

1857. Captain James Smith Describes the Atlantic Slave Trade

In 1859, eighty-five slave ships, capable of carrying between thirty and sixty thousand slaves, were outfitted in New York to serve the slave markets of Cuba. Captain James Smith was one of the few slave traders convicted of violating U.S. and international laws. Even though participation in the slave trade was considered piracy and a capital offense, he was sentenced to only two years in prison and a \$1,000 fine. The treatment of convicted slave traders finally changed during the Civil War. In February, 1862, Nathaniel Gordon was executed in New York City because of his involvement in the slave trade. The document that follows is an edited version of an interview with Smith. It originally appeared in a book written in 1857 and published in 1864.

“New York is the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade. It is the greatest place in the universe for it. Neither in Cuba nor in the Brazils is it carried on so extensively. Ships that convey Slaves to the West Indies and South America are fitted out in New York. Now and then one sails from Boston and Philadelphia; but New York is our headquarters. My vessel was the brig ‘Julia Moulton.’ I got her in Boston, and brought her here, and sailed from this port direct for the coast of Africa.”

“But do you mean to say that this business is going on now?”

“Yes. Not so many vessels have been sent out this year, perhaps not over twenty-five. But last year there were thirty-five. I can go down to South Street, and go into a number of houses that help fit out ships for the business. I don’t know how far they own the vessels, or receive the profits of the cargoes. But these houses know all about it.”

“But when you reach the African coast, are you not in great danger from British Ships-of-War?”

“Oh, no, we don’t care a button for an English squadron. We run up the American flag, and if they come aboard, all we have to do is show our American papers, and they have no right to search us.”

“How many Slaves could you carry on your vessel?”

“We took on board 664. She would carry 750 with ease. The boys and women we kept on the upper deck. But all the strong men - those giant Africans that might make us trouble - we put below on the Slave deck.”

“Did you chain them or put on handcuffs?”

“No, never; they would die. We let them move about.”

“Are you very severe with them?”

“We have to be very strict at first - for a week or so - to make them feel that we are the masters. Then we lighten up for the rest of the voyage.”

“How do you pack them at night?”

“They lie down upon the deck, on their sides, body to body. There would not be room enough for all to lie on their backs.”

“Did many die on the passage?”

“Yes, I lost a good many on the last cruise - more than ever before. Sometimes we find them dead when we go below in the morning. Then we throw them overboard.”

“Are the profits of the trade large?”

“Yes, sir, very large. My brig cost \$13,000 to fit her out completely. My last cargo to Cuba was worth \$220,000.”

Questions

1. How many enslaved Africans did Smith transport on this voyage?
2. How much money were these people sold for in Cuba?
3. Smith says “New York is the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade.” According to Smith, what role does New York play in this trade?
4. When Smith was convicted of illegal slave trading, he was sentenced to two years in prison and a \$1,000 fine. In your opinion, was this a fair punishment? Explain.