

Merchant Networks in the British Intercolonial Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century

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In November 1765, port officials in Kingston, Jamaica, recorded three vessels departing for other colonies with shipments of slaves. On November 1, Captain William Connor sailed the sloop *Eagle* for North Carolina, carrying four “Negroes” amidst a cargo of rum. On the nineteenth, the ship *Molly* departed for Cartagena on the Spanish American mainland with two hundred slaves, rum, and “provisions.” Four days later, the schooner *Vulcan* cleared for Charleston, South Carolina, loaded with five slaves, rum, mahogany, soap, and candles.¹

For Kingston, the busiest slave trading entrepôt in British America, it was a rather slow month for the export trade in slaves, but the three voyages represent three key aspects of the British inter-colonial slave trade in the eighteenth century. In transshipping slaves from Jamaica to North Carolina, the *Eagle* ventured from a bustling hub of the slave trade that received thousands of slaves annually from Africa to a backwater of the British Atlantic. It was a market-scale distribution. North Carolina rarely received shipments of slaves directly from Africa, nor of trade goods directly from Europe. The colony’s importers relied on an intercolonial network of American merchants to link

¹ Naval Office Shipping Lists for Jamaica, Kew, England, Public Record Office, CO 142/18, ff.136-137.

them to transatlantic networks. The *Eagle* was one of many small inter-colonial vessels that provided colonial backwaters with their indirect connections to the Atlantic World.

While the *Vulcan*'s voyage from Jamaica to South Carolina followed a similar route to that of the *Eagle*, it represented a different trading dynamic because Charleston was the busiest port of slave importation on the British American mainland. Although still importing far fewer slaves than Kingston, Charleston was not dependent on other entrepôts for supplies of slaves. The merchants who transshipped slaves from Jamaica to South Carolina competed with traders carrying slaves directly from Africa. This contest put merchants in the inter-colonial trade at a disadvantage in the price they paid for slaves, but they compensated with a responsiveness to market conditions garnered by their intercolonial mercantile correspondence, or they accepted lower profit margins because trading slaves fit nicely with other aspects of their mercantile ambitions. Merchants trading slaves from one British colony to another typically incorporated their slave trading with broader commercial activities, and they speculated in slaves opportunistically when market conditions allowed for profitable exchange.

More important, in terms of the number of Africans moved, were voyages like that of the *Molly*, carrying slaves to foreign colonies. Over the course of the eighteenth century British traders shipped more African captives across the Atlantic to the Americas than the merchants of any other empire. British slave traders supplied Britain's own expanding plantation colonies with labor, but also supplied slaves to foreign colonies—especially the Spanish. Foreign trade in the Caribbean was fraught with many risks, as imperial rivalries led to trade restrictions, privateering, and bureaucratic obstacles. To circumvent such problems, merchants often conducted the slave trade across imperial

boundaries as a transshipment trade. British transatlantic traders delivered slaves to British colonies, and colonial merchants acquired these recently arrived Africans and exploited the latest information from and personal connections in foreign territory to deliver the captives.

The distribution of slaves in North America after the infamous Middle Passage or Atlantic crossing is an understudied aspect of the Atlantic slave trade, which required the extension of the slave trade's merchant networks beyond the major ports of transatlantic importation (such as Bridgetown, Kingston, and Charleston in the British case) to subsidiary ports, inland regions, and foreign territories. On the one hand, study of this intercolonial or distribution phase of the slave trade shows that the merchant networks of the slave trade were more extensive within the Americas than historians have typically described. On the other hand, detailed study of how the intercolonial trade operated reveals limits on the reach of the mercantile connections of traders organizing the transatlantic trade from Britain's colonial trading centers of Bristol, Liverpool, and London. The networks of the transatlantic and intercolonial slave trades were overlapping, but distinct. Colonial merchants in the American *entrepôts* held an important (and profitable) position between these two networks, or perhaps more accurately connecting these two networks. Transatlantic traders sold slaves more or less directly to plantation owners living near the major ports of American importation, but for sales of slaves to areas at some remove from the major *entrepôts* the transatlantic traders were wholesalers. Colonial merchants used their intra-American networks to reach these more distant consumers of the human commodity. In some cases both transatlantic traders and remote American buyers were content to leave well-connected colonial

merchants in the entrepôts in their role as middlemen. At other times, however, transatlantic traders and American buyers resented this additional layer in the slave trading network. Their occasional efforts to bypass the colonial middlemen, efforts which often failed, reveal the somewhat bifurcated nature of the British Atlantic slave trading network—a network in which prominent merchants in the American entrepôts of the slave trade served as the link between otherwise separate transatlantic and intercolonial networks.

The key to understanding market-scale distributions, like that of the *Eagle* from Kingston to North Carolina, is recognizing a primary consideration of transatlantic slavers in selling their cargoes—speed. Rapid sale was crucial to the profitability of slaving voyages from Africa because longer trips meant increased payments to ship crews and, perhaps more important, higher slave mortality. Hopping from port to port in search of the highest prices might lead to slightly higher net income for a voyage, but the extra revenue rarely compensated for the higher operating costs associated with the additional months spent at sea. With this in mind, most transatlantic traders—whose average cargo size was well over three hundred slaves in the eighteenth century—sought to maximize the speed of sale by taking their cargo to a port where they expected demand to be high enough to consume the entire shipment. This expectation required not only a region with strong demand for African laborers, but also an economy robust enough to pay for them.²

² The concern with selling all slaves in one port became more pronounced in the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century, port hopping in the search for high prices was more common. On the importance of speed to transatlantic slavers, see Richard Nelson Bean, *The British Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, 1650–1775*, (New York: Arno Press, 1975), p.63; Trevor Burnard and Kenneth Morgan, “The Dynamics of the Slave Market and Slave Purchasing Patterns in Jamaica, 1655–1788,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 58 (2001), pp.205–28, who note the appeal of Jamaica’s large market to transatlantic vessels (p.211); Daniel C. Littlefield, “Charleston and Internal Slave Redistribution,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*

As a result, a relatively small number of major ports tended to dominate slave importation. For instance, of the 376 transatlantic slave deliveries to the Carolinas whose port of disembarkation is known, 367 of them (97.6%) delivered their slaves to Charleston, while just 9 ventured to other ports in North or South Carolina.³

Profitable slave trading to smaller ports was possible, but it had to be undertaken on an appropriately small scale. Transatlantic traders tailored their deliveries according to market size to some degree by sending smaller ships to those parts of Africa and America where they anticipated relatively low levels of supply and demand, and by only using larger ships for regions where they expected higher volume traffic.⁴ Nevertheless, if the demand for slaves was too modest at an American port, transatlantic traders tended to view it as not worth their trouble. Ships in the transatlantic trade tended to specialize in

87 (1986) pp.93–105, also notes the importance to transatlantic traders of selling their whole cargo in one port, and Kenneth Morgan, “Slave Sales in Colonial Charleston,” *English Historical Review* 113 (1998), pp.908–9, asserts that transatlantic traders preferred selling in South Carolina to selling in Virginia because the centralization offered by a major entrepôt saved time and money; David Geggus, “The French Slave Trade: An Overview,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., vol. 58.1 (2001) stresses the importance of both high demand for slaves and of abundant capital for attracting transatlantic traders to the French Caribbean’s principal entrepôts of Cap Français, but he also notes that a quarter of vessels delivering slaves to that port also continued to other ports to disembark more slaves, pp.125–128; Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990), argues that “the vast majority of the Dutch slave ships disembarked their slaves at one harbor,” p.169. Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972) notes the importance of a large economy to sellers choosing a port to sell in, noting that Royal African Company ships often avoided smaller islands in part because they considered the buyers there less likely to pay their debts, p.235. Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1962) also notes the attraction of the Jamaican market for transatlantic traders because of its size, but he also shows that some investors in the trade did instruct ship captains to island-hop in search of the best prices (pp.294–6). On the average sizes of transatlantic cargoes, see Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), pp. 148–9.

³ David Eltis, et. al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999). Another 385 voyages in the database list “South Carolina” as their place of disembarkation without specifying a port and have been left out of this calculation, but the calculation includes voyages where the exact port is unknown if there is enough information to rule out Charleston (e.g., “North Carolina”).

⁴ David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.128.

slaves, which encouraged them to target American markets that imported slaves on a large scale.

