

The African Experience in America: A Brief Overview

The African presence in the Americas is as long as that of Europeans. Discounting the pseudoarchaeological claims of pre-Columbian contact (Fell 1976; Van Sertima 1976), the first Africans arrived in the Americas with many of the early European explorers and colonists. But, unlike Europeans who came to the "New World" seeking gold, land, or religious freedom, Africans were unwilling immigrants who were enslaved and forced to work for those who kept them in bondage. Spain issued the first proclamation to regulate the export of slaves to the Americas in 1501, and Brazil was the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888. For close to 400 years, slavery was the primary feature of the African experience in the Americas. Even after the abolition of slavery, most African Americans occupied a second-class status and faced exploitation, discrimination, and racism.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

The European trade in Africans began long before Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Portuguese navigators had made their way to the African coast in the 1430s and 1440s, reaching the Senegal River by 1445. Although the Portuguese were initially more interested in gold than slaves, they took African captives to Lisbon where there was a small demand for slaves on the Iberian peninsula. Muslim traders from North Africa had controlled a trans-Saharan trade in slaves since Roman times, but the opening of sea routes to Africa by the Portuguese broke the Islamic monopoly on the trade (Davidson 1980:57-60; Klein 1986:14). For the next 50 years, the Portuguese shipped 500 to 1,000 enslaved Africans annually and sent many of them to Iberia, where they occupied a social position comparable to free peasants and performed similar kinds of labor (Saunders 1982). These Africans became known as *ladinos*, or "Europeanized" African slaves, because they adopted the

language, religion, and customs of their masters. The first black inhabitants of America were *ladino* slaves who accompanied their masters on the early voyages to the Western Hemisphere (Klein 1986:19).

As Europeans established permanent settlements in the Americas, the trade in Africans rapidly grew. Eventually, millions of Africans were transported in the ships of Portugal, Spain, England, France, Holland, Prussia, Denmark, Sweden, Brazil, and the United States. The trade involved transactions between European buyers and African sellers. The African sellers comprised two primary groups: suppliers and slave-merchants. The suppliers acquired captives primarily through warfare, but they also practiced small-scale kidnapping, raiding, and the enslavement of criminals, domestic slaves, and debtors. Slave-merchants formed a new class of traders who took advantage of opportunities to participate in the European trade of human chattel (Posnansky 1989). They built a powerful middle position for themselves by obstructing contact between the European buyers and the African suppliers of slaves (Davidson 1980:106).

It is estimated that between 11 and 12 million Africans were sold into slavery between the 15th and 19th centuries, and about four-fifths of this number were exported during the period of 1700-1850 (Lovejoy 1989:369-373). Enslaved Africans were obtained from several principal regions along a vast coastline between Senegal in the north and Angola in the south. These regions (Figure 1) as defined by Lovejoy (1983:52-58) and more recently redefined by Manning (1990:64-72) to include: Senegambia (present-day Senegal and Gambia); Upper Guinea Coast (Guiné-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia); the Gold Coast (Ghana and eastern Ivory Coast); the Bight of Benin, also known as the "Slave Coast" (Togo, Benin, and a small coastal portion of Nigeria); the Bight of Biafra (the Niger River delta and a portion of the Cameroon); and West-Central Africa (Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo, Zaire, and Angola).

In terms of volume, there were four major sources for slaves sent to the Americas. West-Central Africa supplied approximately 40 percent of all the slaves that came to America. Each of the

