The slave trade of Bristol with the British mainland colonies in North America 1699-1770

W. E. MINCHINTON

"The merchants from Bristol carry it on with good success"¹

When the Royal African Company's monopoly of the English slave trade from West Africa was officially breached in 1698, the first beneficiary was Bristol.² Although some Bristol vessels may have been interlopers in the trade in the later seventeenth century,³ it was not until the 10 per cent act that the participation of the western ports in the slave trade grew. Challenging London for a decade or two,⁴ Bristol became the leading English slave port from the 1720s to the early 1740s. In 1731 and 1732 over half of the English clearances in the slave trade annually were from Bristol.⁵ Then, as Bristol had replaced London, so Bristol in its turn was overtaken by Liverpool, which remained the most important English slave-trading port from the 1740s until the trade came to an end in 1807.

VOLUME AND DIRECTION OF THE TRADE

In the American mainland colonies throughout the period from 1698 to 1775 the major markets were in Virginia and South Carolina but some slaves were also carried to New York, Maryland and Georgia. Of the 39 slave-vessels which are known to have traded with Virginia between 1698 and 1708, 5 came from Bristol and the remainder from London; between 1710 and 1718, 21 out of a total of 66 slave-vessels came from Bristol, 20 from London, 11 from Liverpool and 12 from other English ports; and in the following ten years, 1718-27, Bristol ships
numbered 49 out of a total of 70, with London supplying 15 and Liverpool 5 of the remainder. From the Mediterranean pass registers it is not usually possible to identify which of the American mainland colonies the vessels were intended for, but the naval office shipping lists and other sources show that Bristol vessels continued to bring slaves, though in declining numbers, to Virginia until the eve of the Revolution. Between 1751 and 1763

**Table 1** Number of Bristol slave ships trading with Virginia, 1699–1769: tonnage in brackets when known

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Africa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29*(2844)</td>
<td>23 (1925)</td>
<td>18 (2060)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From West Indies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5 (400)</td>
<td>3 (312)</td>
<td>2 (300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34 (3244)</td>
<td>26 (2237)</td>
<td>20 (2360)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes 2 vessels for which no source of cargo is given.

Bristol ranked second to Liverpool as a slave-trading port. Out of the 52 slave-vessels trading with Virginia, 25 came from Liverpool, 18 from Bristol, 6 from London and 3 from other English ports. As can be seen from Table 1, most of the vessels (85 per cent) came directly from Africa and only a few (15 per cent) via the West Indies. (For the sources of Table 1 and later tables, see Appendix.) Virginia ranked second to South Carolina as an importer of slaves and in most years more Bristol slave-vessels came to Virginia than to South Carolina; but on occasions during the years for which figures are available for both colonies, for instance, in 1731, 1734 and 1739, the reverse was the case. Details of Bristol slavers trading with South Carolina are given in Table 2 but these undoubtedly understate the number of cargoes involved.

Inevitably the number of vessels sailing from Bristol in the slave trade fluctuated considerably from year to year as a result of weather and war, slaving conditions on the West African coast,
market conditions in the American mainland colonies and other factors. Further, when prohibitive duties were imposed in South Carolina on the importation of slaves, the slave trade to that colony came to a standstill. There were virtually no slave imports into South Carolina between 1741 and 1749 and between 1766 and 1768 inclusive. In the 1740s some of the Bristol vessels which normally brought slaves to South Carolina, such as the Amoretta,

Table 2  
Number of Bristol slave ships trading with South Carolina, 1717–1765: tonnage in brackets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1717–1719</th>
<th>1724</th>
<th>1729–1730</th>
<th>1752–1753</th>
<th>1758–1760</th>
<th>1763–1765</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>1 (45)</td>
<td>3 (150)</td>
<td>33 (3140)</td>
<td>1 (130)</td>
<td>10 (1020)</td>
<td>6 (670)</td>
<td>54 (5155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indies</td>
<td>4 (300)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>7 (670)</td>
<td>1 (90)</td>
<td>1 (50)</td>
<td>1 (130)</td>
<td>14 (1240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5 (345)</td>
<td>3 (150)</td>
<td>40 (3810)</td>
<td>2 (220)</td>
<td>11 (1070)</td>
<td>7 (800)</td>
<td>68 (6395)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seafower and Shepherd, carried their cargoes to Virginia instead. The trade was also checked by the non-importation movement in both Virginia and South Carolina in 1770 and brought to a halt by non-importation in 1775. On 29 April 1775 Felix Farley's Bristol Journal reported that 'the Catherine, Capt. Frazer of this port, proceeded from the Windward Coast of Africa, to South Carolina with a cargo of slaves, but on her arrival there was not permitted to land one. After being supplied with water and whatever else he wanted, he sailed for St Kitts'.

