



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE:

Divergent Interests in the Transatlantic Slave Trade: Reconciliations and Ramifications

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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question –

- How could seemingly rational human beings reconcile their involvement in the capturing, transporting, sale, and enslavement of other human beings? What were the ramifications for their involvement?

Guiding Questions for This Investigation –

- What did each one of the profiled interests have to gain by their involvement?
- How were they impacted by this involvement? What were the ramifications?
- What is the nature of collective responsibility?
- Was the involvement of one of these interests worse than the others or does any involvement equate to equal complicity?

2. Contextual Essay –

Over 11 million Africans were captured, sold, and transported to the Americas between 1450 and 1867. During the nearly 400 years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, five separate interests - ***northern merchants, British business interests, sugar cane plantation owners, African traders and southern plantation owners*** - engaged in this practice. Too often these participants are portrayed as evil men concerned only with enhancing their wealth. While there is validity in this perception, it paints with too broad of a brush. These divergent groups each had their own agenda with their own justifications, although clearly those pale in comparison to the devastation that resulted. The focus of this project is to delve into the gray areas. One question that must be addressed in any study of the Transatlantic Slave Trade is why would they do it? Another area that must be explored is the damage that they left in their wake.

Northern Merchants

While Africans had been transported into the Americas since 1450, they didn't show up on the shores of North America until 1619. Northern merchants, however, would feel slavery's presence, very quickly. The institution itself would be legally recognized first in the colony of Massachusetts in 1641. (*Farrow, preface*)

A symbiotic relationship quickly developed between the northern and southern colonies. Prior to the American Revolution, 70% of all American slave voyages were on ships registered to Rhode Island owners. (*Farrow, pg.21*) Cotton harvested in Southern regions would drive the northern economic engine. By 1860, Massachusetts was home to 472 cotton mills, all of which were dependent on southern cotton. (*Farrow pg.16*) So strong was this relationship that many northern mills specialized in “negro cloth” to be worn by slaves who picked the cotton to begin with! (*Farrow, pg. 12*)

Northern fortunes weren’t confined to southern cotton. They were also linked to the West Indian sugar trade. By 1775 over 80% of New England’s overseas exports went to the West Indies. Flour, dried fish, corn, potatoes, onions and cattle were all sent to the islands to feed their ever-increasing population of slaves. (*Farrow, pg 122*) Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her book “The Education of Freedmen” lamented that “The northern slave holder traded in men and women whom he never saw, and whose separations, tears, and miseries he determined never to hear.” (*Farrow, preface*)

While slavery’s direct presence wasn’t as directly felt in the north, they were not immune to the consequences of slave ownership. In 1712, 27 slaves in New York City organized a rebellion. They burned a building in the middle of the city and then attacked the whites as they put the fire out. The retribution was harsh. They were all captured. Six committed suicide, twenty were burned alive and one was executed on a breaking wheel, a form of punishment considered so cruel that it had been outlawed in the colony. (*Rodriguez*)

Southern Plantation Owners

Southern slavery was dying out as the 18th century was coming to a close: it wasn’t until the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney (from Connecticut) in 1792 that slavery began to pay. The resulting explosion of the slave population in the south gives testament to the revolutionary impact of the cotton gin. By 1860, slavery had made the south one of the wealthiest regions in the world. (*Coclanis lecture*)

As the Second Great Awakening took hold in the north, abolitionist sentiment began to grow. In response to this, southerners began to defend what they called “the peculiar institution.” Thomas Dew’s famous pro-slavery arguments were widely read and applauded throughout the south. His arguments centered around three major themes: blacks were much better off as slaves as opposed to being free; the sin of slavery didn’t originate with the south, so southerners shouldn’t have to pay for it; and finally, that slavery was condoned by both the Old and New Testaments. He noted that Jesus lived in a Roman world where slavery existed yet never spoke against it. He purported that freeing slaves would do them more harm than good. (*Walker*)

Slavery had become so entrenched in America that by 1770 the colony of South Carolina was comprised of over 60% slaves, and in some regions it was much higher. Southern colonies such as Georgia, Virginia and North Carolina had percentages ranging from 35-45% slave. The resulting friction manifested itself with various rebellions. Taking his cue from the successful slave revolt in Haiti (1791), Denmark Vesey launched his ill-fated revolt in South Carolina in 1822. Later, in 1831 Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia would incite massive white retaliation. The end result was the enactment of black codes that greatly reduced even the limited freedoms that slaves had come to expect. One such law was the chilling marriage vow that slaves were forced to recite. The words “until death or distance do we part” sent a very clear message that the specter of breaking up slave families was always present. Slave owners used this to great effect to keep slaves in line.

