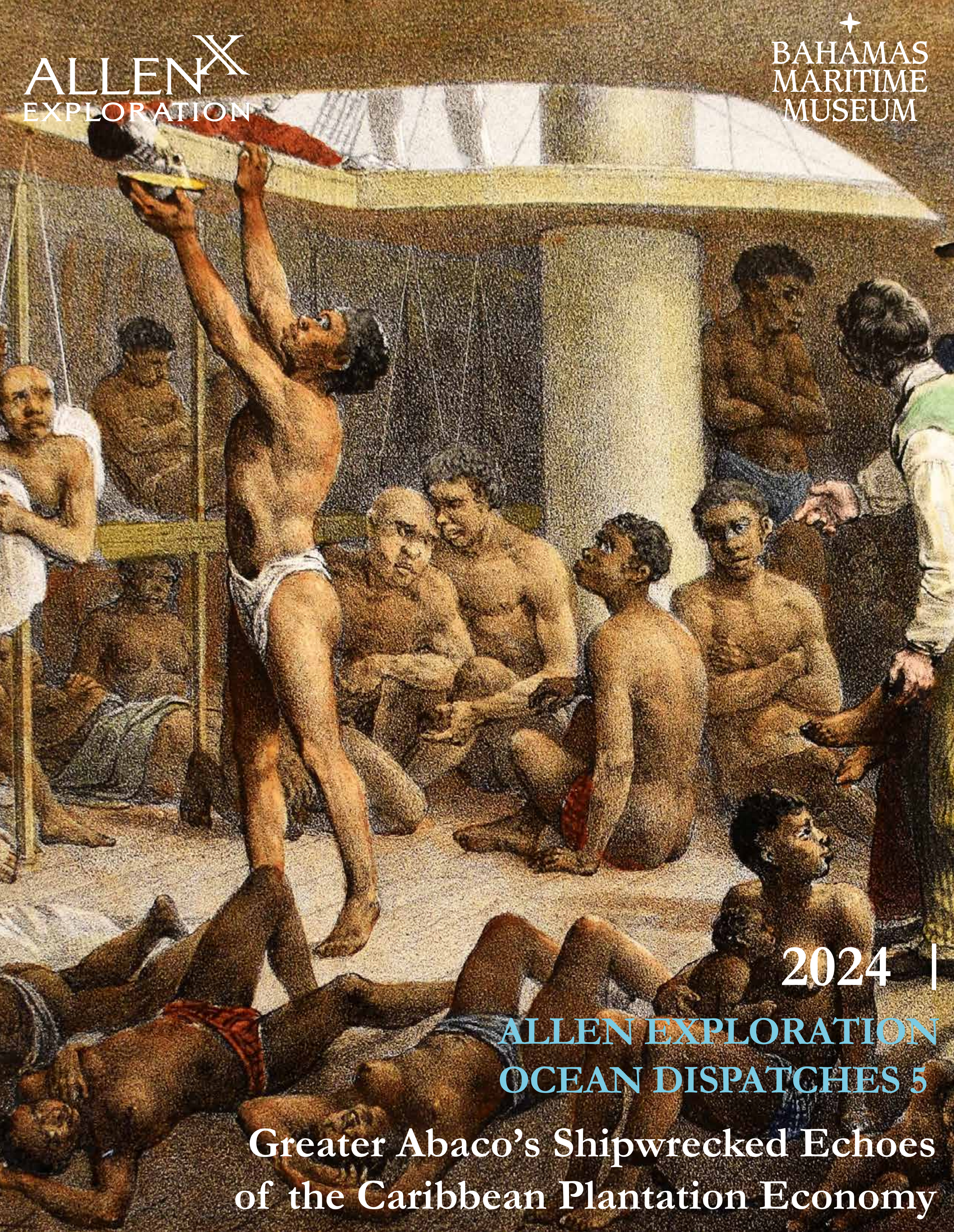

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Greater Abaco's Shipwrecked Echoes of the Caribbean Plantation Economy

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Greater Abaco's Shipwrecked Echoes of the Caribbean Plantation Economy

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The Bahamas Lost Ships Project's latest stage of historical research, managed by Allen Exploration, focused on the Greater Abaco region in the northern Bahamas, has identified 596 shipwrecks. A notable cluster are 14 slaver ships that sank between 1767 and 1860 while sailing mostly from Africa and Virginia and South Carolina in the United States to ports in Georgia and New Providence, The Bahamas, but mainly to Cuba and Louisiana. A further 39 ships were transporting 65 commercial consignments – from sugar boilers and sugar boxes to coffee, sugar, cigars and even Panama hats – linked to the plantation economy. In addition to bearing witness to the region's major role in the transatlanic and intra-regional US slave trade, the research has emphasized the major role of Cuba in sustaining enslavement deep into the 19th century and the illegal involvement of US ships in trafficking and transport. Over 70% of all ships explored in this report were US flagged.

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1. Introduction

In the latest stage of The Bahamas Lost Ships Project, managed by Allen Exploration,[1] a total of 596 shipwrecks have been historically documented as sunk and scattered across the Greater Abacos region in the northern Bahamas. These sea lanes witnessed substantial maritime traffic since at least 1657, when several Spanish salvage vessels recovering treasure from the wrecked *Maravillas* galleon met their fate in a different storm in the same waters.[2]

For ships seeking an efficient route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Florida, the preferred passage was by way of the Providence Channel (Fig. 2). This passage has two distinct parts, a northeastern channel and a northwestern channel, named for their position relative to New Providence Island. The crucial Northwest Providence Channel runs east/west between the Florida Strait to the west and east into the Northeast Providence Channel at the southern tip of Great Abaco Island. To the north, the sea lane is flanked by

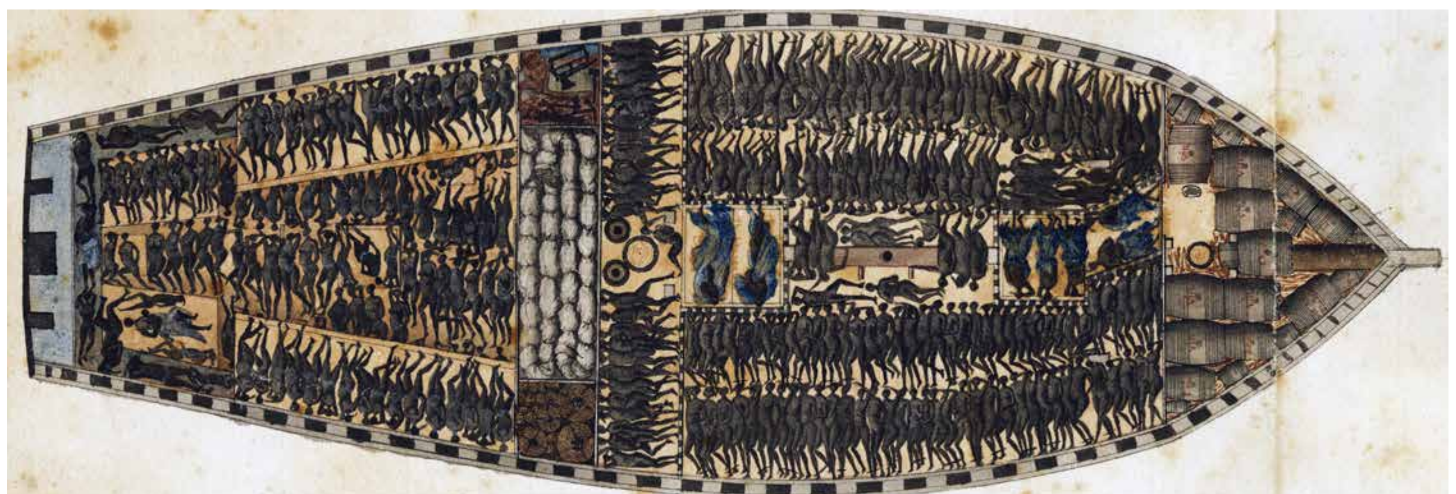


Fig. 1, Slave deck of the *Séraphique Marie* of Nantes in France, trading in 1770 with Angola. Painting: René Lhermitte.

Grand Bahama Island and to the south by the Grand Bahama Bank. Using these shipping channels, vessels could work their way south to New Providence Island, Cuba or west into the Gulf of Mexico and the major southern ports of the United States, principally New Orleans and Mobile.

Fig. 2. *A New Map of Part of the United States of North America* by John Cary, 1806, showing the location of the Providence Channel in the northern Bahamas.

The Bahamas Lost Ships Project's extensive inventory of wrecked historical ships includes a highly conspicuous data set of both the wrecks of merchant vessels trafficking enslaved peoples from West Africa and the United States (Fig. 3), as well as equipment, cargoes and commodities linked to the colonial plantation economy between 1704 and 1887 (Fig. 4).

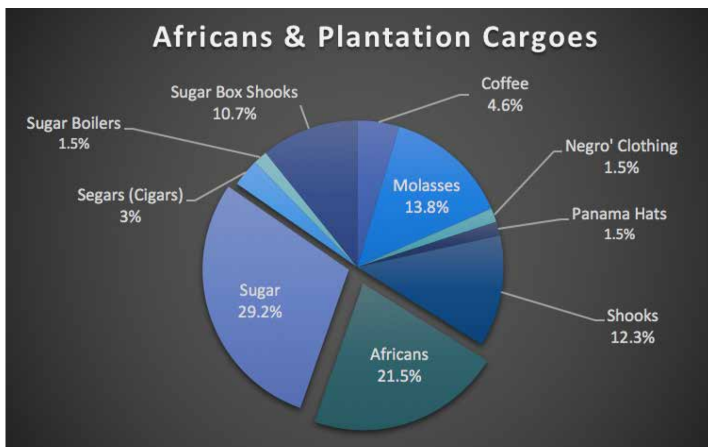
The 14 known slave ships sunk in the Greater Abacos region encompass the entire chain of the plantation economy from the physical trafficking of Africans to major plantations in Cuba, as well as intra-regionally within America, to equipment used to operate sugar and coffee plantations in Cuba, and the finished agricultural produce and products cultivated and manufactured on the Caribbean island for export.

