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A 'SLAVING PORT'?: THE CAPTIVE AND CONVENTIONAL TRADES IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, 1768-1775

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In the 350-year history of the transatlantic slave trade, no fewer than 188 ports dispatched vessels to Africa, but just twenty of these ports (slightly more than 10 percent) accounted for some 93 percent of all slave-trading voyages.[1] Clearly, while many merchants around the Atlantic rim turned their hand to slave trading at some point, the vast majority of the trade was organized in a much smaller selection of what we might consider true slaving ports. The causes of this concentration included high capital requirements, which excluded all but the wealthiest merchants, who in turn tended to cluster in major ports; the need for specialised mercantile connections and trading expertise, which spawned what economists call commercial 'clusters' or 'agglomerations'; and simple geography, as some ports were better situated to take advantage, whether by virtue of pre-existing maritime capacity, favourable wind systems, or proximity to trade good sources.[2]

However, there is a paradox in all of this. If, on the one hand, a small number of ports specialised in slave trading, it is also true that in none of them was slave trading the sole commercial activity. Merchants in slave trading ports, in other words, always engaged in more conventional trades. Measuring the relative significance of the slave trade in these ports is difficult. Clearances to Africa always constituted a small fraction of total departures, in some cases a truly miniscule proportion. For example, in Bristol, the fifth-ranking point of departure for the transatlantic slave trade with 2,083 voyages dispatched, African clearances accounted for between 4 and 12 percent of all departures. For Liverpool, the leading port of origin for the transatlantic slave trade, African clearances ranged between 6.8 and 12.9 percent of the total. Similar clearance figures have led one historian of the French slave trade

to conclude that 'The slave trade was not a specialist's activity.' Clearances, however, are an imperfect metric, especially for the slave trade. As several historians have noted, commodified human beings were worth much more than bulk commodities or manufactures and thus generated more profit and capital for regional and national economies, well beyond what clearance statistics alone would suggest. Given all of this, two basic questions emerge. First, just how important was the slave trade to those ports that carried it out on a consistent basis? Second, to what extent were slave-trading ports merchants specialised?[3]

This chapter seeks to address those questions by focusing on a single port, Newport, Rhode Island, over the period 1768-1775. Newport was the eleventh-ranked Atlantic slave-trading port, responsible for about 800 voyages.[4] With a population of 9,200 in 1774, Newport was smaller than most of the other top slaving ports, such as first-ranked Liverpool (population of 77,000 in 1800) and second-ranked Salvador de Bahia (population of ca. 50,000 in 1800). That would suggest that Newport was a very atypical outlier, but as these rankings suggest, slave trading was not always organised in the major metropolitan cities, and approximately 40 percent of it was organised in the Americas. Lisbon, with 1,096 voyages, ranked tenth, just above Newport, and Amsterdam, with 122 voyages, ranked twenty-ninth, although the city's merchants were probably connected with voyages departing from other Dutch ports. So while Newport's extremely small size raises questions about its typicality, it is clear that the correlation between a port's total population and slave trading is very weak.[5]

Historians who have broached the importance of Newport's slave trade have come to differing conclusions. An older literature held that 'triangular trade', by which they meant multiple trades, was central to the commerce of colonial New England. Historians of the 1950s-1970s, many employing quantitative methods, effectively demolished the larger notion of triangular trade as a major commercial pattern, but in the process greatly underestimated the importance of the slave trade. A few works went so far as to label the New England slave

trade a ‘legend’. Later works, focused on Rhode Island and Newport in particular, reversed course, holding that that the slave trade was the port’s ‘First Wheel of Commerce’, but a final resolution to the question has never been reached.[6]

Less directly but still relevant to the topic, economic historians have debated the degree of specialisation by early American merchants. For many decades, a consensus reigned, largely based on the records of individual merchants, that colonial-era traders were of necessity ‘jacks-of-all-trades’. Work done in the 1970s-90s, often more quantitative in nature, revised that thesis to argue that American merchants were actually quite specialised. However, the most thorough of these works addressed the Middle Colonies and were cautious about applying that conclusion to New England, which did not have a major agricultural export comparable to wheat. Crucially, none of the ports under study were heavily involved in the slave trade, which was in any case a distinction unique to Newport. The relative importance of Newport’s slave trade in relation to its other trades thus remains an open question.[7]

Weighing a port’s slave trade against more conventional enterprises is difficult, as the case of Newport reveals. Methodologically, it requires the complete reconstruction of a port’s activity from an imperfect documentary record. In the case of Newport, no comprehensive port records survive for the colonial era, when the locally-organised slave trade was at its height. It is possible to gain a sense of aggregate port activity from the shipping news section of the local weekly newspaper, but the complete print runs needed for this kind of reconstruction have survived for only a few years. Based on newspaper shipping notices, it has long been known that the proportion of Newport vessels clearing for Africa fluctuated between 2 and 7.5 percent in the late colonial era. Even then, shipping notices contain limited information, only the names of the vessels, the surnames of the captains, and the port from or to which the vessel cleared. This information allows us to gain a general sense of proportion

in Newport's overall trade, specifically what share of the port's vessels came from or went to a given region, but it does not allow for a deeper analysis. Without knowing the vessels' owners, it is impossible to determine which merchants were involved in which trades or in what proportion, nor can we ascertain whether a port's commerce was dominated by a few large merchants or spread among many. The absence of given names for the shipmasters in the notices makes it virtually impossible to reconstruct voyage routes or to gauge the degree of specialisation.[8]

