AMERICAN RUM, AFRICAN CONSUMERS, AND THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Sean M. Kelley

University of Essex

skelley@essex.ac.uk

Abstract:

The present article examines the North American rum-for-captives trade, which like other New World-based trades, relied heavily on sugar cane-derived alcohol. It argues that African consumption patterns played a key role in shaping the American rum-for-captives trade during the years 1730-1807. Most interpretations of the rum trade offer what might be termed a “supply-side” interpretation of the slave trade, an emphasis on voyage planning and decision making on the part of European and American slave traders. While these were important factors, an examination of the rum trade highlights the important demand-side factors that shaped the slave trade. The most important market for American rum was the Gold Coast, but slave traders still needed to adopt a range of practices in order to cope with the problem of oversupply. The Upper Guinea Coast served as secondary market, but here the expansion of Islam, in part a response to the growing trade in captives, imposed limits on the demand for alcohol. After independence in 1783, American merchants were able to gain access to French and Dutch India goods, which allowed them to diversify their assortment of trade goods, especially after 1793. Carrying textiles in addition rum helped the United States to become the third-largest carrier immediately before abolition in 1808.

I. Introduction

In the autumn of 1774, Rhode Island’s Samuel and William Vernon were planning the twenty-ninth African voyage of their mercantile career. In this instance they were in
discussions with the London merchant Robert Heatley about the possibility of partnering in a
slave trading voyage to the Gambia. Heatley, who had traded for many years on the Gambia,
was not sanguine about the prospects of the proposed voyage. “A large Cargo from North
Am. is no way fitt for Gambia,” noted Heatley, explaining that “the Consumption of Rum is
so small there to any other part of ye Coast.” Heatley was partly correct—textiles, personal
items, and metalware ruled the market in Upper Guinea—but despite his years of experience,
he underestimated the demand for rum in the Gambia. It was indeed possible, even profitable,
to trade rum there for captives; Americans had been doing so for decades, and in other parts
of Africa as well. And indeed, the Vernons would soon send their vessel to Upper Guinea
without Heatley’s help. Yankee merchants like the Vernons, however, had to confront the
simple fact that the demand for rum in Africa was finite and geographically specific. Success
in the trade required tailoring their approach to appeal to African consumer tastes, which they
accomplished by adopting a broad repertoire of commercial strategies. ²

The literature on the American rum trade in Africa is an old one, dating back to the late
nineteenth century. Americanists know its basic outline quite well: merchants, based mostly
in New England but also from New York, distilled West Indian molasses into rum, traded the
rum for captives in Africa, sold the captives in the Caribbean, and returned home with sugar,
molasses, and bills of exchange on London merchant houses. Familiar as this narrative is to
historians, almost all of the existing literature has been based on a supply-side model of the
slave trade that views the planning and decision making of European and American slave
traders as the primary shaping force. This interpretation is not wrong, of course, but it does
rest on the unstated assumption that Africans were entirely passive consumers of European
goods, rum in this case.³ However, as recent work has emphasized, African consumer tastes
exerted a strong influence on the slave trade, equal to if not more important than such factors
as wind patterns, mercantilist restrictions, and voyage organization. Trade was possible only
insofar as certain items were in demand; absent that, it would have been more difficult and less profitable, perhaps even impossible. Aware of this, slave traders spent a great deal of energy trying to gauge African tastes and ran their businesses accordingly. Supply-side interpretations, then, cannot in themselves explain the contours of the American rum-for-captives trade. Attention to African consumption patterns can reveal much about about the geography of rum trade, as well as its operation at the regional level.  

In addition to underscoring the importance of African consumption as a force in the slave trade, recent work has also confirmed that consumers in almost all regions demanded European and Asian manufactures above all else. In fact, textiles alone may have accounted for half of the total value of all trade goods exchanged for captives. Alcohol was a minor trade good in the aggregate, though disproportionately significant to slavers based in the Americas, for whom textiles were often too expensive. But Africans did not consume alcohol in general; they preferred specific drinks. French brandy, for example ruled the Bight of Benin, while Brazilian cachaça (gerebita) was the spirit of choice in Angola. The Bight of Biafra imported almost no alcohol at all, preferring, it seems, locally produced fermented beverages. The origins of these regional preferences are difficult to document, but it is reasonable to suppose that spirits introduced early on acquired a self-perpetuating popularity as they became integrated into cultural life.  

American “rum men,” as the Yankee slavers were known, could not ignore the geography of African alcohol preference; they had to work within its boundaries. In practice, this meant trading in the only two regions that were receptive to rum: Upper Guinea and the Gold Coast. But demand for rum varied even within these two areas. The Gold Coast was the greater market by far, the destination of three-fifths of all American vessels. As a result, however, traders often had to deal with glutted markets, as well as adapt themselves to the regional gold-based system of exchange. Upper Guinea furnished a secondary market for
New England rum, but demand was limited, as Robert Heatley correctly perceived. What he may or may not have realized was that the demand for spirits was likely depressed by the steady spread of Islam throughout the region at exactly the same time that the slave trade was reaching its peak.  

The American rum-for-captives trade began around the turn of the eighteenth century. Prior to that, American merchants had dabbled in the slave trade but their participation was limited by the lack of a suitable trade good. Early outbound cargoes included such commodities as cattle and corn, which was to be exchanged at Barbados for a suitable cargo before sailing to Africa. One early trader forwent the trade goods altogether and simply abducted captives by force. The emergence of a local distilling industry in the late seventeenth century, however, made it possible for American merchants to institute a regular slave trade. From the time this trade matured, around 1730, to its abolition in 1808, Americans averaged about twenty voyages per year (not including the years 1776-1783, when slave trading ceased due to the American Revolution). Over this period, the peak the American slave trade, rum accounted for 85-90 percent of the value of all trade goods. In contrast, spirits, including both rum and brandy, made up about 2 percent of the value of all trade goods carried aboard British vessels.  

The contours of the rum-for-captives trade, then, its geography, its volume, and its conventions, were dictated not by American merchants but by African merchants and the consumers they supplied. The present discussion will begin with an examination of the economic role of rum as a trade good, with special reference to the prevailing supply-side interpretation, what might be called the “prime cost thesis.” The next section examines the rum trade on the Gold Coast, the most important region of American trade in Africa. Although demand for rum on the Gold Coast was considerable, it was not unlimited, and Americans had to devise a range of strategies to be profitable. The next section examines the
rum trade in Upper Guinea, where demand was much smaller. The final section explores transformations in the rum trade that accompanied North America’s shift from British colonial region to independent republic after 1783. On the one hand, independence meant that Americans were legally prohibited from trading at the British forts on the Gold Coast, their customary markets, an obstacle that was compounded by rising captive prices. On the other hand, as major neutral carriers during the Wars of the French Revolution, Yankee merchants suddenly found themselves in possession of the much-valued Indian and European textiles. The final years of the legal slave trade, ca. 1793-1808, saw a partial shift away from reliance on rum and toward a more balanced assortment of trade goods, which in turn coincided with a great upsurge in American slave trading.