Of lesser importance was Bristol's slave trade with the other mainland colonies. In the first half of the eighteenth century Bristol merchants appear to have traded infrequently with Maryland. In 1741 Philip Lee, the naval officer in the North Potomac district, reported that he and his partners had 'been employed for some years past by some Merchants in Bristol to sell and dispose of what Negroes they should consign to them'. From the mid-century imports of slaves into Maryland declined sharply. Of the 10 vessels which brought 238 slaves to Annapolis be-
tween 1753 and 1765, only one was a Bristol vessel. The Alexander, owned by John Fowler & Company of Bristol, entered there with 110 negroes from Africa on 29 July 1761; but in the previous year another Bristol vessel, the Diamond, is said to have lost 99 out of 329 slaves on a voyage from Bonny to Maryland. The 1771 duty on the import of slaves virtually brought the slave trade to Maryland to an end.

When the prohibition of slavery in Georgia was lifted in 1749, negroes at first came coastwise or overland from South Carolina. Later a wider trade developed with slaves at first coming from the West Indies. Of the 136 entries of vessels with slaves recorded between 1755 and 1767, there were only three vessels in some way connected with Bristol. The snow Fanny, built in Bristol but registered in St Christopher, carried 13 slaves from St Kitts on 28 December 1764; the schooner Industry, registered in Bristol but owned by a Boston merchant, entered with two slaves from Guadaloupe on 31 October 1765; and the brig Nelly, registered in New York and part-owned by a Bristol merchant, imported 10 slaves from Jamaica on 7 December 1765. The direct trade between Africa and Georgia only began after 1766. A complete record of this trade is not available but between 1768 and 1771, out of a total of 21 vessels employed, two were Bristol vessels. Together, the Constantine in 1768 and the Gambia in 1769 brought 390 slaves to Georgia. A small number of negroes were also brought by Bristol vessels from the West Indies to New York. In 1717 the Illustrious of Bristol brought one negro from Barbados to New York, as did the Sarah Galley in 1726. In 1729 the Don Carlos brought 47 negroes from Jamaica and in 1734 the Prince William brought two from the same island, while in 1738 the Torbay brought eight negroes from Antigua.

Although at the beginning of the eighteenth century and infrequently thereafter a number of consignments came via the West Indies, most of the slaves carried to Virginia and South Carolina by Bristol merchants were brought directly from the west coast of Africa. Between 1699 and 1769, 139 Bristol vessels carrying 28,102 slaves came directly to Virginia from Africa while 24 came via the West Indies with 2,319 slaves. Sixteen of the latter vessels carried substantial cargoes and accounted for 2,175 (94 per cent) of the total number of slaves carried from the West Indies. Only the other eight (with cargoes
of 3, 20, 30, 6, 8, 41, 19 and 17) conform to the generalisation that slaves formed just one part of a general import trade involving many other goods. Indeed, as in the case of Captain William Barry of the Dispatch in 1725, the masters of some Bristol ships were ordered to try to dispose of their cargoes of slaves in South Carolina or Virginia if they failed to find a market for them in the West Indies. For South Carolina the surviving records show that 54 Bristol ships carrying 12,037 slaves entered directly from Africa and 14 vessels carrying 369 slaves entered from the West Indies. As three of the latter carried cargoes of 211, 60 and 42 negroes respectively, the remainder carried only a small number of slaves, together with other commodities.

The third aspect, a very limited trade, was the movement of negroes between the various American mainland colonies. In the case of Virginia this amounted to about 4 per cent of the total slave trade with that colony. In this trade were seven Bristol vessels which brought 51 slaves to Virginia from other mainland colonies between 1725 and 1774. Some Bristol vessels also had a limited share in the distribution of slaves to other colonies from Charleston, South Carolina. Finally, in a very small number of cases, one or two slaves, probably employed as servants, were brought to the American mainland colonies from Bristol.

Though Bristol made but a minor contribution to the slave trade of Georgia and Maryland, she played a substantial role in the supply of slaves to Virginia and South Carolina. Between 1698 and 1715 the trade developed slowly but from the expiration of slave duties in the latter year, Bristol came to dominate the Virginia slave market, as Table 3 shows. Over time the markets for Bristol slaves in Virginia changed. Before 1740 most of Bristol’s shipments were concentrated in the York River and those of Liverpool in the Rappahannock. Thus between 1718 and 1727 over 80 per cent of Bristol’s slave imports entered through York River. After 1740 Liverpool continued to concentrate on the Rappahannock but Bristol’s imports shifted to the expanding tobacco area of the Upper James. Between 1759 and 1766 all Bristol’s slave imports were directed to the Upper James. In South Carolina, where the demand for slaves grew in the 1720s with the expansion of rice cultivation, Bristol merchants were less dominant. As with Virginia, Bristol was the major supplier of slaves in the 1720s and 1730s, as Table 4
shows, but prohibitive duties in the 1740s then brought the trade to a halt. Though Bristol merchants regained a temporary dominance in the early 1750s, thereafter their position declined. An

**Table 3**  
Bristol slave imports into Virginia, 1699–1769

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Africa</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>1070</td>
<td>7046</td>
<td>6857</td>
<td>5066</td>
<td>4648</td>
<td>2843</td>
<td>28102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From West Indies</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Bristol imports</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>1927*</td>
<td>7154</td>
<td>7475</td>
<td>5701</td>
<td>4684</td>
<td>2843</td>
<td>30423*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total English imports</td>
<td>6607</td>
<td>4415</td>
<td>11091</td>
<td>13558</td>
<td>10453</td>
<td>7993</td>
<td>7791</td>
<td>61908</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bristol imports as percentage of total English imports: 9·7 43·6 64·5 55·1 54·5 58·6 36·5 49·1

* Includes 2 slaves from Bristol in 2 Bristol ships.