Fortunately, British customs records do survive for the years 1768-1775. With information on 839 voyages and cargoes, along with their origins or destinations, and containing the names of 211 merchants and 333 captains, these records enable a more complete reconstruction of individual merchants' activities than the newspaper shipping notices alone and have not been consulted by historians. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that these documents do not constitute a complete record of the port's activity. As tax records, they list only those vessels that entered or left the port with an 'enumerated commodity', or items subject to duties as specified in the Navigation Acts. The vast majority of the entries, which total nearly 800, are for vessels arriving in Newport with Caribbean molasses, or less commonly, with sugar, coffee, wine, pimiento, glass, indigo, and tea. Moreover, the record of departures is much slimmer than the record of entries, with just 46 vessels, mostly for carrying tobacco to Africa and Nova Scotia.[9]

Coastwise trade with the other British mainland colonies is the most serious blind spot in these records. The reason is simply that apart from tobacco, most the commodities produced on the mainland, such as grain, lumber, foodstuffs, and fish, were not enumerated and therefore were not subject to taxation. Vessels leaving or entering with no enumerated commodities, as well as those clearing or entering with undeclared commodities (i.e. contraband) were never entered into the ledgers. Given the fact that coastwise trade

accounted for a majority of the port's traffic, coupled with the fact that coasters tended to carry non-enumerated commodities, this would appear to be no small problem.[10] However, as the discussion below will show, it is not as serious a weakness as it might seem because the coastwise trade appears to have been mostly in the hands of merchants from colonies other than Newport. In other words, Newport merchants, and Rhode Island merchants more broadly, concentrated on the West Indian and African trades, which tended to involve enumerated commodities and which in turn made it more likely that they would appear in the customs records, leaving much of the coastwise trade to others. Ironically, the slave trade is also poorly represented in the customs records. Incoming slave ships invariably entered the ledgers as arriving from the Caribbean with enumerated goods, but never directly from Africa. Identifying the slave ships among inbound vessels requires matching in other sources, such as the outbound shipping notices, outbound customs records, and the *Slave Voyages* database. Outgoing slave ships are easier to spot, but they only entered the record when declaring enumerated goods, such as tobacco. Vessels clearing without tobacco, or those that neglected to declare it, do not appear. In fact, for the years covered here, 1768-1775, only 38 slave ships appear in the inbound and outbound customs records, while another 108 voyages are absent. For this reason, the customs records will be supplemented here with information from the *Slave Voyages* database and from newspaper shipping notices.

This chapter begins with discussion of Newport as a port in both the conventional and slave trades. A key task of that section is to weigh the relative importance of Newport's slave trade against its other trades. The next section examines slave-trading merchants to determine the relative importance of the captive trade to their larger enterprise. To simplify matters, the focus here will be on molasses imports as a proxy for the wider Caribbean trade to allow for a comparison with the value of captives carried. The final section addresses specialisation among ship's captains by comparing the frequency of their slave- versus conventional-trading

voyages. In all, the customs records suggest that slave trading was economically significant to Newport, despite the low proportion of Africa clearances, and that those merchants and mariners who engaged in the 'Guinea trade' tended to specialise in it, although there was considerable individual variation within the group.

Maritime Commerce in Newport

Situated on Aquidneck Island, on the south-eastern edge of Narragansett Bay, Newport, Rhode Island was founded in the 1630s by radical religious dissenters fleeing the Puritan orthodoxy of Massachusetts. From the time of the town's founding, Newporters earned their living from the sea, but they faced major disadvantages stemming from their proximity to Boston, a much larger port with stronger financial ties to England. Although Newport merchants failed to break into the direct trade with England, by the early eighteenth century they had established themselves in multiple interstitial trades. A 1708 report by the governor specifically mentioned the carriage of produce and lumber to the Caribbean for molasses, sugar, indigo, cotton and English manufactures, and a similar exchange of foodstuffs and lumber for wine in Madeira and the Azores. The report made little mention of privateering, a major wartime activity, but it did sketch the colony's incipient slave trade, which at the time focused on Barbados and was organised in conjunction with merchants there. African voyages continued sporadically though the 1720s (8 voyages) before surging during the 1730s (68 voyages).[11] It was during that decade that the transatlantic slave trade became firmly established in Newport and assumed its distinctive form, the exchange of rum for captives on the Gold Coast for transport to the British Caribbean. However, with the onset of global war in 1739, Newport's slave trade declined precipitously, as shipowners turned to privateering and other pursuits less vulnerable to harassment by the enemy.[12]

