



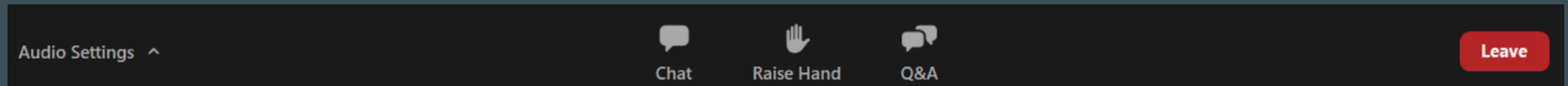
# INSIDE THE VAULT

Lincoln's Refusal to Pardon Nathaniel Gordon  
with Dr. Jonathan White

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2024



# How to Participate



- If you would like to ask a question, you can use the Q&A feature.
- We will be answering audience questions throughout the session.
- The views expressed here are those of the historian.

## For Security and Privacy

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.



# Dr. Jonathan White



Jonathan W. White is a professor of American studies at Christopher Newport University. He is the author or editor of seventeen books that cover a variety of topics, including civil liberties during the Civil War, the USS *Monitor* and the Battle of Hampton Roads, the presidential election of 1864, and what Abraham Lincoln and soldiers dreamed about. Among his awards are the 2019 State Council of Higher Education for Virginia's Outstanding Faculty Award—the highest honor bestowed upon college faculty by the Commonwealth of Virginia; CNU's Alumni Society Award for Teaching and Mentoring (2016); and the 2015 Abraham Lincoln Institute Book Prize. He has published two books with CNU students, with a third forthcoming. His recent books include *A House Built by Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House*, which won the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize; *Shipwrecked: A True Civil War Story of Mutinies, Jailbreaks, Blockade-Running, and the Slave Trade*; *Final Resting Places: Reflections on the Meaning of Civil War Graves*; and a children's book, *My Day with Abe Lincoln*, that was officially released today.

# Today's Document

Abraham Lincoln's respite of execution for Nathaniel Gordon, February 4, 1862.  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00182, page 1)

Abraham Lincoln,  
President of the United States of America,  
To all to whom these Presents shall come Greeting:  
Whereas, it appears that at a Term of the  
Circuit Court of the United States of America  
for the Southern District of New York holden in  
the month of November A.D. 1861, Nathaniel  
Gordon was indicted and convicted for being  
engaged in the Slave Trade, and was by the  
said Court sentenced to be put to death by  
hanging by the neck, on Friday the 7<sup>th</sup> day of  
February, A.D. 1862;  
And whereas, a large number of respect-  
able citizens have earnestly besought me to  
commute the said sentence of the said Nathaniel  
Gordon to a term of imprisonment for life, which  
application I have felt it to be my duty to re-  
fuse;  
And whereas, it has seemed to me  
probable that the unsuccessful applications  
made for the commutation of his sentence  
may have prevented the said Nathaniel

