

200th Anniversary of the British Act of Abolition

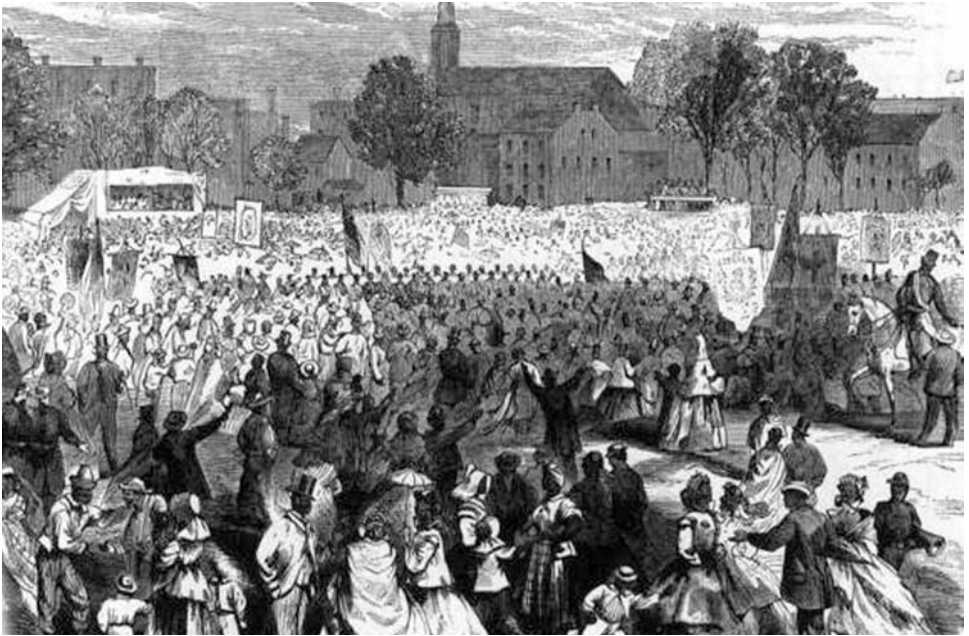
200TH Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade: A Time for Reflection

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March 25, 2007, marked the 200th anniversary of a momentous date in human history, the legal abolition on that date, in 1807, of the highly profitable traffic in captured African human beings that had become known as the Atlantic “slave trade” by Great Britain. So significant was this development in human history that no less a body than the United Nations’ General Assembly passed a resolution calling upon the nations of the world to recognize this date as an occasion for remembrance and reflection, a day to reflect upon what this represents. This is no small matter coming from the same body that established the annual remembrance of the March 21, 1960, Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa (in which sixty-nine African demonstrators against apartheid were killed and hundreds more injured) as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which is still observed. And, indeed, there is much on which to reflect on this anniversary,

which, on its surface commemorates a very positive step forward in human history but whose actual results were much more complex and diversified.

Predictably, the positive aspects were played up with much hoopla in Britain, which could boast of its leadership role in bringing an end to this ignominious chapter of history, hosting special programs and events throughout the year. As but one example, the release of the film “Amazing Grace” (the title of the hymn composed by John Newton, the notorious slave ship captain who famously repented and joined the ministry) that acquainted viewers with the noble struggle that was waged by William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and others in the British Parliament to get the Anti-Slave Trade Bill to finally pass into law after decades of effort and rancorous debate. As worthy as such stories are, it is equally important to note that Britain was not the first nation to abolish the slave trade



(Denmark did so in 1803), nor the only one to do so in 1807 (the United States passed its law banning any further importation of Africans into the nation even earlier, on March 2, to take effect the following year).

So what makes this date of the British Abolition so important? Two factors enter into this question. On the one hand, unlike Denmark, whose small colonial holdings were limited to the Virgin Islands, Britain was a major imperial power, with a large and strong enough Royal Navy to enforce (or at least attempt enforcement of) the prohibition on the high seas. This same power gave Britain the political and diplomatic clout to negotiate treaties with other nations in order to expand the ban on the slave trade into their own respective dominions and ships. On the other hand, Great Britain's position of preeminence was based in large part on the fact that she herself had been the country most heavily involved in the so-called "slave trade" in the previous century, when the traffic in captive human beings reached its peak.

As early as 1713, Britain had won the coveted "asiento," a monopoly contract to provide all of the Spanish overseas colonies with slave labor (144,000 people at the rate of 4,800 per year) for 30 years. By the second half of the century, British ships dominated this most lucrative of trade routes, greatly enriching the empire and cities like Liverpool, Bristol and London. British prohibition of any further participation by its citizens was thus seen as a major reduction of that trade.

