

# SHIPS OF BONDAGE AND THE *Fight for Freedom*



Center for the Study of  
**SLAVERY**  
& **JUSTICE**



**iziko**  
museums of  
South Africa

an agency of the  
Department of Arts and Culture



## *Ships of Bondage and the Fight for Freedom*

### **Curatorial Statement**

In our imagination, ships are vessels of travel, of connections, creating networks, which compress space. We look at them as cruise vessels transporting us to places where we can explore and have holidays, or we see them as transporting cargo across vast oceans. These vessels of leisure and cargo have a history, one which we tend to forget.

The forcible removal of over 12 million Africans to the Americas was one part of an international trade in human bodies. Another was the multinational enslaved human beings who were shipped in an Indian Ocean slave trade to the Cape Colony. Often times both these aspects of this global trade in human bondage are narrated as: capture; crossing the Atlantic (The Middle Passage); or traveling on the Indian Ocean; sale; plantation life or company slave. In these narratives we oftentimes elide the ships, which carried the enslaved human cargo. Who were the men -- the sailors, the captains, the navigators that were engaged with this enterprise of the sale of human flesh? What did the enslaved do on board these ships? How were the ships outfitted and transformed from vessels of trade to vessels of human bondage? Animated by these issues, we have attempted to construct an exhibition around slave ships and the world they created. All exhibitions have a perspective and so do we. For us, the voices and actions of the enslaved are central to this story and drama of human suffering. It is not a story about victimhood, but rather it is one about how the human spirit, in the midst of the most grotesque attempts to repress it, was still able to bring forth light. For us, there were no ships of bondage without fights for freedom. In this exhibition we attempt to show both the bondage and the fight for freedom.

We hope that you, the viewer, will find what we have done interesting, sobering and a testimony to a human quest for freedom in the face of an extreme system of domination.

Anthony Bagues, *Lyn Cross Professor of Social Sciences and Critical Theory & Director of Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice, Co-Curator*

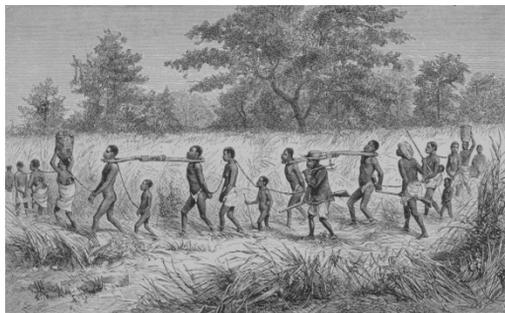
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Courtesy of the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA

*The Slave Traders are robbers of Men, Kidnappers, and Ensnarers.*

-Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, African abolitionist, and former slave, 1787

*156 gallons of rum and a barrel of flour for two Africans, "1 boy" and "1 garle"*

-Brig Sally's account book, November 15, 1764

The social system of slavery has a very long human history. All peoples and societies have had slavery as a historical and social experience. In what has been called the period of the ancient world, slavery existed in many regions -- for example, in the Roman Empire. In China, the Han dynasty ruled over slaves and so did the Aztec empire in the Americas. In parts of the Islamic world, slavery also existed as well as in Europe and parts of Africa.

The word slavery derives from the word, *Slav*. It was used to describe people from Eastern Europe. Slavery can be a plastic word, covering many things. However, no matter what meanings the word might cover, slavery has always been about some form of domination and, at its core, is about a lack of freedom. The African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois once described slavery as a system that rested on the "submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individual." It is true of all forms of slavery. Systems of slavery always involve hierarchies of classification in which some humans are considered non-human and outsiders of an existing social order.

## **Slavery and the Making of the Modern World**

In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, slavery existed in some parts of the world primarily as a system in which men and women were captured and sold into bondage. There were many reasons for this, including debt and being captured as a prisoner of war. But no matter the reasons, once a person became a slave he/she would be considered an outsider for the period of their bondage.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Dutch created slave trading posts where slaves to the society were a significant segment of the population of Malaya, Sumatra and Java. Dutch slavery created a slave trading system from Borneo to the Philippines. The 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> centuries have been called the “age of exploration” by some, but this “exploration” was also a period of colonial conquest and expansion of European colonial empires. It is within the context of *the age of colonial conquest* that slavery took on a distinctive form and became integral to the foundations of the modern world. Before the 1492 voyages of Columbus to what became the New World, the Portuguese in a 1442 voyage to Africa returned to Lisbon with African slaves. By 1448, estimates say that the number of African slaves in Portugal grew to 1000 and by the 1480s they were building slave forts along what was then called the Gold Coast. Sugar production in the Portuguese islands of Madeira and the Cape Verde Islands led to the growth of African slavery outside of continental Africa. By the time of the Columbian voyages and the establishment of sugar colonies in the Caribbean, African slavery was already an established fact of colonial conquest.

The creation of various colonial European empires opened up the way for these various colonial powers to engage in African slave trade. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Dutch established the Cape Settlement, they did so within a global European colonial context and one in which slavery was already the order of the day. Thus while Atlantic and Cape Settlement slavery were different in some ways, they were both produced by a world system of European colonial empires. Both were central to the making of the modern world.

The following were some of the general conditions of being a slave:

- The individual was the property of another.
- The individual had no major rights in relation to the master.
- The master determined how the individual lived, and where and how he/she worked.
- The life of the slave was regulated by slave laws and customs.

- Manumission was possible. A slave could be emancipated by his/her master.

