

## Rebellious Passage

In late October 1841, the *Creole* left Richmond with 139 slaves bound for New Orleans. It arrived five weeks later minus the Captain, one passenger, and most of the captives. Nineteen rebels had seized the US slave ship en route and steered it to the British Bahamas where the slaves gained their liberty. Drawing upon a sweeping array of previously unexamined state, federal, and British colonial sources, *Rebellious Passage* examines the neglected maritime dimensions of the extensive US slave trade and slave revolt. The focus on south-to-south self-emancipators at sea differs from the familiar narrative of south-to-north fugitive slaves over land. Moreover, a broader hemispheric framework of clashing slavery and antislavery empires replaces an emphasis on US antebellum sectional rivalry. Written with verve and commitment, *Rebellious Passage* chronicles the first comprehensive history of the ship revolt, its consequences, and its relevance to global modern slavery.

Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie is Professor of History at Howard University and author of *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South: Virginia, 1860-1900*; *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World*; and *Freedom's Seekers: Essays on Comparative Emancipation*.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-47624-9 — *Rebellious Passage*  
Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie  
Frontmatter  
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*The Creole Revolt and America's Coastal Slave  
Trade*

JEFFREY R. KERR-RITCHIE

*Howard University, Washington DC*



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[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
 New Delhi – 110025, India  
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108476249](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108476249)  
 DOI: 10.1017/9781108616324

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Kerr-Ritchie, Jeffrey R., author.

TITLE: Rebellious passage : the Creole revolt and America's coastal slave trade / Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018043005 | ISBN 9781108476249 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781108700009 (paperback : alk. paper)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Creole (Brig) | Slave insurrections – United States – History – 19th century. | Mutiny – United States – History – 19th century. | Slaves – Emancipation – Bahamas – History – 19th century. | Slave trade – United States – History – 19th century. | Slave trade – Atlantic Coast (U.S.) – History – 19th century.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC E447 .K47 2019 | DDC 306.3/6209730904–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018043005>

ISBN 978-1-108-47624-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-70000-9 Paperback

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*To the Nineteen*  
*Horace Beverley*  
*Walter Brown*  
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*George Grandy*  
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*Elijah Morris*  
*George Portlock*  
*Doctor Ruffin*  
*Peter Smallwood*  
*Warner Smith*  
*Addison Tyler*  
*Madison Washington*  
*America Woodis*

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxvi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xxix
1 Eagle versus Lion	I
2 The Coastal Passage	37
3 “Several Cases”	66
4 “Engaged in the Business Ever Since She Was Constructed”	77
5 “The Negroes Have Risen”	99
6 “Their Determination to Quit the Vessel”	125
7 “Old Neighbors”	151
8 “A New State of Things”	171
9 “Property Rights” versus “Rights of Man”	188
10 <i>Causa Proxima, Non Remota, Spectatur</i>	214
11 “Full and Final Settlement”	250
Epilogue	268
<i>Appendix 1: Captives aboard the Enterprise, March 1835</i>	289
<i>Appendix 2: Manifest of the Hermosa, October 10, 1840</i>	292
<i>Appendix 3: Creole’s Captives and Shippers, October 20 to 28, 1841</i>	295

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[More Information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
	<i>Appendix 4: Richmond Citizens’ Ten Resolutions, January 27, 1842</i>	303
	<i>Appendix 5: Joshua Giddings’s Nine Resolutions, March 21, 1842</i>	305
	<i>Bibliography</i>	307
	<i>Index</i>	332

# Figures

2.1	America’s Coastal Passage, 1807–1864.	page 43
2.2	Ship manifest for the <i>Hunter</i> , Norfolk, October 17, 1835.	52
3.1	Detail of ship manifest for the <i>Hermosa</i> , Richmond, October 10, 1840.	75
4.1	Ship manifest for the <i>Creole</i> , Richmond, March 10, 1841.	81
4.2	Thomas McCargo’s insurance contract, New Orleans, November 15, 1841.	86
4.3	John Bacon’s list of rebels, Nassau, Bahamas, November 30, 1841.	96
5.1	Captain Ensor’s testimony, Nassau, Bahamas, November 18, 1841.	110
6.1	The <i>Creole</i> ’s rebellious passage, November 1841.	129
6.2	Governor Cockburn’s letter on the ship revolt, Nassau, November 17, 1841.	135
7.1	The public library that was once a jail, Nassau.	157
7.2	Plan of the jail in Nassau, 1842.	158
7.3	Plan of Gambier Village, New Providence Island, Bahamas, n.d.	165
7.4	Elijah Morris’s land grant, Gambier village, August 23, 1879.	166
9.1	<i>Dr. Channing’s Last Address</i> , Lenox, Massachusetts, August 1, 1842.	201
10.1	Africans thrown overboard from a Brazilian slave ship, 1832.	221
E.1	Ship manifest for the <i>Creole</i> , Richmond, March 29, 1842.	271
E.2	Detail of John Hagan’s will, New Orleans, June 9, 1856.	278
E.3	Judah Benjamin’s tombstone, Cimetière du Père Lachaise, Paris.	283
E.4	Alexander Morris’s land grant, Adelaide Village, New Providence Island, Bahamas, November 26, 1898.	287

