John Brown House Museum Family Guide

The Sally and the Transatlantic Slave Trade
The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Ask a staff member at the front desk for the maps of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Look at the maps, what do you notice?

These maps show us something called the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Transatlantic Slave Trade, also referred to as the Triangle Trade, was a massive trade route at the time of John Brown, and an important part of the Rhode Island economy. The slave trade is an important, but very sad part of Rhode Island’s history.
How did the Transatlantic Slave Trade work?

1. Locate Rhode Island on the map.
Ships left Rhode Island ports with rum.

2. Locate the West African Coast on the map.
Ships then would sail to Africa. In Africa, the crew traded rum for African men, women, and children.

The Africans who were traded were kidnapped. They were forced to leave their friends, families, and communities. Most white Americans in this time period did not believe that the kidnapped Africans should be treated like human beings because of the color of their skin. And so the kidnapped African people were treated with cruelty and hatred.
White Americans forced kidnapped Africans to become slaves and do labor, without pay, in fields, factories, and homes in the Caribbean and United States. Because they were enslaved, their children would be enslaved, too. While many of us know that slavery used to exist in the South, enslaved people also lived and labored in Rhode Island.

Who are “enslaved people?”

In this guide, we are going to refer to the kidnapped Africans in the Transatlantic Slave Trade as “enslaved people” rather than “slaves.” “Enslaved people” is a name that focuses more on the fact that these people were people, unlike what many Americans believed. Enslaved people were more than their status as a slave.
How did the Transatlantic Slave Trade work? (continued)

We remember that ships left Rhode Island, sailed to Africa, and on the African coast traded goods for people. What happened next?

3. Locate the Caribbean on the map.

After purchasing Africans, the ships would go to the Caribbean. This part of the journey could be deadly. Conditions on the ships were terrible for enslaved people and many died. It was known as the “Middle Passage,” and could take as long as several months. The image below shows us how cramped space was for enslaved people on the ship.

4. After the Middle Passage, most of the enslaved African were sold as slaves in the Caribbean. They would work on sugar plantations. The ships brought sugar back to Rhode Island. Some enslaved people would come too, to become slaves in Rhode Island.

5. Once back in Rhode Island, rum was made with that sugar. This allowed the cycle of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to begin again.

ACTIVITY

Go to the formal parlor in the museum. On the touch table, see if you can find the scent cube that smells like a rum barrel. This is what the containers that rum was shipped in would have smelled like.

What else do you see on this table?

The dark piece of wood is *mahogany*. Mahogany is a type of wood that was logged by enslaved people in the Caribbean and sent to the North American colonies, including Rhode Island. Rhode Island was well-known for furniture-making. Mahogany is another product of the Slave Trade. Look around the formal parlor, and see if you can find pieces of furniture that are made of mahogany.

On the touch table in the gift shop, see if you can find the *cacao pod* (an image of two pods is below). There also is a plastic container filled with cocoa beans. Cocoa beans would be ground to make chocolate. Chocolate was another product of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, sent from the Caribbean to the United States.

Many objects in this house have connections to the Slave Trade.
As we can tell from the objects we just looked at, many objects in this house are related to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. But why was it so important? Why would so many Rhode Islanders be a part of something that was so awful?

Even common people who were not captains on these ships or who invested money to send these ships out benefited from the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Rhode Islanders who made the rum used to buy enslaved people made money, the sailmakers who made the sails for the ships made money, farmers who sold crops to feed the ship’s crew and to feed enslaved people in the Caribbean made money, and so on. At this time in history everyone played a role in slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade whether they intended to or not. Most of the wealth in Rhode Island at this time was fueled by the Trade. The economy in Rhode Island boomed because of the Trade. This is called complicity.
The Sally was a ship in the Transatlantic Slave Trade sent out by John Brown, the man who owned this house, and his brothers Joseph, Nicholas, and Moses. The ship left Rhode Island in September of 1764 and arrived back in Rhode Island in December of 1765.

Why is the Sally important?

The house that you are standing in now was built in 1788, 12 years after the Sally came back to Rhode Island. The reason why we are talking about the Sally is because John Brown, the owner of this mansion, paid for the voyage. Money that John made from participating in the Transatlantic Slave Trade would have been used to build this house.

On the Sally was Captain Esek Hopkins (in the image on the left), 15 crew members, and Edward Abbey, a young boy owned by Esek. The Brown Brothers hoped that the Sally would bring them a good profit, and also asked Esek to bring back four young 15-year-old enslaved boys to Rhode Island.
Who was Edward Abbey?

Edward Abbey was not enslaved, but rather an African American indentured servant born in about 1749. He became Esek Hopkins’ indentured servant on June 2, 1764. Edward was 15 at the time of the Sally. An indentured servant was someone who would become free eventually. Edward Abbey was not an enslaved person, but not free as an indentured servant.

What happened on the Sally?

The Sally’s voyage did not go as planned. On the ship, enslaved Africans revolted with the hopes of rebelling against the crew so they could go back to their home. But the crew responded violently, and about 8 enslaved people died. Approximately 70 of the 155 enslaved people on the Sally became ill from the terrible conditions on the ship and passed away. In total, 109 out of 196 enslaved Africans died during this voyage.

Because of the number of deaths of enslaved people on the Sally, the journey lost a great deal of money for the Brown brothers. Esek Hopkins was not able to sell very many enslaved people because so many died and the others were too sick to sell at a high rate.
The story of the *Sally* is incredibly sad. But it also is something that is important to talk about. Events like what happened on the *Sally* happened on many other ships in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The slave trade was deadly and dangerous for the enslaved people who had to live in the horrifying conditions on the ship.

The journey of the *Sally* - like all slave ship voyages - was horrific for the enslaved Africans on the ship and that should be the most important takeaway. But there is some hope to be found in this story. Moses Brown, John Brown’s brother, was so upset with the horror of the *Sally* that he decided to change his life. He became an abolitionist, which means he fought against the slave trade and he wanted to free people who were already enslaved. He changed his religion to be a Quaker since Quakers preached abolition.
The Brown brothers, like many wealthy Rhode Islanders, owned enslaved people. John Brown and his family moved into this house in 1788, after a Rhode Island law called for enslaved people to become free over time. From old documents, we know he had servants in this house, but we do not know if enslaved people worked for him here. But we do know that enslaved people worked in his businesses and at other properties he owned.

John Brown’s 1788 house (the house you are in right now)
The historical documents historians look at usually come from wealthy white men and occasionally women in history, because they were the people who could read and write. Their belongings were also the most likely to be saved because they were the most “important” people in society and had power. As much as we want to learn about the lives of enslaved people, there are few old documents written from their point of view. We can learn about enslaved people from their actions, instead. Enslaved people rebuilt their lives in new places, made friendships, found love, and also fought back against their enslavement by escaping their owners.

But why don’t we know more about the enslaved people owned by John Brown? Or enslaved people on the Sally?

By learning about the Transatlantic Slave Trade and recognizing that it was an horrible practice, we are able to learn from this history and think about how we can support equality in our world today.
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Teaching Tolerance
Child Out of Place: A Story of New England, Patricia Q. Wall
Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl, Tonya Bolden
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