

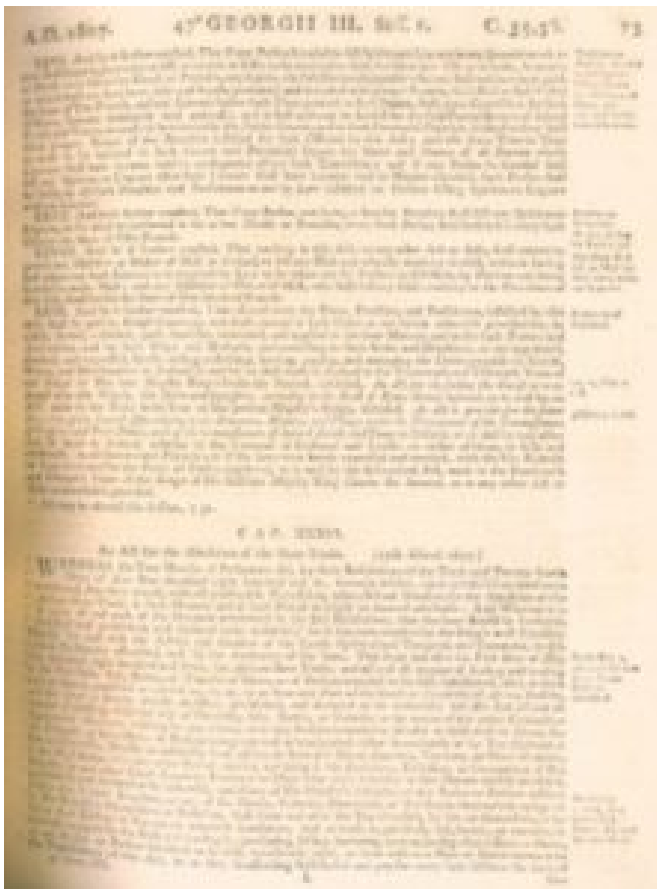


ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

Retracing the Steps of British Abolitionists: A Digital Learning Approach to the History of the Atlantic Slave Trade

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The transatlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in history. It involved an intercontinental transfer of wealth, goods, and most importantly, millions of people over the course of four centuries. Great Britain was one of the chief participants in the traffic. According to estimates available through [*Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*](#) (2013), Britain alone transported more than 3,259,000 enslaved Africans across the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th centuries. In the late 1700s, at the height of British involvement, the nation

accounted for approximately a third of the total international trade. However, in 1787, British abolitionists banded together under leaders such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce to form the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, creating an alliance of politicians, religious men and women, former slaves, and reformed slave traders, to challenge one of the most widespread, economically rooted institutions of the age. For twenty years, this group and their allies worked tirelessly to convert the public and Parliament to their cause, challenging the most politically and economically powerful nation of the day to abandon profit in favor of morality, justice, and freedom. The sheer volume of primary source documents from the British abolition movement, from both sides of the debate, provides endless opportunity for exploration and analysis of a topic that remains socially and historically relevant.

In the Fall of 2016 at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I participated in a course titled “Fighting the Atlantic Slave Trade” in which students retraced the steps of British abolitionists in their quest to secure legislation ending the transatlantic slave trade. Developed with support from the Campus Writing Program and taught by Professor Daniel Domingues, a historian specializing in Africa and the transatlantic slave trade, the course first premiered in the Fall 2016 semester as the History Department’s Sophomore Seminar, an annually-offered course with alternating topics designed to introduce sophomore History majors to historical research and research writing. While students participated in a weekly meeting for traditional lecture and discussion, the majority of our research and assignments were conducted online. According to Delmont (2016), “Digital work has the potential to make scholars more creative, inquisitive, and precise.” This was certainly true for “Fighting the Atlantic Slave Trade,” as it challenged students to incorporate creative writing and digital media into traditional research writing assignments. In a departure from previous Sophomore Seminars, “Fighting the Atlantic Slave Trade” not only required

the expected written assignments and familiarization with primary source documents, but prompted students to undertake our own campaign for abolition, empathize with the struggle of abolitionists, and engage in creative approaches to digital historical research.

