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The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database: Origins, Development, Content

Dataset Article

Article Authors

David Elits, Emory University and University of British Columbia

Dataset Creators

Stephen D. Behrendt, Victoria University, Wellington, NZ

Daniel B. Domingues da Silva, Rice University

David Elits, Emory University and University of British Columbia

Herbert S. Klein, Stanford University

Paul Lachance, Emory University

Philip Misevich, St. John's University

David Richardson, Hull University, UK

Contributors

Rosanne Adderley, Richard A. Arzill, Joseph Avitable, Manuel Barcia Paz, Maria del Carmen Barcia Zequeira, James G. Basker, José Luis Belmonte Postigo, Franz Binder, Richard Birkett, Ernst van den Boogart, Alex Borucki, Angela J. Campbell, James Campbell, Mariana Pinho Candido, José Capela, Comité de Liaison et d'Application des Sources Historiques (Saint-Barthélemy), John C. Coombs, Katherine Cosby, Jose Curto, Maika Dennis, Marcela Echeverri, Suzan Elits, Jorge Felipe, Roquinaldo Ferreira, Manolo Florentino, Charles Foy, David Geggus, Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, Spencer Gomez, Oscar Grandío Moráquez, Jerome Handler,

Robert Harms, John Harris, Candice Harrison, Henk den Heijer, Nick Hibbert Steele, Jane Hooper, Marial Iglesias Utset, Sean Kelley, Willem Klooster, Ruud Koopman, Nancy Kougeas, Robin Law, Paul Lokken, Janaína Perrayon Lopes, Emma Los, Pedro Machado, Leonardo Marques, Antonio de Almeida Mendes, María de los Ángeles Meriño Fuentes, Greg O'Malley, Cláudia Paixão, Aisnara Perera Diaz, David Pettee, Johannes Postma, Fabrício Prado, James Pritchard, Nicholas Radburn, Vanessa Ramos, Alexandre Vieira Ribeiro, Justin Roberts, Carlos da Silva, Luana Teixeira, Jelmer Vos, Lorena Walsh, Andrea Weindl, Rik van Welie, David Wheat

Description

The www.slavevoyages.org web site (henceforth Slavevoyages) completed thirteen years of successful operation in 2021. Drawing on four decades of archival research on five continents, a revolution in computer processing costs, and the more recent explosive growth of the worldwide web, the site currently offers public access to several databases on slave trading in the Atlantic World. The largest of these—the trans-Atlantic slave trade database (or TSTD)—comprises details of 36,000 slave trading voyages between Africa and the New World. The time span covered is from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century. We think that TSTD contains some information on over 80 percent of the voyages that ever took place and that information is distributed across 258 variables that incorporate time, geography, prices, ship characteristics, and people. The site also offers personal information on 95,000 Africans found on board some of those voyages in a separate database, as well as a UI that permits users to explore our estimates of the overall size and direction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade broken down by each of the 340 years of its existence and over 500 locations around the Atlantic world that were involved in this traffic. The site currently averages 1,500 visitors per day who consult a mean of ten pages per visit. It was one of the first web-based databases to use crowdsourcing to correct existing information and attract new contributions to its core database. This is currently refreshed on an approximately annual basis, but earlier versions are made available to users on a download page. Slavevoyages has become the basic reference tool for anyone studying the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and is used widely by teachers, genealogists, and scientists as well as historians and more specifically, scholars of slavery and the slave trade.

The typical digital humanities website sees its role as giving users access to primary sources and providing the tools to draw on them. The basic model was established at the beginning of the internet era by Ed Ayers's *The Valley of the Shadow* site, which followed the effects of the Civil War on people living in two counties—one in Pennsylvania and one in Virginia. This initiative combined a wealth of new documentary sources (via digitization) with existing scholarship and historical maps to provide opportunities to create new interpretations.¹ Slavevoyages.org has always taken a different tack in a deliberate attempt to increase our catchment audience. The

¹ Edward L. Ayers, *The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War* (1993-2007), Valley.Lib.Virginia.edu.

site contains few documents and very little interpretation. From the outset the basic record comprised a voyage, not a document. The ambitious aim of the site was to assemble and reference all surviving information about every trans-Atlantic slave voyage - whether that info came from a document or a secondary source. If anyone—within the academy or not—needs to know about any voyage in the 350 years of Atlantic slave trading, then our intention has always been that they would find it in our databases. If they cannot find it then we undertake, after appropriate vetting, to add it. In effect, Slavevoyages is a secondary source. It also offers users many options to display and analyze the data that interests them.

Much of the site is built with classrooms and non-academic users in mind. It strives to combine scholarly integrity with features that appeal to a broad audience from young students to professional researchers, from genealogists to geneticists. Users can select data on the basis of any variable or combination of variables and can then analyze and display their selection with a range of tool kits. Some of these are standard options commonly available on the internet, others less so. At the simplest level users can immediately access a summary statistics page that displays eight statistics frequently used in the literature on the slave trade. A second option allows users to create tables, and a third provides access to various data visualization formats including donut, X-Y, and bar graphs. Data selections can also be plotted in a timeline; the site offers various time line options. Two more unusual options are the map toolkit, which enables users to plot data driven path graphics for any combination of ports and regions across the Atlantic world. There is a time-lapse feature that displays the selected voyages as they move across the Atlantic one venture at a time – the complete slave trade can be viewed in just four minutes. Pausing the animation and then hovering over a voyage reveals summary details and gives a link back to the main user interface where users can inspect the full information on the voyage. Every stage in this process – from selecting data through to the construction of maps – can be downloaded in Excel or .csv files.

