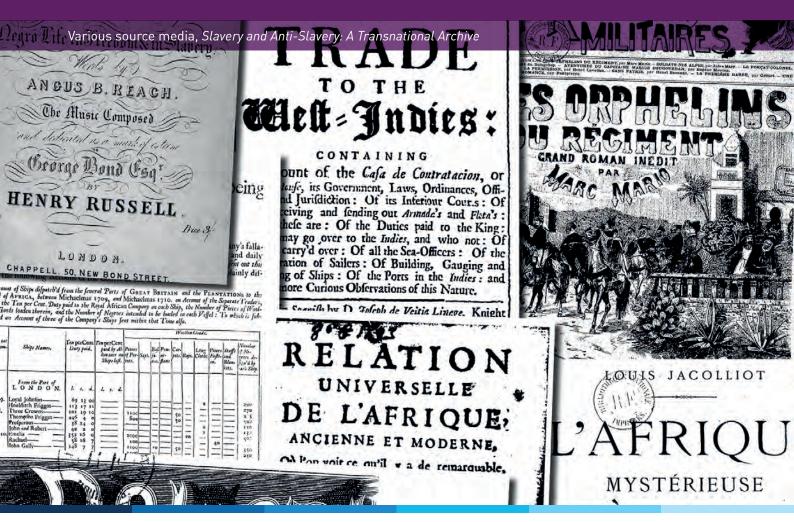# *Slavery and Anti-Slavery* for Research and Teaching

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Historians are not alone in asserting that their work is, at least to some degree, a search for truth about past events. But whereas the archaeologist and anthropologist have their spades and artifacts, and novelists are limited only by their imaginations, historians have their own unique set of tools. Primary among these, and indispensible to our mission, are documents. Any historians worth their salt can tell you which archives house those papers most pertinent to their own research; they will also tell you that accessing sources beyond those specific archives is a necessary step in discovering new ways of looking at familiar subjects, thus advancing the profession.

Historians, however, have traditionally faced challenges regarding the documents they need. A seemingly endless supply of boxes, each filled with papers to be carefully analyzed, can be a daunting sight. It is still more daunting when those boxes are scattered across a continent, or around the world, each needing to be tracked down and visited individually. While there is extraordinary value in that time-honored physical approach, and the sparks of epiphany that can leap from the page and lead the researcher to ever more pertinent documents, those rewards are fleeting when one is working under time constraints. Fortunately, the digital age is upon us. We now have a choice.

In addition to the standard primary sources one would expect—newspaper collections and books published in the antebellum era, for example—*SAS* includes a broad selection of documents from several different archives. In Part I, *Debates over Slavery and Abolition*, the user can access the Slave Trade Papers of Sir Thomas Fowell-

Buxton, who succeeded William Wilberforce as leader of the anti-slavery movement in Great Britain in the early nineteenth century. This source provides information not just about the slave trade itself, but also about its connections to the greater British goals of colony and empire, as well as the parliamentary history of the British abolition movement. It also gives insight into abolition as a worldwide movement.

From the other side of the Atlantic, *SAS* provides the papers of American abolitionist Lewis Tappan. Composed largely of copies of Tappan's outgoing letters over several decades, this collection details Tappan's activities and also his private thoughts and sentiments, particularly in regard to religion. Other, lesser-known abolitionists are represented in *SAS*; for example, one can find therein the diaries of Ellen Wright Garrison, champion of abolition and women's suffrage, and wife of William Lloyd Garrison.

Organizations are also well represented. The American Colonization Society's papers include 151,000 documents, dealing with the colonization movement, internal workings of the society, and the foundation, settlement, and education in African colonies. The American Missionary Association Archives, physically located at the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, contains about 155,000 pieces. Approximately 140,000 of these are letters from missionaries and teachers. The history of the association can be traced from its inception (it grew directly from the committee of volunteers who came together in 1839 to help provide a defense for the Africans who had taken over the slave ship *Amistad*). Much of the correspondence

concerns the *Amistad* trial, as well as continuing efforts to encourage abolitionism in Northern churches and, in the later papers, descriptions of AMA's efforts to aid freedmen.

