

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 49
Number 4 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 49,
Number 4

Article 4

1970

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Recommended Citation

Kriple, Kenneth F. (1970) "The Case Against a Nineteenth-Century Cuba-Florida Slave Trade," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 49: No. 4, Article 4.

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THE CASE AGAINST A NINETEENTH-CENTURY CUBA-FLORIDA SLAVE TRADE

by KENNETH F. KIPLE*

THE BELIEF THAT there existed a sizable clandestine traffic in Negro slaves between the island of Cuba and Florida after 1808 has been a persistent one in the historiography of slavery in the United States.¹ There are, of course, many logical reasons for this persistence.

Perhaps *most* important is that the Atlantic slave trade to Cuba, despite its illegal nature after 1820, continued to grow in volume until the middle 1860s and even then slaves continued to be imported to the island until slavery itself was finally abolished in 1886.² Hence many have felt that the Cuban planters, blessed with a continuing supply of slaves from Africa, could not only have satisfied their own labor requirements during the first half or so of the nineteenth century but would also have had a surplus of slaves to sell to their less fortunate North American counterparts.³ Nor would the physical problems connected with carrying out this illegal transfer of slaves from

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1. In 1808 importation of slaves to the United States became illegal.
2. As a result of British persuasion and diplomatic pressure, Spain, on September 23, 1817, prohibited her subjects from engaging in the slave trade north of the equator, beginning in December of that year. The treaty further specified that after *May 20, 1820*, the trade would be forbidden to all Spanish subjects south of the equator as well. Moreover, the introduction of any slave to Spanish-owned territory by anyone of whatever nationality was declared illegal after 1820. "Real cédula de Su Majestad y Señores del consejo, por la cual se manda guardar cumplir el tratado que va inserto, concluido entre S.M. y el rey del reino unido de la Gran Bretaña e Irlanda para la abolición del tráfico de negros," año de 1818, Madrid en la Imprenta Real, *Archivo Histórico Nacional* (hereinafter referred to as AHN Ultramar), *legajo* 2547, L.2, No. 26. See Fernando Ortiz Fernández, *Hampa afro-cubana: los negros esclavos, estudio sociólogo y de derecho público* (L a Habana, 1916), *passim*, for an estimate of the dimensions of the Cuban slave trade, particularly during the last half of the century.
3. For example, see Hubert H. S. Aimes, *A History of Slavery in Cuba, 1511-1868* (New York, 1967), 245-49.

Spanish to United States territory have appeared insurmountable. Instead, "because of its long and indented coastline, and of its proximity to Cuba, Florida afforded an excellent opportunity for the illegal importation of slaves."⁴ Moreover, for a bit more than a decade after the United States closed its Atlantic slave trade, much of the Floridas remained in Spanish hands, thus eliminating any legal problems of navigation between Cuba and the closest North American mainland. Hence it has been urged by at least one recent author that "until 1818 a slave ferry operated regularly between Havana and Pensacola."⁵ From Florida the slaves were in turn smuggled into the southern United States.⁶ In fact, the Cuba-to-Florida traffic was purportedly so great during this period that "three hundred square rigged vessels were seen in Spanish [Florida] waters," and "Amelia Island was then probably the most populous slave station in the world."⁷

Even after the United States acquired all of the Floridas, the Cuba-Florida traffic is alleged to have continued because the United States lacked the "enforcement machinery" to give meaning to its slave trade laws.* Largely because of this, another historian has assured us that for the period 1821-1841 "Cuba was the centre of a considerable trade in Negroes to the United States," with Florida presumably a major terminus of this trade.⁹ In fact, we are informed that even as late as the years 1859-1862 slavers made forty voyages between Cuba and the United States mainland, with Florida again as the most logical place for clandestine landings.¹⁰

Obviously then, there exist sufficient historical accounts to make a case for a Cuba-Florida slave trade from 1808 right up to the Civil War. Besides, it has the appeal of "making sense,"

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4. Dorothy Dodd, "The Schooner Emperor: An Incident of the Illegal Slave Trade in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XIII (January 1935), 120.
 5. Daniel P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1365* (New York, 1965), 203.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. John Randolph Spears, *The American Slave Trade: An Account of Its Origin, Growth and Suppression* (New York, 1900), 123-24.
 8. Frances J. Stafford, "Illegal Importations: Enforcement of the Slave Trade Laws Along the Florida Coast, 1810-1823," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLVI (October 1967), 124.
 9. Aimes, *Slavery in Cuba*, 245-48.
 10. William Law Mathieson, *British Slavery and Abolition, 1823-1838* (London, 1926), 232.

at least superficially, for certainly propinquity made for opportunity. However, historians are now discovering that very often those things connected with the Atlantic slave trade to the New World which seemed to earlier scholars to "make sense"-and were subsequently footnoted by others, thus hastening the conversion from opinion to fact-have very often turned out to bear little, if any, resemblance to reality.¹¹ The burden of this study will be to demonstrate that the same is probably true for the Florida-Cuba slave trade.

