

Debates Over Slavery and Abolition: Slave Trade in the Atlantic World

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Blake, William O. The history of slavery and the slave trade, ancient and modern : the forms of slavery that prevailed in ancient nations, particularly in Greece and Rome : the African slave trade and the political history of slavery in the United States. J. & H. Miller, 1857. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GF0100302352/SAS?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=d12929a0&pg=99>.



A Transnational Phenomena

Most Americans do not realize that only about 6 percent of the enslaved Africans who crossed the Atlantic came to the present day United States. The remaining 94 percent ended up in other American locations, primarily Brazil, Jamaica, or Saint Domingue (the present day Haiti) as well as numerous other Caribbean islands, and all the Spanish speaking lands in the Caribbean, North and South America. Likewise, before the first Africans came to the colony of Virginia in 1619, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had already been in progress for more than a century. Furthermore, the abolition of the slave trade in the U.S. in 1808 was not the end of the trade. Indeed the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a very active slave trade, and U.S. shippers participated in the trade to Cuba, Brazil and other countries until its final ending in 1888. Thus the slave trade was a pan-Atlantic phenomenon that covered half the globe for four centuries.

These facts mean that the slave trade cannot easily be studied in one country, because the system, which involved many countries from Europe and the Americas, was too complex, multi-lateral, and inter-regional for one thread to be teased out and viewed in isolation. In order to understand the system-wide patterns, historians must consult a very diverse and scattered series of sources, both published materials in the form of books as well as thousands of unpublished documents still resting in archives. The basic source material for the study of the slave trade is found on four continents in a wide range of libraries, archives, and printed papers.

Origins of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The story of slavery does not begin with European ships arriving on the African coast. Slavery was already prefigured by the history of social stratification, war, and captivity in Africa, both before the trans-Atlantic slave trade started, and during the time of the slave trade—before enslaved Africans entered European ships. European merchants had little or no involvement in the first part of the slaves' journey; that portion was in Africa and was generally the work of African rulers, merchants, and sometimes lawless figures like bandits. Only in Angola did Europeans routinely command armies that captured people, or preside at courts that condemned others to slavery. Elsewhere

Europeans were only at the receiving end of processes taking place before they came. Thus, understanding the larger African past is as essential to understanding slavery and the slave trade as knowing the history of Europe or the Americas.

African Records: Local

Most African societies did not keep written records, though a few did. The richest local records are restricted to Islamic societies around Timbuktu, the African kingdoms near the Portuguese colony of Angola, and the slave-trading kingdom of Dahomey. As a result, historians are dependent on the writing of Europeans, whose interests were tied up in the slave trade, for understanding the African societies that produced the millions of captives who crossed the ocean in slave ships. Their testimony, biased by their commercial interests and by racial prejudice, is for many regions the only evidence we have of African society in the era of the slave trade.

European Travelers and Missionaries

The evidence for slavery in African society, and the complex circumstances that led African elites and merchants to participate in the slave trade on the scale that they did, is largely documented by travelers who visited Africa during that period. European travelers to Africa varied widely in their motivations, background, level of education, and experience. The most common traveler went to Africa because of the slave trade (or trade in other commodities such as gold), although another substantial group were missionaries. Later, beginning in the eighteenth century, there were what might be termed curiosity travelers, who went to study and understand African societies, and often to create reports to send back to readers in Europe.

The sort of information that travelers produced thus varied depending on what their purpose was in going to Africa. Travelers with commercial motives, such as the ship's captains, clearly offer reports that deal with trade, or diplomatic and political events relating to trade. Thus, for example, Captain Landolphe, a French merchant, provides an account of Benin in the 1770s that is a vital source of information about that country and its role in exporting slaves, one which goes quite a long way beyond a simple commercial report. Missionaries, like the Abbé Liévin-Bonaventure Proyart



BRANDING SLAVES.

