

Introduction:

The raw number of ships, people, and voyages that were a part of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade is so massive, it is easy to focus on the larger chunks of people and nations that are grouped into one massive category. The enormity of the number of people that the Spanish, Portuguese, and British shipped across the Atlantic is so large that it is easy to overlook the role other nations played in the transatlantic slave trade. Specifically, from 1514 to 1866, over 380,000 people completed the middle passage on Dutch ships.¹ Focusing specifically on a smaller nation is important because it helps us realize how international the slave trade was, and how it involved all maritime European nations. This paper touches on the case of one Dutch slave ship that was captured in 1825 by the British royal navy. Learning the story of this ship helps us to put names and a personal story onto a historical event distinct for its disregard for humanity.



Location of Duke town and a satellite photo of Duke Town today²

¹ "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade - Database," accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#statistics>.

² Google. (n.d.) [satellite photo of Duke Town]. Retrieved March 20, 2021. From google earth application.

The Charles:

On the 22nd of December 1825, on the River of Old Calabar near Duke Town, (now Akwa Akpa) the Brig “Charles” was captured and seized by the 12-gun Brig-Of-War “Conflict” under John Chrystie.³ At the time of capture, the Charles had 265 captives aboard. When she arrived in Sierra Leone, she had 243 captives: 128 men, 23 women, 55 girls, and 37 boys. Out of the 243 people, 184 are described as having cuts in various places and in varying quantities.⁴ Thirty people are described as having no marks. All the boys are recorded as having cuts. Thirty people were recorded as having no cuts, and half of those people are recorded as being girls.

After the capture of the Charles, John Tasker Williams, a British official in Sierra Leone wrote in his report to England “... this baneful traffic appears to have assumed a novel feature, and which, until it be checked, must of certainty tend most materially to increase the misery inflicted on the wretched population of this ill-fated Country, The Slave-trade is now carried on to a much greater extent than has been hitherto known, under cloak of the Flag of His Majesty The King of the Netherlands.”⁵ Williams goes on to describe that within the last eight months, seven slavers had been captured, all of which were furnished with papers from Dutch colonial authorities in the Caribbean.

At the time of capture, the *Charles* was sailing under the alias: “L’Eugene,” and hoisted a French flag. Upon further inspection of the Charles, and interrogation of its crew, it was found that the *Charles* had Dutch papers hidden in a drawer in the cabin. Among the papers was a receipt for 600 Spanish dollars made out to T.G. Groebe, the Government Secretary of the Dutch island of

³ JOHN TASKER WILLIAMS, “John Tasker Williams, Esq. to Mr. Secretary Canning,,” February 15, 1826. (Parliamentary papers)

⁴ HCA 35/14

⁵ Parliamentary papers

St. Eustatius. The payment was stated to be for “Renewing Register and Muster Roll”⁶ and buying insurance worth 2000 Spanish dollars. The British were also able to determine that the papers identifying the vessel as French were blatant forgeries because they showed the *Charles* at Rio Janeiro one day after the Dutch papers recorded the ship being at St. Eustatius and French Guadeloupe.

Nobody knows for sure where the ship was heading, however after interrogation of a few crewmembers, it was revealed to the British by a cabin-boy named Lindor, that the *Charles* had made one slaving voyage prior to its capture in 1825. In that first voyage, the *Charles* ended up in Suriname. Additionally, the crew claimed that the captain on board, Louis L’Oiseau was the sole owner of both the captives and the *Charles*. This claim is somewhat dubious given the reputation that the crews of slave ships had.

Williams also mentioned that he communicated with E. P. G. Bonnouviré, the commissary judge from the Netherlands who arrived in August of 1825. Bonnouviré assured Williams that he had made “strong representations to his government on the subject.” This led Williams to hope that the Dutch colonial authorities will “exercise greater caution, as to the Parties to whom such Licences are granted.”⁷

Around this time, the political situation made it risky for British captains to stop and search French ships – the captains could face severe personal consequences and risk provoking a diplomatic incident if they stopped a French ship. Therefore, slavers were motivated to disguise their ships as French ships. As a result, in 1825 the British Commodore of the Anti-slavery

⁶ Parliamentary papers

⁷ Parliamentary papers

Squadron thought that at least two-thirds of the French slavers that the squadron boarded in 1825 were actually carrying Dutch papers.

Background on British antislavery

The transatlantic slave trade was an instrumental and profitable part of Great Britain's north American colonies right up to its abolition. In fact, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the transatlantic slave trade reached its most profitable point in the years right before abolition,⁸ so it is worth examining the reasons behind the British decision to abolish the Transatlantic slave trade. The fact is that the main push for abolition was moral, and an immensely costly decision that the British largely considered a failure in the years immediately after.