To do so, it seems best first to consider the extent of the contraband slave trade to the United States as a whole, from whatever source, for its magnitude would undoubtedly have had a bearing on the size of the Cuba-Florida trade. During the first part of the twentieth century, such scholars as W. E. B. Dubois, Lewis Gray, and W. H. Collins put the total number of illegal slave importations to the United States at between 250,000 and 270,000 for the period 1808-1860.¹² In view of the fact that during these years the United States slave population increased from fewer than 1,000,000 to almost 4,000,000, these estimates seemed reasonable or even a bit conservative.

However now that there is more examination of the slave trade in terms of vessel capacity, slave mortality aboard ship, and the many obstacles a slaver had to overcome-both legal and physical-these earlier estimates appear excessive. Philip D. Curtin, for example, *has estimated* that the total number of slaves brought to the United States during the years 1808-1861 did not exceed 54,000, while others have agreed that "no large number of contraband Africans were imported into the United States between 1808 and 1861."¹³ These later studies, in turn, tend to "fit" with Warren Howard's recent work which found the smuggled slave in the United States in the nineteenth cen-

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11. Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969), *passim*.
 12. W. E. B. DuBois, *Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (New York, 1954), 108-18; DuBois, "Enforcement of the Slave Trade Laws," *American Historical Association Annual Report, 1891*, 161-73; Lewis Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1933), II, 649-51; W. H. Collins, *The Domestic Slave Trade of the Southern States* (New York, 1904), 20.
 13. Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 74-75; Peter Duignan and Clarence Clendenen, *The United States and the African Slave Trade, 1619-1862* (Stanford, 1963), 19.

tury definitely "elusive" and seriously doubted that "he ever existed in very large numbers."¹⁴

Evidence contained in the decennial returns of the United States Census Office emphatically agrees with Howard. We know, for example, that far more men than women were victims of the Atlantic slave trade, and, for this reason, the slave sex ratio of nations receiving imports was always high.¹⁵ Illustrative is Cuba, which in 1817 possessed 167.1 slave males for every 100 females, a disproportion between the sexes which had increased to 176.8 by 1827.¹⁶ In the United States, by contrast, there were only 105.1 slave males for every 100 females in 1820, and by 1840 this ratio had fallen to 100.4, remaining at this level until the Civil War.¹⁷ Moreover, the census office in 1870, despite an effort to tabulate those Negroes which might have been illegally imported, could discover only 9,645, out of a population of 4,880,009, who had been born outside the United States.¹⁸ Furthermore, of these 9,645 blacks a mere 1,984 claimed to have been born in Africa, while Cuba was listed as the place of nativity in only 508 cases.¹⁹

Taken together then, recent historical investigations and statistical evidence caution against a belief in an extensive contraband slave trade to the United States. This in turn, would tend to warn against an easy acceptance of a Cuba-Florida slave traffic. It most certainly rules out such suggestions as the presence of "three hundred" slaving vessels in Florida waters, if for no other reason than it can be demonstrated that the average number of slaves per vessel carried to Cuba from Africa during the years 1820-1860 was about 330.²⁰ If one assumes that the

14. Warren Howard, *American Slavers and the Federal Law, 1837-1862* (Berkeley, 1963), 154.

15. Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, states that "slave cargoes at this period contained between two and five males for each female," fn. 41.

16. Computed from "Estado General de la población . . . correspondiente al año de 1817," Archivo General de las Indias, Audiencia of Santo Domingo (hereinafter referred to as AGI, Santo Domingo), *legajo* 1342. The census of 1827 can be found in Cuba, Dirección general del censo, *Census of the Republic of Cuba; 1919* (Havana, 1919), 273-75.

17. Calculations are based on the appropriate decennial returns of the United States Census Office.

18. U.S. Department of the Interior, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States . . . Compiled from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census, June 1, 1870* (Washington, 1872) I, 6, 336, 338.

