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Gracie Edler is a fourth-year history major. She wrote her paper on the slave ship, *Bom Caminho* for Dr. Matthew Hopper's Transatlantic Slave Trade class. Gracie is also the 2021-2022 president of the History honors society, Phi Alpha Theta.

Captured at the Cape: The Enslaved Africans Aboard Bom Caminho

Gracie Edler

The year was 1824. It was early spring and His Royal Majesty's ship the *Bann* was victoriously taking three captured slave ships back to Sierra Leone for trial when, along the mouth of the Lagos River, her crew spotted another vessel along the Cape Coast.¹ It was a Portuguese brig by the name of *Bom Caminho*, her size and location arousing suspicion as to what she could be transporting. In ships just as these, Portuguese slave-traders were infamous for taking hundreds of captives from the Bight of Benin to Brazil, where the slave trade legally flourished under the newly independent Brazilian empire. The *Bann* boarded the huge vessel, and upon investigation discovered over 350 Africans aboard, the majority being men and boys, all bound for enslavement in Bahia.² The British ship seized the slave ship as its fourth victory along the West African Coast, authorized to take the ship by the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1815, which stated that a Portuguese ship

1 D.M. Hamilton, *Sierra Leone: Commissioners Gregory and Hamilton, J. Rendell, etc.* (1824), The National Archives of the UK (TNA), FO 84/28, 170.

2 "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," Slave Voyages.

found along the Northern African Coast to have enslaved Africans aboard would be considered an illegal slave ship.³ With the hundreds of packed Africans and hundreds of prepared water casks, there was no doubt that this brig was engaging in the illegal trading of enslaved Africans, and due to the flag it was sailing under, the *Bom Caminho* was sentenced in Sierra Leone's British and Portuguese Court of Mixed Commission. The story of the ship may have ended there, but the lives of the captives did not.



Figure 1. Map of Bom Caminho Journey, Slave Voyages.

This paper will investigate the journey of the Portuguese *Bom Caminho* and the events unfolding before, during, and after her capture. The *Bom Caminho* was one of hundreds of slave ships captured during the struggle for abolition, however, its unique story highlights the 19th century interactions between the Portuguese—the biggest proponent for enslaved labor—and the British—the biggest proponent for abolition. With the help of priceless sources, this voyage and its outcome bring truth and awareness to the slave trade and its elements through a specific ship's unforgettable journey. Each ship in the slave trade had its own story and outcome, and the unfathomable number of ships and enslaved

3 Hertslet, *Hertslet's Commercial Treaties: Tratado De Commercio e Navegação*, (1840), 83-105.

Africans can muddle the details of the slave trade, making the “slave trade” an incomprehensible entity when, in reality, it included hundreds of years, ships, and enslaved people. In this essay, I will use the details of the *Bom Caminho* to help bring back the humanity of the slave trade by focusing on the story of a single ship and her voyagers. I will also emphasize the treaties and relations between two major world powers divided upon a profitable yet inhumane system to situate this microstudy into the broader history of human interaction.

The irony of Britain leading the abolition movement is that she was the very country to lead the slave trade towards its peak. The Transatlantic Slave Trade was established for economic profit and no other country profited off the slave trade to the same extent that Britain did. The British Empire created a monopoly of many markets using Africans as slaves. Furthermore, as historians have researched, Britain did so by using a triangular trade system that gained off the selling of captured Africans, the upkeep of the enslaved people, and the marketable products, produced by those enslaved, bringing surplus and wealth that no country could rival in the 18th century.⁴ With the boom of demand from a rising population and the capacity for constant trade, there would be little reason for Britain to end such a lucrative practice. This was the case at least until other countries gained control of similar trades and as humanitarian beliefs at home arose, causing anti-slavery sentiments in Britain.