## Preface

One warm evening in late 1879, sexagenarian Elijah Morris sat on his porch in Gambier Village just outside the large town of Nassau in the Bahamas. Behind him stood a thatched roof cottage on ten acres of land for which he had recently purchased the deed. In front was West Bay Road hugging the northern end of New Providence. Ahead of him, Morris could see and hear the waves crashing from the northern Caribbean Sea. Far beyond the eye lay the shoreline of the southern United States where he had been born as somebody else's property.

As he gazed at the sunbeams of the setting sun playing in the waves, he reflected on his remarkable life's journey. He had been born enslaved in Virginia in 1818. In October 1841, he lay in a slave trader's pen in Richmond awaiting forced transportation to the Deep South through the bustling port of New Orleans. There he encountered other captives dissatisfied with their condition. With scores of other captives he was loaded onto a ship adorned with a figurehead in the shape of a lady. In early November, Morris along with eighteen other captives rose up, seized the slave ship, and directed it toward the Bahamas. Controlled by the British, this island had a reputation for liberating slaves. After several days of being kept aboard in Nassau harbor, the captives were allowed to go free. Morris recalled fondly that this liberation was undertaken by captives who walked to freedom assisted by hundreds of local Bahamians who had surrounded the slave ship and ferried its newly freed people to the mainland. This act of racial solidarity remained etched in his memory. He and his fellow conspirators had been lodged in the local jail because of the death of one of the white overseers and serious injuries to the ship's officers. Morris and his fellow rebels were eventually released after



spending four months incarcerated in the Nassau jail. He stayed close to the city, raised a family, worked and saved, built a house, and eventually bought some land.

What was a former American slave doing in the Bahamas? Why was he where he was? What was the nature of the coastwise slave trade experienced by Morris and his fellow captives? Who were these enslaved people aboard the slave ship named the *Creole*? Who were the slave rebels and why did they rise? What were the reactions of a slaveholding nation deeply split over the issue of slavery? What were the reactions of a national abolitionist power that had recently terminated its slave trade and colonial slavery and was determined to pressure others to do the same? What were the consequences of the maritime revolt Morris helped to lead? What can this generation learn from a slave ship revolt in a faraway place in a faraway time? This book seeks to answer some of these engaging questions.

The *Creole* revolt generated a lot of attention among politicians, abolitionists, diplomats, newspaper editors, and others across the English-speaking Atlantic world throughout the early 1840s. This enthusiasm seems to have waned during the 1850s and after the legal abolition of American slavery in 1865. In contrast to commemorations of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1 and Juneteenth celebrations marking the termination of American slavery, the *Creole* revolt does not appear to have garnered much popular attention during the post-emancipation decades. The centennial of the *Creole* revolt in 1941 attracted little comment. This might have been because of the ongoing Second World War, and especially the fallout from Japan's surprise military attack on Pearl Harbor and America's subsequent entry into World War II in early December 1941. The exception was one journalist's suggestion that the *Creole* revolt would make a great movie. Unlike so many other movies that failed to cater to "colored people," this historical event would attract alternative patrons because it grew "out of their life in America."<sup>1</sup> The Black Freedom Struggle also does not appear to have generated much historical interest in the *Creole* revolt. This was in marked contrast to attention toward the *Amistad* rebellion with its emphasis on resistance and social history from below with ordinary men and women during the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Louis Lautier, "\$250,000 Movie Contest Shows Lack of Sepias," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 15, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Viking, 2012), 4.

