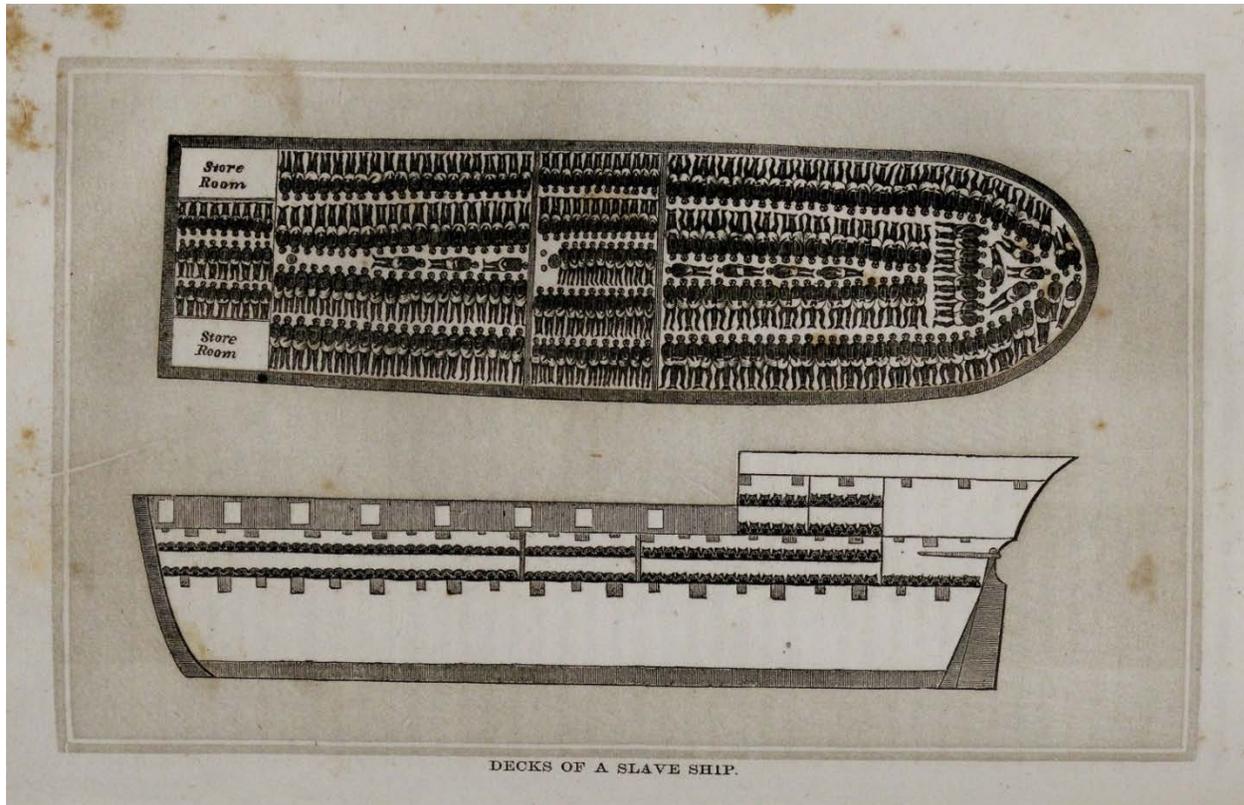


The Middle Passage

Introduction

Historians estimate that approximately 472,000 Africans were kidnapped and brought to the North American mainland between 1619 and 1860.¹ Of these, nearly 18 percent died during the transatlantic voyage from Africa to the New World. Known as the “middle passage,” this sea voyage could range from one to six months, depending on the weather. On large ships, several hundred slaves could be packed below decks. Branded and chained together, they endured conditions of squalor, and disease and starvation claimed many lives.



“Decks of a Slave Ship” from *The History of Slavery and the Slave Trade, Ancient and Modern*, compiled by William O. Blake (Columbus OH: J. & H. Miller, 1861). (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00267.038)

Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, described the horrors of the middle passage in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, published in 1789.

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocating us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation

¹ David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. (Yale University Press, 2010) p 205.

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was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs [*large buckets for human waste*], into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.

In 1748, the sloop *Rhode Island*, owned by the prominent Livingston family, left New York on a slave-trade voyage. It arrived in West Africa on January 18, 1749, and over the next four months Captain Peter James acquired 120 slaves along the African coast. By the time the vessel arrived back in New York in July 1749, “they buried 37 Slaves & Since 3 more & 2 more likely to die.” According to historian Philip Misevich, a loss of 32 percent of the slaves on a voyage was extremely high and it was therefore most likely a financial disaster for the Livingstons.²

Captain James carefully recorded the captives’ deaths, day by day, in his account book.

