

## Author Biography

*Jessica Smith*

Jessica Smith is a third-year History major. She wrote her article on *La Volez Passagera* for Dr. Matthew Hopper's class titled "The Transatlantic Slave Trade." Her research interests include the slave trade in colonial Latin America and early United States history. After completing her undergraduate education, Jessica plans to attend graduate school to study African American history.

# Fighting for La Volez Passagera: Abolition and the Spanish Slave Trade

*Jessica Smith*

On the morning of September 7, 1830, Lieutenant Edward Harris Butterfield stood on the deck of the Spanish slave ship *La Veloz Passagera*. Butterfield surveyed the scene around him, taking in the carnage that lay at his feet. He made note of the damage done not only to the crew and cargo of the slaving brig, but also his own naval vessel, His Majesty's Ship *Primrose*. The bloody battle cost the lives of three members of *Primrose's* crew and injured many more during battle, including the captain. *La Veloz Passagera* lost forty-six members of its crew and its captain was injured during the conflict.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the crew of *La Veloz Passagera* was attempting to avoid capture by the British Royal Navy vessel in an effort to prevent the navy from discovering the ship's illegal cargo. Lieutenant Butterfield and his crew fought their way onto the slave ship to search for a sign that the vessel was engaged in the illegal traffic of slaves. Once

---

1 Correspondence with British Coms. at Sierra Leone, Havana, Rio De Janeiro and Surinam, and with Foreign Powers on Slave Trade, 1831 (Class A&B), Parliamentary Papers, 1831-32, XLVII, 576-577.

on board, they discovered nearly 600 enslaved Africans chained below the ship's deck. The ship's captain, Don Jose Antonio de la Vega, put the lives of his entire crew and cargo of African captives at risk by choosing to engage in battle instead of surrendering to *Primrose*.

*La Veloz Passagera* was one of thousands of ships that participated in the largest forced migration in modern history: the Transatlantic Slave Trade. At least 12 million Africans fell victim to the slave trade from 1492 to 1866.<sup>2</sup> Powers such as Great Britain, France, Portugal, and Spain purchased enslaved Africans on the coast of Africa and shipped them across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean to be used as slaves across the globe. Despite the difference in nationality of slave traders, the brutality with which the powers treated the enslaved Africans aboard their ships was indistinguishable. According to James Field Stanfield—a sailor on a slave ship in the 1770s—once aboard slave ships, the crew forced African captives below the decks where they spent most of the voyage chained not only to the ship but to each other. When they were allowed onto the deck of the ship, the captives remained in chains and the ship's crew would sometimes use the opportunity to beat enslaved Africans for any minor inadvertencies.<sup>3</sup> Despite its brutality, due to economic dependence on the forced labor of enslaved Africans, the slave trade flourished for years.

It was not until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that European powers spoke out against the slave trade on a broad scale. In March of 1807, Great Britain, once one of the Transatlantic Slave Trade's most prominent supporters, signed the Abolition Act, effectively outlawing British subjects' participation in the trade.<sup>4</sup> Through the use of the Royal Navy, Britain became one of the most influential adversaries of the trade. Britain deployed its Royal Navy in conjunction with treaties signed with other world powers in an attempt to bring the slave trade to

---

2 Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 267.

3 Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 149.

an end. These treaties gave the British Royal Navy the right to search and seize ships suspected of engaging in the trade.

Through the examination of *La Veloz Passagera*'s case and Spanish involvement in the slave trade from the late 1700s to mid 1800s, this paper will argue that, following the opening of the slave trade in Spain, Spanish slavers were more concerned with financial prosperity than they were the safety of their captives and crew. As the bustling plantation economy of the Spanish Empire grew, Spanish slave traders favored quantity of captives over quality of life on their ships in effort to bring as many captives as possible back to Spanish ports. The story of *La Veloz Passagera* reveals the horrors of the slave trade and demonstrates how Spanish slave traders were poised and ready to attack British Royal Navy vessels set on taking their cargo. This paper also examines the mistreatment of African captives during their time aboard slave ships and after liberation. Although abolitionists envisioned freeing enslaved Africans and resettling them in freetowns, the towns that "freed" Africans were forced to live in were far from picturesque.