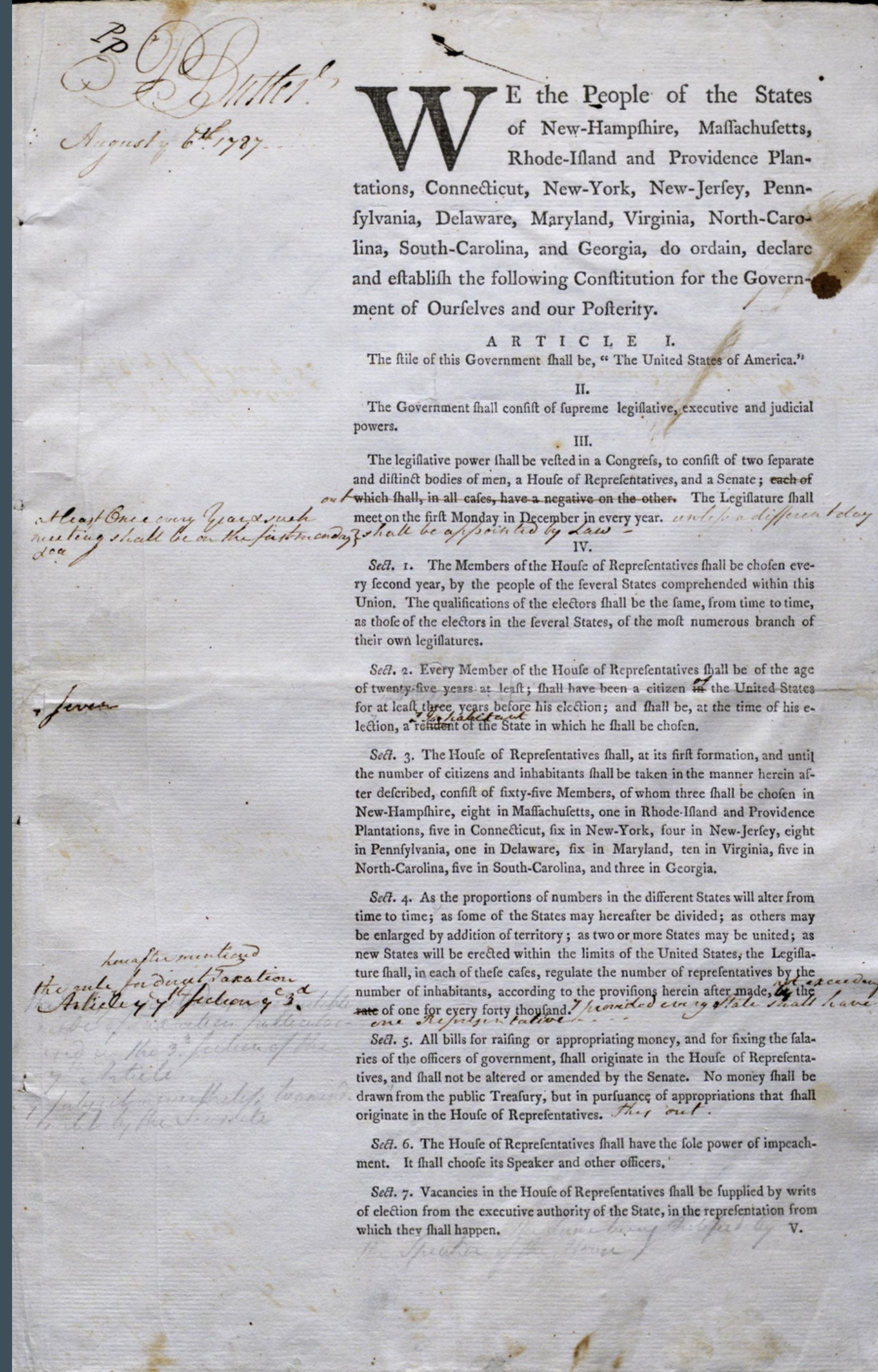


# The first draft of the Constitution

August 6, 1787

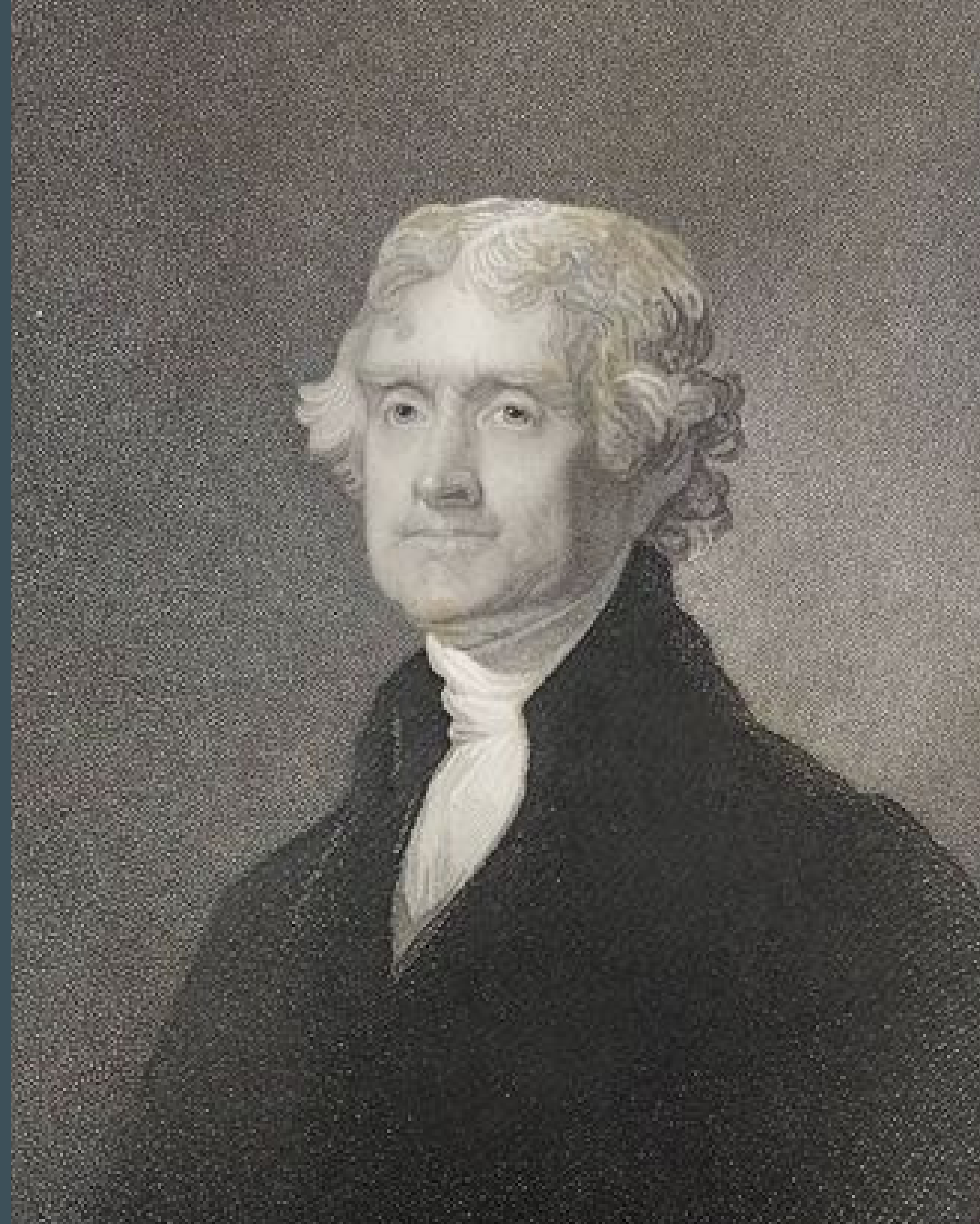
## Article 1, Section 9

“The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight . . .”



Pierce Butler's copy of the first draft of the US Constitution, August 6, 1787.  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00819.01, page 1)

# Thomas Jefferson



Portrait of President Thomas Jefferson, by John B. Forrest, circa 1810-1870.  
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1192)

