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Walter E. Minchinton

Characteristics of British Slaving Vessels, 1698–

1775 During the past twenty years or so, considerable attention has been devoted to the history of the Atlantic slave trade to the American colonies. Research has, however, been concentrated on a limited range of topics. Following the publication of Curtin's *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, there has been much debate about "the numbers game." Mortality and the problems of the middle passage have been discussed and a number of writers have examined the market for goods and currency arrangements in West Africa, but there has been comparatively little interest in the vessels involved in the trade. Curtin considered the slave ships only in terms of their slave-carrying capacity, and Anstey's treatment of the subject in *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition* was brief. There have recently been some signs of interest in the slaving vessels themselves, for example, Klein's study of the slave ships trading with Virginia.¹

This article provides a systematic discussion of the nature of the British slave fleet by examining the Naval Office shipping

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1 Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (London, 1975). Discussion of the size of the trade has been summarized by Paul Lovejoy in "The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis," *Journal of African History*, XXIII (1982), 473–502. On mortality, see Herbert Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton, 1978); Joseph Miller, "Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Statistical Evidence on Causality," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XI (1981), 385–423. For the market for goods, see David Richardson, "West African Consumption Patterns and their Influence on the Eighteenth-Century English Slave Trade," in Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn (eds.), *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1979), 303–330. For the currency question, see Hogendorn, "A Supply-Side Aspect of the African Slave Trade: The Cowrie Production and Exports of the Maldives," *Slavery and Abolition*, II (1981), 31–52. For shipping, see Klein, "Slaves and Shipping in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, V (1975), 383–412.

lists located in the British Public Record Office (see Appendix 1). These lists offer a standardized record of shipping in the slave trade with the mainland colonies of North America. The term “British” rather than “English” is used because a small number of Irish and Scottish vessels were employed in the trade.

Following the passage of the navigation act of 1696, a consolidated record of vessels entering and clearing the colonial ports was compiled by naval officers who were acting on behalf of colonial governors. This article concentrates on the period from the later seventeenth century, when Naval Office shipping lists first became available, to the eve of the American Revolution, when they were no longer compiled for the American mainland colonies.²

THE SLAVE FLEET BY PORT OF REGISTRATION Until the slave trade was thrown open by the Act (9 & 10 William III c 26) of 1698, it was a monopoly of the Royal African Company, and only London vessels could lawfully engage in the trade. Although there were interlopers before 1698, the Naval Office shipping lists provide no information about the illegal trade. Even after 1698, the lists are too incomplete to provide a full picture of the slave trading vessels, which must be derived from other sources. Table 1 sets out the general position. The Naval Office shipping lists can be used to amplify the account of the relative and shifting importance of London, Bristol, and Liverpool in the Atlantic slave trade. Table 2 provides information on the number of voyages made by British slavers to South Carolina and Virginia. The data show that the decline in London’s interest in the slave trade was not as great as had previously been held. The figures on Bristol’s slave trade do not contradict the accepted view, but those for Liverpool cast doubt on what has previously been written. Although Curtin has held that Liverpool had not yet entered the slave trade by

2 The Naval Office shipping lists are discussed in more detail in Appendix 1. They are available on microfilm with introductions by Minchinton in the series *British Records relating to America in Microform* (East Ardsley, Yorkshire). A new edition of the Virginia lists, Minchinton, Celia King, and Peter Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics, 1698–1775* (Richmond, Va., 1984), has been published. This volume replaces the transcripts in Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America. IV. The Border Colonies and the Southern Colonies* (Washington, D.C., 1935), but Donnan’s book provides transcripts of the Georgia Naval Office shipping lists for 1755 to 1767 and the Maryland lists for 1753 to 1765.

Table 1 Clearances of Vessels to West Africa, 1710–1775

	FROM LONDON	FROM BRISTOL	FROM LIVERPOOL	TOTAL
1710	24	20	2	46
1725	87	63	unknown	over 150
1730–1739 ^a	25	39	21	85
1750–1759 ^a	13	20	49	82
1771	58	23	107	188
1772–1775 ^a	40	22	94	161 ^b

^a Annual average

^b Including five from other English ports

SOURCE Derek P. Lamb, "The English Atlantic Slave Trade in its Final Phase, from the early 1770s to 1807," unpub. M.A. thesis (Univ. of Exeter, 1974), 2, 3, 86.

1725, Parkinson had previously provided information about earlier Liverpool ventures. He lists eleven slave voyages, including one to Madagascar. As Table 2 indicates, his figures understate Liverpool's participation in the slave trade. Thus, partial though the Naval Office shipping lists are, they contain important data on participation in the slave trade by merchants in London, Liverpool, and Bristol.³

So far, the analysis has assumed that it was only ships of Bristol, London, and Liverpool which engaged in the slave trade, and there is a good deal of support for this assumption. But a few vessels from other ports were involved. For Virginia, there are entries for thirty-two vessels from other British ports (nine from Whitehaven, six from Glasgow, four from Dublin, three from Greenock, two each from Belfast, Lyme and Plymouth, and one each from Dumfries, Irwin [in the Clyde], Lancaster, and Leith). Of these vessels, twenty-three brought in small cargoes of slaves, a total of 172, the Dumfries ship brought 81, and there were three unspecified cargoes, all from the West Indies; one vessel brought one slave from Philadelphia; the Leith vessel

3 For London, see James Rawley, "The Port of London and the Eighteenth Century Slave Trade: Historians, Sources and a Reappraisal," *African Economic History*, IX (1980), 85–100. For Liverpool, see Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 147; Cyril N. Parkinson, *The Rise of the Port of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1952), 88–89, which notes the following slave voyages from Liverpool: two in 1700 (one to Barbados), two in 1701 (one to Barbados), two in 1703, two in 1709, two in 1720, and one (to Madagascar) in 1724. The extent of Liverpool's slave trade in this period is emphasized when the figures for trade to the West Indies are considered.

Table 2 Number of British Vessels Entering South Carolina and Virginia with Slaves, 1698-1775

	1698-1709	1710-1719	1720-1729	1730-1739	1740-1749	1750-1759	1760-1769	1770-1775	TOTAL
LONDON vessels entering									
South Carolina	—	11	9	36	—	3	14	—	73
Virginia	40	22	17	13	3	5	5	1	106
Total	40	33	26	49	3	8	19	1	179
BRISTOL vessels entering									
South Carolina	—	5	3	40	—	9	11	—	68
Virginia	11	34	43	36	29	16	9	1	179
Total	11	39	46	76	29	25	20	1	247
LIVERPOOL vessels entering									
South Carolina	—	1	—	3	—	11	12	—	27
Virginia	1	12	6	21	10	10	21	2	83
Total	1	13	6	24	10	21	33	2	110
OTHER BRITISH vessels entering									
South Carolina	—	1	1	5	—	9	9	—	25
Virginia	4	9	2	6	5	5	1	—	32
Total	4	10	3	11	5	14	10	—	57
Grand Total	56	97 ^a	81	160	47	68	82	4	595 ^a

^a Including two vessels for which the port of registration is unknown.

