Background

Shortly after settling **Salem** in 1626, British colonists began connecting and trading with **slave plantations** in the **West Indies**. You might think of this trade as a “business” where people made products which were then bought/sold (or traded) for other goods.

New England products included salted fish, farm produce (onions, potatoes, etc.), wood products (barrels, shingles, etc.), lumber, and farm animals. Ship owners (**merchants**) and ship captains were the most directly involved and could make the most money from a trading voyage. However, the trade created many jobs in Salem (sailor, fisherman, farmer, shop keeper, ship builder, blacksmith, etc.) and touched the life of many Salem residents.

In the West Indies, New England merchants traded their cargo for goods including sugar, molasses, coffee, cacao, and cotton. These trade goods were produced on large plantations by the forced labor of enslaved Africans.

New England products were valuable in the West Indies because they were essential to operating these large slave plantations. And West Indies trade goods, especially sugar and molasses, were valuable in New England, where colonists used molasses to make rum. Rum was sold locally or shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe and used to purchase slaves in Africa.

Like any business, the main purpose of slavery was to make money. Slave plantations maximized profits by forcing people to work without pay. Colonists in New England and the West Indies made money by supplying **products** their “customers” wanted or needed. And in both regions, this included people. In addition to sugar and molasses, some Salem ships returned from the West Indies with enslaved people of African descent.

Sometimes colonists made a specific request of a ship captain to purchase an enslaved person. Sometimes ship captains (who spent most of their life at sea) wanted an enslaved person to help their wife at home. Other times merchants simply added enslaved people to a ship’s cargo because they were a valuable product and could be sold in New England.

In rural and urban areas across New England, colonists had a demand for unpaid labor. Some purchased enslaved children (who were less expensive) and trained them in skilled jobs (similar to an apprentice). Enslaved Africans worked on ships and farms, in rum distilleries, blacksmith shops, and in many other significant parts of the **economy**.

***Vocabulary***

* Salem: Indigenous people of the Massachusett nation lived and travelled through the area making up present-day Salem. They named the area Naumkeag, roughly translating "fishing place." British settlers colonized this land in 1626 and named it "Salem."
* Slave plantation: a forced labor camp where enslaved people (often kidnapped from Africa) were forced to work under threats of violence.
* West Indies: also known as the Caribbean, a region of the Americas made up of several islands. European colonies have included Spanish, English, French, and Dutch colonies.
* Merchants: colonists who supplied trade goods to local and overseas customers. Merchants who owned their own ships hired ship captains (or masters) to transport trade goods. Captains were usually responsible for the actual selling, buying, and exchanging of goods.
* Cargo: trade goods carried on a ship.
* Product: enslavers treated people like commodities, products capable of being bought and sold. However, human beings can never be "products." Enslaved people continuously fought for and retained their humanity.
* Economy: a region's wealth and resources, including the goods and services people produce and consume.