In the Atlantic slave trade and plantation slavery, all of the above conditions were present with two major differences. Atlantic slavery cannot be understood as a process unrelated to the expansion of European colonialism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was European colonial expansion which created the grounds of Western slavery. In many places both slavery and colonialism were integrated into one historical set of events and became fused. As the bondage of Africans emerged and began to dominate the Americas, different justificatory ideas emerged about this bondage. These arguments ranged from the so-called inferiority of the African and why the African was a natural slave, to issues which circled around religion and the pseudo-scientific; to biological and then to cultural. The core of these arguments became the foundation on which the slave system of the Americas was constructed. They were central in producing a new form of slavery, one based exclusively upon race. Racial slavery became a new form of domination. The second difference between slavery in the Americas and other forms of slavery was the centrality of the plantation as an economic and social entity. Of course there were regions where slavery existed and there was an absence of plantations. But the plantation, which had emerged in Madeira and the Canary Islands, became one of the dominant models for economic production in the Americas.

In this context, the permanent outsider, who was a slave, became non-human. As this happened, the African became racialized and race became the ideological justification for slavery in the Americas. Listen to Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia* about what he considered to be the impossibility of including emancipated blacks into American society. He writes: "This unfortunate difference of color and perhaps of faculty is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people ... Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave when made free might mix without staining the blood of his master."

This specific form of slavery where race became the marker of who and what is a human being has created all our pasts and continues to haunt our present. Its legacies abound.

If in the Atlantic world, the ideological justification of slavery became dominated by race. In the Cape Colony, the racial argument was mixed with false ideas about the inferiority of other colonized peoples. However, by the 1800s as the arguments about labor in the Cape Colony became pressing ones, race became a dominant frame for both English and Dutch colonial powers. In the 1842 debates around post emancipation labor in the colony, these were some of the remarks made: "Hill coolies were very docile and easily managed ... well limbed and active." In the discussion about the importation of what were called 'Prize Negroes,' the argument ran thus: "They would be decidedly prejudicial to the hewers of wood and drawers of water already in our colony ... they would greatly and permanently retard the civilization." One member of the council, John Ebdon, said: "While we profess to be desirous of importing intelligent labor, we are again, as in the days of yore, importing savages to be our domestics and labors." Therefore, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century racial system of classification had become the norm in the colony.

As we can see, slavery, a system of human domination, was based upon "property in the person" and was widespread during the period of European colonial empires.

For centuries slavery was part of a global system of commerce, and European nations chartered companies such as the British Royal African Company, the French Company of the Indies, the Danish West India Company, and the South Sea Company to trade in both goods and people. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) was one of these major trading companies. Oftentimes called the "first multinational," the company was granted a monopoly of trade in the East Indies. In Asia, the VOC traded in slaves and in Batavia (Jakarta), where the VOC had a

major trading station, it has been estimated that over half the population was enslaved.

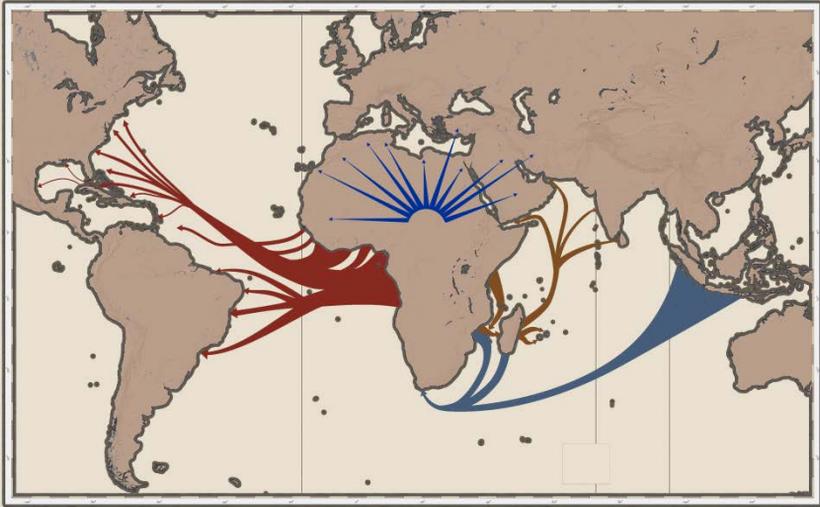
In this exhibition we tell the story of three ships of bondage, ships which traded on the routes of the Atlantic slave trade from Africa to the Americas and the Indian Ocean, as well as from East Africa and Madagascar to the Cape Colony of South Africa. These are stories of a fight for freedom by enslaved Africans on these *Ships of Bondage*.

### **A World Made by Slavery and the Sea**

The enslaved African came from societies that had civilizations, social structures, and economies, which were complex and wide-ranging. At the time, the social and economic structures of these societies ranged from those primarily engaged in agricultural production to ones that had large-scale urban states.

In some African communities, domestic forms of slavery existed. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century particularly, there was an extensive trade which involved Arab traders who imported slaves from sub-Saharan Africa to North African states and the Middle East. This trade also operated on the Eastern part of Africa. In this system, women were captured and made into slaves, often becoming part of harems. Again, on the eastern side of Africa, African slaves were captured and sent to places like Mauritius as part of the labor force on European plantations. But as previously stated, the European slave trade created a new form of slavery in which race would become *the* marker for who was human. The blood of the enslaved, the crack of the whip, the brutal flogging, the rape of female slaves – all this was part of the history of the making of the modern world in the Americas. It was African slave labor which drove the economy of the Americas and laid the foundation for tremendous accumulation of wealth for centuries. At the same time, the revolts of the enslaved, the insurrections, and the fight for dignity to live like a human being shaped the making of our world.

The African slave trade had two routes: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the Indian Ocean Slave Trade. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade took over 12 million Africans to the Americas with millions more dying on the dreaded “Middle Passage.”



Map displaying global slave routes. Courtesy of Lynn Carlson, exhibit cartographer.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian Ocean Trade along the East African coast supplied slaves to India and then later on in the colonial period to the Cape Colony in South Africa. Overtime, Zanzibar and Madagascar became important ports for slavers. The Atlantic African slave trade was big business. It required forts and slave castles along the West African coast in countries like Ghana, Togo, Benin, and the western part of Nigeria. There were slave ports in places like Lagos, Aneho, and Grand-Pupo. At these ports the enslaved were often placed into barracks of confinements called *barracoons*.

