

Atlantic Capital and Captivity: Commercial Evolution and Enslavement (1520–1770)

The expansion of global mercantile markets between 1520 and 1770 represents a profound transformation in human geography, economic organization, and institutional power. The early modern Atlantic world was not a loose collection of isolated ports, but a highly integrated, violently extractive network where capital accumulation in Western Europe was structurally dependent on the forced migration and exploitation of African and Indigenous labor.

To map this transformation, we must examine eight critical maritime and riverine nodes that collectively illustrate the diverse strategies of early modern empires: **Veracruz, Havana, Liverpool, Montreal, Manhattan, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Richmond**. These cities did not develop along a singular path. Instead, they represent distinct structural models of Atlantic mercantilism. Veracruz and Havana served as early Iberian imperial anchors, built to extract silver and secure strategic shipping lanes. Liverpool evolved into a specialized financial and logistical engine that sustained the transatlantic slave trade without bringing its human cargo to British shores. Montreal operated as a continental outpost where captive labor was embedded within a fur-trade economy dependent on Indigenous alliances. Meanwhile, the British North American mainland ports—Manhattan, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Richmond—formed a decentralized network of agricultural exporters, provisioning nodes, and plantocracies that capitalized on the gaps within European mercantilism.

1. The Iberian Archetypes: Veracruz, Havana, and the Foundations of Empire (1520–1770)

The commercial systems of the Spanish Atlantic were defined by top-down state regulation, fiscal centralization, and the defense of bullion routes. Following the conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1521, the Spanish Crown sought to channel the immense mineral wealth of the Americas directly into the royal treasury through a strictly regulated monopoly network (*el sistema de flotas y galeones*). Veracruz and Havana emerged as the twin pillars of this early Caribbean economy.

Veracruz: The Gateway to New Spain and Early African Provenance

Founded by Hernán Cortés in 1519, Veracruz became the sole legal Atlantic port of entry for the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Its commercial evolution between 1520 and 1770 was shaped by its dual role as a silver exporter and a major entry point (*puerto mayor*) for enslaved labor.

During the first century of Spanish rule, the catastrophic collapse of the Indigenous population—caused by Eurasian diseases and the brutal labor demands of the *encomienda* system—led to an immediate labor crisis in silver mining, sugar production, and ranching. To resolve this, the Spanish Crown turned to African labor through the *Asiento de Negros*, a lucrative monopoly contract leased to foreign merchants.

Demographic and Economic Milestones in Veracruz

- **The Golden Age of Importation (1595–1640):** During the period of the Iberian Union (when the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were unified), Portuguese slave traders (*asientistas*) used their networks in West-Central Africa to flood Veracruz with captives. Historians estimate that between 1595 and 1640, more than **110,000 enslaved Africans** arrived at Veracruz. During this window, New Spain was one of the largest importers of enslaved people in the Western Hemisphere.
- **Provenance and Demographics:** Shipping manifests from this era reveal a concentrated provenance zone, with the vast majority of captives drawn from the **Angola and Upper Guinea** regions. By the 1640s, Mexico City and the urban centers of Veracruz possessed some of the largest populations of African descent outside of Africa, altering the region's cultural landscape.
- **The Eighteenth-Century Shift:** By 1700, the demographic profile of Veracruz and New Spain had fundamentally changed. Direct transatlantic slave importations to Veracruz slowed dramatically, averaging fewer than 500 arrivals per year by 1750. This decline was driven by a recovering Indigenous population, a rapidly expanding mixed-race (*casta*) demographic, and a growing population of free Afro-Mexicans who provided cheaper wage labor than expensive imported slaves.

The concentration of enslaved labor along the Veracruz-Mexico City transport corridor also fueled significant resistance. The rugged mountains surrounding Veracruz became home to Maroon colonies (*palenques*) formed by self-liberated individuals. The most famous was led by **Gaspar Yanga** in 1609. His community resisted Spanish military expeditions so effectively that the Crown eventually granted them legal autonomy, establishing the free town of San Lorenzo de los Negros—a clear structural limit to total colonial control.

