

Session 1

Road to Civil Rights – Setting the Scene

Slavery

Slavery is as old as civilisation but European enslavement of Africans began in the 14th century. Initially African slaves were used as servants for the rich. The Spanish were the first Europeans to become involved in the slave-trade. The English became involved in the 16th century when Francis Drake and John Hawkins began capturing people in Sierra Leone and selling them as slaves to Spanish settlers in the Caribbean. By the end of the 18th century Britain was the main player in the slave trade. The expansion of the slave trade from Africa was driven by the need to recruit labourers to exploit the natural wealth to be found in the Caribbean.

The “Trade Triangle” involved British ships taking goods such as guns, gunpowder and textiles to Africa, where they were exchanged for slaves. The slaves were then transported to the Caribbean when they were sold for products such as sugar, tobacco and cotton which were then brought back to Britain.

Slavery in America

In the 17th century Europeans began to establish settlements in the Americas. The division of the land into smaller units under private ownership became known as the plantation system. Plantation owners required labourers and slaves became an important part of the workforce. Crops grown on these plantations such as tobacco, rice, sugar cane and cotton were labour intensive. Slaves were in the fields from sunrise to sunset and at harvest time they did an eighteen-hour day. Women worked the same hours as the men and pregnant women were expected to continue until their child was born.

The death-rate amongst slaves was high. To replace their losses, plantation owners encouraged the slaves to have children. Child-bearing started around the age of thirteen, and by twenty the women slaves would be expected to have four or five children. To encourage child-bearing some plantation owners promised women slaves their freedom after they had produced fifteen children. This was a promise rarely kept.

The plantation owners in America had complete freedom to buy and sell slaves. State laws gave slave marriages no legal protection. In these

transactions husbands could be separated from their wives and children from their mothers. Housing for slaves was basic and overcrowded and, in the southern states, education was actively discouraged.

Liverpool and the Slave Trade

Liverpool was late in entering the slave trade but she quickly surpassed London and Bristol. By the 1740s she was the number one slave port in the whole of Europe. Overall, Liverpool ships transported half of the 3 million Africans carried across the Atlantic by British slavers.

Although Liverpool merchants engaged in many other trades and commodities, involvement in the slave trade pervaded the whole port. Nearly all the principal merchants and citizens of Liverpool, including many of the mayors, were involved.

Liverpool and the Abolition of the Slave Trade

On 22 May 1787, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed, consisting of nine Quakers and three Evangelical Christians. William Wilberforce became their voice in Parliament. There had been individuals and groups lobbying for a change in the law for a while. There was also a pro-slavery lobby which was backed by merchants who feared for their livelihood. Liverpool had a sizeable number of people arguing to keep the slave trade. There were also some who actively worked to abolish the trade such as William Roscoe, Edward Rushton and William Rathbone.

The slave trade was abolished in 1807 in Britain and slaves in all British colonies were freed in 1833.