Merchants who transshipped slaves from the major Atlantic entrepôts to smaller American markets, on the other hand, were not typically slave trading specialists. They carried small numbers of slaves amidst mixed cargoes, selling the slaves (and other goods) for higher prices in markets with a smaller demand for slaves where buyers had fewer options. Since merchants engaged in such inter-colonial traffic in other goods already paid crews for these voyages, they did not face the problem of adding to their overhead costs by carrying a few slaves to a smaller port; they were going anyway. Slave mortality was still a risk in market-scale slave shipments, but intercolonial merchants—like all buyers from transatlantic traders—had discretionary power to purchase only those slaves who appeared to have survived the Middle Passage in fairly good health. Transatlantic shippers, on the other hand, feared increasing mortality if they kept sick slaves on board while checking prices and arranging sales at multiple ports. Coastal traders could purchase a number of slaves suited to their destination market, so the mortality risk was limited to that one additional voyage.

As a result, especially by the mid to late eighteenth century many owners of transatlantic slaving vessels embraced a role as wholesalers selling not to the ultimate slaveholder, but to bulk purchasers who distributed slaves in the Americas. Some earlier transatlantic traders were less comfortable with this specialized role, giving their ship captains lists of markets to try in the Americas when looking for favorable terms of sale. For instance, Isaac Hobhouse, Noblet Ruddock, and William Baker of Bristol organized a slaving voyage in 1725. They instructed Captain William Barry to proceed from Africa

in their ship *Dispatch* to Antigua, but if favorable terms were not offered there to try Nevis, and then Charleston as a last resort.⁵ Selling agents in the Americas had argued against stopping at multiple American ports for prices, however. They did so partly to garner themselves more business, by encouraging transatlantic traders to ignore other ports, but also because they saw the effects of prolonged voyages on the African captives. The deplorable condition of the migrants evoked little expression of sympathy, but the agents were responsible for their sale, so they wanted the slaves to arrive healthy. Perhaps none expressed this belief more forcefully than the Jamaican traders Tyndall and Assheton, who berated their partners in Bristol in 1729 for the state in which a group of Africans reached them:

The *Aurora* is arrived with 270 Slaves: the worst cargoe of Bonny Slaves have been seen this long time, which You may guess by the ships touching at every Place to Windward.... She was a month from B[arbadoes] hither, which Capt. Davis says was a great measure to Impare the Slaves very much.⁶

Lest the Bristol owners suspect that Tyndall and Assheton simply hoped to monopolize commissions by diverting more business to Jamaica, they continued to emphasize the point in later letters to the Bristol traders. “[We] do assure you, the Owners of the *Aurora* suffer much by touching from Place [to] Place[;] there's not two thirds of her Cargoe now Living.”⁷ In their eyes, the dangers of shipboard mortality during weeks of searching outweighed the potential profits from finding higher prices.

⁵ Isaac Hobhouse, Noblet Ruddock, and William Baker, to the captain of the brig *Dispatch*, Oct. 7, 1725, Bristol Central Library, Jeffries Collection, Vol. XIII, f.3.

⁶ Bristol Central Library, Jeffries Collection, Vol. XIII, f.111.

⁷ Tyndall & Assheton to Isaac Hobhouse, 1 Nov. 1729, Bristol Record Office, Letters to Messrs. Isaac Hobhouse and Onesiphovous Tyndall, merchants of Bristol from their agents in the West Indies, mss. 8029/16e. For earlier warnings about multiple stops, see Bristol Central Library, Jeffries Collection, Vol. XIII, f.91; for the conditional offer of investment, see *ibid.*, f.97.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, transatlantic traders increasingly saw wisdom in the logic of Tyndall and Assheton. Many owners of transatlantic slaving ventures mentioned only a single port where slaves should be sold in their instructions, partly for fear of shipboard mortality, but also to minimize additional costs associated with stops. In 1765, Aaron Lopez of Rhode Island warned the captain of his ship, *Betsey*, of these dangers when instructing him to head directly from Africa to Jamaica. “[W]e would not have you put into any port in the West Indies if it Can be avoided; We have no need of recommending to you that in the persuit of your Voyages, you use the greatest dispatch, as Such a Small Vessel cannot Support any great Expen[ce].”⁸ Even large ships raised concerns about the port costs of multiple stopovers. Writing about early-nineteenth-century trade more generally, historian Richard Pares argues that port costs and duties were too high in the West Indies to allow trading ventures with numerous ports of call to remain profitable.⁹ As such, many transatlantic slave merchants sent vessels directly to a single American port for all sales, or instructed ships to stop only once for information (usually at Barbados—the first island en route from Africa) before proceeding to a final port of sale. Henry Trafford typified this trend when routinely cautioning the captains of his ships that “dispatch is the life of the African Trade.”¹⁰ Trafford valued speed over finding the absolute highest price. As a result, awareness that transshipment traders purchased slaves in a certain American port could make that market

⁸ Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930), v.3, p.211-2. Rhode Island traders often used smaller ships than was typical of the transatlantic slave trade, see Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981).

⁹ Richard Pares, *A West-India Fortune* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950) p. 226.

¹⁰ Trafford reiterated this statement in multiple letters in the 1770s; see Liverpool Record Office, Tuohy papers, Part 4, (380 TUO 4), letters 6 and 7. See also Thomas Leyland to Captain Charles Wilson, Liverpool, 9 Dec 1786, Liverpool Record Office, Letter Book of Thomas Leyland, 387 MD 59, p.199.

more attractive to transatlantic traders. Rather than seeking to cut out the middle man by figuring out where and how American merchants would send the slaves for profitable resale, many transatlantic traders simply trusted that the presence of American distributors as buyers would keep demand stable and prices high.

While this entrepôt-transshipment model suited most transatlantic traders and merchants in the entrepôts just fine, merchants and prospective slave buyers in the ports that received their slaves indirectly often bemoaned their lack of access to direct African shipments. North Carolina, for example, struggled to attract shipments of slaves from any source in the first half of the eighteenth century because it lacked an export commodity that was attractive to merchants engaged in the slave trade. Much of what the colony did export went overland to Virginia. In 1736, former Governor George Burrington complained in a report on that state of North Carolina's ports that the lack of overseas trade from the colony prevented the delivery of slaves on any meaningful scale, despite a demand for African labor in the colony. "It is a great misfortune to the people of North Carolina," Burrington bemoaned, "that they buy and sell at the second hand," in virtually all branches of commerce. This was especially problematic in the slave trade, Burrington continued, because "the planters are obliged to go into Virginia and South Carolina to purchase [slaves] where they pay a Duty on each Negroe, or buy the refuse, distemper'd or refractory Negroes brought into the Country from New England and the Islands, which are Sold at excessive Rates."¹¹ In a market where inter-colonial traders did not compete with transatlantic traders, potential buyers were at a distinct

¹¹ Burrington to the "Commissioners of His Majesty's Customs," 27 July 1736, PRO, CO 5/295, ff.29-35. Burrington noted the role of New England in supplying slaves because merchants from that region controlled the trade between North Carolina and the West Indies until the mid-eighteenth century. See also Donnan, *Documents*, p.236.

disadvantage. Inter-colonial traders could exploit buyers' shortage of options by overcharging North Carolinians for slaves considered undesirable in other markets. Merchants in the entrepôts sold such slaves at discounted prices since other slaves were available, creating an opportunity for those engaged in inter-colonial trade to regions that lacked access to more desirable slaves. As a result, North Carolinians often complained of receiving other colonies' "refuse" slaves.¹²

Some transshipment of slaves deemed undesirable in the major entrepôts occurred within the Chesapeake region as well. Augustus Moore served as an agent on the James River in Virginia for Isaac Hobhouse and Company of Bristol. The James River was the primary entrepôt for the Chesapeake, and in 1723 Hobhouse's, ship *Greyhound* delivered a group of Africans to more in a typical transatlantic shipment. After Moore sold "y'e best" slaves locally, he disposed of the rest "by one bold stroak to a Maryland chapp, to gett yo'r Refuse Negroes off." Maryland received far fewer African shipments than the James River did, so transshipment to such a remote region offered Hobhouse and Co. and Moore a means to unload slaves not desired in the local market and offered the "Maryland chapp" a chance to profit from transshipment.¹³

Given the emphasis on transshipping undesirable slaves to the smaller American markets, it comes as little surprise that merchants and buyers in these secondary American ports chafed at being forced to buy slaves from colonial middlemen at inflated prices. They typically lacked the mercantile connections and economic clout, however,

¹² See also "Captain [Governor George] Burrington's Represent'n of the present State and Condition of North Carolina," 1 January 1733, PRO, CO 5/294, ff.67-70.