Support for abolition increased in the late 18th Century in Britain for various reasons. There was an economic influence for the end of the slave-trade: two-thirds of British-transported captives were being sold to foreign powers, such as the U.S.A. and France, who had prosperous sugar plantations that were competing with British prices.⁵ Along with economic rivalry, the British politic had surges in support for abolition due to the rise of humanitarianism. With their

4 Pat Hudson, *Emancipation and the Remaking of the British Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland (New York: Manchester University Press, 2014), 36-37.

5 Ibid, 39.

emotional and usually religious plight, the humanitarians, who gained their name for their alleged selflessness, sought the complete destruction of the “inhuman and morally indefensible”⁶ practice. Groups such as the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade arose, and Quakers and Anglicans alike were those “who led the movement in Parliament”⁷ for political and economic changes. These groups focused on emotion to strike compassion into their fellow Englishmen, unveiling the brutality and immorality of the slave trade with imagery. Thus, Britain found its own motivation for ending the slave trade through both social and economic pressures, but the real challenge would be achieving this goal by pursuing *global* abolition.

The abolition of the slave trade started slowly in the early 1800’s and only progressed with English perseverance. Matthew Mason argues that “the British government drove the entire history of the international politics of abolition,” due to their system of treaties and naval implementation established before and (more importantly) after the Napoleonic Wars.⁸ Britain, during the war period, was able to hinder the slave trade by seizing “enemy ships” and taking prizes of war, such as the Africans aboard.⁹ However, this only lasted until the end of the war, leaving Britain with no legitimacy to seize other ships as the other countries were still legally practicing. With such profitable margins and resources, other countries were unwilling to part with the slave trade. Especially when a powerful rival country such as Great Britain was furiously fighting for abolition, likely with ulterior motives. Thus began the endless creation of treaties between Britain and its fellow powers, especially Portugal, in efforts to legally pursue abolition.

Portugal was reluctant to relinquish its labor force via enslaved Africans

6 Suzanne Miers, *Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade* (New York: Africana Publishing Company), 6.

7 Miers, 4.

8 Matthew Mason, “Keeping Up Appearances: The International Politics of Slave Trade Abolition in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no.4 (Oct. 2009): 809-832.

9 Miers, 9.

because it had sugar colonies in Brazil that demanded harsh labor yet lucrative profits that Portugal was in dire need of after the wars in the early 1800s. However, in 1810, Portugal and Britain signed a treaty to gradually establish abolition in Portuguese territories, such as Brazil, given that Britain would aid Portugal after the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁰ This treaty did little to enforce abolition, only asking unmotivated Portuguese government officials to stop their own slave ships. This changed with the Treaty of 1815 and its amendments in July of 1817, in which British ships were allowed to seize Portuguese slave ships that had African captives aboard, so long as the slave ship was north of the equator.¹¹

The Treaty of 1815 stated that slave trade South of the Equator in Portuguese territories was legal, and ships in travelling in this space could not be seized. However, if a slave ship travelled north of the equator, by chase or chance, and was found with captive Africans aboard, the vessel *could* be seized, examined for papers and evidence, and all cargo and materials would be lawful prize if condemned. Thus, Royal Navy could seize suspected slave vessels off the Bight of Benin: exactly where the British *Bann* was patrolling the day it encountered the Portuguese *Bom Caminho*.

The *Bann* and its fellow British vessels were sent to patrol the Atlantic Sea as Britain's treaties promised eventual abolition, but it was up to the British Royal Navy to ensure that ships trafficking enslaved Africans were captured and condemned. The job was easier said than done. The Royal crafts, designed for naval warfare of the Napoleonic era, were heavy, small, and slow. They had a difficult time catching up to the high-tech clippers working for the slave trade and lacked sufficient space to hold the hundreds of captives aboard seized ships. Treaties with countries were constantly changing, limiting the Navy's ability to capture other crafts, at times, leading members of the Navy release ships with chained Africans aboard. If a slave ship was captured, court systems before 1850

¹⁰ Mason, 813.