II. Rum as a Trade Good: The Prime Cost Thesis

Traditional interpretations of the rum-for-captives trade privilege the supply side, the notion that the rum trade succeeded due to economies stemming from the production of rum, rather than emphasizing consumer demand. The two are not mutually exclusive, but ignoring the appeal of rum to consumers implies that Africans were passive and undiscriminating recipients. The first of these supply-side arguments, and the one most easily dismissed, is the claim that unlike other trade goods, rum did not require “sorting,” meaning that it did not need to be combined with other goods in order to be accepted in trade by African dealers. There is some truth to this assertion. Between 85 and 90 percent of the value of all trade goods carried aboard American vessels consisted of rum (with the remainder consisting of tobacco), and some captains were able to purchase all of their captives using rum alone. Trade books from the Rhode Island vessels Marygold and Adventure, which sailed in 1759 and 1773, respectively, reveal that their masters used rum to pay for 99 percent of the total purchase price of their captives. On the 1770 voyage of the Newport brig Othello, rum
accounted for about 94 percent of the purchase price for captives, and in 1803 the master of
the Bristol schooner *Punch* agreed to trade his entire cargo of 6,000 gallons of rum for forty-
eight captives. British vessels, laden with textiles and other manufactures, were rarely if ever
able to trade a single commodity for captives. For them, having the optimal “assortment” of
goods was essential. However, as will come clear shortly, there are many examples of
American shipmasters “sorting” their cargoes. And even those who managed to pay for their
captives with rum alone found it necessary to use other goods, often gold, to pay for
provisions and customs.\(^8\)

A far more persuasive supply-side case is the argument that “prime cost,” or the amount
paid for the trade goods at a vessel’s home port, gave American rum men a cost advantage of
up to 100 percent over British vessels dealing in the usual textiles and manufactures. David
Richardson first tentatively advanced this interpretation in 1979 with an analysis of one
vessel’s trade book, and two years later, Alison Jones applied prime cost to a much wider
survey of trade books, finding that Americans enjoyed an advantage of between 40 percent
and 49.5 percent over British vessels. In other words, rum that cost the Americans 20
shillings at times could buy almost 30 shillings worth of captives.\(^9\)

The prime cost thesis may have some validity. Rhode Islander George Sweet even said
so explicitly, reporting that he managed to pay only £20 “prime cost” while the “goods men”
(i.e. European vessels carrying the usual dry goods) were paying £30.\(^10\) However, there is
reason to believe that the prime cost advantage was rarely so great. Sweet, as it happens, was
only able to apply his prime cost advantage to the purchase of fifteen captives, far fewer than
he would have wanted. The advantage presumably did not apply to his subsequent deals.
And as Richardson pointed out in his own study, other costs, such as the difficulty of
recovering proceeds from voyages due to poor ties with London financiers, likely eroded
whatever advantage the Rhode Islanders enjoyed. Moreover, it is possible to identify still
other factors specific to rum, such as the problem of leakage, which affected virtually every
cargo and effectively increased prime costs. Leakage of 5 to 10 percent was “considered
standard,” but could run as high as 20 or even 50 percent. Assuming ten percent leakage,
the 20 shillings in the above example should really be counted at 22.2 shillings prime cost,
while leakage of 20 percent would have to be reckoned at 25 shillings. Along with the extra
costs mentioned by Richardson, it is clear that significant leakage could potentially erase any
advantage that might have existed and perhaps even left some rum men at a cost
disadvantage. Furthermore, if the prime cost differential really were so great, the American
slave trade would probably have been much more sizable than it was, with British merchants
coordinating with their American correspondents to organize voyages, but this rarely
happened.

Another problem with the prime cost thesis is that it applies solely to captive purchases.
Captives were unquestionably the largest expense for any slaving voyage, but they were not
the only one, with provisions being the most obvious secondary expense. Provisions could
often be had for rum, but not always, so though while on its 1769 voyage the Othello used
rum to pay for 90 percent of value of its captives, it still had to use gold dust to pay for corn,
conches, yams, and goats. As the captain, John Duncan, told his employers, corn and yams
were “Very Scarse and Not to be Purchased without Gould.” The Adventure, which used rum
to pay 99 percent of the cost of its captives, was similarly forced to trade gold dust for fowls,
conches, limes, palm oil, fish, and wood.

A final issue with the prime cost thesis is that it applies almost exclusively to the Gold
Coast. One the one hand, this makes a great deal of sense. The Gold Coast was far and away
the most important source for captives carried aboard American slave ships. Over 58 percent
of the pre-1808 voyages and 68 percent of the pre-1776 voyages originating in ports from
Pennsylvania northward made their primary captive purchases on the Gold Coast. But
those figures actually raise an important question: why did one region of Africa so dominate American slave trading? No one factor can explain why. The presence of British forts, strong mercantile ties, and the geography of winds and currents all likely played a role. But at least part of the answer is that of all of the regions of Africa that American traders might have used to supply captives, the Gold Coast furnished the best, indeed probably the only consistently strong market for North American rum. Alcohol figured in the slave trade of other regions, but Americans rarely visited these areas, and regional preferences for spirits other than rum was likely what kept them away. The prominence of the Gold Coast, in other words, highlights the problems as much as the success of the rum trade. In the final analysis, the prime cost thesis provides at most a partial explanation for Americans’ ability to conduct a slave trade. A full explanation requires an examination of consumption patterns in Africa itself.15

III. “Rum Men” on the Gold Coast

Rum first appeared on the Gold Coast in the late seventeenth century. It soon insinuated its way into Gold Coast life in a multitude of ways. The Fante political elite drank it in numerous settings, underscoring their elite status. John Corrantee, the chief caboceer or magistrate at Anomabu, the most important destination for American slavers, heard his subjects’ disputes while lounging in a tub, smoking and sipping rum. The European fort-based population was another important market. As one British captain told the Board of Trade, American vessels “generally” traded rum with the governors of the forts, where it was indispensable to any number of transactions. Company traders used it to open negotiations, make agreements, and settle “palavers” (disputes) with African and Eurafrikan traders, to pay
laborers and canoe men, and to purchase captives for resale to private traders like the Americans. During the 1760s, fort commanders hoarded rum because it allowed them to purchase gold on better terms than with other goods. The spirit’s versatility, especially as a “dash” to seal a deal, was what led so many castle-based traders to demand a constant supply. In 1715, before the American rum trade had come into its own, Royal African Company officials actually pondered sending a ship directly to the West Indies in order to ensure a steady supply. Therefore, when Company employees said there was “no trade to be made without rum,” or that a fort “may as well be without guns as without rum or brandy,” they were referring to the spirit’s utility in the running of the forts, as a dash or payment for services, not an insatiable demand for rum among the population at large.\(^{16}\)

