

Unintended Consequences: The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

Primary Investigative Question(s) – Why was the slave trade abolished and what were the consequences of it?

Contextual Essay:

Introduction

In some ways, the introduction of Africans to North America was an accident. In 1619, a Dutch Man of War captured a Spanish ship in the Caribbean and the African captives were traded to English colonists at Jamestown for supplies. This marked the beginning of a two hundred year triangular trading relationship in North America, which was part of a much larger system that brought Africans as slaves to the New World.¹ By the 18th century, Britain and Portugal dominated the slave trade accounting for about seventy percent of the trade between 1775-1800. At the height of the slave trade, the British were responsible for sending 30,000 Africans a year to the New World.²

In 1807, the British passed the Slave Trade Act which banned British involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The government worked for the next sixty years to suppress the trade worldwide by deploying their navy to interdict slaving vessels and using their diplomats to negotiate treaties with other nations to end the trade. There is some disagreement among historians about whether slavery was profitable for the British at the time it was banned; however the most recent scholarship suggests that their motivations were something other than economic.³

The United States banned the importation of slaves in 1808. Even though the slave trade continued well afterward, taken together these legislative acts represent the beginning of the end of the slave trade. The focus of this essay is on the motivations to end the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the unintended consequences brought about by its abolition. Abolition illustrates a truism of history put forward by V.I. Lenin: “*We make our history ourselves ... [but] what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed.*” For the abolitionists, their noble goal of ending the Transatlantic Slave Trade resulted in a burgeoning domestic slave trade in the United States. For Virginians who schemed about getting rich from the domestic slave trade, their political power diminished with their declining population as slaves and farmers moved south.

¹ Estimates of the slave trade in North America range from 4-5% of the entire slave trade.

² Eltis, David, Was Abolition of the U.S. and British Slave Trade Significant in the Broader Atlantic Context?. The William and Mary Quarterly 66.4 (2009): 28 pars. 6 Dec. 2010

³ Ibid.

Abolition of the Slave Trade in Britain

Eric Williams, in his doctoral thesis “*The Economic Aspects of the Abolition of the Slave Trade and West Indian Slavery*,” argued that the Industrial Revolution in Britain was funded by the capital generated from slave labor. He further asserted that the slave trade ceased to be profitable by 1807, thus belying Britain’s true motivation for passing the Abolition Act of 1807.⁴ David Eltis, and other historians, have disputed Williams’ theory and argued that morality rather than economics was the greater motivating factor for the British. Demand for raw goods like cotton only increased during the 19th century and therefore the need for slave labor was enhanced, not diminished. Furthermore, the price of a slave quadrupled between 1807 and 1860 which amounted to the loss of potential profits.⁵ While British motivations varied, Quakerism and Enlightenment thinking played a major role in the movement to outlaw the trade.

Quakers, on both sides of the Atlantic, were some of the first and most vocal opponents of the slave trade. As a religious minority, they were already well organized for their own political protection. Quakers were able to leverage their resources to forge a successful campaign against the trafficking of slaves. They targeted the slave trade and not slavery, although many members opposed that institution as well. The Quaker-led Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade met in London in 1787 and designed the iconic seal of the kneeling African man with the inscription, “Am I not a man and a brother?” This statement reflected their moral opposition to the slave trade implicitly attacking the notion accepted at the time that Africans were sub-human and therefore naturally suited to bondage. The seals became fashionable on both sides of the Atlantic and were greatly influential in spreading the abolitionists’ message to the general public.

The abolitionist stand was not wholly moral. Many opposed the slave trade and slavery because it conflicted with their enlightened notions of free labor as promulgated in Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations. This book laid the philosophical groundwork that appealed not only to those at the salons but to Great Britain’s growing working class forged from the Industrial Revolution. The institution of slavery conflicted with the notion that every man owned their own labor.

William Wilberforce, perhaps more than any other person, was responsible for the successful political campaign to abolish the slave trade. At the suggestion of Prime Minister William Pitt, Wilberforce took up the abolitionists’ cause in Parliament. He drew upon the work of Thomas Clarkson, who as a member on the Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade collected and catalogued the evidence and effects of the trade.⁶ It took fifteen years to gather the support to move the bill through the House of Commons and to get royal assent. The slave trade was formally abolished in 1807.

