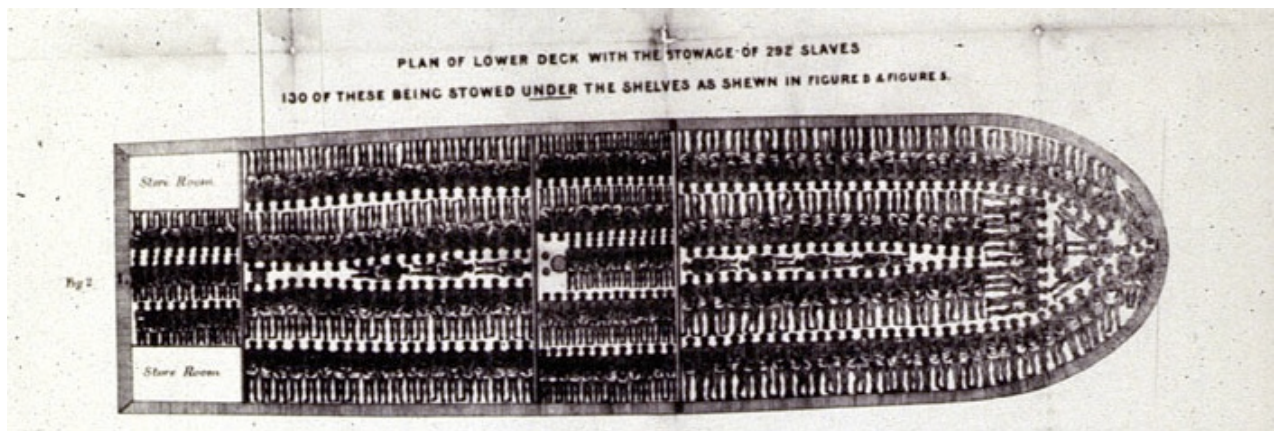


## How the Slave Trade Took Root in New England

On Feb. 28, 1638, the slave trade probably began in New England when a ship arrived in Massachusetts Bay from the West Indies. The Salem ship *Desire* carried enslaved Africans along with the other cargo of cotton and tobacco.

After a slow start, the slave trade would take root in New England. First it flourished in Massachusetts then gained a toehold in coastal New Hampshire. Finally it dominated Rhode Island, which became the biggest slave market in the colonies.



In the slave trade, captured Africans were packed belowdecks in a transatlantic slave ship.

Over time, the African-American population would reach 10 percent in some parts of New England. As the slave population rose, so did the number of free blacks. Africans could buy their freedom, or they could win it by fighting in the Revolution or getting too old to work. Black men could escape their bonds and go to sea.

But many African-Americans would learn the sad truth that freedom was just another word for harassment and discrimination.

### The Slave Trade in New England

English settlers had tried to enslave Indians in 1636 and 1637, capturing them after they lost the [Pequot War](#). The Indians made lousy

slaves, however, as the Puritans complained they would 'not endure the yoke.' So they sent the captured Indians to Bermuda, which prevented them from uprising, and exchanged them for enslaved Africans.

The Massachusetts [Puritans in 1741 made slavery legal](#). And until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was Massachusetts merchants who mostly supplied slaves to New England. Peter Faneuil built [Faneuil Hall](#) in Boston with money inherited from his uncle's slave trade.



Phillis Wheatley , victim of the slave trade.

The slave trade wasn't easy because multinational companies [held a monopoly on Africa's Gold Coast and Guinea](#). There, most captured Africans were bought and herded onto slave ships.

But by 1676, [Massachusetts merchants started buying slaves in Madagascar and then selling them to Virginians](#). Many New Englanders, though, preferred experienced slaves, so merchants swapped captured Africans for slaves who'd already worked the plantations. Sometimes

the merchants brought back weaklings like [Phillis Wheatley](#) who they couldn't sell in the West Indies.

Some merchants preferred their slaves young and easily trained. They [would send rum to the Caribbean with directions for the captain to return with an African child.](#)

### **Rhode Island Slave Trade**

[Rhode Island merchants began importing African slaves](#) at least by 1652, but they pursued the slave trade in earnest around 1700. There were two reasons: First, the slave-trading monopolies were breaking up. Second, large plantations in Narragansett, R.I., and nearby New London, Conn., needed labor. So did New England's burgeoning industries and maritime trades.