Of course, demand beyond the forts was considerable—if not then rum would hardly have been valued as it was. Rum appeared at the very moment the region was emerging as a major slave-trading destination, coinciding with the regional shift from gold to captive exports, spurred by the rise of the slave-trading states of Akwamu, Denkyira, and finally Asante. And in contrast to other regions of Africa, no religious strictures inhibited the consumption of alcohol. To the contrary, as historian Emmanuel Akyeampong has written, alcohol was widely accepted and used to “bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds,” marking the passage from one stage of life to the other and becoming integral to naming, puberty, marriage, and funeral ceremonies. As an element of the region’s oath-taking ritual, “drinking fetish” became essential to the conclusion of legal agreements, the giving of gifts, and a host of other purposes.\(^{17}\)

The demand for rum on the Gold Coast, however, was not unbounded. From the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, a time before the surge in American slave trading, spirits constituted only 8 percent of the trade goods exchanged by the Royal African Company on the Gold Coast. Factoring in interlopers and separate traders, for whom rum
tended to be a more significant trade good, would probably raise that figure, but not by too much. A snapshot from the accounts of trader Richard Miles during the 1770s suggests little movement in rum’s market share over the first three quarters of the century. Liquors of all types constituted 9.2 percent of the total value of the goods he exchanged for captives. In fact, for Miles it was textiles, not rum, that were the *sine qua non* for Gold Coast trade, appearing in all but two of his transactions and accounting for 51.1 percent of the total value of his trade goods. Spirits factored into 79 percent of his transactions, important but something short of indispensable. It seems probable that Miles, like other traders, used rum to close deals but could never rely on it as a staple of his trade. Interestingly, Miles’s only two non-textile transactions involved trading rum for elderly or infirm captives, suggestive of the spirit’s relatively low value.¹⁸

It is not surprising, then, that the Gold Coast rum market was subject to periodic gluts. Richard Miles wrote that over the period 1773-75 the British forts were overstocked with rum and were having trouble disposing of it. Letters from shipmasters lamenting the presence of too many rum men were also common. Encountering several rival rum men off Anomabu in 1751, the veteran slaver David Lindsay wrote “God noes when I shall Gett Clear of [the rum]… ye trade is so very Dull it is actuly a noff to make a man Creasey.” In 1753, the governor of Cape Coast Castle noted the presence of “4 or 5 Rum-men” and expected that they would have difficulty making their purchases. In 1756 Captains William Pinnegar and Thomas Teakle Taylor each wrote separately to say that there were five Rhode Island vessels at Anomabu, but only one had managed to purchase a full cargo of captives. In 1765 Thomas Rogers met with six other rum men, which left him unable to unload his goods to factor Richard Brew, a favorite partner of the Americaners. And again in 1770, amidst “excessive dull Times,” John Duncan lamented that the eight rival rum men at Anomabu were driving
the value of rum down by offering as much as 170 gallons per captive. “There is many of our Countrymen here that does not look upon Rum better than Water,” he wrote.19

Apart from glutted markets, a second concern for the rum men was the regional monetary system, which was based on gold. It was gold that originally attracted Europeans to this part of the African coast, and it was the need to safeguard specie against depredations by other Europeans that led to the concentration of so many forts and castles (which would have been useless against any well-organized African military force). Captives surpassed gold as the region’s most valuable export at the close of the seventeenth century, but gold remained significant to trade. Some historians have argued that prices on the Gold Coast were denominated in rum and that therefore it, along with gold, served as the regional “currency.” This is a misreading of the situation: the “currency” of the Gold Coast was gold. From the seventeenth century on, and certainly during the heyday of the rum men, commercial exchange ran according to the “sorting system” (i.e., an “assortment” of goods), in which the value of a good was denominated in ounces of gold, along with smaller denominations like “ackies” (worth 1/16 of an ounce) and “tackus” (worth 1/12 of an acky). Trade books usually listed prices paid in ounces and ackies, though some trade books, such as that of the Adventure, recorded the price in gallons. This practice is likely the source of the claim among some Americanists that rum functioned as a “currency” along the coast. But the simple fact that rum found a market does not mean that it served as a medium of exchange comparable to gold. Prices were denominated in gold, and specie was universally accepted. A ship arriving with a hold full of gold would have had no trouble purchasing captives; ships arriving with holds full of rum often did.20

To complicate matters, prices were negotiated not in reference to weights and measures of actual gold, but according to a fictive unit known as the “trade ounce.” One ounce of gold was worth two ounces in trade, but the actual value of the trade ounce was negotiated in
reference to an assortment of goods, which of course fluctuated. This system turned against slave traders during the 1760s and 1770s, the height of American activity on the Gold Coast. Before that time, trade ounces served as an abstract way of valuing a particular assortment of goods. During the 1760s, Gold Coast sellers began to demand a portion of the purchase price in ounces of actual gold, with the remainder payable in trade ounces. The cause of the change is unclear, but it appears to be connected to the region’s shift from net exporter to net importer of gold, and perhaps also to a decline in regional gold production. It also coincided with a period of intermittent warfare between the inland slave-trading power of Asante and Fante middlemen on the coast.\(^{21}\)

This shift toward demanding payment in gold was further accompanied by a rise in nominal prices, placing slavers in a double bind. As one frustrated captain explained to the Board of Trade in 1777, “if a slave cost 12 ounces of trade in which an ounce of gold must be given, then 10 ounces of trade are actually given, together with 1 ounce of gold equal to two ounces of trade.” When a member of the Board failed to see the problem, the captain clarified that demands for partial payment in specie required traders to purchase gold at regular (non-trade ounce) prices in order to pay for captives whose prices were denominated in trade ounces. Fort-based traders, therefore, began to buy as much gold as possible, which they used to acquire slaves for re-sale, which in turn led to charges that they were profiting at the expense of private traders.\(^{22}\)

This situation affected the rum men in complex ways, but for the most part it worked against them. One the one hand, it is possible that the need to pay a portion of the purchase price in gold may have benefitted American traders, at least some of the time. Whatever prime cost advantage the Americans may have had would have become magnified as prices rose and demand for specie became commonplace.\(^{23}\) British captain Thomas Bennett also implied to the Board of Trade that rum gave American traders special access to the forts,
which took advantage of their permanent presence and well-developed connections to exchange it (along with tobacco) for gold at the most favorable prices. This situation likely played to the advantage of the Americans. But evidence also suggests that American captains had to play by the same rules and make at least partial payment in gold. The same Captain Bennett told the Board of Trade of a Captain Keith of Rhode Island, who once arrived on the coast with 8-10 thousand ounces of gold (an improbably large amount that was surely a misstatement) and recounted a voyage on which he saw a half-dozen “New Englandmen…with rum and gold, buying slaves.” Keith appears to have made his observations during the 1750s, when the price of gold was lower and well before the demand for partial payment in gold became more widespread.24 Surviving trade books contain numerous examples of gold payments for captives, although only for a fraction of the transactions, such as that of the Othello, which paid gold for at least twelve captives on its 1769 voyage and four on its 1770 voyage, or the incomplete records of the schooner Active, which paid in gold for four of its seven recorded captive purchases.25