Since the early 1970s, the *Creole* has been the subject of at least four journal articles, four book chapters, and two books.<sup>3</sup> This historical scholarship charts three major directions. The first concerns the *Creole* revolt's contribution to sectional division between proslavery southern states and antislavery northern states. In 1970, James Stewart's fine biography of Joshua Giddings highlighted the Ohio congressman's 1842 resolutions on the *Creole* rebels' natural rights of personal liberty.<sup>4</sup> Several years later, Howard Jones penned an important article on the *Creole* revolt as a "microcosm" of southern concerns over slavery and rebellion being encouraged by outside interference from northern states and foreign powers.<sup>5</sup> These works have proven influential in shaping subsequent writing on links between the slave ship revolt and antebellum sectionalism.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Clifton H. Johnson, "The Creole Affair," *The Crisis* vol. 78, no. 8 (Oct. 1971): 248–251; Howard Jones, "The Peculiar Institution and National Honor: The Case of the *Creole* Slave Revolt," *Civil War History* vol. 21, no. 1 (Mar. 1975): 28–50; Edward D. Jervy and C. Harold Huber, "The Creole Affair," *The Journal of Negro History* vol. 65, no. 3 (Summer 1980): 196–211; Anita Rupprecht, "'All We Have Done, We Have Done for Freedom': The *Creole* Slave-Ship Revolt (1841) and the Revolutionary Atlantic," *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 58 (2013): 253–277; Philip Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 *Creole* Revolt," in Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Maggie Montesinos Sale, "The Case of the *Creole* (1841)" in *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Stanley Harrold, "Romanticizing Slave Revolt: Madison Washington, the *Creole* Mutiny, and Abolitionist Celebration of Violent Means," in *Antislavery Violence*, John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold, eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Roy Finkenbine, "The Symbolism of Black Mutiny: Black Abolitionist Responses to the *Amistad* and *Creole* Incidents" in Jane Hathaway, ed., *Rebellion, Repressions, and Reinvention: Mutiny in Comparative Perspective*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001); George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick, *The Creole Mutiny: A Tale of Revolt aboard a Slave Ship* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003); Arthur T. Downey, *The Creole Affair: The Slave Rebellion That Led the U.S. and Great Britain to the Brink of War* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> James B. Stewart, *Joshua R. Giddings and the Tactics of Radical Politics* (Cleveland: Case-Western Reserve University Press, 1970), chap. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, "Peculiar Institution."

<sup>6</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 555–558, 909n25–9. Stanley Harrold argues that the cult of American romanticism encouraged non-violent abolitionists to embrace slave revolts like that of the *Creole* against southerners' defense of slavery. See Harrold, "Romanticizing Slave Revolt." The sixth and seventh editions of *From Slavery to Freedom*, the pioneering African-American history textbook by John Hope Franklin published in 1947 refer to US Congressman Giddings's political usage of the *Creole* revolt. For some reason, the textbook's ninth edition published in 2011 fails to mention the *Creole*.

The second route focuses on the diplomatic fallout between the United States and Great Britain over what is described as the *Creole* “affair.” This approach has undergone a major shift from the slave ship revolt being a minor diplomatic irritant to its causing a full-blown crisis portending military conflict.<sup>7</sup> The most strident statement of the latter approach is Arthur Downey’s 2014 book with the sensationalist subtitle, *The Slave Rebellion That Led the U.S. and Great Britain to the Brink of War*, proclaiming the author’s thesis. The problem of fugitive slave flight during the American Revolution and War of 1812 – together with maritime disputes over impressment and right of search, and the release of slave cargoes from coastal slavers driven into British territorial waters that culminated in the *Creole* slaves’ release – threatened a major military conflict between the two powers. Only deft American and British diplomacy resulting in the passage of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842 deflected “the potential for a third US–UK war.”<sup>8</sup>

The historical literature’s third pathway is that of heroic slaves engaged in a glorious liberation struggle. Social movement activists and rebels of the Black Sixties helped focus attention on the actions of their predecessors. Both Clifton Johnson, director of the newly formed Amistad Research Center in New Orleans during the early 1970s, and Vincent Harding’s poetic *There Is a River* published at the end of the decade, depicted the *Creole* revolt as a rivulet in the long river of black resistance.<sup>9</sup> Edward Jervey and C. Harold Huber published a gripping narrative account of the *Creole* revolt based upon two key documentary sources that centered on slaves’ actions.<sup>10</sup> Eugene Genovese’s comparative examination of slave revolts in the western hemisphere did not mention the *Creole* but implied maritime

<sup>7</sup> E. D. Adams, “Lord Ashburton and the Treaty of Washington,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 17, no. 4 (July 1912): 764–782; Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), chap. 14; Wilbur D. Jones, “The Influence of Slavery on the Webster-Ashburton Negotiations,” *Journal of Southern History* vol. 22, no. 1 (Feb. 1956): 48–58; Alexander Deconde, *A History of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1963), 157–158; John O. Geiger, “A Scholar Meets John Bull: Edward Everett as United States Minister to England, 1841–1845,” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4 (Dec. 1976): 577–595.

