

Should 1807 really be celebrated as the end of the slave trade?

An investigation into the West Africa Squadron and the illicit slave trade after 1807.

Background Information

With the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807, it was assumed by many abolitionists that slavery itself would soon die out in the Americas. However, as early as 1810 it had become clear that such hopes were misplaced. Not only did slavery continue to thrive in the colonies, but a widespread illicit trade had developed in defiance of the 1807 Act. In fact, it has been estimated that up to a quarter of enslaved Africans were carried to the Americas *after* 1807 (Lewis-Jones 2010).

Abolitionists themselves admitted that they had seriously underestimated the difficulties in stopping abuses of the ban by British traders, and very little had been achieved in terms of curtailing foreign slave trading (Jordan 2005: 162). At the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, the British ceded to French demands for the continuation of their slave trade, and they were not able to reach a cessation agreement with the Spanish until 1817 (but only North of the Equator) and with the Dutch in 1818. Brazil did not outlaw her trade until 1851, and Cuba was still buying and selling slaves until the 1860s. Not only did slave ships continue to sail under foreign colours, but British ships also impersonated them in order to avoid capture, such as the English ship “Prince William” which was found to be displaying the name “Marquis Romana” while carrying 109 slaves in an attempt to pass as Spanish (Jordan 2005: 164).

From 1807, the Royal Navy made attempts to intercept illegal slave ships, but with only five vessels by 1811, their success was severely limited. It was not until 1815 that the West Africa Squadron was established as a preventative force, and even with this development naval ships were often too old and slow to catch slave ships. By the 1850s, however, there were twenty-five ships and two thousand sailors on the West Africa station, supported by a thousand African sailors, making the enforcement of the 1807 Act much more effective (Lewis-Jones 2010). Between 1807 and 1860, the Royal Navy West Africa Squadron seized more than 1500 slave ships and emancipated 150,000 Africans.

Ships seized on the route of the ‘Middle Passage’ or on the West African coast were escorted to the Vice Admiralty Court of Mixed Commission at Sierra Leone, where, if condemned, the slaves were registered as ‘emancipated’ and often put to work as apprentices or domestic servants (Jordan 2005: 144). Under an Act of 1814, condemned ships could then be registered under British colours, and join the Royal Navy Squadron.

The *Henriqueta*

The slave ship *Henriqueta* provides an excellent case study of both the illicit slave trade after 1807, and British attempts to control this trade.

Between 1824 and 1827, she carried out at least ten voyages between Bahia in South-East Brazil and West Africa, trading in total more than 2500 slaves. She has been described as “one of the most important vessels operating in the 1820s during the era of illegal slave trading” (Tinnie 2008). Her owner, the Brazilian Jose de Cerquiera Lima, was well known as a slave trader, and owned at least 16 other slave ships.

The *Henriqueta*’s first brush with the Royal Navy came in 1824 when she was apprehended and taken to the Court of Mixed Commission in Sierra Leone. However, having no slaves on board, she was restored to her owner (www.slavevoyages.org). She then made repeated voyages between Brazil and West Africa under the command of her captain Joao Cardoso dos Santos, until September 1827 when she was again apprehended by the West Africa Squadron.

The *Henriqueta* left Bahia in August 1827 on her final slaving journey in possession of a passport which granted her permission to trade at “the Ports of Cabinda on the Occidental coast of Africa” on the condition that she “enter solely such ports on the coast of Africa where the slave trade is permitted to the subjects of the [Brazilian] Empire, and to return from thence to any of the ports of this Empire where alone they shall be permitted to land the slaves” (FO 315/65). This is a clear reference to the fact that on 23rd November 1826, Brazil had signed a treaty with Britain permitting the continuation of her slave trade south of the equator (Tinnie 2008).

However, on September 6th 1827, the Captain of the *HMS Sybille* noted in his log that he had captured “the Brazilian brig *Henriqueta* from Lagos to Bahia with 562 slaves” (ADM 51/3466). He later wrote to his commander that he had “the satisfaction to report to you for the information of His Royal Highness the Lord High Admiral, that His Majesty’s Ship under my command, captured on the 6th of September last, the Brazilian Brig *Henriqueta*, of 257 tons, mounting three guns, a crew of 38 men and having on board 569 slaves, from Lagos in the Bight of Benin” (ADM 1/1682).

The *Henriqueta* reached Sierra Leone “under the command of Mr Frederick William Mather, admiralty mate of His Majesty’s Ship “*Sybille*”, having made a good passage of twenty three days” (FO 84/66). The slaves “were landed and delivered over to the Liberated African Department” (FO 84/66) for registration. They were emancipated “by Decree of the British and Portuguese Court of Mixed Commission on the 29th day of October 1827, the said Brig having been pronounced liable to condemnation by the said commission on the same day for having been at the time of capture engaged in the illicit traffic in slaves” (FO 315/31).

Five hundred and forty-two Africans were registered as emancipated by the Liberated African Department. 48% were men, 14 % women and the rest children, the youngest being a girl of six months travelling with her mother, Ahgotay, who was aged twenty-eight (FO 315/31). Each African was registered with their name, age and height, as well as a description of any marks on their body, the purpose of this registration being to prevent their re-enslavement.

Following her condemnation at Sierra Leone in October 1827, the *Henriqueta* was requisitioned to the Royal Navy West Africa Squadron and became the HMS *Black Joke*. One extract from her log book shows that she captured six vessels suspected of smuggling slaves in only a month between October and November 1830, including five French ships carrying over 1500 slaves which she was obliged to release due to diplomatic agreements with France, and one Spanish ship, sailing for Cuba which she forced to land on the African coast, allowing 567 slaves to escape. The vessel was sent to Sierra Leone for adjudication, becoming the HMS *Fair Rosamond* in the West Africa Squadron, mirroring the *Black Joke's* own fate as the *Henriqueta* three years previously (ADM 1/1 and www.slavevoyages.org).

Bibliography

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