American slavers employed a range of tactics to deal with the cycle of glutted markets on the Gold Coast. One was of course to exchange rum and other American produce with European ship captains interested in improving their own assortments, as Captain John Sabens of the sloop Columbia did in 1802. Or they might exchange it with the Africans who searched for gold in the region’s streams, some of which were in sight of passing ships. There were difficulties, of course. Fraud was a problem, as gold dust could be easily adulterated. The solution was to hire a Fante “gold taker” (which was often required in any case) who assayed all gold and served as a middleman or broker with the suppliers of both specie and captives. Europeans did not always trust gold takers, but they at least took heart in knowing that those who were caught defrauding a client were banned from the trade for life. Alternately, a shipmaster might exchange rum for Asian or European textiles, sometimes
referred to as “dry goods,” along with sundry manufactures. This might be done on the Gold Coast with other Europeans, or it might be done with African or European merchants on the Upper Guinea Coast en route to the Gold Coast. In 1756 the snow Venus bought textiles (and gold) from the Dutch at El Mina, and in 1806 John Sabens of the Charlotte traded for textiles at Cape Assini. On the same voyage he signed a contract to purchase captives for—in addition to rum—tobacco, gunpowder, cloth, and looking glasses.26

Another strategy to deal with the rum problem was to send a boat to “leeward,” which might mean as far east as Ouidah on the Bight of Benin. The object of these trips was to purchase Brazilian rolled tobacco, which was valued much more than the American variety carried aboard the rum men. When on his 1765 trip Thomas Rogers learned that rolled tobacco was in demand at Anomabu, he immediately readied his boat for a trip to Ouidah. Gurnay Wall, captain of the New York sloop Wolf, actually deemed it advantageous to send his longboat to Ouidah with five captives to trade for tobacco, in the hope that the tobacco he received for them would allow him to buy more than that number of slaves on the Gold Coast. In their written instructions to John Duncan on his 1765 voyage, Newport’s Vernon brothers told him he could if necessary trade “as farr as Whydaw or Gaboon.” It is not always possible to distinguish between American and Brazilian tobacco in the trade books, but rolled tobacco appears explicitly in at least two of them, one belonging to an unknown vessel from 1734, the other for the sloop Venus from 1756.27

New York’s Gurnay Wall was responsible for one of the more creative efforts to compensate for low rum demand. Frustrated at the high price of captives, which is also to say the low value of rum, he and some other shipmasters “came to a Resolution to let the Negroes have no Rum.” Wall’s embargo backfired, as his trading partners retaliated by refusing to let him have water or provisions. On another occasion, Wall sought to gain advantage by diluting his rum. He did succeed in purchasing one captive with a hogshead of
rum watered to 50 percent of normal strength. Watering down the rum to that extent, however, did not likely succeed with any regularity. As Jay Coughtry has suggested, Fante traders were far too savvy to fall for the trick, so that even the success of Captain Wall in pawning off his low-proof product was seen as a rare instance of “good fortune.”

As Table 1 suggests, rum was a serviceable trade good on the Gold Coast, but to maximize their profits ship captains often found it expedient to sort it with other goods. The spirit accounted for between 50 and 99 percent of the value of all goods traded for captives (not including the sloop Rhode Island, which only purchased 5 captives on the Gold Coast), with five of the eleven trade books showing values of over 90 percent. Still, on six of eleven voyages (again, omitting the Rhode Island) over half of all captive transactions were “re-sorted,” meaning that other goods in addition to rum, such as gold and textiles, were used to make the purchase. Five voyages, those of the Venus, the Sally (TSTD2 #36336), the Adventure, and two by the Othello, come close to offering support for the notion that rum did not require sorting. Yet even those vessels sorted their rum with other goods for at least some of their transactions. Five more vessels sorted rum with other goods for over half of all transactions (not including the sloop Rhode Island, which took on only seven captives from the Gold Coast).
Table 1: Rum Payments and Cargo “Sorting” by American Slave Vessels on the
Gold Coast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voyages ID #</th>
<th>Vessel</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rum as Pct. of Total Pmnts.</th>
<th>Pct. Transactions “Sorted”</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified</td>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>1733</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified</td>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>1734</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified</td>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>1736</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td>Sorted rum with textiles rec’d from other vessels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24944</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1749</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Only purchased 5 captives on Gold Coast. Also traded in Upper Guinea--see Table 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36207</td>
<td>Venus</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1756</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36232</td>
<td>Marigold</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1759</td>
<td>99.0</td>
<td>Pct. Sorted cannot be calculated from record.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36260</td>
<td>Royal Charlotte</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1762</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>Value of rum varied and was computed here using the mean value in the trade book of 1.32 gals. per acky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36336</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>RIHS</td>
<td>1767</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>Also traded in Upper Guinea--see Table 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36370</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1769</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>Incomplete--based on only 7 purchases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36371</td>
<td>Othello</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1769</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Many gold expenditures for provisions and other goods and services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36404</td>
<td>Othello</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1770</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>Approximate: accounting for other commodities paid is imprecise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36474</td>
<td>Adventure</td>
<td>Crane</td>
<td>1774</td>
<td>99.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The column “Rum as Pct. Total of Payments” tells how much of the total captive purchase price was paid in rum. The column “Pct. Transactions ‘Sorted’” gives the proportion of individual purchases that involved trade goods in addition to rum.

Sources: Crane, A Rhode Island Slaver; NYHS, Newport Historical Society, Rhode Island Historical Society. Due to irregularities in the sources, all figures should be regarded as approximations rather than precise measurements. A small number of transactions for which it was impossible to determine the proportion of rum given were omitted from these calculations.

IV. “Rum Men” on the Upper Guinea Coast

The situation in Upper Guinea differed from that of the Gold Coast. Aware of the frequency of glutted markets on the Gold Coast, American slavers offset that risk by trading in a second region. Upper Guinea was the only other place where New England rum was in demand. The region ran a distant second to the Gold Coast as a source of captives for American slavers, accounting for about 28 percent of all voyages from northern ports before 1808 and 22 percent before 1776.29 For a variety of reasons, however, Upper Guinea would
remain a second-choice region for American slavers. The first of these was simply that, until the mid-eighteenth century, there were comparatively few captives available for sale, on average about 3,000 per year over 1701-1725 at Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward Coast combined. Moreover, most people, it appears, drank locally produced fermented beverages, including palm wine and drinks made from grain. The region’s Muslim population, a growing minority, by all accounts adhered strictly to their faith’s injunction against alcohol. According to Francis Moore, who traded on the Gambia in the early 1730s, “The only Liquor to please a Mahometan is Sugar and Water.” Distilled spirits were of course known, likely introduced in the mid-seventeenth century. Closely associated with the slave trade, spirits seem to have been especially important to the *ceddo* regimes, or polities that employed a military elite of slave origin to engage in predatory raiding. According to Mungo Park, the name for one of these groups, the Soninke (“Sonakies”), actually meant “men who drink strong liquors.” The King of Saloum (“Barsally”) during the 1730s was a classic example. A great drinker of distilled spirits, he reportedly sent word to the forts when supplies ran low. To pay for his prodigious consumption, he would “ransack some of his enemies’ towns” for captives. When not at war, he raided his own towns, setting fire to them and letting his troops seize residents as they fled the blaze.30