<sup>8</sup> Downey, *Creole Affair*, vii.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, “Creole Affair;” Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 112–113.

<sup>10</sup> Jervey and Huber, “Creole Affair.”

resistance.<sup>11</sup> Maggie Sale's discursive analysis of slave ship revolts pits masculine fighters depicted by antislavery politicians, activists, and press editors against the "implicit feminizing of the enslaved population," propagated by defenders of American slavery.<sup>12</sup> Walter Johnson's examination of the US domestic slave trade described the *Creole* rebellion as the consequence of "infrapolitics" in which a group of strangers formed themselves into a resistance collective.<sup>13</sup> Independent scholars George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick's *The Creole Mutiny* published in 2003 told the tale with a central focus on Madison Washington as the tragic hero who lost his wife but gained his personal liberty.<sup>14</sup> This book was clearly aimed at a popular audience. The desire to increase popular understanding of the *Creole* revolt has become even more evident with encyclopedia articles together with entries on Wikipedia.<sup>15</sup> Eric Taylor's *If We Must Die*, published in 2006, provides the first book-length survey of slave ship revolts. He situates the *Creole* revolt within a broader tradition of what he calls "second wave Atlantic shipboard slave resistance."<sup>16</sup> Marcus Rediker's *Amistad Rebellion* published in 2012 argues that the *Amistad* along with the *Creole*

<sup>11</sup> "And when, as in some noteworthy cases, slaves aboard ships in the domestic slave trade rebelled and steered for Haiti or for the protection of the British, they demonstrated that the appearance of favorable conditions and a genuine chance of success could trigger bold action," Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Sale, "Case of the *Creole*," 134.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 75–76. For influential studies of subaltern resistance through the notion of infrapolitics, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) and Robin D. G. Kelly, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Hendrick and Hendrick, *Creole Mutiny*. Although well written and readable, the book lacks detailed archival research, employs guesswork, and narrates other revolts to fill in the gaps in the *Creole* story. One reviewer concluded, "the *Creole* story still stands as incomplete." "The *Creole Mutiny*: A Tale of Revolt aboard a Slave Ship by George Hendrick; Willene Hendrick," Review by Howard Jones, *The Journal of Southern History* vol. 70, no. 2 (May 2004), 427–428.

<sup>15</sup> Philine Georgette Vega, "Creole Case (1841)," in Junius Rodriguez, ed., *Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition* vol. 1 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 148–149; "Creole Case," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creole\\_case](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creole_case).

<sup>16</sup> Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 156–159.

capped a “decade long wave of rebellion” in the “Atlantic geography of resistance.”<sup>17</sup>

*Rebellious Passage* differs from previous scholarship in several distinct ways. First, it centers on slaves, rebels, and free blacks before, during, and after the shipboard revolt. It seeks to uncover the lives and experiences of captives in slavery, in confinement, aboard ship, and after emancipation. Most studies mention Elijah Morris but go no further. In contrast, we trace this important rebel leader through a documentary trail from Virginia to England to the Bahamas. The same is true for women and children captives whose personal stories help recast vital parts of a familiar narrative. We also bring to life those native Bahamians who engaged with the *Creole* in contrast to their usual depiction as blank ciphers. These central actors’ voices, actions, and humanity are presented here as important parts of a historical drama that does not have to be fictionalized or occluded for more famous dramatis personae.

This study is also unique in its focus on the coastal trading career of the slaver *Creole* as a means to illuminate the maritime coastal business. Most studies start and finish with the 1841 voyage. Yet examination of ship manifests, together with enrollment and registration records, reveals that this coastal slaver had a lucrative career between its official registration in October 1840 and its spectacular demise in November 1842. Moreover, this ship was only one of many engaged in coastal slave trading. Between the illegalization of American participation in the Atlantic slave trade on January 1, 1808 through US congressional prohibition of the coastwise trade in July 1864, scores of thousands of captives were transported in thousands of sea journeys from ports in the Upper South down to ports along the Gulf coast. The maritime component of the domestic slave trade has been touched on by several scholars, but it demands much more thorough investigation. This book seeks to open up this important topic of the coastwise trade through the rise and fall of one particular coastal slaver and its remarkable odyssey.