A March 18th, 2007, Associated Press (AP) articles provides some insight about what this actually meant to a city like Liverpool, which was virtually built on the profits of the triangular trade (cheap goods sent to Africa and traded for captives; captives sold in the New World in exchange for the products of slave labor: sugar, tobacco, cotton, indigo, dyewood, coffee, etc.; and these products brought back home to be sold in England, with a very handsome profit at all three points of the triangle).

By the late 1700s Liverpool ships alone, including the Brooks, which gave us the most famous diagram of any slave ship, accounted for eighty percent of the British slave trade and forty percent of the total for Europe. Liverpool's Customs House was decorated, as Dr. Eric Williams reports in his classic study *Capitalism and Slavery*, with "carved Negro heads," and the frieze of the city's "ornate Town Hall" contains the face of an African woman, as the AP article reports. In fact, the article reminds us that the hit song "Penny Lane" by the Beatles, who were from Liverpool, refers to a street in that city that was named for one of the more notorious slave traders and investors. It was Capt. James Penny who once demonstrated that the only way for a slaving voyage to be profitable was for ships to be overcrowded to the point where a percentage of deaths were certain and inevitable. A more humane method of carrying fewer captives, who might all survive, would only guarantee a loss of money for the ship owners, Penny stated. That harsh rule of profit and loss made the "Middle Passage" the reality that it was (he might also have added that an even higher percentage of deaths among the officers and crews of slave ships was also a certainty).

The motives for abolition

The citizens of Britain, particularly in port cities like Liverpool, who outfitted the departing ships with the shackles, chains, cooking pots, and instruments of torture that were standard requirements of slavers, and loaded on the cheap muskets, cloth, beads and other trade items, were well aware of the "slave trade" taking place somewhere between this outgoing voyage and the time of the ships' return, laden with the rich produce of the New World. However, few of those citizens, other than, say, surviving crew mem-

bers, actually witnessed that "Middle Passage," and the unspeakable horrors that were endured by the captives. By the 1780s, as the traffic was reaching its all-time peak, these horrors finally began to find a voice. The famous diagram of the ship Brooks was published, with a graphic commentary by a ship's surgeon who had served aboard a slaver. Educated African survivors like Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) and Ottobah Cugoana published narratives of their experiences, offering, for the first time, an African perspective. Moral outrage swept through society, and government officials like Wilberforce and Clarkson took up the charge to remove this shameful blot from Britain's claim to civilization.

Of course, then as now, it would take more than offended moral sensibilities to bring an end to an enterprise as hugely profitable as slave trading and slavery. The lowliest of Englishmen might typically return from a stint as a plantation owner or overseer in the West Indian "sugar islands" with enough wealth to thumb his nose at royalty. However, around this peak period of the slave trade, the British planters' once-secure position was facing an increasing threat of competition from the rapidly growing sugar economies of Cuba and Brazil, and the handwriting was on the wall. In this circumstance, it was well realized that what the abolition of British participation in slave trade would really accomplish would be a significant cut in the vital labor supply to these competitors. The British planters, whose days of wealth were limited anyway, would come out well, being handsomely compensated for their "losses," at the taxpayers' expense. But even with such cynical motives, at least a step toward social justice had been made (it should be remembered that in 1807 the Transatlantic slave trade was already more

than three centuries old and considered just a “normal” business).

In the United States, for its part, where, in striking contrast to Britain, the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade has barely raised a ripple of attention, a different set of motives were involved, with morality playing even less of a role. Some histories point out that this abolition came about simply as a consequence of the compromise deal that had been made two decades earlier. When the Constitution was ratified in 1787, the nation’s most rankling debate—over whether a nation dedicated to individual freedom should tolerate slavery—was still not resolved, and there was no end of it in sight. The compromise was to allow the importation of African captives to continue for another twenty years only. At the end of that period, in 1807, no real moral enlightenment was reached. If anything, the invention of the cotton gin in the 1790s (making cotton cultivation suddenly more profitable and launching an economy based on this crop in the American South similar to Cuba and Brazil’s sugar enterprises) and the recent Louisiana Purchase in 1803, doubling the size of the United States and opening up a vast new territory, in some Americans’ eyes, to expanded plantation slavery, only serving to become more powerful motives to retain the legal importation of Africans.