¹³ Aug. Moore to Isaac Hobhouse & Co, Virginia, 6 May 1723, Bristol Central Library, Jeffries Collection, Vol. XIII, f.28. For comparison of slave deliveries to the various rivers of the Chesapeake, see Lorena S. Walsh, "The Chesapeake Slave Trade: Regional Patterns, African Origins, and Some Implications," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. 58 (2001): 139-70.

to re-route the transatlantic trade directly to their ports. In 1763, Henry Laurens of Charleston explained the reasoning to Joseph Brown, a merchant in Georgetown, South Carolina. Brown sought to attract a direct shipment from Africa to his port, but Laurens insisted that transatlantic traders would resist

sending a Vessell to your Port without a warrantee both as to the price and remittances; as there never have been an attempt of that Kind made...[and] there is so fine a Markett for slaves in the Center of the province and in the old beaten Track.... [T]he affrican Traders...love to go and allways seek for that Market where there is most money, stirring and where there are Men of Fortune who in Case of a Glutt will take of[f] a Cargo at some rate or other and pay for them.

Laurens explained that transatlantic traders wanted assurance, not just of “better prices than at Charleston,” but also of “better remittances” of payment and of enough demand to sell the whole cargo in one port. If several other vessels sold slaves in Charleston at the same time, Laurens explained, transatlantic traders feared that a shipment to Georgetown would saturate demand there. Even when prices were high at small ports, transatlantic traders feared being “forced to sell for long Credit in order to m[a]intain the prices.”¹⁴ Instead, Laurens agreed to transship five slaves from Charleston to Georgetown. Even then, he preferred to leave the work of retailing the slaves to Brown, paying him a commission for this service since Brown had the personal contacts with planters in the area.¹⁵

Of course Georgetown, South Carolina, was no major destination for the slave trade, but the port’s situation relative to Charleston was mirrored by numerous other secondary or tertiary ports throughout British America. Merchants and planters on the eastern shore of Virginia knew that slaves sold for cheaper prices across the Chesapeake

¹⁴ Henry Laurens to Joseph Brown, 24 December 1763, Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, pp.384-5.

¹⁵ Henry Laurens to Joseph Brown, 15 March 1764, *ibid*, v.4, p.388.

on the James River, just like their counterparts in Honduras knew that the prices for the slaves they received from Jamaica were inflated by the transshipment traders. All such secondary ports would have loved to attract transatlantic traders directly in order to have the pick of their cargoes at wholesale prices, but they were simply too small and underdeveloped financially to attract the large ships coming from Africa.¹⁶

The slave dealings of Laurens in the summer of 1764 highlight the work that merchants in the major American ports of importation put into developing their networks distributing incoming Africans from entrepôts to hinterlands. In the wake of the Seven Years' War, demand for slaves was high throughout South Carolina, and to capitalize on this need, Laurens imported slaves directly from Africa and via transshipment from the Caribbean. Recognizing that Charleston and its vicinity accounted for only part of the colonies' demand, Laurens pursued sales in the hinterland through at least five channels.

First, Laurens courted remote buyers to sales in Charleston through direct correspondence and advertising. He wrote to William Frierson, in the Williamsburgh Township, sending him broadsides for the sale and asking him "to disperse the Advertisements as quick & as generally as you can & I wish it may suit you & many others of my old friends in your Quarters to attend the Sales." He sent a similar invitation (without extra advertisements) to Daniel Heyward in "Indian Land." Apparently these appeals drew results, as Laurens later noted that "people come from all quarters" to buy slaves. Second, for those planters who could not travel to Charleston, Laurens fulfilled requests if they were willing to trust his judgment and integrity. For William Thompson,

¹⁶ For examples of entrepôts transshipping slaves and other imports to the secondary ports in their area see the Naval Office Shipping Lists from the Public Record Office for Jamaica, Barbados, Charleston: CO 142/13-25; CO 33/13-23; T 64/47-49; CO 5/508-510. See also lists for Dominica and Grenada in the late eighteenth century when they also served as entrepôts: CO 76/4-7; BT 6/41; CO 106/1-5.

who lived on Black Mingo Creek, west of Georgetown, Laurens purchased “two Young Negroes, a Male & a Female,” in accord with Thompson’s request. He did not record how he planned to send Thompson the slaves.¹⁷

Third, perhaps encouraged by these sales to far-flung customers, Laurens became a buyer of slaves to send to outlying areas for re-sale to planters who did not travel to the entrepôt. With William Price, a Georgetown merchant, Laurens speculated on a “parcel of Negroes” imported by other transatlantic traders. Price then transshipped these slaves to Georgetown, a smaller port up the coast, for re-sale. Fourth, as a selling agent for slave traders to Charleston, Laurens occasionally sent slaves inland for sale. In August he was offered commissions to sell a group of slaves “which came in most wretched plight” from St. Kitts. Laurens “sold Three Men & three Women ... & one Boy” in Charleston, but explained to their owners that “As to the other eight I could not get them off here at any tolerable rate.” Instead, he continued, “I have sent them a little way in the Country where I think there is a better chance of Selling them than here.” He later reported that “Those 8 Negroes sent into the Country have yielded at least 50 per Cent more than they would here.” Finally, not satisfied to be only a slave merchant, Laurens purchased “Eleven New Negroes” for himself and shipped them up the Ashley River to his own Mepkin Plantation on the schooner *Baker*, under Captain John Gray and a crew of slaves.¹⁸ As Laurens’ activities illustrate, colonial merchants in the slave trade maintained extensive networks of communication within the colonies to make themselves

¹⁷ Laurens to Frierson, 11 June 1764; to Heyward, 11 June 1764; to Thompson, 18 and 19 June 1764; to Joseph Brown, 29 June 1764, *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Volume Four: Sept. 1, 1763-Aug. 31, 1765*, ed. George C. Jr. Rogers (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1974), pp.281, 305, 314-315, 320-321.

¹⁸ Laurens to Paul Trapier, 25 June 1764; to Joseph Brown, 26 June 1764; to Timothy Creamer, 26 June 1764; to Day & Welch, 10 September 1764, 17 December 1764; *ibid.*, pp.316-319, 412-413, 538.

valuable connections to the transatlantic slave traders whose American networks rarely extended beyond the major ports of slave importation.

Merchants in less prominent slave trading ports, whether importing slaves directly from Africa or importing them via transshipment, faced even more pressure to maintain extensive regional networks because demand for slaves in their immediate vicinity could be quite small. For instance, merchants who imported slaves to Pennsylvania typically could not simply advertise and wait for buyers to come to them. With slave labor not so predominant, Pennsylvania merchants feared that demand would not draw enough buyers to port and often took or sent slaves into the countryside in search of buyers. In the 1730s and 1740s, Robert Ellis was the most prolific slave importer in Pennsylvania—mainly via inter-colonial trade. He advertised numerous slave sales in Philadelphia newspapers, but he also distributed slaves throughout the region for sale by his agents. In September 1736, for example, Ellis wrote to a Mr. Shaw, who was either up or down the Delaware River from Philadelphia, to inform him that he had “Sent [him] four Negroes, Two Garls and Two Boys, which I Desire you will Dispose of them if you can, [for] not Less than Twenty Six Pounds Each.” Ellis sold other slaves from the same shipment in Philadelphia, but apparently sought to spread slaves around to avoid glutting the small market.¹⁹ Likewise, in January of 1739, when Ellis managed the sale of two slave shipments, he sent some slaves to Jacob Kollock in Lewes, in what is now Delaware, for sale on commission. Ellis’s partner in Philadelphia, John Ryan, later complained to

¹⁹ Ellis to “Mr. Shaw,” Sept. 18, 1736, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), Am 9251, Robert Ellis letter book, 1736-1748, p.8. The slaves Ellis was selling probably reached Philadelphia via transshipment aboard the sloop *Elizabeth and Lavenia*, which delivered twenty-eight “Negroe Boys and Girls” from Charleston; see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 8/5-12/1736. For more on Ellis, see Darold D. Wax, “Robert Ellis, Philadelphia Merchant and Slave Trader,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 88 (1964): 52-69.