Today, one might describe the slave trade as notorious due to the utter disregard for the wellbeing of Africans throughout this period. However, the notoriety attached to the slave trade is something that developed over time and may not have been present at the time. There is, however, the case of one Spanish slave ship that stood out, even during the time of the slave trade. Alexander Findlay, the Lieutenant Governor of Sierra Leone calls it, in a letter to his Britannic Majesty, "the notorious Spanish slave ship *Veloz Passagera*."<sup>5</sup>

### **The Capture of *La Veloz Passagera***

On August 21, 1828, the Spanish slave brig *La Veloz Passagera* sat anchored on the coast of Havana, Cuba, furnished with papers claiming a

---

5 Alexander Findlay & W. Smith to His Majesty (18 Oct. 1830), The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, 134-136.

commercial voyage to the coast of Africa.<sup>6</sup> The ship's crew consisted of four officers and roughly 108 mariners that boarded the ship at Havana. Armed with guns and a hefty crew, *La Veloz Passagera* set sail on August 25. The captain and owner of the ship, Don Jose Antonio de la Vega, later joined his crew when they arrived in Cadiz, Spain. According to a crew member, Alexandro Nocetty, the ship sailed under Spanish colors, but they had "French and American colors on board" if they needed to deceive other vessels.<sup>7</sup> *La Veloz Passagera* and its crew arrived on the coast of Africa three months after its departure from Havana on the November 7, 1828. On November 19, she embarked at Whydah and spent time between the coast and the Portuguese islands for two years before setting sail back to Havana on September 4, 1830.<sup>8</sup> The ship left the coast of Africa having picked up 556 Africans set to be sold at Havana.<sup>9</sup>

As *La Veloz Passagera* began its voyage back to Havana, the British Royal Navy ship *Primrose* was sailing to Badagry, Nigeria. At around five o'clock in the evening on September 6, 1830, Lieutenant Edward Harris Butterfield spotted the slave vessel off the coast while on his ship, *Primrose*.<sup>10</sup> The *Primrose* sailed after *La Veloz Passagera*, unable to catch up with the ship until eleven o'clock that same day. William Broughton, commander of the *Primrose*, fired two shots in an effort to hail the slave vessel before sending Lieutenant Butterfield to search the vessel. According to the Lieutenant, upon boarding the vessel, the crew seemed prepared to fight with guns on board the ship aimed directly at the *Primrose*. Lieutenant Butterfield explained to the captain and crew of *La Veloz Passagera* that he intended to search their vessel to which the captain declined. Despite Lieutenant Butterfield's insistence on searching the vessel, the captain refused his

---

6 The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19,134-136.

7 Parliamentary Papers, 1831-32, XLVII, 576-577.

8 Sierra Leone (Spain and Holland): Commissioners Evan, Smith, Findlay and Fraser (18 Oct. 1830), The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), FO 84/104, 154-158.

9 "Spanish Ship La Veloz Passagera - Register of Slaves" (1830), The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), FO 315/33, 33-47.

10 Parliamentary Papers, 1831-32, XLVII, 578-581.

requests and Butterfield returned to the *Primrose* to report the captain's resistance to a search.<sup>11</sup>

The *Primrose* remained with *La Veloz Passagera* through the night without incident until six o'clock the following morning. At this time, Commander William Broughton of the *Primrose* hailed the slave ship once again to allow a search of their vessel, informing the brig that they had five minutes to send or receive a boat, or he would begin fire. Five minutes passed. Captain Broughton put his hand to his hat, signaling his crew to fire a broadside at *La Veloz Passagera*. It is unclear who fired first, but Lieutenant Butterfield claims that shots were fired simultaneously, beginning the bloody conflict between the two vessels. According to George Bentham, a midshipman on the *Primrose*, Commander Broughton ordered the crew to board the slave vessel after the exchange of broadsides. Bentham claimed that *La Veloz Passagera*, being taller than the *Primrose*, gave the slave ship's crew a tactical advantage that allowed them to hold off the *Primrose* crew's advances for some time. It took nearly an hour for the *Primrose*'s crew to take hold of *La Veloz Passagera*.<sup>12</sup>

In that hour, as many as 52 crew members aboard *La Veloz Passagera* were killed.<sup>13</sup> Five male captives stationed at the vessel's guns during the conflict lost their lives, another was badly wounded.<sup>14</sup> On board the *Primrose*, surgeon Alexander Lane tended to twelve wounded crew members. The injured included Commander Broughton who, according to other crew members' accounts, was wounded by a boarding pike thrown from the *Veloz Passagera* just after the broadsides were fired. The *Primrose* also lost three of its crew during the conflict: marines John Allen and William Bunker and seaman James Graham.<sup>15</sup>

Once *La Veloz Passagera* was successfully captured, it was taken to Sierra

---

11 *Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, XLVII, 578-581.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, XLVII, 548.

14 The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, 134-136.

15 *Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, XLVII, 578-581.

