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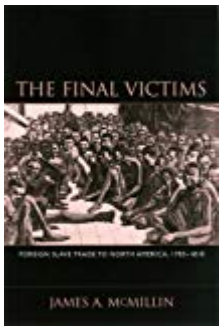
James A. McMillin. *The Final Victims: Foreign Slave Trade to North America, 1783ï¿½"1810.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. xi + 207 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-546-3.



Reviewed by Gregory O'Malley

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In *The Final Victims*, James McMillin examines a portion of the transatlantic slave trade surprisingly little studied by prior scholars--imports of slaves to the United States and the Mississippi Valley after the American Revolution. Ever since Thomas Jefferson blamed the King of England for the slave trade in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, Americans have tended to view the slave trade as a colonial phenomenon, often with the corollary view that slavery in the United States was an aberrant legacy of a more exploitative past, a stubborn, old weed to be stamped out by the American march of progress. McMillin presents a forceful challenge to this linear and triumphant view of America's history of slavery by asserting that, once the United States secured its independence, Americans resumed the slave trade with alacrity. He argues that the compromise at the Constitutional Convention, which prevented Congress from interfering with the trade for twenty years, allowed Americans to recommit themselves to the use of enslaved labor. By the time the United States abolished slave imports in 1808, he states, "more than one hundred thousand African slaves had been disembarked in Charleston and other North American ports in the Lower South and Mississippi Valley" (p. 1).

As part of this argument, McMillin presents four principal revisions to scholarship on the slave trade to North America. With each of these points, he examines a broader base of evidence than previous historians and makes important contributions to the field. The first conclusion, that the United States--including Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida--imported approximately 170,000 slaves between 1783 and 1808, demands McMillin's greatest attention and is arguably his most significant contribution, though one can quibble with the estimate (p. 48). To reach this figure, McMillin joins the field of scholars revising the estimates put forward by Philip Curtin in his pioneering *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (1969). McMillin argues that Curtin's estimate of seventy thousand imports between 1790 and 1810 suffers from an uncritical acceptance of a nineteenth-century estimate by H. C. Carey, which relied on unrealistic calculations of the enslaved population's natural growth (pp.13-17). To replace this estimate, McMillin employs three methods of

measuring the trade and then strikes a balance between them. First, he estimates the natural growth of the African-American population and deducts that figure from the net growth of the population, figuring that the remainder of the growth should equal net African immigration. This is the same method used by Carey and adopted by Curtin, but McMillin improves upon their blanket estimate of natural reproduction by adjusting the figure for regions known for high mortality, such as the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia. By this method, he estimates that imports of 200,248 Africans must have supplemented the natural increase of the population (pp. 18-23). For his second method, McMillin adds up the total imports from any slave voyages he could document through newspapers, port records, correspondence, or merchant's accounts. This method leads to an estimate of 106,000, which he states must be too low, given the gaps and omissions in the surviving records (pp.30-39). To address the problem of holes in the documentary record, McMillin employs a third method, namely estimating the carrying capacity of all ships engaged in the slave trade. By this method, he calculates that these ships could have carried 146,000 people to North America (pp. 39-46). McMillin then explains where holes in the records of shipments and documented arrivals leave room for additions to the lower estimates to bring them more closely in line with the estimates based on census data, and ultimately triangulates on the 170,000 estimate.

McMillin's argument that the previous estimate of seventy thousand needed upward revision is quite convincing and is based on an impressive collection of sources. That said, a few of his assumptions may have prompted a slight overcalculation. In balancing between his three estimates, attention seems to focus more on what might have made the lower estimates too low than on questioning what might have made the highest estimate too high. This is partly for good reason; McMillin is quite right to argue that records will never allow any historian to document every importation of slaves, so the lowest of his figures had the least chance of accuracy. Nonetheless, McMillin rather quickly dismisses his own question about his highest figure--whether early censuses were as thorough as later ones. If the early censuses undercounted, then the overall growth of the slave population was slower than the records seem to indicate. Hence, the slave trade would need to account for less growth. This seems especially important to consider if one interrogates the data on documented slave arrivals--the method that produced the lowest estimate. While it is certainly true that not all arrivals could possibly be documented, there is also a danger of counting the same arrival multiple times, which would inflate the estimate. In his thorough research, McMillin has documented any mention of vessels arriving in, or bound for, America with slaves, and where a specific cargo size was not specified, he estimates the likely number of slaves based on averages for the specific type of ship. The trouble comes when the names of vessels do not appear in the documentary record. If a newspaper reports an unnamed ship buying slaves on the coast of Africa in December, and a merchant records the arrival of a ship with 170 slaves the following May, might not these be reports of the same shipment?