## Slavery in the Cape Colony

*“The Dutch have some crocodile settlers at the Cape, that should be called to a particular account for their murders and inhuman barbarities...” – Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, former slave and abolitionist*

When Jan van Riebeeck, a VOC administrator, landed at the Cape in 1652, European colonial empires had been consolidated. The VOC was already engaged in the slave trade and used enslaved labor in their colonies. Thus it became very easy for the company to decide that slaves were required for the Cape Colony.

In March 1658, over 170 slaves, originally from Angola and captured by the Dutch from a Portuguese vessel, arrived at the Cape. Van Riebeeck seemed to have preferred his personal slaves from Angola. Although many of these slaves ran away, this landing was significant.

Between 1658 and 1808, over 63,000 slaves were brought to the Cape. They came on ships of bondage from India, Ceylon, Malaysia, Madagascar, Angola, China, Java, Mauritius, Mozambique and Timor. They worked on wine estates and built the Castle of Good Hope. Enslaved peoples worked as domestics, carpenters, cabinetmakers and masons.

The Cape Colony became totally dependent on enslaved labor so much that in 1797 W. S. van Ryneveld, responding to questions about slavery in the colony, stated: “An immediate interdiction to the importation of slaves would of course, effectuate that the culture, especially the two principal branches thereof, viz corn and wine would begin to languish, and afterwards entirely to decay.” Thus slavery was a central element of the Dutch colonial conquest and part of the distinctive emergence of Afrikaner political and social ideas. In addition, Britain occupied the colony twice, in 1795 and 1802. During these occupations slavery continued. Thus both the British and the Dutch colonial powers were responsible for the continuation of slavery in the Cape until it was abolished.

In 1753, a set of codes governing the life of slaves was proclaimed. They became known as the *Tulbagh Code* and included the following :

- A curfew for slaves and after 10 pm slaves had to carry passes and a lantern
- Slaves could not sing nor whistle
- Slaves were not allowed to congregate in groups on public holidays
- Slaves who stopped to speak on the streets could be caned
- Slaves who engaged in violence against their masters could be put to death.

### **Slavery at the Cape Coast Colony [Cape Town, South Africa]**

Many South Africans today are the descendants of slaves brought to the Cape Colony from 1653 onwards.

1652: The Dutch East India Company (VOC) establishes a refreshment station for the eastbound ships at the Cape.

1653: Abraham van Batavia, the first slave, arrives.

1654: Slaving voyage to Madagascar.

1658: Farms granted to Dutch free burghers (ex-Company employees). Portuguese slaver ship carrying about 170 Angolan slaves captured by the Dutch and brought to the Cape.

1687: Burghers petition for slave trade to be opened to free enterprise. They were to do this repeatedly until this was allowed in 1791.

1700: Government restricts male slaves being brought from the East.

1717: The VOC ends assisted immigration from Europe.

1722: Slaving post established at Maputo, Mozambique by Dutch.

1732: Maputo slave post abandoned due to mutiny.

1753: Cape Governor Rijk Tulbagh codifies slave law.

1766: Slave rebellion on board the *Meermin*.

1767: Importation of male slaves from Asia abolished.

1784: Government directive abolishing the importation of male slaves from Asia repeated, and again three years later.

1791: Slave trade opened to free enterprise.

1795: British take over the Cape Colony.

1802: Dutch regain control of the Cape.

1806: British reoccupation of the Cape.

1807: Slave trade abolished.

1808: External slave trade ended. Revolt by slaves at the Cape.

1813: Cape Slave Law codified.

1822: Last slaves illegally imported.

1825: Royal Commission of Enquiry at the Cape investigates Cape Slavery.

1826: Guardian of Slaves appointed. Revolt by Cape slave owners.

1830: Slave owners ordered to record slave punishments.

1834: Slavery abolished. Slaves become “apprentices” for four years.

1838: End of slave “apprenticeship.” ‘Prize slaves’ were still brought to the Cape up to 1856 and apprenticed for 14 years in slave-like conditions.

*Courtesy of: Iziko Museums of South Africa*

## **Slavery in Rhode Island and the Atlantic World**

Slavery existed in Rhode Island and New England prior to the American Revolution in 1776. Rhode Island was one hub of the Atlantic slave trade. Before the arrival of African slaves, colonists enslaved American Indians, captured during wars between the two communities. By 1638, Africans from the West Indies were brought to the northeastern colonies. It was during this time that enslaved Africans first arrived in Rhode Island.

As a hub Rhode Island played a major role in the transatlantic slave trade. During all the years of North American slavery, more than half of the slave vessels launched came from Rhode Island. Most of the slaves acquired during these voyages would be sold in the Caribbean and American south. Rhode Island rum fueled the trade, as a commodity of exchange for slaves in Africa.

Trade also deeply linked Rhode Island to the system of African slavery. The state depended on the sugar produced by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean for its rum production. During this period, Caribbean economies narrowly focused on sugar production and export, leaving them reliant on Rhode Island products from Narragansett pacers to furniture and candles for use in their daily life. This economic network created by slave ships, rum, sugar, and products produced in

the state meant that many Rhode Islanders would find themselves connected to the trade in some way, whether through consumer choices or trade work.

In Rhode Island the state legislature passed laws in 1652 abolishing slavery and in 1659 stopped the importation of enslaved Africans, but neither were strictly enforced.

Enslaved people comprised 10% of the Rhode Island population by the 1750s, with most living in Newport and South County. The Gradual Abolition Act passed in 1784 freed anyone born after March 1 of that year, but this law did not impact those already enslaved. Fifty years later, by the 1830s, slavery had petered out in Rhode Island.

## **Slavery and the Atlantic World**

1444: The first public sale of African slaves takes place in Lagos, Portugal.

1482: The Portuguese start building the first permanent slave trading post at Elmina on the Gold Coast (now Ghana). The fort eventually passes through Dutch and English hands and by the eighteenth century was handling 30,000 slaves each year.

