

What's not to like about sugar? On the average, modern Americans consume 100 pounds of sugar per year. It's sweet, and it gives a big energy boost. Well, yes, there are calories, cavities, and diabetes, but, in moderation, sugar is harmless ... right? In 1700, English consumption empire-wide was about four pounds of sugar per person per year. That certainly seems moderate. Yet in 1700 alone, approximately 25,000 Africans were enslaved and transported across the Atlantic Ocean. Up to two-thirds of these slaves were bound for sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Brazil to produce "White Gold." Over the course of the 380 years of the Atlantic slave trade, millions of Africans were enslaved to satisfy the world's sweet tooth. A sugar by-product, molasses, was distilled into rum and sent to Africa to purchase more slaves—this is the infamous Triangle Trade in the history books. Sugar's most bitter legacy is that the labor of slaves fueled the enslavement of even more Africans.

Sugar Comes to the New World

Ironically, sugar cane is not a plant native to the Americas. It is a perennial grass whose tropical species seems to have originated in New Guinea, and subtropical species in India. During the invasion of India in 326 B.C., Alexander the Great's soldiers became the first Europeans to see sugar cane; honey was the primary sweetener of the Western world at the time. Arab traders and Moorish conquerors spread the plant throughout the Mediterranean region, introducing it in Spain around 714 A.D.

Centuries later, under Spanish sponsorship, Christopher Columbus is believed to have carried sugar cane stem cuttings from the Canary Islands to Hispaniola on his second voyage, planting the seed-cane in Santo Domingo by December 1493. Subsequent Spanish colonizers spread the crop to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. The Portuguese introduced sugar cane to Brazil and received shipments of sugar from Pernambuco by 1526.

European settlers also brought with them the methods for growing and harvesting sugar cane. Cane was planted by plowing furrows spaced about a yard's width apart and then placing seed-cane stems flat in the furrows at one-yard intervals. In some cases, seed-cane stems were planted in holes to a depth of six inches. The mature sugar cane plant ranges from 4-12 feet in height; its soft interior contains the juice with the highest caloric content of the plant world.

Slavery and Sugar

Sugar planting, harvesting, and processing is tiring, hot, dangerous work and requires a large number of workers whose work habits must be intensely coordinated and controlled. From the very beginning of sugar cultivation in the New World, there were not enough European settlers to satisfy the labor requirements for profitable sugar plantations. Native Americans were enslaved to work on the earliest sugar plantations,

Sugar stands at the center of the Triangle Trade; it was the engine that drove the African Diaspora. Slaves of the Caribbean sugar plantations produced molasses that was transported to New England for distillation into rum that was shipped to Africa in exchange for the slaves who would endure the final leg of the triangle, the horrific Middle Passage to the sugar islands.

The origins of the word "rum," may come from sugar via the Latin word for sugar, "saccharum." Although the Spanish and Portuguese probably began distilling alcoholic beverages on their sugar plantations at an early date, the British in Barbados were producing rum by 1627. They fermented a gallon and a half of sugar cane molasses with yeast to create a "wash" that was distilled into a gallon of rum. An acre of sugar cane generated enough molasses by-product during the sugar-refining process to produce an average of 200 gallons of rum. However, owners of sugar plantations considered distilling to be too wasteful of labor and wood, which could be better used towards producing "white gold," sugar. A sugar house inventory from Bristol, England, in 1690 indicates a hoghead of raw sugar to be worth about £11 and a cask of molasses to be worth £3.

--Sherman Edwards, lyricist 1776

"Shall we dance to the sound of the profitable pound in Molasses and Rum and Slaves?"

The Triangle Trade

During harvest, slaves worked day and night, especially in the mills and sugarhouses, so that there would be no bottlenecks in production. Shifts lasted up to 18 hours. Sugar production paused only as slaves cleaned out fireboxes or other equipment. Although some planters provided extra food and drink during the harvest and others encouraged competitions to boost production, sugar production was the result of coercion. Slaves in the sugar fields and mills were controlled by both the threat and use of deadly force.

A healthy, adult slave was expected to be able to plow, plant, and harvest five acres of sugar. Sugar planting was back-breaking work. Lines of slaves, men, women and children, moved across the fields, row by row, hand-planting thousands of seed-cane stems. Between 5,000 and 8,000 pieces had to be planted to produce one acre of sugar cane. Workdays in the fields typically lasted from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. with a noon-time break of perhaps two hours.

to the New World.

asked King Ferdinand of Spain to protect the Taino Indians of the Caribbean by importing African slaves instead. So, around 1505, enslaved Africans were first brought especially in Brazil. Those who could, escaped from the fields, but many more died due to European diseases, such as smallpox and scarlet fever, and the harsh working conditions on the sugar plantations. A Catholic priest named Bartolomé de las Casas

Great Britain's North American colonies had struggled from Jamestown onward with profitability. Sugar processing in the colonial era required large quantities of wood, a resource scarce on the islands of the Caribbean but abundant in New England. New Englanders began to trade wood for sugar and molasses. Around 1700, sugar refiners were erected in Baltimore and New York (sugar refining would be New York City's most profitable industry 1870-1917). However, European refiners dominated the market, so the manufacturers of the Northeast looked at molasses, sugar's by-product, for greater opportunities. Specifically, they distilled molasses into rum.

As early as 1664, the Dutch were distilling rum on Staten Island in New York; Boston's first rum distillery is recorded as operating in 1667. By the 1700s, New England distilleries were producing millions of gallons of cheap rum to supply traders with rum that could be exchanged for slaves. Once the slave ships arrived in Africa, merchants could buy adults for 110-130 gallons of rum or children for about 80 gallons. Rum cost as little to produce as five and a half pence per gallon; in 1746, a slave could be purchased for about £5 and auctioned in the West Indies for £30-80. Rhode Island alone dominated between 60-90 percent of the exchange rum trade with its Guinea Rum. Slave traders owned and operated 30 rum distilleries in Newport whose casks they loaded onto over 150 slave ships. It is estimated that the slave traders of the single city of Newport, Rhode Island, exchanged rum for over 106,000 Africans. Once brought to the islands, the enslaved would produce sugar, yielding molasses to distill into rum to exchange for more slaves, in a vicious cycle of profit.

Separating Sugar and Slavery

By the end of the 1700s, slaves were so synonymous with sugar that abolitionist groups attempted to convince people to stop using sugar to help end slavery.

The East India Company promoted its sugar as an alternative to slave-produced West Indies sugar. In advertising, a company distributor "respectfully informs the Friends of Africa that she has on Sale an Assortment of Sugar Basins, handsomely labeled in Gold Letters: "East India Sugar not made by Slaves." The advertisements neglected to mention that the company used poorly paid, overworked Javanese and Indian laborers in the Far East to produce sugar.

By the late 1700s, expansion of Caribbean sugar plantations resulted in the flooding of the marketplace with sugar. Prices fell, reducing the profitability of the plantations. Profits shrank further as French sugar producers undercut the prices of British sugar producers and drove them out of business. In Africa, the devastating depopulation of the continent resulted in a shortage in the supply of slaves, forcing slave traders to pay more for slaves.