Forgotten History: Rhode Island And The Slave Trade

Rhode Island also played a central role in the transatlantic slave trade, especially in the so-called “triangular trade” linking New England, West Africa, and the West Indies. Rum-laden Rhode Island ships sailed to Africa and acquired cargoes of Africans, who were carried to the plantation colonies of the West Indies and sold. The ships returned home with holds filled with sugar and molasses, which was distilled into rum — Newport alone boasted two dozen distilleries — and shipped back to Africa to procure more slaves, completing the triangle.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Rhode Islanders undertook more than a thousand slaving voyages, bearing over 100,000 men, women, and children into New World slavery. While accounting for only a small fraction of the twelve million Africans transported to the Americas over the 350 years of the transatlantic slave trade, this traffic was vital to Rhode Island’s economic development. One would be hard pressed to find any eighteenth-century Rhode Islander whose life was not entangled in some fashion with slave trading. A few made great fortunes in the trade.

In the nineteenth century, this history would be almost completely erased from Rhode Islanders’ collective memory. The exhibition that follows seeks to recover that memory by recounting the story of a single ship, the Sally, a ninety ton brig, that sailed from Providence to West Africa in 1764.

For most Americans, the word “slavery” conjures a set of southern images — of cotton fields and pillared plantation homes. But slavery existed in all thirteen colonies of mainland North America and, for a time, in all thirteen original states. Enslaved persons made up roughly ten percent of the population of Rhode Island in 1750. In port cities like Newport and Providence, the proportion was higher.
The Brown Brothers

The Sally was owned by Nicholas Brown & Co., a partnership of the four Brown brothers: Nicholas, John, Joseph, and Moses. The Browns were among the first citizens of Rhode Island, prominent Providence merchants and important early benefactors of the College of Rhode Island. The college, which was established in 1764, the same year that the Sally sailed, was later renamed Brown University, in recognition of a gift by Nicholas’s son, Nicholas, Jr.

By the standards of Rhode Island merchants, the Browns were not major slave traders, but they were not completely inexperienced either. In 1736, the brothers’ father, Captain James Brown, and their uncle Obadiah dispatched the sloop Mary to Africa. The Mary was the first slave ship to sail from Providence. In 1759, Nicholas and John joined with Obadiah and several other Providence investors to outfit another slave ship, the Wheel of Fortune. A French privateer captured the vessel, taking much of the family’s investment with it.

In 1764, the brothers decided to try the slave trade again. The Seven Years War between France and Great Britain had just ended, and American commerce remained in the doldrums. The family needed capital for its new iron furnace, as well as for its Fox Point spermaceti candle factory. The result was one of the most disastrous voyages in the long history of the triangular trade.
Unable to find an experienced commander for the Sally, the Browns turned to Esek Hopkins, a local ship's captain and member of one of Rhode Island's most illustrious families. Hopkins had successfully commanded privateers during the Seven Years War, but he had no experience in the African trade, a fact that may have contributed to the subsequent debacle.

Hopkins survived the voyage of the Sally and went on to a distinguished career. In 1775, he was named commander in chief of the newly created Continental Navy. After the Revolution, he served in the Rhode Island state legislature, where he emerged as one of the state's leading advocates of public education. He also served as a trustee of the College of Rhode Island. Many public sites in Providence today are dedicated to his memory, including a street, a public park, and a middle school.
Hopkins assembled a crew of fifteen men for the Sally. The ship's articles specified the duties and wages of each hand. The crew included one black man, Edward Abbie, Hopkins's slave.

It was the custom on slave ships to offer captains and officers a "privilege"—a commission in addition to regular wages. Typically a captain received a privilege of four slaves to sell on his own account for every one hundred and four that he delivered. Hopkins was offered a more generous package—ten barrels of rum on the outward journey and ten slaves on the return. In all, the officers of the Sally were promised a "privilege" of twenty slaves. Clearly the Brown brothers anticipated a profitable voyage.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men's Names</th>
<th>Quarters</th>
<th>Arrival Wages before 4th</th>
<th>Wages for March, for the Rest of the Voyage</th>
<th>Hospital Money, £, s. d.</th>
<th>When discharged</th>
<th>Wages since 4th, £, s. d.</th>
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PROVIDENCE, Rhode Island: Printed by Websters & Plumer, near the Green House, where all sorts of stationers and booksellers keep.
Outfitting a slave ship took many weeks and engaged the energies of the entire community. Local sail lofts and rope walks prepared the canvas and rigging. Caulkers sealed the hull. Coopers built barrels. Carpenters prepared the hold for its human cargo.

In addition to provisions for the crew, the Sally carried goods to trade in Africa, including ten hogsheads of tobacco and thirty boxes of spermaceti candles. The most important trade good on the Sally, as on most New England slavers, was rum – 17,274 gallons.

The ship’s stores also included the implements needed to control the enslaved passengers, including pistols and small arms, two blunderbusses, seven swivel guns, a cask of gunpowder, thirteen cutlasses, forty handcuffs and leg shackles, three lengths of chain, and a dozen padlocks.
The Sally arrived on the West African coast in November, 1764, after a two month passage. Hopkins opened his account book on November 10, exchanging a few gallons of rum for wood, corn, and chickens, as well as a “Small Tooth” — an elephant’s tusk. He purchased his first Africans five days later, trading 156 gallons of rum and a barrel of flour for a boy and a girl.

