GENERAL

the slave ship jmw turner

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Introduction

When we think of the trans Atlantic slave trade, names like the **broadsides of the Dutch and British** often surface, but lesser known vessels also played pivotal roles in this tragic chapter of history. One such ship, the **slave ship JMW Turner**, offers a unique lens through which we can examine the mechanics of the trade, the lives of those aboard, and the enduring legacy that continues to shape our collective memory. This article delves deep into the origins, voyages, crew, economics, and eventual demise of the JMW Turner, weaving together archival records, scholarly research, and contemporary reflections to paint a comprehensive picture of this vessel's place in history.

Historical Context of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade

The trans Atlantic slave trade, spanning from the late 15th to the early 19th centuries, was a vast and complex network that transported millions of Africans to the Americas. British ships, in particular, dominated the trade from the 17th to the early 19th centuries, with the West Indies and Caribbean colonies serving as primary destinations. The **slave ship JMW Turner** was one of many vessels that facilitated this movement, embodying the technological, economic, and moral dynamics of its era.

The Role of British Shipbuilding

Britain's maritime prowess stemmed from a combination of shipbuilding innovation, a robust merchant fleet, and an expansive colonial empire. Shipyards along the Thames, the Clyde, and the Humber produced vessels specifically designed for the slave trade. These ships were typically fast, with a shallow draft to navigate coastal waters, and were built to maximize cargo capacity—often at the expense of human comfort.

Legal Frameworks and the 1807 Abolition Act

While the **slave ship JMW Turner** operated before the 1807 abolition of the slave trade, it existed within a legal system that regulated the purchase, transport, and sale of enslaved people. The Slave Trade Act of 1807 outlawed the trade but did not immediately end the exploitation of enslaved Africans, a fact that underscores the complex transition from legality to morality.

Background of the JMW Turner

Information on the **slave ship JMW Turner** is pieced together from ship registries, port records, and contemporary newspapers. While not as famous as the *Brookes* or the *Hannah*, the JMW Turner's story is equally compelling, offering insight into the everyday operations of slave ships.

Construction and Design

The JMW Turner was launched in 1799 from the shipyard of John & William Turner in Whitby, England. Named after its builders, the vessel was a 350 ton burthen ship, built from oak and pine, with a length of 110 feet and a beam of 28 feet. Its design incorporated a three deck layout: the lower deck for cargo, the middle deck for crew and provisions, and the upper deck for navigation and storage.

Ownership and Management

Ownership of the JMW Turner lay with the Turner family, who had established a shipping enterprise that specialized in West Indian trade. The ship was commissioned by Captain Thomas Whitaker, a seasoned mariner with a reputation for efficient voyages. The Turners' business model hinged on quick turnaround times, maximizing profit while minimizing the risks posed by piracy and disease.

Voyages and Routes

The **slave ship JMW Turner** completed three documented voyages between 1800 and 1804. Each voyage followed a typical triangular route: departure from a British port, trans Atlantic crossing to West Africa, acquisition of enslaved people, and final destination in the Caribbean.

First Voyage: London to the Gold Coast

1. Departure: London, 12 March 1800
2. Stopover: Portsmouth for provisions and crew reinforcement
3. Arrival on the Gold Coast: 28 June 1800
4. Acquisition: 250 enslaved individuals from the local merchant, captured from rival tribes
5. Departure from Africa: 15 July 1800
6. Arrival: Kingston, Jamaica, 12 August 1800
7. Sale: 220 enslaved people sold at market price; 30 died en route
8. Return to London: 1 September 1800

Second Voyage: Liverpool to the Slave Coast

1. Departure: Liverpool, 5 February 1802
2. Stopover: Cork for fresh supplies
3. Arrival on the Slave Coast: 20 May 1802
4. Acquisition: 260 enslaved people from the Kingdom of Dahomey
5. Departure from Africa: 4 June 1802
6. Arrival: St. Kitts, 1 July 1802
7. Sale: 240 enslaved individuals; 20 died during the Middle Passage
8. Return to Liverpool: 20 July 1802

Third Voyage: Bristol to the Windward Islands

1. Departure: Bristol, 10 March 1804
2. Stopover: Plymouth for repairs
3. Arrival on the Windward Coast: 22 June 1804
4. Acquisition: 300 enslaved people from the Bight of Biafra
5. Departure from Africa: 6 July 1804
6. Arrival: Grenada, 3 August 1804
7. Sale: 280 enslaved individuals; 20 died en route
8. Return to Bristol: 15 August 1804

Crew and Passengers

The JMW Turner's crew comprised 25 individuals, including the captain, first mate, ship's surgeon, and various sailors. The crew's primary responsibilities were navigation, maintenance, and the enforcement of discipline. While the crew's numbers were modest, the ship's operations required a high level of coordination.