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(found in the SAS database along with numerous other similar accounts) saw Africa and its life in a different way, prejudiced perhaps but with different biases than those of a ship's captain or merchant. Missionary sources are often extremely rich, because missionaries believed that they needed to know a great deal about the societies that they visited in order to understand how to change them.

European Business Records

Although the book length traveler's account is undoubtedly the most common source of deeper historical information, social customs and political systems and structures, the details of African history must often be wrenched from the numerous but often sketchy accounts of European commercial factors operating as business agents rather than travelers. The National Archives of the United Kingdom, for example, contains a vast store of records left by English factors in Africa employed by the Royal Africa Company, Great Britain's monopoly slave trading company, whose holdings are found in the

SAS database. The records are voluminous, but they contain a nearly daily record of events in those parts of Africa where the company did business. These records are particularly valuable for piecing together the many wars and commercial disputes among the African powers on the Gold Coast (modern day Ghana), Sierra Leone, the Gambia area and the region around the old kingdom of Dahomey (modern day Bénin).

The daily business of the slave trade from the European side is of course much more thoroughly documented than the African conditions, which often have major gaps and are frequently only known from second and even third hand reports. The commercial companies, like the Royal Africa Company, kept detailed records of the volume of the trade, conditions on the coast and among their factories, and such records are invaluable for understanding the business of the company. On the one hand, they supply details about the Africans, for example the debt registers of the Royal African Company often tell us "who was who" in African society, and how the company did business with African rulers and merchants. On the other hand

they are a detailed record of the small European communities that grew up around trading posts and the mixed race or culturally hybrid African groups who provided daily support. Such company reports allow us to discern movement of prices, types of commodities exchanged, long range movements of commodities and other economically valuable information.

Private concerns or private merchants, who were numerous, are harder to pin down in the documentary record. Their records were not systematically kept, nor were they always maintained for future generations. Seen as obsolete business records long before they were thought of as historically important, many were simply thrown away when they were no longer useful for the business purposes for which they were generated. Nevertheless, their papers reveal a somewhat different sort of slave trade business than is found in the company records. They often visited different parts of Africa, beyond the coastal forts. But private traders' records are also not particularly descriptive of Africa or indeed of anything but the business workings of the slave trade.

The American Record

The American side of the slave trade, including Latin America and the Caribbean, is documented differently from its African side. For one thing, the American recipients of slaves were all European colonies and thus kept records of commercial dealings. Again the records of the Royal African Company allow us to follow the movement of people to various American colonies, and to learn of the sale of the slaves to their new homes. Travelers to those islands also provide descriptions of slavery and of the processes by which captive Africans were converted into laborers. Shipping records document the intercolonial movement of slaves—for example, slaves landing in Jamaica or Antigua might be immediately re-transported to New York. Local factors reports, represented in the same records, tell us of the first steps the newly arrived Africans faced in their new environment.

The Abolition of the Slave Trade

The formation in England of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 witnessed a transformation in the written record of the slave trade. The English parliament began to debate the

question of the morality of the slave trade, and both the Abolitionists and their enemies gathered information about the trade to strengthen their case. In the process they collected newer types of information, gathered statistics, interviewed people and published much of what they had found.

Anti-slavery tracts and pamphlets denounced the trade, and relied on eyewitness testimony to prove its horrors. The English Parliament gathered great volumes of this testimony in its deliberations, which are published in the *Parliamentary Papers*, represented in the SAS database. Pro-slavery advocates pointed out the African role in the development of the trade, and the better fate that slaves allegedly had in America than in Africa. This new debate produced polemical literature which, while often detailed, was also suspect of exaggeration, at the very least. Sharp and often contradictory information was produced, tabulated and thrown into the fray. But at the same time, this new literature also illuminated the trade itself.

For example, dueling interpretations of the Kingdom of Dahomey, written by Robert Norris and Archibald Dalzel, reworked first hand information that each had gathered to produce more nuance in understanding Dahomey than might have been attained simply by reading the factor's reports. Using this material is obviously fraught with historical danger, and hence it is important to explore its full body carefully.