Essential to the course was each student's creation of a fictional 18th century character involved in the British Slave Trade, ranging from former merchants and planters, religious and political reformers, Enlightenment philosophers, concerned citizens, former slaves, etc. For example, my character was a self-titled, Anglican activist motivated by religious morality. With these fictional characters, students played active members of Thomas Clarkson's Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the leading abolitionist organization in late 18th and early 19th century Britain. Accompanying each weekly written assignment was a journal entry in which students, acting as their characters, would reflect on our latest goals for abolition, our current projects, the political climate, and our personal fears and hopes for the movement. Transcending traditional research, this approach allowed us to not only study British abolitionist propaganda and methodology, but step into the shoes of the abolitionists themselves, undertaking the actual projects and encountering the very obstacles faced by our historical colleagues. These setbacks ranged from the international political turmoil of the French and Haitian Revolutions, to the failure of the Sierra Leone Company, and to powerful opponents like the pro-slavery West Indian Lobby. Every week, this unique strategy allowed students to personally experience the successes and failures of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, creating a personal connection to the fate of British abolition.

Learning Platforms and Digital Sources

Course materials were delivered through Canvas, a Learning Management System (LMS) currently being phased in to replace Blackboard as the University of Missouri-Columbia's primary source of online interaction between students, professors, and course materials. Course content was divided into fifteen modules, one for each week of the semester. Moving forward in time (from 1787 to 1807, and then to 1825 for retrospective reflection on our journey as abolitionists) each module contained a briefing that coincided with key events in the history of British abolition, outlining the changing circumstances and events surrounding the movement, public and Parliamentary opinion on the trade, and opportunities for the movement's advancement. Armed with this knowledge, students were then provided with instructions for creating that week's writing assignment. Written as our characters, these weekly assignments varied in length and nature, from report, pamphlet, poem, speech, sermon, legislation, etc. Included in each briefing were a variety of links to digital surrogates for primary source documents pertaining to the topic of the module, accessible through databases such as Gale's [*Eighteenth Century Collections Online*](#). According to Agarwal (2016), "Creating a digital archive essentially creates a collection of digital data, which researchers can mine in ways that go beyond what is possible with physical collections." This was especially true for "Fighting the Atlantic Slave Trade," as the vast digital archive of writings was invaluable not only for researching the events and opinions of the time, but utilizing the information found in correspondence, testimonies, pamphlets, sermons, and legislation to inspire our own journal entries and campaign materials.

Another important digital resource students explored included the aforementioned *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. This interactive database contains almost 36,000 records of voyages that transported or intended to transport slaves from Africa to the Americas. Throughout the course, we used this database much like British

abolitionists used customs houses. It provided students important but horrific statistics of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Utilizing search tools, we collected demographic information, uncovered mortality rates, and outlined the primary locations for ship departure, as well as embarkation and disembarkation of slaves in Africa and the West Indies. In addition, *Voyages* provided interactive displays designed to demonstrate the volume of voyages and geographic extent of the transatlantic slave trade.

The assignments of each weekly module were not only relevant to the continuation of the abolition movement simulation, but also designed to build upon the digital research undertaken during previous weeks and develop broader knowledge of the political and economic realities of the era. Beginning the campaign with introductions to leading members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and demographic statistics from *Voyages*, students began exploring digitized primary sources for information on the economic deficiencies of the trade, exploiting these weaknesses in Parliamentary reports, mobilizing public opinion through pamphlets, poems, songs, etc. This information would prove invaluable when countering the arguments of opponents later in the course of the campaign. The large number of suggested sources included in each module created the opportunity for variation in student assignments and allowed students to revisit previously used sources and adapt relevant information to new campaign materials. Over the course of the semester, students were able to follow their progress through Canvas, and received detailed feedback from Professor Domingues through tools such as Canvas Speedgrader.