Some of the most powerful voices against the transatlantic slave trade came from formerly enslaved people, a few of which wrote about their experiences. One of these formerly enslaved Africans was Olaudah Equiano, who wrote an autobiographical account of his experiences which included his capture in Africa, his experience of the horrors of the middle passage, his enslavement in the new world, and his emancipation. Olaudah Equiano's account quickly became a best seller in Britain and helped to popularize the cause of abolition to the British public.⁹ The cause for abolition became the first mass movement in British politics, so much so that it hurt the cause for abolition because the ruling elites feared popular uprising in the aftermath of the French revolution. Because of the nature of the British political system, in the early 19th century, the arguments for abolition were completely different depending on the audience. To the public, the arguments were moral. People read accounts from people involved in the trade attesting to its

⁸ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).

⁹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 1814.

brutality and were particularly horrified by the conditions in the slave ship during the middle passage. In the houses of Parliament, the arguments were completely different and based on the risk that slavery posed to the stability of British colonies. Parliament only abolished the trade in 1807 because the proponents of abolition argued that it would hurt the French empire. It also gave the royal navy a convenient excuse to seize foreign merchant vessels, which were in extremely high demand in Napoleonic times.

Background on Royal Navy

Around the period right after the Napoleonic wars, the British royal navy was the unchallenged hegemon of the oceans. Additionally, the end of the Napoleonic wars allowed the British Admiralty to allocate more resources to enforcing the legal abolition of the slave trade. To handle the ships that were now be captured by the British anti-slavery squadron, Admiralty courts of mixed commission were established in Sierra Leone. Admiralty courts in the British empire had a reputation for being simple, cheap, and famously corrupt.¹⁰ An example of this is that they were “notorious for having personnel who held multiple offices.” This allowed individuals to leverage their official positions very profitably.¹¹ In another example of what can be seen as the moral “flexibility” of the abolitionists, some of the abolitionists considered the corruption of the courts to be “honest graft.” On one occasion in 1810, Zachary Macaulay, a prominent anti-slavery activist, defended the captors of a slave ship who submitted poor paperwork to the court by arguing while, the sailors had not followed the law, any decision against them would discourage sailors from pursuing slave ships in the future.¹² In the case of

¹⁰ Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*, The Lewis Walpole series in eighteenth-century culture and history (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Christopher Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, 1968.

¹² Scanlan

the *Charles*, Lieutenant John Chrystie, received 258 pounds from the mixed court, worth around 36,000 dollars today. Chrystie would have received this bounty roughly six months after the capture of the *Charles* in December 1825.

Background on this specific Royal Navy vessel

The *Conflict* was one of many 12-gun brigs-of-war that were commissioned in the Napoleonic wars. The *Conflict* joined the British anti-slavery squadron based in Freetown around 1824 and was commanded by Lieutenant John Chrystie – an officer of the minimum rank required for a search of a suspected slave ship to be conducted.¹³ The *Conflict* was hulked in 1832 and used to receive crews and captured Africans from captured slave ships.¹⁴ She was sold in 1840.

Background on British relations with treaty country

In 1814, around the end of the Napoleonic wars, the British government started to negotiate the return of Dutch colonies seized during the Napoleonic wars. In this context, in the same year, the Prince of the Netherlands issued a decree which prohibited Dutch ports in Europe and west Africa from supporting the slave trade. However, the decree included an explicit carve out for the West Indies in that the penalties laid out by the treaty did not apply in any way to the transport of slaves within the West Indies no matter if they were transported within the Dutch colonial empire or transported between foreign and Dutch islands.¹⁵

Background on treaty

¹³ "Hertslet's Commercial Treaties. : A Collection of Treaties and Conventions, between Great Britain and Foreign Powers, and of the Laws, Decrees, Orders ... v.3.," HathiTrust, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015035789729?urlappend=%3Bseq=3>.

¹⁴ "HMS Conflict," accessed March 14, 2021, <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~pbtyc/18-1900/C/01080.html>.

¹⁵ Hertslet's Commercial Treaties

In January of 1818, the Dutch signed a treaty with the British that permitted British vessels to search and detain Dutch slavers. Article two of the treaty states: “The two high Contracting Parties ... mutually consent that the ships of their Royal Navies... may visit such merchant vessels of the two nations, as may be suspected upon reasonable grounds, of having Slaves on board for an illicit traffic; and in the event only of their finding such slaves on board, may detain and bring away such vessels, in order that they may be brought to trial before the tribunals established for this purpose, as shall hereinafter be specified.”¹⁶ The treaty also specified that this right of “visit and detention” only applied in the specific part of the Atlantic ocean off west Africa. The same 1818 treaty also provided for the creation of mixed courts to review the legality of the capture of individual slave ships off the west African coast.

In 1823 an equipment clause was added which gave the British Royal navy and mixed courts the legal authority to seize vessels that were not carrying captives when the vessel itself was captured but had on board the instruments to participate in the slave trade. These instruments included the presence of shackles, or extra provisions, and the way a ship was constructed – whether it had open hatches to the hull for instance.

Story of what treaty was used to condemn the slave ship

The 1818 treaty between Britain and the Netherlands would have been sufficient to condemn the *Charles* as she was seized with captives on board. That same treaty set up the court of mixed commission between Britain and the Netherlands that condemned the *Charles*.