The third way in which this book contrasts with previous scholarship is that it tells the Caribbean side of the story.<sup>18</sup> It seems rather strange that

<sup>17</sup> Rediker, *Amistad Rebellion*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> “. . . this book does not attempt to explore the impact of the *Creole* revolt on the slave and free black communities in the United States (or in the British Caribbean colonies).” Downey, *Creole Affair*, vii.

this aspect has been largely confined to the deck of the *Creole*. In other words, the sailing of the ship into Nassau, the boarding of the ship by British troops, the interrogations and confinement, and so forth represent the “Caribbean.” Much less attention has been paid to the role of Bahamians in the liberation of the captives. Important relations between black Bahamians and former American slaves are rarely examined or commented upon.<sup>19</sup> The experiences of the newly liberated in the Bahamas and Jamaica have not been examined. The rebels go from being confined in the ship in early November to being released in mid-April without any comment on what happened to them in the Nassau jail and thereafter. These important parts of the story are rarely examined in detail and deserve much closer attention if we are to appreciate the broader spatial dimensions of the *Creole* revolt.

Finally, the book situates the *Creole* revolt within an international framework of clashing interests over slavery, slave trading, abolition, and empire building. In contrast to an older historical literature as well as some more recent works, it shows how slavery and slave trading permeated Anglo-American relations rather than being just peripheral or a minor irritant.<sup>20</sup>

But it goes beyond the familiar Washington–London axis by examining the broader world of clashing empires over slave trading, abolition, and post-emancipation. Events leading up to the *Creole* revolt, as well as the shipboard rebellion itself, cannot be explicated from a broader historical context in which Britain was seeking to expand its imperial power by using the Royal Navy to back its slave-trading treaties with other nations. This ran smack bang into Spain’s expansion of colonial slavery in Cuba, Brazilian slaveholders’ sustained efforts to circumvent the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1830, and the emergence of Haiti as an antislavery state. In particular, this work draws attention to transcontinental clashes over slavery and abolition between British Canada, the United States, and Mexico especially during the decades of the 1820s and 1830s. This is a complicated history, but it must be broached if we are to appreciate the broader dimensions of the *Creole* rebellion.

<sup>19</sup> One exception is Rupprecht “All We Have Done.”

<sup>20</sup> This is analogous to Matt Mason’s salient point concerning slavery’s sectional divide in American politics prior to political differences temporarily resolved by the 1820 Missouri Compromise. Mathew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1–8.

The *Creole* revolt is a richly documented history. There are four important federal sources. The first emanated from the US Senate in 1842 and consists of forty-six pages of official correspondence, officer and crew depositions, and protests against mutiny, murder, and slave liberation collected at Nassau and New Orleans. It is a vital source for reconstructing the slave ship revolt as well as the process of slaves' self-liberation in Nassau, albeit from the perspective of those antagonistic toward the slaves' liberty. It is the source most used by scholars, but its bias against the captives and their actions requires careful exegesis.<sup>21</sup> The second was a US Senate report on the activities of the Anglo-American Commission (AAC) for the adjustment of outstanding civil claims and property disputes involving American and British citizens. Issued in 1856, its eighty pages detail the AAC's schedule, claims, and decisions. It is an excellent source for examining maritime disputes between the United States and Great Britain between 1812 and the early 1850s that has been overlooked by scholars.<sup>22</sup>

The third federal source consists of underutilized ship manifests. As a consequence of the outlawing of American citizens' participation in the Atlantic slave trade in 1808, Congress legislated that every ship involved in domestic transportation was required to sign manifests stipulating that no African slaves were being imported into the United States. *Rebellious Passage* draws on a small sample of thousands of these ship manifests stored in federal archives scattered in several northern, southern, and western states.<sup>23</sup> Finally, there are US consul dispatches from Nassau to Washington in 1841 and 1842 housed at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). The consul records are particularly revealing for the light they shed not only on the *Creole* revolt but also on America's political ambitions in the northern Caribbean.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> US Congress, Senate, Executive Document 51, 27th Congress, 2nd Session, Message from the President of the United States, Communicating, in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate Copies of Correspondence in Relation to the Mutiny on Board the Brig *Creole*, and the Liberation of the Slaves Who Were Passengers in the Said Vessel, January 1842, Washington DC, 1–46.

<sup>22</sup> US Congress, Senate, Executive Document 103, 34th Congress, 1st Session, Message of the President of the United States, Communicating the Proceedings of the Commissioners for the Adjustment of Claims under the Convention with Great Britain of February 8, 1853, Washington, 1856.

