

# In Search of the Cuban Slave Ship DOS AMIGOS

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The year was 1830. The location was the bustling port of Havana, Cuba. There, aboard a sleek, low, black-hulled brigantine schooner, Captain Juan Ramón Mujica and his crew of 34 officers, men and boys completed final preparations for their departure. They loaded casks of water, firewood, food and supplies for a transatlantic voyage. On or about July 13<sup>th</sup>, they weighed anchor.

The vessel cut a striking profile as the breeze filled her sails as she made way across the harbor to the mouth of the port between the Morro Castle and the Castillo de la Punta, then out to the open sea. With her towering raked masts, long bowsprit, and a boom that extended well past her stern, she was clearly built for speed and was capable of carrying a great press of sail. This was a most beautifully designed ship, but she was built to serve a most ugly purpose, which was only spoken of in knowing hints, coded phrases and convenient



*Schematic drawing of the Spanish brigantine schooner Dos Amigos*



*The Dos Amigos at sea. Drawing by Henry Rusk, from *The History of American Sailing Ships* by Howard I. Chapelle (New York: W.W. Norton. 1934)*



*Stowage of captives aboard a 19th century  
slaving vessel: the Spanish schooner Josefa  
Maracayera*



euphemisms by those who profited quite handsomely from her nefarious business.

Her name was the *Dos Amigos*, at least for this voyage (such was the devious nature of her commerce). Her destination was Africa. Her supplies also included hundreds of pairs of iron shackles, chains and other implements of human restraint. She was a slave ship, fully engaged in a traffic that had finally been declared illegal after more than three and half centuries. It was not known then, but with this voyage she was destined to make her mark on history, on the present, and on the future, notably through an ambitious Replica Project made possible by her surviving design plans. That future may be shaped significantly by assistance from the people of Cuba today, both at home and abroad, in retrieving and reconstructing the story of this important historical vessel.

## *The Background*

Vessels like the *Dos Amigos*, with their very distinctive rakish profiles, were not at

all an uncommon sight in the Port of Havana. They were often said to look, like other ships of their time, “like swallows among pigeons.” These vessels were the legendary Baltimore Clippers of the early 1800s—sharp, fast-sailing two-masted schooners and brigs—which found very brisk markets in both Cuba and Brazil. Those countries had high demands for an incessant supply of unpaid forced labor to fuel their rapidly expanding sugar economies. As a result, they kept the Baltimore shipyards, which were also highly dependent on enslaved labor, busy at a fever pitch.

On sugar plantations, a so-called “prime male slave” (typically aged 15-25 years) was literally worked to death in only nine years, on average, after his arrival. In the harsh calculus of that business, it was simply far more profitable for plantation owners to replace the deceased laborer with a newly arrived one, rather than to raise a new enslaved population through procreation. In 1807, however, just as the demand

for forced labor began increasing dramatically in Cuba and Brazil, two other nations—Great Britain and the United States—passed laws that abolished the centuries-old so-called Atlantic “slave trade”<sup>1</sup> which began even before Columbus discovered the western hemisphere in 1492. However, these laws did not abolish slavery itself in their respective dominions. Their motives in passing these laws were as much practical and economic as moral.

Certainly those laws responded to the moral outrage that found its voice in the Abolition movement of the late 1700s, but there were other interests to be served as well. Slave owners in the United States were frightened to their very core by the success of the Haitian Revolution, which was mainly carried out by African-born laborers who were newly imported onto the island. Great Britain, for its part, felt the sting the sugar competition from Cuba and Brazil was bringing to the planters in its own Caribbean colonies. British officials felt that cutting off the labor supply to those countries could reduce that competition significantly. For this reason, the British government began working diligently to expand abolition by negotiating treaties with other nations. It was just a matter of time, given Great Britain’s predominant wealth and influence at the time, before abolition was implemented by Spain, of which Cuba was an “ever faithful colony,” through a treaty with Britain signed in 1821. The signing of this treaty roughly coincided, as it turned out, with the end of the Napoleonic wars. The end of these wars allowed the British Royal Navy to turn its attention to enforcement of the laws and agreements pertaining to the high seas. As a result, an Anti-Slave Trade Squadron was deployed to the coast of Africa and to the

West Indies. By the treaty provisions, the Squadron was authorized to seize any Spanish slave vessels with captives aboard and to free the surviving captives in the West African colony of Sierra Leone, if the Court there agreed that the ship was taken as a lawful prize.