**Table 4**  
Bristol slave imports into South Carolina, 1717–1767*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Africa</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>7619</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>2671</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>12037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From West Indies</td>
<td>53†</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Bristol imports</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>7911</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>2687</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>12406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total English imports</td>
<td>1603†</td>
<td>1729</td>
<td>15642</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>8530</td>
<td>6489</td>
<td>34371</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bristol imports as percentage of total English imports: 8·7 29·1 50·6 66·7 31·5 14·1 36·0

* Bristol vessels only brought negroes to South Carolina in certain of the years of some of the periods cited, that is, in 1724, 1758–60 and 1763–5.
† The number of negroes carried by one vessel from the West Indies is not stated.
Slave trade of Bristol

analysis of advertisements in the *South Carolina Gazette* shows that, between 1757 and 1766, Bristol's share of slave imports into Charleston was 24 per cent, London's 16 per cent, and Liverpool's 31 per cent; while Lancaster was the chief amongst the other ports engaging in the slave trade with South Carolina.\(^27\) By the early 1770s Bristol's share had fallen to under one-fifth. Overall, therefore, while Bristol had a dominant share in the supply of slaves to Virginia and South Carolina in the 1720s and 1730s and Bristol's contribution to Virginian imports remained substantial till the 1760s, in the case of South Carolina Bristol was of declining importance in the later 1750s and 1760s.

Of the sources of slaves imported into the American mainland, it is not possible to speak with precision for so many of the vessels were merely recorded as coming from 'Africa'.\(^28\) But for Virginia between 1699 and 1769 the position can be summarised both for total slave imports and for imports by Bristol vessels as in Table 5. Similar information for South Carolina is contained in Table 6.

### Table 5 Origins of slaves imported into Virginia, 1699–1769

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>Total imports</th>
<th>Bristol imports</th>
<th>Bristol imports as percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>28098</td>
<td>14094</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>3565</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea</td>
<td>7268</td>
<td>2667</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calabar</td>
<td>8830</td>
<td>7884</td>
<td>89.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>3826</td>
<td>2200</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madagascar</td>
<td>1231</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total from Africa</strong></td>
<td><strong>53105</strong></td>
<td><strong>28102</strong></td>
<td><strong>52.9</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Indies</td>
<td>8251</td>
<td>2319</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British North America</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>61908</strong></td>
<td><strong>30423</strong></td>
<td><strong>49.1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the relative merits of the different African slaves, at least as far as South Carolina merchants are concerned, we have the opinion of Henry Laurens who declared in 1755 that 'there must
not be a Callabar amongst them. Gold Coast or Gambia’s are best, next to them the Windward Coast are prefer’d to Angola’s.\textsuperscript{29} And in the same year he lamented that the \textit{Matilda} of Bristol with a cargo of nearly 200 slaves from Calabar had to undergo a long quarantine due to smallpox aboard and he feared that other vessels would get their slaves on the market first because

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Origins of slaves imported into South Carolina, 1717–1767}
\begin{tabular}{llll}
\hline
\textbf{From} & \textbf{Total imports} & \textbf{Bristol imports} & \textbf{Bristol imports as percentage of total} \\
\hline
Africa & 17889 & 7648 & 42.8 \\
Gambia & 1722 & 331 & 19.2 \\
Guinea & 2704 & 737 & 27.3 \\
Calabar & 304 & 209 & 68.8 \\
Angola & 7303 & 3112 & 42.6 \\
Senegal & 90 & — & — \\
\hline
Total from Africa & 30012 & 12037 & 40.0 \\
West Indies & 4100 & 369 & 9.0 \\
British North America & 258 & — & — \\
\hline
\multicolumn{4}{c}{34371*} \\
\multicolumn{3}{c}{12406} & 36.0 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\begin{flushleft}
\textit{* Includes one from the Isle of May.}
\end{flushleft}
\end{table}

‘Callabar slaves wont go down when others can be had in plenty’\textsuperscript{30} since it was held that they tended to commit suicide more readily than slaves from other parts of West Africa. More generally, too, South Carolina planters appear to have had stronger ethnic prejudices about the kinds of slaves they bought than their Virginia neighbours.\textsuperscript{31} They seem to have preferred above all to have had slaves from Senegambia, from the Bambara and Malenke, and generally had a prejudice against short people. They would take negroes from the Gold Coast but had a marked dislike of those from the Bight of Biafra.\textsuperscript{32} By contrast, Curtin suggests, the relatively high Virginian percentage of Calabars may well be a reflection of South Carolinian prejudice, in that Biafran slaves unacceptable in Charleston were sold in the nearest convenient market.\textsuperscript{33}
Like most eighteenth-century trades, the Africa trade was seasonal, affected by weather conditions at sea and the timing of the harvests. 'The properest season to render the Guinea voyages most prosperous and safe, is to depart from Europe about the latter end of September', wrote James Barbot; but the clearings from Bristol show that vessels from that port were not always able to observe this advice. Table 7 does, however, show that the largest number of clearances took place between August and October.