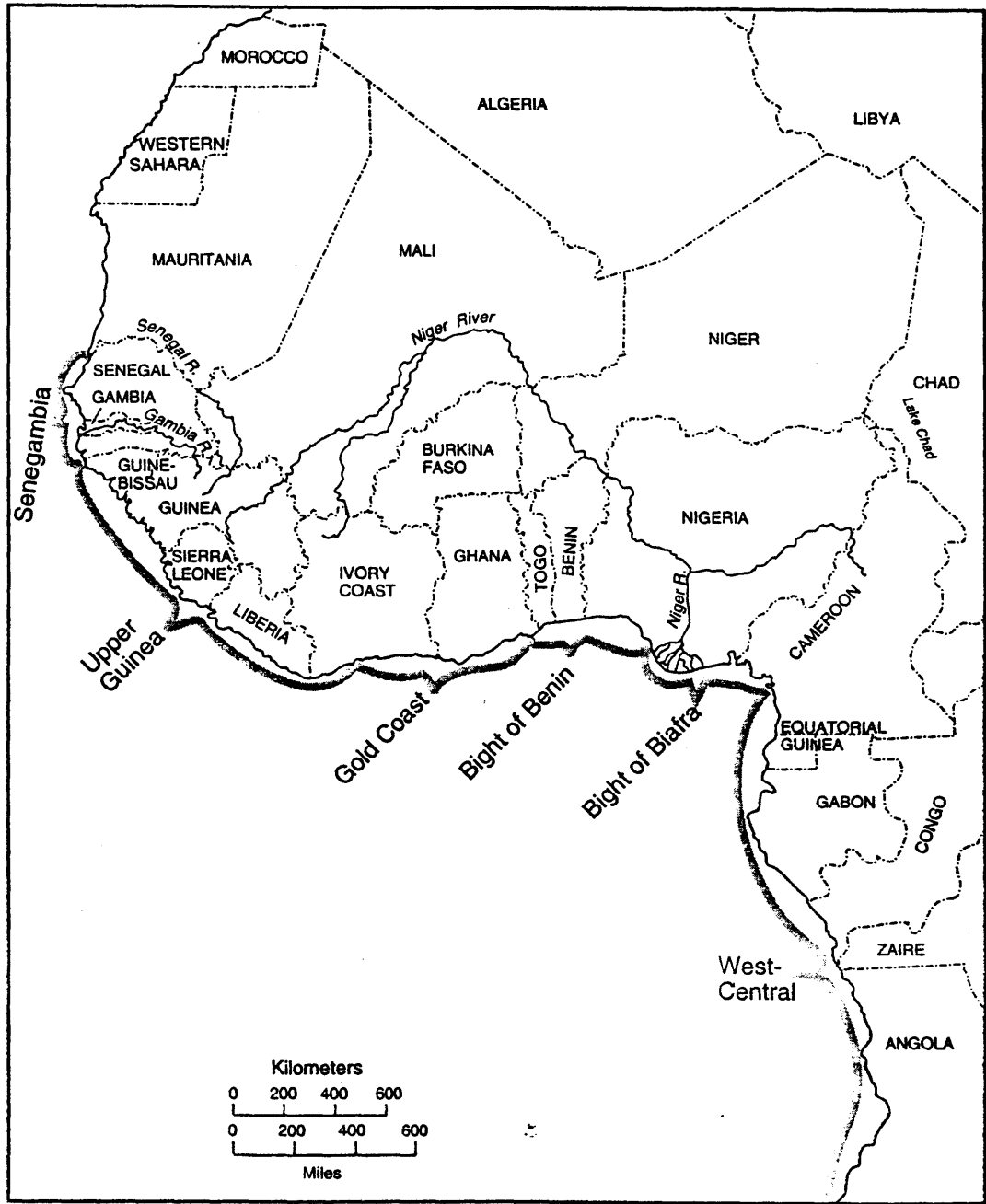
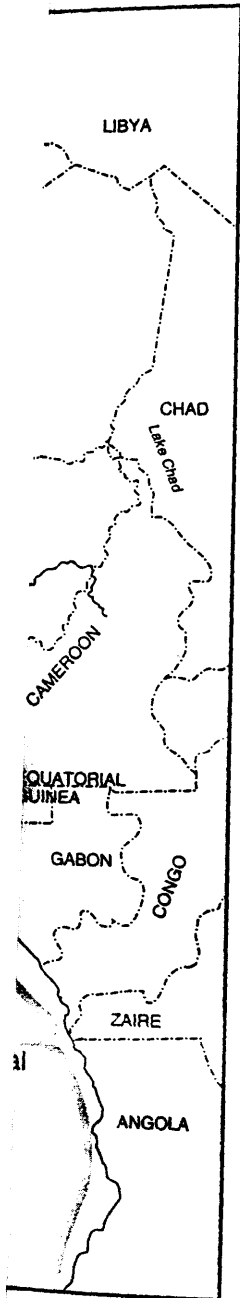


FIGURE 1. Regions of the slave trade in West Africa. (Illustration by Marcia Bakry, National Museum of Natural History.)



