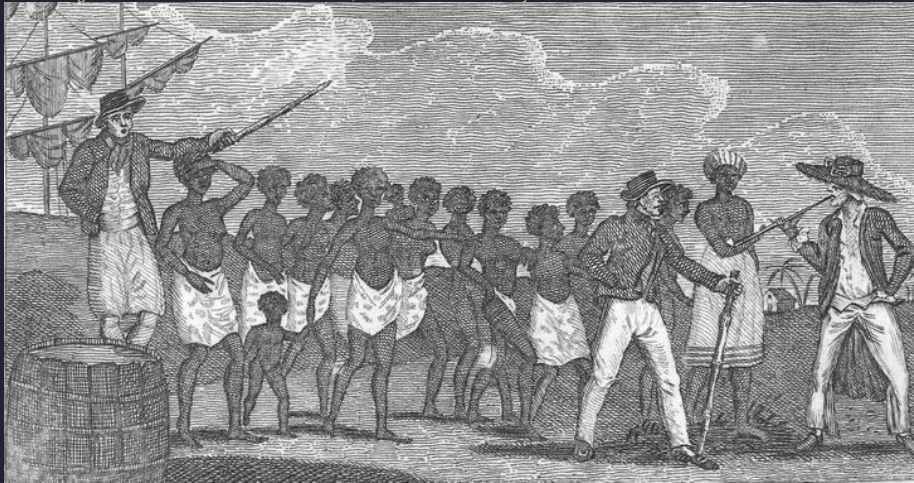




Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library



"Negroes just landed from a slave ship," engraving in Richard Phillips, *A General Description of the People of Africa*, 1810

*"we will sooner
suffer death than
submit to such
abominable
degradation"*

The "Middle Passage" of Boyrereau Brinch, an Enslaved African

The horrific transatlantic journey of captured Africans known as the Middle Passage is recounted by few of the enslaved themselves in surviving documents. One of the few known accounts appears in the memoir of Boyrereau Brinch, who was born in west Africa about 1742. Captured at age sixteen, he was taken to the Caribbean island of Barbados and sold. After fighting as an enslaved sailor on a British ship during the French and Indian War (1754-1763), he was taken by his owner to Connecticut and sold again. In 1777 he enlisted in the American army and served in an infantry regiment until the end of the war. In 1783 he was honorably discharged and, due to his military service, emancipated from slavery. He then bought land in New Hampshire, married, and in 1810 dictated his memoir to an anti-slavery lawyer who published it in 1810. These excerpts begin with the day of his capture.

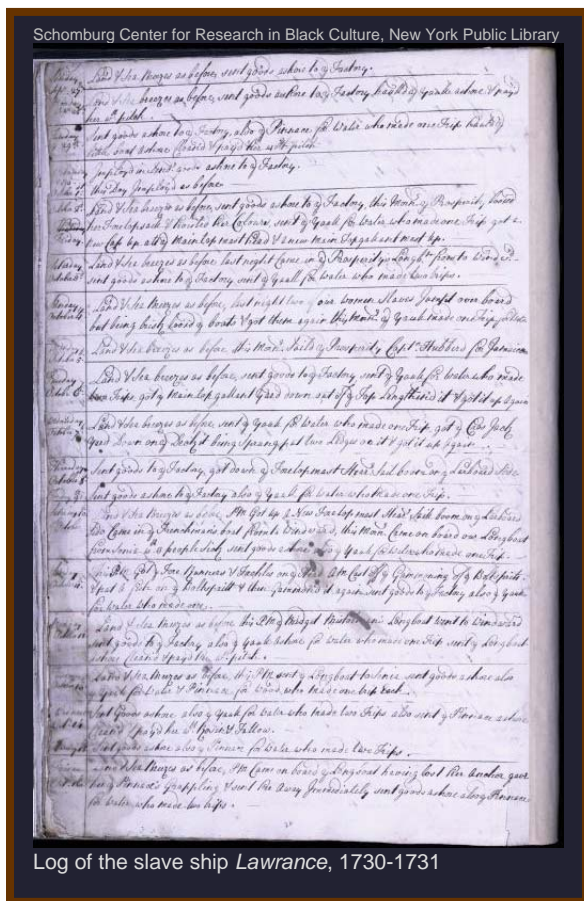
When we ascended the bank, to our astonishment we discovered six or seven animals fastening a boat, and immediately made towards us. Consternation sat fixed upon every brow, and fear shook every frame; each member refused its office. However, home invited so urgently that nature began to do her duty, we flew to the wood with precipitation. But Lo! when we had passed the borders and entered the body thereof, to our utter astonishment and dismay, instead of pursuers we found ourselves waylaid by thirty or forty more of the same pale race of white *Vultures*, whom to pass was impossible, we attempted without deliberation to force their ranks. But alas! we were unsuccessful, eleven out of fourteen were made captives, bound instantly, and notwithstanding our unintelligible entreaties, cries & lamentations, were hurried to their boat, and within five minutes were on board, gagged, and carried down the stream like a sluice, fastened down in the boat with cramped jaws, added to a horrid stench occasioned by filth and stinking fish, while all were groaning, crying and praying, but poor creatures to no effect. I after a siege of the most agonizing pains describable, fell into a kind of torpid state of insensibility which continued for some hours. Towards evening I awoke only to horrid consternation, deep wrought misery and woe, which defies language to depict. I was pressed almost to death by the weight of bodies that lay upon me. Night approached and for the first time in my life, I was accompanied with gloom and horror.

