

WARNING: THIS CLIP CONTAINS SEGMENTS DEALING WITH SLAVERY AND THE CRUELITIES ASSOCIATED THEREWITH. IT IS NOT EASY TO WATCH AND IS NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.

On the 28th of November, 1781, the crew of a slave ship called the *Zong* threw many African slaves overboard. Later, owners of the vessel tried to collect the "value" of their lost "cargo" via an insurance settlement.

Although no one was ever criminally prosecuted for the crime, there was a civil trial.

How did these events transpire? Who were the people who brought a claim for money to recover the value of the "cargo" they had lost?

Owners of the ship were prosperous merchants from Liverpool. They filed a lawsuit, against their insurers, to recover funds via their insurance policy.

If we analyze this case a bit, we can fairly conclude that these merchants were filing litigation to recover money damages for mass murder which had occurred aboard their ship.

History tells us that these types of murders - sending kidnapped people overboard during the "Middle Passage" - were not uncommon. What made the *Zong* affair stand out is the audacity of the owners in their efforts to recover damages, for themselves, in court.

A Dutch ship, the *Zong* was purchased by William Gregson and his slave-trading syndicate in 1781. Historians estimate that ships owned by Gregson - who was one of Britain's biggest slave traders - transported around 58,201 Africans to the "New World."

Beyond the *Zong's* gruesome conditions - akin to other slave ships - is this fact: Some of the kidnapped Africans were held against their will, aboard the vessel, long before the events which came to light during the court trial.

About 244 captured Africans were on the ship when Gregson bought it. The crew was not a "normal" crew, for a slave ship. The captain, for example, was a doctor.

Something else was different about the *Zong's* travelers. Slave vessels rarely had passengers - the ships and their onboard conditions were much too vile for that - but the *Zong* carried a passenger named Robert Stubbs. He had once served as a colonial governor.

After Gregson took ownership of the vessel, the *Zong's* crew spent about five months sailing along Africa's western coast as they sought-out more slaves to purchase. When the ship finally set course for the Americas, some of the captives had been in the hold for a year.

During the 18th century, the person who manned the water barrels was called a "cooper." The *Zong's* cooper had become ill during the crossing. By the time the ship reached the island of San Tome, where the crew planned to purchase food and water, the cooper was not properly caring for the water barrels.

With its water barrels leaking, the *Zong* continued its trek across the Atlantic. As the ship neared the island of Jamaica, the captain became ill. He died not long after the ship reached Jamaica.

Although the *Zong's* first mate was next-in-line, to take command of the ship after the death of the captain, that did not happen. Instead, Robert Stubbs - the passenger - took over. That infuriated the first mate who was relieved of his post.

Although Stubbs had prior experience, as the captain of a ship called "Black Joke," he was not a well-liked man. He also had a bad reputation, from his days as a colonial governor in the Gold Coast.

With an inexperienced crew manning the ship, and water running dangerously low, the crew mistook a friendly island for a hostile one. Keeping their ship in the Caribbean, instead of making port, they worsened the water shortage.

Although the eleven crew members could have rationed water, they decided to eliminate the captives. Initially they selected 54 women and children whom they pushed, through cabin windows, over the side of the ship.

One cannot imagine the unbelievable fear of these human beings who, still chained, were sent to their watery deaths.

With the water shortage becoming more critical, the crew sent another 68 people to their deaths over the ensuing days. Not waiting for their turn to die, ten additional slaves jumped overboard.

One captive, who could speak some English, begged for the crew to spare their lives. He tried to persuade them

that the slaves could make it to their destination without food or water.

No one listened to him.

Later - when the owners sued for insurance coverage, to pay for their loss - two people made sure that the trial received extensive publicity.

Granville Sharp (the son of a cleric and a man who utterly despised slavery) heard about the *Zong* affair from Olaudah Equiano (a former slave). A man who believed in racial equality and human rights, Sharp did what he could to even inspire the insurance company's legal team.

Robert Stubbs, the erstwhile captain who had survived the ghastly journey, was the only witness at trial. He tried to present himself as an outsider who saw - but did not participate - in the horrific events.

Because the facts - including how many people died and who, actually, was in charge - were so confused, England's Lord Chief Justice ordered a new trial.

History isn't clear whether a retrial ever occurred. What matters, though, is what happened during the first trial.

Granville Sharp and Olaudah Equiano made sure that the story wasn't just told inside the courtroom. As the facts became known to the public, people were forced to hear about the "brutal, morally bankrupt and even murderous" methods employed in the very trade which was sustaining the British Empire.

As Sharp and Equiano fought for justice, on behalf of the murdered slaves, people in Britain began to change their minds about the slave trade in general. About three decades after the *Zong* captives died, Members of Parliament finally agreed to support William Wilberforce in his efforts to end the slave-trade industry.

To begin the story segment on the *Zong* affair, in this clip from "[The Power of Art](#)," move the video forward to 10:49.

Note ... This segment, from the "Power of Art," features Simon Schama discussing an oil-on-canvas painting by J.M. William Turner (Joseph Mallord William Turner), entitled *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*. Turner created this work in 1840, and it is based on the *Zong* affair.

See Part 2 of this *Zong* Story.

Credits:

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