Leone by *Primrose* where its case would be tried in the British and Spanish Court of Mixed Commission.<sup>16</sup> The vessel arrived at Sierra Leone on October 8, 1830, and the case went to trial just a week later on October 16. Sixteen of the enslaved Africans on board died on the voyage to Sierra Leone and five more passed in the time between their arrival and the trial. The court convicted *La Veloz Passagera* as engaging in the illegal trafficking of slaves, in violation of the Treaty between Spain and Britain. At this time, the court also emancipated the surviving enslaved Africans from the vessel. Of the 556 enslaved Africans originally boarded on the vessel, only 529 survived to emancipation. The 205 men, 54 women, 145 boys, and 125 girls who survived were to be employed as servants and free laborers in Sierra Leone.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Slave Trade in Ouidah**

*La Veloz Passagera* received its human cargo in the Bight of Benin located off the coast of West Africa along what the English referred to as the “Slave Coast.”<sup>18</sup> The Slave Coast was a primary place of purchase for transatlantic slave traders. Located just east of the Gold Coast, the Slave Coast consisted of about eight trading ports that mainly focused on the trade of enslaved Africans but also provided traders with the opportunity to exchange goods such as beads, gun power, and alcohol. According to the first mate of *La Veloz Passagera*, Alexandro Nocetty, the entirety of the vessel’s human cargo was shipped from a port on the Slave Coast known as Jakin. The gunner of the vessel, Juan Bermudez, specified that the captain purchased the cargo from the Chacha and shipped it from a shore near Ouidah, presumably Jakin.<sup>19</sup> This specification is significant to where the

---

16 Sierra Leone (Spain and Holland): Commissioners Evan, Smith, Findlay and Fraser (18 Oct. 1830), The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), FO 84/104, 149.

17 Thomas Stilwell & Sons to Treasury (7 Jan. 1831), The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, pp. 115-116; Shee to His Majesty’s Principal Secretary (10 Feb. 1831), The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, 139-142.

18 Luis Nicolau Pares and Richard Vernon, *The Formation of Candomble: Vodun History and Ritual in Brazil* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 5.

19 *Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, XLVII, 576-577.

captain of *La Veloz Passagera* purchased the cargo, due to the role that the Chacha played on the Slave Coast.

The Chacha was a Brazilian trader named Felix de Souza who was considered to be one of the key slave traders in Ouidah. The specific duties of the Chacha are disputed, but it seems that, until the 1840s, the Chacha essentially monopolized the slave trade in Ouidah, and was considered to be a sort of liaison between the King at the time and European traders.<sup>20</sup> Felix de Souza was given the title of Chacha around 1818 and, although monopolizing the slave trade may not have been in his job description, began to dominate the trade at Ouidah.<sup>21</sup> Chacha de Souza held his position during the time that *La Veloz Passagera* was obtaining their captives. Juan Bermudez's claim that the cargo was purchased from Chacha suggests that *La Veloz Passagera* bought the enslaved Africans at Ouidah and dispatched them from the port of Jakin nearby. The distinction between place of purchase and place of shipment may seem insignificant, however, this distinction is a key factor in comprehending what the slave trade was like in the area which *La Veloz Passagera's* cargo was purchased.

By the mid-eighteenth century, both Jakin and Ouidah were a part of the kingdom of Dahomey.<sup>22</sup> Dahomey conquered Jakin in 1724 and Ouidah just three years later in 1727, allowing the kingdom to take control of trade at both ports.<sup>23</sup> However, in 1732, Dahomey destroyed the port of Jakin in response to rumors of a rebellion. Subsequently, Ouidah became the primary center for Dahomey's engagement in the slave trade, and, by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ouidah became the

---

20 Pares and Vernon, 32-33.; Robin Law, "Royal Monopoly and Private Enterprise in the Atlantic Trade: The Case of Dahomey," *The Journal of African History* 18, no. 4 (1977): 555-577.

21 Law, "Royal Monopoly," 555-577.

22 J. Cameron Monroe, "Urbanism on West Africa's Slave Coast: Archaeology Sheds New Light on Cities in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade," *American Scientist* 99, no. 5 (2011): 402.

23 Robin Law, "Slave-Raiders and Middlemen, Monopolists and Free-Traders: The Supply of Slaves for the Atlantic Trade in Dahomey," *The Journal of African History* 30, no. 1 (1989): 50.

center of the slave trade along the Slave Coast.<sup>24</sup> Ouidah was the second largest exporting city in terms of volume and importance during the Transatlantic Slave Trade next to Luanda.<sup>25</sup> According to historian Robin Law, by the late 1690s, “as many as 50 [slave] ships in a year, and [was] capable of supplying 1,000 slaves every month” visited Ouidah.<sup>26</sup> The port was of vital importance to the English, French, and Portuguese, who had established permanent forts in the town for better access to trading. Despite the forts being occupied by these three nations during the bulk of the transatlantic slave trade, when the slave trade was outlawed in 1807 the forts were abandoned, but Ouidah’s participation in the trade did not cease. Ouidah continued to be the main source of slave exports for both Brazil and the Spanish colony Cuba.<sup>27</sup>