Thus in the 16th year of my age, I was borne away from native innocence, ease, and luxury, into captivity, by a christian people who preach humility, charity, and benevolence. "Father! forgive them for they know not what they do."

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. In Benjamin F. Prentiss, *The Blind African Slave, Or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace. Containing an account of the kingdom of Bow-Woo, in the interior of Africa; with the climate and natural productions, laws, and customs peculiar to that place. With an account of his captivity, sufferings, sales, travels, emancipation, conversion to the christian religion, knowledge of the scriptures, &c. Interspersed with strictures on slavery, speculative observations on the qualities of human nature, with quotations from scripture* (St. Albans, Vt.: Harry Whitney, 1810). Full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brinch/menu.html. Spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

I remained in this situation about four days. The cords had cut the flesh, I was much bruised in many parts of my body, being most of the time gagged, and having no food only such as those brutes thought was necessary for my existence. Sometimes I courted death, but home would force upon me with all its delights and hope, that soother of all afflictions taught me to bear with patience my present sufferings.

On the fourth day, about four o'clock in the afternoon, we arrived at the ship and were carefully taken out of the boat and put on board. Even this momentary relief seemed to cheer my desponding spirits, and at least eased the pains I endured, by relieving me of those galling cords with which I was bound. I was suffered [allowed] to walk upon the deck for a few minutes under a strong guard, which gave my blood an opportunity in some degree to assume its usual circulation. But in a short time I was forced into the whole, where I found my comrades with about thirty more poor African wretches whom the ship's crew had stolen from a neighboring tribe. These poor creatures were screaming, crying and wringing their hands, with prayers and ejaculations to the great Father for their deliverance. This group was composed of men, women and children. Some little girls and boys, not more than six or seven years of age were shut up in a pen or sty, crying for food and water and their fathers and mothers. One little boy about seven years of age told me he went in the evening to drive the goats for his mother, and they ran after him and caught him, and his mother did not know where he was, and he was afraid his little brothers and sisters would starve, as he was the oldest and there were no one to drive goats, as his father was taken away before, therefore there was no one to help her now.¹



I for a moment forgot my distress and shed one tear for the boy. But sympathy assumed her dominion, and we all wept for one another and ourselves, the children crying for bread and water, and no white soul paid any attention.²

As I walked round, I observed some men & women in the hatchway, in Irons. They were pleading for their deliverance, or that they rather than remain as they were, might receive instant death. What had been their offence I never learned. At sundown we were separated into small parties [groups], and I was separated from my comrades, and bolts and bars for the first time in my life confined me to a small apartment, and language cannot describe more misery than I experienced that night. Solitude brought home to my tender, youthful mind, remembrance and reflection, two unwelcome messengers. But early next morning, all was bustle, noise and confusion. They weighed anchor, hoisted sail, and we sailed down the river. Here to my sorrow I learned what the white men came to Morocco, in which my father before had so imperfectly described to me, on his last return home. In a short time we came to anchor before a town called in my language, Yellow Bonga, the English name of which place I could never learn. . . .