1510: The first slaves arrive in the Spanish colonies of South America, having travelled via Spain.

1518: The first direct shipment of slaves from Africa to the Americas takes place.

1562: John Hawkins becomes the first Englishman to trade in slaves.

1564-1565: Hawkins leads a second slaving expedition. Partly sponsored by Queen Elizabeth I who allows Hawkins to make use of a royal ship, the *Jesus of Lubeck*. The expedition is a success.

1567-1568: A third slaving expedition is mounted by Hawkins but two of the vessels are captured by the Spanish. No further expeditions are made for some years.

1605: Establishment of fugitive communities of slaves in Brazil called Palmares.

1619: Dutch traders start to convey slaves from Africa to America.

1630s: British interest in the slave trade grows as plantations are established in the Americas. A number of companies are set up to deal with the trade.

1638: Africans from the West Indies were brought to the northeastern colonies. It was during this time that enslaved Africans first arrived in Rhode Island.

1652: The Dutch establish a colony at the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Colony. Their position now makes them the dominant slaving nation.

1652: Rhode Island state legislature passes a law abolishing slavery but it is not strictly enforced.

1659: Rhode Island state legislature passes a law stopping the importation of enslaved Africans but it is not strictly enforced.

1660: The Royal Adventurers into Africa, a British company, is set up to trade in slaves and other commodities from Africa. By 1665 it was able to earn £100,000, but competition from private traders forces the company to cease trading in 1672.

1672: The Royal African Company is established with James, Duke of York, as its governor. Between 1672 and 1689 it is responsible for transporting nearly 90,000 slaves. It faces competition from private traders but grows and prospers.

1700: Britain becomes the dominant slave-trading nation.

1713: Britain wins the right to carry slaves to the Spanish Americas under the Terms of the Treaty of Utrecht (drawn up at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession). They sell the rights to the South Sea Company for £7.5m. Despite difficulties the Company grows and prospers.

1739: Stono rebellion in the American south.

1780s: The slave trade reaches its peak. It is estimated that one slave ship leaves Britain every other day. The toll on human life is considerable. The Privy Council estimate that half of the slaves are dying either in transit or in the initial period after their arrival.

1784: The Rhode Island Gradual Abolition Act freed anyone born after March 1 of that year, but this law did not impact those already enslaved. Fifty years later, by the 1830s, slavery had petered out in Rhode Island.

1787: The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade is founded by Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson.

1788: The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade organizes its first petition campaign. Over 100 petitions complaining about slavery are presented to Parliament.

1789: Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave, publishes his autobiography, *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano*, or *Gustavas Vassa, The African*. The book is a best seller.

1792: The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade organizes its second petition campaign. This time 519 petitions are presented to Parliament.

1794: The uprising of the slaves in St. Domingue forces the French Revolutionary government to abolish slavery.

1801: Toussaint L'Ouverture proclaims a constitution in St. Domingue, which abolishes slavery.

1804: The ex-slaves in St. Domingue defeat the French army and rename the former colony Haiti.

1807: Britain passes the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which outlaws the British Atlantic slave trade.

1808: United States passes legislation banning the slave trade.

1811: Slavery is abolished in Spain and the Spanish colonies. Cuba, however, refuses to accept the ban and continues to deal in slaves.

1813: Slave trading is banned by Sweden.

1814: Slave trading is banned by the Netherlands.

1817: France abolishes slave trading, although it is not made effective until 1826. Great Britain and Spain sign a treaty prohibiting the slave trade.

1819: Portugal abolishes the slave trade north of the equator. Britain places a naval squadron off the West African coast to enforce the ban on slave trading.

1823: The Anti-Slavery Society formed. Members include Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and Henry Brougham. The Society campaigns for better conditions for slaves in the West Indies and for the gradual abolition of slavery.

1828-1830: British Parliament is presented with over 5,000 petitions calling for the abolition of slavery.

1833: The Abolition of Slavery Act is passed. It brings into effect the gradual abolition of slavery in all British colonies. Plantation owners in the West Indies receive £20 million in compensation.

1839: Rebellion aboard the slave-ship, *La Amistad*, takes place. The rebelling slaves are eventually allowed by an American court to return to Africa.

1848: Slavery is abolished by France.

1851: Slave trading is abolished by Brazil.

1858: Slavery is abolished in Portuguese colonies although all slaves are subject to a 20-year apprenticeship.

1861: Slavery is abolished in the Dutch colonies of the Caribbean.

1865: Slavery is abolished in the United States following the Civil War.

1886: Slavery is abolished in Cuba.

1888: Slavery is abolished in Brazil.

## *What Did the Ships of Bondage Look Like?*

### **The Nautical Machinery of Slavery**

#### **Outfitting the Slaver**



Technical advances in tall ships and knowledge of geography and navigation allowed the Portuguese to transport the first shipment of African slaves across the Atlantic in the late fifteenth century.

As the trade grew, thousands of merchant vessels such as barks, schooners, brigs, and snows were

transformed into slavers as they approached Africa. Similarly, VOC vessels such as fluyts and hoeckers which left the Cape for slaving voyages were multi-use ships trading in both cargo and human bodies. Regardless of the type of ship or its port of origin, an important consideration of the transformation from merchant vessel to slaving vessel was to prevent slave insurrection.

For ships traveling the Atlantic slave route, crews erected a ten-foot high barricade with a narrow door on the stern side in order to stop access to the captain's navigational equipment. Nets around the vessel's railing prevented the enslaved from jumping overboard. The vessel was outfitted with the tools of captivity and torture such as manacles, shackles, swivel guns, ammunition, cat o' nine tails, and sometimes branding irons. Platforms in the hold maximized the number of slaves purchased. After the enslaved were sold in various slave markets, sailors broke down the additions, transforming the ship back to a merchant vessel, but the stench of captivity, death, and torture lingered.