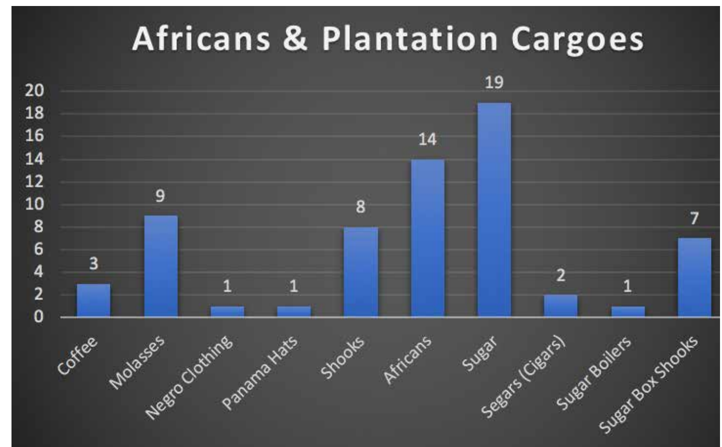
This report presents the historical evidence for this thin-slice of maritime history, from voyage summaries to the fate of enslaved peoples, and assesses the gravitational pull of Cuba and New Orleans, politically and economically, underlying these shipments. The majority of the voyages were undertaken by American-flagged vessels. The role of New England shipping in supplying Cuba and Louisiana's plantation economy is assessed, and the rationale underlying the coastal trade observed between Charleston and New Orleans is examined.

2. Shipwrecked Statistics

Of the 14 ships wrecked in the Greater Abacos region while trafficking enslaved peoples over a 93-year period spanning 1767 and 1860, 11 or 78% were US flagged, one Spanish and the nationality of two are unknown (Table 1). Eight (57%) of the voyages originated in the United States, five in Africa and one in the Caribbean. Eight of the vessels were heading for

Figs. 3-4. Distribution maps showing the locations of wrecked slaver ships (left) and cargoes linked to the plantation economy (right) sunk off the Greater Abacos region. Photo: © Allen Exploration.





Figs. 5-6. Charts displaying the numbers and percents of slaver ships and cargoes linked to the plantation economy lost off the Greater Abacos region. Photo: © Allen Exploration.

final destinations in the United States, three to Havana, Cuba, and one to Nassau, New Providence (plus 2 undocumented).

Four of the ports of departure for the intra-American voyages that took place between February 1802 and October 1840 were Charleston (South Carolina) and another four lay in Virginia (two Norfolk, one Alexandria, one Richmond). Seven other anticipated ports of destination were New Orleans (Louisiana), one was Havana, Cuba, and another is unspecified.

Of the two American ships that sailed from Africa, the *Agnes* was heading for Nassau, New Providence, under the command of Captain Kelshall when it was lost on June 29, 1802.[3] The other vessel, the 129-ton New Orleans-based slaving schooner *Peter Mowell* – destination Cuba[4] – sank off Lynyard Cay on July 25, 1860, and is the only wreck of a slave ship to be examined archaeologically in The Bahamas.[5]

One of the intra-American vessels, the sloop *Nancy* based in Montserrat, was transporting 20 enslaved people and other cargo for Georgia when it was holed and lost off northern Abaco on February 7, 1767. Its last port of call was St. Eustatius, and the final destination would have been Savannah (Georgia). The *Nancy* is of immense historical value (and archaeological if discovered) as the ship on which Olaudah Equiano, later christened Gustavus Vassa by an enslaver, almost died. Equiano went on to become a founding figure, and highly influential political player, in Britain's abolition movement.

The Spanish schooner *Cecilia* ran ashore and was lost under the command of Captain Docharty while navigating the Greater Abaco region on November 11, 1819. The enslaved people being trafficked were en route from Africa to Havana, Cuba.[6]

The number of the trafficked humans in a single vessel ranged from 15 people on the *Atalanta*, heading from Charleston for New Orleans in 1806,[7] to 400 people trafficked by Captain Rich on the American schooner the *Peter Mowell* in 1860.[8]

Fig. 7. Capture in 1858 of the slaver *Emilia* off Cuba by the Royal Navy's *Styx* & *Jasper*. Photo: Wellcome Collection, 37934i.

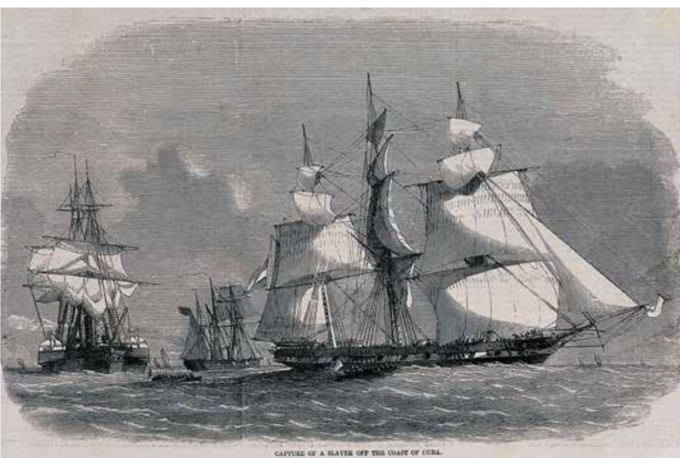


Fig. 8. A slave cabin in The Bahamas, 1885, by Winslow Homer. Photo: Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Mellon.

Table 1. Slaver ships wrecked off the Greater Abacos region of the northern Bahamas between 1767 & 1860.

Ship Name Nationality	Master, Home Port, Ship Details	Date of Loss	Departure	Destination	Cargo
Nancy (American)	Owner: R. King; William Phillips, Montserrat, sloop	February 7, 1767	St. Eustatius, Caribbean	Savannah, Georgia, USA	20 slaves + cargo
General Oglethorpe (American)	Owner: Robert Mackay; William Paterson, 530 tons	February 5, 1802	Charleston, South Carolina, USA	Havana, Cuba	Slaves
Agnes	Captain Kelshall	June 29, 1802	Africa	Nassau, New Providence, Bahamas	Slaves
Hope (American)	Schooner	February 20, 1803	Africa	------	Slaves?
Atalanta (American)	Owner: Charles Guilladen; Lazarus Mitchell. Charleston, schooner	March 13, 1806	Charleston, South Carolina, USA	New Orleans, Louisiana, USA	15 slaves
Heroine (American)	Wilson, Hartford	October 7, 1807	Charleston, South Carolina, USA	New Orleans, Louisiana, USA	85 slaves
La Rosa	Captain Capot	June 5, 1816	Bony, Africa	Havana, Cuba	> 300 slaves
Young Sachem (American)	Lawrence W. Smith, Norfolk, schooner	March 13, 1818	Norfolk, Virginia, USA	New Orleans, Louisiana, USA	101 slaves
Altezara (American)	Owner: Henry Armistead; Samuel Glover, Norfolk, sloop	March 15, 1819	Norfolk, Virginia, USA	New Orleans, Louisiana, USA	47 slaves
Cecilia (Spanish)	Docharty, schooner	November 11, 1819	Africa	Havana, Cuba	Slaves
Comet (American)	Isaac Staples, brig	January 2, 1831	Alexandria, Virginia, USA	New Orleans, Louisiana, USA	164 slaves (+ passengers)
Encomium (American)	P. Sheffield, Charleston, brig	February 3, 1834	Charleston, South Carolina, USA	New Orleans, Louisiana, USA	45 slaves (+naval stores, passengers)
Hermosa (American)	J.D. Chattis, Richmond, schooner	October 19, 1840	Richmond, Virginia, USA	New Orleans, Louisiana, USA	48 slaves (+ tobacco, cotton goods)
Peter Mowell (American)	Owner: Salvador Prats? Alexander Smith, 129 tons, schooner	July 25, 1860	W. Africa	Cuba	400 slaves

Table 2. Ships with cargoes linked to the plantation economy lost off the Greater Abacos region of the northern Bahamas between 1704 & 1837.

Ship Name Nationality	Master, Home Port, Ship Details	Date of Loss	Departure	Destination	Cargo
Unidentified (French)	150 tons	1704	Martinique, West Indies	France	Sugar, indigo, cocoa, drugs
Sally (American)	Brigantine	January 16, 1806	Havana, Cuba	Norfolk, USA	Molasses, sugar
Hiram (American)	Captain Anner, schooner	July 1, 1808	New York City, USA	Havana, Cuba	Shooks, boards
Unidentified	------	April 5, 1815	Jamaica, Cuba, Santo Domingo?	------	Sugar, logwood, mahogany
Unidentified	------	March 2, 1816	------	------	Flour, rice, Tenerife wine, Muscovado sugar, tar, turpentine, ash oats
Hercules (Portuguese)	------	September 5, 1819	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	Lisbon, Portugal	Rice (bags), sugar (boxes, bags), hides, rum, molasses, coffee, lard
William	A.S. Sutherland, New Orleans, 340 tons	October 1, 1820	Liverpool, England	New Orleans, USA	Blankets, 'Negro' clothing, flannels, writing desks, sugar boilers
Hippolite	Brig	November 14, 1820	Le Havre, France	Savannah, USA?	Sugar, liquor
Levant	Richard Crockett, Portland (Maine), brig	October 14, 1822	Portland, Maine, USA	Havana, Cuba	Boards, shooks, fish, lard, potatoes, bread
Cornelia (American)	Everet Emerson, Portland (Maine), brig, 156 tons	March 15, 1837	Havana, Cuba	Boston, USA	Molasses (hogsheads), Havana segars (cigars; full & half boxes)
Unidentified	------	April 3, 1837	------	------	Molasses

Table 3. Ships with cargoes linked to the plantation economy lost off the Greater Abacos region of the northern Bahamas between 1837 & 1856.

