



0. THE MIDDLE PASSAGE MYTH - Story Preface

1. AFRICA, BEFORE SLAVERS

2. SLAVE-TRADE BEGINNINGS

3. THE TRIANGLE TRADE

**4. THE MIDDLE PASSAGE MYTH**

5. MIDDLE PASSAGE REALITY

6. JOHN NEWTON, SLAVE TRADER

7. OLAUDAH EQUIANO

8. HUMANS: PROPERTY and AUCTIONS

9. WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

10. VOICE of a MOVEMENT

11. MASSIVE EXPLOITATION

12. THE FAMOUS SPEECH

13. CONVINCING the PUBLIC

14. SLAVE TRADE ABOLISHED - FEBRUARY 23, 1807

15. MORE TRAGEDIES

16. AMAZING GRACE

In this image we see "Musicians, Kingdom of Kongo, 1670s," a seventeenth-century drawing by Father Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecucolo and included in his *Araldi Manuscript*. The image (Reference Bassani-19) is online via [Slavery Images.org](http://Slavery Images.org), compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite; sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

In July of 1788, as MPs (Members of Parliament) debated the issue of African slave-trading, pro-slave-trade members summoned individuals, like Robert Norris, to testify.

From Liverpool, Norris insisted that Africans were treated fairly and their transatlantic passages were comfortable. His book on the subject - at [pages 171 and 172](#) - reveals his general position:

*That the opinion...of these ships being unequal to the numbers which were said to be crowded in them, is groundless...That on the voyage from Africa to the West Indies, the Negroes are well fed, comfortably lodged, and have every possible attention paid to their health, cleanliness, and convenience.*

Thomas Clarkson, in [chapter 23](#) of his history, summarizes Norris' testimony to the privy council. The captive Africans, Norris said:

*had sufficient room, sufficient air, and sufficient provisions. When upon deck, they made merry and amused themselves with dancing. As to the mortality, or the loss of them by death in the course of their passage, it was trifling. In short, the voyage from Africa to the West Indies "was one of the happiest periods of a Negro's life."*

Norris, like others, wanted to maintain slave-trading for economic reasons. He knew slave labor was "the connecting medium of our foreign with our domestic commerce." British manufacturing depended on it. If that connection were removed:

*The export of British manufactures, which to Africa and the Colonies amount to nearly three millions sterling annually, would soon be reduced to nothing...From the inevitable decrease of the import of West Indian productions, there would be such a deficiency of the national revenue, as the imposition of fresh taxes, upon a people deprived of their accustomed resources of opulence and industry, could not possibly replace ... Our national importance would quickly decline, and be known to the next generation, only by the page of history. (Norris, [pages 182-183](#))*

Anti-slave MPs were unimpressed. Their withering cross examination drew out actual facts about the gruesome Middle Passage (and the "savage legacy" racism would ultimately produce).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-MIDDLE-PASSAGE-MYTH-Amazing-Grace>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-MIDDLE-PASSAGE-MYTH-Amazing-Grace>

## Questions 2 Ponder

### How Did Slave-Trading Connect Britain's Foreign and Domestic Commerce?

As British slave-trading grew into a major industry, it became "the connecting medium of our foreign with our domestic commerce," according to Robert Norris, a witness on the subject who testified before Parliament in 1788.

If the slave-trade became such a vital connection between Britain's foreign and domestic commerce, its removal would significantly impact Britain's financial stability. How do you think the slave trade could have grown into such a major component of Britain's economy?

If Norris was right, about the significance of slave-trading to Britain's financial circumstances, how would it be possible for Members of Parliament to make slave-trading illegal?

In today's world, can you think of anything which should be made illegal but isn't because it contributes so much money to a country or a society? If so, what is it? Why hasn't it been made illegal?

## Media Stream



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