Predictably, Cuban planters had no patience for the laws or treaties made in far-away Spain by people who had no real understanding of the needs of the island. As a result, the planters were determined to circumvent all restrictions by any means necessary. The law of supply and demand would trump all other laws, whatever the risks. Those risks were high—including diseases, revolts, capture, piratical attacks, and natural disasters—but, for that very reason, so were the profits. Thus was established a ready market for fast vessels, like the *Dos Amigos*, which were built specifically for the illegal but extremely profitable business of eluding British patrols with highly valued human cargo.

These small, swift vessels could be easily hidden among the secluded islets, creeks and bayous along the coast of Africa where the clandestine traffic of human beings flourished. They took to the sea with great speed, usually outrunning rather than outfighting (in the interest of profit) the slower British frigates that pursued them. However, whatever advantages these vessels gained in speed, they lost in heightened mortality rates amongst the captives, often around 20 per cent. These specially designed 19<sup>th</sup> century vessels were quite different from their “legal” counterparts of previous centuries, which were usually ordinary merchant vessels, modified on the coast of Africa for the trans-Atlantic crossing with their human cargo, and then modified again for their “homeward passage” laden



Havana, her sail was spotted at the early morning hour off the coast off Cameroon by the British pursuit vessel, H.M. Brig *Black Joke*, a notoriously fast Baltimore-built former slaver from Brazil. Equally aware that his ship had been spotted, Captain Mujica attempted to make a fast retreat up the Cameroons River, but the winds were very light, and the chase was painstakingly slow.<sup>2</sup> The crew of the *Black Joke*, in pursuit, resorted to sweeps (large oars) to move up the river, while the captain sent her smaller boats ahead, “manned and armed,” according to the ship’s Master’s Log. It was not until later the next day, a full twenty-nine and a half hours later, that the chase ended “off King Bell’s Town”, as the trading post of one of the more famous Cameroonian middlemen traders, called local “kings,” was known.

The capture was an unusual one. Firstly, Cameroon had long since ceased to be a location of primary interest to slaving captains, who generally preferred the more notorious and profitable ports to the west, in modern-day Benin and Nigeria. The 567 Africans aboard the *Dos Amigos* (who may have come from elsewhere) were somehow hastily landed ashore, as Captain Mujica tried desperately to remove all evidence of his trafficking activity. By the stipulations of the Treaty between Britain and Spain, a ship with no captives aboard could not be seized, but a clause had been added to the Treaty for precisely the circumstance, in which a ship might be empty but the Africans who had been aboard were seen by British eyewitnesses. The crew of the *Black Joke* boarded the *Dos Amigos* “after a light resistance.” The vessel was taken as a captured prize to Sierra Leone, where the Court of Mixed Commission condemned

her at trial as an illegal slaver and ordered the vessel to be sold at auction.

Many other captured vessels which met this same fate in court ended up being sold very cheaply right back into the slave trade under different, and sometimes even to the same owners. A few of these fast vessels found new, nobler lives as Mediterranean fruit transporters, where speed was important. And a significant number, as if star-crossed at birth to serve some evil purpose on the seas, became opium clippers in Asia. The excellently designed *Dos Amigos*, however, was promptly purchased by the Commodore of the British Anti-Slave Trade Squadron, Jonathan Hayes. She was converted to a pursuit vessel under the new name *Fair Rosamond* to capture other slavers. She joined and eventually replaced her own captor, the *Black Joke*, in establishing an impressive record of captures and liberating many hundreds of captives in Sierra Leone. Yet, it should be pointed out that far more slave ships escaped than were captured, and many of those captured were released on legal technicalities even with their captives aboard. The *Fair Rosamond* also was deployed for a time in the Royal Navy’s North American and West Indies (NAWI) station. She patrolled the waters around Cuba and once visited Antigua for repairs before she was finally worn out in 1843 and was ordered by the British Admiralty to be “taken to pieces” in Sierra Leone, thus ending her story, or almost...

### *The Dos Amigos Today, and Tomorrow: The Replica Project*

As it turned out, the capture of the *Dos Amigos* was a triple victory with an added bonus: a) a particularly effective slave vessel

was removed from the barbaric trafficking in human lives; b) the Royal Navy acquired a formidable weapon in its effort to suppress the trade; and c) 567 human beings were spared the horrors and deaths they would have faced crossing the ocean to Cuba or even the voyage to Sierra Leone, which would have been equally as long, had they remained aboard. The bonus was that not only were the *Dos Amigos*' official documents which provided the names of her captain and crew captured and preserved, thus providing valuable historical records of the voyage, but also, in the process of her conversion from slaver to slaver-catcher, she was taken to England and carefully measured and surveyed. That effort produced a particularly rare and precious set of additional documents: virtually the only set of complete design plans of an actual slave ship—out of all the thousands of ships—that engaged in this nefarious “trade” for more than four centuries before it finally ended.