¹¹ Hertslet, 91-99.

weren't prepared or funded enough to handle complex issues brought up by the Royal Navy, and each case had to be handled individually.¹² Thus, the Royal Navy, at least in the first half of the 19th century, faced many challenges while enforcing abolition. However, in the case of the *Bom Caminho* and the *Bann*, the Royal Navy had just enough power to seize ships with enslaved African aboard. As a result, the *Bann* was able to trial the trafficking vessel.

Regarding the judgement of the *Bom Caminho* and its crew's fate, the ship had a convoluted case. When captured in March, she was sent to trial in Sierra Leone, where her captain and crew were cited in April 28 of 1824 to appear in court on May 15th of that year. Captain Joaquim Luis d'Araujo, working under the shipowner Thome Alfonco de Moura of Bahia, had papers documenting journeys and reasons for travel, a passport issued by the Provisional Government of Bahia (under the Brazilian Emperor) from November 1823.¹³ This passport allowed the *Bom Caminho* to travel from Molembo (Angola) to Rio de Janeiro with 506 Africans. The *Bom Caminho* left Bahia, Brazil in December of 1823 under the intent of following through with these papers' instructions. In fact, on the way to Southern Africa to buy enslaved Africans in January, the *Bom Caminho* was stopped and investigated by *H.M.S. Owen Glendower*, led by none other than the future captain of the *Bann*, George Woolcombe.¹⁴ Captain Woolcombe endorsed these papers, warning the crew to stay south of the equator on their slave-trafficking travels, as per the agreements in the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1815. Two months later, Captain Woolcombe caught the brig illegally above the equator off the coast of the Bight of Benin and brought the ship in for trial under the British and Portuguese Court of Mixed Commission at Sierra Leone. Now

12 Peter Grindal and Andrew Lambert, *Opposing the Slavers: The Royal Navy's Campaign Against the Atlantic Slave Trade* (I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016), 183-232.

13 E. Gregory and D.M. Hamilton, *Correspondence with the British commissioners, at Sierra Leone, the Havannah, Rio de Janeiro, and Surinam, Relating to the Slave Trade, 1824-1825 (Class A)*, Parliamentary Papers, 1825, XXVII, 47.

14 Extracted from the Registry of the British & Portuguese Court of Mixed Commission at Sierra Leone, TNA, HCA 35/5, 263.

in May of 1824, under Judge Edward Gregory Coquire and Commissioner of Abolition Daniel Molloy Hamilton, the papers and circumstances of the *Bom Caminho* were questioned. As no claimant for the vessel appeared at court, the ship was condemned, and the captives aboard were emancipated.¹⁵ The fate of the captain and crew are unknown as they did not appear at the trial.

Both the vessel and the equipment aboard were considered ‘lawful prizes’ of the British Empire once the ship was condemned and many items were sold immediately after the trial. The hull of the *Bom Caminho* was sold to a man recorded as Graves for £190—about \$31,523.32 in current U.S. currency. The miscellaneous goods on the ship, like chests, planks, and palm oil casks, traded out for a gross total of £269: today, \$42,889.74.¹⁶ Most of the income came from the ship itself and the hundreds of gallons of palm oil aboard, both useful and profitable for overseas trade. These pounds went toward costs for the trial, capture, and other expenses at about £220—\$35,083.19 today.¹⁷ As per the standard, the captain and his crew of the *Bann* received payment per number of captive Africans aboard—£10 per slave before expenses—a small incentive for their work on the seas.¹⁸ The costs and methods of enforcing abolition were a necessary step towards ending the slave trade. Britain came one step closer to global abolition, a gradual process that progressed ship by ship, after condemning the *Bom Caminho*.

As for the story of the people unwillingly aboard the *Bom Caminho*, the enslaved Africans were purchased at Badagry, one of the hotspots in Africa for both captives and palm oil. As a commercial center with a transport-friendly lagoonside, Badagry was home to a mix of people, both European and African.

