



Revolts During the Middle Passage

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Les révoltes des prisonniers africains sur les navires négriers nantais.

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By Jean-Marc Masseaut, *Les Anneaux de la Memoire* (Shackles of Memory)

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would first like to thank the National Park Service for the work that they are doing and for this important topic and today's event.

I want to thank our colleagues at the University of North Florida, the Musée des Ducs des Bretagne, which is the Nantes History Museum, as well as and the University of Nantes, and the City of Nantes. Both administrations of Jacksonville and Nantes have supported the growth of this event and it is a good example of what is developing between our two cities.

The Shackles of Memory in Nantes is honored to collaborate with the staff at Kingsley Plantation. We worked together to create today's program, the new exhibits, and educational materials. I want to congratulate the team in Nantes and the team here in Jacksonville for the good work we have done together this year, and for our event two years ago.

Regardless of where we live, we share a willingness to learn from the past, our common history. And when that past is the long and tragic human experience of the slave trade and slavery, we all know that the past affects our present and so we know the importance of identifying our historical heritage.

Since we share that willingness to understand our past we can work together. In more and more places around the Atlantic ocean, and around the world, scholars, museums, administrations, and public authorities are involved in research and sharing knowledge about the slave trade as a part of our human condition.

While there has been a lot of research done, there is yet much more to do on that topic, museums, parks and special exhibitions are the main tool for telling the history to the public.

And among those who are involved in what we can call *the work of memory*, many of them wish to describe their local experience in an international context, as part of a global story. It is a good method, because the Atlantic slave trade that we discuss was part of an international economy which linked many societies around the globe.

In the long history of the Atlantic, one of the main experiences of the ancestors of the people of North and South America was the crossing the Ocean. For the most part, Africans who crossed the Atlantic, enslaved and carried in the holds of ships, were forced to be deported from their homelands - it was the experience we call the »Middle Passage «.

Also crossing the Atlantic on the slave ships, were the European sailors, who were also jailers for the slaves on board, and sometimes the sailors understood the shackled experience, as many themselves had been jailed as criminals.

Most of the documents relating the travels of the slave ships come from the merchant navy archives. In the port of Nantes, which was the first slave trade port of France during the 18th century, many documents were protected and we can learn from them today. French records have been very well preserved.

It is from these documents describing some of the 1,500 slave trade voyages from Nantes that we can better know about the life of these people during the Middle Passage.

Many things have been written yet about the voyages and I will not tell the complete story of life aboard the slave ships during weeks, and sometimes months, at sea.

I will just talk about how young people from Africa, mostly men but also women, resisted their deportation and enslavement aboard the Nantes slave trade ships during the 18th century.

A slave ship was a regular merchant navy ship. A trade ship became a slave ship after purchasing or trading for slaves on the coast of West Africa. Nantes ships were just like those from the Western European trade ports - they were ships for carrying goods from the Americas to Europe, but they could also transported prisoners from Africa to the Américas.

The average of the number of the people deported on each Nantes slave trade ship was between 250 and 350 Africans imprisoned on each ship. To man the ship which carried these shackled people, it was necessary to hire and equip them in Europe, with 30 to 40 crew members, mostly Europeans and mostly young men, like their prisoners.

But a slave ship was also a jail.

The voyages by the sea during the 18th century were very rough for everybody: crew members, migrants or military troops.

But even under a militaristic or hard work discipline all these people were free, with rights, even if they were not always respected.

The enslaved prisoners had no rights.

Yet even if they had been imprisoned by violence or on captured on a raid in Africa, they never accepted that destiny.

Because of this spirit of resistance, the slave ships had to be floating jails.

Resistance began in Africa where these people were captured by soldiers or bought and sold by merchants. The fight for freedom started with the resistance against the African slave traders. Then they resisted the ship's crewmembers and the European slave traders. Once the slaves were on board the ships, the sailors and trader had to handle a frightened population and resistant set of prisoners. And even though the ship was very small, about 35 yards length and surrounded by the sea, without any exit, the prisoners had to be incarcerated under the deck and shackled if necessary. This method was compulsory for the crewmembers.

Among the prisoners there were always people strong enough and smart enough to escape, or organize a revolt, which could be dangerous for the life of the crewmembers and which could also destroy the maritime and slavetrade expedition.

And those who were not strong enough to physically fight against the young, experienced, and armed crewmembers, would revolt in other ways, such as killing themselves in individual or collective suicides.

We can calculate an approximate average for revolts on French slave ships. It happened every 20 voyages out of 3,500 voyages known today. That means that on each slave trade ship, the crewmembers had to be aware of the threat of a revolt and had to prevent it.

If they forgot that rule of constantly being prepare for revolt, they were reminded of it by their prisoners. The sailors and jailers were reminded of what the reality of enslavement – the loss of family, home, and hope - motivated the slaves to do, to revolt.

I will quote a Nantes slave trade ship logbook describing what happened in November 1754:

« the captain who was not experienced for these kinds of voyages, decided to unshackle 20 negroes to let them free on the deck in spite of the warnings from his second mate. All the negroes of the ship revolted behind those who had been unshackled »

The captain and the boatswain were killed before the revolt finally failed.

From the beginning to the end of that voyage, after weeks or months on board, some African prisoners still found enough energy for fighting.

