Slavery, Abolition and the Transition to Colonialism in Sierra Leone
The Harriet Tubman Series on the African Diaspora
Slavery, Abolition and the Transition to Colonialism in Sierra Leone

Edited by
Paul E. Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz
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Christopher Fyfe (1920-2008)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>David Richardson</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Sierra Leone in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Paul E. Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Liverpool Ascendant: British Merchants and the Slave Trade</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on the Upper Guinea Coast, 1701-1808</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kenneth Morgan</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. “Keep hur Bottom Well paid with Stuff”: A Letter of</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction for a Slaving Venture to the Upper Guinea Coast in 1760</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bruce Mouser</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. Robert Bostock of Liverpool and the British Slave Trade on</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Upper Guinea Coast, 1769-93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Denise Jones</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. The Dirty Business of Panyarring and Palaver: Slave Trading</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Eighteenth Century</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sean Kelley</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6. Forgotten Colony in Africa: The British Province of</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegambia (1765-83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Paul E. Lovejoy</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7. “African” Settlers in the Founding of Freetown</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>James Sidbury</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 8. “Dedicated to the Sound Politicians of all the Trading Nations of Europe”: Sierra Leone and the European Colonial Imagination ........................ 143
Kate Hodgson

Chapter 9. From Company Administration to Crown Control: Experimentation and Adaptation in Sierra Leone in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries .................................................................. 163
Suzanne Schwarz

Chapter 10. Freetown and “Freedom?” Colonialism and Slavery in Sierra Leone, 1790s to 1861 ........................................................................................................... 189
Philip Miservich

Chapter 11. La Amistad’s “Interpreter” Reinterpreted: James “Kaweli” Covey’s Distressed Atlantic Childhood and the Production of Knowledge about Nineteenth-Century Sierra Leone ................................................................. 217
Benjamin Lawrance

Chapter 12. Sierra Leone Indentured Workers in Guyana and Martinique in the Nineteenth Century ........................................................................................................... 257
Céline Flory

Notes on Contributors .................................................................................................. 273
Bibliography ...................................................................................................................... 277
List of Illustrations
======================

Figures
Figure 1.1 Freetown, Sierra Leone, c. 1850................................. 3
Figure 1.2 Bunce [Bence] Island, c. 1727................................. 9
Figure 1.3 King in Full Dress, with Wives and Children, Sierra Leone River, c. 1805 ......................................................... 12
Figure 1.4 Freetown, Sierra Leone, c. 1850................................. 14
Figure 1.5 Sierra Leone River, 1787-88................................. 16
Figure 3.1 Factory Point, Îles de Los, c. 1794 ......................... 54
Figure 3.2 Bunce Island, c. 1727............................................. 55
Figure 3.3 Newspaper Advertisement: The Ship, Bance Island, at Charleston................................................................. 57
Figure 8.1 C.B. Wadström, A View taken near Bain, on the Coast of Guinea in Affrica (London: James Phillips, 1789) ......................... 144
Figure 9.1 Medal Commemorating the Abolition of the Slave Trade .......... 170
Figure 11.1 Lithograph of “James Covey” from John Warner Barber (1840) ....................................................................... 218
Figure 11.2 Slave Barracoon (1849)........................................ 228
Figure 11.3 Cross Section of Embarkation Canoe (1849) ........... 229
Figure 11.4 Crossing the Bar of Gallinas (1849) ...................... 230
Figure 11.5 The Capture of the Slaver Formidable by HMS Buzzard, 1834... 233
Figure 11.6 Market on Gallinas Coast, c. 1845-50.................... 240

Maps
Map 1.1 Upper Guinea Coast, 1820........................................ 8
Map 11.2 James “Kaweli” Covey’s Atlantic Journeys............... 220

Tables
Table 1.1 Slave Departures from Upper Guinea Coast ............... 24
Table 2.1 Number of Slaves Embarked on the Upper Guinea Coast, 1701-1808: Port of Origin of British Ships ................................................................. 42
Table 2.2 British Commercial Partnerships on the Upper Guinea Coast, 1701-1808 ............................................................................................................ 42
Table 2.3 Location of British Slave Purchases on Upper Guinea Coast, 1701-1808 ............................................................................................................ 44
Table 4.1 Slave Voyages of Robert Bostock .......................................................... 80
Table 5.1 Captive Embarkations between Cacheu and Cape Palmas, 1768 .......................................................... 92
Table 6.1 Embarkations by National Carrier from Senegambia, 1765-1783 .......................................................... 115
Table 6.2 Destinations of Africans from Province of Senegambia and French Enclaves, 1765-83 .......................................................... 115
Table 8.1 Anatomy of a Free Community .................................................................. 151
Table 10.1 Fugitive Slaves Entering Freetown by Ethnicity and Gender, 1858-61 .......................................................................................... 204
Table 12.1 Number of Indentured Workers, 1854-1857 ......................................... 262
Table 12.2 Place of Origins of Recruits .................................................................... 264
Table 12.3 Ages of Indentured Workers .................................................................. 265
Table 12.4 Status of African Immigrants in Guyana, 1869 ....................................... 269
Acknowledgments

An interdisciplinary conference held at the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation, University of Hull, in September 2008, provides the inspiration for this volume. Fittingly, the conference, “Empire, Slave Trade and Slavery: Rebuilding Civil Society in Sierra Leone. Past and Present,” occurred a year after the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade, which was widely celebrated both in Britain and throughout the world. Under the leadership of Professor David Richardson, Director of the Wilberforce Institute, the organizers wanted to sustain the interest in slavery and abolition that had reached a peak during 2007 and the celebration of British abolition. The intention was to focus on the themes addressed in this volume, as well as to explore contemporary issues that have affected Sierra Leone’s more recent development, including the reconstruction that was underway following the termination of civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002). The present volume focuses on the historical period of the slave trade and the settlement of Freetown as a colony arising from the abolition campaign. Seven of the papers which follow were presented at the WISE conference, while the editors have written an introduction that places the several contributions to the volume in the context of the history of the upper Guinea coast and the early development of the colony of Sierra Leone. The interrelationship between transatlantic slavery, abolition and colonization in Sierra Leone forms the central theme of this collection.

The volume is dedicated to Christopher Fyfe (1920-2008), whose contributions to the history of Sierra Leone are widely recognized as pioneering. Fyfe became Government Archivist of Sierra Leone in 1950 and undertook the task of transferring government documents to a temporary archive at Fourah Bay College and the classification of documents according to the standards of the Public Record Office in London (now the National Archives at Kew). Speaking at a symposium at St. Antony’s College, Oxford, in May 1992, Fyfe explained the circumstances leading to his appointment as Government Archivist at Freetown:

It appeared that the substantial archive of the Sierra Leone government, going back some 150 years, had been removed from its secure storeroom during the war, had deteriorated badly, and was now in urgent need of salvage. In 1950 archivists were hard to find. Training for archive administration had hardly begun. Most archivists were either established civil servants in the Public Record Office or venerable clergymen in cathedral closes – persons unwilling to undertake a salvage job in Sierra Leone. So my kind brother-in-law, having failed
to find anyone better, invited me since I had at least a degree in history, to be Government Archivist for two years.

Lacking any archival training, Fyfe explained how his work of “archival salvage” consisted of “getting the archives up off the floor onto shelves in some sort of order, and making a rather amateurish catalogue...” He then started to read the documents, and by the time he left Freetown he had “begun writing a history of Sierra Leone.”

In 1962 Oxford University Press published his massive *A History of Sierra Leone* (780 pages), which focused on the contributions of the descendants of the early settler community at Freetown, including the so-called “Liberated Africans” who were removed from slave ships by the Royal Navy between 1808 and the early 1860s. He also published numerous articles and several other books after he was appointed to the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh. In his Introduction to the Gregg Revivals edition of his seminal volume, which was published in 1993, Fyfe explained how he chose to entitle the book *A History of Sierra Leone*, and not *The History of Sierra Leone*. Fyfe saw himself “not as the author of the final definitive study but as a pioneer who hoped that other historians, particularly historians from Sierra Leone, would take it as a starting point for their own work.”

Published in the year after Sierra Leone gained its independence from Britain, his book still constitutes the key point of reference for scholars undertaking research on the colony. Fyfe’s unparalleled command of surviving archival sources in Sierra Leone and Britain combined with his broad overview of trends of change, offered an analytical and narrative framework within which scholars have extended research on the early settlement of the colony. Fyfe’s death at the age of 87 occurred just weeks before the conference that underlies this book. Moreover, his leadership has been an inspiration to the editors of this volume, who have been engaged in a digital archival project in collaboration with Mr. Albert S. Moore, who currently holds the position of Government Archivist of Sierra Leone that Fyfe once held. The project, funded by the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library, with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Canada Research Chair in African Diaspora History, has as its intention the preservation of the very documents that Fyfe initially preserved but which suffered years of neglect during the civil war and which are still held in “temporary” accommodations at Fourah Bay College, now part of the University of Sierra Leone.

The conference organisers are grateful to have received support for the conference from the City of Hull, the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation at the University of Hull, Liverpool Hope University, the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on Africa and its Diasporas at York University, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Canada Research Chair in African Diaspora
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Paul E. Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz
NOTES


3 Typescript of Introduction given to Suzanne Schwarz by Christopher Fyfe.
Preface

This collection of essays had its origins in an international conference on Sierra Leone Past and Present co-sponsored and hosted in September 2008 by the University of Hull's Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation (WISE). Its goal was to mark the bicentenary of the establishment of Sierra Leone as Britain’s first crown colony in Africa and to reflect on its future prospects as it emerged from its recent civil war. The idea for such a conference first arose in 2007, when at another conference, also held at WISE, to commemorate a related bicentenary – the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 – it was agreed by myself, as the then Director of WISE, and Paul Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz, the editors of the current volume, to launch a joint academic initiative on Sierra Leone, a country whose history has strong ties with Britain in general and Hull in particular. Hull-born British abolitionist, William Wilberforce, played a prominent part in promoting from 1787 onwards the initial free-labor settlement at Freetown that was to become the Colony of Sierra Leone, while Hull itself signed a twinning agreement with Freetown some two hundred years later with a view to promoting mutual exchanges and cooperation between the two.

The first stage in the initiative was to convene the conference from which this volume has arisen. WISE, the Harriet Tubman Institute at York University and Liverpool Hope University funded the conference and more specifically provided financial support for African, especially Sierra Leonean, academics and students to visit Hull. The essays in the volume include revised versions of some of the papers presented at the conference as well as others since written specifically for the volume. Primarily focussing on the history of Sierra Leone, the volume is dedicated to the memory of Christopher Fyfe, who did so much to advance scholarship on the history of the country and who died just before the conference held in Hull in 2008.

Those who jointly convened that conference see the current volume as one element among an ongoing series of academic and educational activities intended to assist the people of Sierra Leone to better understand their own history and to build a more prosperous future. Among the activities already under way are initiatives to encourage women in Sierra Leone to use photography to interpret what freedom means to them and to develop career opportunities; with support from the British Library’s Endangered Archives scheme, to protect and preserve the rich and in many ways unique historical records located in the country’s archives; and, working with other institutions, to make available to both Sierra Leoneans and the international scholarly
community the historical evidence found in those archives. Hull City Council and the Hull-based international photojournalist, Lee Karen Stow, have been particularly prominent in taking forward the first of these initiatives, while Lovejoy and Schwarz have been primarily responsible, with support from their own universities and other funding bodies, for taking forward the other initiatives. One outcome of the latter was an international conference convened in Sierra Leone in 2012 as a follow-up to that held in Hull in 2008. That conference will give rise to a further volume of essays in due course. In all these ways, the legacy of the conferences held at WISE in 2007-2008 lives on, and the Institute is delighted to have been associated with Professors Lovejoy and Schwarz in ensuring that, two hundred years on, the historic significance of the founding of Sierra Leone, first as a privately funded settlement and then as a British crown colony in the age of abolitionism, continues to be recognized and appreciated.

David Richardson
WISE 10 January 2013.
Chapter 1. Sierra Leone in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Paul E. Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz

This collection of essays provides a fresh look at the history of Sierra Leone that places Sierra Leone within the larger landscape of the greater Atlantic world system. The essays do not begin with the arrival of settlers from Britain, Canada and Jamaica or with so-called “European” exploration of Africa, which is where historians have normally started. Although some readers might think otherwise, this volume demonstrates that the founding of Freetown and the development of the Colony of Sierra Leone was not a frontier experience analogous to the settlement of the Americas. Such a European perspective ignores the reality of the Muslim interior of Freetown and the importance of the Poro secret society as a means of self government that transcended ethnic boundaries in non-Muslim areas. Rather, the volume demonstrates that the meaning of “Sierra Leone” changed over time and that the establishment of Freetown was a frontier of the African diaspora. Christianity, migration, the abolition of the slave trade, and experiments in labor mobilization through means other than slavery were haphazardly introduced in a context that has to be seen in perspective.

The collection brings together diverse studies with innovative approaches that normally might have appeared as journal articles. The first group of chapters focuses on the activities of individual traders, who were involved in sophisticated arrangements of credit on the coast that enabled the slave trade in the eighteenth century. The second set of papers focuses on the missed opportunities of the nascent colony at Freetown, the nature of the “creole” society that emerged, its contradictions and the fallacy of the “freedom” that was supposedly intended. Instead, a new type of African diaspora came into being in Sierra Leone that was more African than it was European. The strength of the collection is the diversity of the contributions, and the
autonomy with which each writer has been permitted to pursue ideas without the overriding necessity to conform to a theme or scheme of history.

The essays analyze the importance of the upper Guinea coast of West Africa as a slave export region from the mid-eighteenth century into the abolition period of the nineteenth century, as well as the patterns of trade which underpinned the increased outflow of enslaved Africans to the Americas. The volume also examines the ways in which the formation of one of the world’s first post-slavery societies was based on the voluntary and coerced settlement of peoples of African origin and descent, as well as being closely intertwined with abolitionist initiatives to end the transatlantic slave trade, which is the context for the essays in this volume.¹

The “Province of Freedom,” formed in 1787 under the direction of Granville Sharp and the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor in London, was intended as a new model settlement in Africa for former slaves who would govern their own affairs and demonstrate their capacity for economic independence. Although the measure of political self-determination allowed to these former slaves and their descendants was severely curtailed after the Sierra Leone Company assumed control of the settlement from 1791, the idea persisted that this “infant colony” could bring about a transformation of attitudes to the slave trade by demonstrating that the black settlers were capable of economic, cultural and social improvement.² In the two decades preceding Britain’s legal abolition of the trade in 1807, leading campaigners also used this small colony as a practical experimental site in their attempts to undermine the slave trade at its source in Africa. Not only was evidence gathered in Sierra Leone used to bolster parliamentary campaigning efforts, but employees of the Sierra Leone Company in Africa also attempted a far more radical solution to the problem of slave trading by confronting African merchants and local leaders face to face in an effort to persuade them to reject the trade in human cargo in favor of an “honourable” or ethical trade in agricultural and other produce. The Company’s attempts to bring about a shift from slave labor to free labor in West Africa had far-reaching implications for landownership and patterns of settlement by Europeans in Africa. The success of this free labor experiment depended to a great extent on the renegotiation of the economic and social relationships between Europeans and Africans which underpinned the Atlantic slave trade.

Abolitionist intervention prompted growing metropolitan interest in Sierra Leone by the early nineteenth century. As Robin Law has suggested, “its annexation as a British Crown Colony in 1808 effectively represented the beginning of the creation of the British empire in Tropical Africa.”³ The formal annexation of Company territory had clear ramifications for the conduct of British policy overseas, and reflected a wider ambition to forge a new global identity as a crusading abolitionist nation. From 1808, British policy in Sierra Leone reflected “imperial government-sanctioned goals” and
committed military resources to suppressing the transatlantic shipment of African men, women and children. Freetown was used as the first base for Royal Navy anti-slave trade patrols on the West African coast. Although the impact of these patrols on the outward traffic of Africans to the Americas was initially limited, the demographic and cultural repercussions of military intervention on settlement patterns on the Sierra Leone peninsula were dramatic. Almost 100,000 people, who were designated as “Liberated Africans” and who were drawn from across different provenance zones of the slave trade, were released in the Crown colony by the 1860s. The origins of multi-ethnic society in Freetown can be traced back to the arrival of black loyalist settlers from Britain and Nova Scotia in 1787 and 1792, but the influx of “recaptives,” as the individuals who were taken off slave ships after 1807 were also called, from across West and west central Africa created a further sharp discontinuity in settlement patterns.

Figure 1.1 Freetown, Sierra Leone, c. 1850

Why does Sierra Leone hold so much attraction for historians? Sierra Leone represents a contradiction, a “Province of Freedom” established in the midst of iniquitous slave traders, most notably at Bunce Island (earlier Bance or Bence Island, but here referred to by its current spelling) at the headwaters of navigation on the Sierra Leone River and at various islands and rivers along the upper Guinea coast. The attempts by abolitionist campaigners and former slaves to establish a post-slavery society in West Africa took place in the midst of an on-going area of slave supply. Furthermore, this socio-economic experiment to form a colony for freed slaves was located in an area which had experienced a rapid expansion in slave exports from the 1740s. At the same time that colonial administrators expounded principles of freedom from their base at Freetown, ships continued to embark enslaved Africans in large numbers for the Americas, particularly to Cuba and Brazil. Officials employed
at Freetown were powerless to intervene directly to stem the export of slaves in the first two decades of the settlement’s existence between 1787 and 1807. Located at the tip of a mountainous peninsula, Freetown overlooked the wide river, but this small settlement with meager defence capabilities could not command the wide mouth of the river or the rivers and islands to the north and south and thereby halt the outward flow of slaves.8

In this book, we mean several things when we use the term “Sierra Leone,” although we always attempt to be clear in usage. The problem of definition lies partly in the fact that the meaning of the term showed marked shifts in geographical application between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. The name Sierra Leone or “Sera Lyoa” is attributed to Portuguese navigators of the late fifteenth century who used the term initially to refer to the steep range of hills on the peninsula, a feature of the landscape which was striking in contrast to the low-lying land of the adjacent coastline.9 The use of the term “Sierra Leone” is, however, complicated by the fact that contemporary commentators in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also used it to describe a broader geographical area encompassing stretches of coastline north and south of the peninsula.10 In the eighteenth century, the name Sierra Leone was applied to a “small area round the estuary” which included “the south shore of the bay (the present Freetown shore), the islands in the river, especially Bunce, and often the mainland on the south bank of the river near the swamp-surrounded town of Robanna.”11 In the context of slave trading on the upper Guinea coast in the eighteenth century, Sierra Leone referred first and foremost to the Sierra Leone River which, according to Thomas Winterbottom in his Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone published in 1803, was known locally as the Mitomba River.12 British colonial intervention resulted in a further shift in the geographical scope of the term, and by the turn of the nineteenth century the name Sierra Leone had become “synonymous with Freetown and the immediate vicinity of the peninsula.”13 “Sierra Leone” was used by the promoters of the first settlement scheme in 1787, and subsequently for the Company that was formed by Henry Thornton, William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson and which managed the settlement until it was taken over by the British Crown in 1808. Sierra Leone then referred to the British colony on the peninsula, and by territorial and juridical extension in the course of the nineteenth century to the Protectorate of Sierra Leone, and resulting in the colonial boundaries that eventually became the independent country of Sierra Leone in 1961.14

Many themes pertinent to the history of Sierra Leone in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are explored in this volume. Our intention here is to emphasize research that is attempting to position the history of Sierra Leone as central to an understanding of wider changes in the Atlantic world, including the emergence of new attitudes to slavery and emancipation,
increasing European intervention in African affairs, and shifting patterns of coerced, voluntary and semi-voluntary migration among peoples of African origin and descent in the aftermath of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the West Indies. The first section of this book explores the pre-abolitionist era before the establishment of Freetown and the “Province of Freedom.” The second section explores the development of Freetown and the establishment of the Colony after 1808 in the context of British governance of an outpost for the suppression of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Sierra Leone and the Rivers of the Slave Trade

The formation of the “Province of Freedom” in 1787 marked, as Christopher Fyfe pointed out, a “decisive, and until then unprecedented, break in the continuity of Sierra Leone history.” British intervention on the peninsula in the late eighteenth century led to the introduction of a new population of peoples of African descent from the Americas, which represented a clear break in the cultural and ethno-linguistic continuity on the upper Guinea coast. This intervention was far more significant than the sporadic settlement of occasional merchants from Europe and the Americas until that time, which is perhaps one reason that early scholarship overlooked many other factors in the history of the region.

As Magbaily Fyle has argued, some historians have given the “misleading impression” that the history of Sierra Leone began with the introduction of “Western influence” in the late eighteenth century.

Sierra Leone’s development needs to be viewed in a wider African context that takes into account the rich histories of indigenous communities in shaping events on the upper Guinea coast. British interventions in West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were multifaceted and frequently contradictory in causation and effects. Besides the investment in Royal African Company property and particularly commercial “castles” on the Gold Coast and fortified warehouses at Ouidah and other places, attempts were made between the late seventeenth and mid eighteenth century to cultivate commercial crops for export using slave labor. Although this interest in alternative commodities is more usually associated with abolitionist schemes to reform Africa from the late eighteenth century onwards, the production of rice and early attempts to cultivate indigo on Tasso Island in the estuary of the Sierra Leone River between the 1680s and the 1720s were motivated not by a humanitarian impulse but by a desire to supplement profits from slave trading.

Eurafrican interaction on the upper Guinea coast can be traced back to the mid fifteenth century, when the area was first drawn into the Atlantic slave trade through the activities of the Portuguese. In this early period, European traders made reference to the upper Guinea coast, to the north of
Cape Mount, as opposed to the lower Guinea coast, to the east and south of the Cape. However, Philip D. Curtin, in his seminal census of trans-Atlantic migration, published in 1969, divided the African coast into broad regions which he designated Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, and the Gold Coast, among other regions, and these designations have been subsequently enshrined in the important, on-line “Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.” For our purposes, however, these designations are problematic. As Lovejoy shows in chapter 6, there was a short-lived Province of Senegambia established by the British Crown in the 1760s, and the region “Senegambia” is widely used today in the analysis of African history but with varying meanings. Viewed from an African perspective, moreover, “Sierra Leone” was never a region in the way the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database uses the term; rather in African history, the usual designation is “upper Guinea coast” and incorporates the area from the Senegal River, including the off shore Cape Verde islands, as far south as the border between modern Liberia and Sierra Leone. From a European nautical perspective, the region to the west of the Gold Coast was often called the “windward” coast. However, this maritime description was not recognized in West Africa, where ecological zones were prominent, particularly between the savanna and the coastal forest, which was known as the western part of “Sudan,” which derived from the Arabic term for the “land of the blacks.”

The division of the coastline into slave trading regions has the effect of focusing attention mainly on places of embarkation along the coastline to the exclusion of inland African routes from the hinterland and the states and societies that dominated that hinterland. The economies of coastal and inland areas were closely interconnected, and Sierra Leone needs to be set in the wider context of the rivers of the upper Guinea coast, the Fuuta Jalon (Futa Jallon) highlands and the western Sudan. All these areas were economically interdependent; the manufacture of agricultural implements in coastal areas of upper Guinea drew on iron from Fuuta Jalon and areas bordering the savanna and forest, as well as imported iron, while coastal societies supplied rice, fish, and salt in exchange for slaves, cattle and cloth. Ports of slave embarkation were closely linked to short-distance and long-distance inland trading routes and societies through the large number of rivers and their tributaries which stretched inland from the coast between the Gambia River and Cape Mount. The demand for slaves on the coast not only increased the flow of goods “between littoral and hinterland,” but also long-distance trade expanded by the late eighteenth century “with all rivers between the [Rio] Nuñez and the Rokelle discharging slaves into the hulls of European ships.” Trade in commodities other than slaves was an important element in commercial relationships in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and exports from the upper Guinea coast also included ivory, gold, beeswax,
camwood, indigo and rice. This trade in what would later be called “legitimate” commodities was closely interconnected with the operation of the slave trade; caravans conveyed both slaves and export products from inland areas to the coast and visiting captains purchased foodstuffs, particularly rice, for slaves as well as goods for return transport to America and Europe.

Muslim traders dominated the inland routes, and Muslim polities exerted a profound influence on affairs on the coast through their control of slave supplies and other commodities as far south as Cape Mount. The jihad that led to the foundation of a Muslim theocracy in Fuuta Jalon in the eighteenth century was particularly important in the increased availability of slaves for purchase along the upper Guinea coast, as has been recognized at least since the early work of Walter Rodney in the 1960s, and as Morgan points out in his essay. The role played by the Fula from Fuuta Jalon and Muslim merchants from other places further inland in trade with littoral societies was pivotal, and influential caravan leaders organized large caravans comprising slaves, cattle, and a variety of other commodities, including kola nuts and small quantities of gold for sale at the coast. The availability of salt resources on the coast also attracted long distance trade, and the market in kola nuts, which were consumed as a stimulant, linked this area of the upper Guinea coast to wider trading networks. As Rodney long ago demonstrated, “Sierra Leone was on the periphery of an important route which stretched from the upper valley of the St. Paul river through Kankan and Kissidougou.”

Because of the importance of the western Sudan, Fuuta Jalon, and the forests where kola nuts were grown, we have tried to avoid the use of the terms “interior” and “hinterland” in this volume, unless the point of reference is clear. From the perspective of the western Sudan, the Muslim networks of trade and government were positioned between the Atlantic and Sahara. Otherwise, the term “interior” conveys a European perspective that may be useful for some purposes but not for understanding Sierra Leone and its history.

The balance of trade in slaves and other forms of goods for export shifted in importance in the course of the eighteenth century. Between the 1620s and the 1720s, the limited availability of slave supplies on the upper Guinea coast led the Royal African Company to place greater emphasis on trade in commodities other than slaves. As Morgan’s chapter demonstrates, the Royal African Company was involved only sporadically in small scale slave-trading ventures on the upper Guinea coast in the mid to late seventeenth century. In their efforts to find profitable export commodities to supplement the trade in slaves, the Royal African Company experimented in the cultivation of indigo on Tasso Island and York Island in the Sherbro River in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century.
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

Map 1.1 Upper Guinea Coast, 1820

In the eighteenth century, French, British (including North American) and Portuguese (mainly Brazilian) merchants were the principal factors in the trade at the coast, but after the collapse of the French trade in the early 1790s and British abolition in 1807, merchants from Cuba and Brazil dominated the traffic.30 By the mid eighteenth century, the number of Africans transported from the upper Guinea coast reflected the dominant role of the Atlantic slave trade in the local economy of the littoral. Over two-thirds of the enslaved Africans (approximately 1,481,000) who were transported from the upper Guinea coast between the early sixteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century left after 1740 (see Table 1.1). In the period from 1642 to 1740, an estimated 266,000 Africans were shipped from the upper Guinea coast as compared with 804,000 between 1741 and British abolition of the trade in 1807.31 Besides the Sierra Leone River, slaves left from Îles de Los, Rio
Pongo, Rio Nuñez, and Sherbro Island in the eighteenth century (see Map 1.1). Trade in the Sierra Leone estuary, and principally at Bunce Island, accounted for the forced exile of an estimated 148,000 Africans between 1563 and 1808, but most were transported between 1750 and 1807. British ships dominated slave-trading in the Sierra Leone River and more generally on the upper Guinea coast, although vessels from France and North America also took significant shares of the trade between 1741 and 1807. After 1755, there was a revival in Portuguese trade, that is Brazilian trade, particularly from Bissau and Cacheo, to the north of Rio Nuñez, to Amazonia in north-eastern Brazil, a trade that lasted until 1815. From the perspective of the Africans who were embarked, the national origin of the vessel made a difference to their life experiences as it strongly influenced the areas to which they were sent.

Figure 1.2 Bunce [Bence] Island, c. 1727


Slaves embarked on Liverpool ships far exceeded the numbers who left on vessels from other British ports before 1808, and sixteen of the twenty leading British partnerships active on the upper Guinea coast in the pre-abolition period came from Liverpool. In his chapter, Morgan explains this dominance in terms of the commercial expertise of Liverpool merchants in building up business and personal networks with European, Eurafrican and African traders, even though for some of the merchants the upper Guinea coast was a secondary source of supply compared to other provenance zones, particularly the Bight of Biafra. Several captains and merchants, including James Penny, acquired first-hand knowledge of the trade by residing on the coast for different periods, and others arranged for the children of their African and Eurafrican suppliers to be educated in Liverpool. Such personal contacts nurtured relationships based on trust and were essential to the conduct of business on the upper Guinea coast where trade was characterized
by face to face dealings.

Eurafricans were particularly important in the organization of slave supply, and a number of powerful families, including the Rogers, Tuckers, Caulkers and Clevelanders, dominated trade at different places. Recognizing the importance of William and James Cleveland to his business interests, the Liverpool merchant Robert Bostock sent his son to work with William Cleveland on the Banana Islands, off the southern portion of the peninsula. In her chapter, Denise Jones shows how Bostock’s dependence on the Clevelanders demonstrates the ways in which Bostock attempted to promote his interests over those of competing traders. Bostock’s difficulties in redeeming debts from the Clevelanders illustrates the financial insecurity of trading on this coast compared with Bonny in the Bight of Biafra, where centralized authority protected credit by enforcing payment of debts.

Trust was fundamental to the conduct of business in a context where slave merchants and ship captains extended goods on credit to African and Eurafrican merchants to facilitate the supply of slaves. Hence, in 1760 Timothy Fitch of Boston instructed the captain of the Charming Phillis only to give preference in the distribution of his cargo to traders that “you Know to be Sponsible men provided thay will give you as much as another.” As Mouser demonstrates in his chapter, Fitch commissioned many slaving voyages to the upper Guinea coast in the 1750s and 1760s, and for this venture he selected a captain with prior knowledge of trading on the coast that had been gained in two previous voyages as chief mate and captain. Fitch relied on his skill and experience to gauge the best methods of conducting trade, particularly since this involved goods advanced as unsecured credit. He instructed Gwinn to purchase between seventy and eighty slaves, particularly a “Cargo of Young Slaves” either by coasting “from place to place” or by trading at the Îles de Los, where large numbers of slaves could be purchased in single lots. The coasting commerce was typically more time-consuming as it meant negotiating with traders at different locations and purchasing slaves in small numbers, a method that John Newton pursued in his trading ventures on the upper Guinea coast in the 1750s. Although giving Gwinn the flexibility to conduct trade to the best advantage, Fitch recommended “gowing to the Isle Delos if you Cant Finish Sereleon.” As Mouser points out in his chapter, Îles de Los acted as a slave warehousing or bulking center where Africans were gathered ready for the arrival of ships. In the period between 1759 and 1820, an estimated 64,000 Africans were embarked at the Îles de Los, who were then sent to the eastern Caribbean, St. Domingue, Jamaica, South Carolina and Georgia. The cost of trading for slaves was usually higher at bulking centers as brokers took a percentage of the profits, but a potential advantage was that disputes could be minimized.

The scope for disagreement with African traders was increased in business negotiations where human pawns had to be used to secure credit.
In these cases, individuals who were related to African merchants were held on slave ships as security against goods that were advanced on credit until slaves were delivered to erase the debt. As F.B. Spilsbury, who was at Rio Pongo and Bunce Island in 1805, observed: “If a king or any other person goes to a factory, or slave-ship, and procures articles which he is not at that time able to pay for, he sends his wife, sister, or child, as a pawn.” Merchants identified those being held in pawn by “putting a tally around their necks,” according to Spilsbury, who “saw a great number of pawns with their tallies,” when he was at Bunce Island and neighboring Tasso Island. The use of tallies on the upper Guinea coast appears to have been a local means of identifying pawns to ensure that they would not be removed from the coast, as in the case of “the king in full court dress, followed by his wives, [who] has a boy with this article round his neck [i.e., a tally], going to be pawned” (Figure 1.3). If a pawn was removed, it was expected that the pawn would be restored; otherwise no vessel from the country involved would have been again allowed to trade.

Violence, as Sean Kelley establishes in chapter 5, was a frequent outcome of business conducted in this way, and hence he argues that the upper Guinea coast “seems to have experienced higher rates of African-European violence than elsewhere.” The prevalence of direct trading with small scale merchants and traders was one of the factors which increased the possibilities for dispute. Conflict arose particularly in those cases where captains considered it legitimate to sell pawns as slaves when they considered that accumulated debts and obligations had not been adequately fulfilled by traders on the coast, but from an African perspective this was often interpreted as panyarring or kidnapping, which in turn could lead to retaliation against other ships and their crew, particularly those which were identified as coming from the same port in Europe or the Americas.

The direct nature of Eurafrican trading relationships was linked to the comparatively limited level of corporate investment in forts and castles in areas adjacent to Sierra Leone, although the fort on Bunce Island was an important exception as a point of slave embarkation. However, Bunce Island did not represent the typical form of trading in this region, which was usually based on the smaller barracoons and trading outposts of resident merchants of Eurafrican descent. Their intermediary roles overcame the difficulties and uncertainties presented by direct trading with African suppliers from the interior of the upper Guinea coast and accounted for the upsurge in slave shipments in the second half of the eighteenth century.
Figure 1.3 King in Full Dress, with Wives and Children, Sierra Leone River, c. 1805

The settlement established at Freetown in 1787 laid the basis for the British Crown Colony of Sierra Leone two decades later. As Lovejoy demonstrates in his chapter, however, Sierra Leone was not the first British effort at colonization in West Africa. The little-studied and short-lived “Province of Senegambia,” to which abolitionist Gustavus Vassa (alias Olaudah Equiano) almost went, was the antithesis of the “Province of Freedom,” being rather a province of the slave trade. Although Vassa did not sail out to Sierra Leone with the first settlers in 1787 as originally planned when he was appointed “Commissioner of the Black Poor,” he did maintain a keen interest in the repatriation of former slaves to Africa, and in his will he included a bequest to fund a school in Freetown.46

The “Province of Freedom”

Sierra Leone has particular significance as one of the world’s first post-slavery societies, predating the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue by several years.47 The foundations of the “Province of Freedom” originated not in slave revolt, but in joint planning of the settlement by Sharp and free blacks settled in London.48 The settlement rapidly developed as a multi-ethnic society, as it was a focal point for inward migration by people of African origin and descent dispersed in the British Atlantic world. Between 1787 and the mid-nineteenth century, the influx of displaced people of African origin and descent consisted of different streams of voluntary, semi-voluntary and coerced forms of migration which linked this area with developments in West Africa, west central Africa, North America, the Caribbean and Europe. In the first six decades of the nineteenth century, the smaller settler population comprised mainly of Jamaican Maroons and black loyalists from Britain and Nova Scotia underwent rapid expansion. The patterns of migration were complex and consisted of various intersecting currents of Atlantic movement and counter-movement, which began with the settlement of blacks from Nova Scotia as well as those from London and included the arrival of 550 Jamaican Maroons in 1800. This settlement took place at a time when a high proportion of enslaved Africans transported from the upper Guinea coast were destined for slavery in the sugar plantations of Jamaica and the rice plantations of South Carolina and Georgia.49

After 1807, approximately 100,000 Africans were released in Freetown from vessels which had embarked slaves on the upper Guinea coast as well as other parts of the African coast.50 This emigration greatly exceeded the early settlement from Britain and North America. The disparate groups of voluntary and coerced migrants who came to reside in Freetown had widely divergent experiences of freedom and enslavement that had been acquired in Africa and in the Atlantic world, which fundamentally shaped political and cultural relationships. In the case of the black loyalists from Nova Scotia who had gained their freedom by fighting for the British in the American War of
Independence or who had otherwise secured British protection, expectations of self-determination and personal religious freedom brought them into frequent conflict with white officials who were only prepared to grant a limited measure of autonomy in political and spiritual affairs. As James Sidbury argues in his chapter, conflict with the Sierra Leone Company reflected the ways in which the Nova Scotian settlers brought their own vision of a new African nation to Sierra Leone and how the settlers hoped that they could transform Temne culture and beliefs. The dangers of settlement were real enough, as revealed in the high proportion of deaths following the first attempt at emigration from London in 1787.

Figure 1.4 Freetown, Sierra Leone, c. 1850

Source: Lithograph, A. Laby and J. Needham, Wilberforce House Museum, Hull Museums

The choice of site for the “Province of Freedom” offered a number of potential advantages, as well as significant disadvantages, for the settlement of freed slaves. The selection of the location is usually explained in terms of Henry Smeathman’s optimistic report on the tropical abundance of the area near the Sierra Leone River, but his assessment of the rich agricultural capacity of the soil proved misleading. Knowledge of the coastline among European traders, especially those engaged in slave trading, was already extensively developed through trading links that undoubtedly contributed to the decision to locate the settlement on one of the largest natural harbors in the world. As demonstrated above, European trading outposts had been established at various points along the upper Guinea coast over more than two centuries. Portuguese influence at the Îles de Los was extensive, and factories under the control of European and Eurafrican traders were dispersed on the other islands and along the numerous rivers and estuaries north and south of the Sierra Leone River. European attention also focused on the upper Guinea coast, and indeed the abortive Province of Senegambia, as possible sites for convict settlements, but the area was considered too
deleterious to the health of Europeans and in the aftermath of the loss of the American colonies, Botany Bay in Australia was selected instead.\textsuperscript{51}

Although the formation of the “Province of Freedom” took place against a backdrop of expansion in slave supply from the upper Guinea coast after the mid-eighteenth century, abolitionist campaigners were no doubt aware that the peninsula at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River was a relatively minor embarkation area compared to areas further south along the African coast. From the point of view of the Sierra Leone Company, this aspect of the site offered a potential advantage. After all, if abolitionists were to attack the slave trade at its roots the settlement needed to be located in an area where there was active trade and access to other commodities. The aims of the new settlement were clearly antithetical to slave trading interests and provoked vigorous opposition in Britain, the Caribbean and Africa. When the Sierra Leone Company, the successor to the St. George’s Bay Company, assumed responsibility for the settlement in 1791, vested slave trading interests and West Indian planters in Parliament successfully opposed plans for the Company to have a monopoly of trade on the Sierra Leone River.\textsuperscript{52}

Throughout its history the Company repeatedly attributed many of its difficulties and financial failings to the fact that the Company could not exclude slave traders from its territory. Hence, the Freetown settlement experienced a sharp confrontation in both principle and practice between abolitionist views of the slave trade and the pro-slavery interests of European, Euraficran and African traders.

As the new colony was located in close proximity to areas of slave embarkation in the Sierra Leone River, along the Bullom Shore, north of the River, and at the Banana Islands and Sherbro, to the south of the peninsula, the black settlers were at risk of re-enslavement if they ventured outside the narrow territorial boundaries of the colony. Even if they stayed in Freetown, they were likely to encounter visiting slave captains and crew, as well as African and Euraficran slave traders who the Company invited to Freetown on a regular basis. One such encounter with a Liverpool slave ship captain sparked a riot in June 1794. Alexander Grierson confronted some Nova Scotian settlers on the wharf at Freetown with how he would punish them as disobedient slaves if he had them in the West Indies. According to Company reports, the settlers responded by threatening to knock out Grierson’s brains with a hammer.\textsuperscript{53} Moreover, Company policy led to numerous contradictions in practice. On the one hand Company officials invited African and Euraficran traders to Freetown, but then complained when slave trading influences interfered with the development of their cherished plans of “Commerce, Civilization and Christianity.” If Company officials could not keep unwanted slave traders outside the boundaries of Freetown, neither could they prevent settlers, missionaries and employees from being drawn into slave trading in the hinterland. Misevich’s chapter demonstrates how
even some recaptive Africans liberated by Royal Navy patrols after 1808 were implicated in slave-dealing in the colony.

Figure 1.5 Sierra Leone River, 1787-88

Source: Carl Bernhard Wadström, *Observations on the Slave Trade, and a description of some part of the coast of Guinea, during a voyage, made in 1787, and 1788* (London: James Phillips, 1789)

Abolitionists adopted various strategies in their attempts to demarcate Freetown and the Sierra Leone peninsula as areas free from slave trading and slavery, but with limited resources and scant influence beyond the narrow strip of territory that was occupied this was impossible to implement in practice. Disagreements over land sovereignty marred relationships with nearby Temne rulers, and the destruction of Granville Town by King Jimmy in December 1789 reflected wider tensions in maintaining an abolitionist-inspired settlement in an area so heavily influenced by slave-trading interests. The abolitionist principles of colonial officials in Freetown had to be sufficiently mutable to take account of the realities of life in West Africa. Macaulay had to cooperate with William Cleveland of the Banana Islands to ensure a regular supply of rice for Freetown, even though he knew that Cleveland was a major slave supplier. As Misevich’s chapter demonstrates, successive governors after the establishment of the Colony in 1808 were faced with the vexed issue of how to deal with fugitive slaves who sought asylum in the Colony. Although the principle that the Colony should be free
from slave trading was enshrined in the name Freetown, the Colony’s early governors were acutely aware of the dangers of antagonizing neighboring African and Eurafrican traders whose goodwill was vital to the survival of the Colony. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, colonial administrators adopted more robust policies in confronting slavery and pursuing slave traders outside the boundaries of the Colony. Attempts to confront the problem of slavery, as Misevich recognizes, “raised fundamental questions about Britain’s colonial project and forced officials at home and abroad to rethink the nature of the colonial state.”

The cultural boundaries of the Freetown settlement were permeable, and the lives of officials and settlers were closely interconnected with the cultural and economic life of the surrounding areas and the people who were there. The “Province of Freedom” was established on ceded land in Temne territory, and in 1793 a number of Company employees undertook short expeditions to explore the neighboring territory more fully and establish trading relationships with influential leaders. Frequent “palavers,” as these negotiations were known, also took place to acquire sovereignty over land, although Company officials often failed to understand local custom and practice in landlord-stranger relationships. African traders moved in and out of Freetown on a regular basis and interacted with the settlers, both before and after Sierra Leone became an official colony in 1808. Betsey Heard, a slave trader who had been educated in Liverpool, was a regular visitor to Freetown and advised the Company doctor and botanist on the local medicinal uses of plants and herbs. Nova Scotian settlers built boats as a means of trading beyond Freetown, and female settlers engaged extensively in petty trade in food and other commodities. Various settlers left Freetown to establish new households among the Temne, and as Sidbury observes in his chapter, there was increasing disaffection with the Company government that led to the formation of a breakaway settlement by Nova Scotian Methodists at Pirates’ Bay in 1796.

The plans of the Sierra Leone Company were firmly based on the view that ethical opposition to the slave trade could be successfully combined with extensive profits for shareholders. As Schwarz explains in her chapter, the Sierra Leone Company planned to generate a profit by exporting agricultural commodities to British markets. Company officials reasoned that if local Africans could be persuaded to cultivate the riches of the soil in place of slave trading, this would produce cargoes of sugar, tobacco, cotton and other consumer goods which would eventually displace slave-produced crops from the West Indies. Thomas Clarkson’s report on the economic potential of Sierra Leone to the Company directors in 1791 reveals a detailed awareness of the type of commodities exported from the upper Guinea coast by slave traders and the Royal African Company in earlier times, including ivory, camwood, gold and beeswax.
The territory occupied by the settlement was intended to form the base for an advancing frontier of economic influence which would erode support for the slave trade from the inland areas of supply. Aware of the importance of Fuuta Jalon as a slave supply region, Company officials attempted to widen the scope of abolitionist support on the upper Guinea coast by trying to persuade Muslim leaders to abandon slave trading in favor of trade in other commodities, although of course this was a naïve expectation. James Watt’s expedition to Fuuta Jalon in 1793 explored the possibilities of developing trade, although Macaulay was aware that Freetown was not particularly well placed geographically to take advantage of this inland trade. Rio Pongo and Rio Nuñez were much better located, unless a road could be opened between Freetown and Timbo, the Fuuta Jalon capital.57 His report to the directors in London documents Fula influence at Rio Nuñez and the Company’s intention to trade with this Muslim state.58 On 30 June 1793, Macaulay described how:

The king of the Foulahs is a very powerful man, he lives about 300 miles up the country. When slaves come to the Rio Nunez &c from that country, they come generally in bodies of one or two hundred, attended by double the number of armed Foulahs. The slave traders of the Rio Nunez &c. wished lately to avail themselves of the war [between Britain and France] in order to lower the price of slaves, and when the Foulah caravans came down they refused to trade unless a deduction was made in the price. To their great disappointment however, the Foulahs were offended at this treatment broke up the palaver and carried all their slaves back again.59

Macaulay actively encouraged Muslim merchants to spend time in Freetown as a way of building up practical support for the Company’s ideals of “Commerce, Civilization and Commerce.” Muslims commanded a central economic position in the Colony throughout the nineteenth century.

Following the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, the Sierra Leone Gazette carried an optimistic article focusing on the potential for cultivation and trade in the natural productions of Africa. This article argued that,

As the slave-trade is now stopped, the people of the coast should take example from others around them. Every native Chief or Trader, who has seen the flourishing plantations on Tasso [Island], and knows how much money the Cotton will bring that is raised there this year, must perceive at once both that the country people can be made to work, and that their work may make their employers very rich.60

Tasso Island is located to the south of Bunce Island in the estuary of the Sierra Leone River, which Dr. Thomas Winterbottom described as the site of a cotton plantation owned by Bunce Island. In 1806 Joseph Corry observed that the island had “remarkably fertile soil” which was “capable of producing any tropical production.”61 Six years later, however, the slave trade continued
apace and efforts were still focused on persuading Muslim merchants to halt the movement of slaves from inland areas to the coast. A medallion commissioned by Macaulay was struck in Birmingham in 1814 for distribution in Sierra Leone, and this carried an Arabic inscription explaining that the trade had been abolished (see Figure 9.1).

The European promoters of Sierra Leone envisioned Freetown as the beginnings of an advancing Christian frontier in West Africa. Thomas Clarkson was optimistic that through trade “a road would be opened to the Christian Missionary to lay before unenlightened Nations the Gospel of Reconciliation and Peace.” As such, the settlement would act as a bridgehead or forward base from which missionaries could spread the Gospel. In a context of increasing evangelical concern for the plight of “poor heathens,” Sierra Leone was the focus of a number of early missionary experiments by Methodists, Baptists and Anglicans. Initial missionary efforts focused on the neighboring Temne and Susu, but Company officials were also optimistic that Muslim Fuuta Jalon could be drawn into an expanding zone of Christian influence. Plans were formed in 1795 for the settlement of Methodist missionaries among the Fula, as the Reverend Melvill Horne explained to Mary Fletcher in 1795.

Although Company directors emphasized how the Christian complexion of the colony was fundamental to its wider objectives of moral and economic reform in Africa, they gave little recognition to the early preaching and teaching initiatives carried out among the Temne by some of the settlement’s free black settlers. As Sidbury demonstrates in his chapter, the Nova Scotian settlers “were engaged in an Exodus, and upon arriving in their Promised Land, they hoped to initiate a transformation that would convert the heathen peoples of the Old Country into a single civilized Christian people that could take up its proper place in sacred and secular history.” Macaulay frequently disparaged the spiritual beliefs and educational attainments of the Nova Scotian settlers and cast doubt on their suitability for missionary work, however. This pessimism was undoubtedly linked to how the evangelical conversion experiences of the former slaves from North America had led to congregational independence and a commitment to a republican spirit which proved objectionable and distasteful to Anglican Company officials.

The religious composition of the colony was more variegated, however, than is often represented in contemporary accounts, not only with respect to the influence of Muslims and the religious beliefs of the local Temne population but even among the settlers. The diversity of religious influences was shaped by the arrival of Jamaican Maroons in 1800, and the settlers in frequent contact with neighboring Temne people would have observed and most likely assimilated aspects of their religious and cultural behavior that has not been documented. The frequent visits of Signor Domingo in the 1790s also suggest the continuation of residual influence arising from early
Portuguese-speaking Catholic missions among the local population. Judging by the names listed in the Registers of Liberated Africans in the Sierra Leone Public Archives, moreover, Muslims formed a significant component among the first “recaptives” released at Freetown in 1808 and 1809. The Muslim presence in the colony was substantially increased by the later influx of Yoruba Muslims and other Muslims from the Central Sudan.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the Company was no longer financially viable and virtually all of the shareholder capital that had been raised a decade earlier had drained away. There was no doubt that as a practical business enterprise the Company experienced unmitigated failure, but, as Schwarz demonstrates in her chapter, after 1807, the African Institution actively pursued the Company’s policies of “Commerce, Civilization and Christianity.” This ideology continued to be promoted, as reflected in Thomas Fowell Buxton’s *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy*. Despite the failure of the Company, abolitionist pressure in Parliament was undoubtedly a principal factor that influenced the decision to annex Sierra Leone to the Crown in 1808, although it was stressed at the time that this was not intended as the start of an expansionist policy of acquisition in West Africa. As Hodgson argues in chapter 8, however, interest in the potential of Sierra Leone as a site of colonization was not confined to Britain. From the late eighteenth century, Swedish and French proposals for colonization schemes on the upper Guinea coast also contributed to an image of Africa as a space that could be colonized within a broader European political consciousness. There was also American interest in Sherbro Island as a potential site of colonization for free blacks in the early nineteenth century, but this initiative foundered because of poor planning and the continuance of the Atlantic slave trade.

Despite the reluctance to acquire expensive new areas of territorial responsibility, the implementation of abolitionist policy in Sierra Leone signaled the extension of intervention in African affairs, which was frequently justified on humanitarian grounds. After 1808, naval commanders and governors of the Crown colony frequently exceeded the legal limits of their authority by attacking slave barracoons in independent territory beyond their jurisdiction. In the 1820s, Governor Turner considered occupying further territory along the coast as an effective means of stemming the outflow of slaves, but, as Misevich recognizes in his chapter, such proposals were actively discouraged by metropolitan authorities. By the 1850s, attitudes nonetheless shifted. Governor Hill annexed a large area of territory including Sherbro Island and the adjacent mainland and thereby added “thousands of new Sherbro and Mende subjects” to British colonial jurisdiction.

The development of the Colony at Sierra Leone illustrates how British attitudes and policy towards abolition changed markedly over a twenty year period from 1787 to 1807. After the collapse of the “Province of Freedom,”
Sharp was unable to persuade the British government to commit any further funds to this “infant colony.” Yet, Sierra Leone became central to a new British abolitionist agenda aimed at ending the transatlantic slave trade. Freetown was designated as the base for a Court of Vice Admiralty and in 1819 a Court of Mixed Commission for the implementation of an active policy of slave trade suppression that expanded Britain’s moral crusade to halt the trade in human cargo. The humanitarian impulse lying behind the suppression policies involved the Royal Navy directly in the forced sea-borne relocation of tens of thousands of enslaved Africans to Sierra Leone. Although these Africans had been spared the Middle Passage, they were still involuntary migrants subject to colonial control and various forms of coerced labor. The Africans who were “liberated” in the Colony were not actually given their freedom but were required to enter into apprenticeships of up to fourteen years duration; apprenticeships which Thomas Perronet Thompson and Robert Thorpe considered little different to systems of enslavement.

The contemporary dispute over apprenticeship formed a sad chapter in a long and bitter controversy about the limits of freedom for black settlers in Sierra Leone. Definitions and expectations of liberty were highly contested issues throughout the Colony’s existence, particularly as British officials frequently reverted to the use of stereotypical and paternalistic ideas of African behavior and capacities. The struggle over the meaning of freedom began early. Shortly after their arrival in Freetown in 1792 Nova Scotian settlers repeatedly challenged the narrow concepts of freedom that were being imposed on them by British colonial officials, including Macaulay and William Dawes. In a petition taken to London by two of their representatives in October 1793, the black loyalist settlers complained how “Mr. Dawes seems to wish to rule us just as bad as if we were all Slaves which we cannot bear.”

The influx of “Liberated Africans” from 1808 onwards added to the complexity of the multi-ethnic society in Freetown, and this generated tensions in the interaction among different groups. Thompson, the first governor of the Crown colony, investigated a number of complaints of cruelty which the recaptives lodged against Nova Scotian settlers and Company officials alike. Other recaptives expressed resistance to the form of freedom offered in this Crown colony by running away from their apprenticeships, and many of those who were released from slave ships in the first years of suppression soon returned to their places of origin. According to advertisements for runaway recaptives in the African Herald and the Sierra Leone Gazette in 1809, individuals were not treated as free people but their masters and mistresses regarded them as valuable property. Typically twenty dollars was offered as a reward for each individual returned to the jailer. The construction and style of these advertisements bear a striking resemblance to advertisements for slave runaways in the plantation societies of the Americas. For example, Cato Freeman, a Nova Scotian tailor, placed an
advertisement in *The African Herald* on 11 November 1809 offering a reward for the return of two runaways, including

A stout negro fellow, named CUPID. Is about twenty-six years of age, six feet two inches high, and has the marks of a musquet ball on his left breast. Calls himself Osman and pretends to read and write some language of the heathen [i.e., Arabic].... Has never been ill-used, having been employed only in his master's business. Ran away in consequence of a slight whipping given to his wench. Also a well-made negro wench, named PUSSEY. Eighteen years of age, and carried with her a male negro child of about six weeks old. Calls herself Fantona [Fatoma?] and says she belongs to the other.... Are supposed to be hid behind Thornton-Hill or about Granville Town.\(^7^0\)

In these cases, the fugitives apparently were Muslims who may have been able to find refuge with Muslims merchants who dominated the trade into the interior.

In addition to those who ran away, recaptives originating from the Bight of Benin returned to their homelands from the 1830s, which contributed to the dispersal of economic, cultural and religious influences from Sierra Leone to Yorubaland and the Niger River valley. Entrepreneurial individuals purchased slave vessels condemned by the Courts of Mixed Commission and used these to trade at some distance from the Colony.\(^7^1\)

Intervention by Royal Naval patrols to suppress the slave trade created an internal African diaspora in which Freetown played a pivotal role. The Africans released at Sierra Leone included people drawn from all the main provenance zones of the slave trade, although the numbers from different regions depended on the strength and geographical reach of the West Africa Squadron at different points in the nineteenth century. The African names of individuals recorded in Registers of Liberated Africans held in the Sierra Leone Public Archives and in the National Archives at Kew yield clues to the areas beyond the coast from which these individuals originated, while other colonial records provide fragmentary references which can be used to reconstruct aspects of the life histories of individuals after their release. The case of Kaweli (also known as James B. Covey) is well-documented as he acted as a Mende translator and interpreter in the high profile case of *La Amistad* in the United States. In his chapter, Lawrance analyzes Covey’s complex routes to enslavement and transportation as a child in the area near the Sierra Leone River and the circumstances associated with his release at Freetown as a Liberated African in 1833. In common with other young males who were taken off slave ships, he was entered for service on board a Royal Naval vessel which formed part of the West Africa Squadron and thus played a role in the release of other Africans. Covey subsequently returned to Sierra Leone with survivors from *La Amistad*, which also illustrates the multiple forms of migration undertaken by some Liberated Africans.
Flory’s chapter shows that some Liberated Africans at Freetown formed part of an outward migration of workers willing to cross the Atlantic under indenture contracts. As Flory demonstrates, French recruitment in West Africa in the 1850s and 1860s exploited the apprenticeship system by promising “free” passage to the Americas in return for compensation and repatriation after the term of service was over. The British anti-slave trade campaign to re-settle Liberated Africans in Sierra Leone and the later schemes to encourage their emigration to the West Indies demonstrate further that Freetown served as a way station in the establishment of a new diaspora of Africans. The outward movement of the so-called Liberated Africans who were released at Freetown between 1808 and the early 1860s extended not only to areas from where individuals originally came but also across the Atlantic.

The essays in this volume clearly demonstrate how the upper Guinea coast was closely intertwined with the Atlantic world, principally through its role as an area of slave supply to the Americas and then as an area of settlement of individuals released from the grip of the slave trade. In many respects, the Colony was at the vortex of the interaction between the slave trade and its abolition, on the one hand, and then the emancipation and subsequent modifications of labor and social relationships, on the other. Freetown and then the Colony of Sierra Leone were the sites of extensive African and European encounters not only through the commercial networks that sustained the slave trade, but also through direct abolitionist intervention to persuade and then subsequently to compel those involved in the slave trade to relinquish the traffic in human cargo. At various points in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sierra Leone was at the heart of debate on the rights and wrongs of slavery, the value of free labor, the meaning of freedom, and the viability of schemes for the economic, social and religious reform of Africa. Through this unusual experiment in settlement on the upper Guinea coast, abolitionists attempted to transform slavery by exerting pressure on West African societies and slave traders from Europe and the Americas through a combination of economic reform, military force and moral and religious suasion. Anti-slavery and the transition to colonialism in Sierra Leone were intimately interconnected, and the complex interplay of these forces undoubtedly influenced the basis of further intervention in Africa and elsewhere in the nineteenth century.

Much more can be learned about the various populations in Freetown and the immediate villages of the colony established to accommodate the growing influx of Liberated Africans. Returns for “alien” children in the colony from the 1850s and returns of fugitive slaves for the second half of the nineteenth century indicate that the migrations explored in this volume will be supplemented with future research.
Table 1.1 Slave Departures from Upper Guinea Coast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Departures</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper Guinea</td>
<td>1501-1641</td>
<td>185,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Guinea</td>
<td>1642-1740</td>
<td>266,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Guinea</td>
<td>1741-1807</td>
<td>804,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Guinea</td>
<td>1808-1856</td>
<td>226,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1501-1856</td>
<td>1,481,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>1668-1829</td>
<td>145,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>1644-1816</td>
<td>258,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bissau</td>
<td>1686-1843</td>
<td>126,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Îles de Los</td>
<td>1759-1820</td>
<td>64,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone River</td>
<td>1563-1808</td>
<td>148,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallinas</td>
<td>1731-1856</td>
<td>98,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**NOTES**


5 Of an estimated 3.2 million Africans embarked on slave ships in the period between 1808 and 1863, less than 200,000 were released by anti-slave trade patrols. David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2010), 271-74.


8 The vulnerability of the settlement was emphasized in December 1789 in an attack by King Jimmy, a local Temne ruler, on Granville Town, and subsequently in the devastating French attack on Freetown in 1794. Braidwood, Black Poor and White Philanthropists, 197-98, 204-207.


11 Hair, “The Spelling and Connotation of the Toponym ‘Sierra Leone’,” 43-58.

12 Winterbottom noted how, “the river Mitomba, or Sierra Leone, is conspicuous for its magnitude, and is one of the most beautiful in Africa.” See Thomas Winterbottom, An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone, to Which Is Added an Account of the Present State of Medicine among Them, 2 vols. (London: C. Whittingham, 1803) vol. 1, 14.

13 Hair, “The Spelling and Connotation of the Toponym ‘Sierra Leone’,” 52.

14 In 1896 a “British protectorate was proclaimed over the territory adjoining the Colony ... adding to it an area about the size of Scotland made up of a great variety of disparate political and cultural units,” Fyfe, “1787-1887,” 416.


17 Law, “Before 1787: The first 325 years of Afro-European interactions in Sierra Leone.”

18 C. Magbaily Fyle, A Nationalist History of Sierra Leone (Freetown, 2011), 10, 54, 252.


23 Rodney, History of the Upper Guinea Coast, viii, 1-2, 16-17, 223; Walter Hawthorne, From Africa to Brazil. Culture, Identity, and an Atlantic Slave Trade 1600-1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6-7, 63.

24 Rodney, History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 226, 228.

25 Rodney, History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 152.
34 Hawthorne, *From Africa to Brazil*, 61-64.
39 Loading rates for Liverpool ships trading on the upper Guinea coast in the second half of the eighteenth century were typically one slave per day. Lovejoy and Richardson, “African Agency and the Liverpool Slave Trade,” 52, 58.
43 F.B. Spilsbury, *Account of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa; Performed by His Majesty’s Sloop Favourite in the Year 1805* (London: Richard Phillips, 1807), 32.
44 Spilsbury, *Account of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa*, 32.
45 When the *Trio* was captured by a French squadron, the captain of the *Trio* sent a female pawn to shore to avoid her seizure, and “As he behaved with such honour, he can again return; but had he not, no Englishman would have been again allowed to trade. Should any other vessel come from that place, they will deliver to him the slave for the pawn,” Spilsbury, *Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa*, 32. Also see Paul E. Lovejoy, “Pawnship, Debt and ‘Freedom’ in Atlantic Africa during the Era of the Slave Trade: A Re-assessment,” *Journal of African History* 55, 1 (2014), 1-24.
47 Law, “Before 1787: The first 325 years of Afro-European interactions in Sierra Leone.”
49 Walker, *Black Loyalists*.
50 The influence of “individuals from ethnic communities indigenous to Sierra Leone” among the Liberated Africans has been emphasized in a number of


52 Reasons Against Giving a Territorial Grant to a Company of Merchants, to Colonize and Cultivate the Peninsula of Sierra Leona, on the Coast of Africa (London, 1791), 2-16.

53 Grierson complained that Robert Keeling had “excited a Mob to insult and threaten him....” Robert Keeling and Scipio Channel were “discharged from the Company’s service,” as it was considered “indispensably necessary to the well being of the Colony, and to the carrying on the Company’s views, that the persons of strangers should be protected from violence, and that all riotous and disorderly conduct in the settlers should be openly discouraged & vigorously opposed.” The National Archives, CO 270/2, Minutes of Governor and Council, 16 June 1794. For a discussion of Grierson’s voyages to the upper Guinea Coast, see Suzanne Schwarz, ed. Zachary Macaulay and the Development of the Sierra Leone Company, 1793-4: 2. Journal, October-December 1793 (Leipzig: University of Leipzig Papers on Africa, History and Culture, series no. 4, 2002), 12.

54 Fyle, Nationalist History, 45.


60 Sierra Leone Gazette 1 (January 1808), 2.

61 Winterbottom, Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone, vol. 1, 19-20; Joseph Corry, Observations upon the Windward Coast of Africa; the Character, Religion, Customs, &C. Of the Natives, with a System upon Which They May Be Civilized, and a Knowledge Attained in the Interior of This Extraordinary Quarter of the Globe, and Upon the Natural and Commercial Resources of the Country (London: G. and W. Nicol, 1807), 3-4.

62 British Library (hereafter BL), Add MS 12131, Thomas Clarkson, “Letter Addressed to the Chairman of the Sierra Leone Company by the Revd. Mr. Thomas Clarkson,” in Collection of Papers Relative to Sierra Leone, f. 20.

63 This phrase was used repeatedly by the Reverend Melvill Horne in his Letters on Missions Addressed to the Protestant Ministers of the British Churches (Bristol: Bulgin and Rosser, 1794).

64 John Rylands University Library of Manchester, MAM Fl 3/13/4, Melvill Horne to Mary Fletcher, 6 November 1795.
65 Zachary Macaulay recorded on 19 June 1793 how “S. Domingo reads the Portuguese language fluently. After dinner he produced his mass book and prayed with seeming devotion for some time and he gave me to understand that it is a constant practice with him morning and evening to pray to God.” Schwarz, Zachary Macaulay and the Development of the Sierra Leone Company, 1793-4: 1. Journal, June-October 1793, 10; P.E.H. Hair, “Franciscan Missionaries and the 1752 ‘Donation of Sierra Leone,’” Journal of Religion in Africa 30, 4 (2000), 408-32.


70 The African Herald, 11 November 1809, 30.


Chapter 2. Liverpool Ascendant: British Merchants and the Slave Trade on the Upper Guinea Coast, 1701-1808

Kenneth Morgan

This study investigates the reasons for the dominance of British merchants in the eighteenth-century slave trade on the Sierra Leone River and adjacent locations on the upper Guinea coast, especially the ascendancy of Liverpool in this branch of transatlantic slaving. British merchants went to many parts of the African coast. During the eighteenth century, when British transatlantic slaving reached its peak, British vessels took slaves from all seven regions but especially from the Bight of Biafra and west central Africa. The area near the Sierra Leone River was a relatively marginal area of slave provenance, though it was more significant after 1750 than before. Slave embarkations on British ships from the region adjacent to Sierra Leone, which here includes the region from Rio Nuñez, Rio Pongo and Îles de Los in the north to the Sierra Leone River, Sherbro Island, the Gallinas as far as Cape Mount in the south, totaled 2,931 before 1676 and 24,008 between 1676 and 1750. The number then increased substantially to 65,174 in 1751-75 and to 71,279 from 1776 to 1809. During the eighteenth century France was the only other trading power than Britain with a significant presence in the slave trade on the upper Guinea coast south of Bissau and Cacheo; estimates of Portuguese slave embarkations are just over a third of those for Britain, and they were concentrated at Bissau and Cacheo. Neither Spain and Portugal nor their overseas trading communities had any substantial slave trade with the region south of Bissau and Cacheo. The main delivery areas for ships carrying slaves from the upper Guinea coast in the eighteenth century were the British Caribbean (accounting for 85 percent of slave disembarkations) and the British North American mainland colonies.
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

(which took 15 percent). The main destinations, in descending order of importance, were Jamaica, Barbados, the Carolinas and Georgia, and Grenada.4

Between 1563 and 1568, almost a century before the English slave trade became a regular feature of British overseas commerce, thirteen voyages are known to have left England to pick up slaves on the upper Guinea coast for delivery to Santo Domingo in Hispaniola and mainland Hispanic America. Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake were among the captains of these voyages.5 Otherwise before 1698, when the Royal African Company held monopoly rights in the English slave trade, only sporadic slave trading in English vessels occurred on the upper Guinea coast. The Company did not need to extend its operations there because it dealt primarily with fortified British trading establishments, filled with its own personnel, in Senegambia, especially on the Gambia River, and along the Gold Coast.6 The Company had forts at two locations on Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone River and York Island in the Sherbro River. These were 150 kilometers apart, and they operated on a small scale: only nineteen slave vessels left these two forts between 1663 and 1713.7 The French attacked Sherbro in 1705 and York Island was rarely used after 1714. By 1728 the Royal African Company had been driven out of the Sierra Leone River as a result of depredations by pirates. Its trade there never resumed.8 During the eighteenth century, when private merchants dominated the British slave trade, Liverpool, Bristol, London, and Lancaster merchants all traded with the upper Guinea coast, but Liverpool merchants easily dominated this trade consistently in each decade from 1750 to 1810.9

The relatively low total of slave embarkations from the upper Guinea coast before 1750 stemmed from the unsuitability of that region for slaving ventures. The interior economy was more oriented towards commodity production than the supply of captives for transatlantic markets. Kola nuts were produced in the interior, along with gold, rice, ivory and other products. Before 1750 ivory, beeswax and camwood from Sierra Leone were worth more than slave shipments.10 Slave departures from the region rose significantly, however, after the militant Islamic forces of the Fuuta Jalon highlands, pursuing a jibad, sold slaves to finance wars and to found and consolidate their state. In particular, after wars between the Susu of Sulima and Fuuta Jalon in 1762-63 and quickly executed armed raids continuing until the 1790s, captives were sold on the coast into the slave trade. The captives included a sizeable number of prisoners who refused to convert to Islam.11 By the 1780s, Muslim traders regularly brought caravans of fifty or 100 captives from wars in the interior to the coast for sale to slave merchants.12 This coincided with a period of extensive planter demand in the Americas for “saltwater” slaves, that is, recently arrived Africans, and an escalation in the volume of the transatlantic slave trade.13
When Sierra Leone became a colony for free black settlement and for legitimate trade in agricultural products, there were inevitably tensions between the free settlers under the Sierra Leone Company, incorporated in 1791, and slave traders. But even though rising slave prices and the stagnation of credit after a major British financial crisis in 1793 led to declining demand for slaves from that region, the British shipped Africans from the upper Guinea coast until they abolished their slave trade in 1807. The final legal slaving voyage from Britain to Sierra Leone was that of the *Polly*, owned by John Anderson of London, which left the Thames on 24 April 1807, embarked 190 Africans at Bunce Island, delivered 175 of these slaves to Kingston, Jamaica, and departed from there for London on 25 April 1808.