### **Slavery in Spain, 1780-1807**

Before the 1790s, the slave trade to the Spanish colonies essentially remained closed to Spanish subjects. Only private, authorized groups were allowed to organize expeditions to purchase Africans and have them brought to the Spanish colonies. There were also restrictions placed on foreign participation in the slave trade to the colonies.<sup>28</sup> Prior to 1790, the slave trade to the Spanish colonies was centralized in major port cities like Havana. These areas utilized enslaved African labor to a greater extent than the surrounding areas. African labor helped Havana grow into a major shipping port for a myriad of commodities, including enslaved Africans.<sup>29</sup> 1789 marked the first year of the open slave trade in

---

24 Law, “Royal Monopoly,” 559; Robin Law, “Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey,” *The Journal of African History* 27, no. 2 (1986): 240.

25 Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury, *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 42.

26 Law, “Dahomey and the Slave Trade,” 240.

27 Canizares-Esguerra, Childs, and Sidbury, 43-44.

28 Joseph M. Fradera and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery and Antislavery in Spain’s Atlantic Empire* (Berghahn Books, 2013), 34.

29 Herbert S. Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 209-210.

Spain with the introduction of a Royal Cedula on February 28.<sup>30</sup> The Cedula, also known as the free slave trade law, allowed any subject of Spain to participate in the slave trade to the colonies, giving them permission to outfit voyages on their own terms to the Slave Coast.<sup>31</sup>

The opening of the slave trade to the Spanish colonies allowed an influx of Africans to be brought into the colonies, most notably, Cuba. Theresa A. Singleton claims in her article on slavery in relation to Cuban coffee plantations that from the time the trade opened in 1790 to the official end of the trade in 1867, 780,000 enslaved Africans were brought into Cuba.<sup>32</sup> Many of the Africans brought to Cuba were used to cultivate sugar and coffee plantations that supported the Cuban economy. The profits involved in the production of these crops kept the need for African labor high, and it seems that Spanish subjects were eager to be involved in the trade. As the price for slaves continued to drop and Spaniards became more eager to participate in the lucrative trade, Cuba became the largest slaveholding colony in Spain. At the time of *La Veloz Passagera's* voyage, sugar was produced at a higher rate than any other plantation crop.<sup>33</sup>

### **Slavery in the Spanish Empire, 1807-1867**

While Cuba's sugar economies were continuing to grow, Great Britain was heading towards the abolition of the slave trade. After their own declaration of abolition in 1807, they pressured other powers to sign treaties to end the slave trade. This was no simple task for the British Government, especially when it came to dealing with Spain. Britain's Abolition Act of 1807 came at a time in which Spanish economies relied on the supply of African labor, and less than twenty years after the Royal Cedula opened the slave trade to Spanish subjects. Spain was

---

30 Fradera and Schmidt-Nowara, 34.

31 D. R. Murray, "Statistics of the Slave Trade to Cuba, 1790-1867," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 3, no. 2 (1971): 132.

32 Theresa A. Singleton, "Slavery and Spatial Dialects on Cuban Coffee Plantations," *World Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (2001): 1.

33 Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 333.

not ready to give up participation in the trade because the lack of continuously supplied labor may have affected the prosperity of the growing sugar plantations. Spain officials publicly agreed with Britain in 1815 that the slave trade was inhumane but would not agree to the abolition of the trade until two years later.<sup>34</sup>

In Madrid on September 23, Spain and Britain signed a joint treaty for the abolition of the slave trade. The treaty declared that the Spanish government would cooperate with Great Britain by “adopting in concert with His said Majesty, efficacious means for bringing about the abolition of the slave trade; for effectually suppressing illicit traffic in slaves, on the part of their respective subjects.”<sup>35</sup> The treaty went on to solidify that beginning May 30, 1820 it would be illegal for Spanish subjects to “purchase slaves, or to carry on the slave trade on any part of the coast of Africa.”<sup>36</sup> The 1817 treaty included clauses specifying that the treaty only outlawed participation in the slave trade North of the equator, and that the British Royal Navy had the right to search Spanish vessels, but could only detain them if slaves were actually found on board.<sup>37</sup>

The 1817 Spain-Britain treaty meant that Spanish subjects had only three years left to participate in the trade legally. Author Ada Ferrer argues that this time crunch did not slow the importation of Africans to Cuba but rather caused Spanish slave traders to move faster in an attempt to purchase as many enslaved Africans as possible in those three years. According to Ferrer, from 1817 to 1820 Cuba’s imports were higher than they had ever been previously. It seems that during this time slave traders exchanged safety for speed. Although conditions on board slave ships for a standard voyage were a far cry from livable, the conditions became even worse during this three-year period. The traders favored the quantity

---

34 Suzanne Miers, *Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade* (New York: Africana Publishing Company), 11.