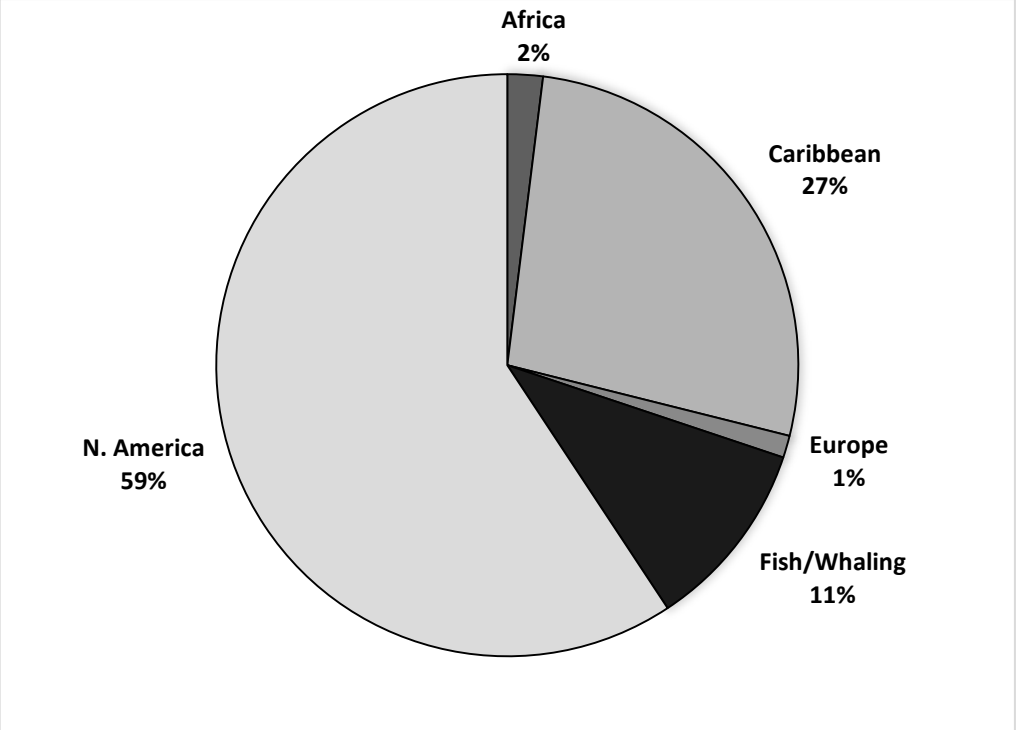
Peace returned in 1748 and ushered in a period of growth for Newport. The years 1750-1775 were particularly good for the town's trade, despite the challenges of the Seven Years' War, and the colony became the fifth largest port in North America, after Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charles Town, South Carolina. During those years, the transatlantic slave trade came roaring back from the war-induced hiatus of the 1740s. The number of voyages climbed from about eleven per year during the 1750s, to fifteen per year during the 1760s, to twenty per year from 1770-1775. All other trades grew as well. Caribbean clearances rose from 131 in 1763 to 200 by 1774, and coastwise departures went from 230 to 526 over that same period. The town's population, meanwhile, doubled, and in 1764, the colonial legislature claimed that 2,200 seamen manned the colony's vessels. This growth occurred despite the various boycott and non-importation movements in the lead-up to the American Revolution. Newporters participated enthusiastically in the era's street protests, and famously burnt the king's customs schooner *Gaspée* in 1772. For several months in 1774 they refused to endorse the Continental Association's trade restrictions until finally (and reluctantly) signing on late in the year.[13]

Rhode Islanders were aware of the colony's economic growth and wanted to maintain it. In 1764, in response to Parliament's passage of the Sugar Act, the Rhode Island legislature issued a 'Remonstrance', which also happens to provide the most complete portrait of the late-colonial economy. The authors' core argument was the Sugar Act would force Rhode Island merchants to pay more for molasses, ruin their trade, and leave them unable to pay for the £120,000 of British imports they consumed each year. The Remonstrance focused much attention on molasses, which it called 'an engine in the hands of the merchant' as both a re-export and as essential to rum manufacture, the commodity that fuelled the slave trade. Rum, alleged the Remonstrance, generated £40,000 in remittances annually, equivalent to one-third of the colony's current account deficit with Britain. Although the figures given in the

Remonstrance revealed almost twice as many vessels cleared for mainland than for Caribbean destinations (352 to 184), the 'coasting' trade in foodstuffs, lumber, and ship stores received almost no attention at all. The reason for that had to do with the purpose of the Remonstrance, which was to get Parliament to repeal the Sugar Act (which it eventually did). The authors likely deemphasised coastal trade because it did not generate as much in bills of exchange--needed to pay debts in Britain--as the Caribbean and African trades did. Finally, the coastal trade likely attracted less attention in the Remonstrance because (as we will see) it was largely in the hands of non-Rhode Islanders, which meant that most of its earnings accrued to merchants elsewhere.[14]

The goal of the Remonstrance was avowedly political, but its fundamental claims ring true. Based on modern volume estimates and price data, the Remonstrance's £40,000 figure for slave trade remittances may have been slightly exaggerated for rhetorical effect, but not wildly so. The clearance figures in the Remonstrance, which derive from now-lost port records, comport with those taken from the shipping notices. For example, the notices for 1773, a year for which a complete run survives, reveal a similar breakdown, with the North American coastal trade accounting for nearly three-fifths of clearances, the Caribbean for just over one-quarter, fishing and whaling (which received almost no mention in the Remonstrance) for 11 percent, and Africa at 2 percent, and Europe for 1 percent (see Figure 1). Incoming traffic essentially mirrored this structure, though with slightly more vessels from Europe (2 percent) and no vessels from Africa, which is not surprising given the slave trade's triangular nature. Most of these vessels are likely included in the Caribbean figures, just as some of the North American arrivals likely came initially from the Caribbean.[15]

Figure 1: Destinations of Vessels Clearing from Newport, 1773



Source: *Newport Mercury*, January-December 1773.

But just how significant was the mainland coasting trade to Newport's overall trade? Clearance figures alone imply that it was extremely important, but data on the residence of coastal traders makes it clear that merchants outside of Rhode Island organised most of this trade. If we use membership in the Fellowship Club (later known as the Marine Society), Newport's fraternal organisation for sea captains, as in indicator of local residence, then the ties to Newport appear very weak (see Table 1). For the year 1773, only one-quarter (26 percent) of all captains in Newport's coastal trade were members of the Fellowship Club at any time in their lives. This percentage was roughly equal to the percentage among fishermen and whalers, but roughly 20 points lower than for those captains in the Caribbean (43 percent) and European (44 percent) trades, and far below the percentage in the Guinea trade (60 percent.) There are problems with these sources, so the figures must be taken as a general index, not as precise measurements. Not all local captains were members of the Society, and the absence of first names in the shipping news means that identification here is done solely on the basis of surname. Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that North American voyages

took less time than Caribbean, African, and European voyages, so some captains in the coastwise trades registered large numbers of clearances in a given year, which helped to inflate the coastwise totals. For example, in 1773, a Captain Cox, not of Rhode Island, cleared Newport seven times for New York and once for Falmouth, Massachusetts, while a Captain Field, also not local, cleared thirteen times for Nantucket. Of course, some Newport skippers did work in the coastwise trade, but by all appearances they were in the minority. Much the same can be said about fishing and whaling. Newporters and Rhode Islanders were represented, but seemingly in smaller numbers.