British dominance of the slave trade from the upper Guinea coast – a relatively small player in the history of transatlantic slaving as a whole – was inextricably linked to Liverpool’s ascendancy in the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Within the context of British slaving at the upper Guinea coast from the four main British slave trading ports – Liverpool, London, Bristol and Lancaster, my analysis shows how Liverpool merchants carved out a slave trading niche within the context of commercial connections forged in that region. The first section surveys statistics on the decadal growth of the British slave trade with the upper Guinea coast in the eighteenth century according to the involvement of the four leading ports in the British slave trade. The data show the timing and scale of the growth of Liverpool’s trade in comparison with other ports. Additional data are presented on the twenty leading British merchants trading in slaves on the upper Guinea coast in the eighteenth century, which demonstrates the extent of Liverpool’s market power in the region. The second section examines Liverpool’s dominance in the British slave trade by linking its human capital resources to the commercial arrangements and trading networks that characterized the process of slaving. Particular ports and specific merchants dominated the slave supply when the British slave trade was at its height.

By the 1750s Liverpool gained the ascendancy over other British ports in loading slaves at the upper Guinea coast, and then maintained this position through to the end of the British slave trade (Table 2.1). Known embarkations of slaves on British ships indicate that the slave trade was a minor affair in the first half of the eighteenth century. Between 1701 and 1750 London ships embarked 3,819 Africans on the upper Guinea coast, including the Sierra Leone River, Bristol vessels loaded 1,237, Liverpool ships took 1,160, and Lancaster had no slave trade at all with the region. The upper Guinea coast attracted less attention from British slaving merchants in the first half of the eighteenth century than any other West African region apart from areas along the so-called “Windward Coast.” British merchants took
slaves from the upper Guinea coast before 1750 without any consistent trend in shipments.

The British slave trade increased in the second half of the eighteenth century as trade expanded in response to greater supplies of slaves and to strong planter demand. Slaving interests at Liverpool and among their trading networks along the upper Guinea coast were closely involved in this expansion. Liverpool's trade grew significantly in the quarter century before the American Revolution, but not at levels comparable for the Bight of Biafra, west central Africa or the Gold Coast. This reminds us that the upper Guinea coast was only a secondary supplier of slaves, even for Liverpool ships. Nevertheless, Liverpool merchants were quicker than those from either London or Bristol to tap this particular slave market, drawing on capital resources and catering for European goods wanted by consumers. Investors in Liverpool and its hinterland, and people in North-West England, the West Riding of Yorkshire and the west Midlands, contributed approximately £200,000 annually towards the cost of outfitting ships and supplying trade goods for Liverpool's slave trade by 1750. Merchants from Liverpool supplied textiles and copper, pewter and brass goods that were in demand in Sierra Leone.

In each decade from 1760 to 1808 Liverpool embarked over twice as many slaves on the upper Guinea coast as all other British ports combined. No other port, from any other country, challenged Liverpool's dominant position in the slave trade from the region in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the 1750s and 1760s, in particular, Liverpool strengthened her hold on this regional niche of British transatlantic slaving. Liverpool's share of slave embarkations was 44 percent of British trade in the 1750s and, in the context of an increased volume of trade, rose to 68 percent in the 1760s (Table 2.1). Liverpool's trade with all West African slave supply regions, apart from Senegambia, increased in the 1760s over the level for the 1750s, but there was a greater increase in her level of slave departures from the upper Guinea coast than from any other part of West Africa.

Though Liverpool's slave trade with the Bight of Benin and west central Africa declined in the 1770s over the level reached in the 1760s, Liverpool consolidated its connection with the upper Guinea coast in the slave trade. Between 1771 and 1780 Liverpool accounted for about 84.5 percent of known slave embarkations at the upper Guinea coast from British ports. This increased share of the slave market was partly made possible by the collapse of Bristol's slaving interests there. Liverpool's share of slave embarkations was less in 1781-90 than in 1771-80, but it still came to over 70 percent of British trade. Bristol and London made a more effective challenge to Liverpool's slaving activity in the 1790s, but Liverpool's share of deliveries was still over half. In 1801-08, the final period of the legal British slave trade, Liverpool accounted for three-quarters of slave embarkations on the upper
Guinea coast on ships from British ports. This occurred when the Bristol and Lancaster slave trade had withered away. The British slave trade at Sierra Leone was characterized by a pattern of merchant participation common in transatlantic slaving and by considerable dominance by particular merchants. Following the usual practice of investment in the slave trade, an ad hoc group of partners was assembled for each voyage, with varying shares in the ship, slave sales and cargo proceeds; the composition of these partnerships varied on specific voyages. Some merchants took sole ownership of slaving voyages but partnerships of between two and nine investors were more typical.

Table 2.2 shows that the leading twenty British merchant groups trading with the upper Guinea coast embarked 30,587 slaves in the period 1701-1808. A comparison of data in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 indicates that this group accounted for over a quarter of slave embarkations on the upper Guinea coast on British vessels. In keeping with its position as Britain’s leading slave port, Liverpool accounted for two-thirds of the slaves shipped by these twenty merchant partnerships (Table 2.2). Liverpool therefore had a management elite in this branch of the British slave trade, as in other areas of slaving in West Africa during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Between 1701 and 1808 Bristol contributed only one of the twenty leading merchant partnerships in the British slave trade with the upper Guinea coast: James Rogers, Richard Fydell, Thomas Walker and Sir James Laroche. London had only three merchants in this group: the brothers John and Alexander Anderson and their uncle, Richard Oswald, the leading merchant in a syndicate of six associates of Scots extraction based in London. By contrast, sixteen of the twenty leading British slave merchant partnerships came from Liverpool, including seven of the top ten. These Liverpool traders were among the top fifty Liverpool slave merchants in that period. Four of them – Thomas Hodgson, William Earle, William James and John Tarleton – were among the ten leading slave merchants from Liverpool in the eighteenth century.

Despite the dominance of Liverpool’s merchants, the upper Guinea coast remained a marginal area for the British slave trade as a whole: only three from Bristol (John Anderson, James Rogers, Richard Fydell) and three from Liverpool (Daniel Backhouse, Miles Barber, John Hodgson) took more than 15 percent of their total slave embarkations in West Africa from there. Most British merchants trading in slaves at the upper Guinea coast assembled Africans from other provenance areas. James Rogers concentrated mainly on gathering slaves from the Bight of Biafra but his second focal point was Îles de Los and Bananas. John and Thomas Hodgson were among the leading slave traders with Îles de Los, Cape Mount and Bassa, but they traded with all other slave provenance areas. John Tarleton took slaves from all West African regions apart from Senegambia. Richard Oswald shipped more slaves from...
Bunce Island than from elsewhere, but he also traded on a small scale with Senegambia and to the windward coast beyond Sierra Leone. Miles Barber concentrated on slave embarkations from the Îles de Los but also traded with many other places.

Stephen D. Behrendt has recently highlighted the crucial importance of experience in stimulating the growth of the eighteenth-century British slave trade, notably the slaving endeavors of Liverpool merchants. Behrendt has developed the idea of an investment in “human capital,” primarily in relation to the abundant supply of seafarers that Liverpool could draw upon to sustain its slave trade after c. 1740. But, as he and other historians have recognized, the knowledge of local conditions was crucial in a broader sense for commercial interactions in the slave trade. Merchants needed to hire good captains and reliable crew for their slaving voyages, but they also had to liaise successfully with a range of other business personnel, including middlemen or agents on the West African coast, African rulers and traders, and factors for the sale of slaves in the Americas. In short, they needed to establish and maintain trading networks that could facilitate their voyages. They also needed to share commercial information and to embed trust in their business dealings over large distances with considerable time lags in payments. The successful deployment of links in the chain of human capital is an important explanatory reason for the growth of the British slave trade at the upper Guinea coast during the eighteenth century. This can be shown by reference to the connections among the leading British merchants engaged in that commerce and in the trading networks they created and sustained. These attachments were substantial, active for decades, and especially connected with the influence of Liverpool and, to a lesser extent, London.

During the eighteenth century, the leading British merchant partnerships with the upper Guinea coast consolidated their trade in two ways. First, several of them had close personal and business relations that enabled them to share commercial knowledge about the slave trade. Second, they built up and maintained close business relations with middlemen along the upper Guinea coast, many of whom were either British by birth or Eurafricans who had received schooling in England. These commercial orbits interacted; in other words, the ties that bound together leading merchants at British ports who took slaves from the upper Guinea coast were extended to commercial links between those merchants and the middlemen who themselves liaised closely over trade. These connections were particularly strong for merchants from Liverpool, though they also reflected the activities of some Bristol and London merchants. Well-connected trading networks were the key to serious participation in this branch of transatlantic slaving. By establishing such associations, British merchants ensured that they had regular access to the depots where slaves were kept for sale into the slave trade.
Detailed information is available on the two sets of networks. The close family and commercial connections among British slave merchants engaged in trade with upper Guinea were striking. Among those from Liverpool, John and Thomas Tarleton were brothers; John Tarleton and David Backhouse were involved together in numerous slave voyages; and both Tarletons and Backhouse were concerned in various ownership combinations on thirteen Liverpool slaving voyages to the upper Guinea coast (sometimes with Clayton Tarleton as an additional owner). John and Thomas Hodgson were brothers who acted in partnership. They were co-owners (sometimes with others) on seven slaving ventures to Îles de Los, Cape Mount, and Bassa. Thomas Hodgson was a former employee of Miles Barber who, with his elder brother, took over the slave factory at the Îles de Los (see below) when its owner Barber retired in 1793. Thomas Hodgson was the father of Ellis Leckonby Hodgson, with whom he also had shares in slave voyages. The Hodgsons, Barber and Backhouse had known each other since at least the 1750s when they were merchants based at Lancaster, and involved with the slave trade, before they migrated from the Lune Valley to the Liverpool area. The family connections between John and Alexander Anderson of London have already been mentioned.

These merchants sent out relatively small ships. In the period 1790-97 English slaving vessels on the upper Guinea coast averaged 157 tons, which was one third smaller than those trading with the Niger delta and smaller than English “Guinea” ships trading with any other West African region. British slave ships on the upper Guinea coast also employed fewer crew than on vessels to other slave supply regions. Ship captains, with instructions from their British owners, established and maintained commercial relations with slave suppliers in upper Guinea. Resident British traders were stationed there – and on the adjacent windward coast – by the late 1740s, on the eve of the increased British slave trading activity with upper Guinea. Some were descendants of immigrants from various parts of western Europe who were based at various places along the upper Guinea coast since the days of the Royal African Company. They lived near rivers along the coast, such as the Sherbro, Rio Pongo, the Sierra Leone, Dembia, Kissi, the Scarcies and Rio Nuñez, or on islands such as Bunce Island, the Banana Islands, Îles de Los, Plantain Island, and Sherbro Island. About thirty traders operated at Bunce Island in the 1730s. In 1744 former employees of the Royal African Company worked on the Banana Islands, trading in shallops to the northward at Rio Pongo and Rio Nuñez for slaves, ivory, and camwood.

Middlemen chose the mouths of rivers as locations for trade because they were a natural geographical position for delivering slaves from the interior to ocean-going vessels. The offshore islands were partly favored for their perceived healthy climate and access to commodities as well as slaves. Ships bound to the Gold Coast and Old Calabar, for instance, frequently stopped at
the two small Banana Islands for provisions for their slaves. These islands, described by a contemporary as “the Paradise of Africa,” had good timber resources, good opportunities for catching fish, and even sugar cane could be grown; they were relatively healthy locations with no swamps. Bunce Island and Îles de Los were valued for the protection they offered in the case of commercial disputes, although the islands faced the risk of attack from the coast. Both along the rivers and on the offshore islands, middlemen conducted the slave trade through “bulking centers” for the enslaved, comprising either floating factories or fixed factories. British merchants and their ship captains relied on middlemen or factors who were resident along the upper Guinea coast to interact with African suppliers of slaves. Captains received either coast commissions or a couple of privilege slaves for liaising successfully with middlemen. The middlemen agreed upon prices for slaves with African suppliers and then took goods on credit from the slave ships to trade for captives. It is probable that most African and Afro-European traders based along the coast and offshore islands could only supply limited numbers of slaves to ships. This was partly because slaves at Sierra Leone were brought by Africans plying craft along the rivers and creeks and making up cargoes of captives from the out factories in those locations. Thus British slave ships often embarked slaves on the upper Guinea coast at two or three places (Table 2.3). A slower pace of trade in the region than in many other parts of West Africa, such as the Bight of Biafra, as evidenced in loading rates on the coast for slaves, meant that there was a need to ensure costs did not escalate, and this could best be dealt with by securing close relationships with resident traders on the Sierra Leone coast and repeating business with them from one year to the next.

An additional consideration influencing British slave merchants in conducting trade in Sierra Leone with known and trusted traders lay in the potential disease hazards, including the prevalence of malaria and dysentery. Trade with Africans, rather than middlemen, was common on other parts of the coast, such as at the Gallinas. Yet it was avoided at Sierra Leone, largely because sufficient security mechanisms for honoring credit advanced were not as readily available there as in the Bight of Biafra, the main source of slaves for British transatlantic slaving in the eighteenth century. The lack of such measures for credit protection on the upper Guinea coast stemmed from the decentralized legal and political structures common throughout most of the region. One Liverpool merchant acknowledged the problems of trading for slaves with local African officials rather than the resident middlemen mentioned above when he advised the master of the Jenny in 1787 “not to trust any goods to the nation there [i.e. at Cape Mount] on any Account whatsoever or forfeit of your Commissions and Priviledge hereafter mention[ed]. For trusting of goods there has been the over setting of many voyages.” Thus, British merchants maintained business links with
resident Europeans or Eurafricans along the coast rather than dealing directly with local African officials.

After 1750 the number of European and Eurafrican middlemen in Sierra Leone increased, and they became closely tied to the commercial transactions carried out by British merchants and their ship captains. Middlemen who traded with British slavers included Nicholas Owen on the Sherbro River in the 1750s and Henry Tucker in the Sherbro area by the 1780s; Harrison and John Matthews on the Îles de Los in the 1780s; and the Cleveland brothers on the Banana Islands. Anglo-African traders dominated trade on the Sierra Leone coast by the 1770s and 1780s, notably in the Sierra Leone estuary, the Îles de Los, and Rio Pongo and Rio Nuñez. Several had strong Liverpool connections. James Penny, a Liverpool ship captain in the slave trade, resided in the Îles de Los and the River Kissi in the period 1768-70. John Matthews, a naval officer who wrote an account of Sierra Leone, managed Liverpool factories on the Îles de Los and in the Sierra Leone estuary in the mid-1780s. By the turn of the nineteenth century, even a relatively small embarkation point for slaves such as Rio Pongo had many European and Eurafrican resident traders who handled slave cargoes. They included John Ormond, Sr (d. 1791), originally from Liverpool, who arrived in Sierra Leone about 1760 as a cabin boy on a slave ship, was employed by slave traders on Bunce Island, settled on Rio Nuñez around 1760, and three years later moved to the Fatola branch of Rio Pongo. By repute a cruel man who tolerated no challenges to his commercial authority, he was referred to by Zachary Macaulay as “an extensive slave trader,” and was supposed to have made £30,000 from his involvement in supplying slaves. Another British trader on the Rio Pongo in the 1790s was John Fraser, who had agents in Liverpool.

Some of these middlemen had been educated in England, and Liverpool was one of the preferred places for their schooling. Fraser’s children, for example, were partly educated at Liverpool, and, after his death, his executors received funds for their maintenance and education there and at Rio Pongo. Such education enabled them to trade with greater advantage over their less well-informed countrymen when they returned to Africa. Many of them married African women, acquired groups of African associates, either slave or free people known as “gromettas,” and forged relations with traders along the upper Guinea coast. They were able to speak, read and write in English. Miles Barber of Liverpool, for instance, furthered his commercial interests in Sierra Leone by sending the children of his employees at his slaving factory to England for their education. Some of them were schooled in Liverpool.

A number of British slave traders had strong contacts with members of the Cleveland family, whose presence along the coast was established by William Cleveland (d. 1758). His mulatto sons, John and James, were both educated in Liverpool. The Cleveland brothers had a fleet of ships in the coastal trade working down to Cape Mesurado. In the 1780s and 1790s they dominated
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

trade on the Banana Islands, which were solely possessed by the British by the mid-1780s.\(^{50}\) James Cleveland (d. 1791) was “an eminent capital Slave Trader”\(^{51}\) who exercised considerable power along the coast. He had between 200 and 300 armed gromettas at his beck and call to raid the properties of debtors who were slow in repaying debts. He owned a slave factory at Îles de Los with Richard Horrocks, agent of the Hodgsons of Liverpool. His influence was aided by his membership of the Poro society which regulated political and social conduct in the interior.\(^ {52}\) His mulatto nephew William, educated in England, ran the slave depot on the Bananas by the 1790s. John Clarkson’s diary recorded that the Clevelands “have always carried on a great trade in slaves.”\(^ {53}\) That they established reliable, well-embedded trade relations with British merchants trading to the upper Guinea coast is shown by the unhesitating way in which a Liverpool slave merchant requested that one of his captains should lodge any goods he could not sell in their store and leave an account of them for another Liverpool vessel to consider.\(^ {54}\) By forging strong contacts with local European and Eurafrikan traders in the estuaries along the Sierra Leone coast and on the offshore islands, British slave merchants, especially those at Liverpool, created a strong infrastructure for their commercial activities.

A contemporary French visitor to Sierra Leone underscored the importance of the presence of English middlemen along the upper Guinea coast. He noted that the English traders had residences on offshore islands, such as the Îles de Los, that were well regulated and “conducted with the greatest address.” The commerce of the English factors based in the Sierra Leone River in 1786 was considerable; their operations stretched from Cape Verga to Cape Palmas. The English middlemen used light boats, built on the offshore islands, to enter the middle-sized rivers in Sierra Leone. They visited the smallest bays; as they proceeded along the rivers, “they see and become acquainted with every thing worthy of notice.” Local Africans informed the English establishments at Bunce Island and Sherbro “of everything that could interest them,” and thus those traders were “always sufficiently apprized of the passing circumstances and events, to enable them to conduct their affairs with advantage.” The British traders in Sierra Leone moreover had good commercial communications all along the coast, and so “all the establishments were either informed, or transmitted information of whatever was of importance to be known.”\(^ {55}\) Thus, for example, the Caulkers, the Eurafrikan family who were the leading traders at the Banana Islands in the late eighteenth century, worked closely with traders from Bunce Island and the Îles de Los and cooperated with other traders along the upper Guinea coast from the Cacine River to the Sherbro River in provisioning slaving vessels. The Caulkers used their trading power to build up their wealth, and came to rival local African rulers in their importance.\(^ {56}\)
The extensive British trading establishment at Bunce Island enabled the firms in question to maintain their market power in the Sierra Leone branch of the British slave trade. In 1748 Richard Oswald of London, along with other Scottish associates in the metropolis, including Alexander Grant, Augustus and John Boyd, John Mill and John Sargent II, invested in the trade castle on Bunce Island, making use of a fort and factory built by the Royal African Company in the 1670s. Bunce Island, only a third of a mile long, lay at the limit of navigation for ocean-going vessels. It was described “as one of the most desirable positions…to command the interior commerce of the countries bordering upon the river Sierra Leone and its branches.” It became an emporium for the British slave trade. Its trade castle comprised a fortified factory, dwelling houses for the white employees, slave houses, administrative headquarters, warehouses and holding rooms for captives. Bunce Island had the advantage over other possible slave trading locations in Sierra Leone of being a place where vessels were exempt from paying the customary duty of fifteen bars to local African officials on the Bullom Shore and elsewhere.

Oswald and his associates were involved in fourteen known voyages in the slave trade. They had separate contracts with neighboring African rulers which enabled them to use most islands in the Sierra Leone estuary for slave trading. During the 1760s Bunce Island’s trade as a depot for slaves was enhanced by the establishment of “outfactories” on nearby islands and creeks at places to the north such as Îles de Los, Sousos, Turraduggy and Wonkafong and to the south at Kissi, Sherbro Island and the Turtle Islands. The Bunce Island factory, in short, maintained a very active trade on the coast between Cape Sierra Leone and Cape Palmas. Slaves from these locations and Bunce Island were dispatched to the Dutch and French as well as to British ships. Between 1748 and 1784, when Bunce Island was controlled by Oswald and his associates, some 12,929 enslaved Africans were shipped from the island. Most of these captives were shipped before 1770. Bunce Island’s slaving activities declined after the start of the American War of Independence when wartime exigencies disrupted transatlantic slaving. In 1779 it was captured by the French, who demolished many of its buildings and dispatched two ships from there, with stores, to St. Domingue. The French returned Bunce Island to its owners after the end of the American Revolution and the fort there was gradually rebuilt.

The London merchants John and Alexander Anderson succeeded their late uncle Richard Oswald at the Bunce Island slaving factory in 1784. Together they were involved in seventeen known slaving voyages at Sierra Leone. They paid an annual tribute to the king of the Bullom as rent for use of the land. They expanded their influence by establishing similar establishments in the neighborhood, such as their plantation on Tasso Island, just to the south of Bunce Island, where they grew cotton, coffee and sugar...
They employed around 220-230 grometts who navigated craft along the coast, supplied out-factories with goods, and brought the returns back to Bunce Island. At the height of this trade Anderson purchased between 900 and 1,200 slaves per annum and held them on the island. In 1785 and the first five months of 1786 the factory sold more than 3,000 slaves to the Danes and nearly 4,000 slaves to the British American colonies. That Bunce Island was a substantial bulking centre for slaves is shown by damages worth £20,000 that were claimed had been inflicted on its premises by invasions by the French and the Americans in 1794. The Bunce Island factory easily dominated London’s slave trade with Sierra Leone after the American Revolution, supplying about 87 percent of London’s slave embarkations from the upper Guinea coast. But the Andersons whittled down their trade there after 1800, and by 1811 they had ceased operations at Bunce Island.

Some London and Liverpool merchants trading in slaves had strong connections with factories at the Îles de Los, comprising three main islands and six smaller ones. These were very small islands: the largest one, Tamara, was only 8.5 km long and less than a kilometre wide. But despite their limited size, these islands were, by some margin, the single most important known trading location on the upper Guinea coast for British merchants (Table 2.3). They were favored by British traders for several reasons. They had a healthy climate; they were linked to the caravans that brought slaves to the coast in the dry season; and palm oil, camwood, malaguetta peppers, hides, beeswax, ivory, gum resin and gold dust were readily available. The islands also had a safe anchorage in deep water where ships could lie in all weathers and from which slaves could not easily escape. The factories enabled them to centralize the barter of goods for Africans. Miles Barber of Liverpool, for instance, owned a factory on the Îles de Los, which he bought in 1754, when he was living in Lancaster. He supplied slaves to the French as well as to his own ships, and traded in rice, ivory, beeswax and dyestuffs. To complement his factory, he stationed an 800-ton ship there to store valuable merchandise. He established a bulking centre for slaves at the Îles de Los immediately after his arrival there. In 1754 it was reported that 1,640 slaves were shipped from those islands on board Liverpool vessels.

Barber’s factory was a substantial operation, handling around 2,500 slaves annually by 1768–70. Henry Smeathman, the English botanist, visited the site in 1773 and referred to Barber’s establishment as a “very large African Company in Liverpool” which had a sort of dockyard on the mainland shore which was well supplied with magazines, ships’ stores, merchandise, a forge, and a house for sick slaves. From this base Barber employed sloops and schooners to go out and come back on a daily basis to the five rivers between the Îles de Los and the Sierra Leone River that were navigable for large vessels. The factory was sacked by American privateers from Boston in the War of Independence, but restored thereafter. Barber went bankrupt in
1777, but resumed his slave trade in 1785-86, when he moved from Liverpool to London.\textsuperscript{71} Besides handling slaves for his own Liverpool ships, in the mid-1780s, Barber had contracts to supply slaves to French ships from Le Havre and Nantes.\textsuperscript{72}

Apart from his factory at Îles de Los, Barber maintained factories on the Sierra Leone River at Port Loko, Rokel and Tasso Island. He also had floating factories in the Sherbro River and at Cape Mount, Mesurado, Bassa and Cape Palmas, and a land-based factory in the Gallinas. By the mid-1780s Barber traded around 4,000 slaves from Îles de Los, but also handled another 2,000 slaves at his other establishments.\textsuperscript{73} He was not the only Liverpool merchant to own slave establishments on the Îles de Los. John Dawson, a prominent Liverpool slave trader, had a factory there by the mid-1790s. John and Thomas Hodgson owned “Factory Point” on the main island in the Îles de Los, and had the use of forty-one sloops, schooners and boats to carry out their slave and commodity trade. Their business in the 1790s was handled by Richard Horrocks.\textsuperscript{74}

Three concluding comments seem in order. First, the British slave trade on the upper Guinea coast during the eighteenth century highlights the ways in which merchants could tap a relatively minor market for enslaved Africans at a time when transatlantic slaving was expanding. The supply of slaves on the upper Guinea coast increased after the mid-eighteenth century as a result of wars carried out by a Muslim theocracy in its hinterland region. This occurred at a time when planter demand for slaves, despite periodic fluctuations, expanded significantly. The British slave trading fraternity, especially in Liverpool, took advantage of the commercial opportunities in the “Guinea” traffic. Though the British slave trade expanded more considerably in the Bight of Biafra and west central Africa in the eighteenth century, the upper Guinea coast offered a secondary market for British slave merchants with smaller ships and fewer crew than common in slaving ventures with other West African regions. Second, the slave trade on the upper Guinea coast reflected Liverpool’s dominant role among British ports. Though Bristol, London and Lancaster merchants also participated in this regional branch of slave trading, Liverpool accounted for nearly four-fifths of British slave trading on the upper Guinea coast in the eighteenth century. Sixteen of the leading slave merchants sent vessels there. Liverpool exercised considerable dominance in Sierra Leone, therefore, just as it did in virtually every other slave supply region in the period.

The third conclusion drawn from this study is that the main reason for this degree of dominance lay in the close trading relationships and networks that Liverpool merchants in particular carved out in Liverpool and its hinterland and along the river estuaries and offshore islands at Sierra Leone. Liverpool merchants in the slave trade with upper Guinea had considerable personal and business interests among themselves. They were able to connect
this commercial orbit, and its opportunities for trade expertise and shared knowledge of trading conditions, with the scattered groups of European and Eurafrican traders on the upper Guinea coast with whom they consolidated commercial relations, the nurturing of trust, and a mutual knowledge of the conduct of the slave trade in that region. Often this meant that resident middlemen in Sierra Leone had received schooling in England and sometimes in Liverpool itself. In these ways, British merchants, notably those from Liverpool, created a strong, workable infrastructure for their slave trade at Sierra Leone. Liverpool’s ascendancy in this branch of British transatlantic slaving activity was therefore based on sustained dominance after 1750, and this resulted from the trading networks established by the human capital they invested in the trade.

Table 2.1 Number of Slaves Embarked on the Upper Guinea Coast, 1701-1808: Port of Origin of British Ships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Delivery</th>
<th>Port</th>
<th>Slaves Embarked</th>
<th>Location on Upper Guinea Coast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1701-1710</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>850</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1711-1720</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>639</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1721-1730</td>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>948</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1731-1740</td>
<td>Lancaster</td>
<td>331</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1741-1750</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1,051</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1751-1760</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,453</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1761-1770</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>18,662</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771-1780</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>4,678</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1781-1790</td>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>2,969</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791-1800</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5,937</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801-1808</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,078</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (www.slavevoyages.org)

Table 2.2 British Commercial Partnerships on the Upper Guinea Coast, 1701-1808

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merchants</th>
<th>Port</th>
<th>Slaves Embarked</th>
<th>Year of Delivery</th>
<th>Location on Upper Guinea Coast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John &amp; Alexander Anderson</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>5,645</td>
<td>1787-89, 1791-97, 1806, 1808</td>
<td>Bunce Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Sandys, James Kendall &amp; Andrew White</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>3,034</td>
<td>1773-75</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Kilner &amp; Miles</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>2,251</td>
<td>1764, 1766-68</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barber</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Tons</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Anderson</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>2,012</td>
<td>1798, 1800-1801, 1803, 1808</td>
<td>Bunce Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Tarleton, Daniel Backhouse, Clayton &amp; Thomas Tarleton</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>1,989</td>
<td>1787-91</td>
<td>Îles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles Barber</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>1,772</td>
<td>1763, 1768, 1770-71</td>
<td>Îles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Oswald</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>1,746</td>
<td>1756, 1764, 1771, 1774-75, 1784-86</td>
<td>Bunce Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Sandys</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>1,294</td>
<td>1773-74, 1776-77</td>
<td>Îles de Los, Cape Mount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Sandys, John Mackmillan, James Kendall &amp; Andrew White</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>1,201</td>
<td>1770, 1772</td>
<td>Îles de Los, Gallinas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Rogers, Richard Fydell, Thomas Walker &amp; Sir James Laroche</td>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>1,198</td>
<td>1789-92</td>
<td>Banana Islands, Îles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Hodgson, Jr &amp; Ellis Leckonby Hodgson</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>1,159</td>
<td>1798-99, 1801-1802</td>
<td>Îles de Los, Cape Mount, Bassa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Ormandy, John Tarleton, Daniel Backhouse, Thomas Hereford &amp; William Harrison</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>1,063</td>
<td>1773, 1775, 1779</td>
<td>Îles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Kilner, Miles Barber &amp; William Denison</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>1,017</td>
<td>1763, 1765, 1771</td>
<td>Îles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles Barber, Samuel Sandys, James Kendall &amp; Andrew White</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>1774-75</td>
<td>Îles de Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William James &amp; George Evans</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>1775-76</td>
<td>Bassa, Cape Mount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>1st Place</td>
<td>2nd Place</td>
<td>3rd Place</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ïles de Los</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunce Island</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Mount</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banana Islands</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherbro</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio Pongo</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bassa</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio Nuñez</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallinas</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Mesurado</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eltis et al., *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (www.slavevoyages.org)

**NOTES**

1. All statistics and details on merchants presented in the paper, unless otherwise stated, are taken from David Eltis et al., *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, www.slavevoyages.org.


3. For contemporary acknowledgment of British dominance in the slave trade at certain places on the upper Guinea coast in the 1780s, see Sheila Lambert, ed.,
4 For the Sierra Leone River-South Carolina connection, see Daniel C. Littlefield, 
*Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge, 
Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel 
Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 63-64, 67-69; and Joseph A. 
(Freetown: USIS, 2000).

5 For the Hawkins voyages see P.E.H. Hair, “Protestants as Pirates, Slavers and 
Proto-Missionaries: Sierra Leone, 1568 and 1582,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 

6 The Company’s contribution to the slave trade at Bunce Island and the Sherbro 
River is discussed in K. G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London: Longman, 
1957), 185-86, 215, 221, 257.


Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 248; George E. Brooks, 
*Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance 
from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press, 
2003), 239, 242; V. R. Dorjahn and Christopher Fyne, “Landlord and Stranger: 
Change in Tenancy Relations in Sierra Leone,” *Journal of African History* 3 (1962), 
394.

9 Kenneth Morgan, “Liverpool’s Dominance in the British Slave Trade, 1740- 
1807,” in David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz and Anthony Tibbles, eds., 

10 Paul E. Lovejoy and Jan S. Hogendorn, “Slave Marketing in West Africa,” in 
Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn, eds., *The Uncommon Market: Essays on the 

11 Bruce L. Mouser, “Trade, Coasters, and Conflict in the Rio Pongo from 1790 to 
201; Winston McGowan, “The Development of European Relations with Futa 
University of London, 1978, 80-86.

12 Report of the Lords of the Committee of the Privy Council relating to Trade and 
Plantations…on the Slave Trade, 1789, no pagination, evidence of Lieutenant John 
Matthews.

13 David Eltis, “African and European relations in the last century of the 
transatlantic slave trade,” in Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, ed., *From Slave Trade to 
Empire: Europe and the Colonisation of Black Africa 1780s-1880s* (London: Taylor and 
Francis, 2004), 22-23.

14 Suzanne Schwarz, ed., *Zachary Macaulay and the Development of the Sierra Leone 

Eltis et al, *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, voyage #83129.

For the growth and regional distribution of Liverpool’s slave trade in Africa, see Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, “African Agency and the Liverpool Slave Trade,” in Richardson, Schwarz and Tibbles, *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery*, 47.


All statistics in this and the next paragraph are derived from Table 2.1.


Some individuals appear more than once because of the different structure of partnerships.


Information on many of these Liverpool slave merchants can be found in David Pope, “The Wealth and Social Aspirations of Liverpool’s Slave Merchants of the
Second Half of the Eighteenth Century,” in Richardson, Schwarz and Tibbles, Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery, 164-226.


32 Behrendt, “Human Capital in the British Slave Trade,” 71, shows that ships required a crew of 25 on average in the period 1750-1807. Senegambia was the only West African region with a lower manning requirement.


35 William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, W. H. to Duncan Campbell enclosed in Judge Buller to Shelburne, 1 July 1782, Shelburne Papers, vol. 152 no. 41; E. G. Ingham, Sierra Leone after a Hundred Years (London: Seeley and Co., 1894), 49 (quotation).


39 Hancock, Citizens of the World, 202-203.

40 For an examination of the relative importance of departure ports, see David Eltis, Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, “Slave-TRading Ports: Towards an Atlantic-Wide Perspective, 1676-1832,” in Robin Law and Silke Strickrodt, eds., Ports of the Slave Trade (Bights of Benin and Biafra): Papers from a Conference of the Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling, June 1998 (Stirling: Centre for Commonwealth Studies, 1999), 18-19. For a contemporary estimate of annual slave departures from different locations on the upper Guinea coast at the turn
of the nineteenth century, see Joseph Corry, *Observations upon the Windward Coast of Africa, the religion, character, customs, &c. of the natives...With an appendix; containing a letter...on...the means of abolishing the slave trade* (London: G. and W. Nicol, 1807), 54. For a discussion of how slaves were purchased on the upper Guinea coast, see Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell, eds., *The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton) 1750-1754* (London: Epworth Press, 1962) and accounts for slave purchases at the Îles de Los in 1775 in Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1930-35), vol. 3, 282, 284.


44 Liverpool Record Office, Robert Bostock to Captain Peter Byrne, 2 July 1787, Robert Bostock letterbook (1779-90). For similar admonitions by the same merchant, see Robert Bostock to Captain James Fryer, c. 10 January 1790, 6 May 1790, and to Captain Stephen Bowers, 19 June 1788, Robert Bostock letterbooks (1779-92). Bostock is known to have embarked 452 slaves at Sierra Leone on four separate voyages in which he was the sole owner; see Eltis et al. *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.


50 Corry, *Observations upon the Windward Coast*, 8-9; Silvanus M. X. Golberry, *Travels in Africa, performed during the years 1785, 1786, and 1787 in the western countries of that*
continent...Translated from the French...by F. Blagdon (London: James Ridgway, 1802), vol. 1, 15; Alexander Peter Kup, ed., *Adam Afzelius Sierra Leone Journal, 1795-1796*, Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia, XXVII (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1967), 78, 80. For a Bristol merchant who traded with the Cleveland, see Richardson, *Bristol, Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade*, vol. 4, 112, 123, 138, 144, 166, 169, 176. For a Liverpool merchant trading with the Cleveland, see Liverpool Record Office, Robert Bostock to Captain William Walker, 31 March 1786, to Captain Peter Byrne, 2 July 1787, to James Cleveland, 10 August 1789, and to Captain Samuel Gamble, 16 November 1790, Robert Bostock letterbooks (1779-92).


53 Ingham, *Sierra Leone*, 50; Schwarz, *Zachary Macaulay*, vol. 1, 17 n. 58.

54 Liverpool Record Office, Robert Bostock to Captain Samuel Gamble, 16 November 1790, Robert Bostock letterbook (1789-92).


58 Corry, *Observations upon the Windward Coast*, 3.


60 Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 172, 175, 176, 178-79, 180, 181, 188, 191, 205, 207-10, 214; Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 248-49, 251. Hancock includes reproductions of eighteenth-century maps, plans and drawings of Bunce Island, some of which are included in this volume.


64 *Journal of the House of Commons*, vol. 53, 25 May 1798, 624.


SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

67 Donnan, *Documents*, vol. 4, 495; Mouser, “Îles de Los as Bulking Center,” 84-90; Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa*, 293.


71 Pope, “Wealth and Social Aspirations of Liverpool’s Slave Merchants,” 185.


Chapter 3. “Keep hur Bottom Well paid with Stuff”: A Letter of Instruction for a Slaving Venture to the Upper Guinea Coast in 1760

Bruce L. Mouser

This study focuses upon a single letter of instruction written by a ship’s owner to a captain who was about to begin a commercial voyage in 1760 that would carry goods from Massachusetts to the upper Guinea coast and that would exchange those goods for slaves to transport back to the place where the voyage began.¹ The Phyllis, also called the Charming Phyllis, was the same vessel that carried a young slave from the Gambia to Boston in 1761 where she was sold to John Wheatley, who named her Phyllis Wheatley, the African American poetess.² This study in part addresses where Phyllis Wheatley came from on the upper Guinea coast and thereby contributes to a study of her life and times.

This letter, while only 1,285 words long, provides a window through which to view the trade in human cargo that dominated commerce in the mid-eighteenth century. It is a succinct example of what owners or investors believed to be important considerations to insure that a voyage conclude with generous profits to compensate for high risks taken. Commerce was purely a business arrangement that included contracts, credit, insurance – all designed to reduce risk – and careful attention to the likes and dislikes of the American market for labor. This was not a world of pirates or of minor investments, nor one for the novice. In this case, the voyage bought slaves in small lots, which was still the practice. The account provides a single person’s view of the nature of commerce along the upper Guinea coast in 1760 and of its dangers to investor, captain, and crew. At the same time, the author reveals what he considered as unimportant for his time, his class, his race, and his world view.
In the 1750s and 1760s, Timothy Fitch of Medford, Salem, and Boston, in the British colony of Massachusetts, commissioned many ventures between Boston and the upper Guinea coast, with a majority destined to deliver their human cargoes to the West Indies and the Carolinas but with some returning to Boston where slavery and slave sales were still permitted. The Medford Historical Society of Medford, Massachusetts, holds the Fitch collection of papers regarding the slave trade; seventeen documents have been transcribed. Three of these documents consist of correspondence between Fitch and Peter Gwinn, who captained nine of Fitch’s voyages to purchase slaves in Africa between 1759 and 1770. The letter of instruction written to Gwinn on 12 January 1760, which is the focus of this chapter, relates directly to commerce at Îles de Los and on the neighboring coast. The letter does not indicate the complexities of alternative markets for slaves in the American colonies.

Letters of instruction from the owner/s or investor/s of a cargo to the captain or supercargo responsible for exchanging his cargo of trade goods in Africa were always required at the outset of a voyage, and all parties considered such instructions to be binding contracts that established terms for the trading venture. The letters varied greatly in length and in attention to detail. Owners or investors who had been captains themselves tended to write elaborate letters, sometimes almost reliving a personal experience from their own past. Letters to captains who were reasonably young or new to the coast and its commerce tended to be long and detailed. Seasoned captains, in contrast, often received little more than reminders of the names of persons to contact, lists of debts to be settled, or order sheets describing ages, gender, and skills of slaves to be purchased. In most cases, captains and supercargoes knew more about the daily mechanics of the commerce than did investors or the ship owners, unless the latter had been captains or supercargoes themselves. What distinguished a captain from an owner often was lack money to invest.

In this case, Gwinn had already captained one of Fitch’s voyages to the upper Guinea coast and had been Chief Mate to Captain William Ellery on another. He knew the general circumstances of the trade and a bit of the politics and the dangers that would greet him once he arrived on the coast. But there was an order with respect to “letters of instruction” that needed to be followed. This was a time when a portion of such letters would be devoted to the task of reaching the African coast before the unhealthy time occurred. This was a time of sail, which meant that it was vital that a captain appreciate nature’s gifts that would expedite his journey. He would need to wait for strong Westerly winds to push his vessel across the Atlantic and to take advantage of ocean currents to carry him in directions where winds might not be helpful. If the captain were new or young, either in age or experience, a letter would contain elaborate descriptions of these natural features. The
owner might include a copy of a journal or log book kept by an earlier captain or a copy of a mariner’s guide or atlas. The objective was to understand and use nature’s normal features.

Fitch wanted his captains to remain focused, however, on the contracted task – to accomplish the assigned transaction upon the African coast. He did not want his captain to put into port any place before reaching the commercial center at Saint Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River – and to stop there only if it were convenient to do so. That complex of trading factories was known as Senegal and had been under British control since 1758. Its trade in ivory, gold, and slaves was considerable. Fitch was willing for the voyage actually to end at Senegal but only if Gwinn were able to obtain one hundred percent profit on Fitch’s investment and costs. But Fitch doubted that that was possible, despite the fact that his cargo of trade goods was of the best quality. He did not want Gwinn to bring his vessel to anchor at Senegal’s dock which would have made it too available for pilferage at the hands of Senegalese workers and from that of Gwinn’s own crew. Once docked, local merchants would surely tempt him to sell only the best of his cargo of trade goods, thereby leaving him with less-desirable items to trade elsewhere. Docking also would involve fees or charges for anchorage, waterage, and so forth. Nor did Fitch want Gwinn and his crew to tarry longer than twelve hours at Saint Louis, which already by 1760 was known for its enticing feminine companionship that might be sought after a 30-45 day voyage across the Atlantic:

Boston 12th January 1760

Sir

You Haveing Comand of my Schooner Phillis your Orders Are to Imbrace the First Favourable Opertunity of wind & wheather & proceed Directly for the Coast of Affrica, Touching First at Sinegal if you fall in with it. On your arrivall there Cum to anchor with your Vessell & go Up to the Factory in your Boat & See if you Can part with Any of your Cargo to Advantage, If you Can So as at Least to double upon ye Cost or Better than you may Sell what part you Can & take prime Slaves for pay if Reasonable Cash, but they must Not Cull your Cargo Unless thay give you a Good price, if you Could Sell the whole of your Cargo thare to a Good Proffett & take Slaves & Cash & Cum Directly Home that would Shorten the Voyage Much, but this is not Very Likely to be the Case. You Must Spend as little Time as possible at Sinagal.

An important part of every letter described the type of commerce that the owner/investor expected the captain/supercargo to use or the options that were available upon the coast. Essentially, two methods were employed in mid-century. In one, a ship captain moved his vessel slowly along the coast, perhaps briefly anchoring off shore from a town or village, or near the mouth of a river. Word of his presence quickly spread, so that slave sellers – if given sufficient warning – might have slaves ready to sell when the captain appeared
offshore. In this method, bargaining between buyer and seller took place on the vessel’s deck, and that transaction would have been free of credits and debits and contracts. This method required the use of a translator who would be taken on board or hired locally to make negotiations possible and avoid misunderstandings. In any case, once a newly-purchased slave was taken on board as a part of a cargo, he/she needed to be fed, watered, tended to, protected from others in the cargo, and guarded to prevent escape and rebellion, for however long it took to produce the vessel’s expected cargo. This method of coasting worked well for a schooner or small sea-worthy vessel (a brigantine or a snow) because numbers needed to fill a cargo would remain reasonably small. Fitch’s vessels tended to carry less than one hundred and fifty cargo, a number that still might require significant time to fill, especially if bought in small lots. In this voyage which Fitch was about to commission, it would take Gwinn 207 days to complete its trading circuit which placed the Phillis at Senegal about the first of March, leaving two remaining months to trade his goods and fill his cargo.

A second method, and one that was gaining popularity along this section of the upper Guinea coast, involved the positioning of bulking centers where an American or European trader lived and where he warehoused trade goods in demand for both the Africans who brought slaves to sell and Europeans who might need repairs or help on the coast. Two such centers existed near Sierra Leone in 1760 – Bunce Island in the estuary of the Sierra Leone River and Factory and Crawford, two islands in the Îles de Los group located not far from Point Sangara, about one hundred and thirty kilometers northwest of the Sierra Leone River and opposite modern Conakry.

Figure 3.1 Factory Point, Îles de Los, c. 1794

Source: ©National Maritime Museum, London, Sandown manuscript, f. 188r.
At the time, Bunce Island was operated by the firm of “Grant, Oswald & Co.” of London, which maintained close working relationships with traders up and down this coast. The firm of “Hodgson and Co. of Liverpool” maintained a significant center at Îles de Los, where one might find a doctor, supplies needed in ship maintenance, a pilot with knowledge of the coastline and entrances of neighboring rivers, and skilled workmen capable of repairing damaged vessels.12

Figure 3.2 Bunce Island, c. 1727

These bulking centers employed agents as sub-factors who lived on local rivers and who funneled slaves or trade goods to these centers where ship captains could purchase slave cargo in bunches. The person in charge of these bulking centers became a broker in this commerce – producing distance between the slave supplier and the Atlantic buyer. His services, however, came with higher prices for slaves he supplied. But he also made it easier for both partners by being responsible for all fees and customs associated with commerce and by being willing to negotiate in an African fashion with the seller and in an Atlantic fashion with the buyer. By 1760, Fitch had two options, and he essentially advised Gwinn to use whichever one that worked best:13

& than proceed Down the Coast to SereLeon & thar make the best Trade you Can from place to place till you have disposed of all your Cargo & purchd your Compleat Cargo of Young Slaves which I sopose will be about
By 1760, the market in slaves was sophisticated enough that investors such as Fitch knew what they wanted in a cargo of slaves and what a captain or supercargo should avoid when making a selection upon the African coast. The most important characteristics included gender, age, profession, health, and deformity. In 1760, male workers were preferred to female workers. The practice in America at that time was to purchase "prime" males of 14 to 20 years of age, use them up, and replace them if they became ill or too old to work. Young children and young girls were to be avoided, especially for the West India markets. The market for girls or women was very specialized, with the result that Fitch only requested them when they were on order from a buyer. Women and girls also required special arrangements on board ship, which brought additional costs and difficulties.

Of these characteristics, the issue of health was the most difficult to determine. Examination of slaves could be complicated. Visible defects (bad teeth, broken or misshapen limbs) were easily detected, but local merchants learned to camouflage illnesses by using local medicines and stimulants. Ships capable of carrying large numbers often had a physician on board to check for diseases. The final selection also often occurred at the last moments before a cargo was loaded and when everyone was anxious to complete the transaction. Sellers used the confusion most evident at those times as an opportunity to substitute cargo, or at least a few within it. The bane of the buyer was to have purchased a slave who appeared to be healthy but whose contagious condition became known a few days after leaving the coast for the Americas, having infected the entire cargo and ship crew in the meantime.

The health of his cargo was perhaps second in importance to the health or status of his vessel. In a time of war, a vessel loaded with trade goods was an easy target for privateers who often acted little better than pirates, seizing the vessels and property of ships that carried the flag and papers of a country with which they were then at war. "Letters of Marque" issued during the Seven Years War (1756-1763) were the excuses or justifications for opportuneistic seizure. Luckily, the rivers of upper Guinea tended to empty into the Atlantic through numerous estuaries, with meandering streams stretching as much as twenty kilometers inland. Captains were always warned to remain alert and to position their vessel so that a quick retreat was possible.

Another type of vessel health had to do with ravages that inevitably would come to a vessel’s bottom if it had not been adequately prepared for or maintained during the voyage. Wooden bottoms – once softened – were nearly impossible to replace. If a vessel needed to be grounded and cleaned of barnacles that came with long exposure to tropical waters that would inevitably mean that the cargo would need to be off loaded and protected in some fashion. At that point, both the vessel and its cargo would be at risk.
The vessel would be laid on its side and cleaned or graved and its bottom covered with tar or pitch to provide a shield against further deterioration. If the bottom were too damaged, the vessel would be condemned and not permitted to sail again:

Take None but Healthy Slaves & be Very Carefull in Examing them. & be Sure to bring as Few Women & Girls as possible. Whearever you Lay with your Schooner be Sure to Lay So As to be Seacure from Any of the Enemys Vessells that may be Gowing Up or Down the Coast. You must Observe your Vessells Botton is Bare of Stuff & wants Graving be Sure Grave hur the Very First
Opportunity you have & Keep hur Bottom Well paid with Stuff as often as you Can to Keep hur from the Worms.

Letters always reminded the captain and supercargo that there was an Atlantic clock operating that could have a major impact upon a voyage’s success, especially if a captain ignored it. Everyone involved in the commerce knew that rains along the Sierra Leone coast would begin in May, and with rains would come fevers and tropical diseases against which captain and crew had few defenses. But diseases also affected the cargo. Everyone had heard stories of voyages that had been lost when captain and crew became too ill to begin the return trip to America (the “Middle Passage”) or too incapacitated to protect themselves against rebellion when the slave cargo realized the extent of illness on board a vessel. Epidemics also broke out among the cargo, and it had been reported that victims had been systematically thrown overboard in an attempt to keep a disease from destroying a total voyage. From Fitch’s perspective, transactions upon the coast needed to be completed before rains and fevers became major issues. Fitch was particularly adamant in his instructions that the 1 May deadline was more than a mere suggestion. If goods taken to Africa for exchange had not been sold or traded by that date, the captain was to sell at cost which Fitch believed would always find buyers.\(^\text{16}\) There was, however, a problem with that logic. Resident traders in Africa, who had become accustomed to tropical disease, might be eager to delay completion of contracts because they were also aware that captains were operating under these instructions:

You have a Very Fine Cargo & well Sorted to Comand the Trade Every Article is of the Very Best Therefore hope you wont be Detaind Upon the Coast Longer than ye 1th of May by Any Means, the Consequence you Know We have Experienced to be Bad, You & your people & Slaves will get Sick which will Ruin the Voyage, Whatever you have left Upon hand after April, Sell it Altogether for what you Can Get if Even at the First Cost Rather than Tarry Any Longer Tho your Cargo is so well Sorted that I make No Doubt you'll be able to Sell it all before that Time & to a good proffett.

Having expressed confidence that Gwinn would have completed his business in Africa by 1 May, Fitch then drew Gwinn’s attention to the issue of keeping both his crew and his cargo of slaves alive and healthy during the Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas. This was an important section in any letter of instruction, for the loss of a slave translated directly as a loss in total profits. That had happened on board Fitch’s Snow Caesar in 1759 when twenty-six of his cargo of 153 slaves died before reaching American markets.\(^\text{17}\) Once the last of the slaves were loaded, and once the voyage across the Atlantic had started, the crew could relax momentarily. The final days at anchor in Africa were always the most dangerous for the crew. It was the slave seller’s responsibility to deliver his merchandise to the ship, but
once they had boarded the vessel, the seller’s responsibility ended, and it was up to the captain and his crew from that moment to maintain order and discipline. The crew had not yet had time to assess the cargo for troublemakers, with the consequence that rebellion would likely succeed at this point, at least for some. The shore was within swimming distance. In many cases, the seller sent a young male who was trained in language to act as interpreter between the crew and the cargo, sailing with the cargo until they reached the American market. Or it was common for a trusted slave to be used as a “bomba” or “bomb boy” who possessed a “booming voice” that demanded respect. The cargo often was led to believe that the bomba was a market slave, except that he had privileges. The bomba most often was the largest and most articulate, and he was the comedian who moved easily between crew and cargo and who reduced tensions building during the Middle Passage. 

Fitch believed that a captain could avoid the problems of rebellion and disorder by making certain that slaves were treated with respect and that crew followed proper protocols and kept the cargo busy. In coasting commerce, slaves were put on board in small lots, with the earliest purchased spending the most time on the ship until it arrived at its departure point from the African coast. Once slaves were on board, it became necessary to protect the crew against rebellion. The shore was nearby, and if it were possible to reach the water and swim to shore, slaves might attempt a rebellion. Seventy days in the hold of a crowded slaver was a long time. Two meals per day were prepared and even a dram of rum was given occasionally, perhaps to remind them of easier times and to give them a respite from their boring condition. The most dangerous time, however, was when the cargo was being moved from one place to another onboard. Some captains built a barricade or barricado on the main deck, a door on each side, and portals through which the crew could fire weapons if slaves decided to seize control of the barricade. Slaves were permitted to come up into the barricade on a revolving schedule, and it was inside the barricade where the slaves danced and took baths.

Fitch, like many investors, had heard stories of ways to reduce costs and maximize profits in the trade. One strategy was to reduce food intake among slaves, thereby reducing costs. Some captains and owners took this to an extreme by planning for specific mortality during the Middle Passage and by taking on provisions in Africa only to satisfy these assumptions. Clearly Fitch wanted a live, healthy, and robust cargo to appear in Boston when the Phillis returned to the Americas after a ten week voyage across the Atlantic. His reputation as a seller in the Boston Market and the reputation of Gwinn as a loyal employee and an able captain and supercargo depended upon it:

be Constantly Upon your Gard Night & Day & Keep good Watch that you May Not be Cutt of by Your Own Slaves / tho Neavour So Fiew On Board Or that you Are Not Taken by Sirprize by Boats from the Shore which has often ben the
Case.21 Let your Slaves be well Lookd after properly & Carefully Tended Kept in Action by Playing Upon Deck, a full allowance of Vickualls & Drink & by no means suffred to be abused, if Sick well Tended in ye Half Deck & by All Means Keep up Thare Spirretts & when you Cum off the Coast bring off a Full Allowance of Rice & water for a Ten Weaks Passage Upon this your Voyage Depends in a Grate Measure.

The change in the African market from buying a few slaves at a time to buying slaves in large consignments and at warehousing centers encouraged credit arrangements that complicated commerce significantly. That a ship captain might negotiate with a small group of traders meant that a letter of instruction would likely include directions regarding unfinished business from an earlier voyage. Essentially a captain would come to the coast with a cargo of trade goods. If he engaged only in “coasting” and remained aloof of local politics, then there essentially was little need for extending credits. The establishment of bulking centers meant, in contrast, that a ship captain negotiated with a broker, with a sufficient cargo of trade goods offloaded at the broker’s shop where the latter used it as barter for slaves. Instead of cash, the ship captain received compensation for his goods in the form of human cargo.

While credit arrangements of this sort may have started from a hand shake between assumed equals, both tended to mistrust and expect less than full compliance from either side. Still, a formal “settlement of account” was drawn at the end of a trading venture to list expenses to be changed against the sale and essentially to reach a consensus regarding the state of the trade at a given point. Occasionally a “settlement of account” needed later resolution. A “promissory note” needed to be paid. The letter of instruction would have given special emphasis to this problem, transforming the captain into a bill collector associated with unpaid bills from an earlier visit to the coast.

It was likely common that each letter of instruction contained information about a series of unpaid promises that still needed to be resolved. In an earlier voyage commissioned by Fitch, Captain William Ellery of the Snow Caesar, had established commercial arrangements of credit with resident traders, among them a Mr. Wallice and a Mr. Ord. Mr Ellery’s “Book” likely refers to his journal and business accounts in which he would have copied formal documents; this was a time when it was common to keep duplicates. In 1758, Fitch sent two vessels to the African coast with cargoes of trade goods, and with plans to sell both vessels on the coast. Walter Rand captained the Sloop Bacchus, and Elias Ellery the Schooner Peggy. Neither returned to Boston in 1758.22 In 1759, Fitch had asked Ellery, then captain of the Snow Caesar, to act on his behalf. Whatever remained of Rand’s cargo and his crew was to have been taken on board Ellery’s Snow Caesar once he reached the coast. That apparently had happened, but Fitch had yet to settle his accounts with Rand, which Gwinn was to collect, if possible. Rand apparently had
remained on the African coast, likely as a resident trader or waiting for an opportunity to sail to America when the *Bacchus* sale was complete. Gwinn was carrying letters of introduction from Fitch, authorizing Gwinn to accept payment from Rand.

The reference to Wallice and Ord, likely involved unfinished business associated with an earlier cargo of goods given to them on credit. It was common along the coast for a ship captain to assign his cargo to a resident trader who then used the goods to purchase slaves and other goods for the return cargo. Once slaves were purchased and placed on board vessels, a strict accounting of services and goods provided by the resident trader was made, and any imbalance in accounts noted. Often a promissory note was drawn, indicating generally that African partners owed the ships some specific sum. That had happened here, with Captain Gwinn being asked to obtain payment from Wallice and Ord:

> You'll See by Capt. Ellerys Book which I deliver you that Messrs. Wallice & Ord Owe me Two Hundread & Ninty Barrs which I make no Doubt but They will have Honour Enough to pay you & if you Can get Anything from Capt Rand. do— I have wrote to them by you & all Capt. Ellery Friends which I make no Doubt will Assist you.

Perhaps the most essential document for profitable trading upon the African coast was a list of recent prices paid for goods. Payment might be made in a variety of ways. Gold or cash was one method, but that was not always the most profitable one. Essentially traders bargained and attempted to increase the exchange value of their own goods and reduce the value of those items they were buying. Along this section of coast, items were bundled into a form of currency called “bars”, with some bars being expensive bars while others were considered cheap bars. The only way to know how these bars were calculated and the composition of a bar was to maintain detailed lists of recent bar transactions. Captain Ellery’s book clearly contained that data:

> Keep good Accompt of all your Trade you have Capt. Ellerys Book for your Guide & Sketch of what I think it the Lowest you will Sell your Cargo at is What Capt. Ellery Sold at the worst of Times, by which you'll See you have More Cargo than Sufficiant to purchase your Cargo, Unless Sum Accident Happens.

The idea of unforeseen tragedy seems to have been a depressing afterthought. Certainly, the coast of Africa contained many dangers for the ship’s captain and its owner, as well as the crew. Spending long periods along the coast brought problems for the ship and its crew, but the coast itself also had its own dangers. Ships might run aground or hit a reef. If that were to happen and if the ship were sufficiently damaged, the rules of Africa would take precedence, which meant that locals obtained rights of salvage. Rebellions and disease added to that list. Fitch emphasized that disasters
sometimes were complete. Fitch’s letters always reminded captains that, once the vessel had received both its cargo of slaves and sufficient rice, they should exchange all remaining trade goods for African products, “if you have anything left. Upon Hand After you are fully Slaved & Ric'd & Sell it for What it will fetch for Camwood Wax Leath or anything Else Rather than Bring it Home.”

In nearly all cases, letters also included a section that spelled out procedures to be followed once the vessel arrived at a designated market area in the Americas. This section was often elaborate in detail, especially if there were several potential markets and if markets were crowded or beset by epidemics. In the 1760s, those markets were likely found among the coastal towns from South Carolina northward to Virginia. Fitch had indicated in this letter of January 1760, however, that the preferred market for this particular voyage was Boston, where the voyage had begun. At the same time, Fitch was aware that currents and winds might take the Phillis to markets in the Caribbean or to ports of the southern British colonies. In that eventuality and if markets brought high prices, a captain might be given an option to sell under certain conditions and with specific persons with whom Fitch had previously conducted business. A letter of instruction would list those persons by name and provide details regarding the type of transaction that would be acceptable to the investors:

On your Passage Homeward, if you find the Wind favours you more to go to Cape Fear than to Cum Hear you May go Thare & apply to my Friend Capt R Quince, who will Assist you in the Sail of your Cargo, but than I would take Nothing thare for Slaves but Gold & Silver and after you have Sold As Many As you Can for Cash if Any left On hand bring them with You Home to Boston. This is Only in Case you Can Make a Shorter Passage than Coming to Boston if you go thare you'll find Letters Lodgd with Mr Quince for your Govourment.

Periods of war presented special challenges to captain and investor. Privateers carrying Letters of Marque and in search of easy captures produced unease for all participants and increased risks. Owners and investors wanted to know the circumstances of the boat and of the investment at each step – just in case an insurance claim needed to be submitted. Gwinn obviously was aware that slaving vessels were insured by companies that stipulated exact circumstances allowable for claims. Normally, letters of instruction would draw attention to specifics of legislation that regulated the trade and treatment of slaves, for if those regulations were not followed closely, insurance companies would deny claim payments. The only mail service between Africa and Boston would have come through the participation of captains who willingly carried letters from Africa to Europe, or America. Some letters would be lost due to carelessness or disregard, but others might have been
carried by boats that were later captured. Letters were to be regarded as evidence of losses for insurance claims:

There is One Thing I Must Impress Upon Your Mind that is By No means to fail wrighting me by Every Opertunity to Any part of the Cintinant, to any or all the Islands in the west Indies, by way of Tennerief, Or Any of the Islands, or Even/ Via Europe/ Bristol or Liverpool. You May Frequently have Opertunities & be Sure to wright as often As Opertunity presents. Supposing it was Ten Times in a Day, Out of which it may be than One of Two may posibely Reach me Letters are in Warr Time Especially of Very Grate Sarvis in Govourning Respecting Insurance.

As an investor, Fitch obviously preferred for his captains to return with no lingering commercial agreements that needed to be resolved in a later voyage. Unsecured credit essentially amounted to little more than trust, and trust was a risky gamble. Mortality for Europeans living on the African coast also was high, and it was not always certain that contractual parties would still be there in a year’s time. Yet, the advantages of establishing long term trading arrangements with traders on the African coast were increasing and Fitch recognized that in 1760:

& this is what, I Reacomend & by no means would have you Omitt. Make no Debts & Mind you are Not Over Reachd in Trade giving the Prefference of your Cargo to Doctr. Clow & Others that you Know to be Sponsible men provided thay will give you as much as Another.

Approaching the end of his letter of instruction, Fitch liked to include clichés or truisms that every captain knew but that were worth remembering:

You must Tack One Article with Another & make that, that is the Demand Sell that, that Lay Upon Hand [i.e., bundle items together into bars so that items that were not popular would be attached to those in high demand] where you Can light off[+] a Number of Likely Slaves to be Sold in a Lott Dont part for a Trifull for Such will give you dispatch which is all you Must Look & Aim at [i.e., if determined to sell quickly in groups, then expect to receive what you receive, and no more] Small preasents properly bestow’d upon Clow Dowdell & Such men as Can be of Sarvis to you is No Loss: [i.e., adding a “dash” or extra payment is just a cost of doing business and will pay a dividend, eventually] – you may Gain 5 per. Ctt. in the Gage of your Rum Between Gunter & Rod, [i.e. the rum is 5 percent better than average, which can be diluted by that much].

Finally came the instruction concerning compensation. Letters listed the terms of payment for captain and for other officers if required by law. Captains were always reminded that their performance with reference to keeping detailed journals and records regarding prices and with reference to maintaining a schedule to secure the best prices in the Americas would determine whether they would be hired for a later voyage. His wage would be
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

specified, and the additional benefits would be listed. Benefits always included a captain’s “privilege” which essentially meant that the captain bought a slave in Africa using the investor’s money. When the slave was sold in America, the captain returned the investor’s money but kept the increased value as his privilege. Fitch permitted his captains to have “three privilege” and three percent of the net profit of the cargo of slaves:

by all Means I Reacomend Industry Frugallity & dispatch which will Reacomend you to further Bussiness. Your Wages is Three pounds Ten Sterling per Month, Three Slaves privlidge & Three per Ctt. Out of the Cargo of Slaves Delivered at Boston, This is all you are to have. I remain with wishing You a Good voyage Health & Success & am Your Friend & Owner.

In this case, Fitch added an addendum, perhaps as an afterthought. Fitch reminded Gwinn that slaves with herniated navels brought poor prices in Boston, which he should avoid if possible. Should he accidentally land at a slave market in America, he was permitted to sell slaves, so long as he received a good price, and if he had other goods remaining on board to sell, he should receive the prevailing price. And finally he reminded Gwinn that his signal flag when entering Boston Harbor should be flown from his Fore Topmast Head, the forward mast on his vessel:

P.S. Endeavour to get as fiew Slaves as you Can with thare Swel'd Navells, which is a Hurt to the Sail Hear. if you Should by Any Accident put into Any port upon ye Continant Homeward bound you may Sell as many Slaves as you Can for a Good Price & Ready pay & be Sure to advise me Every man has got his months pay. What Rum or any thing Else you dttd is Coast Price
Your Signall when you Cum in will be your Jack at Fore Topmast Head
Tim Fitch to Capt Gwinn
Letter of instruction
Jany 1760

Fitch’s letter of instruction to Captain Gwinn, while perhaps brief in number of words, tells us much about the mechanics of the slave trade on the upper Guinea coast as it was practiced in the mid-eighteenth century. Interestingly, this letter did not mention Bunce Island by name, although that may have been understood by the term “Sierra Leone.” Nor did the letter specifically mention the Cleveland, located on the Bananas, or any other Africans, Euro-Africans, or Europeans who by mid-century had established themselves as important brokers upon this coast. In this case, it provided only general boundaries within which a captain or supercargo could trade and reminded him of the dangers that he would encounter should he ignore certain conditions such as climate, winds, or nature’s clock. And in direct
language it demonstrated that this was a commercial arrangement, and nothing more than that. Slave trading was a business that demonstrates how Phillis Wheatley reached Boston and shows the connections between Boston and Eurafricans on the upper Guinea coast.

NOTES

1 For a summary of data regarding the 1760 voyage of the Phillis, see David Eltis et al., Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Voyage #25215. For a general discussion of letters of instruction, see Marcus Rediker, The Slave Ship: A Human History (New York: Viking, 2007), 190-99.
2 For the accomplishments of Phillis Wheatley, see Margareta Odell, Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and Slave (Boston: Geo. W. Light, 1834).
3 See the Society’s website, http://www.medfordhistorical.org/slavetradeletters.php
4 I am indebted to Andrea Johnson and Philip Keitel, students at Tufts University, who, in spring 2000, transcribed this and other correspondence, under the direction of Professor Rosalind Shaw in a class in Anthropology. Several errors in the online transcription were noted and corrected below. For a list of vessels captained by Peter Gwinn between 1758 and 1770, see Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.
6 In the following analysis, I have inserted sections of a complete letter written by Fitch to Gwinn on 12 January 1760. The parts of the letter are all contained here, and are recorded in original sequence. Punctuation, spelling, and capitalization are as in the original. Item placed within brackets [ ] are added words for clarification.
7 See Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, voyage #25226.
9 The term “boat” in this case referred to a longboat, a pinnace, or a yawl that would have been attached to the vessel.
10 Suzanne Schwarz, ed., Slave Captain: The Career of James Irving in the Liverpool Slave Trade (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 27, suggested that the average purchase on the Gold Coast in the 1791 to 1797 period, a time when coasting was no longer popular, was two to three slaves per day.
11 Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, voyage # 25215 (Phillis).
12 For Bunce Island, see David Hancock, Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 177-220. For Îles de Los, see Bruce Mouser, “Îles de Los as Bulking Centre in the Slave Trade, 1750-1800,” Revue Francaise d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer 83, 313 (1996), 77-90.
13 In his letter to Gwinn, dated 27 November 1766, Fitch noted specifically that he preferred trade with “Factors” rather than “the Natives”, noting however that
prices paid for slaves would be 15 percent to 25 percent higher if purchased from factors. Factors were strangers or outsiders who were independent entrepreneurs or agents of large trading companies. They contracted with landholders for the privilege of trading within their towns and domains, in return for anchorage fees, taxes, and customs payable to local landholders. A landholder/host agreed to protect his stranger/guest and his property, and the guest agreed to remain separate from political authority. For the “landlord/stranger” relationship along this section of coast, see Bruce Mouser, “Landlords-Strangers: A Process of Accommodation and Assimilation,” _The International Journal of African Historical Studies_ 8 (1975), 425-40.


16 In Fitch’s letter to William Ellery, 14 January 1759, Fitch had even directed Ellery to sell at a disadvantage (below costs) after 1 May.

17 http://www.medfordhistorical.org/images/slaveletters/p10_600_2.jpg


19 For an aborted slave rebellion on board the _Sandown_, see Mouser, _Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica_, 97-99. For a successful rebellion, see _British Press_ (London), 19 December 1804, 3.

