

## AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

### Teaching Scholars Program

#### SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

##### **Title: Why Sugar?**

**Primary Investigative Question:** How did the demand for sugar transform the culture of the Atlantic World during the time 1500-1800?

Sugar, the primary crop of the British West Indies, dominated the economy during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This highly specialized commodity, coupled with its by-products, rum and molasses, transformed the culture and populations of indigenous groups of people. The monoculture of sugar promoted a Triangular Trade relationship between the Caribbean, the American Colonies, Great Britain, and Africa. The global consumer demand for consumption kindled a transformation in production and distribution. The lessons created for this unit will engage students in an important way to study Atlantic history.

##### **Contextual Essay**

The rise of the new Atlantic history is one of the most important new historiographical developments in years. Modern scholars grapple with the idea of moving outside of one's comfort zone, where the primary focus of a regional history is no longer all encompassing. The United States has always depended upon its transactions with other nations for commodities, cultural values, and populations. This surge of interest in the study of Atlantic history is a kaleidoscope of the movement and exchange of ideas, people, and culture.

In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries royalty chartered enterprises thus expanding the British Atlantic World. Their history is a bookend for the modern British Empire. The right to occupy, or claim land, as well as to establish governments, was intrinsic to charters in America. Such charters, attractive for the Crown as well as investors, challenged Iberian claims to territory. The Crown diplomatically defended ventures in areas such as the Leeward Islands and in Barbados.

The Atlantic, unlike a nation-state, whose borders shift continuously, has an inbuilt geography. Interest in studying the Atlantic is as natural as the ocean itself. This history is as an interchange of ideas, cultures, and ethnicity. Transnational and sub-national groups such as merchants, absentee landlords, African slaves, and indentured servants are crucial actors in the production of the Atlantic world. They provide a multitude of subjects and perspectives to consider when exploring the evolution of the British West Indies.

Migration was a normal aspect of the life cycle. Patterns of migration from Britain and Ireland shaped migration across the Atlantic. While it occurred as a common response to one's personal ambitions or economic hardships, the idea of permanence could be problematic. Migration one experiences at the onset of marriage, the acceptance of a new colony to govern or the migration of a group sent to work in the sugar cane fields of the West Indies brought people from remote parts of the British empire into contact with each other. Migration included both those who participated in chain migration and those who arrived in the West Indies in chains.

British Sojourners, an elite group of white islanders, spent their formative years receiving an education in England. Planters spent large amounts of money generated through the production of sugar to provide the comforts of home for their children. These individuals intended to return to England and identified themselves culturally as British. The wealth spawned through the production of sugar and its byproducts restrained the creation of a strong infrastructure. Jamaica, unlike Spanish Hispaniola, was a frontier settlement prior to the American Revolutionary War. Barbados, a British colony, maintained a high proportion of whites who operated small or middling sugar plantations. A windward position of the island prevented fewer attacks from occurring. This fact, coupled with a stronger infrastructure, fueled a Creole state of mind in eighteenth-century British Caribbean.

White indentured servitude appeared in the Americas in 1620. Initially, used as a device to transport Europeans to British colonies, it bound hundreds of English workers as emigrants for servitude overseas. Transportation costs varied from colony to colony, which certainly affected the rate at which one could repay the loan. Indentures were transferable, whereby masters could freely buy and sell the remaining terms of their servants in response to changes that occurred in the economy. Regions that depended heavily on white servants for labor needs soon turned to black slaves as a principle means of labor. The mid-seventeenth century saw an increase for the demand of labor with the cultivation of sugar. The harsh working conditions experienced by field laborers made Englishmen avoid the Caribbean.

The European demand for goods laid the foundation for the Anglo-American domination of the modern world. Europeans acquired technology, goods, and labor during this conquest for tropical groceries. While the mercantilist paradigm, one featured traditionally in U.S. History books is classically accepted, the concept of Triangular Trade must be infused within a study of the British West Indies. American colonies supplied raw materials; England transferred these materials into serviceable goods, while West Africa provided the labor to harvest these materials. The Atlantic was a coastal community where people and goods were traded with little or no regard for imperial boundaries. The cultivation of sugar intensified the Atlantic Basin domination.

A discussion of triangular trade cannot occur without the acknowledgement of the transatlantic slave trade. The trade was phenomenally profitable as ships were able to sail full on each leg of the journey. Historically, trade occurs when a region overproduces a commodity. Trade is a mechanism used to rectify imbalances between regions. Sugar and slaves were two salient characteristics of Barbados in the seventeenth century. Death, a demographic result of an imbalance of genders, races and social classes, was the third characteristic.