Scholarly investigation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade has generated a set of records that is unprecedented in the annals of global migrations. The international nature of the slave trade has meant that sources for a single voyage can appear in the archives of several different countries as slave vessels crisscrossed international boundaries. It is thus probable that some information has survived for as much as ninety percent of all the trans-Atlantic slave voyages that ever occurred. Most of what is still unknown lies in the earlier period. Records for the early slave trade to the Spanish Americas are surprisingly good, and the largest lacunae is for the first century of the slave trade to Brazil (from about 1560). The Dutch, French, British, and U.S. slave trades are relatively well served by the sources, partly because these nations entered the business later. When the slave trade was at its peak—between 1700 and 1820—the archives are at their most complete. But uncertainty re-appears in the nineteenth century after Britain and the United States' formal abolished the slave trade. At this point much of the slave trade became illegal and was directed mainly to Cuba and Brazil. Owners and captains went to considerable lengths to hide their involvement in the traffic, flags of convenience became common, and the identity of a vessel could change more than once during the same voyage. British naval reports, records of British and international courts, abundant documentary sources in Brazil and Cuba,

and a newspaper culture that emerged in all circum-Atlantic countries in these last years of the traffic help to offset such subterfuges. Nevertheless, a disproportionate number of the corrections that users submit to the editors are for the sixty years following on from British and U.S. abolition in 1807.

TSTD has gained considerable recognition in the literature in slavery studies and digital humanities. An anonymous referee described the original 1999 CD-ROM version as the largest database on pre-colonial African history that will ever exist. Another commentator compared its impact on slavery studies with the impact that the Hubbell telescope had on astronomy.² It has become increasingly rare to see publications in this field that do not cite the trans-Atlantic slave trade database regardless of whether scholars are preoccupied with quantitative issues. Historians, economists, literary scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, religious studies scholars, and musicologists have all cited TSTD. In the words of a recent paper in the peer-reviewed journal *Rationality and Society*, "Nearly all historical assessments of the trade written after the database's release have used this quantitative data, and its reliability is well established in the literature."³ Scholars with interests in political, cultural, or economic issues increasingly call on the age, gender, and regional patterns of the slave trade revealed by the 2008 website. Both the place names database and the TSTD's voyages data have been absorbed into WorldMap.⁴

Dates of Data Collection

1968-2021

Dataset Languages

English, Spanish, Portuguese

Geographic Coverage

Africa, Europe, North America, South America

Temporal Coverage

1514-1866

Document Types

Official records of ship movements

² Bernard Bailyn, "Considering the Slave Trade: History and Memory," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (Jan. 2001): 245.

³ Andrew Marcum and David B. Skarbek, "The Collective Action Problem of Onboard Slave Revolt," *Rationality and Society* 26 (2014): 236.

⁴ *World Map*, Esri ArcGIS, <https://worldmap.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=c4a5acafe28a479eb60aa245cfc4d7a5>.

Newspapers
Legal documents
Private business documents
Travel accounts
Financial Accounts
Digital Data Repository
Inventory or Probate Record
Runaway Advertisement
Ship Registry, Log, or Manifest
Will and Testament

Sources

TSTD draws on the National Archives of twenty-seven countries in Europe, the Americas, and Africa, as well as numerous city, county, and regional archives and libraries. A full source list can be found at <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about#sources/3/en/>.

Methodology

TSTD contains details of 36,000 voyages and has 258 variables, about forty percent of which are about the people on board the vessel with the remainder on aspects of the vessel itself and its itinerary. The variables are grouped into seven categories: the ship, itinerary, the enslaved people on board, the dates of phases of the voyage, captain and crew, outcome of the venture, and sources. The sources for each voyage are individually listed. No voyage contains values for every variable. The minimum requirements for inclusion are a year, a determination that the voyage was involved in a slave trading venture, a location, and a reliable source. Finally, it is not possible to claim knowledge of every slave voyage that set out, so for the trans-Atlantic slave traffic, at least, a set of interactive estimates is provided that makes allowance for missing voyages. Downloadable files explain the derivation of these estimates. See <https://slavevoyages.org/voyage/downloads#full-versions-of-the-trans-atlantic-slave-trade-database/0/en/>.