Ship Name Nationality	Master, Home Port, Ship Details	Date of Loss	Departure	Destination	Cargo
Marinero (Spanish)	Captain Cimoyan, schooner	August 1, 1837	Havana, Cuba	Cadiz, Spain	Sugar (bags), coffee (bags) & segars (cigars; boxes)
Marblehead (American)	Ranlett, Boston, schooner	August 2, 1837	Matanzas, Cuba	St. Petersburg, Russia	1,700 boxes sugar
Banker (American)	Rider, Bucksport (Maine), schooner	June 16, 1842	Bucksport, Maine, USA	Matanzas, Cuba	Sugar box shooks
Sterling (American)	Ross, Frankfort (Maine), brig	March 8, 1847	Belfast, Maine, USA	Matanzas, Cuba	Sugar box shooks
Sea Maid (American)	Hichborn, Prospect (Maine), brig, 200 tons	January 23, 1849	Belfast, Maine, USA	Havana, Cuba	Sugar box shooks
Speedwell (American)	Wilson, Cohasset (Massachusetts), brig	September 19, 1849	Aux Cayes, Haiti	Boston, Massachusetts, USA	Coffee, logwood
Unidentified	Bark	April 26, 1851	------	------	Sugar
Alvano (American)	Connor, brig	September 23, 1852	New York City, USA	Remedios, Cuba	Hoops, shooks
Torno (American)	Owner: A.J. Hobson & N.O. Cram; Mitchell, Portland (Maine), brig	January 7, 1855	Portland, Maine, USA	Cardenas, Cuba	Sugar box shooks
Versailles (American)	Pendleton, Camden (Maine), brig, 198 tons	May 23, 1855	Boston, Massachusetts, USA	Havana, Cuba	Shooks
Martinic (American)	Johnson, East Machias (Maine), brig	December 10, 1855	New York City, USA	Havana, Cuba	Box shooks
Cabasa (American)	Smith, Portland (Maine), bark	April 10, 1856	Cienfuegos, Cuba	Boston, Massachusetts, USA	300 hogsheads sugar, 40,000 pounds turtle shell, Panama hats

Table 4. Ships with cargoes linked to the plantation economy lost off the Greater Abacos region of the northern Bahamas between 1859 & 1870.

Ship Name Nationality	Master, Home Port, Ship Details	Date of Loss	Departure	Destination	Cargo
Lucy W. Angier (American)	Owner: Acquire & Company; Toothaker, Belfast (Maine), brig, 200 tons	January 6, 1859	New York City, USA	Remedios, Cuba	Shooks
Thalia (British)	Oner: Holden & others; D. Boddie, St. John, New Brunswick, bark, 221 tons	May 8, 1859	St. John, New Brunswick	Havana, Cuba	Sugar box shooks, lumber
Lucinda (British)	Robert Brown, Yarmouth (Nova Scotia), brig, 195 tons	April 17, 1860	Matanzas, Cuba	Cork, Ireland	> 350 barrels molasses
Forest City (American)	Owner: William Pickett & others; J. Bain, Portland (Maine), brig, 198 tons	November 28, 1861	Cardenas, Cuba	Portland, USA	150 hogsheads molasses
A.M. Bartlett (American)	Owner: M. Rich & others; J. Bartlett, Boston, schooner, 217 tons	February 5, 1862	Boston, Massachusetts, USA	Sagua, Cuba	Hoops, shooks
Hattie S. Emery (American)	Owner: Cushman & Emery; William Fitts, Portland (Maine), brig, 366 tons	December 27, 1868	Portland, Maine, USA	Matanzas, Cuba	Sugar box shooks, hoops
Mary Alice (British)	Owner: Robert West; McDonald Bridgewater, (Nova Scotia); brig, 141 tons	January 24, 1870	Nassau, New Providence, Bahamas	Halifax, Nova Scotia	Rum, sugar, molasses, soap

Table 5. Ships with cargoes linked to the plantation economy lost off the Greater Abacos region of the northern Bahamas between 1870 & 1887.

Ship Name Nationality	Master, Home Port, Ship Details	Date of Loss	Departure	Destination	Cargo
Sarah Louisa (British)	Owner: J.H. Prince; Asa Doane, Boston, schooner, 106 tons	December 24, 1870	Havana, Cuba	Boston, Massachusetts, USA	Sugar, rags
Bright Star (British)	Owner: Jacob B. McDonald; John J. McPhee, St. John (New Brunswick), schooner, 180 tons	October 4, 1878	Manzanillo, Cuba	New York City, USA	Molasses, melado, palm leaf
Navasota (American)	Owner: Pendleton & Rose; J.A. Hooper, Boston, brig, 362 tons	May 26, 1876	Havana, Cuba	New York City, USA	> 300 hogsheads & bags of sugar
Mataoka (American)	Owner: J.J. Abrahams; William H. Smoot, Baltimore (Maryland), schooner, 218 tons	December 25, 1876	Nassau, New Providence, Bahamas	Baltimore, Maryland, USA	Sugar in casks
Palestina (American)	Owner: Loud, Claridge & Company; A.F. Ford, Windsor (Nova Scotia), bark, 318 tons	July 11, 1878	Portland, Maine, USA	Havana, Cuba	Sugar hogsheads, shooks, long lumber, staves
Isaac Carver (American)	Owner: M. Gray; Oliver Gray, Bucksport (Maine), brig, 180 tons	April 8, 1879	Cardenas, Cuba	Delaware, USA	Molasses
Eliza Morton	Owner: J.S. Winslow & Company; Augustus Leland, Portland (Maine), brig, 438 tons	April 14, 1879	Portland, Maine, USA	Matanzas, Cuba	Hogsheads, box shooks
S.V. Merrick (American)	Owner: Wainwright & Bryant; R.S. Lippincott, Philadelphia, brig, 335 tons	November 7, 1882	Caibarien, Cuba	New York City, USA	550 hogsheads sugar
Cecilia Rio Grandeuse (Spanish)	Owner: E. Rivas y Sagarra; Don Pedro Maristany, Barcelona, brig, 108 tons	December 2, 1887	Cardenas, Cuba	Barcelona, Spain	200 puncheons rum, 1,500 bags centrifugal sugar, 50 barrels refined sugar

Fig. 9. Enslaved Africans being trafficked on a slave ship; by Johann Moritz Rugendas *c.* 1830. Photo: Museo Itaú Cultural.

Some vessels carried multiple consignments, including naval stores, passengers, tobacco and cotton goods.

Thirty-nine ships are linked to the macro-arc of the colonial plantation economy, accounting for a further 65 consignments (Tables 2-5). Of the ships involved, 22 (71%) were American, five British (16%), two Spanish, one French and one Portuguese (with eight unknown).

Of these, the *William* was launched in Bath, England, in 1806 before going to pieces in a severe storm on October 1, 1820, some 1.5 miles off western Abaco and 21 miles north of Hole-in-the-Wall. The 340-ton ship was sailing from Liverpool to New Orleans with 'Negro' clothing, sugar boilers, blankets, flannels and writing desks[9] – presumably a commissioned consignment purchased for a sugar plantation factory in the hinterland of the great port of New Orleans.

Sixteen shipments transporting wooden shooks and boards dispatched from St. John in New Brunswick, New York City, Boston and the towns of Portland, Bucksport and Belfast in Maine were all heading for Havana, Matanzas, Cardenas, Remedios and Sagua in Cuba between 1808 and 1879. The last ports of departure for eight of these American-flagged ships between 1822 and 1879 was Portland (five cargoes), Belfast (two) and Bucksport in Maine.

At the end of the production line, finished produce was being exported from Cuba by way of the Abaco region in the northern Bahamas to the United States, Nova Scotia, Portugal, Spain, France, Ireland and Russia. Exports included sugar (19 consignments), molasses (nine), coffee (three), 'segars' (cigars, two), melado syrup (one) and even Panama hats (one).

3. The Fate of Shipwrecked Africans

The enslaved peoples whose ships were wrecked while being trafficked through the Greater Abacos region had already encountered unimaginable horrors after sailing at least 8,300 kilometers across the Atlantic Ocean's Middle Passage (Figs. 1, 9, 10).[10] Many West African people forcibly trafficked had never even seen the sea before, let alone a fantastic-looking large wooden ship.

Now, closing in on the end of their harrowing journeys, whether to New Providence, just 195 kilometers away, Havana, Cuba, some 600 kilometers away, or New Orleans in Louisiana, 1,300 kilometers distant, they were forced to endure a totally new experience – the terror of shipwreck. Unlike crews free to swim for it or to take to a ship's boat, the enslaved were often locked and bolted below deck when a vessel foundered to ensure the crew got optimum space while escaping in the ship's boat or were not attacked amidst the panic.

More often than not, the fate of the enslaved casualties went unrecorded. The captains commanding the voyages, and the owners of the human cargoes, viewed their drowning as an economic inconvenience that they did not assess in human terms. Especially when insurance compensated for a loss (as was the case for the wreck of the *Comet* on January 3, 1831, see below).

The wrecking near Abaco in The Bahamas and near death of the formerly enslaved Olaudah Equiano, re-named Gustavus Vassa in the Americas, makes the ship he sailed on, the *Nancy*, and its consignment of enslaved Africans, an especially iconic case

Fig. 10. A display about the transatlantic slave trade in The Bahamas Maritime Museum. Photo: Allen Exploration.

Olaudah Equiano Strikes for Freedom

Robert King, Montserrat, July 10, 1766: "To all men unto whom these presents shall come: I, Robert King, of the parish of St. Anthony, in the said island, merchant, send greeting. Know ye, that I, the aforesaid Robert King, for and in consideration of the sum of seventy pounds current money of the said island, to me in hand paid, and to the intent that a negro man slave, named Gustavus Vassa, shall and may become free, having manumitted, emancipated, enfranchised, and set free, and by these presents do manumit, emancipate, enfranchise, and set free, the aforesaid negro man slave, named Gustavus Vassa, for ever; hereby giving, granting, and releasing unto him, the said Gustavus Vassa, all right, title, dominion, sovereignty, and property, which, as lord and master over the aforesaid Gustavus Vassa, I had, or now have, or by any means whatsoever I may or can hereafter possibly have over him, the aforesaid negro, for ever. In witness whereof, I, the above said Robert King, have unto these presents set my hand and seal, this tenth day of July, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and sixty-six."

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African, by Olaudah Equiano (Boston, 1837), 162-63.

Fig. 11. Olaudah Equiano, from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano...* (1837).

(Figs. 11-12). Equiano managed to buy his freedom from his master, Robert King of Montserrat, after saving £70 by making side deals as he managed shipments for King.[11] As the Black founder of the abolition movement in England, history could have turned out very differently if Equiano had succumbed to the storm.

Equiano was born in 1745 to a powerful family in an Igbo community in Nigeria, only for his world to be turned upside-down when he was kidnapped from his village, enslaved and trafficked to Barbados, aged 11. Lieutenant Michael Henry Pascal, an officer in the Royal Navy, purchased Equiano when he was sold to the colony of Virginia in 1754. Equiano travelled far and wide with his enslaver, fought with him in the Seven Years War, learned the mariner's trade and was sent to London for schooling.

In insecure times, Equiano was next sold to a captain bound for the Caribbean and finally to the Quaker Robert King in Montserrat. King appreciated Equiano's skills and put him to work in trade rather than sweating in the plantations. After three years in his service, King let Equiano buy his freedom in 1766. On 30 January 1767, Equiano set sale for Georgia on the trader and slaver the *Nancy* on what was supposed to be the start of a voyage of freedom to settle in England once and for all. Only the ship was wrecked off the northern Bahamas.