British Business Interests

Northern merchants and southern plantation owners profited off of slavery through their connections to Great Britain as well. During the 1860 season, the United States created 2.3 billion lbs. of cotton with over ½ being sent to Great Britain’s 2,650 cotton factories. (*Farrow*) Indeed, many historians believe that the industrial revolution in Great Britain would not have been possible without slave labor in

both the United States and the Caribbean. Banking, heavy industry, and insurance all benefited from the slave trade. The Barclay fortune was centered on the slave trade. It is the profits earned from this endeavor that allowed them to establish their bank. Boulton and Watt used profits from the slave trade to invest in steam engine technology. This technology was initially geared to sugar processing. British insurance giant Lloyd's of London got its start by insuring slave ships out of Liverpool. (*Williams*) Profits from slave related industries such as plantations and the trading of slaves accounted for 2,797,000 (pounds) in 1770 alone. (*Blackburn*)

These profits came with a cost. As enlightened principles took root in England, members of Parliament led by William Wilberforce began clamoring for the abolishment of the transatlantic slave trade. Wilberforce's 1789 speech before Parliament put into stark focus the human toll that the trade extracted. He pointed out that it was common practice for slave ships to leave at night "lest they (slaves) be sensible of their departure." (*Cobbett*) He goes on to dispel the notion that slaves were happy and healthy on board ships. It is stated that slaves were forced to dance under threat of being flogged. Wilberforce pointed out that evidence indicated that 12-½ % died during the Middle Passage. Another 4½% died on shore the day of the sale. After proper seasoning in the tropics, Wilberforce stated that 50% mortality rates were common.

Sugar Cane Plantation Owners

Wilberforce expended a great deal of energy attacking the transatlantic slave trade with a focus on the West Indies. There was a reason for this. Starting with Barbados and then shifting to Jamaica, the West Indian sugar trade and the slaves that it required proved to be a major facet of the British economic system. The introduction of cane sugar into the European diet had wide ranging impacts. Beyond the teacup, sugar was used as a performance-enhancing drug for the factory workers driving Britain's industrial revolution. (*Miller's Lecture*) In one year alone (1770), sugar trade profits totaled 1,075,000 lbs. in Great Britain. (*Blackburn*) To fuel this engine between 1642 and 1807 the British transported 3,246,000 slaves to the Caribbean compared to only 292,000 to North America. It should be noted that the 18th century was a particularly deadly time to be enslaved in the West Indies. On average, the mortality rate hovered around 60 per 1000 slaves. Infant deaths accounted for a large percentage of this. (*Knight*)

African Traders

Slaves transported in huge numbers to the Caribbean embarked from the west coast of Africa. Their origins are largely unknown, but what is documented is how they initially became enslaved: at the hands of other Africans. Slave-trading kingdoms of western and central Africa - such as Akan of the kingdom of Asante (Ghana), the Fon of Dahomey (Benin), the Mbunda of Ndongo (Angola) and the Kongo (Congo) - played a large role in the transatlantic slave trade, while Europeans kept close to the coast. It is estimated that 90% of slaves shipped to the Americas were enslaved by Africans and sold to European traders. (*Gates*)

What caused Africans to enslave other Africans? Two primary factors played a role here. The primary factor was warfare. Captured prisoners were, depending on the kingdom, sold directly into slavery. Portuguese merchant Duarte Pacheco's early 15th century observation of Benin is illuminating, "the kingdom was usually at war with its neighbors and takes many captives, whom we buy at twelve or fifteen brass bracelets each, or for copper bracelets, which they prize more." (Obadina) Bracelets were not the only items that were traded. These kingdoms were as anxious to acquire material wealth as their European counterparts. Guns, tobacco, textile, iron and rum were just some of the products exchanged for slaves.

It's important to note that slavery was well entrenched in Africa before the European involvement. A slave's status would vary anywhere between peasant status to chattel slave. (A condition that Aristotle referred to as "property with a soul".) Periodic drought has been the norm in the savanna regions extending from Senegal east to Cameroon. During these times it was not uncommon for families to sell off both

children and adults so that they might survive. (Ball) The resulting Diaspora's impact on cultures and societies in western and central Africa is impossible to fathom.

The ramifications for Africa were catastrophic demographically, economically and politically. It's been estimated that between 1701 and 1850 9.3% of the population of West and West Central Africa was taken by the transatlantic slave trade. (Gillezeau Pg.2) If you factor in the collateral damage that comes with the acquisition of the slaves the % can only rise. The altered development of the African economies as a result of this dynamic was devastating. Reallocating resources for the sole purpose of capturing humans greatly retarded these regions economic development. Politically the notion that state building would be discouraged had a debilitating effect. By devaluing land and citizenry for the purposes of taxation African kingdoms played a large role in destabilizing this region of the world. - Much to the Europeans delight. (Gillezeau Pg.6)

In conclusion, multiple forces involved in the transatlantic slave trade each played a large role in this crime against humanity. They all would point to justifications for their involvement, be they economic, religious, or cultural. The end result was a disaster on a global scale. The transatlantic slave trade's participants might have been able to reconcile their involvement to themselves. History has proven these justifications to be lacking.