Abolition of the Slave Trade in the United States

From the crisis leading up to the Revolutionary War until its conclusion, every state legislature and the Continental Congress passed measures halting the slave trade. These actions must be put in the context of other economic sanctions enacted against Great Britain at the time; however they do represent North America’s first experiment with abolition.

Virginians had been calling for the end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade since the 1750s mostly because they stood to profit off its abolition. Virginia possessed the most slaves of any colony in 1750. Because of the decline in demand for tobacco starting in the late 18th century, Virginia did not require as many

⁴ Williams, Eric Eustace. *Capitalism and Slavery: Eric Williams. Introduction by D. W. Brogan*.. London: A. Deutsch, 1964.

⁵ Eltis.

⁶ You can view a virtual version of Thomas Clarkson’s box here: <http://museumbox.e2bn.org/creator/viewer/show/34>

slaves. This surplus coupled with a steady supply of Africans led to a steep drop in the price of slaves. Cutting off the supply from Africa would boost the price of slaves traded domestically.⁷

Planters in the Deep South had more use for slaves. Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin transformed southern agriculture. New England and British industrialists needed the cotton for their growing textile industries. This demand spurred immigration of both white farmers and slaves deeper south where the gin could process the short staple cotton. The production of cotton required a huge labor force.

New England and Mid-Atlantic states had a variety of interests. Some influential New Englanders had profited greatly off the slave trade by financing several voyages. Additionally, the growing textile industry depended upon cotton cultivated by slave labor. However, many Northerners were affected by the growing abolitionist movement led by the Quakers. Slavery was abolished in every state north of Maryland from 1781 to 1804.

During the Constitutional debate regarding the importation of slaves, the delegates struck a bargain not to interfere with the slave trade for twenty years. In Madison's notes on the Convention, he recorded these thoughts of General Pickney of South Carolina:

General PINKNEY declared it to be his firm opinion that if himself & all his colleagues were to sign the Constitution & use their personal influence, it would be of no avail towards obtaining the assent of their Constituents. S. Carolina & Georgia cannot do without slaves. As to Virginia she will gain by stopping the importations. Her slaves will rise in value, & she has more than she wants.

George Mason speaking at Virginia ratification convention had this to say: "The augmentation of slaves weakens states; and such a trade is diabolical in itself, and disgraceful to mankind; yet, by this Constitution, it is continued for twenty years." Subsequently, South Carolina, Georgia and Louisiana (after it joined the union) allowed the importation of slaves while the Chesapeake states kept the ban. In the intervening years, Virginians worked hard to push for the ban which was passed by Congress and signed by President Jefferson in 1808.

The Effects of Abolition

Great Britain

After the Abolition Acts, three million Africans were transported to the Americas where slavery as an institution continued to thrive.⁸ The British government did not ban slavery in its colonies until 1833. Not all slave trading nations agreed to be signatories to treaties outlawing the practice and the illegal slave trading continued to thrive. The British government created the West African Squadron division in their navy for the purposes of halting the illegal slave trade. They attempted to cut off the trade at the points of embarkation by blockading the coastlines and capturing (often ruthlessly) ships and seizing their cargo. Additionally, the British negotiated treaties with African rulers to end their participation in the slave trade. If they did not sign, the British often used force to overrun them which some have argued was a prologue to British colonial rule in Africa.⁹

⁷ Deyle, Steven, An "abominable" New Trade: The Closing of the African Slave Trade and the Changing Patterns of U.S. Political Power, 1808-60. *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66.4 (2009)

⁸ Eltis

⁹ Ibid

Africa

As a result of the slave trade, much of African society was uprooted from their ancestral homes. Additionally, unscrupulous rulers came to power that worked with Europeans to provide slaves. The trade stunted Africa's development and left them vulnerable to European colonialism. Unfortunately, the Abolition Acts did not spell the end of Africa's problems. Three million Africans were transported after abolition, mostly to Brazil and Cuba. The trade shifted away from Northwest Africa to Central and Southern Africa. This reflected Britain's ability to effectively suppress the slave trade north of the Equator. However, the British had little impact in the southern hemisphere in which Portugal and later Brazil were still actively involved in the slave trade.¹⁰ Many African leaders, who had depended upon the slave trade, were now left to find other items to sell to the Europeans because Britain had cut them off from the slave market.¹¹

Chesapeake

Chesapeake planters and slave traders had the most to gain by the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. They had the most slaves and the decline in the demand for tobacco had left them with an oversupply. Before the American Revolution, almost all slaves came from Africa or the West Indies. After the Revolution, the internal slave trade became a major operation, sometimes referred to as The Second Middle Passage. Richmond was an important center of the domestic slave trade. While providing Chesapeake planters and traders with a wealth in capital, the slave trade also led to their decline in political importance as their population moved southward. Although their need for slave labor declined, Chesapeake planters were increasingly tied to the institution of slavery through their role in the trading of slaves.