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THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA

Bights, Benin and Biafra, contributed approximately 17–20 percent of the total transatlantic exports (Law 1989:46). The Gold Coast was fourth with approximately 8–10 percent. The remaining areas supplied slaves but never on the scale of the four major exporting regions (Lovejoy 1983:48–58, 140–144, 1989:372–375).

African captives began the dreaded Middle Passage at ports along the coast, but their homelands were more often the interior forests and grasslands sometimes hundreds of miles away from the ports. Although the point of departure and place of origin for enslaved people were not the same, in some cases there was a correlation between the exporting region and the ethnic background of those enslaved. For example, the majority of African captives leaving from the Bight of Biafra were Igbo with some Ibibio, while those from the Bight of Benin were mostly Gbe-speaking (Ewe-Fon) or Yoruba (Lovejoy 1989:375). Additionally, several scholars working with plantation inventories, census material, burial records, court papers on captured slave ships, custom registries, and other records identified the ethnic origins of enslaved populations within specific New World areas during specific periods in the following places: the British Caribbean (Higman 1984); Cuba (Fraginals 1977); Louisiana (Hall 1992); Saint Domingue (Haiti) (Geggus 1993); and South Carolina (Holloway 1990). However, no enslaved population was ethnically homogenous, and the ethnic origins for many remain vague or unknown.

The movement to abolish the slave trade began in the last two decades of the 18th century, and resulted in national laws abolishing the trade in 1802 in Denmark, in 1807 in Great Britain, and in 1808 in the United States. However, the trade continued throughout the first half of the 19th century where it was still legal and where the illegal smuggling of slaves was practiced. By 1870, the slave trade had finally come to an end in West and West-Central Africa.

Slavery in the Americas

Once in the Americas, enslaved Africans were put to work in every possible manner. Enslaved

laborers worked in cities, towns, and rural areas. They labored in agricultural fields, mines, factories, maritime trades, craft industries, and domestic service. Not only did the kinds of labor vary, but slavery varied over time and from place to place (Berlin and Morgan 1993:3–5). Different crop or craft requirements, work routines, and organization of labor profoundly structured their lives, as well as the character of the slave-based societies that were formed from their labor.

The Spaniards were the first Europeans to import African laborers to the Americas, and in the 16th century, Mexico and Peru were the designations for most Africans. African labor was used for diverse purposes but mining, farming, and textile production were the major industries. By 1650, some 250,000 to 300,000 Africans had been imported to Spanish America primarily to Mexico and Peru. After that date, the number of imports dropped off, but the importation of Africans was revived in the late 18th and 19th centuries to the Spanish American islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico (Klein 1986:28–37, 150).

The development of a plantation economy based upon sugar cultivation in Portuguese Brazil in the 1500s set the stage for a sugar revolution that changed the course of American slavery for the next two centuries. Large-scale sugar production required a tremendous amount of labor, and enslaved Africans became the preferred labor source for this industry after 1570. By 1600, Brazil had become the world's leading producer of sugar. The need for African laborers intensified as other European nations established sugar operations in the Caribbean. The sugar-producing islands of Barbados, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Saint Domingue, Saint Croix, and others became important power bases for European imperialism in America (Mintz 1985).

The development of slavery in British North America, the United States, proceeded along a different path than in Latin America or the Caribbean. Tobacco—the cash crop introduced in England's first permanent settlement at Jamestown—did not require the labor demands of sugar, and it could be profitably grown in small patches. Although the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619 or earlier,

for most of the 17th century, English planters of the Chesapeake apparently preferred white indentured labor over black labor as the number of white servants far exceeded the number of black slaves. For a number of reasons, but due primarily to shortages of white labor, Chesapeake planters shifted increasingly to enslaved African labor in the 1680s and 1690s (Boles 1984:16). By the early 1700s, twice as many Africans were exported than during the entire 17th century, thus transforming the Chesapeake's tobacco economy from one based upon white indentured labor to one based upon enslaved black labor.