19. *Ibid.*, 336, 338.

20. Computed from the "Estado de las expediciones de negros bozales capturados en las costas de la Isla de Cuba," AHN, *legajo* 3547;

same class of vessel would have been employed in the Cuba-Florida trade, then this implies some 90,000 slaves in a single year, or almost twice the number of Africans which Philip Curtin estimates that the United States as a whole imported during a fifty-three year period.

Another reason for doubting the existence of a Cuba-Florida trade concerns the types of evidence used by historians. Many of those who have made a case for this traffic either personally have relied on an autobiographical account by a *slaver* or have used works dependent upon this account.²¹ Captain Richard Drake described huge joint stock companies representing both Spanish and American interests which made fortunes by smuggling great numbers of slaves first into Florida and then up the Perdido and Escambia rivers into Georgia and from there distributing these blacks to other southern states. Yet Drake's account has recently been examined by a historian of the American slave trade and pronounced "almost certainly spurious."²² It was commented that "apparently there was enough interest in the trade to make production of such accounts a worthwhile enterprise."²³

The capture, or for that matter the accidental grounding, of laden Spanish slaving vessels in Florida waters has also been pointed to as evidence of a Cuba-Florida slave trade. The example of the *Guerrero* is representative and mentioned often by those seeking to document this traffic.²⁴ The error they make is not in pointing out that the vessel ran aground on the Florida Keys in the year 1827 with a substantial slave cargo aboard; rather, they mistakenly assume that the vessel's captain was attempting to smuggle these slaves into Florida. That this is a mistake is evident from the records of the British Foreign

"Return of all Vessels Captured by British Cruisers for Violations of Slave Trade Treaties in Each Year from 1840-1847 . . .," in Appendix to "Minutes of Evidence Before [the] Select Committee on the African Slave Trade of the House of Lords," House of Lords Sessional Papers, *Accounts and Papers* (1849), XXVIII, appendix F, 111-17.

21. Richard Drake, *Revelations of a Slave Smuggler: Being the Autobiography Of Captain Richard Drake, An African Trader for Fifty Years from 1807-1857* (New York, 1860). A portion of Drake's *Revelations* can be found in George Francis Dow, *Slave Ships and Slaving* (Salem, 1927).

22. Howard, *American Slavers*, 320.

23. *ibid.*

24. Stafford, "Illegal Importations," 132.

Office which clearly indicate that the *Guerrero*, a many-gunned and well-manned brig, cleared Havana for Africa in early 1827, with the intent of "plundering the [slave] cargoes of weaker vessels on the coast" and then returning to Havana, not Florida, to market its pirated slaves.²⁵

The *Guerrero's* career of piracy, however, was short-lived. Successful in relieving another vessel of its slave cargo, the *Guerrero's* luck ran out soon after it re-entered the Caribbean. With the island of Cuba lying directly ahead, it was encountered by the schooner H.M.S. *Nimble*, a British naval vessel patrolling Cuban waters for the precise purpose of capturing illicit slavers. Choosing to flee instead of fight, the *Guerrero* ran north and west, away from Havana, hoping to shake off its pursuer in the Florida Straits.²⁶ Due to the vagaries of wind and current, however, it found itself off the Florida Keys and, in an unsuccessful bid for freedom, attempted to cross over the shoals and reefs of the keys into the Gulf of Mexico.²⁷

Clearly, the *Guerrero* was in Florida waters very unwillingly, yet this accidental grounding of a Cuban vessel has been used by many as proof of a Cuba-Florida slave trade. So too, for that matter, has the capture of a vessel apparently quite guilty of engaging in exactly this sort of traffic. This reference, of course, is to the celebrated *Emperor* case—the only documented landing of slaves in Florida which were brought from Cuba after 1820.²⁸ Though a proven example of slaves from Cuba being landed illegally in Florida, this case, by the very fact that it created such a stir, testifies to the uniqueness of the event. The discovery that such an act had taken place during the year 1837 not only created an uproar in St. Joseph, Florida, the scene of the landing, but occasioned many newspaper editorials and caused the authorities to hunt down and confiscate all the contraband slaves, as well as the vessel *Emperor* valued at \$3,000.²⁹ That such a commotion resulted from this instance of illegal slave importations suggests plainly that these importa-

25. J. T. Kilbee and William Mackay to George Canning, July 31, 1827, House of Commons Sessional *Papers, Accounts and Papers* (1828), XXVI, 143. (Hereinafter referred to as *Commons Accounts and Papers*).