African-Americans in the South

The abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade had negative consequences for slaves in America. The decline in supply from Africa and the increase in the demand for slavery in the Deep South meant that African-American slaves faced the prospect of being "sold down the river." The domestic slave trade had the effect of breaking up families and communities that had been well established for generations. Males between the ages of ten and twenty nine were most likely to be sold. Spouses, as well as children, were often separated from their loved ones. Increasingly, free blacks were abducted and sold into slavery as profits soared in the trade. Masters used the threat of sale as a way to inspire more fear. It is estimated that about 800,000 slaves moved from the upper South to the lower South from 1820-1860.¹²

Deep South

The invention of the cotton gin breathed new life into the institution of slavery; however the abolition of the slave trade made southern planters dependent upon slaves from the Chesapeake. At the time of the Civil War, the price of a prime male in New Orleans was worth \$1381 which is approximately \$30,000 in today's money.¹³ While cotton exports brought the South great wealth, it stunted their growth in many

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Afigbo, Adiele E., *Africa and the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. The William and Mary Quarterly 66.4 (2009)

¹² Pritchett, Jonathan B. "Quantitative Estimates of the United States Interregional Slave Trade, 1820-1860" *The Journal of Economic History*. Vol. 61, No. 2 (Jun., 2001), pp. 467-475

¹³ Wahl, Jenny. "Slavery in the United States". EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples. March 26, 2008. URL <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/wahl.slavery.us>

ways. Because of the high cost of slaves and the need for large quantities of land, southerners had very little savings. Because slaves often produced other goods and services other than agriculture, there was little development of a middle class. The South lagged behind the North in industrialization as they were forced to export most of their cotton to be made into clothes. Additionally, southern railroad networks lagged severely behind the North which would lead to great problems during the Civil War.

New England

Despite the early emancipation of slaves before and after the Revolutionary War, the New England economy was heavily dependent upon the institution of slavery. New England financiers invested in slave voyages (before and after abolition) that brought Africans to the New World. Shipbuilders and merchants also benefited from the trade. The invention of the cotton gin closely coincided with the abolition of the slave trade. The increased production of cotton produced by slave labor fueled the textile industry in the North. While New Englanders depended upon slave labor, abolitionists focused on banning the practice altogether. Just as in Great Britain, Quakers represented a huge voice in the abolitionist movement. The publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (a Quaker) had a great role in turning public opinion against slavery. This moral divide between North and South was one of the contributing factors to the Civil War.

Conclusion

The end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade illustrated the law of unintended consequences for abolitionists. The Transatlantic Slave Trade continued for at least another sixty after the abolition acts. In the United States, the abolition of the Atlantic trade spurred the growth of a domestic slave trade that had extremely negative consequences for African-Americans.

Annotated Bibliography

Afigbo, Adiele E., Africa and the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The William and Mary Quarterly 66.4 (2009): 20 pars. 6 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/66.4/afigbo.html>>.

Afigbo explains that the British goal was to cut off the slave trade across the ocean. It had the effect of cutting off West Africa but not southern Africa from the slave trade. He points out that West Africans were forced to find more legitimate things to sell.

Deyle, Steven, An "abominable" New Trade: The Closing of the African Slave Trade and the Changing Patterns of U.S. Political Power, 1808-60. The William and Mary Quarterly 66.4 (2009): 30 pars. 6 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/66.4/deyle.html>>.

This source outlines the motivations of Virginians to abolish the slave trade, as well as lays out some of the unintended consequences of the domestic slave trade. Virginians used their political influence to push for abolition before, during, and after the revolution. He further explains that after abolition, the domestic slave trade, while providing Virginians with a wealth in capital, led to their decline in political importance as much of their population moved southward. The fact that the slave trade was sanctioned for twenty years after ratification was a move meant to appease the Deep South's need for slaves, but Virginians moved quickly and effectively in 1808 to end the legal trade in North America.