But whether that liquor was rum is another question. The King of Saloum, for example, favored French brandy above all other liquors, and that spirit seems to have dominated the market at the start of the eighteenth century. The regional preference for brandy clearly favored the French over the English, so in the 1720s the Royal African Company embarked on a campaign explicitly designed to introduce rum to the Upper Guinea Coast for the expressed purpose of changing tastes. They had some success, but whether rum ever completely displaced brandy as the favored spirit is doubtful.31 Francis Moore’s account of his experiences as a Royal African Company factor on the Gambia in the early 1730s
captures the diversity of regional alcohol preferences at a moment of change. Of the larger population, he reported, “their Liquor is Palm-Wine, Ciboa-Wine, Honey-Wine, (which is not unlike our Mead) Brandy and Rum, though he noted that where brandy and rum were available, “they drink but a small Quantity of the others.” Elsewhere, Moore recounted being attacked by thirteen “Jolofs,” who threatened to kill him if he did not supply them with brandy, specifically, and not rum. And of course, he repeatedly stressed the strict abstention of the Muslim community.32

With the formation of the Muslim theocracy in the Futa Jallon in the 1720s, and its consolidation over the 1750s-1770s, the rum market worsened. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Islam spread considerably in both the coastal and inland areas, spurred in part by the slave raiding and general wantonness of the hard-drinking ceddo regimes. This created a paradox from the perspective of American rum men. On the one hand, religious conflict brought an increase in the number of captives embarking from Upper Guinea, from 5,600 per year in 1726-50 to 15,500 annually in 1751-75.33 Captive embarkations picked up even more after 1776 with the inauguration of religious conflict in the Futa Toro. On the other hand, American rum merchants could not take full advantage, since the more Islam spread, the less demand there was for rum.34 Timothy Winterbottom, who resided at Sierra Leone in the 1790s, observed that Muslim Fulas and Mandinkas “very strictly abstain from fermented liquors, and from spirits, which they hold in such abhorrence, that if a single drop were to fall upon a clean garment, it would be rendered unfit until washed.” Another traveler reported that Muslim Fulas held “drunkards in abhorrence,” while yet another reported meeting a Mandinka merchant who would not touch rum (though he would drink wine or spruce beer). Since much of the slave trade in Upper Guinea was ultimately was in the hands of Muslim Fulas and Mandinkas, their attitudes toward alcohol probably helped to keep imports low.35
At the same time, of course, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that alcohol, and rum in particular, found at least some demand. Without some demand, there could not have been a rum trade with Upper Guinea. The resident European population in the forts and in trader enclaves like the Rio Pongo, Wonkopong, and the Scarcies River furnished a ready, if comparatively small market. No doubt much of the rum they purchased was ultimately re-traded, but a fair amount was consumed by the compound residents, free and enslaved. After its seizure from the French in 1758, the British garrison in the Province of Senegambia constituted another market, not just for rum but for other goods carried aboard North American vessels, such as sugar, tobacco, and lumber. Goreé continued as a favored market for American rum even after the British returned the fort to the French in 1763. But often this meant exchanging rum for more saleable goods. Newport skipper Robert Elliott visited there in 1771 to swap rum for “dry goods,” meaning African, European, and Indian textiles, which he felt left him with “a very good assortment.” After the 1790s, the D’Wolf family would make it one of their main destinations on the Upper Guinea Coast.

The non-Muslim population—the “drunkards” so disparaged by the Fulas of the Futa Jallon—comprised a majority of the population, and with no particular objections to rum and other spirits, constituted a much larger market than fort personnel. Mungo Park’s translation of “Sonakies” as “men who drink strong liquors” suggests both a condemnation of and a non-negligible demand for alcohol. Over the course of the eighteenth century, rum worked its way into the region’s cultural life. Local elites who did business with slave traders used the spirit to reward supporters and clients. One ruler on the Gambia River reportedly distributed twenty gallons of rum per day to his “numerous Retinue” during a visit to James Fort. His “retinue” surely used the rum to make purchases and solidify their own ties of patronage. Not that political elites were above simply drinking the rum. Mongo Dandi, a non-Muslim Baga-Bullom who acted as landlord to a community of British slave traders at Wonkopong,
to the north of Sierra Leone, “was almost always drunk, and often laid out in the Streets all Night.” Rum also had ceremonial uses in Upper Guinea, where it had become integrated into what one anthropologist has called the “social and sacred alcohol-based traditions.” A hogshead of rum was essential to the week-long funeral ceremonies held at Galam (Kajaaga). The burial of one local ruler’s mother was postponed until an American vessel arrived to exchange fifteen puncheons of rum for fifteen slaves. Weddings in the Rio Pongo reportedly necessitated two demi-johns (approximately ten gallons) for residents of the town, along with one demi-john for the father of the groom.\textsuperscript{37} Even some professedly devout Muslims consumed American rum, religious injunction notwithstanding. James Watt reported that some officials of the Futa Jallon state drank in secrecy, and even those who “strictly abstained” still hoped that rum would be available to them in Paradise.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite these examples, there is good reason to believe that Islam really did suppress demand for rum in Upper Guinea. Regional demand was low enough so that at times a single shipload was enough to saturate the local market. When Caleb Godfrey arrived at Sierra Leone in the fall of 1754, he reported that another Newport vessel had already traded there. Consequently, wrote Godfrey, “The times hear for Rum never was Duller[.] [I]t was with Difficulty I could gitt [local rulers] to take it for ye Custome[,] I can’t hear of any place but their is a rum Vessel or, that their has bin Very Latly and supplyed them what little rum the Vessels hear wanted.” He wound up trading well to the north and south of Sierra Leone Bay in markets untouched by the earlier vessels. When Thomas Rogers first arrived at the Isles de Los in 1764, his was the only rum vessel, but as soon as a New York vessel arrived the price of captives jumped from 80 to 90 bars, meaning his rum was suddenly devalued by 12.5 percent. When John Duncan traded in the same place four years later, he found demand similarly slack, telling his employers, “there is nothing more to be done here as a small Matter of Rum Furnishes this part [of] the Coast.”\textsuperscript{39}
For their part, American and European merchants seemed to understand that Upper Guinea could absorb only limited quantities of rum. In 1737, with the American slave trade on the rise, the owner of a Massachusetts vessel chastised his captain for lingering too long on the Gambia, which, he pointed out, “is no rum country.” Indirect evidence that merchants were aware of Upper Guinea’s shortcomings appears in statements indicating a clear preference for the Gold Coast. In 1763, when word of a rum glut reached Boston, a local newspaper was sure to note that the surplus was more acute in “Places on the Coast where that Commodity has generally been vended.” The remark was a reference to the Gold Coast but, it also demonstrated an awareness that some regions were better rum markets than others. In 1772 Newport’s Jacob Rivera and Aaron Lopez told Captain William English that they had “no Opinion of the windward Coast trade,” and went on to instruct him to proceed to the Gold Coast. 40

