Sugar and Slavery: Molasses to Rum to Slaves
By Jean M. West

What's not to like about sugar? On the average, modern Americans consume 100 pounds of sugar per year. It's sweet, and it gives a big energy boost. Well, yes, there are calories, cavities, and diabetes, but, in moderation, sugar is harmless ... right? In 1700, English consumption empire-wide was about four pounds of sugar per person per year. That certainly seems moderate. Yet in 1700 alone, approximately 25,000 Africans were enslaved and transported across the Atlantic Ocean. Up to two-thirds of these slaves were bound for sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Brazil to produce "White Gold." Over the course of the 380 years of the Atlantic slave trade, millions of Africans were enslaved to satisfy the world's sweet tooth. A sugar by-product, molasses, was distilled into rum and sent to Africa to purchase more slaves--this is the infamous Triangle Trade in the history books. Sugar's most bitter legacy is that the labor of slaves fueled the enslavement of even more Africans.

Sugar Comes to the New World

Ironically, sugar cane is not a plant native to the Americas. It is a perennial grass whose tropical species seems to have originated in New Guinea, and subtropical species in India. During the invasion of India in 326 B.C., Alexander the Great's soldiers became the first Europeans to see sugar cane; honey was the primary sweetener of the Western world at the time. Arab traders and Moorish conquerors spread the plant throughout the Mediterranean region, introducing it in Spain around 714 A.D.

Centuries later, under Spanish sponsorship, Christopher Columbus is believed to have carried sugar cane stem cuttings from the Canary Islands to Hispaniola on his second voyage, planting the seed-cane in Santo Domingo by December 1493. Subsequent Spanish colonizers spread the crop to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. The Portuguese introduced sugar cane to Brazil and received shipments of sugar from Pernambuco by 1526. Sugar was introduced in the 17th century by the Dutch to the Guyanas, the British to Barbados, the French to Martinique and Saint-Domingue (Haiti), and the Swedes and Danes to other islands of the Antilles. Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, the first governor of French Louisiana, and French Jesuits both introduced sugar cane from Saint-Domingue to New Orleans in the 1700s; however, the first commercially successful sugar planter in Louisiana was Etienne de Boré, who produced around 100,000 pounds of sugar in 1795.

European settlers also brought with them the methods for growing and harvesting sugar cane. Cane was planted by plowing furrows spaced about a yard's width apart and then placing seed-cane stems flat in the furrows at one-yard intervals. In some cases, seed-cane stems were planted in holes to a depth of six inches. The first crop took from 9-24 months to mature, depending on the climate (sugar can be killed by freezing temperatures), but produced crops for three to six years before declining production yield made it necessary to replant the crop. Yield varied widely depending on climate, from 25 to 100 tons of sugar cane per acre. Jamaican planters might expect a hogshead (around 1600 pounds) of refined sugar to be produced per acre; a typical plantation was around 750 acres in size. The mature sugar cane plant ranges from 4-12 feet in height; its soft interior contains the juice with the highest calorie content of the plant world.

Along with seed-cane and cultivation techniques, Spanish colonists brought the technology to produce sugar. Cane must be cut when it is fully ripened. To release the cane syrup (juice) from the sugar cane, it must be immediately ground in mills, usually located near the cane fields. The earliest mills were probably round millstones, set upright, pushed by humans or animals. The first shipment of milled sugar from Hispaniola occurred around 1516. Four years later, a water-powered mill that ground the cane between two horizontal rollers was built in Hispaniola. In South America around 1600, a new type of sugar mill was invented that used three vertical rollers; this was the typical mill used on sugar plantations throughout the New World during the colonial period. Modern mills can produce 50 pounds of juice from 100 pounds of cane.

The extraction of sucrose from the juice and its crystallization into solid sugar required that the juice be cleaned by adding lime and straining the impurities from juice. The clarified sugar syrup was boiled in a series of kettles until it crystallized, producing granular sugar and molasses. Modern refining techniques produce roughly ten pounds of raw sugar (brown sugar), or 9.5 pounds of refined sugar from 100 pounds of cane. Molasses is the left-over syrup out of which no more sugar crystals can be refined; the same 100 pounds of cane that produce ten pounds of sugar will also produce 2.7 pounds of molasses.

Slavery and Sugar

Sugar planting, harvesting, and processing is tiring, hot, dangerous work and requires a large number of workers whose work habits must be intensely coordinated and controlled. From the very beginning of sugar cultivation in the New World, there were not enough European settlers to satisfy the labor requirements for profitable sugar plantations. Native Americans were enslaved to work on the earliest sugar plantations, especially in Brazil. Those who could escaped from the fields, but many more died due to European diseases, such as smallpox and scarlet fever, and the harsh working conditions on the sugar plantations. A Catholic priest named Bartolomé de las Casas asked King Ferdinand of Spain to protect the Taino Indians of the Caribbean by importing African slaves instead. So, around 1505, enslaved Africans were first brought to the New World. For the next three and a half centuries, slaves of African origin provided most of the labor for the sugar industry in the Americas.