## The Sally

In 1764, the Rhode Island based Nicholas Brown and Company owned by four brothers launched a slaver, the *Sally*, to procure quick capital to support the company's other investments. The brothers were prominent merchants in the state, and helped to found what is today the Ivy League Institution Brown University. The *Sally* is significant not only because it was the first slaving vessel out of the Rhode Island town of Providence, but also because records from the voyage survive to tell us about how this venture was a disaster.

ARTICLES

AGREED upon, by and between *Esek Hopkins* Captain of the Brig *Sally* and *Nicholas Brown* and *Company* for the Voyage to *Africa* and *the West Indies* for the purpose of *Slavery*

ARTICLES of Agreement between the said *Esek Hopkins* Captain of the Brig *Sally* and *Nicholas Brown* and *Company* for the Voyage to *Africa* and *the West Indies* for the purpose of *Slavery*

Item	Quantity	Value	Remarks
Sugar	1000	1000	
Rice	1000	1000	
Beans	1000	1000	
Peas	1000	1000	
...	...	...	...

Articles for the Brig the *Sally*, 1764.  
Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library  
at Brown University

The brothers selected their friend Esek Hopkins to be captain of the *Sally*. He assembled a crew of thirteen men, including Edward Abbie, his slave. Some of these men would perish along the way from diseases. The vessel was prepared for its journey with support of numerous local people from merchants to sail makers to farmers. In addition to provisions, he secured seven swivel guns, arms and “40 hand Cufs & 40 Shakels,” to transform the *Sally* from merchant vessel to slaver. The Brown brothers gave Hopkins specific instructions about his route to Africa and where to purchase and sell the enslaved in the Caribbean for the best price. They also requested that he bring back “four likely young slaves” for themselves.

## The *Meermin*



Dutch Hoeker, 1789.  
Courtesy of Groenewegen, Gerrit.

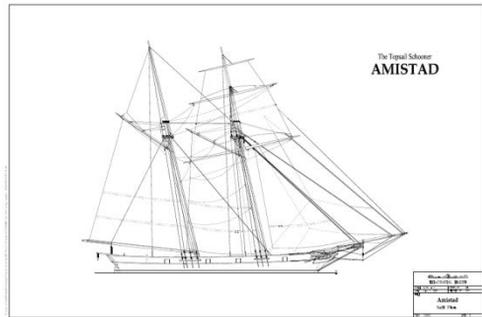
The *Meermin* was a “Hoeker,” one of several owned by the VOC, created as a fishing vessel used to catch cod and haddock. Hoekers later became merchant ships.

Built in 1759 in Amsterdam, the *Meermin* sailed for the Cape on her first voyage in 1761. Prior to her ill-fated 1766 voyage, she had sailed in 1762 to Madagascar as a slaver.

## *La Amistad*

*La Amistad*, meaning “Friendship,” was a Spanish trading schooner. At 1200 square feet, with two masts, it was small, fast and easy to maneuver. The small ship was

deployed to bring forty-nine enslaved men and 4 enslaved children, recently arrived from Africa on the slave ship *Tecora*, from Havana to the sugar plantations of Puerto Principe (Camagüey), Cuba. Such ships were popular with slave traders, pirates and blockade-runners since they were built to catch the wind. Because of its size, *La Amistad* lacked the standard equipment of slavers – she had no barricade or gunroom to protect the crew in case of an insurrection.



Courtesy of Tri-Coastal Marine

For years before the ill-fated 1839 journey, *La Amistad* imported Africans to Cuba. By the mid-nineteenth century, Cuba had become the most important sugar colony in the Caribbean, as the Haitian revolution destroyed the plantation system in the colony of St. Domingue.

## Captains and Crew



Courtesy of the Library of Congress,  
Washington, D.C.

The structure of command on slave voyages depended upon the slave trading company and rotated around captains and head merchants.

### **The Captain: *Master and Commander***

For the Atlantic slave trade, the captain was fully in charge. For the VOC, the head merchant and captain collaborated. The duties of the head merchant were to direct the captain on the venues for slave trading. The duties of the

captain were to navigate an efficient course, maintain authority over the crew, fill the vessel to capacity with enslaved peoples, and negotiate a high sale price for the enslaved cargo at port markets. Enlisting for a slaving voyage was a risky prospect, but if successful the profits were high. The risks included death, disease, mutiny among the crew, and rebellion of the enslaved. Poor decision-making could easily turn a potentially lucrative venture into a disaster.

### **The Crew: *Sailors and Servants***

A slaver's crew came from diverse economic and regional backgrounds, but most were desperately poor with few other job prospects and so were willing to risk their lives out at sea for a paltry wage. Lowest in rank, sailors toiled day and night, manning the sails, scrubbing the decks, and repairing the vessel's fittings. Upon

reaching slave ports, the sailor's status became privileged vis-à-vis the enslaved as they enforced the captivity of this human cargo. Slavers required nearly double the crew of a typical merchant vessel. Once the enslaved were sold at ports in the Atlantic and elsewhere, sailors

found they were dispensable, and sometimes captains bullied the few surviving seamen into deserting.



Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum,  
Greenwich, England

## The Enslaved

The trans-Atlantic slave trade carried over 12 million men, women and children from the coastlines of Africa to the New World. They may have been Fula or Mande, Yoruba or Merina, but once on board the slave ships they gained new names. They were physically stripped of their clothes as well as other attributes by the ship's crew. Their ethnicity, hometown, surname, religion, heritage and any other identifying information was discarded and replaced by a price. ***United by their captivity, they formed a diverse floating community in common bondage.***

For the enslaved who were brought to the Cape Colony, the voyages from East Africa, India, Malaysia, Java and other parts of Dutch colonial empire were done in trading vessels which had been transformed into ships of bondage. Slaves from different countries came on these ships as the slave voyages went to specific ports. One difference therefore between Atlantic slavery and the slave trade which

brought the enslaved to the Cape was that the latter was done within the frame work of colonial slave trade within the colonies already established by the Dutch VOC. However in the early 1800's, many slaves were brought from the African interior to work on the plantations on the east African coast producing coconuts and grains. Some of these were sold to slavers and taken to the Cape Colony. .