15 E. Gregory and D.M. Hamilton, Names of Judge and Commissioner sourced from Extracted from the Registry, 263-264.

16 Portuguese Brig “Bom Caminho”: Account Sales of the Hull, Tackle, Apparel, Furniture, Cargo, TNA, HCA 35/5, 276-277.

17 Disbursement, TNA, HCA 35/5, 278.

18 Grindal, 205.

Many European countries, such as France, Britain, and Portugal, established factories, or trading ports, in this rich area. Like many trading capitals, Badagry was home to a variety of African peoples, as travel, trade, and the slave trade would bring a plethora of different cultures. Badagry was desirable due to its geography; the lagoon and waterways allowed for the capture of other African tribe members for enslavement from the inner reaches of the continent. With cheaper rates than other African towns due to the number of available captives, wealth, and business in Badagry exploded even in the face of Eastern and Western competitors. Because of this, tensions for political and economic control of this region were high and Badagry faced constant pressure from invading neighbors and internal governmental issues. Not to mention, European powers were very happy to encourage the wars to increase competition and decrease market prices.¹⁹ These issues persisted throughout the slave-trade's era, as demand for laborers kept the competition and business profitable for slave traders.

Although the Africans on the *Bom Caminho* were purchased at Badagry, this wasn't the homeland of all of them, which is the case of many other captives aboard ships in the slave trade. As mentioned before, commercial centers brought a range of people and the practice of selling enslaved neighboring tribes meant that Africans aboard ships often weren't from the area of purchase or even from the same tribe. In 1824, when the *Bom Caminho* was picking up Africans for enslavement, the Badagry region was under control of the Oyo people. The neighboring Dahomey and Ijebu were two rivals that had been competing for the trade port control around Benin for years.²⁰ Different tribes had their own unique markings, from scarification to tattoos. The various markings on each individual aboard the *Bom Caminho*, as recorded in the registry following their emancipation, showed their various origins. The Yorubaland, consisting of the

19 Robin Law, "A Lagoonside Port on the Eighteenth-Century Slave Coast: The Early History of Badagry," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 28, no. 1 (1994): 32-59.

20 "1824 Map," *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*.

Oyo, Ijebu, and other tribes in modern-day Benin and Western Nigeria, had the long-standing practice of marking for beauty, identity, and religion. This included lines across the face horizontally and perpendicularly, with families and identities distinguished by these variations.²¹ Others had markings that could hint to a previous slave-owner and recapture, as many aboard the ship were scarred with a B across the left breast like the man named Hawodoo or with a BC on the right breast like tens of men such as Logona, Mojoby, Amira, Aboo.²² The practice of “branding” bought captives was common for merchants in the slave-trade era and showed the rates of recapture in Africa. Each of the 327 that landed in Freetown, Sierra Leone for liberation was documented with their identifying marks, signifying the diversity of backgrounds aboard the single slave ship.

Originally, the fate of those aboard the *Bom Caminho* would have been a life in Bahia, Brazil, home of the port city of the second-largest number of African captives in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.²³ Sugar, cotton, and tobacco were the top crops sold for profits in Bahia and the area was exploited to only produce these cash crops, much to the distress of its civilians and the enslaved Africans forced to work these extreme harvests.²⁴

The majority of enslaved Africans were sent to work on plantations, but the size of the property affected working conditions. There would usually be an overseer, typically another enslaved individual, managing the enslaved on larger plantations, henceforth enslaved Africans had no contact to the slave-owner (see fig. 2). Large farms would work with timber and sugar, products that demanded short-term, brutal work with large amounts of casualties. An enslaved African in Brazil would be bought for 20-to-30-pound sterling (£2,252.33 or \$3189.38

21 Edward, Ojo, Oluranti, and Saibu, Israel Abayomi, “Understanding The Socio-Cultural Identity of the Yoruba in Nigeria,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 27 (2018): 145-154.

22 *Bom Caminho Register* 2942, FO 315-331, 143-146.

23 Dale T. Garden, “Untitled,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 19, no. 37/38 (1994): 346.

24 *Ibid*, 346-347.