Following Britain's decision to abolish the slave trade in 1807, and a similar decision in the United States the next year, both countries made efforts to suppress the trade. Britain negotiated treaties with other European countries to win their agreement to support abolition; and then followed this diplomacy by stationing the Anti-Slavery Squadron in the Gulf of Guinea to ensure compliance. The squadron left its own supply of records, which include not only statistical and navigational materials, but also eyewitness accounts of the operations of the slave trade itself, both in Africa and its interior and on the coast. Eyewitness from the Anti-Slavery squadron did not share the same prejudices as the earlier slave captains did, nor were they like the earlier travelers and missionaries. A new optic on African history was thus opened up.

The Abolitionist movement also created the impetus for the foundation of Sierra Leone, a British colony on

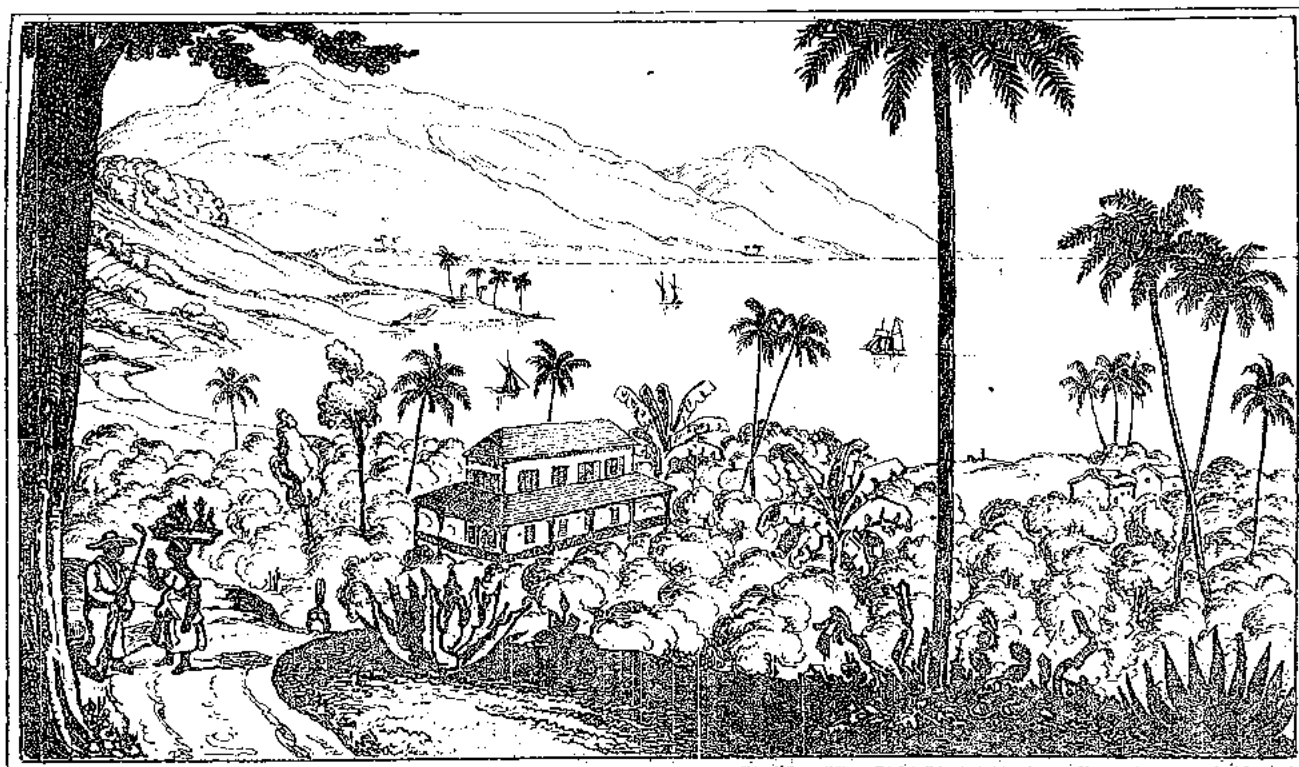
the coast of West Africa initially intended as an African home for a variety of groups that had been stranded after the American Revolution in British colonies, along with the “Black Poor” of England. The colony soon became the final destination for thousand of captives taken from slave ships seized by the British. The colony also expanded inland, and became the center for a movement within Africa to abolish the slave trade. As a colonial region and as a new sort of European colony, Sierra Leone left an abundant first hand literature, not only in British archives, but also in pamphlets, semi-official documents, and books.