South Carolina was another mainland British colony that established plantation slavery early in its development. But unlike the early white settlers of Virginia, white settlers of Carolina relied upon enslaved Africans from the very beginning of the colony's founding in 1670. Many of the first English settlers to Carolina came from Barbados with their enslaved laborers looking for new opportunities to produce a cash crop and to recreate a West Indian plantation society. A prosperous plantation economy developed from the successful introduction of rice culture in the South Carolina lowcountry, the lower coastal plain, and tidewater areas. Rice cultivation required large amounts of labor, therefore the importation of Africans greatly increased to the point that in 1740 blacks almost outnumbered whites by about 2 to 1 (Ferguson 1992:xxi). In this way, South Carolina's lowcountry resembled more closely the plantation societies of the Caribbean than of Virginia.

Although plantation slavery was for the most part restricted to the southern colonies of British North America, all 13 colonies utilized slave labor during the first three-quarters of the 18th century. For archaeological and other related studies of slavery in the Northeast, see the following: Boulton (1983); Huey (1970); New York Bureau of Historic Sites (1979); New York Saratoga-Capital District Park (1976); and New York Taconic State Park (1976). Between the American Revolutionary War and the first two decades of the 19th century, slavery was gradually abolished in all the northern states. Yet, at roughly the same time, slavery was increasing in the southern states due to the rapid

increase in the cultivation of another staple—cotton.

The southern cotton boom arose from several factors: a growing demand for cotton in England's and later New England's developing textile industry, technological improvements that made the ginning and processing of cotton easier, and the availability of fertile lands obtained through land concessions with Native Americans. Although tobacco, rice, and other staples continued to be cultivated during the 19th century, cotton gave the region its major money crop and employed the labor of approximately 75 percent of all southern slaves. This economic boom initially took place in the upland areas of South Carolina and Georgia, and after 1816 moved westward to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. In the older seaboard states—Maryland to South Carolina—declining soil productivity and markets for rice and tobacco hindered further expansion. Many planters in these worn-out regions migrated to the new frontier states taking their enslaved laborers with them. Even small white subsistence farmers began to cultivate cotton because it could be grown profitably on any scale. Cotton cultivation helped to unify slaveholding and non-slaveholding whites of the antebellum South, and this union fostered a political solidarity that fueled a virulent racism toward blacks (Boles 1984:63–74).

One of the consequences of slavery was the creation of a distinctive black culture by Africans in the Americas. In no place was African culture transplanted intact, but certain beliefs, customs, practices, and behavioral patterns were unique to enslaved communities throughout the Americas. African-American culture was forged from African, Native American, and European sources, and was partially shared by whites. It was most coherently developed in areas with high concentrations of blacks, but both large and small black communities established and maintained an African-American identity of their own as they were unwilling simply to assimilate Euroamerican lifeways. Without this culture enslaved people would not have survived. With it, they were able to provide themselves with an identity and meaning which protected enslaved African Americans

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THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA

from the oppressive master-dominated society (Klein 1986:187).

Resistance, Manumission, and Emancipation

From the very beginning of American slavery, Africans and their descendants resisted their bondage. Slave resistance was manifested in many ways, including lying, stealing, breaking tools, feigning illness, refusal to work, rebellion, or taking one's freedom by running away. Enslaved people's efforts to maintain a separate cultural identity also constituted a form of resistance. Slaveholders responded to acts of resistance by tightening their control often through cruel, demeaning, and violent punishment. Yet, whenever possible, enslaved people challenged white authority, choosing the form of resistance that best suited their needs.