Kollock about the high commission he charged for his “Sales of 16 Negroes.” Lewes was not the only farther destination for slaves from these shipments. To underscore his complaint, Ryan pointed out to Kollock that “there are Others concern’d with us (Mr. Ellis & I) who have been at Vast Pains & Trouble in...Selling ‘em up & down in Severall Parts of the Country...[who] cant pretend to Charge more than 5 P Cent Commission.” Apparently, Philadelphia merchants, on the margins of the transatlantic slave-trading network, worked hard to develop regional networks for slave distribution.²⁰

Not all slave distribution within British America after the Middle Passage followed the market scale pattern. As the volume of Britain’s transatlantic slave trade grew, fewer British American ports remained entirely reliant upon the inter-colonial trade for slaves. More British islands received direct shipments of African laborers in the first half of the eighteenth-century, and several ports on the North American mainland became significant transatlantic importers as well. One might expect the initiation of transatlantic deliveries to an American port to have rendered inter-colonial shipments to that region virtually obsolete, but merchants engaged in inter-colonial trade showed a remarkable willingness in the eighteenth century to compete in the slave trade with merchants supplying slaves directly from Africa. For instance, the two colonies of the British mainland that received the most extensive transshipments from the Caribbean in the first half of the eighteenth century—Virginia and South Carolina—were also the mainland’s

²⁰ John Ryan to Mr. Jacob Kollock, Jan. 25, 1739, Robert Ellis letter book, 1736-1748, pp.170-171. In an earlier example of slaves sent from Philadelphia down to Delaware, in May 1715, Philadelphia merchant Jonathan Dickinson reported to John Lewis of Jamaica about “ye three Negroes ye Sent” to Dickinson for sale, noting that he had sold them to some “Low’r Countey [now Delaware] men at Thirty Pounds P head,” but Dickinson did not make clear whether he traveled to Delaware with the slaves, or whether the “Low’r Countey men” had come to Philadelphia. Library Company of Philadelphia, Jonathan Dickinson letter book, 1715-1721, Yi 2 / 1628: Alcove 4, Shelf 12, ff.21-22.

leaders in slaves imported directly from Africa. Tables 1 and 2 show that transshipments continued to these colonies alongside transatlantic deliveries. This is not to suggest that inter-colonial deliveries were equally significant or that they did not fluctuate from year to year, reacting in part to the volume of the transatlantic trade, but simply to point out that the inter-colonial trade continued in competition with the transatlantic trade.

Understanding why and how the inter-colonial slave trade competed with transatlantic deliveries requires recognizing that merchants increasingly incorporated slave transshipment into their broader inter-colonial trading endeavors. Between 1713 and 1763, of the 279 inter-colonial slave trading voyages between British ports for which the complete cargo of the vessel is known, over 79% carried mixed cargoes of slaves and trade goods. If the trade were undertaken carefully, inter-colonial merchants found it profitable to transship slaves from the largest entrepôts, such as Bridgetown and Kingston, to smaller slave markets that still received some direct shipments from Africa. Transatlantic traders possessed the advantage of buying slaves at cheaper prices on the coast of Africa than inter-colonial merchants could find available in the largest Caribbean entrepôts. Nonetheless, inter-colonial merchants trading between the largest ports of transatlantic importation and less significant ones found incorporating the slave trade into their activities profitable for several reasons, if they possessed a reliable merchant network that allowed them to monitor market-conditions in various American ports.

First, variations in local economies and the transatlantic trade sometimes created price discrepancies between various American markets. Many ports never received enough slaves to satisfy local demand, so periodic shortages in certain markets created price discrepancies. In 1738 an anonymous writer to the *South Carolina Gazette*

Table 1: Estimates of slaves imported to Virginia via the transatlantic and inter-colonial trades, 1711–1750

Year	Slaves imported directly from Africa ^a	Slaves imported from the Caribbean ^b
1711-1715	591	595
1716-1720	6,126	1,623
1721-1725	4,902	675
1726-1730	8,316	311
1731-1735	8,069	724
1736-1740	8,919	639
1741-1745	5,037	755
1746-1750	4,677	1,566

^a Source: David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

^b Source: Gregory E. O'Malley, "Beyond the Middle Passage: Slave Migration from the Caribbean to North America, 1619-1807," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser. 66 (2009), 141.

explained that merchants had delivered thousands of slaves annually to South Carolina over the previous decade due to a “much greater Price [for slaves] here than in any other Part of America.” These high prices attracted transatlantic traders, to be sure, but they also allowed for profitable inter-colonial trade. “I have known many Slaves bought in the Barbadoes, etc. and sent here for sale,” the letter to the *Gazette* continued, “which have been sold with good Profit.”²¹ Transatlantic slave traders did not always find the American market where prices for slaves were highest. Whether this was due to the difficulty of obtaining current information from across the Atlantic, or due to a desire to trade in ports where one had personal connections, or due to an interest in exchanging slaves for the produce of a particular colony is unclear. Regardless, such variance in slave prices presented an opportunity for inter-colonial traders.

Charleston presented such an opportunity in the 1750s and 1760s. The expansion of indigo and rice cultivation in South Carolina pushed up the demand for African labor,

²¹ Anonymous writer to the *South Carolina Gazette*, March 9, 1738, in Donnan, *Documents*, vol. 4, pp.291-295.

Table 2: Estimates of slaves imported to South Carolina via the transatlantic and inter-colonial trades, 1701–1765

Year	Slaves imported directly from Africa ^a	Slaves imported from the Caribbean ^b
1701-1705		625
1706-1710	180	625
1711-1715	517	625
1716-1720	1,316	885
1721-1725	3,311	421
1726-1730	2,907	509
1731-1735	10,155	881
1736-1740	10,396	223
1741-1745	1,089	112
1746-1750	1,843	305
1751–1755	7,014	2,270
1756–1760	14,154	1,279
1761–1765	16,094	2,505

^a Source: David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

^b Source: Gregory E. O'Malley, "Beyond the Middle Passage: Slave Migration from the Caribbean to North America, 1619-1807," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser. 66 (2009), 142.

and colony governor James Glen noted in 1754 that American merchants quickly recognized the opportunity. "As Negroes are sold at higher Prices here than in any part of the King's Dominions," he reported to the Board of Trade, "we have them sent from Barbadoes, the Leeward Islands, Jamaica, Virginia and New York." Glen wrote partly to compliment his own work by showing that "this Province is in a flourishing condition," but import records show that the surge of transshipments was no figment of his self-aggrandizing imagination.²² Throughout the 1740s slave transshipment voyages to Charleston numbered in the single digits annually, with none at all in some years (even after the end of King George's War). With prices high in South Carolina, beginning in

²² James Glen to the Board of Trade, 26 August 1754, in Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, p.313. Demand for slaves may also have been pent up at this time due to slow importation during much of the 1740s thanks to King George's War, but this alone is an unsatisfactory explanation because shipments did accelerated immediately following the war.

the 1750s, transshipment traders increased deliveries alongside their transatlantic counterparts (see table 2).

Inter-colonial traders also exploited their greater ability to control the timing of their voyages and their timely access to market information to deliver slaves at precisely the moment within the year when they could be sold to the greatest advantage. In South Carolina, merchants often expressed the hope that their vessel would be the first to deliver slaves in any given year when planters were eager to acquire slaves for the upcoming growing season. John Guerard explained in 1754 that shipments of slaves arriving in the spring “come in at the best Time as the Planters have just Pitch'd their Crops & will give the more as the Negroes will be of Greater Service in hoeing thro' the whole Season.”²³ In February of 1757, the snow *Hannah* delivered South Carolina’s first slaves of the year in a transshipment from Barbados, and the Charleston merchants Austin and Laurens reported with envy on the ship’s advantage at arriving first in a year when prices for South Carolina’s crops were high. The strong economy “has given such spirits to our Planters,” Austin and Laurens wrote, “that one day last week when there was a sale of 200 Negroes from Barbados, mostly Calabars, [the African ethnicity least desired in South Carolina] they were induced to give £280, £270, & £260 [very high prices] for the men that were tollerable. The first Gambias [a preferred slave ethnicity in South Carolina] that arrive we expect the prime Men will bring £300.”²⁴ Inter-colonial traders enjoyed greater control over the timing of their arrival than transatlantic traders,

²³ South Carolina Historical Society, John Guerard letterbook, 1752–1754, (34/0321 OvrSz), f. 258.

²⁴ Austin and Laurens to Augustus and John Boyd & Co. (of London), 14 March 1757, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, Volume Two: Nov. 1, 1755-Dec. 31, 1758, Philip M. Hamer, ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1970) p.459. For the *Hannah*’s arrival, see Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, p.365.

given their shorter voyages and the relatively simplicity of buying slaves in a Caribbean market rather than on the African coast.