20 See Rediker, _Slave Ship_, 70, for a description of a barricade. C. M. MacInnes, “The Slave Trade,” in C. Northcote Parkinson, ed., _The Trade Winds_ (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948), 268, described a similar and “charming” voyage in which a dram of rum was given to each slave “before breakfast.”

21 This comment is puzzling, although it likely represented tales that circulated among ship captains (for one such report, see Bruce L. Mouser, “The Voyage of the Good Sloop Dolphin to Africa 1795-1796,” _The American Neptune_ 38, 4 [1978], 258.) One of the unwritten rules of coastal commerce required everyone to pay customs. If an attack came from shore, it likely came in reprisal for a captain’s failure to follow a local protocol or pay the local landlord a known fee or custom. Essentially, local authorities would exact payment by seizing something belonging to the captain, either at the point of his departure from the coast or when the captain next arrived to conduct business. Or the next vessel visiting the coast might pay a price for the actions of an errant predecessor. David Richardson, “Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” _William and Mary Quarterly_ 58, 1 (2001), 72, and Stephen D. Behrendt, David Eltis, and David Richardson, “The Cost of Coercion: African agency in the pre-modern Atlantic World,” _Economic History Review_ 54, 3 (2001), 455-56,
however, reported ninety-three cases of attack from shore, which included attacks on slave ships’ boats. In Lovejoy and Richardson, “African Agency and the Liverpool Slave Trade,” 59, the authors noted as a consequence of political instability along the Sierra Leone coast, ships “experienced unusually high risks of attack from the shore by local African groups.”

22 Eltis et al., *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, voyages #26384 (Bacchus) and #26385 (Peggy).

23 For a court case involving disagreements over such an arrangement, see William Greenwood versus Benjamin Curtis, Supreme Court of Massachusetts, Suffolk, 6 Mass. 358, 1810 Mass. LEXIS 46. For William Ellery at Boston in 1758 with a cargo of “young boys,” see *The Conservative*, Nebraska City (2 May 1901), vol. 3, 11-12. For “barr,” see the next footnote.


25 “Leath[er].”

26 Captain Richard Quince was a respected merchant (Richard Quince and Co.) and political leader (judge) in the town of Brunswick that was located at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, in North Carolina. For Quince, see Mark Wilde-Ramsing et al., *The Rose Hill Wreck* (Kure Beach, NC: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992). Normally letters contained detailed instructions about persons or companies in the West Indies with whom the ship’s owner conducted business previously. Letters of introduction would be included for delivery to them, and arrangements for payments would have been set. In this case, however, the intended market was Boston, where Fitch was located.

27 The term “Government” in this instance is not clear, except that it might refer to the way Gwinn was to govern his trade with Quince.

Liverpool merchants played a central role in the initiation and rapid expansion of the upper Guinea coast as a slave export area for the transatlantic slave trade. In the period between 1750 and 1776, the upper Guinea coast contributed one in four of the slaves taken on Liverpool ships to the Americas. From the mid-eighteenth century to the abolition of the British trade in 1807, vessels from Liverpool transported far more slaves from the upper Guinea coast than their competitors from Bristol, London and Lancaster.1 Detailed analysis of how the trade operated in Africa has not been fully explored, partly because of the dearth of sources. Fragmented letters for other areas of Africa survive in collections of slave traders’ records,2 and the Thomas Miles papers represent a significant source for examining the correspondence of a European operating in Little Popo (Aného).3 Bruce Mouser’s examination of the Timothy Fitch letter in a previous chapter demonstrates the American perception of trading conditions and pitfalls on the upper Guinea coast. However, there is a collection of letters between a merchant and his agents on the upper Guinea coast that shows both the African and British sides of the trade.

The letterbooks of Robert Bostock contain a substantial collection of correspondence from the British side of the trade to merchants in Africa.4 Specifically, there is correspondence for sixteen voyages, thirteen of which went to the upper Guinea coast. Bostock traded at a variety of locations on the upper Guinea coast, including Îles de Los, Rio Pongo, and Cape Mount, but the main focus of his trade was with James and William Cleveland, Eurafrican traders resident on the Banana Islands, located to the south-west of Cape Shilling at the “southerly tip of the Sierra Leone peninsula.”5 Some
flavor of their counterparts’ contents can be determined in Bostock’s letters as he responded to the letters received from the Bananas. This rich and extensive source presents the opportunity to examine the strategies that a merchant deployed to attempt to control and expand his part of the slave export market. Bostock’s side of the correspondence gives an exceptional insight into the balance of power in the relationship between a Liverpool merchant and his African slaving network. As this correspondence relates to the period of rapid British expansion, the evidence also has significance for assessing the complexity and weakness of the structure of the slave trade along the upper Guinea coast. Moreover, Bostock’s correspondence indicates that he had to work hard to meet the sophisticated demands for barter goods on the West African coast, particularly as these demands showed significant variations at different trading locations.6

Between 1769 and 1793 when Robert Bostock was trading as a captain and an owner, Liverpool had clearly established a dominant position in the transatlantic slave trade.7 In common with many captains in the Liverpool trade, Robert Bostock was not born in the town. Parish records indicate that he was baptized at Tarvin in Cheshire.8 Liverpool offered the opportunity for captains to make the transition to merchant,9 unlike Bristol where the number of captains becoming owners for the period 1700-1807 was only 11 percent.10 Bostock may have preferred the better financial prospects offered by Liverpool, even if the human cost was high with five men dying for every one who made the transition to merchant.11

Unlike James Irving, whose career path is clearer due to his position as a surgeon,12 it is not known how Bostock progressed to become a slave captain. His first command appears to have been onboard the *Little Ben* in 1769 aged 26, but prior to that his letterbooks provide no suggestion of how he attained that position.13 Behrendt argues that those slaving captains who became merchants rarely left the slave trade, but largely remained in the business that they understood for the remainder of their careers.14 While Bostock is broadly an example of this assertion insofar as at the beginning of his career he listed his occupation as “Captain” and at the end as “Merchant”15 it is not clear how typical Bostock was among Liverpool slaving captains. His career does not have the neat divide of “Captain” and “Merchant,” especially during the first half of his career. During the period when he could be described as an active slaving captain from 1769 to 1786, he was not only listed as a co-owner in all six vessels that he commanded, but also appears to have invested in a further eleven slaving ventures. Bostock’s main contacts in Liverpool appear to have been Thomas Ratcliffe and Thomas Foxcroft, both of whom were the principal owners in Bostock’s ventures, as well as the vessels he captained. This investment in 17 vessels during the period when he can be seen principally as a captain places him in the top 10 percent of slave vessel owners for Liverpool between 1700 and 1807.16 It is therefore debatable whether
Bostock can be rightfully classified as a captain only during this time, since he was also clearly a capital investor in slaving ventures.

Furthermore, from 1786 he became the sole or principal owner in a further 17 ventures which places him in the top 5 percent of Liverpool slaving investors from 1700 to 1807. More research is needed to discern whether this cross-occupation of captain and owner in slaving ventures (and not necessarily owner in the vessel being commanded) is typical in the Liverpool trade. Andrew White and James Kendall who were operating on the upper Guinea coast during the same period as Bostock also made the transition to owner and similarly had interests in about 34 vessels. Nonetheless, Bostock has been described as a small slave trader. In absolute terms this is probably a correct assessment, since his tally of 34 slave voyage investments does not appear to come close to the total investments made by William Boats, who appeared as an owner for more than 150 vessels or William Davenport who invested in 151 ventures. However, in relative terms Bostock’s significance as a slave trader should not be underestimated. While Bostock may not have been in the top rank of Liverpool slave traders who invested on average in 4-5 vessels per year, such as George Case, William Davenport and John Dawson, his average investment of more than 2 ships per year places him alongside Felix Doran, James Aspinall and Francis Ingram who were among the top 15 Liverpool slave venture investors.

From his first voyage in 1769 as a captain and owner to the last in 1793 as sole owner, Bostock had a preference for trading along parts of the upper Guinea coast. Of the seven vessels that he commanded from 1769 to 1787 all but one clearly traded there. It is currently unknown where else he traded on the coast, but Bostock’s preference for the upper Guinea coast was shared with his co-owner Thomas Ratcliffe. Of the other 11 vessels that Bostock invested in during his command career to 1786, half traded there. In the second half of his career Bostock did send a few vessels to the Bight of Biafra. This was probably an attempt to broaden his trading portfolio in response to his worsening financial problems with William Cleveland.

Bostock’s underlying preference for the upper Guinea coast is made absolutely clear in his surviving letterbooks commencing 1786, where his organization of voyages centered on trading there. From 1786, all but four of his vessels traded along the upper Guinea coast, and Bostock appears to have had a specialized knowledge of the different requirements of the market on the upper Guinea coast compared with the goods required for the Bight of Biafra. His cloth orders were for a mixture of colors in the same cloth as he requested “mixt romalls,” whereas for the Bight of Biafra his cloth orders were predominantly color specific and included “blue cotton bonny romalls.” These variations may not have been due to the introduction of new or superior styles of cloths by Europeans to Africa, but rather compliance with long-established local preferences. The importance of this
nuanced understanding of the demands on the upper Guinea coast is reflected in the Sierra Leone Company’s anxiety to build-up their own specialist knowledge of local demand.27

The centrality of cloth as a trading commodity on the upper Guinea coast is echoed in the inventory for the Kite which appears to have been produced for an insurance claim after it had been scuppered in 1787.28 Cloth represented more than a third of the value of the goods listed, of which over 80 percent were given East Indian cloth designations. This dominance of East Indian cloths is superficially in line with Herbert Klein’s assessment of its importance as a slave trading commodity throughout the African coast.29 However, most of Bostock’s orders for East Indian type cloths within the letter books were made with Manchester suppliers who were listed as African and/or cloth manufacturers in Scholes Manchester and Salford Directory 1794.31 It is possible that Manchester was a distribution centre for East Indian cloths. However, it is more likely that, given their description as manufacturers,32 Bostock’s suppliers were producing replica East India cloths which were good enough facsimiles to be acceptable as trade goods on the upper Guinea coast unlike the ersatz East India cloths produced by the Royal African Company in the seventeenth century that were rejected by traders in Africa.33 This may partly explain how Liverpool merchants opened the slave trade there, since these copies were probably cheaper to purchase than the authentic cloths, which were only available from the monopolistic East India Company. Cheap imitation cloths produced in Manchester would have reduced capital outlay, thus increasing the potential profits from trading on the upper Guinea coast with its preference for cloths that could be satisfactorily imitated. Moreover, the infrastructure for ready transportation of these replica East India goods to Liverpool was in place by 1776, with the completion of the Bridgewater Canal extension to Runcorn.

Bostock also provides evidence that British suppliers had ranges of goods that were designed for the needs of the upper Guinea coast as distinct from other areas of the African coast, telling Robinson Heywood “every article in the Windward line” when he visited them.34 However, Bostock does not seem to have relied heavily on the market knowledge of these trade goods suppliers, but instead created his own information network for tracking demand on the coast. Bostock provides glimpses of an informal network that operated within Liverpool. He informed Captain Williams that he had been speaking to Captain Mount of the Hammond, who had returned from Cape Mount, and that the goods that Williams had on board would sell there as an alternative to the “Windward Coast,” the primary destination of his vessel.35 With Liverpool accounting for 73 percent of the British slave trade at this time, the port’s slave merchants had direct access to returning captains who could provide verbal and extended interrogatories on the goods demanded on the upper Guinea coast,
which would have provided a level of detail that formal correspondence could
not provide. In addition, Bostock shows that there were informal exchanges
on the prices of African trade goods, and that he took advantage of such
information to purchase goods at the best price. While he gave no indication
of his source, he wrote to Robinson Heywood that he was “informed the
Windward Coast Goods are much lower in price & great occasion [...] is for
it” and asked that they provide him with the prices for a list of goods he
wanted for his next slaving voyage.36

Bostock also had engaged in correspondence that spanned the
transatlantic slave trading network which provides evidence of his almost
obsessive preoccupation with keeping ahead of demand. He scolded his
captains and African contacts for not writing to him more often to keep him
informed of the goods in demand.37 This seeming deficiency by his captains
occurred despite his pre-emptive written instructions including the command
to “take care to write me by every Opportunity … and be very particular in
mentioning … what goods is in most Demand on the Coast.”38 Bostock gives
the impression that demand on the upper Guinea coast could change rapidly
and needed to be tracked. Although none of the letters that arrived are with
the letter books, he filtered the information he received into his replies so that
the intelligence in the missing inward letters can be discerned, such as when
he informed James Cleveland that he had received the “arranges” (beads) that
were required.39 This preoccupation with satisfying demands in Africa is in
line with recent historiography which argues that discerning African slave
merchants would not engage in trade where the barter goods did not match
the market’s needs and wants.40 However, it may also indicate that in his
trading relationship with James and William Cleveland, keeping up with
demand was one of the few areas over which Bostock had any degree of
control.

One of Bostock’s central business contacts was the Eurafri
can slave
supplier James Cleveland of the Banana Islands.41 The relationship probably
began while Bostock was an active slaving captain. Bostock represented this
interaction as more intimate than a simple business relationship based on
market transactions. When Cleveland’s son was born he wrote that he
flattered himself “it will be called after your h[um]ble S[ervan]t – which
wou’d give me pleasure to hear it was,”42 and was subsequently delighted to
hear that Cleveland did name his son after him.43 Bostock expressed the hope
that Cleveland intended “sending him to England [and that I] shall have the
care of his education which nothing wou’d give me greater pleasure.”44 This
type of educational exchange has been found between Liverpool slave traders
and African suppliers operating out of Old Calabar and strengthened their
bonds by intimately acquainting them with the other’s families and preparing
the next generation of slave traders who became familiar with both their
counterparts and their world.45 The offer to educate Cleveland’s son and an
earlier enquiry after his own son in Cleveland’s care demonstrates that this practice also occurred between Liverpool merchants and merchants on the upper Guinea coast and seems to have been an intrinsic facet of the personal relationships on which the trade there relied.46

The statements of intimacy that Bostock used in his letters to Cleveland included “the Friendship subsisting so long betwixt us.”47 Similarly, “wish I was with you”48 appears to have been common in correspondence between other African and Liverpool merchants. William Earle declared his love for Old Calabar to Duke Abashy and was careful to inform him of aspects of his family life that did not normally find their way into regular business correspondence, including declaring that his wife sent her love.49 Both Otto Ephraim and Grandy King George signed off their 1773 letters to Ambrose Lace with the words “your best friend,”50 although by 1776 Otto Ephraim had adopted the more formal and regular late eighteenth century letter closure of “Your most obedient Humble Servant.”51 This more prescribed valediction was not necessarily an indication of a cooling in their relationship as Ephraim added a postscript to a later letter that asked after Lace’s wife and children which took care to name each child in turn.52

The common thread in these examples is that Bostock, Earle and Lace were former slave ship captains so are likely to have met their correspondents during their commands, thereby forming a deeper and more intimate relationship, which was subsequently carried into their correspondence. By contrast William Davenport and Thomas Leyland’s correspondence contains no direct linkage with African merchants, and consequently any profession of intimacy and acquaintance is missing. Nonetheless, the network of trust and iterative trading between African and Liverpool merchants was based on the relationships formed by captains with African merchants, whose knowledge was valued and ultimately permitted merchants to become owners.53

Despite these expressions of intimate and long-standing acquaintance there is a clear impression that Bostock needed Cleveland to acquire slaves for him at the Bananas far more than Cleveland needed him to supply trade goods from Britain. In the opening line of the letterbook commencing 1789, Bostock lamented:

I wrote you by the Little Ben & Jemmy and have not had the pleasure of a Line from you, I hope you have not lost the use of your Hands as you are confident nothing would give me more pleasure.54

Bostock frequently sent Cleveland gifts such as clothing, pictures, umbrellas, cheese and potatoes,55 along with far more intimate items like the “8 Ruffled Shirts of my Daughters making marked with you name.”56 There is no evidence that Bostock received any gifts in return, which suggests that these gifts expressed his hope of reciprocity through trade rather than an expectation that Cleveland would give back equivalent gifts. Although this
proffering of gifts was common business practice in the eighteenth century as a means to establish business relationships that went beyond market transactions by creating obligations, nonetheless the one-sidedness of Bostock’s gift giving is suggestive that he was the supplicant in the relationship with Cleveland and that the balance of power lay in the latter’s hands.

The anticipated intimacy did not reach the levels that Bostock hoped for and there was little he could do to truly influence slave supply through Cleveland. Bostock appears to have been painfully aware that Cleveland not only did not give him any preference in trade, but also did not “give him his turn,” delivering slaves to rival vessels before supplying Bostock’s vessel, despite agreeing to trade with Bostock’s ship first. Bostock’s disbelieving outrage at Cleveland’s dealings was impotent. The reality was that Bostock was relatively powerless to influence Cleveland. The power balance in their relationship becomes clearer when it is considered that Bostock did not attempt to negotiate with Cleveland over the price of slaves. Only once did he declare “you value the Slaves too high” but immediately conceded the issue to Cleveland by stating “but that Business I leave to you.” This reticence to negotiate over the price of slaves in Africa is not matched in his dealings with West Indian buyers. Bostock was firm in his demands in the Americas and would threaten to take his business elsewhere if his expectations were not met. He also incessantly compared the prices of slaves in the West Indian markets, which, again, he did not attempt in Africa. This lack of comparison does not necessarily demonstrate an inability to discover information on African slave prices given that the same sources (mostly in Liverpool) that were knowledgeable on the West Indies should also have known about prices in Africa, but rather that Bostock did not feel powerful enough to dictate terms to Cleveland.

Bostock attempted to promote his position in his relationship with Cleveland through fair means and foul. He offered to pay commission to Cleveland for sending his vessels off more quickly, but favored trying to find a way to restrict the number of vessels that Cleveland could have the opportunity to trade with either by obtaining exclusive trading rights with him or by undermining Cleveland’s reputation in Liverpool through gossip about Cleveland’s sharp practices, then telling Cleveland that “Fisher declared he would send no more goods to you,” perhaps in an effort to deter Cleveland from trading with them. This objective of restricting Cleveland’s trading opportunities was at the core of Bostock’s problem in his relationship with Cleveland. As Herbert Klein has argued, it is necessary to replace the paradigm of European merchants exploiting naïve Africans for a model that provides agency to African merchants selling slaves into the Atlantic trade.

The resident merchants were able to keep European traders on the littoral and maintain a power balance, since they controlled the flow of slaves off the
coast. However, Bostock’s relationship with Cleveland shows a deeper slant in favor of Cleveland. Bostock was trying to trade one to one, whereas Cleveland was able to trade with many traders, not only English but also French. He did not rely on Bostock and indeed appears to have had his choice of trading opportunities; a fact acknowledged by Bostock when he wrote to Cleveland that he heard that “your coast was overstock’d with ships.” It would only have been through the creation of a one to one business relationship that Bostock might have achieved an advantage, and he does not appear to have been able to fix Cleveland into that position despite his best efforts.

In the manner of their trade Cleveland put Bostock into an even more dependent position by not supplying all the slaves due to Bostock’s ships. Bostock’s vessels advanced trade goods to Cleveland and others for future delivery of slaves, which was the means by which the supply of slaves from the interior was kept flowing. British traders relied upon local merchants to organize the assembly of the slaves at the coast. Goods were given in advance of the delivery of the slaves to the vessels in order to facilitate their purchase by African traders. Lovejoy and Richardson’s analysis of this process applies to Old Calabar, but it is almost certain that Bostock was using the same mechanism to accumulate the slaves for his vessels. While he does not refer to advancing goods directly prior to the exchange, his use of the term “barter” implies advancing trade goods; he wrote to Fyer stating “You say that You have bartered your Cargo to be paid in October, I hope the Gentleman that has took it from you will be punctual.” However, Bostock found that the full value of the trade goods advanced were not realized in the delivery of the number of slaves that were promised.

The debts seem to have built up slowly at first. The first mention that Bostock made of money owed on goods left in Africa from the Jemmy and Bess is dated 4 May 1789. It is not clear how much was owed, as Bostock stated that he attached the balances but these were not copied into the letterbooks. Bostock clearly believed that his money troubles at this time stemmed from “having such a Heavy sum of money” tied up with Cleveland. Whether this perception was entirely correct is a matter for debate. Bostock does not show any understanding that by accepting post-dated bills of exchange from the West Indies he was supplying short term credit to the planters in the Americas, but then, from his perspective, the key difference between the advance of credit to America and Africa was that the former was secured by guarantees. The latter relied upon trust both in the individual African traders and their power to honor the agreements made.

Cleveland does not seem to have provided the full value of the trade goods that had been supplied by the time Bostock’s ships left the Banana Islands, however. From 1786 his indebtedness continued to accumulate, which escalated suddenly with the stranding of the Kite in 1789. The insurance
claim that Bostock made centered on the 92 slaves that were on-board the vessel around the time it sank. Bostock wanted compensation for what were called “wreck slaves.” The details of the claim are scattered through Bostock’s letters to Cleveland, but it appears that instead of being sold at public auction as wreck slaves for the benefit of the underwriters, the slaves had been transferred onto another of Bostock’s vessels, the Little Ben, apparently on Cleveland’s instructions. The underwriters argued that the claim for the slaves was invalid as they were on-board the Little Ben at the time of the stranding and so did not belong to the Kite. With rare frankness Bostock told Cleveland that the business was “badly managed” and held that Cleveland owed him for the 92 slaves. Although it is not clear why Bostock held this debt against Cleveland, the restrictions of the Dolben Act of 1788 held that the slaves were now part of the Little Ben’s cargo allowance. The slaves had been paid for out of the Kite’s wares, leaving the value of the goods advanced from the Little Ben before the stranding of the Kite still owing.

Bostock made frequent demands for the balance to be paid and tried to collect the debts via his captains, although his communications with Cleveland continued to be cordial. In this period he sent Cleveland’s son a silver corral, and wrote obsequiously that he hoped “I have not offended you [and] it hurts me much not to have a few lines from you.” In July 1788 he changed his instructions to his captains and told them not to leave any spare cargo with Cleveland, ordering them to leave anything on the coast by 1790. This erosion of trust seems to have largely occurred through the increasing indebtedness of Cleveland that Bostock had not intended to allow. By the time of Cleveland’s death in 1792 he owed Bostock £1,237. By comparison the value of the trade goods on-board Bostock’s vessel the Kite was £1,592, so that the level of his indebtedness was relatively substantial.

Bostock does not seem to have protected his advances to Cleveland with anything other than trust. His inability to collect the outstanding debts reveals the weakness of Bostock’s organization of his trade. While Ouidah had a strong central authority through the Dahomey kings and their local officials to whom European traders could appeal for redress against African debtors, as did Calabar through the Ekpe society, on the upper Guinea coast there seemed to be no central authority to which Bostock could turn to for help. As Bruce Mouser has noted, secret societies exercised political control there, particularly Poro, but were stronger in some areas than in others. Bostock did not write to other Africans to assist in collecting his debts which suggests that either no authority existed in that area of the upper Guinea coast, that he did not know of its existence or that he had no African contacts who could help him. His failure to recoup his debts indicates that there was no effective authority that he, as a European, could utilize. Consequently Bostock was powerless to impose his will on Cleveland. Moreover, as a middleman,
Cleveland was probably subject to pressures and local politics that could have acted as obstacles to him fulfilling his undertakings to Bostock. His position had been achieved through a violent coup against the local chief in 1785, and it is possible he had not consolidated the power base necessary to enforce the delivery of slaves from the interior. Bostock may actually have been trading with a man who was as helpless to enforce the payment of debts as he was, in an area where the organization of the slave trade and mechanisms for debt management were fragmented.

In 1787 Bostock instructed Captain Peter Rome “not to trust any goods to the natives there [Cape Mount] … for trusting of goods there has been the over setting of many voyages as when you trust them you never see them again,” which is paradoxical considering his apparent trust in Cleveland up to 1790 along with his continuous trading with him up to the latter’s death, despite the evidence that Cleveland was at best unreliable in honoring his debts. There is a tension between Bostock’s sweeping assessment of mistrust in African business culture and his confidence in Cleveland. This tension can be resolved if it is accepted that while Bostock doubted Africans in general, his faith in Cleveland arose from Cleveland’s position as a Eurafrican. It may be that Bostock relied on Cleveland because he perceived him to be more European in culture than African. If indeed Cleveland was the James Cleveland who was educated in Liverpool in the early 1780s, this would have confirmed Bostock’s perception that Cleveland possessed European notions of honor and scruples and so could be trusted to make good on his debts. Moreover, Cleveland’s mulatto status could also explain why he may have been less powerful than Bostock perceived. It is possible that he was mistrusted by local African traders as an acculturated European, and consequently was not given any quarter by them, nor access to the power structures (secret or other) that would have enabled him to force interior traders to supply the slaves he had used Bostock’s goods to purchase.

Bostock attempted to break his reliance upon Cleveland by widening his contact network on the upper Guinea coast. It is worth noting in relation to the previous point that this expansion was wholly with European traders residing there. Charles Wilkinson, a Liverpool resident, went to Rio Pongo in 1789 to trade. Bostock reported that he had a good character reference for Wilkinson and permitted Williams to trade with him. By January 1790 it was apparent that Wilkinson, like Cleveland, was not converting the trade goods advanced into slaves and he owed Bostock an unspecified though apparently substantial amount. Announcing that Mrs Bostock had given birth to a daughter, Bostock sourly informed Fryer that “I had rather been presented with Mr Wilkinsons debt.”

A similar picture emerges from his trade with Richard Horrocks at Îles de Los – further trade goods were not converted into slaves in time for Bostock’s vessels sailing. Within four months of Bostock’s first letter to
Horrocks, he was writing to him to ask for the outstanding balance to be paid. A year later Bostock still appeared to be owed the money. Again, both Horrocks and Wilkinson are indicative of the weakness of the organization of the slave trade on the upper Guinea coast. Like Cleveland, they may not have had the power to enforce the collection of slaves within the region, and were effectively as powerless as Bostock.

The alternative to the cycle of indebtedness was for Bostock to attempt to break into other African slave markets. In March 1789, he sent the first of four vessels to the Bight of Biafra. Liverpool merchants dominated the trade there from 1785, and it was perhaps from the internal Liverpool information network that Bostock gained the idea to venture there. However, Bostock appears to have had little idea on how to direct his captains when they were there as he confined their written directions to the process of selling the slaves in the Americas. Only once did he indicate that he had provided verbal direction for slave purchases in the Bight of Biafra, but as this related to the condition of the slaves it is possible that he was relying upon the captains’ previous experience there to acquire the slaves as he himself had none, beyond possible anecdotal information from his interaction with other slave traders and captains. Bostock does not appear to have established any correspondents among the slave suppliers in the Bight of Biafra, but also does not appear to have acquired any new debtors, which suggests that the organization of the slave trade there was different than on the upper Guinea coast for collecting the slaves due. The lack of new correspondents underlines the personal relationships that were needed to trade along the upper Guinea coast.

Moreover, immediately after Doyle returned from Bostock’s first venture to the Bight of Biafra, Bostock suggested taking pawns as collateral against advanced trade goods on the upper Guinea coast. It is likely that he got this idea from trading at Calabar, as this was an established mechanism for Liverpool slave traders there for ensuring the delivery of slaves when trade goods had been advanced and where trust and amity was an insufficient guarantee. Bostock only mentioned taking pawns that one time, and it is not clear whether any were taken, although it would have been a mechanism with which he could have guaranteed his investment.

Bostock was concerned with the possibility of slave resistance and instructed one captain to “be continually watchfull … to guard against an Insurrection.” Apparently there was an incident that prompted this warning; Bostock had written to Fryer seven months earlier that “the slaves destroy’d the whole of the papers,” which prevented him from sending reports. The reference is likely to a slave insurrection on the unnamed vessel carrying the letters. The presence of manacles and locks in the Kite’s inventory, along with the large crews that were redundant upon reaching the
Americas shows that, in common with other slave traders, Bostock implemented security measures to protect against slave resistance.

Another threat to Bostock was the danger of crew insurrection. When he heard that Captain Williams was mortally ill in late 1789, Bostock acted with alacrity to recruit a replacement. Within four weeks he had hired Samuel Gamble, who met the criteria in the Dolben Act for the appointment of captains and dispatched him to the coast. Bostock had been informed by the ship’s surgeon that the crew had taken advantage of Williams’s illness to raid the ship’s cargo, and therefore his instructions to Gamble included taking an inventory of the remaining goods and settling the accounts with the crew. He directed the surgeon to put the long boats on shore, possibly to prevent the crew from running away in them, while waxing loquacious about the influence of alcohol in ruining a good crew. Even though this fear of crew insurrection was not confined to the upper Guinea coast, Emma Christopher has demonstrated that in areas where there was a higher incidence of slave militancy, there were above average incidences of crew insurrection. It may be that Bostock’s rapid and active reaction to Williams’s death reflected this situation.

Bostock’s letter books provide rich evidence of his experience of trading with James and William Cleveland at the Banana Islands. The relationship was characterized by an inequality of bargaining power and increasing debt. How typical this was for other slave traders on the upper Guinea coast during this period is almost impossible to state with any confidence, since comparable sources are so far elusive. However, Robert Bostock does not appear to have seen his situation as unusual, and it may be that through this qualitative analysis of the power balance between a slave purchaser and slave suppliers, it is possible to see that it was the African traders who held the balance of power since they had the option to trade with many, whereas Europeans such as Bostock had the option to trade with only a few. Being locked into the slave trade at the Banana Islands through the extension of credit, Bostock was never able to break out of the area completely, right up to the time of his death in 1793.

Table 4.1 Slave Voyages of Robert Bostock

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Voyage Database #</th>
<th>Date Sailed</th>
<th>Bostock Status</th>
<th>Slaves on board</th>
<th>Destination (Voyage Database)</th>
<th>Destination (Letterbooks)</th>
<th>Letterbook Source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Little Ben</td>
<td>91581</td>
<td>30/08/1769</td>
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<td>91582</td>
<td>14/08/1770</td>
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<td>91783</td>
<td>17/07/1771</td>
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<td>Townside</td>
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<td>Ship Name</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>Burrows</td>
<td>91972</td>
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<td>Bonny, Bight of Biafra</td>
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<td>Matty &amp; Betty</td>
<td>92591</td>
<td>Owner</td>
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<td>Captured by French after Slaves embarked, unspecified location</td>
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<td>Little Ben</td>
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<td>Bud</td>
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<td>80587</td>
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<td>Bud</td>
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<td>81728</td>
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<td>Jemmy</td>
<td>82002</td>
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<td>03/04/1786</td>
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<td>161</td>
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<td>82003</td>
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<td>170</td>
<td>Sierra Leone estuary</td>
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LivRO, 387 MD54, Letter of Instruction to Captain Walker, April 1786
LivRO, 387 MD54, Bostock to Cleveland, 15 May 1786
LivRO, 387 MD54, Bostock to Messrs […] & Frasier, 8 July 1786
LivRO, 387 MD54, Bostock to Captain Rome, July 1787; Bostock to Willock,
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<td>Kite</td>
<td>82173</td>
<td>23/06/1788</td>
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<td>Bess</td>
<td>80500</td>
<td>04/03/1889</td>
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<td>Iles de Los, New Calabar, Bonny</td>
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<td>80501</td>
<td>19/07/1790</td>
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<td>229</td>
<td>Gambia</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
<td>Rio Pongo; Banana Islands; Iles de Los</td>
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Mount: 21 September 1788
LivRO, 387 MD54, Bostock to Captain Rome [Undated May 1787]
LivRO, 387 MD54, Bostock to […], Undated [July 1788]
LivRO, 387 MD54, Bostock to Captain Bowers, 19 June 1788
LivRO, 387 MD54, Bostock to Jas Baillie, 25 September 1788; Bostock to Thos Daniel & Son, 28 September 1788
LivRO, 387 MD55, Bostock to James Cleveland, 4 May 1789; Bostock to Richard Horrocks 19 October 1789
LivRO, 387 MD55, Bostock to Griffith & Applethwaite, 9 May 1789; Bostock to Fryer, May 1790
LivRO, 387 MD 55, Bostock to Fryer, January 1790; Bostock to Captain Fryer, 17 March 1790
LivRO, 387 MD 55, Bostock to Munro McDowall & Co, 19 August 1790
LivRO, 387 MD55, Bostock to Wm Cleveland, 14 October 1791; Bostock to Horrocks, 14 October 1791; Bostock to Charles Wilkinson, 14 October 1791.  

82
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Bess</th>
<th>80502</th>
<th>14/10/1791</th>
<th>Sole Owner</th>
<th>240</th>
<th>Banana Islands, Windward Coast unspecified</th>
<th>Rio Pongo; Banana Islands; Îles de Los</th>
<th>LivRO, 387 MD55, Bostock to Wm Cleveland, 14 October 1791; Bostock to Horrocks, 14 October 1791; Bostock to Charles Wilkinson, 14 October 1791.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jemmy</td>
<td>82006</td>
<td>12/01/1792</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>Old Calabar; New Calabar</td>
<td>St. Nicholas, Cape Verde Islands; New Calabar</td>
<td>LivRO, 387 MD55, Bostock to Thos Gudgen &amp; Co, 10 April 1792</td>
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<td>Sole Owner</td>
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<td>109</td>
<td>New Calabar</td>
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NOTES

8. Chester Record Office, Tarvin Parish Registers (St Andrews), P9/1/3.
10. Eltis et al., *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. 
11 Behrendt, “Captains in the British Slave Trade from 1785 to 1807,” 112-14.
13 Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Voyage #91581.
15 LivRO, Gore’s Liverpool Directory 1774 & 1790.
16 Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.
17 Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.
18 Jane Longmore, “‘Cemented by the Blood of a Negro?’ The Impact of the Slave Trade on Eighteenth-Century Liverpool,” in Richardson, Schwarz and Tibbles, Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery, 238.
19 Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.
20 Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Voyage #82274. Coincidentally this vessel was also named Little Ben.
21 Vessel #91581 (Little Ben), 91801 (Townside), #91582 (Little Ben), and #91972 (Burrowes) are listed in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database as principally trading with the Windward Coast. Vessel #80587 (Bloom) is listed as trading “Other Africa,” but the vessel’s accounts show that the slaves were drawn from the Windward Coast (LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54 16). Likewise Bostock’s letterbook’s testify that the Jemmy (82002) traded on the upper Guinea coast, (LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54 14-15, Bostock to Captain Walker, 31 March 1786). Vessel #92478 (Little Ben) has yet to be identified.
22 Eltis et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.
23 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Robert Bostock to Robinson Heywood, 24 November 1789; Bostock to Sergant Chambers, 2 December 1789; Bostock to Moses Formosa, 12 December 1789; Bostock to Ackers and Coalson, Robinson and Heywood, Richard Powell and Samuel and Thomas Taylor, 29 August 1790; Bostock to Sargent Chambers, 30 August 1790; Bostock to Phillips and Co., 31 August 1790; Bostock to Thomas Gudgeon, 31 October 1791.
24 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Robinson Heywood, 24 November 1789.
25 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Sergant Chambers, 30 August 1790.
27 Suzanne Schwarz, “Commerce, Civilization and Christianity: The Development of the Sierra Leone Company,” in Richardson, Schwarz and Tibbles, Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery, 262-63.
28 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54, ff. 22-27.
30 See for example Bostock’s orders to Robinson Heywood Letterbook, 387 MD55, ff. 54, 100-1, 141, 142; Richard Powel and Co., ff. 101, 138; Beaver, ff. 139, 142; Ackers & Wilson, f. 150; Taylor and Worthington, ff. 142, 143.
31 Schole’s Manchester and Salford Directory 1794 (http://www.historicaldirectories.org/) lists Robinson Heywood, 111; Richard Powell and Co.,105; Beaver, 13; Ackers
and Wilson, 1; and Taylor and Worthington, 130, as either Manufacturers of African goods, or Cloth Manufacturer.

33 Kriger, *Cloth in West African History*, 33-34.
34 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Robinson Heywood, 6 December 1789.
35 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Williams, 30 August 1789.
36 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Robinson Heywood, 24 November 1789.
37 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54, ff. 21 & 30-32; Letterbook, 387 MD55, ff. 2, 36, 45, 64, 75, 149, 152 & 167.
38 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54, Bostock to Peter Rome, May 1787. See also Bostock to Stephen Bowers, 19 June 1788; LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55 Bostock to James Fryer, un dated [January, 1790].
39 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54, Bostock to James Cleveland, 10 October 1788; LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 9 June 1790. For “arranges” that appear to have been beads used in the African trade, see Thomas Mortimer, *A General Commercial Dictionary* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1819).
42 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, 13 November 1789.
43 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, 9 June 1790.
44 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, 13 November 1789.
46 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to James Cleveland, 4 May 1789.
47 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, 13 December 1790.
48 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, 6 May 1790.
49 Merseyside Maritime Museum, D/EARLE/2/2, Earle Papers, Letterbook of William Earle, 1760-1761,
54 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 4 May 1789.
56 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54, Bostock to Cleveland, 19 June 1788.
58 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 10 August 1789.
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

59 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54, Bostock to Cleveland, 10 October 1788.
60 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Munro & Co., Barbados, [Undated, February/ March 1791].
61 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Gudgeon & Co., 22 May 1792.
62 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Doyle, 4 May 1789; Bostock to Fryer, 6 May 1790; Bostock to Flint, 13 December 1790.
63 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 10 August 1789.
64 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 4 May 1789; Bostock to Cleveland, 13 November 1789.
65 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 10 August 1789.
66 Klein, Atlantic Slave Trade, 98.
68 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Munro McDowall & Co, 1 May 1790; Bostock to Captain Fryer, 27 September 1790.
69 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 6 September 1790.
70 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, 6 September 1790.
71 Lovejoy and Richardson, “Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History,” 334, 339-41.
72 Lovejoy and Richardson, “Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History,” 334, 339-41.
73 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, 6 September 1790.
74 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 4 May 1789.
75 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Wilkinson, 5 September 1790.
77 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 13 November 1789; Bostock to Cleveland, 6 May 1790.
79 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, 9 June 1790.
80 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 20 January 1790.
81 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Cleveland, 6 May 1790.
82 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Williams, 4 July 1789.
83 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, 6 September 1790.
84 LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to William Cleveland, 16 August 1791.
86 Lovejoy and Richardson, “Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History,” 347-49.
89 Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 10.
LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD54, Bostock to Peter Rome, July 1787.


I am grateful for David Richardson’s observations on this issue.

LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Wilkinson, 4 May 1789; Mouser, “Trade, Coasters and Conflict in the Rio Pongo,” 52.

Mouser, “Trade, Coasters and Conflict in the Rio Pongo,” 52.

LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Williams, 10 August 1789.


LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, 25 July 1790.

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LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Horrocks, 14 October 1791.

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LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Flint, 11 November 1790.

Lovejoy and Richardson, “Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History,” 354.

LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, [Undated January 1790?].


LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, [Undated January 1790].

LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Fryer, 31 May 1789.

The National Archives, Kew. Muster Rolls of the Port of Liverpool, 1773-1800, BT98/34-60.


This may be the Samuel Gamble who commanded the Sandown, See Bruce L. Mouser, ed., A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica: The Log of the Sandown 1793-1794 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

Behrendt, “Captains in the British Slave Trade from 1785 to 1807,” 94-96.

LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Gamble, 16 November 1789; Bostock to Bushby, 16 November 1789.

LivRO, Letterbook, 387 MD55, Bostock to Bushby, 23 October 1789.

Chapter 5. The Dirty Business of Panyarring and Palaver: Slave Trading on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Eighteenth Century

Sean Kelley

Twenty men led by two “Portuguese Negroes” fell upon the snow Jolly Batchelor while it rode at anchor in Fourah Bay, Sierra Leone in 1742. They seized the seventy-five slaves and killed the master.¹ In 1726, near the Sherbro River, an African Company sloop used its guns to bombard some one hundred soldiers commanded by the King of Sherbro. Eleven died.² In 1751 at Sherbro, forces loyal to an Anglo-African trader cut off – ambushed and plundered – a French snow. The captors put six crew members to death and seized the slaves. Then, two days later, the captors resold some of the slaves to nearby English ships, and the following day the captain was ransomed and redeemed. Two years afterward, while on a return voyage, the same captain attacked a shallop belonging to his onetime captor, killing one of “his people,” and confiscating five slaves, seven hundredweight of ivory, and a small boat.³

Incidents like these, along with uncountable individual kidnappings and assaults, prompted veteran slaver John Newton to summarize the trade at Sierra Leone and the so-called “Windward Coast” as “a warlike peace,” adding almost poetically, “We trade under arms; and they are furnished with long knives.”⁴ That violence was integral to slavery at the point of enslavement and on the plantation is a truism; but amid the columns of numbers and escalating bar graphs representing eighteenth-century slave exports from Africa, it is easy to overlook the constant mayhem that attended coastal exchange. Reports of the latest bloodshed circulated among ship captains almost as rapidly as one of Sierra Leone’s famous tornadoes, to the
point where they became almost mundane. John Newton told the House of Commons that rumors of African and European “depredations” – some accurate and some not – were so commonplace among ships’ crews that they were referred to as “the news of the day.” Although this sort of violence often seemed random and senseless, it was actually quite logical in its own way. And though it might be expected to hinder the trade in captives, in many respects it actually facilitated the trade, as Africans, Euro-Africans, and Europeans devised a functional common language of justice, punishment, and retaliation.

To be certain, some of the violence was simple resistance to enslavement, if not always to slavery as an institution. Perhaps the most common sort was shipboard revolt. Vessels departing upper Guinea were especially prone to rebellion. Accounting for only 9 percent of all slaving voyages, it was nevertheless responsible for 40 percent of all revolts for which the location can be determined. Other modes of resistance included flight, marronage, and suicide, largely unquantifiable. As Sylviane Diouf summarized in a recent anthology on African resistance to the slave trade, “If nothing else, the need for shackles, guns, ropes, chains, iron balls, whips, and cannons… eloquently tells a story of opposition from hinterland to the high seas.” Similarly, in an examination of the Gold Coast, Raymond Kea has characterized the high incidence of pillage along the routes linking the hinterland with the coast as social banditry in response to the rise of the abirempom mercantile elite in the sixteenth century, a conclusion that will certainly not be contested here. Yet much if not most of the violence was not resistance on the part of the enslaved or social banditry, but rather grew out of disputes between European and African traders. To be certain, the boundary between slave resistance and trader conflicts, or for that matter, social banditry, can be difficult to determine, and it is quite possible that they fed one another. Still, whether as a result of miscommunication or malfeasance, merchants, traders, and mariners clashed often, setting off cycles of retaliatory violence. This latter sort of violence is the subject of this essay. Actual resistance to enslavement was endemic throughout West Africa, but disputes between traders can hardly be considered in the same category.

Clashes between European and African traders were of a dual and contradictory character. One the one hand, they represented, in David Eltis’s words, “market breakdowns,” or instances in which the normally (or perhaps it is better to say “normatively”) smooth-running slave-trading system collapsed. Like any economic dislocation, they could, to the extent that the clashes were more prevalent in some places than in others, lead to disruptions in supply and regional cost differentials. But there was more to violence than a breakdown in market relations. As Eltis points out, violence between Europeans and Africans often signaled closeness as much as it did alienation. After all, some level of communication and comity is necessary in the first
place in order to have misunderstandings and breakdowns. “Both sides had to take into account the wishes of the other,” writes Eltis, “but there were substantial cultural misapprehensions between Africans and Europeans.” This constant tension between understanding and misapprehension is the very stuff of cross-cultural interaction, whether as a process of “creolization,” as Ira Berlin has suggested, or what North American historian Richard White has termed a “middle ground.” Both models capture the essence of coastal interaction: the development of new languages; the emergence of bi-lingual cultural and economic brokers; and the inevitable miscommunications, or creative misunderstandings, which spawned both violent and non-violent efforts to restore lost equilibrium.9

Compared with other parts of the continent, upper Guinea was a third-tier slave exporting region at best, lagging far behind such areas as the Kongo-Angola region and the Bight of Benin. Up to the eighteenth century, the stretch of coastline between Rio Nuñez and the Assini River averaged a few hundred captive exports per year, with shipments of ivory, camwood, gold, and foodstuffs exceeding the trade in human beings in monetary value.10 Then, at the start of the eighteenth century, and especially with the commencement of jihad in Fuuta Jalon in 1726, the number of captives increased to over 1,300 per year. Slave exports surged once more after mid century, the result of several factors: the inauguration of a more violent phase of jihad in the Fuuta Jalon; the solidification of trans-Atlantic mercantile networks, particularly those centering on British ports, especially Liverpool; and increased demand for plantation labor in the New World colonies.

From 1751 to 1800, average exports from the two regions topped 8,000 captives per year, despite the interruptions of the Seven Years’ War, the American Revolution, and the Wars of the French Revolution. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 41 percent of the total enslaved Africans were shipped from ports between Rio Nuñez and Cape Mount, with the remainder embarking from points between Cape Mount and the Assini. A contemporary estimate of the trade for the year 1768 provides a more detailed breakdown (See Table 5.1), reflecting the increased trade to the north and south of Sierra Leone, as well as at the recently revived Bunc Island. The slave trade from these areas was largely a British one; in fact, it was largely a Liverpool trade. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, nearly two thirds of the post-1750 captives embarked on British vessels, with France accounting for less than 10 percent and North America for about 8 percent. Dutch traders accounted for less than 1 percent of the slaves taken from the area immediately north of Cape Mount, but for about 27 percent of those taken from points south.11
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

Table 5.1 Captive Embarkations between Cacheu and Cape Palmas, 1768

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Britain</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>N. America</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Cacheu and Sierra Leone</td>
<td>3700</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
<td>4200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone/Bunce Island</td>
<td>4200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Sierra Leone and Gallinas</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Gallinas and Cape Mount</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>800</td>
<td></td>
<td>2300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Cape Mount and Cape Palmas</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>6500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>14900</strong></td>
<td><strong>1000</strong></td>
<td><strong>3300</strong></td>
<td><strong>21700</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Eg. 1162A, 266, British Library.

Europeans and Africans found ample opportunity for intercultural contact along this coast, despite the existence of the entrepots at Bunc Island, Îles de Los, and Banana Islands, which had the tendency to limit contact. Even so, to an extent greater than in most coastal areas, the slave trade here involved a sizable number of lesser European and Eurafrican dealers. These small-scale merchants passed easily into an indigenous pre-existing landlord-stranger framework that governed relations between traders and host societies. Under its terms, the former paid for the privilege of conducting business while the latter provided protection from outside threats. By the mid eighteenth century, a new culture flourished with its own language, rooted in Luso-African precedent, but now with a largely English veneer. There were fewer resident traders to the south of Sherbro, but direct negotiations between ship captains and African merchants were more common here and were carried out in the same hybridized framework as elsewhere. Mariners who frequented this coast noted the universal invitation to trade in the form of a column of smoke rising from the shore. In this environment, a dualistic “middle ground” flourished in which market antagonisms, violence, and retaliation were resolved into a shared system of conflict resolution that had its origins in Africa but was also shaped by European input.12

Tension among Europeans, Africans, and Eurafricans existed everywhere the slave trade was carried out. Although it is impossible to quantify precisely, upper Guinea seems to have experienced higher rates of African-European violence than elsewhere. Contemporaries certainly believed it to be more violent, especially south of Cape Mount. William Smith described kidnapping here by vessels bound for the Gold Coast as a “Custom too often used.” Another traveler wrote of the “Panyarrs [kidnappings] and Murders so frequently between them [local residents] and us,” while a third warned that
vessels venturing up the Northern Rivers were “frequently cut off by the natives on their return.” The same fears can be found in an essay from the 1790s dispensing advice to ivory traders. “I would recommend to make it a general rule always to be upon your guard among all natives whether you know them to be good or bad,” counseled a veteran of the trade. Specifically, this meant ordering the watch to call out “all is well” every half hour while at anchor; erecting a barricade athwart the vessel for defensive purposes; forbidding “natives” to carry arms onboard; manning the swivel guns at all times; and keeping all but a few principal traders off the quarter deck (the primary site of trade negotiations).

The traders’ fears were well placed. Violence was probably more common in upper Guinea than elsewhere for a combination of reasons. Much of the region was politically decentralized, in contrast to many other regions where a strong state helped deter kidnappings and other misdeeds on the part of Europeans. The numerous smaller resident traders also meant that ship captains could afford to cheat, attack, or otherwise antagonize African suppliers, since there was always a competing supplier nearby. Before the mid-century rise in slaving, the large number of interlopers and separate traders operating on this coast had less to lose in the event of violent conflict than the Royal African Company, which depended entirely on maintaining good relationships with their African landlords. Once the Company was dissolved, there was even less moderating influence, strictures against abducting and attacking Africans notwithstanding. Finally, ship captains who stopped for provisions – a very common practice for vessels headed to the Gold Coast and points leeward – probably felt freer to forgo customs payments to African political leaders and engage in small-scale opportunistic kidnapping. John Newton testified that traders might commit “depredations or taking off Slaves by force,” if the captain were on his final voyage and no longer dependent on good will and solid relationships with people shore side. As Newton implies, shipmasters who expected to return probably restrained themselves from abductions, even when the opportunity presented itself, knowing that they would lose a future trading partner.

Political decentralization also made it hard to restrain African traders who were inclined to ratchet up tensions. In the absence of a strong state, the networks of political, economic, and religious clientage that shaped life on the upper Guinea coast – the Mane at Cape Mount, the Muslim Juula traders, the Poro society – meant that attacks on one seemingly isolated individual could wind up involving a chain of patrons and allies. This principle applied to Europeans as well, who as “strangers” on the coast depended on their landlords for protection. One European resident trader noted that he and his companions survived only by relying on the “the great men of the country who defends in case of quarrels or any disturbance.”
Perhaps the most common cause of violence was kidnapping, referred to throughout coastal West Africa as “panyarring.” Though it often seemed to be a pure act of brutality in the service of profit, and though it was portrayed as simple kidnapping in the slave trade hearings held by the House of Commons, there was more to panyarring than the gain of a slave at no cost. The verb “to panyar” derived from the Portuguese “penhorar,” and referred to the seizure of goods or persons as security for debt, a sense it retained through the seventeenth century. For during these years, the commodities in play were mostly non-human: ivory, dye wood, and foodstuffs. Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson have placed particular emphasis on the links between panyarring and another African institution, pawnship, or the practice by which African merchants received trade goods on credit and left people, often family members, as security. Pawnship sought to circumvent the violence inherent in panyarring, but wound up spawning a great deal of misunderstanding and mayhem itself.17

The taking of pawns could cross over into panyarring in any number of ways. Conventions on precisely how long a ship captain had to give a trader to redeem pawns were vague. According to one trader, ship captains were expected to give at least three to four weeks’ notice before departing with any pawns.18 Some captains followed this practice, while others did not. When African merchants received word that a ship with pawns was preparing to sail, they often negotiated a transfer of the pawns to another vessel, with slaves from the second vessel going in the place of the pawns on the first. Captains who hoped to maintain good relations for future trading would go along with the plan, but many others simply absconded. One captain who traded in the 1770s reported that “few of them [i.e. pawns are] ever retrieved.”19 It is impossible to say how many pawns wound up enslaved in this manner, but the number and proportion in a given cargo evidently fluctuated greatly. In 1771, Paul Cross, an English trader who then resided at Cape Mesurado, delivered thirty-four captives to the ship Little Will, fourteen of which were pawns. Shortly afterward however, he delivered twenty-three captives to the brig William, only one of which was a pawn, and in 1773 he delivered another thirty-five captives to an unnamed vessel, with only two pawns. Africans who lost pawns in this manner often regarded it as a form of illegitimate panyarring that demanded retaliation. Here was a prime locus of misunderstanding. For Africans, pawnship had strong articulations with kinship and insider status in general. Pawns could legitimately expect humane treatment, to say nothing of redemption. The abduction of a pawn could send reverberations through networks of kin and clients. British traders viewed pawnship in purely contractual terms, with the loss of a pawn analogous to a demurrage payment or a distress sale.20

Pawnship — and consequently panyarring — had an additional racial dimension, though in a fashion typical for the eighteenth century African
coast, it did not follow a simple black-white color line. Captains and metropolitan traders were generally reluctant to extend credit to Africans. On the other hand, Eurafricans, who were invariably considered “black,” often received significant advances. In 1724, the Bunce Island ledger listed the debts of “black” traders, virtually all of whom were Luso-African, at 4,823 bars. Of this, a single trader, José Lopez de Moura, owed 4,475 bars. Interestingly, the white traders listed actually owed less, only 739 bars all together. And this willingness to extend unsecured credit to Eurafricans apparently continued as the slave trade picked up. William Cleveland, who traded later in the century, received so many advances that when he stopped repaying, his creditors had no choice but to carry over his debt for years on end, lest they be forced to write off their investment and lose a valuable coastal contact. Less-trusted Africans, on the other hand, were more often required to provide security in the form of pawns, increasing their exposure to panyarring, the forfeiture of pawns, and hence to violent exchanges with Europeans.

Sometimes the interplay between credit and violence could be quite complicated, with multiple players joining the game, as Captain Richard Jenkins of the Sylvia found at Mano, north of Gallinas, in late 1751. Jenkins was well acquainted with the region’s culture of slave trade-related violence, having been “cut off” at Little Bassa some years before. The reason for the attack is unknown, but he lost his ship and several members of his crew and barely escaped with his own life. On the 1751 voyage, Jenkins struck a bargain with a dealer named Tom Bryan, probably an Anglo-African, advancing him goods on the understanding that Bryan would deliver sixteen captives to Jenkins in six weeks time. The Sylvia then departed to make more purchases, returning seven weeks later. Over several days, Jenkins saw a number of Bryan’s men lightering captives to vessels which had made their agreements after he had, but Bryan’s men never approached the Sylvia. Jenkins eventually sent his second mate ashore, who was promptly seized by Bryan’s men. Bryan informed the mate that he had “stopped him” in order to “prevent what we designed against him.” The mate protested that there was no “design,” but was told that another shipmaster had accused Jenkins of plotting against Bryan. The mate told Bryan that the story was fabricated “to palliate [the informant’s] own Actions who had stop’d one of the principal Traders in the place,” but to no avail. That evening, the mate managed to escape and return to the Sylvia. Bryan, meanwhile, maintained his embargo of the Sylvia while continuing to trade with other vessels.

After several more weeks of waiting, Jenkins’s crew “catch’d” Bryan’s son, and shortly after that seized a canoe with seven men. In response, Bryan sent Jenkins (now down the coast at the St. Paul River) seven captives. Jenkins responded that only two of the seven were “tolerable” and released the younger Bryan to carry the message, along with two hostages. At some
point Jenkins also seized two men from Little Bassa, where he had once been cut off. In the meantime, Bryan failed to respond to Jenkins’s message. Unwilling to carry the “unmerchantable” captives across the ocean, and perhaps hoping to salvage his reputation along the coast for future dealings, Jenkins deposited the seven remaining captives at Cape Coast Castle with instructions to have them returned when possible.24

Although we only have Jenkins’s version of the affair, and therefore may be missing crucial information, the incident offers a window into the connection between credit, violence, and retaliation. Both Jenkins and Bryan were fully conversant in the ways of trade and negotiation, each quite prepared to seize individuals as they felt necessary. So too was the unnamed captain who (in Jenkins’s version of events) planted the story about a “design” against Bryan. Jenkins’s decision to kidnap the two men from Little Bassa is perhaps the strangest episode, since they had no apparent connection to Bryan. He may have done so in retaliation for his earlier captivity there, but if so his decision to release the men and provide for their transport home is puzzling. Perhaps the men were “unmerchantable,” like the other captives he released, or perhaps he realized that his actions would have serious repercussions for his ability to trade there in the future, though whether the release of the men would actually help his cause is open to question.

Eventually, the connection between pawnship and panyarring became weaker, with panyarring becoming virtually synonymous with kidnapping. As late as 1728, the chief factor at Bunce Island could refer to boats and other goods as being “Panyared.”25 But by that time, with slaving surpassing other activities, panyarring had become increasingly associated with the seizure of human beings, in the process acquiring connotations of illicitness. John Atkins, who visited in the 1720s, captured the term in transition from seizure of goods to simple kidnapping when he wrote, “Panyarring, is a Term for Man-stealing along the whole Coast: Here it’s used also, for stealing any thing else.”26 By the late eighteenth century, panyarring usually referred to the illegitimate seizure of a person, with no special connection to credit and debt, in European usage if not among Africans. Panyarring and kidnapping figured prominently in the slave trade hearing conducted by Parliament in the 1790s, as abolitionists sought to establish it as a common path to enslavement.

Africans furthermore distinguished between panyarring done by African slave suppliers, what we might call slave-raiding, and the carrying off of Africans by European ship captains. An incident at Sierra Leone in 1772 highlights the distinction. When a Liverpool ship anchored in the bay to trade, the captain struck a deal with King Tom for the company of a woman during the length of his stay. When the ship departed with the woman still aboard, King Tom derided it as a “buchra, or white man’s panyarring.”27 Although the number of people who fell victim to this sort of kidnapping accounted for no more than a small fraction of the total number of captives
taken aboard European ships, it happened quite frequently. When Willem Bosman arrived at Cape Mesurado in 1700, he found the residents unwilling to board his ship. Two months earlier, two English vessels had come and carried off several people, “destroyed all their Canoa’s, [and] Plundered their Houses.” Ship captains also frequently abducted people who came aboard to negotiate trade, whether in slaves or other goods, hence the reluctance of many to venture onto the ships and the readiness of those who did to jump overboard at the slightest threat. One African merchant, afraid of being poisoned or drugged when offered a drink, required the captain to consume “a dram out of every one of the bottles, to the amount of 12,” saying that “it was usual for traders ... to make use of poison.” And some captains were indeed rash and unpredictable. One master, upset at finding no slaves for sale after having been lured down the coast by two traders, simply seized a merchant’s canoe man, declaring that “he would not be made a fool of.”

Panyarring begat retaliation. This might take the form of “cutting off” the ship or otherwise attacking the ship or a detachment of its crew, and either killing or panyarring them to gain leverage. Acts of panyarring frequently escalated, as powerful Africans felt the obligation to protect or avenge “their people.” John Atkins recounted that “if any of our Ships from Bristol or Liverpool play tricks and under pretence of Traffic seize and carry away such of them as come on board ... the Friends and Relations never fail with the first Opportunity to revenge it.” Atkins believed that Africans followed the principle of collective punishment based on race. “They [aggrieved Africans] never consider the Innocence of who comes next, but as Relations in Colour, Panyarr the Boat’s Crews who trust themselves foolishly on shore, and now and then by dissembling a Friendship, have come on board, surprized and murdered a whole Ship’s Company.” But by most accounts, Africans retaliated in much more discriminating ways. While at Sierra Leone in the 1750s, Nicholas Owen was seized in retaliation for depredations committed earlier by a Dutch vessel. “Upon our setting our selves on shoar,” he recorded, “we ware secur’d by the natives, put into irons, and hove down upon the ground in a barborous manner, striping [sic] us of all our cloaths, and in short made a prize of us.” Although Owen and his friends were relieved of trade goods worth four years’ pay, their lives were spared because they were not Dutch. Other reports suggested that Africans drew even finer distinctions, punishing English ships from specific ports while leaving others alone. John Newton saw Bristol and Liverpool vessels “materially injured in their trade and boats, in consequence of the conduct of some ships from the same ports, that had left the coast.” Put simply, in the violent exchanges that plagued the upper Guinea coast, collective punishment could be nation-specific, and even port-specific, in addition to race-specific. Rather than indicating cultural distance, retaliation as finely calibrated as this indicates a high degree of mutual knowledge on the part of traders and dealers.
Mariners were not the only Europeans who took part in these violent exchanges. Upper Guinea boasted hundreds of resident traders as well. Even a large installation like Bunce Island maintained a half-dozen or so smaller trading outposts up and down the coast. Because in most cases traders were dependent on the good will of their landlords and neighbors, they hoped to avoid the cycle of panyarring and retaliation. “I live in [a] country Surrounded With Mahomedians,” wrote Paul Cross, keenly aware of his own vulnerability. This realization did not prevent him from being seized by an Anglo-African trader for a dispute over payment for four slaves, though he was released when several other resident traders placed pressure on his captor. Even the owners of Bunce Island acknowledged that “We don’t depend entirely upon the strength of the place for the safety of our property, but chiefly upon a good understanding with the Natives[,] without which the strongest Fortification in Africa would be of very little Service.” Still, some resident traders did panyar. According to Polish botanist Anthony Pantaleo How, a “notorious kidnapper” by the name of Griffiths operated near Cape Lahou in the 1780s. Reportedly, a local ruler took revenge for Griffiths’s panyarring by capturing one of his ships, seizing the master, and then flogging him against a tree for four straight days.

Panyarring, “cutting off,” and other acts of violence became part of the middle ground on which Europeans and Africans met and conducted business. It would be an exaggeration to say that anybody actually perceived the violence as a mode of communication or conflict resolution. After all, when a crew member or one’s “people” suffered abduction or bodily harm, those who considered themselves responsible for their well-being generally responded in kind, sending a clear message that the precipitating act was regarded as unjust. At the same time, violence of this sort was not viewed by either side as random or senseless; on the contrary, it was common and predictable. Parties to the many disputes understood the potential consequences for their actions and drew on a largely standard menu of responses. In this sense we might say a shared middle ground of violence developed between Europeans and Africans, a cousin of the creole languages and trading customs that flourished in the same time period.

As further evidence of this, not all disputes degenerated into violence, and even the most violent disputes could be adjudicated, which was essential for the continuation of the trade. The question, in most cases, was whose rules and laws would be used to settle disputes. In theory, British sailors were subject to maritime law. Resident traders were subject to British law as well, under the authority of the Royal African Company. When the Company dissolved in 1750 and was replaced by the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, Article XXIX of the new charter was unequivocal on the subject of panyarring and other attacks, prohibiting “Fraud, force, or Violence, or by any other indirect practice whatsoever, to take on board, or carry away … or
commit, or suffer to be committed, any Violence on the Natives, to the Prejudice of the said Trade,” prescribing a fine of £100 for violators.\textsuperscript{37}

Private traders found it necessary to deal with questions of law and justice, however. Alexander Anderson, one of the proprietors of Bunce Island in 1789, was certain that English law applied at the fort. When some of the new Sierra Leone colonists stole some of his provisions, he apprehended them, tried them, found them guilty, and sold them as slaves to a French ship. When later questioned before Parliament on whether it was legal under British law to condemn free men to permanent chattel slavery, Anderson wavered, lest he inadvertently confess to a crime. Bunce Island and the slaves who lived there were “Under the British government,” he ventured, but since the owners paid rent to a Bullom landlord, they were “sometimes subject to the laws of the Kings and Princes of the Country,” which presumably allowed for enslavement and provided cover for his actions. Pressed again later on the question of whether “five freemen can be sold as Slaves,” Anderson responded that this had been done “under the law of necessity,” thus discovering a third legal tradition governing the slave trade.\textsuperscript{38} Anderson’s novel legal doctrine was self-serving to be sure, but in other circumstances “necessity” dictated flexibility and openness to West African methods of conflict resolution.

The institution through which disputes between Europeans and Africans were addressed was known in the region as “palaver.”\textsuperscript{39} Although the palaver was clearly of African origin and flourished outside of any European influence, the term itself derives from the Portuguese “palavra,” meaning “word,” and the variety that developed along the coast in the era of the slave trade was a prime example of middle ground hybridity. Today the term in general signifies prolixity or chatter. In Africa it has long signified a dispute or conflict, but at the same time, “to hold a palaver” meant to attempt to resolve a dispute. Europeans routinely compared it to the lawsuit, setting up yet another site of creative misunderstanding.

Palaver was so central an institution that many villages were centered on a structure known as a “palaver house.” John Atkins described one near Sestos as “large, and built something like our Lodges for Carts, open, 4 foot from the Ground; then a Stage to sit, rafted and well covered against Rain and Sunshine. Here they meet without distinction; King and Subject, smoaking from Morning to Night.”\textsuperscript{40} Though many disputes between Europeans and Africans were adjusted on board ship or elsewhere on shore, Europeans sometimes did visit village palaver houses to press grievances or negotiate deals. The houses were used for many other purposes, functioning as multi-purpose civic spaces.

Any number of things could trigger a palaver. As we have seen, pawnship, panyarring, and the various forms of retaliation generated many disagreements requiring a sit-down. Fraud on the part of Europeans, whether
in the form of false-bottomed and poorly packed barrels, watered spirits, defective guns, or debased specie, could also set off a palaver. Other causes included violations of trade etiquette, such as the failure to pay customs or reciprocate a gift, sexual indiscretions with local women, or even harsh words. And just as the actions of a client could reverberate through the network of patronage, obliging those higher up to engage in retaliatory violence, gromettas and one’s “people” could set off a palaver through their deeds. One Luso-African trader at Sierra Leone, who also was the head of a village, actually moved his entire settlement because “his people” kept clashing with gromettas employed by English traders.41

Several Europeans witnessed palavers among Africans, and all emphasized their highly formal and regular nature. Cases were heard by the local ruler and a group of male elders and were argued by “palaver talkers,” who began the proceedings with a salute. The palaver talkers then spoke at length, sometimes all day, with what one observer described as “such dignity of action, force, and energy of elocution, as would do honour to an English orator.”42 Contestants did not speak for themselves, and on at least some occasions the ruler did not hear the arguments directly. Rather, the elders heard the palaver talkers, and then summarized their cases to the ruler, along with a recommendation for a judgment.43 In most instances, they ordered that some form of restitution be paid. In more serious cases, such as murder and adultery, they ordered the guilty to undergo a trial by ordeal by drinking a poison known as the “red water.” Those who vomited it up were deemed not guilty, though they often remained ill for some time; those who died received their just punishment.44

Palavers took on a different character when Europeans were involved. Many palavers were in reality small disagreements that cropped up during trade negotiations and were settled face-to-face, outside the formality of the palaver house. Haggling over the price of trade goods or slaves was considered a form of palaver, and some nations had a reputation of being especially tough negotiators. “Among the Foulahs in particular, commercial transactions are carried on with extreme tardiness,” offered Joseph Corry, “a palaver is held over every thing they have for barter.”45 Viewing palavers as the equivalent of lawsuits, British traders often came away disappointed at not having received the justice they believed was theirs. “In their disputes with white men,” reported John Matthews, “they are not very rigid observers of justice; and ... if a white man should succeed in his suit ... they never adjudge any recompense to be made him on any occasion; and, right or wrong, he must pay all the expenses.” When Mathews asked them why this was so, his interlocutor responded, “White men get so much money; they cannot want their money.”46 Another trader cautioned his colleagues to “Beware of palavers” and advised that it was best to avoid going ashore altogether. “They can bring a palaver against you for looking only, perhaps you must pay a
quantity of goods to gain your liberty,” he said, warning that Africans might initiate a specious complaint as a pretext for holding a European for ransom.47

Nicolas Owen also lamented the need to submit to palaver, which he analogized as “black law.” Many of his palavers were apparently set off by his gromettas and wound up involving him as their patron. Like Mathews, Owen believed that many palavers were contrived to extort money or goods. “They’ll make a show of justice in order to draw liquer or goods from you if possible,” he whined, adding that “If they see you are poor they quite neglect you, otherwise if rich almost any crime may be bought off[.]”48 These complaints reveal the degree to which Europeans felt bound to participate in African justice. Owen and other Europeans would probably have avoided subjecting themselves to African-controlled conflict resolution if they could have, but their dependence on their suppliers’ goodwill and their vulnerability to any sort of selective embargo left them with little choice. This and the following perhaps help to explain violence.