**Table 7** Months of clearance of Africa vessels from Bristol, 1730–1776

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

132 145 207 169

277 376

It is not yet possible to analyse statistically the times of arrival of slave-vessels on the coast of West Africa or their length of stay there but the situation in the American mainland colonies can be examined. For South Carolina, Donnan once wrote that 'it can scarcely be said, after examining these records, that there was a definite season for the arrival and sale of these cargoes, since they frequently appeared as early as January and laggard captains often arrived in late November or early December'. But an analysis of the figures does not support quite such a negative conclusion. As can be seen from Tables 8 and 9, most vessels arrived in the American colonies between April and October. Of 68 Bristol vessels, 45 (66 per cent) entered South Carolina during these seven months (and 26, or 38 per cent, between June and August) while 33 out of 36 London ships (92 per cent) arrived there in the summer months. As Joseph Wragg noted in 1736: 'it's very rare that any slaves arrive here between the last of
October and the first February but suffer considerably by the cold; on fitting out for this place, regard should all ways be had to the time of being here to avoid the extremity of the cold and as early as may be in the spring.37 Twenty years later, on 13 October 1756, Henry Laurens wrote: 'our planters now think that the importation of slaves is nearly over for the present year',38 and his letters concerning slave cargoes are concentrated in the summer months. It was during these months that the indigo harvest required additional labour and planters were anxious to increase their labour force at this time.

**Table 8**  
*Arrivals of Bristol slave vessels in South Carolina, by months, 1717–1765*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Africa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From West Indies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 9**  
*Arrivals of Bristol slave vessels in Virginia, by months, 1718–1769*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not known</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Africa</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From West Indies</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A similar picture emerges from the somewhat more numerous entries into Virginia. As Table 9 shows, most of the Bristol slave-vessels—95 out of 137 (69 per cent)—arrived in Virginia between May and August.

The slavers would plan to arrive in Virginia in the summer,
sell their slaves, carry out any repairs necessary and then be in
time to collect the packed hogsheads of tobacco which were
ready for shipment in July or August. Such an arrangement also
suited the planters for ‘when negroes come in about the begin-
nung of the summer’, a contemporary stated, ‘the planters are
abundantly more fond of them and will give greater prices for
them, because they are sure of the advantage of their labour in
the year’s crop, whereas negroes bought at the latter end of the
year, are of little service till the next spring’.

When all was ready and weather conditions were favourable,
the vessels cleared the American colonies and sailed with the pre-
vailing south-westerlies filling their sails for England. Some at
least of the constant traders returned to Bristol to unload their

table 10  voyage times of Bristol vessels in the Africa trade,
1723–6, 1763–7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of ships</th>
<th>Length of voyage, in months</th>
<th>Number of ships</th>
<th>Length of voyage, in months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total voyages</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>12-2</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>14-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>12-9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>15-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeward Islands</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11-3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland colonies</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12-3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

cargo, to refit and to prepare for a further outset, while others
were made ready for other trades. Though in theory it should
have been possible—and most profitable—with swift dispatch to
complete the triangular voyage within twelve months, this was
comparatively seldom achieved. Unfavourable weather at sea
and delays in port obtaining cargo or refitting caused the yearly
timetable to be upset. Moreover, as Table 10 shows, the total
voyage time tended to lengthen in the course of the century, due
in the main to a lengthening of the time which had to be spent on
the African coast. The high average figure for the mainland
colonies for the second period, 1763–7, may also have been affec-
ted by the smallness of the sample. All the same, a number of the vessels in the trade were constant traders. An outstanding example of this is the Greyhound, a 100-ton ship, built in Bristol in 1706 and owned by Isaac Hobhouse & Company. From 1718 until 1736, when she was replaced by a new and larger ship of the same name, there is evidence that she was regularly employed in the slave trade to the American colonies. The Amoretta, a vessel of 85 tons also belonging to Isaac Hobhouse, made a number of voyages to Carolina in the 1730s and then, when the imposition of prohibitive duties destroyed this trade in the 1740s, as already mentioned, traded with Virginia, although apparently less regularly. There were also a number of vessels which made more than one voyage although they could hardly be considered constant traders. About a quarter of the vessels trading to Virginia made more than one voyage but of those going to South Carolina only about one-fifth seemed to do so. And there were the vessels which for one reason or another were employed in the trade for a single voyage.