A healthy, adult slave was expected to be able to plow, plant, and harvest five acres of sugar. Sugar planting was back-breaking work. Lines of slaves, men, women and children, moved across the fields, row by row, hand-planting thousands of seed-cane stems.

Between 5,000 and 8,000 pieces had to be planted to produce one acre of sugar cane. Workdays in the fields typically lasted from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. with a noon-time break of perhaps two hours.
During harvest, field slaves worked even longer hours, especially in Louisiana where workers raced against the weather to collect the harvest before the first frost and attacks by insects. Mature sugar cane's exterior skin is so hard that workers had to cut through the stem with cutlasses or machetes. They also had to stoop to cut the cane at ground level because the most sugary section of the cane is the lower stem. Harvesting cane was as backbreaking work as planting cane, and cuts from the sharp tools were common. Once the cane stalk was cut, slaves stripped any remaining leaves and stacked the cane. It then would be tied into bundles and loaded onto donkeys, wagons, or two-wheeled carts to be carried to the sugar mill. Throughout their work, overseers with whips supervised the field slaves.
Once the harvest began, it was essential to process the cane immediately. Slaves ran the sugar mills, feeding the stalks between giant rollers. Up to a dozen boys and men typically worked around the clock to process sugar, working with the stench of rotting cane in intense heat. As machinery grew more complex, with conveyor belts, Rillieux's sugar processing evaporator and centrifuges, the slaves working the sugar houses became increasingly skilled mechanics. Yet, it was not unusual for slaves to be injured or crushed when trapped and pulled into the rollers as they fed stalks into the mill or tried to untangle stalks from flywheels and gears.
Slaves also boiled the cane juice, ladling scum from the surface of the scalding liquid and then transferring it from kettle to kettle, reducing the syrup to crystals. Slaves routinely suffered burns during this process, often referred to as the "Jamaica Train," and the heat in the sugar houses was so intense that slaves were rotated out after four hours, their limbs swollen from the heat and humidity. Once the crystals formed, there was still heavy labor ahead. The harder the solid cakes of sugar were, the better the sugar quality, but the pieces had to be broken up with shovels, picks and crowbars. Finally, sugar was shoveled into hogsheads (wooden barrels) and packed solidly before the barrel holes were plugged with a piece of sugarcane. The sugarcane plug helped to siphon out the remaining molasses from the sugar in the hogshead; the molasses dripped onto a floor angled so it would drain into a trough or cistern. Then, the slaves would scoop molasses into barrels by hand. By the 1850s, the expected yield from each slave's labor was five hogsheads of sugar and 250 gallons of molasses.
During harvest, slaves worked day and night, especially in the mills and sugarhouses, so that there would be no bottlenecks in production. Shifts lasted up to 18 hours. Sugar production paused only as slaves cleaned out fireboxes or other equipment. Although some planters provided extra food and drink during the harvest and others encouraged competitions to boost production, sugar production was the result of coercion. Slaves in the sugar fields and mills were controlled by both the threat and use of deadly force.

<u>The Triangle Trade</u>

> *"Shall we dance to the sound of the profitable pound in Molasses and Rum and Slaves?"*
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> --Sherman Edwards, lyricist 1776

Sugar stands at the center of the Triangle Trade; it was the engine that drove the African Diaspora. Slaves of the Caribbean sugar plantations produced molasses that was transported to New England for distillation into rum that was shipped to Africa in exchange for the slaves who would endure the final leg of the triangle, the horrific Middle Passage to the sugar islands.
The origins of the word "rum," may come from sugar via the Latin word for sugar, "saccharum." Although the Spanish and Portuguese probably began distilling alcoholic beverages on their sugar plantations at an early date, the British in Barbados were producing rum by 1627. They fermented a gallon and a half of sugar cane molasses with yeast to create a "wash" that was distilled into a gallon of rum. An acre of sugar cane generated enough molasses by-product during the sugar-refining process to produce an average of 200 gallons of rum. However, owners of sugar plantations considered distilling to be too wasteful of labor and wood, which could be better used towards producing "white gold," sugar. A sugar house inventory from Bristol, England, in 1690 indicates a hogshead of raw sugar to be worth about £11 and a cask of molasses to be worth £3.