Table 1: Outbound Ship Captains and Membership in Newport's Fellowship Club, 1773

Destination Region	Number	Pct. Surnames appearing in Fellowship Club List
Africa	15	60.0
Caribbean	218	43.6
Europe	9	44.4
Fishing/Whaling	85	24.7
N. America	481	26.4
Total	808	

Sources: *Newport Mercury*, January-December 1773; *Charter of the Marine Society of the Town of Newport* (Newport: Newport Mercury, 1806).

Newporters, and Rhode Islanders more broadly, therefore dominated the Caribbean and African trades. The figures in Table 1 point to that conclusion, but in fact they understate the level of dominance. Of the 21 slave traders appearing in the customs records, exactly three resided outside of Rhode Island, with the vast majority living in or near Newport. Only three lived outside of Rhode Island. A similar dominance is evident in the list of ship owners from

the *Slave Voyages* database. Slave trading was further concentrated among a small number of elite merchants, who commanded both large amounts of capital and possessed experience and connections in Africa and the Caribbean. Two-thirds of slave-trading merchants with two or more voyages to their credit were in the top decile of Newport's 1772 tax payers and paid a median tax that was nearly four times that paid by the next decile, which included all but one of the remaining slave merchants (See Table 2). (The quoted figures do not include those slave ship owners who dispatched fewer than two vessels or captains who owned a small share in the voyages they commanded).[16]

Table 2: Wealth and Slave Trading in Newport, 1772

Decile (N=1,112)	**Median Tax (£, R.I. currency)**	**Owners/ captains 1+ voyages**	**Owners 2+ voyages**	**Captains, 2+ voyages**
1	5.10	28	14	5
2	1.35	15	6	6
3	.85	8	1	5
4	.5	4	0	2
5	.35	7	0	3
6-10	.1	14	0	8

Source: Sean M. Kelley, *American Slavers: Merchants, Mariners, and the Transatlantic Commerce in Captives, 1644-1865* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), p. 260.

The costs and profits for the Newport slave trade are very difficult to estimate due to the nature of the sources. No comprehensive accounts such as those left by Liverpool's William Davenport have survived to provide a clear picture of expenditures and revenues.[17] Anecdotally, however, the profitability of Newport's slave trade seems very much in line

with elsewhere.[18] This stands to reason since if it were significantly more profitable than others, we would expect to see metropolitan British merchants increase their involvement, and if it were significantly less profitable, we would expect to see lower levels of activity. A very rough calculation of the total value of the captives carried by Newport's slavers during the years 1768-75 suggests a gross market value of about £728,000 sterling, or £4,854 sterling per voyage. The molasses entering Newport in 1768-75 was worth some £231,468 sterling but divided among 680 vessels works out to a gross market value of £341 per voyage.[19]

The slave trade therefore appears to have been much more important to Newport's merchants than simple clearance statistics would suggest. Newport's coastwise and fishing/whaling trades were largely in the hands of outsiders, with the bulk of the profits accruing elsewhere. By contrast, the African and Caribbean trades were the backbone of the town's external commerce.

Merchant Specialisation and the Slave Trade

Given that some molasses was converted into rum and re-exported to Africa, the obvious questions are, to what extent did these two cornerstone trades overlap, and to what extent did merchants specialise in them? As a starting point, it is worth noting that over two-thirds of all Rhode Island-based merchants who paid customs duties (the vast majority of which were for molasses) are not on record as owning shares in slave-trading voyages. This is very likely an overestimate, since ownership data in the colonial Rhode Island slave trade is partial and, where it exists, tends to miss minority partners. Still, there is no reason to doubt the larger point, which is that a sizable majority of Newport merchants focused solely on the Caribbean molasses and other conventional trades. The other 32 percent of molasses importers were involved in slave-trading voyages, whether as senior partners/organisers or as owners of

smaller shares (usually one-eighth or one-quarter). It is important to note that this figure applies to ownership at any point in the merchant's life, not necessarily to the 1768-1775 period covered by the records. For example, William Redwood Jr. appears as a molasses importer, but his only known slave voyages occurred in the 1750s. Similarly, George Gibbs, whose 32 molasses cargoes in 1768-1775 made him one of Newport's top importers, only dispatched the first of his three Guinea voyages almost two decades later, in 1789. In all, only 14 percent of the merchants on the customs lists can be linked with slave vessels during the same 1768-1775 time period they cover. Once more this is a probable understatement of the true proportion, but there is no reason to doubt that only a small minority of molasses importers were actively slave trading at any given moment.

Table 3: Residences of Slave- and non-Slave-Trading Merchants, 1768-1775

Residence	Non-Slave Traders	Slave Traders, any period	Slave Traders, 1768-1775	Totals
Rhode Island	102 (68.0%)	48 (32.0%)	21 (14.0%)	150
Non-Rhode Island	60 (89.5%)	7 (10.4%)	0 (0.0%)	67

Sources: RG 36, Account of Duties Received Under Acts of Parliament, 1768-1775, National Archives and Record Administration, Boston/Waltham, MA; Bartlett, ed., Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island.