Olaudah Equiano's memoir captures the story of the tragedy in graphic detail.[12] After dreaming for three nights that his ship, the *Nancy*, was wrecked amidst surfs and rocks, Equiano was awoken to inspect a large grampus at half past one in the morning. By the time he realized the object was not a fish but a rock, the current started pushing the vessel sideways towards the danger. Finally, the lazy captain arrived on deck and the anchor was prepared to be lowered. However, it was too late; the ship's fate was sealed.

Fig. 12. The *Nancy* & Equiano being wrecked off northeast Abaco in 1767. From *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789).

As the storm attacked, the captain prepared to nail shut the hatches, leaving the enslaved

people below helpless because, otherwise, "every one would endeavour to get into the boat, which was but small, and thereby we should be drowned; for it would not have carried above ten at the most." "I could no longer restrain my emotion," Equiano wrote, "and I believe the people would have tossed him overboard if I had given them the least hint of it." In the end the hatches stayed unlocked by luck because there was no means for anyone to leave the ship in the darkness. Equiano and the crew stuck to the dry part of the vessel, "and trust to God till daylight appeared, when we should know better what to do."

The next day all 32 people on the *Nancy* – including the enslaved – were ferried ashore in the boat, its two-feet-long gash repaired by Equiano (using pump leather and tallow grease), with no loss of life, to a small key of the Bahama islands, five or six miles away. Eleven days later, after being fearful of being eaten by cannibals, the survivors headed towards New Providence. On the second day of the voyage, the boat reached the island of 'Obbico' (Abaco), with all water running out and the men surviving on a few drops licked off leaves.

The Nancy Wrecked off The Bahamas

"... the surf was foaming round us, and made a dreadful noise on the breakers… One swell now succeeded another, as it were one wave calling on its fellow: the roaring of the billows increased, and, with one single heave of the swells, the sloop was pierced and transfixed among the rocks! In a moment a scene of horror presented itself to my mind, such as I never had conceived or experienced before. All my sins stared me in the face… My spirits at this forsook me, and I expected every moment to go to the bottom… The captain immediately ordered the hatches to be nailed down on the slaves in the hold, where there were above twenty, all of whom must unavoidably have perished if he had been obeyed. When he desired the man to nail down the hatches I thought that my sin was the cause of this, and that God would charge me with these people's blood."

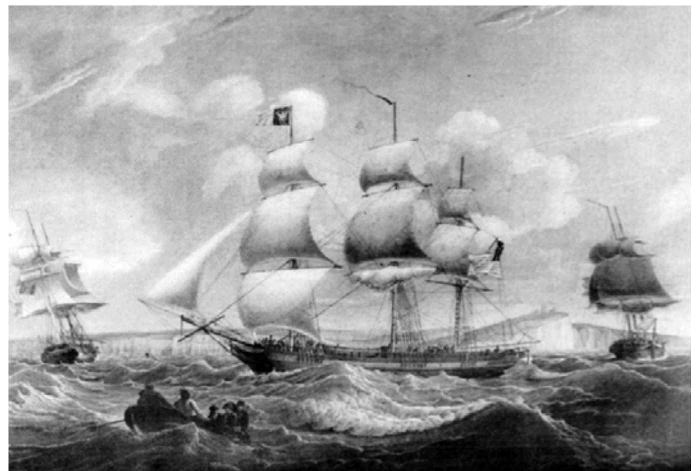
The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African, by Olaudah Equiano (Boston, 1837), 177.

What the survivors took for a pirate ship ended up being a wrecker carrying 40 men from a whaling schooner lost two days before the *Nancy*, nine miles north of Equiano's vessel. After sailing for three or four days to reach the southern end of Abaco Island, catching "a good many lobsters and other shellfish" along the way, the wrecker was also nearly sunk after striking the shoals in a fresh violent gale of wind. The storm swirled for two days. The *Nancy*'s "old captain and sickly useless mate, and several others, fainted; and death stared us in the face on every side."

Three days after the storm ceased, the survivors reached New Providence where the inhabitants "shewed us a great deal of hospitality and friendship." The crew took passage on a ship for Georgia, by way of Jamaica, while Equiano stayed on New Providence for 17 or 18 days where "there were some free black people here who were very happy, and we passed our time pleasantly together, with the melodious sound of the catguts, under the lime and lemon trees." Although tempted to stay in The Bahamas for good, Equiano's heart was fixed on England and he sailed for Savannah, Georgia, with the rest of the enslaved people that Captain Phillips "could not sell." The rest is history.

The wreck of the *General Oglethorpe* on February 5, 1802, en route from Charleston to Havana (Fig. 13), is another example of a shipwreck terror off northeast Abaco Island, this time seeing 23 people lose their lives when the ship went to pieces off Fish Key.[13] Fifteen more survived at the mercy of the waves in the ship's boat for eleven days before being picked up. The fate of the few trafficked enslaved people who survived went unrecorded.

Fig. 13. The *General Oglethorpe* of Charleston sinking off Fish Key, Abaco Island, on February 6, 1802. Photo: MacKay, R., *Wreck of the General Oglethorpe – 1802.*



Robert MacKay of the General Oglethorpe Slaver Expects to Die

Robert MacKay, owner of the *General Oglethorpe*, after being shipwrecked off northeast Abaco, Thursday February 11, 1802: "If I can accuse myself of low spirits during the time of our sufferings, it was while we were on the first land we made at leaving the wreck when I most sincerely lamented the fate that had deprived twenty-three of my fellow creatures of existence, and a fate I had so narrowly escaped – and this morning, standing on a barren rock, with no other shelter from a most tempestuous storm than Heaven's Canopy, cold, hungry and shivering at the appearance of my miserable companions, had the thoughts of home not always been first in my recollection, I should have wished one friendly flash to close the misery I scarcely expected to survive."

MacKay, R., *Wreck of the General Oglethorpe – 1802*: 51-2.

The *General Oglethorpe* was a very fine vessel built by John Patterson, a skilled shipbuilder of Philadelphia relocated to St. Mary's, the southernmost port of Georgia. The 530-ton vessel was named in honor of Georgia's founder.[14] A remarkable account of the storm that destroyed the ship was later written by Robert MacKay,[15] the ship's owner. With "thunder and lightning, the sea breaking over the wreck tremendously and threatening us with instant dissolution," five feet of water had filled the hold when the crew threw loose spars overboard to make a life raft. As morning broke, two to three feet of water had flooded the stateroom. The chairs and trunks were all afloat. The shore of the west end of Little Abaco stood six miles away.

The captain tried to push his way onto the first boat ashore, having "took no command upon himself and gave no advice…" "I spoke to him often," MacKay wrote, and "he gave stupid answers and seemed only concerned with his own safety." The owner, by contrast, stayed on the water until he heard that the crew planned to push the boat off without any enslaved people. MacKay reached shore with 15 crew and two trafficked Africans. The Second Mate, Joshua Frazer of Charleston, had escaped on another boat with ten crew and 13 enslaved people.

Several other small wrecks littering the shore of the key were set on fire to attract any passing wreckers. Overnight the *General Oglethorpe* went to pieces. The boat made it to Grand Bahama where "impenetrable brushwood" that tore everyone's clothes made it impossible to travel by foot. The weary survivors got back into the boat and headed eastward, where they encountered great trouble getting down the east end of sandbanks. In their travels, the men survived on beached shark, conch and crawfish.

Finally, on Tuesday February 16, after 11 days at sea, the men of the *General Oglethorpe* were saved by the *Ranger* of Charleston sailing from Havana for New Providence. They reached Nassau the next day to learn that other wreckers had also picked up more survivors. After the severe gale made it impossible for the boat to return to the wreck, the survivors stuck on the stricken ship had decided getting through the reef on a raft would be impossible. So, when the ship began to roll from side to side, they lashed themselves in the chains using the ends of the lanyards left dangling in the deadeye rigging when the masts were cut away.

"In this situation they were when they saw the slaves drown without a possibility of assisting them," evidently locked below deck, MacKay learnt. The forecastle had parted from the hull around one o'clock in the morning and floated away. Soon after, the starboard side of the deck lifted up from the timbers. The lower part of the deck had separated and it was on this hull structure that the survivors drifted for 24 hours to Carter's Key, living off shellfish and seven year apples for 17 days before being saved by wreckers. Two enslaved Africans that escaped with Robert MacKay survived the ordeal. The fate of the 13 enslaved people who traveled with Joshua Frazer went unrecorded.

Five year later, Captain Wilson, the crew and 85 enslaved people on the *Heroine*, Charleston for New Orleans, also ended up cast away, this time on Whale Key on October 7, 1807 where the survivors spent almost two weeks. Eventually the schooner *Centipede* rescued and carried them to Nassau.[16] How the British colonial government of the island of New Providence handled the arrival of these trafficked Africans is a moot point in history, but is especially interesting since King George III of England had signed The Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade six months

earlier on 25 March 1807.

Although America followed Britain by adopting for the trans-Atlantic trade its own Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves on March 2, 1807, the intra-American coastal trade did not become illegal until January 1, 1863. Presumably the Governor of The Bahamas would have accepted the fate of the enslaved people on the *Heroine* at such an early date as an extension of US sovereign rights, before tension and differences of interpreting the law split the two countries.

Inevitably, enchained Africans sank on slaver ships wrecked off the Greater Abacos region. Nineteen of 47 on the *Altezara* owned by Henry Armistead, for instance, succumbed on March 15, 1819 when the American sloop, heading from Norfolk (Virginia) for New Orleans, was cast away half a mile north of Hole-in-the-Wall.[17] But large numbers survived their terror to be landed in the provincial capital with a vice-admiralty court to adjudicate the fate of wrecked 'finds'.

Liberation & Displacement in New Providence

For almost 20 years after Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807, "the process of liberated African settlement in the Bahamas… remained a somewhat haphazard process that local authorities treated with a mixture of both wariness and confusion even as they began to consider both the labor potential and likely social and cultural inputs of the group."[18]

Most of the displaced Africans were condemned at Nassau's Court of Vice-Admiralty, and between 1811 and 1832 over 1,400 Africans had been put ashore under the protection of the Crown.[19] On landing at Nassau (Fig. 14), the rescued Africans were placed under the charge of the Chief Customs Officer. It was his duty to bind them to suitable masters or mistresses, for them to learn a trade or handicraft, as well as the English language and religious training. These indentures or apprenticeships lasted for periods from six months to 14 years.[20] During this time, no African could be indentured or transferred to another colony without the permission of the Collector of Customs.

