

HISTORY IN STONEWARE

Depictions of the British Slave Trade
on an 18th-Century English Punch Bowl



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In his 1964 exhibition *American History on English Jugs*, that featured a number of English Liverpool-type ceramic pitchers with American patriotic designs, curator James Biddle of The Metropolitan Museum of Art commented, "To search out our country's [America's] past, we do not have to rely solely upon history books. Sculptors, painters, print-makers, and artisans, both European and American, have employed their arts to commemorate great, and indeed not so great, events."¹ Biddle's statement, which applies to any number of geographical contexts, serves as an important reminder of the powerful ability of objects to function as "history books" in and of themselves, providing us with unique perspectives, insights, or illustrations of particular events, broader developments, and global and cultural encounters. An English 18th-century stoneware punch bowl in the collection of Historic Deerfield aptly illustrates Biddle's point. Recent research has uncovered that the bowl not only com-

memorates a particular sea voyage, it provides—similar to a history book—a visual narrative of the broader, international system of the slave trade.

In 1967, Historic Deerfield's founders Henry and Helen (Geier) Flynt acquired an exceptional example of an English enameled white salt-glazed stoneware punch bowl from dealer Lillian Boschen of Freehold, New Jersey. In addition to possessing a number of interesting painted scenes, the interior of the bowl contains the inscription: "Succes [sic] to the Frenship [sic], Capt Peirce, / 1760." Historic Deerfield's object files reveal that the Flynts, as well as the seller, had few details about the names referenced on the punch bowl. At the very least, they likely deduced that the *Friendship* was an English ship, that Peirce was the ship's captain, and that the bowl commemorated a voyage that occurred in the year 1760. Due to the presence of a rare painted scene of black figures loading plant matter into barrels,

on the side of the bowl, they may have also guessed that the *Friendship* traveled to Africa or the West Indies and was involved in the slave trade. Although lacking definitive answers to questions surrounding the larger context of the ship's voyage, the Flynts, who avidly collected decorated white-salt glazed stoneware, were likely eager to acquire this exceptionally painted bowl.²

In the decades after the bowl's acquisition, questions regarding the specific nature of the *Friendship*'s voyage remained unanswered. Staff curators surmised that the *Friendship* possibly functioned as an English slaving vessel, but lacked evidence to support such a claim. Thanks to the plethora of scholarship produced over the past 30 years related to the African experience and the 18th-century slave trade, and the rise of web-based digitization projects, evidence of the *Friendship*'s participation in the trade has recently surfaced.

Two sources proved invaluable in uncovering the story of the *Friendship*: the recent scholarship of historical archaeologist Jane Webster³ and The *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.⁴ These revealed that the *Friendship* was indeed a Liverpool-based slave ship, that departed the city in 1760, and arrived in Bonny, Nigeria, on the west coast of Africa the same year. There, the ship acquired a total of 276 enslaved people; the final destination and fate of the voyage remain unclear.⁵ One can reasonably assume, however, that the *Friendship*'s voyage, similar to many other slave ships, was part of the triangular trade system. In England, this system

entailed carrying British manufactured goods to Africa's west coast to trade for enslaved people. These Africans were then transported to the West Indies or Americas in exchange for cotton, sugar, and tobacco destined for the English market.⁶

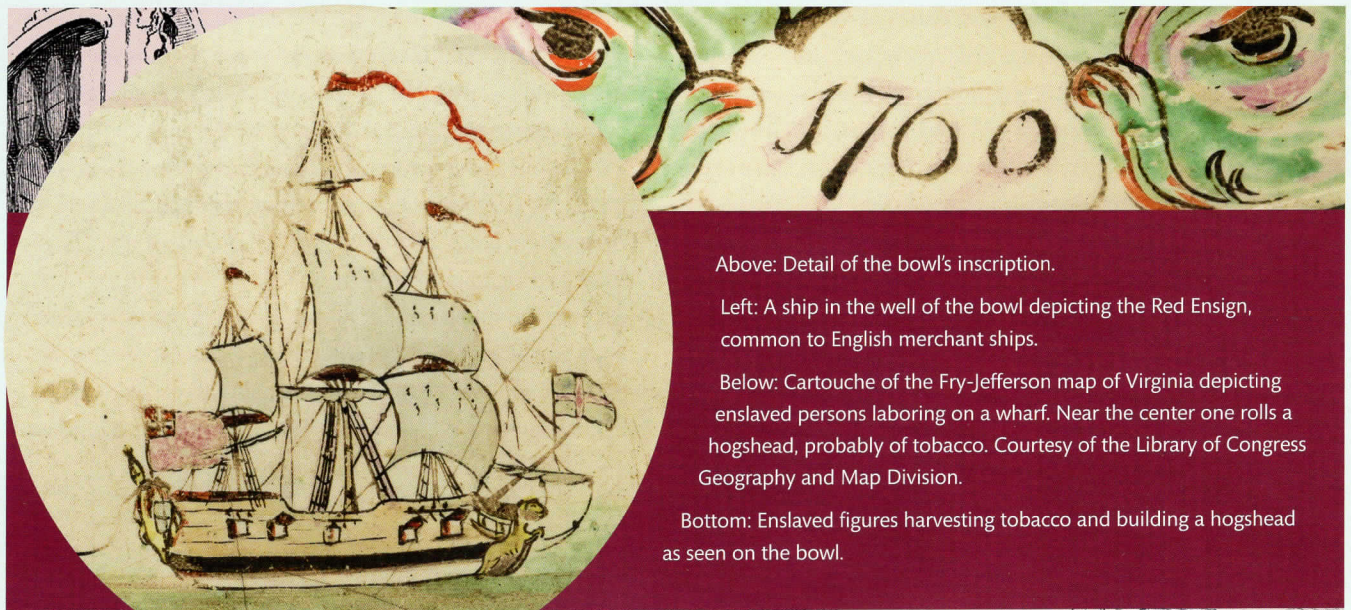
Details about the life of Captain Peirce remain incomplete. We can, however, make certain assumptions about his background based on information known about other English slave ship captains. For instance, Captain Peirce likely approached his role not only with extensive maritime experience, but also a formal education. As a ship captain, he earned a modest income, and perhaps used his earnings to invest in other slave ship ventures.⁷ The bowl, an expensive