Utilizing Digital Resources

In a unique spin on the traditional University level research writing course “Fighting the Atlantic Slave Trade” required each student to undertake their own abolition campaign on behalf of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. This was made possible by the wealth of digital resources at the students’ disposal. The American Historical Association (2013) found that:

Digital technologies have expanded the reach of scholarship in the way scholars communicate their research to an audience and present findings, as well as influencing the questions they ask in planning a research project. Text analysis, data and text mining, mapping, data visualization, and a variety of other digital methods and tools make forms of research beyond the traditional text-based article or monograph possible, while also encouraging scholars to consider questions of data storage, visual presentation, and user engagement.

Students were encouraged to familiarize themselves with navigating digital resources and incorporate information gleaned from these sources to our assignments. Digital resources such as *Voyages* allowed students to immediately navigate information unavailable through traditional university libraries, due to the collaborative nature of the database. Though historical research can seem daunting, I found that the use of familiar digital mediums furthered the immersion process. In addition, when digitized, multiple students can simultaneously access primary source documents, which was often necessary for completing written assignments and engaging in group work.

Though digital resources aid in historical research, students and professors hoping to apply these methods still encounter challenges in the university setting. According to Delmont (2016), “The disconnect between traditional evaluation and training and new digital methods means young scholars take on greater risks when dividing their limited time and attention on new

digital methods that ultimately may not face scholarly evaluation on par with traditional scholarly production.” Though digital work may not be taken as seriously in an academic setting, collaborative digital projects enable historians to create new avenues for research, and increase the visibility of historical issues. We still grapple with the transatlantic slave trade’s legacy, and the digital resources dedicated to this topic enable young historians to explore and preserve the contributions of the abolition movement to current world politics and culture.

Immersion, Empathy, and Results

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of “Fighting the Atlantic Slave Trade” was the course’s immersion into the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The course format, the accessibility of digital sources, the role-playing element, and the nature of the written assignments all contributed to our increasingly personal involvement in the movement. Acting as our characters, we waged a campaign against the transatlantic slave trade in the same manner as British abolitionists. In many ways, we not only retraced their steps, but also stepped into their shoes. The digital resources at our disposal included the same essays, pamphlets, and accounts available to abolitionists. Therefore, students were exposed to many of the same authors, schools of thought, and methodologies of the movement. In our written assignments, we too compiled reports of demographic data, crafted speeches to mobilize the public, and drafted reports to persuade Parliament, etc. Due to the course’s chronological structure, every week students were apprised of the ongoing political and social developments helping and hindering the movement, adapting to continually changing circumstance and combating recurring problems. Together, we capitalized on the decreasing profitability of the British sugar industry and the opportunity provided by the Sierra Leone Company. Together, we

weathered the backlash against the French and Haitian Revolutions. Students struggled to answer the same questions voiced by abolitionists. Can imperialism be used for good, or is it the source of all evils? How, and with what, do you replace a major component of the economy? How do you persuade producers, consumers, and legislators to abandon profit in favor of morality? These questions and others provided a continuous challenge over the course of the semester. The unique format of the course encouraged students to move beyond research and fully engross ourselves in the campaign. Increased empathy, for both the abolitionist and millions of men, women, and children victimized by the transatlantic slave trade, proved an unavoidable consequence of this project. With that empathy came the understanding that the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade did the unthinkable, triumphing over wealthy opponents, powerful lobbyists, and public indifference. In twenty years, members mobilized a vast, diverse abolition movement that successfully convinced the most powerful nation of the age to champion the gradual eradication of the transatlantic slave trade. As a result of “Fighting the Atlantic Slave Trade” students witnessed that by utilizing writing and research, activists can overcome the most daunting obstacles to affect real change.



Originally from Columbia, Sarah Jolley is a sophomore double-majoring in English and History, with minors in Political Science and Latin. As an Arts, Social Science, and Humanities Scholar and member of the University of Missouri Honors College, she has worked as a content manager on the undergraduate research project *Visualizing Abolition*. On and off campus, Sarah has interned with Persea Books and served as the treasurer of the Mizzou Undergraduate History Society and Chair of the Award for Academic Distinction Planning Committee.

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