SOURCES Naval Office shipping lists for South Carolina (PRO CO 5/508-11); Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics, 2-189*.

brought one from an unknown source; and three vessels from Dublin, Lancaster, and Whitehaven brought a total of 387 blacks from Africa, all in 1752. Thus only in the unusual circumstances of a single year did the vessels of other ports participate to any real effect in the slave trade to Virginia.⁴

Shipping from other British ports entering South Carolina with slaves consisted of ten from Lancaster, five from Poole, three from Belfast, two from Whitehaven, and one each from Cork, Exeter, Greenock, Penrhyn, and Plymouth, a total of twenty-five. Of these, twelve vessels brought 125 blacks from the West Indies between 1719 and 1758, and thirteen vessels entered with 2,136 blacks from Africa between 1759 and 1765 (four in 1759, five in 1760, and four in 1765), an average of 164 blacks per vessel.⁵

Information available for Georgia covers a much shorter period, 1755–1767. Only in 1766, when the enforcement of a prohibitive duty on slaves by the South Carolina legislature forced vessels to divert to Georgia, was there any substantial importation of slaves direct from Africa. Four vessels were involved: one from London, one from Liverpool, and two from Lancaster, bringing in a total of 375 slaves. In 1767, a Liverpool vessel brought in 154. The remaining slave cargoes in which British vessels were involved between 1764 and 1767 (six from London, five from Liverpool, three from Greenock, and one each from Bristol, Irwin, and Lancaster) resulted in the importation of 164 slaves from the West Indies and 51 in the Lancaster vessel from Africa.⁶

The limited information available for Maryland shows one London and one Bristol vessel entering with 190 slaves from Africa between 1753 and 1765.⁷

A total of sixty-four vessels bringing slaves into the mainland colonies came from ports other than London, Bristol, and Liverpool—about 10 percent of the total—of which only twenty-six brought slaves from Africa. The other British ports which were involved in the trade fall into four groups: the west coast ports,

4 Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics, 2–175*. The source of one slave brought in by a Leith vessel which is stated to be “North Britain” is clearly a clerical error.

5 PRO CO 5/508–11. (See Appendix 1 for information on the location of records.)

6 PRO CO 5/709–10 in Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 612–623.

7 PRO CO 5/749–50, *ibid.*, 48.

Whitehaven and Lancaster (the latter being a near neighbor of Liverpool); five ports in the southwest (Exeter, Lyme, Penrhyn, Plymouth, and Poole); three Irish ports (Belfast, Cork, and Dublin); and a group of Scottish ports (Dumfries, Glasgow, Greenock, and Irwin on the west coast and Leith on the east coast). None of them made a sustained contribution to the trade.

TYPES OF VESSEL In the eighteenth century, two kinds of descriptions of vessels were current, by hull form and by rig. Merchant-ship hulls were divided into five classes: frigate, haggboat, pink, cat, and bark. The profile of the hull determined cargo capacity, sailing performance, and maneuverability. A bark, for example, would normally be too full-bodied to be employed in the slave trade. Unfortunately the Naval Office shipping lists only occasionally mention specific hull form (for example, “frigate” or “pink”); as a result, no analysis of slave vessels by hull form is possible. The Naval Office shipping lists do, however, normally provide information about the way in which the vessels were rigged. The main categories were the ship, a three-masted vessel, which was the largest employed in the slave trade; the snow, the biggest of the two-masted vessels; the brig and the schooner, which also had two masts; and the sloop, a smaller single-masted vessel. To this list of rigs was added the barque in the mid-eighteenth century (see Appendix 2 and figures 1 to 6).⁸

There were developments in tonnage of vessels also. Between 1680 and 1720 the dividing line between the normally two-masted and normally three-masted vessels came at the 50–60 tons level; by the early 1730s, the dividing line was at 80–90 tons, rising to 100 tons in the 1760s; but there were differences between London, and Bristol and Liverpool, as Table 3 shows.

Previous historians have devoted limited attention to the rigs of vessels employed in the slave trade. Parkinson, echoed by Anstey, stated that “the typical Guineaman [slave vessel] in the

8 For a classification of hull forms, see Fredrik H. af Chapman, *Architectura Navalis Mercatoria* (Stockholm, 1768). Contemporary definitions of vessel types by rig taken from William Falconer, *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (London, 1780) are given in Appendix 2. Simplified profiles of the rigs of vessels with virtually no rigging and no fore-and-aft sails between the masts (which would have been common to all of the square-rigged vessels) are given in Appendix 2. I am indebted to David MacGregor for his comments on this section.

Table 3 Tonnage Division between Two- and Three-Masted Vessels

	1733-1734	1753-1754	1773-1774
London	100-120	130-150	140-160
Bristol and Liverpool	70-80	100-120	100-120

SOURCE Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1962), 77.

Table 4 Types of British Vessels in the Virginia Slave Trade, 1725-1769 (Percentages in Brackets)

	1725-1729	1730-1739	1740-1749	1750-1759	1760-1769
Ship	10 (24.4)	35 (46.1)	20 (42.6)	16 (44.4)	12 (33.3)
Snow	4 (9.8)	9 (11.8)	12 (25.5)	12 (33.3)	5 (13.9)
Brig	4 (9.8)	5 (6.6)	6 (12.8)	2 (5.6)	5 (13.9)
Sloop	1 (2.4)	1 (1.3)	—	1 (2.8)	1 (2.8)
Schooner	—	—	1 (2.1)	—	—
Unknown	22 (53.6)	26 (34.2)	8 (17.0)	5 (13.9)	13 (36.1)
Total	41	76	47	36	36

SOURCE Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 53-175.

first half of the 18th Century was a ship, barque, snow or brig.” Only the schooner and sloop are missing from the list given above, so that Parkinson’s statement does not provide a precise analysis of the rigs of slavers. Moreover, although there is evidence that both schooners and sloops were used, no evidence has come to hand that barques were employed. Table 4 analyzes slaving vessels in the Virginia trade. It indicates that ships predominated, and that snows were also employed in significant numbers.⁹

Writing of English merchant shipping, Davis stated that brigs and snows were “the typical ships of the middle decades of the eighteenth century. They were almost identical and both were used for all purposes.” But, he continued, “the snow was more

9 Parkinson, *Rise of the Port of Liverpool*, 96; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 9. Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807* (Philadelphia, 1981), states that “snows and barks accounted for the remaining 8 percent” of slavers by vessel type (73-74). His Table 9 for the period 1720 to 1807 notes only one bark (and that in the period 1784 to 1807) and 54 snows; the bark does not appear in the “List of Rhode Island Slaving Voyages 1709-1807” in the Appendix (241-285). The validity of this conclusion is limited, particularly for the periods 1725 to 1729, 1730 to 1739, and 1760 to 1769, by the large numbers of vessels of unknown type (53.6, 34.2, and 36.1 percent).

commonly the ocean voyager while the brig could be found most often in home waters, and particularly those of the North Sea.” As is evident from Table 4, brigs as well as snows were to be found in the Atlantic slave trade. Both were capable of fast and safe voyages and could be operated with a comparatively small crew. Snows would have had an advantage over brigs on ocean routes—when the trade winds were encountered—because they carried a larger spread of square canvas.¹⁰

Rigs are less useful as a guide to the capabilities of vessels employed in the slave trade because the tonnage range for each type of vessel was substantial, as the figures for Virginia in Table 5 indicate.

