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Final Paper

HIS 511C-01

Sailing the Seas of Slavery: An Analysis of Instructions to British and American Slave Ship  
Captains in the 1700's

The slave trade is an extremely broad topic, and it covers a long and complicated historical period. No two primary documents contain the same information. Each document provides a unique perspective and new or supporting information on the slave trade and the people involved. The documents that will be focused on in this paper specifically cover the communications between merchants and the captains they employ. Although these letters cannot provide specific information about the actualities of the middle passage, because they were all written before the slaving voyages ever set sail, they do provide the specific guidelines that merchants wished the captains to follow. The letters of instruction to British and American slave ship captains from 1725 to the mid 1790's are a source that is rich with information about the slave trade. They provide information ranging from where the slaves were purchased and what type of people were most likely to be purchased as slaves, to the places that the slaves were then sold and the treatment of the slaves aboard the ships.

Source Overview

The documents that will be analyzed and discussed in this paper were written to slave ship captains, so a little background on who was most likely to be captain aboard a slave ship, as well as who was usually funding these slaving expeditions may prove beneficial. In her book, Lindsay says that the British and Portuguese were the main slave traders during the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

which is when all of the documents that will be examined in this paper were written<sup>1</sup>. However, the documents under examination are from British or American slavers to British or American captains. This is known for several of the documents because they have the location they were being sent from, but even for those that do not have a location this is a safe assumption. This is because of the names of the captains, the fact that the letters were written in English, and the knowledge gained from Lindsay that the British were leading traders in slaves during this time period.

The six documents examined in this paper are from the 1700's, specifically ranging from 1725 until 1785. The earliest letter was a letter to Captain William Barry from Bristol England in 1725<sup>2</sup>. It was written from No. Ruddock, Isaac Hobhouse, and Wm. Baker, the sponsors of his slaving voyage. In this voyage Captain Barry sailed from Bristol to Andony, and from there to South Carolina. The next letter was written by an unnamed author from Boston to Captain William Atkinson in 1728<sup>3</sup>. Captain Atkinson was told to take his sloop *Katherine* to Guinea and then eventually to Virginia. Captain Pollipus Hammond received a letter from Newport in 1746 telling him to take his sloop *Anstis* to an unspecified part of the coast of Africa and then go to Barbados with his cargo of slaves<sup>4</sup>. Captain William Ellery took the *Snow Caesar* to Senegal and then to either South Carolina or the Island of St. Christopher's according to his letter from 1759<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 5, New Jersey, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Instructions to Captain William Barry." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 327-329, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> "Instructions to Captain William Atkinson, 1728." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 36-38, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 1930.

<sup>4</sup> "Instructions to Captain Pollipus Hammond, 1746." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 138-139, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> "Instructions to Captain William Ellery, 1759." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 68-69, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 2002.

An unnamed captain was instructed in 1785 to an unspecified part of Africa and then to Martinico to receive more instructions<sup>6</sup>. Captain Charles Molyneux set sail in the mid 1790's<sup>7</sup>.

There are certain things that are mentioned in all letters, and other things that are unique to a particular letter. A few items that are in most letters include what slaves are to be bought from the coast of Africa, a timeline for the voyage, and how to prevent disaster while aboard the ship. Some items that are only mentioned in particular or singular letters include the mention of pirates, the discussion of how to prevent slave escape, and ideas on what could cause disease. The letters all additionally contain rich and varied information that will be discussed later on in this paper.

### Background Information

In order to fully appreciate all of the information in these documents, one must first contextualize it within the time from which it comes. It is also important to understand where slavery came from, what perils were faced by slaves and crew alike on the middle passage, and other general information about the slave trade and specifically the middle passage. The slave trade was active from the 1500's and continued until the end of the 1800's<sup>8</sup>. It reached its height in the 1700's, with 85 percent of the slaves crossing the Atlantic after the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>. One scholar estimated that 11 million Africans in total were transported as slaves from Africa between 1440 and 1880<sup>10</sup>. This is the time period that is being focused on in my paper, as all of the primary sources were written in the 1700's. These slaves came from a variety of

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<sup>6</sup> "Instructions to Captain \_\_\_\_\_, 1785." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 78-80, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 1930.