Inter-colonial traders competing against transatlantic deliveries, however, could not engage in the trade in so-called “refuse” slaves. For instance, in his private correspondence with merchant partners and his ship captains in the Caribbean, Charleston merchant John Guerard repeatedly emphasized the importance of sending only healthy slaves, and preferably young adult males, from the Caribbean to South Carolina. To compete against transatlantic traders, Guerard would need to sell more desirable slaves. For instance, he proposed to his partners in 1752 that their ship *Molly* under Captain Watts purchase slaves in Barbados for transshipment to Charleston. If Watts “does but bring a good Sort I flatter my Self they [will] Sell well,” Guerard argued, explaining that the only slaves then available in Charleston were “Callabars, a Sort the worse Liked of any that is brought here” despite coming directly from Africa.²⁵ The perceived quality of the slaves was especially crucial to traders in an intermediate market such as Charleston, where transshipment traders had to compete with direct imports from Africa. Since inter-colonial merchants engaged in a variety of branches of trade, they could avoid engaging in slave transshipment if strong, healthy slaves suited to their market were unavailable or if market conditions were not favorable enough to allow competition with transatlantic traders.

In fact, “competition” may be a slightly misleading term for the relationship between such transatlantic and intercolonial trading. What the American merchants actually did was identify moments at which demand was high enough in certain ports that it would allow transshipments of slaves to supplement direct African imports. Rather

²⁵ John Guerard letterbook, ff. 17-8.

than competing with transatlantic traders, whose prices were lower, inter-colonial traders simply sold additional slaves in markets where demand for African laborers exceeded transatlantic supply. In the 1770s, Charleston presented such an opportunity to American slave merchants. South Carolina saw a surge in demand in the years just prior to the American Revolution, when the colony considered enacting a non-importation compact designed to put economic pressure on Britain. Plantation owners scrambled for last-minute slaves to maintain productivity during the anticipated cessation of trade. Writing to a prominent transatlantic slave trader in Rhode Island in 1772, Nathaniel Russell of Charleston described the ensuing clamor for slaves: “There has been a Great many negroes imported here this Summer and many more Expected; they continue at very Great Prices, a Cargo of 220 very Prime Slaves Averag'd Last week £52 Stlg. which is the highest ever known here, they are at Least £10 Stlg. higher here than in the West Indies.”²⁶ Russell was not alone in noting the price discrepancy between the Caribbean and South Carolina. Reacting to the news, many transshipment traders seized the opportunity. Inter-colonial imports surged in the early 1770s as high prices attracted merchants from all over British America. Levinus Clarkson’s letter to a partner in New York requesting “any New Negroes who have not been Six Months in any of his Majesty's Colonies” was part of the scramble to acquire slaves for Charleston.²⁷ Some merchants were so eager to capitalize on Charleston’s high prices that they sent seasoned slaves and hoped to find a way around the prohibitive duty on them. In July 1773, Nathaniel Russell scolded Christopher Champlin, one of his Rhode Island correspondents, for sending a seasoned slave to Russell in Charleston under the

²⁶ Nathaniel Russell to Aaron Lopez, 14 July 1772, in Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, p.450.

²⁷ Levinus Clarkson to David Van Horne, 23 February 1773, in Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, p.456.

expectation that he would smuggle the slave in for sale without paying the duty.²⁸ Most transshipment came from the Caribbean. Between 1771 and 1774, Charleston imported over 3,000 slaves from the islands. Such transshipments accounted for over 15 percent of the slaves arriving in the period.²⁹

Another important factor in inter-colonial traders' efforts to sell slaves in markets that were also targeted by transatlantic traders was the connection between slave trading and other branches of commerce. Transshipments of slaves were not just connected to other trading activities because vessels carrying slaves between colonies also carried other trade goods. Merchants sold slaves to acquire goods they desired for other branches of trade. Arguing that high prices were not the only factor attracting slave shipments to South Carolina in the 1730s, the anonymous writer to the *Gazette* in 1738 offered an explanation of the importance of selling slaves from the merchants' perspective. He suggested that selling slaves gave traders an advantage in other branches of commerce, asserting that

Negroes may be said to be the Bait proper for catching a Carolina Planter, as certain as Beef to catch a Shark. How many under the Notion Of 18 Months Credit, have been tempted to buy more Negroes than they could Possibly expect to pay in 3 Years! This is so notorious, that few Inhabitants I believe will doubt it. I have hear'd many declare their own Folly in this particular, with a Resolution never to do so again: Yet so great is the Infatuation, that the many Examples of their Neighbours Misfortunes and Danger by such Purchases do not hinder new Fools from bringing themselves into the same Difficulty.

²⁸ Nathaniel Russell to Christopher Champlin, 28 July 1773, in Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, pp.464-5.

²⁹ See Gregory E. O'Malley, "Beyond the Middle Passage: Slave Migration from the Caribbean to North America, 1619-1807," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser. 66 (2009), p.142; for transatlantic shipments, see Eltis, et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.

The writer did not differentiate here between the transatlantic and inter-colonial slave trades, but the “bait” metaphor was equally applicable to both trades.³⁰ From the planters’ perspective the “trap” was debt. Slaves were expensive, and if a planter purchased several African laborers from a merchant on credit, he was “caught.” He had committed himself to paying that merchant at least a portion of future harvests.

From the merchants’ perspective the quarry was not the planter himself, but his produce. Shipping colonial staples back to Europe was a profitable branch of trade for which merchants competed, and the sale of slaves helped traders “catch” a share of this commerce. Merchants preferred immediate payment if they could get it, but offered credit when necessary. Recognizing this relationship between the slave trade *to* South Carolina and the export trade *from* South Carolina helps explain why inter-colonial traders were willing to compete with transatlantic traders in supplying slaves to such colonies despite the fact that they had to sell on thinner margins.

John Guerard was one of the Charleston merchants who applied this reasoning in the mid-eighteenth century, incorporating slave transshipment with broader trading activities and exploiting the demand for slaves to secure a share of South Carolina’s export trade. With various partners in England, Guerard invested in numerous trading ventures, including a number of transatlantic slave trading voyages.³¹ One venture that Guerard financed repeatedly, with his partner William Jolliff of Poole, was a four-legged trade that sent English manufactures to Madeira, wine from Madeira to Barbados, slaves and/or Caribbean produce to Charleston, and Carolina produce back to England. What is interesting about Guerard’s management of this trade is that the route remained the same

³⁰ Anonymous writer to the *South Carolina Gazette*, March 9, 1738, in Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, pp.291-5.

³¹ Eltis, et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* lists Guerard as the part owner of five transatlantic voyages; see voyages numbered 24010, 24011, 26018, 26019, and 32717 in the database.

regardless of whether the vessel carried slaves on the third leg or not. Guerard and his partners treated slaves as a commodity just like rum or sugar for that leg of their commerce. Their concern was not the South Carolina labor force, but what could be bought low in Barbados and sold high in Charleston. In 1754, Guerard wrote to Captain Watts, of his vessel *Molly*, who was in Barbados preparing a cargo for the trip to Charleston. Guerard advised him of what he thought

might answer best from Barbados about which I am greatly at a Loss seeing we are so over Stockt with Rum, that what is of the Produce of the West India Islands Sells at [low prices] & dull Sale Even at that Low Rate; Muscovado Sugar Sells at [moderate prices] but I reckon it is Dear [i.e. expensive] at the Islands; Negroes I imagine will also fall in Price [in South Carolina] as the Planters Produce here is now Lower than has been for a few Years Past.³²

Guerard's only consideration was the relative price of goods in Barbados and Charleston. Whether South Carolina planters wanted slaves was not the question; surely they did, but Guerard feared that prices would be too low to make transshipment profitable. To him, and many other merchants of the British Americas, slaves were just a trade good to incorporate into his mercantile activities.

But they were not a good quite like any other; when market conditions were favorable, Guerard considered them the most advantageous of commodities. Writing about a similar four-legged voyage made by Captain Watts in 1752, in which the first two legs had not gone particularly well, Guerard explained to Jolliff that he saw only one way for the voyage to end up profitable. “[I]f he [Capt. Watts] does but ma[ke] choice of the right Sort of Negroes I may make some small Profit upon the Voyage & that is all the

³² John Guerard letterbook, f.235. Guerard and Jolliff were not the only merchants engaged in this “square” trade, linking England, Africa’s Atlantic Islands, the Caribbean, and the North American mainland. Shipping records for Virginia in 1732 note that two vessels transshipping slaves there from the Caribbean had come from Madeira before that. Such notation of prior stops is rare, though, so just how frequent such voyages is unclear; see Donnan, *Documents*, v.4, p.189.