April	Women	May	Men	Boys	boys	girls	June	June	Men	Boys	Boys	girls	Women	July	Men	Boys	Boys	girls	Women
1		1						1					1	1			1	1	
2		2						2			1			2					
3		3						3						3	1				
4		4						4						4					
5		5						5						5			1	1	1
6		6						6			1			6					
7		7						7						7				1	
8		8						8				1		8			1		
9		9						9						9					
10		10			2			10						10					
11		11						11			1			11					
12		12						12						12					
13		13				1		13						13					
14		14						14						14					1
15		15						15						15					
16		16			1			16				1		16					
17		17						17			2			17					
18	1	18						18					1	18		1			
19		19						19						19			1		
20		20						20						20					
21		21						21						21					
22		22						22						22			1	2	
23		23						23						23					
24		24						24			1			24					
25		25						25				2		25					
26		26						26			1	2		26			1		
27		27			1			27						27					
28		28		1				28						28					
29		29						29						29					
30	1	30						30						30					
		31												31					

“An Account of what Slaves Died on the Cost and upon The Passedge From guine to New york and when Died on Bord the Sloope Rhode Island—1749.” From the Sloop *Rhode Island* account book, 1748–1749. (The New-York Historical Society)

² Philip Misevich, “In Pursuit of Human Cargo: Philip Livingston and the Voyage of the Sloop Rhode Island,” *New York History* 86, No. 3 (2005): 185–204.

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On July 29, Robert Livingston reported to Petrus Dewitt on several business dealings—including the loss of the slaves from the *Rhode Island*. Livingston’s callous description demonstrates the slave-trade investor’s emphasis on the financial loss, rather than the human cost:

We have thank God had the good fortune of haveing one of our Guinea Sloops come in, tho after along passage of 79 days in which time they buried 37 Slaves & Since 3 more & 2 more likely to die which is an accident not to be helped, and which if had not happend we Should have made a Golden Voyage but as it is there will not be much left I fear, unless the other Sloop meets with better Luck

Questions for Discussion

1. Study the image “Decks of a Slave Ship.” How and why would abolitionists use this illustration to rally opponents of the slave trade?
2. Study the image “Decks of a Slave Ship.” How might those involved in the slave trade use this image in order to attract investors?
3. Describe the conditions reported in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* that were responsible for the loss of life on board slave ships.
4. Why did Captain James keep detailed records about the loss of lives on the sloop *Rhode Island*?
5. What does the letter from Robert Livingston to Petrus Dewitt tell us about the concerns of slave traders?

The Middle Passage

Transcript

Robert Livingston to Petrus Dewitt, July 29, 1749. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03107.04449)

New York y^e 29 July 1749

M^f Petrus Dewitt,

Sir

Yours of the 20 Instant I have before me, but at this time am not at Leasure to answer you perticularly, Wadell, Lilly, & Lawrence are all on Sailing, and then I am not very well my Self at present I agree with you that it will be for my Interest to have as much ore Carted this Summer as possible, wherefore lett it be Done as Soon as you can and if possible kept asunder from my mothers, which if cannot be done, then do you & Jamme as you best can; I also approve of your notion to advertize the Cutting of the wood for Coaling, do it on Rec^t. of this while I imagine it begins to be time & gitt Connor to take the first Cuting he Certenly is a Sharp fellow, and can manage those folks for us if he pleases, & I think he ought to Serve us in this, & every thing Else, I Shall write for the hard Stones that are yett wanting & gitt them in time its certenly much best to have them Carried up to the works in winter, you must agree with the wood Cutters best you can, wherewith I Shall be Content; as to the N England money that is Indeed an article worth Consideration & how to Determine it to yr best advantage I know not, you certenly take it for more then any other person if you allow 1 for 6, its not taken any where for less then 62 at which price I think you ought to have taken it all this Summer, but how your Engagements, Stand with your Carters, ore Digers, & wood Cutters, with Regard to this money falling & whether that may not be a Damage to the works to lower it at this time I cant Realy Say, wherefore must leave it to you, but would have you to continue the takeing of it at 6, no longer then to fulfill those Engagements, & leave no Room for those folks to Cast any Reflections upon us; you will do well to Receive no more of this money at 6 for one then what you'll want to pay to your Carters & as this is the only way I Se at present to gitt rid of it without aloss

I am much Concernd to find that the Brick maker is out of order could have wished he had Continued in helth and afinished the 60,000 as I Shall want them & more, if he groes better lett him finish that Quantity at least, if not we must do best we can with what is done and gitt the Rest best I can am now Diging my foundation So that I have more trouble on my hands, then I