<sup>7</sup> *Ship Christopher's Book, Fourth Voyage*, "Instructions to the Captain," in "Before the Atlantic Voyage: An Inquiry into the Business of Slave Trading during the Late Eighteenth Century," by Linda M. Rupert, Duke University, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 1, New Jersey, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Harms, *The Diligent*, pp. xvii, New York, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 132, New York, 2010.

backgrounds and places, and were then sold to a variety of ports after their transport across the sea. The majority of slaves that were purchased over the course of the slave trade came from West Africa<sup>11</sup>. During the 1700's specifically, the majority of slaves were captured or bought from the Bight of Benin and Congo/Angola<sup>12</sup>. The slaves brought to North America only accounted for 4 percent of the overall slave trade<sup>13</sup>. This is important to the letters in question because many of the captains were instructed to bring the slaves that they purchased to North America.

By the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French and British West Indies and Brazil were where the majority of slaves were being taken, and this continued to be true throughout the 1700's<sup>14</sup>. The slave ships in the documents get their slaves from different places according to the instructions sent to them by those who have hired and sponsored them. Where the slaves came from, and if all the slaves on a given ship came from the same place certainly affected the voyage and lives of those aboard the ship. This would affect their language, if there were language barriers, and the culture of the slaves aboard.

When the slaves were brought across the Atlantic in order to profit the merchants and captains who purchased them in Africa, they were subject to very poor conditions. However, a surprisingly low percent of slaves perished in the voyages compared to the overall rates of slave mortality during the trade. During the average time it took to cross from Africa to the ports where the slaves would be sold, which was about 1-2 months, only 18 percent of slave mortality was suffered on slave ships. This is compared to the 71 percent of deaths suffered during the

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 8, New Jersey, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Harms, *The Diligent*, pp. xvii, New York, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Harms, *The Diligent*, pp. xv, New York, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 35, New Jersey, 2008.

slave trade that occurred while moving slaves from the interior of Africa to the coast<sup>15</sup>. This is important to the documents examined in this paper due to the emphasis on disease prevention found within the letters. It is additionally important to consider because of the way that slaves were examined by captains to prevent sickly or weak slaves to be bought in Africa or brought aboard the slave ship.

Slave mortality differed according to where the slaves were purchased from, which may have to do with increased likelihood of catching malaria and yellow fever in certain ports<sup>16</sup>. Despite the relatively low percent of deaths suffered on this leg of the slave trade, the actual number of deaths is very high. According to Lisa A. Lindsay in “Captives as Commodities,” nearly 2 million slaves died in the middle passage alone<sup>17</sup>. In this paper we will be exploring how and why these slaves died, or at least coming up with possible answers to these questions based on the primary sources that will be analyzed. A higher percent of men crossed the Atlantic as slaves than women and children, and this information could also affect what one considers when reading primary documents asking for specific genders or age groups to be brought to certain locations and sold<sup>18</sup>. In addition to that, it is possible that the export of women and children caused higher mortality rates from particular ports purely because they were being sold from distressed societies<sup>19</sup>.

The ships that were taken on the slaving voyages were not just any ships. Before they transported slaves, the ships were modified specifically for this purpose. The ships that slaves were transported in featured ventilation ports that allowed the air to flow through the areas that

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<sup>15</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 132, New York, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 139-143, New York, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 4, New Jersey, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 4, New Jersey, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 143, New York, 2010.

slaves were held. There were also other special changes made to the ship to better hold the slaves. In addition to this, the slaving ships rarely returned with produce from the places that they sold the slaves<sup>20</sup>. All of these bits of information help one to better understand what the merchants or traders had in mind for their vessels during the slave trade, and shed some additional light on the things that both crew and slaves aboard the slaving vessels experienced.