Throughout the eighteenth century, most of the Bristol ships, like those of other British ports engaged in the slave trade, remained comparatively small. It was commonly held that such vessels were better suited to West African conditions where there was a shortage of good sheltered anchorages or river entrances were made difficult by bars. A smaller ship could also be more quickly slaved than a larger vessel. Small vessels, a contemporary averred, 'near allways get money at the worst of times'. Even so the trend was towards larger ships and the average tonnage of Bristol slave-vessels increased from 96 tons in 1710–19 to over 120 tons in the 1760s. These figures for the Bristol slave fleet as a whole were reflected in the figures available for the two American mainland colonies. The average tonnage of Bristol vessels entering Virginia rose from 101.4 tons between 1727 and 1738 to 156.3 tons between 1760 and 1769, while for South Carolina the average tonnage of Bristol slavers increased from 69-0 tons for the years 1717–19 to 114-3 tons for the years 1763–1765.

The size of a slave-vessel's crew was determined by the numbers required to sail her and the additional men needed to deal with the human cargo on the middle passage and to defend her. In consequence slave-vessels tended to sail from Bristol and the other
Slave trade of Bristol

English ports with larger crews than would be required for vessels of a similar tonnage and rig in other trades. Once the slaves were sold, it has been argued, a smaller crew was required on the return voyage to Bristol. In general there was a positive correlation between the length of stay of a vessel in port and the extent of the reduction of its crew. But, as Table 11 shows, there were marked differences between the colonies. Thus while about 1 in 10 of the vessels trading with Virginia left with a reduced crew which might well largely be accounted for by accident, illness or death, 61 per cent of the Bristol vessels cleared from Charleston with a crew which was smaller by a more substantial proportion—17-9 per cent or almost one crew-member in five. No direct evidence is available to suggest why this marked difference should have existed between the two colonies, but it might be surmised that it was easier for crew to be paid off, or to desert and to find another vessel for the homeward voyage, possibly at a higher wage, from Charleston which was a significant entrepot, than it was from Virginia which lacked a major port at this time.

TABLE 11  Average loss of crew by Bristol slavers, 1720–1769: percentage loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number leaving with reduced crew</th>
<th>Total ships</th>
<th>1720–9</th>
<th>1730–9</th>
<th>1740–9</th>
<th>1750–9</th>
<th>1760–9</th>
<th>1720–69 overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1·4 (1)*</td>
<td>4·6 (6)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7·7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24·9 (13)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>12·1 (4)</td>
<td>5·1 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Indies</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>27·5 (42)</td>
<td>34·7 (32)</td>
<td>23·6 (26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Number of vessels leaving with reduced crews in brackets.

THE RETURN VOYAGE

When the slave-vessels had unloaded their slaves, they were prepared for the return voyage to their home port. In many cases, stages had to be dismantled, to enable the holds to be used for cargo, damage to the vessels had to be repaired, and the ship had
to take on victuals, water and other stores for the homeward voyage. Since few, if any, Bristol slave-vessels appear to have cleared the American mainland colonies for England in ballast, a cargo had also to be secured. And when completely ready to clear for England, departure might be delayed by unfavourable weather. The bar at the entrance to Charleston harbour also could not always be cleared easily and clearance from elsewhere on the American mainland had to be negotiated with care. All this took time. Between 1725 and 1769 the average length of stay of slavers in Virginia was 76 days and between 1718 and 1765 in South Carolina was 51-6 days. Before mid-century it is generally agreed that English slavers in all branches of the trade endeavoured to secure return cargoes and certainly some continued so to do after 1750.

