

Sugar and Slavery: Molasses to Rum to Slaves

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 calorie 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,

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 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 to the New World.

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.

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.

The Triangle Trade

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

--Sherman Edwards, lyricist 1776

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 hogshead of raw sugar to be worth about £11 and a cask of molasses to be worth £3.