<sup>23</sup> Records of the US Customs Service, 1745–1997 Record Group 36  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/365>

<sup>24</sup> Bureau of Marine and Navigation, Record Group 41; Dispatches from US Consul in Nassau, British West Indies, Record Group 59, National Archives and Records



There are also important documentary collections at the state level. The Virginia Library in Richmond is home to tax records that are useful for reconstructing the activities of local slave traders in the maritime business and to local newspaper reports of popular support for the extension of slave property rights beyond the municipality. New Orleans has several useful archives. The records of seven legal suits against insurance companies in the Commercial Court of Orleans Parish are available on microfilm at the City Archives in the New Orleans Public Library. They contain insurance contracts, slave lists, court documents, correspondence, and much more that tell us about the *Creole*'s slaves and slave-owners as well as the broader business of the US coastal slave trade.<sup>25</sup> The Amistad Research Center (ARC) at Tulane University holds photocopies of bills of lading, slave schedules, insurance contracts, court petitions, and memorials for compensation from the AAC that are essential for understanding the origins and consequences of the *Creole* revolt. The New Orleans Notarial Archives (NONA) is an important repository for reconstructing the selling histories of traders transporting captives aboard the *Creole* and other slave vessels. Certificates describing the age, sex, and origin of slaves that were attached to some of the bills of sale also shed some light on the humanity of those who were transported.<sup>26</sup> The Williams Center at Historic New Orleans holds the best collection of Louisiana newspapers on microfilm. Finally, there is a detailed report, published in 1845, of one of the major lawsuits together with its ruling and rulings on the *Creole* in the state Supreme Court. This source is indispensable for understanding the broader world of competing statute laws, property rights, financial obligations, and diplomatic differences in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American world.<sup>27</sup>

Administration; US Customs Service, Record Group 36, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

<sup>25</sup> These seven lawsuits were: #4408 Thomas McCargo v. The Merchants Insurance Company of New Orleans; #4409 Thomas McCargo v. The New Orleans Insurance Company; #4410 Edward Lockett v. The Merchants Insurance Company of New Orleans; #4411 Edward Lockett v. The Fireman's Insurance Company of New Orleans; #4413 Andrews and Hatcher v. The Ocean Insurance Company; #4414 Sherman Johnson v. The Ocean Insurance Company; #4419 John Hagan v. The Ocean Insurance Company. The docket numbers are CCNO references. See <http://nutrias.org/~nopl/inv/creole.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, 1929, rpt., Little and Brown, 1963, 155–156.

<sup>27</sup> "Thomas McCargo v. The New Orleans Insurance Company," in Merritt M. Robinson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, vol. 10, (March 1 to June 20, 1845). Samuel M. Stewart, 1845, 202–354. These 152 pages report the lower court case, the appeal of insurance companies before the state Supreme Court,



There are two important archives in London for information pertaining to the *Creole* revolt and its broader political dimensions. The voluminous Aberdeen Papers at The British Library (BL) are indispensable for understanding Anglo-American difficulties and resolutions especially in the correspondence involving British special envoy Lord Ashburton, US Secretary of State Daniel Webster, and British Foreign Secretary Lord Aberdeen.<sup>28</sup> The National Archives at Kew is the other major repository. Its Colonial Office and Foreign Office records on relations between London and Nassau are essential for understanding imperial governance in general as well as the critical moment of transition from colonial slavery to abolition during the 1830s and its implications. There are also legal records from the Vice-Admiralty Court at Nassau, Bahamas, that enjoyed local jurisdiction over maritime affairs, as well as Bahamian Governor Sir Francis Cockburn's correspondence with the Foreign Office.<sup>29</sup> The focus of documentary research for *Rebellious Passage* has been on broader issues of maritime disputes over freedom on the high seas.

There are also useful records in the Caribbean. The Department of Archives at Nassau is indispensable for tracing the settlement patterns of a number of former captives from the *Creole*. Local histories, oral interviews, land grant records, village maps, and other records reveal not only where some of these people spent their lives but also interesting details on household and landholding patterns. This is particularly true of *Creole* rebel leader Elijah Morris who turned out to be one of the stimulating revelations from this local research. Indeed, Morris's archival footprint allowed me to move the narrative away from the heroic leadership model of Madison Washington toward a more meaningful engagement with real, existing freedoms of a former rebel who was at liberty, owned land, and raised a family independently.

These various archives scattered across the English-speaking Atlantic world pose challenges to the *Creole* scholar. The time, travel, and expense of international research, together with the need to work through several

the slave-owner's rebuttal before the state Supreme Court, and Judge Henry Adams Bullard's summation and rulings on the *Creole* and six other law suits. This 1845 report also reproduces documents and depositions contained in the 1842 US Senate document as well as materials from the Nassau investigation.

<sup>28</sup> Aberdeen Papers 85, Add MS 43.123, British Library (BL), London, England. Enlarged photocopies of some of these papers, together with some additional papers, can be found in RP (Reserve Photocopy) 6981/13 also in the Aberdeen Papers. Wilbur Jones and Howard Jones appear to be the only *Creole* scholars who consulted this source.