To obtain a return cargo, Bristol merchants sought the help of agents in the colonies. In the case of South Carolina this was facilitated by the fact that certain Bristol merchants who resided there for a period became partners with some of the merchants there. Among these was Samuel Brailsford, who was first in partnership with Thomas Middleton (1751–60) and then with John Chapman (1763–5) in altogether 54 cargoes of slaves before returning to Bristol. Before his bankruptcy in 1755, Nathaniel Wraxall was a member of the firm of Inglis, Pickering & Wraxall (1751–4) who then acquired another Bristol partner, John Lloyd, and traded first as Inglis, Lloyd & Hall (1759–64) and then as Inglis, Lloyd & Company (1765–73). Thomas Farr was in partnership with Isaac da Costa (1760–3) and then with Robert Smyth before he returned to Bristol in 1764. The Bristol merchant John Crofts traded jointly with Benjamin Dart in two ventures in 1765 while John Powell was a member of the firm of Powell, Hopton & Company from 1771 to 1774, during which time they were concerned in 34 cargoes of slaves. American merchants, if Henry Laurens is any example, were ready to find homeward cargoes for slave-vessels. In 1749 he wrote to Isaac Hobhouse of Bristol suggesting that Hobhouse should entrust his business in South Carolina to Laurens’ firm. Laurens’ proposal was ‘to load the ship importing the slaves with such produce as to be obtain’d at the season, pay coast commission there [at Charleston—Laurens was writing from London], make good all debts, remitt according to the times of payment if freight to be
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had & as much in bills of exchange as can be procur'd with cash arising from the sales, to give security in England for remitting the proceed, our factorage ten per cent'. Laurens also acted for a number of other Bristol merchants including Henry Bright, Thomas Easton & Company, Joseph Daltera, Devonshire & Reeve, Charles Gwynn, and Henry Weare & Company. In addition, other Charleston merchants acted as agents for Bristol merchants. In the 1730s Joseph Wragg, Benjamin Savage and Jenys & Baker dealt with almost all the Bristol slave imports while together with Inglis, Lloyd & Hall and Austin & Laurens, already mentioned, Miles Brewton, the largest South Carolina slave merchant, handled most of the Bristol consignments of slaves after the mid-century. In Virginia, Bristol merchants do not appear to have been so deeply involved in partnerships with American agents, perhaps because the centralised market for slaves which existed in Charleston was not paralleled in Virginia. But a number of Bristol slave firms were also tobacco importers and though it has sometimes been held that slave-ships were not suitable for the transport of tobacco, it seems clear that these firms were nevertheless concerned to secure homeward cargoes for their vessels even if at freight rates lower than the prevailing ones for vessels engaged in the direct trade between Bristol and Virginia. Among the Virginia merchants who acted for Bristol slave-traders were George Braxton, Augustine Moore and John Tayloe, all of whom served Isaac Hobhouse on occasion.

The return cargo of slave-vessels usually consisted of whatever were the normal export commodities of the colonies: from Virginia, tobacco, pig iron, staves, pitch and tar; from South Carolina, rice, indigo, skins, turpentine, pitch and tar. Thus in 1723 the Greyhound returned from Virginia with about 144,000 lbs of tobacco and 10 tons of pig iron, while in August 1755 the Pearl left Charleston with 288 barrels of rice and 60 barrels of pitch on her owner's account and 30 hogsheads of skins for another Bristol merchant, which 'was as much as the master could find room for'. By comparison with other vessels in these trades, which themselves were not always able to obtain a full cargo, some Bristol slavers, like the Pearl, carried what appears to have been a full cargo, but others returned more lightly laden. In the latter cases it is not easy to say whether this was due to the fact
that they were slavers or because freight for Bristol was generally scarce. For tobacco there was a market in Bristol, which was a tobacco-processing port. Of the Bristol vessels which cleared from Virginia between 1725 and 1769, 73 per cent brought tobacco to Bristol, and of the remainder, only 6 cleared from Virginia in ballast. Of these, two sailed for Maryland in search of a return cargo.

From South Carolina whose main produce, rice, had a market in Europe rather than in England, it was more difficult to secure a homeward cargo. In 1733 an advertisement announcing the arrival of a Bristol slaver stated, 'for the encouragement of which Sale great Regard will be had to ready Rice, as well as ready Money'. And in February 1756 Henry Laurens reported, 'Tis very rare a freight offers with us for Bristol. That port lies inconvenient for reshipping of rice & the Bristol gentlemen have always ships enough with us to carry home as much or more of our produce than their market will take off. We have two ships of Messrs Devonsheir, Reeve & Lloyd now with us. Both will go for Portugal as there is no encouragement for them to load for Bristol'.

For a full appreciation of the slave trade of Bristol with the American mainland colonies other questions ought also to be explored. The purpose of this contribution has been to show how the interest of Bristol merchants in this branch of trade waxed and waned, to discuss some aspects of the nature of Bristol shipping employed in this trade, and to provide some information about the return voyages made by Bristol slave-vessels from the American colonies to Bristol.

APPENDIX: SOURCES OF TABLES

Table 1 is derived from Elizabeth Donnan, Documents illustrative of the history of the slave trade to America, 4 vols (Washington, D.C. 1930–1935, reprint New York, 1969), 4. pp. 173–234. But the 1739–47 figure for ships from Africa includes two vessels omitted in Donnan's transcription, as follows: 22 September 1746 the Nancy snow, John Baber master, 70 tons, 4 guns, 20 men, built at Bristol 1729, registered there 12 February 1729, owned by Samuel Jacob and Company, entered the Upper James from Guinea with 209 negroes and ¼ ton elephants teeth: 24 September 1746 the Williamsburgh ship, John Tate master, 100 tons, 10 guns, 16 men, built at Bristol 1735, registered there 2 October 1738, owned by John King and Company, entered the Upper James from Guinea with 360
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e negroes, 31 elephants teeth and 200 scriviloes: PRO CO 5/1446. It will be noted that for certain years the naval office shipping lists are incomplete, and hence, according to the surviving returns, no Bristol vessels entered Virginia 1756-59. Tables 3-6 and 9 are based on the same sources as Table 1. Table 2 is derived from the South Carolina naval office shipping lists, PRO CO 5/508-11, as is Table 8. Table 7 is from PRO CO Adm 7/77-100. Table 10 is from P. D. Richardson, 'The Bristol slave trade in the eighteenth century', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Manchester, 1969, p. 73; and Table 11 is from David G. Rees, 'The role of Bristol in the Atlantic slave trade', unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Exeter, 1970, pp. 34, 84.