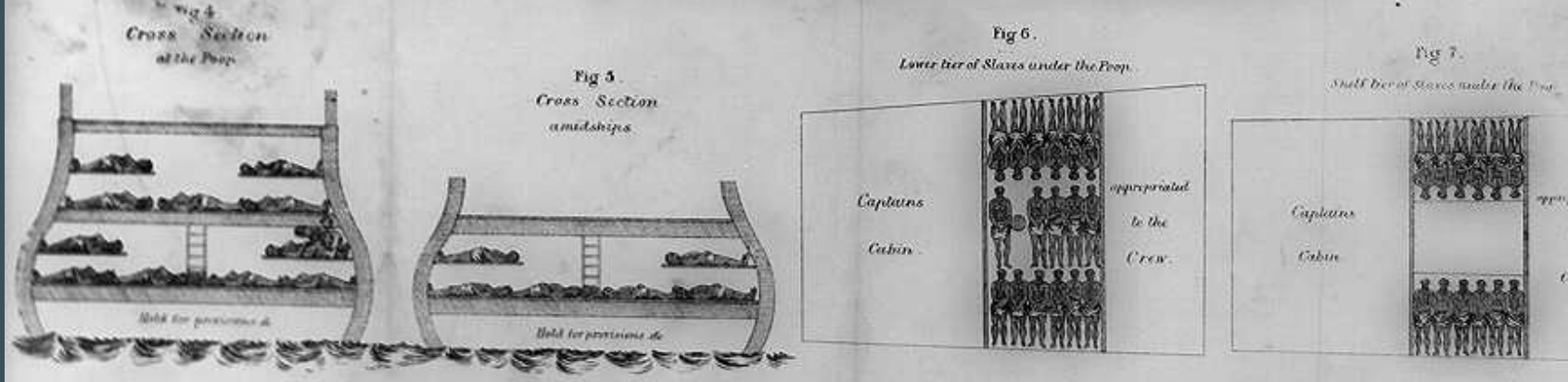
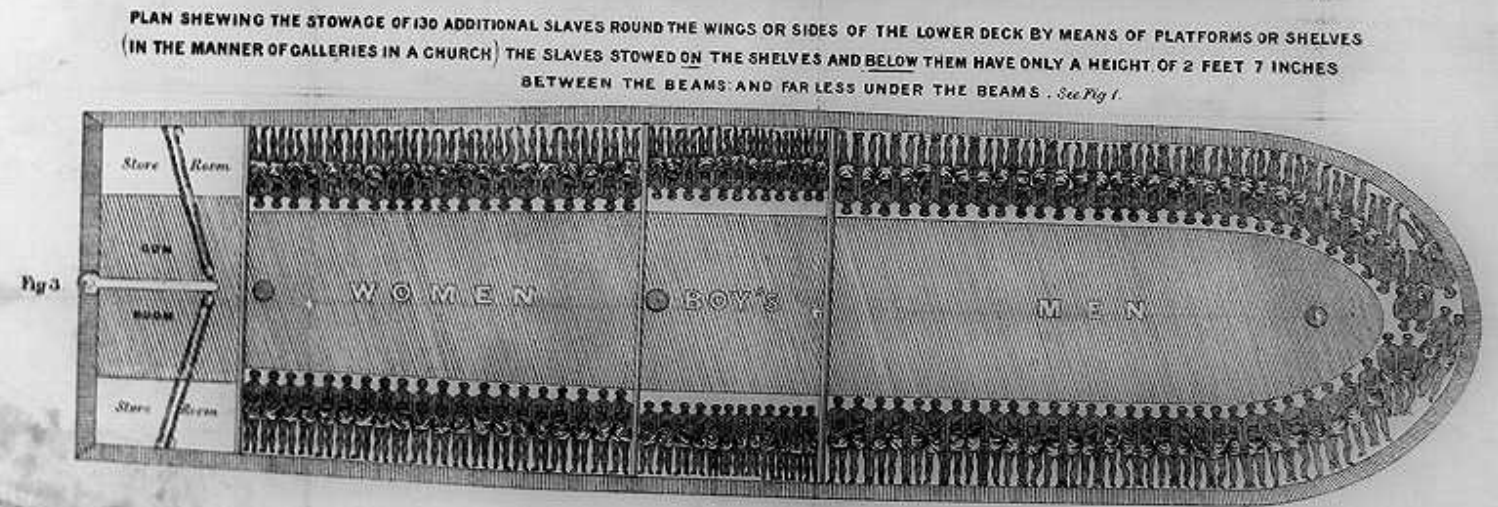
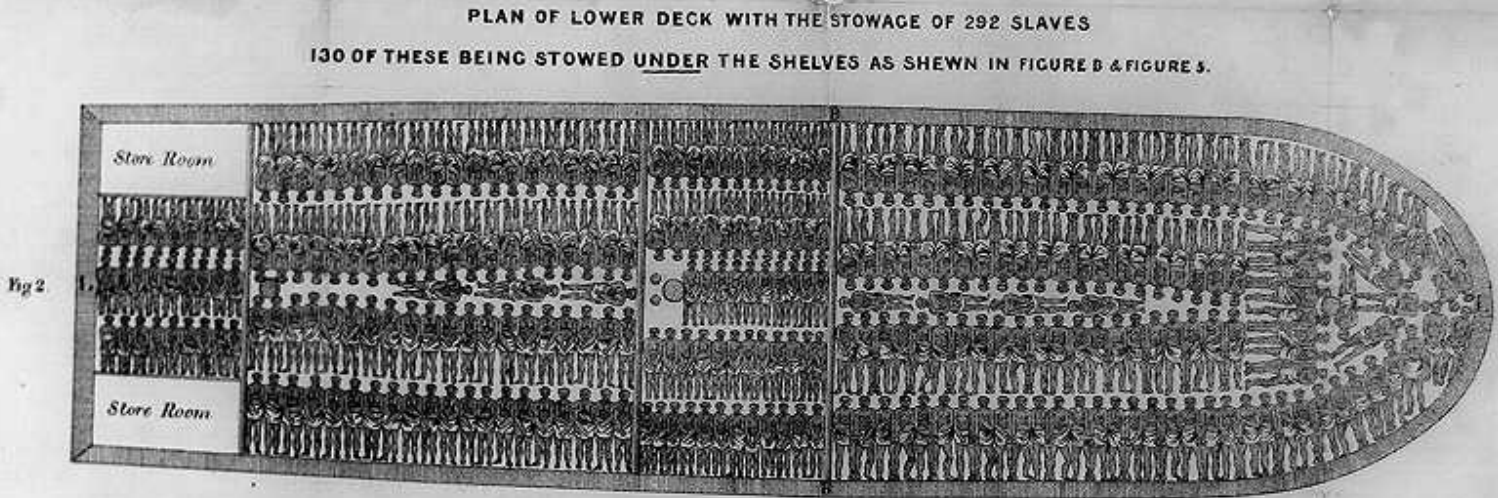
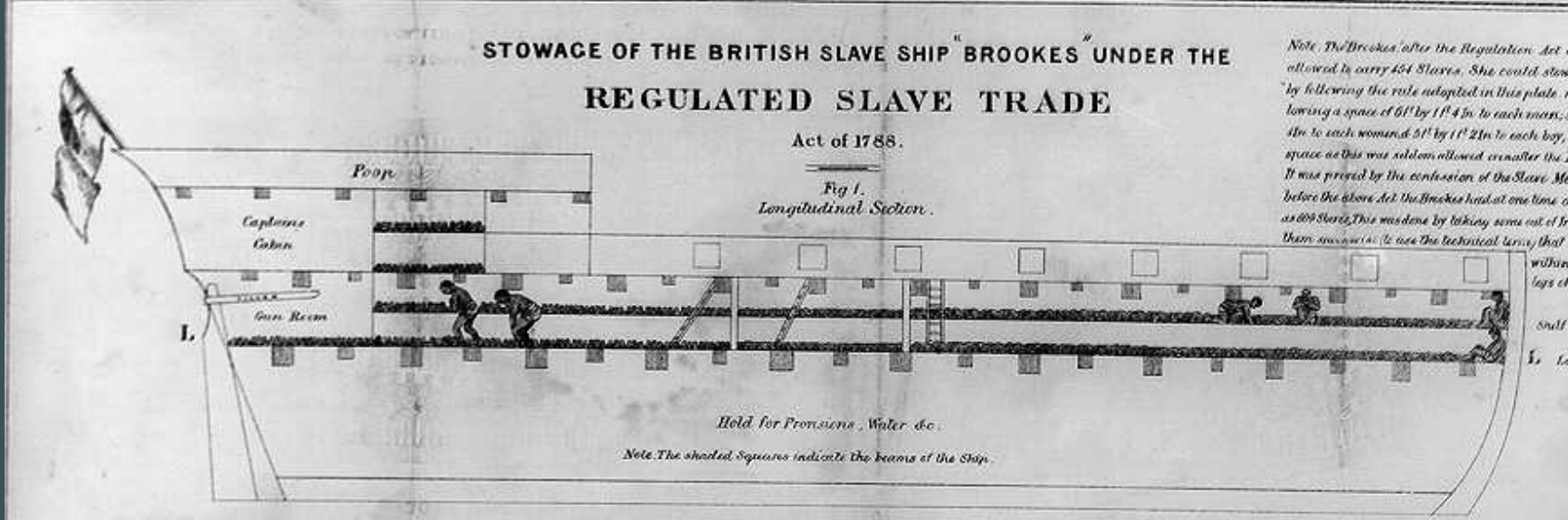