Opposite and right: Punch bowl, white salt-glazed stoneware with polychrome enamels, probably made in Staffordshire, England; possibly decorated in Liverpool, 1760. 67.189

Below: Detail of the bowl's inscription.





Above: Detail of the bowl's inscription.

Left: A ship in the well of the bowl depicting the Red Ensign, common to English merchant ships.

Below: Cartouche of the Fry-Jefferson map of Virginia depicting enslaved persons laboring on a wharf. Near the center one rolls a hogshead, probably of tobacco. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division.

Bottom: Enslaved figures harvesting tobacco and building a hogshead as seen on the bowl.



commission, was likely presented to Peirce by the ship's syndicates or investors prior to the ship's departure, and used to toast to a successful voyage. Or the bowl may have been a gift from investors particularly satisfied by the results. The bowl would not have been taken on the voyage, but left behind and displayed in the captain's home.

While questions persist about the voyage and its captain, it seems likely that the image of the *Friendship* painted on the well of the bowl is a relatively accurate rendition of the ship. Through careful research, Webster has argued that many paintings of slave ships decorating English punch bowls were not generic images, but "faithful likenesses" which "would have been instantly recognizable to the individuals who owned and captained the ships themselves."⁸ Based on Webster's theory, we might assume that the *Friendship* was a three-masted, armed vessel (bearing gun ports), possessing a gilt animal-like figure-head at the bow of the ship, and ornate quarter galleries or balconies off the stern. The flags on the ship, generally speaking, also faithfully correspond with British merchant flags. For instance, the flag at the stern of the ship is a fairly accurate depiction of the Red Ensign used on English merchant ships. A separate engraving or image of the *Friendship* is presently unknown, so the bowl's painting may be the only surviving depiction.

Thanks to Webster's analysis of other ceramics commemorating slave voyages, we know that Historic Deerfield's punch bowl is exceedingly rare. The bowl is the earliest known dated example of a ceramic object depicting a British or American slave ship, and also the only example of its kind composed of white salt-glazed stoneware. The other 12 documented examples are composed of porcelain, tin-glazed earthenware (i.e., delftware), and creamware.⁹

This bowl not only commemorates the voyage of the *Friendship*, it also uniquely captures the wider realities of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and documents the various stopping points along the route. One can argue that several scenes painted on the sides of the bowl make direct or indirect references to the slave trade. For instance, the castle-like structures painted on the sides of the punch bowl may be fanciful renditions of so-called slave castles or forts. During the 18th century, English and other European powers utilized a number of these forts on the western coast of Africa for holding enslaved Africans before shipment overseas. If this is the case, the decorator may have been inspired by images of slave castles published in England. The painted castles, featuring turreted walls and towers with buildings emerging from behind, bear some semblance to engravings of forts in William Smith's *Thirty Different Drafts of Guinea* (London, 1727).