The need to resort to African justice proved the undoing of Richard Hall, an Englishman who traded at Sherbro. One of the “people” of a nearby trader was condemned to drink the red water for an unspecified crime. Rather than submit to his ordeal, the man stole a boat from Hall, apparently without the latter’s knowledge, and escaped to his “frinds in the country.” In retaliation, the trader grabbed one of Hall’s gromettas. Seeking redress, Hall then went to the King of Sherbro, who told him that he should panyar one of the trader’s people. Hall then seized five of the trader’s people and brought them to the King to be “tryd by country law.” In the meantime, probably after intense politicking by the unnamed trader, the King switched sides and eventually brokered a resolution by which Hall received his man back in return for the five hostages he took. Because the other trader was considerably more influential and had rallied the community of resident traders to his side, Hall deemed it impossible to stay and wound up leaving Sierra Leone altogether.49

There are hints, too, of resident traders going beyond pragmatic acceptance of African justice to a deeper engagement with local culture. John Newton, a devout Christian, deplored the many resident traders who, “settling in Africa at the age of thirty or forty, have … been gradually assimilated to the tempers, customs, and ceremonies of the natives.” Some, he noted, even preferred Africa to England, having become “dupes to all the pretended charmes, necromancies, amulets, and divinations of the blinded negroes.”50 One of these “dupes” was Nicolas Owen. When Owen first witnessed a Muslim who was Mande using divination to identify a thief, he denounced the practice as the work of a “demon or evil spirit.” Later, after being robbed himself, he decided to engage the services of a Mande ritual expert to find the culprit. And on another occasion, when one of his own
people confessed to sorcery after having been found out by another divination ceremony, Owen’s skepticism gave way to belief, though he still considered it the work of the devil. “There’s a great many whites that thinks all these thing [sic] are false, but what a man sees and imploys his reason upon [sic] must have some grounds of truth,” he wrote, “Neither do I think it unlikely, since we have examples in all ages of the power of witchcraft among persons who dedicate themselves to that impious practice.” As Owen suggests, few Europeans fully embraced African ways of knowing, and even those who did tended to view them through the prism of their own upbringing. Yet that it was possible at all reveals the extent of cultural interpenetration, as well as the potential for “creative misunderstanding,” that accompanied violence, crime, and justice along the coast.

Africans also faced European justice, although as members of the landlord society it was rather uncommon. It appears Africans submitted to European justice only when circumstances dictated it. One of the more remarkable instances on record involves Caleb Godfrey, the captain of the Rhode Island sloop Hare, which slaved at Sierra Leone in 1754. The previous year, the London snow Race Horse, had been “cut off” by a force from the Bullom Shore, to the north of Sierra Leone River, resulting in the deaths of Captain William Canfield and five crew members. The reason for the attack is unknown, but very likely had to do with the usual conflicts. Although Godfrey had no apparent connection to the initial incident, he became involved when the European traders based at Quiaport (not far from Wonkafong), purchased the man they believed had ordered the attack and delivered him to Godfrey for punishment. An experienced slave trader and a man of violent tendencies, Godfrey delivered. Clapping the man in irons aboard the Hare, Godfrey announced that there would be a public execution two days hence. On the night before the execution, the prisoner perished by unknown means. Not one to betray his charge to “make an Example” of the man, Godfrey cut his head and hands off and displayed them aboard his vessel for “Several days.”

Why the Quiaport traders chose Godfrey for this duty is unclear. His familiarity with the idiom of violence probably played a role. His status as a sojourner, as opposed to a resident, may also have been a factor, being seen as insulation against further retaliation. His willingness to serve (it is tempting to say his “zeal”) was likely motivated by several things, not the least of which was a desire to terrorize the local population. Accustomed to a world in which black people were thoroughly subordinated to whites, he may have found the situation on the coast, where Africans enjoyed a great deal more power, to be threatening. He noted with obvious satisfaction that the gromettas in the area all approved of the execution of this “Great Rogue,” and they assured him that the act would deter future aggression. Another target audience for Godfrey’s terrible display may have been his own crew,
coming at a moment of particularly tense relations. He had already come to
to blows with several of his crew and had set a dog on one of them. This latest
gesture served notice that he would commit the most heinous acts in the
name of maintaining proper order and hierarchy.

But there is more to the incident than the obvious terroristic intent of its
authors. It represented another turn of the wheel in the ongoing game of
retaliation that structured the slave trade, with Godfrey demonstrating
convincingly that he knew how to operate in that environment. The incident
may also have borne some connection to local political conflicts that were
only partly connected to the slave trade. In the letter recounting the incident,
Godfrey noted specifically that the executed man was a Bullom, that is to say
he was of non-Mande background and almost certainly a non-Muslim. He
further noted that the Susu “Commend[ed]” his actions, which in turn
suggests that the original Bullom attack on the Grey Hound may have stemmed
from a dispute over local control of the slave trade. At stake would have been
not only the profit from selling captives, but other income in the form of
customs, payments for provisions, and wood and watering rights. That the
incident occurred in the northern rivers at a time of jihad raises the possibility
that there may have been a religious dimension as well, with non-Muslim
Bullom falling under pressure from Muslim Susu backed by Futa Jalon. If one
or more of these factors were in play, then rather than simply “mak[ing] an
Example” of the man, Godfrey was an unwitting accomplice to a local
political power play.53

Amid the escalating bar graphs and ever-thickening directional arrows
delineating the flow of Africans to the Americas, it is tempting to conceive of
the slave trade in purely economic terms. And indeed, that approach goes a
long way toward explaining the why and when of one of world history’s most
transformative and devastating events. The weakness of that approach, for all
of its explanatory power, is that it presents the slave trade as a rather neat
process of supply meeting demand, albeit at an almost incalculable human
cost. But the interface between buyers and sellers in the slave trade was
anything but neat. It involved not merely intercultural contact, with all its
attendant misunderstandings, but the creation of a space in which people of
differing backgrounds, economic situations, and motivations could conduct
their grisly business. Here, the boundary between the cultural and the
economic blurred.

Atlantic slavery was conceived in violence and conflict, and rarely, if ever,
did it transcend the strife that spawned it. But not all violence is senseless, and
sometimes it carries a great deal of meaning. In this case, the attacks,
panyarrings, cut-offs, and palavers were not extraneous to the Atlantic slave
trade; rather, they made up a middle ground where the dirty business of
buying and selling human beings was conducted. It was more than a
breakdown of the system. It was the system.
NOTES


4 John Newton, Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade (London: J. Buckland and J. Johnson, 1788), 24. The terms “Sierra Leone” and “Windward Coast” are both problematic. In the eighteenth century, “Sierra Leone” referred specifically to the bay and highlands near present-day Freetown, while “Windward Coast” was a broader designation that Europeans applied to the vast stretch of coastline between the Gold Coast and either Sierra Leone or Senegambia. Neither term would have meant much to the people who lived in those places. This essay will use geographically specific names wherever possible and apply the term “upper Guinea” to the larger region.


During the 1720s, before the abandonment of Bunce Island, ivory, camwood, and gold purchases were generally worth more than purchases of "sale slaves," or slaves intended for trans-Atlantic markets. However, if we include the value of "factory slaves," or those intended to remain in Africa to work for the Company, the total value of slave purchases was greater than the value of non-human commodities. See Sierralone [sic] Ledger, 1723-24, T70/654, 36-39; Sierralone Leger [sic], 1726, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), T70/655, 24-25, 66, 74, Records of the Royal African Company.


John Atkins, A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies, in His Majesty's Ships, the Swallow and Weymouth (London: Caesar Ward and Richard Chandler, 1735), 152; Smith, New Voyage, 102; A Treatise Upon the Trade from Great-Britain to Africa, Humbly Recommended to the Attention of the Government (London: 1772), 21.

"Mr. Parfitts Information respecting Trade between Sierra Leone & Cape Lopaz, including the Islands St. Thomas &c," British Library (hereafter BL), Add MS 12131, 86-96. Despite the title, Parfitt clearly addressed most of his remarks to the "Windward Coast" trade. My thanks to Kenneth Morgan for bringing this document to my attention.


Entry for 9 June 1724, Bence Island Ledger, 1723-1724, T70/363, RAC. Lopez later led a successful attack on Bunce Island, driving out British traders for over a decade.


Richard Jenkins to the President and Council at Cape Coast Castle, n.d. [ca. 1752], in TNA, CO388/45, fols.78-79. The volume contains three sets of page numbers. Jenkins’s letter appears in the second numbered set.

Jenkins to President and Council.

“Abstract of the most Material Occurrences in the District of Sierra-Leone [sic] from June 16th to October 25th, and the Minutes Continued from Thence to November 28th, 1728,” TNA, T70/1654 54-55.

Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 53.

Testimony of George Yonge, in Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, vol. 73, 206.

Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Knapton, D. Midwinter, 1705), 475.

Testimony of George Yonge, in Lambert, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, vol. 73, 206.


Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 151-52.


Paul Cross to unknown, n.d.; George Williams to Mr. Lewis, 11 November 1778; George Williams to Thomas Baggy, 7 November 1778, SCL, Paul Cross Papers.

Richard Oswald to the Board of Trade, 6 July 1752, TNA CO388/45, 78-80.


Donnan, *Documents*, vol. 2, 482.


Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 64.

Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 53-54.

John Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra Leone, on the Coast of Africa; Containing an Account of the Trade and Productions of the Country, and of the Civil and Religious Customs and Manners of the People* (London: B. White and Son, 1788), 79.

Joseph Corry, *Observations on the Windward Coast of Africa; the Character, Religion, Customs, &C. Of the Natives, with a System Upon Which They May Be Civilized, and a Knowledge Attained in the Interior of This Extraordinary Quarter of the Globe, and Upon
the Natural and Commercial Resources of the Country (London: G. and W. Nicol; James Aspen, 1807), 43.


45 Corry, *Observations upon the Windward Coast*, 59.

46 Matthews, *Voyage to the River Sierra Leone*, 80.

47 BL, Add MS 12131.


49 Ibid., 64-66.


52 Caleb Godfrey to William and Samuel Vernon, 16 October 1754, Samuel and William Vernon Correspondence, Slavery Collection, New York Historical Society. Godfrey did not name the attacked vessel and gave the name of the dead captain as “Cofeald,” but it seems clear he that meant Captain William Canfield of the *Race Horse*. See Eltis et al., *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, voyage #77634 and Martin and Spurrell, *Journal of a Slave Trader*, 87.

Chapter 6. Forgotten Colony in Africa: The British Province of Senegambia (1765-83):

Paul E. Lovejoy

The Province of Senegambia became the first British colony in Africa when established by an act of Parliament in 1765. Although the Province legally existed until it was disbanded in the Treaty of Paris in 1783, it was a colony in name only, and effective occupation of the Senegal valley only lasted until 1779. In some ways, the Province of Senegambia was a precursor to the Colony of Sierra Leone and hence is worth comparison with the later scheme for the settlement of Freetown as a “Province of Freedom” in 1787 and then its formal recognition as a Colony in 1808. By contrast with Sierra Leone, however, the Province of Senegambia was an attempt at establishing British sovereignty for purposes of slave trading rather than settlement. Despite the failure of the Province as a British possession, there were tenuous connections with the establishment of Freetown that demonstrate that for a variety of reasons, various interests in Britain were looking to Africa for the purposes of extending British imperial rule.

The Province of Senegambia was one of many schemes for extending colonial empire that were being discussed in imperial circles in the second half of the eighteenth century. Despite its short existence, Senegambia set a precedent for colonial settlement in Africa, which was a factor in the choice of Sierra Leone, further south, as a colony for Africans who had been liberated from slavery. At first glance there appears to be little similarity between the Province of Senegambia and the later Colony of Sierra Leone, other than that they were both located on the upper Guinea coast of Africa. Indeed the imperial vision could not have been more different. While Sierra Leone was labeled a “Province of Freedom,” Senegambia was surely the “Province of the Slave Trade.”
The history of this experiment in colonization in Senegambia intersects with several themes that provide context for the foundation of Sierra Leone as a place of settlement for former African slaves and their descendants. For much of the eighteenth century, individual merchants and settlers had remained on the upper Guinea coast in search of individual wealth, often marrying locally. The resulting mulatto class dominated trade along the coast, and the widows of British merchants sometimes became involved in trans-Atlantic networks. The interactions across the Atlantic included South Carolina, Georgia and the Floridas, as well as other places along the upper Guinea coast, such as Rio Pongo, that highlight the connections of the Atlantic littoral, including Cape Verde Islands. Fenda Lawrence represents this coastal class of British subjects. She moved from the Province of Senegambia to Charleston and then settled in Savannah in the early 1770s. She was from Kayor. As her biographer, Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, has recognized, Fenda Lawrence was a free African woman who owned property through her marriage, and her migration is but one example of trans-Atlantic linkages between the upper Guinea coast and the Americas. As seen in this case, the model of empire allowed movement from Senegambia to North America. Bunce Island, the center of British slave trading on the Sierra Leone River, was part of this network, although not part of the Province of Senegambia. Some abolitionists, including Olaudah Equiano, alias Gustavus Vassa, were skeptical of the initial attempt to establish a “Province of Freedom” at Freetown on the peninsula at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River because of this association with the slave trade, although Vassa appears to have been willing to migrate to the Province of Senegambia as a missionary.

The association of Gustavus Vassa with the Province of Senegambia has been largely overlooked. In early 1777, Vassa was fresh back from the Mosquito Shore, where he had been engaged in an ambitious scheme to settle Central America and launch an invasion of Spanish America. Working for Alexander Blair and Dr. Charles Irving, Vassa was the overseer on the model plantation on the Rio Grande de Matagalpa that was designed to produce castor oil for the worsted industry in Britain. Disillusioned by this venture, Vassa returned to his job of barbering in the Haymarket and visiting adjacent coffee houses and public houses in early 1777. There, it appears, he met the Acting Governor of Senegambia, Matthias McNamara, who had returned to London in July 1777. In early 1779 Vassa was working in McNamara’s house and seeking his sponsorship for a missionary appointment in Africa. The relationship between the two men is not entirely clear, but it is alleged here that Vassa sought out McNamara in his attempt to return to Africa. It is probable, indeed highly likely, that Vassa intended to settle in the Province of Senegambia. Vassa already was knowledgeable of settlement schemes and indeed had been involved in one on the Mosquito Shore. A focus on his
involvement in the Sierra Leone project to establish Freetown in 1787 has often missed his earlier efforts. Even if he had been appointed to a missionary post in 1779, France occupied Senegambia in that year and effectively ended the colonization scheme for the Province of Senegambia. Vassa would subsequently be involved in the Sierra Leone mission in late 1786, but would withdraw over charges and countercharges of corruption and incompetence. Nonetheless, African settlement remained dear to Vassa’s heart, and in his will he left funds for a school in Sierra Leone.

Both the Province of Senegambia and subsequently Sierra Leone need to be placed in the context of other proposals to establish settlement colonies in Africa and elsewhere in the expanding British imperial vision. As early as the 1750s and 1760s, Malachy Postlethwayt was advocating expansion in Africa for commercial purposes. Although he died in 1766, his influential *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* was widely discussed in imperial circles. According to Christopher Brown, Senegambia, despite its failure, found “a constituency in Britain for the colonization of Africa…. Those who had resided in Senegambia for any length of time returned to Britain convinced that on the African coast, if given another chance, they could build a fortune for themselves, and perhaps for the nation, too.” Brown argues that the loss of North American colonies created uncertainty about future economic developments, and some looked to Africa. Between 1783 and 1788, “more than a dozen schemes materialized to transform or expand British enterprise on the African coast. Returned Senegambia administrators came forward with plans to colonize the Gambia River district, to which Britain retained exclusive trading rights at the peace.” Many if not most of these schemes focused on Gambia and then Sierra Leone, related to settlement of convicts, which ultimately took place at Botany Bay in Australia. Other proposals, including Henry Smeathman’s scheme, looked to Sierra Leone.

Before the Seven Years’ War, British interests in West Africa, including the Gambia were represented by the commercial consortium, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa. However, when Britain took control of French outposts at Goree and St. Louis in 1758, there were new ideas on how to promote British interests. With peace, Goree was returned to France, while St. Louis and claims to the Senegal valley remained in British hands, along with the Gambia. While initially the area was put under the administration of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, in early 1765, the Commissioners of the Board of Trade and Plantations issued a report to the Crown on British establishments in Africa. The Board of Trade recommended that for the furtherance of trade to Africa it was essential to maintain a British presence on the coast. The attraction was the supposedly great commercial possibilities of the region, particularly in gum arabic, used in the manufacture of silks, as well as the gold that was known to be produced in the interior, specifically at Bambuhu and Bure, and of course most
importantly, slaves. The Board recommended that the region of Senegambia should be taken out of the hands of the Company of Merchants and instead placed directly under Government with the establishment of a civil constitution and provision of a military force adequate for its protection.

By an order in council, 1 November 1765, the territory between Cape Rouge and Cape Blanco, five hundred miles of coast, was declared the Province of Senegambia, with a governor to be appointed and civil administration set up. In establishing the Province of Senegambia, it was decided that the form of government should be that of a colony comparable to the British colonies in the Caribbean and North America, with provision for legal administration, courts, and a representative council. The model of government of the new Province was based on the prevailing colonial structure in the Caribbean and North America, with a Governor and Council of four ex-officio members, the commandant of the troops, a superintendent of trade, a secretary, and nine persons appointed by the Crown “in like manner as the Councils in the American colonies,” for administrative and legislative responsibilities. A Chief Justice was appointed in charge of a judiciary and also to serve on the Council. The first Governor was Colonel Charles O’Hara, who was given instructions on 6 February 1766, assuming his duties at St. Louis in mid April. He remained in office until he was recalled in November 1775, whereupon Matthias McNamara, the Lieutenant Governor stationed at James Island in the Gambia since 1772, became Acting Governor until his dismissal in 1778. O’Hara’s most noteworthy act as governor was to instigate a war that led to the destruction of the Walo state on the lower Senegal in 1775 and the enslavement of much of its population. On the Gambia, Lieutenant Governor McNamara was equally engaged in profiting from the slave trade, despite official regulations that prohibited private trading. As Brown has observed, British appointees recognized the opportunities for profit, too, as they conspired to transform Senegambia into personal fiefdoms in the same years that their peers pursued similar prospects for speculation in those parts of the Americas opened up by British conquest. Senegambia seemed to allow for the founding of a permanent beachhead on the African coast. Within a year of arrival, Governor O’Hara had devised plans to establish white colonists several hundred miles up the Senegal River, near where he thought to be extensive gold mines and “prodigious quantities of Rice, Wax, Cotton, Indigo, and Tobacco.”

His successor, Matthias McNamara, would try to arrange for a colony of convicts along the Senegal in 1776, as part of the discussion of convict resettle ment that would eventually lead to Botany Bay. The colony of Senegambia was thought to have unknown potential, like grandiose schemes in North America and the Caribbean. O’Hara even predicted that, in time, Senegambia would become “one of the richest Colonies, belonging to his Majesty,” and British colonists would “extend over every part of this
Continental that was worth while to settle.” In 1765, O’Hara was directed by the Board of Trade to incorporate black soldiers into his garrisons in Senegal as vacancies occurred. O’Hara refused because “This ‘impolitic’ suggestion would ‘destroy the subordination’ which ‘the Negroes’ were obliged to accept,” and undermine his own plans for white settlement. In 1776, he headed a delegation to Whitehall that proposed the establishment of a convict colony several hundred miles inland. Similarly, Edward Morse “bombarded the government in the same years with schemes to populate the region with British settlers and diversify the export trade,” with the intention of provisioning the Caribbean and thereby replace North America as a source of supplies.

The outbreak of war with France and Spain over North American independence effectively undermined efforts to develop Senegambia. McNamara recommended that “five dozen adolescent Senegalese boys” be purchased to fortify British outposts, but this proposal was not implemented, and Britain was not able to defend Senegambia against the French. While the French were initially rebuffed in 1778, the British presence on the coast effectively ended in 1779. In the peace, France kept St. Louis and Goree, while Britain was allowed to return to the Gambia River. Thus ended the abortive effort to establish the Province of Senegambia, which was nominally a colony for slightly more than a decade. According to Brown,

The eighteen years of British “rule” in Senegambia turned out to be an unqualified failure for the British and a disaster for the Wolof peoples of Senegal. Without colonists, Senegambia was a colony only in name. The elaborate constitution proved wholly inappropriate for a province that never boasted more than a few dozen British residents.

As governor, O’Hara increased the volume of the slave trade but alienated the creole population that controlled the gum arabic trade. In the end, according to Brown, “dissension, backbiting, and corruption plagued the first British ‘province’ in Africa.”

In the aftermath of the War of Independence in North America, the British Government surrendered both their colonial possessions in Central America and in West Africa. In Central America, the British had maintained what was called a Superintendancy over the Mosquito Shore, which reported to the Government of Jamaica. Established in 1741, territorial claims and support for the Miskitu Kingdom were abandoned to Spanish authority at the same time as the dubious colonial status of Senegambia was terminated. The Mosquito Shore had been governed through “indirect rule,” whereby officials of the Miskitu Kingdom who were formally appointed in Jamaica effectively governed the Caribbean coast of Central America. In West Africa there were local alliances that were real or coveted, such as with Kayor, but unlike the Superintendancy of the Mosquito Shore, the model of government in
Senegambia was based on the Caribbean and North America pattern of settler colony and plantation development. Hence the Province of Senegambia was the first, tentative, but completely unrealistic effort, to establish a colonial presence in Africa.

Senegambia was a “Province of the Slave Trade” whose purpose was to provide slaves for the Americas and to secure gum arabic for Britain’s textile industry. Despite some misguided pronouncements, the focus in Senegambia was neither on European emigration nor plantation development, but on the slave trade. It was not intended as a colony of settlement, and its principal immigrants were mutinous soldiers, rebellious sailors and criminals who had been exiled as punishment for their alleged insubordination, and occasional merchants who relocated to the African coast or stayed on there, often marrying local women who provided access to commercial networks into the interior. The inhabitants on James Island were few. In 1763, for example, there were 3 civilian officers, 8 European soldiers, 30 “castle slaves” and 13 “dependants of castle slaves,” for a total population of only 54. Many of the officers of the Province of Senegambia were Irish – O’Hara, McNamara, Wall, Wallace – who were obliged to inflict heinous punishments for trivial matters, on each other, subordinates, and by extension the victims of the slave trade. The Irish background is important to recognize because Senegambia was an outpost of empire, where the fate was quick death from disease or survival through brutality and marriage into local society. The brutality among the Irish elite suggests a level of horror that helps visualize slavery. McNamara, for example, left a family in Senegambia, whom he recognized in his will, but he also left plantations of slaves in the Caribbean.

The Province of Senegambia was founded to promote trade, and that included, especially, the slave trade. The commanding officers of the Province of Senegambia, in what some historians have seen as a mockery of a “colonial possession,” were actively and often illegally involved in the purchase and resale of human beings as slaves. Preoccupation with the slave trade, and specifically the destruction of Walo by British-inspired conflict, set the tone of this colonial enterprise. The contradiction between slave trade and legitimate production was not resolved in British thinking, which allowed corruption, opportunism, and miscegenation to reveal the pattern.

Fortunately, we have considerable documentary evidence on the scale and direction of the slave trade, which is summarized in the following tables. Based on the surviving records of the trade, 63,738 Africans left Senegambia, including the French enclaves in the Province of Senegambia at Albrada on the Gambia and the island of Goree. Approximately 83 percent of this number went on British and North American ships, and the rest on French ships. As shown in Table 6.2, 52,642 Africans survived the Middle Passage, with almost one third (32.1 percent) disembarking in North America, while
slightly more than half remained in the British Caribbean or were transshipped elsewhere. The French Caribbean islands accounted for the remaining 16 percent of those who arrived from Senegambia.

Table 6.1 Embarkations by National Carrier from Senegambia, 1765-1783

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<thead>
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<th>Britain</th>
<th>North America</th>
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<td>4,627</td>
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<td>14,052</td>
<td>2,062</td>
<td>3,174</td>
<td>19,728</td>
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<tr>
<td>1771-1775</td>
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<td>4,583</td>
<td>26,454</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2,544</td>
<td>11,985</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>48,009</td>
<td>4,883</td>
<td>10,846</td>
<td>63,738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
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<td>7.7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: David Eltis et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (http://www.slavevoyages.org)

Table 6.2 Destinations of Africans from Province of Senegambia and French Enclaves, 1765-83

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>British Caribbean</th>
<th>French Caribbean</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Percent British</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1765</td>
<td>2,097</td>
<td>2,660</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>4,933</td>
<td>96.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1766-1770</td>
<td>4,381</td>
<td>8,789</td>
<td>2,237</td>
<td>15,407</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771-1775</td>
<td>8,439</td>
<td>9,804</td>
<td>3,521</td>
<td>21,764</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1776-1780</td>
<td>2,001</td>
<td>6,017</td>
<td>2,520</td>
<td>10,538</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>16,918</td>
<td>27,270</td>
<td>8,454</td>
<td>52,642</td>
<td>83.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eltis et al., *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*

In his historical novel of the slave trade, Alex Haley did not associate his own family’s history with the Province of Senegambia, nor did he realize that his family’s history was part of a pattern. This lacuna in recognizing that his family derived from a consciously imposed colonial system that created a province of enslavement in the name of Senegambia is not surprising because the Province of Senegambia was a formal British colony in name only. When Alex Haley published *Roots: The Saga of An American Family*, a novel based on his family's history, in 1976, he did not know that there was such a British colonial establishment that was legally involved in enslavement in Africa and specifically connected with North America. Haley retells the story of Kunta Kinte, allegedly kidnapped in about 1767 and taken from his home village of Juffure along the Gambia River, and shipped to Maryland on *The Lord Ligonier* as a slave. Haley claimed to be a seventh-generation descendant of Kunta.
Kinte. Whether or not the details of Haley’s ancestry can be verified, the incident does reflect the importance of enslavement to the Province of Senegambia.

Although legally officials of the Province of Senegambia were not supposed to be involved in trade, in fact it appears that all of the officers in the short history of the Province were. First, the payment of salaries to soldiers and employees had to be done through the exchange of commodities on local markets. The most logical way of paying salaries was to pay in commodities or to actively engage in trade. Second, the principal officials, including McNamara and notably O’Hara, engaged in trade, illegally, to make as much money as they could. O’Hara was only called to order after not sending any written reports to the Colonial Office for five years. When Lord Dartmouth assumed the Colonial Office portfolio in 1774, he ordered O’Hara to explain himself. His patience ran out in 1776 and O’Hara was ordered home, just as Superintendent Hodgson was being reprimanded for his involvement in the slave trade on the Mosquito Shore. While the Foreign Office initially looked the other way, in both cases, Government was forced to intervene for other reasons, such as the embarrassment of the presence of a delegation of Miskitu in London in 1775 who were charging personal aggrandizement and mismanagement in British claimed territory on the mainland of the Caribbean and the scandal over official corruption in Senegambia, where McNamara and others were implemented and which required cleansing in the face of the war with France, Spain, and the newly formed United States of North America.

How McNamara secured the position of Lieutenant Governor at James Island in 1772 is not known. The two early authorities on Gambian history, Eveline Martin and Richard Gray, both suspect a strange intervention, because McNamara was appointed over the heads of a number of unspecified senior officers. Because O’Hara was not consulted he was decidedly hostile to McNamara after his appointment, even though or perhaps because they were both Irish and Senegambia was considered the lowest posting possible in the colonial service. Indeed Senegambia, and particularly Gambia, was a place for convicts and the dregs of the British service. Through their behavior, moreover, both O’Hara and McNamara lived up to the expectations of such postings, achieving levels of colonial misrule that presaged Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness by some 150 years. O’Hara was even accused of beheading someone who did not salute him, a charge that came from the French officer at Goree and hence might thereby be considered suspect if it did not confirm the numerous other abuses to which the troops under his command, known as O’Hara’s Forces, were prone. McNamara was even worse, imprisoning his subordinates in terrible conditions, in the “black hole” under the stairs at James Island. It was home to Joseph Wall for ten months after McNamara assumed the Acting
Governorship on the recall of O’Hara in 1776. Wall had been O’Hara’s second in command and was dispatched under McNamara to the Gambia, where he too fell under the corruptive sway of British colonialism in its infancy in Africa. Wall survived his torture to win retribution against McNamara in London courts, but then returning to Senegambia committed equally barbarous actions, ultimately being executed in London for his misdeeds on the Gambia in 1805, having lived in exile in France for many years before he returned to London to try to vindicate himself, obviously unsuccessfully.  

McNamara became Lieutenant Governor of Senegambia in 1774 and was based at James Island. He was actively involved in the slave trade. For a brief period, a guardian of Gustavus Vassa, McNamara was described by Edward Morse, Chief Justice of Senegambia, as “a man without education, extremely brutal, vulgar, and avaricious, but possessed of an uncommon share of natural parts.” While McNamara subsequently served as Acting Governor of the Province of Senegambia in 1776-1778, he retained links with his family, as the McNamara clan built its wealth on West Indian slavery. While in the Province of Senegambia McNamara not only engaged ruthlessly in trade, but he even imprisoned subordinates to prevent disclosure of his business affairs and stole the goods of officers whom he detained illegally. As a result, he was able to amass a considerable fortune, and, according to his will, he owned plantations in Granada and Tortola, as well as property in Senegambia and London, and had family connections to estates in Ireland.  

McNamara was recalled in April 1777, and there followed inquiries into his term in office. In the course of investigations, McNamara lost several law suits over the abuses that were perpetrated in the context of his activities in promoting the slave trade for his personal gain as well as fulfilling his responsibilities in advancing government-sanctioned support of the slave trade. Specifically there were the charges by Joseph Wall, commander of O’Hara’s Forces and subsequently Lieutenant Governor at James Island, against his imprisonment without due process. McNamara ordered his solitary confinement at James Island for ten months without proceeding with charges, which were in any event proven spurious. McNamara’s case opened in London on 2 June 1777 and continued until 16 July 1777. On 19 July, McNamara appeared before the Council; on 30 July, the charges against Wall were dismissed, and McNamara was told that he had “trifled” with the Board, “and treated it with the most injurious and insolent contempt.” Thereafter, Wall brought charges against McNamara for false imprisonment and embezzlement. The jury awarded Wall damages to amount of £1527 14s. 6d. Thomas Wallace, who lied on behalf of McNamara, was arrested for subornation of perjury, and other charges were brought against McNamara. For McNamara, the situation worsened when the Chief Justice of Senegambia, Edward Morse, whose description of McNamara’s character has
been quoted above, accused McNamara, Wallace and Sharpless of conspiracy against him. McNamara appealed, but the Committee of Council for Plantation Affairs upheld the decision. On 28 August 1778, McNamara received formal notice of his dismissal. Lord Mansfield, famous for his Somerset decision, presided over the case of Wall vs McNamara for false imprisonment, and when the charges were substantiated, McNamara was dismissed as Lieutenant Governor of Senegambia. Mansfield duly awarded Wall £1,000 damages. Shortly after this notorious affair, Gustavus Vassa actually worked in McNamara’s household and attests to the great wealth and continued influence of both McNamara himself and also his perjured associate Wallace. As far as historian Gray is concerned, “McNamara passed out of the history of the Gambia after his dismissal,” but it can be added that he left behind considerable information on how British officials operated in the Province of Senegambia. The few who benefited made a lot of money out of slavery, which they documented in self-incriminating detail.

As Vincent Carretta has observed, Vassa had very little to say about the North American crisis in his Interesting Narrative. However, there are several letters to newspapers in 1777-1778 that are signed with the name “Gustavus Vassa,” but do not appear to be Vassa’s writing style. It is therefore likely, as Carretta has also observed, that the letters were written by someone else. It is my suggestion that the someone else could have been Matthias McNamara. Vassa was an intelligent barber, and it may be that McNamara used Vassa’s name because he could not publicly state his views when his legal matters were before the courts. McNamara’s losses were considerable, and yet in 1779, he lived in splendor in London, with a large household staff, and on his death was able to bequeath plantations on Granada and Tortola, as well as property in Senegambia and London. He left his Senegambia property to his children to his female “servant,” Willima, for the benefit of his children by her. McNamara owned property in Grenada, Tortola and the Province of Senegambia. Exactly what that property was is not clear, but in his trade at James Island, as with other merchants along the coast, a local marriage was often beneficial, as the long-standing loyalty in this case seems to establish.

McNamara suggested to Vassa that he become a missionary to Africa and wrote a letter to Robert Lowth (1710-1787), Lord Bishop of London, in 1779 that recommended his return to Africa as a missionary. Dutifully, Vassa informed Lowth that “Your memorialist’s only motive for soliciting the office of a missionary is, that he may be a means, under God, of reforming his countrymen and persuading them to embrace the Christian religion,” and claimed that he was qualified because he was “a native of Africa” and was acquainted “with the language and customs of the country,” i.e., Africa. Vassa was zealous in attempting to convert McNamara’s household staff to Methodism, which seems to have impressed McNamara, who wrote the Lord Bishop that he “believe[d] him a moral good man.” He rested his opinion on
the fact that “I have resided near seven years on the coast of Africa, for most part of the time as commanding officer. [And] From the knowledge I have of the country and its inhabitants, I am inclined to think that the within plan will be attended with great success.” Wallace, who had resided in the Province of Senegambia for almost five years, also wrote a letter on Vassa’s behalf, on 11 March 1779. This correspondence, too, should be seen in the context of Vassa’s understanding of the Province of Senegambia and the possibilities of settlement schemes in Africa [see Appendix 1].

Why is it that Vassa had virtually nothing to say about the North American crisis, while his name was used in the press to present opinions on that conflict? Is Vincent Carretta correct that the letters written under the name Gustavus Vassa in 1777 and 1778 have no connection with the actual life of the abolitionist? Or were these public statements on the North American situation somehow associated with Vassa, even though it is clear from writing style that the letters are not his. Is it possible that Matthias McNamara is in fact the author, or someone else who employed Vassa as a barber? Be that as it may, the relationship between McNamara and Vassa seems to be worth exploring. Because Vassa knew McNamara, he had to know about the Province of Senegambia, which almost certainly was a subject of discussion with McNamara in relation to Vassa’s intended return to Africa. Although exactly what they might have talked about is far from clear, the fact that Thomas Wallace also wrote on Vassa’s behalf confirms the likely focus on Senegambia. Was it impossible that McNamara, despite his disgrace, might return to Africa? Clearly, he would not have written to the Lord Bishop if he did not think so. In a parallel and contemporary public humiliation involving Superintendent Robert Hodgson of the Mosquito Shore, the disgraced Hodgson re-emerged, in part because he was married to the illegitimate daughter of Prime Minister Pitt. McNamara’s clan continued to be powerful in imperial circles, and Matthias might well have resurfaced, except that he died in 1783. In 1779, McNamara clearly had Vassa in his plans. The fact that Vassa’s application to the Lord Bishop of London was turned down can be attributed to the uncertainties of war as much as anything else.

Vassa was indirectly connected with the Province of Senegambia through his association with Matthias McNamara and what he would have discussed and learned in that relationship. If the letters attributed to Vassa that were written in 1777-78 were a product of this relationship, then colonial ventures, Vassa’s Christianity and his native origins in Africa would have figured into the interaction between the two men and would account for McNamara’s letter of recommendation in 1779. Only a few years later, in 1786, Vassa became associated with Britain’s second colonial venture in Africa, the Sierra Leone project. The full implications of this trajectory are only becoming apparent. Vassa, a missionary to the Mosquito Coast, but fulfilling the role of overseer, wanted to become a missionary to Africa, but was recommended by
a notorious slave trader and corrupt official. When he was selected to help organize the first Sierra Leone venture, he already had considerable experience in exploring various ambitious and not always carefully planned ventures of British colonialism. For Vassa, the British umbrella offered possibilities of redemption. When he ultimately emerged as a leading abolitionist in the 1780s, it was because of this previous experience and what he had learned about Africa from his association with people like Matthias McNamara. Vassa was fully involved in early settlement schemes, first on the Mosquito Shore in 1775-76, and then with the possibility of venturing to the Province of Senegambia in 1778-79, before becoming involved in the Sierra Leone settlement in 1786-87 and prominent in the British abolition campaign that ultimately reinforced the Sierra Leone project, leading to its recognition as a Colony in 1808. Although Vassa did not receive a missionary appointment in 1779, the Province of Senegambia had effectively come to an end anyway with French occupation of St. Louis and Goree. Both on the Mosquito Shore and in his missionary vision for the Province of Senegambia, Vassa’s agenda was far different from the men who were his patrons. Whereas the Mosquito Shore venture was intended to promote military conquest of the interior, rather than evangelization, it was still a dubious and highly speculative venture. By contrast the brutal behavior of McNamara, O’Neil and others in Senegambia contrasts with Vassa’s own agenda of liberation and redemption. His patrons’ goals were evidently quite the opposite as they have been described here.

Appendix I

1. VASSA’S MEMORIAL TO ROBERT LOWTH, LORD BISHOP OF LONDON, 1779

To The Right Reverend Father in God, ROBERT [Lowth], Lord Bishop of London.

THE MEMORIAL OF GUSTAVUS VASSA, SHEWETH,

THAT your memorialist is a native of Africa, and has a knowledge of the manners and customs of the inhabitants of that country.

That your memorialist has resided in different parts of Europe for twenty-two years last past, and embraced the Christian faith in the year 1759.

That your memorialist is desirous of returning to Africa as a missionary, if encouraged by your Lordship, in hopes of being able to prevail upon his compatriots to become Christians; and your memorialist is the more induced to undertake the same, from the success that has attended the like undertakings when encouraged by the Portuguese through their different settlements on the coast of Africa, and also by the Dutch; both governments encouraged the blacks, who by their education are qualified to undertake the
same, and are found more proper than European clergymen, unacquainted with the language and customs of the country.

Your memorialist’s only motive for soliciting the office of a missionary is, that he may be a means, under God, of reforming his countrymen and persuading them to embrace the Christian religion. Therefore your memorialist humbly prays your Lordship’s encouragement and support in the undertaking.

GUSTAVUS VASSA.

2. MACNAMARA’S LETTER TO ROBERT LOWTH, LORD BISHOP OF LONDON

At Mr. Guthrie’s, Tailor,
No. 17, Hedge-lane.

MY LORD, I have resided near seven years on the coast of Africa, for most part of the time as commanding officer. From the knowledge I have of the country and its inhabitants, I am inclined to think that the within plan will be attended with great success, if countenanced by your Lordship. I beg further to represent to your Lordship, that the like attempts, when encouraged by other governments, have met with uncommon success; and at this very time I know a very respectable character, a black priest, at Cape Coast Castle. I know the within-named Gustavus Vassa, and believe him a moral good man. I have the honour to be,

My Lord,
Your Lordship’s
Humble and obedient Servant,

MATT. MACNAMARA.
Grove, 11th March, 1779.

3. WALLACE’S LETTER TO ROBERT LOWTH, LORD BISHOP OF LONDON

MY LORD,

March 13, 1779.

I have resided near five years in Senegambia, on the coast of Africa, and have had the honour of filling very considerable employments in that province. I do approve of the within plan, and think the undertaking very laudable and proper, and that it deserves your Lordship’s protection and encouragement, in which case it must be attended with the intended success. I am, my Lord,
Your Lordship’s
humble and obedient Servant,

THOMAS WALLACE.

Appendix 2

Complaints against Matthias McNamara, 1778

T 1/541/2-13 AFRICA: Senegambia (Gambia, Senegal): R Cumberland:
forwards affidavits and minutes relating to complaints by merchants
against Governor MacNamara.

T 1/549/1-14 AFRICA: Senegambia (including Goree): W Chamberlayne:
opinion that Francis MacNamara should be paid money disbursed on
behalf of his brother, the late Governor of Senegambia, for wages of
crew of the Lord Dartmouth.

T 1/552/165-166 AFRICA: Senegambia (including Goree): Hugh J Hansard:
asks for payment of a bill drawn by Governor MacNamara.

T 1/567/52-53 AFRICA: Senegambia (Gambia, Goree and Senegal): Memoral of George Browne, contractor reduced to bankruptcy by
Governor MacNamara's iniquitous practices, regarding non-payment
of money due to him. He also applies for contract to supply Goree.

T 1/577/202-211 AFRICA: Senegambia (Senegambia (Gambia, Goree and
Senegal): Law Officers' approbation of claim by William Nicholson,
who acted as Agent, against contractor, George Brown. Conflict with
Governor MacNamara.

CO 267/17 Charges against Lieutenant-Governor Macnamara.

SP 78/299 Lieutenant governor Macnamara to lord George Germain. The
French are daily infringing British rights. A monsieur Monoron,
director of the French African company at Gorée is waiting for a
passage to England. He is no better than a spy. He has threatened to
seize all English ships trading in places within this province between
Fort Lewis and the Gambia river.

NOTES

1 I wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
for supporting this project. Feisal Farrah, Carlos Liberato, and Karlee Sapoznik
were helpful in the collection of data for this paper. Katrina Keefer and Mariza
Soares commented on an earlier draft. My collaboration with Mark Duffill in
researching the life and times of Gustavus Vassa should be noted.
5 Brown, Moral Capital, 277-78.
8 Martin, British West African Settlements, 65-68, citing various archival sources. See especially Report to the Crown on the British Establishments on the Coast of Africa by the Commissioners of Trade and Plantations, 21 February 1765, CO 389/31; Instructions to Charles O’Hara, 6 February 1766, CO 268/2; O’Hara to the Board of Trade and Plantations, 28 May 1766, CO 267/1; O’Hara to Conway, 28 May 1766, CO 267/13; Morse to Townshend, 12 August, 1782, CO 267/20; Petition of Anthony Bacon, CO 267/13; O’Hara to the Board of Trade and Plantations, 1 September 1766, CO 267/13; Board of Trade and Plantations to Shelbourne, 5 March 1767; Dartmouth to O’Hara, 27 Oct 1773, CO 268/3; Dartmouth to O’Hara, 18 August 1773, CO 267/16; O’Hara to Dartmouth, 24 January 1774, CO 267/16; Dartmouth to O’Hara, 21 March 1774, CO 268/3; O’Hara to Dartmouth, 24 January 1774, CO 267/16; O’Hara to Dartmouth, 10 May 1773, CO 267/16; O’Hara to Dartmouth, 10 February 1775, CO 267/16; O’Hara to Dartmouth, 20 June 1775, CO 267/16; O’Hara to Dartmouth, 13 May 1775, CO 267/16; Dartmouth to O’Hara, 20 April 1775, CO 268/3; O’Hara to Dartmouth, 18 August 1775, CO 267/16; Dartmouth to O’Hara, 1 September 1775, CO 268/3; Journal of the Board of Trade and Plantations, 23 April, 1776, CO 391/81; Report on Senegambia, 10 June 1776, CO 268/2; Germaine to O’Hara, 16 June 1776, CO 268/3. All archival references are to The National Archives, Kew.
9 Complaints against O’Hara – see McNamara to Dartmouth, 26, 29 January 1776, CO 267/1; McNamara accusations against O’Hara, 8 June 1775, CO 267/16; Germaine to John Clarke, 5 February 1777, CO 268/3; Dispatches from Clarke, 4, 26 July 1777, CO 268/4.
10 According to Boubacar Barry, 8,000 people were enslaved in 1775 as a result raids by the Maures that has been organized with the complicity of O’Hara; see Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 67-68.
11 Brown, Moral Capital, 275.
12 Brown, Moral Capital, 275.
13 Charles O’Hara to Earl of Dartmouth and Board of Trade, 1765, 26 July 1766, CO 267/1, as cited in Brown, Moral Capital, 308.

14 Brown, Moral Capital, 308.

15 For the gum arabic trade, see Barry, Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 72-73; and James Searing, West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151-53.

16 Brown, Moral Capital, 276.

17 Barry, Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 72-75.

18 For total number of embarkations from the Senegambia region, as defined in David Eltis et al., The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (http://www.slavevoyages.org), also includes people leaving on Brazilian ships from the Bissau, Caheo, and Cassamance estuaries to the south of the Province of Senegambia. See Balari Gibba, “The Slave Trade along the Banks of the Gambia River from the mid Fifteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century,” MA Paper, University of Toronto, 1999; Carlos F. Liberato, “Riverine Atlantic: Slavery and Slave Trade in the Rivers of Guiné and the Grão Pará and Maranhão, 1755-1777,” Ph.D. thesis, York University, forthcoming.


20 According to Gray (Gambia, 248, 255), Ensign Matthias McNamara became Lieutenant-Governor at James Island “over the heads of senior officers…; his correspondence betrays the fact that he must have been a singularly unlovable and unpleasant person – conceited and a venomous backbiter. How he came to obtain the appointment is not at all clear…. His selection for the post was extremely unpopular and he did nothing to allay that unpopularity. The predominant notes of his correspondence with the home Government are the complete self-satisfaction of the writer and the underhand attacks which he makes on his brother officers.” Also see Martin, British West African Settlements, 65-68.


22 Gray, Gambia, 244, citing Morse to Lord Townshend, 12 August 1782, CO 267/20.

23 Will of Matthias McNamara of Grove, Middlesex, 24 September 1781, PROB 11/1082.

24 Dean, “Joseph Wall of Goree Island,” 295-301. Also see Gray, Gambia, 259-64.

25 Warrants of 23 June and 14 August 1777, CO 267/4, as cited in Gray, Gambia, 261-63.

26 Petition of Matthias McNamara, 21 January 1778; Petition of Thomas Wallace, 27 January 1778; and petition of Francis McNamara, 5 February 1778. McNamara was brought before the Council of Trade to answer charges against him; see especially the examination of Thomas Wallace, CO 267/4. Board of Trade to the King, 3 March 1778, CO 268/2, ff. 296-303; CO 267/6.

27 Germaine to McNamara, 28 August 1778, CO 268/3; and Wall v. McNamara, English Reports, XCIX, 1239.


McNamara will, 1781, PROB 11/1082.

Vassa, *Interesting Narrative*.
Chapter 7. “African” Settlers in the Founding of Freetown

James Sidbury

The spring of 1792 witnessed two very different arrivals at the future site of Freetown. First, approximately 1,200 black settlers traveling from Nova Scotia arrived at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River. In what is the most frequently described moment in the early history of the settler society that they founded, these trans-Atlantic immigrants disembarked, gathered on the shore at the site of the town they would build, and sang a hymn proclaiming that “The Year of Jubilee has come / Returned ye ransomed sinners home.”

There is little wonder that this powerful image of more than a thousand people of African descent who had escaped enslavement to American pharaohs and managed to return to mother Africa plays such a prominent role in each retelling of the founding of Sierra Leone, and obviously, given my invocation of it at the beginning of this essay, I think it worthy of the attention that it gets. I do, though, want to reconfigure its place in the history of the colony, by juxtaposing it to the story of another arrival, an arrival that occurred just a bit later that same spring.

John Clarkson, brother of Thomas and first Governor of the Sierra Leone Company’s colony, knew that Granville Sharp had sent an earlier community of black settlers and that the town they had built – “Granville Town” – had been attacked and destroyed by a neighboring Temne headman, so he quickly reached out to make diplomatic contact with local leaders. In a less than subtle attempt at intimidation, he crossed a small bay to pay a visit to King Jimmy, who had led the attack on Granville Town. While there, Clarkson issued an invitation to Naimbana, the paramount Temne leader in the area who lived farther upriver, offering to send a Company vessel to transport him down to visit Freetown. Naimbana accepted and his resulting
arrival, as described by Clarkson, is telling. The headman disembarked from the Lapwing wearing:

- a sky-blue silk jacket with silver lace, striped cotton trousers, ruffled shirt, green morocco slippers, a cocked-hat with gold lace, and a white cotton cap, for which a large old judge’s wig was afterwards substituted. He had a belt round his neck from which hung the figure of a lamb bearing a cross set with rays formed of paste.

Modern scholars will be unsurprised to learn that a political leader in a slave-trading region of West Africa dressed in clothes imported from different regions of the world, or that he presented himself in ways that played on, without replicating, European notions of authority and gentility. Nor will they see anything unusual in the fact that he asked Clarkson to arrange for one of his sons to travel to London to be educated in English ways. That the headman had already sent one other son to France, to learn Catholic ways, and had sent a third to be educated in an Islamic society accords perfectly with current understandings of the cosmopolitan cast of the eighteenth-century West African slave trading elite.²

If, however, Naimbana’s arrival matches our expectations, it may have surprised Clarkson, given that the Company he worked for placed a presumably-ignorant and naked African – not a headman wearing a powdered wig and carrying an emblem of Christianity – on its coat of arms. While we should not generalize from the Company’s beliefs to those of the black settlers, many who sang of the coming Jubilee probably found Naimbana’s appearance equally disconcerting. Most were former American slaves who had escaped from bondage by siding with the British during the American Revolution. After struggling for several years in Nova Scotia, where they had been transported after the Revolutionary War, they traveled to Africa with plans as grandiose as their invocation of Jubilee suggest. They were engaged in an Exodus, and upon arriving in their Promised Land, they hoped to initiate a transformation that would convert the heathen peoples of the Old Country into a single civilized Christian people that could take up its proper place in sacred and secular history.³ In short, they, too, expected the semi-naked illiterate savage who was portrayed on the Company’s coat of arms, not the cosmopolitan Temne gentleman who came to visit Freetown that day.

The contrast between these two arrivals brings to the fore one of the most interesting and less-often explored aspects of Freetown during the 1790s. For reasons of substance and because of the nature of the surviving sources, historians focus on the contentious relations between the self-styled “Nova Scotians” – the black American settlers – and white Company officials. Scholars analyze Thomas Peters’ challenge to John Clarkson, the struggles between Governor Zachary Macaulay – one of Clarkson’s successors – and the settlers following the French sack of the settlement in
1794, and the build-up to the settler uprising in 1800. Standard elements of this story include disputes over land, quit rents, religion and self-government, disputes that convinced the Nova Scotians that the Company’s promise of a fresh start in their promised land, a start based on freehold land, racial equality, and political rights, had been falsely made. The essence of this narrative can be conveyed through the complaints of a group of Methodist settlers who claimed that while they used to call their new home Freetown, in the wake of ill treatment by Company officials, they had “Reason to call it A town of Slavery.” This focus on the struggles between settlers and the Company is certainly merited, but it can leave too little space for consideration of the ways that the settlers who arrived to re-make Africa and its residents interacted with the Temne, who were the projected local objects of this remaking.

The men and women who came to describe themselves as Nova Scotians traveled from Canada to Africa in a single flotilla, but they had taken a variety of paths to reach the ships that left the Maritimes. Slightly less than a quarter of the roughly 1,300 migrants had been born in West or west central African communities. Enslaved in their homelands, they had been sold into Britain’s North America colonies, where they worked on northern farms, in artisanal households, or most commonly in the tobacco fields or rice paddies of the Chesapeake and the Carolina Lowcountry. The other three-fourths had been born in North America. Most had been born into the creole slave communities of Virginia and Maryland, or the rapidly creolizing world of the South Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry. One might reasonably expect that the members of this diverse group embarked on their Exodus to Africa with very different expectations of their destination.

In some ways, that is surely true. As will become evident below, one of the emigrants was literally returning to his former home, having been sold from Sierra Leone as a child. At least one other Nova Scotian (John Kizell) had been enslaved and sold out of the nearby Sherbro region, and he would later use his knowledge of it to serve as an intermediary between black American settlers and people who were native to the region. Because the only surviving partial and imperfect list of prospective emigrants that lists birthplaces fails to distinguish among different African origins, it is difficult to say how many, if any, other Nova Scotians had even childhood memories of the Temne people or of the general region surrounding what would become Freetown. Nor, of course, can we know how many of the Virginia- or Carolina-born were the children of parents sold out of Sierra Leone, much less the accuracy and detail of stories they might have heard from parents or kin. Notwithstanding those limitations, it is clear that there were some among the Nova Scotians who had first hand knowledge of West Africa, and that most others had spent their lives in one of the two dominant slave cultures in British North America.
The Nova Scotians, however, probably shared a more coherent outlook and set of expectations about Africans than these varied backgrounds might lead one to expect. In part, this is because the homelands of the African-born probably no longer existed as they would have remembered them. Company officials and others who worked with the Nova Scotians left few discussions of linguistic or other cultural indicators marking some of the black loyalists as “salt-water” slaves, so most of the African born had probably come to the Americas while young and had lived for two or even three decades in the New World. That certainly does not mean that they would have forgotten their places of birth or their languages or their early ways of life, but given the increasing scholarly consensus about both the intensely local nature of collective identity in much of West and Central Africa and the rapid, dislocating changes in the slaving regions of the continent during the last half of the eighteenth century, any who expected to find some pristine version of what they remembered leaving behind surely would have been disappointed.

More importantly, there is good evidence that the migrants did not go in search of a way of life they had lost when they were spirited out of Africa, as revealed through their decisions to leave the Maritimes. When John Clarkson traveled through the Nova Scotian countryside recruiting Black Loyalists to help found the new Sierra Leone colony, he found a people gathered into various denominational, or even congregational, communities. Various black Baptist, Wesleyan Methodist, and Huntingdonian Methodist congregations decided collectively that God was calling them to an Exodus from the northern wilderness into which they had been deposited following the American War for Independence. They decided together to liquidate any property they held, to travel together to the ships Clarkson had commissioned to transport them to Africa, and they convinced Clarkson to allow them to remain in their congregational communities on the ships sailing to Africa. Few Nova Scotians boarded Clarkson’s ships seeking to return to lost homes. Most traveled instead in search of a new promised land in the Old World.

In fact, the written record left by the Nova Scotians, which is rich relative to that left by most contemporary diaspora black communities, suggests that, instead, they intended to build new homes for themselves and for the people they would find living in Africa. Those who traveled and then settled in Baptist communities coalesced around David George, a preacher who had developed diaspora Christian beliefs in the African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia. American victory in the Revolutionary War had dispersed many of the Savannah Church’s leaders, some of whom went on to found black Baptist churches and movements throughout the British Caribbean, much as George founded a Baptist Church in Freetown. The Huntingdonians had grown in Nova Scotia as a result of the missionary outreach of John Marrant, who had turned to Christianity in mid-century
Charleston after hearing George Whitefield preach. Marrant then traveled widely, from Cherokee country in upland Carolina to London to Boston and elsewhere, pursuing a trans-national Atlantic mission in which he offered witness to God’s plan to raise and redeem an African people.

The Wesleyan Methodists left less evidence than the African Baptists or Huntingdonians of their early commitment to Africa’s redemption. In fact, we know far less about what they thought of Africa and how they understood the meaning of their mission to the continent prior to their arrival. Recent work by historian Cassandra Pybus has revealed, however, that the core group of Nova Scotian Wesleyans escaped from Virginia slavery during the Revolutionary War as a congregation and community in a process that approximated serial migration. It seems reasonable to guess that the blacks who worshipped in this previously undiscovered Virginia Methodist congregation may have shared the commitment of the Baptists and Huntingdonians to the redemption of Africa. Whether that is true, the Wesleyans quickly outpaced the other congregations once they arrived in Africa, becoming the denominational center of black separatist theology in Sierra Leone.12

In the eyes of unhappy Sierra Leone Company officials, all three black religious groups shared a commitment to Antinomianism, seeing themselves and their congregations as beyond the reach of earthly law. The black congregants themselves did not use that term, at least not in any surviving documents, but they did insist that they were a gathered people, and that having been granted Grace, they were secure in that Grace. This could and did create tension between the settlers and the Company, but it also provides a key to the Nova Scotians’ conception of their Exodus, and of the mission they faced in their Promised Land. If the land was promised to them, it was promised for a purpose. Their charge was to spread “true” religion to God’s lost children in Africa, and they assumed, at least originally, that the peoples of Africa would quickly recognize and accept Christian religion. That Christian religion would of course be one of the religions of the Nova Scotians, and devotees of each of the denominations in Freetown shared a belief that the peoples of Africa as God’s Chosen should unite to form an African people.

As a result, those traveling to the continent of their birth, like those leaving the continent where they had been born, shared a rebirth in Christ as “Africans.” They or their parents had found “true religion” and “civilization” in America, and they sought to fulfill God’s plan through their immigration to the Old World. They would redeem Africa by converting Africans both spiritually (to Christianity) and also in the secular realm, by replacing the illegitimate trade in human beings with legitimate commerce in inanimate commodities. In this, they shared an important part of the vision of the British abolitionists who created the Sierra Leone Company, as shown in
Suzanne Schwarz’s discussion of the Company’s vision in her contribution to this volume, but their personal experiences with slavery and their understanding of themselves as “Africans” meant that something else was also at stake. Most were not “returning,” even when they were literally returning to their place of birth. They were engaged in a project of transformation and, to borrow an almost opposite modern term, nation building, but unlike Company officials, they sought to build a nation of their own. Of course not all of the 1,192 settlers who left Nova Scotia for Sierra Leone lived according to these values. A small but significant (and undetermined) number became involved in the leading local business – the slave trade – once they settled in Freetown, and many more traded with slave traders. Others, as will become clear below, cast their lot with the Temne, either at the beginning of their stay or as they became disillusioned with the Company. The fragmentary nature of the records with which the Nova Scotians’ beliefs can be reconstructed do not allow for any rigorous analysis of the amount of discord surrounding different claims, but the Methodists, the largest denomination among them, were portrayed by Company officials as operating with what was, to those officials, a troubling degree of consensus.

They expected to find Africans mired in ignorance and superstition and ready to accept the guidance of those who had found the light and returned to share it. What the Nova Scotians did find must have been confusing. No doubt many of them found Temne animist beliefs to be superstitious, though modern scholarship on the persistence of folk beliefs among European and African American Christians should remind us that those differences were less marked in fact than in the perceptions of formally-educated western Christians traveling to or reading about West Africa. Given all the hardships they faced during their first decade in Africa, the Nova Scotians may have come to wonder whether Temne appeals to non-Christian supernatural forces had greater utility than their Christian faith suggested. Likewise the Nova Scotians arrived at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River with relatively conventional Anglo-American judicial and political assumptions about rule by consent, trial by jury and written law, so they surely frowned upon Temne traditions of dispute resolution that relied on different forms of trial by ordeal and upon the local form of authoritarian political rule. As will become clear, however, when Company officials violated the Nova Scotians’ senses of justice and legitimate government, some sought to accommodate themselves to Temne political traditions. Those efforts served to highlight the differences between the two peoples.

Sources create a barrier to telling this story. The Nova Scotians’ conflicts with the Company can be analyzed closely precisely because Company officials reported on those conflicts in some detail. Company officials wrote less, but still substantially, about their own interactions with the Temne. They
had far less reason, however, to report to London about the settlers’ interactions with the Temne. Thus the primary evidence that has survived is of incidents that were unusual enough to have attracted the notice of Company officials, incidents that somehow raised issues those officials thought worthy of notice in England. This creates a strong bias within the records for contentious encounters between settlers and the local population, not just because conflict often draws notice, but because officials, especially Governor Macaulay, relished the chance to describe occurrences that underscored, at least in their own minds, the superiority of Company policies and the degree to which the Nova Scotians were dependent upon, and should be grateful to, their white British patrons. One can, of course, infer a great deal about the kinds of routine interactions that probably lay behind reported conflicts, but it is important to acknowledge and remain on guard against the effects of the archival bias toward conflict.13

The earliest reports of interactions between settlers and neighboring Africans reflected officials’ fears that the Nova Scotians would be corrupted, or perhaps victimized, by the slave-trading traditions of the coastal regions surrounding Freetown. Clarkson and his successors sought to balance their desire to shield the settlement from the barbarous traffic taking place around it on the one hand, with their countervailing hope that the example of Freetown would convince the Temne to turn away from trafficking in humans, a hope that could only come to fruition as a result of exchanges between settlers and Africans. Company officials hoped to control these exchanges until the colony developed into a prosperous ongoing concern that would “prove” to the Temne the superiority of legitimate trade. Nonetheless, Nova Scotians inevitably became involved with neighboring Africans, often harmoniously, but even harmonious interactions could create problems because of cultural difference.

As the colony developed economically during its first half-decade, settlers built boats, raised livestock and expanded trade with local villages.14 This increased contact sometimes validated Company officials’ fears that settlers might be victimized. In late 1794 inclement weather forced three settlers trading on the Rio Nuñez to go ashore unexpectedly, whereupon “the natives . . . seized them and reduced them to slavery.” A few months later a dispute arose when one settler, perhaps fearing that the colony’s courts would not find in his favor or perhaps hoping that Temne law would treat him more fairly than British law had in the past, used threats to force another settler to submit to a Temne “ordeal of fire” to prove that she had not stolen money. Freetown settlers also accused Temne people from surrounding villages of rustling livestock and of enticing male settlers into adulterous liaisons, after which they sought monetary damages in their local judicial system.15 Slavery, robbery, cattle rustling and adultery were all familiar to the settlers before they arrived in Sierra Leone, but in each of these cases, a secondary dispute arose
because seemingly-routine conflicts became entangled in incompatible modes of dispute resolution. Unfortunately, each of these cases disappeared from the written record after providing a momentary glimpse of the ongoing relationships that produced the conflict.

Before the end of Freetown’s first year, a more sustained site of African-settler interaction emerged, and it was one that would draw the periodic attention of Company officials throughout the 1790s, thus providing a slightly fuller picture. One of the persistent tensions between Nova Scotians and officials involved the perpetual delay, at least in the settlers’ minds, of the Company’s promised delivery of freehold land. Initially this was rooted in the difficulty of getting lots surveyed, but after Clarkson’s recall at the end of the first year, it quickly became a struggle in which the settlers insisted that the Company’s demand that they pay annual quit rents constituted a negation of the promise of freehold land. While most Nova Scotians remained within Company bounds and fought for their perceived rights, a breakaway group stopped waiting for the Company to live up to its pledge. These settlers chose instead to strike a deal with King Jimmy, the Temne leader who had sacked Granville Town, and to move onto land that he granted them. This initially occurred while John Clarkson was Governor when “five or six families” moved out of Freetown. Perhaps because Clarkson was almost as frustrated by delays in the distribution of land as the settlers were, this initial settlement does not seem to have reflected open antagonism towards the Company, or at any rate toward its representatives in Freetown. Over the course of the next three years, however, the Company’s directors recalled Clarkson because of his sympathy for the Nova Scotians, and the settlers perceived his successors to be more and more hostile. The increasingly virulent disagreements between the settlers and Company officials destroyed many settlers’ faith in the Company’s intentions, and in 1796 a group of Methodists chose not simply to move beyond the colony, but to withdraw from the Company’s authority; effectively, they seceded from the colony.

The breakaway community was composed of Methodists who had grown tired of Governor Macaulay’s attempts to impose his version of religious orthodoxy. They had resisted the Methodist preacher he had asked London to send out, and they distrusted his assurances that he and the Company that he represented had their best interests at heart. The settlers withdrew from Freetown in league with a white minister who accepted their sense of the sacred, and they used the Methodist organizational structure of classes within a congregation to order their new settlement. Overtures to local headmen won them land “freely Given” by Prince George, Jemmy Queen and by King Tom at Pirates’ Bay, located slightly to the east of the first breakaway village. Initially they appointed three of their Methodist class leaders (Nathaniel Snowball, Luke Jordan, and Jonathan Glasgow) to lead them, and Snowball quickly emerged as their Governor. They retained the biblical vision that had
informed their decision to move to Africa, modeling themselves explicitly on the “Ezerlites,” but they extended the Exodus that all of the Nova Scotians had taken on when they left Freetown for a new promised land – this one held at the pleasure of two Temne headmen. Moving from the authority of the Company to that of Temne rulers could not help but complicate their mission. It left them committed to pursuing their vision of a transformed Africa – transformed by Christianity, by freehold property, and by commerce in exclusively non-human commodities – under the aegis of people who held contrary views.

Governor Zachary Macaulay’s reports, letters, and journals provide the fullest surviving descriptions of settler life during this period. He did not, of course, record the successes of those who fled from his policies to live at Pirates’ Bay. Perhaps his long stretches of silence about the breakaway settlement indicate that the settlers and their Temne hosts were largely successful in negotiating and accommodating one another’s ways. It is certainly true, as noted earlier, that African peoples living on the slaving coast had extensive experience of working among different legal and cultural regimes, and as Lauren Benton has shown, many peoples throughout the early modern world adapted to legal pluralism in the face of contact with different traditions. If, however, Macaulay remained silent about any of these cross-cultural successes, he did tell the Sierra Leone Company Board of Directors when problems arose, and though the problems that he recorded do not represent “normal” life, one incident provides a glimpse of the conflicts that could develop and the choices that the secessionist Nova Scotians faced as they sought to pursue their collective dreams of building communities that would civilize and transform their Promised Land.

In January 1799 Macaulay reported “extraordinary transactions” in what he disdainfully labeled the “petty Settlement in Pirates Bay.” The “Spirit of God” had come to Sally Cooper in a dream, and it told her of a “great treasure” that “lay hid in a field at a small distance from her house.” She did not tell her husband, but she mentioned her dream to Jane Marshall, her friend and neighbor, perhaps in part because Marshall’s “own father had” reportedly “found a treasure in the same way.” Cooper and Marshall went to their Methodist Class leader, America Talbot, who inspected the site but insisted that no one dig the treasure until he could inform Nathaniel Snowball, who was both their preacher and the settlement’s Governor. Snowball was traveling, and when he returned, he and Talbot dug at the appointed spot but found nothing; Jane Marshall then protested, reporting that Talbot had taken advantage of Snowball’s absence by secretly removing “the money” on the first night after she and Cooper had told him of the dream. Cooper’s husband, perhaps peeved at having been excluded for so long, demanded and got a trial, but apparently neither jury trials nor Temne trials by ordeal were the norm at Pirates’ Bay. Few suspicions were allayed.
when Governor Snowball, serving as judge, acquitted his friend Talbot. Cooper’s husband then turned to King Tom for a ruling, presumably hoping that the Temne headman would reward Sally Cooper with her rightful treasure. King Tom did not, however, choose to treat the case as a dispute between two free subjects living in a town under his jurisdiction. Instead, he seized Talbot and issued a ruling that was cleverly rooted in local notions of collective village rights: “The Money he was sure was among them. He would leave it to them to settle the individual who had it. But they must pay him jointly the sum of 700 Bars, he having a right to” forty percent of all treasure. Though he did not explain how King Tom had determined that the settlers’ treasure was worth 1,750 Bars, Macaulay thoroughly enjoyed the trouble this incident created for his antagonists at Pirates’ Bay.

Just two months later a similar clash between American experiences and African beliefs arose. Settler Frank Peters had been born near the future site of Freetown and had been sold into Atlantic slavery when young. Upon emigrating from Nova Scotia he had found his “mother and relations” and “separated himself entirely from the Colony ... resuming the Native dress manners and language.”19 It is difficult to comprehend the joy that reunions like this one must have produced — and there were several similar reunions in early Freetown. Peters’ joy proved, however, to be short-lived. Soon after he moved back to live with his kin, Prince Tom, the village headman, fell prey to malign spirits and injured himself with an axe. In keeping with his understanding of causation, he cast about for the responsible party. Frank Peters, recently returned but surely still an outsider in the village probably seemed the logical force that had disrupted the community’s harmony. He was “marked out” as “guilty” and sentenced to enslavement. Prince Tom had Peters seized, bound, and carried to the coast to be sold. Luckily, Peters’ ties to the Company frightened off European traders at Pirates’ Bay and Bunce Island, buying him time to break his fetters and make “his way into the Colony” at Freetown. For Macaulay, this story showed the colony’s anti-slave-trade credentials to advantage; he hoped that it would increase the settlers’ “distaste” for “going among the Natives.” He might have been better served had he shown some respect for the Nova Scotians or looked to change the policies that were pushing settlers out in search of alternative places to live, but both the treasure digging incident and Frank Peters’ narrow escape from re-enslavement underscore the cultural gulf that separated the black American “Africans” returning as “ransomed sinners home” from the Temne people who had long called the coast of Sierra Leone their home.