# British slave ship "Brookes"

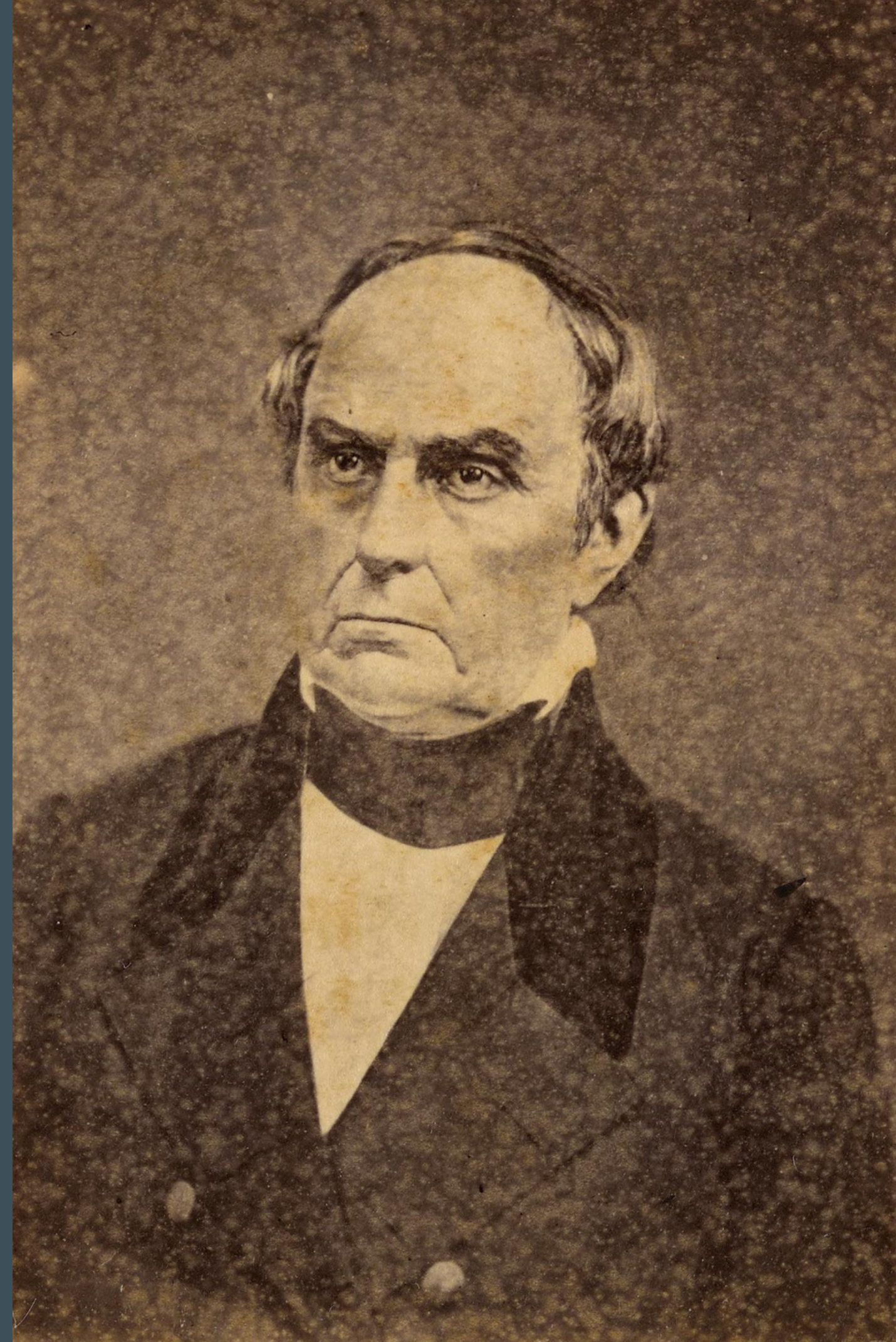
1788



Stowage of the British slave ship "Brookes" under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788, 1788.  
(Library of Congress)