### **The Fight for Freedom: We Want to Return Home**



Courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Yale University.

On the ships of bondage, the enslaved were often held in chains, naked and cut off from kinfolk, and crammed into dank terrifying quarters with strangers from other places. Structural changes to trading vessels transformed them into ships of bondage. Air circulation vents were created for the slave quarters; new platforms were constructed to hold the maximum number of people. Cannons and barricades were put in place to repel the possibility of a slave rebellion.

For the enslaved captives on these ships, it was a terrifying voyage into the unknown. On the ships to the Americas, enslaved Africans recalled the tales that they had been told about the disappearance of families and friends eaten by strange white men. In spite of this, the enslaved were determined to make a human world out of this brutality. They created new communities on board and when possible rebelled and rose up in mass insurrections.

In 1765 the slave ship *Sally* had what the captain said was a “failed insurrection.” In 1766, 146 slaves from Madagascar, in an insurrectionary act, seized the slave vessel, the *Meermin*, bound for the Cape Colony. In 1839, a group of Africans slipped their chains on *La Amistad* and seized the ship.

## Insurrection on the Sally

Upon arriving to the Grande River, today Guinea-Bissau, Hopkins met frequently with local elite, bringing rum to facilitate negotiations to purchase slaves. After nine months he had purchased 196 slaves, and then set sail for the slave markets of Antigua in the Caribbean.

The enslaved began to perish before the journey back. Hopkins wrote in his captain’s log that one of the first to die was a woman who “hanged her Self between Decks.” A week into the journey, the enslaved revolted. Hoping to regain control, the crew of the *Sally* fired onto the deck, killing 8 and injuring several others. After the failed insurrection and before reaching the slave markets of the West Indies, another 109 of the enslaved would perish.

1765	Aug 1	1 male Slave Dy'd	196
	2	1 boy Slave Dy'd	24
	27	1 Woman & 1 boy Dy'd	23
	28	Slave Dy'd on the Deck was obliged first on the Deck and Portugall & was severely wounded & died by 10 o'clock & was buried	10
	28	1 boy & 1 male Slave Dy'd	32
	30	1 boy & 1 male Slave Dy'd	34
	31	1 Woman Slave Dy'd	35
	Sept 1	1 Woman & 1 male Slave Dy'd	36
	2	1 Woman Slave Dy'd	38
	3	1 boy Slave Dy'd	39
	4	1 boy Slave Dy'd	40
	6	1 man Slave Dy'd	41
	7	3 boys & 1 male Dy'd	44
	8	2 Women and 2 boys Dy'd	46
	9	1 Woman & 1 male Slave Dy'd	47
	11	1 boy Slave Dy'd	48
	12	1 boy Slave Dy'd	49
	14	1 male Slave Dy'd	54
	15	1 male Slave Dy'd	55
	16	1 Woman Slave Dy'd	56
	19	1 man Slave Dy'd of his wounds on the Deck when Slave Dy'd	57
	20	1 boy Slave Dy'd	58
	21	1 woman Slave Dy'd	59
	23	2 Women & 1 male Slave Dy'd	61
	25	1 woman & 1 woman Slave Dy'd	62
	26	2 men & 1 male Slave Dy'd	64
			65
			66

Account book for the *Sally* in which Hopkins describes the slave revolt. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

After the devastating human and financial loss from the *Sally* venture, the Brown brothers would continue to be part of the system of slavery by trading goods produced by the enslaved and outfitting ships bound for Africa. Of the four

brothers, only John would sponsor other slaving voyages. Moses would become outspoken against the trade, empowered through his admittance into the Quaker community. However, he would find that his chief rival in the fight for the abolition of slavery was John, his brother.

*[Had the Sally never sailed], I should have  
been preserved from an Evil, which has given  
me the most uneasiness, and has left the greatest  
impression and stain upon my mind of any, if  
not all my other Conduct in life..."*

– *Moses Brown*

### **Insurrection on the *Meermin***

In January 1766, the *Meermin*, with 146 enslaved Africans from Madagascar, sailed for the Cape Colony (Cape Town, South Africa). It was the Captain Gerrit Muller's first slaving expedition. Chief merchant Johann Krause and assistant, Olaf Leij, helped him.

Before the vessel left for the Cape Colony, the slaves led by Massavana attempted a failed escape bid. It was a sign of things to come.

As the *Meermin* continued its four-week journey from Madagascar to the Cape Colony, the enslaved waited for an opportunity to seize the ship. During the

course of the voyage, Captain Muller ordered the slaves to be unshackled and work on the ship's deck. Thinking the enslaved had no capacity to revolt, he also gave the order for the slaves to clean the swords and the assegais on February 18, 1766. This provided the opportunity the enslaved had been waiting for. Led by Massavana and Koesaij, they formulated a plan of attack, killed Krause, and then turned on the crew. Frightened, some crew jumped overboard and over 20 were killed in the insurrection. Twenty-nine crew members who were below decks were spared on the promise that they would sail the ship back to Madagascar.

For many slave insurrections the primary objective was to take the ship and return to their own country and live like free persons – to return home was freedom. But for Massavana, freedom did not come. Unable to sail the *Meermin*, the slaves relied upon the remaining crew to sail the ship back to Madagascar. This did not happen. Instead the crew sailed the vessel back to the Cape.

A bottled message sent by the captain's assistant, Olaf Leij, was found. So when the *Meermin* landed on the beach near Soetendalsvlei, the enslaved were met by the white Dutch militia. In the ensuing battle, many were killed and Massavana and Koesaij were captured. Both were tried for leading the insurrection and then sentenced to Robben Island for life. Massavana died three years later on the island.