Background on slave trade in this particular region

¹⁶ Hertslet's Commercial Treaties

The *Charles* was captured on the mouth on the river old Calabar, near duke town, now Akwa Akpa in southern Nigeria. In this region, the supply side of the slave trade was dominated by an ethnic group called the “Efik.”¹⁷ the Efik were a class of merchants who carved out a spot in the lucrative slave trade by acting as middlemen between the slavers in the African interior and the Europeans. The captain of the *Charles* would have probably bought the ~265 captives who were on board at the time of capture from the Efik merchants. The captain would have paid with a combination of luxury goods: like fine dishes, Indian cottons, and French brandy and other commodities like copper or European manufactured good like guns and knives. The captain of the *Charles* would have engaged with many Efik merchants over months at a time and partake in many rounds of barter to obtain captives. It has also been noted that some Europeans and Efik developed long-lasting personal relationships, cultivated over several voyages to Duke Town in which the Efik merchant would request specific goods for the European to return with. In the case of the *Charles* however, it is unlikely that the captain would have had longtime relationships with any of the Efik merchants because the *Charles* had only made one voyage prior to being captured.

Background on the general treatment of liberated Africans

The Sierra Leone colony is unique in that it and its institutions were created to facilitate the emancipation of Africans and the management of those emancipated Africans. In less pleasant terms, the colony was designed as a dumping ground for emancipated Africans where the British would treat the Africans as an economic resource much like they would have been treated as slaves in the West Indies.

¹⁷ Stephen D. Behrendt et al., *The Diary of Antera Duke, an Eighteenth-Century African Slave Trader* (New York: Oxford University Press, with the assistance of the International African Institute, 2010).

It may come as a surprise, but the British abolitionists heartedly supported this system of “emancipation.” This is because the British abolitionists where not interested in freeing Africans and then treating them as citizens. The British abolitionists were much more interested in saving the souls of the Africans. This, they thought could be done though missionary work, the spread of British “civilization,” and putting the emancipated Africans to work growing cash crops. Put more clearly: the British abolitionists envisioned a society of English-speaking Christian Africans who grew cash crops to sell on a global market. The abolitionists still harbored racist attitudes about the racial inferiority of the Africans.

Emancipated Africans in Sierra Leone might have also become soldiers. The English military thought that Africans were much more resistant to tropical disease than Europeans – according to Philip Curtin, a historian, between 1810 and 1816 the death rate from disease for British troops in Sierra Leone was 483 out of 1000.¹⁸ This created an incentive for the British government to purchase at least 19 thousand captive Africans to serve as soldiers between 1795 and 1807. Some emancipated Africans were compelled to join the Royal African Corps – the British military force in Sierra Leone. Life in the corps was rife with disease and quite terrible, but it was generally considered a better than farming which was seen as work for women and slaves.

Story of what happens to the captives removed from this particular slave ship

It is impossible to know what exactly happened to the people than were emancipated from the *Charles*, but we can speculate that most of them would have become indentured servants. Perhaps some of the men would have been pressed into the Royal Africa Corps. Once the Africans stepped of the *Charles*, they would have stepped into the bottom strata of Freetown

¹⁸ Scanlan

society. They would not have known a word of English and would have been thrust into a polygamous society consisting of Africans from many different parts of the continent who all spoke different languages.¹⁹ Some of the newly emancipated Africans from the *Charles* would have been chosen by European residents to serve them as servants. These people would be taught a trade like carpentry or brick laying. The women from the *Charles* would have entered a favorable marriage market because of the gender imbalance in Freetown – slave ships usually had many more men than women aboard. Adults from the *Charles* could have also been put in service to the state, where they would fell trees, sweep streets, and clear the interior for a couple of years, then be granted a small plot of land for farming.²⁰

Explanation of how the story of your ship exemplifies the broader history of slavery and anti-slavery

The story of the *Charles* shows the scope and scale of the transatlantic slave trade. The fact that the *Charles* was not a British, French, Portuguese, or Spanish vessel, but was Dutch, shows that the trade was international and involved all the maritime European nations. The *Charles* itself even was officially an international vessel due to the forged papers that identified it as the French “L’Eugene.” The simple fact that the *Charles* had over 200 human beings on board at the time of capture, the vast majority of whom had cuts on their faces and bodies even before the middle passage began, hints at the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade. The British register of the captives emancipated from the *Charles* represents some of the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade – hundreds of people listed on a page characterized by only a binary sex, height, age, and description of physical markings to be pawned off into slave-like conditions as indentured

¹⁹ João José Reis et al., *The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom, and Islam in the Black Atlantic* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁰ João José Reis

servants. However, no matter what the British registers represented at the time, today we can appreciate that they list the names of those enslaved. We have a record that those individual people lived and existed at that one point in time, a type of record which is all too rare in human history. For the vast majority of the people who ever lived, we have no record of their individual existence, they have lived and died and been forgotten like they never existed at all. But we can remember the people who walked off the *Charles* in 1826. Their names are recorded, and their lives are remembered.