While the captains are an important piece of the slaving puzzle, it is in a way even more important to know who was paying for these slaving voyages. Slaving voyages were originally run mainly by government supported companies that had a monopoly on the enterprise. Each country had a different company that it supported and gave a charter to, but the companies and charters were not respected by those of the other countries, who continued to fund and run slaving expeditions. This eventually evolved into a system that allowed private traders to also participate in the slave trade, although this was mainly because the government supported companies could not supply the number of slaves that the market demanded. During the 1700's, the slave trade had for the most part opened up to private slaving enterprises<sup>21</sup>.

A part of what stimulated this extension of the slave trade was advocacy for the independent traders to help the Caribbean grow into its full potential. The argument was made that the Caribbean had been deprived of slaves, and the slaves that had been brought to the islands were not capable of clearing its lands and preparing them to be productive. That being said, those who had supported and continued to support the government chartered trading companies argued that they were interested in what was best for the country as a whole, while independent traders were only concerned with getting rich themselves<sup>22</sup>. Some people would

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<sup>20</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 139-143, New York, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Harms, *The Diligent*, pp. xviii, New York, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Harms, *The Diligent*, pp. 32-37, New York, 2002.

even claim that while it was the captains and crew who would do the particularly gruesome work involved in the slave trade, and indeed most voyage outfitters never saw the true toll this practice took on human life, those who financed the voyage were the ones responsible for the rapid expansion of the slave trade<sup>23</sup>.

One item worthy of noting is the precedence for slavery and slaving. At the point that the selected primary documents come into play, slavery has already been well established as an institution. Lindsay says that it was the demand for labor in the new world that led to this explosion of human exploitation and racism<sup>24</sup>. As was previously mentioned, it was later though, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, that slavery peaked. Even then, the vast majority of slaves were not going to North America, but places like Brazil. It is important to keep this in mind when analyzing the documents, because where they were going would surely affect the middle passage for the slaves and everyone else involved. In many of the letters of instruction it states where the slave ships should be sailing to, and this also gives the reader an idea of whether the ship was on an unusual journey, or travelling the same route that many other slave ships also travelled.

The 1700's are also a difficult time to understand when referencing the political climate regarding slaves in multiple countries. There were competing ideas of whether to spread slavery or abolish it altogether. In France particularly, certain religious authorities worked to destroy slavery with references to the bible. These ideas are not vocalized in the documents in question, but that does not mean that those writing the documents were not aware of these anti-slavery sentiments. The captains as well may have been aware of the immorality of the slave trade, and

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Harms, *The Diligent*, pp. 31, New York, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities*, pp. 24-30, New Jersey, 2008.

that certain religious authorities had taken a stance against it<sup>25</sup>. The fact that abolitionism isn't mentioned in any of the documents it creates a notable silence. It is unknown to the reader whether the captains knew of the abolitionist ideas, although it is likely, and equally unknown what the captains thought of these ideas.

All of these factors must be taken into consideration when contemplating the primary documents. When placed into the proper historical context these instructions to slave ship captains are particularly rich documents when attempting to sketch a rough outline of what the sponsors for the slaving voyages expected. The letters are additionally extraordinarily helpful for beginning to piece together the kind of experiences that would be had by those aboard the slaving vessels.

#### Primary Source Analysis

In the letters of instruction, some captains were given very specific guidelines for how to care for the slaves, while others were simply told that they were to manage the slaves as they saw fit. One of the letters that discusses specifics regarding the care of the slaves is written to Captain William Barry<sup>26</sup>. He is told to look after the slaves and the ship's supplies, and to boil the slaves supplies. He was additionally told to prevent his crew from harming the slaves aboard his vessel. In the instructions to Captain William Ellery it says only that he must always keep crew

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Harms, *The Diligent*, pp. 27, New York, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> "Instructions to Captain William Barry." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 327-329, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 2002.



members watching over the slaves and keep them safeguarded<sup>27</sup>. In the letter to an unnamed captain it says to treat the slaves well, but not well enough that they might revolt<sup>28</sup>.