However, another force, unforeseen and undeniably powerful, had entered the picture. The very cause of Napoleon’s desperate sale of the Louisiana territory to the United States guaranteed the success of the Haitian Revolution, which sent shock waves throughout the Americas, proving that slavery was not invincible and that enslaved Black people could be victorious, diplomatically as well as militarily. The American South and its representative Congressmen were very keenly

aware that the revolt in Haiti, which could spread to other locations, was carried out primarily by African-born Blacks who had been imported to the island, rather than born there. These lawmakers were quick to learn the lesson that was to be drawn from that fact, and so a prohibition of any further importations of people directly from Africa came quite naturally.

The impact of the abolition

To assess what the abolition of the slave trade by Great Britain and the United States actually accomplished 200 years ago, and how this history affects us today, we would have to begin with two sobering notes. The first, of course, is that the Abolition of the forced importation of Africans was a long way (26 years, to be exact, in the British dominions, over 50 years in the United States, and not until the 1880s in Cuba and Brazil) from the Abolition of slavery itself (during every single day of those long delays, literally thousands of human beings began new lives in slavery and thousands of lives ended without ever having tasted freedom). The second sobering note is that abolition did not end the slave trade. Indeed, it actually launched a new, illegal phase of this strange commerce that was even more profitable due to the risks of capture, and far more lethal for the Africans who were drawn into the vortex of the traffic, who suffered more on the illegal ships and died in greater proportion to their numbers.

This was because smaller and faster ships, designed specifically for this “trade,” had entered the drama. Although their relative speed conceivably lessened the duration of the voyages (depending on weather), the conditions aboard were far worse than anything experienced in previous centuries. Moreover, the trade increasingly became the

domain of outlaws, pirates and thugs (financed and insured by “respectable” ship owners and investors, of course), and piratical attacks on slave ships, attempting to steal one another’s “cargoes,” became another routine danger and misery to be faced by the Africans crowded aboard these vessels. Additional hazards came from the hasty clandestine loading and unloading operations, usually at night, often through shark-infested waters, and from the numerous cases of slaving captains who, to avoid being captured, simply “destroyed the evidence” by dumping entire shiploads of chained Africans into the ocean.

Some of the consequences of this slave trade Abolition were less direct and less immediately visible or recognized. In England, the Liverpool ship suppliers, Birmingham iron foundries, Manchester textile mills, etc., all had to adjust to the greatly reduced demand for their wares. Across the ocean, however, the shipyards of Baltimore, Md., would, in the decades following Abolition, thrive as never before. Their famous “clipper” designs produced fast-sailing schooners and brigs that could outrun British patrols, and were in extremely high demand in both Brazil and the Spanish colony of Cuba. The respective governments of these two countries would both sign treaties with the British to cooperate in the suppression of the slave trade, but their citizens were not going to be denied the endless supply of forced labor that they saw as the very lifeline of their economy. As a result, an elaborate system of corruption, smuggling, subterfuge and anti-legal cultural attitudes emerged and festered in both places, rewarded by fabulous wealth.

On the African side of the equation, another kind of unexpected consequence ensued in these countries. Whereas in previ-

ous centuries the old merchant slavers were attentive to pick up African captives from numerous locations along the coast, so that their mixed languages and cultures would frustrate their ability to organize and plot revolts, the illegal slavers of the nineteenth century needed to capture their “cargoes” as quickly as possible and therefore more frequently boarded people from the same location, and visited the same locations more frequently. As a result, a large concentration of Yoruba Africans from southwestern Nigeria came to dominate the enslaved population, keeping much of their language and cultural traditions intact, and passing these on to other Blacks. The power of Santería in Cuba and Candomblé in Brazil today is very much the result of these historical developments, even though, over the centuries, Kongo people from Angola had been the most largely represented population among imported Africans.

The cotton economy of the American South faced much the same labor crisis as Cuba and Brazil (although not as intensely; the particularly brutal regime of sugar plantations literally worked a “prime male slave” to death in nine years’ time, on average). With the abolition of importation, the Southern planters had to meet their needs for replacement laborers either by smuggling in workers or, more commonly, by natural procreation amongst the enslaved population—and they actually resorted to both. Smuggling followed the same system as in the other countries, with clandestine nighttime landings of Africans ashore, who were quickly marched to inland camps where they were detained for a few weeks to be “fattened” and taught a few words of English, so it might be pretended that they had been in the country all along. Ironically, one of the preferred smuggling routes was the Florida peninsula,

then Spanish territory, the very same region that had long been “Freedom Land” to Native and Black Seminole Maroons escaping slavery and European encroachment in the states to the north, or those taking the “Underground Railroad” to freedom in the Bahamas and elsewhere. The smuggled Africans would be brought from hidden camps in Florida into Georgia and Alabama and sold as pretended “recaptured runaways.”