The Africans were usually apprenticed as domestics, mechanics, sailors, laborers, fisherman, wreckers, wood cutters, salt rakers and agricultural workers. They could also be enlisted into His Majesty's land and sea services. Before then, they were sent to the African Hospital at Roslyn, situated about one mile west of Nassau on the coast. Roslyn encompassed 10 acres of

Fig. 14. Map of Nassau harbor, New Providence, The Bahamas, from Britsh surveys between 1841 and 1881 (US Navy, 1885).

land that included a hospital, store and kitchen.

From 1836-1840 the African Board assisted the Collector, made up of prominent citizens and officials who were also responsible for recaptives not under apprenticeship and for vagrants. Board members arranged food and clothing for newcomers.

Prior to 1838 recaptives were placed in independent settlements or as apprentices to individual owners. They often worked under supervisors in settlements such as Carmichael on New Providence or in the Out Islands.[21] Apprenticed Africans usually performed the same tasks as enslaved people, labored under similar conditions and received rations rather than wages.

In the 1830s there were at least eight free black villages or settlements outside the town of Nassau: Grant's Town and Bain Town just south of the city; Carmichael and Adelaide in the southwest; Delancey Town just west of Nassau; Gambier in the west; and Creek Village (New Guinea) and Fox Hill in the east. By 1834, there were more free blacks per square mile (36.9%) in New Providence than whites (17.7%) or enslaved people (28.1%).

The Case of the Comet

The Genius of Universal Emancipation (April 1831), 193: "The crew and slaves were all saved, and carried into Nassau N.P. where they were about to be re-shipped by the owner, or his agent, for the original port of destination, when permission, for this object, was refused by the officers of the Customs, at Nassau, and they have subsequently been seized by the Court of Vice Admiralty, for other disposition. The case is now under consideration by this court. How it will be determined, admits of considerable speculation. The slaves, agreeably to the laws of the United States, are of mixed character. In his relation to his owner, he is considered as property—to the laws, he is accountable as a human being. If the English laws at Nassau consider him in the former point of view they are subject to division among the wreckers, as in all other cases of 'property' but citizens of that place, we believe, are not permitted to hold this kind of property from its supposed incompatibility with what is termed the freedom of the English Institutions… Considered as human beings, they are enlarged and free, and the wreckers, and original owners, alike, are refused all claim upon them, in any point of view. In the mean time, many of the slaves have been suffered to escape; and without question, this has been winked at by those in authority."

Fig. 15. Early morning in Nassau market, New Providence, The Bahamas, 1891.

In 1838 all indentures were cancelled, only to be reintroduced in 1842 under a system which allowed one-year contracts until an individual reached 16 years old. The system was modified in 1852 and again in 1863. The Collector could also allow recaptives to work on their own. The liberated Africans formed the nucleus of a peasantry that developed during slavery. Not all of that class owned land, some merely had access to it. New Providence received the majority of the liberated Africans.

Attitudes were hardening by 1816 when *La Rosa* was lost near Green Turtle Key on June 5 with a human cargo being trafficked from Bony in Africa to Havana.[22] While the ship was lost, Captain John Pakenham of the Royal Navy's HMS *Bermuda* recovered more than 300 enslaved people and landed them in Nassau (Fig. 14) for the port town's vice-admiralty court to decide their fate. The arrival coincided with a period of open hostility between William Wylly, the Attorney General of The Bahamas, and other white residents of Nassau unsympathetic to the African 'refugees' and unhappy at how Nassau was expected to serve as a refuge for 'liberated' Africans.

Captain Pakenham left the enslaved Africans in the care of Nassau's collector of customs, assuming they would be treated according to the abolition act. Judge Peter Edwards, however, ruled that the seizure was unwarranted and ordered Pakenham to pay for the court's costs and £26,000 for the value of

Figs. 16-17. Ruins of the Clifton Plantation, New Providence, owned by William Wylly, Attorney General of the Bahamas from 1793-1821. Photos: Sean Kingsley.

the Africans, presumably to the owners of *La Rosa*, despite the illegal status of the ship's trading. Edwards decided that insufficient proof existed to prove *La Rosa* acted illegally.[23]

An infuriated William Wylly complained in writing to Charles Cameron, Governor of The Bahamas, that "Mr. Edwards is so extremely deaf, that I do not suppose he will venture to assert that he has, for the last seven years, distinctly heard one word in ten that has been addressed to him." An appeal by Wylly resulted in a reversal of the vice-admiralty ruling.[24] *La Rosa*'s Africans became new immigrants in The Bahamas.

A legal precedent now set, the old pirate capital became a new model hope for enchained Africans (Figs. 15-19) sailing through the Greater Abaco region before beginning their final sea legs to Cuba or New Orleans and eternal enslavement. Several high-profile cases that followed in The Bahamas "produced a deep sensation throughout the United States."[25] When the American brig *Comet*, travelling from Alexandria in Virginia to New Orleans, went to pieces off Spanish Key on January 3, 1831,[26] the survivors among the 164 enslaved Africans – insured for $71,300 by The Louisiana State Insurance Company, The Mississippi Marine & Fire Insurance Company and The Merchants Insurance Company of New Orleans[27] – blazed a trail to freedom after wreckers took them to New Providence.

The government refused permission for Captain Isaac Staples to transport the enslaved people on to their intended final destination because they had not technically been imported, and therefore violated an act of parliament. Major General J.C. Smith, Governor of His Majesty's possessions in The Bahamas, had acted under the orders of his government and, in turn, following the Abolition of Slavery Act that legislated how:[28]

> in case and person or persons, illegally held or detained in slavery, shall hereafter, by shipwreck or otherwise, be cast upon, or shall escape to, or arrive at, any island or colony, &c., under the dominion or in the possession of his Majesty, it shall and may be lawful for his Majesty, his heirs, &c., or for any such officer, civil or military, as aforesaid, to deal with, protect, and provide for any such persons condemned as prize of war, or as forfeited under this act.

The loss three years later of the *Encomium* to adverse currents that threw the ship onto a reef around February 3, 1834, five miles from Fish Cay, with 45 enslaved people of both sexes and different ages (as well as naval stores and passengers),[29] caused an identical political fallout. Instead of being permitted to continue and complete the enslaved peoples' journey from Charleston to New Orleans, the British once more set free the trafficked Africans carried to Nassau by wreckers after the governor of New Providence overruled a court case, leaving Captain Paschal Sheffield to explain the uproar to Charleston's furious enslavers.

The affair created enormous political fallout into 1836, which saw President Andrew Jackson send reams of paperwork to the government of Great

Britain "in relation to the outrage committed on our flag and the rights of our citizens."[30] In the end the US government's claim for compensation for the 'seized' enslaved people ended in May 1839 when the van Buren administration accepted an agreement of $115,000, including interest and expenses, for the value of the lost Africans. The State Department funneled around 80% of the payment to the insurance companies that had compensated the enslavers.[31] The admission of an element of guilt reflects the complexity of enforcing anti-enslavement laws and national ideals.

For the third time in less than a decade, the legality of how to act when human cargo from a wreck was landed at Nassau arose after the American schooner *Hermosa* ran ashore and was bilged in heavy winds near Spanish Key on October 19, 1840. Despite the slave traders being asked to be taken to a US port, wreckers landed the crew and enslaved in Nassau on October 22. There the captain ensured his 'cargo' was kept away from the wharves and all communication with shore, anchored in the harbor. The ploy failed when magistrates supported by British West Indian soldiers took possession of the ship and brought the Africans to shore where they were freed.[32] The 38 Africans dispatched alongside consignments of tobacco and cotton goods from Richmond (Virginia) for New Orleans again escaped a life of enslavement.[33]

Two decades later, no question remained about the correct way to process shipwrecked Africans being illegally trafficked. When the slaving schooner *Peter Mowell* sank off Lynyard Cay on July 25, 1860 after 36 days at sea en route for Cuba, 390 of the original 400 West Africans who had survived crossing the Middle Passage from the Congo River escaped by crossing to safety on a spar dropped between the ship and land.[34] The bilged slaver was a total wreck. Captain Alexander Smith offered the Bahamian wrecker Ridley Pinder $40,000 to take him and his enslaved 'cargo' to Cuba and made a similar request to the wrecker Henry Sweeting to be taken to Cotton Key.

In the end, the surviving crew and Africans were landed at Nassau three days later by the wrecking schooners the *Spy* owned by William H. Russell, Thomas Russell's *Try* and Octavius Dorsett's *Expeditious*. On Athol Island they were treated for dysentery and itchiness, and provided with food, blankets, clothing, cooks, nurses and interpreters. Ten days later, the group was moved to Fort Charlotte, except for at least four boys who died from their ordeal.

Governor Bayley of New Providence decided to distribute the 383 survivors across The Bahamas as indentured apprentices for two years, a period soon increased to five years for adults and six years for the children to allow them sufficient time to learn a new language and new skills. A total of 255 men, women and children stayed in Nassau, while another 120 were dispatched to the Out Islands. Eight remained sick in hospital.

Those settled in Nassau were apprenticed to joiners, carpenters, boat-builders and blacksmiths, while 21 joined the 1st West India Regiment. The

Fig. 18. A 'Negro Cabin' in Foxhill, New Providence, *c.* 1901. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-114278.

Fig. 19. A 'Negro' family & cabin, Grant's Town, New Providence. *c.* 1900. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-D4-13486.

Fig. 20. Unloading logs on the Dismal Swamp canal, Virginia. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-stereo-1s15979.

Africans in the Out Islands were put to work in the salt ponds, fruit plantations and in domestic service. By a later order of October 1860, any Africans placed in "unskilled, ill paid, or repulsive" labor had their indentures cancelled. By February 18, 1861, a report described the survivors as "exceedingly intelligent. Though only four months have elapsed since their arrival here, they understand already the English language, and have adapted themselves to the new country in which they find their lot cast."

4. The Intra-American Slave Trade

The departures between 1802 and 1834 of four slavers recorded in the shipwreck inventory covering the

Fig. 22. Green Hill, Plantation and Main House, 378 Pannills Road Long Island, Campbell County, Virginia, showing a frame barn, laundry, slave quarters, kitchen, main house, brick dependency & ice house. Photo: Library of Congress, HABS VA,16-LONI.V,1--1.