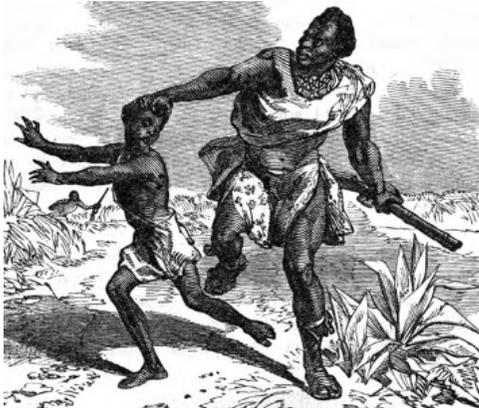


Figure 2. "Soldier Capturing a Boy," *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, 1800s.

today) and work for an intense 7 years (replacement was needed for 2.5-10% of enslaved workers every year). A single worker's maximum output averaged 45 *arroba* (1,457 pounds) of sugar, an amount two to three times the worth of his or her purchase.²⁵ In some cases, the enslaved were given one day a week in the rainy season to plant their own crops for self-subsistence, a system that minimized the owner's extra expenditure. This was known as the "Brazilian system" to the rest of the west.²⁶ This brutal farm work was common for those taken across the Middle Passage, and those aboard the *Bom Caminho* were just miles away from this fatal future. However, with the *Bann's* chance capture of the *Bom Caminho*, the captives aboard the brig would have a different fate in Sierra Leone.

Freetown, Sierra Leone, was meant to be a place of freedom for emancipated people of color. By 1829, over 81,745 captives, more than anywhere else in the British empire, were released here to produce cash crops and goods as freed people.²⁷ In fact, until 1833, it was Britain's largest post-emancipation

25 Kit Sims Taylor, "The Economics of Sugar and Slavery in Northeastern Brazil," *Agricultural History* 44, no. 3 (1970): 268-269.

26 *Ibid.*, 271.

27 Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), 3.

colony.²⁸ However, what followed many emancipated Africans were years of cheap labor and free apprenticeships in the name of education, profit, and capitalism. With the gradual end of the slave trade also came the expected replacement of free labor with a cheap, profitable alternative. The solution was a workforce that consisted of “freed” Africans, who were considered the “most numerous and least expensive workers”²⁹ in the British colonies. The mentality that Africans had to “earn back” their freedom through apprenticeship justified a period of forced labor with low wages. This apprenticeship was further justified with racial ideology as Africans were seen as inferior and childish with need for Western European education. This racial superiority was supported by abolitionists, who agreed that freed Africans needed to learn a trade to be successful in the European-dominated world. As such, this arrangement pleased both the economists and the humanitarians, replacing slavery rather than ending it.

The mentality created a reality for the 327 captives of the *Bom Caminho* who were released at Freetown—seven of the original 334 died on the trip to Sierra Leone. Each African was registered with details regarding their “deposit” locations, their physical state and ethnic markings, and their biological information. Instructed by D.M. Hamilton operating under his colonial and court orders, the emancipated individuals were to be sold into apprenticeships and as servants. Of the 196 men, a few went to the hospital for unknown reasons, most likely of disease or malnourishment due to the conditions aboard slave ships. Many others went to British subjects to serve as apprentices, while the 50 women were split between the hospital and various employers. The 81 children met the same fate as the adults.³⁰ It is presumed that those bought by private buyers worked as apprentices to “acclimate to society.”

Slavery wasn’t abolished but rather replaced with this system, and those

28 Scanlan, 19.

29 Ibid, 21.

30 *Bom Caminho Register*, SLR 173008-17634.

aboard the *Bom Caminho* were among the thousands subjected to the irony of liberation. The journeys of people who suffered under a system of slave-trafficking, the ships employed, and peoples' fates are often lost in the long history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. However, a detailed investigation of *Bom Caminho* begins to illuminate the true experience of abolition: the stories encoded in statistics.

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