As the Abolitionist movement advanced, Europeans took an interest in exploring Africa. Intrepid travelers sought to visit interior areas that had never been visited by Europeans. The Royal Geographic society, for example, sponsored travelers like Mungo Park to visit the interior of Senegambia; the Frenchman René Caillé traveled as far inland as the Niger bend. These travelers, scientific in their outlook and systematic gatherers of facts, provided vivid firsthand accounts of the African societies they visited. They also saw the

slave trade in action and learned enough of African history and politics to offer insights and information on the course of the slave trade at its height.

Scholarship in the Digital Age

Historians have worried and vexed themselves over the volume and direction of the slave trade ever since the publication of Phillip Curtin’s groundbreaking 1969 book, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: a Census*. Curtin’s work, which was mostly a gathering of earlier partial studies, was followed by the more difficult work of compiling direct evidence. The only way to figure out the volume of the trade was to wade through literally thousands of documents dealing with the shipping business. This work was tedious but fortunately there were a number of scholars willing to do it, and their efforts were speeded by the use of digital technology. In an early and very promising use of joining databases through computer technology, a generation of new research was gathered in 2001 in the *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* published under the auspices of Harvard University’s W. E. B. Du Bois Institute. The project



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A West Indian Residence.

Alexander, James Edward. *Transatlantic sketches, comprising visits to the most interesting scenes in North and South America, and the West Indies : with notes on negro slavery and Canadian emigration*. Vol. 1, R. Bentley, 1833. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0103741370/SAS?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=6eb8ca99&pg=164>.

continued and an online and greatly expanded version appeared in 2009. The database itself, though only a partial survey of the whole trade, allows visitors to the site to track voyages and has already begun to figure into new publications.

The data housed in these databases allows scholars on the American side of the ocean to locate the pattern and origins of slaves reaching American destinations. Materials collected in the *Slave Trade Database*, for example, prompted historians to recognize that some areas received large groups of slaves from one or another part of Africa. The Portuguese colony of Pernambuco, Brazil, for example, received almost all its slaves from Angola; as did the Spanish colony of New Spain. The first generations of Africans in North America and the Caribbean were also largely from Angola. Other trends show that large bodies of slaves from southern Nigeria populated Virginia; Angolans and then Sierra Leoneans supplied slaves to South Carolina.

Material collected from the databases also allowed the conditions of the Middle Passage to be studied in greater detail by aggregating vast numbers of discrete records. Mortality, ship revolts, length of voyage and profitability data all were readily available thanks to the capacity of computers to process and calculate from the large number of original records involved. Yet for all the power and significance of computer technology there is nuance and detail that no database can capture. Voyage data also sometimes reflects human drama, irony and other factors that only emerge from studying the unique record of each voyage for which there is information. The SAS database allows the original documentation to be studied for those elements of the mundane events of Atlantic crossings that defy quantification.

The documentation on the slave trade is vast, and it is also scattered. Bits and pieces of written evidence can be found on every continent bordering the Atlantic and in a dozen different languages. There is a great deal of work still remaining to be done before historians can gather all the threads into a comprehensive account. Before such an account can be written the documentation needed should continue to be gathered and sorted. The Du Bois database and the wide range of documents in the SAS database provide a route into

the study of the massive documentation generated by the slave trade. With the aid of such tools, the shape of the history of the West will be fundamentally rewritten.