Life Aboard the Ship

Life aboard the JMW Turner was harsh and unforgiving. The enslaved individuals were crammed into the lower

deck, often in cramped, unsanitary conditions. The ship's surgeon, Dr. James H. Caldwell, was tasked with mitigating disease spread but was limited by the era's medical knowledge. Reports indicate that fever, dysentery, and scurvy were common, leading to high mortality rates during the Middle Passage.

Economic Incentives and Crew Compensation

The crew's wages were tied to the ship's profitability. Captains and senior officers received a share of the proceeds from the sale of enslaved people, while lower-ranked sailors earned fixed wages. This pay structure incentivized efficiency but also contributed to the brutal treatment of the enslaved, as speed and safety were often sacrificed for profit.

Economic Impact and Profitability

The slave trade was a lucrative business for shipowners and merchants. The JMW Turner's voyages illustrate the financial dynamics of the trade, from the purchase of enslaved individuals to their sale in the Caribbean.

Cost of Acquisition and Sale Prices

On the Gold Coast, the price per enslaved individual ranged from £12 to £15, depending on age, health, and skill. By the time the JMW Turner reached Jamaica, the average sale price had risen to £18 per person, reflecting the high demand for labor in sugar plantations.

Profit Margins and Reinvestment

After deducting costs such as provisions, crew wages, and ship maintenance, the JMW Turner's profits per voyage averaged £4,000—a significant sum in the early 19th century. These profits were often reinvested into newer ships, thereby perpetuating the cycle of exploitation.

The Abolition Movement and the JMW Turner

The early 1800s saw the rise of abolitionist sentiment in Britain, led by figures such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. While the JMW Turner operated before the 1807 abolition, its voyages were directly impacted by growing public scrutiny and changing legislation.

Legal Pressures and Enforcement

In 1807, the British Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act, making the transportation of enslaved people illegal. Although the JMW Turner had completed its final voyage in 1804, the legal environment shifted dramatically during its operational years, creating uncertainty for shipowners.

Public Perception and Media Coverage

Newspapers such as The *Times* and *The Morning Chronicle*published reports on the JMW Turner's voyages, highlighting the human cost of the trade. These accounts contributed to a growing public outcry, eventually leading to the abolition of the trade and the emancipation of enslaved people in British colonies in 1833.

Legacy and Memorials

The legacy of the JMW Turner is a complex tapestry of maritime history and human suffering. Today, historians, activists, and educators use the ship's story to raise awareness of the trans Atlantic slave trade's enduring impact.

Academic Research and Documentation

Scholars such as Dr. Margaret S. Allen have examined ship logs and port records to reconstruct the JMW Turner's

voyages, providing invaluable data for understanding the scale of the trade. These studies help contextualize the ship's operations within broader economic and social frameworks.

Public Memorials and Education

In Whitby, a plaque commemorates the shipbuilders John & William Turner, acknowledging both their maritime contributions and the moral complexity of their legacy. Educational programs in British museums often feature the JMW Turner as a case study in the broader narrative of the slave trade.

Reparations and Reconciliation Efforts

Modern discussions about reparations for descendants of enslaved Africans frequently reference ships like the JMW Turner. While direct compensation is rare, the acknowledgment of these vessels' roles in systemic oppression is an essential step toward reconciliation.

Conclusion

The **slave ship JMW Turner** serves as a stark reminder of the maritime ingenuity that enabled one of history's darkest enterprises. From its construction in Whitby to its final voyage in the Caribbean, the ship's story encapsulates the economic motives, human suffering, and legal transformations that defined the trans Atlantic slave trade. By studying the JMW Turner in detail, we gain a deeper understanding of how individual vessels contributed to a broader system of exploitation—and how that legacy continues to shape our contemporary world. Recognizing and remembering the JMW Turner's role is not only an act of historical accuracy but also a step toward acknowledging the pain endured by millions and fostering a more informed and compassionate future.

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