Great Britain's North American colonies had struggled from Jamestown onward with profitability. Sugar processing in the colonial era required large quantities of wood, a resource scarce on the islands of the Caribbean but abundant in New England. New Englanders began to trade wood for sugar and molasses. Around 1700, sugar refineries were erected in Baltimore and New York (sugar refining would be New York City's most profitable industry 1870-1917). However, European refiners dominated the market, so the manufacturers of the Northeast looked at molasses, sugar's by-product, for greater opportunities. Specifically, they distilled molasses into rum.
As early as 1664, the Dutch were distilling rum on Staten Island in New York; Boston's first rum distillery is recorded as operating in 1667. By the 1700s, New England distilleries were producing millions of gallons of cheap rum to supply traders with rum that could be exchanged for slaves. Once the slave ships arrived in Africa, merchants could buy adults for 110-130 gallons of rum or children for about 80 gallons. Rum cost as little to produce as five and a half pence per gallon; in 1746, a slave could be purchased for about £5 and auctioned in the West Indies for £30-80. Rhode Island alone dominated between 60-90 percent of the exchange rum trade with its Guinea Rum. Slave traders owned and operated 30 rum distilleries in Newport whose casks they loaded onto over 150 slave ships. It is estimated that the slave traders of the single city of Newport, Rhode Island, exchanged rum for over 106,000 Africans. Once brought to the islands, the enslaved would produce sugar, yielding molasses to distill into rum to exchange for more slaves, in a vicious cycle of profit.

Separating Sugar and Slavery

By the end of the 1700s, slaves were so synonymous with sugar that abolitionist groups attempted to convince people to stop using sugar to help end slavery. British abolitionist poet William Cowper was inspired in 1788 to write "The Negro's Complaint," in which he specifically condemns the sugar trade:

Why did all-creating Nature
Make the plant for which we toil?
Sighs must fan it, Tears must water,
Sweat of ours must dress the soil.
Think ye Masters, iron-hearted,
Lolling at your jovial Boards,
Think how many Backs have smarted
For the Sweets your Cane affords!

The East India Company promoted its sugar as an alternative to slave-produced West Indies sugar. In advertising, a company distributor "respectfully informs the Friends of Africa that she has on Sale an Assortment of Sugar Basins, handsomely labeled in Gold Letters: "East India Sugar not made by Slaves." The advertisements neglected to mention that the company used poorly paid, overworked Javanese and Indian laborers in the Far East to produce sugar.

By the late 1700s, expansion of Caribbean sugar plantations resulted in the flooding of the marketplace with sugar. Prices fell, reducing the profitability of the plantations. Profits shrank further as French sugar producers undercut the prices of British sugar producers and drove them out of business. In Africa, the devastating depopulation of the continent resulted in a shortage in the supply of slaves, forcing slave traders to pay more for slaves. Although sugar would not be as profitable for sugar cultivators in the New World as it had been before 1800, it would continue to be cultivated by African slaves until Brazil's emancipation of slaves in 1888.

The exception would be Haiti. In the late 1700s, the French colony of Saint-Domingue was one of the most important sugar producers in the world. It sent most of its raw brown sugar to France to be refined to meet the rising demand of French consumers; in doing so it became the wealthiest colony in the New World, wealthier than the 13 British colonies of North America combined. Substantial amounts of sugar, rum, and molasses went to non-French markets as well, sometimes as smuggled goods. Saint-Domingue's prosperity rested on slave labor, over 500,000 slaves by 1789. With the examples of the American and French Revolutions fresh in their minds, the slaves of Saint-Domingue rebelled against the colony's French planters in 1791. Rebel leader Toussaint Louverture, along with other generals and groups of rebel slaves, destroyed many of the sugar plantations.

One observer recalled, "The most striking feature of this terrible spectacle was a rain of fire composed of burning cane-straw." In 1801, Toussaint proclaimed the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue, but he knew he needed to restore sugar production, which had fallen 80 percent over the decade of rebellion. He implemented the system of fermage, leasing abandoned plantations to senior army officers and government workers who would employ sharecroppers to perform the agricultural work. Napoleon Bonaparte sent an army of 33,000 troops to reestablish control over the colony. Although Toussaint Louverture was betrayed and died in a French prison in 1803, nearly 30,000 French soldiers perished from yellow fever and the French army withdrew. Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe declared independence from France on January 1, 1804, and the Republic of Haiti, the first black republic in the world born of a slave revolt, was established.

General Dessalines tore out the white section from the French flag to symbolize the end of white European domination of Haiti. Yet, white is also the color of refined sugar, the sweet, chemically-pure granules produced at such a great price by enslaved Africans, beginning four centuries ago on the island of Hispaniola, which Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic. In tearing out the sugary white center of the French tricolor, Dessalines symbolically began the process of separating sugar from slavery.