That gulf was not unbridgeable. Though we cannot be sure, it seems likely that King Tom knowingly exploited the differences between English and Temne civil law when he laid claim to 700 bars worth of the treasure that Sally Cooper dreamed. It also seems possible that Frank Peters’ escape may have been in the cards from the time Prince Tom decided that the newcomer
was responsible for the mishap with the axe; otherwise it is hard to understand why he sent those putatively trying to sell the Nova Scotian to Pirates’ Bay. Nathaniel Snowball and his followers disapproved of slavery and would not have wanted to antagonize the Company by allowing a settler to be sold from their settlement. If this is true, then Prince Tom skillfully managed to banish the malign figure from his village without seriously endangering his relationship with the Company at Freetown, as would probably have been the case had Peters been sold into the Atlantic market. Political leaders from slave trading regions had extensive experience of seeking to take advantage of the fissures created when competing cultural and judicial norms came into contact, so these Temne leaders knew how to negotiate the cultural divides separating their people and others who came to live in the region.

Africans of the diaspora also had ample experience of negotiating cultural difference. One could argue, in fact, that it is the very success with which Africans in the age of the slave trade incorporated neighbors’ traditions and accommodated to alternative political, social and cultural regimes that has helped to fuel the seemingly endless debates about the relationships among African and American cultures. The creativity with which victims of the dislocations associated with slavery adapted to new situations provides ample evidence that can be fitted into a creolization model. The creativity with which those same victims used the cultures they had inherited to reconstruct life in various new settings provides equally ample evidence for scholars inclined to trace cultures from Africa to the Americas. Perhaps the clearest symptom that this debate asks a question that makes less and less sense is the vogue for holding onto the language and assumptions of creolization, while moving the site at which it occurred from the Americas to the African littoral. As we move from teleological assumptions focused on creating a unified history of the diaspora that moves from a stable beginning and toward a recognized end – from African to African American in the classic formulation – and turn our attention instead to the ways that different people used the cultural tools at their disposal to make sense of the disruptions created by Atlantic slavery, it will become possible to ask questions rooted more deeply in our understandings of the perceptions of those who experienced the horrors of slavery.

Histories of ethnogenesis among African born and African descended peoples in the Americas suggest that many would have arrived in Sierra Leone prepared to meld their cultures and traditions with those of the Temne.

The Nova Scotians did not, however, share this openness to adaptation, because they or their parents had exercised it by converting to forms of Protestant Christianity that rejected the relativistic assumptions necessary for such adaptation. For them, the Temnes’ ways constituted a challenge to their divinely appointed mission, as can be illustrated in the dramatic build-up to their 1800 uprising against the Sierra Leone Company. By 1799 relations
between many of the Nova Scotians, the Wesleyan Methodists, in particular, and white Company officials had deteriorated to the point of no return. A significant portion of the settlers came to believe that as “Africans” who were living “in their own country,” they were free of any obligation to “obey the King and laws of England,” so they sought to achieve a formal and permanent separation from the Company. But the strategies they used and the society that they sought to build, as “Africans,” were deeply rooted in their Anglo-American experiences: they petitioned Company officials for redress of their grievances; they passed and posted written laws and declared that “all that come from Nova Scotia” would be subject to them or must “quit the place;” they defended their new system by insisting that it was “just before God and Man.” As events moved toward open rebellion, rumors began to circulate in Freetown that the “rebels” had convinced the neighboring Temne to join their attack on the town. The basis for this rumor cannot be known – two years later several refugee rebels who fled to the Temne would join their new hosts in an attack on the Colony, but we can be sure that the African community that the Nova Scotians hoped to build had little in common with the Temne communities in which the surrounding residents of Africa lived. The ransomed sinners who arrived on shore in 1792 hailed their return home, but the Temne headman’s arrival in his powdered wig and Christian pendant offered an early warning of the differences between the real place they had sailed to, and the home they had imagined would be waiting to be transformed.

It would be glib and unforgivably dismissive of the choices made by the many different peoples of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sierra Leone to claim that these incidents of misunderstanding among self-styled “Africans” from North America, English officials, and Temne long-term residents of the region surrounding Freetown set a template for the periodic discord that has arisen in Sierra Leone. Analogous rough beginnings can be found in many settler societies that became prosperous and powerful – albeit generally by marginalizing or killing off the original residents – and histories of inter-ethnic conflict are hardly limited to societies with founding stories like Sierra Leone’s. Nonetheless, it is striking that, from its origins as a British colony, Sierra Leone could be understood as a site where self-consciously enlightened visions of peaceful intercultural relations and humane commerce confronted and sometimes caused collective senses of identity and grievance that could and did erupt in violent resistance and even more violent repression.

NOTES


5 See “The List of Blacks in Birchtown who gave their names for Sierra Leone in November 1791,” http://www.blackloyalist.info/sourcedetail/display/42 (accessed 10/25/2009). It lists the places of birth of 123 heads of households who indicated interest in going to Sierra Leone. Of those, 48 (39 percent) were born in the Chesapeake, 38 (31 percent) in “Africa” (only Isaac Anderson among them was given a more specific birthplace: “Angola”), 29 were from the Carolinas (16 from “Carolina,” 12 from “Charles Town,” and 1 from “North Carolina”), and 8 were from other places that ranged from Pennsylvania and New Jersey to Bermuda and Antigua. The list only includes birthplaces for adult men, so these figures significantly overstate the number of Nova Scotians who were born in Africa, because victims of the Atlantic slave trade were disproportionately men, and because virtually all of the children who immigrated to Sierra Leone would have been American born.


7 This discussion of the Nova Scotians’ African vision is drawn from Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, esp. chapters 3 and 4 unless otherwise noted.

8 The average age of the 38 men listed as African born was 41 with a high of 70 and a low of 22. Thirty of the 38 (79 percent) were listed with ages ending in 0 or
5 (e.g. 40 or 45), so all of the information on ages should be treated as reflecting rough estimates rather than precise statistics.

Alexander X. Byrd, Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008);

10 For a moving meditation on the difficulties inherent in the modern impulse to look to Africa as homeland, see Saidiya Hartman, Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).


12 Sidbury, Becoming African in America, chapters 4 and 5 for the Baptists, Huntingdonians and Methodists in Sierra Leone. For Pybus’s black Methodists, see http://methodists.blackloyalist.info/ (accessed 1 November 2009).

13 The classic discussion of silences in the archives is Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

14 These stories are drawn from reports to the Colonial Office. See, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), CO 270/3, 5 November 1795 (settler boat); CO 268/5, Dawes to Court of Directors, 11 April 1795 (“settlers have opened a Trade with the Neighboring Rivers for Stock Rice etc.”).

15 TNA, CO 270/3, 11 December 1794 (Rio Nuñez), 21 February 1795 (ordeal by fire), 21 March 1795 (adultery); CO 270/4, 9 June and 24 June 1799 (cattle).


Macaulay, 25 February 1799, Reel 6. See F. B. Spilsbury, *Account of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa; Performed by His Majesty’s Sloop Favourite in the Year 1805* (London: Richard Phillips, 1807), 21 for more settler-African tension. A white resident described Temne life and highlighted their perceived differences from settlers in “A Letter from Africa,” Free-Town, 22 April 1796, *Evangelical Magazine* IV (1796), 421-22. David George postponed evangelizing among the Temne because they were “at war with one another though they are at peace with us” (John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register, for 1790, 1791, 1792, and part of 1793* [London: Brown, James, and Cottle, 1795], 256).

This was a form of expertise that developed throughout colonial regions; see Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures*.

Miller, “Retention, Reinvention and Remembering” is a crucial starting point. See James H. Sweet, “Mutual Misunderstandings: Gesture, Gender and Healing in the African Portuguese World,” *Past and Present* 203 (2009), 128-43, for an important exploration of the dangers to scholarship and potentially to society of anachronistic categories of analysis. For an attempt to apply some of these ideas in a way that sees cultural adaptation as a defining characteristic of Atlantic societies, see James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares Esguerra, “Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68 (2011), 181-208 and Sidbury and Esguerra, “On the Genesis of Destruction, and Other Missing Subjects,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68 (2011), 240-46.

See Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, and Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, for examples of African born captives adapting to the cultures of their African enslavers. That provides, of course, a suggestive rather than an exact analogy.

These differences are, of course, relative. See *Becoming African in America*, chapter 4 for Governor Macaulay’s conviction that the Nova Scotians were far too open to Temne ideas and forms of what he considered theological corruption.

Ludlam to Wansey and the Tythingmen, n.d. Appendix to the Minutes for the Year 1800, TNA, CO 270/5. Emphasis in original.
Chapter 8. “Dedicated to the Sound Politicians of all the Trading Nations of Europe”: Sierra Leone and the European Colonial Imagination

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Kate Hodgson

Carl Bernhard Wadström, “one of the Romantic period’s leading colonial projectors and historians of African colonization,” produced two large prints in the late eighteenth century that encapsulated his vision of Africa as it was and indicated what it could become, transformed by European investment and no longer pillaged by slave traders. The first, entitled *A View taken near Bain, on the Coast of Guinea in Affrica, Dedicated to the Feeling Hearts in all Civilized Nations*, depicts a woman outside a thatched hut, being dragged away from three small children by a group of slave traders, all armed with spears, swords and whips (Figure 8.1). In the background, an African landscape is depicted as a sweeping vista of palm trees and lush, green vegetation. The second image is entitled *A View of Joal, on the Coast of Guinea in Africa, Dedicated to the Sound Politicians of all the Trading Nations of Europe*. Two traders on horseback are dragging a slave between them in the foreground of the image, but the eye is drawn to the panoramic view behind them. A wide river runs through the scene, bordered with trees and herds of cattle grazing at the water’s edge. The town is busy and densely populated and the sea can just be glimpsed, with a ship waiting offshore. These images served both as an appeal and as an advertisement, promising a new approach to West Africa marketed at both the “feeling hearts” and the “trading nations” of Europe. Like the “Province of Freedom” plans for Sierra Leone, this combination of philanthropy and commerce was founded on pamphlets, prints and subscriptions aimed at a sympathetic abolitionist audience. Yet Wadström’s
African scheme was specifically conceived as a new form of colonization, based on cooperation rather than competition between European nations.

Figure 8.1 C.B. Wadström, *A View taken near Bain, on the Coast of Guinea in Affrica* (London: James Phillips, 1789)

Wadström travelled to the West African coast in 1787, with a view to determine where to establish a free agricultural colony. His voyage was partially funded by both Sweden and France and his first writings upon his return to Europe were published in London. This multi-national investment indicates the degree to which speculative interest in Africa was growing across late eighteenth-century Europe. During this period, colonization schemes in West Africa would revitalize interest in the cartography of the region, inspire a series of expeditions and travel narratives and prompt the foundation of geographical societies such as the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa (1788). They would also throw an unprecedented spotlight on the workings of the slave trade on the coast of West Africa. The first part of this chapter situates the foundation of the Sierra Leone settlement in 1787 within a wider European context. It examines three eighteenth-century African colonization plans by Henry Smeathman, Granville Sharp and
Carl Bernhard Wadström, following how far these plans imagined the possibility of a collaborative European colonial endeavor. It then looks in more detail at how Wadström, an “inhabitant of the glacial zone of Europe,” as he described himself, attempted to plot the colonization of West Africa along the lines of his own economic, religious and political ideals. The final part of the chapter examines how Sierra Leone was viewed from a continental European perspective, particularly in the context of renewed conflict between Britain and France. It considers how the Freetown settlement contributed to the image of Africa as a space that could be colonized within a changing British political consciousness.

In many ways, Sierra Leone can be seen as the culmination of the move towards imagining a “new Africa” that had emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, peaking with what Deirdre Coleman has described as “a torrent of utopian ideas and fantasies” in the 1780s. The African plantation had been the subject of speculation among French philosophers and economists since the mid-eighteenth century. Enlightenment theorists were beginning to re-imagine both the coast and interior of West Africa in terms of European colonial presence. The entry for Africa in Diderot’s innovative Encyclopédie suggested that: “Trade only takes place on the coasts of Africa; the interior of this part of the world is not yet well known.” The idea of expanding the British colonial presence in West Africa also gained in prominence during this period, as Malachy Postlethwayt called for Britain to take over France’s trading posts in Senegal in 1758. The coast of West Africa was considered as a potential site for penal colonies. Interest in what the geographical area could offer beyond enslaved Africans for the transatlantic trade also grew due to the research of European naturalists and scientists, and was prompted by the religious fervor of sects like the Swedenborgians, who saw the interior of Africa as a potential new Jerusalem. Surveying these European “schemes for plantations, colonies and legitimate commerce in Africa,” Christopher Brown notes that a comprehensive history has yet to be written.

The colonization of West Africa became a focus of interest for British philanthropists in the 1780s. The London Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor was founded in 1786, followed by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade the following year. Initially collecting and distributing charitable donations among the black population of the capital (many of whom were veterans of the American War of Independence) was the main activity of the Committee, but they quickly moved towards the goal of resettling their group of “Black Poor” elsewhere in the Atlantic world. They were encouraged to consider Sierra Leone by Henry Smeathman, who presented a proposal to that effect to the Committee in the summer of 1786. Although many of the committee initially favored Nova Scotia as a destination, the idea of a province of freedom in West Africa was taken up by
a number of the community leaders and potential settlers. Plans were thus engaged to commission three ships, carrying 411 settlers to West Africa in 1787. The black abolitionist Gustavus Vassa, better known later as Olaudah Equiano, was appointed as a naval commissary in charge of provisions. His account of the preparations for the departure of the first settlers highlights a number of the scheme’s flaws, most notably corruption of the agent and lack of supplies. Vassa concluded that while the expedition was “humane and politic in its design [...] there was evidently sufficient mismanagement attending the conduct and execution of it to defeat its success.”

For many eighteenth-century abolitionists, the Sierra Leone settlement was seen as an opportunity to right the wrongs that had been inflicted on Africa by the slave trade. French abolitionists such as Benjamin Frossard looked to Sierra Leone as a potential model of colonization for France to follow; there was also interest from Northern Europe, as both Sweden and Denmark were considering establishing African plantation colonies. Above all, the continued British abolitionist interest and involvement in the settlement led to the formation of the Sierra Leone Company in 1791 with a number of founding abolitionist members including Granville Sharp, Henry Thornton, William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. The image of Sierra Leone as a colonization scheme and as an eighteenth-century European abolitionist project will be the focus of this chapter, within the overall framework of political and moral considerations outlined.

Free utopian settlements or national colonies?

The main characteristic shared by all of the European colonial plans and experiments directed towards West Africa in the late eighteenth century was “the apparent lack of contact with reality,” or “at least with African reality.” In drawing up their plans for a new settlement on the Guinea or “Grain” Coast, the colonial theorists Henry Smeathman, Granville Sharp and Carl Bernhard Wadström drew broadly upon various philosophical, religious and legal theories, but as Curtin notes, applicability to the specific context of eighteenth-century coastal West Africa was not a primary concern. The three proposed settlements also shared a number of other aims - particularly the desire to avoid Crown control - which indicate that dissatisfaction with European governance was a significant factor in drawing up their plans.

Henry Smeathman published his Plan of a Settlement to be made near Sierra Leona in 1786; the first of the three plans under consideration here to appear in print. This was the culmination of years of efforts to promote his West African colonization schemes to the Swedish, the French, the Americans, or any other potential sponsor, and he complained in letters of having to take his plan “a-begging from continent to continent on uncertainties.” Smeathman first visited the coast of West Africa between 1771 and 1775 as a naturalist and spent the next decade trying to raise funds to return as a colonist. His
initial expedition was partially financed by two Quaker opponents of slavery, John Fothergill and John Lettsom, and although Smeathman himself was not a committed abolitionist, he saw the potential of encouraging philanthropists to invest in Africa. Envisaging an African commonwealth of thousands of settlers that he had redeemed from slavery every year, as well as potential black colonists from Europe and the Americas, Smeathman wrote to another Quaker:

It is then very obvious, that by a regular Code of Laws, a well concerted plan of agriculture, manufactures and commerce, and with little more money than would buy a cargo of slaves, a free commonwealth might be founded, which would be a sanctuary for the oppressed people of colour, and gradually abolish the trade in the human species.19

As well as creating a source of income, private and philanthropic sources of revenue would also allow Smeathman to operate outside of European government restrictions. He explained in a letter to Lettsom that he would “rather command one ship for a few private individuals, than ten for a state,” thus avoiding bureaucracy and the possibility of the colony being taken over by corrupt officials: “I do not see very clearly how it would be possible to preserve the liberty of those I might ransom in behalf of an European state.”20 Smeathman’s concerns here can, however, be read as an opportunist appeal to his British sponsors, based on civic pride: “if no gentleman, in your truly respectable society, will take it up, I have been advised to make overtures to a foreign power.”21 Smeathman was a salesman, first and foremost, and before his death in 1786 his motives were already a source of suspicion to the Committee.22

Smeathman and Sharp differed in their attitudes towards the slave trade, however their respective plans for the Sierra Leone settlement coincided in many ways, particularly in their stated desire to evade Crown control as far as possible but allowing for potential financial support from Government.23 Sharp’s Short sketch of temporary regulations (until better shall be proposed) for the intended settlement on the Grain Coast of Africa, near Sierra Leona, also published in 1786, was based on the Anglo-Saxon Frankpledge system, which he described as “an arrangement for securing perfect subordination, peace and good government.”24 Frankpledge, in Sharp’s eyes, would establish the colony as an idealized version of England as it could have been, a community of freeholders who were able to organize and defend themselves without the need for a dedicated police force, as existed in France and elsewhere on the continent. Despite the “Englishness” of Frankpledge, however, much of Sharp’s vision for the Sierra Leone settlement had an international character. He wished to avoid as far as possible being placed under the restrictions of a government colony, and intended for his “Province of Freedom” to be populated by a multinational and multiethnic group of settlers:
A FREE COMMUNITY hath been formed, consisting of People from various Nations, and of various complexities, from the four Quarters of the World, who distaining national prejudices, and partial “respect of persons”, have agreed to unite in BROTHERLY LOVE and to promote and maintain the just Rights of Humanity, to which, as MEN, ALL are equally entitled.

Sharp’s commitment to the international character of the Province of Freedom also encouraged him to reserve twelve plots of lands free of charge for the Swedenborgians, whom he described as “men of science and abilities.” Two of these plots were taken up by August Nordenskjöld and Adam Afzelius, who later became the colony’s mineralogist and botanist. The third colonization plan was published three years later by Wadström, Nordenskjöld and two other Swedenborgian colleagues, Johan Gottfried Simpson from Prussia and Colborn Barrell from America. They also saw the colonization of West Africa as a chance to re-invent Europe from a utopian perspective. Their collective publication, Plan for a Free Community upon the Coast of Africa, under the protection of Great Britain; but entirely independent of all European laws and governments, emphasized the idea of the free community as a new start; a way for those who might be “dissatisfied with their condition” and “agitated by a restless desire of emigrating” to escape the restrictions of their own countries and together create a new society. Like Smeathman and Sharp, the Swedenborgians were influenced by the doctrines of the Rights of Man and the American revolution, and attempted to apply these to the foundation of a new colony: “Man is born to Liberty, and according to his ability and industry, he is intitled to all the prerogatives that the Community can afford him; but Liberty is restrained.... Everyone feels a sort of Political and Economical Slavery.”

While the theories of the Swedenborgians were inspired by utopian and universal Enlightenment ideals, they were also motivated by a practical need to find financial backers for their colony. Although the original African voyage of Wadström was funded by the courts of Sweden and France, by 1789 he had begun to look towards Britain as the most likely source of income, primarily due to the precedent established by the Sierra Leone “Province of Freedom” and the existing support for philanthropic societies connected to Africa. “In the eyes of all Europe” and even according to divine Providence, the Swedenborgians flattered, Britain should now take the lead in bringing their idea of the perfect colony to fruition. The Plan described these new Enlightenment colonies as “Seminaries for the Human Race.” Using the image of the seminary as a kind of seed colony of ideas, the Swedenborgians were able to convey a religiously and agriculturally-inspired representation of the “New Africa,” which was given an idyllic echo by Wadström’s green, fertile and populous images of Bain and Joal, presumably Baine on the Sierra Leone River and Joal, to the south of Goree on the Senegal coast.
An Anatomy of a Free Community: Wadström’s perfect colony

Wadström’s images of West Africa were just one aspect of the colonization project being promoted to an elite European market in the 1780s. Members of Parliament, leading businessmen, members of the African Association, constituted the major target market in Britain for African colonization – the “Sound Politicians” to whom one print was dedicated.30 A similar tactic was employed by Wadström’s most substantial work, An Essay on Colonization, dedicated to Paul Le Mesurier, the Lord Mayor of the City of London: “in testimony of his laudable and exemplary zeal, in promoting the civilization of Africa.”31 This publication strategy was based on a commercial model of building up subscriber lists, serial publications, announcements of colored illustrations to be sold separately and advertisements.

Crucial to the plan was the economic promise of Africa, and thus the image of the West African coast that is projected to potential investors emphasizes the wide perspective of available space, easy access to rivers and shipping, as well as a large potential market for European goods and trading suggested by the illustrations of well-populated scenes. This idyll was imagined by Wadström as a direct competitor to the interests of the slave traders, portrayed in the foreground of the images of Baine and Joal. The effect of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans is portrayed in Wadström’s writings as a consistent disruption, disorder and interference with the establishment of the ordered colonial framework that he envisages for West Africa. Wadström was seeking to appeal to abolitionist “Feeling Hearts” in Europe, and the commercial viability of the enterprise had to be carefully balanced with his humanitarian ambitions. As well as London’s business elite, Wadström acknowledged the British abolitionists in his Essay on Colonization, arguing that African colonization and abolition were “friends of the same cause.” He was also careful to present his project as a complement to existing initiatives rather than competition, stressing that every new plan for colonization in Africa should “act connectedly and in harmony with the Sierra Leone Company.”32

Significantly, the humanitarian colony concept was also designed to appeal to a wider audience on the continent, and Wadström successfully sold his two-volume Essay on Colonization to individual subscribers from Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France, and beyond. Shorter works by Wadström were translated and published in both German and French in the 1790s, again indicating that “the Trading Nations of Europe” were observing African colonization plans with interest. The initial Swedenborgian Plan for a Free Community upon the Coast of Africa suggested that the experiment should be an international one, with only very loose ties to any European state, welcoming settlers from across the Atlantic world. African trade was
seen as a way of promoting “the wealth and prosperity of nations,” in the plural, rather than any one dominant colonizing nation. This internationalist perspective has been recognized in a recent special edition of the Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History with regard to the foundation of Sierra Leone. The editors suggest that “the Sierra Leone project was neither especially British nor – in any explicit sense – a work of imperial aggrandizement,” pointing not only to the Swedish contingent and the Black loyalist settlers from America, but also the provenance of the idea itself, which had been marketed in turn to a number of different European nations.

In visualizing his perfect colony, Wadström tirelessly created maps, plans, diagrams and drawings, on a scale that ranged from an outline map of the whole continent to sketches of the houses colonists would live in and the clothes they would wear. These were published in the Essay on Colonization alongside diagrams of slave ships, as he attempted to establish himself as a leading abolitionist authority on West Africa. Wadström’s images thus contributed to the idea of African colonization as a humanitarian action which was becoming implanted in European political consciousness in the late eighteenth century.

The desire to become, as the initial subtitle of the Plan for a Free Community suggests, “Intirely Independent of all European Laws and Governments” is symbolically reflected in Wadström’s diagrams, which reject existing national markers such as flags and currencies in favor of a new international humanitarian imagery. The suggested seal for the island of Bulama was the well-known abolitionist image of a kneeling supplicant slave, with the caption “Am I not a man and a brother?” The prospective colony’s currency depicts two clasped hands, one black and one white. The power of these images was already beginning to be established internationally, as Wadström points out. The ease of recognition would help to reaffirm the abolitionist credentials of the new colonies, not only in Britain, but throughout the world, despite the questionable suitability of the symbol of a chained African for a colony founded upon the principle of freedom. Wadström’s notes on the Bulama seal focus on its promotional value, as a recognizable symbol of abolitionism: “We had a considerable number of these Medals made in his beautiful composition and distributed gratis to many of the friends to this grand cause.” The modernity of this international marketing strategy extended to a new colonial initiative and to a new continent is striking.

The professed internationalism and independence of Wadström’s ideas are limited in many ways, however. Although his colony would be open to “Men, of all descriptions,” its political and judicial governance was restricted to members of the New Jerusalem Church and to those educated in England. Much of the interior order of the planned colony would thus effectively be retained under British tutelage, as a diagram of the organizational structure of the colony in Plan for a Free Community suggests:
Table 8.1 Anatomy of a Free Community

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The importance of classification and the imposition of order onto space designated as colonial by Europeans have been emphasized by Benedict Anderson in a chapter of *Imagined Communities* entitled “Census, Map, Museum.” Through differentiation and organization into units and series, Anderson explains, commercial possibilities are identified and value systems established. He compares colonial thought to a “totalising classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth.”37

Anderson’s “totalising classificatory grid” of colonial thinking is exemplified by this Swedenborgian imagined colonization project, with each square representing a governmental ministry and overall control of a significant part of the grid held by the members of the New Jerusalem Church. It could be argued that models are created through these kinds of classificatory systems, that go on to redefine structures of governance and national boundaries in both Europe and Africa, even while ostensibly trying to avoid re-creating the same European divisions within the colonized space. The eighteenth-century drive to scientifically collate, map, theorize, classify and mathematicize new territories can be seen in the headings and sub-headings of the works of Wadström and other colonial theorists of the time, for example *An Essay on Colonization*, which uses sub-headings such as “Climate, Soil and Water,” “Produce,” “Commerce” and “Health.”38

The classification systems of the late eighteenth-century colonial imagination would lead the way for nineteenth-century European imperialist expansion, and the abolitionist movement was pivotal in this shift in Africa’s position in European consciousness. The presence or absence of slave traders is used as a factor by Wadström in classifying – and rating – European nations according to the morality of their colonial interests in Africa. Thus *An Essay on Colonization*, while acknowledging the commercial origins of all established colonies, distinguishes between “those modern European colonies which have already been established, or attempted, in Africa, on the principles of commerce, and of those which are now forming on the principles of humanity.” The former are attributed to Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands and Austria; while Britain, Sweden and Denmark are credited
with the establishment of “civilizing” colonial settlements. Wadström thus lays this “classificatory grid” based on African colonial interests over the map of Europe in order to highlight certain nations for praise, and others for censure. In doing so, he contributes to what Joel Quirk and David Richardson have described as the “shifting attitudes towards slavery in Europe as part of a wider reformulation of European identity.” In the same vein as Swedenborg’s model of categorizing Africans according to geography and type, Wadström categorizes European nations according to humanitarian criteria.

Wadström’s categorizations in An Essay on Colonization are based upon a series of fine distinctions between different types of commerce and different types of colonization, which feed into his complex classificatory systems. Opposition to the transatlantic slave trade plays a central role in this systematizing colonial imagination, as do a number of other concerns. These include the promotion of agricultural labor and indenture schemes, publicity, recruitment, and public financing of the colonial project, missionaries and the promotion of Christianity beyond the coastal regions of Africa, the character of the colonial settlers, and particularly the establishment of commercial systems that would be able to replace the centrality of the slave trade to European interests in Africa. This interest in categorizing slave trading nations and civilizing nations took on its own impetus and became a central, directive force in Wadström’s thinking on colonization. Although the religious interests of the Swedenborgians were originally focused towards the interior of Africa, trading and practical concerns led Wadström to focus instead upon the emerging coastal colonies of Sierra Leone and Bulama. In his publications, he attempted to negotiate this conflict between European economic interests and his desire to create an African utopia.

The flaws and contradictions in the Swedenborgian colonization project were evident. First and foremost, their plans relied on the apprenticeship or “gentle Servitude” of African laborers, which was written into the constitution of the so-called “Free Community.” They also expected a significant level of cooperation between the different groups that had a stake in the colony, and aimed to position themselves eventually to become politically and legally free from European nations while retaining trading links with all of them, as the View of Joal suggests: “Dedicated to ... all the trading nations of Europe.” Distance – from Europe, from the slave trading areas along the coast, and from the Americas – became a crucial issue in Wadström’s writing, as he attempted to map out the situation of his imagined ideal colonies, while acknowledging in An Essay on Colonization that distance itself can prove to be misleading: “Distance, like a fog, confuses objects, and lends them a magnitude that does not belong to them.” The real magnitude of European colonial engagement made itself felt in Africa during the
revolutionary wars, as staying neutral and remaining at a political distance in the colonies became progressively more difficult.

“Mischief for mischief’s sake”: New colonization and Europe’s revolutionary wars in Africa

The period between the founding of the Sierra Leone colony in 1787 and the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 spanned two decades of intense interest in colonization along with continuing conflict between Britain and France. However, Wadström’s vision of West Africa as an international, humanitarian colonial sphere dedicated to “the Sound Politicians of all the Trading Nations of Europe” was put under strain by the revolutionary wars in the 1790s. The commercial and colonization projects that had been established in West Africa were undermined by the war, which restricted shipping access and the supply of provisions. Bulama, along with Joal and Baine, the villages pictured in Wadström’s commercial prints, were all situated between the precariously established British “Province of Freedom” at Sierra Leone and the French slave fort at Goree, on a coastline frequented by hostile slave traders, privateers and warring naval squadrons. The impact of the revolutionary wars was felt particularly strongly in Sierra Leone in September 1794, when the colony was attacked by a French squadron. This final section will examine the progression of Wadström’s theories of colonization in the context of the revolutionary war between France and Britain, as well as giving more general consideration to the impact that the Sierra Leone settlement had on European colonization schemes directed at West Africa in the 1790s.

In France, Sierra Leone had been viewed with great interest by the Society of the Friends of the Blacks since its inception. The “Province of Freedom” was referred to enthusiastically in a speech in February 1789 by the president of the Society, Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, who called for Sierra Leone to become a truly international humanitarian scheme: “The project is unfulfilled if its advantages are to be limited to such and such a Nation. In order for the establishment to keep its sublime character, its ports must be open to all Nations.” Another French abolitionist, Benjamin-Sigismond Frossard, in a speech to Parliament in 1792, encouraged France to follow Britain in investing in Africa:

Africa is closer that Asia or America. It offers incalculable resources to those who will take advantage of them; thus England has already founded establishments of this type in Guinea, especially at Sierra Leone. It is to be hoped that France will not delay in following her example.

However, initial support for Sierra Leone and enthusiasm for “sublime” African plantation schemes were quickly overtaken by the pace of events in revolutionary France, and by the outbreak of war in Europe. At the beginning of the war, following “discrete negotiations” between Girondin abolitionists
in France and the British Sierra Leone Company, Sierra Leone was designated as neutral territory. The settlement lost this protection, however, when the Girondins were defeated in the revolutionary Convention in 1793, and many abolitionists, including Brissot de Warville, were guillotined.

Sierra Leone therefore suffered a major blow in September 1794, when a French squadron attacked and ransacked the colony, destroying the company offices and much of Freetown. Eyewitness reports stated that the British colonial administration had been particularly targeted in the attack, but opinions were divided on whether it had been deliberately ordered by the French government. Some theories at the time suggested that the captain of the fleet had turned privateer and started ransacking for his own gain, that a slave ship captain with a grudge against the Sierra Leone Company had tricked him into attacking the settlement, or even that the Convention itself had been misled and was unaware of the humanitarian character of Sierra Leone. However, public opinion in Britain tended to see the attack as both informed and deliberate, viewing it as revolutionary mischief.

Although the government newspaper the True Briton initially dismissed the destruction as "no great National loss," the public outcry led them to revise their position and a week later the ransacking of Sierra Leone was described as "wanton barbarity," an "outrage against humanity" and a justification for the war against the French to continue indefinitely.

Even before the attack on Sierra Leone, the negative effect of war on European prospects for colonization had been anticipated by Wadström. In An Essay on Colonization, he took stock of the result of decades of battles between France and Britain: "these two great nations have, by their quarrels over colonies well nigh ruined one another." The high cost of political turmoil and war between the European powers supported Wadström’s conviction that some distance between the continent and his ideal African colony was necessary, or else "what such a community might build up to-day, was liable to be swept away tomorrow."

However, war also made colonies more vulnerable to attack and more in need of naval protection, as the bombardment of Sierra Leone showed.

The ability to negotiate the distance between colonizers and colonized, especially in wartime, thus, remained an unresolved problem for Wadström. He republished the Plan for a Free Community the year that war broke out in Europe, but omitted the controversial subtitle: “entirely independent of all European laws and governments,” suggesting that he was in the process of rethinking how far the ideal colony would be dependent on metropolitan government. At the same time, colonial independence was also an issue for the Bulama expedition of 1792, which ran into conflict with the British government because the settlers planned to make their own laws: “they were told that printing the constitution was a high misdemeanor, and that they
thereby had rendered themselves liable to severe punishment; that wherever they should make their settlement, there the laws of England attached.”

After the attack on Sierra Leone, Wadström moved to Paris and began lobbying the French Executive to sign a treaty with Britain against slave trading and cooperate to prevent the establishment of new slave forts in Africa by other European nations. He also asked for Sierra Leone and Bulama to be formally recognized as non-profit, philanthropic institutions, for their neutrality to be respected in future, and for the Sierra Leone Company to be compensated for losses incurred as a result of the September 1794 attack. Contradicting his previously-expressed desire to avoid government intervention, Wadström concluded by proposing that revolutionary France should become more involved with new colonization schemes and take the lead in becoming the protector of “the unhappy Africans.” In response to Wadström, the legislative assembly formed a commission to investigate his claims.

With no response from the commission, Wadström wrote again in December 1797 to the French foreign minister Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, suggesting that if both France and Britain established West African colonies and agreed to abolish the slave trade, this shared endeavor could help to rebuild relations between them, creating shared philanthropic aims and a friendly rivalry between the two powers. In exchange for cooperation in this new West African colonial sphere, he offered up the suggestion of the Cape Verde islands for France’s colonial possession.

Finally, Wadström also helped to re-launch abolitionism in France, holding the first public meeting of the new Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies (Society of Friends of the Blacks and the Colonies) in 1797. New and former members began to regroup around Wadström in Paris, including Abbé Grégoire, Benjamin Frossard and French economist Jean-Baptiste Say. The official regulations of the Society laid out its aims: to work towards the universal abolition of slave trading and slavery, to carry out “improving” works in the colonies, especially in agriculture, industry and commerce, and to found new colonies. Members of the Amis des Noirs et des Colonies saw Sierra Leone as a pioneering project for the new colonization movement, which inevitably influenced how they viewed their own mission to found new African colonies. In addition to Wadström’s publications on Sierra Leone and Bulama, an article by Abbé Grégoire, “Notice sur la Sierra-Leona,” appeared in the French revolutionary journal La Décade philosophique in 1796. Grégoire stressed the shared values of French republicanism and the Sierra Leone colony, promising that once peace had been re-established: “we will be able to more effectively prove our interest in a colony founded on the eternal principles of justice and freedom on which our republic is based.”

The incorporation of “Friends of the Colonies” into the title of the society says much about the late eighteenth-century imperialist ambitions of
France. Colonization was evolving there to become “a truly public affair.” Somewhat ironically, given his initial opposition to government involvement, Wadström’s lobbying contributed to this shift in French attitudes towards colonization, and particularly towards a growth of interest in Africa. In 1797, Talleyrand published a pro-African colonization pamphlet, entitled *Essay on the advantages to be gained from new colonies in the present circumstances.* The following year, the French commission set up to investigate Wadström’s address on Sierra Leone eventually issued a report, which considered the question: “Would it be useful for France to found new colonies?” The report noted the contemporary zeal for “conquests, crusades, travels and discoveries,” but cautioned that while colonialism was usually beneficial to countries with strong economies, France should consider its existing overseas possessions before attempting to found any new settlements. Despite this note of caution, however, the report praised the “sublime” and “generous” idea of the Sierra Leone Company, and stated that the French Republic wished the settlement every success. It concluded that in the future, France should focus its colonizing efforts towards the coast of Africa, which had the potential to become “another America.”

Wadström’s proposed division of colonial interests presided over by a European committee that would establish common principles of civilization and humanity was one of a number of solutions for a lasting peace between Britain and France being promoted at the time. Africa had already begun to be promoted in late eighteenth-century Europe as a space that was open for colonization. Growing numbers of travel narratives also contributed to the interest in African “civilization” as a common European project. As the reports of the French commission and foreign minister suggest, it was believed at the end of the eighteenth century that, freed from the disruption of the slave trade and the incursions of the revolutionary war, West Africa had the potential to become the site of profitable and peaceful colonization. After the coup of 18 Brumaire in 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte took power and France’s colonial focus shifted again - away from the idea of West African colonies, and towards Egypt, the re-establishment of slavery and the disastrous attempt to regain control in Saint Domingue. However, the concept of the humanitarian colony had been established, and would continue to be present in European consciousness of Africa into the nineteenth century.

**NOTES**

1 Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64.
This study was researched and written during a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation, University of Hull, as part of the EURESCL project (7th PCRD).


5. Philip Curtin refers to “a new attitude on the part of Europeans” towards Africa from the 1780s onwards; see The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850 (London: Macmillan, 1965), xii. Also see Coleman, Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery, 28.


8. Malachy Postlethwayt, In Honour to the Administration. The Importance of the African Expedition considered; with copies of the Memorials [...] presented to the Ministry, to induce them to take possession of the French forts and settlements in the River Senegal (London: Printed by C. Say, sold by M. Cooper, 1758).


[16] Henry Smeathman, *Plan of a Settlement to be made near Sierra Leona, on the Grain Coast of Africa*, intended more particularly for the service and happy establishment of Blacks and people of colour to be shipped as freemen, under the direction of the Committee for relieving the black poor, and under the protection of the British Government (London: Sold by T. Stockdale, G. Kearsley, and J. Sewell, 1786).


[21] “With respect to the deceased Mr. Smeathman, he had the art of telling his Story very well and represented things in the most favourable light [...] What his real Designs were when he should have landed in that Country and had nothing farther to hope and fear from the Committee, will be a subject for strong suspicion in the Breast of every Man concerned as long as they live” (Proceedings of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, 4 August 1786).

[22] In contrast to the aspirations toward self-government in plans laid out by both Smeathman and Sharp, the level of financial and organizational commitment on the part of the British government needed to make the settlement a reality was substantial, as Braidwood notes (Black Poor and White Philanthropists, 87-90).


29 Nordenskjöld, Wadström, Barrell and Simpson, Plan for a Free Community, 44. The Swedenborgian “seminary” also refers to the seed of the colonizers and the idea of population through reproduction, as Deirdre Coleman has noted. See “Bulama and Sierra Leone: Utopian islands and visionary interiors,” in Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, eds., Islands in History and Representation (London: Routledge, 2003), 63-80.


32 Wadström, Essay on Colonization, vol. 1, iii, 117.

33 Wadström, Observations on the Slave Trade, and a description of some part of the coast of Guinea (London: 1789), v.


35 Bulama was an unsuccessful island colonization project in Guinea Bissau, West Africa between 1792 and 1794, which, similarly to Sierra Leone, aimed to employ Africans as free laborers to produce goods for the European market. For an account of the attempt, which ended in the deaths of most of the settlers, see Philip Beaver, African Memoranda: Relative to an Attempt to Establish a British Settlement on the Island of Bulama, on the Western Coast of Africa, in the Year 1792. With a brief notice of the neighbouring tribes, soil, productions, &c. And some observations on the facility of colonizing that part of Africa, with a View to cultivation; and the introduction of letters and religion to its inhabitants: but more particularly as the means of gradually abolishing African Slavery (London: C. & R. Baldwin, 1805).


38 The mystic founder of the New Jerusalem church, Emanuel Swedenborg also had a vision of Africa based on abstract geometric principles, using figures such as “D E” and “D B” to designate areas of the continent, which influenced Wadström’s systems of categorization. See Swedenborg’s map of Africa in The New Jerusalem Magazine (London: Printed for the Society, 1790), 186. On Swedenborgian mysticism and Africa, see Robert W. Rix, “William Blake and Radical Swedenborgianism,” Esoterica 5 (2003), 73-94.


41 Nordenskjöld, Wadström, Barrell and Simpson, Plan for a Free Community, 50.


SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

44 Benj. Sig. Frossard à la Convention Nationale, sur l’Abolition de la Traite des Nègres, Paris le 12 décembre 1792, l’an premier de la République Française (Paris: Gueffier, 1792), 21-22. Abbé Grégoire reports that another Girondin politician, Armand de Ker显示出kint, also called the attention of the Convention Nationale to Sierra Leone in 1792, asking for a parliamentary investigation into the progress of the settlement and how France could best support it. “Notice sur la Sierra Léona,” La Décade Philosophique, Littéraire et Politique, an IV, vol. 67 (29 February 1796), 402-12.


46 These theories emerged in the press and in subsequent French publications, including Abbé Grégoire’s “Notice sur la Sierra Léona” in 1796 and Jean-Baptiste-Léonard Durand’s 1802 work on African colonization. Durand wrote that the attack was “disapproved by all reasonable Frenchmen and disavowed by the government,” Voyage au Sénégal ou Mémoires historiques, philosophiques et politiques sur les découvertes, les établissements et le commerce des Européens dans les mers de l’Océan atlantique (Paris: H. Agasse, 1802), 156. The role of the Convention in the attack has been more recently reassessed by historians such as Yves Benot, who notes that “this episode has never been convincingly elucidated” (La démente coloniale sous Napoléon, 158).

47 “The destructive Predatory excursion of the virtuous French Republicans on the coast of Sierra Leone, is in perfect consonance with the whole principle of their Rebellion. – Mischief for mischief’s sake,” “Postscript,” St. James’s Chronicle, 7 February 1795.

48 See the True Briton, 7 February 1795 and 12 February 1795. The Morning Post, however, cautioned the country against overreaction to the attack on Sierra Leone (19 February 1795).

49 Wadström, Essay on Colonization, vol. 1, 60.


51 Wadström, Plan for a Free Community at Sierra Leona, upon the Coast of Africa, under the Protection of Great Britain; with an Invitation to all Persons desirous of partaking the Benefits thereof (London: T. & J. Egerton, 1792).

52 Beaver, African Memoranda, 18.


54 Wadström, “Au citoyen Taleyrand, ministre des relations extérieures” (Paris le 17 frimaire an 6) in Précis sur l’établissement des colonies de Sierra Leona et de Boulaama à la Côte Occidentale de l’Afrique, v-ix.


56 Grégoire, “Notice sur la Sierra-Leona,” 411. Also in La Décade philosophique, see reviews of Matthews, A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leona, on the Coast of Africa, an V,
vol. 18 (20 March 1797), 536-42 and Wadström, Précis sur les colonies de Sierra-Léone, an VI, vol. 18 (20 March 1798), 525-33.


58 Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Essai sur les avantages à retirer des colonies nouvelles dans les circonstances présentes, Par le citoyen Talleyrand. Lu à la séance publique de l’Institut national le 15 messidor an 5 (Paris: Institut National, 1797). In this pamphlet, Talleyrand argues for the settlement of new African colonies, in preparation for potential losses in the Americas. These would be closer to metropolitan France, and based on more “natural” and “durable” ties.

59 Conseil des cinq-cents, Rapport au nom de la commission chargée d’examiner l’ouvrage présenté au Conseil par le citoyen Wastrom [sic], relatif à l’établissement de Sierra Léona, Boulama, et à la colonisation en général, & de quelle utilité peut être cet établissement pour le commerce français (Paris: Eschasseraux ainé, 1798), 2.

60 Conseil des cinq-cents, Rapport au nom de la commission chargée d’examiner l’ouvrage présenté au Conseil, 14-15.

61 See for example John Leyden, A Historical and Philosophical Sketch of the Discoveries and Settlements of the Europeans in Northern and Western Africa at the close of the eighteenth century (Edinburgh: J. Moir, 1799), which was translated into French in 1803, and Jean-Baptiste-Léonard Durand’s Voyage au Sénégal, as well as the travel narratives published by African explorers such as Pruneau de Pommegorge, Mungo Park and Sylvain de Golberry. The subject of the essay writing prize of the French National Institute of the Sciences and Arts in 1803-04 was “The discoveries made in Africa, by the Europeans to the end of the eighteenth century, compared with those made by the Ancients since Ptolomy,” suggesting sustained interest in African colonization projects.
Chapter 9. From Company Administration to Crown Control: Experimentation and Adaptation in Sierra Leone in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

Suzanne Schwarz

Within five months of the passage of the act to abolish the slave trade in March 1807, royal assent was given to a bill transferring Sierra Leone to British Crown control. As a result, this precocious colony on the upper Guinea coast of West Africa became intimately connected with Britain’s new-found moral imperative to impose abolition on other nations still engaged in slave trading. The hoisting of the British flag in place of the Company’s flag at Freetown on 1 January 1808 marked a new and decisive phase in British abolitionist efforts to stem the Atlantic slave trade and to establish a civil society on the West African coast which would radiate its civilizing influence across the continent. The establishment of a Vice-Admiralty Court to condemn illegal slaving vessels intercepted by royal naval patrols linked Sierra Leone directly with Britain’s new political stance on abolition, and the implementation of suppression policies over the next half century produced radical discontinuities in the size and ethnic composition of the colony’s population.

Even though there was far-reaching change in the nineteenth century, the Crown colony looked back to the eighteenth century and was heavily influenced by the abolitionist principles and ideas developed by the Sierra Leone Company. This government-chartered trading company incorporated in 1791 formed part of abolitionist attempts to dismantle the transatlantic slave system and its anti-slavery experimentation foreshadowed developments in the early years of the Crown colony. As the successor to Granville Sharp’s
short-lived “Province of Freedom,” the Company had an overt abolitionist identity and an ambitious agenda for the socio-economic reform of Africa. Yet, this formative phase of abolitionist intervention in West Africa has received comparatively little attention in historical literature, despite the insight it offers into patterns of early British anti-slavery thought.

While there is no doubt that the Company’s financial schemes had failed decisively by 1807, this should not overshadow the importance of this innovative phase of anti-slavery experimentation. Much of the literature on British anti-slavery has focused on the campaigning strategies and political tactics of abolitionists, as well as the role of popular protest in influencing the course of legislative reform. Within this broader pattern however, Company ideas and philosophy formed an integral, yet distinctive part of abolitionist campaigning strategy conducted within Africa and against a backdrop of Britain’s continuing dominance of the Atlantic slave trade. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, there was considerable optimism in abolitionist circles that Sierra Leone provided an experimental model which would demonstrate empirically that slavery need not necessarily be an essential feature of empire and that Africa’s economic future need not depend on the continuance of the slave trade.

The traditional historiographical picture emphasizes the Company’s abysmal financial and trading record, as well as the allegedly ephemeral nature of their policies and ideas. As a result, little attention has been paid to how policies developed by the Company in the late eighteenth century exerted a fundamental influence on the development of Britain’s first significant African colony. Although Sierra Leone’s new status as a Crown colony represented a significant change in legal status, the transfer was characterized at least in the short term by continuity in policies and practices on the ground in Sierra Leone. Ludlam explained to Stephen Caulker, a local slave trader, on 5 February 1808, that:

the long expected transfer of this Colony from the Sierra Leone Company to His Majesty has at length taken place. No changes will be made however in the principles on which we proceed or in our desires to obtain the friendship and good will of all around us by just & peaceable behaviour towards them.

Company ideals did not fade with the legal termination of the business enterprise. This chapter offers a re-evaluation of aspects of the Company’s legacy and the ways in which this early experiment continued to exert a considerable degree of influence on contemporary debate on Africa and abolition in the early to mid nineteenth century. Precursors of key strands of nineteenth-century abolitionist thought can be traced in Company attempts to reform economic systems in Africa through the development of what was later called “legitimate” trade. This intellectual legacy is reflected partly in the way in which ideas for the reform of Africa developed by Thomas Fowell
Buxton in the opening years of Queen Victoria’s reign bear a striking resemblance to arguments expounded in Company literature in the final decade of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} The missionary identity of the Crown colony is another area where it is possible to detect the influence of experimentation carried out during the Company’s phase of administration. Ideas of “Commerce, Civilization and Christianity” which shaped the Company’s reforming vision for Africa in the closing decade of the eighteenth century endured far beyond the formal period of its existence. After its business affairs were wound up in 1807, the Company’s ideals were promoted and transmitted through extensive personal networks of abolitionists and missionary sympathizers, as well as through the work of the influential African Institution. The continuity in personnel is also striking, as key abolitionists involved in the Sierra Leone Company continued to exert an influence in the affairs of the Crown colony after 1808.\textsuperscript{16}

The transfer of the colony to the Crown was interpreted by many contemporaries as clear evidence of the futility of Company schemes. The dramatic losses of shareholder capital, the Company’s increasingly fractured relationships with the Nova Scotian settlers, as well as the need to apply to government for financial assistance in the early nineteenth century all reinforced the impression that the Company was an unequivocal failure. On the eve of the transfer, Joseph Corry, an apologist for the slave trade, asserted that the Company had failed to achieve any of its stated objectives and that it is “a subject of great regret to the benevolent supporters of this establishment, that an unprofitable expenditure of their property is the only existing perpetuity of their humane interference.”\textsuperscript{17} The transfer of property and settlers to British government control was also interpreted by a number of opponents as damning evidence of the Company’s debacle. In a vitriolic attack on the Company and a number of its leading promoters in 1815, Dr. Robert Thorpe, appointed Chief Justice to Sierra Leone, argued that with “every plan defeated, every artifice exposed; the Company desirous of relieving themselves from the enormous expense, prevailed on government to accept a surrender of the Colony.”\textsuperscript{18} Henry Thornton, Chairman of the Court of Directors, who had strenuously resisted proposals for the colony to be abandoned, certainly did not regard the transfer to the Crown as an admission of failure. Thornton, like Granville Sharp before him, was unwilling to abandon this African experiment and saw government intervention as the basis of a secure future which would preserve the Company’s legacy in Africa.\textsuperscript{19} He had lobbied for more than five years to accomplish this transfer and had proposed as early as 1802 that the colony’s long-term survival depended on the state assuming civil and military responsibility. He attempted to add weight to these arguments by pointing to the geo-political advantages that would arise from using Sierra Leone as a naval base to protect trading routes and British influence in Africa. He argued
that “the nation which possesses Sierra Leone, may command, to a very considerable degree, the trade of a large part of Africa”, and he warned of the loss of influence that would result from abandoning the colony, as “there will be no British station between Gibraltar and the Gold Coast, and no convenient and safe British harbour between the same place and the Cape of Good Hope.”

Thornton was robust in defending the Company against charges of failure, arguing that their principles had not yet been given “fair trial” against a backdrop of sustained maritime warfare and the government’s dilatoriness in abolishing the trade. In parliamentary debate on abolition in 1804, he made clear his view that the “failure of success on the part of the Sierra Leone company” was due to extraneous factors and did not in any way invalidate its underlying principles. In his final report to shareholders in 1808, Thornton argued that “however great may have been the Company’s loss in a pecuniary view, the Directors are unwilling to admit that there has been a total failure in their main objects, or that their capital has been expended without effect.” He argued that a number of important objectives had been accomplished during their period of experimentation:

The Company have communicated the benefits flowing from a knowledge of letters, and from Christian instruction, to hundreds of negroes on the Coast of Africa; and by a careful education in this country, they have elevated the character of several of the children of African chiefs, and directed their minds to objects of the very first importance to their countrymen. They have ascertained that the cultivation of every valuable article of tropical export may be carried on in Africa; that Africans in a state of freedom are susceptible of the same motives to industry and laborious exertion which influence the natives of Europe.

Above all, Thornton was confident that they had laid the foundations of a settlement “which by the blessing of Providence, may become an emporium of commerce, a school of industry, and a source of knowledge, civilization and religious improvement, to the inhabitants of that Continent.” Thomas Clarkson also considered that the Company should not be assessed in narrow terms of its poor financial performance, as its true potential lay in its ability to act as a “medium of civilization for Africa.” The colony, in Clarkson’s view, constituted a “metropolis, consisting of some hundreds of persons, from which may issue the seeds of reformation to this injured continent.” However, it is clear that this vigorous defense of the Company’s record by its leading directors was extremely partial and selective in scope and represented their aspirations rather than their actual achievements in West Africa.

The decision to transfer the colony to Crown control was fiercely contested and reflected deep-rooted anti-abolitionist opposition to Company ideals. An article in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* of April 1830 asserted that this hostility was long-standing and could be traced back as far as the formation of the Company in 1791. The author argued that the anti-slavery
identity of the scheme “has served to imbitter [sic] hostility, to sharpen every arrow of detraction, and to give increased weight to every malignant suggestion, and to every false representation respecting this colony.”25 The persistent political lobbying of Wilberforce and Thornton over a period of more than five years undoubtedly influenced the government’s decision to assume responsibility for Sierra Leone, despite the considerable reluctance in some quarters to take on the costs and administrative burdens associated with a new area of territorial control in Africa.26 One Member of Parliament, perhaps having heard reports of local African concerns about sovereignty, argued that Britain had no right to take possession of territory surrounding Freetown and that “our endeavours to settle there, would be the means of carrying among them bloodshed and desolation.”27 In 1807, several MPs vigorously opposed the transfer on the grounds that public funds of over £100,000 had already been flagrantly wasted on the settlement.28 A familiar anti-abolitionist argument used to oppose further spending on Sierra Leone was that charity ought to begin at home and that public funds should not be used for “the support of visionary schemes of philanthropy.”29

The decision to annex appeared to turn on the moral obligation owed to fifteen hundred Nova Scotian settlers and Jamaican Maroons. Lord Henry Petty supported the transfer on the grounds that it would be “the most cruel injustice” to abandon the settlers “after the fidelity and attachment they had manifested to the British government.” One of the possible motives for accepting this new responsibility may have been Britain’s emerging self-perception as a protector of rights and liberties overseas, although other MPs reluctantly accepted this new colonial responsibility on the grounds that breaking up the colony and dispersing the settlers would prove even more costly.30 In response to a letter from Lord Liverpool dated 30 November 1811, Governor Maxwell pointed to the financial benefits of the colony:

> Neither has the Public Money (considered merely as a matter of account) by any means been expended on this Colony without a Return which deserves a much greater consideration than is generally given to it, namely, the Asylum which it has afforded to the Nova Scotians and Maroons so that they are no longer a Burthen upon the British Treasury.31

A second strand of humanitarian defense put forward to convince MPs to accept this responsibility was the idea that a British colony would be of benefit to Africa. Wilberforce and Thornton urged MPs in 1807 to keep in mind their “higher objects” of “civilizing a considerable portion of Africa.”32

In practical terms, the government inherited responsibility for a narrow stretch of territory focused on the Sierra Leone peninsula and approximately 2,000 inhabitants resident in Freetown.33 The urban infrastructure, based on a grid plan, was already well developed and included over 300 houses, a wharf and Company storehouse, a church and various other public buildings.
Defensive structures included Fort Thornton on Thornton Hill, named after the Company’s director, and a tower constructed in the design of a Martello Tower in 1805. The population of this port city was swelled by a transient element of visiting traders, including Muslims, as Freetown had developed as an important market centre attracting Africans from a hinterland stretching up to 100 miles distant. The Company report of 1804 indicated that “Freetown was at this time a place of considerable resort. It is estimated that from one to two hundred natives visited the Settlement every day for the sake chiefly of exchanging articles of African produce for British manufactures.”

The Company’s legacy to the Crown in 1808 was complex and contested, with conflicting forces and attitudes embedded in the management, structures and daily life of the settlement. Despite the colony’s declared abolitionist identity, repeated accusations of slave trading were leveled against Company employees, traders, missionaries and settlers. The issue of whether Company servants had perpetuated slavery through the use of apprenticeship for recaptives released at Freetown lay at the heart of a long running and acrimonious dispute which developed between William Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay and Thomas Perronet Thompson, the new governor of the Crown colony in 1808. The government’s cultural inheritance was also vexed. Freetown was a multi-ethnic settlement before the influx of recaptives and tensions had already developed in the interaction between Europeans, Jamaican Maroons, former slaves of African descent, and neighboring Africans.

The most problematic area of the Company’s legacy, however, lay in the breakdown of its relationship with the Nova Scotian settlers. Buxton pointed to the early “breach of faith” with the settlers linked to the failure to allocate plots of land of the size they had been promised before their arrival in Sierra Leone. The Company’s repeated failure to understand the expectations, perspectives and independent outlook of these self-liberated slaves and their desire to make their “Children free and happy” is reflected in the increasingly negative racial stereotypes adopted to characterize their behavior. The Company’s distaste for the perceived radicalism, republicanism and “unjust pretensions” of the Nova Scotians is reflected in the hostile depiction of “idle, turbulent and unreasonable” settlers who had disappointed the expectations of their sponsors. This viewpoint was restated by colonial officials in the early years of the Crown colony, as a letter in the Secretary of State’s Despatches in the Sierra Leone Public Archives referred to how the Nova Scotians had “in no degree amended the very bad habits which they brought from America, and which have as much retarded the advancement of the Colony.”

The Crown also assumed responsibility for a site where abolitionists had been experimenting for over twenty years with ways to shape a new future for Africa by eradicating the traffic in slaves and attacking the system of
plantation slavery. It was with some satisfaction, as well as misplaced optimism, that Thornton explained to Company shareholders in 1808 that the decision to establish a Vice-Admiralty Court at Sierra Leone would give “full effect to the measure for abolishing the slave trade.” From the Company’s perspective, the adoption of Macaulay’s proposal for an Admiralty prize court to condemn captured slaving vessels provided a more direct and potent method of implementing the anti-slavery principles that they had been pursuing in Sierra Leone since 1791. After 1808, and with the backing of the British parliamentary and legal system, a key difference in strategy in Sierra Leone lay in the deployment of military force to intercept illicit slaving vessels along the African coast.

Closing avenues for slave exports by intercepting vessels and blockading ports was intended to create the circumstances in which Africans would exploit the natural resources of their land and engage in legitimate trade for European goods. With the deployment of only a small number of naval vessels during a time of war, this policy had limited success in compelling Africans to halt the supply of slaves. In 1812 commissioners reported that the patrols had managed to cause sufficient “interruptions and annoyances” to disrupt slave exports from the rivers in the colony’s immediate hinterland. These interceptions displaced the trade from the immediate area of the Sierra Leone peninsula, but the astute adaptation of slave traders resulted in a shift in trade to areas north and south of the colony. As Misevich recognizes, slave dealers in their efforts to avoid capture by naval vessels “moved their operations into the swampy creeks in southern Sierra Leone, which were harder for the vessels to patrol.” When Gallinas ports were subsequently closed to slave exports, there was a further displacement to Rio Nuñez and Rio Pongo. Several governors adopted a more interventionist policy to stem the trade in the 1840s and 1850s and, shortly after, on the occasion of Prince Alfred’s visit to Sierra Leone in 1860, the Legislative Council expressed its gratitude to the Royal Navy “for the security which trade enjoys on this Coast.” The address explained that were “the Squadron cruizing in these waters withdrawn … legitimate commerce would be destroyed, and the Slave trade, now circumscribed and limited, would again be renewed and become widely extended along the Coast with all its attendant horrors.”

This enthusiastic tribute was undoubtedly a vast oversimplification, as domestic slave trafficking continued in the colony’s hinterland until the early twentieth century and legitimate commerce was, to a great extent, dependent on African slave labor. Yet, the tribute reflects a view that had emerged as a key tenet of abolitionist thought by the mid nineteenth century; the view that legitimate commerce would eradicate the slave trade and bring benefits to both Britain and Africa.

Such ideas, however, had a far longer gestation in Sierra Leone. Buxton acknowledged that Sierra Leone was one of very few areas in Africa where
discernible progress had been made in the development of legitimate trade
and agricultural cultivation. Experimentation to apply these ideas in practice
on the upper Guinea coast can be traced back to the closing decade of the
eighteenth century, as the Sierra Leone Company attempted to transform a
slave-trading society to one based on “legitimate” forms of trade, and
abolitionist, Christian and humanitarian values. A bronze medal struck to
commemorate the abolition of the trade and intended for distribution in
Sierra Leone gave visual expression to the Company’s aims of developing
European models of commerce, civilization and Christianity in Africa (see
Figure 9.1). In the foreground a European and African are shown shaking
hands, whilst in the background Africans are depicted tending the soil. The
portrayal of other Africans dancing amidst a scene of huts and palm trees is
intended to show the happy consequences that would follow from abolition.
An Arabic inscription on the reverse states that the “sale of slaves prohibited
in 1807, Christian era, in the reign of George the Third; verily we are all
brothers.” This medal, commissioned by Zachary Macaulay from the Soho
Mint in Birmingham and designed by John Phillip, was intended to dissuade
Muslim traders from the interior from bringing enslaved Africans to sell to
Europeans at the coast.

Figure 9.1 Medal Commemorating the Abolition of the Slave Trade
Within a month of the transfer of the colony to the Crown, Ludlam used his correspondence with a Muslim trader to transmit the same type of message. He explained how:

this place now belongs to the King of England … He has ordered the English to buy no more slaves: because he thinks the people of Africa will be happier in their own country, than they can be in another, and because the Headmen of this country may become very rich if they make the people work for them here, & employ them trading to the back country, instead of selling them to work for other people. If the Koran does not tell you to sell any of your prisoners to the Christians, I think Mahamamedoo never sold his slaves. He ordered his people to teach them book or to make them work and pay him tribute. I hope therefore you will encourage your people to trade, & to raise those things which we buy of them, for you know how much money my people pay every week to the canoes which come from your country.55

This message closely reflected the strategies that the Company had been using for sixteen years to persuade Africans to relinquish slave trading in favour of a “just and honourable commerce” in the agricultural commodities of Africa.56 The upright stance of an African shaking hands with a European contrasts markedly with the more usual abolitionist representation of a supplicant slave, and is suggestive of contemporary recognition of the importance of partnership in the pursuit of abolitionist goals in Africa.
The Company’s focus on the African supply side for slaves as a means of undermining the Atlantic trade was innovative and predated Buxton’s policy recommendations in *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* by almost half a century. Company promoters, however, pursued their abolitionist policies in a radically different political and legal context from that which developed after 1808. When the Company was granted its trading charter in 1791, the government refused to countenance any notion of a zone free from slave trading in and around the colony. Intense anti-abolitionist opposition from West India planters and Liverpool merchants influenced the government’s refusal to grant the Company a monopoly of trade at Sierra Leone and Company officials were required to prosecute their views of trade in full competition with slave traders. This attitude still prevailed as late as 1805. When Henry Thornton proposed to the Lords of the Committee of the Privy Council two years before the abolition of the trade that the transfer of the colony to the Crown should be accompanied by a clause “to secure the discontinuance of the Slave Trade in the Colony,” this was peremptorily dismissed on the grounds that a “positive stipulation to this effect would, on the part of the Crown, be both novel and objectionable.” Thornton’s attempt to exclude slave traders from the colony reflected his conviction that the Company’s plans had been thwarted from the outset by the continuing presence of African and European slave traders in and around Freetown. In an account of the difficulties faced by the Company written shortly after the transfer of the settlement to the Crown, William Wilberforce also insisted that the “[s]lave trade not only operated against us commercially but caused us to be surrounded with enemies both in ye persons of European slave traders and their agents but in ye native slave factors and ye chieftains also all of whom accustomed to derive the chief luxuries as well as gunpowder and firearms from slave trading…” This on-going competition obstructed their attempts to work in collaboration with Africans towards abolition, as the circumstances produced, according to Wilberforce a “general concert of ye natives against us … and obstructed our confidential intercourse with the natives.”

Even before the work of the West Africa squadron commenced, Sierra Leone had emerged as a site of contest between abolitionist and anti-abolitionist values. Macaulay, within the limits of his power, had attempted to use legal devices to interrupt the export of slaves on vessels trading at Sierra Leone during the Company phase of administration in the closing decade of the eighteenth century. Cognisant of the fact that a number of individual states of the USA had abolished the trade, Macaulay confronted the American captain of the *Katy* for illegal trading in November 1793 and threatened to inform on him unless he abandoned his trading venture. Macaulay compiled a list of all American vessels which had engaged in slave trading in Sierra Leone over the preceding twelve months and urged Thornton to dispatch this to the
American government as a basis for stopping that branch of trade entirely. In contrast to suppression policies applied in the Crown colony, Macaulay’s powerlessness to intervene directly in the liberation of slaves is revealed in a letter to his sister in 1795. He described how he went on board a slave ship where he encountered a young mother separated from her child at the Îles de Los who begged for his help to return her to her family. She pleaded “carry me back to Sierra Leone” and “I will serve you for ever, I can sew, I can wash, I can do anything.” Macaulay, who sent his sister a silver ring given to him by the woman, described how he had advised her “to be comforted a few weeks past and she w[oul]d arrive in a country where some kind master w[oul]d reconcile her to her loss, and where she w[oul]d not be likely again to be separated from her children.”

In another incident reported in 1796, Macaulay witnessed three enslaved Africans awaiting shipment. He described how their eyes were swollen “with weeping,” and that “their faces were very lively pictures of dejection.” He made no attempt to intervene to secure their release, but simply resolved to pray for them.

Lacking parliamentary sanction for abolition and without effective military means to impose their views on African and Eurafrican traders, the Company attempted to eradicate the slave trade by persuasion and example. Unable to intervene directly in the export of Africans on slave ships, Company officials attempted instead to cut off sources of slave supply through a process of economic reform. Several key strands of abolitionist thought underpinning this policy are contained in a lengthy report on the economic potential of Sierra Leone which the directors commissioned from Thomas Clarkson in 1791. Central to Clarkson’s plan was the idea that free labor in Sierra Leone could cultivate sugar and other valuable tropical commodities for export more cheaply than slave labor in the West Indies. It was envisaged that this model of free labor cultivation would provide a direct challenge to the economic logic for the export of slaves from Africa, and that plantation slavery in the colonies would eventually wither if the production of tropical commodities in Africa provided an alternative source of supply of raw materials and agricultural products to European markets. Clarkson argued that the cultivation undertaken by the Nova Scotian settlers would have the effect of stimulating agricultural production in the colony’s hinterland, thereby encouraging “the Natives in the neighborhood” to see the benefits of harnessing the natural resources of the land in place of the export of slaves.

The directors considered that the abundant natural resources of Africa were largely untapped and gave orders to employees in Sierra Leone to “set on foot a considerable sugar plantation without delay.” The Clarkson plantation on the Bullom Shore was established for the cultivation of rice and sugar in 1794 and the Company experimented with the employment of local Africans for cultivation, although whether this was really free labor as the
Company presumed is doubtful. African labor was withdrawn after a disagreement over wage levels, and the Company later admitted that appointing former slave overseers to manage these new plantations was probably a mistake. After a decade of experimentation the directors admitted that the costs of sugar cultivation were too high, although there was still considerable optimism that it would be possible to establish profitable exports of tropical products, including coffee. Undeterred by these failures in cultivation, the early years of the Crown colony witnessed attempts by the African Institution to identify a profitable alternative.

The Company was alert to the economic benefits of establishing an alternative model of commerce, and pointed out in its first published report that Africa would not only supply raw materials to support British industrialization but offered “a continually increasing market for the sale of the produce of British industry.” This idea of commercial advantage was reiterated by Buxton in his Remedy and, in common with the earlier policies of the Sierra Leone Company, he placed emphasis on how this new commercial relationship could atone for the injuries imposed upon Africans through the Atlantic slave trade. The Company report of 1791 referred to the importance of discovering “some mode of compensating to her the injuries she has so long been sustaining at our hands,” whilst Buxton commented on the “measure of atonement for the injuries we have done to her.” Company policy thereby combined an evangelical view of benevolent humanitarianism with an economic rationale for abolition.