Fig. 21. Cutting logs near the Potomac River in Alexandria, Virginia. Photo: A.J. Russell, 1862/1863, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-10317.

Greater Abaco region from Charleston (South Carolina) and from 1818-1840 of another four from Virginia (two Norfolk, one Alexandria, one Richmond) fit into recognized intra-American slave trade patterns. South Carolina and Virginia were the two leading competitors in the American slave trade. The same holds true for the port of New Orleans in Louisiana serving as the intended destination for seven of the ships sunk in the Greater Abacos between 1806 and 1840. Most of these voyages post-date the United States officially abolishing the trans-Atlantic African slave trade on January 1, 1808,[35] but not the intra-American coastal commerce.

After the American Revolution, the internal US slave trade became a major operation referred to

Fig. 23. Price, Birch & Co., dealers in slaves in Alexandria, Virginia. Photo: A.J. Russell, 1861-1865, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-11746.

as a Second Middle Passage. Virginia possessed the largest slave population of any US state (Figs. 22-23), but following its decline in tobacco production in the mid-18th century, a surplus remained. In 1790 Virginia had been the geographic center of the nation's Black population, with 45% of all Southern enslaved people, a figure which dropped to 28% by 1820 and 12% by 1860. From 1790 to 1860, Americans transported more than one million African Americans from the Upper South to the Lower South, fueled by the international demand for cotton. Planters in the new cotton states were willing to pay hundreds of dollars more per human than owners in the older lands.[36]

Fig. 24. Slave quarters in the McLeod Plantation, 325 Country Club Drive, Charleston. Photo: Library of Congress, HABS SC,10-CHAR.V,10A--1

By contrast, the enslaved population in the states of the Deep South soared. Alabama's share grew by more than 393,000, Mississippi's by thirteenfold to nearly 437,000 and Louisiana's increased by almost 263,000. South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana, where 44% or more of their total populations were enslaved, became ever-more committed to the institution of slavery.[37]

As a result of the increased demand, from 1800 to 1860 Southern slave prices more than tripled. A male field hand in New Orleans who cost around $500 in 1800 rose to more than $1,800 by the time of the Civil War. By 1860 slave property was one of the most

Fig. 25. The city of Charleston, South Carolina, looking across Cooper's River. Painted by G. Cooke; engraved by W.J. Bennett *c.* 1838. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-00199.

valuable investments in the country. The conservative estimate of $3 billion for the market value of the Southern enslaved population was three times greater than the amount of all capital invested nationally in manufacturing, railroads or livestock. Slave property equated to some seven times the revenue invested in American banks, seven times the total value of all currency in circulation, 12 times the value of the entire US cotton crop and 48 times the total of federal expenditures that year.[38]

Charleston was the largest city and port in the Lower South throughout the 18th century, with 12,000 inhabitants by 1775, and the region's leading urban slave market. The city was advantageously located for boats to sail a web of inland waterways stretching from St. John's River in Florida to the Cape Fear River in North Carolina. The Carolina lowlands produced profitable indigo, long-staple cotton and rice.[39] Enslaved people shipped out of Virginia, by contrast, were marketed at various points along the Potomac, Rappahannock, York and James rivers.[40]

The date of three of the four shipments of enslaved people exported from Charleston in 1802, 1806 and 1807 that ended up wrecked in the Greater Abacos region, notably predate the beginning of the economic decline of South Carolina and Charleston, precipitated by the worldwide collapse of cotton prices in 1819 and the rise of Alabama and Mississippi as the main providers of cotton.[41]

New Orleans, with a population of 27,176 in 1820, and the leading port feeding into the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys (Fig. 26),[42] became an increasingly large center of intra-American slave imports after the collapse of sugar production in Saint-Domingue and Haiti stimulated the development of the staple in the lower Mississippi Valley, where new fortunes could be earned.[43] The culture of sugar expanded up the Mississippi to Pointe Coupee and westward along bayous Lafourche and Teche with the arrival of hardy varieties of cane and the introduction of steam mills in the early 1820s, until the annual yield advanced from 30,000 hogsheads in 1823 to 88,000 in 1828 and 100,000 hogshead in 1834.[44]

Major exports from New Orleans included sugar and pork to US ports and cotton to Europe, in exchange for imports of glassware, soap, textiles, hardware and candles. The port city served as a distributing center for Caribbean coffee imports, while tobacco was exported to Prussia and the Low Countries.[45]

Fig. 26. New Orleans harbor in 1841, looking across the Mississippi River. In the foreground, African Americans, likely enslaved people. Engraved by W. J. Bennett, published by Henry I. Megarey, New York.

Fig. 27. A sugar mill in Cuba owned by Don Francisco Diago. Photo: from *Los Ingenios: Coleccion de vistas de los principales ingenios de azucar de la Isla de Cuba* (Havana, 1857).

5. Voyages to Cuba

A total of four slavers trafficking Africans and 25 of the 65 consignments linked to the plantation economy shipped through and wrecked in the Greater Abacos area were heading for the island of Cuba (Tables 1-5). More broadly, of the 493 destinations identified among the historical sources for all 596 ships lost within this zone, a high proportion, 180 (36.5%), were located in Cuba:

- Caibarien: 1
- Cuba General: 1
- Mariel: 1
- Remedios: 2
- St Jago: 3
- Santiago de Cuba: 1
- Cardenas: 10
- Havana: 130
- Matanzas: 28
- Sagua: 2
- St. Juan: 1

By a bitter twist of irony, it was a strike for liberty, the great slave rebellion in Haiti in November 1791, that forced sugar prices to skyrocket and persuade Spanish officials to turn to Cuba for a safer solution. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, Britain had tried to influence its allies to support the abolition of slavery. By the Treaty of Paris of May 1814, France joined England in suppressing the international slave traffic. Both now turned their pressure on the Spanish monarchy.

On paper, King Fernando VII prohibited his subjects in September 1817 from being engaged in the slave trade on the coast of Africa north of the equator. Captains contravening the ruling were to be sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in the Philippines, while their slave cargoes would be declared free. The ban was extended to African seas south of the equator in May 1820. The British government even agreed to pay a £400,000 indemnity to Spain for losses suffered in legitimate trade piggybacking off the transatlantic slave trade.[46]

In reality, Cuba's plantation economy escalated, especially after 1817, when Madrid abolished Spain's royal tobacco monopoly. Cuba's ports were now open to vessels of foreign nations and trade. Enslaved African labor was more in demand on the island than ever before (Figs. 31-33).

Where British merchants and captains caught illicitly trafficking humans or participating in the slave trade risked the confiscation of their ship and a fine of £100 for every enslaved person found in their possession, Spain stayed isolated in a "mystic hibernation," resenting foreign-inspired reform. As Spain's overseas imperial assets were progressively stripped, revenues from the Cuban sugar trade were embraced

Enslaved Africans Landed at Matanzas, Cuba

"On again reaching Matanzas, I ascertained that a slave-ship had just entered the port from the African coast, with 250 slaves on board. She had been chased by the British schooner Skip-Jack for some hours before making the harbour, and I regret much to say, for the cause of humanity, that she had escaped it during the darkness of night. On proceeding to the quarter where these wretched beings were confined, I found them all huddled together in a large room, in which they were exposed to sale like a drove of pigs, in a state of complete nudity, with the exception of a bandage tied round their loins. They were disposed in lots of graduated ages, and were seated on the floor in groups of eight and ten, feeding out of a parcel of buckets, or rather devouring a miserable mess of the coarsest plantain, with a meagre sprinkling of bones and rice, exhibiting a colour as black as ink. It was, in truth, a species of pottage that I should have refused giving to my swine."

Henry Tudor, *Narrative of a Tour in North America, Comprising Mexico, the Mines of Real del Monte, the United States, and the British Colonies with an Excursion to the Island of Cuba* (London, 1834).

Fig. 28. The Yumuri Valley, near Matanzas, Cuba, *c.* 1899. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-stereo-1s20383.

as the life blood of its treasury (Figs. 31, 32). Which meant keeping ships trafficking enslaved Africans. Cuba was soon transformed "from a neglected, underpopulated, and somewhat economically stagnant way station on the periphery of the vast Spanish overseas possessions to become

Fig. 29. Harbor entrance to Havana, Cuba. From *Meyer's Universum or Views of the Most Remarkable Places and Objects of All Countries*, *Volume 8* (1841).

the center of an emasculated American empire."[47]

Cuba's Spanish leaders, meanwhile, refused to accept responsibility for the global nature of colonial enslavement, arguing that "The Negroes have come and are here to our misfortune; not by our fault, but that of those who first initiated and encouraged this commerce in the name of law and religion."[48] Traders from across the Atlantic world filled the vacuum created by Britain's withdrawal from the slave trade, operating under the colors of nations that had not yet enforced anti-slave-trade laws or simply turned a blind eye. By the 1820s, the volume of Atlantic slave-trading was nearly as great as during the peak decades of the 1780s and 1790s.

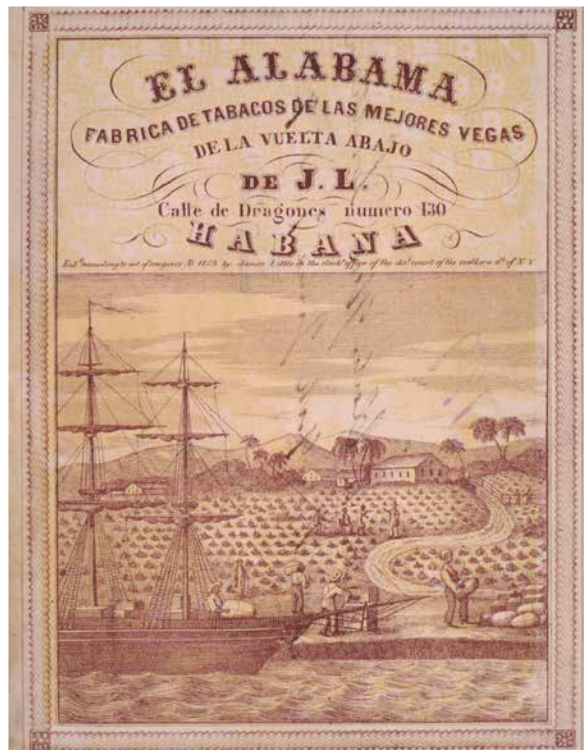


Fig. 30. Tobacco label showing bales of tobacco being carried by laborers from a plantation to ship. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-1996.