# Webster-Ashburton Treaty, 1842

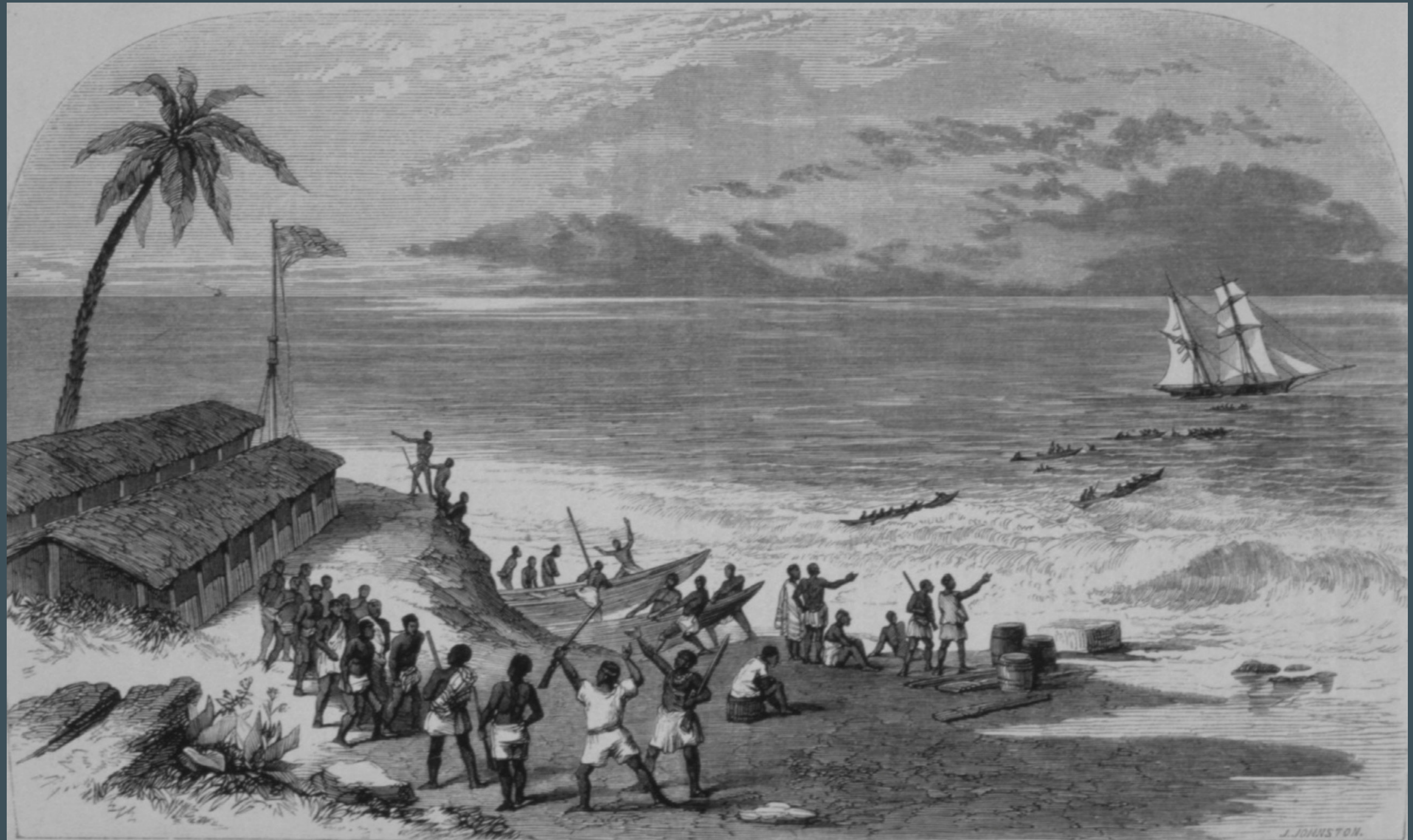


Portrait of Secretary of State Daniel Webster by Mathew B. Brady, 1862.  
(Library of Congress)



# Shipping Slaves through the Surf, West-African Coast

1856

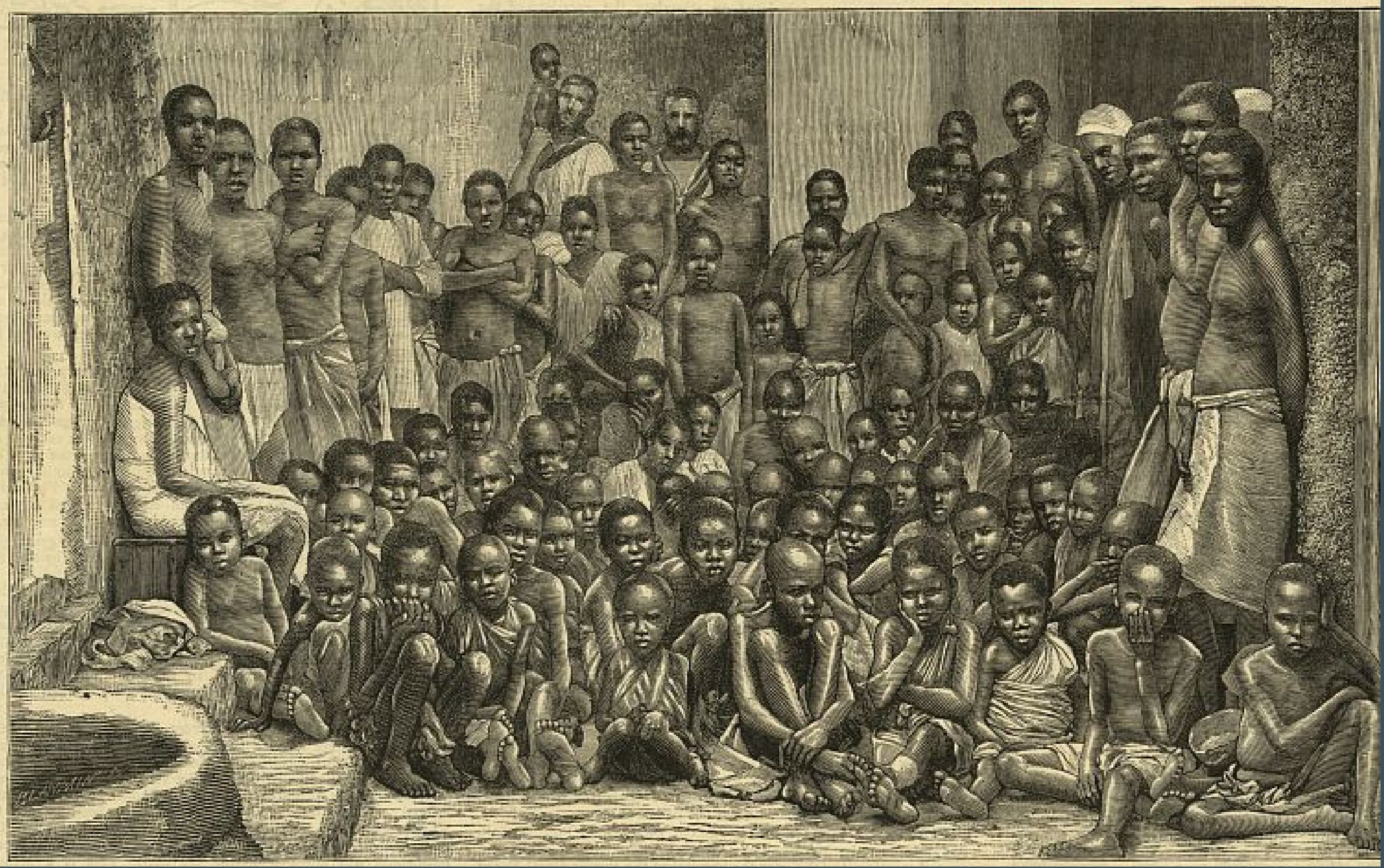


SHIPPING SLAVES THROUGH THE SURF, WEST-AFRICAN COAST. A CRUISER SIGNALLED IN SIGHT.  
(From a Sketch by a merchant on the Coast.)