26. Kilbee and Macleay to Canning, December 31, 1827, *ibid.* (1829), XXVI, 230.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Dodd, "Schooner Emperor," 117-28.

29. *Ibid.*, 124-28.

tions were hardly commonplace.

An even more convincing argument against the allegations that Cuba was a source of slaves for Florida and the South during the nineteenth century is the little appreciated fact (on the part of North American historians) that Cuba neither possessed nor had access to any surplus of slaves. On the contrary, slave labor was in scarce supply, and consequently, blacks were in very great demand on the island due to the sugar revolution which it experienced throughout the entire last century.³⁰

From a labor standpoint, Cuba was ill-prepared for this revolution. As late as 1792 the island had a slave population of only 84,456, which had increased seventy years later to only 370,553.³¹ This increase was due largely to the efforts of illicit slaving captains who successfully defied the provisions of the treaties of 1817 and 1835, by virtue of which Spain promised Great Britain to end the slave trade to Cuba and gave the British navy authority to "police" suspected Spanish slaving vessels.³² Yet the increase was not nearly enough, and as late as 1858 the Spanish government was fretting about the great demand for slaves on the island.³³

If, then, there was a continual scarcity of slave labor in Cuba during the first six decades of the nineteenth century, it seems logical that the Cubans would have been less than eager to sell a portion of their slaves to North American planters. An analysis of differential slave prices which prevailed at roughly the same time periods in Cuba on the one hand and Florida and the southern United States on the other, seems to indicate that this eagerness was lacking.

As the legal slave trade drew to a close in the United States, a young healthy male, fresh from Africa, was selling for about \$250, a price that coincides with the average insured value of Negroes being imported at the time.³⁴ In Cuba during 1807,

30. For an account of the diplomatic difficulties this shortage of slaves produced, see Arthur F. Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817-1886* (Austin, 1967), *passim*.

31. *Census of the Republic of Cuba*, 266, 275.

32. For details of the treaties of 1817 and 1835, see Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba*, 17-34, 60-64.

33. "Informe del Consejo de ministros," San Sebastian, November 27, 1858, AHN, Ultramar *legajo* 3550, No. 16.

34. Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, Vol. IV: *The Border Colonies and the Southern Colonies* (Washington, 1935), 521-22, 529.

the price was the same, with bozales (Negroes newly imported from Africa) selling for \$225 to \$265.³⁵ After "seasoning"—a cruel process of forced acculturation which about seven to twelve per cent did not survive—the slave in either country was worth considerably more.³⁶ Thus in Cuba a young healthy black, six months away from Africa (and therefore at least partially seasoned) would bring between \$350 and \$400, while a seasoned male slave or a female skilled in domestic work was worth about \$500.³⁷

Nor did the price vary in Florida, with a newly arrived prime slave at Amelia Island being sold for \$250, while "others went for \$175 to \$200."³⁸ On the other hand, in the southern United States as a whole, the average price for seasoned slaves was between \$400 and \$500 in 1814, rising temporarily to between \$800 and \$1,000 in 1818, and then descending again to a \$400 to \$500 level.³⁹

Clearly then, the price of bozal Negroes in the United States, until their importation was prohibited in 1808, and in both Florida and Cuba until 1817, was similar. The momentary price increase in 1818 in the American South might have tempted slavers to smuggle in slaves to Florida from Cuba had the price of bozal Negroes on the island not increased to a level of between \$380 and \$600.⁴⁰ The higher price in the United States was for seasoned slaves, implying, of course, that they were familiar with the cultivation of cotton and spoke English. A

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35. Aimes, *Slavery in Cuba*, 267. Cuban slave prices, of course, were given in pesos. Conveniently, for the period in question, the Spanish silver peso was traded on a par with the United States dollar. See John Ramsay McCulloch, *A Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical and Historical of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (London, 1846), 312-13.
 36. Alexander von Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, translated from the Spanish with notes and a preliminary essay by J. S. Thrasher (New York, 1856), 227-29.
 37. *Diario del Gobierno de la Habana*, issues of October 1 and 31, 1814, AGI, Santo Domingo, legajo 1637.
 38. *American State Papers, Documents, Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States, Class X: Miscellaneous, 2 Vols.* (Washington, 1834-61), II, 957-75; Stafford, "Illegal Importations," 130.
 39. Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, 1918), 370-71.
 40. Aimes, *Slavery in Cuba*, 267. Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, ed., *Historia de la nación Cubana*, 10 vols. (La Habana, 1952), II, 301, placed the price of bozales at between \$500 and \$600.

bozal, because he still had to undergo seasoning, would have been worth much less, while a seasoned slave from Cuba would neither have been familiar with cotton cultivation nor would he have spoken English, consequently reducing his value to southern planters.