Havana: From Strategic Guard Post to Sugar Plantation Frontier

Havana's early history was shaped by its geography. Situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, the city was uniquely positioned to utilize the Gulf Stream, making it the natural assembly point for the Spanish treasure fleets before their dangerous voyage across the Atlantic. For over two centuries, Havana's merchant market revolved around servicing these fleets, building defensive fortifications, and exporting tobacco and cattle hides.

The Asiento and the Demographics of Pre-1760 Havana

Throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Havana's slave market was strictly limited by Spanish mercantilist policy. The Crown viewed Cuba primarily as a strategic military asset rather than an agricultural colony. Slave importations, while continuous, were managed in small batches by foreign monopolies, including the French *Compagnie de Guinée* and, after the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, the British South Sea Company.

Between 1715 and 1760, legal importations under the British Asiento averaged between **500 and 800 captives per year**, which were largely used for urban domestic service, public works, and early tobacco cultivation.

The 1762 Inflection Point

The commercial trajectory of Havana changed during the **Seven Years' War**. In the summer of 1762, British forces captured Havana after a grueling siege. During their eleven-month occupation, British merchants dismantled Spain's restrictive trade monopolies, declared Havana a free port, and integrated Cuba into the British transatlantic trading network.

[Havana's 1762 Commercial Shock]

Spanish Mercantilism (Pre-1762) —► ~500–800 captives/year (Strictly controlled)

British Occupation (1762–1763) —► 4,000+ captives in 11 months (Unprecedented surge)

Post-1763 Spanish Reforms —► Shift to large-scale sugar monoculture

During this brief eleven-month window, British traders imported more than **4,000 enslaved Africans** to Havana—a volume that exceeded a decade of legal trade under the old Spanish system. This influx of labor, combined with the mass importation of industrial boiling equipment, permanently altered the Cuban elite's economic goals. When Havana was returned to Spain in 1763 in exchange for Florida, King Carlos III instituted the *Reformas Borbónicas* (Bourbon Reforms). Recognizing the immense profitability of the British model, the Spanish Crown lowered duties on slave imports and encouraged the expansion of large-scale sugar plantations (*ingenios*). By 1770, Havana had evolved from a strategic naval port into an aggressive plantation economy, setting off a century of mass human importation that would make Cuba the world's leading sugar producer.

2. The Financial Crucible: Liverpool and the Logistical Machinery of Transport (1660–1770)

While Havana and Veracruz functioned as entry points for captive labor, Liverpool evolved into the world's premier organizer and financier of that trade. In 1660, Liverpool was a minor, regional port on the River Mersey, overshadowed by Bristol and London. By 1770, it had become an industrial and commercial powerhouse, controlling over 80% of the British slave trade and more than 40% of the entire European transatlantic market.

[The Liverpool Triangular Trade Loop]

Liverpool (Manufactured goods, metals, textiles) —► West African Coast

West African Coast (Enslaved Africans) —► Caribbean / Americas

Caribbean / Americas (Sugar, tobacco, cotton) —► Liverpool (Refining & Wealth)

The Mechanics of Capital Accumulation

Liverpool's commercial growth was driven by its unique geography and aggressive local merchant strategies. Unlike London, where deep-seated corporate monopolies like the Royal African Company restricted individual trade, Liverpool's merchant market was decentralized, entrepreneurial, and highly flexible.

The opening of the **Thomas Steers wet dock in 1715**—the world's first commercial wet dock—allowed ships to load and unload regardless of the Mersey's extreme tides, drastically cutting turnaround times and shipping costs.

Furthermore, Liverpool was uniquely close to Britain's emerging industrial heartlands. Merchants loaded their ships with Manchester textiles, Staffordshire pottery, Birmingham firearms, and copper sheets from North Wales. These goods were precisely what West African elites demanded in exchange for captives.

Statistical Scale of the Liverpool Slave Trade

The scale of Liverpool's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade can be tracked through port clearing records and the database of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Voyage Project:

Era / Decade	Average Annual Slaving Voyages	Estimated Captives Transported per Decade
1720–1729	12 to 15	~35,000
1740–1749	35 to 40	~90,000
1660–1770 (Total)	Over 100 per year by 1770	~1.5 million captives total (1700–1807)

The Local Demographic Anomaly

Crucially, Liverpool's immense wealth was built on a trade that left almost no visible demographic footprint within the city itself. British common law and the lack of a agricultural plantation economy meant that enslaved Africans were rarely brought to the English mainland.