NOTES
2 An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual conference of the American Historical Association in December 1970. In revising it I have benefited from comments by Stanley Engerman, Stephen Fisher, George Rogers and Richard Sheridan.
4 Between Michaelmas 1709 and Michaelmas 1710 the separate traders dispatched 24 ships from London, 20 from Bristol, 2 from Liverpool, 2 from Jamaica and 2 from Barbados; and in the same period the Royal African Company sent out 3 ships from England and 2 from the Plantations: Calendar of State Papers Colonial, 1710-n (1924), no. 554.
5 The figures were: 1731, Bristol 52 ships, London 25, Liverpool 13; and 1732, Bristol 45 ships, London 25, Liverpool 19: Public Record Office (PRO) Adm 7/77-8.
6 Figures derived from Donnan, 4, pp. 131-2, 175-87.
7 Prohibitive duties were in operation between 1740 and 1744, April 1746 and 1749 and 31 December 1766 and 1 January 1769. See Elizabeth Donnan, 'The slave trade into South Carolina before the Revolution', American Historical Review, 33 (1927-8), pp. 804-28; W. Robert Higgins, 'The geographical origins of negro slaves in colonial South Carolina', South Atlantic Quarterly, 70 (1971), pp. 34-47.
8 Donnan, 4, pp. 207, 210, 214.
9 I owe this reference to Bryan Little. The previous month the South Carolina Gazette had reported the arrival of the Katherine with 300 slaves from Angola which could not be landed: Donnan, 4, p. 470.
10 Little information is available concerning the slave trade with North Carolina. Lacking good harbours, most of its trade was carried out overland through either South Carolina or Virginia. Information, too,
is lacking for Delaware, and the details presented in Darold D. Wax, 'Negro imports into Pennsylvania, 1720-1766', Pennsylvania History, 32 (1965), pp. 254-88, while confirming that imports were small, do not allow precise calculations of imports to be made or enable the importing vessels to be identified.

11 Donnan, 4, p. 27. Earlier individual Bristol slavers such as the Mediterranean (1725-6), the Berkeley (1733-4) and the George (1740-1) may have traded with the colony: PRO E 190/1196/1, 1199/1, 1210/1, 1211/3, 1214/3, cited in P. David Richardson, 'The Bristol slave trade in the eighteenth century', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Manchester, 1969, p. 149.

12 But see also Donnan, 4, p. 43, for a letter of 10 July 1763 from Thomas Ringgold to Samuel Galloway which suggests that the Bristol merchants Devonshire & Reeve may have been sending cargoes of slaves to Maryland.

13 Donnan, 4, p. 48. On the number of slaves carried, see ibid., 4, pp. 39-40, which reports the arrival of the Alexander with 'the loss of so great a part of her slaves' that only 105 were still living and of these, 11 were in such poor condition that 6 died before 17 September 1761.

14 Ibid., 4, p. 35. The Diamond had obtained a Mediterranean pass for a voyage to Africa and America on 12 October 1759: PRO Adm 7/90.

15 Donnan, 4, pp. 616, 618.

16 Ibid., 4, pp. 624-5.

17 Ibid., 2, pp. 464, 481, 485, 498, 502.

18 In December 1761 a cargo of 67 slaves was brought to Virginia by a Bristol vessel, the Expedition, by way of Barbados: ibid., 4, p. 172.

19 Between 1725 and 1769, 89.5 per cent of the slaves imported into Virginia came directly from Africa: Peter Waite, 'The English and English-colonial trade in slaves to Virginia, 1698-1769', unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Exeter, 1973, pp. 56-7. For South Carolina, it has been estimated that 86 per cent of slave imports came from Africa: Higgins, 'Geographical origins', op. cit., pp. 40-5.

20 This includes two Bristol vessels carrying 569 slaves from Guinea to Virginia in 1746 listed in PRO CO 5/1446 but omitted from the printed list in Donnan, 4, pp. 188-234 (see above, p. 54). Altogether 18 vessels which brought in 1,874 slaves are omitted from the list printed in Donnan. These omissions affect the calculations in Herbert S. Klein, 'Slaves and shipping in eighteenth-century Virginia', Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 5 (1975), pp. 383-412.

21 Ibid., p. 387. While the average number of slaves carried by all the vessels from the West Indies was 12.0, Bristol vessels carried an average of 128.9 slaves. Bristol vessels from the West Indies (which had an average tonnage of 91 tons compared with the overall average of 51 tons) carried 1.4 slaves per ton compared with the overall average of 0.2 slaves per ton.