The CD-ROM included with *The Final Victims* presents McMillin's database of documented slave shipments and arrivals. Given the breadth of McMillin's research, this is an extremely valuable resource to other historians of the slave trade, and he should be applauded for the openness with which he presents his findings. Examination of the data presented, though, does raise the question of whether several slave trading voyages might have been counted multiple times because they appeared in various sources that McMillin consulted. If so, this would widen the gap between the highest and lowest estimates, suggesting that the overall estimate might need to come down just a bit. This is not to suggest, however,

that McMillin's overall contention--that many more slaves entered the United States than previously thought--is invalid; he quite convincingly shows active importation, legal and illegal, throughout the post-Revolutionary period.

The second major conclusion of ***The Final Victims*** is that recognizing the higher volume of slave trading forces us to adjust our understanding of the ethnic make-up of the African-American population. This argument has important implications for studies that trace the transmission of cultural, technological, and linguistic practices from regions in Africa to the Americas. Many records of slave arrivals note a specific region of departure in Africa, and McMillin calculates their relative proportions to show that, compared to the colonial period, Americans after the Revolution imported fewer people proportionally from Senegambia, the Windward Coast, and the Bight of Benin, while increasing the importation of individuals from Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra, and west central Africa. Perhaps more importantly, he shows that overall North American imports--colonial and early national--varied from the norm elsewhere in the Americas. The modern-day United States imported more people from Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, and the Gold Coast than most other regions did, while taking fewer individuals from the Bights of Benin and Biafra. These conclusions should aid scholars studying cultural differences across slave populations, but McMillin's work also reminds readers of the diversity of the slave population's West African origins. No one region supplied the majority of slaves.

McMillin's third argument is compelling in showing the broad participation of American merchants in slave importation. While British traders, who had been prominent before the Revolution, resumed their activities after the war, McMillin shows the increasing participation of Americans. In particular, he documents the crucial involvement of southern merchants by the 1790s, especially from Charleston. McMillin shows that steady demand kept prices high, making the trade quite profitable, and he is particularly effective in showing how the slave trade was integrated into the broader economy. Few merchants were slave trade specialists; instead, a broad range of merchants participated in the trade at various times. McMillin also notes that many of these merchants were recent immigrants to the United States from various parts of the British Isles.

Finally, McMillin argues that conditions for the forced migrants in the slave trade worsened after the Revolution, a point that he supports thoroughly for the frantic period just prior to abolition, but which may not be as broadly applicable as he suggests. He shows that journeys to the Gulf Coast to supply the emerging Deep South cotton and sugar plantations were often longer than other transatlantic journeys, particularly because merchants often transshipped slaves to the region from the Caribbean, so slaves completed the deadly Middle Passage only to board ships again for North America. While such journeys undoubtedly added to the hardships of the captives, journeys to South Carolina and Georgia were far more common than those to the Gulf Coast, and there is little evidence to suggest that journeys to the Atlantic Coast changed much from preceding decades, at least until 1807. McMillin does show convincingly that, in the rush to import slaves prior to abolition, greedy merchants overcrowded ships (if they could get enough slaves in Africa) and then compounded the problem by holding slaves off the market once they had been legally imported to the United States. The Charleston slave market was glutted from last-minute voyages, so many merchants kept slaves aboard ship for months waiting for prices to rise, this led to horrific mortality rates and emphasized the merchants' view of their captives as human commodities.

Overall, McMillin presents a wealth of new evidence showing that the slave trade to North America after the Revolution was more significant than scholars have recognized, and makes a valuable contribution to the study of the slave trade and American slavery more broadly. While Revolutionary ideology pushed some Americans to reject slavery as incompatible with their experiment with democracy, *The Final Victims* shows that other Americans maintained their enthusiasm for importing Africans to exploit as unfree laborers, even as they experimented with a form of government that allowed greater freedoms to people of European descent.

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