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can well manage alone <text loss> and the not being able to Sell any of my flower is a <text loss> ning affair to me in the article of money, and as to give you a <text loss> to Sell on wheat I cannot unless its So low, as that people will not care to Sell for & Since I am that I cannot afford to give more then 3/p^r Peck and that only for a Short time I Expect that it will 3/p^r Bushel in the fall when new wheat comes to market, as Philad^a & Jersey have by much a larger crop then ever & I believe this Province too God be thanked for his mercy & Goodness,

We have thank God had the good fortune of haveing one of our Guinea Sloops come in, tho after along passage of 79 days in which time they buryed 37 Slaves & Since 3 more & 2 more likely to die which is an accident not to be helped, and which if had not happend we Should have made a Golden Voyage but as it is there will not be much left I fear, unless the other Sloop meets with better Luck we have now about 80 well Slaves. 44 ounces of Gold & goods of E[l]ephants teeth and Capt Lindsey had about one half of our Cargo Shiped from hence on board of him when Cap^t. James left him So that we Stand a Chance of makeing a Saveing Voyage Still, am now Sending you up Eight of them & the Boat which I bought from the Rest of the Concern'd <text loss> cheap as Slaves are Sold Should have Sent you more but <text loss> the boys where to Small, these I Send are of the biggest Sort, <text loss> I must first hear from you before I dare venture to Send any more Inclosed you have amemorandum of the costs of them, on which believe you may Venture to advance 5. 6. 7. & 8 pounds p^r head according as you find them Likely, of which you'll be the best judge when you come to Se them, when Lindsey comes in Shall Send you more of them, but if the Size of these Boys will do can Send you more next Trip wherefore lett me know.

as to the Horses I have Spoake to my mother about them & She Desired me to acquaint you that She approves of your Selling them as fast as you can which do when you have opportunity before it be too late in the year lett Volkert pick out those I am to have by my fathers will & then do you & he pick out as many more as you jude I Shall necessarily want which Suppose cannot be less then 8 geldens more, the Black mare I would have for my Saddle horse, So that you Should buy 1 or 2 Breeding mares for me besides those 6 I am to have; if the Bridge at Sober cannot be made this fall it will be necessary that a long & thick Log be lade Laid over the Creek for the folks to walk over in the Spring when the water is high to Lift the gates, which if I mistake not are on the <text loss> of the Creek. therefore I think very necessary, as to the wheat at angram if there be more then the folks want you may lett it be brought to the mill and

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there lett it be ground & bolted for my mother. I cannot take any of it to my use, we have just now Sold Less boys out of the Sloop, Then those I now Send you for £ 42. this for your Government, Inclosed you have Invoice of what I now Send you amounting £ 489.13.4. in

2.16–

Such goods as will be to your Likeing, and as I beleive you want in the Store, I have a parcell of Barcelona handcarchiefs by me, if you want more of them lett me know. Rum I hope you'll have Enough untill the boat can be back again when I Expect to have 6 more Ready, as to money I am So Stratened that I cannot lett you have any more as I am obliged to Ship all my produce & for which I Shall Send money before next Spring; I also Send 112 bs hemp for Jamme to make a Takle fall for the mill & its very good & much better then what Groes in this Country lett him Spin & lay it while its dry whether, and not much to do in the mill, the negro man I jude not to be above 20 years of age <text loss> worth £ 56. however you are to do as you think best but under £54. you Should not Sell him, The Goods I wrote for from London will Dou<text loss> be Shiped me as I have made provision to pay for them Have no time <text loss> more to you now, have Sent you 12 watermillons for you and M^f Volkart

I am

S^r Your Most Humble Serv^t

Rob^t. Livingston Jun^r.

I Send up an Ew Lamb of the Large Breed, from London, I had it for a present lett Care be taken of it–

The Middle Passage

Images

New York July 29 1749

Mr. Petrus Dewitt

Sir

Yours of the 20 Instant I have before me, but at this time
 am not at leisure to answer you particularly, Waddell, Lilly, & Lawrence
 are all on sailing, and therefore am not very well my self at present
 I agree with you that it will be for my Interest to have as much or better
 this Summer as possible, wherefore lett it be Done as soon as you can
 and if possible kept as near from my smother, which if cannot
 be Done, then do you & Vammie as you best can, I also approve of
 your notion to adventure the getting of the wood for baling, do it onlee
 if the while I imagine it begins to be time, & gett know to take
 the first cutting he Certainty is altho' a fellow, and can manage
 these folks for us if he pleases, & I think he ought to tender us in
 this, & every else, I shall write for the part of things that are yett wanting
 & gett them in time its Certainty much best to have them campt up
 to the works in winter, you must agree with the wood Cutters best
 you can, also with I shall be Content, as to the Money that
 I indeed on estate with Consideration & how to Determine it
 know not, you certainly take it for more then any other person if
 you allow, for 6, its not taken any where for less then 6, at which
 price I think you ought to have taken it all this Summer, but how
 your Engagements stand with your Carters, ore Diggers, & wood Cutters,
 with regard to this moneys falling & whether, that may not be Damage
 to the works, I cant exactly say, wherefore must leave it to you, but
 would have you to condemn the taking of it at 6, no longer then
 to fulfill their Engagements, & leave no room for those folks to cast
 any Reflections upon us, you will do well to receive no more of this money
 of 6 for one then what youe want to pay to your Carters & this is the
 only way I see at present to gett rid of it without also

