Slavery was widely practiced in Africa for centuries before the Atlantic slave trade, both within African society and in trade. Social forms varied in sub-Saharan Africa at the start of the Atlantic slave trade, with rich kingdoms in some areas and dispersed tribal communities in others. The Arab slave trade, which started around 700 C.E., helped make slave trading a part of the economy in much of Africa.

Slaves were widely used as domestic servants, and slave ownership was a sign of prestige in some African cultures. In parts of Africa, plantation agriculture using slave labor was also practiced.
In the seventh century, Arabs spread Islam across North Africa into Spain, throughout the Middle East, and deep into Eastern Africa, where they converted African natives while at the same time subjugating many into slavery.

Slaves were used for mining, agriculture, and as domestic servants. Many slave boys were castrated; most of them died, but those that survived guarded harems. Women were favored in the slave trade, and sex slavery was common.

It is estimated that over the 12 centuries in which the trade was active, 14-20 million Africans, 2/3 of them women, were sold in the Arab slave markets, an important part of the complex trading network.
Henry the Navigator, prince of Portugal, explored the African coast in the early 15th century, in search of a new route to the Orient. The Portuguese opened trade with the kingdoms of West Africa on the way to China and India. Slavery, already widely practiced in Africa, became a part of that trade.

Europeans also colonized the Canary Islands, and started using African slaves to work the sugar plantations there.
In 1455, Pope Nicholas V issued a Papal Bull, *Romanus Pontifex*, in which he authorized the Portuguese “to subject to servitude, all infidel peoples.”

In another Papal Bull, *Inter Caetera*, issued in 1456, Pope Nicholas V “granted to Prince Henry, as Grand Master, of the Order of Christ in Portugal, all lands (and peoples) discovered or conquered from Cape Bojafor, in Africa, to and including the Indies.”
Starting with the voyage of Columbus in 1492, the Americas became part of a trade network that would dominate Western history for the next 500 years.

Over 10 million Africans would survive the dreaded Middle Passage to the Americas in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries; however, the journey claimed the lives of millions more, as did the cruel roundup of slaves in the African interior.
African slaves in the Americas, by country of destination

- Dutch West Indies
- British N. America
- French West Indies
- British West Indies
- Spanish Empire
- Brazil

(x1000)
African slaves in the Americas, by country of origin

- Nigeria: 24%
- Angola: 16%
- Ghana: 13%
- Senegal/Gambia: 11%
- Guinea-Bissau: 6%
- Sierra Leone: 6%
- Other: 6%
The first slave was brought into what was to become the United States in 1619, one year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

The “peculiar institution” lasted until 1865, when the 13th amendment prohibited slavery in the U.S.

The role of slavery in the economy, its distribution and character varied widely over the years and from place to place. Always marginal in the North, it became the foundation of the economy in the South.
Anthony Johnson, a West African, was an example of the ambiguous status of early black settlers.

“Antonio a Negro,” as he was called in early records, arrived in Virginia in 1621 and worked on a tobacco plantation. It is not clear whether he was an indentured servant or a slave.

In addition to his plantation work, Anthony was able to tend his own crops, including tobacco, and keep livestock. He married another West African and they had children. Eventually, they were able to buy their freedom and their own land. He took the name Johnson. His wife was named Mary.
By 1650, they owned 250 acres in Virginia. In 1665, they moved to Maryland, where they leased a 300-acre tract of land. Anthony died five years later; Mary renegotiated the lease for another 99 years. That same year, a court in Virginia ruled that, because "he was a Negro and by consequence an alien," the land owned by Johnson (in Virginia) rightfully belonged to the Crown.

It is interesting to note that Johnson owned at least one slave. There is a court record in which a neighbor tried to take the slave away by arguing that Johnson himself was black, but the court sided with Johnson.
The Johnson family story shows that race was not initially the major factor for determining slave status under the law.

In fact, racial lines were not clearly defined until the late 1600s, when interracial marriage became a crime. Laws were also passed that made it a crime for ministers to marry interracial couples. Subsequent laws defined people as black if at least one grandparent was black. By the time the Revolution began, interracial marriage was illegal throughout the colonies. This cemented race-based slavery in America.
New Orleans was the site of the largest slave market in the U.S.

New Orleans slave auction, 1839
None of the original 13 colonies were free of slavery; however, unlike that of the South, the economy of the North was not based on slave labor.
Blacks as a percentage of the entire population, 1700

- New Hampshire
- Massachusetts
- Rhode Island
- Connecticut
- New York
- New Jersey
- Pennsylvania
- Delaware
- Maryland
- Virginia
- North Carolina
- South Carolina
Blacks as a percentage of the entire population, 1770

New Hampshire
Massachusetts
Rhode Island
Connecticut
New York
New Jersey
Pennsylvania
Delaware
Maryland
Virginia
North Carolina
South Carolina
Georgia
From 1936 to 1938, over 2,300 former slaves from across the American South were interviewed by writers and journalists of the federal Works Progress Administration. These former slaves, most born in the last years of the slave regime, provided first-hand accounts of their experiences on plantations, in cities, and on small farms.

The WPA narratives capture the voices of American slavery, revealing the texture of life as it was experienced and remembered.
Religion helped bond slaves

Many slaves were allowed to worship separately from their masters, and often this was the only time they were allowed to be alone. That time was important in maintaining cultural traditions from Africa, which helps to explain the development of a unique African American religious tradition in the U.S.

Even slaves that were not allowed private worship used the church as a unifying institution, as it helped bond members of diverse African cultures who spoke different languages and had different traditions.