TONNAGE Although the incomplete nature of the Naval Office shipping lists makes it impossible to establish total tonnage figures of vessels employed in the slave trade, they do permit an analysis of the average size of vessels employed by the major ports of Britain—London, Bristol, and Liverpool—and its smaller harbors. Since there are few secondary ports, the information on them is grouped. The details are set out in Table 6.¹¹

In the early years of the trade, when it was a monopoly of the Royal African Company, larger vessels were employed. The average size of London vessels fell when private traders entered the trade in 1698. During the first three quarters of the eighteenth century, vessels of not more than 160 tons proved to be appro-

Table 5 Tonnage Range of British Vessels in the Virginia Slave Trade, 1725–1769

	1725–1729	1730–1739	1740–1749	1750–1759	1760–1769
Ship	70–300	60–180	50–300	70–180	100–230
Snow	60–81	50–100	50–87	50–100	70–100
Brig	40–108	50–80	50–70	50–54	70–100
Sloop	75	56	—	100	51
Schooner	—	—	220	—	—

SOURCE Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 53–175.

¹⁰ Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1962), 77–78.

¹¹ Variations between tables in the number of vessels, total tonnage, and so on are explained by the absence of data in some categories.

Table 6 Average Tonnage of British Vessels Carrying Slaves to South Carolina and Virginia, 1698–1775

	LONDON	BRISTOL	LIVERPOOL	OTHER	TOTAL
SOUTH CAROLINA					
1717–1719	79.5 (11) ^a	69.0 (5)	30.0 (1)	45.0 (1)	71.9 (18)
1722–1727	100.0 (9)	83.3 (3)	—	60.0 (1)	93.1 (13)
1730–1739	103.9 (36)	95.25 (40)	56.6 (3)	59.2 (5)	95.4 (84)
1752–1759	103.3 (3)	93.3 (9)	90.0 (11)	80.0 (8)	89.7 (31)
1760–1765	169.8 (14)	113.6 (11)	100.0 (12)	75.5 (9)	119.7 (46)
VIRGINIA					
1698–1709	126.8 (25)	79.3 (7)	80.0 (1)	75.0 (4)	110.9 (37)
1725–1729	103.1 (8)	84.5 (25)	79.8 (6)	65.0 (2)	86.5 (41)
1730–1739	113.5 (13)	97.5 (36)	73.1 (21)	63.5 (6)	90.8 (76)
1740–1749	113.3 (3)	96.4 (29)	84.0 (10)	50.0 (5)	89.9 (47)
1750–1759	114.0 (5)	104.4 (16)	98.2 (9)	78.0 (5)	100.4 (35)
1760–1769	114.2 (5)	132.2 (9)	88.3 (21)	120.0 (1)	103.75 (36)
1770–1775	200.0 (1)	130.0 (1)	85.0 (2)	—	125.0 (4)

^a Number of vessels in brackets.

SOURCES PRO CO 5/508–11; Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 2–189.

private carriers in the trade for a number of reasons. Such a tonnage limited the capital investment involved; it restricted the number of slaves that could be carried by the vessel and hence decreased the amount of time spent off the west coast of Africa, where there were few harbors and the teredo worm posed a threat to the hulls of vessels; and it facilitated the disposal of slaves, particularly where the markets were limited. Whereas slave vessels grew little in size in the first half of the eighteenth century, the tonnage of London and Bristol ships increased in the third quarter of that century.

London slave vessels were larger than those of Bristol—and of Liverpool—because London was the most important shipowning port in the country and had better accommodations for larger vessels. Similarly, the vessels of Bristol, a long-established port, were larger than those of a newer port. In the trend toward larger size, the changing source of vessels employed in the slave trade, particularly the increase in the number of prize vessels involved, was a factor of some importance. Overall, these figures demonstrate that slave vessels were smaller than has sometimes been suggested. The slave trade with the West Indies also used smaller

vessels, even though averages mask the tonnage range involved. Parkinson was in error when he wrote that “the typical Guineaman in the first half of the 18th Century was . . . of 250 or 300 tons,” and Anstey also overestimated the tonnage of slave vessels when he wrote that they were typically of 150 to 300 tons.¹²

The information in the Naval Office shipping lists also enables us to examine whether the size of a vessel was related to its route. Table 7 provides information about the routes of British slavers trading with South Carolina and Virginia. Apart from the fact that the direct route from Africa became the more important one in terms of the numbers of vessels, the data suggest that there was no significant difference in tonnage between those vessels employed on the direct route and those which called at the West Indies before transporting slaves to the mainland colonies. Commercial decisions, not technical factors, were decisive.

The averages do not, however, reveal the full story. The tonnage ranges of vessels involved in trading with South Carolina and Virginia are given in Table 8. These figures show that there was a decline in the proportion of small vessels, with the percentage under 50 tons falling in the course of the eighteenth

12 Gary M. Walton comments on the failure of all shipping to colonial waters to increase in size “because of high risks of under-utilization and longer-than-average port times” (“Sources of Productivity Change in American Colonial Shipping, 1675–1775,” *Economic History Review*, XX [1967], 78). See Parkinson, *Rise of the Port of Liverpool*, 96; Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 9. As the following table shows, London slave vessels trading with the West Indies were also smaller than Parkinson and Anstey suggest:

Number, Total Tonnage, and Average Tonnage of London Slave Vessels Trading to Barbados and Jamaica, 1680–1769

	BARBADOS			JAMAICA		
	NUMBER	TOTAL TONNAGE	AVERAGE TONNAGE	NUMBER	TOTAL TONNAGE	AVERAGE TONNAGE
1680–89	73	8560	117	36	4195	117
1690–99	47	8001	170	8	940	118
1700–09	90	12787	142	—	—	—
1710–19	48	5170	108	52	6235	120
1720–29	10	1011	101	5	730	146
1730–39	16	1860	116	—	—	—
1740–49	—	—	—	18	1920	107
1750–59	3	370	123	12	1875	156
1760–69	—	—	—	28	4526	162

SOURCE Christopher J. French, “The Role of London in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1680–1776,” unpub. M.A. thesis (Univ. of Exeter, 1970), 13.