<sup>29</sup> Bahamas National Archives, Nassau, Bahamas.

different historiographies on slave resistance, the antebellum United States, British colonial abolition, maritime business insurance, Atlantic empires, international diplomacy, and other details make for a demanding schedule. It might explain why scholars prefer to write up various aspects of the *Creole* rather than present a more complete historical analysis. This book seeks to provide the most thoroughly documented and comprehensive study in the hope of not only revealing more about the reasons, nature, and consequences of the shipboard revolt, but also addressing broader issues of empires clashing over slavery and liberty in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. The bigger picture aligns with those recent works that trumpet transnational and comparative approaches toward unearthing the past as compelling correctives to historical studies characterized by an increasing academic over-specialization that is intellectually stifling and parochial.

*Rebellious Passage* is organized into eleven chapters and concludes with an epilogue. Each segment aims to tell a vital feature of this dramatic tale. The first one contours a series of clashes and tensions between the United States and the United Kingdom on land and sea between the 1770s through the 1830s. In particular, it seeks to contextualize the *Creole* revolt by focusing on maritime clashes between expanding British colonial abolition and American slavery. It insists that the British antislavery state pursued imperial interests by attacking slave trading and undermining slave societies. At the same time, the American slave state sought aggressive maritime expansion in the northern Caribbean and Gulf waters. Chapter 2 examines the maritime dimensions of the domestic slave trade. Apart from contributing to our knowledge about this understudied topic, it seeks to reveal the experiences of captives in the coastwise trade. What was a month aboard a coastwise slaver truly like? Moreover, it demonstrates how the roles in slave commerce of traders, captains, sailors, investors, and federal employees contributed to the expansion of the American Empire *along the coast*.

Chapter 3 narrates the stories of several US coastal slavers and the liberation of their captives in the British West Indies between 1830 and 1840, both contrasting and highlighting the clash between slavery and antislavery empires that were both expanding. Examination of the contest between American coastal slavery and British colonial abolition not only helps us better understand the *Creole* revolt and its consequences; it further illustrates how different national policies were of the same territorially expansive coinage.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed examination of the slaver *Creole* prior to the 1841 rebellion, one that is little known and often mistakenly presented. Based upon excellent federal shipping records, it also aims to narrate this history as exemplary of the Coastal Passage. The following chapter narrates the *Creole* revolt. My telling differs from several other narratives in its emphasis on oral communication and verbal exchanges to reproduce the voices of those captives who were historical actors but who did not testify or leave a written record. Moreover the focus on experiences of fighting, killing and maiming, hiding, fear, capture, release, and so forth aims to put a more human face on this dramatic shipboard revolt.

The next two chapters focus on events in the Caribbean. Chapter 6 examines the release of the captives from the American slaver in Nassau harbor. It argues that, contrary to the view depicted by biased contemporary accounts and repeated uncritically by most scholars, freedom was an opportunity that was acted upon rather than the gift of the British authorities. It further maintains that liberation emanated from the creation of a racial bond between former American slaves and black Bahamians recently emancipated by British colonial law. In other words, the act of liberation represented a diasporic connection in which freedom was a shared struggle. The next chapter examines the transition of former American slaves into new British subjects and the ways in which these new colonial subjects defined their freedom.

We then shift to the broader canvas of international and national politics. Chapter 8 demonstrates how local differences between expanding slavery and colonial abolition reverberated in the respective capital cities. These differences between Washington and London are pursued as imperial contestation rather than as a short spasm of fractured international relations. Scholars frequently focus on differences between London and Washington in the aftermath of the *Creole* revolt. But it is clear that there were far broader clashes over slavery and freedom involving the abolition of Atlantic slave trading, the future of slave societies in Cuba and Brazil, and so forth. The ninth chapter examines the ways in which newspapers and politicians used the *Creole* revolt to make alternative statements about the rights of property, sovereign domain, and human rights. Specifically, it illustrates how the maritime revolt revealed sectional differences – between northern antislavery proponents for whom slave laws were municipal versus southern slaveholders and their supporters for whom slave laws extended beyond states – were protected by the federal government, and subject to the law of nations. This chapter demonstrates how an international crisis seeped down to local levels through newspaper

reports and politicians' actions, including several southern states protesting the *Creole* revolt, insisting on the sanctity of slave property, and rejecting British actions. It also offers brief analysis of British views on the ship revolt – especially concerning the rights of man discussed in local newspapers – for the first time. It further provides transatlantic dimensions to Mexican and Texan independence in contrast to conventional treatments of political struggles over annexation as sectional prelude to the Civil War.