The South’s main source of newly enslaved labor, however, was procreation, and it is here that Abolition of the slave trade produced yet another level of indignities for enslaved Black women. Now, as never before, their value as “breeders” became very much emphasized, and this value was much ballyhooed on the auction block. As if to substantiate these claims as to their breeding value, enslaved women were subjected to all manner of medical “inspections” by doctors who could officially attest that they were well equipped to produce numerous offspring. Such claims have to be seen in the light of the behaviors that their “owners” would enforce in order to ensure that these “breeders” delivered on what was promised. “Unnatural procreation” may be a more apt term.

Finally, as in Cuba and Brazil, the American South also produced its own intact African cultural legacy. In one of the rare instances of Africans being systematically imported from a specific part of Africa to a specific part of the New World, the Mendi and Temne peoples of Sierra Leone, most notably the Gola and Kissi subgroups, were brought to the low-lying coastal Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia because of their highly developed expertise in rice cultivation. As the ban on further importation of Africans into the South was enforced, the descendants of these Sierra Leonian peoples, living in relative isolation, through procre-

ation, became a sizeable population, whose language and culture, now known as Gullah and Geechee, is virtually unchanged from the “Krio” culture of their African homeland.

Abolition 200 years later

The 200th Anniversary of the British and American abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in their respective nations is a time for us to reflect upon our collective history, and on who we are as a result of it. It is a reminder of how history is made, and of how, although greed, ignorance and fear may always seem to carry the day, there are also voices of intelligence, strength and courage that will not be stilled. The anniversary is a reminder of those who denounced the immorality and hypocrisy of the slave trade and slavery, with genuine passion and conviction, regardless of the cost to themselves, and who never relented until some success was won. The Abolition Acts of 1807 were far from perfect documents, either in their intent or in their results, but they were monumental leaps forward in the evolution of modern human consciousness in recognizing a moral wrong as such. We are also reminded that, for all of their horrors and torments, neither the so-called “slave trade” nor slavery itself could fully deny a people who came from a place of strength and wisdom their cultural heritage. Fundamental African community values, spirituality and respect have survived as the bedrock on which the nations of the New World have been, and continue to be, built.

In traditional African cultures the recurrent rhythm of anniversaries is always observed with the reverence and importance it deserves. Anniversaries connect us with our past and future, with our ancestors and our generations yet unborn. The recurrence of cosmic alignments that come with each calen-

dar date reconnects us to all the specific events that have occurred before with the same alignments. This traditional science invites us to live and feel what our ancestors lived and felt 200 years ago, and to appreciate better where we stand today because of their struggles (all of America has African ancestors, whether biologically or culturally). Our responses and actions will open the way for our future generations' appreciation of this date, and make clear is that the struggles continue.

The British may justifiably celebrate the righteousness of the cause embraced by some of their past heroes with films like "Amazing Grace." Yet, in such depictions, the story is all about European men. The nameless, unseen Africans are merely invisible, faraway pawns in these Englishmen's parliamentary and diplomatic games. There is no recognition that it was only the constant resistance and indomitability of the African captives aboard the slave ships that served notice to the world that this was indeed a barbaric, unnatural, perverted and immoral practice, and not one, as the slavers liked to claim, that was somehow ordained by God for the "civilization of savages." Small wonder that the solemn and self-congratulatory anniversary program in London's Westminster Abbey was appropriately disrupted by an African gentle-

man who even "startled" the queen with his bold demand that the truth be told.

Most of America, for its part, is still conflicted and confused by the matter. Good-hearted people find it hard to reconcile their forebears' participation in racism and oppression, or that the ill-gotten wealth that they still enjoy to a far greater degree than the average African American is linked to centuries of injustice. Many immigrants to this nation prefer not to wonder if their courageous move to seek a better life in a new land might have been a devil's bargain to share the spoils of an iniquitous history. These lingering issues are for our generation to address.

Africa's own descendants too will need to be well grounded in our understanding of history, lest we fall for the same kinds of trickery and foolhardiness that got our Ancestors put on board the ships in the first place. We therefore revive the remembrance of our anniversaries and what they have to teach, such as Sharpeville (and the Ponce Massacre, in Puerto Rico, on the same date, in 1937), and such as this 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the slave trade, which will be observed all year. As a result of our diligence in applying our inherited wisdom, our entire race – the human race – will only benefit greatly.