Of the documents being examined, Captain Barry's letter is the only one that goes into detail on how to prevent slaves from escaping. To prevent escape, Captain Barry is told to always have a watch over the slaves and to never let the watch fall asleep while on duty so that the slaves would not try to take over the ship. He is also told to prevent the slaves from jumping overboard and escaping. The measures that were taken to prevent this possibility of escape included a net that was strung around the ship chest high and by keeping the slaves shackled to one another.

In some of the letters there are also specifics about how to prevent disease among the slaves and crew. This was important because although the slaves were viewed as less than human, they were a source of profit. The more slaves died on the voyage, the less money + was made. If too many died, it is possible that money would be lost on the voyage, for the captains bought them from different places on the coast rather than enslaving people themselves. As was previously mentioned, Captain Barry was told to boil supplies for the slaves. This was probably to prevent them from becoming sick, although it is hard to know for certain without more context in the letter. Barry is also instructed not to let the slaves row canoes over to ship lest they become exhausted, which he believed would cause them to become ill.

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<sup>27</sup> "Instructions to Captain William Ellery, 1759." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 68-69, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> "Instructions to Captain \_\_\_\_\_, 1785." In *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America: Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies*, pp. 78-80, by Elizabeth Donnan, New York, 1930.

The most significant details about the prevention of disease in slaves are found in the letter of instruction to an unnamed captain. He is told to wash his ship with vinegar and smoke it, and also take certain steps to clean his water. The captain is also to make sure both crew and slaves stayed clean. Captain Charles Molyneux was also told to avoid slave sickness, although in his case it appears that the fears of sickness came from the environment<sup>29</sup>. In order to prevent the slaves and his crew from contracting an illness, he is told to leave the Congo before the rains began. This is an important difference in letter instructions, because one can see fears of disease as the direct effects of tarrying too long in one place. In other documents, it is mentioned that the traders who sponsored the slaving voyages wanted the captains to leave the coast at particular times, but this is the only document that cites direct consequences of lingering.

What is not written in these letters is just as interesting as the things that the letters outright state, or perhaps even more interesting. This is because one can understand much from the information that the merchants felt the captains did not need, or the information that they were too concerned about to mention. One of the silences in these letters is the address of slave insurrections or mutiny. This subject is hinted at in multiple letters, such as when William Barry is told to keep careful watch over the slaves and make sure that those on watch don't fall asleep, as this might prove fatal. Even with these little hints and worries coming out in the letters, there is no direct mention of slave mutiny. This is possibly because the captains of the ships were already well aware of this possibility, or perhaps because they wanted to keep morale high on the ships. It is also possible that the slavers instructing the voyages were arrogant and believed that slave insurrection wasn't possible on their ships. Whatever the reason, it is important to note that

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<sup>29</sup> *Ship Christopher's Book, Fourth Voyage*, "Instructions to the Captain," in "Before the Atlantic Voyage: An Inquiry into the Business of Slave Trading during the Late Eighteenth Century," by Linda M. Rupert, Duke University, 2002.

there is no mention of these dangers in any of the letters of instruction despite the obvious precautions that were being taken to avoid slave mutiny.

Another major silence in these letters is the mention of other factors that could lead to a failed voyage. This is somewhat surprising considering the amount of detail that is included about disease aboard the slaving vessels, which could be just as catastrophic. This may be due to the fact that disease was something that was viewed as preventable. One small mention of the possibility of a pirate attack is in the letter to Captain William Barry. He is told to trust no ships that he comes across in case they are pirates. The entirety of this mention amounts to about a sentence, and is the only mention of this sort in any of the letters that were examined. This is interesting because one could imagine that the fear of pirates would not be misplaced when considering a voyage that was at sea for as long as most slaving voyages were, and the fact that the slaving vessels carried slaves and other goods that amounted to no small amount of wealth. Perhaps the fear of pirates for slaving ships was not as strong as it would be for other trading ships, as slaves would be even harder for pirates to keep alive in order to resell without all of the necessary equipment. Along these same lines is the mention to Captain William Ellery of a possible change in the political climate while out on a slaving voyage, which would affect where the Captain should sell the slaves he had purchased in Africa.