Chance I have.”³³ When discussing a similar transshipment with Thomas Rock, a partner in Bristol, Guerard expressed similar high hopes in the profitability of trading slaves, suggesting that not only could slaves bring high prices, but that having slaves to sell facilitated the acquisition of other goods for export, which avoided an unprofitable trip to England in ballast. When Rock’s ship *Carolina* arrived from Antigua in 1752 without a planned transshipment of slaves, Guerard complained to Rock that if the *Carolina* had “brought Some [slaves] it would have been the most Likely means to have given her a Dispatch [i.e., quickly obtain a cargo for export], but now I shalle be under great Difficulty to Effect it.” According to Guerard, at times when slaves were in high demand, planters were more likely to arrange the shipment of their crops for export with merchants who offered slaves for sale. Guerard criticized Rock for instructing his captain that if “no Guinea Men [i.e. slave traders from Africa] arrived during the time he was at Antigua...your Orders was not to waite.” A wise merchant, in Guerard’s eyes, sacrificed time to obtain slaves when demand for them was high.³⁴ Merchants in the inter-colonial slave trade competed with transatlantic traders partly because price discrepancies between American markets allowed for profitable transshipment, but also because the high demand for slaves facilitated the acquisition of export cargoes. In criticizing Rock, Guerard highlights the different perspectives and access to information possessed by merchants on the American end of the slave-trading network.

The inter-colonial trade from British colonies to foreign ones offers an interesting contrast to the market-scale distributions within the British Empire in that many

³³ John Guerard letterbook, f. 7.

³⁴ John Guerard letterbook, ff. 3–4. In letters to Rock in the following weeks, Guerard continued complain about the difficulty of obtaining a cargo for the *Carolina*, *ibid.*, 6–7, 11–12.

transatlantic traders were not content in their role as wholesalers but the limits of their mercantile networks prevented them from cutting out colonial middlemen. Until the early eighteenth century British shipments of slaves to foreign colonies (direct from Africa or via intercolonial transshipment) remained minimal because the British only gradually rose to prominence in the African trade. British slave trading to foreign colonies in the Americas received a major jumpstart with the securing of the *asiento* contract—the exclusive right to deliver slaves to Spanish American—in 1713. The British operated that trade under the auspices of the South Sea Company, and under the terms of the *asiento* the Company maintained its own agents in Spanish American ports, so the merchant network for operating that trade largely consisted simply of company correspondence. The collapse of the *asiento* in 1739, however, required British merchants to take more initiative in developing their networks of commercial contacts to facilitate the trans-imperial slave commerce.

In this endeavor, colonial merchants held a decided advantage over traders in Britain given their proximity to Spanish American markets (and French American markets, which became equally important to the British in the mid to late eighteenth century). Direct evidence of the dealings of such intercolonial merchants are murky, largely because such trade was illegal in the eyes of both French and Spanish authorities, but circumstantial evidence clearly indicates that British colonial traders based in the major American entrepôts of the slave trade were navigating the turbulent inter-imperial waters to transship slaves to foreign territory. For instance, British transatlantic merchants' instructions to ship captains bound to Africa to purchase slaves regularly urged the purchase of an "Assortment [that] will answer for a Spanish Contract,"

meaning a group of young, healthy, predominantly male slaves who would interest Spanish buyers. Despite the obvious interest in selling to the Spanish, however, such instructions routinely ordered the vessels to head to British Caribbean ports for sale.³⁵ Transatlantic traders sought lucrative foreign markets, but reached them indirectly with the help of colonial merchants.

The British export trade to the French also grew after the *asiento* arrangement terminated. The French colonial economy boomed between 1740 and 1770, increasing the demand for slaves as the British increased their dominance in the transatlantic slave trade. With the Spanish trade languishing, British traders pursued the French market aggressively. When French slave traders failed to keep pace with their colonies' demand, the British stepped in, bribing French colonial officials as necessary to gain access to St. Domingue's markets.³⁶

According to Secretary John Pownal of the British Board of Trade, transshipment to the French benefited from a price gap between British and French colonies. In his "Account of the Slave Trade" (ca. 1753), Pownal argued that the French paid "near 20 p Cent more" for slaves on the African coast than British traders did, "and consequently their slaves came proportionally dearer to the market."³⁷ The differential resulted from Britain's extensive and efficient system of trading posts and forts on the African coast, and their consequent speed in acquiring cargoes. This efficiency was enhanced by their

³⁵ James Clemens & Co.'s instructions to Capt. William Speers of the Ship *Ranger* bound from Liverpool to Africa and the West Indies, 3 June 1767, Tuohy papers, Part 4, letter 2.

³⁶ Robert Louis Stein estimates that French traders carried just 45 percent of the slaves imported between 1740 and 1760: *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) pp.25–7, 109–10.

³⁷ Donnan, *Documents*, v.2, p.507. In fact, the prices that Pownal quotes suggests that prices in the French colonies were more than "proportionally dearer" if his 20% estimate was accurate for the coast of Africa. He cited £40 as the price for the finest slaves in British American colonies, but asserted that in French colonies they sold for the equivalent of over £54—which is 35% higher.

use of smaller ships, which required less crew relative to the number of slaves carried.³⁸ Regardless of the reason, this differential created an opportunity that British merchants seized eagerly as the volume of their transatlantic trade increased. In 1753, Charleston merchant John Guerard lamented that this foreign trade from Barbados to the French was making transshipment to South Carolina difficult. He argued that “there was no Likelywood” that slave prices would fall considerably in Barbados—making transshipment to the mainland profitable—because there was too much demand in Barbados both from local planters and from transshipment traders looking “to Supply the French Islands.”³⁹

This growing trend of transshipment to French markets saw the British colonies of the eastern Caribbean become more involved in the foreign trade. Barbados was well situated for this trade, given its long-prominent role as a British importer and its proximity to several French islands. Other eastern British islands also dabbled in international transshipments in the mid-eighteenth century. The owners of a transatlantic vessel skippered by William Ellery sought sales to the Dutch when they instructed Ellery to head to British St. Christopher in 1759. They explained that St. Christopher was “handy to St. Eustatia’s,” a Dutch island that was open to trade with other foreign powers.⁴⁰ John Guerard of Charleston believed that New Providence—in the British Bahamas—could be used as a hub because he heard Spanish traders often visited. He contemplated sending slaves there in a scheme that would have required multiple transshipments for the Africans involved. In 1754, he sent instructions to Captain Watts in Barbados that if nothing seemed promising for Charleston, he could attempt to buy

³⁸ Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, pp.123-36.

³⁹ John Guerard letterbook, f.197.

⁴⁰ Donnan, *Documents*, v.3, pp.68-69.

slaves in Barbados for a sale to the Spanish at New Providence. “[I]n Such Case you may Purchase the full Number of Negroes [that his previous instructions had ordered for Charleston]...but Let me beg of you to take none but what is Likely & young, free from Disorders in mind, body, or any Defect whatsoever, all men. [T]he Spaniards are very nice [i.e., picky] in Negroes.” To sell from a position of strength, Guerard also suggested that “should you go to Providence I must further Observe to you that you may perhaps do your Business to more advantage if you were to Feign the want of something & that you put in there rather by Accident than Choice.” In that case, Guerard hoped that prospective buyers would offer high prices for fear that Watts might carry the slave cargo elsewhere once he repaired his ship. How this plan would have fared remains unknown, because Watts ultimately headed to Charleston from Barbados anyway, without slaves.⁴¹

Neither the transshipment route from St. Christopher to St. Eustatius nor that from the Bahamas to the Spanish colonies was common, but Guerard’s convoluted scheme for selling slaves to the Spanish by transshipping them from one British port to another serves to point out the difficult, faltering nature of international slave transshipments at mid-century. With the expansion of the British transatlantic trade and the removal of the South Sea Company from the largest branch of international slave trading, private British traders scrambled to figure out how to access lucrative foreign markets. This effort was initially stymied by the wars that raged off and on from 1739 to 1748; thereafter, merchants struggled to manage the trade, in part because the Spanish adopted ever-shifting policies to combat their problem of slave supply. It was precisely the precarious and capricious nature of this trade that led most British transatlantic traders to leave it to colonial merchants to navigate the risky foreign ventures.