Great Britain's involvement in slavery began in 1562. Barbados experienced high mortality rates, which necessitated an ever-increasing supply of slaves from West Africa in order to prevent the labor force from dwindling. This company delivered nearly half of the 100,000 slaves to Barbados. Widespread participation by the British was crucial for the development of sugar plantations in the West Indies. The importation of African slaves into the Americas was pivotal to the British vision for national expansion.

Sugar was already a tried and true commodity when Europe began to colonize the Americas. Christopher Columbus, on his second voyage to Hispaniola, carried sugar cane across the Atlantic. The climate of the Caribbean, ideal for cultivating sugar began to flourish by the end of the colonial period. Planters adopted innovations in cultivation with the advent of technology that Barbadians borrow from the Brazilians. Plantation production moved from a diversified culture to a sugar monoculture. Small farms amalgamated to large plantations while labor transitioned from free to slave labor. Settlements evolved from sparsely to densely populated, while indigenous people dwindled and slave populations grew.

Sugar dominated the export business of plantation economies in the British West Indies more than another crop. Sugar and its by-products, rum and molasses, comprised approximately 93 percent of the total exports of Barbados. The monoculture of sugar was reflected in Barbados as well as other Leeward Island sugar producers when everything else came second to this cash crop. The colony of Jamaica, unlike Barbados, had a more diversified economy. Much of the land was not suitable for producing just sugar; the coastline was unsuitable for harboring boats.

The sugar revolution, which generated a massive boost to the Atlantic Slave trade, engineered a leg of trade with New England of molasses and sugar. Sugar convoys, an outward voyage of four man-of-war ships, sailed from November to January while utilizing winds and currents to their advantage. A ship sailing from Plymouth, England could easily reach Madeira within twenty-six days. London's presence was felt though out the Caribbean as investors raised capital, distributed goods and influenced the government in favor of the production of sugar cane. The advent of the sugar revolution forever changed the palate of Europeans.

The Molasses Act of 1733 passed at the insistence of large plantation owners. Molasses from the British West Indies was priced higher than that of other Caribbean communities. The islands had little or no need for large quantities of lumber and fish so frequently traded by American colonists. While Parliament did not prohibit the trading with non-British Islands, an attempt to levy a large tax for trading did occur. Molasses, a staple for the diet of New Englanders and the basis for the production of rum, was never taxed effectively. The Sugar Act, also referred to as the American Revenue Act or the American Duties Act was passed by Parliament on April 5, 1764 for generating revenue from the colonies.

The American colonies were far from the most important of Britain's twenty-six colonies. This honor would be bestowed upon the sugar islands, particularly that of Barbados and Jamaica. The history of the Americas is one that encompasses the story of people, commodities, cultural practices, and ideas. Transnational and sub-national groups such as merchants, absentee landlords, African slaves, and indentured servants are crucial actors in the production of the Atlantic world. They provide a multitude of subjects and perspectives to consider when exploring the evolution of the British West Indies.

The project, “Why Sugar?” is a unique opportunity to engage students in the process of becoming Atlanticists. When asked to contemplate the travesty of slavery, American students may find it surprising to learn that our country’s involvement was the direct result of Triangular Trade. History is not merely a story, but is a study where one must probe, question, and analyze what is known. The concepts that students will have about the British Atlantic world, will reflect the state of their knowledge. This knowledge will engage students in the integration of the movement of ideas, people, and cultural encounters.

The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800 presents a wealth of investigative opportunities for students. An abundance of scholarly research , along with web based resources, reflect a genuine interest on the part of the academic world to reach the general public with the idea that we are all interconnect through ideas and movement. The history of our community did not develop in a vacuum, but rather through a tangled web of interaction with our Atlantic neighbors.

## Annotated Bibliography – “Why Sugar?”

Armitage, David, (2002).

Three Concepts of Atlantic History. In Armitage, David & Braddick Michael J. (Eds.), *The British Atlantic World 1500-1800*, (pp 11-27). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

*Armitage’s concepts of Atlantic history aides ones understanding the relationship between the movement of people, ideas and goods. It contributes to the understanding of development of the British Empire. The term Atlanticists is a new concept to many scholars.*

Darity, William Jr., (1992).

British Industry and the West Indies Plantations.

In Inikori, Joseph E. & Engerman, Stanley L. (Eds.),

*The Atlantic Slave Trade, Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*. (pp 247-279). Durham: Duke University Press.