Table 7 Number and Tonnage of British Vessels Bringing Slaves from Africa and the West Indies to South Carolina and Virginia, 1698–1769

	1698–1709	1717–1719	1725–1729	1730–1739	1740–1749	1750–1759	1760–1769
SOUTH CAROLINA							
From Africa	—	11 (850) ^a	7 (640)	59 (6011)	—	22 (1970)	42 (4948)
average tonnage	—	77.3	91.4	101.9	—	89.5	117.8
From West Indies	—	7 (445)	6 (570)	25 (2006)	—	9 (810)	4 (560)
average tonnage	—	63.6	95.0	80.2	—	90.0	140.0
Total	—	18 (1295)	13 (1210)	84 (8017)	—	31 (2780)	46 (5508)
average tonnage	—	71.9	93.1	95.4	—	89.7	119.7
VIRGINIA							
From Africa	22 (2650)	—	31 (2522)	59 (5250)	36 (3280)	25 (2494)	32 (3245)
average tonnage	120.4	—	81.3	89.0	91.1	99.8	101.4
From West Indies	15 (1455)	—	9 (935)	16 (1491)	11 (947)	9 (880)	3 (310)
average tonnage	97.0	—	103.9	93.2	86.1	97.8	103.3
Total	37 (4105)	—	40 (3457)	75 (6741)	47 (4227)	34 (3374)	35 (3555)
average tonnage	110.9	—	86.4	89.9	89.9	99.2	101.6

^a Total tonnage is indicated by bracketed numbers.

SOURCES PRO CO 5/508–1; Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics, 2–175*.

Table 8 Tonnage Composition of British Slave Vessels Trading to South Carolina and Virginia, 1698-1769
(Number and Percentage of Vessels)

	1698-1709	1717-1719	1725-1729	1730-1739	1740-1749	1750-1759	1760-1769
SOUTH CAROLINA							
0-49 tons	—	4 (22.2)	—	5 (5.9)	—	5 (16.1)	3 (6.5)
50-99 tons	—	8 (44.4)	8 (61.5)	37 (44.0)	—	11 (35.5)	12 (26.1)
100-149 tons	—	5 (27.8)	3 (23.1)	37 (44.0)	—	15 (48.4)	19 (41.3)
150-199 tons	—	1 (5.5)	2 (15.4)	4 (4.8)	—	—	7 (15.2)
200+ tons	—	—	—	1 (1.2)	—	—	5 (10.9)
average tonnage	—	71.9	93.1	95.4	—	89.7	119.7
number of vessels	—	18	13	84	—	31	46
VIRGINIA							
0-49 tons	3 (8.1)	—	1 (2.4)	3 (3.9)	2 (4.2)	—	1 (2.8)
50-99 tons	14 (37.8)	—	28 (68.3)	46 (60.5)	26 (55.3)	18 (51.4)	15 (41.7)
100-149 tons	10 (27.0)	—	10 (24.4)	18 (23.7)	16 (34.0)	13 (37.1)	15 (41.7)
150-199 tons	4 (10.8)	—	1 (2.4)	9 (11.8)	—	4 (11.4)	2 (5.5)
200+ tons	6 (16.2)	—	1 (2.4)	—	3 (6.4)	—	3 (8.3)
average tonnage	110.9	—	86.5	90.8	89.9	100.4	103.75
number of vessels	37	—	41	76	47	35	36

SOURCES PRO CO 5/508-II; Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics, 2-175*.

century; at the same time, the proportion of vessels over 100 tons rose. Yet, as late as the 1760s, there were very few vessels over 200 tons.

PLACE OF CONSTRUCTION Like the general merchant fleet in the eighteenth century, the vessels employed in the slave trade consisted of three types: those built in Britain, those built in the colonies, and those taken as prizes. The Naval Office shipping lists enable an analysis to be made of the place where the slave vessels were built. The information available is set out in Table 9. This table, which records the year of operation and not the year of construction or purchase, lends support to the argument that war in the eighteenth century resulted in an increase both in the number of colonial-built vessels employed (since colonial-built vessels were cheaper than British-built ships in wartime) and in the number of prizes available for purchase. These figures do not support Davis' conjecture that, when war ended in 1713, "the demand for American ships probably fell away sharply." Nor do they suggest that Davis was on firm ground when he continued that British demand for colonial-built vessels "was certainly at a low level in the early thirties." Davis further suggested that "perhaps by 1730 one English ship in every six was American-built and by 1760 one in four." Table 9 shows that, by the 1760s, colonial-built vessels formed an even larger proportion of slave vessels than of the general merchant fleet.¹³

Another point to emerge from a study of these figures is that, in the course of time, there was an increase in the size of colonial-built vessels which entered the slave trade, and that, by the 1750s, they were on average larger than British-built vessels.

But to the further questions of to what extent slave vessels were of special construction or built especially for the slave trade, the Naval Office shipping lists can provide no answer.

AGE The Naval Office shipping lists also provide information about the age of slave vessels trading with South Carolina and

13 For the short period from 1764 to 1767, of 22 British slavers entering Georgia, 8 were British-built, 11 were colonial-built, and 3 were prize vessels (derived from PRO CO 5/709-10, in Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 614-623). Davis, "From the Beginning to about 1815," in *Untapped Sources and Research Opportunities in the Field of American Maritime History* (Mystic, Conn., 1967), 17; *idem*, *Rise of British Shipping Industry*, 68.

Table 9 Place of Construction of British Slave Vessels Trading to South Carolina and Virginia, 1698–1769
(Number and Average Tonnage of Vessels)

	1698–1709	1717–1719	1725–1729	1730–1739	1740–1749	1750–1759	1760–1769
SOUTH CAROLINA							
British-built	—	13 (67.3)	8 (100.0)	39 (106.2)	—	7 (62.1)	12 (119.0)
Colonial-built	—	3 (90.3)	5 (82.0)	45 (86.1)	—	18 (98.0)	22 (126.4)
Prize	—	2 (75.0)	—	—	—	5 (94.0)	12 (108.3)
Total	—	18 (71.9)	13 (93.1)	84 (95.4)	—	30 (89.0)	46 (119.7)
VIRGINIA							
British-built	27 (119.1)	—	25 (94.6)	52 (96.9)	27 (91.1)	14 (85.3)	13 (76.2)
Colonial-built	8 (76.9)	—	16 (73.9)	24 (77.5)	16 (81.7)	15 (102.0)	11 (124.5)
Prize	1 (150.0)	—	—	—	3 (136.7)	6 (131.7)	12 (114.5)
Total	36 (110.5)	—	41 (86.5)	76 (90.8)	46 (90.8)	35 (100.4)	36 (103.75)

SOURCES PRO CO 5/508–11; Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics, 2–175*.