With rum demand in Upper Guinea strong enough to justify sending vessels, yet aware that the market was easily glutted, American merchants adopted a variety of strategies. As on the Gold Coast, re-sorting became standard practice. Rhode Island’s Thomas Eldrid, who sailed in the 1760s, testified to the House of Lords that he “exchanged [rum and tobacco] either at the English Factories, or with English Ships on the Coast” before purchasing captives, in contrast to the Gold Coast trade, where he “purchased [captives] chiefly with Rum and Tobacco.” 41 One of the more elaborate re-sorting schemes was devised by Boston’s Samuel Waldo in 1734. With rum apparently scarce in New England, Waldo decided to send two vessels to the West Indies with the usual American produce. Once there they were to trade for cash or “Rum for Guinea,” along with gunpowder, trade guns, and “other Goods that you may think as suitable and reasonable.” They were then to proceed to the Santiago in the Cape Verdes to take on salt and as much of the island’s famous cloth, a prized good in the slave trade, “as may be necessary to assort you.” In fact, re-sorting at the Cape Verdes seems
to have been fairly common. The 1734 trade book for an unnamed Newport vessel contains entries for “St Jago cloth,” named after the archipelago’s largest island. In 1753, a sailor aboard a Rhode Island vessel noted that bolts of Cape Verde cloth costing 3 crowns (15 shillings) in the islands sold for 10-12 shillings on the Upper Guinea Coast, all of which implies that his vessel had re-sorted there. In 1765 the Brown brothers’ Sally sorted itself with “St. Jago cloth” on the Geba River, and in 1804 the D’Wolf ship Charlotte stopped at Cape Verde for textiles before heading to the Upper Guinea Coast. A receipt for one of the Charlotte’s later transactions at Gorée reveals that the captain purchased one of its captives for an assortment of cloth, gold, and rum. The Charlotte also purchased at least nine more captives at the Isles de Los using no rum at all, rather an assortment consisting primarily of produce and lumber. But not all re-sorting at Cape Verde involved textiles. In 1735 a Boston vessel traded some of its rum for eight horses, which it then carried to the Gambia.42

As Table 2 confirms, vessels calling on the Upper Guinea Coast rarely bought captives for rum alone. In contrast to the Gold Coast, where rum accounted for 50-90 percent of the value of goods traded, here it accounted for between 31 percent and 80 percent. Just as importantly, for each vessel in at least half of the transactions the rum was “sorted” with other goods. In three of the five, over 90 percent of all captive purchases were made with an assortment of goods. The Brown brothers’ Sally (Voyages #36299), for example, sent its longboat up and down the coast to accumulate large amounts of Cape Verdean, Asian, and local textiles, along with European guns, brass pans and basins, gold, and knives, which it then traded for captives. It should be emphasized that the table analyzes only transactions for captives. Americans often used other goods to pay for provisions and sundry expenses. It was very common, for example, to swap lumber, flour, sugar, pork, even colonial manufactures like pewter tankards, not only for captives but for rice, the principal food aboard slave ships calling in the region.43
Table 2: Rum Payments and Cargo “Sorting” by American Slave Vessels on the Upper Guinea Coast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voyages ID #</th>
<th>Vessel</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rum as Pct. Of Total Pmnts.</th>
<th>Pct. Transactions “Sorted”</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unidentified</td>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>1733</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Also traded on Gold Coast--see Table 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24944</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1749</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>Also traded on Gold Coast--see Table 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36299</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>Also traded on Gold Coast--see Table 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36336</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>RIHS</td>
<td>1767</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Also traded on Gold Coast--see Table 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unidentified</td>
<td>NYHS</td>
<td>1774</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The column “Rum as Pct. Total of Payments” tells how much of the total purchase price was paid in rum. The column “Pct. Transactions ‘Sorted’” gives the proportion of individual purchases that involved trade goods in addition to rum.

Sources: Brown University; Newport Historical Society; NYHS; Rhode Island Historical Society. Due to irregularities in the sources, all amounts should be regarded as approximations rather than precise measurements. A small number of transactions for which it was impossible to determine the proportion of rum given were omitted from these calculations.

Perhaps the most effective strategy Americans adopted for the Upper Guinea trade was to relegate it to secondary status, after the Gold Coast. Vessels bound for the Gold Coast often stopped in Upper Guinea, but mostly to purchase provisions. Captains might also purchase a small number of captives “to Windward” in order to get a head start and shorten their stay on the Gold Coast. Another variation was to exchange some of the rum for other trade goods in hopes of improving the assortment for the Gold Coast trade. That was exactly what William Smith of Boston had in mind in 1794 when he instructed his supercargo to “stop at the Windwd. Coast as farr as Cape Monte, and sell part of it [his cargo of rum] for such articles as may be more saleable at Anamabo and Bite of Benin.” In the end, Upper Guinea could never be more than a secondary market for rum.44
V. Transitions: American Independence and the Re-Export Boom

The American War for Independence, which lasted from 1775-1783, put a temporary stop to the American slave trade. When the rum men disappeared after 1775, a sudden alcohol shortage took hold along the Gold Coast. Rhode Islander Peleg Clarke, who in 1776 had partnered with Jonathan Fletcher of London to outfit and command a vessel from that port, lamented not having stocked European brandy before setting out. In response to the shortage, he reported, six West Indian rum men had arrived, along with two more vessels from London, stocked with Dutch gin and brandy. These six West Indiamen had left the coast “very well supplied with rum,” but they were apparently not able to maintain the trade, and the shortage reigned for most of the war.45

When the Americans returned to the Gold Coast after 1783, they hoped to profit from pent-up demand, but instead they encountered problems in other areas. Independence had resulted in their exclusion from Britain’s mercantilist trading system, which now barred the purchase of American rum at the British forts. With many other Europeans on the coast, and with rum in great demand, the injunction proved impossible to enforce, so the Board of Trade eventually rescinded the order. The familiar cycle of shortage and overstock soon reasserted itself. In 1785 Boston’s Samuel Brown found himself uncertain about the resumption of the trade. “[T]he prospect on the Coast does not appear to me very promising at this time,” he wrote, “as at least 2000 Hogsheads of Rum has been & will be Ship[pe]d from [Massachusetts and Rhode Island] from the 15 of August to the 15 November all of which or nearly all I imagine will find the way down to Annamaboo which it appears to me must drop the price very low there indeed.”46

Compounding the familiar problem of glut was the increasing demand by Gold Coast middlemen for payment in specie. Colonial-era slavers had sometimes managed to purchase
captives using rum alone, but in 1792 Silvestre Jones informed Boston’s Samuel Brown from Anomabu that he had bought seventy-five captives “and are buying for gold every day….We sold the greatest part of our Rum to the Castles for 28 Galls for one ounce of gold and give for slaves at eight ounces for a Prime Man and seven for a Prime woman.” Off Tantumquerry at about the same time, John D’Wolf of the Sukey proposed to trade rum for boy captives, but knew enough to offer gold for prime men. In 1793, a different vessel named the Sukey traded its rum to the French in exchange for gold dust, which it then traded for captives.47