“Shipping Slaves through the Surf, West-African Coast.” Printed in *The Church Missionary Intelligencer*, 1856. (slaveryimages.org)

# Rescued Africans

1884



“The African slave-trade - slaves taken from a dhow captured by H.M.S. ‘Undine,’” *The Graphic*, June 7, 1884. (Library of Congress)

# New York City in the Civil War Era

1856



“Coffee House Slip and New York Coffee House”  
by George Hayward, 1856.  
(New York Public Library)

ENGR. BY G. HAYWARD 125 WATER ST. N.Y.

FOR D. F. VALENTINE'S MANUAL 1856

COFFEE HOUSE SLIP AND NEW YORK COFFEE HOUSE.

PICTURE COLLECTION  
N.Y. PUBLIC LIBRARY

# Abraham Lincoln

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February 24, 1861

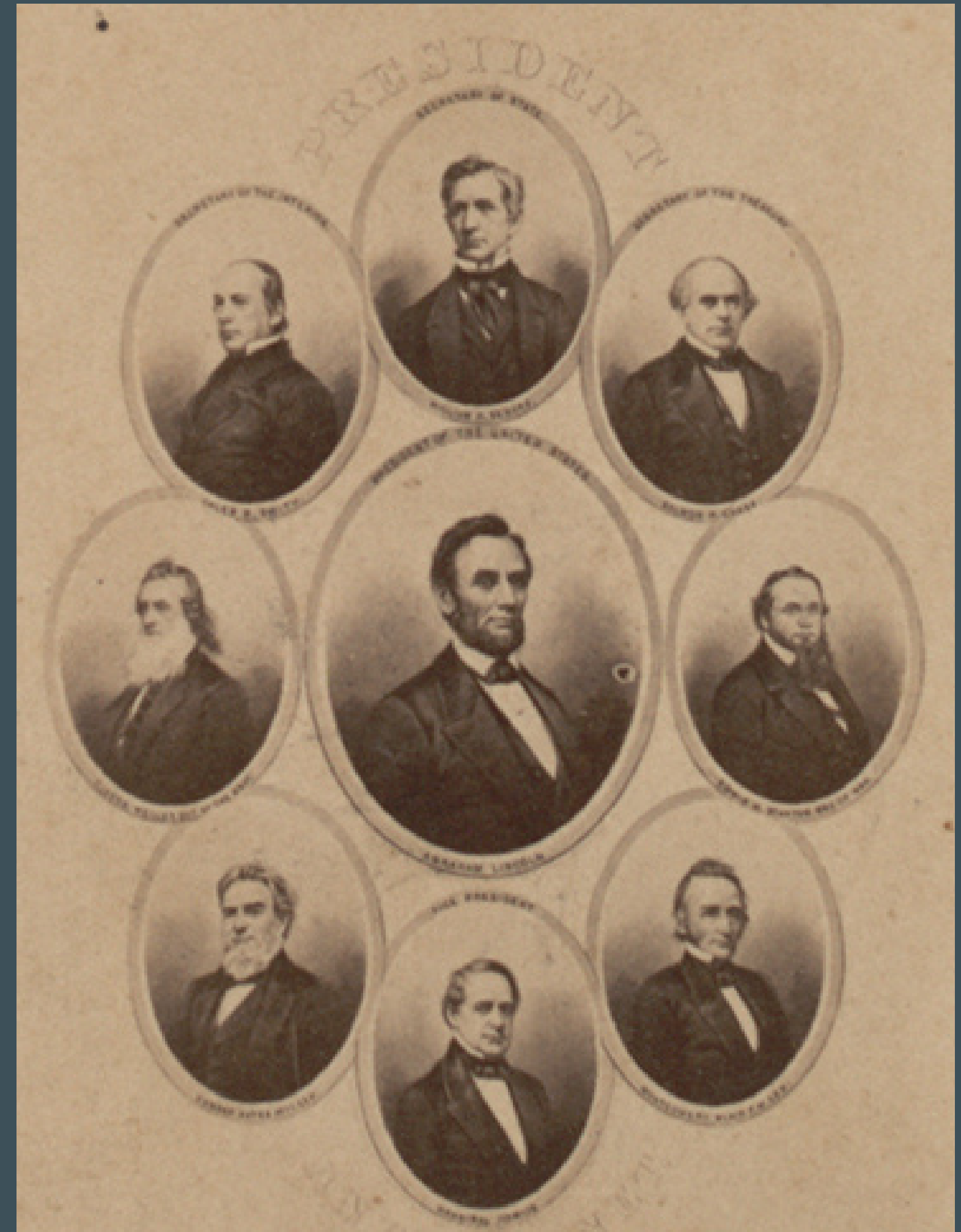


Portrait of Abraham Lincoln from Brady's National Portrait Gallery,  
February 24, 1861. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05111.02.0002)