Eltis, David, Was Abolition of the U.S. and British Slave Trade Significant in the Broader Atlantic Context?. The William and Mary Quarterly 66.4 (2009): 28 pars. 6 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/66.4/eltis.html>>.

Eltis describes two currents to the slave system southern and how the British government efforts to suppress the slave trade were successful in what he terms the northern wheel (trade north of the equator), but that it continued to flourish in the southern wheel. He describes a shift of the slave trade away from the Gold Coast to southern and western Africa. The Abolition Acts did not achieve their goal of cutting off the trade which continued to flourish in the Caribbean and South America. Additionally, he refutes the notion put forward by Eric Williams that British motivations to end the slave trade were economic rather than moral. Britain had an economic incentive to stay in the slave trade, and that makes the abolitionist movement's success more remarkable.

Finkelman, Paul. *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South : A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003

Finkelman is an expert on proslavery thought. This book presents the documents that illustrate the different currents of southern thought regarding slavery including their many moral justifications. His focus on Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* is particularly instructive as we see clearly Jefferson's contradictory views on slavery.

Klein, Herbert S. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

This book presents an overview of the Atlantic Slave Trade from its origins to its end. In particular, it places the slave trade in a global context and examines the general trends and particular manifestations of the slave trade. In his last chapter, "The End of the Slave Trade," Klein explains the significance of the evangelical movement in Britain as a primary motivation for the abolitionist movement while addressing Eric William's thesis regarding economic motivations.

Lindsay, Lisa A.. *Captives as commodities: the transatlantic slave trade*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008.

Like Klein's book, this book is a survey of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The final chapter is devoted to the end of the slave trade. It too highlights the evangelical movement as a major force in the abolition movement, but also points to the significance of enlightenment thinking, particularly Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, as a contributing motivation.

Pritchett, Jonathan B. "Quantitative Estimates of the United States Interregional Slave Trade, 1820-1860" *The Journal of Economic History*. Vol. 61, No. 2 (Jun., 2001), pp. 467-475
Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Association
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2698028>

This journal article gives an overview of the quantitative estimates of slave migration in the antebellum period. Pritchett estimates that over 800,000 slaves were forced to migrate from the Upper South to the Deep South from 1790-1860. This is important because it highlights the major unintended consequence of the decision to abolish the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Namely, abolition led to a thriving domestic slave trade that was just as cruel and inhumane.

Rothman, Adam. "The Domestication of the Slave Trade in the United States." *The chattel principle: internal slave trades in the Americas*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004. 32-54.

Rothman explains why Southern slave owners allied themselves with those forces opposing the Atlantic slave trade all the while expanding the slave trade in the South. He explains that southerners (particularly in the Chesapeake) were motivated by Anglophobia, fear of slave rebellion, and the most importantly the potential for profit. Virginia's economy was no longer dominated by cotton, but rather by wheat and slaves. While their speeches and writings reflection moral misgivings about slavery, there was underlying economic motive to end the trade.

Wahl, Jenny. "Slavery in the United States". EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples. March 26, 2008. URL <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/wahl.slavery.us>

This article views the institution of slavery through an economic lens. In particular, it is useful for statistics and figures related to the value of slaves and slavery to southerners. By 1860 in Louisiana, a slave was worth about 30,000 dollars. This explains why Virginia's economy (which no longer depended as much upon slave labor) was heavily dependent upon the slave trade with the Deep South. Virginians, then, followed the Deep South into the Civil War—and not vice versa.

Williams, Eric Eustace. *Capitalism and Slavery: Eric Williams. Introduction by D. W. Brogan.*.. London: A. Deutsch, 1964.

This is a classic Marxist critique of the slave trade in Britain. In particular, Williams asserted that the decision to abolish the slave trade in Britain was motivated by economics rather than morality, namely that slavery and slaving had ceased to become profitable thus undermining the argument that abolition occurred for moral reasons. His work was important because it inspired a host of economic histories of the slave trade that sought to determine the profitability of the trade. His thesis has been refuted by subsequent scholars who argued that the decision to end the slave trade hurt Britain economically.