### **Massavana**

*My name is Massavana. I was asked by the*

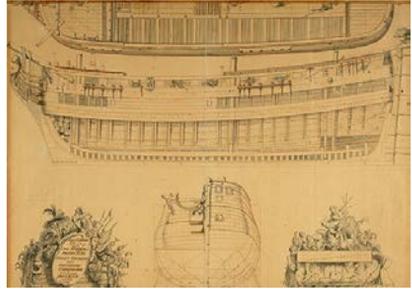
*King of Toulie to visit the Dutch Ship...*

*I was dressed in clean clothes, with gold*

*and silver ... when this was done, half way*

*back, the King tied me up, and his people undressed me – they took my gold, silver and clothes off my body – and they sold me – as a slave...*

*The slaves planned for a long time to become masters of the ship. Our aim was to go back to our own country.*



Het Scheepvaartmuseum,  
The National Maritime Museum, Amsterdam

### **Insurrection on *La Amistad***



Courtesy of the New Haven Museum

In the early hours of July 2, 1839, several captive Africans quietly slipped out of their fetters in the hold of the slave schooner *La Amistad*. Breaking the padlock which held them captive below the main deck of the vessel, four men -- Cinqué, Faquorna, Moru, and Kimbo -- climbed up and out of the hatchway onto the main deck. Using cane knives found onboard, they attacked the sailors and gained control of the ship.

Wanting to return home, but lacking knowledge of how to navigate the vessel, they were forced to keep some of their sailor captors alive so that they could sail the vessel for them. During the day the Spanish captors sailed following the Africans' wishes. At night they defied the Africans, steering the vessel back to the west and north, hoping to stay near the islands of the Caribbean and the coast of North America. After eight weeks at sea, a United States Navy survey ship captured *La Amistad* off of Long Island, and carried the Africans, the Spaniards, the cargo, and the schooner to the nearby state of Connecticut. The presence of these Africans in Connecticut and their determined fight to be free became one of the most celebrated court cases in the annals of the legal struggle against racial slavery, galvanizing the US abolition movement. In the end, the enslaved won their fight against being declared as property and many returned home to freedom.

### **Voices from *La Amistad***

The 53 enslaved Africans onboard *La Amistad* came from diverse communities. It is believed that most were from Southern and Eastern Sierra Leone and came from communities many miles from the coast. These fragments of their voices from contemporary historians, newspaper articles, and the lengthy trial helps us to piece together these individuals whose lives were radically altered by their capture, enslavement, and later freedom.

### **Cinqué**

Before his capture, Cinqué was a rice farmer in Mani Dzhopoa in Mendi country where he lived with his wife, two daughters, and one son. He lived far from the coast, about a ten days walk from Lomboko. His bondage began the day four men captured him while walking on the road, tying his right hand to his neck.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

His leadership began during the Middle Passage, when he tried to engage the other enslaved Africans on the *Tecora* before they were transferred to *La Amistad*. On *La Amistad*, it was he who found the nail on deck, which was used to break the Africans' shackles. Once the men had freed themselves of their chains, they waited for Cinqué to give the signal to emerge from the hold and begin their fight for freedom. He would then lead the 49 other enslaved men into the night revolt against their captors.

Perhaps the most well know of all the *Amistad* Africans, numerous contemporary news articles depicted Cinqué as the hero and leader of the insurrection. He would serve as the inspiration for artists for years to come.

## Grabeau

Grabeau lived a two days walk from the coast. Married without children, his parents had both passed away. He worked as a traveling merchant and came from an influential family in his region, including an affluent uncle who owned slaves. Like Cinqué, he was captured on the road, but it was not a random act. He was taken as payment for his Uncle's debt, after one of the slaves originally used as payment ran away from the debt collectors.

His knowledge of several African languages allowed him to work with the African American translators who helped the *Amistad* captives tell their side of the story during the trial.

Grabeau was considered the second most influential leader of the *Amistad* Africans. He had been a local leader of the Poro society, a male secret society



Courtesy of Beneicke Rare Book  
and Manuscript Collection,  
Yale University.

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integral to governing social structure of the communities where the *Amistad* Africans had come. The tattoos on his body indicated to his shipmates that he was high ranking, and they would have looked to him for leadership. Contemporary historians remarked on his acrobatic skills, which probably were acquired during his warrior training as a member of the Poro society.

## Fuli

Fuli lived with his parents and five brothers in Mano until one evening when his village was surrounded and burned by soldiers sent by the African King Siaka. Siaka worked with the infamous Spanish slave trader Pedro Blanco and relied on members of the African elite to capture Africans from the interior and bring them to his forts on the Gallinas Coast. After this ambush, Fuli spent a month traveling to Fort Lomboko with other prisoners. It is not known what happened to the rest of his family.

Fuli remembered his experience on *La Amistad*, receiving little food and drink, likely two meals of two potatoes and a plantain daily to be washed down with half a teacup of water. Fuli, like several other enslaved men on *La Amistad*, was beaten for drinking water he found below decks. Sailors applied a mixture of rum, salt, and gunpowder to his wounds, leaving his punishment visible to all for months.



Courtesy of Benecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Yale University.

## Kinna

Kinna came from an elite family, but was forced into slavery after his father's death by a local king. The king gave his son control of the enslaved Kinna, who in turn sold him to a man who would sell him to the Spanish traders at Lomboko.

Kinna remembered vividly the moment that cemented the Africans' resolve to revolt on *La Amistad*. The mulatto cook, Celestino, as a means to pacify the captives, made gestures with his knife to indicate that if the Africans did not behave they would be cut up and salted like beef. The Africans read this performance as an indication of the cannibalism of their captives. Kinna remembers, "We very unhappy all dat night- we 'fraid we be kill- we consider....we break off our chains and consider what we should do." The night of the revolt, Celestino would be the first one killed.

## Little Kale



Courtesy of Beneicke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Yale University.

Of the many children aboard the *Tecora*, Jose Ruiz purchased four. Young Africans were desirable as slaves because they took up less space on the vessel, and had many years of work ahead of them.