Flight and rebellion were among the most aggressive forms of resistance, and were punishable to the fullest extent of the law. These extreme measures were attempted only when there were no other viable alternatives. Escape was common to all slave societies, and most escapes were temporary absences to visit other plantations, go into town, or hide out in nearby woods. This kind of short-term truancy—known as *petit marronage* in Latin America and the Caribbean—was more tolerated than attempts toward permanent escape. In contrast to *petit marronage*, *grand marronage* could and did result in the creation of independent communities of maroons that stood in open defiance to the institution of slavery (Vega 1979; Arrom and García-Arévalo 1986; Nichols 1988; La Rosa Corzo 1989, 1991; Agorsah 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993; Orser 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1993, 1994b). Maroon communities existed throughout the Americas; some won their independence through peace treaties with whites, while others were crushed by the massive force of slaveholders. Today, descendants of maroons, proud of their heritage, live in isolated, semi-autonomous communities in various parts of the Americas (Price 1973:1-3).

Rebellions occurred far less often than escapes.

They tended to be more prevalent in enslaved communities with large numbers of African-born slaves. Revolts and conspiracies to revolt almost always resulted in tougher laws restricting the activities of slaves and, sometimes, of free blacks as well. By far the most celebrated and successful slave revolt was the one that took place as part of the Haitian Revolution against France. The Haitian slave rebellion began in 1791, and culminated in 1804 with the abolition of slavery and the independence of Haiti. This rebellion shocked the slaveholding classes throughout the Americas, making them realize that the destruction of their world could come at the hands of the people they held in bondage.

The most common route to freedom for enslaved people prior to emancipation was through manumission. Manumission from slavery was generally obtained through self-purchase or at the whim of the slaveowner. Slaveholders granted freedom to enslaved people for various reasons, but primarily to free enslaved children they fathered, to reward a person for faithful service, or to reduce the amount of surplus labor. However, freedom from slavery did not result in total acceptance or equality. Once freed, former slaves usually entered the lowest ranks of society and faced restrictions on their freedom (Klein 1986:226). Even in slaveless societies, like the antebellum Northern states, African Americans experienced discrimination and exploitation (Litwack 1961). Manumissions took place during the entire course of slavery in all slave societies, but the laws and practices governing manumissions reflected changing attitudes that vary from place to place.

In the southern United States, manumissions were initially more widespread in the Upper South than in the Lower South. Beginning in the 17th century—before enslavement necessarily carried a life sentence—slaves in Maryland and Virginia could be freed after serving a set term comparable to indentured servants, by proving white ancestry, if one parent was free, or by converting to Christianity. Later in the mid-18th century, some slaveowners freed slaves when the agricultural economy of the Chesapeake shifted from tobacco, a labor-intensive crop, to wheat and other grains which

required less labor. After the American Revolution, a large number of slaveholders affected by the ideals of liberty granted manumissions to those they enslaved. Some freed their slaves outright, but most slaves received their freedom through wills after the owner's death. Between 1790 and 1810, the free black population of the Upper South more than tripled as a consequence of Revolutionary-era manumission (Johnson and Roark 1984:31).

The American Revolution aroused little sentiment toward manumission among slaveholders of the Lower South. Enslaved people of the Lower South most often obtained their freedom through self-purchase, which they found preferable to manumission by will. Self-purchase was usually limited to a few people with skills who could earn and save money to buy freedom for themselves and their families. Owners also had to be willing to part with the person. In the 1790s, the free black population of the Lower South was supplemented by hundreds of mulatto refugees fleeing from Saint Domingue during the Haitian revolution. They sought refuge in several southern cities, namely, Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans, which greatly added to the existing free black population in those cities. Thus, the free black population of the Lower South tended to be highly skilled, urban dwellers with lighter skin (Johnson and Roark 1984:33).

Throughout the South, two-thirds of all free blacks lived in rural areas and farmed or worked in lumbering, mining, and other industries. Few owned land and most were tenants hiring out their labor to white planters and farmers. A small minority of free blacks owned slaves, and an even smaller percentage of those became planters with a sizable enslaved labor force. In cities, free blacks performed skilled jobs or owned shops and other small businesses. They created separate institutions: churches, schools, fraternal orders, and other community organizations. The most prosperous free blacks built fine houses and socialized with whites.

Regardless of income, all free blacks were subjected to restrictions on their freedom. Some states required that they have a white guardian to ensure the white community that they would behave prop-

erly. In other states, they had to register at the courthouse and pay a special tax. They also had to provide proof of their freedom by carrying free papers or other forms of identification (Singleton 1984:47-48).