Conversely, the vast majority of slavers in the customs records were involved in the molasses trade. In fact, slavers were among the most prolific importers of molasses. Aaron Lopez, for example, dispatched 15 slave ships and paid duty on 49 incoming molasses cargoes (including those carried by his own returning slave ships). That was enough to make him both Newport's top slave trader and top molasses merchant. Other leading slavers, such as Joseph and William Wanton (seven Guineamen and 43 molasses shipments) and Evan and Francis Malbone (five slave voyages and thirty-six molasses cargoes) pursued a similar strategy. Not all slavers did, however. The Vernon brothers, William and Samuel, followed a

different strategy, dispatching six slave ships during the years 1768-1775 while tallying just 14 molasses entries, four of which were their own returning slave ships.[20]

Participation in the molasses trade by slavers is hardly surprising. Molasses often constituted a part of the remittance for captives sold in the Caribbean, and it was also the main ingredient for rum, which drove the slave trade. But not all slave traders were major molasses merchants, and five of them, or one fifth, imported no molasses at all in 1768-1775. Their vessels either carried other commodities, such as coffee and wine, or did not enter Newport with enumerated goods. Other slavers only declared relatively small amounts of molasses. The Vernon brothers' slave ship *Hampden*, for example, returned in 1773 with just 513 gallons (approximately five hogsheads), which suggests that molasses was not their main line. This is not surprising. Contrary to older 'triangle trade' scholarship, which envisioned New England slavers as locked in an endless rum-captives-molasses cycle, slavers invariably preferred to receive their payments in bills of exchange over produce. Finally, we must bear in mind that most Newport slave ships (108, to be exact) simply did not appear in the customs records. Whether this was because they never returned to Newport (vessels may have been diverted into other trades after delivering captives or sold outright) or because they returned without declaring any enumerated commodities is difficult to say. Whatever the case, it is probably safest to assume that these 'missing' vessels did not return with significant amounts of molasses.[21]

The differing strategies and levels of specialisation among traders can be seen in Table 3. On average, the human cargoes transported by the twenty-five slavers in the customs records were worth almost nine times more than the molasses they carried. Caleb Gardner had the most imbalanced ratio, transporting some 440 captives worth about £15,400 against just 537 gallons of molasses, worth £373, for a captives-to-molasses value ratio of 41:1. Aaron Lopez, who was both the biggest slave trader and the biggest molasses trader during

the years 1768-1775, transported 1,957 people worth approximately £68,495, compared with 228,997 gallons of molasses, worth £14,082. The captives Lopez transported were worth more than five times as much as the molasses, which was actually below the average ratio for Newport's slave traders. These ratios are actually slightly lower than those based on merchant records. Jay Coughtry's study of Audley Clarke's accounts from the early nineteenth century, one of the few complete sets of merchant records in existence for a Newport slave trader, reveals that Clarke would have needed 78 Caribbean voyages to equal the returns he made from his three African voyages, a ratio of 26:1.[22]

Table 4: Rum vs. Captive Values for Selected Rhode Island Slave Traders, 1768-1775

Name	No. Captives, 1768-75 (est.)	Value of Captives (£)	Gallons of Molasses, 1768-75	Value of Molasses (£)	Value of Captives: Value of Molasses
Champlin, George and Christopher	429	15,015	13,576	1916	8:1
Gardner, Caleb	440	15,400	537	373	41:1
Lopez, Aaron	1,957	68,495	228,977	14,082	5:1
Malbone, Francis and Evan	695	24,325	264,343	12,191	2:1
Mason, Benjamin	540	18,900	11,888	531	36:1
Vernon, William	443	15,505	44,407	3940	4:1
Wanton, Joseph and William	951	33,285	291,970	13,746	2.4:1
Simeon Potter	800	28,000	17,718	1,982	14:1

Sources: See n. 14.

There are many caveats to mention regarding these figures. To start, they they are gross figures with no accounting for cost, so they cannot be taken as directly representative of profits. Slave voyages were very expensive to fit out, and as far as can be determined, profits averaged about 10 percent, with a significant minority of voyages losing money. These figures are moreover based solely on molasses, despite the fact that merchants dealt in a greater variety of commodities, many of them unenumerated and therefore invisible in the customs accounts. Most notably, Aaron Lopez, Newport's biggest taxpayer and most active slave trader, was deeply involved in the whale oil and spermaceti candle markets. It is also very likely that the captive totals are underestimated for most merchants, particularly the more active ones. The reason for this is the spotty ownership data for colonial Rhode Island slave ships in the *Slave Voyages* database. It is virtually certain that some of the larger traders have unattributed voyages in the database, and there are probably additional unnamed single-voyage organisers as well, but these information gaps will probably never be filled. Finally, due to the nature of the sources, which in most cases allowed space for the entry of just one owner's name, likely the managing partner, the data does not capture and surely understates value and prevalence of fractional shares in voyages. The figures presented in Table 4 are therefore nothing more than a crude indicator of the relative value of the captive and commodity trades to individual merchants. However, even given these problems, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the slave trade was the main source of profit for Newport's slavers. Put differently, despite engaging in multiple trades, when it came to profits, these merchants specialised in the slave trade.