Macaulay’s attempts to win African converts to abolition and to form partnerships based on trade in agricultural commodities with influential Africans predated European negotiations on suppression with African rulers in the later nineteenth century. African responses to Company attempts to wean them off the slave trade can be traced in Macaulay’s journals, as well as those written by John Gray and James Watt following visits to Furry Cannaba’s town in the area of the Kamaranka River in 1795. A year earlier, the Company had dispatched James Watt and Matthew Winterbottom to establish new forms of trading relationships with headmen in the Fula and Susu countries, as a means of interrupting slave supply to the Rio Pongo and Rio Nuñez. Alimamy Sadu, ruler of Fuuta Jalon at Timbo, was clearly unconvinced by Watt’s explanation of the Company’s anti-slavery policy of commerce and Christianity. When informed that the Company wished to trade in cattle, rice and ivory but not slaves, as “God said it was wrong,” he countered by questioning why “it was that every white person that comes to Africa should want slaves more than any thing else, & that we could not buy them.”

Company officials made no headway in interrupting the slave trade before 1808. This is not surprising given the difficulties of implementing suppression policies in the nineteenth century, but the Company’s attempts to
confront the weight of slave trading interests are all the more striking as they were experimenting in an area that had witnessed a massive upsurge in slave shipments in the mid to late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{75} There is no evidence to indicate that any African or Eurafrican trader abandoned slave trading as a result of the Company’s presence on the coast. Even if African traders had been susceptible to Company persuasion, the dispersed and fragmented nature of slave supply on the upper Guinea coast and the lack of a centralized system of state control were obstacles militating against success in imprinting its influence on local trading structures.\textsuperscript{76} Yet, Company policy was based on an astute understanding of the importance of African agency in slave supply and the need to secure, as Buxton later recommended, the agreement and compliance of Africans in the suppression of the trade.\textsuperscript{77}

The transfer of the colony to the Crown and the abolition of the slave trade were factors that inspired missionary societies in nineteenth-century Britain to view Sierra Leone as fertile ground for Christian preaching. Missions also formed an integral part of Company attempts to eradicate the slave trade and although most, if not all, were unmitigated failures they laid the foundations of cooperation with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and other voluntary missionary societies that was such a distinctive feature of the Crown colony. Despite considerable efforts devoted to establishing missions on the ground in Sierra Leone, no overt reference to missions was included in Thornton and Wilberforce’s public defense of the Company in the years leading up to the settlement’s transfer in 1808. The Company’s undoubted commitment to spreading the gospel of Protestant Christianity as part of a civilizing mission was not declared openly in parliamentary debate, probably because such activity was still regarded as the province of radicals and religious enthusiasts. In 1799 Macaulay was aware that the Company’s opponents wanted to “prove us visionaries, dissenters and democrats” and open support for overseas missions, associated in the popular mind with Calvinistic dissent, would have been used to ridicule their schemes.\textsuperscript{78} In his economic report, read to Company directors in 1791 and apparently not intended for wider publication, Clarkson placed emphasis on how new commercial relationships based on trade would be the means by which a “road would be opened to the Christian Missionary to lay before unenlightened Nations the Gospel of Reconciliation and Peace.”\textsuperscript{79}

In a context of growing millennial expectation, attempts to redeem perishing souls in Sierra Leone caught the evangelical imagination in Britain and America. The origins of the London Missionary Society, one of the leading voluntary societies of the Victorian period, can be traced directly to the missionary experimentation of the Reverend Melvill Horne in Sierra Leone in the early 1790s.\textsuperscript{80} Horne also exerted a significant influence on the CMS in its early formative years, and he remained a member of the Society until his death in 1841. In correspondence with the CMS in 1811 Horne
referred to the importance of maintaining a “Christian Ministry” in Sierra Leone, and his invitation to preach the anniversary sermon the same year points to his continuing influence with the Society.  

Although Horne’s mission was a total failure and he returned home after just fourteen months, his subsequent account of his experimentation in *Letters on Missions; Addressed to the Protestant Ministers of the British Churches* in 1794 inspired key missionary strategists to send candidates to Sierra Leone. News of his mission, together with reports of James Watt’s expedition to the Fuuta Jalon in 1794, influenced the London, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Baptist missionary societies to send out candidates between 1796 and 1804.  

Pioneering work on the study of African languages and the translation of the Scriptures in Sierra Leone in the late eighteenth century also inspired missionary societies with the prospect of spreading the gospel to Africa. Henry Brunton’s publications on the Susu language formed the basis for missionary planning and training of recruits by the CMS in the first decade of the nineteenth century. This initiative in Sierra Leone informed the development of the British and Foreign Bible Society and key Company figures including Sharp, Thornton, Wilberforce and Macaulay were active in promoting the work of this organization in collaboration with its founder Josiah Pratt.  

In this first phase of experimentation the colony itself was not the intended mission field as the population was already largely Christian, but in the second decade of the nineteenth century the influx of African recaptives led to a change of emphasis in missions to Sierra Leone. On the insistence of Colonel Sir Charles McCarthy, the Governor of Sierra Leone, the CMS focused on education and spiritual work among the newly arrived recaptives in the outlying colony villages rather than on their earlier plans for missions to the Susu and Fula.  

African agency was of vital importance in missionary endeavor in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone, and a large number of the “native clergy” employed in Africa by the CMS originated from Freetown and district and were educated at Fourah Bay. Prosperous Yoruba traders returning to Badagry and Abeokuta from 1838 also disseminated Christianity and the CMS mission at Abeokuta developed in response to their requests for Christian services. In 1842 Buxton proposed the establishment of a seminary in Sierra Leone to facilitate the use of African agency in the spread of civilization and Christianity to the continent. Earlier precedents of African agency in missions can be traced during the Company phase of administration, as the Nova Scotians supplied some of the earliest missionaries of African descent to neighboring Africans. Boston King explained in his memoirs in 1798 that he had been drawn to Sierra Leone by the prospect of spreading the gospel to Africans and that he had prayed for the “poor benighted heathens of that country which gave birth to my forefathers.” Company directors were hopeful that the children of the Nova Scotians could be the means by which
“some of the more distant and even of the interior parts of Africa, may one day possibly be indebted for the introduction of Christianity, for the propagation of European knowledge.’’ This was a clear precursor of the Buxtonian plan that people of African descent, including settlers from Sierra Leone, would carry “Divine truth and all its concomitant blessings into the heart of Africa.”

In the short term, the continuing influence of Company policy can be traced in the work of the African Institution in the two decades following abolition. Sierra Leone was one of the organization’s principal concerns and its influence on government extended to the selection of the Crown colony’s first governors. The first report of the African Institution provided a robust defense of the Company’s record and argued that despite the disadvantages it had faced, it had laid a firm foundation on which others could build in Africa. One of the main aims of the Institution, which also acted as a political pressure group, was to diffuse “useful knowledge” to Africans as a basis for developing their understanding of “the agricultural and commercial faculties of that vast continent.” This first report contended that the Company’s achievements had provided a “basis upon which we may proceed at once to build,” as it had demonstrated clearly the “possibility of introducing agriculture, innocent commerce, and other means of civilization into Africa.” The existing infrastructure of the colony also provided “in that centrical [sic] part of the great African continent” a place where “schools may be maintained, useful arts may be taught, and an emporium of commerce be established, by those whom our patronage may animate, or our information enable, to engage in such undertakings.” The language directly echoed the ideas of the Sierra Leone Company, as the Institution’s directors anticipated the “establishment, in the room of that traffic, by which Africa has been so long degraded, of a legitimate and far more extended commerce, beneficial alike to the natives of Africa and to the manufacturers of Great Britain and Ireland.”

This continuity in ideas and language is not surprising, as the first committee of the African Institution was comprised mainly of directors and prominent supporters of the Sierra Leone Company, including Henry Thornton, Thomas Clarkson, Joseph Hardcastle, George Harrison, William Roscoe and Granville Sharp. Macaulay was appointed Secretary, and the personal networks which sustained the Company remained central to the African Institution. Approximately one-quarter of the subscribers listed in 1807 were amongst the original shareholders in the Sierra Leone Company. Given the dramatic slide in the value of Company shares by the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is likely that the Reverend Thomas Gisborne of Lichfield lost all of the money he invested in five Company shares in 1792, but his continuing interest in abolitionist issues is reflected in his status as a subscriber to the African Institution in 1807.
Interest in promoting missions to Sierra Leone was also a central priority of the African Institution. Although the directors resolved that the Institution would not organize missions on their own account, they were supportive of the efforts of the newly formed voluntary societies. The presence of the Reverend Josiah Pratt and the Reverend John Venn, founders of the CMS, on the first committee of the African Institution points to the continuing interest in promoting missionary endeavor alongside commercial reform and civilization in Africa. Behind the scenes, Wilberforce, Macaulay and Thornton played a leading role on the committees of the newly formed missionary and Bible societies, and supported missionary ventures which used Sierra Leone as a springboard for wider activities in Africa. Josiah Pratt, Secretary of the CMS, exerted a significant personal and religious influence on Buxton and this link may again help to explain the continuing influence of the Company ideals of commerce, civilization and Christianity. Buxton’s ideas on the conduct of missions using indigenous leadership in turn influenced missionary strategy developed in the mid nineteenth century by Henry Venn and David Livingstone.

In the long term, the Company’s influence on patterns of anti-slavery thought can be traced in Buxton’s New Africa policy. This transfer of ideas is not surprising, as Buxton was in regular contact with Macaulay and Thomas Clarkson in the 1820s and 1830s through the campaign for the abolition of slavery. Buxton was clearly familiar with Macaulay’s career in Sierra Leone and in a letter dated November 1824 persuading him not to take legal action against the publication John Bull, he spoke warmly of Macaulay’s service with the Company, pointing out that “as Governor of Sierra Leone you merited and obtained the applause of all those who felt for the Negro race.” Buxton was also knowledgeable about the work of the African Institution and delivered a critical lecture to a meeting on 30 January 1821 in which he questioned whether their practice of “holding secret conversations with ministers” rather than “openly & boldly proposing our own measures to parliament and country” had retarded the cause of anti-slavery.

In June 1837 Buxton, shocked by the idea that the slave trade might be “going on worse than ever,” expressed his conviction to his brother-in-law Joseph John Gurney, that “it is possible notwithstanding all our mortifying failures still to extinguish it.” In July 1837 he restated an argument expressed frequently by abolitionists in the late eighteenth century that “the existence of the trade banishes every other trade from Africa” and that, as a result, Britain lost the benefit of a “natural and innocent commerce” with Africa. He also informed Gurney, one of the original subscribers to the Sierra Leone Company, that the continuance of the slave trade prevented the spread of civilization and religion. By 1839 he had reached the conclusion that the abolition of the trade could not be accomplished by the deployment of force alone or through the agreement of suppression treaties with European
powers. He argued that the solution lay in Africa and in convincing the African “experimentally” of “the capabilities of her soil, and the inexhaustible store of wealth which human labour might derive from its cultivation.”

In the development of his thinking on the slave trade and in the preparation of draft manuscripts of his books for publication, Buxton repeatedly sought advice from the earlier generation of abolitionists. On 16 November 1838, Buxton asked Thomas Clarkson to give his candid views on his proposed plan for trade and the encouragement of agriculture combined with missionary activity in Africa. In a lengthy letter of 26 November 1838, Clarkson provided a detailed critique of Buxton’s proposals which was informed by his knowledge of Sierra Leone Company schemes. Clarkson alluded to their shared values or “our great object … which is after all the greater desideratum, viz., the Civilization and Christianization of Africa with the spread of Agriculture and a lawful Commerce.” Clarkson considered that the proposed locations for the settlements in Africa were well-chosen and, reiterating arguments that he had presented 47 years earlier in his report to Sierra Leone Company directors, advised that Sierra Leone which opened up the opportunity of “its introducing you to the Foulahs & other populous Nations ought not to be forgotten.” Clarkson offered to send Buxton a copy of this report, stating that “I think you would be pleased to see it.” Clarkson explained that the first part of the 36-page report focused on the “Productions of Africa” whereas “the second contains the ways & means of establishing a trade in these.” Buxton also sought Clarkson’s views six months later, and in a letter of 1 July 1839 Clarkson promised to send the comments that he had made after reading the book twice over a period of six days. In his detailed response published as Appendix D to The African Slave Trade and its Remedy, Clarkson pointed to how Sierra Leone furnished “historical proofs” of the practicability of Buxton’s proposals. Clarkson also pointed to his expertise on the subject and noted how he had “studied the subject for more than half a century, and give it as my opinion that yours is the only plan that will answer.”

The research material Buxton collected indicates that he had read and taken notes from a wide range of sources on Africa, including Clarkson’s early treatises on the slave trade, the Sierra Leone Company report of 1794, and various reports of the African Institution. Based on the Company report of 1794, Buxton extracted notes to the effect that “chiefs who have acquired property by slave trade cannot promote plans for industry & reformation. Put an end to the trade & Africa shall be required to give the produce of her land & labour instead of the inhabitants in payment for the necessaries of life.” He also extracted notes from page 123 relating to the “most effectual means of promoting the Civilization of Africa,” and consulted the appendix which contained a list of the “animals, vegetables and fruits natural to the vicinity of Sierra Leone.” He also extracted extensive notes from the reports of the
African Institution, including reference to the “growing commerce of Sierra Leone with the Interior almost to the banks of the Niger.” Another entry recorded how the “possibility of introducing civilization into Africa] proved by the Sierra Leone Company – that articles from West Indies may be raised on African coast – that Negroes will work – Native chiefs may be brought to cooperate – Sierra Leone a basis on which Government may build. Schools may be maintained emporium of commerce established &c.” Buxton’s notes also include reference to how “the experiment has been first tried and proved successful in SL of introducing into Africa the British Constitution and religious instruction.” The use of language in Buxton’s Remedy also points to his detailed familiarity with the published reports of the Sierra Leone Company.

The abolitionist project attempted by the Sierra Leone Company in Africa between 1791 and 1807 spanned a pivotal phase of development in anti-slavery campaigning, ranging from the growth in popular abolitionist protest through to the political achievement of abolition and the start of Britain’s interventionist policy of slave trade suppression. The Company’s reforming vision for Africa was a clear precursor of abolitionist policies adopted in the early to mid nineteenth century, but its experimental strategy also looked back to ideas circulating in print from the 1750s by Malachy Postlethwayt and others which examined economic alternatives to the Atlantic slave trade. Most, if not all, of these earlier proposals for African reform did not get off the ground but the Sierra Leone scheme, in contrast, attempted to translate moral opinion into practical action.

In the 1790s when the Company was attempting to develop an African dimension to abolition and experimenting with ways of reforming Africa from within, these ideas were undoubtedly regarded as radical and progressive. By 1808, many of the pioneering ideas tested out by the Company were no longer considered extreme and they converged with Britain’s new political outlook on abolition. The neglect of Company’s ideas in abolitionist historiography may owe something to the fact that these ideas were subsumed so thoroughly within the policies and practices of the Crown colony. Sierra Leone may well, as Drescher argues, have disappointed the hopes of abolitionists as a “labor experiment in direct competition with West Indian slavery.” Nonetheless, the theoretical assumptions of the Company, as well as the practical experience gained in Sierra Leone, continued to influence debate in abolitionist circles on the moral, religious and economic reform of Africa in the interval between the transfer of the colony to the Crown and the publication of Buxton’s New Africa policy. The informal transference of ideas within networks of abolitionists is not always well documented, but a reference in Macaulay’s correspondence points to the continuing influence of Company ideas relating to sugar cultivation by free labor as a method of challenging plantation slavery. In May 1824 Macaulay informed his wife Selina
that “Cropper is busy drawing up his plan” for sugar cultivated by “free labour, which I have no doubt … must eventually knock slavery on the head.” Company ideas, although not accepted wholly or uncritically by Buxton in the late 1830s, were adapted and reconfigured in a post-abolitionist context. A fundamental weakness in Buxton’s approach, however, was the way in which he failed to take account of the sustained criticisms of the colony by Thomas Perronet Thompson and Robert Thorpe. The pamphlet war sparked by Thorpe in 1815 was impassioned, long-running and damaging to Wilberforce, Macaulay and Thornton, particularly as it echoed earlier criticisms of the colony made by Thompson. In reviving the ideas of the evangelical promoters of the Company, Buxton paid little heed to the views of critics with first-hand experience of colonial government in Sierra Leone. He also took no account of criticisms of Company schemes expressed by neighbouring Africans.

Attempts to establish commercial forms of agriculture in Africa as a viable alternative to the slave trade formed part of wider British efforts to reform the international economic order after 1815 and clear antecedents of “Britain’s first Development Plan for Africa” can be identified in Company policy. In the debate on the transfer of Sierra Leone to the Crown, moral arguments on the evils of the slave trade and the benefits of abolition were used to legitimize the extension of direct British government rule to this small area of African territory. Sierra Leone provides an early example of how the policy of slave trade suppression and the promotion of legitimate trade drew Europeans into greater metropolitan interference in African affairs at a time when there was only very limited colonial occupation by Europeans. This was intervention within narrow limits, however, and normally fell short of formal annexation. Sierra Leone was not intended as a foundation for the further extension of colonial rule in Africa. The establishment of Crown rule there in the early nineteenth century was undertaken with considerable reluctance by the British government in response to special pleading from the abolitionist lobby.

NOTES

1 This paper was first presented as a keynote lecture at the conference “Empire, Slave Trade and Slavery: Rebuilding Civil Society in Sierra Leone. Past and Present,” Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation (WISE), University of Hull, September 2008. The research on which this chapter is based was supported by a grant from the Scouloudi Foundation in association with the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. I am also grateful for the award of an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship at the Henry E. Huntington Library. I would like to thank Kathryn Ellis, Robin Law, Paul Lovejoy, Bruce Mouser, David Richardson and Silke Strickrodt for ideas and comments which have informed the development of this research. The
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2 Substance of the Report Delivered by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, To the General Court of Proprietors, on Thursday the 24th of March, 1808 (London: W. Phillips, 1808), 3-4.


Registers of Liberated Africans held at the Sierra Leone Public Archives record details of up to 84,307 African recaptives released at Freetown between 1808 and 1848. As a result of a British Library Endangered Archives Pilot project led by Paul E. Lovejoy, nine Registers of Liberated Africans spanning 1808 to 1819 were retraced in the Sierra Leone Public Archives after a long period of neglect. These registers record details of the names and personal characteristics of over 12,000 recaptives released by the Vice-Admiralty Court at Freetown. Sierra Leone Public Archives. Fourah Bay College, Freetown, (hereafter SLPA), Registers of Liberated Africans, 1808-1848. For a discussion of the scope and significance of these registers, see Suzanne Schwarz, “Extending the African Names Database: New Evidence from Sierra Leone,” African Economic History 38 (2010), 137-63; Suzanne Schwarz, “Reconstructing the Life Histories of Liberated Africans: Sierra Leone in the Early Nineteenth Century,” History in Africa 39 (2012), 175-209.


Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, 97-98.

SLPA, Governor’s Letter Book, 1808-1811, 13.


Drescher highlights this continuity in *Mighty Experiment*, 96-97. One of Thomas Ludlam’s first tasks in the Crown colony was to write to existing Company officials stating their new terms of appointment and salaries. On 1 January 1808, he wrote to various officials stating that “His Majestys Pleasure having been signified to me that all servants of the Company who chose it should continue to hold their present offices and situation under Government.” He also wrote to local slave traders, including William Cleveland, stating that “the Colony is now in the hands of his Majesty who has been pleased to order me to continue Governor.” The new governor of the Crown colony, Thomas Perronet Thompson, arrived in Sierra Leone to replace Ludlam just over six months later in July 1808. A letter of 1 August 1808 referred to his appointment at a salary of £2,000 per year. By 29 July 1809, he had received orders recalling him to England. SLPA, Governor’s Letter Book, 1808-1811, 1-3, 8-9, 43, 68; Michael J. Turner, “The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints and the ‘African Question’, c. 1780-1820,” *English Historical Review* 112, 446 (1997), 333.

19 Substance of the Report Delivered by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, to the General Court of Proprietors, on Thursday the 26th March, 1801 (London, W. Phillips, 1801), 34-42; Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 93, 105.
20 Substance of the Report Delivered by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, to the General Court of Proprietors, on Thursday the 29th March, 1804 (London: W. Phillips, 1804), 28-29.
26 Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 97; Drescher, Mighty Experiment, 95.
27 Parliamentary Debates, 9 July 1804, 967-68.
28 Parliamentary Debates, 29 July 1807, 1001-1002.
30 Turner, “The Limits of Abolition,” 330; Drescher, Mighty Experiment, 94; Parliamentary Debates, 29 July 1807, 1001-1006.
31 SLPA, Secretary of State Despatches, 3rd April 1809-24th November 1812.
32 Parliamentary Debates, 29 July 1807, 1002; Drescher, Mighty Experiment, 95-96.
33 A census of the population taken in October 1802 indicated that there were 1,673 inhabitants in the colony. This included 891 Nova Scotians, 515 Maroons, 92 members of the African Corps, 90 “Crewmen” or Kru, 27 Europeans, and 58 individuals described as “Dalla Moodoos People.” The National Archives (hereafter TNA), WO 1/352, War Department In-Letters and papers, iv. Sierra Leone: Sierra Leone Company.
34 Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 93-94; Peterson, Province of Freedom, 32-33.
36 Substance of the Report, 1804, 8.
39 Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 99.
The first 60 recaptives listed in the Registers of Liberated Africans were released from the French slave ship the Marie Paul, condemned at Freetown on 10 November 1808. The first recorded recaptive was Macha, a male aged 28 who was 5 feet 9¼ inches in height. SLPA, Register of Liberated Africans, 1808-1812. These were not, however, the first recaptives released in the Crown colony. See Schwarz, “Reconstructing the Life Histories of Liberated Africans,” 175-209.


SLPA, Secretary of State Despatches, 3rd April 1809-24th November 1812, 93; House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, Extracts from the Report of the Commissioners Appointed for Investigating the State of the Settlements and Governments on the Coast of Africa (1812), 3.


National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, ZBA2808 (www.nmm.ac.uk/visit/exhibitions); Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Accession Number 1885N1541.88, Medal Commemorating the Abolition of the Slave Trade 1807. This example from Birmingham is dated 1814, and was engraved by G.F. Pidgeon, www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1885N1541.88


Postscript to the Report of the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company to the General Court Held at London on Wednesday 19th of October, 1791 (London: James Phillips,
1791), 4-5; Bruce L. Mouser, “Trade, Coasters, and Conflict in the Rio Pongo from 1790 to 1808,” *Journal of African History* 14, 1 (1973), 45-64


61 HL, MY 419, Zachary Macaulay to Jean Babington, 9 February 1795.

62 HL, MY 418 (8), Journal of Zachary Macaulay, 5 April 1796.


64 British Library (hereafter BL), Add MS 12131, “Letter Addressed to the Chairman of the Sierra Leone Company by the Revd. Mr. Thomas Clarkson,” in Collection of Papers Relative to Sierra Leone, ff. 9, 12, 14, 17, 22. For a discussion of the main issues in the report and the sources consulted by Clarkson, see Schwarz, “Commerce, Civilization and Christianity,” 256-63; Schwarz, “*A Just and Honourable Commerce*,” 11-19.

65 *Postscript to the Report, 1791*, 7; Buxton also noted how “Africa possesses within herself vast, though as yet undeveloped resources,” *African Slave Trade and its Remedy*, 301.

66 Substance of the Report, 1798, 8-12; Substance of the Report, 1804, 22-23.


68 *Postscript to the Report, 1791*, 4-5.


72 BL, Add MS 12131, “Mr. Gray’s Journal in January and February 1795 to and from Furry Cannaba” and “Mr. Watt’s Journal to Furry Cannabas Between the 31st January and 11th February 1795,” in Collection of Papers Relative to Sierra Leone.


75 This contrasts with the centralized political authority in Bonny in the Bight of Biafra. See Lovejoy and Richardson, “African Agency and the Liverpool Slave Trade,” 54-56.


77 HL, MY 483, Zachary Macaulay to Selina Mills, 20 June 1799.
81 Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, General Secretary’s Department, G/AC 4, Melvill Horne to the Secretary, 14 September 1811.
82 Greville Ewing, Defence of Missions from Christian Societies to the Heathen World: A Sermon Preached Before the Edinburgh Missionary Society on Thursday, February 2, 1797 (Edinburgh, 1797), 15, 81-82.
89 Boston King, “Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher. Written by Himself During his Residence at Kingswood-School,” Methodist Magazine 21 (June 1798), 261-65.
90 Substance of the Report Delivered by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, to the General Court of Proprietors of the Sierra Leone Company on Thursday March 27th, 1794 (London: James Phillips, 1795), 68-69.
91 In November 1832 Buxton sent a circular letter to the secretaries of the missionary societies in which he referred to the establishment of a missionary college in the West Indies “for the purpose of training persons of colour as instructors to the Negroes.” RH, Buxton papers, vol. 3, 37-39; Buxton, African Slave Trade and its Remedy, 11.
94 African Institution, 1807, 50-67; Substance of the Report, 1808, 14.
96 African Institution, 1807, 74-88.
Buxton attended a “slave meeting at Brougham’s” on 8 February 1829 which was attended by Zachary Macaulay, and in December 1832 Buxton wrote to Macaulay explaining his view that “we must fight the battle with a single eye for the benefit of our clients the slaves.” RH, Buxton papers, Buxton to J.J. Gurney, 9 February 1829, vol. 2, 123-25; Buxton to Macaulay, December 1832, vol. 3, 45.

Buxton also asked James Stephen in August 1838 for criticism of his book and explained that he intended to make some changes, including reference to the value of free labor over slave labor. RH, Buxton papers, Buxton to James Stephen, 24 August 1838, vol. 17, 201-202.

For a discussion of local responses, see Schwarz, “A Just and Honourable Commerce,” 29-36.
Chapter 10. Freetown and “Freedom?”
Colonialism and Slavery in Sierra Leone,
1790s to 1861

Philip Misevich

The issue of slavery confronted Freetown officials from the time the settlement was first established under the Sierra Leone Company. In a region immersed in slave commerce, Freetown emerged as a site where slaves, masters and colonists negotiated ideas about slavery, colonialism and rights-in-people. In contrast to the late-nineteenth century, when European administrators elsewhere had more clearly defined models for dealing with abolition and its potential consequences in different settings, the foundation for Freetown’s policies toward slavery was first set by Company officials in the 1790s, when the Atlantic slave trade was in full stride. Indeed, in Britain’s effort to end the export trade in African slaves, colonists were drawn into engaging with slavery both inside and outside of Freetown. Slaves themselves often forced the issue, sensing that the British suppression movement offered them new opportunities to resist the worst aspects of their treatment and at times even challenge their status. In the Sierra Leone case, the relationship between the suppression of the slave trade, colonialism and slavery was thus time and again re-forged based on actions taken by slaves, owners and colonial governors in the first six decades of the nineteenth century.

The conflicting pressures that officials faced when dealing with African slavery and the resulting colonial (in)activity against the institution has been well detailed. This chapter refocuses the debate from official policies and legislation on slavery to an analysis of the ways that slaves exploited British opposition to the slave trade to push the slave question onto the colonial
agenda. In the first half of the nineteenth century, this generally included escaping to the colony during transport to the coast or from barracoons while awaiting shipment. However, an uprising on Bunce Island, a neighboring settlement with a long and intimate involvement in the slave trade, broadened the debate over the changing relationship between masters and slaves and more generally the position of slavery in the early colonial era. Believing that British opposition to the slave trade would prevent owners from disciplining slaves, a group of plantation laborers briefly rebelled and overtook the island in 1809 before being captured and executed.

More important for colonial officials was their concern over the circulation of young slaves into and out of Freetown. In the 1830s and again in the 1850s, administrators uncovered evidence of widespread slave use and slave dealing around the colony by both Liberated Africans and Muslim merchants. In the early 1850s, Governor Kennedy began catching and prosecuting these slave dealers. However, his efforts raised questions about whether Liberated Africans were considered British subjects, since their status was not clearly defined. Moreover, the proceedings called into question the government’s ability to prosecute individuals who committed crimes outside of Freetown. In acting against slave dealing and slave holding, colonists were thus faced with questions about the boundaries of the state itself and the identities of those living within it. In part to address some of these tensions, the government turned to a policy of annexation, adding considerable portions of Sherbro country to the colony in the early 1860s. While such actions did not resolve the related issues of slavery and the slave trade within the colony, they foreshadowed changes in official policy that would come to dominate the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Slavery, the Suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and Fugitive Slaves

Located in the midst of an active slave using and exporting region, Freetown officials faced an immediate dilemma regarding the status of interior slaves who entered the colony. Recognizing their status as slaves was against British policy and at odds with the objectives of the new settlement. But by freeing slaves who arrived in Freetown, officials put themselves at odds with the headmen among whom they settled and who supplied the colony with provisions. This tension, and a hint at the way it would be resolved, was recognized in the initial instructions from the Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, which explained that officials were “not to deliver up any persons who are slaves and [the Directors] wish no slavery to exist in the colony. But your own prudence must dictate on the spot the time, and the mode of asserting these principles, in perfect consistency with the safety of our colony.” Under these guidelines, Company directors maintained the
humanitarian aspect of their settlement while leaving officials on the ground to work out the finer details of how to put these directives into action.

When Freetown was transferred to the Crown, proclamations from government officials at home were much clearer in their opposition to slavery within the colony. Under the Sierra Leone Company Transfer Act of 1807, it was declared illegal for inhabitants to buy, sell or assist in the dealing of slaves in Freetown. However, the Act had a number of important shortcomings. For example, it left undefined the meaning of the term “inhabitant” and it was also unclear whether those subject to the new law could be punished if they were caught dealing in slaves outside of the settlement. Though concerns were not raised at the time, the unresolved questions over the scope and meaning of the Transfer Act periodically reemerged over the nineteenth century, causing headaches among officials at home and turmoil between governors, merchants, slaves and headmen in Sierra Leone.

Whatever the legislation against slavery was, of course, it was the ways that Sierra Leone governors interpreted and enforced the law that mattered. Particularly in the first few decades after Freetown was founded, when administrative infrastructure was relatively underdeveloped and government policy depended more on individuals’ personalities and inclinations, differences emerged in the enthusiasm with which Freetown’s policy makers approached slavery. Under Zachary Macaulay, who governed Freetown during part of the 1790s, opposition to slavery in the settlement was unwavering. Despite protests from a number of interior headmen who complained that their slaves were escaping into Freetown and seeking British protection, Macaulay refused to return the fugitives. In contrast, under Governor Columbine, Freetown’s policy toward slaves who absconded to the colony was briefly reversed. In an 1811 Sessional Paper, Columbine proclaimed that “the Government of Sierra Leone disclaims any such attempt to interfere with the ancient customs of Africa; and therefore any such people running away illegally from their masters and taking refuge in Sierra Leone, will be given up when properly claimed, and the right of the Master made out to the satisfaction of the Government.” Within two months, however, Columbine reversed his position and reaffirmed the government’s intentions to harbor slaves who sought British protection.

By forcing British officials to define their policies toward the status of fugitives crossing into Freetown, Sierra Leone’s slaves thrust slavery onto the colonial agenda from the end of the eighteenth century. Although the issue was fundamentally about the application of British laws within the colony, the decisions that governors made in response to absconding slaves had repercussions that extended far beyond the settlement. By taking advantage of British protection against their owners, slaves drew colonial officials into conflicts with their former owners and changed the context in which owners were able to enforce claims over their dependents. Moreover, despite the
official claim that their policies toward slavery only applied within Freetown, the migration of slaves from the Colony’s interior muddied the dichotomy between internal and external affairs, on which colonial laws were built.

The complexity of the fugitive slave issue is underscored by the case of Pa For, one of nine slaves who escaped to Freetown in the summer of 1798. Pa For was “rightfully” owned by Mr. Cleveland, a mulatto merchant located at the Banana Islands, who was at war with King Firama. A neighboring leader, King Tom, tried to take advantage of the insecurity that the conflict generated, giving notice that he would receive any slaves who voluntarily gave themselves up and that he would receive them as friends, not captives. Pa For thus put himself and his wife and family under King Tom’s protection and under his new owner he was treated kindly and given land. However, King Tom’s actions upset a number of other regional authorities who had a stake in the outcome of the war. During a visit to Robaga, one such leader, Signor Domingo, confronted King Tom and argued that many of King Tom’s slaves rightfully belonged to King Firama. Fearing for his fate under a new owner, Pa For escaped and made his way into Freetown.10

The resulting disagreement over this case included three separate claims over individuals from the interior and, as Zachary Macaulay quickly discovered, the case involved Macaulay in the intimate politics of the Colony’s hinterland. Each party used the affair to assert his influence over the others. King Tom lambasted King Firama, “who had sent these palavers to [Macaulay] without first apprizing him.”11 Banna, Firama’s deputy, replied that he had been sent to demand the return of Pa For and the others, not to “talk palaver.” For Macaulay, the case provided a chance to demonstrate Freetown’s neutrality, so he refused to give the slaves up to either party. Macaulay’s decision caused Firama to visit the settlement in person, where the headman tried a new tactic. Firama claimed that according to country law, it was not permissible to take a man’s property for nothing in return. Macaulay, however, turned the tables on the leader, citing a conversation he had several years ago with an old man named Robin Rasey who explained that according to the country laws on this matter, any slave who fled to a new owner became that person’s property.12

A deeper analysis of the above case suggests that despite their efforts, the British were unable to separate the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade from involvement in the politics of slavery itself — from many slaves’ perspectives, the phenomena were deeply intertwined. Indeed more often than not, slaves who escaped to Freetown did so upon the threat of being sold. Pa For, for example, was briefly owned as a domestic slave and fled only on hearing rumors implying that if he was sold to King Firama, he would ultimately be traded to an Atlantic slaver. In another case, a slave named Corri escaped from the Bullom Shore into the colony in 1827, where he sought British protection. Corri was initially a slave of Robanna, a headman in the
Rokelle region, from whom he ran away to Yongroo, the resident town of King George. Corri lived there until King George’s death in 1826. The relative stability that Corri enjoyed under his former owner disappeared with the leader’s death. He was thereafter constantly threatened with resale by Pa Smart, a relative of George who lived near Yongroo. After one such threat, Corri took his wife and three children and escaped with nine others to an island in the Rokelle River. Pa Smart pursued the group and recovered Corri’s wife, children and eight of the other fugitives. Corri himself avoided detection and floated into Freetown on a cork, where he was received by Government officials.  

In addition to using Freetown to avoid being sold, slaves also took advantage of growing commercial networks leading into the colony to seek protection during trade excursions. It has been thoroughly demonstrated that by the middle of the nineteenth century, slaves throughout Africa were used to carry agricultural products from the interior to the coast. Although less evidence is available on the organization of the trade in agricultural goods in the first half of the century, it is clear that slaves were also used as porters during that period. From the 1790s, southern headmen used slaves to man canoes headed into Freetown. As the Colony’s commercial significance grew throughout the region, the volume of the canoe trade increased, which brought additional slave porters into British territory. Once slaves crossed into the colony, they often exploited opportunities to seek refuge among the Liberated African population, challenging the claims that their owners held over them.

One such incident occurred in 1801, when John Cleveland, from Sherbro, entered the colony on a trading mission with a slave named Banna. Banna belonged to Mr. Andow, a slave factor at Cape Mesurado, who arranged the excursion. After completing their business, Banna refused to return with Cleveland and expressed his desire to remain in Freetown. Cleveland appealed for Banna’s return, but to no avail: colony officials explained that slavery was not recognized within Freetown and that they would allow Banna himself to choose his fate, ensuring his safety if he decided to remain in the colony. In deciding to stay, Banna strengthened the impression among interior slaves that Freetown was a site where struggles between masters and slaves might play out in favor of slaves. For those slaves who heard about the case, Banna likely inspired them to consider breaking ties with their owners should the opportunity present itself.

While the evidence is necessarily scanty, one case demonstrates the impact that the action of a few slaves could have on a master’s control over the rest of his slaves. In a memorial to the colonial Governor issued in 1820, Samuel Samo expressed his concerns over Freetown’s policy toward fugitive slaves. As a merchant with a long history of involvement in upper Guinea’s commercial affairs, Samo had an intimate knowledge of slavery in the region.
In 1797, he settled in Rio Pongo where he opened a factory and engaged in the slave trade. By 1811, he had relocated to the Îles de Los, where he received a large land grant from local leaders and purchased 100 slaves to clear the ground for cultivation. From the Îles de Los, Samo became actively involved in trade with Americans and Europeans. His increasing wealth drew the attention of Liberated Africans from Freetown, who began trading with his settlement. According to Samo, the new relationship that developed between his slaves and Sierra Leonean traders opened opportunities for several captives to escape to British territory where they received certificates of freedom, preventing them from being reclaimed. He further noted that these deserters kept in contact with his remaining slaves, encouraging them to flee. Charles MacCarthy, then Governor of Sierra Leone, had little sympathy for the merchant. Rather than condemn the Liberated Africans for their role in the affair, MacCarthy recommended that Samo indenture his remaining slaves to prevent future absconding.\(^\text{17}\)

Although slave owners had reason to be concerned over the fugitive slave issue, they were not without their own recourse in responding to the loss of their slaves. The boldest owners pursued slaves inside colonial boundaries, but this risked facing retribution from a militarily-superior British force. When a family of slaves who belonged to Wemba escaped to Freetown, he first lodged a complaint with the settlement but, according to colony officials, he failed to prove his case. Wemba therefore turned to force, sending 20 armed men to recover the family. The party broke into the fugitive family’s house in Granville Town and carried them off at night. Perhaps recognizing the danger of such a precedent, a group of Freetown inhabitants set off after Wemba’s men, catching and disarming them before they escaped from the settlement. Wemba was initially fined $100 for the incursion into British territory, but later negotiated a reduced payment of about $30.\(^\text{18}\)

Most rulers tried hard to avoid direct confrontation with the British government and instead resorted to more subtle methods to prevent the escape of their slaves. In several cases, British settlers reported that interior headmen positioned patrols just outside of the colony to capture slaves in mid-flight. In early 1827, Colonel Denham informed Governor Campbell of an “imprudent mulatto fellow,” probably from one of the Tuckers’ settlements, who had established himself in the region just south of Kent, in Freetown. Denham reported the man was placed there as a spy, passing on information about colonial developments, “as well as to entrap any domestics fleeing from the Sherbro headmen to the settlement to claim freedom.”\(^\text{19}\)

While it is thus clear that, in general, the growth of Freetown provided slaves with new opportunities to escape from their masters, it is also apparent that local, regional and international developments had an effect on when and why slaves chose to flee. In his work on colonial Mombasa, Frederick Cooper highlights the significance of transitional moments as catalysts for historical
affairs. Such turning points were also important in the development of slave flight in Sierra Leone, which did not increase in a linear path but rather changed pace depending on political occurrences in Freetown and in its hinterland. At the local level, as the slave Corri’s case demonstrates, the death of an owner was often a traumatic experience for his or her slaves, who faced the prospect of being sold and separated from family members or other slaves with whom they might have formed a bond. Warfare also undermined the relative security of slave life and increased the likelihood of running away. Regionally, slaves seem to have responded to perceived changes in the security that absconding to Freetown provided. Small numbers of slaves ran away immediately upon the establishment of the settlement and more continued to seek protection up to the proclamation of the Transfer Act. Fugitive slaves again emerged as an important issue around 1820, likely due to the increased influence of Liberated Africans in the hinterland and the worsening conditions that slaves faced as they were pushed to meet the growing demand for agricultural provisions in newly-established markets. Following Samuel Samo’s proclamation, however, the colonial government raised the issue with less frequency, suggesting that fewer slaves absconded in the 1820s.

After cooling for nearly a decade, the concern over fugitive slaves reemerged in the 1830s, this time fueled by the decisions of a succession of Freetown governors to intervene in wars in the interior. Following years of hostility between powerful families in the Rokon region, Governor Findlay secured a treaty of friendship with the parties. In the treaty, colonial officials used a new approach in trying to settle the fugitive slave question, agreeing to return runaway “domestics” – one of the first times this distinction appeared in an official document. Although the treaty was approved at the time, when a similar one was proposed in 1836 by Governor Campbell to end feuds among headmen in Magbele, British officials at home refused to ratify it, objecting to the clause binding Freetown to return runaways. As Charles Glenelg, the Secretary of State noted, “the convention is obviously formed with the intention of allowing masters of fugitive slaves to claim them as domestics and as the Municipal Law of England can allow of no such compromise between freedom and slavery, there is no alternative but to expunge the whole of the … article.”

From the perspective of the headmen, the British reversal on the decision to return fugitive slaves represented a major blow and led most of them to view the settlement with renewed suspicion. Moreover, it raised the possibility that the local rulers would retaliate against Liberated Africans traveling through their territory. Governor Doherty, who succeeded Campbell, voiced concern that the Magbele treaty “indiscreetly revived and agitated” the fugitive slave issue and recommended that future agreements exclude clauses on runaways altogether. The damage, however, seemed to be done. In 1840,
reportedly fueled by anger over the loss of their slaves, inhabitants of the Quiah country were thought to have joined with parties from the Bullom Shore to plan an attack on the colony. Although a subsequent investigation revealed that the conflict had much more diverse origins, it is interesting to note that officials immediately assumed it was rooted in concerns over slavery. By this point in the nineteenth century, control over slaves seems to have emerged as the central tension in Freetown’s relationship with the headmen of the interior.

The Bunce Island Revolt

For those slaves who remained with their masters, the British suppression effort represented an opportunity to test the rights that masters claimed over them. Although the diverse ways in which African slaves understood and employed shifts in moral opinion about the Atlantic slave trade to their own advantage remains to be explored, one dramatic occurrence in the first decade of the nineteenth century demonstrates that slaves in Sierra Leone were well aware of the suppression movement’s potential to improve their lives. Drawing their own implications about the consequences of the ending of the slave trade, a group of plantation slaves rose up and took control of Bunce Island, in the Sierra Leone estuary, for a week before the rebellion was suppressed and the ringleaders executed.

Bunce Island had been involved in supplying slaves for transatlantic vessels from the mid-1660s, when the Gambia Adventurers sublet the island from the Royal Adventurers, a chartered British merchant company. From 1672, when the settlement was taken over by the Royal African Company, it maintained its position as the British headquarters for Sierra Leone trade. After a dispute between Walter Charles, the Island’s new British governor, and an Afro-Portuguese settler, the settlement was burned down in 1728 and subsequently abandoned by the Company. Still, even in private hands, Bunce Island remained the most prominent point of slave embarkation in the Sierra Leone region throughout the eighteenth century.

In the first few decades after Freetown’s establishment, Sierra Leone’s headmen feared that the new settlement would interfere with the slaving networks that had for some time connected Bunce Island with the mainland. Colony officials tried to ease their fears by reasserting the principle of non-interference in the affairs of the interior. Governor Thompson assured the local rulers that “it was certainly open to the natives to bring down traffic of any kind which they might wish, with the single exception of bringing slaves actually into the British settlements.” As a personal favor, the governor only requested that local officials keep slave vessels docked off Leopard’s Island, well out of colonial jurisdiction.

As in the cases involving fugitives entering Freetown, however, the slaves living on Bunce Island drew an inevitable link between the suppression of the
transatlantic trade and improvements in the relationship between slaves and masters. Several slaves concluded that the end of the Atlantic slave trade would rob masters of their most potent controlling weapon – sale to New World-bound vessels. Without this crucial tool, they reasoned, owners would be unable to maintain their positions of authority. For the few slaves at Bunce Island who articulated this idea, the suppression of the slave trade represented a moment when the entire slave system might be overturned. With this in mind, a group of slaves rose up and tried to exploit the cracks they perceived to have formed in their owners’ control over them.

The rebellion began on 13 October 1809, when, according to the island’s superintendent, Samuel Walker, the settlement’s slaves began behaving in a “riotous manner.” That morning they freed one of the island’s slaves who had been previously confined as a punishment for a misdemeanor. The following day, Walker gathered his slaves and tried to identify the culprit. While standing in line, the group rose up and refused to obey any orders, quickly turning hostile and overtaking the island. Walker fled in fear and he immediately sent to Freetown for assistance, appealing to its inhabitants’ common British bonds and to their interest in preventing regional instability. Despite the contrasting ideological foundations of the two settlements, Freetown officials agreed to help, noting that “it is the duty of the government of this colony to render every possible assistance at all times to any British settlement upon the coast, and particularly to one whose interests are so closely connected by local circumstances with the welfare of this Colony as are those of the Settlement of Bunce Island.”

On 16 October, just three days after the unrest started, Thompson sent a military force to subdue the rebels. Several days later, a court martial was assembled in Freetown, which convicted 14 individuals for their involvement in the affair. Banna and Morrey, who led the rebellion, were sentenced to death; the less active participants were removed to the Gold Coast.

The Bunce Island revolt demonstrates the difficulty in distinguishing between the slave trade and slavery itself. Certainly for those on Bunce Island who risked death to challenge their masters’ authority, intervention in one sphere had important consequences for the other. Recounting the incident to the Colonial Office, Thornton explained that the revolt had arisen “from the persuasion of the inhabitants that as the abolition of the slave trade had deprived the superintendent of the island of the power of punishing acts of insubordination by selling the offender, there remained no method of enforcing subordination.” Freetown’s response to the Bunce Island rebellion is an equally telling moment for understanding Britain’s colonial objectives in the early nineteenth century. By providing assistance to Samuel Walker, the British forcibly reasserted the dichotomy between the Atlantic slave trade and African slavery.
Kidnapping, Slave Dealing and Slaveholding, 1830s to 1861

Few things illustrate the complexity of Britain’s confrontation with slavery better than the fact that slaves continued to circulate within the colony and its outskirts throughout the nineteenth century. As part of the transformation of the internal slave trade in which southern Sierra Leone slaves were transported to the peanut-producing regions north of Freetown, merchants at times entered the colony with young slaves to sell.33 On other occasions, Liberated African children were kidnapped and added to the growing number of people forcibly driven toward groundnut plantations. As with fugitive slaves, the transport of enslaved children across colonial boundaries forced Freetown officials to intervene in internal affairs. Their actions also provided slaves with new opportunities to leave their owners and seek British protection.

Although the use and trade of slaves in Freetown was not systematic in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, they did periodically emerge as problems. On two different occasions, George Nicol, a European carpenter once employed by the Company, was questioned about his role in purchasing slaves. Nicol confirmed that he did buy at least three children, but that in each case he had actually saved them from being embarked on a transatlantic vessel. Several years later, Nicol was again on the defensive for related charges, after he asked a merchant at Robanna to purchase a 7-year-old girl from Pedro Naimbanna, the town’s headman.34 As these two examples imply, however, the scope and scale of the Freetown slave trade was apparently limited during this period.

In 1830, Chief Justice Jeffcott provided the first evidence of widespread slave dealing around Freetown. After examining several years of population data, he found a large difference between the number of Liberated Africans imported into the colony and those who were counted in censuses, even when accounting for a birth-to-death ratio of seven to one.35 Despite the variety of causes that might have helped explain these discrepancies, Jeffcott immediately looked to kidnapping and enslavement, concluding that “the slave trade is either directly carried on, altho’ of course not openly and ostensibly, or that it is aided and abetted in this Colony.”36 His bold proclamation caused major concerns in Freetown and abroad. The Secretary of State formed a board of enquiry to investigate the claims and it concluded that Liberated Africans were indeed held in considerable numbers in the interior.37 Colonial officials were shocked at the extent of the trade and they began actively pursuing individuals involved in colonial slaving. Over a three-week period between January and February, they handed down 26 indictments for slave dealing.38
In pursuing suspected slave dealers who were accused of kidnapping Liberated Africans, Freetown officials were also forced to confront headmen in the interior, to whom the victims were sold. When Governor Findlay received a report that five Liberated African boys had been forcibly removed to the Lower Boom River in the Sherbro region, he dispatched a representative to demand their return. The story of these individuals underscores the complications that Freetown officials faced in navigating Sierra Leone’s internal slaving networks. The boys were first sold to Kony Tom, nephew of James Tucker, the headman of the Lower Boom. Kony Tom then transferred them to a French slave trader named Sabatier, who resided at Yealla, one of Tucker’s towns on the Boom. However, during a recent war, nearly all of Tucker’s towns were destroyed, forcing the leader to flee to Kittam. In the confusion, Sabatier made for the Gallinas to sell some of his slaves to Siaka, King of the Gallinas, but he was intercepted by Mahmadoo Seacy, one of Cleveland’s head warmen, who took the party captive. Seacy sold the Liberated Africans to a party of Susu slave traders, who took them further inland. In the end, however, Cleveland was able to track the captives down, and he released them to officials on York Island.

British excursions to the interior to recover kidnapped Liberated Africans provided the region’s slaves with new opportunities to seek protection from their masters. Some hinterland slaves simply lied about their origins. Given the rather confused records of Freetown’s population, it was not especially difficult for any slave to claim a Liberated African identity. Often, the only way an official determined whether a slave would be granted protection was if they spoke English. For example, when the condemned slave schooner Enganador arrived in Freetown in 1844, Governor Ferguson confirmed that three liberated slaves “who spoke the broken English of Sierra Leone with great fluency” were found on board.

Given the lengthy history of Britain’s commercial relations with the Sierra Leone coast, however, it is inconceivable that Liberated Africans were the only English speakers. Indeed, southern Sierra Leone’s headmen often conducted business with Freetown merchants in English themselves or through the use of English translators. By using linguistic grounds to define Liberated Africans, colony officials allowed any English-speaking slaves to submit claims for British protection. As a result, Freetown representatives who were sent to investigate the kidnapping of a small group of Liberated Africans often arrived to find a larger number of slaves who claimed colony origins. With few guidelines, officials were given wide latitude to determine who and who not to “liberate.”

Governor Doherty recognized the problems with this method of identifying Liberated Africans during one investigation in 1840. In that year, a report from Mr. Kennedy, an official in the Havana court of mixed commission, suggested that Liberated Africans were frequently found on
condemned vessels in Cuba. Kennedy mentioned in particular the case of Daniel Speck, an English-speaking captive found on a slave ship that was captured earlier in the year. Although Speck’s colonial origins were not in question, Doherty nevertheless argued that kidnapping was far less common than Kennedy claimed. Using language as a benchmark to identify Liberated African origins was a large part of the problem. Knowledge of English, Doherty insisted, could just as easily come from a temporary residence in the colony or from simply living in Freetown’s vicinity.42

Despite Doherty’s skepticism, it is clear that Liberated Africans were at times subjected to re-enslavement, particularly when they traveled outside of the colony. During the investigations that followed the condemnation of the Enganador, several slaves claimed to have been from Freetown. According to their testimony, these Liberated African subjects had been seized and sold while engaged in trading ventures in the hinterland. Tom Peters, one of the victims, noted in his deposition that he was a Sherbro man who was brought to the colony on a condemned slave vessel when he was young. After his first liberation, Peters was sent to school at York under Superintendent Pratt. Pratt wished to bring Peters to England but Peters refused and fled to Kissi, where he worked for Mahamadoo, an Aku man, as captain of his canoe. On one excursion up the Bompey River to Tiama, in Mende country, Mahamadoo sold Peters to Sanasee, Tiama’s headman, to settle a debt. From there Peters was sold to the Boom country, where he spent three months as a slave under Tayack before being taken to the Gallinas, where he was purchased by Luiz.43

Colonial officials were further outraged when the three liberated individuals provided evidence of additional atrocities committed against Elizabeth Eastman, a female recaptive who worked for Luiz as a washerwoman in southern Sierra Leone. During their detention in a barracocon at Seabar, Eastman recognized the three men from the colony. She took pity on them, bringing extra food and water. Luiz, however, found out about the arrangement. Fearing that she intended to free the captives, Luiz beat her severely in front of the men and then shackled her.44

In response to these graphic depositions, Fergusson sent Commodore Jones to meet Harry Tucker at Seabar, where Eastman was abducted. While Jones was unable to obtain immediate redress for the incident, the headmen of Sherbro and Gallinas agreed to meet and settle the affair. In June – four months after Eastman’s mistreatment was first reported – the headmen concluded their gathering, levying a fine valued at ten slaves against Harry Tucker.45 Tucker paid half the fine in goods to Sycummah, the King of Jong country, but settled the remainder with five enslaved children. The offering put the Freetown governor in an uncomfortable bind. On the one hand, the colony could not accept payment in slaves, but on the other, rejecting them meant returning the children to slavery. Governor Fergusson determined to accept the mixed payment and liberate the children.46
In addition to slave dealing and the kidnapping of Liberated Africans, Freetown officials faced the growing problem of slave use in the colony. The extent of slavery within Freetown emerged in the 1850s under Governor Kennedy, but slaves were likely used in the settlement much earlier. The secrecy of the trade was undermined only when Kennedy received assistance from Momodu Yeli, a Mandinka Muslim from Jolof country, who began testifying against several well-known slave dealers in 1852 in return for a small reward. Yeli’s support for the administration, however, came at great personal cost. In a letter of commendation to British officials at home, Kennedy warned that the informant “will never again be able to go beyond the precincts of the colony without danger and his personal safety is questionable even within it.”

Yeli’s testimony reveals an intricate slaving network which supported the circulation of slaves around the colony. The majority of incoming captives were supplied through the same route that connected southern Sierra Leone with the peanut plantations to the north. During this lengthy journey, smaller numbers of enslaved Africans were rerouted into Freetown, separated from the others who were driven further along. The organization of this trade revolved in part around the age of its victims. Young slaves were in great demand in Freetown, where they were put to work within households as domestic laborers. Because of their youth, child slaves were easily hidden from view and were also more likely to be absorbed into existing family units over time.

In many cases, however, enslaved children did not become permanent members of Freetown households but rather were sold back out of the settlement as they grew older. Given the demand for labor in the interior, slave owners in the colony could easily dispose of their maturing slaves, and they frequently did so in exchange for cattle supplied from the interior. The organization of this trade ensured a continuous cycle of alienation for the victims whom it affected, who rarely had time to acculturate into their hosts’ households. For their part, Freetown’s slave owners were primarily concerned with the impact that an extensive stay in the colony would have on the rights that slaves claimed, fearing that over time slaves would gain a sense of British customs, leading them to challenge their masters’ authority. In one case, a young slave who had been in the colony for ten years was unexpectedly sold to Susu slave dealers from Mabelly and carried by canoe to Medina. “He would have kept me,” the boy later explained, “had I not known so much English fashion,” which the owner felt would cause the boy to run.

The various “worlds” through which young slaves circulated is underscored by the case of Koota, who testified against her owners in 1853. During a war in the Mende country southeast of Freetown, Koota was sold to a Susu slave dealer who brought her to Wonkafong, where she was held in slavery for several years. Around 1850, Koota was again sold to Peter Wilson,
a Liberated African, who brought her into Freetown where she worked as a domestic for Wilson’s wife. After two years, Koota, then between 14 and 15 years old, was removed to Romatangoh, on the Bullom Shore, with a small group of enslaved children, where she was eventually freed with Momodu Yeli’s help.53

Koota’s experiences highlight the centrality of gender in the internal slave trade of nineteenth-century Sierra Leone. Slavery scholars have long recognized the high demand for female slaves in Africa, but they have disagreed over its cause. In their seminal collection of essays on African slavery, Miers and Kopytoff emphasize African women’s reproductive roles, suggesting that slaves’ primary significance was in their ability to increase the size of households. Around the same time, a generally Marxist approach to issues concerning African slavery led by Claude Meillassoux and others detailed the significant role that women played in producing agricultural commodities. More recent works have synthesized these two views, recognizing women’s productive and reproductive capacities in their discussion of African slave systems and noting that slavery varied in Africa depending on time and place.54

In Freetown, young female slaves were sought after as domestic laborers, wives and dependents. However, given the secretive context in which the colony’s slave trade operated, it is often difficult to distinguish owners’ motivations for investing in slaves. In some cases, settlers appear to have purchased girls as wives, with whom they presumably intended to have children. Other times, however, owners redefined their slaves as wives to avoid punishment from Freetown officials. In the mid-1850s, for example, Boccari Soonkonokoh asked Momodu Yeli to act as a witness for his purchase of a slave girl. He paid $16 for Phena, a Koronko girl, whose name he changed to Seerah. He kept her in the house for some time but upon hearing that he was accused of slaveholding, Soonkonokoh had his first wife remove the girl from the colony. His plan did not work; he was quickly arrested and tried for slaveholding. In his defense, Soonkonokoh first testified that he bought the girl not as a slave but only to help carry water. Later, he added that he found Phena while in Kono country, where he “fell in love with her and redeemed her for a wife.” A witness to the case confirmed that Soonkonokoh had paid kola to the girl’s previous master in the interior for her release. Even Phena herself seemed unsure of her status within the household – when asked directly she noted that she was never called a slave.55

The ambiguity in defining what constituted slavery left considerable leverage for Freetown’s governors to choose when to intervene in cases of slave dealing and slaveholding and when not. From a legal perspective, the situation should have been clear. In 1843, Britain passed legislation that made it an offense for British subjects to own or trade slaves anywhere in the world. But as with other parts of Africa under British control, colonial
administrators seemed either unaware of the magnitude of slavery within their possessions or unwilling to deal with the consequences of suppressing it. It was not until the 1850s that Freetown officials began a protracted campaign to confront slavery within their settlement.

Governor Kennedy spearheaded the mid-century movement against slaveholding, kidnapping and slave dealing in the British settlement. From the outset, Kennedy took an active stance against the movement of children throughout Freetown. During his first year as Governor, he rescued 268 children – 138 male and 130 female – including both those who were carried into the colony and some who were removed from it. His intervention uncovered a slaving network much larger than officials had anticipated. To combat the distribution of young slaves in the region, Kennedy passed a series of measures to restrict access to girls and boys and to monitor their movements within the colony. In December of 1853, he passed the “Ordinance for the better protection of Alien Children within the Colony of Sierra Leone,” which required the registration of any person under the age of 21 who entered the colony within 24 hours of their arrival. Two years later, this ordinance was amended to include a provision requiring all incoming children to attend school for four hours a day and stating that such children could not be removed without the government’s permission.56

In passing ordinances for the registration of “alien” children, Kennedy intervened in a contentious issue over which settlers, administrators and inhabitants of the interior vehemently disagreed. At the heart of the matter was how to define slavery. Some settlers argued that the children who arrived were part of extended family networks from the interior and that the adults who received incoming children played an important role in raising them. In a memorial circulated in 1854 and signed by “citizens of Freetown,” a group of settlers took a bolder approach, dismissing the notion of child slavery altogether. Kennedy’s investigations, they felt, only demonstrated that “free African children of free African parents residing in the neighboring territories are placed, in accordance with long usage, under the guardianship of their friends or connections for education and training in useful occupations.”57

Perhaps in a final effort to frighten the governor from intervention, the memorialists warned that by rescuing suspected slaves who entered Freetown, the government risked scaring away merchants and disrupting the flow of goods into the colony.

In the context of increased surveillance over the movements of Freetown’s inhabitants, the Governor also began keeping a register of fugitive slaves who escaped to Freetown. For each absconding slave, an entry was made that included name, sex, age, ethnicity and other relevant data. Until 1858, the register was not regularly maintained. Beginning that year, however, annual reports were submitted to the colonial office in which the registers were copied. Although these likely represented a small fraction of the total
numbers of slaves who escaped to the colony, their numbers still indicate a slow increase in the volume of slave flight over the decade. From just 35 recorded slaves entering the settlement in 1858, the number of runaways increased to a high of 117 the following year. Between 1858 and 1861, when colonial officials began annexing additional territory in the interior, a total of 288 fugitive slaves were recorded.58

The data suggest that during this period, slave flight was limited to those captives living within close range of the colony. Given the risks that fugitive slaves took in traveling through relatively unknown territory, this is hardly surprising. Table 10.1 demonstrates that more than four out of every ten registered fugitive slaves came from the adjacent Temne-speaking territory, in which Freetown itself was settled. The remaining fugitives were predominantly Mende and Sherbro with a small group of Koronko, Vai, Kono and others. Through the remainder of the century, however, slaves appear to have come in larger numbers from the Mende-speaking interior. Although a full analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is interesting to note that over time, the frontier from which slaves escaped in their flight to Freetown appears to have extended further inland.

Table 10.1 Fugitive Slaves Entering Freetown by Ethnicity and Gender, 1858-61

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temne</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mende</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherbro</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koronko</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colony Born</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loko</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Sierra Leone</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limba</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kono</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toma</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fula</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vai</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>167</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Register of Escaped Slaves Database, based on TNA, CO267/261, Hill to Sytton Bart, 13 July 1858; CO267/264, Fitzjames to the Duke of Newcastle, 19 August 1859; CO267/267, Fitzjames to the Duke of Newcastle, 27 August 1860; and CO267/271, Hill to the Duke of Newcastle, 18 July 1861. Five cases in which an arriving slave’s gender was unspecified are not included.
By the middle of the nineteenth century, the question of how to confront slavery in Freetown and its hinterland commanded attention at the highest levels of the colonial administration. Freetown’s governors began to understand and accept what slaves from the interior had been making clear all along – that slavery could not be isolated from the slave trade and, equally important, that migration between the colony and its interior made British policies toward slavery particularly difficult to apply. The latter issue was especially problematic as the interventionist governors of the 1850s began pursuing those responsible for the movement of slaves across colonial boundaries.

**Slave Dealing and Defining the Colonial Subject**

In the wake of the British government’s outrage over the extent of slave trading within colonial territory, Freetown governors began a more active attempt to suppress the traffic in young slaves. Those who were caught or suspected of slave dealing were tried by a Grand Jury. In two sessions in early 1853, 17 individuals were convicted. However, from Kennedy’s perspective, the juries were unreliable. Often jurors had personal or commercial relationships with those who were brought to trial. Aku jurors were particularly reluctant to rule against suspected criminals of the same ethnic background. Still determined to crush the Freetown slave trade, Kennedy passed an ordinance abolishing Grand Juries and restricted petty jurors by a property qualification. The ordinance was not well received among settlers. A group of more than 550 sent a petition in protest to the Secretary of State, which was rejected. 59

Often, however, slave dealers operated outside of the colony, entering covertly to sell or purchase small groups of young girls and boys. Many Liberated Africans were themselves implicated in the operation along with Muslim merchants from adjacent lands. 60 Although cases where slave dealers were caught inside colonial territory went directly to trial, officials were less clear about their jurisdiction in the interior. The problem stemmed from disagreements over the legal status of Liberated Africans. According to several leading legal practitioners, since Liberated Africans were never officially declared to be colonial subjects, Freetown authorities had no right to pursue them outside of the settlement. Without guidance from the British officials at home on the issue, Freetown’s government feared that the pursuit of slave dealers would reach a dead end. 61

With this in mind, successive governors sent a flurry of despatches to officials at home requesting an immediate clarification of the legal status of Liberated Africans. The resulting correspondence exposed significant differences of opinion over how to approach the issue. For administrators in Sierra Leone, the situation was dire. Governor Macdonald suggested it was necessary for an Act of Imperial Parliament to confirm Liberated Africans as
British subjects. The Secretary of State, however, dragged his feet, replying that local legislation was sufficient. Given the magnitude of the Liberated African population, Macdonald felt more decisive action was required. Moreover, many recaptives actively exploited the legal loophole. In a pointed letter to Earl Grey summarizing the problem, Macdonald noted that “We should either allow [Liberated Africans] to be amenable to country law (which in our treaties is strictly prohibited) or we should make them amenable to our own law … Liberated Africans currently claim British citizenship when it suits their interests and disown this right when it would render punishment.”

Concern over the legal status of Liberated Africans was not limited to Sierra Leone. In the late-1830s, a wave of recaptives emigrated to the Bight of Benin, where they established themselves as traders and missionaries. Decades later, around the same time when Freetown administrators were anxiously awaiting advice from the Colonial Office on the Liberated African question, officials in Lagos sought clarification on the legal status of Sierra Leone emigrants arriving in the Bight of Benin. The situation was particularly confused for the earliest arrivals, many of whom were born in the Lagos hinterland, had lived some time in Freetown after their liberation and then returned. Although the Treaty of Cession signed in 1861 declared all the city’s inhabitants “the Queen’s subjects,” this was distinct from granting them the status of British subjects. In 1865, Sir John Glover, Lieutenant-Governor of Lagos, took decisive action, determining to treat any non-“British” born inhabitants as British subjects while in the city, but remove this status if they left.

Ultimately, confronting the problem of slavery raised fundamental questions about Britain’s colonial project and forced officials at home and abroad to rethink the nature of the colonial state. Despite their intention to live in relative isolation from the people and developments of the interior, pursuing slave traders required a degree of intervention that inevitably enhanced Freetown’s position in regional affairs. It also made governors increasingly aware of the need to clarify the relationship between colonial settlers and interior settlements. Still, the Colonial Office baulked at any requests to acknowledge these needs in writing. The tension continued to play out over the status of Liberated Africans. Rather than passing an Imperial Act to clarify their legal status, as Governor Macdonald sought, the Secretary of State continued to seek solutions in local legislation. Treaties might be more carefully worded, to include “British subjects or Liberated Africans,” for example. But this, he added, required that any old treaties with interior rulers be renegotiated.

In the end, however, colony officials successfully argued that a concise definition of Freetown’s inhabitants was the only way to suppress the colonial slave trade. In August 1853, an Imperial Act was passed that made all Liberated Africans British subjects. The Act made it possible to take more
extensive actions against settlement dwellers who engaged in the slave trade. The legislation, however, raised new concerns. While it allowed Freetown’s officials to pursue suspected slave traders beyond the British border, the Imperial Act did not provide guidelines on how to negotiate with the headmen in whose territory the suspects resided. Instead, British governors used the momentum created by the Act to pursue a policy of annexation, adding new territory to expand the legal and commercial boundaries in which British rules applied.

**Slavery, the Slave Trade and Colonial Expansion**

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an increase in European competition for African agricultural products unlike any previous period in the history of Afro-European affairs. One consequence of this development was a new emphasis on European claims over land in Africa. The willingness of Europeans to increase their African landholdings, however, came slowly and at times only begrudgingly. Indeed, throughout the first forty or fifty years of the nineteenth century, officials more commonly emphasized the need to minimize their presence in Africa. In the British case, years of financial investments in their African possessions did little to enhance their profitability. Administrators still faced growing budget deficits and a deadly disease environment that proved fatal for as many as half of new arrivals.66

Moreover, the widespread use of slave labor in the interior meant that colonial expansion would require a direct confrontation with slavery and slaveholders. For much of the nineteenth century, the intimate relationship between colonization and slavery tended therefore to limit British desire to take control of any possessions beyond those that they already held. For many years, British forts along the Gold Coast were administered by councils of merchants, who permitted slaveholding and the return of fugitive slaves. In 1843, the British government took over responsibility for the settlements. To minimize their impact on commercial relations and prevent discord among interior slave owners, Britain restricted its sovereignty to the coastal forts and their immediate surroundings, classifying the remaining territory a protectorate. Although slavery was outlawed within the Gold Coast colony, officials did not disrupt slaveholding or trading in the protected zones.67

By the time the British government assumed control over the Gold Coast settlements in the 1840s, the transatlantic slave trade from the region was over. This enabled the British to frame discussions about colonial expansion in terms of interference with domestic slaveholding without having to worry about the suppression of the external slave trade. As this chapter has demonstrated, however, Freetown’s growth occurred in the context of an overlapping expansion of slave trading and local slave use. For some colonial officials in Sierra Leone, the most logical way to abolish the Atlantic slave
trade was by assuming control over larger parts of West Africa. This was particularly true in southern Sierra Leone, which was annexed briefly in the 1820s but which maintained an ambiguous position in Britain’s empire in the subsequent decades.

