

## African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

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Volume 2

Issue 1 April 1995

Article 6

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4-1-1995

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#### Recommended Citation

Kamerling, Henry (1995) "Research Note on the Atlantic Slave Trade Database Project," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol2/iss1/6>

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## Research Note on the Atlantic Slave Trade Database Project

*Submitted by Henry Kamerling, hkamerli@uiuc.edu*

The following appeared in the Summer 1994 edition of *Uncommon Sense*, newsletter of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, and was submitted to H-Business at Austin Kerr's invitation (I thought many subscribers in other fields would be interested in knowing about the project). In 1993 the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to create a consolidated database on the Atlantic slave trade. The aim of the project is to computerize voyage data on most of the slave voyages that sailed from Africa to the Americas from the sixteenth century to the 1860s. The core data will consist of over 200 fields of information, including fields for the names of vessels, captains and shipowners, regions and dates of trade in Europe, Africa and the Americas, and the number, age and gender of slaves confined on the Middle Passage. When the project is completed in three to five years, data on the Atlantic slave trade will be available through computer networking services such as Internet. The first stage of the project established fields of information and integrated numerous computerized data-sets of Atlantic slave voyages that historians have compiled over the past twenty-five years. These sets include: Herbert S. Klein on the slave trades to Havana (1790-1820), Rio de Janeiro (1795-1811) and Virginia (1727-1769), and the Angola slave trade (1723-1771); Svend E. Green-Pedersen on the Danish slave trade (1698-1789); David Eltis on the Atlantic slave trade (1811-1867); and Johannes Postma on the Dutch slave trade (1675-1802). The second stage of the project will computerize published and unpublished sets of slave voyage data compiled by Jean Mettas (French slave trade), Jay Coughtry (Rhode Island slave trade), James Rawley and Joseph Inikori (British slave trades), and then will integrate several new British slave trade data-sets created by Stephen D. Behrendt, David Eltis and David Richardson. Well over half of all transatlantic slave voyages -- including the majority of British, French and Dutch slave voyages -- soon will be recorded in machine-readable format. The major tasks in the project are the matching of fields of information created from widely different sources often for different purposes, and the elimination of duplicate voyages. When completed, the core set of more than 20,000 transatlantic slave voyages will comprise the largest data source for the long-distance movement of peoples before the twentieth century. Refined demographic data on the volume of the trade (and thus of pre-colonial African populations) and the spatial distribution of African peoples throughout the Atlantic world will allow scholars to assess more accurately questions of African state formation, agricultural and ecological change, Africancultural survivals, and the development of the Atlantic economies. Sub-sets of information on vessel tonnage, slave age/gender ratios, and crew/slave mortality will permit a more thorough analysis of shipping productivity, patterns of family structures, and disease transmission in the Atlantic world. The database has been organized so that additional information on slave voyages can be added easily to the set and so that related information, such as African climatic patterns, slave phenotypes, slave rebellions, or slave prices, can be linked to the main data-set through a common variable such as the vessel name or the voyage identification number. Building related files will broaden the scope of analysis from the slave voyage to the impact of the transatlantic slave trade in the creation of the modern world. Indeed, it eventually may be possible to relate individual Africans or groups of Africans to the vessel on which they were disembarked in the Americas, as has been done with other migrant groups. The project organizers welcome additional data on transatlantic slave

voyages to include in the consolidated data-set. Stephen D. Behrendt, U. Northern Iowa, [steve.behrendt@cobra.uni.edu](mailto:steve.behrendt@cobra.uni.edu), David Eltis, Queen's University, [eltisd@qucdn.queensu.ca](mailto:eltisd@qucdn.queensu.ca)