Shipmasters, Specialisation, and the Slave Trade

Can we say that Newport's ship captains specialised in the slave trade? The fact that merchants valued experience for the captains they employed in the slave trade suggests they

probably did. Moreover, because Newport had the highest concentration of seasoned captains in North America, it often furnished skippers to slavers in Boston and New York. Knowledge of Africa and experience clearly mattered, and this surely militated in favour of specialisation. On the other hand, we know that Newport's slave ship captains, like their employers, engaged in multiple trades over the course of a career. Caleb Godfrey, who commanded about a half-dozen Guineamen, filled his time in between trips to Africa—which sometimes lasted a year--by sailing in the Caribbean and coastwise trades. And during wartime, some slave ship captains, such as William Pinnegar, Benjamin Hicks, and Thomas Underwood, moved into privateering. The question, of course, is to what degree certain captains specialised in the slave trade. The obstacles to answering that question parallel those involving merchants. Indeed, the question is complicated by the fact that many slave ship captains owned shares in their voyages and were therefore also merchants.[23]

To start, it is worth pointing out that slave ship captains earned considerably more money than non-slave ship captains. This true of both those who owned shares in the voyages those who did not. What made commanding a Guineaman so lucrative was the ability to transport captives as 'privilege' at no charge. The size of the privilege varied, but most captains were allowed between four and six captives, each of whom could be sold for upwards of £35 sterling. Captains would have to purchase the captives themselves, of course, and they lost their investment when one died, but since the sales price in the Americas was up to six times the purchase price in Africa, most captains earned considerably more in privilege than they did on wages alone. In addition, some slave ship captains earned a 2.5% 'coast commission' on purchases and sales in Africa. The total value varied but was roughly comparable to wages. This all meant that even without owning voyage shares, slave ship captains earned more than those in the conventional trades, and the difference was visible in estate inventories. In a sample of 88 Rhode Island estate inventories from the eighteenth and

early nineteenth centuries, the mean estate value for slave ship captains was $1,572, against $699 for non-slave ship captains. The disparity is all the more remarkable when keeping in mind that many of these estates were inventoried decades after the decedent's final African voyage. Slave-trading wealth, in other words, endured.[24]

Reconstructing maritime careers, however, is difficult, and for many of the same reasons that make it difficult to reconstruct a given merchant's portfolio. Complete runs of personal papers for ship captains are rare for the period, and the lack of first names in the shipping news makes it difficult to rely on those sources, although some reconstructions have been done.[25] The customs records, however, allow us to fill the gaps, although the same weakness applies to the captains as to the merchants, specifically that these records count only those vessels that paid customs duties. This problem aside, it is clear that the slave trade was very much the preserve of Newport's, and to some extent Rhode Island's, maritime fraternity. Sixteen percent of all Rhode Island-resident captains in the record commanded a slave ship during the years 1768-75, and 22 percent are on record has having skippered a Guineaman at some point in their careers. In other words, one in five Rhode Island captains sailed in the slave trade at some point, and this does not count voyages that they may have undertaken at ranks below captain, which virtually all of them likely did at some point. Only 2 percent of the non-Rhode Islanders in the records captained a slave ship in the period 1768-75, and only 3 percent did so at any time. These figures underscore the notion that slave trading experience and skill was concentrated in Newport.[26]

As a rule, those who skippered a Guineaman during the 1768-75 period were not deeply involved in other trades. This contrasts somewhat with the merchants, most of whom were involved in the molasses trade at some level, with some of them among the leading molasses traders. The reasons for this divergence are simple: while merchants could send out multiple vessels, captains could only command one ship at a time. African voyages, moreover, took

much longer than West Indian runs, so embarking on just one slaving voyage blocked out time that might otherwise have been spent on shorter trips. Nor should we underestimate the impact of serious illness, a virtual inevitability for any slave trading voyage, which likely kept some captains out of circulation as they recovered (that is, if they did not die on the voyage, as at least six did during these years). Those captains who commanded slave ships over the years 1768-75 averaged 1.75 Africa trips, and most of them made only one. That same group of captains averaged 1.4 voyages to the Caribbean (not including returning slave voyages), although quite a few made no additional voyages at all. Finally, the relatively high earnings of the slave trade, which was the main attraction, allowed slave ship captains to take longer breaks between voyages. This contrasts with shipmasters in the conventional trades, for whom shorter voyages and no 'privilege slaves' meant lower earnings per voyage and consequently more voyages. Between 1768 and 1775, the average captain entered Newport 2.4 times. This amounts to one more voyage than the average slave ship captain, but the number includes many non-Rhode Island vessels for which Newport was just a one-time stop. Twelve captains managed to squeeze eight or more voyages into the same period, something that would have been impossible for a slave ship captain to do.[27]

So while slave ship captains did not sail exclusively in the Guinea trade, slave-trading did constitute a speciality within Newport's maritime community. This was in part due to the need for experience, which prompted merchants to hire from a relatively small pool of knowledgeable, Newport-based, ship masters. Captains, for their part, understood that a single African voyage could potentially pay as much as multiple Caribbean voyages, though obviously the risk of serious illness or death was much higher. And lastly, the simple fact that Guinea voyages could last up to a year or more meant that slave ship captains did not have the time or opportunity to make large numbers of voyages in the coastal or Caribbean trades.

Conclusion: A 'Slaving Port'?

Determining relative importance of the captive and conventional trades is extremely important as nations and communities reckon with the legacy of slavery and the slave trade. However, measuring the relative importance of these pursuits, whether at the level of the port, the merchant, or the mariner, is a difficult task. Clearance data, whether gleaned from newspaper shipping notices or port records, is relatively easy to come by but of limited value given the disproportionately high value of human cargoes. Complete sets of merchant papers, such as the William Davenport accounts analysed by David Richardson, are extremely valuable but inevitably raise the question of typicality.[28] We simply cannot know whether other slave merchants, particularly smaller investors, followed the same pattern. Reconstructing the careers of slave ship captains, has proven possible, although more so for British captains than American ones. Given the very important differences between the British and American slave trades, with Americans as both undercapitalised and more sporadic in their participation, it is reasonable to question just how much we can generalise from British examples.[29]

The Newport customs records of 1768-75 offer a way to address the economic importance of the captive and conventional trades in one slave-trading port. The customs records include only those vessels that entered or departed with enumerated commodities and therefore miss a significant portion of Newport's total trade. However, other features, such as the inclusion of first names and the names of ship owners, mean that these records offer information that other sources, such as the shipping notices, do not contain. So while the customs records cannot provide us with a full portrait of Newport's aggregate trade, by using molasses imports as a proxy for the conventional trades, it is possible to gain some sense of the relative importance of slave trading to the port, to the merchant community, and to ship captains.