*This article provides detail regarding the development of West Indian plantations and the British Industry. Exportation in terms of the relationship between slave trade profits to the national income is explored. British participation in the slave trade was essential to the development of the West Indies.*

Emert, Phyllis Raybin. (1970). *Colonial Triangular Trade: An Economy Based on Human Misery*, Perspectives on Histories series.

*This anthology of primary and secondary sources is a compelling look at the West Indian slave trade. Triangular trade illustrates America’s involvement on the world’s stage. This resource is suitable as informational text for ages 10-14 year.*

Galensen, David W. (1982).

The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Barbados Market.

*The Journal of Economic History*, 42 (3) 491-511.

*This article explores the monoculture of sugar in terms of a demanding a slave labor force. It provides details regarding the Royal African Company as well as characteristics regarding sugar and slaves in Barbados.*

Galensen, David W. (1984).

The Rise and Fall of Indentured Servitude in the Americas: An Economic Analysis. *The Journal of Economic History*, 44 (1) 1-26.

*Information regarding the cultivation of sugar and the increase of labor is discussed in this article. Concrete details regarding the process for becoming indentured along with the history of indentured servitude is explored.*

## Annotated Bibliography – “Why Sugar?”

Galloway, J.H. (1985).

Tradition and Innovation in the American Sugar Industry, c. 1500-1800:

An Explanation. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 75 (3) 334-351.

*The evolution of the American sugar industry from 1500-1800 is explored in this article. The innovations of planters as well as the emergence are explained as well as the debates in plantation historiography. Galloway proposes the development of a planter class as a hypothesis.*

Games, Alison, (2002).

Migration. In Armitage, David & Braddick, Michael J. (Eds.),

The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800. (pp 31-50). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

*Ideas regarding migration provided insight and clarification in terms of the varied reasons for movement throughout the Atlantic world. Migration is an integral component in understanding how each part of triangular trade relates.*

Higman, B.W. (2000).

The Sugar Revolution. *Economic History Review New Series* 53, (2) 213-236.

*Higman's work identified six central elements in the sugar revolution. He also discussed how the sugar revolution generated a massive boost to the Atlantic Slave trade. His thoughts regarding how the sugar revolution pointed to the transforming power of a single commodity was powerful. His ideas concur with O'Shaughnessy's thoughts about the power of sugar.*

Mintz, Sidney W. (1985).

Sweetness and Power, The Place of Sugar in Modern History.

New York: Penguin Books.

*Mintz' work provides an in-depth history of food, sugar production, and consumption in relationship to eating and being. The role of sugar as power establishes concepts that are an integral component to the objectives of this project. Sugar is considered in terms of how it has altered work patterns, eating habits and the diet of modern individuals.*

O'Shaughnessy, Andrew Jackson. (2000). An Empire Divided, The American Revolution and the British Caribbean. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

*This work provides explicit details regarding the relationship between sugar and its by-products, rum and molasses. Details regarding a sugar dominated monoculture help to understand how it reached its supreme expression in Barbados where everything was sacrificed for sugar. The chapter regarding British Sojourners helps one to understand why the sugar colonies did not develop as fully as the American colonies.*

## Annotated Bibliography – “Why Sugar?”

Shammas, Carol, (2008).

America, the Atlantic, and Global Consumer Demand, 1500-1800.

In Reichard, Gary W. & Dickson, Ted (Eds.),

America on the World Stage, A Global Approach to U.S. History. (pp 2-11).

Chicago: The University of Illinois Press.

*Shammas' article is the foundation for this scholarly research. Core ideas and fundamental ideology prompted further exploration as well as the basis for the primary investigation question.*

Shammas, Carol, (2000).

The Creation of the British Atlantic World.

In Mc Cusher, John J. & Morgan, Kenneth (Eds.), The Early Modern Atlantic Economy.

(pp 163-185). New York: Cambridge University Press.

*Shammas further explores concepts regarding the impact of topical goods on the European market in this article. Ideas regarding consumption for sugar, molasses and rum are discussed in relationship between the Empire and consumption further strengthening the concept of Triangular trade and transnational relationships.*

Sheridan, Richard. (1974)

Sugar and Slavery. An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623-1775.

Canoe Press, University of the West Indies, Jamaica.

*Sheridan's work provided great insight in the economic history of the British West Indies. His work is of great relevance to the understanding of the relationship between slave and the monoculture of sugar. Sheridan's research is referenced several times in writings other historians.*