# President Lincoln and His Cabinet

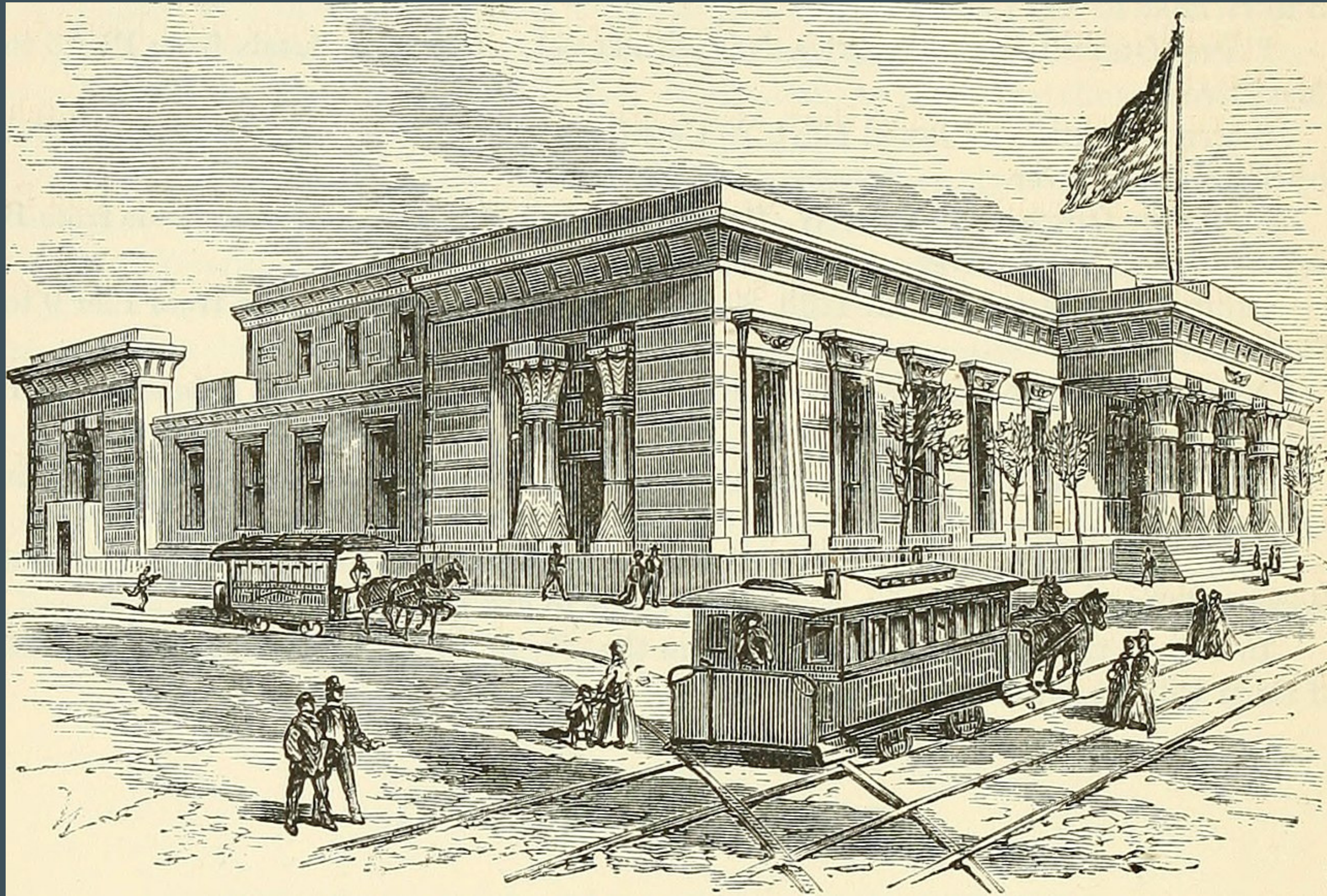
Circa 1862



President Lincoln and Cabinet, circa 1862.  
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00732.02)

# The Hall of Justice, or, "The Tombs"

1870



“Criminal Courts, in and for the City and County of New York” by John Hardy, 1870.  
(New York Public Library)

# Petition for Pardon

1862

*Brownson*

To the Hon. ABRAHAM LINCOLN,  
President of the United States:

THE UNDERSIGNED, citizens of PORTLAND, (Maine,) and vicinity, humbly represent, that CAPT. NATHANIEL GORDON, a native of this city, having been legally convicted of being engaged in the African Slave Trade, and sentenced to be executed on the 7th day of February, A. D. 1862, his life is now in your hands.

THEREFORE, while we condemn the crime with which he stands convicted, as we do all other crimes of a heinous character, we cannot forbear humbly craving from you Executive clemency. We do not presume to ask for an unconditional pardon, but we do humbly pray that Captain GORDON'S sentence may be commuted to imprisonment, even though your Excellency should make it during his life—and we do this in behalf of a young and devoted Wife and infant Son, for a most excellent and highly respectable Mother, for fond Sisters, and an extensive circle of the most respectable connections.

WE THEREFORE ask for that mercy on earth, which we all hope for in Heaven.

*And as in duty bound will ever pray.*

*A. H. Merryman*

*J. S. Badger*

*Albert Curtis*

*Phustis*

*David Sands*

*Z. W. Dearborn*

*Henry Orr*

*Beny + D Gray*

*Wm Dunning*

*Am J Harmon*

*Chas Crossman*

*W. Hinckson*

*James Hall*

*J. J. Fox*

*S. D.*



Petition for the Pardon of  
Nathaniel Gordon, 1862.  
(National Archives)

# Respite of execution for Nathaniel Gordon

February 4, 1862

"It becomes my painful duty to admonish the prisoner that, relinquishing all expectation of pardon by Human Authority, he refer himself alone to the mercy of the Common God and Father of all men."

Abraham Lincoln's respite of execution for Nathaniel Gordon, February 4, 1862.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00182, page 1)

Abraham Lincoln,

President of the United States of America,

To all to whom these Presents shall come Greeting:

Whereas, it appears that at a Term of the Circuit Court of the United States of America for the Southern District of New York hold in the month of November A.D. 1861, Nathaniel Gordon was indicted and convicted for being engaged in the Slave Trade, and was by the said Court sentenced to be put to death by hanging by the neck, on Friday the 7<sup>th</sup> day of February, A.D. 1862;

And whereas, a large number of respectable citizens have earnestly besought me to commute the said sentence of the said Nathaniel Gordon to a term of imprisonment for life, which application I have felt it to be my duty to refuse;

And whereas, it has seemed to me probable that the unsuccessful application made for the commutation of his sentence may have prevented the said Nathaniel





### THE ATTEMPT TO COMMIT SUICIDE.

Nothing worthy of note occurred until about three o'clock A.M. on Friday morning, when the keepers were alarmed by the prisoner being suddenly seized with convulsions. At first it was supposed that he was trying to strangle himself; but on a close examination it was evident that he was suffering from the effects of poison. Dr. Simmons, the prison physician, was immediately sent for, and stimulants were freely administered for the purpose of producing a reaction. For the first half hour or so the efforts of the physician appeared to have but little effect. The patient became quite rigid under the influence of the poison, his pulse could scarcely be felt, and it was thought that after all the gallows would be cheated of its victim. Drs. James R. Wood and Hodgman, who were also in attendance upon the prisoner, labored hard to resuscitate the dying man, and finally, by means of the stomach-pump and the use of brandy, the patient was sufficiently recovered to be able to articulate. It was not until eight o'clock, however, that the physicians had any hope of saving Gordon's life. From that hour, however, the prisoner gradually recovered, although he was subject to fainting fits for hours afterward. When sensible he begged of the doctors to let him alone, preferring, he said, to die by his own hand rather than suffer the ignominy of a public execution.

It has not been satisfactorily ascertained how or in what manner the unfortunate man procured the poison with which he contemplated self-destruction. The symptoms were evidently those of strychnine, and the only way in which the keepers can account for the presence of the poison is its introduction in the cigars which Gordon had smoked so freely the night before. On Thursday the prisoner was compelled to undergo a rigid search, his clothing was changed entirely, and he was placed in a new cell, so that it would seem impossible almost for him to have procured the poison in any other way than that suggested by his keepers.