By 1770, out of a total population of roughly 35,000, Liverpool home to only a few hundred black residents, who were primarily employed as aristocratic domestic servants, free sailors, or dock workers. Instead, Liverpool's demographic impact was felt across the Atlantic, as its ships supplied the workforces of Jamaica, Barbados, Virginia, and eventually Cuba. The profits from this human trafficking flowed back into the northwest of England, funding the canals, banks, and early factories that drove the Industrial Revolution.

3. The Continental Fringe: Montreal and the Intersection of Fur and Indigenous Captivity (1660–1770)

Montreal presents a sharp contrast to the maritime, plantation-oriented economies of the Atlantic coast. Situated deep within the North American interior at the confluence of the Saint Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers, Montreal was the economic engine of New France until the British Conquest of 1760. Its commercial expansion was driven not by sugar or silver, but by the global demand for beaver pelts and other furs.

[The Montreal Inland Trade Dynamic]

European Trade Goods (Kettles, blankets, firearms) —► Interior Indigenous Networks

Interior Indigenous Networks (Furs & Captives/*Panis*) —► Montreal Merchants

The Institutional and Legal Reality of Canadian Slavery

Slavery in Montreal was formally institutionalized under French colonial rule through the **De Meulles Memorandum of 1689** and Louis XIV's subsequent royal permissions, which were later confirmed by the **Intendant Raudot Ordinance of 1709**. This ordinance explicitly legalized the absolute ownership of both African and Indigenous captives.

When Montreal surrendered to the British in September 1760, the French merchant elite took careful steps to protect their human property. Article 47 of the **Articles of Capitulation of Montreal** explicitly stated:

"The Negroes and panis of both sexes shall remain in their quality of slaves, in the possession of the French and Canadians, to whom they belong; their masters shall be at liberty to keep them in their service in the colony, or to sell them."

Demographic Distinctiveness: The Dominance of the *Panis*

The demographic profile of enslavement in Montreal differed from any other city in this study because it relied primarily on the captivity of Indigenous people rather than Africans. In Canadian historical records, these individuals were universally referred to as *Panis* (a corruption of the name of the Pawnee nation, though it was applied loosely to captives from many western plains tribes).

Quantitative Breakdown of Montreal Enslavement (Pre-1770)

Historical reconstructions of parish records, wills, and bills of sale by scholars like Marcel Trudel reveal clear trends in Montreal's slave population between 1660 and 1770:

- **Total Documented Enslaved Population:** Roughly **4,000 individuals** were legally held in New France during this era, with more than **2,500 located in Montreal** and its surrounding agricultural dependencies.
- **The Demographic Split:** Approximately **65%** of the enslaved population in Montreal was **Indigenous (*Panis*)**, while **35%** was of **African descent**.
- **The African Pipeline:** Enslaved Africans in Montreal were highly expensive luxury assets. Because Montreal was frozen out of maritime trade for half the year, it had no direct ties to the transatlantic slave trade. Instead, Africans were brought in small numbers as contraband from the British colonies (New York and New England) or shipped from the French Caribbean via Louisbourg.

The Economic Function of Slaves in Montreal

Unlike the large workforces of Charleston or Havana, enslaved people in Montreal were integrated into an urban, mercantile economy. They were held in small numbers—usually one or two per household—by the political elite, wealthy fur merchants (*marchands-voyageurs*), and religious institutions like the Sulpician Order and the Grey Nuns.

Enslaved people worked as domestic servants, cooks, clerks, and dock laborers, maintaining the urban households that coordinated the fur trade. Ownership of an African or *Panis* slave along Saint-Paul Street was a key status symbol, signaling that a merchant had successfully converted the profits of the interior fur trade into permanent colonial status.