Virginia between 1700 and 1769, as set out in Table 10. Although the calculations of average age are affected by the number of vessels involved, two points emerge from this table. First, the size of the 0–5 year group suggests that new ships were being recruited for the slave trade throughout the period under discussion, and the high age figures reflect the continued employment of older vessels during periods of high demand. Since no information is available about the age of prizes, those vessels are excluded from Table 10.

Although precise figures are not available, it is possible to estimate the age of slave vessels compared with that of the general merchant fleet. Davis has argued that for ships in the oceanic trades “twenty or twenty-five years would probably see the end of [their] profitable and safe use in distant trades with cargoes of substantial value,” a lifespan also accepted by Price. But no more detailed studies have been completed. Accepting that these estimates are well-founded, then it is clear from Table 10 that few slave ships had reached the end of their profitable and safe use, for most of them were less than ten years old. The assertion that slave ships were “old” cannot be substantiated from the information available in the Naval Office shipping lists: in fact, the data show that the stock of vessels employed in the slave trade was constantly being rejuvenated by the addition of new ships. Age, however, was not the only factor affecting the lifespan of slave vessels. Like other shipping in tropical waters, they were exposed to the depredations of the teredo worm, which shortened their working lives.¹⁴

ARMAMENT Since the eighteenth century was far from peaceful and the rule of law had not been firmly established in the oceans of the world, piratical attacks continued to be a threat. As a result, slave vessels, many of which carried Mediterranean passes as a protection against the Barbary pirates, were armed. The accepted method of assessing the armament of vessels is to determine the ton/gun ratio, with the more heavily armed vessels having the lower ratios. Table 11 sets out the position for British slave vessels

14 *Ibid.*, 376; Jacob Price, “Discussion,” *Journal of Economic History*, XXV (1956), 65–67; Marshall Smelser and William I. Davisson, “The Longevity of Colonial Ships,” *American Neptune*, XXXIII (1973), 16–19; John E. Merritt, “The Triangular Trade,” *Business History*, III (1960), 4.

Table 10 Age of British Slave Vessels Trading to South Carolina and Virginia, 1700-1769 (Number and Percentage of Vessels)

	1700-1703	1717-1719	1725-1729	1730-1739	1740-1749	1750-1759	1760-1769
SOUTH CAROLINA							
0-5 years	—	9 (56.3)	3 (23.1)	15 (18.1)	—	8 (32.0)	6 (20.0)
6-10 years	—	6 (37.5)	6 (40.1)	27 (32.5)	—	12 (48.0)	9 (30.0)
11-15 years	—	1 (6.2)	2 (15.4)	23 (27.8)	—	2 (8.0)	13 (43.3)
16-20 years	—	—	2 (15.4)	8 (9.6)	—	2 (8.0)	—
21+ years	—	—	—	10 (12.0)	—	1 (4.0)	2 (6.7)
Total	—	16	13	83	—	25	30
VIRGINIA							
0-5 years	16 (66.7)	—	12 (29.3)	19 (25.0)	13 (29.5)	10 (33.3)	8 (33.3)
6-10 years	4 (16.7)	—	15 (36.6)	32 (42.1)	9 (20.4)	9 (30.0)	9 (37.5)
11-15 years	3 (12.5)	—	10 (24.4)	14 (18.4)	9 (20.4)	6 (20.0)	3 (12.5)
16-20 years	—	—	3 (7.3)	7 (9.2)	5 (11.5)	2 (6.7)	2 (8.3)
21+ years	1 (4.1)	—	1 (2.4)	4 (5.3)	8 (18.2)	3 (10.0)	2 (8.3)
Total	24	—	41	76	44	30	24

SOURCES PRO CO 5/508-11; Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics, 2-175*.

Table 11 Armament of British Slave Vessels Trading with Virginia, 1698–1772 (By Periods of War and Peace)

	1698–1706	1726–1738	1739–1746	1749–1755	1758–1763	1764–1772
Total tonnage	3270	6141	3927	3544	2654	550
Number of guns	281	429	391	187	209	28
Tons/gun	11.6	14.3	10.0	18.9	12.7	19.6
Number of vessels	30	67	45	33	25	4
Average number of guns carried	9.4	6.4	8.7	5.7	8.4	7.0

SOURCE Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 2–167.

NOTE: Years of war: 1739–1746, 1758–1763; years of peace: 1726–1738, 1749–1755, 1764–1772.

trading with Virginia, distinguishing between periods of war and periods of peace. The figures show that slave vessels were more heavily armed in wartime and also support the thesis that slave vessels, like merchant vessels generally, were less heavily armed after mid-century. The decline, however, was not so sharp as that for merchant vessels generally, suggesting that slave vessels continued to carry more guns than other merchant vessels.¹⁵

Because the information provided by the Naval Office shipping lists is general rather than specific, no distinction is made between swivel guns and carriage guns. It has been argued that some of the armament carried by slave vessels was in the form of swivel guns, the purpose of which was to control the slaves, not to protect the vessel against armed attack. Whether this conclusion is correct cannot be assessed using the shipping lists.¹⁶

MANNING The Naval Office shipping lists also provide information about the size of the crews of slave vessels. It might be expected that slavers, being more heavily armed in wartime, would carry more crew than in peacetime. The accepted method of measuring manning of vessels is to establish the ton/man ratio. The smaller the figure, the more heavily manned were the vessels. Table 12 sets out the information calculated for British

15 Walton, "Sources of Productivity Change," 71–72; French, "Role of London," 20. Further, the larger the vessel, the less heavily it was armed.

16 The nature of the armament would also affect manning. A large number of guns might still require only limited manpower if they were light swivel or 6-pounder guns; by contrast, only four to six cannon throwing a heavy weight of shot—for example, an 18- or 24-pounder—would require large gun crews.

Table 12 Manning of British Slave Vessels Trading with Virginia, 1726–1772 (By Periods of War and Peace)

	1726–1738	1739–1746	1749–1755	1758–1763	1764–1772
Total tonnage	5586	4097	4264	3075	1300
Number of men	1174	1010	962	702	250
Tons/man	4.75	4.0	4.4	4.4	5.2
Number of vessels	59	48	41	30	11
Average number of men carried	19.9	21.0	23.5	23.4	22.7

SOURCE Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 54–187.

NOTE: Years of war: 1739–1746, 1758–1763; years of peace: 1726–1738, 1749–1755, 1764–1772.

Table 13 Manning of Bristol Vessels Trading with Virginia, 1749–1775 (Tons per Man)

	1749–1755	1758–1763	1764–1775
Slave vessels	3.9	3.75	4.1
General merchantmen	10.0	6.0	11.0

SOURCES Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 139–189; PRO CO 5/1349–50, 1352, 1446–50.

slavers entering Virginia by war years and peace years. This table provides support for the proposition that slavers carried more men in wartime than in peacetime. It also suggests that crew size fell proportionately as operating efficiency increased during the eighteenth century.