3. Annotated Bibliography –

Farrow, A., Frank, J., Lang, J. (2006), *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery*. Ballentine Books

Farrow, Frank and Lang's book examines the role that northern business and politics played in benefiting from the slavery both in the south and in the Caribbean. They explore the intricate web that was created by northern textile companies, banks, insurance companies (Aetna apologized for their role in 1998) and shipping lines. The authors do a very good job of explaining how tightly linked the north was to the slave trade. In doing so they offer up a wealth of information relative to how the north could reconcile their role in the slave trade.

Rodriguez, J. (2007) *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion, Vol.1*. Westport CT. Greenwood Press

Rodriguez explores the nature of northern racism and the role that it played in the New York City rebellion of 1712. In doing so he offers up a fascinating glimpse into northern race relations. He profiles the savagery that took place and underscores that direct contact with slavery had its negative effects in the north as well as the south.

Walker, R. (1852) *The Pro-Slavery Argument: As Maintained by the most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States, Containing the Several Essays, on the Subject, of Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew*

This compilation of pro-slavery arguments offers up an interesting look at how southerner's reconciled themselves to what they euphemistically referred to as "the peculiar institution". His arguments spell out in detail the reconciliations that the south was forced to make in the face of growing northern abolitionist fervor. The sentiments referenced here are echoed by other more well known southerners such as Thomas Jefferson.

Williams, E. (1944) Capitalism and Slavery, University of North Carolina Press

This paper written in 1944 explored slavery as an instrument to the developing industrial might of Great Britain. Williams looks at the growth of British banking, insurance and heavy industry as outgrowths of the transatlantic slave trade. In his paper, Williams offers up some excellent rationalizations for British involvement in the slave trade. He argues that bedrock institutions such as Lloyds of London and Barclays Bank would never have succeeded without the capital that was earned through the trading of slaves.

Blackburn, R. The Making of New World Slavery (1997). Verso Press

Blackburn draws on a significant amount of studies while investigating the economics of the transatlantic slave trade. In this book, Blackburn shows that plantations were profitable enterprises. The scale of capital flowing into Great Britain according to Blackburn, allowed for Britain's evolution into an industrial economy. The hard data here offers up a wealth of justifications for British business interests.

Cobbett, W. (1803) The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803. Vol. 28, cols 42-68

This testimony by Wilberforce gives voice to the rising sense of outrage that many people in Great Britain were feeling towards the slave trade by the end of the 18th century. In these excerpts Wilberforce counters fellow MP Mr. Norris's assertions that the slave trade is a benign institution. Point by point, Wilberforce excoriates Norris's arguments. This testimony speaks to the ramifications of the slave trade on Britain.

Knight, F. (1997) General History of the Caribbean, Vol.3 UNESCO

In this book Knight makes the case that the ramifications of the slave trade took a harsh human toll in the Caribbean. Focusing in on 18th century slave populations in Barbados and Jamaica, Knight points out the increased necessity for more slaves due to the harsh environments that they were forced to work in. Infant mortality is particularly high at this time. He draws parallels between the slave experience in the Caribbean and those in North America.

Gates, H. Ending the Slavery Blame Game. The New York Times, April 23, 2010.

In this New York Times editorial, Gates points out that Africans were complicit in the slave trade and any claims for reparations are specious at best. He points out various kingdoms that benefited financially from the capturing and selling of slaves. This article speaks to both the reconciliation and ramification aspects of the trade's impact on African traders.

Ball, J. (2000) The Atlantic Slave Trade. National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles

In this paper Ball explains the differences in African slavery and the version that evolved in the Americas. He also explores the causes of African slavery paying special attention to the ecological factors that might have been missed by others. The nature of cyclical droughts and the devastating impact they had on African families goes a long way towards explaining why some Africans sold family members into slavery. Once again, the reconciliation and ramification aspects are touched on here very nicely.

Obadina, Tunde (2000) Slave Trade: A Root of Contemporary African Crisis. African Economic Analysis, 2000

This article does an excellent job of explaining the complicated economic dynamic that emerged between African societies and European slave traders. She offers up illuminating anecdotal evidence that explores the motivations on the part of African leaders as they sought material gain from the sale of captured slaves.

Gillezeau, Rob., Whatley, Warren (2009) The Impact of the Slave Trade on African Economics. University of Michigan Press 2009

This article takes a micro-economic look at the social, political, and most importantly the economic ramifications of the transatlantic slave trade on West and West Central African societies. It explores in great economic language, how the Africans were actively pursuing a policy that was in direct conflict with their own self-interest.