

Tracing slaves' roots

At W&M, scholars review ocean of data

By Will Mollnux
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WILLIAMSBURG

An international community of scholars here at a weekend conference studying all aspects of the transatlantic slave trade got a peek at an incredible amount of newly assembled information — a computerized database of 27,233 slave voyages.

The information, to be published in November on CD-ROM by Cambridge University Press, is the largest compilation of raw data ever made regarding the shipment of slaves from Africa to the Americas between 1588 and 1867. The CD-ROM was previewed during the conference on "Transatlantic Slaving and the African Diaspora" at Colonial Williamsburg over the weekend.

It had been generally estimated that 10.5 million captured persons were transported to European colonies in North and South America during those three centuries. A precise number may never be tabulated, but initial readings of the computerized data confirm previous estimates that 12 million adults and children were shipped from Africa and that 10.5 million arrived.

The number of persons held in bondage who died during weeks-long passages across the Atlantic is well over a million. In the 19th century, when Great Britain and other European nations outlawed slavery, some slave ships were interdicted at sea and sent back to Africa. Some ships were lost in storms at sea.

It is believed that two-thirds of all shipments of African slaves ever made are represented in the database. Full documentation on the departure and arrival of specific voyages is available, however, for only about 5,000 ship passages.

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Slaves

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The data on the slave trade — one of the largest and the most significant migrations of human beings — is a compilation of years of research by dedicated scholars in the United States, Canada and Great Britain, who pored over all known documentary records of trade ships sent out by the Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch and English. This work was done under the auspices of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute of Afro-American and African Studies at Harvard University and is commonly referred to as the Du Bois Dataset.

Joseph Miller of the University of Virginia, who gave more than 700 scholars here an overview of the Du Bois Dataset, called the information "a wonderful gift" that represents for scholars "a wonderful opportunity" for refined study of various specific aspects of this migration — a forced migration that, until 1830, was far larger than the European colonization of the Americas, and a migration that, until now, has not received the scholarly attention it merits.

Joanne Braxton of The College of William and Mary said the release of the Du Bois Dataset "is a time of celebration" for scholars who will now be able to expand and diversify their work, which will become more sophisticated.

Patrick Manning of Northwestern University and others at the conference noted that information stored in the dataset will be tabulated and analyzed by historians and other scholars for years to come. Bernard Bailyn of Harvard likened its use to that of a telescope by astronomers, calling it "a Hubble telescope to the past." And minutes later David Union Davis of Yale characterized the Du Bois Dataset as "opening an endless galaxy of questions to be answered."

The dataset will be used by anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, musicologists, sociologists, economists, linguists and scholars in innumerable other disciplines, as well as novelists.

The dataset will yield all sorts of empirical information on which scholars can formulate more complete and accurate understandings of the function and economics of the slave trade, which have international implications and societal reverberations still felt today. As Collin Palmer of the City University of

New York put it: "Now there will be no excuse to write nonsense," meaning no reason for historians to arrive at unsubstantiated conclusions about the transatlantic slave trade.

One of the four scholars who edited the Du Bois Dataset, Herbert Klein of Columbia University, said in an interview that he was "pleased and not surprised" that an initial reading of the dataset supports previously arrived-at estimates of the volume of slave traffic, a subject that, nevertheless, remains open to debate among some historians. Klein and other scholars cautioned that the Du Bois Dataset will be of scant use to genealogists, because no names of slaves were kept. A separate database of Louisiana slaves, compiled by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall of Rutgers University, does list 62,000 slaves by name.

The Du Bois Dataset does, however, contribute to the knowledge of the number of persons, by gender and age, who were transported from specific ports along the west African coast to Caribbean islands and ports in North and South America. The dataset also includes information on time of passage, mortality at sea, composition of crews manning slave ships, density of cargo, prices paid for slaves. In all, the dataset has information listed in 225 fields.

Another of the compilers, David Ellis of Queens University, assured the conference that the CD-ROM is "user friendly." A demonstration of its use was presented Saturday.

In general, the 17 academics who delivered papers at the three-day conference — sponsored by the Du Bois Institute and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture — exhibited an excitement at having prepublication access to the dataset and voiced caution regarding hastily-made interpretations. Scholars at the conference, held in the Bruton Heights School Education Center at Colonial Williamsburg, were unanimous in stating that "more work needs to be done" regarding all assessments and conclusions of the slave trade reached so far. Many spoke of the need for scholars to take a holistic view of slavery. What matters, Bernard Bailyn said in summary, is that the Du Bois Dataset be used — along with historic memory — to learn "how people lived."

Among the complex and often sensitive topics that intrigue scholars, whose papers were subject to challenge and debate, are:

- The construction and modification of ships used in the slave trade. A cargo of 330 is often considered about average.

- The ratio of crew members to persons transported.

- The ratio of persons as cargo and the tonnage of ships.

- The profitability of the slave trade.

- The numbers of slaves who died during capture, while being transported along the African coast, while at sea in the "Middle Passage" and while becoming acclimated to enslavement in the New World. One scholar, Stephanie Smallwood of the University of California at San Diego, suggested the Du Bois data indicates "surprising new information" to challenge the assumption that death at sea was a daily event.

- The willingness of African slaves to sell females and the initial desire among European slavers to secure men, although they agreed to purchase women to work, alongside men, in the fields of indigo, sugar, coffee and tobacco plantations.

- The resistance of Africans to enslavement, their acts of rebellion and incidents of escape. David Richardson of the University of Hull reported that there are 470 documented cases of slave revolts and attacks on slave ships from the African shore. It is estimated that violent acts of resistance took place during one of every 10 voyages and that the incident rate was apt to be higher on ships carrying a higher percentage of females.

- The participation of Africans in the slave trade.

- The resistance of slaves to give up native traditions, customs and spiritual beliefs.

- The melding by communities of slaves of different African traditions, customs and spiritual beliefs.

- The patterns of domestic chores assumed by men and women before enslavement and the assignment of work in bondage.

- The impact of the slave trade on slaveowners.

- The impact of the slave trade on Africans, both those who remained in Africa and those who were transported to the Americas.

- The study of racism, or, as suggested by one historian: "How do we face up to a truly profound historic evil?"

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