⁴¹ John Guerard letterbook, ff. 235-8.

The increased specialization of some transatlantic slave traders as wholesalers and some American merchants as retailers is revealed by two related trends evident in records of sales of Africans after the Middle Passage. Smaller numbers of buyers purchased larger numbers of slaves, and increasingly these buyers were merchants. Studying the largest British slave market in the Americas—Kingston, Jamaica—Trevor Burnard noted this trend even for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but it continued thereafter and reached other ports later.⁴² Examples of these bulk sales appear in the records of the Kingston branch of the Case and Southworth merchant house, which invested heavily in transatlantic slaving voyages in the mid-eighteenth century. Of the 204 slaves Case and Southworth imported to Kingston on the *Buckley* in 1755, Benjamin Perreira purchased 75 and Jasper Hall bought 47, accounting for over 60% of the shipment just between the two of them, and leaving the remainder for purchase in small lots by local planters. At the sale of the *Adlington*'s cargo later that year the merchant house Grant & Lesslie purchased 14 slaves, while Aaron Barrah Lousada purchased 47. A few months later Jasper Hall returned for the sale of slaves from the *Judith* and purchased 117, while Bayley, Ellworthy and Co. bought 14.⁴³ For the three sales combined, Case & Southworth sold over half of the Africans arriving in groups of 45 or more (see table 3).

While the ultimate destinations of these particular Africans are unknown, other records suggest that many of these buyers were involved in the transshipment trade to foreign colonies. Jasper Hall transshipped slaves to Curacao in 1753 and to Havana in

⁴² Trevor Burnard, "Who Bought Slaves in Early America? Purchasers of Slaves from the Royal African Company in Jamaica, 1674-1708," *Slavery and Abolition* 17.2 (1996), p.72.

⁴³ Liverpool Record Office, Case and Southworth papers, Journal of Case and Southworth, Kingston, Jamaica, 1754-1757, (380 MD 33), ff. 120-132, 143-177, 190-216.

Table 3: Proportion of slaves sold in groups by Case and Southworth, 1754-1757 ^a

Number of slaves sold to a single buyer	Proportion from the <i>Buckley</i>	Proportion from the <i>Adlington</i>	Proportion from the <i>Judith</i>	Total from Total
1	2%	4%	2%	2%
2-5	9	24	13	14
6-10	21	23	12	19
11-20	7	18	13	12
21-45				
45+	61	31	60	53

^a Source: Liverpool Record Office, Case and Southworth papers, Journal of Case and Southworth, Kingston, Jamaica, 1754-1757, (380 MD 33), ff. 120-132, 143-177, 190-216.

1762, and he also invested in transatlantic slaving voyages that touched at Jamaica before proceeding to Spanish colonies.⁴⁴ Port records list a “Grant & Co.” as the owner of two small transshipments of slaves leaving the Kingston in 1755. These may be the slaves who “Grant & Lesslie” purchased from the *Adlington*.⁴⁵ Aaron Barrah Lousada made large purchases from all three slave shipments, and while he does not appear as a ship owner in the colony’s export records, he and a partner named Samuel Pereira Mendez made payments to Case & Southworth in “Heavy Money,” making it likely that they traded to Spanish America since hard currency was scarce in the British colonies.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, ownership data in the colonial port records is not consistently reliable, so tracking the distribution of these Africans is difficult.⁴⁷ Regardless of the slaves’ destination, the consistent prominence of merchants in such purchasing suggests that

⁴⁴ Naval Office Shipping Lists for Kingston, Jamaica, PRO, CO 142/15, f.62 and CO 142/16, f.176; Donnan, *Documents*, v.2, pp.533-6.

⁴⁵ PRO, CO 142/16, ff.73, 83.

⁴⁶ Journal of Case and Southworth, ff. 189-190.

⁴⁷ Several problems impede the process of tracking slaves by the owners listed in the shipping lists even where shipping lists survive. First, the owner listed usually owned the vessel, but if a merchant paid freight charges to ship goods or slaves aboard a vessel he did not own, his name will not appear in the shipping lists. Second, ships owned by more than one individual often only have the name of one individual recorded in the shipping lists; this is apparent from numerous inconsistencies between shipping lists for various ports, where departure records list one owner, but arrival records at a different port list a different owner for the same vessel. Perhaps most important, vessels owned by foreigners did not appear in the shipping lists at all before passage of the Free Port Act, and thereafter foreign ships were listed in a separate register that did not list information on ownership.

Case and Southworth were aware that distributors of slaves formed a considerable share of their market, but they did not re-route their transatlantic shipments to find the ports where these buyers transshipped slaves. They continued to sell slaves in Jamaica because the merchants buying slaves for transshipment kept demand and prices steady in Jamaica, allowing Case and Southworth—and other transatlantic traders—to sell their slaves quickly and profitably. The records of other transatlantic traders show similar trends toward selling to a small number of large purchasers.⁴⁸

Other ports show similar trends in the mid- to late eighteenth century, though they followed behind Kingston. When the brig *Fanny* delivered 158 slaves for sale in Barbados in late 1767, one John Wooster purchased 70 slaves, nearly half of the cargo, himself.⁴⁹ In 1773 the captain of the sloop *Adventure* sold his entire African cargo of 81 slaves delivered to Barbados to the firm Philip Lytcott and Co.⁵⁰ Whether Wooster or Lytcott and Co. purchased slaves for transshipment is unknown, and Barbados shipping lists do not survive for the period, but given the volume of these sales, some form of further distribution seems probable.

In some cases merchants appear to have negotiated discounted rates for bulk purchases. At the sale of the *Elizabeth*'s cargo at Kingston in 1754, the firm Dias and Gutierrez purchased 44 slaves, while other purchasers bought just one or two slaves each. The small purchasers paid an average of £43.75 for adults, while Dias and Gutierrez paid £35 each (though that rate was for a mix of men and women, while small purchasers

⁴⁸ For examples, see the records of the slaving ship *Harlequin* from 1782, University of Liverpool Library, Special Collections and Archives, Dumbell Papers, "Records of ships engaged in the slave trade from Liverpool: *Harlequin*" (Dumbell MS.10.46); or three voyages of the ship *Earl of Liverpool*, from 1797-9, Dumbell Papers, "Records of ships engaged in the slave trade from Liverpool: *Earl of Liverpool*" (Dumbell MS.10.50). See also Burnard and Morgan, "The Dynamics of the Slave Market in Jamaica."

⁴⁹ Liverpool Record Office, Case and Southworth papers, Sales Account Book of Case and Southworth, 1763-1769, (380 MD 36), ff. 120-1.

⁵⁰ Donnan, *Documents*, v.3, p.266-7.

purchased only men). Similarly, small purchasers on average paid just over £35 for boys and just under £35 for girls; Dias and Gutierrez paid just £20 each for boys and girls. Some of this discount may be explained by the timing of their purchase late in the sale. The selling agent described the cargo as “no better than refuse,” so buying late in the sale, Dias and Gutierrez may have purchased mainly ill or otherwise undesirable slaves. Nonetheless, the price differential is striking.⁵¹

While many transatlantic traders targeted markets where American merchants bought slaves for transshipment, some were not comfortable that bulk sales to American merchants worked to their advantage. In 1768, one group of Liverpool merchants—James Clemens, Matthew Stronge, Follicott Powell, and Henry Hardwar—specifically cautioned the captain of their transatlantic vessel *Sally*, bound for Barbados, against selling slaves for less than £32 each, “for you know they Buy Slaves there to make an Advantage of them by sending them to another Markett.” Instead, they insisted, “that Advantage we may Avail Ourselves of, as well as they, provided the Cargo be healthy, and the Ship in condition to proceed elsewhere.”⁵² Yet the fact that Clemens & Company sent their vessel to Barbados with hopes of finding that other more profitable market, rather than ordering their ship directly there, speaks to the advantage that merchants in the Americas possessed with regards to distributing slaves after the Middle Passage.

At times transatlantic traders even suspected collusion between their own selling agents and the American transshipment traders who bought slaves from them. In 1767, James Clemens & Co. warned the captain of their transatlantic slaver *Ranger* that his work would not end once he found a selling agent in the West Indies. Though Clemens

⁵¹ Donnan, *Documents*, v.3, p.145.