Slave ship captains sought to fill their holds as quickly as possible; long stays along the African coast increased the danger of insurrection as well as exposure to tropical diseases such as yellow fever and malaria, which claimed crew and cargo alike. Unfortunately, the Sally arrived at a singularly unpropitious moment. With the end of hostilities between France and Great Britain, the West African coast was awash in slave ships, including two dozen from Rhode Island alone. The market for rum was glutted. Captives were in short supply and prices were high.

Hopkins eventually accumulated a full cargo, 196 people in all, but it took him an extraordinarily long time — nine months — to do so. One can scarcely imagine the experience of those confined below decks.
In the centuries after Columbus’s voyage to the New World, some twelve million Africans were carried as slaves to the Americas. About half a million of these men, women, and children came to mainland North America, what is today the United States. Vastly larger numbers were borne to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and Central and South America; Brazil alone imported over four million Africans. Such were the profits to be earned from sugar production that planters found it economical to work slaves to death and replace them with fresh imports. The average life expectancy of a slave on a Caribbean sugar plantation was less than seven years.

The slave trade was history’s first genuinely global industry. Ships from Spain, Portugal, England, France, Holland, and Denmark, as well as from North America, plied the African coast, filling their holds with captives. Much of the wealth of the modern West flows, directly or indirectly, from the transatlantic slave trade.

As the voyage of the Sally showed, slave trading could be a deadly business. At least ten percent and perhaps as much as a quarter of the enslaved Africans loaded into ships perished in the Middle Passage. But the profits to be made from a successful voyage were spectacular. During peak seasons of planting and harvest, slaves in the West Indies commanded prices eight to ten times higher than what traders paid in Africa.

In 1807, the British Parliament and the U.S. Congress passed bills formally abolishing the transatlantic slave trade. Though both nations made some effort to suppress the trade, the trafficking of slaves to Brazil and the Caribbean continued virtually unabated for another half century.
Over time, slave traders learned how to maximize returns on each voyage. They came to understand the tastes of trading partners, the best seasons to trade, and the number of calories needed to keep the Africans confined in their ships' holds alive. (Captives who refused to eat were force fed.) They even developed techniques for packing their human cargo as efficiently as possible. Girls were typically allotted an area of four feet six inches in length by twelve inches in width. Boys were allotted slightly more space — five feet by fourteen inches — and adults slightly more still.

The plate featured here is from a book published in France in 1764, the year the Sally sailed. In the top image, a European trader licks an African’s chin, a technique used to assess a captive’s health (sour-tasting sweat was believed to indicate disease) and age (young, “beardless” slaves commanded higher prices). In the lower image, a longboat bears newly purchased Africans to a waiting slave ship, while those left behind weep. Abolitionists would later use such images to illustrate the horrors of the slave trade, but this author’s goal was to show the kind of calculating, unsentimental attitude needed to succeed in the business.
Eighteenth-century commerce — whether between French fur traders and Iroquois trappers, Virginia tobacco planters and Scottish factors, or Portuguese sea captains and Bombay spice dealers — revolved around the exchange of gifts and elaborate displays of hospitality. Before men did business with one another, they had to establish their character and credentials. It was no different when Esek Hopkins and the Sally arrived on the coast of West Africa.

The Sally's trade book details Hopkins's negotiations with an African king on the Windward Coast, shortly after the ship's arrival. Over the course of five days, Hopkins dispensed literally hundreds of gallons of rum as gifts and "customs," not only to the king but also to various members of his "retinue," including his geographer, "high Constable," and "alkade." Only then did the king agree to "open trade."
On June 8, 1765, seven months after the Sally’s arrival on the coast, Hopkins purchased his one hundred and eighth African, a woman, in exchange for an assortment of rum, snuff, iron bars, cloth, cutlasses, guns, and gunpowder. Later that afternoon, the ship’s longboat returned with ten more captives. It was Hopkins’s most successful day of trading. A small notation in the log on the same day noted that a “woman Slave hanged her Self between Decks.” She was the second enslaved person on the ship to die.

The Sally finally embarked for the West Indies in August, 1765. Of the 196 Africans that Hopkins had purchased, nine had been sold on the coast, nineteen had died, and a twentieth had been left for dead. Three crew men had also perished.
The horror had only begun. In the first week at sea, four more people—a woman, a girl, and two boys—died. On the eighth day out, the slaves rose in rebellion, a fact conveyed in another terse log entry: “Slaves Rose on us was obliged [to] fire on them and Destroyed 8 and Several more wounded badly 1 thye [thigh] and one Ribs broke.” Following the failed insurrection, the trickle of deaths became a torrent. The slaves were “so Despirited,” Hopkins wrote, that “Some Drowned themselves, Some Starved and others Sickened and Dyed.”
As the Sally approached the West Indies, Africans continued to die on an almost daily basis, their bodies unceremoniously consigned to the sea. The ship’s account book records 109 deaths in all. While Hopkins spoke of starvation and despair, the speed with which people perished suggests the effects of disease, most likely amoebic dysentery — “bloody flux,” in eighteenth-century parlance. Transmitted through human feces, the disease produces violent diarrhea and eventual death through dehydration.
Hopkins sailed first to Barbados, hoping to find instructions from Nicholas Brown & Co. Finding none, he proceeded to the island of Antigua, where he sold what remained of his cargo. Emaciated and sickly, the Sally's slaves fetched very low prices.