4. The Provisioning Nodes: Merchant Autonomy and Secondary Labor Markets in Manhattan and Philadelphia (1660–1770)

Between 1660 and 1770, the middle colonies of British North America developed a unique commercial ecosystem. Lacking the tropical climate required for lucrative cash crops like sugar or rice, Manhattan and Philadelphia built their economies around shipping, processing, and the "provisioning trade."

These cities became the agricultural breadbaskets of the Atlantic world, exporting flour, wheat, timber, and livestock to feed the enslaved workforces of the Caribbean. This indirect connection to the plantation complex generated substantial local capital and shaped a distinct model of urban enslavement.

[The Provisioning Trade Cycle]

Philadelphia / Manhattan —► Foodstuffs, Lumber, Livestock —► West Indies Plantations
West Indies Plantations —► Specie, Molasses, Small Slave Parcels —► Phila. / Manhattan

Manhattan: From Dutch Frontier to British Maritime Hub

Following the 1664 transition from the Dutch New Netherland to the British Province of New York, Manhattan experienced rapid commercial growth. The city's merchants quickly realized that the fastest way to accumulate wealth was to supply the British and French West Indies.

Demographic Fluctuations and Slave Re-exportation

Manhattan's involvement with slavery was both deep and highly visible. Unlike Philadelphia, New York merchants frequently engaged in direct transatlantic slave voyages, particularly through elite families like the Livingstons and the Waltons.

However, the majority of captives arrived in Manhattan via secondary coastal trades from the Caribbean.

[Manhattan's Urban Labor Profile (1740s)]

Total Population: ~10,000 to 12,000

Enslaved Black Population: ~2,000 (15–20% of total)

Primary Roles: Maritime dockwork, cooperage, shipwrighting, domestic service

- **The Scale of Presence:** By 1740, enslaved people made up between **15% and 20% of Manhattan's total population**, making New York home to one of the largest urban slave populations north of the Mason-Dixon line.
- **The 1711 Slave Market:** In 1711, the New York City Common Council established an official, Wall Street-based slave market where captains and merchants could rent or sell enslaved laborers by the day or week. This market operated continuously until 1762, demonstrating how deeply captive labor was integrated into the city's daily financial life.
- **The 1741 Conspiracy Panic:** The anxieties of hosting a large, concentrated slave population boiled over in the **New York Slave Insurrection of 1741**. Following a series of mysterious fires across Manhattan, the city erupted in a wave of panic. Based on thin evidence, 13 African men were burned at the stake, 17 were hanged, and over 70 were exiled to the Caribbean, highlighting the intense racial tensions underlying Manhattan's commercial success.

Philadelphia: Capital Accumulation and the Quaker Paradox

Founded by William Penn in 1682, Philadelphia grew faster than almost any other city in the British Empire. By 1770, it was the largest and wealthiest city in North America, with a population approaching 28,000. Its commercial elite, initially dominated by Quaker merchant families, built an economic empire on the systematic export of grain and lumber to the Caribbean.

The Demographic Contraction of Philadelphia Enslavement

The history of enslavement in Philadelphia is defined by a sharp conflict between economic self-interest and religious morality. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Philadelphia merchants bought and sold enslaved Africans to build the city's early infrastructure. By 1720, enslaved people made up roughly **10% of the local population**.

However, the demographic trend in Philadelphia diverged significantly from Manhattan between 1750 and 1770:

[Philadelphia Enslaved Population Trend]

1720: ~10% of total population (Urban infrastructure labor)

1750: Radical drop due to German/Irish indentured labor influx

1758: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting bans Quakers from slave trade

- **The Indentured Labor Alternative:** In the 1740s and 1750s, Philadelphia became the primary port of entry for thousands of German and Scotch-Irish redemptioners and indentured servants. This massive influx of cheap white labor reduced the urban demand for expensive, lifelong enslaved workers.
- **The Quaker Abolitionist Turn:** Led by radical reformers like John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, the Society of Friends underwent a profound moral shift. In **1758, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting** issued a formal condemnation of the slave trade, telling members to clear their households of slave labor or face disownment.
- **The Structural Paradox:** While the visible presence of enslaved people on Philadelphia's docks dropped to under 4% by 1770, the city's merchant class remained structurally dependent on the slave system. The capital that funded Philadelphia's banks, insurance houses, and brick mansions was still extracted from the Caribbean provisioning trade. Philadelphia fed the plantation complex, meaning its financial growth was fundamentally tied to Atlantic slavery regardless of local ownership rates.