35 Lewis Hertslet, *A Complete Collection of the Treaties and Conventions*, vol. 2, (London, 1820), 273-295.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Hertslet.

of slaves over quality of life as they pushed past the capacities of their ships to force as many Africans on board as possible.<sup>38</sup> During this three-year period, slave traders allowed for ship conditions to worsen in order to bring as many captives as they could to Spain before the navy began enforcing the abolition treaty. Even after the slave trade was officially outlawed in 1820, the slave trade to Cuba continued to grow. In his article, D.R. Murray draws on the statistics of the slave trade to Cuba to claim that about half of the Africans brought to Cuba over the entire history of its involvement in the trade, were brought after slavery had been outlawed in Spain, from 1821 to 1867.<sup>39</sup> Despite the daunting quantity of these figures, the British Royal Navy was able to seize some of the Spanish vessels illegally engaged in the slave trade.

### *La Veloz Passagera's Crew*

While the captain and crew of a captured slaving vessel often suffered few to no consequences, this was not the case for the crew of *La Veloz Passagera*. As a result of the conflict on September 7, 1830 between the slave vessel and the HMS *Primrose*, three crew members of the *Primrose* lost their lives. The conflict took place due to the *Veloz Passagera's* refusal to allow a search of their ship: a violation of the 1817 Spanish-British treaty. Therefore, in the eyes of the British government, the crew of *La Veloz Passagera* was responsible for the deaths of the crew members aboard the *Primrose*.

The morning of September 7, 1830—the day the *Primrose* captured *La Veloz Passagera*—24 of the slave ship's crew were arrested for the murders of the navy vessel's crew members John Allen, James Graham, and William Bunker.<sup>40</sup> The 24 men were taken prisoner and sent to England from Sierra Leone, where they were imprisoned on board the *Culedonia* at Plymouth.<sup>41</sup> The men were not,

---

38 Ada Ferrer, "Cuban Slavery and Atlantic Antislavery," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 31, no. 3 (2008): 267-295.

39 Murray, "Statistics on the Slave Trade," 149.

40 The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), FO 84/104, 151.

41 *Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, XLVII, 547.

however, tried in a British court. Instead, they were sent to Spain, the defendants' home country, to stand trial under Spanish laws for the murders. British officials concerned in the matter trusted Spanish officials to handle the trial due to the nature of the case. Commissioners at Sierra Leone, Alexander Findlay and W.M. Smith believed that the Spanish government would “not fail to inflict full penalty of the law of Spain upon those men.”<sup>42</sup> At the time, similar cases to that of *La Veloz Passagera* were happening among Spanish vessels engaged in the trade. Findlay and Smith argued in a letter to Viscount Palmerston that because of the frequency of these cases “an example is required to be made, to operate as a warning,” to other Spanish vessels.<sup>43</sup>

This aspect of *La Veloz Passagera*'s story demonstrates how invested in the slave trade Spanish slave traders were. Spanish slave traders were so desperate to bring enslaved Africans back to Cuba to support plantations that they engaged in battles with British Royal Navy ships. The reactions of Findlay and Smith illuminate that *La Veloz Passagera* was not an isolated incident. They had clearly seen other cases of Spanish vessels resisting capture by the Royal Navy. While perhaps not to the brutal extent of *La Veloz Passagera*, cases of slave ships resisting capture happened with enough frequency that the governments needed to send a strong message. By the 1820s, Cuba was one of the world's leading producers of sugar and, as demonstrated by *La Veloz Passagera*, they would not allow the threat of the Royal Navy to prevent them from participating in the trade. Resistance to the British campaign for abolition, however, was not unique to Spain and began at the start of the campaign.

### **British Antislavery and the HMS *Primrose***

Great Britain's Abolition Act of 1807 was the beginning of a century long campaign against the slave trade. Prior to 1807 British abolitionists began voicing outrage toward the slave trade and the inhumanity of its methods. In part,

---

42 *Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, XLVII, 572.

43 *Ibid.*

pressure from abolitionists helped push Britain to outlaw British participation in the trade.