Colonial expansion in southern Sierra Leone began in 1825, under Governor Turner. A fierce Scottish veteran of the Peninsular War, Turner took a maverick approach to his responsibilities as governor. He was particularly concerned with his duty to suppress the Atlantic slave trade. For Turner, the solution was simple – take control over the coast where slaves were exported. In a number of despatches to the Colonial Office, Turner proposed a plan that included annexing the entire coast from Goree to Cape Mount. He was equally desirous to intervene in the wars responsible for supplying slaves. In this context, the governor sailed to Sherbro to mediate a long-standing dispute between the Caulker and Cleveland families which involved warriors from throughout the region. As part of his solution, Turner proposed a treaty that required a number of coastal headmen to give up the slave trade and cede the land between the Kamaranka River and the town of Camalay in the Lower Kittam, to which they agreed. The following year, a number of rival chiefs led by James Tucker refused to abandon the slave trade. In response, Turner led a military expedition, blockading the coast between Seabar and Cape Mount.68

Turner’s actions were not well received in London. Although the governor died shortly after his Sherbro expedition, Bathurst explained to his successor that he would not agree to “anything which might be construed into a desire of territorial aggrandizement,”69 and so he revoked Turner’s treaties of annexation. Denied this option, subsequent governors turned to a mixture of treaties of friendship, a system of distributing stipends and, on occasion, military means to enforce their authority over the Sherbro. Over time, these methods of intervention became increasingly demanding in the stipulations they included. In 1849, a number of Sherbro headmen signed a treaty that among other things required them to submit disputes to the colonial government for arbitration, whose decisions could not be challenged. In return the governor promised to protect the signatories and provide a stipend of 400 bars per year.

It is unclear, however, whether Sherbro headmen would have distinguished between the various relationships that the treaties defined. As a rule, few African leaders willingly sold the rights to their land. In a region where warfare and enslavement dominated the political landscape, treaties with Britain were valued for the protection they provided against rivals. Thus despite the government’s overturning of Turner’s treaty, many Sherbro headmen continued to apply for British military support. Ultimately, this suggests that Sherbro headmen had a very different conception of “colonization” in which control over land was not the central issue.
Indeed it was in the context of these different interpretations of colonial expansion that the British officially laid claim to parts of what became southern Sierra Leone. By the late 1850s, a number of French firms had established themselves at Bonthe to trade in palm products. After a dispute with Thomas Stephen Caulker, the French sent in a man-of-war, the Grondeur, to Bendu, which ordered Caulker to remove the fortifications surrounding his town and demanded that he sign a treaty protecting French trade. In 1858, the French returned and burned Caulker’s settlement at Bendu. In the wake of this conflict, Caulker appealed to Governor Hill in Freetown for help, offering to cede Bendu in return. He warned that the French hoped to seize this town and other parts of the Bagroo, from which timber was abundantly supplied. Hill wasted no time in dispatching a naval force to the region and ordered the acting Consul to hoist a British flag at Bendu. Later in the year, Hill formalized the cession of Bendu and Cha, adjacent to the Shebar straits, and a number of other parts of Sherbro.

The annexation of these regions was subsequently contested by groups of powerful headmen, led by William Tucker of Gbapp. They argued that the signatories to the treaty had no legitimate claims to the land they offered. According to the contesting headmen, they had no objection to putting themselves under British protection, but they were unwilling to give up their sovereignty. With little sympathy from the governor, the headmen’s protests grew more menacing. Their threats against British-controlled Bendu never materialized, however, and the Colonial Office approved the measure.

In signing new treaties of annexation in the Sherbro, Governor Hill added hundreds of square miles of territory and thousands of new Sherbro and Mende subjects. More importantly, he reintroduced the colony’s right to use annexation as a response to specific commercial circumstances – a policy dating back to Turner’s expedition to the Sherbro. Indeed, Turner’s annexation treaty featured centrally in subsequent debates over colonial boundaries. In the 1860s, a border dispute arose between officials in Freetown and Liberia which lasted nearly two decades. A Boundary Commission was established to work out the dispute, but before it met, Governor Rowe surprisingly decided to revive the 1825 treaty, asserting rights over trade in strategic parts of Turner’s Peninsula and at the mouth of the Boom. The Colonial Office confirmed the move in 1881 and approved subsequent measures to expand British colonial holdings in the following two years. By 1883, Sierra Leone had thus established control over the coast between Freetown and Cape Mount and set in motion the process for fixing permanent colonial boundaries in upper Guinea.

The impact that these measures had on slavery in southern Sierra Leone was complex. From the British perspective, having suppressed the transatlantic trade by the 1860s, they could now approach the issue of domestic slavery as one in which they did not need to intervene directly. In
support of a non-interventionist turn, reports on slavery from the 1860s thus tended to underscore the benign nature of the institution. In a despatch to the Earl of Carnarvon summarizing the position of slaves in the Sherbro, Governor Kortright explained that:

it is of a very mild form...I can scarcely accept that the people of Sherbro are unaware that it is in their power to break the chain at any time should they choose to. I believe in a majority of cases their position is voluntary. I request permission to adopt the course taken at the Gold Coast, to let it be known by proclamation that all men are free in British territory and that it is not in the power of any one to retain their services against their will.70

As they did elsewhere in Africa at this point, the British put little effort into publicizing the new rights that slaves in the region gained upon the expansion of the colonial settlement.

Not all slaves needed advising on how to use changes in control over African land to their benefit. Some began fleeing to British officials stationed in Sherbro to claim their freedom, as they had done earlier by escaping to Freetown. In other cases, slaves submitted complaints of mistreatment to officers in British Sherbro and requested them to intervene in disputes with their masters. While this did not lead to the kind of massive migration of slaves in French West Africa a quarter century later, it does suggest that slaves continued to exploit British antislavery sentiments to challenge their bonds and redefine their relationships with their masters in a changing colonial context.

Conclusion

Although British colonial officials distinguished between the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself, some enslaved Africans drew no such distinction. Indeed, in the first half of the nineteenth century, small groups of captives living in Freetown’s hinterland exploited Britain’s campaign against the Atlantic traffic to challenge the authority of their owners. In some cases, as with the revolt on Bunce Island in 1809, such confrontations turned violent. But more commonly slaves used flight or the threat of escape to negotiate new rights for themselves and their families. That some Africans used British abolitionist rhetoric to justify their actions suggests that the campaign against the slave trade had meaning for those who faced the threat of enslavement or continued enslavement.

Although comparatively few slaves took such initiatives, the actions of those who did had a significant impact on the evolution of colonialism in Sierra Leone. They forced British officials in Freetown to clarify their positions on slavery well before more widespread policies were enacted in Lagos and along the Gold Coast. More importantly, the questions surrounding slavery and slave dealing in and around Freetown pushed
officials to debate the status of Liberated Africans in the British Empire, ultimately leading to the passage in 1853 of an Imperial Act making them British subjects. Ultimately, this chapter suggests that slaves played a central role in shaping British policy toward African slavery and colonization.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank participants in the conference entitled “Empire, Slave Trade and Slavery: Rebuilding Civil Society in Sierra Leone,” hosted at the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation, for their useful feedback.


5 The tension between colonies and metropoles and the impact on the development of empires has reemerged as a theme in colonial studies over the past two decades. See, for example, the introduction and most of the chapters in Frederick Cooper and Anne Stoler, eds., Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

6 For example, TNA, CO270/3, 13 September 1794.

7 TNA, CO270/12, 26 February 1811.

8 TNA, CO270/12, 29 April 1811. Columbine noted that the earlier proclamation was misconstrued but does not provide a specific reason for the change in policy. It is likely, however, that his previous statement was considered dangerously close to accepting slavery within British territory.

9 A point more generally made in Miers and Klein, Slavery and Colonial Rule, 6, but for later in the century.

10 TNA, CO270/4, 16 July 1798.

11 TNA, CO270/4, 16 July 1798.

12 TNA, CO270/4, 9 August 1798. Macaulay often used statements from elderly inhabitants to bolster his arguments about country law. In this case he also cited conversations with Mr. Aspinall, a merchant in the Scarcies, and Mr. Richards of Bunce Island, who both confirmed his position on fugitive slaves. Macaulay also appealed to King Firama’s practical side, asking whether, in the reverse case, if a
group of Temne slaves from Firama’s settlement escaped to Freetown, should they be returned to Mr. Cleveland, a Sherbro man? Fyfe alludes to Macaulay’s use of country law against Sierra Leone’s headmen. See Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 54.

13 TNA, CO267/81, Reffell to Campbell, 23 February 1827.


16 TNA, CO270/6, 11 September 1801.

17 Samo’s memorial appears in TNA, CO267/52, Individuals, Samo to Bathurst, “The Memorial of Samuel Samo, of Factory Island, One of the Iles de Los – on the Western Coast of Africa – Merchant.” MacCarthy’s reply is in TNA, CO267/51, MacCarthy to Henry Eonlburn, 30 September 1820.

18 Substance of the Report, Delivered, by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, to the General Court of Proprietors, on Thursday the 29th March, 1798 (London: Printed by James Phillips & Son, 1798), 32.

19 TNA, CO267/81, Campbell to Hay, March (N.D.), 1827.


21 Estimations of the fugitive slave population are difficult before the 1850s. No official statistics were kept. It is likely that somewhere between 10 and 25 slaves arrived at the Colony seeking British protection each year over the first few decades of the nineteenth century. In 1840, Governor Doherty noted that 41 slaves had sought refuge in Freetown over the previous three years: 22 men, 11 women and 8 children. See TNA, CO267/159, Doherty to Russell, 22 April 1840.

22 TNA, CO267/140, enclosure in Campbell to Bart, 21 November 1837. For the context of the Magbele and Rokon conflicts and subsequent British intervention, see Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 185-186 and 206.

23 TNA, CO267/159, Doherty to Russell, 22 April 1840; TNA, CO267/159, Doherty to Russell, 29 July 1840.

24 In one of the few major works dedicated to African strategies against the slave trade, no contributions specifically address the impact of the suppression movement on African resistance to the slave trade. See Sylviane A. Diouf, Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003). A number of rebellions did take place among slaves in the Sierra Leone

25 Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, 4-5. For a first-hand account of Bunce’s destruction, see TNA, T70/1465, which includes Walter Charles’s diary and minutes of transactions up to the point of the attack.


27 TNA, CO267/27, Thornton to Castlereagh, 4 February 1810.

28 Thompson made this request to avoid accusations of supporting the slave trade from agents of the Sierra Leone Company whom, he claimed, considered him their enemy. See TNA, CO267/27, Thornton to Castlereagh, 4 February 1810.

29 TNA, CO267/27, Thornton to Castlereagh, 4 February 1810.

30 TNA, CO267/27, Thornton to Castlereagh, 4 February 1810.

31 The majority of documents on the Bunce Island revolt are in TNA, CO270/11, 14 October 1809 and its enclosures. See also TNA, CO267/28, Walker to Thompson, 4 November 1809. The revolt is briefly noted in Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, 108.

32 TNA, CO267/27, Thornton to Castlereagh, 4 February 1810.

33 See Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City*, 163-89, for the enslavement of children around Lagos. Victims of the internal and external slave trade appear to have become younger throughout Africa in the nineteenth century. Though causes for this are not well understood, a new collection of essays on children in slavery over time provides several new perspectives. See Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller, eds., *Children in Slavery through the Ages* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009).

34 TNA, CO267/24, 29 August 1808 and 14 September 1808. See also [Review of the Trials of the Slave Traders, Samuel Samo, Joseph Peters, and William Tufft: Tried in April and June 1812, before the Hon. Robert Thorpe, L.L.D…: with two letters on the slave trade/from a gentleman resident at Sierra Leone, to an advocate for the abolition in London (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1813).

35 Jeffcott later admitted to miscalculating this ratio, although it was still found that nearly 3,000 Liberated Africans were unaccounted for once a more accurate one was used. TNA, CO267/109, Findlay to Goderich, 29 June 1831 and enclosures.

36 TNA, CO267/109, Findlay to Goderich, 29 June 1831 and enclosures.
The investigation also noted that Sherbro and Mende slaves, whose homelands were nearer to the Colony, returned home in small numbers, accounting for some of the difference in population figures. One witness testified that as many as 500 Liberated Africans were enslaved in the Mandingo country alone. Another believed that 250 had been sent to the Rio Pongo and Gallinas regions over the previous three years. See enclosure 3 in TNA, CO267/109, Findlay to Goderich, 29 June 1831.

TNA, CO267/105, Murray to Findlay, 15 May 1830.

Enclosure 1 in TNA CO267/103, Findlay to Hay, 17 July 1830. It is interesting to note that unlike other British colonies later in the century, Freetown officials seemed to pursue slave dealers with vigor. For the inactivity of colonial regimes against slave dealing, see Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City*, 179-80. More broadly, see Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


TNA, CO267/260, Doherty to Russell, 18 October 1840.

TNA, CO267/187, Fergusson to Stanley, 15 February 1845 and enclosures.

Ibid.

Slaves, in this case, were a unit of value similar to the “bar” trade in upper Guinea. By levying a fine in slaves, it did not necessarily mean it was paid with the transfer of human beings but rather that the value of the fine was determined against the cost of a slave. On the bar trade, see Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa; Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 312; and Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, 9. John Grace provides a similar example of a slave as a unit of currency in *Domestic Slavery*, 13.

TNA, CO267/187, Fergusson to Stanley, 15 February 1845; and enclosure in ibid, Fergusson to Stanley, 16 June 1845.

Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, 270-72, briefly mentions Yeli’s role in undermining the colony’s slave trade. For additional detail, see TNA, CO267/229, Kennedy to Parkington, 23 December 1852. For the quote, see Kennedy to Parkington, 6 January 1853, in *British Parliamentary Papers, Slave Trade* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968), vol. 90, 343.

On the organization of the trade and its relationship to the broader transformation of the internal slave trade, see TNA, CO267/231, Kennedy to the Duke of Newcastle, 14 March 1853. For a similar treatment of Lagos’s concerns toward the use of slave children, see Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City*, 163-78.

TNA, CO267/229, Kennedy to Pakington, 23 December 1852; TNA, CO267/234, Kennedy to the Duke of Newcastle, 9 December 1853.

The impact of such constant movement must have been similar to the “institutionalization of marginality” described by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff. See the introduction in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery*
**FREETOWN AND “FREEDOM?” COLONIALISM AND SLAVERY IN SIERRA LEONE**


52 The idea that the slave trade spanned a number of “worlds” comes from Robert Harms, *The Diligent: A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

53 See enclosures in TNA, CO267/233, Kennedy to the Duke of Newcastle, 18 July 1853.


55 TNA, CO267/233, Enclosure 7 in Kennedy to the Duke of Newcastle, 18 July 1853.

56 TNA, CO879/1, African, XXVI, Memoranda on the British Settlements on the West Coast of Africa,” 15-16, summarizes the context of the ordinances. For the individual passage of each one, see TNA, CO267/234, Kennedy to the Duke of Newcastle, 9 December 1853; and TNA, CO267/249, Hill to Labouchere, 18 December 1855. Similar ordinances were passed in Lagos, but not until 1877. See Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City*, 182-183.

57 TNA, CO267/239, Kennedy to the Duke of Newcastle, 10 February 1854.

58 Each record has been entered into a dataset covering the period between 1858 and 1894; see Appendix. The annual lists for the period between 1858 and 1861 can be found in TNA, CO267/261, Hill to Sytton Bart, 13 July 1858; CO267/264, Fitzjames to the Duke of Newcastle, 19 August 1859; CO267/267, Fitzjames to the Duke of Newcastle, 27 August 1860; and CO267/271, Hill to the Duke of Newcastle, 18 July 1861.


60 See Misevich, “On the Frontier of Freedom,” chapter 4, for the relationship between Islam and the slave trade in Freetown and its hinterland. Colonial governors generally identified slave dealers as Susu or Mandinke. Whether the slave dealers would have given themselves these labels is open to debate. The significant point here is that they were identified with Islam.
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

61 British Parliamentary Papers, Slave Trade, vol. 90, 331, Macdonald to Earl Grey, 10 August 1851 and reply.
64 British Parliamentary Papers, Slave Trade, vol. 90, 340, Macdonald to Pakington, 14 June 1852.
66 Philip D. Curtin, “Epidemiology and the Slave Trade,” Political Science Quarterly 82, 2 (1968), 190-216. In the Freetown case, naval officers also complained that the settlement was too far removed from the major sources of slave supply in the Bight of Benin and Biafra. This often resulted in high rates of mortality during voyages returning captured vessels to Freetown for trial in the court of mixed commission. A brief effort to transfer the courts and suppression apparatus to Fernando Po ultimately failed. See Robert T. Brown, “Fernando Po and the Anti-Sierra Leone Campaign, 1826-1834,” International Journal of African Historical Studies 6, 2 (1973), 249-64; David Northrup, “African Mortality in the Suppression of the Slave Trade: The Case of the Bight of Biafra,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 9, 1 (1978), 47-64.
69 Quoted in Fyfe, History of Sierra Leone, 159.
70 TNA, CO879/8, African Number 82, Part I, Kortright to the Earl of Carnarvon, 28 June 1875.
Chapter 11. La Amistad’s “Interpreter” Reinterpreted: James “Kaweli” Covey’s Distressed Atlantic Childhood and the Production of Knowledge about Nineteenth-Century Sierra Leone

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Late 1839 Josiah Willard Gibbs found himself wandering Manhattan’s waterfront, the length of the East River from the Fulton “Slip” to the Battery. “For two days he wandered … looking for colored men who would respond to his raised fingers and careful counting: eta, fili, kiau-wa…. Everywhere he met incomprehension, or laughter from Negroes proud of their ability to speak English.” At Staten Island’s quarantine station he held aloft one finger and shouted “eta,” whereupon “the word brought the Negroes running to the rail.” Among the more serendipitous aspects of William Owens’ offensive imagining of the “discovery interview” – a breakthrough for La Amistad’s captives – was Gibbs’ stumbling upon “Mendi-speaker” James Covey. This “ecstatic first meeting,” further mythologized by Steven Spielberg, is littered with journalistic conventions associated with historical nonfiction. But this ahistorical artistic creation distorts Covey’s personal journey of childhood understanding toward adolescence and adult self-liberation.

Kaweli, also known as James B. Covey, was born about 1825-26 to parents living in the forested southwestern uplands, where today Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia meet. In infancy they relocated to the southeastern Moa River valley. At five or six he was kidnapped and sold to a Bullom headman in approximately 1827-29. After three years he was resold to a European. From a coastal barracoon he became part of an illegal slave
shipment in 1833. The Royal Navy captured his ship, and Covey was transferred to the Church Missionary Society (CMS). After five years in school, he joined the crew of HMS *Buzzard* in 1838. In 1839, while the *Buzzard* was in New York, he met Gibbs of Yale Divinity School, who engaged him as interpreter for *La Amistad*’s captives. After his detention under subpoena in the United States, he returned to Freetown with the freed survivors of *La Amistad*. He worked at the Union Missionary Society mission and was also engaged in the slave trade. He died in 1850 and was buried at the Kaw Mendi mission.

Figure 11.1 Lithograph of “James Covey” from John Warner Barber (1840)
This sketch is vague as uncertainty surrounds Covey’s life for four principal reasons. First, as epistolary evidence demonstrates, Covey was never the center of attention of the trials and remained peripheral to the white American abolitionists who championed the cause of the survivors of La Amistad. Second, and perhaps because of this, no scholar has spent more than several paragraphs on his contribution, let alone his origins and background. Third, adding confusion to the mix, as interpreter playing a pivotal role, he made multiple, and sometimes conflicting, declarations about his origins, background, and experiences. And fourth, one consequence of his distressful past was a classic childhood survival technique, specifically the skillful crafting of knowledge and information for dispersal to particular audiences, especially potential protectors.

This chapter explores the life of Kaweli or James B. Covey (Figure 11.1) via geographical phases and legal subjectivities deployed by the former child slave, seaman, and interpreter. In establishing a biographical timeline and his physical movements, I am focusing on the implications of the age of individuals making Atlantic passages. Covey’s life story relates to the production of knowledge in the trial of La Amistad. As the Mende translator, Covey revealed the events that Cinque and the others on La Amistad had experienced, and therefore served as cultural broker for their attorneys so that the court would not have to draw only on English and Spanish language texts and narratives. Were it not for Covey, it is quite conceivable that the survivors would have been returned to Cuba otherwise, and possibly to their deaths, but certainly to their re-enslavement.

Covey and two other individuals provided the invaluable service of translating the narratives of the survivors. While Covey features marginally in most stories about the trial, his role in the production of knowledge could not have been more central. For that reason alone, it makes sense to reconsider what we know and do not know about him and to scrutinize the role of translator. There is much more to be said about Covey’s background than previously realized, and that this new background information provides an important avenue to reconsidering the type of expertise and knowledge he provided. Covey’s movement across the Atlantic offers insight into the place of children within the illegal nineteenth-century slave trade, the role of rescued children in the expansion of Christianity in West Africa, and African participation in British naval patrols. While Covey is perhaps most famous for serving as an interpreter, his childhood experiences were fundamental in establishing the context of enslavement that made his mediation possible.
The various sources for Covey, including polysemous “autoethnographic” texts, originate in the United States, Europe and West Africa.
Covey there are letters, mainly to abolitionist Lewis Tappan. From his voice, there exist testimonies from *La Amistad* trials, including spoken and transcribed testimonies, and written depositions and affidavits. Supplementary materials include discussions by contemporaries, logbooks, and mission correspondence. Information from Covey himself is sparse, but contemporary observations enrich the investigation.

It is possible to discern four phases in Covey’s childhood, which are anchored geographically: first, his familial origins and first enslavement in Kono/Kisi/Mende territory; second, his second enslavement, forced migration and rescue in the Gallinas region; third, his education and service in the Atlantic world, and finally, his sojourn in North America and his West African homecoming. In order to examine these four geographical phases, I first explore the historical bases of Covey’s self-narration. From the documentary record, I interpret his self-narration as a form of subjectivity characteristic of “distress” and emanating from a supplicant. Covey’s distressed subjectivity recasts his significance: he was no simple interpreter, but rather a cultural broker whose interpreting constituted part of a broader strategy of survival.

Covey’s distressed childhood and his attempts to ameliorate his situation by garnering protectors’ attention may be mapped geographically (see Map 11.1). The Covey who emerges from the historical record deploys quasi-legal subjectivity, which in turn requires a rethinking of his significance. Covey was effective in trial because he brokered experiences that mirrored his own. This chapter thus narrates the geographical and historical stages of Covey’s life in order to show that his experiences prior to the *La Amistad* trial are central to understanding why he was successful in court. With this new perspective on an erstwhile peripheral character, the trial of *La Amistad* emerges not only as a touchstone of abolitionism in North America in the mid-nineteenth century, but also reveals African contributions to the ending of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

**Atlantic Children: Age before Agency in Narrative Subjectivity**

Child history and childhood studies have transformed socio-historical praxis, but unevenly so. Historians of Europe blazed trails for research and questioned categories of analysis. But as Wilma King’s study demonstrates, disaggregating trends in child history do not neatly match the invisible and silent categories child slaves occupy.\(^\text{10}\) Biographies by former child slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Gustavus Vassa (also known as Olaudah Equiano), continue to delineate the adolescent slave experience.\(^\text{11}\) And scholarship on children within Africa is only beginning to build on
advances by historians, and grapple with the complexities of recovering “multiple notions of childhood” from archival and oral records.  

Although Covey was a child slave in Africa, his later experiences in the U.S. are quite unlike any other former child slave. As King has observed, “differences in the times of their narratives matter, as well as the ages of the narrators along with the amount of time spent in slavery.” When we encounter Covey in adolescence, his African origin, his Mende skills and his freedom are evident and accepted by U.S. courts. Covey’s narrative constitutes neither a vindication of resistance nor a celebration of freedom. It omits classic tropes, such as attacking an overseer or rejecting a master’s advances, and contains scant Middle Passage detail. Furthermore, most slave autobiographies were published by adults. Covey’s self-narrative, by contrast, emerges in adolescence, and remained unpolished and fragmented, until he disappeared from the historical record. Covey craves “attention,” but to paraphrase Jonathan Crary, the historical drama embroiling him, shocked, fragmented and dispersed his voice.

Covey’s fragmented story emerges from two primary narrative sources: court depositions by and about him, and personal letters. And while methodological difficulties associated with epistolary evidence are familiar terrain, the complexity of court testimony requires further consideration. Covey’s complete narrative only emerges in the “intertextuality” of translating La Amistad’s survivors’ stories. Indeed, although an individual, his subjective interest still reflects that of a group or collective. Covey’s narrative, drawing on Robert Blair St. George, emerges in stages, and is rehearsed and affirmed via public performance.

Covey’s narrative is at once an indirect report about others’ experiences, as much as it is a report of his own distress. Covey’s subjectivity is made accessible because of the larger relational system within which he operated as translator. In lieu of the requisite legal standing to address courts, Covey’s post hoc self-narrative of distress operated as a form of legal subjectivity, whereby he imbricated La Amistad’s victims’ narratives with his analogous traumas. In this way, the psychological dimensions of the captives’ narratives’ shared feelings gave voice to Covey’s self and subjectivity. “Distressed subjectivity” constitutes a genre of legal supplication conveying a desire to elicit support and sympathy from potential protectors, and it provides access to Covey’s subjectivity. In the British Empire, the adoption of the name “distressed subject” operated as a deliberate self-narrative performance of imperial marginality. A product of voluntary and/or involuntary movements, distressed subjects sought amelioration by appeals to authority. The concept of “distressed” is thus a constructive way of interpreting the legal subjectivity of supplicants, such as Covey.

One neglected category among many supplicants who may adopt a distressed subjectivity is the “natally-alienated” slave child. Jerome Handler
notes most slave autobiographers mention their involuntary movement from Africa, most famously Vassa. But whereas on the surface slave narratives appear similar, a child’s perspective is qualitatively different. Because vulnerable children seek, above all else, protection through association, the study of slave children requires careful and deliberate contextualization. From child slaves’ multiple experiences of distress it is possible to disaggregate the multivalent narratives of “self-understanding,” and isolate “real” and “true” historically and geographically-contingent moments informing self-narrative. The “processual” nature of child subjectivity viewed through the lens of distress helps to avoid the hagiographical overdetermination of identity-driven analyses of adult narratives.

Distressed subjectivity also pushes back against a trend in children’s studies that focuses on fiction. Mining fictional child narratives for agency and apparent intentionality is counterproductive as it creates a tension between deliberate and consensual action. I propose a different formulation that moves away from a repression-based model of agency, and highlights instead the non-consensual subjectivity of “quasi-legal” actors. Children, adolescents, Africans and slaves, like Covey, lacked legal standing in the nineteenth century. Legally-speaking, they were incapable of conveying consent, yet we learn of their subjectivity via the collaborative intertextuality, and almost habitus-like quality, of legal fora. The phrase quasi-legal subjectivity emerges from this tension.

The distressful subjectivity of child slaves emerged from the dislocation and suffering that began with the initial enslavement wrenching them from their natal home. As the geographical phases elucidate, Covey embarked on a cross-cultural, trans-regional, and trans-national voyage. He entered networks of mobility that were largely illicit, involving violence, compulsion and subterfuge. These networks were more extensive and complex than a child could conceive or navigate with autonomy. To safeguard his interests, Covey supplicated himself to many powerful adults, some of whom had an almost antithetical relationship to the conditions that gave rise to his predicament. Although exceptional in many respects, the phases of Covey’s cultural and social dislocation surely resemble those of many children. His survival strategies – his self-presentation as Christian and modern; regular referencing of his childhood; and shifting attempts to bond with protectors – reflect the perilous networks of illegality, and the preferential status anti-slavery campaigners accorded former slave children, both characteristics of the moral economy of “the age of abolition.”

Covey’s distressed subjectivity helps establish his significance. Before considering the geographical stages of Covey’s distress, we must first reclassify him: he was not simply an interpreter or translator, but rather, a “cultural broker.” He connected practically with La Amistad’s victims via the Mende language, but the shared distressful experiences and the seemingly
unobtainable goal of protection in constantly shifting conditions was what cohered the community. As a broker, his subjectivity emerged as a consequence of his empathic strategy; and his traumatic childhood thus challenges prevailing paradigms of helplessness and powerlessness of child enslavement.

In this light, his interpreting is revealed to be part of a broader strategy (and not a telos of Creole “identity”) to reconstitute “family” in the context of distress.36 As a cultural broker, his distress was an adolescent “interpellative” apparatus and ideologically contextual response whereby his subjectivity mirrored others’ traumatic lives.37 Covey’s narrative mirrored some of La Amistad’s victims; the collective experience of distress suffered by all, made his intersubjective mediation of their stories effective.38 Covey’s distressed subjectivity was a self-representational action by an individual with few alternatives.

“Ethnic” Origins, Birth, and First Enslavement in West Africa (c.1820-1832)

The first of four phases in Covey’s life was situated on the upper Guinea coast in what is today Sierra Leone. The ethnolinguistic origins of Covey and his parents can be interpreted in the context of major cultural and political transformations during the early nineteenth century and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The precise location of Covey’s birthplace in 1825-26 remains unclear, but other childhood places of residence are discernible. Moreover, Covey’s first experience of enslavement sheds light on the wider significance of slavery in coastal societies.

Although we know Covey was celebrated for his Mende conversation skills, he claimed to have a Kisi mother and Kono father. Kisi is a Mel language, of the Atlantic branch of Niger-Congo, the closest relatives of which are Sherbro, Mani, Kim, and Bom.39 Kono, by contrast, is in the Mande family, the closest relative being Vai.40 While the precise early nineteenth-century socio-political relationship between Kono and Kisi peoples is unclear, Covey’s mother’s Kisi community inhabited inland toward the east (today’s borderland of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia), possibly “to the southward of Sulimana and Sangara” rivers.41

In approximately 1820, possibly when Covey’s parents met, the Kisi were yet to migrate across the Makona River.42 The Kisi in this region were a “highly decentralized ethnic group,” and acephalous communities’ attitudes to slavery and marriage are relevant.43 Covey’s mother was possibly part of a group with important socio-political traditions and ethnic attributes, including a possible preference for linguistic exogamy.44 A second component of Covey’s multi-ethnicity, his Kono father, also helps frame his first enslavement. Kono, like Vai, part of the Mande family, is closely related to
Koranko. In the eighteenth century, southern Mende displaced Kono farmers, who subsequently relocated to Koranko.45 In the era of the slave trade, Koranko and refugee Kono inhabited centralized defensively-constructed settlements.46 So it is conceivable that his Kisi/Kono origins and parents’ relocation to Mende territory were part of the transformations taking place in the context of the ongoing violence of the slave trade.

Indeed, while the precise relationship between early nineteenth-century Koranko and Kono is unknown, Koranko, Kono, and Kisi feature in slave records among the captives in Havana registers.47 Philip Misevich explains this conflation of groupings “not all closely related to one another” as partly a function of sharing “numerous personal names.”48 The 130 individuals are over 13 percent, the second largest grouping. Misevich further disaggregates captives based on debarkation. Among those departing Rio Pongo, 125 or 21.9 percent were “Koronko/Kissi/Kono.”49 For Covey’s likely departure zone in 1833, the Gallinas, Misevich observes the same grouping numbered 34, or 10.1 percent of the total of 357, a “relative decline in exports” of more than 20 percent.50 “Mendi” constitute 19 percent in Havana, and 10.7 percent and 35.6 percent of Rio Pongo and Gallinas respectively.51 How Covey was classified is unknown, but we can reasonably assume that, had he the misfortune to complete his Atlantic voyage, he would have been among the plurality of identifications in Havana, Rio Pongo, and particularly the Gallinas.

A third factor in Covey’s origins concerns the appellation Mende. Exactly how and why Covey highlighted Mende shall become clearer, but precisely whence this ethnicity came can be tied to two developments: namely his parents’ relocation to Mende territory at his birth in approximately 1825-26 or during his infancy; and his first experience of enslavement among the Bullom. The only record of one of Covey’s African names comes from Gibbs, who observed that, his “original name was Kaw-we-li, which signifies in Mendi, war road, i.e., a road dangerous to pass, for fear of being taken captive.”52 It is impossible to corroborate the name’s ethnicity; there is no record of Covey using this name or referring to a Mende name. If this was his name, his slave mistress may have given it to him.

By contrast, Covey’s descriptions of his infancy claim that his “parent’s house” was in “Go-la-hung, whither they had removed when was quite young.”53 In his New Haven deposition, he stated, “I was born in the Mendi country, in a place called ‘Gho-roun’ and the Mandi is my native language.”54 In a third instance, before the District Court, Covey mentioned “Berong” and revealed that “Barton has been in my town, Gorang,” likely John B. Barton, the Georgian Methodist missionary in Monrovia 1831. Furthermore, determining the distance from the coast to Covey’s next location is anchored around his statement that “[o]ne man carried us two months’ walk.” There are three plausible candidates for Covey’s parent’s home – two towns called
Gonahun, and one Gorahun – all of which are broadly within Mende territory. Covey’s multiple testimonies include references to the Moa (Mua) River. A fourth text noted his birthplace as “Go-raun, by the river Mo-a, in the Mendi country.” Covey also notes that La Amistad’s captives “speak of rivers which I know.” While all three are relatively close to the Moa (or Sulima), only one is “two months walk” from Mani, Covey’s next residence. The most precise geography comes from Gibbs’ interviews with the three interpreters, Covey, Charles Pratt (the Buzzard’s “cook”), and John Ferry. So with reasonable certainty we can assign Covey a childhood residence in Golahun, in the eastern-most portion of Kenema district, a village approximately twenty miles west of Liberia’s border (see Map 11.1). The village was likely part of what is today the Barri chiefdom, and was two months’ walk to the coast, just over one hundred miles, squarely within Misevich’s “average” distance.

Covey’s account of his first enslavement is the fourth key to understanding his heritage. Covey’s infancy is emblematic of one principal path to child enslavement, namely kidnapping. Children were particularly vulnerable to raids, and Covey’s experience fits into an emerging narrative about child enslavement. Gibbs stated Covey “was taken by three men” from his parents’ house. Before the District Court, Covey stated, “I was stolen by a black man who stole ten of us.” Abduction was the path to enslavement for two children aboard La Amistad, along with others more famous.

In this new cultural locale Covey’s subjectivity further metamorphosed. Gibbs noted, “He was carried to the Bullom country, and sold as a slave to Ba-yi-mi, the king of the Bul-loms, who resided at Mani. He lived there for three years, and was employed to plant rice for the wife of Ba-yi-mi, who treated him with great kindness.” The riverine community, identified as Mani in the historical records, is a far throw from the very small contemporary Mani language community near the Guinea border. Prior to Covey’s enslavement at Mani, Bullom speakers (and other Mel languages, including Sherbro, Bom, and Kim) inhabited much of the coast. “Bullom” settlements were scattered from the Scarcies Rivers to Sierra Leone River, with insolated pockets of Mel-language (possibly Mani or Bullom) settlements dotted along the coast further southward into the Gallinas river region. Mani is likely a small Moa River settlement, several kilometres inland. While identifying the person of Ba-yi-mi is unlikely, it is probably a variation of the “Bullom” phrase “Bay Yeome,” which Gustavus Nyländer translated as “title of the king... of the highest headman.” It is conceivable this Mani settlement was an outpost of Bullom slave-traders who had been progressively moving south over several decades.

Stripped from his birth context, Covey lived in Mani among a “Bullom” family in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual context, working a marsh paddy-rice farm. He was part of an enslavement community of varied peoples.
Theophilus Conneau provides a description of “one sociable family” in Gallinas in 1836. He explains that among “the indigenes of this river” after “the establishment of the Spanish factories … there is much similarity in their languages.” He observed that, “they soon became naturalized with the aborigines of the sandy and marshy soil.” Covey lived among “Bul-loms” working in a paddy, like all the coastal communities. Indeed by the late eighteenth century, the “Rice Coast … centered on” the upper Guinea coast including the area that is today Sierra Leone. Covey’s job in the paddies will never be known. But as Walter Hawthorne explains, children’s roles included chasing away birds and monkeys, watching cattle, and later the backbreaking work of dike building.

**Enslavement, Conflict, and Rescue in Gallinas (c. 1832-1835)**

While Covey’s first enslavement was idiosyncratic, the next phase more closely resembled prevailing narratives about trans-Atlantic slavery. Covey was sold to a Spanish or Portuguese man, who came from Cuba or Brazil, in Gallinas. He briefly stayed in a barracoon, and boarded a ship in 1833. The ship was captured after only “four days” at sea, and brought to Freetown in mid-July, where he acquired the name James. In their own way, each of these moments – Covey’s second enslavement, brief middle passage, rescue, and return – shaped his subjectivity.

Whereas Covey seemingly remembered his paddy life fondly, his Bullom owners viewed him as expendable. The Bullom Ba-yi-mi lived in unstable times; instability was the consequence of wars for slave-raiding purposes, which may have led them to settle the region initially. While Kono sought protection from Mande, and Kisi succumbed to expansionist states, the dispersed Mani and Bullom used their geographical position to combat external threats. Conneau stated that, “every family of note” was “isolated … by its different branch of the river, and everyone fortified itself in their marshy land.” The Bullom looked elsewhere for captives, and went farther afield. They traded with merchants from Cuba, such as the infamous Spaniard Pedro Blanco of the Havana-based Martinez and Company, concealed their factories in the marshes, and “imbibed the habits of slave hunting,” and “panted but for wars and captures.” As a result “slaves in time became scarce, and the youth of the day, cradled in indolence, sought distraction in slave wars, which ever yield a rich reward.”

A picture thus emerges of Covey, for three years a slave at the center of the illegal trade, an area “colonized by Spanish slave dealers.” In this enslavement community Covey was highly disposable. There are a number of possibilities why Covey “was sold to a Portuguese, living near Mani, who carried him, with 200 or 300 others, to Lomboko.” He may have been sold
to repay a debt, for credit, or for goods, such as gunpowder. One description of the Gallinas trade provides important insight into the coastal transaction:

The manner of obtaining and shipping slaves at Gallinas may be described in a few words. Intelligence is sent abroad, through the country, that “slave money lives on the beach,” that is, that merchandise is offered for slaves. The “mercenary” chiefs and the head-men of all the tribes are made such by the fact that money awaits the production of slaves, at once fit out expeditions to the nearest defenceless towns; which they surround and fire in the night time, making prisoners of all fugitives. These, without exception, are now slaves, and are brought down to Gallinas and sold. Nine-tenths of all slaves are thus obtained.

While there are many scenarios, as Covey was relinquished rather than captured, his second enslavement did not mirror most of those in the Gallinas barracoons.

Figure 11.2 Slave Barracoon (1849)

Source: Illustrated London News (14 April 1849), 237.

Lomboko’s precise location will probably remain unknown, but it was only one of many establishments in “this remarkable spot, this modern Tyre, this den of iniquity.” The “labyrinth of islands” was ideal for illegality. It became popular as naval patrols made profitability in the Rio Pongo, to the north, “more or less impossible.” Conneau described the “sluggish [Gallinas] river” oozing “lazily into the Atlantic,” as “an innumerable mesh of spongy islands… covered with reeds and mangroves, like an immense field of fungi, betokening the damp and dismal field” of “death and slavery.” Lomboko has been identified as a corruption of Dumbocoro, and it may be one of several factories run by Pedro Blanco and Martinez and Company. At the time, Sergeant Talfourd described the barracoons as, “extensive
buildings of themselves; and the buildings, necessary for the parties to live in to attend to the slaves, are numerous. At Dumbocoro there may be fifty or sixty houses, storehouses, and places.”84 Slave “factories” may have included “permanent barracoons” but they were designed to evade detection.85 (See Figure 11.2) They had to withstand tumultuous weather, but “the wattled yards” were constructed of pliable materials like bamboo and acacia.86 At the trial of Pedro de Zulueta, Justice William Henry Maule described them as “large barns,” containing “five or six hundred slaves sometimes.”87

Covey’s second enslavement may be better contextualized by reference to the almost mythical world of Blanco of Gallinas, a primary slave-trader about whom more is known than most. When he employed Conneau, Blanco’s “two large factories monopolized this lucrative trade.”88 Blanco, from Malaga, in Spain, relocated from Cuba to Gallinas in 1824-25.89 Under Blanco, “Gallinas soon became, not only the centre of an extensive and lucrative traffic, but the theatre of a new order of society and a novel form of government,” of which he “was the head, the autocrat. Over all, his authority was absolute, acquired and maintained, not by his wealth alone, but by his will, energy, ability and address.”90 Blanco’s operation was only one of many in the area, but is the broader context central to Covey’s illicit origins.91 Conneau distinguished Blanco’s residence from the barracoon; the barracoons were on separate islands. Conneau explained that slave prisons, of which there were “ten or twelve … contained from one hundred to five hundred slaves.” Each was “made of rough staves or poles” and then “clamped together” by “iron bars.” And each barracoon was guarded by “two or four Spaniards or Portuguese” in “watch-houses” equipped “with loaded muskets.”92 So whereas Covey claimed to have been sold to a Portuguese man, this does not preclude the possibility that he sojourned in Blanco’s many facilities.

Figure 11.3 Cross Section of Embarkation Canoe (1849)

Source: Illustrated London News (14 April 1849), 237.

Covey resided in the barracoon about one month before boarding. If this was an average stay in a barracoon, we cannot say, but in the context of illegality, there was considerable indeterminacy about movement from barracoon to ship along the “surf-lashed sea-coast.”93 Missionaries observed
slaves “put into barracoons” while awaiting “the arrival of a vessel.” When a ship appeared, a lookout signaled “either to come in… or go to windward or leeward… according to the danger” from the British Navy. If clear, “the slaver runs in… to receive her cargo immediately.” Canoes servicing the boats could “carry at least five hundred slaves at once” and the process could run twelve hours. Passage was dangerous because canoes could capsize. (See Figures 11.3 & 11.4)

Figure 11.4 Crossing the Bar of Gallinas (1849)

The brief, final stage of Covey’s enslavement lasted four days. According to Covey’s deposition before the Connecticut District Court, “I was sailing for Havana when the British man-of-war captured us.” The captured ship returned to Freetown within four days with no slave deaths. The seizure would have had to occur at least six years prior to Covey’s 1838 enlistment, while its escort into Freetown coincided with the stationing at the CMS mission in 1832-1834, prior to leaving in 1835, of Covey’s future guardian, John William Weeks. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database lists twelve ships that meet some of these requirements. With these variables, the most likely candidate is the schooner Segunda Socorro, captained by José de Inza. HMS Trinculo captured the ship at 6°30’ N and 12°12’ W on 9 July 1833. Havana-bound with 307 slaves, it flew the Spanish/Uruguayan flag. Its log suggests it was only two days from Gallinas when HMS Trinculo gave
chase. Its journey from Gallinas to Freetown lasted four days, and all 307 slaves were disembarked alive; 33.9 percent were boys. “Recaptives” disembarked in Freetown were often identified by name. The Register of Liberated Africans lists one boy, aged nine, standing 54 inches, named “Covie,” branded “B” on his left arm, disembarked from the Segunda Socorra. This is the only African boy with such a name in the database, and possibly the future baptized “James” and anglicized “Covey.”

To underscore the indeterminacy of Covey’s enslavement, during the trial the captain of the Segunda Soccoro, de Inza, swore that the slaves were owned by “the Black Chiefs at Galinas, viz. Siacco, Manna, Amurah, and Mandingo Lahi.” Despite the seizure, he returned to the trade and was again on trial in Cuba the following year. By contrast, Covey was taken to the CMS station of John William Weeks.

Education and Apprenticeship in the Atlantic (c.1835-1839)

The third phase of Covey’s youth begins with his baptism, apprenticeship, and education. After moving through youth to adolescence Covey was subject to the apprenticeship regulations for “recaptive” slaves, including schooling, and naval enlistment. For almost a year he sailed with the squadron that rescued him, aboard HMS Buzzard under Captain Charles Fitzgerald. After the Buzzard seized two American vessels and escorted them to New York, Covey resided briefly in Staten Island’s docks before his “discovery.”

When Covey entered the CMS mission school in 1833, he became part of a long “experiment” of colonization and proselytization that began in 1787, leading to “the first modern Church of tropical Africa.” As a young, “recaptured” child, Covey was precisely the vessel sought by John William Weeks. The CMS operated a two-pronged campaign: the expansion of Christianity and the eradication of “traditional” practices. Christian recruits were acquired from two groups – modern forward-looking adults, including “recaptives,” and orphaned and “rescued” children. Covey was surely, like other recaptive child slaves, subject to the apprenticeship requirements, and this is most likely how he entered the CMS school. The Sierra Leone-based register image accorded a nine-year old “Covie” a different identification number (42643) but included him in a group of apprentices to be sent to Bathurst, a small town behind Freetown, near Charlottetown and Leopoldstown, in the Parish of St. James.

The CMS mission focused considerable attention on children; and this bode well for colonial administrators. From the colony’s early foundations officials sought access to children. In a letter to fellow “philanthropist” John Campbell, Governor Zachary Macaulay “commissioned” his emissaries to
“collect” a number of “tolerably good subjects” for conversion to “free men of Christ.” Macaulay emphasized the child’s age:

[T]he age you fix is far too great…. Few young women at 15 in this country retain their chastity, and even at an earlier age the imaginations of both boys and girls are polluted by the unclean practices…. Besides their tempers are then fully formed…. I should think indeed that neither the one nor the other ought to exceed 12 or 13 and that their education should be continued at least 5 or 6 years.\(^{109}\)

While Macaulay’s attempt to create African Christians may have “failed,” it paved the way for the Christian Institution.\(^{110}\) Formed in 1814, for “the education of receptive children,” the institution “soon evolved into a seminary,” offering a level of education higher than village schools.\(^ {111}\) From 1827 it became the Fourah Bay Institution, and it was in a Bathurst satellite school where Covey – known now as James – found himself in July 1833.\(^ {112}\)

The main institution, “suffered many setbacks and struggled” to achieve its “intended impact.”\(^ {113}\) Enrollment in Fourah Bay did not surpass twenty during Covey’s sojourn. Despite limited resources, it furnished schoolmasters and clerks. Weeks arrived in 1824, and worked as “a mechanic and evangelist” before becoming the head.\(^ {114}\) The future Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther was among the earliest pupils, and Crowther was briefly Covey’s teacher in Bathurst.\(^ {115}\) Yet in spite of success stories like Crowther, the CMS struggled to prevent students leaving for “more lucrative posts” in the “thriving merchant class.”\(^ {116}\)

We can only speculate how Covey’s education altered his worldview. It would appear he was designated to the CMS as part of the apprenticeship encumbered by all the rescued boys.\(^ {117}\) In the “discovery interview” imagined by Owens, Covey reportedly said to Gibbs: “I was placed in the asylum for liberated Africans. There I went to school[,] to the missionaries[,] and studied the English language.”\(^ {118}\) Gibbs, however, skipped this intermediary stage, when he reported that after a “British armed vessel” intercepted Covey’s ship, and “Covey thus obtained his freedom.”\(^ {119}\) In New Haven Covey declared, “I learned to speak the English language in Sierra Leone and have been taught to read and write,” and before the District Court he made a similar, narrower claim: “I learned to speak English at Sierra Leone.”\(^ {120}\) Notwithstanding the purpose of CMS to fashion educators and missionaries, Covey was assigned to the navy, continuing his “apprenticeship.”

Covey’s life took its next dramatic turn in 1838. Oral and written reports attest to Covey’s naval service, although the Buzzard’s ledger makes no mention of him. The Buzzard was a 3-gun brigantine Cherokee-class brig-sloop, launched in 1834, commanded by Charles Fitzgerald.\(^ {121}\) References to anonymous boys, cabin-boys and mates would likely comprise African crew, including the “twenty blacks” Fitzgerald added in Freetown in October
Gibbs states, “he was enlisted as a sailor,” but Covey is unclear about how he entered the navy. Covey’s first deposition states simply that he was “a sailor on board the British Brig of War Buzzard.” Before the District Court, however, he claimed he “[w]as put on board a man-of-war one year and a half.” Because impressment of Africans was illegal, conscription was unlikely. After five years in Bathurst, he may have been encouraged to leave, and complete his apprenticeship in the navy.

Figure 11.5 The Capture of the Slaver Formidable by HMS Buzzard, 1834

Precisely how Covey came aboard the Buzzard is secondary to what happened during the approximately eleven months of service. The Buzzard, sailing with the West African Squadron, seized four ships before coming to New York. Indeed it had been very active along the coast for several years, and the only known image of the ship shows it capturing the slaver Formidable in 1834 (see Figure 11.5). With Covey aboard it sailed to Fernando Po, Principé, and into the Niger River delta. In March 1839 it intercepted two ships flying U.S. flags, the Eagle and the Clara. The Eagle presented a conundrum. It began from an unspecified Bahia port in September 1838. When captured in March 1839, it was clearly “Spanish property” and:

the American flag was only hoisted to cover that vessel from being taken by an English Man of War whilst empty and that on her receiving on board her slaves
for which purpose she was equipped, the American flag would have been hauled down and the Spanish flag hoisted.\textsuperscript{128}

The \textit{Clara} left Havana July 1838. It had no slaves when seized July 1839, but like the \textit{Eagle}, Fitzgerald considered it a “Spanish Schooner with slave fittings.”\textsuperscript{129}

These seizures were part of a “brief period of confusion” tied to illegal slaving.\textsuperscript{130} The \textit{Eagle} and \textit{Clara} were but two vessels servicing slave-holding nations, but flying American flags.\textsuperscript{131} In 1838-39, in the absence of U.S. support, the Royal Navy increased the number of seizures, including American ships. In 1839 the abolitionist (and expert witness at the Amistad trial) Richard Robert Madden argued that the action was necessary for many reasons, including the facts that, since 1820 the illegal trade had increased from 15,000 to 25,000 slaves a year; American capital was being invested in Cuba facilitating circumvention of the new treaty between Spain and Britain; and because Cuban and Brazilian vessels hoisted American flags.\textsuperscript{132} Fitzgerald and others operated under the doctrine of “right of visit,” a version of “right of search” asserted by Lord Palmerston.\textsuperscript{133} As Calvin Lane explains, “the American public did not make this nice semantic distinction” and the possibility of war escalated.\textsuperscript{134} So when Gibbs “found” Covey, he had just survived a dangerous few months at sea. Whether discharged from duty or granted temporary leave, nothing suggests he returned to Her Majesty’s service. The precise early arrangements are unclear. Amos Townsend wrote:

My present opinion tonight is, that if neither of them [James Covey and Charles the Cook] would voluntarily remain they had better go down in the morning and then the committee in New York might prevail, by the aid of Capt. Fitzgerald to persuade one of them to return. They might be willing to return after a visit to their shipmates as they came up with the expectation of staying but a few days.\textsuperscript{135}

When the \textit{Buzzard} sailed for Bermuda Covey was “left behind indefinitely.”\textsuperscript{136}

**Trial and Tribulation in the Americas and West Africa (1839-1846)**

In North America Covey was approximately fourteen years old. But as an African, ex-slave, Royal Navy sailor, he had little legal and social standing. Once again he was held against his will. Between 1839 and 1841 he resided in various locations, and subsisted mainly on the kindness of Canadian and US abolitionists. After the success of \textit{La Amistad}’s victims, he appears marginalized and almost forgotten. He subsequently appealed to Lewis Tappan to help him return to Africa, which Tappan did. Upon return to Sierra Leone in 1842, there exist scant accounts of his subsequent activities, including possible slave-trading. He died in 1850 in the presence of American missionaries.
After Fitzgerald kindly consented to Covey’s temporary release, he accompanied Gibbs to New Haven, seemingly in his personal employ. Covey stated in New Haven, that he had “been employed to interpret to Mr. Josiah W. Gibbs the account which the above Africans give of themselves, and have truly interpreted the questions of Mr. Gibbs to them, and their replies to the questions, and saw him take down their answers in writing.”

But Covey himself was unclear about the precise arrangements. Before the District Court, he claimed, “I have been in this country six months; came in a British man-of-war; have been in this town (New Haven) four months with Mr. [Timothy] Bishop; he calls on me for no money, and [I] do not know who pays my board.” Bishop was a member of the “Friends of the Africans,” or “Amistad Committee” founded by Tappan. Covey met numerous abolitionists during the period, including James Gillespie Birney and possibly the black abolitionist and runaway slave, Thomas van Rensselaer. He requested educational and religious books for the captives.

He resided with Bishop, the New Haven abolitionist and banker, four months until the January 1840 trial.

Covey was one of three interpreters. John Ferry, the “Gissi” man, had been deemed “not of any service,” although he was the only one of a first group of five Africans to make any headway prior to the first district court hearings. As Kisi, Ferry was Covey’s kinsman. But Ferry could “not hold much intercourse with the Africans.” Charles Pratt, the Buzzard’s cook, also interpreted but was let go, returned to New York and sailed to Bermuda.

Of the three, Covey was viewed as the least “steady,” possibly because he was by far the youngest, and abolitionist Amos Townsend cautioned that Covey “needs to be under the eye of some one who can exert some authority over him.” Townsend further noted that, “he is rather careless of obeying those who have no absolute authority over him.” He supplied knives to some of the imprisoned Africans, causing great anxiety. The Amistad Committee doubted whether “James” would “be willing to remain unless compelled,” and laid plans for a “subpoena” and incarceration. By 31 October 1839, Covey consented to remain with the permission of Fitzgerald. It appears, however, that Fitzgerald was unwilling to relinquish him. The Buzzard left New York in early November after James had been “detained by a subpoena,” with an understanding that he would be “sent to Sierra Leone … one of these days.”

Covey’s participation consisted of extensive pre-trial interviews with the prisoners, a pre-trial deposition on 3-4 October 1839, followed by multiple court appearances in New Haven and Hartford, and a final Hartford habeas corpus hearing in March 1841. Prior to the trial, he met with the Africans and assisted with translating and recording their narratives. Amos Townsend reported the prisoners’ delight in meeting Covey, thus:
I am most happy to be able to say that the two Africans brought up by Professor Gibbs are able to converse fervently with all the prisoners. We called with them at the prison this morning just as they were at breakfast ... one of the captives coming to the door and finding a fellow countryman who could talk in their own language took hold of him and literally dragged him in.\textsuperscript{151}

In November Covey was “duly cautioned and sworn,” requisite for legal standing in any deposition.\textsuperscript{152} Covey’s African-ness was never in question; most sources (with the exception of Gibbs), focused almost exclusively on the “celebrity” status of \textit{La Amistad’s} survivors.\textsuperscript{153} The work was exhausting.\textsuperscript{154} Covey fell ill, which delayed the Hartford trial until 7 January 1840.\textsuperscript{155} Covey was not introduced to the court as an expert.\textsuperscript{156} There is no record of a court stipulation conferring the status of interpreter. Covey appeared unaware that he ought only to interpret for the defense.\textsuperscript{157}

As the case unfolded, however, Covey wondered about his involuntarily status. Covey seemed unaware “his presence at the court” was “indispensable to a fair hearing of the case,” because he expressed anxiety about his future.\textsuperscript{158} Tappan had “promise[d] him some compensation” and to “see that his wants are supplied” but Covey appears incognizant of arrangements.\textsuperscript{159} After the January 1840 trial, Covey studied with “the young men in [Yale] college.” Amos Townsend reported:

\begin{quote}
As to the employment of James - He has spent much time in the prison in assisting the teachers and in teaching them himself. He is now engaged a portion of his time in study himself by the kindness of some of the young men in college and is at this time manifesting some tender regard for his own spiritual good.\textsuperscript{160}
\end{quote}

The Amistad Committee made “no bargain with James as to wages,” not “know[ing] what would be proper.” Amos Townsend was at a loss, knowing of no “employment to which I can put him in this time of stagnation,” but aware that he was “needed again” for the April trial, as “Mr. Baldwin says that the testimony will all have to be gave over again.”\textsuperscript{161}

While “communication” may have been “the most important objective for the defense,” Covey was even more indispensable to the Africans.\textsuperscript{162} After the Circuit Court reaffirmed the District Court, however, Covey stayed in New Haven. While awaiting the Supreme Court appeal, the Africans depended on Covey entirely, and forestalled Townsend’s attempt to terminate service. Townsend reported:

\begin{quote}
One of them with much feeling and sorrow said to me “I don’t know how long I live, may be I die in America. I die I no want go to hell. Me want to go heaven. Jim Covey go home you no talk Mendi – I no talk America – me sick nobody talk to me.” On account of their importunities I gave up the idea of parting with James at that time.
\end{quote}
He continued, they needed him “as a medium of communication to make known their wants, and to gain information.” The feeling was mutual; in a letter to Tappan Covey wrote:

Sir[,] I see [in] the papers in New Haven [a]bout my going home. If I am going or [n]o please to tell me[,] I wish you may send me a letter. Our African friends love to read and they want to know if I am going home[,] I dont [sic] want to go home and leave those Africans[,] If I am to go home I is [sic] sorry to go home to leave Kanna and Kila Cinque for Ma and all the others. If you please to let me know if I stay here till next January.  

Covey situated himself among New Haven’s Christian community, and Townsend observed he “benefitted and improved by his residence” there. Covey professed his faith:

I tell you I love Jesus the blessed Saviour and so I love all the Africans[,] I like to go home very well but I remember if I go home it is bad for them. Some of the white men say that the Africans never read[,] It is a sin for them to speak so they do not know how to pray to God who say the African[s] never learn.

Covey’s desire to remain in New Haven was melded with a nascent Christian pedagogy. He explained:

But I will say the African[s] love me and you and all the good friends[,] They love to pray. They read. They love there [sic] teacher and if you sent Book [sic] for them they glad to see it[.]

This letter, and all subsequent ones, were signed “James B. Covey.” We can only speculate on the origin of the middle initial, but it may not be inconsequential that the young recaptive “Covie” was branded with the letter “B.”

Covey was remunerated sporadically and provided with board and clothes, but invoices suggest he rarely had more than one dollar to his name. After the initial plea to Tappan, a second letter makes evident that Covey was seemingly on his own recognizance and “without work.” He asked to be made a “sarvent to rich men,” and stated:

I hope that the Lord may bless you Soul and body[,] I dare say it is good to have a friend and now I will say the man who keep the jail [Pendleton] he would let me go in to teach the poor Africa[ns.] Now if you want me to stay at new Haven give me some work to sarvent [sic] some of the gentlemen New Haven or New York.

He also complained about the “wicked man” (likely Pendleton, the jailor), who “drink rum and swear and curse God.”

In January 1841, Townsend affirmed the informality of the “agreement” with James. He stated, “I have never made any agreement as to compensation.” Notwithstanding, an estimated $340 was spent on him over fifteen months. It is unlikely Covey was in Washington in March 1841, but
he assisted in the final *habeas corpus* writ heard in New Haven’s probate court on 15 March 1841, which resulted in the release of the three girls from the custody of Pendleton.\(^{173}\) In April he was sent to New York.\(^{174}\) One of the free Africans asked Tappan of Covey’s whereabouts.\(^{175}\) At one point it appears he may have planned to accompany Dwight P. Janes to Montreal, but why remains unclear. When we next hear from Covey he is destitute in New York.\(^{176}\) Three letters exist from this period. In early June 1841, in a short letter he states that “I am sick bed I could not able to walk sir.”\(^{177}\) He recalls how a third party gave him one dollar, but he “want $5.50.” The handwriting is very shaky, but he seems to indicate that he “began to work the 6 month” and asks Tappan to give “this young man” some money to “bring to me.” He states that he is “so sick Sir I want pay Doctor.” The letter is signed “your truly boy James B. Covey. Poor boy no mother nor father.”

An undated letter is longer and more carefully composed, and expressed a desire to return to Africa. He declared “I am unhappy,” and observed “I know that I love God in my Soul but I have father and mother sister and brother never heard about God and Jesus Christ[,] will you please to sent me back to Si[erra Leone] before I die[?]” He refers three times to “Cinque” and expresses a desire to return with the Africans. His desire to submit himself to Cinque is underscored by the doubtfulness of some claims:

Before Cinque they go back to African [sic] will you sent me home with them if you pleas[e] sir let me know if you goin[g] to sent me with them or no[,] I want go with them in home one of them know my father and mother. If I go with them I shall find my father and mother too but if they not go let me go home to see my friends before I die if I die heare I dont thank [sic] I shall go to h[e]aven because I remember if I go if I go home I shall do good before I die if I dont see my father and mother. Let me see my friends I have no friends here if I am sick who take care of me tell me all what I ask you for it I am go home alone or go with Cinque.

As previously he refers to himself as “your poor boy no father no mother.” But it differs by reminding his erstwhile employer that “I think on you answer my letter if you please[,] You see I teach Cinque them and I pray for them[,] You don’t pay me for it[,] But God will pay pay me if you let me go home you ought to give me $100 or $20[.]”\(^{178}\) The final letter was aggressive. Covey abandoned Tappan for Cinque. He complained that he was “not well” and “now I am sick.”\(^{179}\) He may have received money in response to his earlier letter, but “you can not look doctor for the moneny [sic] what you brought from Mr. Thomas Van.” This was likely a reference to Thomas van Renssalaer, a leading New York abolitionist and former slave. Van Rensselaer was integral to the New York Vigilance Committee and Underground Railroad activities. Covey continued on the subject of money. “I have none sir I believe the money what they give to give
for the African[s] I belie[v]e some is my too.” He also adopted a curious form of reportage:

Because some people ask for money[,] money Mr. Tappan give to you none[.] Did he pay you[?] I say not yet and Mr. Tappan if you dont give me no money sent me home. I am willing to go home.180

He alerted Tappan to his hypocrisy when he wrote “now if tis was some of the America free men speak Cinque languages you have to pay him so much money and you sent me to the England you done give me no money but $1.50.” He asked him “do you pay Ch[arles] Pratt and John Farry [sic] the interpreters they was with me in new Haven[?]” Covey also referred to the news that Townsend “get money for me in the Bank.” Most strikingly, he directed Tappan to the Book of Jeremiah.181 This letter, the only containing an address, was signed “your poor poor boy” and begged “pardon.”182

Covey’s pathetic appeals were rewarded. Although there are no more letters from this period, others lobbied on his behalf. An October letter, signed “Carly,” highlights the bond with La Amistad’s victims.183 Ka-le describes how he loved James “very much” and that he “wish[ed] I shall rather have you go with us to Menda.” Covey was indeed aboard the Gentleman in November 1841.184 Linda Brown-Kubesch notes the ship experienced several storms, and “the Africans became suspicious of their white traveling companions fearing they would be returned to slavery.”185 When the Gentleman docked in Cape Verde some Africans traded tools for food. Iyunolu Osagie describes a struggle over alcohol.186 Tensions continued to Freetown, where they disembarked January 1842.187

Precisely what became of Covey thereafter remains unclear. Scholars continue to debate the fortunes and activities of the returnees, most famously the allegation of Cinque’s slave-trading activities. One of the final national print acknowledgements of the “Mendians” appeared in the New York Tribune:

from Sierra Leone, letters have been… [from] the Missionaries who accompanied the Mendians to their native land. They had been one month at Sierra Leone, and in excellent health… There were several hundreds of Mendians at Sierra Leone, some of whom had recognized several of the Amistad Africans. The Mendians continued to study, but some of them had rushed into their former licentious habits.188

But whereas Cinque’s possible slaving activities remain “high speculative,” Joseph Yannielli uncovered evidence to suggest that Covey “allied himself with a local warlord and was participating in a slaving expedition” in 1845, likely run by the Tucker clan via Sulima (see Figure 11.6).189 Reports from William Raymond, a white missionary who operated in the region for approximately six years, alleged that Covey allied with another survivor, Kinna (known also as Lewis Johnson), to attack the town of “Mperri,” and battled against other former captives, including Fuliwa, Sa, and Sokoma.190 Sa
was killed in this battle. And as so it is remains quite plausible that, as the British fought the illegal trade, an adult Covey settled into a new symbiotic relationship with the opportunistic political economy of the period and region.\textsuperscript{191} He died 12 October 1850 and was buried in the Kaw Mendi Mission by the Reverend George Thompson.\textsuperscript{192}

Figure 11.6 Market on Gallinas Coast, c. 1845-50


**Conclusion: Strategies Emerging from Childhood Distress**

The stages of the young Covey’s life necessitates that scholarly conversations distinguish between Atlantic Africans according to their age. Instead of reaffirming the previous scholarly emphases of identity studies, such as agency and the cultural competencies achieved through mobility, Covey’s early life demonstrates that these paradigms sit comfortably only around adult narratives. For children – many of whom were victims of illegal enslavement – the self-representative subjectivities encountered in Atlantic itineraries reveal less about agency and creative peripateticism, and more about trauma, distress, and a very tangible need for benefactors.\textsuperscript{193} Historians must “open up” their understanding of slave, creoles, brokers, and diasporic travelers, and consider how age mediated the possibilities of (and constraints upon) self-presentation.\textsuperscript{194} We learn more from the complexity of Covey’s intersubjective narration than from fastidious recovery of empirical evidence
based solely on individual life details. Deciphering Covey is made all the more problematic by the “double hermeneutic” implicit in his “quest for intimate familiarity.” We must be duly cautious when interpreting entities who themselves are interpreting their own and others’ worlds.

The distressful subjectivity characterizing Covey’s self-narrative reflects the violence and trauma of his childhood, particularly his natal alienation. Natal alienation was only one of many violent episodes distinguishing Covey’s experience from adult enslavement; if natal alienation is to remain a useful analytic, it is perhaps most effective in the context of child enslavement. Responses to natal alienation include, but are not limited to, manufacturing fictive kinship with protective and powerful individuals, and producing perceived shared memories and experiences. In the context of the trial of La Amistad, Covey attempted to reconstruct something of a family network. He sought protection and affinity with Cinque and later Kinna, after the failure of similar supplications to the Ba-ye-mi’s wife, Weeks, Fitzgerald, Gibbs, Tappan, and the Amistad Committee. Interpreting, while important to the defendants, was only one component of a process of Covey’s wider survival strategy.

While the Supreme Court ultimately determined the outcome of the case, it was able to do so because of the remarkable cultural brokerage skills of James “Kaweli” Covey. Numerous judges wrestled with the known and unknown about the slaves’ origins; and they weighed that knowledge against appropriate international and maritime law. But for reasons stemming partly from the complexity of the textuality of Covey’s narrative, historians have not previously examined the context in which the requisite knowledge was produced. What we now know, is that the victims’ narratives were brokered by a child’s experience of distress and his attempts to overcome the multiple curtailments of his liberty. From an Atlantic child’s strategy of supplication – born of kidnapping, enslavement, transportation and rescue – arose a distressful subjectivity that brokered the narratives of the adults aboard La Amistad.

NOTES

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of the National Archives at Boston, the Amistad Research Center, and the Gilder Lehrman Center for Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University.


3 Owens et al., *Black Mutiny*, 194.

4 “Mendi” was most commonly the spelling of the language and people in the 1830s, as it appeared in the primary sources, hence the quotation marks. I generally use the modern spelling “Mende” when not referencing historical and archival documents. Numerous contemporary accounts of the “discovery” exist. See *The Emancipator* 102 (21 October 1839), 5.


7 Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano*, 229, n. 25, believed there to be “no extant texts written by James Covey.”

8 For further discussion, see Benjamin N. Lawrance, “‘Your poor boy no father no mother’: ‘Orphans’, Alienation and the Perils of Atlantic Child Slave Biography,” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 36, 4 (2013), 672-703.

9 For autoethnography, see Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* 91 (1991), 33-40.


For Middle Passage tropes see Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).