SAS also houses several broader collections. The Schomburg Slavery and Abolition Collection contains items ranging chronologically from 1700 to the early twentieth century. These items include slave passes, deeds, manumission papers, certificates of registry, and other documents directly related to slavery, as well as letters from abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic. The Anti-Slavery Collection housed at Oberlin College has over two thousand items, including political tracts, sermons, and travellers' observations about slavery.

The international perspectives of *SAS* have been greatly expanded with Part II, *Slave Trade in the Atlantic World*. More than one million pages have been added. Just one collection, the Papers of the Royal African Company, has added 250,000 new pages. All of the formerly microfilmed pages and an additional 150,000 new pages were digitized to form this collection. (A portion of this collection of papers, 29 percent, was not included because its pages were too fragile to digitize.) The Royal African Company was Britain's official chartered slave trade company from 1672 to 1689, after which the British slave trade was opened to private traders. The papers are housed in the National Archives in Kew. In addition, there are collections added from the British Library, the Library of Congress, various collections at University archives, and Bibliothèque nationale de France. From the latter, there are more than 450 titles,

books, periodicals, and visuals, such as the *Revue des colonies: Recueil mensuel de la politique, de l'administration, de la justice, de l'instruction et des moeurs*, first published in July 1834 by the *Société des Hommes de couleur*. Its managing editor, Cyrille Charles Auguste Bissette, was born free in Martinique. This Paris publication attempted to link the colonies more closely with France and to promote justice and humanity. The periodical maintained that slavery undermined the principles of the French Revolution. *Revue des colonies* was published monthly until 1842. Those interested in religion and the slave trade will find the *Journal de la Société de la morale chrétienne*, the official publication of the Society of Christian Morality, a group of Christian activists focused in part on ending the slave trade. With a larger global perspective, scholars and students have more opportunities for transnational research and teaching.

Part III, *The Institution of Slavery*, expands the digital collection further and provides researchers with a wealth of resources to examine slavery in the New World. Slave labor, organization, management, and community relations varied across time and region. To develop a fuller understanding of slavery, Part III includes documents that highlight the legal boundaries and parameters of the institution, accounts of day-to-day life on plantations, and periodicals that give a range of perspectives about slavery. The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration collections include legal documents for two important 1850s events in the United States, leading up to the American Civil War: the Dred Scott appellate case and the U.S. Senate investigation of John Brown following his raid on Harpers Ferry. Researchers can access the

Mississippi Department of Archives and History's collections, which reveal slave and plantation experiences through deeds, wills, court cases, and petitions seeking compensation for slavery, manumission, and even a return to bondage by freed people desperate to remain with their families. In Britain, the *Zong* Massacre is covered by collections in the British National Archives at Kew. These, and other legal documents, demonstrate differences within the institution of slavery across centuries and continents.

Part III also offers several collections that detail day-to-day life on plantations in the New World. Researchers can read first-hand accounts of slavery in the United States in the WPA Slave Narratives. In addition, the papers of J. F. H. Claiborne, John J. Crittenden, and James Henry Hammond provide both records related to plantation management and correspondence among members of the white ruling class on slavery as a political, social, and economic institution. Researchers interested in British slavery can refer to the British Library's collections, which include official reports on eighteenth century British colonies in North America and the Caribbean, a late eighteenth century map of a Jamaica plantation, and a travel journal.

A third method for understanding the institution of slavery is through contemporary periodicals. Part III has many American titles, such as *Liberty Standard*, *National Era*, and *Planter's Advocate*, which cover abolitionists' views and pro-slavery arguments. From the Bibliothèque nationale de France, researchers can peruse or search an array of French-language periodicals. *Le Cancanier*, for example, offers

a satirical account of slavery and abolitionism, while *Annales de l'Association de la propagation de la foi* printed letters from missionaries around the world, thus providing a wide range of views on slavery, and *Le Musée Universel* was published in the 1870s and portrays views on slavery after much of the New World had abolished the institution. In addition to France-based publications, researchers can also read newspapers published in the French West Indies. *Le Républicain*and *Le Télégraphe*, both published in Haiti in the first half of the nineteenth century, called for an end to slavery in the rest of the world. These, and many others, provide a trove of sources for researchers.