As noted earlier, the side of the bowl contains a scene rarely found on ceramics depicting what appear to be enslaved persons at work, likely harvesting and packing barrels of tobacco in the West Indies. Note, in particular, the individual at center wielding a hammer or mallet shutting a barrel of freshly packed tobacco. Comparable images published elsewhere may have inspired the decorator. Scenes of Africans harvesting or packaging tobacco were a common subject printed on a variety of media, such as the cartouche on the Fry-Jefferson map of Virginia, and tobacco labels.¹⁰ Only two other bowls commemorating slave voyages, according to Webster, appear to make any reference to the slave trade and depict Africans. One, a delftware punch bowl in The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery (Stoke-on-Trent), has the inscription "Success to the Africa Trade / George Dickinson." The interior depicts a longboat filled with men—a scene perhaps "...intended to depict a yawl or longboat ferrying captives from the shore to slave ships. . . ."¹¹ Another, a porcelain punch bowl in the collections of the National Museums Liverpool, has the inscription "Success to the Will / R Bibby." The exterior contains a painted scene possibly depicting a group of enslaved Africans being transported to the shore for shipment overseas.

A scene of a sailor holding a stick and presenting a seated woman with a pouch is perhaps the most perplexing on the Historic Deerfield punch bowl. Its inclusion, at first, seems out of place. Is it a simple courting scene? Or, is it a rendition of *The Sailor's Farewell* or *The Sailor's Return*, two common 18th-century prints of a sailor bidding his lady farewell and later greeting her on his return home from sea? The subject of *The Sailor's Return*, however, seems a more likely source for this painting. Some *Sailor's Return* prints published in London, such as one engraved by T. Booth in 1744 after a design by Louis Pierre Boitard, depict sailors presenting their companions with gifts after their return home from sea. In this context, the bowl's painting may depict a sailor presenting his lover or spouse with a pouch of money or other valuables earned from his voyage abroad.

More abstractly, the scene of the sailor and elegantly dressed woman speaks to the success and refinement which the slave trade made possible in Liverpool. The lady's elegance and poise stands in stark contrast to the surrounding scenes of working enslaved men and ships entering or docked in harbors. The fact, moreover, that the sailor may be presenting the lady with a pouch of money implies the financial success of such voyages. In Liverpool, not only did many of the city's businessmen grow rich from the trade in slaves, but many local businesses, including the ceramics industry, were supported by the profits reaped from the trade.¹²



Right: A sailor presents a gift from his voyage to a seated lady.

Above: *The Sailor's Return* (London, 1744). Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK.



In addition to the painted decoration, the form and function of the bowl—the consumption of punch—makes indirect reference to the slave trade. Sugar, a key ingredient in punch, relied on forced labor to harvest sugarcane on plantations in the West Indies. Punch was usually drunk communally, with the punch bowl placed at the center of a table and the contents ladled into smaller glasses, or passed around and drunk from directly. In this sense, the bowl also documents one of the many end products of the slave trade (i.e., sugar) enjoyed by the English in a variety of beverages.¹³

When Captain Peirce departed Liverpool in 1760 for the shores of Nigeria, he likely had little idea he was leaving behind a punch bowl of such historical import. The bowl, a remarkable survival, serves as a visual microcosm of the 18th-century slave trade, documenting not only the name of a slave ship and its captain, but also the sites and scenes which would have been all too familiar to 18th-century slavers. Its inclusion in Historic Deerfield's collection serves as an important material document of a once thriving, yet cruel, system of trade, and as a valuable teaching tool for educating future generations about the realities of slavery and the African experience both in America and abroad.

ENDNOTES

1. James Biddle, "American History on English Jugs," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 22, no. 9 (1964): 300.
2. The Flynts' preference for decorated white salt-glazed stoneware is recorded in Donald R. Friary, "To Collect or Not to Collect: Helen and Henry Flynt at Historic Deerfield" (a lecture given at the Colonial Williamsburg Forum, 1982), 23–24, typescript, Historic Deerfield Library.
3. Jane Webster, "'Success to the Dobson': Commemorative Artefacts Depicting 18th-century British Slave Ships," *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 49, no. 1 (2015): 72–98.
4. Web address: www.slavevoyages.org.
5. Webster, "'Success to the Dobson,'" 74–75, 78, 81–82. See also The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, www.slavevoyages.org, Voyage Identification No. 24514, and Lloyd's List, December 30, 1760.
6. Robin Emmerson, "Pottery and the Liverpool Trade," in *Success to America: Creamware for the American Market: Featuring the S. Robert Teitelman Collection at Winterthur* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 2010), 41.
7. These generalizations are based largely on Jane Webster's study of English slave ship captains George Dickinson, George Nelson, Clement Noble, John Smale, Daniel Wilcox, John Hewan, and Robert Bibby.
8. Webster, "'Success to the Dobson,'" 81.
9. Ibid., 75, table 1.
10. An example of a tobacco label featuring similar scenes can be found in the collection of The British Museum (Museum Number: Heal, 117.137).
11. Webster, "'Success to the Dobson,'" 84.
12. Emmerson, "Pottery and the Liverpool Trade," 40–41.
13. Webster, "'Success to the Dobson,'" 81.