The Royal Navy's permanent squadron, established in 1819 to bust the slave trade and operating until 1870, with 36 vessels and 4,000 personnel active (accounting for some 15% of all Britain's commissioned warships), intercepted over 1,600 slaver ships carrying approximately 160,000 enslaved Africans bound for the Americas.[49]

For the abundant ships that slipped the net, the size of the Cuban coast and its thousands of small islands and keys made it almost impossible to patrol. Distinguishing a slaver from a trader among the more than 1,500 vessels that entered the ports of Cuba each year, and warrant a naval boarding, was difficult to impossible.

Fig. 31. Cutting cane on a Cuban sugar plantation *c.* 1904. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-109781.

Despite all these robust measures, Cuba's demands drove the plantation and sugar revolution to keep the slave trade an illegal reality. The number of sugar estates in Cuba rose from 529 in 1792 to 1,000 in 1827, 1,439 in 1846 and 2,430 in 1862 (Fig. 31). Production reached 144,000 tons in 1846 and 446,000 tons worth $60 million by 1861.[50] Planters who risked buying an enslaved person for $1,000 could make 60% profit on a gross outlay of capital. And that was just sugar. By 1800, 60 coffee plantations ringed Havana around 1800, while Cuba's largest coffee estate was said to be planted with a million of trees.[51]

On paper, Spain had agreed that all trafficking in enslaved people from Africa was banned. The assurances, however, were meaningless. Treaties with Great Britain signed in Madrid in September 1817 and June 1835, and the Criminal Law Regarding the Slave Trade agreed in March 1845, sanctioning prison sentences to anyone involved in the slave trade, did not end the trade but drove it underground. Between 1821 to 1867, 543,882 people were trafficked to Cuba from Africa – all while the trade was supposedly illegal.[52]

When Madrid issued a new royal decree in March 1830 to empower Cuban captain-generals to impose severe fines "upon so inhuman [a] traffic [so] that no longer would there be any importation of Negroes into the island," the authorities did not even bother publishing the decree. So the American Naval Officer, Robert Wilson Schufeldt wrote, the island would "draw blood if it could be turned into gold!" and that:

Fig. 32. Unloading sugar onto a wharf at Havana, Cuba in 1899. Photo: Library of Congress LC-DIG-stereo-1s20239.

Fig. 33 The market place in Havana, Cuba, by Elias Durnford. Printed for John Bowles, 13 Cornhill, London. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-03671.

> Spain alone is responsible to the world for the continuance of the Slave trade; Cuba is at the present time its only market, and it is undoubtedly true that not a negro is landed upon that island, without the knowledge of some of the Spanish Officials–if not even the Captain General himself–a large amount of the profits is expended in purchasing their connivance… But in spite of her treaty obligations–& against every dictate, not only of humanity but of the future welfare of her queenly island–She continues it–for her own present selfish advantage.

The Cuba of 1792 was already the world's top producer of sugar, having gone into "a long sugar orgy which might be called the 'first dance of the millions.'"[53] By 1847, 437,000 enslaved people and 153,000 'free' people of color lived in Cuba, and the island's export trade rose from $51 million in 1842 to $92 million in 1862, mostly passing through Havana (Fig. 29). Ten per cent of the enslaved people forced to work in Cuba's fields and factories died every year.[54]

Cuba justified the colossal human cost as God's will. Its leaders quoted St. Thomas to argue that "What is not just in law, necessity makes just." Unsurprisingly, even the Church held substantial financial interests in the sugar industry. In Cuba the enslaved Africans would work "to free [their] souls from eternal damnation," Spain convinced itself.[55]

6. The United States' Fortunes in Cuba's Plantation Economy

In a brutal broadside directed at the very few nations who by 1861 remained so "blind that they will not see," the American Naval Officer Robert Wilson Schufeldt prepared a detailed account of how the Cuban plantation machine was serviced. And, so he unashamedly emphasized, the US was the prime player on the high seas. Nine-tenths of the vessels engaged in the slave trade were American, Schufeldt reported.[56]

By the mid-19th century the transatlantic slave trade cycle usually began in New York, where a vessel was bought for cash and registered as American under the name of a well compensated US citizen. A US Marshall would get a cheque of $1,000 for his "sins of omission" to look the other way. The trader then left for Cuba, where a cargo would be discharged in Havana before the master would "proceeds to fulfil the real object of her owners."[57]

As the present data set from The Bahamas Lost Ships Project graphically shows, outbound American ships often transported boards for making shipping crates in Cuba to export produce, as well as finished sugar box shooks (Figs. 5-6, Tables 2-5). The Pine Tree State of Maine, home to the largest merchant marine in the United States, was renowned in the 19th century for its mutually beneficial trade with the Spanish West Indies, specifically Cuba (Fig. 34), "to a greater extent than any other nation on the habitable globe."[58]

After the Anglo-Spanish War of 1779 and US independence cut off relations with the English Antilles and Barbados, US merchants saw Cuba as its mercantile solution. The US maintained a major distillery industry, with Massachusetts manufacturing the finest 'West Indian' rum, which sold lavishly in England, including to its soldiers as an obligatory ration.

Between 1857 and 1860 alone, the trading relations between US and Cuban trading partners relied on 2,090 ships. The foundation of Maine's commerce with Cuba was the lumber industry (Fig. 34). Forest products travelled on 42% of ships sailing from the US and Cuba between 1856 and 1860, with the Caribbean island purchasing $1,836,114 worth of barrel staves, wooden boards valued at $3,407,581 and another $5,638,030 of wood manufactures in these years.[59] The wooden shooks exported to Cuba fed into the island's sugar revolution. Cuba bought up an estimated 40 million feet of boards from Maine a year to make sugar boxes so it could export in years like 1860 a colossal 1,315,942 boxes and 418,060 hogsheads of sugar.[60] Factories like W.W. Woodbury of Portland could turn out a thousand shooks a day at peak operation.[61]

Fig. 34. Felled logs ready to enter the Aroostook River in Maine *c.* 1903. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-USZC2-6213.

Once the US cargo had been sold, a fresh cargo was purchased, articles needed to buy enslaved people and for their subsistence at sea, such as bread, puncheons of rum, tierces of rice, beans, jerked beef, tobacco, pickles and vinegar, lumber to install the slave deck and powder and old muskets for trade.

The crew were enlarged in Cuba with "a sallow faced, gloomy Spaniard, who is generally Don José or Don Somebody else–whose frequent voyages to 'the Coast' are written in every line of his face. He is the 'Sobrecargo'–the great factotum & transactor of all the business of the ship, & in case of need when boarded by American Men of War, he hoists the Spanish flag–& is the Spanish Captain!" His second-in-command with whom he sailed was the "'Contra maestro' or boatswain–he is the 'n----r' driver, the brute who manages & beats into submission the human cargo on its homeward trip–none but a Spaniard could look or be so cruel as he is!"[62]

At the time of Schufeldt's investigation, eight American vessels sailing to traffic African people passed through Havana's custom's house heading for the Rio Congo in the space of 20 days. The outward voyage under the American flag took 45 days, on average. After unloading the outbound cargo, the US slaver would load empty rum casks, now filled with sweet water from the Congo and placed in the hold, over which cross pieces of wood were installed to form the 'slave deck'. Then the sobrecargo would be offered a selection of often 750 enslaved people to choose from in the factory at a cost of $50 a head (payable in "bad rum to ignorant barbarians for the blood and sweat of their own kith and kin").[63]

Spies were next sent out by the Africa-based agent while the 750 enslaved people were herded naked onto a ship, on average 100 feet long and 30 feet wide. Early in the voyage the enslaved would be hosed down and forced to have their mouths washed out with vinegar to try and prevent scurvy. The unqualified doctor would examine the 'cargo' and throw overboard the dead or the dying, usually caused by dysentery and opthalmia in the foul and confined atmosphere below decks.[64]

Fig. 35. Slave quarters in the McLeod Plantation, 325 Country Club Drive, Charleston. Photo: Library of Congress, HABS SC,10-CHAR.V,10A--1.

Robert Wilson Schufeldt's investigation

pulled no punches when he concluded why the US was so closely aligned with Cuba's illegal slave trade:[65]

> There are two reasons for this; the first is the vicinity of a good market for the purchase of cheap vessels–the facility with which they can be cleared for the coast, & the equal facility with which they can escape conviction if caught, owing probably to an ill concealed sympathy for the institution of Slavery which seems to extend from the head of our present government to every subordinate officer! But the main reason why American vessels are employed is the immunity which our National flag gives to the combined rascality of christendom; The diplomatic dogma that the 'flag covers the vessel' is inconsistent with the spirit of the present day… it nullifies the intention of naval forces at time of pe[a]ce–as an international police of the ocean…

Fig. 36. Broadside for the sale of slaves at the St. Louis Hotel, New Orleans, in 1858. Photo: N. Vignee, Auctioneer.

Most of the sea captains that Schufeldt identified as connected with Cuba's slave traffic came from New England and expected little hostility since the US Consuls appointed to Cuba tended to support slavery. Trist, the former secretary to Thomas Jefferson, who even wed the president's granddaughter, arrived in Havana in 1833, where he strongly encouraged the illegal slave trade to Cuba and Brazil.[66]

Towards the end of the 18th century, the direction of sugar consumption changed dramatically. Whereas in 1793, the United States and Great Britain took about two-thirds of the market volume, by 1794 the US was buying up the lion's share of the trade with over 50% of total imports. The number of North American ships arriving in Cuba rose from 150 in 1796 to 783 in 1826 and 2,088 between 1851 and 1856.

Cuba produced more and more sugar for fewer and fewer markets. By early in the 1880s, the island had passed almost entirely into the North American economic orbit. Nearly 94% of Cuba's sugar production would be exported to the United States.[67]

7. Conclusion

Significant evidence exists among the wrecks of the Greater Abacos region in the northern Bahamas for trans-Atlantic shipments of enslaved Africans across the Middle Passage and within the orbit of the United States, as well as supplies for plantations and commodities processed for final export from Cuba. The value of the historical sources is the blending of texture and narrative to what is often an obsession with statistics about flows of enslaved peoples over time. The above narratives revealed by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project for the Greater Abacos region contribute a human dimension by presenting the character of the storms and conditions that afflicted these slave-related voyages and by shedding light on African, men, women and children forcibly trafficked.