⁵² Tuohy papers, Part 4, letter 3.

recommended agents to employ in Barbados, Grenada, Dominica, or St. Christopher, he urged Captain Speers to monitor the sale, “allways observing that a large lott of the Slaves be not Sold to some friend or intimate under the price” for which most of the slaves sold. The problem, according to Clemens, was that some agents “Sell off some [slaves] at a tolerable price and let a very large Lott go much under [that price] to their friends, which are sent to other Islands for Sale at an Advance [i.e. higher] price.” It was important for the ship’s captain to monitor the sale and the condition of the slaves himself because Clemens believed the agents “will endeavour to persuade you they are Sold to Others at that low price rather than risque Mortality or detain the Ship,” when in actuality the selling agents were partners with those who purchased the slaves at low prices for transshipment. Clemens feared that bulk purchases and the transshipment trade were part of a scheme among American merchants to cut transatlantic traders back in Britain out of their American merchant networks and out of their due profits in the slave trade.⁵³

Clemens was not alone in his suspicion that selling agents in the transatlantic trade sometimes exploited that position to profitably engage in intercolonial transshipments at the transatlantic traders’ expense. Leyland, Penny & Co. of Liverpool revealed a similar concern, warning Captain Charles Wilson in 1788 that “it will require all your address & management to procure a fair Sale, for its now become too much the Custom among the Factors to be both buyers & sellers of Slaves.”⁵⁴ Other transatlantic traders also occasionally cautioned their captains against letting agents “sell too many in one Lott to close the sales, which they frequently do,” but they rarely voiced the same concerns about transshipment that Clemens and Leyland, Penny & Co. offered. Instead

⁵³ Tuohy papers, Part 4, letter 2.

⁵⁴ University of Liverpool Library, Special Collections and Archives, Dumbell Papers, “Records of ships engaged in the slave trade from Liverpool: *Madampookata*” (Dumbell MS.10.47), 1783.

the primary concern for most appeared to be deflation of prices.⁵⁵ Regardless of the concerns expressed, bulk purchases by merchants had clearly become more common by the late eighteenth century.

Still, even colonial merchants struggled to access foreign markets to sell slaves in the second half of the eighteenth century, and in the late 1760s British imperial officials developed a strategy to facilitate trade with foreign colonies without relying on British colonial traders to develop connections for smuggling the slaves. The Free Port Act of 1767 opened a limited number of British Caribbean ports to foreign vessels for trade in specified commodities. Slaves and British manufactured goods could be exported, and foreigners could deliver colonial produce or specie in exchange. It was a policy designed to promote British manufactures and British shipping because foreign produce would then be shipped to Europe in British bottoms.⁵⁶

Slaves entered the equation for two reasons. First, increasing the market for slaves helped British manufacturers because traders to Africa would need more goods to exchange for African captives. Second, the high demand for African labor in foreign colonies made slaves an attractive commodity with which to lure foreign traders to British markets, where they would buy British manufactures.

The new policy offered numerous benefits from the perspective of British traders and policymakers, but it gradually undermined the importance of British colonial

⁵⁵ Francis Ingram & Co.'s instructions to Capt. George McMinn of the *Ingram* bound to Africa and the West Indies, Liverpool, 31 December 1783, Tuohy papers, Part 4, letter 10.

⁵⁶ To protect British colonial production in Jamaica, imports of sugar, coffee, tobacco, pimento, and ginger were barred at Kingston, where the British hoped to focus the free port trade on Spanish cochineal, cotton, and specie—items that did not compete with Jamaica's produce. Foreign sugar was, however, legal to import to Dominica, where British officials placed more emphasis on courting French traders than on protecting British sugar producers from competition. Frances Armytage, *The Free Port System in the British West Indies: A Study in Commercial Policy, 1766–1822* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953) pp. 42–3.

merchants' networks for foreign slave distribution. It targeted the two islands with the greatest opportunity of foreign trade. The first British free ports were Kingston, Savannah la Mar, and Santa Lucea, all of Jamaica—which had a long history of Spanish trade—and Roseau and Prince Rupert's Bay, Dominica—which sat between the two oldest French sugar-producing islands, Martinique and Guadeloupe (see map 1).⁵⁷ The new policy did not end the efforts of British merchants to venture to foreign colonies for profitable sales of slaves, but it increased the number of foreign vessels coming to the free ports. For those British traders without connections in foreign ports, the act allowed them to access foreign markets by selling to French, Spanish, and Dutch transshipment traders. It also eliminated the danger of confiscation in foreign ports, or at least shifted it to foreign colonists, who typically violated their own laws in buying slaves in Jamaica and Dominica.⁵⁸

Not surprisingly, the Free Ports became favorite destinations of British transatlantic slave traders. Thomas Lanwarn suggested Dominica to Rhode Island merchant Aaron Lopez for a proposed transatlantic slave trading venture in 1770, insisting that merchants in Dominica “sell as well to the French and Spaniards for whom they have large orders to execute, as to our Planters of B.Bs. [i.e., Barbados] Antigua and Dominica; so that under these circumstances, Dominica seems to bid fairer to render you advantageous sales, than any other Island.” Lanwarn did not recommend venturing to other colonies he mentioned to sell directly to the ultimate consumers, but rather

⁵⁷ Armytage, *The Free Port System*, p. 42.

⁵⁸ The concern about confiscations was timely, as British imperial officials struggled with Spanish confiscations of their ships in the late 1760s; even those not actually entering Spanish ports could be subject to seizure under the suspicion of trading with Spanish colonists (or “under pretense” of such suspicions, as one colonial governor suspected). See John Pownall to Robert Wood, Esq., 26 August 1769, PRO, CO 5/43, f.229.

Map 1: British islands with free ports and the neighboring foreign colonies



suggested targeting the busiest hub of transshipment. By attracting foreign traders to specific American ports, the free port policy concentrated more of the slave trade on these entrepôts, offering transatlantic traders ports of steady demand.⁵⁹ But the transshipment was increasingly undertaken by foreign buyers in a freer market that required less developed merchant networks, and the late eighteenth century saw the French and Spanish also take steps toward loosening trade restrictions, which would

⁵⁹ Donnan, *Documents*, v.3, p.245. For additional examples of foreign traders buying slaves in the free ports, see British Library, Account Book of the Schooner “Mongovo George,” 1785–1787, (Add. Mss. 43841), ff. 29-34; British Library, Liverpool Papers, Vol. CCXXVII, Papers Relating to the Slave Trade, 1787–1823, (Add. Mss. 38416), ff. 172; Sales Account Book of Case and Southworth, ff. 122-4.

gradually undermine the need for transshipment from the British Caribbean colonies altogether.

In conclusion, the story of Liverpool transatlantic trader Thomas Leyland illustrates both the pressure against transshipment due to loosening trade restrictions, but also the reasons why British slave traders had left it to colonial merchants to transship slaves to foreign territories for so long. In the last two decades of the eighteenth century, Leyland organized numerous transatlantic voyages that sold slaves in various British entrepôts. He consistently instructed captains to buy slaves in Africa who would suit Spanish markets, but then sent the slaves to British ports for sale. Unlike many of his counterparts in the transatlantic trade, Leyland was not satisfied wholesaling slaves in Kingston. He sent letters to merchants and officials far and wide seeking information on how to proceed directly to Spanish America without having his ship and cargo confiscated. He wrote to Moses Benson of London on the matter, inquiring whether bribing Spanish officials was the best strategy, and shortly thereafter he wrote to a Spanish ambassador in London promising to pay “whatever may be required as an equivalent” for a license to trade in Cuba, but his voyages thereafter continued to head to Barbados, Jamaica, and Dominica. The most galling may have been his shipment of slaves to Dominica in 1786, where a Mr. Blair purchased the entire cargo and then proceeded to hire Leyland’s own ship to deliver the slaves to Cuba.⁶⁰ Yet in 1803, Leyland managed to send a transatlantic vessel directly to Spanish America. He instructed his vessel *Enterprize* to head to Barbados for information, but its account of

⁶⁰ Liverpool Record Office, Letter Book of Thomas Leyland, 1786–1788, (387 MD 59). For the quote, see ff.19-20.

sales is from Havana.⁶¹ As trade restrictions loosened it became possible for more transatlantic traders to head directly to foreign markets, but Leyland's struggles to do so should remind us that transshipment played a prominent role in the slave trade because of local traders' easier access to information and their resulting greater responsiveness to market conditions.

⁶¹ Liverpool Record Office, Account Books of the Ships of Thomas Leyland & Co.: Account Book of the *Enterprize*, 1803, (387 MD 43).