After 1820, when the spread of cotton culture revived the need for enslaved labor, manumissions dropped and the free black population increased only through natural means. As sectional differences between North and South heightened, the social position of free blacks was threatened. White southerners became paranoid of having a black community that represented a contradiction to their efforts to defend slavery. Some extremists proposed the colonization or enslavement of free blacks, and in a few cases such proposals were implemented. With the growing white hostility toward them, free blacks gradually accepted the racial identity they shared with enslaved blacks, often emerging as the leaders of a united black community during the Civil War and Reconstruction (Boles 1984:138).

Throughout the Americas, the demise of slavery was a long, slow process. Abolitionists initially thought that the end of the slave trade would automatically result in an end to slavery, but they were mistaken. Slaveholders were unwilling simply to free their labor force without compensation, and they fought emancipationists to the very end. In nearly every case, the abolition of slavery came about only through military and/or political intervention—the United States Civil War being one of the most destructive ends to slavery. Slavery was abolished in places with large-scale slaveholdings in the following chronological order: Haiti in 1804; British West Indies and Guyana, 1838; the French and Danish Antilles, 1848; Peru, 1854; the Dutch Antilles and Suriname, 1863; the United States, 1865; Puerto Rico, 1873; Cuba, 1883; and Brazil, 1888 (Klein 1986:246-257).

Post-emancipation Developments

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corded to citizens of European descent in the Americas. In the old plantation regimes, former masters and former slaves fought over the control of land and labor. Planters wanted to enforce labor systems that would ensure a cheap supply of labor, but denied freed people access to land and equal rights. Emancipated men and women wanted their own land and freedom from any form of forced labor. They were willing to work for old masters but only on their own terms. These disputes between white landowners and black laborers continued in some places well into the 20th century (Klein 1986:258-259).

In the United States, the transformation from slave to free labor and the reshaping of southern society as a whole gave way to a new social order known as Reconstruction—a period roughly dating from 1863 to 1877 (Foner 1990). Reconstruction has been described as “an attempt to make black men [and women] American citizens” (Du Bois 1970[1935, 1969]:708), because of the modest gains African Americans made in achieving their rights to equal citizenship, including the ability to vote, election to public office, access to public education, and a degree of control over their working lives. However, these achievements were undermined with the rise of a white political faction known as the “Redeemers” who gained control of southern state legislatures in the last two decades of the 19th century. They wrote new constitutions that barred most blacks from voting, legalized segregation, passed harsh labor laws that resulted in peonage, used brute force in carrying out their policies, and ignored and sometimes condoned the violent acts of the Ku Klux Klan and other groups against blacks.

These changes caused many blacks to leave the

South. At first, black migrations were limited to Oklahoma, Kansas, and other western states, because many northern industrialists refused to hire blacks as they relied primarily upon white Americans and European immigrants for labor. After the start of World War I, however, labor shortages compelled northern employers to dismantle their color restrictions. Many companies sent labor recruiters to the South to hire black workers or advertised for labor in black newspapers. With the opening up of new job opportunities, hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved to the North during the Great Migration between 1915 and 1940. Later, another wave migration took place from 1940 to 1960 primarily to the West Coast cities of Los Angeles, Seattle, and Portland. Unfortunately, the total numbers of blacks that left the South are unknown, but estimates are in the millions for the entire migration period between 1915 and 1970 (Daniel 1986:77; Crew 1987).

Wherever African Americans settled, they faced similar problems stemming from racism, discrimination, and other social inequalities. After World War II, blacks mobilized their efforts to obtain equal rights through boycotts, strikes, marches, court cases, and riots to force changes in American society. Finally, in the 1960s, the passage of legislation guaranteed black citizens equal rights, and the years following that time continue to be a testing ground for upholding those rights.

The immigrant experience of Africans in the Americas was unlike that of other immigrants who came here seeking a better life. Africans came here as slaves, and their descendants remained slaves for many generations. Emancipation failed to bring equality—a goal that has yet to be achieved completely.