Surviving papers from the voyage include two bills of sale for thirty-six Africans, as well as a letter from the agent who handled some of the sales, apologizing for the disappointing prices, which he attributed to the slaves' “very Indifferent” quality. “I am truly Sorry for the Bad Voyage,” he wrote; “had the Negroes been young and Healthy I should have been able to sell them pretty well. I make no doubt if you was to try this Market again with Good Slaves I should be able to give you satisfaction.”
The voyage of the Sally represented a severe financial setback to the Brown brothers. But they consoled themselves with the knowledge that their ship was safe and that their friend Hopkins had survived. “[W]e need not mention how Disagreeable the nuse of your Lusing 3 of yr hands and 88 Slaves is to us + all your Friends,” they wrote in a November, 1765 letter, “but your Self Continuing in Helth is so grate Satisfaction to us, that we Remain Cheerful under the Heavey Loss of our Interests.”

The brothers responded to the experience in different ways. Three of the four — Nicholas, Joseph, and Moses — withdrew from slave trading. As the letter to Hopkins suggests, their decision seems to have been motivated more by economic than by moral considerations: between the loss of the Wheel of Fortune and the Sally disaster, they had good reason to conclude that slave trading was too risky an investment.

Moses Brown would eventually repent his involvement in the trade. Following the death of his wife in 1773, he underwent a personal crisis. He manumitted his slaves, converted to Quakerism, and threw himself into the embryonic anti-slavery movement. The memory of the Sally clearly haunted him. In 1783, he wrote to his friends in Clark and Nightingale, another Providence merchant firm, urging them to desist from their plans to send a slave ship to Africa. Had the Sally never sailed, he wrote, “I should have been preserved from an Evil, which has given me the most uneasiness, and has left the greatest impression and stain upon my own mind of any, if not all my other Conduct in life…”
By the 1780s, Moses Brown had emerged as one of the new nation’s most ardent abolitionists, a cause in which he was joined by several family members, including his nephew, Nicholas Brown, Jr., namesake of Brown University. His efforts contributed to the passage of the 1784 Rhode Island gradual abolition act and to a 1787 state law outlawing the slave trade. Rhode Island was the first American state to prohibit its citizens from slave trading, but the law was ill-enforced and the trade continued.

Ironically, Moses’s efforts put him at loggerheads with his own brother, John, who continued to traffic in slaves. In 1769, John Brown helped to underwrite another African expedition. Over the next quarter century, he invested in at least five other voyages. “[W]henever I am Convinced, as you are, that [slave trading] is Rong in the Sight of God, I will Immediately Deasist,” he wrote in a 1786 letter to Moses, “but while its not only allowed by the Supreeme Governour of all States but by all the Nations of Europe … I cannot thinke that this State ought to Decline the Trade.” Besides, he added, “from the best Information I can Git & that has beene from Gat Numbers the Slaves [brought to America] are positively better [off] … then those who are Left behind…”

In 1797, John Brown was charged with illegal slave trading; the prosecution was brought at the behest of the Providence Abolition Society, an organization founded by his brother, Moses. Though he acknowledged his continued involvement in the trade, he was acquitted of the charge. The case seems not to have damaged John’s reputation. In 1798, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he remained a vocal defender of the transatlantic slave trade.
For the past year, a group of Brown students has explored the relationship of some of our university’s early benefactors to the transatlantic slave trade. As we entered the John Carter Brown Library to begin our inquiry, we noted the inscription on the building: “Speak to the past and it shall teach thee.” We have returned often to those words as we reflected on slavery and the bitter legacy of inequality, injustice, and racism that it bequeathed to our country.

The process of assembling this exhibition forced us to confront a series of unsettling questions: Should we include a portrait of Esek Hopkins, given that we have no portraits of the nameless Africans who perished under his command? How should we represent the participation of Africans in the slave trade? In focusing on this single voyage, do we do an injustice to the Brown brothers, who were, by the standards of Rhode Island, relatively minor players in the African trade? How are we to judge a man like Moses Brown, who later repented his role in the slave trade and played an important role in the movement to abolish the traffic? Are such judgments even appropriate, given the vastly different political and legal circumstances in which we live today?

Confronting the Sally also compelled us to reflect anew on our own times. Rhode Island no longer dispatches slave ships to the African coast, but human trafficking continues to flourish all over the world. We are horrified by the thought of human beings confined to the fetid hold of a ship, but we accept the existence of urban ghettos and unprecedentedly high rates of black incarceration. In what injustices are we complicit? What might future generations say about us?