As soon as we had fairly got under way, and

¹ At this point in the narrative, a poem that Brinch "deems pathetic and apropos" is inserted. It begins "Help! Oh, help! thou God of Christians! / Save a mother from despair!"

² At this point in the narrative, verses from the New Testament (Matthew 7: 7-37) are inserted. The verses include the "golden rule" as it appears in Matthew: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." [King James Version]

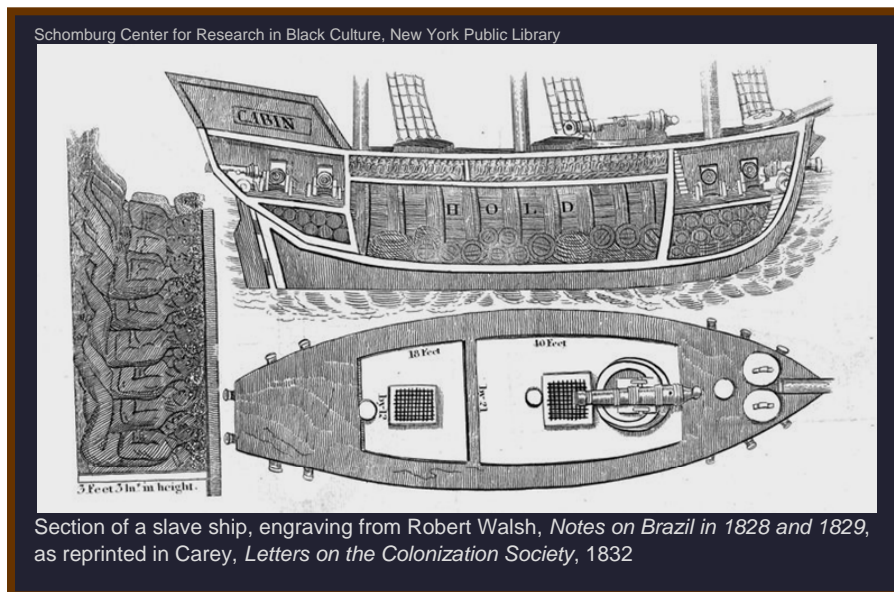
about [after] bidding adieu to the African coast forever, the captain and many of the officers made choice of such of the young women as they chose to sleep with them in their Hammocks, whom they liberated from chains and introduced into their several apartments. After the officers had provided themselves with mistresses of color, they made arrangements for the keeping and feeding the slaves. We were fastened in rows, as before observed, so that we could set upon our rumps or lie upon our backs, as was most convenient; and, as our exercises were not much, we, it was concluded, could do with little food. Our allowance was put at two scanty meals per day, which consisted of about six ounces of boiled rice and Indian corn each meal, with the addition of about one gill of fresh water. While in this situation, the ship's crew had been butchering a goat and threw some meat, which fell near me, but a boy caught too quick for me and swallowed it as soon as a hound would have done. I thought it was my right as it fell before me and therefore clenched him, but one of my comrades interfered and admonishing us, said it was extremely wrong for us to contend as we had no parents or friends to take our parts and could only bring disgrace upon ourselves. We desisted and mutually exchanged forgiveness.