A few minutes after eleven o'clock, when it was apparent to Gordon that the execution would certainly take place, notwithstanding his attempt at suicide, he sent for Marshal Murray, and said he had something of a private nature to communicate. The Marshal repaired to the bedside of the culprit and asked if any thing could be done to alleviate his sufferings. Gordon raised himself slowly from his cot, and with much difficulty, said: "Cut a lock of hair from my head and give it to my wife." Then taking a ring from his finger, he requested that that also should be sent to his wife in remembrance of her husband. The request was cheerfully complied with, and the official, quite overcome with emotion, left the unhappy man to his fate.

*Harper's Weekly*, March 8, 1862.

(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.04)



# “Execution of Gordon the slave-trader”

March 8, 1862



EXECUTION OF GORDON THE SLAVE-TRADER, NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 21, 1862.—[SEE PAGE 150.]

“Execution of Gordon the slave-trader,”

*Harper's Weekly*, March 8, 1862.

(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.04)

### THE EXECUTION OF GORDON, THE SLAVE-TRADER.

NOT the least important among the changes which are taking place in the current of national policy and public opinion is evidenced by the fact that on Friday, 21st February, in this city, NATHANIEL GORDON was hung for being engaged in the slave-trade. For forty years the slave-trade has been pronounced piracy by law, and to engage in it has been a capital offense. But the sympathy of the Government and its officials has been so often on the side of the criminal, and it seemed so absurd to hang a man for doing at sea that which, in half the Union, is done daily without censure on land, that no one has ever been punished under the Act. The Administration of Mr. Lincoln has turned over a new leaf in this respect. Henceforth the slave-trade will be abandoned to the British and their friends. The hanging of Gordon is an event in the history of our country.

He was probably the most successful and one of the worst of the individuals engaged in the trade. A native of Maine, he had engaged in the business many years since, and had always eluded justice. The particular voyage which proved fatal to him was undertaken in 1860. The following summary of the case we take from the *Times*:

It was in evidence (given by Lieutenant Henry D. Todd, U.S.N.) that the ship *Erie* was first discovered by the United States steamer *Mohican*, on the morning of the 5th day of August, 1860; that she was then about fifty miles outside of the River Congo, on the West Coast of Africa, standing to the northward, with all sail set; that she was flying the American flag, and that a gun from the *Mohican* brought her to.

It was shown by Lieutenant Todd that he went on board himself about noon, and took command of the prize. He found on board of the *Erie*, which our readers will remember was but 500 tons burden, eight hundred and ninety-seven (897) negroes, men, women, and children, ranging from the age of six months to forty years. They were half children, one-fourth men, and one-fourth women, and so crowded when on the main deck that one could scarcely put his foot down without stepping on them. The stench from the hold was fearful, and the filth and dirt upon their persons indescribably offensive.

At first he of course knew nothing about them, and until Gordon showed him, he was unable to stow them or feed them—finally he learned how, but they were stowed so closely that during the entire voyage they appeared to be in great agony. The details are sickening, but as fair exponents of the result of this close stowing, we will but mention that running sores and cutaneous diseases of the most painful as well as contagious character infected the entire load. Decency was unthought of; privacy was simply impossible—nastiness and wretchedness reigned supreme. From such a state of affairs we are not surprised to learn that, during the passage of fifteen days, twenty-nine of the sufferers died, and were thrown overboard.

It was proved by one of the seamen that he, with others, shipped on the *Erie*, believing her to be bound upon a legitimate voyage, and that, when at sea they suspected, from the nature of the cargo, that all was not right, which suspicion they mentioned to the Captain (Gordon), who satisfied them by saying that he was on a lawful voyage, that they had shipped as sailors, and would do better to return to their duties than to talk to him.

Subsequently they were told that they had shipped on a slaver, and that for every negro safely landed they should receive a dollar.

The negroes were taken on board the ship on the 7th day of August, 1860, and the entire operation of launching and unloading nearly nine hundred negroes, occupied but three quarters of an hour, or less time than a sensible man would require for his dinner. As the poor creatures came over the side Gordon would take them by the arm, and shove them here or there, as the case might be, and if by chance their persons were covered from entire exposure by a strip of rag, he would, with his knife, cut it off, fling it overboard, and send the wretch naked with his fellows.

Several of the crew testified, all agreeing that Gordon acted as Captain; that he engaged them; that he ordered them; that he promised them the \$1 *per capita*; that he superintended the bringing on board the negroes; and that he was, in fact, the master-spirit of the entire enterprise.

For this crime Gordon was arrested, tried, and, mainly through the energy of District-Attorney Smith, convicted, and sentenced to death. Immense exertions were made by his friends and the slave-trading interest to procure a pardon, or at least a commutation of his sentence, from President Lincoln, but without avail. He was sentenced to die on 21st. We abridge the following account of his last hours and execution [which we illustrate on page 157] from the *Herald* and *Times*:

# Upcoming Teacher Program

## REFRAMING LINCOLN: MYTH, MEMORY, AND CHANGING NARRATIVES

The Reframing Lincoln Seminar: Myth, Memory, and Changing Narratives is a weeklong PD event for up to 25 K–12 teachers at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois.

- Application Deadline: March 5, 2024
- Program Dates: July 21–26, 2024
- Location: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois
- Lead Scholar: Jonathan W. White
- Master Teacher: Justin Emrich



# Upcoming Teacher Program

## TEACHER SEMINARS ONLINE: SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE CIVIL WAR ERA

Examine the origins of the Civil War, focusing on the role of slavery and antislavery as factors of disunion; aspects of the war itself; and the contested memory and legacy of the war, in both commemoration and popular culture. Learn more and register at [gilderlehrman.org/teacherseminars](https://gilderlehrman.org/teacherseminars).



# Upcoming Program

VIRTUAL RESEARCH NIGHT

DAVID McCULLOUGH ESSAY PRIZE CONTEST

Learn More!

We are hosting a Virtual Research Night on Thursday, February 29, 2024, at 7 p.m. ET to support teachers and students interested in learning more about the prize.

Register at [gilderlehrman.org/virtual-research-night](https://gilderlehrman.org/virtual-research-night).



# MA in American History

Registration for the Summer  
2024 semester of the  
Gettysburg College–Gilder  
Lehrman MA in American  
History opens Saturday,  
March 16. Applications are  
open now.



# Upcoming Programs

## INSIDE THE VAULT:

- March 7, 2024: The Overland Trail with Dr. Sarah Keyes (University of Nevada, Reno)
- April 4, 2024: Japanese Servicemen in World War II with author Bruce Henderson (winner of the 2022 Gilder Lehrman Military History Prize)

## BOOK BREAKS: February 4 at 2 p.m. ET (11 a.m. PT)

- Allen C. Guelzo will discuss his book *Our Ancient Faith: Lincoln, Democracy, and the American Experiment*

