wove itself into the entire regional economy of New England. The Massachusetts slave trade gave work to coopers, tanners, sailmakers, and ropemakers. Countless agents, insurers, lawyers, clerks, and scribes handled the paperwork for slave merchants. Upper New England loggers, Grand Banks fishermen, and livestock farmers provided the raw materials shipped to the West Indies on that leg of the slave trade. Colonial newspapers drew much of their income from advertisements of slaves for sale or hire. New England-made rum, trinkets, and bar iron were exchanged for slaves. When the British in 1763 proposed a tax on sugar and molasses, Massachusetts merchants pointed out that these were staples of the slave trade, and the loss of that would throw 5,000 seamen out of work in the colony and idle almost 700 ships. The connection between molasses and the slave trade was rum. Millions of gallons of cheap rum, manufactured in New England, went to Africa and bought black people. Tiny Rhode Island had more than 30 distilleries, 22 of them in Newport. In Massachusetts, 63 distilleries produced 2.7 million gallons of rum in 1774. Some was for local use: rum was ubiquitous in lumber camps and on fishing ships. "But primarily rum was linked with the Negro trade, and immense quantities of the raw liquor were sent to Africa and exchanged for slaves. So important was rum on the Guinea Coast that by 1723 it had surpassed French and Holland brandy, English gin, trinkets and dry goods as a medium of barter." [3] Slaves costing the equivalent of £4 or £5 in rum or bar iron in West Africa were sold in the West Indies in 1746 for £30 to £80. New England thrift made the rum cheaply -- production cost was as low as 5½ pence a gallon -- and the same spirit of Yankee thrift discovered that the slave ships were most economical with only 3 feet 3 inches of vertical space to a deck and 13 inches of surface area per slave, the human cargo laid in carefully like spoons in a silverware case.

A list of the leading slave merchants is almost identical with a list of the region's prominent families: the Fanueils, Royalls, and Cabots of Massachusetts; the Wantons, Browns, and Champlins of Rhode Island; the Whipples of New Hampshire; the Eastons of Connecticut; Willing & Morris of Philadelphia. To this day, it's difficult to find an old North institution of any antiquity that isn't tainted by slavery. Ezra Stiles imported slaves while president of Yale. Six slave merchants served as mayor of Philadelphia. Even a liberal bastion like Brown University has the shameful blot on its escutcheon. It is named for the Brown brothers, Nicholas, John, Joseph, and Moses, manufacturers and traders who shipped salt, lumber, meat -- and slaves. And like many business families of the time, the Browns had indirect connections to slavery via rum distilling. John Brown, who paid half the cost of the college's first library, became the first Rhode Islander prosecuted under the federal Slave Trade Act of 1794 and had to forfeit his slave ship. Historical evidence also indicates that slaves were used at the family's candle factory in Providence, its ironworks in Scituate, and to build Brown's University Hall. [4]

Even after slavery was outlawed in the North, ships out of New England continued to carry thousands of Africans to the American South. Some 156,000 slaves were brought to the United States in the period 1801-08, almost all of them on ships that sailed from New England ports that had recently outlawed slavery. Rhode Island slavers alone imported an average of 6,400 Africans annually into the U.S. in the years 1805 and 1806. The financial base of New England's antebellum manufacturing boom was money it had made in shipping. And that shipping money was largely acquired directly or indirectly from slavery, whether by importing Africans to the Americas, transporting slave-grown cotton to England, or hauling Pennsylvania wheat and Rhode Island rum to the slave-labor colonies of the Caribbean.

Northerners profited from slavery in many ways, right up to the eve of the Civil War. The decline of slavery in the upper South is well documented, as is the sale of slaves from Virginia and Maryland to the cotton plantations of the Deep South. But someone had to get them there, and the U.S. coastal trade was firmly in Northern hands. William Lloyd Garrison made his first mark as an anti-slavery man by printing attacks on New England merchants who shipped slaves from Baltimore to New Orleans.

Long after the U.S. slave trade officially ended, the more extensive movement of Africans to Brazil and Cuba continued. The U.S. Navy never was assiduous in hunting down slave traders. The much larger British Navy was more aggressive, and it attempted a blockade of the slave coast of Africa, but the U.S. was one of the few nations that did not permit British patrols to search its vessels, so slave traders continuing to bring human cargo to Brazil and Cuba generally did so under the U.S. flag. They also did so in ships built for the purpose by Northern shipyards, in ventures financed by Northern manufacturers.

In a notorious case, the famous schooner-yacht *Wanderer*, pride of the New York Yacht Club, put in to Port Jefferson Harbor in April 1858 to be fitted out for the slave trade. Everyone looked the other way -- which suggests this kind of thing was not unusual -- except the surveyor of the port, who reported his suspicions to the federal officials. The ship was seized and towed to New York, but her captain talked (and possibly bought) his way out and was allowed to sail for Charleston, S.C.

Fitting out was completed there, the *Wanderer* was cleared by Customs, and she sailed to Africa where she took aboard some 600 blacks. On Nov. 28, 1858, she reached Jekyll Island, Georgia, where she illegally unloaded the 465 survivors of what is generally called the last shipment of slaves to arrive in the United States.

1. Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade*, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1997, p.519.
2. Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1942, p.68-69.
3. *ibid.*, p.26.
4. "Brown University committee examines historical ties to slavery," Associated Press, *The Boston Globe*, March 5, 2004