5. The Southern Plantocracy: Staple Monocultures and Demographics in Charleston and the Chesapeake (1660–1770)

The final model of Atlantic commercial development is found in the southern mainland colonies, represented by Charleston and the emerging urban landscape of Richmond. Here, merchant markets did not exist to service fleets, finance shipping, or trade provisions. Instead, they were built to directly manage and export massive agricultural cash crops produced by an enslaved majority.

[The Southern Plantation Pipeline]

Direct West African Slaving Ships —► Charleston / Virginia Rivers

Enslaved Labor Force —► Rice, Indigo, and Tobacco Production

Cash Crop Exports —► Direct Transatlantic Wealth Accumulation

Charleston: The Caribbeanized Lowcountry Mega-Importer

Founded in 1670 by English planters from Barbados, Charleston (Charles Town) was explicitly designed from its inception to be a slave-based plantation economy. By 1720, the introduction of **rice cultivation**, followed in the 1740s by **indigo** (thanks to Eliza Lucas Pinckney's agricultural experiments), transformed the South Carolina Lowcountry into the wealthiest agricultural region on the continent.

The Demographics of the African Majority

Charleston was the only mainland North American port that functioned as a major, high-volume direct destination for transatlantic slaving ships, mirroring the labor models of the Caribbean.

Parameter	Historical Data (1700–1770)
Total Transatlantic Arrivals	~100,000 enslaved Africans landed at Charleston's Sullivan's Island quarantine station.
Provincial Demographics	By 1708, South Carolina became the first British colony with a black majority . By 1740, enslaved people made up over 60% of the entire provincial population .
The Gullah-Geechee Genesis	The heavy concentration of captives from specific regions, particularly the Rice Coast of West Africa (Sierra Leone and Senegambia) , allowed enslaved communities to retain deep linguistic and cultural traditions, creating the distinct Gullah-Geechee culture.

Economic Concentration and the Pestilence Landscape

The immense profits generated by rice and indigo created a highly concentrated planter elite. Because the swampy rice fields were hotbeds for malaria and yellow fever, wealthy planters abandoned their estates for most of the year and moved to grand townhouses in Charleston.

This turned the city into a consumer market for European luxuries. Charleston's merchants operated hand-in-hand with the planters, managing the export of rice and the import of human labor. The city's financial life was entirely dependent on maintaining this violent racial hierarchy, an anxiety that was validated by the **Stono Rebellion of 1739**, the largest slave uprising in the colonial mainland.

Richmond: The Fall-Line Node and the Consignment System

Prior to 1770, Richmond was in the early stages of its urban development. Founded by William Byrd II in 1737 and incorporated as a town in 1742, Richmond was strategically located at the fall line of the James River—the furthest inland point that ocean-going cargo ships could navigate.

The Chesapeake Consignment Market vs. The Scottish Factor System

Unlike Charleston, which concentrated its economic power in a single urban port, Virginia's early tobacco economy was highly decentralized. Wealthy planters along the tidewater rivers maintained their own deep-water docks, shipping tobacco directly to London merchants through the **consignment system**.

However, between 1740 and 1770, the commercial landscape of Virginia shifted:

[The Virginia Tobacco Trade Evolution]

Tidewater Planter Elite —► Direct London Consignment System (Decentralized)

Piedmont Small Farmers —► Richmond Fall-Line Factor System (Centralized)

As tobacco cultivation pushed westward into the Piedmont region, smaller farmers could no longer access ocean-going vessels directly. Richmond emerged to fill this gap. Scottish merchant houses bypassed the traditional London consignment system by stationing permanent agents, known as **factors**, along the Richmond fall line. These factors bought tobacco directly from inland farmers in exchange for British manufactured goods and credit.