From the late 1960s, Herbert S. Klein and other scholars began to collect archival data on slave-trading voyages from unpublished sources and to code them into a machine-readable format. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars created several slave ship datasets, some of which the current authors chose to recode from the primary sources rather than integrate the datasets of those scholars into the present set. By the late 1980s, there were records of approximately 11,000 individual trans-Atlantic voyages in sixteen separate datasets, not all of which were trans-Atlantic, nor, as it turned out, slave voyages. And of course, some sets overlapped others. Several listings of voyages extracted from more than one source had appeared in hard copy form, notably three volumes of voyages from French ports published by Jean Mettas and Serge and Michelle Daget and two volumes of Bristol voyages (expanded to four by 1996) authored by David Richardson.⁵ The basis for each dataset was usually the records of a specific European

⁵ Serge Daget, *Répertoire des Expéditions Négrières Françaises à la Traite Illégale (1814-1850)* (Nantes: Centre de recherche sur l'histoire du monde atlantique, 1988); Jean Mettas, *Répertoire des Expéditions Négrières Françaises au XVIIIe Siècle*, Tome 1, Nantes (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer,

nation or the particular port where slaving voyages originated, with the information available reflecting the nature of the records that had survived rather than the structure of the voyage itself. Scholars of the slave trade spent the first quarter century of the computer era working largely in isolation, each using one source only as well as separate formats.

The idea of creating a single multisource dataset of trans-Atlantic slave voyages emerged from a chance meeting of David Eltis and Stephen Behrendt in the British Public Record Office in 1990 while they were working independently on the early and late British slave trades. At about the same time, David Richardson was taking over detailed multisource work on the large mid-eighteenth-century Liverpool shipping business begun years earlier by Maurice Schofield. All this work, together with the Bristol volumes that Richardson had already published, made it seem feasible to integrate the records for the very large British slave trade for the first time, and beyond that, given the available Dutch, French, and Portuguese data, to collect a single dataset for the trade. Meetings in January, 1991 at the American Historical Association and in 1992 at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University, headed by Professor Henry L. Gates, Jr., resulted in grant proposals to major funding agencies. In July 1993 the project received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities with supplementary support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

By the time the project began, Johannes Postma's Dutch data had become available (subsequently revised in 2003), as had Stephen Behrendt's compilation of the extensive British trade after 1779, and also the large and complex Richardson, Beedham, and Schofield pre-1787 Liverpool Plantation Register dataset, all in machine-readable format. Quantities of smaller sets of published material available only in hard-copy form had been available for some time, and as awareness of the project increased, scholars volunteered unpublished data. Over the next three years, the project undertook three major tasks. The first was standardizing the existing data. Pioneers in the field had collected their data using different definitions of variables, sometimes of apparently similar items of information, as well as a range of organizational formats (for example using ship-based rather than voyage-based data). The final list of fields reflected the route of the voyage from its origins in Europe or the Americas, through its embarkation of captives in Africa, and then its movement to the point of sale in the Americas - and for triangular voyages the return to the voyages' starting point. The second task was collating voyages which appeared in several different sets, converting single-source data sets into multisource equivalents and even checking on the validity of old compilations. The third task, which became increasingly important as the project progressed, was adding new information. About half of the 27,233 voyage records subsequently published on the 1999 CD-ROM in 1999 were new.⁶

Slavevoyages.org is the product of a further great surge of information on the slave trade that has happened since 1999. Latin-American slaving expeditions were seriously under-represented on the CD-ROM and, as a consequence, between 2001 and 2005 a major research initiative was

1978); Tome 2, *Ports Autres que Nantes* (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1984), édité par Serge et Michelle Daget; David Richardson, *Bristol, Africa and the Eighteenth Century Slave Trade to America*, Volume 1, *The Years of Expansion, 1698-1729* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1986); Volume 2, *The Years of Ascendancy, 1730-1745* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1987); Volume 3, *The Years of Decline, 1746-1769* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1991); Volume 4, *The Final Years, 1770-1807* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1997).

⁶ *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

undertaken in Portuguese and Spanish language archives around the Atlantic basins to address this deficiency. Three years of funding for this work (from 2002 to 2005) came from the Arts and Humanities Research Board of the United Kingdom and was administered through the University of Hull with David Richardson and David Eltis as the principal investigators. Manolo Florentino anchored the work in Rio de Janeiro, Roquinaldo Ferreira in Luanda, and Jelmer Vos in Lisbon, and other European archives. The major documentary collections explored in this period were in archives in Luanda, Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Lisbon, Havana, Madrid, Sevilla, Amsterdam, Middelburg, Copenhagen, and London, as well as the extensive eighteenth-century newspaper holdings of the Bodleian and British Libraries. While this was happening scholars unconnected with the project continued to give generously of their time and the archival data that they themselves had collected. Although the range and depth of work completed before the year 2000 was impressive, the size and scope of this post-1999 research effort can be gauged by the fact that no less than sixty percent of the voyages in the TSTD contain information unavailable in 1999. As the core dataset expanded, and called on greater varieties of sources, the problem of double-counting grew ever larger and more complicated. In this period, we reached the point at which almost as many resources had to be devoted to this as to gathering the data in the first place.

Since 2018 the website has assumed a new direction in the form of identifying and adding biographical information on any individual that can be associated with a voyage. This new initiative is called People of the Atlantic Slave Trade (PAST) and will have its own user interfaces, within Slavevoyages.

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: UNC Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.15139/S3/12193>

Linked Data Representation: Enslaved.org [Summary Visualization](#)

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