The plans were first published by eminent maritime historian Howard I. Chappelle<sup>3</sup>, and they serve us today as the valuable basis for constructing an historically accurate Replica, which will operate as an international traveling museum, educational resource center and Ancestral memorial shrine, capable of sailing from port to port, telling a story that must be told. As interest in the subject grows, the rare plans also have helped make the *Dos Amigos* one of the best known and most documented of all slave ships in recent years. The ship is featured in numerous publications, has inspired several models, and is to be prominently featured in the National Slavery Museum being planned for Fredericksburg, Virginia.

This ship is all the more historically significant because she belonged to the era

of the specially designed slaving vessel and her biography represents a case study of the illegal slave trade era on both sides of the law. This traveling museum, which is a full-scale, three-dimensional, hands-on experience, will present the story of the Middle Passage, as the forced Atlantic crossing was known, in perhaps the only way that the unspeakable can be spoken. This story is so far beyond the power of words or images alone to tell, but the life-size Replica can reach audiences in many different locations regardless of language differences or even their degree of literacy.

### *Humanizing the Story: The Need for Information from Cuba*

Much of the *Dos Amigos*' latter life as the Royal Navy pursuit vessel *Fair Rosamond* is fairly well documented in British archival records, offering many specific insights into the suppression effort and the conditions aboard captured slavers. On the other hand, the story of her earlier years as the *Dos Amigos* remain very much a mystery that we hope people of Cuba can help to solve. Thanks to the Spanish documents aboard the ship at the time of her capture and are in British archives, we now have some limited information about her captain and crew and the date of departure from Havana. However, we do not know, at this point, if the *Dos Amigos* had made other slaving voyages before 1830 (possibly under a different name), how many of these voyages there may have been, or the name of her owner(s) or others involved. We do not know which destinations she visited in Africa or how many African survivors she may have clandestinely delivered to Cuban markets. Yet another set of questions is

raised as to exactly how her ownership came to be transferred from American (beginning in the Baltimore shipyards) to Spanish in the first place.

Completing this research is further complicated by the general lack of available records, and the deliberate falsifications of records that do exist. This was typical of an illegal activity such as this one. Aside from such intentional factors, there are the “normal” losses that occur due to carelessness, accidents, oversights, and natural phenomena. For example, a fire at the American embassy in Havana destroyed many valuable records, including many that might have pertained to the fraudulent use of the American flag by Spanish slavers to evade British inspections. Another complication is the fact that not only did illegal slavers often carry multiple flags and sets of papers with different ship names, and several ships often used the same name. For example, *Dos Amigos* or “Two Friends” or its equivalent in other languages, was a fairly common name for ships at the time. It suggests ownership by two partners, but this need not be the case.

Researchers who engaged in this type of “detective work” must rely on such objective data as ship accurate descriptions, dimensions and tonnage; names of owners and captains; dates, etc.(when these can be found), in order to confirm the identity of a given ship. In recent years, the task of researchers has been greatly helped by resources like the Internet and by the greatly increased worldwide interest in learning more about this chapter of human history, especially from the African World perspective which has been undisclosed for far too long. An especially encouraging development has been the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) International Slave Route Project, which urges every nation touched by the “slave trade” to conserve every artifact and memory of it, including oral traditions, so that the stories are never “lost, forgotten or obfuscated.” While the Slave Route Project has been specifically instrumental in assisting Cuba with its conservation of archival records, the mention of oral traditions deserves special attention here.

Perhaps even more important than the official records of ships like the *Dos Amigos* is the African side of the story. This side has rarely been recorded in print but has often been best preserved in memories passed from generation to generation. Because Cuba, as one of the last nations to end the Atlantic “slave trade,” was also one of the last locations in the New World to receive African captives directly, it is possibly a more likely place to find such memories, as well as important African cultural and linguistic retentions. The African side of the story is not only important to know because it has been so often neglected from our general knowledge, but also because it is the real story of the Middle Passage, as the forced Atlantic crossing was called. Far more significant than the unpunished crimes, violence, sufferings and deaths that were perpetrated by this brutal traffic in human lives was the indomitability of the human spirit, the strength and ability of those who endured the horrors of the slave ships to resist and to affirm their humanity even against the most overwhelming odds.