Demographic Maturation and the Domestic Transition

Demographically, the Chesapeake region underwent an important transition during this era. While Virginia imported massive numbers of enslaved Africans via the York and James Rivers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, by 1750 the direct transatlantic slave trade to Virginia had slowed.

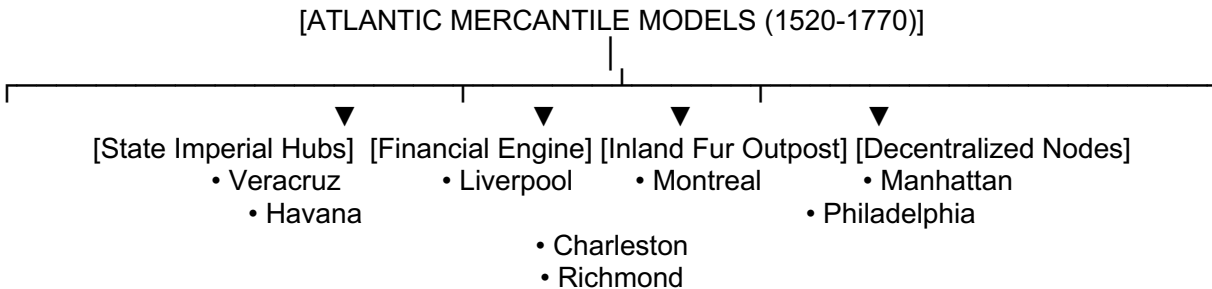
Unlike the deadly rice swamps of Charleston or sugar fields of Havana, the enslaved population in Virginia's tobacco fields experienced natural population growth. By 1770, Richmond was evolving from a frontier trading post into a major domestic hub. It was uniquely positioned to organize and redistribute a native-born enslaved workforce from the old Tidewater estates into the developing Piedmont interior, laying the groundwork for its nineteenth-century role as the largest domestic slave market in the Upper South.

6. Comparative Synthesis: Structural Models of Atlantic Mercantilism

When we analyze these eight cities together from 1520 to 1770, we see that the early modern Atlantic economy was not a uniform system, but a complex network of distinct urban models. Each city's development was shaped by its imperial framework, geographic positioning, and specific labor demands.

Institutional Frameworks of Extraction

The commercial strategies of these nodes can be categorized into four distinct structural models:



1. **State-Centralized Imperial Hubs (Veracruz and Havana):** These ports were designed to protect and concentrate the wealth of the Spanish Crown. Their involvement in the slave trade was managed through state-sanctioned monopolies (*Asientos*) and tied to strategic imperial defense rather than open-market commercialism.
2. **The Logistical and Financial Engine (Liverpool):** This port operated as a pure coordinator of capital and transport. By financing and building the infrastructure of human trafficking, Liverpool accumulated vast amounts of liquid capital without altering its local demographic profile.
3. **The Continental Fur Outpost (Montreal):** Operating far from the plantation complex, Montreal shows that colonial mercantile ambition could adapt to use a unique blend of Indigenous (*Panis*) and African domestic labor to sustain an interior trade network.
4. **Decentralized Commercial and Agricultural Nodes (Manhattan, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Richmond):** These British North American ports operated with high local autonomy, exploiting gaps in the Navigation Acts. Whether by directly building plantation systems (Charleston), coordinating regional tobacco sales (Richmond), or feeding the Caribbean through the provisioning trade (Manhattan and Philadelphia), their economic growth was structurally dependent on Atlantic slavery.

Conclusion

By 1770, the historical records of these eight cities reveal a deeply interconnected Atlantic world where no merchant market existed in a vacuum. The silver ships clearing Veracruz, the sugar fleets assembling in Havana, the slave vessels constructed in Liverpool, the fur canoes arriving in Montreal, the flour brigs leaving Philadelphia and Manhattan, and the tobacco and rice ships departing Richmond and Charleston were all parts of a single, global economic system.

At the center of this entire system was the commodification of human beings. The diversity of these urban spaces—from the rice fields of the South Carolina Lowcountry to the counting houses of the English northwest and the urban households of French Canada—demonstrates how easily early modern capital could adapt to exploit captive human labor across different geographies, climates, and imperial structures.