The slaves were picked very carefully based on what would sell best. According to the majority of letters that are being analyzed, the slaves that sold best were apparently males in their prime. In the letter to an unnamed captain it specifically says that although the decision on the gender and age of the slaves was left up to him, the young men usually sold best. Captain Barry was also told in his letter that the men and boy slaves were the most valuable on plantations. Captain Atkinson was directly told to purchase mostly boys, as was Captain Ellery. On the other

hand, Captain Hammond was told to get both girls and boys. The ages of the slaves in demand also varied slightly, but for the most part the captains were to purchase slaves that were in their prime. That is to say, they were not to purchase small children or older slaves, and interestingly enough they were not to purchase slaves past their mid-twenties.

The directions concerning which slaves to buy goes beyond just sex and age. The captains were also directed to pick out slaves that were healthy and strong, which seems an obvious point of importance. This of course was necessary for the slaves to survive the voyage and be sold at high prices at the end of the passage. In the letter to an unnamed captain it said to very carefully examine the slaves physically, but mainly to pay attention to their temperaments and make certain they weren't prone to violence and anger. This may also have had to do with the possibility of slave mutiny. It also may have been addressed because it may have related to how well the slaves might sell, or may have a variety of effects on their voyage. Because of the nature of the reference, it is difficult to discern exactly what the writer of the instructions has in mind behind the importance of assessing the temperament of the slaves.

Where the slaves came from and where they were going are important points that are addressed in nearly every letter. The slaves came from a variety of places across the coast of Africa. Some were purchased in the Congo, while others were purchased in Andoni or New Guinea. Because of the different locations these slaves came from, they obviously had a variety of backgrounds and languages. However, it appears that although in the instructions the captains are told different places to purchase slaves, some of them are told only one specific place they are to obtain the slaves. This is important because the slaves aboard at least a few slave ships likely shared some cultural or linguistic similarities with one another. On other ships, however, the slaves were purchased at unspecified parts of the coast of Africa. These slaves would have

been jumbled together on board with no means of communication, which would obviously change their experiences in the transatlantic slave trade compared to those who could have communicated.

The slaves were intended to be sold at a variety of locations as well. One cannot say for certain what type of labor the slaves would have been sold into, but some options were more likely than others. A few of the letters of instruction, such as the one written to Captain Barry, specifically state that the slaves they were transporting should be selected according to who would work best on plantations. However, we can understand from this same section of the letter to Captain Barry that the slaves that sold best for plantations were men and older boys. This means that the slaves that Captain Hammond was transporting, which were younger boys and girls, probably were intended for different types of work. What this work was cannot be determined without additional information.

The captains were no doubt chosen very carefully by the people who sponsored their slaving voyages and owned the ships the captains sailed. There were many factors that the sponsors could not account for in their letters of instruction, as many things might have changed in the time that the slave ships were out to sea. The relationship between the captain and the sponsor must therefore have been one of deep trust, as the fortunes of the sponsor were determined by the captain they selected. This is reflected in the Slave Voyages Database, as the merchants or sponsors often chose to continue to employ the same captains. These captains had already proven that they could be trusted with running a voyage and bringing back a profit.

An example of this is seen in the case of Captain William Barry, who was hired by Isaac Hobhouse (who wrote one of the letters examined in this paper) at least 5 times<sup>30</sup>.

These captains were also well rewarded for their service aboard the slave ships. In some of the letters the captain's payment is specified. In the letter to the unnamed captain, for example, it says that the captain is to receive monetary payment as well as payment coming from the holds of the ship. A part of this is that the captain is to receive four slaves out of every hundred. The payment of those who are serving more important roles on the ship beside the captain are also mentioned. This was important because a large portion of the payment that the captain was to receive was dependent upon his success in the slave trade. If there were large profits for the merchants funding the voyage, then there were also large profits for the captain. However, if the voyage failed then the captain received very little as compensation for all of his time and trouble.