Upon the court's order to return the Africans to their native homes, the four youngest captives, Little Kale, Margru, Kagne, and Teme would elect to stay with the missionaries after they were returned to Africa. Unable to re-assimilate into their communities of birth, they took up English names. Margru became Sarah Kinson and Kale, George Lewis. Both became practicing Christians.

Stolen while he was on his way into town to buy rice, Little Kale traveled two months to arrive in Lombok. He was one of several children aboard the *Tecora*, and later, *La Amistad*.

As a young boy, he quickly learned the English language and Bible scriptures the abolitionists taught the *Amistad* Africans while they awaited trial. As the best reader and writer in the group, the other Africans relied on him to convey their needs to the outside world. Prior to John Quincy Adam's testimony in court, he penned a letter to the former president and lawyer, sharing with him the ideas and hopes of the entire group:

*"I want to write a letter to you because you love Mendi people, and you talk to the grand court...we want you to ask the Court what we have done wrong. What for Americans keep us in prison. Some people say Mendi people crazy, Mendi people dolt, because we no talk America language. America people no talk Mendi language. American people ... they tell bad things about Mendi people and we no understand. . . . Mendi people feel bad. O, we can't tell how bad. Some people say, Mendi people no have souls. Why we feel bad, we no have no souls? We want to be free very much.*

*Dear friend Mr. Adams, you have children, you have friends, you love them, you feel very sorry if Mendi people come and take all to Africa. We feel bad for our friends, and our friends all feel bad for us. Americans not take us in ship. We were on shore and Americans tell us slave ship catch us. They say we make you free. If they make us free they tell truth, if they not make us free they tell lie. If America give us free we glad, if they no give us free we sorry--we sorry for Mendi people little, we sorry for America people great deal because God punish liars. . . . Dear friend, we want you to know how we feel."*

## **Margru**

A young girl of about nine years old, Margru's father gave her to his creditors as a deposit on his debt. When he did not pay back his debt in time, Margru was enslaved as payment.

While held in jail during the *Amistad* trial, Margru along with the two other girls Teme and Kagne taught local professors to count in Mendi, which allowed these scholars to find two African American sailors, Charles Pratt and James Covey, conversant in the *Amistad* Africans' mother tongues. These interpreters would be critical to giving the Africans voice during their time in the United States, at a time when others opted to speak for them.



Courtesy of Beneicke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Yale University.

The stories of the fight for freedom on the slave ships the *Meermin*, the *Sally* and *La Amistad* are a small part of the insurrections, revolts, and activities of the enslaved on slave voyages. There were over 30,000 voyages across the Atlantic. On these voyages, individual and collective acts of the captive Africans challenged their enslaved condition. These actions are part of a larger story about abolition.

## The Abolition of Racial/Chattel Slavery

The abolition of slavery in the Atlantic world and in South Africa between 1794–1888 was a watershed moment in world history. For nearly 400 years in some places, colonial power and racial slavery dominated many societies.

In 1794, during the course of the French Revolution, slavery was abolished in the colony of St. Domingue when the revolutionary army of the slaves forced the French Revolutionary Convention to end slavery. The 1801 Constitution of St. Domingue, proclaimed by the ex-slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, finally abolished

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slavery. The 1804 Declaration of Independence by Dessalines announced the Black republic of Haiti.

Throughout Latin America and the Caribbean from 1500 onward, the enslaved established independent communities fleetingly or long lasting. These communities called *Mocambos*, *Quilombos*, or *Maroons* were living examples of the fight for freedom of the enslaved.

In South Africa, there were rebellious activities. Between 1724-1737 there was a group of slaves who became known as the Hanglip maroons. In 1808 after the British took over the colony, there were plans and outbreaks of insurrection led by a slave from Mauritius, Louis. Reports of this outbreak noted that by the time the slaves reached the outskirts of Cape Town, they numbered over three hundred and that they were accompanied by some Khoekhoen. Another rebellion in 1825 was led by the slave, Galant and also involved some Khoekhoen.

The British, who controlled 30% of the slave trade in the 1800s, abolished the trade in 1807 and slavery in 1834.

The dismantling of the slave trade took longer in America. While Rhode Island state law outlawed slavery in 1784, slavery did not end nationally until 1863 and 1865 when the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th amendment, respectively, abolished slavery.

The abolishing of slavery was the work of various individuals, many organizations, and numerous groups. The mass movement of abolitionism was a transnationalist movement. Abolitionism was the call of many slaves and their allies. A civil war was fought over slavery. In each of these, the actions of the enslaved served as a light for freedom.

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## Legacies

The legacies of racial slavery continue to haunt many societies. In South Africa, as apartheid consolidated itself, some of the ways of ruling the slave Cape Colony became part of apartheid's political order. For example, a proclamation issued in 1708 ordered slaves to carry passes. In 1809 a provision was passed called the "Hottentot Proclamation" in which the indigenous Khoekhoen were required to carry passes. In 1923, the Native Urban Areas Act was passed which required all black African men in the cities and towns to carry passes at all times. The pass laws were further developed and intensified under apartheid.

In the 1870s American Jim Crow laws officially mandated racial segregation. These laws were not formally overturned until 1965. But the legacies of these laws and historic systems of racial slavery live on. Today the poverty rate amongst African Americans in America is 28.1 percent; unemployment is 16%; life expectancy, an important index of human wellbeing, is lower in the African American community than whites standing at 73.6 years compared to 78.4 years for whites. Within the criminal justice system black men between the ages of 30-34 have the highest rates of incarceration and black men are 6 times more likely to be in jail than white men. There are still many segregated urban centers across the American landscape and African Americans continue to feel the effects of a long history of racial slavery and racial inequality.

In South Africa, slavery, colonialism, and later apartheid created an authoritarian racial order, which began to be dismantled in April 1994. But by all accounts, there is much to be done as these legacies still shape the social and economic order of the day.

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