These are only a few examples. The research value of having such a large number of pertinent sources instantaneously at hand and searchable should be immediately evident. Suppose one were researching a prominent U.S. abolitionist active in the Northeastern United States in the 1840s. Did that individual correspond with prominent European abolitionists? What effect did they have on him or her, or vice versa? Perhaps your subject had a deep religious conversion and experienced a reversal of his former beliefs about slavery, but never spoke openly about it in any of his writings before his death at the dawn of the Civil War. How frustrating that gap in your knowledge would be! Imagine, then, that a digital search led you to letters that your subject's brother published on his behalf posthumously in 1878, in a California newspaper, and that those letters contained the very details about the man's conversion and the genesis of his abolitionist views that you had been searching for in vain for years. (Something very similar happened to a colleague recently, while he was using Gale's newspaper

database to demonstrate its value to his students.) Before the digital revolution, who would have thought to look in an 1878 California paper for information about the works and beliefs of a Marylander who died in 1860? How many years of visual scanning, and how many miles of travel, before such a connection could have been made? Thanks to tools like *SAS*, it takes only minutes, and there is time and opportunity to follow hunches in directions that would previously have been unfeasible.

SAS is also an excellent teaching tool. For many years, introducing undergraduates to the concept of primary sources meant either sending them to the library for a finite list of books, only a few of which might be available, or handing them a few photocopies. With *SAS* and similar Gale products, students can have the same access to sources that their professors have. Students can learn history by doing history. Teachers can assign papers and research projects that require students to use the approaches that a professional historian must learn. Student access to *SAS* could change the way students think about history. In working with primary sources, students learn how to evaluate those sources, to analyze those primary documents, and to write from primary documents. It is our hope that students, by using *SAS*, learn historical thinking, particularly how historians frame historical problems, how historians use evidence, and how historians produce a historical narrative. We hope that *SAS* makes this process as transparent as possible for students.

History can be described in many ways—as a flowing river, for example, or an intricate web. Students, however, have traditionally perceived history through one lens only: as a story, unfolding in a linear fashion and with a predetermined outcome. This is how textbooks presented history for decades, and that linear mindset tends to stay with individuals long after their student days. Imagine if, instead, students were allowed to completely immerse themselves in the documents, navigating the strands of history's web as if it were the internet. Connections and contingencies would become more apparent, and arguments could be followed from different angles. Students, rather than being presented with a narrative, would be allowed to follow their curiosity and find—or even better, create—narratives of their own, mining the sources and following them from one idea to another.

Such an approach would, of course, be a challenge for teachers. Students, with the energy and enthusiasm of youth but lacking experience, could easily become overwhelmed, distracted, and/or unfocused. Teachers would have to provide them a middle ground between a forced narrative and a complete lack of structure. This could easily be done by well-designed assignments and subtle direction, and *SAS* provides web sites with resources for teachers. The well-trained historian knows the immense value of interpretation and analysis; digital databases and tools such as *SAS* allow students to make their own interpretations and analyses. When these differ from the professionally accepted norms, as they no doubt will, students can be directed to those standard interpretations and theories to see how they relate to their own findings.

We are living in an era of rapid change. The internet and digital sources are already affecting the way the next generation is creating, envisioning, understanding, and communicating ideas. The next wave of historians, if they are to remain relevant, must begin their training, and familiarity with new tools, now. The product you are reading about now is an ideal place to start, especially when one considers not only the technical value but also the cultural significance of the subject.

CITATION

Burton, Orville Vernon: "*Slavery and Anti-Slavery* for Research and Teaching." *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*: Cengage Learning, 2009

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