Britain's colonial control over The Bahamas reflects the unavoidable historical irony of the nation transitioning from a leading poacher in the transatlantic slave trade to gamekeeper seeking to force other nations to abandon their evil ways. With a short memory, in his *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, William Edward Hartpole Lecky (1869) believed that "The unweary, unostentatious and inglorious crusade of England against slavery

Fig. 37. A log cabin in Savannah, Georgia, inhabited by African American slaves or sharecroppers, 1867-1890. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-39591.

may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations."[68]

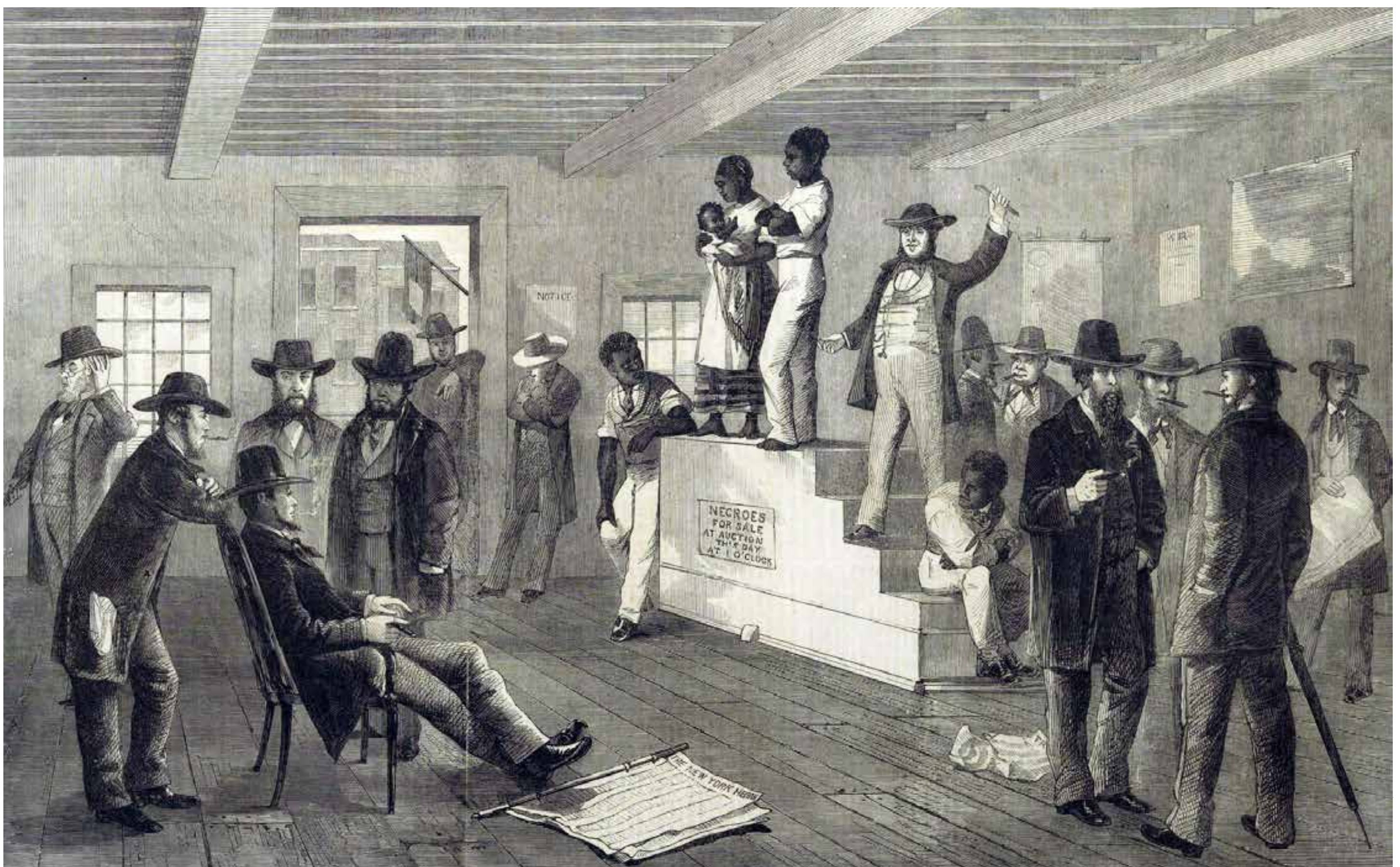
History also often glazes over Britain's role in kick-starting the sugar economy in Cuba that led to the island becoming the greatest importer of Africans in the first half of the 19th century. When Britain seized Cuba in 1762, its fields were home to 70 sugar mills worked by 60,000 enslaved people. British merchants sold 10,000 Africans to Cuba in its occupying months but gave the locals something far more valuable: a taste of free commerce.[69] In turn, this led to the poorly known, yet dominant, role of America and its ships in the massive illegal slave trade to Cuba.

Between 1820 and 1830, 80,000 enslaved people were taken from Africa annually by American ships flying Spanish or Portuguese flags. In 1820, an American officer reported that "he had boarded 20 American vessels in one morning, lying in the port of Gallinas [the Galinhas River in Sierra Leone], and fitted for the reception of slaves... most of the harbors... were visited by an equal number of American vessels, and for the sole purpose of carrying away slaves." These US vessels, evidently owned by Americans, were so completely covered by Spanish papers that it was impossible to condemn them.[70]

Britain may have negotiated with the Netherlands (1818), France (1831 and 1833), Spain (1833) and Brazil (1835) to allow their patrol boats to seize ships fitted out for the slave trade, even when there were no enslaved Africans onboard. Still the US only agreed to the right to search its traders holds as late as 1862. An 1839 article in the American press reported that of 177 slave ships arriving in Cuba, five-sixths were owned by Americans and fitted out in the US ports of New York, Baltimore, New Orleans and Boston. Profits were enormous. More than a million enslaved people left Africa between 1830 and 1860. The number of Africans in the Americas doubled from 1815 to 1860, by when 6,000,000 total were enslaved. The value of the staple crops they produced rose even more rapidly.[71]

The ships, Africans and crews wrecked in the Greater Abacos, and examined by The Bahamas Lost Ships Project, changed lives, fortunes and histories. None more so in the grand scheme of world politics than when Olaudah Equiano faced the eye of a storm and death on February 7, 1767.

Fig. 38. A slave auction in Virginia, USA. From *The Illustrated London News*, 16 February 1861.



Equiano's survival enabled him to go on to spearhead England's abolition of slavery movement and change the world.[72]

Shipwrecks, depending on levels of preservation, are unrivalled windows into the social, economic and personal lives of enslaved peoples and the merchants who trafficked them. The archaeological remains of slaver wrecks yet to be detected by Allen Exploration in the waters of the Greater Abacos region, and by other groups in The Bahamas as a whole, are silent witnesses to a period of history that the world would rather forget but that must be respected to bear witness to the horrors and memories of the colonial past.

By adopting British laws to anti-slavery, New Providence would become the heart of a complex interplay for true freedom and 'Bahamian' identity stretching far back in time and place to Ghana in West Africa.[73]

Notes

[1] Allen, *et al.* 2023a: 1-6.
[2] Allen, *et al.* 2023b: 6.
[3] *Georgia Gazette*, July 22, 1802: 2.
[4] *New York Herald*, August 3, 1860: 8.
[5] Malcom, 2007.
[6] *Royal Gazette*, November 17, 1819: 3.
[7] *Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser*, May 3, 1806: 3.
[8] *New York Herald*, August 3, 1860: 8.
[9] *New York Commercial Advertiser*, November 4, 1820: 2.
[10] Jacobovici and Kingsley, 2022: 91-95.
[11] Lovejoy, 2006: 8-9.
[12] The wreck of the *Nancy* is described in Equiano, 1837: 174-89.
[13] *Lloyd's List*, April 13, 1802: 1.
[14] Hartridge, 2010: 17.
[15] For the loss of *General Oglethorope*, see MacKay, 2024.
[16] *New York Commercial Advertiser,* November 19, 1807: 3.
[17] *Lloyd's List*, June 8, 1819: 1.
[18] Adderley, 2006: 36.
[19] Saunders, 1995: 194.
[20] Saunders, 1995: 194-95.
[21] The National Archives, UK, CO 23/79: *Report on the State and Condition of the Liberated Africans.*
[22] *New York Evening Post*, October 30, 1816: 2.
[23] Adderley, 2006: 36-7.
[24] Adderley, 2006: 37-8.
[25] *Register of Debates in Congress,* 1837: 263.
[26] *Pennsylvanian Freeman*, March 11, 1837: 1.
[27] *Register of Debates in Congress*, 1837: 254.
[28] *Register of Debates in Congress*, 1837: 255.
[29] *New York American for the Country*, March 4, 1834: 2
[30] *Register of Debates in Congress*, 1837: 250.
[31] Downey, 2014: 63.
[32] Downey, 2014: 65.
[33] *New York Evening Post*, November 21, 1840: 2.
[34] The following account derives from Malcom, 2007.
[35] Deyle, 2009: 836.
[36] Deyle, 2009: 835-837, 839, 843.
[37] Deyle, 2009: 843, 844
[38] Deyle, 2009: 840.
[39] Phillips, 1907: 417.
[40] Morgan, 1998: 908, 909.
[41] Charleston: A Historical Overview, 2007: 3.
[42] Redard, 1985: 29.
[43] Ingersoll, 1996: 149.
[44] Prichard, 1939: 315.
[45] Redard, 1985: 64, 67, 75.
[46] Corwin, 1967.
[47] Corwin, 1967: 20.
[48] Knight, 1977: 251.
[49] Burroughs, 2015: 8.
[50] Pérez, 1992: xv.
[51] Abiel, 1992: 203.
[52] Rodrigo-Alharilla, 2020.
[53] Fraginals, 1976: 41.
[54] Pérez, 1992: xvii.
[55] Fraginals, 1976: 60.
[56] Drake, 1970: 218-35.
[57] Drake, 1970: 221.
[58] Demeritt, 1991: 108.
[59] Demeritt, 1991: 108, 109.
[60] Demeritt, 1991: 109.
[61] Demeritt, 1991: 112.
[62] Drake, 1970: 223.
[63] Drake, 1970: 225.
[64] Drake, 1970: 226.
[65] Drake, 1970: 229.
[66] Sparks, 2017: 62.
[67] Pérez, 1992: xvii.
[68] Lecky, 1869: 153.
[69] Corwin, 1967: 10.
[70] Sparks, 2017: 59.
[71] Sparks, 2017: 61, 62, 78.
[72] Jacobovici and Kingsley, 2022: 231, 232, 239.
[73] Davis, 2022.

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