Once Britain outlawed the slave trade for their own subjects, they set their sights on persuading other world powers to join their campaign against the trade. Their efforts were met with resistance on multiple fronts. The goal for Britain was to get countries to sign a treaty agreeing to the abolition of the slave trade and allowing the Royal Navy to enforce the treaty at sea. The first issue was persuading countries to agree to the gradual abolition of the trade. Countries like Spain and Brazil thrived from the labor of enslaved Africans on their plantations and were reluctant to give up their ability to engage in the trade. Even after convincing powers to agree to abolition, a second issue arose when it came to the Royal Navy's right of search and seizure

Britain wanted to mobilize its Royal Navy to subdue the slave trade to any country that signed a bilateral abolition treaty. Britain recognized that a treaty was not enough to effectively abolish the slave trade and that the power of the Royal Navy was needed to patrol the Slave Coast to present a larger obstacle for those engaged in the illegal traffic of slaves.<sup>44</sup> However, countries were skeptical of Britain's motivations for mobilizing the Royal Navy. Britain wanted to give its Royal Navy the power to board ships in search of slaves, essentially allowing the Royal Navy to board any ship hoisting the flag of a country who had signed a treaty of abolition.<sup>45</sup> World powers were wary of allowing the British Navy to board their ships at leisure. The Royal Navy boarding ships had already been a source of outrage for Spain. Before the Spanish government illegalized the slave trade in 1820, countries which had already outlawed slavery hoisted Spanish flags to engage in the trade without suspicion. The British government quickly caught on and began to search and seize any vessel flying a Spanish flag to prevent this

---

44 Maeve Ryan, "The Price of Legitimacy in Humanitarian Intervention: Britain, the Right of Search, and the Abolition of the West African Slave Trade, 1807-1867," in *Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge University Press, 2011): 238.

45 Mason, "Keeping Up Appearances," 813.

practice.<sup>46</sup> By 1830, Britain overcame these challenges and persuaded powers such as Spain, Brazil, and Portugal to sign treaties agreeing to the abolition of the slave trade and allowing the Royal Navy the right to search and seize ships engaged in the trade.<sup>47</sup>

Once Britain negotiated treaties for abolition, the problem became enforcing these treaties at sea. It was all too easy for slave traders to find ways to participate in the trade illegally and pressure was on the Royal Navy to capture slave ships along the West Coast of Africa. However, the agility of slave ships put the Royal Navy squadron at a disadvantage. According to historians Peter Grindal and Adam Lambert, the vessels outfitted in the beginning years of the trade lacked “the sailing qualities to compete with swift and agile slaving schooners,” specifically those headed for Cuba.<sup>48</sup> Navy vessels also faced a disadvantage until the 1830s, as they could only seize slave vessels if they had slaves on board. Thus, even if British Royal Navy officers boarded a ship and found it to be outfitted with the proper equipment to engage in the trade, they could not detain the vessel. In some cases, this caveat led to incidents of suspected slave vessels throwing captives overboard to avoid punishment. With the introduction of the equipment clauses in the 1830s, slave ships could be detained without slaves on board if they were outfitted with the proper equipment and provisions for a slave voyage.<sup>49</sup>

His Majesty’s Ship *Primrose* commanded by Commodore Collier, was one of the Royal Navy vessels patrolling the coast in the early years of the campaign against the slave trade, but it was not known for making significant arrests on the coast. Ships like HMS *Sybil* and *Black Joke*, also commanded

---

46 Ada Ferrer, “Cuban Slavery and Atlantic Antislavery,” 149.

47 Mary Wills, *Envoy of Abolition: British Naval Officers and the Campaign Against the Slave Trade* (Liverpool University Press, 2019), 19.

48 Peter Grindal and Andrew Lambert, *Opposing the Slavers: The Royal Navy’s Campaign Against the Atlantic Slave Trade* (I.B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016), 328-383.

49 *Ibid.*, 233-282.

by Commodore Collier, frequently overshadowed *Primrose*.<sup>50</sup> HMS *Primrose* found some success on the Windward Coast prior to 1830, but its biggest success capture was *La Veloz Passagera*. Originally, *Primrose* was not expected to capture the slave ship. Prior to its capture, *La Veloz Passagera* had been spotted at Ouidah along with eight other Spanish ships by Commodore Collier in June of 1829. At the time, Collier was captaining HMS *Sybilie* and planned not to leave the coast until he had captured *La Veloz Passagera*. However, an epidemic that broke out on the ship caused *Sybilie* to leave the port and *La Veloz Passagera* was unable to be captured. Nearly a year had passed before *La Veloz Passagera* was spotted again. During this time, the *Primrose* pursued but was unable to capture several large slave ships. *La Veloz Passagera* was once again spotted at the coast of Ouidah in June and the commander of *Black Joke* waited patiently to intercept the vessel. However, on September 3, just four days before the capture of *La Veloz Passagera*, the commander had to return home and the slave vessel was intercepted by *Primrose*.<sup>51</sup>

### **Liberated Africans in Sierra Leone**

After capturing *La Veloz Passagera*, HMS *Primrose* brought the vessel's surviving crew and cargo to Sierra Leone to be brought to trial under the British and Spanish Mixed Commission Court.<sup>52</sup> The successful capture of a slave ship did not mean that the enslaved Africans on board were now necessarily out of harm's way. They still had to make the voyage back to Sierra Leone or a similar freetown and await emancipation. The period from capture to condemnation of the ship was not a speedy process, and over the course of this time Africans on board the slave vessels did lose their lives waiting for emancipation. In the case of *La Veloz Passagera*, 21 Africans died between the time of capture and

---

50 Grindal and Lambert, 328-383; Commodore Collier was the commander of a squadron of Royal Navy ships on the West Coast of Africa including HMS *Sybilie*, *Clinker*, and the famous *Black Joke*.