The conclusion in all three areas is that the transatlantic slave trade was economically significant to late-colonial Newport, and constituted a distinct specialty, even though many merchants and mariners had no direct connection to it. An analysis of the customs records supports contemporary arguments for of the importance of the slave trade as a way to earn credits on British merchant houses, with the gross market value of the captives greatly outstripping the value of the molasses carried. The same point can be made regarding slave trading merchants. Although most of them dealt in the molasses and other trades, the customs records suggest that the African trade was the leading activity and source of profit for those who engaged in it. Finally, Newport's slave ship captains tended to specialise in the Guinea trade because their experience made them attractive to voyage organisers, because their earnings were significantly higher than in the conventional trades, and because the long duration of the voyages precluded employment in other enterprises.

A fuller accounting of Newport's balance sheet will have to await the unlikely discovery of relevant sources, but work on other slave-trading ports, yet to be undertaken, will ultimately allow us to assess whether Newport was typical or atypical in its blend of enterprises. It may well turn out that slave trading was of even greater importance to ports like Liverpool and Bristol. Existing figures on the percentage of African clearances in those cities, which run several points higher than for Newport, coupled with better capitalisation and vessels that were on average twice the size of those used by the Americans, would suggest that it was. Whatever the case, the data examined here suggests that the transatlantic slave trade truly was Newport's 'First Wheel of Commerce'.

Notes

[1] David Eltis and David Richardson, Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (New Haven, 2010), p. 37.
[2] Stephen D. Behrendt, 'Human Capital in the British Slave Trade', in David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz, and Anthony Tibbles (eds.), Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery (Liverpool, 2007), p. 66-88; Edward L. Glaeser and Joshua D. Gottlieb, 'The Wealth of Cities: Agglomeration Economies and Spatial Equilibrium in the United States', Journal of Economic Literature, 47, no. 4 (2009), pp. 983-1028.

[3] For Bristol, see David Richardson, Bristol, Africa, and the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade to America (Bristol: Bristol Record Office, 1991), pg. 1: xvi; Kenneth Morgan, Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge, 1993), p. 131. For Liverpool, see Jayne Bunnag, 'Wealth Generation and Deployment in the Liverpool Slave Trade, 1750-1807', Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, in progress. For the quotation, see Guillaume Daudin, 'Profitability and Long-Distance Trading in Context: The Case of Eighteenth-Century France', Journal of Economic History, 64 no. 1 (2004), p. 146. It is worth noting that Daudin's primary concern is the rate of return on investments in the various long-distance trades and not their relative economic importance.

[4] Voyage totals are from www.slavevoyages.org. For this estimate, I have re-allocated all of the voyages listed in the database as departing from 'Rhode Island, port unspecified' (89 percent of all 1768-1775 Rhode Island voyages in the database) to Newport (11 percent of all 1768-75 Rhode Island voyages). There are several justifications for this. First, Newport was by far the leading port in Rhode Island. For many years, including the period under discussion, Newport was the site of the only customs house in the colony, which meant that all Rhode Island vessels stopped there, and most of them likely hired crew and took on cargo. Moreover, because Newport was situated on Rhode Island proper (a.k.a. Aquidneck Island), the two names were used interchangeably throughout the eighteenth century. For those reasons, it is virtually certain that the vast majority of 'unspecified' clearances were from Newport. For Newport's population, see John R. Bartlett, ed., Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (Providence, 1858), p. 239. Finally, a cross-check of the slave ship owners in the customs records with the Rhode Island census revealed that 93 percent of those voyages listed as originating in 'Rhode Island, port unspecified' were organised by Newport residents.

[5] For Liverpool's population, see Liverpool History Society, online at https://liverpoolhistorysociety.org.uk/articles/liverpool-firsts/. For Salvador, see Stuart B. Schwartz, Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550-1835 (Cambridge, 1985), p. 75.

[6] Works questioning the importance of 'trianguar trade' and/or the slave trade include Gilman M. Ostrander, 'The Colonial Molasses Trade,' Agricultural History, 30, no. 2 (1956), pp. 74-84; John J. McCusker, 'The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Continental Colonies, 1650-1775' (Ph.D. diss., Pittsburgh, 1970), pp.493-497; James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, Shipping, Maritime Trade, and the Economic Development of Colonial North America (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 49-51; Gilman P. Ostrander, 'The Making of the Triangular Trade Myth', William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., 30, no. 4 (1973), pp. 635-644; Sarah Deutsch, 'The Elusive Guineamen: Newport Slavers, 1735-1774,' New England Quarterly 55, no 2 (1982), pp. 229-253. Works emphasising its importance include Jay Coughtry, The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1730-1807 (Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 13-21; Elaine Forman Crane, A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era (New York, 1985), pp. 16-33.

[7] For a statement of the 'jacks-of-all-trades' thesis, see Stuart Bruchey, The Colonial Merchant: Sources and Readings (New York, 1966), pp. 169, 197. On specialisation, see Thomas Doerflinger, 'Commercial Specialization in Philadelphia's Merchant Community, 1750-1791,' Business History Review, 57 no. 1 (1983), pp. 20-49; Thomas Doerflinger, A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and the Economic Development of Revolutionary Philadelphia (New York, 1986), pp. 77-134; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, The Economy of British America, 1607-1789 (Chapel Hill and Williamsburg, 1985), pp. 194-198; Cathy Matson, Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York (Baltimore, 1998), pp. 58-59, 135, 142-143.

