
Reviewed by Manuel Barcia (University of Leeds)

Published on H-Early-America (August, 2021)

Commissioned by Patrick Luck

Over the past few years, the study of the transatlantic slave trade has seen a significant increase in the number of books and articles that have explored its many, diverse aspects. The last decades of this inhuman business have been at the core of these new, exciting contributions. Often referred to as the illegal years of the slave trade, as virtually all Atlantic states had by this time abolished their participation in it, this period offers a window into a world of hypocrisy and double standards that affected both those trafficking in human beings and those attempting to abolish the trade. John Harris’s *The Last Slave Ships* is the most recent contribution to this body of scholarship, and as contributions go, this book is simply a game changer.

Harris focuses on the final few years of the transatlantic slave trade, when the actors involved had been limited to carrying on their callous transactions in a small number of ports on both sides of the Atlantic. Of these ports, Harris argues convincingly, New York was the epicenter. It was there, right under the eyes of US authorities, that Africans, Spaniards, Portuguese, Brazilians, and Americans came together, plotting highly profitable transatlantic voyages, all of which had one destination, the island of Cuba.

These final few years of the transatlantic slave trade have received comparatively less study than the preceding decades (i.e., the 1810s-40s). At this time, as Harris explains, a new transatlantic triangle that almost always excluded European ports formed, changing the dynamics of human trafficking throughout the Atlantic. Technological advances, notably the introduction of steam ships, also contributed to a change in the strategies implemented by both slave traders and their nemeses, anti-slave trade patrols.

Coming back to New York, where Harris’s magisterial narrative truly takes off, we can see how international networks of slave traders lived and worked next to each other, exchanging knowledge, financing voyages, and doing it all while sharing the Lower Manhattan streets with those, like the British consular officers, working to bring the slave trade to an end. Harris leads us into a world of deception, ambition, and profit, unraveling the whereabouts and transatlantic movements of several members of these networks. We find them in New York organizing expeditions, we find them along the African coast taking care of the supply of enslaved men and women, and we find them in the Cuban countryside, where they diversified their investments, buying lucrative sugar
plantations, which were almost completely worked by those same enslaved African men and women they had carried across the Atlantic.

Although without doubt the study of these transnational networks is one of the main contributions of this book, Harris’s examination of the role played by the US government and Democratic politicians in this story is equally illuminating. Harris goes further than any other scholar to date in his examination of how US consuls and politicians tacitly and occasionally openly supported this trade. He poignantly reflects on how the refusal of the United States to sign a bilateral treaty with Great Britain, granting each other the right of search at sea, hindered abolitionist efforts and likely extended the trade for a few extra years. He reveals how slave traders carried various flags, and how they were quick to hoist one or another depending on the sort of threat they faced at any given time. The American flag was, without question, the most convenient one for them to use to flee from anti-slave trade patrols.

Even though this book has many strengths, its potential contribution goes much further than what is written on its pages. The book signals some promising paths along which future studies of the slave trade in the period may be directed. Maritime raiding (or piracy, as it was called at the time) is one of them. It is well known that the United States declared slave-trading activities to be piracy in 1820, and yet it was not until the execution of Nathaniel Gordon in 1862 that an American slave trader finally received the penalty reserved for pirates within US law. Harris discusses Gordon’s case and the reasons behind this lack of action on the part of the US, but there is more to be found here by a curious scholar, especially cases involving citizens from other nations brought before US courts over the previous decades. Equally, Harris briefly discusses another topic in need of further study, namely the collapse of direct Spanish involvement in the trade in the 1830s and 1840s.

Overall, *The Last Slave Ships* is a superb addition to the literature of the transatlantic slave trade in the Age of Abolition. By focusing on the United States, and doing so through an international perspective, Harris achieves something that only few have done before. He has produced a truly outstanding transatlantic study of a central nineteenth-century theme.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-early-america


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56391

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.