The African World perspective on this chapter of history is not merely a fresh look at previously hidden facts through another, more revealing lens. It is also a reconnection with a traditional knowledge system which is beneficial to us all. Although the

perpetrators of slavery regularly sought to justify their position by denying that Africa had any scientific or philosophical system whatsoever that was worthy of serious consideration, we now know better, of course. Traditional African wisdom reminds us, for example, that there is only one universe of all things, and nothing ever leaves it. All of our departed Ancestors and future generations are alive in us today, and therefore we must be guided by our past and be responsible toward our future. In a similar way, we are also reminded that we are all products of our shared history. Thus, we, in the modern world, are all products of the Middle Passage and its continuing aftermath. Furthermore, we are also reminded that land and history are inseparable. We are made aware of the land where we are holding this conversation, whose trees provide the paper upon which this article is printed and the wood for the ships that transported us. In this way we are also reconnected to the Native people of these lands, whose near extermination (Cuba is a particular example) was the prelude to the Middle Passage, and to the wisdom and current struggles of their surviving descendants.

Equally important, as the late African scholar Ibrahima Baba Kaké urged even up to the time of his death, is that the knowledge of history, and of the Middle Passage in particular, is too important not to be popularized. It belongs to everyone. It must not be reserved only for a few scholars in polite academic gatherings, for arcane books and treatises, or for museums and institutions with only limited public access. This popularization is indeed very much the purpose of the *Dos Amigos/Fair Rosamond* Slave Ship Replica Project.

The goal of all of this research is to gather all sides of the story in all of the

locations known to be part of the *Dos Amigos/Fair Rosamond* story. This story will impart a real life to the Ship Replica, and it will create an actual case study of the illegal slave trade operation and to make it understandable as a human experience. Unlike general commentaries and diagrams showing nameless silhouettes of African captives or the abstract architectural lines and dimensions of a ship, this case study brings about an understanding in real, individual human terms. At the same time, the living story of this single ship will connect us to the more than four whole centuries of history in which the Middle Passage shaped the world.

## Conclusion

The so-called “slave trade” literally changed the world in the nearly half millennium during which it bloodied the Atlantic Ocean. A constant supply of captive forced laborers was deemed absolutely essential to the making of the Americas (with Cuba being the last country to abolish the “trade”). This genocidal traffic in human beings had an even more profound, opposite effect on Africa, contributing greatly to its depopulation and subsequent continuing underdevelopment. The Triangular Trade route<sup>4</sup> was the most profitable of all and, as historian Eric Williams<sup>5</sup> famously demonstrated, was a major factor in making the industrial revolution possible, ultimately producing the geopolitical distribution of material wealth, military power and diplomatic influence that we see in the world today. Moreover, the Middle Passage was the common denominator that unified all nations of the Americas, regardless of language, cultural or geographic differences. The horrifying human drama which took

place aboard the tiny wooden islands at sea during the tens of thousands of voyages for more than four centuries continues to haunt us today, and the unhealed wounds continue to fester. We are a single human family. Our similarities far outweigh our apparent ethnic, cultural or political divisions. We are all products of a world that the Middle Passage made, and its lingering consequences have only made our common human heritage more unified.

The providentially surviving design plans and archival records of the Baltimore-built, Cuban-owned brigantine schooner called the *Dos Amigos*, which later became the British *Fair Rosamond*, provide us with a precious opportunity to understand the realities of the Atlantic “slave trade” and its attempted suppression in tangible ways that otherwise could never be possible, through the construction of a replica which will serve as a museum, educational resource and memorial shrine. Through this knowledge of yet another human holocaust, but more importantly, of human spirit’s indomitable will to be free, we ourselves are strengthened, and we pass on to future generations a more enlightened understanding of our place in history. The island and the people of Cuba (at home and abroad) hold vital keys to the empowerment of this process, and will long be remembered for their invaluable contributions.

#### NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. “Slave trade” is placed in quotation marks because it is a misnomer. This was commerce in human beings, not “slaves,” which is an artificial, wishful concept of people without human status or rights. Furthermore, as the late scholar Walter Rodney has pointed out, such a practice of murderous raids, abuse and violations in order to provide captives for sale can hardly be called legitimate “trade.”

2. Mujica is also spelled as Mojica or Muxica in various archival records. The Cameroons River is known today as the Duala Estuary.

3. Chappelle, Howard I. (1935). *History of American Sailing Ships*. New York: W.W. Norton.

4. There were many triangular trading patterns which made voyages more profitable, but the most profitable, which became known as The Triangular Trade, took ships from their home ports in Europe or North America with cheap trading goods to Africa, then from Africa with human captives to the Americas, and then back to their home ports with the products of enslaved labor (sugar, cotton, coffee, tobacco, indigo, etc.) Ships departed their home ports on the “outward passage” and returned on the “homeward passage.” In the Triangular Trade route, the second leg of the voyage, from Africa to the Americas, was called the “middle passage.”

5. Williams, Eric (1944). *Capitalism & Slavery*. London and New York: Oxford University Press. 1944