I am much surpris'd to find that the kind mother's out of order
 could have wish'd he had continued in helth and finished the 60,000
 as I shall want them & more, if he goes better lett him finish that
 quantity at least, if not we must do best we can with what is done
 and gett the best best I can am now digging my foundations so that
 I have

Robert Livingston to Petrus Dewitt, July 29, 1749.
 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03107.04449 p.1)

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I have more trouble on my hands, than I can well manage alone
 and the not being able to sell any of my flax, is a
 trying affair to me in the articles of money, and as to give you
 to sell on wheat I cannot, unless it is so low, as that people will not
 care to sell for since I am that I cannot afford to give more then 1/2 p^{ts}
 and that only for a short time for I expect that it will be 1/2 p^{ts} bushel
 in the fall when new wheat comes to market, as Philad. & Jersey have
 by much a larger crop then ever & I believe this Province also God be
 thanked for his mercy & goodness.

We have thank God had the good fortune of having one of
 our Guinea's Sloops come in, the 27th along for 60 days of 79 days in
 which time they brought 37 slaves, since the 2^d of June which
 which is an accident not to be helped, and which if had not happen
 we should have made a golden voyage but as it is there will not be
 much left, I fear, unless the other sloops meet with better luck we have
 now about 100 well shaves, 44 ounces of gold & good of elephants teeth
 and Cap. Lindsey had about one half of our cargo shipped from home
 on board of him when Cap. James left him, so that we stand a chance
 of making a saving voyage at all, am now sending you up light
 of them & the boat which I bought from the best of the Commodore's
 cheap as slaves are sold should have sent you more but
 the boys were so small, these I stand one of the biggest ones, so
 I must first hear from you before I dare venture to send any more
 I enclosed you have a memorandum of the cost of them, on which
 believe you may venture to advance 5. 6. 7. & 10 pounds each
 according as you find them likely, of which you will be the best judge
 when you come to see them, when Lindsey comes in I shall send you
 one of them, but if the size of the boys will do I can send you
 more next trip, wherefore left me know.

As to the slaves I have spoke to my mother about them & she desires
 me to acquaint you that she approves of your selling them as fast as you can
 which to do when you have opportunity before it be too late in this year sell
 Lockert pick out those I am to have by my father's will & then do
 you & he pick out as many more as you judge I shall necessarily want,
 which I suppose cannot be less then 100 golden more, the black man
 I would have for my saddle horse, so that you should buy 100 & 2 breeding mares
 for me besides those I want to have, if the bridge at Robber cannot be
 be made this fall it will be necessary that a long & thick log be laid

Robert Livingston to Petrus Dewitt, July 29, 1749.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03107.04449 p. 2)

The Middle Passage

Said over the Creek for the folks to walk over in the spring when the
 water is high to lift the gates which if I mistake not are on the
 creek therefore I think very necessary as to the wheat I am
 if there be more than the folks want you may lett it be brought to the mill
 and there lett it be ground & bottled for my mother. I can not take any of it
 to my use, we had just now sold 200 bushels out of the stack, then there was
 sold you for £42. this for your government, I enclosed you have Invoice
 of what I now send you amounting £40. 1. 3. 4. in such goods as
 will be to your liking, and as I believe you want in the West I have
 a parcel of Barcelona handkerchiefs by me, if you want more of them
 lett me know. I am I hope you will have enough until the boat
 can be sent again, we will be glad to have 6 more ready as to
 money I am so straitened that I cannot lett you have any more
 as I am obliged to ship all my goods by fold which I shall send
 money before next spring. I also intend 112 Stumps for James to make
 a table for the mill & its very good & much better then what grows in
 this Country lett him spin & lay it while its dry whether and not much
 to do in the mill, the negro man I judge not to be above 20 years of age
 worth 50. however you are to do as you think best but under 50. you
 would not sell him. The goods I wrote for from London will doubt
 be shipped me as I have made provision to pay for them I have no time
 to say more to you now, have sent you 12 water milles for your use & I shall
 send you

I send up an ewe Lamb
 of the large breed from
 London, I had it for
 present lett it be
 taken of it

I'm Your Most Humble Serv.
 Rob^t. Livingston Jun^r

Robert Livingston to Petrus Dewitt, July 29, 1749.

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03107.04449 p. 3)