On the whole, then, it can be said that slave prices in the two countries were similar enough to make the existence of an extensive Cuba-Florida slave trade prior to 1820, as described by Captain Drake, impossible and the existence of even a moderate traffic highly unlikely. By 1821 the price of bozal Negroes in Cuba seems to have run between \$450 and \$600, a price that apparently remained fairly consistent throughout the decade, although again seasoned male slaves were selling for \$650 and more, while female domestics were bringing about \$550.⁴¹ By contrast, even seasoned slaves were bringing only \$500 to \$600 in the United States in 1823, and for most of the decade, in fact, a seasoned field hand in the New Orleans market seems to have sold for \$600 or less.⁴²

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, slave prices in both the southern United States and Cuba hovered around levels established in the 1820s. In Florida, for example, an examination of a list of "slaves and other property belonging to the estate of William B. Nuttall, sold at foreclosure [in] 1844" reveals an "average worth" of about \$300 each, including men, women, and children of all ages, a figure which seems to correspond closely to the average of the South as a whole.⁴³ The valuation placed on the seasoned male slaves of the plantation, however, ranged between \$350 and \$725, while a woman and child together would bring about \$450.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, raw bozales in

41. *Observador de la Isla de Cuba*, September 9, 1821, AGI, Santo Domingo, *legajo* 1635; *Diario de la Habana*, January 21 and 23, 1829, AHN, Estado, *legajo* 6371, No. 21; Guerra y Sanchez, *Historia*, II, 301; Aimes, *Slavery in Cuba*, 267.

42. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 370-71; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1964), 416.

43. Ulrich B. Phillips and James D. Glunt, eds., *Florida Plantation Records From the Papers of George Noble Jones* (St. Louis, 1927), 541-43. Dubois, *Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, 162, gives the average price of slaves in 1840 at \$325.

44. "Bill of Sale for a Woman Slave Named Amy and Her Child Named Flora, from Henry Hartly to David Palmer, Duval County, 8 December 1843," roll 182J, microfilm copy in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

Cuba were selling at between \$350 and \$500, while female domestics and seasoned males were bringing the higher figure.⁴⁵

It was not until the late 1850s and early 1860s that slave prices began to increase appreciably in both slave societies. A list of fifty-four slaves sold in Florida in 1860 by George Noble Jones reveals an average worth of \$900 each, with seasoned men and older boys worth an average of \$1,161.12 and twenty-three women and older girls worth \$921.74 each.⁴⁶ On the other hand, bozales in Cuba were bringing \$750 to \$800 each, while the average worth of all seasoned slaves, including both sexes, was about \$1,000.⁴⁷

From the foregoing, then, it can be seen that slave prices in Cuba, Florida, and the southern United States as a whole closely approximated each other, from the termination of the United States slave trade right up to the beginning of the Civil War. Because of this, it appears unlikely that there was much, if any, nineteenth century slave traffic between Cuba and Florida. Why should a slave trader have risked losing a portion of his cargo to disease aboard ship, or all of his cargo and ship through confiscation if apprehended, in an effort to transfer slaves from Cuba to Florida, only to sell his slaves at little or no profit? The answer, of course, is that he would not. For this reason then, the existence of a Cuba-Florida slave trade is most probably a myth.

45. *Diario de la Habana*, September 5, 1840 and June 11, 1840; and *El Redactor . . . propiedad de la Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País*, July 27, 1840, AHN, Ultramar, legajo 619, No. 48; *Diario de la Habana*, June 6, 1841, AGI, Santo Domingo, legajo 1637. See also Aimes, *Slavery in Cuba*, 267-68.

46. "List of Slaves Sold by George Noble Jones to Joseph Bryan, 1860. With Prices Affixed," Phillips and Glunt, eds., *Florida Plantation Records*, 558-60.

47. Jos. T. Crawford, Consul General in Cuba to the Earl of Clarendon, Havana, February 28, 1856, AHN, Estado, legajo 8048, L.15, No. 5; Aimes, *Slavery in Cuba*, 268.