In 1752 the Nantes slaveship l'Heureux, which means "the happy," spent 5 months along the African coast loading prisoners, and then 3 months at sea crossing the Atlantic Ocean. At the end of the voyage, near by the Island of St Domingue, which is Haïti today, the health condition of the whole population on board was a disaster.

Tens of people, Africans and Europeans had died. Many survivors were sick, probably because of scurvy. There were not enough healthy crew members to maneuver the ship and the captain decided to use some of the stronger enslaved prisoners. After months of life incarcerated on a ship surrounded by the sea, invaded with illness and death, these prisoners had still enough energy for revolting. But again, this revolt finally failed.

Generally, revolts broke out at the beginning of the voyage when the ship was at anchor or not far from the coast of Africa.

No one culture or ethnicity or group of slaves was more or less likely to revolt. It happened all along the coast of Africa.

The slave trade in Africa, along the coast and inland, generated many troubles and created big competition between the African slave traders. Some enslaved populations were the hostages of internal African conflicts and the slave trade. We can only observe that the ability for imprisoned slaves to revolt was dependent on their situation lived by the prisoners before they were taken on board the slave ships. While most slaves were peasants, some of them were warriors and some were even sailors.

In 1728, the King of Abomey's troops (Abomey is in the actual Republic of Bénin) invaded the kingdom of OUIDAH which had become very prosperous because of the Atlantic slave trade. Their troops took the control of the trade. It was a very difficult period in this part of Western Africa.

During this time period, 6 Nantes slave ships were loaded with prisoners in Ouidah and 5 of them had to face a revolt.

As we can imagine, it was only when the ship was still in sight of the coast that the revolted prisoners could have a chance of escaping and surviving.

Here is what happened on the coast of the Republic of Guinea in 1769:

The ship Concord was at anchor when some prisoners revolted against the crew members still on board, the others being ashore for trading. They killed three sailors and took possession of the ship. And the following day African people came from the shore with their canoes, picked up the revolted prisoners and hid them in the forest.

In 1742 on the 13th of August, the prisoners of the slave ship La Sainte Hélène at anchor along the coast of Nigeria, revolted. They killed 8 crew members and picked up all the weapons on board. They took possession of the ship and cut the rope of the anchor. And the ship crowded with more than 300 people went drifting along the shore. There were other Portuguese and French slave ships at anchor in the area. The crew members of these ships tried to recapture the drifting ship but without any success. The revolting Africans repelled them. When finally the ship ran aground, the rebels set her on fire, and tried to escape by jumping in the sea. Many of them drowned or killed themselves and few of them could escape.

It is necessary to state that while there was constant threat of revolt on the slave ships, the success of the revolts was very rare.

During a century which had 1 500 slave trade voyages, we can count only 5 successful revolts on 77 known voyages.

A successful revolt meant that some of the slaves that revolted could escape from a ship. None had all the slaves escape. The will of the African prisoners to fight for freedom was generally broken by the strength of the weapons and the professionalism of the European crewmembers.

These people were workers, the sailors, on the merchant ships and came from the coastal areas of France. They signed on regular merchant ships to the Americas or to the Indian Ocean or signed on slave ships depending on the work that was available at the time. They had learned how to maneuver a ship, how to face the dangers of the sea, and how to fight against the enemies on the war ships. Their lives on ships were often difficult.

During 18th century, there was big competition between the European maritime nations, making the sea a real battlefield. The sailors of the merchant navy had to serve regularly on the French war ship to complete the military crews especially during the wars. They were very appreciated for their professionalism and on the war ship they learnt also the military discipline, and how to use weapons and canons. But as all the warriors they could be also injured, killed, or imprisoned.

During the 18th century, it happened frequently that the French sailors became prisoners of the British during the naval wars between France and the United Kingdom. Some of them had the experience of incarceration in the British ships. They knew what it means to be incarcerated below the deck of an unhealthy ship. So the sailors of the slave ships knew how to sail at sea but also they knew how to imprison their prisoners and fight against them when they revolted.

We do not know if they had any compassion for their prisoners - we do know that they were very efficient as jailers.

That is why the slave ships were sometimes the theatre of desperate behaviors.

The sea was the best wall, enclosing these floating jails. The jailers were experienced and stood together against their prisoners.

Several and significant cases of collective suicides have been related in the logbooks that we can read in the archives.

I will quote a logbook describing what happened on the 23rd of March, 1774, on the Nantes slaveship named le Soleil (the Sun). This ship had left the port of Badagri located between Cotonou and Lagos Nigeria, to go to Sao Tomé Island in the Bight of Benin.

« While we were praying God, In the same place, all together, in the same time, in a same movement ; 14 black women jumped out from the poop [deck] down to the sea. The sea was very rough, the wind was blowing strongly, [and] Whatever diligence that we tried, some of them were killed by the sharks and we could only save 6 of them. . . »

To conclude, I wish to say that the work of history can relate scientifically the facts, including their cruelty. But these events that I related to you are the history of human beings.

And if the European slave ships have been the theatre of considerable human suffering, it has also been the theatre of true human heroism. And this is also the Memory that we have to remember from the Middle Passage. The slave trade was been a Human Disaster, but it could not eradicate Human Dignity.

I thank you for your attention.

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