51 Ibid, 328-383.

52 The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, 115-116.

emancipation, leaving 529 of the original 556 emancipated at Sierra Leone.<sup>53</sup>

British abolitionists envisioned Sierra Leone as a place for emancipated Africans to live together whilst growing accustomed to life free of slavery. Between 1808 and 1863, navy vessels brought roughly 99,000 Africans to Sierra Leone.<sup>54</sup> However, liberated Africans were not given the choice of where they wished to relocate. Africans were forced to live in the freetown of the British government's choosing. British officials at Sierra Leone also governed liberated Africans by their own whims and ideals. Despite the population consisting mainly of Africans, European culture dominated Sierra Leone. Africans became accustomed to the religious practices and ways of living that were comfortable to Europeans, much like the experiences of Africans who completed the voyage across the Middle Passage.

Although Africans at Sierra Leone had not completed their journey across the Middle Passage, they still lived with the traumas that came with being transported on a slave vessel. At the time of the slave ship's capture, they had already experienced long hours confined below deck, mistreatment from the crew of the ship, and many other horrors that came with being on a slave vessel. Even after the slave vessel's capture, many Africans remained on board in the same conditions during the voyage back to Sierra Leone. If they survived the journey, Africans found themselves forced into a way of life in Sierra Leone. David Northrup explains that "faced similar cultural challenges in recreating themselves, if under less traumatic circumstances than in the Americas."<sup>55</sup>

Some liberated Africans were forced to apprentice or enlist, while others were shipped off to other British colonies to support the need for labor.<sup>56</sup>

---

53 The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, 115-116.

54 Richard Anderson, "The Diaspora of Sierra Leone's Liberated Africans: Enlistment, Forced Migration, and "Liberation" at Freetown, 1808-1863," *African Economic History* 41 (2013): 101.

55 Canizares-Esguerra, Childs, and Sidbury, 24.

56 Jake Christopher Richards, "Anti-Slave-Trade Law, 'Liberated Africans' and the State in the South Atlantic World, c.1839-1852," *Past and Present* 241, no. 1, (2018): 197.

In some cases, those tasked with laboring at Sierra Leone were paid miniscule wages, but most African laborers worked as free laborers, growing crops like sugar and cotton much like those enslaved. Local colonial authority in Sierra Leone used Africans to support the village system and help maintain the colony's infrastructure. According to historian Padraic Scanlan, the Africans were tasked with clearing forests to allow the villages to expand into the nearby mountains.<sup>57</sup> Liberated Africans helped cultivate villages at their own expense. The Liberated African Department moved Africans into the housing structures they built and left them to maintain their homes and find a way to survive with little to no government support. The Liberated African Department also used the village system to make it easier to exploit liberated Africans as unskilled laborers.<sup>58</sup> The colonial government in Sierra Leone operated under the guise of freedom and emancipation when, in reality, it undermined liberated Africans as sources of labor and forced them to assimilate to British culture.

### Conclusion

The story of the capture of Spanish slave ship *La Veloz Passagera* lays the foundation for understanding the treatment of African captives from the time of the ship's capture to their experience in Sierra Leone. Demonstrating how Spanish slave traders chose to engage with British Royal Navy vessels in combat, the actions of *La Veloz Passagera's* crew demonstrate how Spanish slave traders were more concerned with financial prosperity than they were with the lives of those aboard their ships. Even after the Spain-Britain treaty abolishing the slave trade in Spain, Spanish slave traders found ways to bring thousands of captives back to Spain to work on sugar and coffee plantations. In fact, conditions on slave ships worsened after the abolition of the slave trade. While abolitionists' efforts were valiant, emancipation did not mean true freedom for African captives.

---

57 Padraic X. Scanlan, "The Colonial Rebirth of British Anti-Slavery: The Liberated African Villages of Sierra Leone, 1815-1824," *The American Historical Review* 121 (2016): 1097.

58 *Ibid.*, 1099.

Liberated Africans endured similar labor and conditions to those who made it across the Middle Passage.