[8] Different authors examining different newspaper years have offered varying figures, from a low of 2 percent (see Richardson, below) to a high of 7.5 percent (Coughtry). See Bruce Macmillan Bigelow, 'The Commerce of Rhode Island with the West Indies before the American Revolution,' Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, 1930, Pt I, Ch. 2, p. 12; Coughtry, Notorious Triangle, 18; Elaine Foreman Crane, 'The First Wheel of Commerce: Newport, Rhode Island and the Slave Trade, 1760-1776', *Slavery and Abolition* 1, no. 1 (1980), p. 182; David Richardson, 'Slavery, Trade, and Economic Growth in Eighteenth-Century New England', in Barbara L. Solow, Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System (Cambridge, 1991), p. 254. Reconstructing the business of individual slave merchants is similarly challenging. See Virginia Bever Platt, '"And Don't Forget the Guinea Voyage": The Slave Trade of Aaron Lopez of Newport', William and Mary Quarterly, 3d. Ser., 32, no. 4 (1975), pp. 601n.2, 605.

[9] RG 36, Account of Duties Received Under Acts of Parliament, 1768-1775, National Archives and Record Administration, Boston/Waltham, MA (hereafter, RG 36, Accounts).

[10] On the importance of coastal trade, see James F. Shepherd and Samuel H. Williamson, 'The Coastal Trade of the British Colonies, 1768-1772,' Journal of Economic History, 32 no. 4 (1972), pp. 783-310.

[11] *Slave Voyages*, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/bTRT4G3C.

[12] Sydney V. James, Colonial Rhode Island: A History (New York, 1975), pp. 13-26, 158-162; John Russell Bartlett, ed., Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (Providence, 1859), pp. 4: 54-55; Sean M. Kelley, American Slavers: Merchants, Mariners, and the Transatlantic Commerce in Captives,

1644-1865 (New Haven, 2023), pp. 77-107; *Slave Voyages*, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/DTNBr3tp. For this calculation, I have eliminated the voyages for which the destination is unknown.
[13] *Slave Voyages*, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/K0YTsmYJ; Richardson, 'Slavery, Trade, and Economic Growth', p. 254; Bartlett, ed., Records of the Colony, p. 6: 379; Elaine Foreman Crane, A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era (New York, 1985), pp. 109-121.
[14] The Remonstrance can be found in Bartlett, Records of the Colony, 6: 378-383.
[15] Based on shipping notices in the *Newport Mercury*, January-December 1773.
[16] Kelley, American Slavers, 260.
[17] David Richardson, 'Profits in the Liverpool Slave Trade: The Accounts of William Davenport, 1757-1784,' in R. Anstey and P.E.H. Hair (eds), Liverpool, the African Slave Trade, and Abolition (Liverpool, 1976), 60-89.
[18] Information on profitability in the American slave trade is scant, apart from a few observations based on incomplete data. Observations vary greatly depending on the voyage, ranging from highs in the 40 percent range to catastrophic losses. For examples, see Darold D. Wax, 'The Browns of Providence and the Slaving Voyage of the Brig *Sally*, 1764-1765,' American Neptune 32 (1972), p. 179; Coughtry, *Notorious Triangle*, p. 20; Platt, 'And Don't Forget the Guinea Voyage', pp. 605, 616-617; Kelley, Voyage of the Slave Ship *Hare*, 184. However, it is unlikely that average profits ever exceeded the 10 percent level that prevailed in the British slave trade. Had profits been significantly greater than 10 percent, we would expect to see many more Anglo-American collaborations, but these were rare.
[19] RG 36, Accounts. Captive prices are from www.slavevoyages.org, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/DTNBr3tp. The price of rum is based on the annual averages between 1768-1775, as calculated in McCusker, 'The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments', pp. 1078-79. Total rum=3,312,605 gals. @ 1.3975 s. / gal.=4,629,365 s. / 20 = £231,468 / 680 vessels = £341 per voyage.
[20] RG 36, Accounts.
[21] For individual voyage totals, see *Slave Voyages*.
[22] RG 36 Accounts. Names of slave traders and prices for captives are taken from *Slave Voyages*. It should be noted that the figures for captives include some voyages that are not attributed to an owner in the database. In addition, when the number of captives for a given voyage was missing from the database, I supplied an estimate based on the merchant's other voyages or, if that were not possible, on an estimate of 100 captives per voyage, which was the mean for American slave ships of the period. Molasses prices are taken from McCusker, 'The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments', 1078-79. For Clarke's voyages, see Coughtry, Notorious Triangle, 20.
[23] Kelley, American Slavers, p. 85; Kelley, Voyage of the Slave Ship *Hare*, pp. 36-39; W. P. Sheffield, Privateersmen of Newport (Newport, R.I.: John P. Sanborn, 1883), pp. 52-55.
[24] Kelley, American Slavers, 264-267. Figures are in 1800 dollars.
[25] Virginia Bever Platt, 'Triangles and Tramping: Captain Zebediah Story of Newport', American Neptune 33 (1973), pp. 294-303.
[26] RG 36 Accounts.
[27] RG 36 Accounts.
[28] David Richardson, 'Profits in the Liverpool Slave Trade'.
[29] Suzanne Schwarz, Slave Captain; Stephen D. Behrendt. 'The Captains in the British Slave Trade from 1785 to 1807' Transactions of the History Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 140 (1991), pp. 79-140; John Pinfold, 'Introduction,' in Hugh Crow, The Memoirs of Captain Hugh Crow: The Life and Times of a Slave Trade Captain (Oxford, 2007), pp. v-xxiv.

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