Chapter 10 examines the protracted legal dispute that reached the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1845; this dispute was between slave merchants and owners versus insurance companies over culpability for the loss of the captives. Readers who desire the sexy stuff of ship revolt can skip this but they would miss some intriguing insights into the murky world of maritime insurance. Indeed, this aspect of the *Creole* story has drawn the least scholarly attention, yet it opens up a fascinating glimpse into the transatlantic world of slave trading, the insurance industry, legal traditions, and maritime property rights. Although it was the hardest chapter to research and write because of my lack of training as a legal historian, it proved to be the most edifying. Chapter 11 analyzes the origins, nature, and outcome of the 1853 Anglo-American Commission that decided the outcome of disputes over lost property claims by citizens of both nations, especially those concerned with coastal slavers. In the spirit of the expansive nature of the project, the epilogue shows some of the ways in which maritime issues that informed and emerged from the *Creole* revolt did not end but continued into subsequent decades. The nineteen figures have been whittled down from a larger collection and have been carefully selected for two main purposes: to illustrate a point or an event more graphically than the text does and to make obscure archival records accessible to the interested reader. The footnotes are not Edmund Wilson's "scholarly barbed wire," but identify sources, add comment on historians and debates, and occasionally try to amuse the reader.

The *Creole* revolt has attracted two previous book-length studies. Why bother with a third one? There are four major reasons. One key objective of *Rebellious Passage* is to use the *Creole* as a means to reveal the maritime dimensions of the domestic slave trade. The Coastal Passage was not simply incidental but central to the expansionist proclivities of the American slaveholding republic in the waning decades before the Civil War. My hope is that other scholars will be inspired to produce much

more systematic analysis of the coastal dimensions of this massive and disturbing forced relocation of captive labor.

A further aim is to demonstrate past continuities. The traditional narrative of pre-1808 Atlantic slave trading followed by post-1808 US transcontinental slave trading must be replaced with a story of the continuous process of enslavement and resistance and its ramifications. The Coastal Passage was a continuation of the forced voyage of enslaved Africans along the southeastern US coast rather than a radical rupture as a consequence of the termination of the Atlantic slave trade. This is one reason why I prefer the nomenclature “US” slave trade to that of “domestic” or “internal” slave trade.

A third purpose is connecting histories. The American slaveholding republic and British colonial slavery are usually taught or researched as separate topics. The *Creole* revolt reveals how they clashed and why this was significant. Caribbean history is invariably presented in terms of national narratives from settlement to colonization to slavery to freedom to migration to independence – with the occasional bow to regional patterns – but this ship rebellion and its consequences link up the northern Caribbean with the British Empire and the antebellum United States. African-American history usually mirrors American history: revolution, war and emancipation, migration, civil rights, and so forth. The *Creole* revolt, however, reflects a very different scenario in which “outsiders” like colonial officials, Bahamian boatmen, and others, helped change the past. It is these connections between slavery and freedom across borders that are the most compelling part of the story.

Finally, this book seeks to make a contribution to historical methodology. Too many studies of the *Creole* revolt make the traders, diplomats, politicians, and lawyers the central actors of the drama. This might be due either to the nature of the evidence or to a preference for a particular historical approach. But surely this maritime rebellion by American captives in the northern Caribbean is a classic example of history from the bottom up. Slaves seized the slave vessel. Their action halted business as usual. Local authorities in Nassau responded. London and Washington responded to these local officials. Proslavery and antislavery adherents seized on the revolt for their own political and ideological purposes. Lawyers and jurists in New Orleans, and international commissioners in London, adjudicated the final settlement of the maritime upheaval. The point is that people in power were reacting to the actions of a rebellion aboard a coastal slave ship by ordinary people in extraordinary times.

*Preface*

xxv

Over the past decade, I have been researching and writing on the ways in which enslaved people took advantage of free soil by crossing either land or sea borders as part of the African Diaspora. Throughout the nineteenth century, colonies, nations, and empires either contained or juxtaposed un-free and free soil. Slaves who wanted liberty often gravitated from the former toward the latter with diplomatic fallout. This approach seeks to transcend ongoing debates in American historical studies about who freed the slaves, whether freedom made a difference, and so forth, by focusing on the dialectic between proximate borders of freedom and slaves' initiatives. It also tries to transcend conventional approaches in British abolition studies between London and the Caribbean by examining saltwater self-emancipators within the latter region. Slaves seized their freedom at the right time and in the right place with international ramifications. This is social and political history from the bottom upward. It drives my recent research and this project is the natural outgrowth.