22 Bristol Central Library, Jeffries MSS. XVI, 3.


24 PRO CO 5/1441-50.

25 Donnan, 4, pp. 176, 178; Higgins, 'Geographical origins', op. cit., p. 45, Table IV.

26 See Robert P. Thompson, 'The tobacco export of the Upper James
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River naval district, 1773–75', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 18 (1961), pp. 393–407; Richardson, 'Bristol slave trade', *op. cit.*, pp. 147–8. Thus between 1718 and 1727 over 80 per cent of Bristol’s imports of slaves entered through York River and none through the Upper James; by 1748–52 over 70 per cent entered through the Upper James and under 30 per cent by the York River.


28 For an overall picture of the places of origin of slaves imported into the American mainland colonies, see Curtin, *Atlantic slave trade, op. cit.*, pp. 154–8.


32 Donnan, 'Slave trade into South Carolina', *op. cit.*, pp. 816–17; Curtin, *Atlantic slave trade, op. cit.*, pp. 157–8. There seems little substance in the suggestion that 'it could be that the "separate traders" found easier access at Angola': Peter H. Wood, '“More like a negro country”: demographic patterns in colonial South Carolina, 1700–1740', in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese (eds.), *Race and slavery in the western hemisphere: quantitative studies* (Princeton, 1975), p. 151. Nor does the available Bristol evidence for the period Wood discusses support his statement that 'certain larger vessels suited to the longer voyage sailed more directly to the Angolan region for their cargo' (p. 157). Of 7 voyages, 2 were made by a vessel of 50 tons, 2 by a vessel of 120 tons and 1 each by vessels of 80, 100 and 120 tons: PRO CO 4/510. Nor, since the majority of Bristol vessels sailed directly from West Africa to South Carolina, does the South Carolina situation 'merely represent an acceptance of those nationalities still available after the West Indian planters had exerted their choices' (pp. 151–2).

33 Curtin, *Atlantic slave trade, op. cit.*, pp. 157–8. But it should be noted that some evidence from Maryland suggests that the slaves 'from the Bight is of least Esteem with us of any that is imported, Gambia the best and generally comes in best helth as the Passage is quick from thence to this place': Thomas Ringgold and Samuel Galloway to Fowler, Easton & Company, 17 September 1761, in Donnan, 4, p. 40.

34 From 'An abstract of a voyage to Congo River or the Zair and to Cabinde in the year 1700' in Donnan, 1, p. 459.

35 Donnan, 'Slave trade into South Carolina', *op. cit.*, p. 808, note 17.

36 PRO CO 5/508–11.

37 Postscript dated 1 July to letter of 30 June 1736 from Joseph Wragg to Isaac Hobhouse, Jefferies MSS, XVI, 148, Bristol Central Library.

38 Hamer and Rogers (eds.), *Henry Laurens, op. cit.*, 2, p. 337.


40 PRO CO 5/1316, 44i, p. 133.

41 According to the records so far examined, 45 out of 409 vessels made five or more voyages in the slave trade with the American mainland...
colonies: figures derived from PRO Adm 7/77–100; CO 5/508–11, 1441–50; Donnan, 4.
42 Donnan, 4, pp. 176–7, 183–5, 279; and naval office shipping lists.
43 Donnan, 4, pp. 278–80, 296; and naval office shipping lists.
44 In addition to the 45 vessels mentioned above (note 41), 136 out of the total of 409 British vessels in the slave trade between 1730 and 1776 made more than one voyage in the trade.
47 It should be noted that these are net figures and may well understimate the loss of crew by desertion. Arthur P. Middleton, Tobacco coast: a maritime history of Chesapeake Bay in the colonial era (Newport News, 1953), pp. 271–5, suggests that despite the laws passed to limit it, desertion was rife throughout the colonial period in Virginia. He argues that vessels which lost crew in the colony recruited replacements in Virginia before sailing.
51 Samuel Brailsford is the only Bristol merchant listed as a Carolina merchant in Sketchley’s Bristol Directory of 1775 (Bath, reprinted 1971).
52 For his bankruptcy, where his partners are named as Messrs Inglis and Pickering, see ‘Cases submitted to counsel’, f. 121 (B 6590, Bristol Central Library). He returned to business and is listed as an American merchant in Sketchley’s Directory in 1775.
53 Listed as a Guinea merchant in 1775 (Sketchley’s Directory).
55 Hamer and Rogers (eds.), Henry Laurens, op. cit., 1, 227.
56 Ibid., passim.
58 Joseph Farrel, a partner in the Bristol firm of Farrel & Jones, lived in Virginia for a period but does not appear to have been involved in the slave trade: Minchinton, Trade of Bristol, op. cit., pp. xviii, 170.
59 On this point, see Walter E. Minchinton (ed.), ‘The Virginia letters of

60 PRO E 190/1192/3: Hamer and Rogers (eds.), *Henry Laurens*, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 301.

61 Minchinton, ‘Triangular trade’, *op. cit.*

62 Donnan, 4, p. 278, note 2.

63 Hamer and Rogers (eds), *Henry Laurens*, *op. cit.*, 2, p. 99.