Newport and Bristol by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had overtaken Boston as the leading slave market in the colonies. In the 98 years between 1709 and 1807, [Rhode Island merchants brought more than 100,000 slaves](#) from Africa to the New World.

The Brown family ran one of the biggest, nastiest slave trading businesses in New England. In 1764, for example, [Nicholas, John, Joseph, and Moses Brown sent their ship Sally to Africa](#) to buy slaves. Her captain bought 196, but returned with fewer than half. At least 109 died in a mutiny, by suicide, starvation or disease.

The federal government banned the slave trade in 1794, though found it difficult to enforce.

### **Early African-Americans**

Connecticut had few [slaves](#) until about 1700, when the number began to rise. By the time of the American Revolution, [all the wealthy families in Norwich, Hartford and New Haven had slaves. So did half of all the ministers and lawyers and a third of all the doctors.](#)



### Manacles used in the transatlantic slave trade

By 1800, Connecticut had more African-Americans – slave and free -- than the rest of New England combined. Then, Connecticut had about a thousand slaves and [5,000 free blacks](#).

African-Americans had already become a substantial minority by the 1750s in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. They reached 10 percent of the Massachusetts population and 11.5 percent in Rhode Island.

New Hampshire's African population grew from 1645, when records show [African slaves in](#) the colony. However, New Hampshire's black population never got as big, proportionally, as the southern New England states.

New Hampshire's African-Americans concentrated on the Seacoast. One reason was that New Hampshire didn't impose a tariff on slaves, so merchants brought slaves to Portsmouth and then smuggled them into the other colonies.

Massachusetts slaves also tended to concentrate in the coastal towns, especially Boston. And in Rhode Island, [black mariners made up one-fifth of the crews leaving Newport by 1807](#).

### **Slavery in New England**

The Puritan missionary [John Eliot](#), who converted Indians to Christianity, decried the treatment of the African slaves. He "lamented . . . with a bleeding and burning passion, that the English used their Negroes but as their Horses or the Oxen, and that so little care was taken about their immortal Souls."

The colonies restricted slaves' behavior in many ways – and sometimes the law didn't differentiate between slave and free. Connecticut in 1690, for example, barred people of color, including Indians, to walk the streets after 9 pm. The colony also required black slaves to have a pass to leave their own town. By 1708, fights between blacks and whites prompted a law that imposed a penalty of 30 lashes on a black person who tried to hit a white person.

Massachusetts passed similar laws between 1720 and 1750. Slaves could not buy provisions at a market, carry a stick or cane, keep pigs or walk on a street after dark or on Sunday.

When slaves got old, tired and lame, their masters often set them free so the town had to take care of them. In 1703, Massachusetts passed a law forcing masters to post a £50 bond for every slave freed. Rhode Island doubled that fee in 1729. Connecticut in 1711 simply required masters to support their former slaves.

### **Emancipation**



Elizabeth Freeman played an important role in ending the slave trade.

The rhetoric of the American Revolution inspired many people to question the morality of slavery. And many slaves [earned their freedom during the war by fighting for either side.](#)

Enslaved Africans took matters into their own hands in Massachusetts. [Quock Walker](#) and [Elizabeth Freeman](#) sued for their

freedom in 1781. The Massachusetts courts decided "the idea of slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and [the Massachusetts] Constitution."

In 1784, [Connecticut](#) and Rhode Island began to gradually – very gradually -- emancipate their slaves. In those colonies, all children of slaves born after March 1 were to be free, though they served as 'apprentices.'

Vermont from the beginning outlawed slavery. The Constitution of the Vermont Republic, adopted in 1777, stated "no male person, born in this country, or brought from over sea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person, as a servant, slave or apprentice, after he arrives to the age of twenty-one Years, nor female, in like manner, after she arrives to the age of eighteen years, unless they are bound by their own consent."

Connecticut didn't abolish slavery until 1848, well after the other New England states. As African-Americans began to shed the bonds of slavery, Connecticut [towns began to warn them out](#), regardless of how long they'd lived there. That practice continued until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*With thanks to [www.slavenorth.com](http://www.slavenorth.com) for this story on the slave trade.  
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