These problems drove slave traders to look beyond their traditional markets on the Upper Guinea and Gold Coasts. When peace returned, Newport’s Vernon brothers outfitted their first slaver of the post-revolutionary period, the Don Galvez, in partnership with Sam Brown of Boston, in late 1783 and dispatched it to the familiar Gold Coast. The Don Galvez found the market there glutted with New England rum, leaving Brown to contemplate sending the vessel to “Angola.” After discouraging experiences with the Gold Coast, Brown and the Vernons began to consider other regions of Africa. In 1793, William Vernon spoke with a Baltimore skipper who had taken two shiploads of slaves from Mozambique to Martinique and thought he might organize a similar voyage. “Perhaps Capt[ain] Grey many imploye his Vessil to advantage in the same way,” he suggested to his brother. “Its a Voy[age], of speculation” he admitted, “on which we proceed blindfolded, and trust to chance & good luck for success.” The partners apparently agreed, and dispatched the Don Galvez on its “voyage of speculation” that same year. The first voyage to Mozambique was not a success, largely because the owners and captain were unfamiliar with the Indian Ocean monsoons, and it took an inordinately long time to conclude. But once they understood the winds, the Vernons saw profit in the venture, dispatching five vessels to Mozambique over the course of the decade.48 Not all Americans abandoned the familiar regions. Notably, the
D’Wolf family continued to use rum to purchase captives at the customary locations in Upper Guinea and the Gold Coast. But they often sorted their cargoes with other items and employed all of the strategies developed over the years to compensate for rum’s drawbacks.

The most significant change to the American trade came in the mid-1790s when, for the first time, merchants regularly sorted their outbound cargoes with large amounts of textiles. This new departure owed less to the development of a domestic textile industry than it did to the booming European re-export trade brought on by the Wars of the French Revolution. Claiming neutral rights, American merchantmen became the preferred carriers for French and Dutch shippers. This in turn allowed them access for the first time to large quantities of Indian textiles, which were free of all duties if re-exported. The slavers quickly grasped the implications for their business. In 1795, when Martin Benson and the Brown family were outfitting a vessel, Benson presented his New York supplier with a long list of “all kinds coarse India Goods, the Coarser, the better, if colours suitable.” Four years later the same firm was excited by news of the arrival of a vessel with “Bengal Goods,” and placed a similar order. Manifests from that decade show that the Browns were not the only ones sorting their cargoes with Indian textiles. Rum’s share of the value of all outbound cargoes dropped from 92 percent in 1790-1793 to 68 percent in 1794-1801. On a few vessels rum’s share of the outbound cargo fell as low as 20 percent. In 1795 Gibbs and Channing’s Hope sailed from Newport with $6111 in rum and over $23,000 in Indian textiles, along with tobacco, candles, flour, and soap. Better sorted, Americans were poised to increase their share of the market for captives.49

But it did not quite happen that way. The American slave trade did recover to a point approaching its prewar level, despite low-level naval conflict with Britain and France through many of these years. The period 1804-07 actually saw the American slave trade hit an all-time peak, and although a causal relationship cannot be established with certainty, it seems
very probable that Indian textiles played a key role in allowing Yankee merchants to participate at the level they did. There can be little doubt that textiles played a significant role in the South Carolina slave boom of 1804-07, a trade in which many New England merchants were involved. Charleston newspapers were filled in these years with sale advertisements for India goods for use in the slave trade. As major players in the Carolina trade, Americans seem to have been responsible for the importation of the goods and almost certainly availed themselves of the textiles for use in the slave trade. Thomas Fletcher, for example, advertised sixty-seven bales of “fine blue Guineas (or Salempores)” from Salem, Massachusetts, which were “suitable for the African market.” Another merchant specified that the India goods he had advertised as “well calculated for the African trade” were entitled to a drawback, or rebate on the import duty.50

After abolition in 1808, rum, along with tobacco, continued to figure in American trade with Africa, but it no longer dominated outbound cargoes to the same extent as before. This tendency is easiest to see among the “legitimate” (i.e. non-slave) traders. According to historian George Brooks, during the nineteenth century rum and tobacco combined accounted for between one-half and two-thirds of the value of the outbound cargoes carried aboard legitimate traders. This is a significant proportion, no doubt, but it is a far cry from the 85-90 percent of the value of outbound cargoes commanded by rum alone in the years before 1808. Determining the outbound cargoes for illegal slave traders is far more difficult. An 1820 federal statute declared slave trading a capital offense, which gave traders a strong incentive to hide their activities. To complicate matters, many of the Americans who were involved in the illegal trade did so as members of far-flung international networks. Often, this meant that American slavers sailed first to Cuba or Brazil, where they picked up a cargo before sailing to Africa, and in many cases these vessels served only as “tenders,” meaning that they carried trade goods to Africa but did not carry captives back to the Americas. One of these, the
Porpoise of Brunswick, Maine, made at least three such trips from Brazil in 1843-44. The Porpoise carried “rum,” among other products, but in this case it was more likely to have been Brazilian cachaca than the New England rum of previous decades. With an emerging textile industry and manufacturing sector at home, Americans would no longer have needed to engage in the time-consuming and complex process of re-sorting their cargoes to compensate for the problems of basing a trade on a single commodity. The late-antebellum New York traders embodied the transformation from scrappy colonies to industrial nation. When federal authorities seized bark Laurens in 1848 for violating the slave-trading statutes of 1794 and 1800 it carried no trade goods at all, only $20,000 in specie. And when the Clotilda left Mobile, Alabama in 1860 to purchase what would be the last Africans brought to the United States as slaves, it carried not rum but aguardiente, likely from Cuba, along with 25 cases of dry goods and $9,000 in gold.51

VI. Conclusion

Americans were not the only slave traders who relied heavily on distilled spirits. Alcohol, distilled from sugar cane, was a major trade good for all of the major New World slave traders, supplemented by tobacco. What made the American rum men different from other New World traders was their near total reliance on rum as a trade good. Brazilian slavers dealt in cachaça and gerebita, but also in textiles procured from the Indian trade. Even the Bahian traders who famously dealt in tobacco and gold shipped great quantities of alcohol and textiles. Aguardiente was a major trade good for Cuban traders, but they managed to supplement their shipments with textiles from Britain and the United States. A similar point can be made regarding the Barbadian traders of the early eighteenth century, who balanced their rum shipments with significant quantities of English woolens. North American traders, however, relied overwhelmingly on rum, with tobacco as a very distant second trade good. In
that light, it is remarkable that they managed to run a successful trade for the better part of a century. Rum had its disadvantages, which American merchants and skippers worked hard to overcome by re-sorting cargoes on the African coast, among other practices. At the same time, it is significant and hardly coincidental that the peak of the American slave trade, that brief moment during the years 1804-1807 when the United States joined the top-tier slave-trading powers, came at a time when the trade in re-exported textiles allowed merchants to balance their outbound cargoes.52

The American rum-for-captives trade was unique in many respects, but it serves to highlight an important force in the larger slave trade: African consumption. Consumer tastes can be difficult to gauge in the wider slave trade, reflected for the most part in the bewildering lists of textile weaves, prints, and colors that populate the ledgers of European traders, to say nothing of the other categories of manufactures that filled out their “assortments.” The overwhelming reliance of American traders on a single product makes it possible to isolate rum as a variable and observe its reception as a trade good, in a way that would be more difficult to do with the usual assortment of goods. The career of American rum on the African coast underscores the need to balance supply-side interpretations of the transatlantic slave trade with a consideration of the demand for particular goods. African consumer preferences had a significant effect on the geography and substance of the transatlantic slave trade. As work on consumption of imported goods continues, the predominant supply-side interpretations will need to be revised.
Endnotes

1 Sean M. Kelley is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Essex, specializing in the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the African Diaspora.