On the morning of September 7, 1830, *La Vélaz Passagera* put roughly 700 lives in danger by choosing to go to battle with *Primrose* rather than surrendering their cargo. This decision demonstrates not only the importance of the slave trade in Spain but also the lengths that Spanish slavers were willing to go to participate in the trade. From the beginning of open trade to the year of the trade's abolition in Spain, Spanish slave traders rushed to bring a multitude of Africans to the Spanish colonies. For the captain of *La Vélaz Passagera*, the potential reward that would come from bringing 556 slaves to Cuba was of more importance than the lives of his own crew. Captain Don Jose Antonio de la Vega's decision cost him his cargo of Africans and the lives of nearly half of his crew.

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

- Alexander Findlay & W. Smith to His Majesty, October 18, 1830. The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA). HCA 35/19, 134-136.
- Correspondence with British Coms. at Sierra Leone, Havana, Rio De Janeiro and Surinam, and with Foreign Powers on Slave Trade, 1831 (Class A&B). Parliamentary Papers, 1831-32, XLVII, 547-581.
- Hertslet, Lewis. *A Complete Collection of the Treaties and Conventions*. Vol. 2. London: 1820, 273-295.
- Shee to His Majesty's Principal Secretary, February 10, 1831. The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, 139-142.
- Sierra Leone (Spain and Holland): Commissioners Evan, Smith, Findlay and Fraser, October 18, 1830. The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), FO 84/104, 148-158.
- "Spanish Ship *La Veloz Passagera* - Register of Slaves." 1830. The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), FO 315/33, 33-47.
- Thomas Stilwell & Sons to Treasury, January 7, 1831. The National Archives of the U.K. (TNA), HCA 35/19, 115-116.

## Secondary Sources

- Anderson, Richard. "The Diaspora of Sierra Leone's Liberated Africans: Enlistment, Forced Migration, and 'Liberation' at Freetown, 1808-1863." *African Economic History* 41 (2013): 101-138.
- Canizares-Esguerra, Jorge, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury. *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Drescher, Seymour. *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Ferrer, Ada. "Cuban Slavery and Atlantic Antislavery." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 31, no. 3 (2008): 267-295.
- Fradera, Joseph M., and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara. *Slavery and Antislavery in Spain's Atlantic Empire*. Berghahn Books, 2013.

- Green, Toby. *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Grindal, Peter, and Andrew Lambert. *Opposing the Slavers: The Royal Navy's Campaign Against the Atlantic Slave Trade*. I.B. Tauris & Company, 2016.
- Klein, Herbert S. *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Law, Robin. "Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey." *The Journal of African History* 27, no. 2 (1986).
- Law, Robin. "Royal Monopoly and Private Enterprise in the Atlantic Trade: The Case of Dahomey." *The Journal of African History* 18, no. 4 (1977).
- Law, Robin. "Slave-Raiders and Middlemen, Monopolists and Free-Traders: The Supply of Slaves for the Atlantic Trade in Dahomey." *The Journal of African History* 30, no. 1 (1989).
- Mason, Matthew. "Keeping Up Appearances: The International Politics of Slave Trade Abolition in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2009).
- Miers, Suzanne. *Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade*. New York: Africana Publishing Company.
- Monroe, J. Cameron. "Urbanism on West Africa's Slave Coast: Archaeology Sheds New Light on Cities in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade." *American Scientist* 99, no. 5 (2011).
- Murray, D.R. "Statistics of the Slave Trade to Cuba, 1790-1867." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 3, no. 2 (November 1971): 131-149.
- Pares, Luis N., and Richard Vernon. *The Formation of Candomble: Vodun History and Ritual in Brazil*. University of North Carolina Press, 2013.
- Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008.
- Richards, Jake Christopher. "Anti-Slave-Trade Law, 'Liberated Africans' and the State in the South Atlantic World, c. 1839-1852." *Past and Present* 241, no. 1 (2018): 179-219.
- Ryan, Maeve. *Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807-1896*.

Edited by Richard Anderson and Henry B. Lovejoy. Woodbridge, Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell & Brewer, 2020.

Ryan, Maeve. "The Price of Legitimacy in Humanitarian Intervention: Britain, the Right of Search, and the Abolition of the West African Slave Trade, 1807-1867." In *Humanitarian Intervention*, 231-236. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Scanlan, Padraic X. "The Colonial Rebirth of British Anti-Slavery: The Liberated African Villages of Sierra Leone, 1815-1824." *The American Historical Review* (2016).

Singleton, Theresa A. "Slavery and Spatial Dialects on Cuban Coffee Plantations." *World Archeology* 33, no. 1 (2001).

Wills, Mary. *Envoys of Abolition: British Naval Officers and the Campaign Against the Slave Trade*. Liverpool University Press, 2019.