It might also be expected that slave vessels would carry more men than would merchantmen engaged in other trades with the mainland colonies. The comparative figures in Table 13 suggest that Bristol slavers were more heavily manned than Bristol merchantmen trading directly with Virginia.

Analyzing the information on manning ratios by tonnage range, as shown in Table 14, not only confirms that Bristol slaving vessels were more heavily armed than other merchantmen, but also suggests that larger vessels were less heavily manned than smaller ships.

Information from the Naval Office shipping lists indicates that slave vessels left colonial ports on the third leg of their voyage with smaller crews than those with which they entered. This

Table 14 Manning of British Slave Vessels Trading with Virginia by Tonnage Groups, 1726–1772 (Tons per Man)

	1726–1738	1739–1746	1749–1755	1758–1763	1764–1772
0–49 tons	—	6.7	—	2.1	—
50–99 tons	4.0	3.7	3.6	4.1	4.8
100–149 tons	4.8	4.1	4.7	4.0	4.9
150–199 tons	7.6	6.1	6.1	4.8	—
200+ tons	—	6.3	5.0	8.0	6.1
Number of vessels	59	48	41	30	11

SOURCE Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 54–187.

Table 15 Reduction of Crews of Slave Vessels in Colonial Ports, 1720–1769 (Percentages)

	SOUTH CAROLINA		VIRGINIA
	BRISTOL VESSELS	LONDON VESSELS	BRISTOL VESSELS
1720–1729	0	8.5	0
1730–1739	24.9	8.9	1.4
1740–1749	—	—	4.6
1750–1759	12.1	0	0
1760–1769	5.1	7.4	7.7

SOURCES Calculated from French, “Role of London,” 16, 18; David Gareth Rees, “The Role of Bristol in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1710–1769,” unpub. M.A. thesis (Univ. of Exeter, 1970), 34.

finding suggests that lower manning was appropriate since the slaves had been unloaded and crew were not needed for their supervision. As Table 15 indicates, there were differences between colonies for the period from 1720 to 1769. The much lower loss of crew in Virginia than in South Carolina is probably explained by the fact that Virginia lacked ports where seamen could join other vessels easily. The degree of crew reduction also varied over time. In wartime, returning vessels needed a larger crew to ensure that their guns were properly manned.¹⁷

17 In the few cases where crew mortality had apparently been heavy before the colonial destination was reached, vessels left with a larger crew than that with which they had entered.

EMPLOYMENT OF VESSELS With information from the Naval Office shipping lists, it is possible to establish the frequency of slave-vessel voyages to the mainland and to determine the extent to which vessels employed in the slave trade were constant traders. An analysis of the information available for four colonies (Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina and Virginia) appears in Table 16. Between 1698 and 1775, there were 619 voyages. The majority of the vessels (414 of 491) made single voyages, but 77 vessels made two or more voyages. The most active participants in the slave trade were the *Greyhound* (100 tons) of Bristol, built in 1706, with ten voyages in 1718, 1719, 1721, 1722, 1723, 1724, 1726, 1732, 1734 and one for which no date is available between 1710 and 1718; the *Amoretta* (85 tons) of Bristol, built in 1726, with ten voyages in 1730, 1732, 1734, 1735, 1736, 1737, 1738, 1739, 1742 and 1744, all but the last two to South Carolina; and the *Liverpool Merchant* (80 tons) of Liverpool, built in 1724, with six voyages to Virginia in 1732, 1734, 1736, 1737, 1738 and 1739. Only nine vessels made more than three slave voyages to the mainland colonies in the period, and the bulk of the trade depended upon ships which, according to the available records, made only one voyage in the slave trade.¹⁸

This evidence suggests that the number of constant traders was few and therefore that any attempt to isolate a distinct slave fleet for the period before the American Revolution is unrealistic. Since slave vessels were drawn from the British mercantile marine, they can be expected to have the same characteristics as other merchant ships.

THE SLAVE SHIPS AND THE MERCHANT FLEET Although information is limited, some comparisons can be made between the slav-

Table 16 Frequency of British Slavers' Voyages to the Mainland Colonies, 1698–1775

Number of voyages	1	2	3	4	5	6	10	Total
Number of ships by frequency of voyages	414	54	14	1	5	1	2	491
Total number of voyages	414	108	42	4	25	6	20	619

SOURCES CO 5/709–10, in Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 612–623; CO 5/749–50 in *ibid.*, 48; CO 5/508–11; Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics*, 21–189.

18 Minchinton, King, and Waite (eds.), *Virginia Slave Trade Statistics*.

ing segment of the general merchant fleet and the fleet as a whole. In the case of Bristol, the annual number of vessels clearing the port can be compared with the number of clearances of slave vessels. Since slavers, on average, completed only one voyage per year (compared with two or more for vessels with European destinations), the percentage figure understates the slave ship share of total shipping. In any case, Table 17 indicates that Bristol slavers never formed more than 15 percent of the Bristol merchant fleet. A comparison of the number of slave vessel clearances with the number of vessels belonging to Liverpool yields the results in Table 18. As Liverpool's stake in the slave trade grew, so did the proportion of slavers in the Liverpool merchant fleet—from 1.2 percent in 1709 to 32.8 percent in the early 1770s.

An analysis of the Naval Office shipping lists for the American mainland colonies enables the nature of the British vessels

Table 17 Clearances of Bristol Shipping, 1717, 1764, and 1773

	TOTAL ^a	SLAVERS	PERCENTAGE OF SLAVERS
1717	268	8	3.0
1764	236	32	13.6
1773 ^b	201	19	9.5

^a Excluding voyages to Ireland

^b The figures for 1773 are incomplete

SOURCE Minchinton, *The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1957), 13–14, 181.