In the sparse scholarship on Covey, an adult triumphalism prevails. Oscar R. Dathorne ascribed Covey a series of adult philosophical positions, including “Afrocentric.” While Covey’s story “does not pose any of the problems associated with filtering facts from fiction,” however, Dathorne himself fabricates an identity with almost unbounded romanticism. This includes, among other things, knowledge of the Vai alphabet and the Spanish language; see Dathorne, In Europe’s Image: The Need for American Multiculturalism, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), 42. Other phrases employed include patriotic, “multicultural,” emblematic of the “subterranean drifts of an [Afrocentric] counterculture,” and a member of a “minority” who “stood outside the outsiders.” Covey “represents the interconnectedness of various worlds,” and “did not allow himself to be branded as the opposite of European man – irrational and inferior;” “Covey presents living evidence that not all African Americans in the nineteenth century considered themselves part of a Europeanizing process … [and] Covey is not seeking to become part of the Eurocentric continuum.” This uncritical view, however, must be vacated as we resituate our interpretation of Covey’s identity markers with evidence from his childhood and adolescence.


See King, Stolen Childhood, 97.

Lawrance, “All we want is make us free.”


Wilma King observes how “children were frequently at the center of the struggle to reunite and maintain families” (Essence of Liberty, 141). For telos see Cooper and Brubaker, “Beyond Identity.”


James Cowels Prichard, Researches into the Physical History of Mankind 3rd ed. (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1837), vol. 2, 75: “The Kissi are a people of whom we know nothing, except that they inhabit the mountainous country about the sources of the Niger, to the southward of Sulimana and Sangara.” The best map for this is to be found in Jones, “Who Were the Vai?” 160.


Childs, Grammar, 5


Some of these were “natural, impenetrable” barriers, and others were manufactured, including “hilltop forts protected by entrenchments,” mud walls fifteen feet thick, “stockades of living trees,” and “winding entrances.” See Stephen Shennan, *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 128-29.


Barber, *History*, 15.

Covey deposition, Yale Library Manuscript Collection, Baldwin Family Papers, MSG 55/1/21/241 [dated 4 October 1839], hereafter referred to as Covey Deposition I.


Gibbs, “Mendi Vocabulary,” 48: “Some of the principal towns in the Men-dí country, according to Covey and Pratt, are Dzha-e-ve-fu-lu, Go-raun or Go-la-húng, Bai-ma, Se-bi-ma, Si-ma-bu, Gna-ya-hung, Gong-a-bu … and Ben-der-ri. The principal rivers are (1.) Mo-a, which runs into the Vai country; (2.) Sewa, which runs into the Bullom country; (3.) Ma-wu-a, which comes from Gissi, where it is called Ma-ku-na, and joins the Mo-a; (4.) Ma-le, which flows by Dzho-po-a, and joins the Mo-a.” A much more extended version exists in American Colonization Society, *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* (Washington, DC: American Colonization Society, 1839), 317-18. Tucker Childs believes the “Ma-ku-na” is “Makona” the name of the river upstream, where it forms the border between Guinea and Liberia.

Misevich, “Origins,” 169. My thanks to Philip Misevich for his assistance with this matter.

Barber, *History*, 15.

Deposition before District Court in Hartford reproduced before Circuit Court and Supreme Court. Available in numerous anthologies, for example, United States Supreme Court, *Reports of cases argued and adjudged in the Supreme Court of the United States* (John Conrad and Co., 1903), vol. 40, 345-46, and henceforth referred to as Covey Deposition II.

Barber, History, 47.


I use “Bullom” in quotes when it appears in an historical or archival document. For descriptions of the “Bullom” shoreline, see James T. Boyle, A Practical Medico-historical Account of the Western Coast of Africa (London: Highley, 1831).

Locating Mani is possibly, according to Joseph Opala, the “holy grail” of Sierra Leone studies. Mani is most likely a remnant name from a former Mani-speaking community, long-since displaced by Mende. See Northcote W. Thomas, “Who were the Manes?” Journal of the African Society 19 (1919), 176-88; 20 (1920), 33-42.


For multi-ethnic context, see Jones, “Who Were the Vai?” 172.


See Walter Hawthorne, Planting Rice and Harvesting Slaves: Transformations along the Guinea-Bissau Coast, 1400-1900 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).


Maryland Colonization Journal 9, 4 (1857), 52.

Maryland Colonization Journal 9, 4 (1857), 51.


See Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Oil*, 51; Conneau, *Slaver’s Log Book*, 250.


*Maryland Colonization Journal* 9, 4 (1857), 52.

For one such building, see Edouard Bouët-Willaumez, *Description nautique des côtes de l’Afrique Occidentale comprise entre le Sénégal et l’Équateur* (2nd ed., Paris: Bajot et Pompe, 1849), 179. Indeed, in 1835 as many as twelve ships were “lying at anchor at Gallinas.” See the otherwise unreliable Richard Drake, *Revelations of a Slave Smuggler: Being the Autobiography of Capt. Rich’d Drake, An African Trader for Fifty Years – From 1807 to 1857; During the Period he was concerned in the transportation...*
92 Conneau, Slaver’s Log Book, 247.
93 Johnston, Liberia, 164.
95 Johnston, Liberia, 166; on one occasion “Pedro Blanco lost… a hundred slaves while trying to send them off in a hurry through the terrible breakers.”
96 Barber, History, 15.
97 Covey Deposition II.
98 David Eltis et al., Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, http://www.slavevoyages.com.Voyage 3014, Hosse (1829); Voyage 2862, Laure (1829) from Sherbro; Voyage 2414, Nueva Isabelita (a) Numero Un (1830); Voyage 2409, Loreto (a) Cornunera (1830); Voyage 2406, Maria de la Concepcion (1830) from Rio Pongo; Voyage 2425, Maria (1830); Voyage 2407, Manzaneras (1830) from Gallinas; Voyage 2427, Ninfa (1830) from Rio Pongo; Voyage 2871, Virginie (1831); Voyage 2418, Maria (1831) from Gallinas; Voyage 2420, Primera (1831) from Gallinas; Voyage 2435, Segunda Socorro (1833) from Gallinas.
99 TNA, FO 315/77/68: “Papers of the Spanish Schooner Segunda Socorro” captured by José de Inza.
102 In the African Names Database [http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/resources/slaves.faces] he is listed as “27094.” According to Misevich, it may not be as simple as this. The Sierra Leone-based register image (Covie is ID 42643, near the bottom) indicates that this person was at least scheduled to be sent as an apprentice to Bathurst. Personal communication, 25 August 2011.
103 Parliamentary Papers (HMSO, 1835), 13.
104 After this second prosecution he remained active. In 1835 he was receiving instructions and correspondence in Ouidah. Robin Law, Ouidah. The Social History of a West African Slaving “Port” 1727-1892 (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 159.
105 Parliamentary Papers (HMSO, 1835), 94.
107 Gibbs, “Mendi Vocabulary,” 44.
108 Indeed, Christian expansion and enslavement have a complicated relationship. One of the first CMS missionaries, Peter Hartwig, abandoned the mission in 1804 and became a slave trader. Nine years later a second missionary also


111 Hanciles, *Euthanasia*, 73. My emphasis.

112 Barber, *History*, 47, based on his testimony.

113 Hanciles, *Euthanasia*, 73.

114 Hanciles, *Euthanasia*, 51. Fyfe described him as a “former carpenter who taught the boys to use the lathe” (*History of Sierra Leone*, 213).

115 “Special Meeting at Kissy”, Wednesday 28 August 1833, Church Missionary Society Archives, B/OMS/Q A1/O1-2: Minutes of Sub-Committees, University of Birmingham, Cadbury Collection, henceforth CMS.


117 Document 216: Private Secretary, Robert Dougan, Freetown, 26 August 1833, to the Reverend Schön, CMS/B/OMS/CA1/O4 1828-42.


119 Barber, *History*, 15: “and remained in this place five or six years, and was taught to read and write the English language, in the schools of the Church Missionary Society…. His Christian name, James, was given him by Rev. J. Weeks, a Church Missionary, at Sierra Leone.”

120 Covey Depositions I and II, respectively.

121 It was the last of its class, the most famous of which was Darwin’s *Beagle*. In April 1837, when it first approached the Sierra Leone coast, it was led by Lieutenant Commander John Luke Richard Stoll. The ship was under the West Africa commands of Frederick Warren (1834); Patrick Campbell (1835-37); George Elliot (1838-39); and William Tucker (1840). TNA, Royal Navy, ADM 51/3064; ADM 53/214 – 217; ADM 37/8796-8800.


123 Covey Deposition I.

124 Covey Deposition II.

125 An all too common occurrence in an earlier period, complaints about impressment of American sailors into the British navy in 1842 turned on the fact that impressment of Africans was illegal but Americans were not yet protected. See Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View, or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850* (New York: D. Appleton,


128 TNA, Royal Navy ADM 53/216. Log Entry of Captain Fitzgerald. 12 March 1839.

129 TNA, Royal Navy ADM 53/216. 19 March 1839.


133 Palmerston’s successor, Lord Aberdeen, reined in this policy. See, *The Times*, 30 April 1842.


135 Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 30 October 1839, #F1-4655, American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (henceforth AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA)


137 Gibbs’ account indicated that on Staten Island Covey was “found, amid some twenty Africans.” It would have been inappropriate for Gibbs to solicit Covey’s assistance without Fitzgerald’s permission. And as Gibbs stated that it was through “the kindness of Captain Fitzgerald, his [Covey’s] services as an interpreter were procured,” the captain was likely involved in the negotiation.

138 Covey Deposition I

139 Covey Deposition II.

140 James Covey to A Committee Member, 4 November 1840. In John W. Blassingame, Mae Henderson, Jessica M. Dunn. eds., *Antislavery Newspapers and Periodicals* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), 497.

141 Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 30 October 1839, #F1-4655, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA. A September 1839 letter from Lewis Tappan refers to an African interpreter who speaks Mandingo. Yale University Library Manuscript Collection, Baldwin Family Papers, MSG 55/1/21/242. He was clearly not useless, as he translated and testified in September 1839. “The Amistad Circuit Court Trial,” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 23 September 1839.

142 Gibbs wrote that, “John Ferry, an African … was born at Slan-go-lo, a town of Yom-bu, in the Gis-si country, and is now resident in New York. He was brought from his native country about the year 1821 or 1822, at the age of 11 or 12, but has often conversed with Gis-si people since that period.” Josiah W. Gibbs, “A Gissi or Kissi Vocabulary,” *American Journal of Science* 38 (1840), 41-42.


144 “Although Charles seems to understand the Africans perfectly and can communicate freely with them, his English is too poor to make himself understood with any readiness.” Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 30 October 1839, #F1-4655, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

145 Townsend to Tappan, 29 October 1839, #F1-4653, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

146 Townsend to Tappan, 29 October 1839.

147 Townsend to Tappan, 30 October 1839.

148 Townsend to Tappan, 30 October 1839: “I have seen James and he consents to remain if Capt Fitzgerald will consent. Charles is very reluctant to leave him as the Capt gave him a charge not to come back without him. To quiet Charles I have promised him that he shall not be blamed and that the Capt’s consent shall be obtained or James shall return on Saturday.”

149 Tappan instructed Seth Staples to tell Baldwin to “detain” Covey on 30 October and explained that he would get Captain Fitzgerald’s “consent.” He claimed “there will be no difficulty. It would be better to have a legal process however.”
Lewis Tappan to Amos Townsend, New York, 31 October 1839. #F1-4657, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

150 Tappan to Townsend, New York, 12 November 1839, #F1-4675, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

151 Amos Townsend to Joshua Leavitt, New Haven, 3 October 1839, #F1-4638A, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

152 Deposition I.


155 The description of the illness lasting one and half months during winter makes a “cold” unlikely, and malaria quite possible. Amos Townsend to [Lewis Tappan?], New Haven, 19 November 1839, #F1-4705 AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA. Tappan, Abel, and Klingberg, Side-Light, 61.

156 Finkenbine, “Symbolism,” 241. He seemed unlikely to enter “the pantheon of black abolitionist heroes,” and did not attract the favors granted others.

157 District Attorney William S. Holabird surprised Covey into translating his questions to Cinqué as a ploy to elicit a confession. Owens et al, Black Mutiny, 233.

158 Amos Townsend to [Lewis Tappan?], New Haven, 19 November 1839, #F1-4705 AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

159 Lewis Tappan to Amos Townsend, New York, 12 November 1839, #F1-4675 AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

160 Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, [February 1840] #F1-4731 AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

161 Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, [February 1840] #F1-4731 AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

162 Edmund Fuller, Mutiny!: Being accounts of insurrections, famous and infamous, on land and sea, from the days of the Caesars to modern times (New York: Crown Publishers, 1953), 343.

163 Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 23 July 1840, #F1-4737. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

164 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 14 December 1840. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

165 Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 23 July 1840, #F1-4737. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

166 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 14 December 1840. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

167 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 14 December 1840. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.
168 For naming and renaming practices among freed children in the South, see King, *Stolen Childhood*, 150.

169 “Amos Townsend’s Jr’s a/c with Committee for Mendians. Expenses incurred for James Covey,” spans October 1839 – October 1841 and totals $437.31. #F1-4659. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA. Amos Townsend purchased him “two plain woollen [sic] pantaloons,” and a “cap, and stockings, and vest” and billed Lewis Tappan. Amos Townsend to [Lewis Tappan?], New Haven, 19 November 1839, #F1-4705 AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

170 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 28 December 1840. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

171 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 28 December 1840. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA. Letters from Cinque and others repeatedly complained about Pendleton.

172 Amos Townsend to Lewis Tappan, New Haven, 11 January 1841. #F1-4861. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

173 Habeas Corpus writ pertaining to the three African girls. 15-17 March 1841. New Haven County Court Records, CT State Library, Hartford.

174 Passage to New York $2. “Amos Townsend’s Jr’s a/c with Committee for Mendians. Expenses incurred for James Covey,” #F1-4659. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.


176 Letters from James Covey to Lewis Tappan, 9 June 1841; 29 June 1841; AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

177 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, 9 June 1841. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

178 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New York, 29 [month unknown], 1841. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

179 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New York, 16 June 1841. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

180 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New York, 16 June 1841. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

181 *Jeremiah* 22.19: “He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.”

182 James Covey to Lewis Tappan, New York, 29 June 1841. AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA. 101 Anthony Street, New York. I visited the Brooklyn site in May 2009 and there exist only derelict warehouses.

183 Carly to James Covey, Farmington, 19 October 1841. #F1-5086, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA.

184 For details of the preparations for departure, see *Hartford Daily Courant*, 21 October 1841; 1 November 1841; 23 December 1841.


The missionaries first decided to continue to Liberia, and only later returned to found the Kaw-Mendi mission along the Jong River, principally for the survivors of *La Amistad*.


John Brooks to George Thompson, 25 August, 5 October 1850, Sierra Leone Collection, AMA Archives, ARC, Tulane, NOLA


Chapter 12. Sierra Leone Indentured Workers in Guyana and Martinique in the Nineteenth Century

Céline Flory

On 14 December 1860, after more than six years in French Guyana, Thomas Coffée, now aged thirty-one, returned to Sierra Leone, the country of his origin. He had served six years as an indentured worker, having voluntarily signed a contract to cross the Atlantic and work off his indenture. He was one of 124 individuals who signed contracts of indenture with Captain Charles Chevalier in Freetown between 1854 and 1857 to work in the French colonies of Guyana and Martinique. Hence his story, discussed below, reflects the extensive efforts of the French and the British to use indenture and apprenticeship as mechanisms of trans-Atlantic labor mobilization in the wake of slavery. Thomas was among the few who were actually repatriated at the end of their contracts. In fact, only ten of the indentured workers from Sierra Leone were repatriated, and hence the migration tended to be permanent. This chapter traces the movements of Coffée and the other 123 individuals involved in this scheme by placing the migration in the larger context of labor mobilization during the transitional years in the nineteenth century when trans-Atlantic slavery was under attack and when attempts were made to substitute other forms of labor recruitment.

Freetown as a Place of Recruitment

Freetown was a source of non-slave labor on the West African coast since at least the 1830s. Freetown had been the arrival point of Nova Scotians, Jamaican Maroons and then Liberated Africans taken off slave ships, which constituted a significant immigration after 1808. By the time of French labor recruitment in the mid nineteenth century, Liberated Africans
represented a majority of the Freetown population, although there was also a significant population that had migrated from the interior of the Colony. Inward migration, coerced and voluntary, contributed to rapid population growth in early nineteenth-century Freetown, although there was also an outward flow of population inland, as well as along the coast and across the Atlantic.

In fact, from its establishment, Freetown experienced an influx of people, many of them Muslims. Because of its economic attractions, Freetown became a magnet for workers from neighboring territories, including “recaptives,” the term used to categorize individuals taken off slave ships who had been sent to the villages but who often wished to leave rural life to improve their circumstances in town.4 People also arrived from further along the coast, especially from the Kru coast between the Sinou and Sassandra Rivers.5 Freetown was the focal point of migration, but after 1839, there was a counter movement, as many people tried to return to their homelands. Specifically, there were various migratory schemes focused on Yorubaland and the Niger River that witnessed a voluntary movement of people. Consequently, the outward migration from Freetown continued into the 1840s, particularly to Badagry as a first stop, and lasted for the rest of the century.6

Official hostility to emigration came mainly from the need for labor in the colony, and if migration was to be encouraged, the British government wanted to promote emigration to British colonies in the Caribbean. At the beginning of 1840, the government authorized the recruitment of free workers for the British Caribbean, where the abolition of slavery had been decreed and there appeared to be a labor shortage. The emancipation law enacted on 28 August 1833 in British colonies provided that slaves should become “apprentices” to their former masters, and only on 1 August 1838 did full emancipation become the rule in British colonies.7 After that, the need for labor became especially serious since former slaves often refused to work on the sugar plantations or to accept employment from former masters.

Efforts to recruit workers were treated with considerable suspicion. Potential candidates were attracted by apparently generous promises, but a law passed on 1 January 1842 prohibited workers from leaving their employment and thereby ending their contracts. By the end of 1842, the voluntary migration of workers to the British Caribbean had dried up. To meet the continuing demand for labor, however, Lord Stanley, minister of the Colonial Office, authorized the recruitment of Liberated Africans freshly taken off slave ships, with the provision that the apprenticeships of these “recaptives” would be served in the Caribbean. Three ships were dispatched to Sierra Leone to implement this scheme in 1843, including the Glen Huntley, which went to Jamaica, the Arabian, destined for British Guyana, and the Senator, which went to Trinidad.
The colonial administration monitored the embarkations to verify that procedures were in accordance with the current British Passenger Act. Lord Stanley prepared regulations detailing the modalities of recruitment, transport and engagement. These new measures did not reduce the skepticism of the local inhabitants at Sierra Leone or the “recaptives” who were under the influence of the missionaries in Sierra Leone. In order to encourage recruitment to this scheme, the government eased some regulations, such as the requirement that recruits had to reside in Sierra Leone for at least six weeks, and the requirement that employers provide ten days notice of dismissal. The stipulation that there had to be at least one woman for every ten men was suspended and sanitary and security rules were abandoned. As this flexibility did not increase the number of recruits substantially, a new approach was adopted. In a confidential agreement in 1844, the government in London and the Commissioners of Emigration arranged that “recaptured” Africans would be sent directly to the Caribbean rather than allowing them to remain in Freetown, where they might want to stay.

At the same time that their documents guaranteed them freedom, the authorities made them sign contracts (engagement) which stipulated a fourteen year period of work for a planter. This method of recruitment was adopted in Sierra Leone and St. Helena, and also in all places where commissioners were established to adjudicate cases of illicit slave trading: Rio de Janeiro, Havana, Luanda and Boa Vista. In order to avoid delays in the departure of ships, the rules of the British Passenger Act were revised so that local authorities in charge of emigration had sole responsibility for the control of the sanitary and security rules.

Between 1843 and 1845, three Royal Navy ships transported 2,187 emigrants to the Caribbean, while nine private ships took another 1,400 Africans from Sierra Leone and St. Helena. There was considerable demand for labor in the Caribbean when the Sugar Duty Act became law in 1846, thereby ending the subsidy for West Indian planters that had protected their market, and consequently there was considerable demand for cheap labor in order to lower the costs of production and keep British sugar competitive with foreign suppliers, such as Cuba and Brazil. To facilitate the transfer of the newly indentured workers, the standards of the British Passenger Act were largely ignored, with local administrators responsible for whatever sanitary and security provisions were deemed necessary. Inevitably, the lax standards led to a diplomatic scandal, and because of high mortality rates, the British government suspended the authorization that was being given to private companies who were organizing the emigration of Liberated Africans. Nonetheless, in 1845, despite the opposition of the Spanish commissioner, a private ship carried “recaptives” from Africa to an uncertain fate.

Because of the demand for labor, the West Indian planters called for a more considerable recruitment of African workers. Thus in 1847 the
government launched a new plan of emigration to extend the area of recruitment south of Sierra Leone to the Kru coast and Liberia. The government decided that in addition to the transfer of newly Liberated Africans, recruitment should also concentrate on the free Kru population, which was already heavily involved in working for wages on ships along the African coast. In November 1849 Hyde, Hodge & Co., a private company from London, obtained a contract to recruit workers, which was renewed five times until 1854. Yet soon after, complaints of significant irregularities were recorded. These concerned the methods of removal of individuals, and the fact that many recruits had been purchased and hence were slaves.

The majority of the immigrants were actually “recaptives” from Sierra Leone, although the number fluctuated according to the movements of trade. Until the 1850s, the interception of slave ships was considerable, so that the inflow of indentured “recaptives” who had to work off their apprenticeships in the Caribbean actually increased as the trans-Atlantic slave trade began to decline and then ended in the mid 1860s. According to G. W. Roberts about 36,120 African immigrants were sent to the British colonies in the Caribbean between 1841 and 1867. Almost all were “recaptives” from Sierra Leone and St. Helena.

**French Recruitment of Engages**

When the French government abolished slavery on 27 April 1848 (for the second time), planters in the French colonies lobbied for the introduction of foreign workers under contract as a means of reorganizing labor mobilization, which had, as of that time, become a free market. In this way, planters hoped to escape dependence on the local population, which was now highly mobile and whose wage demands were more than the planters wanted to pay. In response, the government proposed to subsidize labor recruitment in Africa. Between 1854 and 1862, more than 21,000 Africans were recruited along the West African coast as indentured workers from the French trading post on Gorée to the Congo River. In terms of those who crossed the Atlantic, 18,518 of the migrants actually survived the Atlantic crossing and went to French colonies where colonial administrators and planters welcomed them. Between 1854 and 1859, 1,826 indentured African workers went to Guyana; between 1857 and 1862, 10,552 Africans went to Martinique, and between 1857 and 1861, 6,140 Africans arrived in Guadeloupe. The other 2,482 Africans died during the period of recruitment and during the Atlantic crossing. The migration was comprised of two distinct movements. During the first period between 1854 and 1856, the recruited workers were mostly free, including all those recruited in Sierra Leone. In the second period from 1857 to 1862, almost all of the indentured workers who were recruited were in fact slaves and were described as “rachat préalable,” that is, in a state of
“preliminary emancipation.” This study concentrates on the workers from Sierra Leone who were actually free and willingly entered into labor contracts.

Initially, the intention seems to have been to recruit free workers, which is what happened in Sierra Leone, but to establish a context for the analysis of the Sierra Leone migration, it is important to recognize that French recruiters usually purchased slaves, who in exchange for their “emancipation” had to work for ten years in the Caribbean to serve their indentures. In effect they had to buy their own freedom. Some 93 percent of the African immigrants were recruited as indentured workers in this way. Hence in 1854, when the French government decided to put in place a system of “African immigration,” what was actually implemented was not the recruitment of free workers who willingly entered into a contract but slaves who had no choice. The Sierra Leone portion of this recruitment stands out as unique in the extent to which it demonstrates that free workers were willing to migrate in the Atlantic world at a time when slavery was still being used to send labor to the Americas.

Captain Charles Chevalier was responsible for the inauguration of the African emigration scheme. In April 1855, he signed an agreement with the Ministry of Marine and Colonies for the trans-Atlantic “recruitment of Africans” to serve as a labor force in the Caribbean. On 19 January 1854 he obtained authorization to recruit 400 African workers for the plantations of Guyana. Chevalier was a captain of long service from Nantes who knew the coast of West Africa from Cape Mount to Cape Lahou as a result of trade over many years. There is some fragmentary evidence about his career. Serge Daget mentions him as a “frequent participant in the illegal trade.” It is not possible, however, to identify this man in Daget’s papers since he mentions a “J-B Chevalier,” rather than someone by the name of Charles Chevalier. In his compilation of records on the nineteenth-century French slave trade, Daget mentions a Chevalier three times; on the first two occasions there is no first name, and in the last entry the name recorded is Jean-Baptiste Chevalier. Daget considers that all three references are to the same man. However, the references may not be to the same person. Jean-Baptiste Chevalier was born in Rochefort, while Charles Chevalier came from Nantes. Hence the first two references may have been to Charles. According to the dossier on Charles Chevalier:

Mr. Chevalier has been known for about 25 years on the lower coast by all the kings and influential chiefs with whom he once had commercial transactions, so that when his ship was recognized by a first canoe, it was immediately surrounded by a number of others.

He had established commercial and diplomatic relations with local authorities. In one of his letters, he states that he had personally been preparing his contacts with his idea of developing an emigration scheme for two or three
years before he was given official approval. The agreement signed on 19 April 1855 provided for the introduction of 3,000 workers into Guyana and the payment of an indemnity of 329 francs for each adult and 303 francs for each “non-adult.” The indemnity amounted to 129 francs for an adult and 103 francs for “non adults,” and an advance of 200 francs for each worker who was recruited. The category “non-adult” comprised boys aged 10-13 and girls aged 10-11, and those over 14 and 12 respectively were considered “adults.” The text stipulated that the recruitment was to be spaced over three years from 1855 to 1857, with an expected delivery of 600 to 1,200 workers per year including 10-20 percent females. On 30 November 1856, he signed another agreement to recruit 1,200 workers for Martinique in the space of 20 months at a commission of 350 francs for each adult and 320 francs for “non-adults.”

Chevalier went on four recruiting expeditions to the upper Guinea coast specifically targeting Gorée, Bissau, Freetown, the Gallinas coast, Monrovia, the “Trade Town” coast, the Kru towns, and the coast between Victoria and Cape Coast. Specifically, he went to West Africa in the Cinq-Frères, which was at Freetown in July or August 1854 and arrived in Cayenne on 11 November 1854; the Diane made two voyages, the first being at Freetown from 20 October to 4 November 1855 and arriving in Cayenne on 6 January 1856, and the second voyage reaching Freetown in April 1856 and arriving in Cayenne on 20 June 1856; and finally the Phénix, which was at Freetown in February 1857, arriving in Martinique on 6 July. Chevalier recruited 1,208 workers, but most of his recruits came from the coastal Kru towns south of Sierra Leone. During each of his four expeditions, Chevalier stopped at Freetown, where he recruited a total of 123 men and one woman.

Table 12.1 Number of Indentured Workers, 1854-1857

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Ship</th>
<th>Number of Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cinq-Frères (1854)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane (1855-56)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane (1856)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phénix (1857)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment of Indentured Labor in Sierra Leone

On his first visit to Freetown in 1854, Chevalier immediately attended the French consul, and together they met the Governor of the Colony in order to obtain authorization to recruit according to administrative and fiscal regulations. After receiving the Governor’s sanction, Chevalier posted advertisements along the streets of Freetown with the terms and conditions of engagement for his offer. The posters announced that in return for six years of work, the employer was to provide lodging, small gardens, healthcare, food, and a monthly wage of about eleven shillings. At the end of the contract, workers were to be given the choice between free repatriation and re-employment. According to the posters:

The registering of the emigrants will take place before the officer appointed by the French Government and in charge of the emigration. Persons agreeing to the above-mentioned conditions can, from today up until the time of departure, get all further information by applying at the office ... of this city.

The applicants were to assemble on the day of departure, and on board ship they were to complete the agreement by signing contracts. Upon signing, each worker was given an advance of about twenty-seven shillings in clothes and goods. The terms of the labor contract were listed in eight articles, although there was ambiguity in the details of the engagement.

Relatively few recruits came from Sierra Leone. The reason was the hostility of local authorities in Sierra Leone and the general distrust about migration across the Atlantic in the context of the ongoing suppression measures that demonstrated that the abolition of the slave trade was far from complete. Wishing to promote land cultivation and local industry, the authorities in Sierra Leone and the various Protestant missions were not particularly enthusiastic about Chevalier’s schemes. In addition, the population itself was not convinced by the advantages that they might receive if they emigrated for such a lengthy period. After the Phénix voyage in 1857, the British government forbade French recruitment, not only in Freetown but also anywhere in the colony of Sierra Leone. Hence the Sierra Leone portion of French emigration to the Caribbean was relatively small because recruitment did not continue. Despite their small numbers, however, the emigrants from Sierra Leone were still an identifiable population in Martinique and Guyana.

As listed in the Appendix, Chevalier recruited only 123 men and one woman in Sierra Leone. And of this number, one man escaped and three others died before disembarkation, so that 120 individuals actually arrived at their destinations, 65 men in Guyana and 54 men and one woman in Martinique. This woman, Paki Ken, aged twenty, accompanied her husband Sac, who was thirty years old, in a migration that was almost entirely male.
While the Sierra Leone recruits only constituted about 10 percent of the total number of workers that Chevalier recruited through his indenture scheme, it is clear that the recruiting campaigns were part of the search for new mechanisms for mobilizing labor in the Atlantic world and specifically to meet the needs of colonial colonies in the circum-Caribbean.

Table 12.2 Place of Origins of Recruits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goteé</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bissau</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freetown</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallinas Coast</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monrovia</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade Town &amp; New Seste</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kru Coast</td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria to Cape Coast</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the process of recruitment, government agents recorded the names of the indentured workers at the time of departure. The nominative lists include age and gender, as well as information on occupation, origins, and religion. As demonstrated in Table 12.3, 73 percent of the migrants were aged 15 to 24. The indentured workers recruited in Freetown, just one of the places of recruitment, stayed on board ship approximately 87 days on average, including 53 days before crossing the Atlantic and then another 34 days on the actual crossing. The living conditions on board were characterized by discomfort and a lack of privacy. In fact, three Sierra Leoneans died in the crossing, which was about 2 percent of the group recruited in Sierra Leone. The Cinq-Frères took three months to reach Cayenne, where it arrived on 11 November 1854.

It was stipulated in the second article of the contracts that workers would “undertake all work as stipulated by M. Ch. Chevalier or his representative, and specifically for the cultivation of sugar cane, coffee and other products of the Colony, and agree to fulfill all the obligations in general of the indenture until its termination; that otherwise agree to abide by all the laws and labor requirements that were in force in the colony.” In addition to work on plantations, indentured workers found themselves employed in the construction of Bagne Prison after 1852 and in the gold mines owned by the
Compagnie de l’Approuague. The Compagnie de l’Approuague was owned by the most important planters and merchants in Guyane, and on 20 May 1857, a government decree gave the company exclusive rights to the exploitation of the gold deposits and a concession of 200,000 hectares in the Approuague basin. In an effort to diversify its investments, the company also acquired the large sugar plantation, La Jamaïque.

### Table 12.3 Ages of Indentured Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the terms of the contracts were not entirely clear, the French promoters of the plan insisted that individuals had full knowledge of the facts of employment and had voluntarily agreed to them. For example, Blanchard, the immigration officer on board the Cinq-Frères, observed that “it is senseless to say that each indentured worker embarked without his own decision and knowledge of his contract of engagement with Mr. Chevalier.” The contracts stipulated that the workers should undertake twenty-six days of labor a month based on daily shifts of twelve hours. Irrespective of whether the indentured workers were employed in cane fields or in the gold-bearing sites, the work was extremely hard and laborious and characterized by strict discipline. Faced with such conditions, the workers lodged complaints against their employers, occasionally went on strike, and frequently broke their contracts by running away.

### Biographical Accounts of Sierra Leone Migrants

Information is available on 68 individuals who were recruited in Sierra Leone. Only three lists indicate place of birth and this information is lacking for the 55 immigrants on the Phénix. Thirty-six were born in Freetown, while twenty were born “on the Sierra Leone coast,” eleven were from the Kru coastal towns and one was from the Gallinas. All but six individuals had English names, sometimes of Christian significance, while some of them
were sailors or had been engaged in trade and spoke English. Some knew how to read and write and were identified as Protestants. We can assume that many, if not a majority, were Liberated Africans and Kru who had previously migrated to Freetown and were therefore already involved in working conditions that involved payment by agreed contracts, whether or not these were actually written agreements. The following summarizes what is known about several of the Sierra Leone migrants and their experiences in Guyana and Martinique.

Eight of the indentured workers, including Thomas Coffée and the American, John Thomas, first worked on a sugar plantation owned by Fouré. In February 1855, however, Fouré, found himself in a difficult financial position, and, as stipulated in the terms, sold the contracts to the Compagnie de l’Approuague and the colonial administration for work on the prison. The transfers were symptomatic of the economic changes that were underway in the colony. The Compagnie de l’Approuague and the government were the two largest employers of indentured labor in the colony. Following the construction of the prison, John Thomas continued to be employed by the government at the prison. When John Thomas finished his term of indenture at the prison, he asked to leave the colony and to return to his native land, the United States. He left on a merchant ship bound for Salem, Massachusetts on 16 October 1860.35

Thomas Coffée, together with four of his companions who had arrived in 1854 on the Cinq-Frères, worked in the Approuague gold mines. Besides gold mining, the Company operated a sugar plantation. On his arrival at the mines, Thomas Coffée met twenty of his fellow travellers; eleven of them were from Sierra Leone. The few remaining years left for Coffée were arduous. The conditions of work in the mines, set on the beds of the river and within the Amazonian forest, were very harsh. It was during his stay on this “habitation” that Coffée met Résée Désirée, who was a farm-worker and former slave, aged fifty-six in 1860, who had been born in Africa. She had been sent as a slave to Guyana and was freed as a result of French abolition. Having obtained, as the legislation required, authorization from his employer and the private council, Coffée aged in his thirties, married Résée Désirée, twenty six years his elder, on 12 May 1860.36 A few months after the wedding, both embarked on board the Lawrence ship to return to their native land.37 Having finished his six years of commitment, Thomas decided to be repatriated as his contract gave him the right to do. As long as he had not been convicted of any crime, this right could be extended to his wife. Their personal motivations were unknown, but this step appeared to be a carefully considered scheme and one that was decided perhaps even before the wedding. This repatriation with a Guyanese wife was unique. Indeed by 1870, only fifty-two of the total number of indentured Africans, not just those from Sierra Leone, chose, like him, to marry women from
Guyana, most often women older than the men, and none returned to Africa.\textsuperscript{38} James Macantay’s experience was different. This young man, aged twenty, born on the Sierra Leone coast, arrived at the colony on 6 January 1856 on board the \textit{Diane}. He was then assigned to the Giaimo and Bozonnet Company, which specialized in the exploitation of timber.\textsuperscript{39} After he finished this work, he became a servant in a wealthy household in Cayenne. There he met Marie Marine, a young Guyanese aged twenty, who was also a servant. On 7 September 1865, they were married. Their marriage was authorized by the private council of the colony during the session dated 10 August 1865.\textsuperscript{40} They had two children, a son, George, born in June 1866 and a girl, Alexandrine, who was born two years later. Alexandrine’s birth certificate states that her father was a butcher and that the birth had taken place in their house.

This status of house owner was confirmed by an investigation of the immigration service that indicated that there were only fourteen African immigrant house-owners.\textsuperscript{41} James Macantay decided to stay in Guyana and start a family, unlike his compatriots with whom he worked for Giaimo and Bozonnet. Of the ten men with whom he worked, he was the only one who was there for the entire time of his engagement. In fact, the other nine, with the exception of one who died just one year after his arrival, all ran away at various intervals between 1856 and 1859.\textsuperscript{42} These escapes were in response to the coercion and difficult working conditions that they experienced.

Arthur Powah, a young Sierra Leonean aged fifteen, arrived in the colony on 6 January 1856 on the same ship as James Macantay. A few months after their arrival, he and seven of his companions decided to leave without authorization from their employers, Giaimo and Bozonnet. As far as the local authorities were concerned, they had escaped and broken the terms of their contract. Denounced by Guyanese workers, they were arrested by the French police. Justifying their actions, Arthur Powah and his compatriots John Brown, Stephen Beckley and the Kru John Thomas all accused their employers of poor treatment. They also contested the conditions of engagement imposed on them, and certified that Chevalier had promised them that they would be employed as servants or shop assistants in the city. They insisted that they had no knowledge of their contract of engagement and denied having signed contracts containing the statement that: “the born X not knowing how to sign has made his cross.”\textsuperscript{43} The Governor, however, considered that the migrants: “know perfectly how to read and write, and even have a developed education.”\textsuperscript{44}

Apparently, these individuals had no knowledge of their contracts, which had been signed with a cross by one of the recruiting agents. Likewise they appeared to have no knowledge of the promotional poster used at Freetown. As a result, they left Freetown on the basis of inaccurate and incomplete
information. This report could apply to all the individuals recruited by this captain. Indeed, all 148 contracts which have been located contained the same statement followed by the mark of a cross. In the Guyana departmental archives, there are 95 contracts for individuals recruited during the Cinq-frères voyage in 1854, and 53 contracts for individuals recruited during the voyage of the Diane in 1856.\textsuperscript{45} Also, the archives include many records of complaint filed to the administration contesting the level of wages, the nature of work and the length of engagement.

Arthur Powah’s case is symptomatic of this type of conflict. Based on assertions made by Chevalier and members of his crew, the administration reached the conclusion that all were familiar with the conditions of engagement. The commissioner of immigration responsible for receiving the cases of complainants and checking their accuracy, consistently rejected the criticisms directed against employers and claimed that the cases were not admissible.\textsuperscript{46} The individuals who had signed indentures were in an extremely difficult position. They had to contend with the partiality of the authorities, who were supposedly there to protect them once the contract had been signed. Furthermore, they were trapped financially because their travel costs had already been settled by the administration.

When they wanted to break their contracts, the administration or the planter-employer demanded a refund of the costs of travel, estimated at 329 francs, which was an impossible condition for these workers who had arrived in the colony without savings and who earned low wages. In accordance with their contracts, they earned 13,50 francs per month.\textsuperscript{47} When they arrived in the colonies, the individuals had no possibility of escape from their contract and their employers. Aware of this situation, Arthur Powah and his companions did not file a complaint through the official channels, but decided to escape instead. An investigation led by the Guyanese immigration service in September 1869 sheds light on the experience of these emigrants ten years after their arrival.\textsuperscript{48}

As with other indentured workers, the Sierra Leone group adjusted to conditions in the Caribbean as best they could. There is considerable evidence of resistance, including escape. The harsh conditions are reflected both in the incidence of broken contracts and even the death of workers. Whether they worked on plantations, in mining gold or in other occupations, the Africans continued to identify as a group, whether or not individuals were successful in leaving the Caribbean after the termination of their contracts. The possibilities of repatriation also were limited for other African migrants, including the Kru, who were more numerous than workers from Sierra Leone. Like the Sierra Leoneans, the Kru were familiar to some extent with European expectations. They had a tradition of working for Europeans, spoke English and sometimes French, and were often Christians, although Protestant and not Catholic. In common with the Sierra Leoneans, they had
some comprehension of European colonial society. All these recruits, both Sierra Leoneans and Kru, interacted within an Euro-African context in Africa, and hence were conscious of their rights and were ready to challenge French colonial administration, planters and commercial companies to uphold their rights and protect their freedom. Even though very few individuals signed contracts in Sierra Leone, the French effort at recruitment nonetheless demonstrates the ways in which plantation managers in the Americas attempted to find alternative sources to enslaved labor, and that briefly, Sierra Leone was a focus of recruitment.

Table 12.4 Status of African Immigrants in Guyana, 1869

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Sierra Leone Immigrants (#)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Other African Immigrants (#)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fugitive</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deceased</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repatriated</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>re-indentured</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>missing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>property owner</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>criminal conviction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self employed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without indenture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>left for other country</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td>800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTES


2 There are two lists of repatriates, the first dated 14 December 1860 and the second dated 14 October 1862, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Guyana, Carton 53, files 20 and 22.

3 John Peterson, Province of Freedom, a History of Sierra Leone, 1787-1870 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 279; J.J. Crooks, A History of the Colony of Sierra Leone, Western Africa (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1903), 375.


8 Asiegbu, *Slavery and the Politics of Liberation*, 43-44.


12 Roberts, “Immigration of Africans into the British Caribbean,” 254-59, estimates that there were 400 Kru immigrants. Also see Schuler, “Recruitment of African Indentured Labourers,” 136.


14 See Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Guyana, Carton 52, files 8, 9, 11, 12, 13 and Carton 53, files 18, 20, 22; Guadeloupe, Carton 186, file 1139; and Martinique, Carton 127, files 1136 to 1145.

15 Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Généralités, Carton 118, file 1020, contract of 29 March 1859.

16 The “agreement for the introduction of 3,000 Africans indentured in French Guiana,” 19 April 1855, by Charles Chevalier, Colonies director; 1M55, Guyana Departmental Archives.

17 Ducos, Minister of Navy and Colonies to Chevalier, 19 January 1854, 1M53, Guyana Departmental Archives.


19 Leblanc, Immigration Commissioner, to Protet, Commander, Division navale des côtes occidentals d’Afrique, 18 July 1857, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Senegal and Dependencies, Carton 14, file 23b.

20 Convention of 19 April 1855, Guyana Departmental Archives, 1M55.

21 See the “agreement for the introduction of 1,200 Africans workers in Martinique,” 30 November 1856, by Captain Chevalier, ship owner Maës, and
Minister of Navy and Colonies, Hamelin; French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, ADP, Africa, Carton 42.

22 Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Guyana, Carton 52, files 8 and 9; Guyana Departmental Archives, Collection Lohier, Carton X237; Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Sénégal and Dependencies, Carton 14, file 23 a, b.

23 See Table 12.1, “Number of recruits for each ship in Freetown.” Four nominative lists of emigrants were consulted, including those for Cinq-Frères, 12 November 1854, FNOMA, Guyana, carton 52, file 8; Diane (first voyage), 1 April 1856, FNOMA, Guyana, carton 52, file 9; Diane (second voyage), June 1856, Guyana Departmental Archives, Lohier Collection, carton X237; and Phénix, 22 May 1857, FNOMA, Senegal and Dependencies, carton 14, file 23b.

24 Blanchard, Immigration Commissioner to Faidherbe, Governor, Senegal, 23 July 1854, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Guyana, Carton 52, file 8.

25 British Parliamentary Papers, Correspondence with British Commissioners and other representatives abroad and with foreign ministers in England together with reports from the admiralcy relative to the slave trade: 44, Class B (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), vol. 44, 61.

26 Correspondence with British Commissioners, vol. 44, 61.

27 Earl of Clarendon to Consul Hutchinson, Foreign Office, 28 August 1857, Correspondence with British Commissioners, vol. 44, 49.

28 Clarendon to Hutchinson, 28 August 1857.

29 Article 2 of Indenture contract, Guyana Departmental Archives, Collection Lohier, Carton X247.


31 Blanchard, Immigration Commissioner, to Protet, Governor of Sénégal, 25 October 1854, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Senegal and Dependencies, Carton 14, file 23a.

32 See Immigration Commissioner Reports, Guyana Departmental Archives, Register 1855-59.

33 List of Cinq-Frères, 12 November 1854, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Guyana, Carton 52, file 8; List of Diane (first voyage), 1 April 1856, Guyana, Carton 52, file 9; and list of Diane (second voyage), June 1856, Guyana Departmental Archives, Lohier Collection, Carton X237.

34 For example: “Jeremy Macfaye,” “John William,” “Abraham Georges,” and “Samuel Moses.”


36 Archives Nationales de France, Guyana civil state, Approuague district, 1860, 5MI 783.


38 Archives Nationales de France, Guyana civil state from 1854 to 1870 (from 5MI 780 to 5MI 834).
39 List of *Diane* passengers, 1 April 1856, Guyana, Carton 52, file 9.
40 FNA, Guyana civil state, Cayenne district, 1865, 1866 and 1868, 5MI 794 and 795, Archives Départementales de la Guyana, 5K 61.
42 List of African immigrants, 25 September 1869.
43 Guyana Departmental Archives, Collection Lohier, carton X247.
44 Baudin, Governor of Guyana, to Hamelin, Minister of the Navy and Colonies, 17 February 1857, FNOMA, Guyana, carton 52, file 7.
45 Lohier Collection, carton X247, Guyana Departmental Archives.
46 Letter dated 22 July 1856 from the interior office chief to Favard, interior director. FNOMA, Guyana, carton 52, file 17.
47 Lohier Collection, carton X247.

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Index

A

Abeokuta · 176
abolitionism · xvi, 150, 155, 221, 273
African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia · 130
African immigration · 261
African Institution · 20, 165, 174, 177, 178, 179, 183, 186, 187, 188, 277, 299
agriculture · 147, 155, 177, 179, 181
Alexandrine, George · 267
Amazonia · 9
American War of Independence · 14, 39, 145
Amis des Noirs et des Colonies · 155, 160
Anderson, Alexander · 33, 35, 39, 42, 99, 106
Anderson, Benedict · 151, 159
Anderson, John · 31, 33, 43
Andow (slave trader, Mesurado) · 193
Aného · 69
Antinomianism · 131

apprenticeship · 21, 23, 152, 168, 231, 232, 233, 257
Ashcraft-Eason, Lillian · 110, 123, 277
Aspinall, James · 71, 211
Atkins, John · 47, 96, 97, 99, 105
Atlantic slave trade · 2, 5, 8, 20, 103, 139, 163, 164, 174, 180, 189, 192, 196, 197, 208, 221, 224, 260
Austria · 151

B

Bacchus (sloop) · 60, 61, 67
Backhouse, Daniel · 33, 35, 43
Badagry · 176, 258
Bagroo · 209
camwood · 6, 17, 30, 35, 40, 91, 105
Canada (also Nova Scotia) · xii, 1, 122, 129, 274
Cape Blanco · 112
Cape Coast · 96, 106, 121, 262
Cape Lahou · 98, 261
Cape Mesurado · 37, 94, 97, 193
Cape Mount · 6, 7, 25, 29, 33, 35, 36, 41, 43, 44, 69, 72, 78, 80, 81, 82, 91, 92, 93, 208, 209, 246, 261
Cape of Good Hope · 166
Cape Palmas · x, 38, 39, 41, 92
Cape Rouge · 112
Cape Shilling · 69
Cape Verde islands · 6, 83, 110, 155
Cape Verga · 38
Caribbean (also West Indies) · 10, 13, 15, 62, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 157, 251, 258, 259, 260, 261, 263, 264, 268, 273, 277, 300
Carolina Lowcountry · 129
Carolinias · 30, 52, 139
Carretta, Vincent · 83, 118, 119, 125, 139, 243, 249, 290
Case, George · 71
cattle · 6, 7, 133, 140, 143, 174, 201, 227
Caulker, Stephen · 164, 209
Cayenne · 262, 264, 267, 272
Central America · 110, 113
Central Sudan · 20
Charles, Walter · 196, 213
Charleston · ix, 57, 110, 131
Charming Pillys (slave ship) · 10, 53
Chesapeake (Virginia) · 45, 129, 139, 292
Cheshire · 46, 70, 83, 277, 278, 283, 288, 296
Chevalier, Charles · 257, 261, 270
Christianity · 1, 15, 20, 46, 84, 119, 128, 130, 131, 135, 137, 152, 158, 165, 170, 174, 175, 176, 178, 183, 186, 187, 219, 231, 285, 297
Christopher, Emma · 80, 87
Church Missionary Society (CMS) · 175, 187, 218, 247, 250, 294
Clarkson plantation · 173
Clarkson, John · 38, 127, 128, 130, 134, 139, 140
Clarkson, Thomas · xiii, 4, 17, 19, 27, 144, 146, 157, 158, 166, 173, 178, 179, 184, 186
Cleveland, James · 10, 38, 49, 73, 78, 82, 85
Cleveland, John · 193
Cleveland, William · 10, 16, 37, 69, 71, 73, 80, 86, 95, 183
cloth · 6, 71, 72
Clow, Dr. · 63
coasting · 10, 54, 59, 60, 65
coffe · 39, 110, 174, 264
Coffée, Thomas · 257, 266
Colonial Office · 116, 140, 197, 206, 208, 209, 258
colonialism · 23, 117, 120, 156, 189, 210
colonization · xi, 13, 20, 110, 111, 143, 144, 145, 146, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 159, 160, 161, 207, 208, 211, 231, 275
Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor · 2, 145, 157, 158
Compagnie de l’Approuague · 265, 266
Company of Merchants Trading to Africa · 98, 111
Congo River · 260
Conrad, Joseph · 116, 246
Cooper, Sally · 135, 136
Corry, Joseph · 18, 27, 48, 85, 100, 106, 165, 183
cotton · 17, 18, 39, 71, 128
Court of Mixed Commission · 21
credit (also see trust) · 1, 10, 11, 31, 36, 51, 60, 61, 63, 76, 80, 94, 95, 96, 228
creolization · 91, 137, 275
crops · 5, 17
Cross, Paul · 94, 98, 105, 106
Cuba · 3, 8, 200, 219, 227, 229, 231, 234, 251, 259, 291
Curtin, Philip D. · 6, 67, 104, 214, 216
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

D

Dahomey · 77
Dartmouth, Lord · 116, 122
Davenport, William · 46, 71, 74, 296
Dawes, William · 21, 140
Dawson, John · 41, 71
debt · 11, 77, 78, 80, 94, 95, 96, 200, 228
Dembia · 35
Denham, Colonel · 194
Denison, William · 43
Denmark · 146, 149, 151, 157
Denny, Plato · 44
Diouf, Sylviane · 90
Doherty, Governor · 195, 199, 212
Dolben Act · 77, 80
Domingo, Signor · 19, 192
Doran, Felix · 71
Doyle · 79, 86, 87
Drake, Francis · 30
Drescher, Seymour · 180, 182, 183, 184, 186, 188, 283
Duke Abashy · 74

E

Earle, William · 33, 74, 85
East India · 72
Eastman, Elizabeth · 200
economic reform · 19, 23, 164, 173, 180
Ekpe · 77
Ellery, William · 52, 60, 61, 66 67
Elits, David · 24, 25, 26, 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 65, 66, 67, 83, 84, 86, 87, 90, 91, 104, 105, 107, 115, 124, 185, 241, 246, 249, 251, 274, 278, 283, 284, 292
empire (also colonialism, imperialism) · 2, 109, 110, 114, 164, 208

Eurafrican · 5, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 37, 38, 42, 69, 73, 78, 92, 173, 175
European · viii, 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 32, 36, 37, 38, 42, 45, 54, 66, 69, 75, 77, 78, 90, 92, 93, 96, 97, 99, 101, 102, 114, 121, 128, 132, 136, 139, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 158, 159, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 177, 178, 189, 198, 207, 217, 244, 248, 268, 269, 273, 275, 284, 289, 291, 293, 295, 297, 298
Evans, George · 43
Exodus · 19, 128, 129, 130, 131, 135

F

Factory Island · 212
Findlay, Alexander · 195, 199, 213, 214
fish · 6, 36
Fitch, Timothy · 10, 52, 69
Fletcher, Mary · 19, 27
Florida · 48, 297
Flory, Céline · vii, 257, 273
Fort Thornton · 168
Fourah Bay · xi, xii, 89, 176, 182, 232, 249, 292
Fouré · 266
Foxcroft, Thomas · 70
France · 9, 18, 29, 91, 92, 111, 113, 115, 116, 117, 128, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 151, 153, 154, 155, 156, 160, 161, 271, 272
Fraser, John · 37, 48, 297
free labor · 2, 23, 173, 180, 188
Freeman, Cato · 21
Freetown · vii, viii, ix, x, xi, xii, xiii, xv, 1, 3, 4, 5, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 45, 104, 109, 110, 111, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 136, 137, 138, 145, 154, 163, 167, 168, 172, 176, 182, 183, 185, 187, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206,
INDEX

French Guyana · 257
Frossard, Benjamin-Sigismond · 146, 153, 155, 160
Fryer, James · 48, 72, 78, 79, 82, 85, 86, 87
fugitive slaves (also runaways) · 16, 23, 193, 195, 198, 203, 204, 207, 211
Fuuta Jalon · 6, 7, 18, 19, 30, 91, 105, 174, 176
Fydell, Richard · 33, 43
Fyfe, Christopher · xi, xiv, xv, 5, 24, 27, 28, 45, 48, 49, 83, 139, 140, 182, 184, 211, 250, 270, 282
Fyle, Magbaily · 5, 25

G

Gallinas · ix, xiii, 24, 29, 36, 41, 43, 44, 92, 95, 169, 199, 200, 214, 221, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 240, 248, 249, 262, 265
Gambia River · 6, 30, 111, 113, 115, 124, 285
Gamble, Samuel · 49, 80, 87, 247
George, David · 130, 141
Georgia · 10, 13, 30, 110, 123, 125, 129, 130, 243, 248, 277, 280, 294
Gibraltar · 166
gifts · 52, 74
Girondins · 154
Gisborne, Thomas · 177
gold · 6, 7, 17, 30, 40, 53, 91, 105, 111, 112, 128, 264, 265, 266, 268
Gold Coast · 5, 6, 30, 32, 35, 65, 90, 92, 93, 104, 166, 197, 207, 210, 216, 283, 287, 291
Gorée · 122, 260, 262
Granada · 117, 118
Grant, Alexander · 39
Grant, Oswald & Co. · 55
Granville Town · 16, 22, 25, 127, 134, 194
Gray, John · 174
Gray, Richard · 116
Green, Robert · 44
Grégoire, Abbé · 155, 160
Grenada · 30, 118
Grey Hound (vessel) · 103
Grierson, Captain Alexander · 15, 27
Griffiths · 98
Guadeloupe · 260, 270, 271, 284, 297
gum arabic · 111, 113, 114, 124
Gunter · 63
Gurney, Joseph John · 178, 188, 248
Gwinn, Captain Peter · 52, 61, 64, 65

H

Haley, Alex · 115, 116, 124, 286
Hall, Richard · 101
Hammond, Benjamin · 43, 72
Hardcastle, Joseph · 177
Hare (vessel) · 102, 274
Harrison, George · 177
Harrison, William · 43
Hawkins, John · 30
Heard, Betsey · 17
Hereford, Thomas · 43
Heywood, Robinson · 72, 73, 84, 85
Hodgson, John · 33, 44
Hodgson, Kate · viii, 143, 273
Hodgson, Thomas · 33, 35, 41, 43, 44
Horner, Reverend Melvill · 19, 27, 175, 187, 297
Horrocks, Richard · 38, 41, 78, 82
How, Anthony Pantaleo · 98, 106
Huntingdonian · 130
Hyde, Hodge & Co · 260

I

Îles de Los · ix, xiii, 8, 10, 14, 24, 29, 33, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 47, 48, 50, 52, 54, 55, 65, 69, 78, 81, 82, 83, 92, 173, 194, 212, 293
Imperialism · 188, 283, 289
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

indigo · 5, 6, 7
Ingram, Francis · 71
Ingram, William · 44
insurance · 51, 62, 72, 76
internationalism · 150
Ireland · 117, 177
iron · 6, 90, 229
Irving, Charles · 110
Irving, James · 65, 70, 84, 298
Islam · 30, 184, 215, 300
ivory · 6, 17, 30, 35, 40, 53, 89, 91, 93, 94, 105, 174

J

Jamaica · 1, 10, 13, 30, 31, 47, 48, 49, 66, 87, 113, 247, 258, 275, 293
James Island · 112, 114, 116, 117, 118, 124
James, William · 33, 43, 44
Jeffcott, John · 198, 213
Jenkins, Richard · 95, 96, 106
jihad · 7, 30, 91, 103, 105
Joal · 143, 148, 149, 152, 153, 157
Jolly Batchelor (vessel) · 89
Jones, Denise · vii, 10, 69, 106, 273

K

Kamaranka River · 174, 208
Kankan · 7
Kaweli (also James B. Covey) · viii, ix, 22, 217, 219, 220, 241
Kayor · 110, 113
Kelley, Sean · vii, 11, 89, 274
Kendall, James · 42, 43, 71
kidnapping (also panyarring) · 11, 92, 93, 94, 96, 198, 199, 200, 201, 203, 226, 241
Kilner, Samuel · 42, 43
King Firama · 192, 211
King George · 74, 193
King Jimmy · 16, 25, 127, 134
Kong Tom · 96, 134, 136, 192
King, Boston · 176, 187, 287
Kissi · 35, 37, 39, 200, 225, 245, 247, 252, 282, 285, 291
Kissidougou · 7
Kitchingham, John · 44
Kittam · 199, 208
Kizell, John · 129, 290
Klein, Herbert · 72, 75, 84
kola · 7, 202
Kony Tom · 199
Kru · 184, 258, 260, 262, 265, 267, 268, 269, 270, 297
Kru coast · 258, 260

L

labor · xv, 1, 2, 5, 21, 23, 51, 91, 152, 169, 173, 174, 180, 188, 201, 207, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 263, 264, 265, 266, 269
Lace, Ambrose · 74
Lancaster · 30, 31, 33, 35, 40, 41, 42, 46, 47, 69, 283
Laroche, James · 33, 43
Law, Robin · 2, 24, 47, 86, 181, 183, 185, 186, 188, 212, 249, 278, 283, 287, 288
Lawrance, Benjamin · viii
Lawrence, Fenda · 110
Le Havre · 41
Le Mesurier, Paul · 149
Leopard's Island · 196
Leyland, Thomas · 74
Liberated Africans · xii, 3, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 28, 182, 184, 185, 190, 194, 195, 198, 199, 200, 201, 205, 206, 211, 213, 214, 231, 246, 257, 258, 259, 260, 266, 275, 297
Liberia · 6, 209, 217, 224, 226, 245, 246, 248, 249, 255, 260, 287, 291
Little Bassa · 95, 96
Little Popo · 69, 83, 299
Little Will (vessel) · 94
Liverpool · vii, xii, xv, 9, 15, 17, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 55,
Morse, Edward \( \cdot \) 113, 117, 123, 124
Mosquito Shore \( \cdot \) 110, 113, 116, 119, 120
Mouser, Bruce \( \cdot \) vii, 10, 24, 25, 26, 27, 45, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 65, 66, 67, 69, 77, 86, 87, 181, 186, 213, 247, 275, 293
mulatto \( \cdot \) 37, 78, 110, 192, 194
Muslim \( \cdot \) 1, 7, 18, 19, 20, 30, 41, 93, 101, 103, 107, 170, 171, 190, 201, 205

N
Naimbana \( \cdot \) 127, 128, 139
Nantes \( \cdot \) 41, 50, 261, 270, 281, 282
Netherlands \( \cdot \) 149, 151
New Jerusalem Church \( \cdot \) 150, 151
Newton, John \( \cdot \) 10, 48, 89, 90, 93, 97, 101, 104, 105, 107, 291, 293
Nicol, George \( \cdot \) 198
Niger River \( \cdot \) 22, 233, 258
Northern Rivers \( \cdot \) 93
Norway \( \cdot \) 149
Nova Scotia \( \cdot \) 3, 13, 24, 127, 128, 130, 132, 136, 138, 139, 145, 284, 300
Nova Scotians \( \cdot \) 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 139, 141, 167, 168, 176, 184, 257

O
O’Hara, Charles \( \cdot \) 112, 123, 124
O’Hara’s Forces \( \cdot \) 116, 117
Old Calabar \( \cdot \) 35, 73, 74, 76, 82, 83, 85, 139, 290
Ord, Mr. \( \cdot \) 60
Ormandy, William \( \cdot \) 43
Ormond, John Sr. \( \cdot \) 37, 250
Oswald, Richard \( \cdot \) 33, 35, 39, 43, 106
Otto Ephraim \( \cdot \) 74
Ouidah \( \cdot \) 5, 77, 86, 249, 288
Owen, Nicholas \( \cdot \) 37, 48, 97, 291

P
Paki Ken \( \cdot \) 263
palaver \( \cdot \) 18, 99, 100, 101, 106, 192
panyarring \( \cdot \) 11, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99
Paris \( \cdot \) 50, 155, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 248, 270, 273, 278, 279, 282, 283, 290, 293, 297, 299, 300
pawns \( \cdot \) 10, 11, 79, 94, 95
pawnship \( \cdot \) 94, 96, 99
Penny, James \( \cdot \) 9, 37
Peters, Frank \( \cdot \) 136
Peters, Thomas \( \cdot \) 128
Peters, Tom \( \cdot \) 200
Petty, Lord Henry \( \cdot \) 167
Phillips, James \( \cdot \) ix, xiii, 16, 144, 185, 187, 212, 300
Phillis (also Charming Phillis Phillis) \( \cdot \) 17, 47
Schooner \( \cdot \) 53
Pickup, Thomas \( \cdot \) 44
Pirates’ Bay \( \cdot \) 17, 134, 135, 136, 137
Plantain Island \( \cdot \) 35
plantations \( \cdot \) 13, 18, 114, 117, 118, 145, 174, 198, 201, 258, 261, 264, 268
Por society \( \cdot \) 38, 93
Portugal \( \cdot \) 29, 151
Postlethwayt, Malachy \( \cdot \) 111, 145, 157, 180
Powah, Arthur \( \cdot \) 267, 268
Pratt, Reverend Josiah \( \cdot \) 176, 178
Prince Tom \( \cdot \) 136
privilege \( \cdot \) 36, 64, 66, 92
Protectorate of Sierra Leone \( \cdot \) 4
Province of Freedom \( \cdot \) 2, 3, 5, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, 109, 110, 143, 147, 148, 153, 164, 183, 184, 269, 294
Province of Senegambia \( \cdot \) 6, 109, 110, 112, 113, 114, 115, 117, 118, 119, 120, 124, 183
Pybus, Cassandra \( \cdot \) 27, 131, 139

Q
Quiaport \( \cdot \) 102
Quince, R., captain · 62, 67
Quirk, Joel · 152, 159

R

Race Horse (vessel) · 102, 107
Rackham, John · 43
Rand, Walter · 60
Ratcliffe, Thomas · 70, 71
raw materials · 173, 174
religion · 48, 118, 121, 129, 131, 159, 178, 264, 278
republicanism · 155, 168
resistance · 21, 80, 90, 138, 212, 222, 268
revolutionary wars · 153
rice · 5, 6, 13, 16, 30, 40, 62, 129, 173, 174, 226, 247
Richardson, David · vii, xi, xvi, 24, 25, 26, 44, 45, 46, 47, 66, 67, 83, 85, 86, 87, 94, 104, 105, 139, 152, 158, 159, 181, 183, 185, 186, 246, 278, 283, 284, 289, 290, 292, 295, 297
Rio Nuñez · 9, 18, 27, 29, 35, 37, 43, 44, 81, 91, 133, 140, 169, 174
Rio Pongo · 9, 11, 18, 27, 29, 35, 37, 43, 44, 45, 48, 69, 78, 82, 83, 86, 87, 110, 169, 174, 186, 194, 214, 225, 228, 249, 250, 275, 293
Robaga · 192
Robanna · 4, 192, 198
Rodney, Walter · 7, 25, 26, 45, 49, 50, 105, 296
Rogers, James · 33, 43, 46, 292
Rokelle · 6, 193
Rokelle River · 193
Rokon · 195, 212
Rome, Peter · 78, 85, 87
Roscoe, William · 177
Rowe, Samuel · 209
Royal African Company · 5, 7, 17, 30, 35, 39, 45, 72, 93, 98, 105, 196, 282
Royal Navy (also suppression of the slave trade) · xii, 3, 16, 21, 169, 218, 234, 250, 251, 259
Rumbold, Thomas · 44
runaways (also fugitive slaves) · 21, 22, 195, 204

S

Sabatier (French slave dealer) · 199
Sac · 263
Saint Domingue · 156
Saint Louis · 53, 65
salt · 6, 7, 130
Samo, Samuel · 193, 195, 212, 213
Sandys, Samuel · 42, 43
Santo Domingo · 30
Sassandra · 258
Say, Jean-Baptiste · 155
Scarceys · 35, 211, 226
Seabar · 200, 208
Sellar, Robert · 43
Senegal River · 6, 53, 112, 124, 298
Sestos · 99, 247, 287
Seven Years’ War · 91, 111, 182
Shand, Charles · 43
Sharp, Granville · 2, 127, 144, 146, 158, 163, 165, 177
Sherbro · 7, 9, 15, 20, 29, 30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 41, 44, 45, 47, 89, 92, 101, 129, 190, 193, 194, 199, 200, 204, 208, 209, 210, 212, 214, 216, 224, 226, 246, 249, 255, 282
Sherbro Island · 9, 20, 29, 35, 39, 246
Sherbro River · 7, 30, 37, 38, 41, 45, 89
Thorpe, Dr. Robert · 21, 165, 181, 183, 213
Tiana · 200
Timbo · 18, 50, 174, 186, 293
tobacco · 17, 129
Tortola · 117, 118
trade · xi, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 41, 42, 48, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 59, 60, 62, 64, 65, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 85, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 100, 103, 105, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 116, 117, 118, 124, 131, 133, 136, 145, 147, 149, 152, 164, 166, 169, 170, 171, 172, 174, 175, 178, 179, 181, 189, 190, 193, 194, 196, 197, 198, 201, 202, 207, 208, 209, 210, 212, 214, 225, 227, 229, 231, 234, 240, 260, 261, 266
Trade Town · 262
transport · 7, 51, 96, 127, 130, 190, 198, 259
Treaty of Paris · 109
trust · 9, 34, 36, 42, 63, 74, 76, 77, 78, 79, 97
Tucker, Henry · 37
Tucker, James · 199, 208
Tucker, William · 209, 250
Turner, Charles · 20, 183, 184, 208, 209, 300
Turner’s Peninsula · 209
Turraduggy · 39
Turtle Islands · 39

U

USA · 172

V

Vassa, Gustavus (alias Olaudah Equiano) · 13, 26, 110, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123, 146, 157, 221, 243, 244, 280, 290, 297, 300
Venn, Henry · 178
Venn, Reverend John · 178
Victoria · 262
Victoria, Queen · 165
violence · 11, 27, 89, 90, 92, 94, 95, 96, 98, 100, 101, 102, 103, 223, 225, 241

W

Wadström, Carl Bernhard · ix, xiii, 16, 46, 48, 143, 144, 145, 146, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 187, 293, 300
Walker, Samuel · 197
Walker, Thomas · 33, 43
Wall, Joseph · 116, 117, 124, 282
Wallace, Thomas · 117, 119, 124
Wallace, Mr. · 60, 61
Walo · 112, 114
Ward, Robert · 44
Watt, James · 18, 50, 174, 176, 186, 293
west central Africa · 3, 13, 29, 32, 41
West Indies · 5, 15, 17, 23, 52, 66, 67, 75, 76, 173, 187, 269, 273, 297
West Riding of Yorkshire · 32
Wheatley, John · 51
Wheatley, Phillis · 51, 65, 294
White, Andrew · 42, 43, 71
Wilberforce, William · xv, 4, 146, 168, 172, 183, 186, 188, 299
Wilkinson, Charles · 78, 82, 83
Wilson, Peter · 201
Windward Coast · 6, 27, 31, 48, 49, 72, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 89, 104, 105, 106, 107, 183, 281
Winterbottom, Matthew · 174
Winterbottom, Thomas · 4, 18, 25, 49, 107
Wolof · 113
SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND THE TRANSITION TO COLONIALISM IN SIERRA LEONE

Wonkafong · 39, 102, 201

Yongroo · 193
York Island · 7, 30, 199
Yoruba · 20, 28, 176, 216, 288

Yealla · 199