6 *Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, online at [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org). For the destinations of American vessels, see [http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/AoeelExS](http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/AoeelExS). Unless otherwise indicated, all slave trade statistics will be taken from this source.


8 For the *Marygold, Adventure, and Othello*, see the respective trade books in the Slavery Collection, NYHS and Table 1, below. For the *Punch*, see Purchase Agreement, 13 September 1803, D’Wolf Collection, Ships’ Documents, Box 4, Bristol [Rhode Island] Historical and Preservation Society.
9 Jones, "The Rhode Island Slave Trade," 229.

10 George Sweet to Samuel and William Vernon, 26 December 1774, Slavery Collection, NYHS.

11 Coughtry, Notorious Triangle, 90, 108.


15 Curto, Enslaving Spirits, 66-88; Smith, Caribbean Rum, 44, 56.


19 David Lindsay to Ayrault [], 20 February 1752, in Charles Francis Adams et al., eds., Commerce of Rhode Island, 1726-1774, vol. 9, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 7th Series (Boston, 1914), 59-60; Thomas Melvil to the Board of Trade, 11 March 1753, in CO 388/46, pg. 94, British National Archives (hereafter BNA); Metcalf, "A Microcosm of Why Africans Sold Slaves," 385-386. William Pinnegar to Samuel and William Vernon, 6 May 1756, in Papers of the American Slave Trade, Ser B, pt. 1, reel 28; Thomas Teakle Taylor to Samuel and William Vernon, 4 September 1756, NYHS; Thomas Rogers to Samuel and William Vernon, 26 February 1765; John Duncan to Samuel and William Vernon, 21 August 1770, NYHS.


23 Richardson, "West African Consumption Patterns,” 326-327.

24 Testimony of Thomas Bennett, in Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, 14:135, 137.

Captain Keith may be James Keith, who sailed in the 1750s. See http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1514&yearTo=1866&anycaptain=keith.

25 Brig Othello Trade Book, NYHS; Schooner Active Trade Book, NYHS.


27 William Chancellor Diary, pg. 49, Maryland Historical Society; Thomas Rogers to Samuel and William Vernon, 26 February 1765, NYHS; Samuel and William Venon to John Duncan, 22 August 1772, NYHS.

28 William Chancellor Diary, Maryland Historical Society, pgs. 33, 60-61; Coughtry, Notorious Triangle, 86.

30 Francis Moore, Travels Into the Inland Parts of Africa… Second Edition (London: D. Henry and R. Cave, 1740[?]), 77, 60-61; Mungo Park, Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa (London: Wordsworth, 2002), 29. On the ceddo regimes, the usual term in the literature, and on the Soninke as a ceddo-type group, see Barry, Senegambia and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 22. It should be noted that there has been some debate over the proper application of the term “Soninke.” For discussion, see Lamin Sanneh, Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 83-85.

31 For the Royal African Company’s effort to establish rum as a trade good on the Upper Guinea Coast, see T 70/22, pg. 15.

32 Moore, Travels, 77, 72, 23, 28, 60.


36 Robert Elliott to Samuel and William Vernon, 5 December 1771, NYHS. For the D’Wolfs, see for example Ship Charlotte Account Book, Ships’ Documents, Box 2, Bristol Historical and Preservations Society (hereafter, Bristol Historical and Preservation Society). In the nineteenth century, the black neighborhood of the D’Wolfs’


39 Caleb Godfrey to Samuel and William Vernon, 22 August 1754, NYHS; John Duncan to Samuel and William Vernon, 22 November 1768, NYHS.


42 Samuel Waldo to Samuel Rhodes, 12 March 1734, in Donnan, *Documents*, 3:42-46. Snow *Grayhound* Trade Book, Newport Historical Society (the name of the vessel seems to be mistaken in the catalogue; the true name is unknown); Evaline Martin, ed. *Journal of a Slave Dealer: A View of Some Remarkable Axcidents in the Life of Nics. Owen on the Coast of Africa and America from the Year 1746 to the Year 1757* (Boston, 1930), 35-36; Entry for 21 January 1765, in Trade Book of the brig *Sally*, Brown University, online at http://library.brown.edu/cds/repository2/reponman.php?verb=render&id=1161038386638650 (accessed 10 July 2016); Ship *Charlotte* Account Book, Box 2, Ships’ Documents, D’Wolf Collection, Bristol Historical and Preservation Society; Receipt dated 15 November 1804, Folder 6, Box 2, ibid.; Account with Wilson, n.d. 1804, Box 2, Folder 11, ibid; *Boston Gazette*, 13 December 1736, pg. 2.

43 For examples, see Brig *Sally* Trade Book, Brown University; Sloop *Rhode Island* Trade Book, NYHS.


47 Silvestre Jones to Samuel and William Vernon, 11 March 1792, NYHS; John D’Wolf to George Berwick, n.d., ca. 1792/3, Folder 14a, Box 5, Ships’ Documents, D’Wolf Collection, Bristol Historical and Preservation Society; Deposition of James Gardner Butler, HCA 42/331/1226, pg. 8, BNA.


49 Martin Benson to Brown, Benson, and Ives, 12 August 1795; Brown and Ives to Martin Benson, 30 August 1799, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI. Manifest of the snow Hope, Outbound Foreign Manifests, Newport, French Spoliation Claims, Entry No. 718, RG 36, National Archives of the United States. The statistics come from an analysis of the manifests in this collection, along with those from the Providence District. On Asian goods in the re-export boom, see James R. Fichter, So Great a Profit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism (Cambridge, 2010), 82-110.

50 City Gazette [Charleston], 11 December 1805, pg. 1; ibid., 23 January 1807, pg.1. For more examples, see ibid., 8 March 1804, pg. 3; ibid., 15 October 1806, pg. 3; ibid., 22 December 1806, pg. 3.


52 On the slave trades of Brazil, Cuba, and Barbados, see Sean M. Kelley, “New World Slave Traders and the Problem of Trade Goods: Brazil, Barbados, Cuba, and North America in Comparative Perspective,” article under consideration. On the U.S. as major slave trading power during the years 1804-1807, See Eltis, “The U.S. Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 363-364.