Table 18 Slave Ship Share of Liverpool's Merchant Fleet, 1709, 1730, 1744, 1756, 1764, and 1771 (Total Tonnages in Brackets)

	NUMBER OF LIVERPOOL VESSELS	NUMBER OF SLAVERS CLEARING	PERCENTAGE
1709	84 (5787)	1 (30)	1.2 (0.5)
1730	166 (9766)	15 (1111)	9.0 (11.4)
1744	188 (13772)	34 (2698)	18.1 (19.6)
1756	250 (24270)	60 (5147)	24.0 (21.2)
1764	295 (29596)	74 (7978)	25.1 (27.0)
1771	323 (35586)	106 (10929)	32.8 (30.7)

SOURCE Derived from John J. Gould, "Liverpool and the West African Slave Trade from 1720 to 1769," unpub. M.A. thesis (Univ. of Exeter, 1972), 78–79.

engaged in the Atlantic slave trade to be assessed more precisely. It shows that there was no separate slave fleet nor many vessels employed continually in the slave trade. The slave vessels were drawn from the general mercantile marine and were smaller than has previously been stated, most falling within the 50–150 tonnage range. Reflecting the composition of the British merchant fleet, the slavers ranged in age from newly built vessels to some of considerable age. Further, in the course of the eighteenth century, more colonial-built vessels and prizes were employed. Both the number of guns carried by slave vessels and the number of crew declined relatively as the century wore on, but both armament and manning were higher in wartime than in peacetime. Information in the Naval Office shipping lists about place of registration confirms that the slave trade to the American mainland colonies was in the hands of merchants in three ports—London, Bristol and Liverpool—who dominated the trade. Although a few other ports were responsible for a limited number of ventures, none of them was able to make a sustained contribution to the trade. Finally, this article indicates that the British public records contain information about the shipping involved in the slave trade which, when examined, will enable a more accurate picture of the shipping involved in the slave trade to be obtained.

The Naval Office Shipping Lists

Although naval officers and their functions were clearly foreshadowed in the navigation act of 1663 (15 Charles II c 7) which permitted a colonial governor to appoint a deputy to represent him with respect to the acts of trade, the office itself first appears in legislation in the navigation act of 1696 (7 & 8 William III c 22 para v). The naval officers were required to give security to the Commissioners of the Customs for the proper conduct of their office. They were empowered to grant certificates of entrance and clearance of vessels and to examine all certificates and cockets; they also obtained detailed information on all vessels entering and clearing and entered the data in the Naval Office shipping lists.

Periodically, usually every three or six months, the lists were sent by the governor of the colony to the Board of Trade or Treasury in England. Like other governmental records, they were subsequently deposited in the Public Record Office in London, where those that survive are now to be found, mainly in Colonial Office papers. Additional records are to be found in Board of Trade papers, Home Office papers, and Treasury papers. The Naval Office shipping lists were working documents; as a consequence, many of the files are incomplete. For example, some returns were not compiled or transmitted because of lax administration by the naval officers. In other cases, there were inadequate administrative arrangements, and naval officers were not stationed at all of the ports at which vessels loaded or unloaded. Some records failed to arrive in London, being lost on the way. Once the records reached London, some of them, no doubt, were mislaid, mixed up with other papers, otherwise separated from the main collection, or subsequently destroyed. Whether copies were regularly kept in the colonies is not known, but only a very few survive in the United States.

The limitations on the use of the Naval Office shipping lists begin with the gaps in the records. For no colony is there a complete run of records, although for some, like Virginia, a considerable period (from 1724 to 1769) is available (but with missing quarters). In addition, there are problems about the reliability of information relating to the source of imports and the destination of exports. Apart from the inevitable clerical errors, such limitations do not affect the information which we have relating to the vessels themselves. It is unlikely that incorrect descriptions of vessels would be recorded or that data on armament or tonnage would have been in error. Naval officers would have had a practiced eye, and there was no advantage in giving erroneous or misleading information.

The location in the Public Record Office, Kew, of the Naval Office shipping lists for the mainland slave-importing colonies (with outside

dates) is given below. They are to be found mainly in Colonial Office (CO) papers, but there are some lists in Treasury (T) papers.

Georgia	CO 5/709-10 (1752-67)
Maryland	CO 5/749-50 (1689-1701, 1753-64)
South Carolina	CO 5/508-11 (1717-19, 1722-39, 1752-67)
Virginia	CO 5/1441-50 (1698-1769); CO 5/1349-50 (1771-72); CO 5/1352 (1773-74); T 1/481, 482, 484, 488, 494, 498, 506, 512 (1771-75)

APPENDIX 2

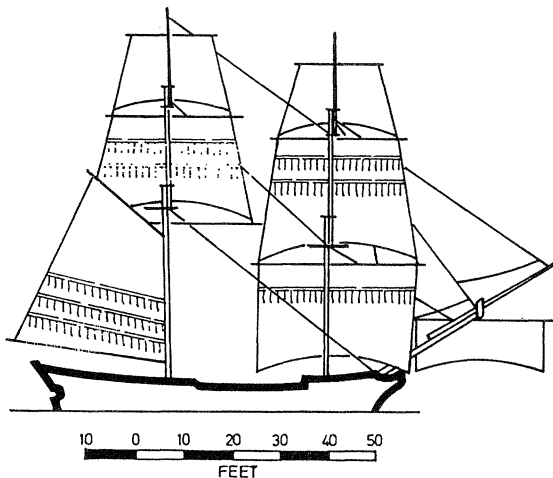
Types of Vessels

William Falconer's *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (London, 1780), which gives, as the title page explains, "a copious explanation of the technical terms and phrases employed in the construction, equipment, furniture, machinery, movements, and military operations of a ship," provides the following information on the various types of vessels employed in the British slave trade.

BRIG, or brigantine, a merchant-ship with two masts [Figure 1]. This term is not universally confined to vessels of a particular construction, or which are masted and rigged in a method different from all others. It is variously applied, by the mariners of different European nations, to a peculiar sort of vessel of their own marine.

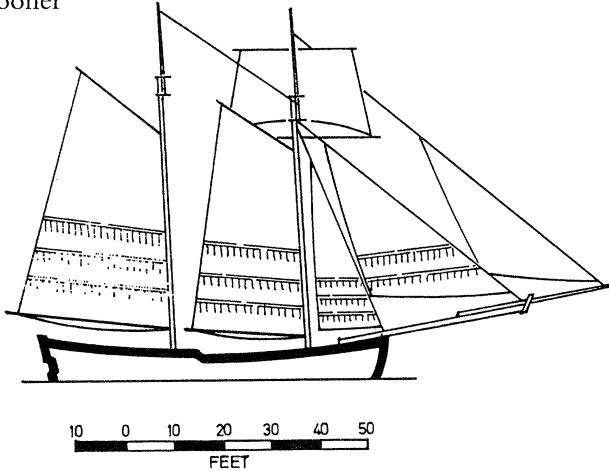
Amongst English seamen, this vessel is distinguished by having her main-sail set nearly in the plane of her keel; whereas the main-sails of larger ships are hung athwart, or at right angles with the ship's length, and fastened to a yard which hangs parallel to the deck; but in a brig, the foremost edge of the main-sail is fastened in different places to hoops which encircle the main-mast, and slide up and down it as the sail is hoisted or lowered: it is extended by a gaff above, and by a boom below (50).