### Historiography

Stephen D. Behrendt wrote "The Captains in the British Slave Trade from 1785 to 1807", in which he claims that historians in the past have failed to look at the entirety of the slave trade, mostly due to the fact that much of the information about them has been largely unavailable or inaccessible<sup>31</sup>. Behrendt claims that one of the main points of the slave that has been overlooked is the captains involved. It appears to be true that many other publications that focus on the slave trade overlook the captains and their role in the trade, as the middle passage is discussed in detail

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<sup>30</sup> Emory University. "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database." 2013. <http://www.slavevoyages.org/>.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen D. Behrendt, *The Captains in the British Slave Trade from 1785 to 1807*, pp. 79-140, 1991.

in the works of Lisa A. Lindsay, Robert Harms, and Herbert S. Klein, but the captains themselves are only briefly mentioned.

In his article Behrendt discussed the slave trade as something that often multiple members of a family would participate in. That is to say, he argues that based on his research many slave ship captains likely became involved in the slave trade due to the involvement of their fathers, whether their fathers were directly or indirectly linked to the slave trade. In addition to Behrendt's initial analysis of why the captains were involved in the slave trade, where many of them came from, and what they expected to get out of it, he also closely examines the life of one particular captain.

Simon Rottenberg chose to focus instead on the act of being a captain itself and all that it entailed rather than the more personal aspects of being a slave ship captain<sup>32</sup>. In his article Rottenberg mentions not only the sometimes illegal trading that captains partook in to advance themselves more personally, but also the overarching struggle between larger companies and independent traders fighting over rights to the slave trade. Later in his article he examines the Rottenberg focuses far less on specifically captains and more on their role in the slave trade in general, and where they fit into the slave trade narrative on the side of the slavers themselves.

This view is very different from the later perspective that Behrendt took in 1991, a full 24 years after Rottenberg published his article. In this we see the evolution of interests in captains and how they related to the slave trade. While Rottenberg sees captains as more of a piece to the whole narrative of the slave trade, Behrendt focuses on captains as a narrative in and of themselves. Behrendt examines the captains and their lives and pasts for the historical value that

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<sup>32</sup> Rottenberg, Simon, *The Business of Slave Trading*, pp. 409-423, 1967.

they have without having to place them constantly into the larger perspective of the slave trade. That is to say, it appears that the study of captains in the slave trade has evolved to appreciate the captains as individuals who were affected by the slave trade and in turn began to affect the slave trade themselves rather than individuals who only existed within a larger narrative.

Both the articles by Behrendt and Rottenberg were affected by the information or lack thereof available to them, and both appreciate the large role that captains played in the slave trade. While their approaches to history vary, their interests are actually fairly in line with one another. In this paper, the historical analysis leans more toward that of Behrendt, but in the future it would be interesting to see an analysis that hinged more on the merchants' perspective of captains in the slave trade and their side of the letters of instruction to captains. More than that, one may rightfully ask why more historians aren't considering the captains and merchants more fully in their analyses of the slave trade when considering the large role that they played in the Middle Passage.

### Conclusion

Although the slaves came from a variety of backgrounds and each faced an uncertain destiny, they were all impacted by the traders and captains that came to purchase them and remove them from their homes. They travelled under captains that had received strict instructions from the merchants who had sponsored their voyages, and these instructions impacted every aspect of their lives without having ever met those who wrote them. The letters to slave ship captains are rich with information concerning the transatlantic slave trade and those involved. When compared and analyzed, they can provide answers to so many historical questions, and just as importantly raise many questions that still need to be answered. The transatlantic slave trade is



a narrative that will take more than one point of view to fill in, but the letters of instruction are a good place to begin.

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