Fig. 1 Brig



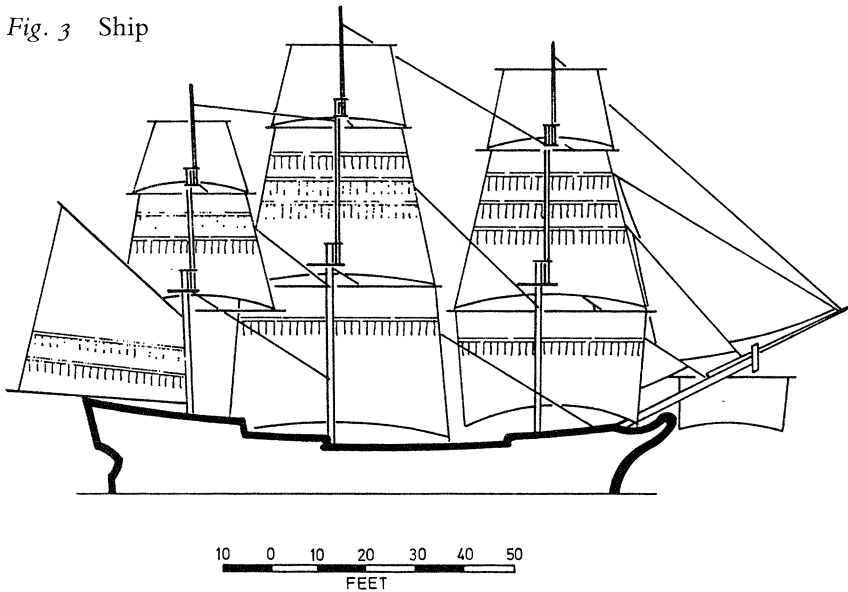
SCHOONER, a small vessel with two masts, whose main-sail and fore-sail are suspended from gaffs reaching from the mast towards the stern; and stretched out below by booms, whose foremost ends are hooked to an iron, which clasps the mast so as to turn therein as upon an axis, when the afterends are swung from one side of the vessel to the other [Figure 2] (257).

Fig. 2 Schooner



SHIP, a general name given by seamen to the first rank of vessels which are navigated on the ocean [Figure 3].

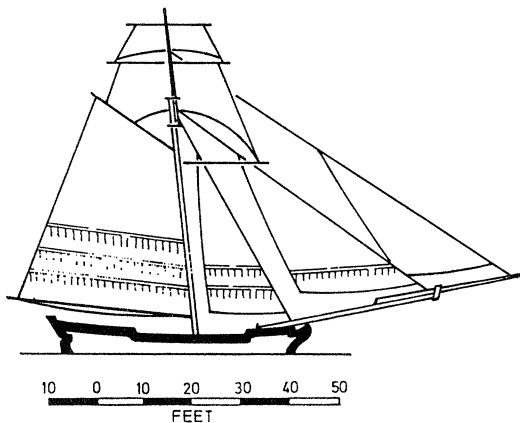
Fig. 3 Ship



Amongst people who are unacquainted with marine distinctions, this term is of very vague and indiscriminate acceptance: and indeed sailors themselves, submitting occasionally to the influence of custom, receive it according to this general idea. In the sea-language, however, it is more particularly applied to a vessel furnished with three masts, each of which is composed of a lower mast, top-mast, and top-gallant-mast, with the usual machinery thereto belonging (262).

SLOOP, a small vessel furnished with one mast, the main-sail of which is attached to a gaff above, to the mast on its foremost edge, and to a long boom below; by which it is occasionally shifted to either quarter [Figure 4] (270).

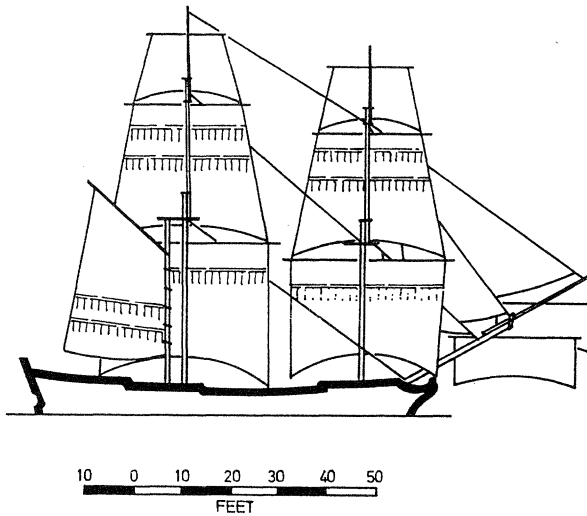
Fig. 4 Sloop



SNOW, generally the largest of all two-masted vessels employed by Europeans, and the most convenient for navigation [Figure 5].

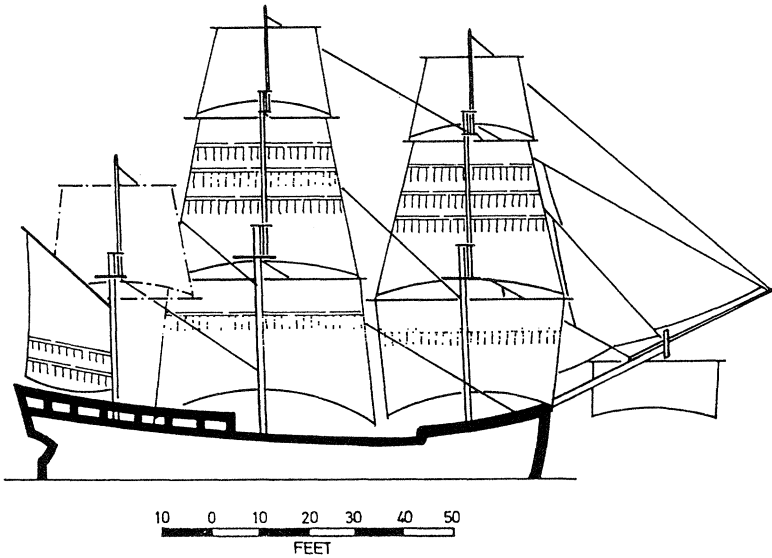
The sails and rigging on the main-mast and fore-mast of a snow, are exactly similar to those on the same masts in a ship; only that there is a small mast behind the main-mast of the former, which carries a sail nearly resembling the mizen of a ship. The foot of this mast is fixed in a block of wood on the quarter-deck abaft the main-mast; and the head of it is attached to the after-part of the main-top. The sail, which is called the trysail, is extended from its mast toward the stern of the vessel (271).

Fig. 5 Snow



BARK, a general name given to small ships: it is however peculiarly appropriated by seamen to those which carry three masts without a mizen top-sail. Our northern mariners, who are trained in the coal-trade, apply this distinction to a broad-sterned ship, which carries no ornamental figure on the stem or prow [Figure 6] (30).

Fig. 6 Bark



These descriptions, as Falconer himself acknowledges, are not precise, and they contain no specific reference to the vessels involved in the slave trade. Further, Falconer does not have an entry for “barque,” although he does have the above entry for “bark.”