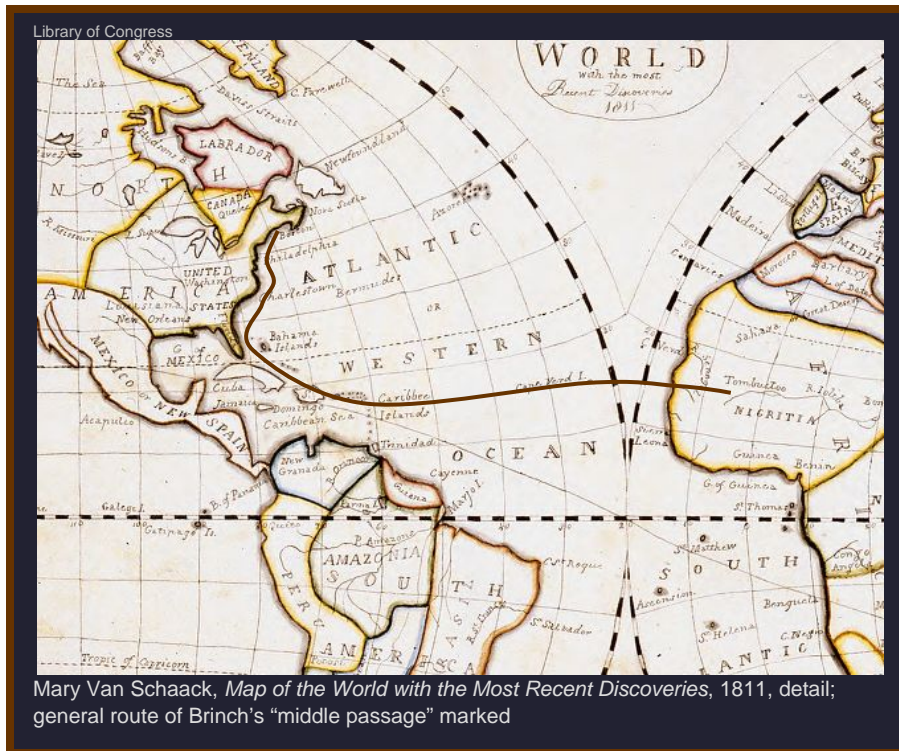
Soon after this we were almost famished for want of water. We often begged salt water of the invalid who attended us. I would get it in my cap and cautiously drink it, which would run through like salts. We were in such a situation that the officers liberated us, and Guy, the boy before mentioned, was so indecent as to drop some from necessity upon the white man's deck. It was laid to [blamed on] another boy who would not expose his friend; therefore he was saluted with only forty lashes, but boy Guy died a few days afterwards and was thrown into the sea, which made food for sharks, as they continually followed us being well baited by the frequent deaths on board.

About this time the princess was delivered of a child, but the great disposer of all events was pleased to waft its infant soul to realms unknown to us. There was great mourning among the maids of honor; they cried aloud. A boy, one of my comrade slaves by the name of Leo, forgetting his sufferings for a moment, was disposed to mirth. He observed, "*Cordier agong, cadwema arroho*" — which in English is, Hark! There is a trumpeter among us.

In this situation upon the boisterous deep, where each gale wafted us to a returnless distance from our families and friends, almost famished with hunger and thirst, to add horror to the scene, the sailors who were not provided with mistresses would force the women before the eyes of their husbands. A sailor one day forced the wife of a slave by the name of Blay before his face. Blay, whose blood boiled with wrath and indignation, said to his comrades in chains, "Let us rise and take them and force them to

conduct us back to our native country again. There is more of us than of them, and who is there among us who had not rather die honorably than live ignominious slaves?" The interpreter happened to overhear him, and gave information against him. Poor Blay was taken to the gunwale and received 80 lashes and was then put in chains with a double weight of iron. At this treatment well may we cry out with Ezekiel — "Behold their abomination in the sight of the Lord."





After a voyage of about five months, the vessel arrived at Barbadoes in the West Indies in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and fifty nine, or thousand seven hundred and sixty, with the slaves who had not either died with disease, mourned themselves to death, or starved. Many of the children actually died with hunger, pent up in the same ship were midnight and beastly intoxication bloated the miserable owner. The cries of the innocent African boy, destitute of the protection of a parent, if they reached the ears,

could not penetrate the heart of a christian, so as to cause him to bestow a morsel of bread upon his infant captive, even enough to save his life.

The slaves, consisting of about three hundred in number, including women and children, were carefully taken out of the ship and put into a large prison, or rather house of subjection. In this house we were all, above twelve years of age, chained together and sat in large circles round the room, and put to picking oakum. A slave by the name of Syneyo, from the town of Yellow-Bonga, taken in the manner formerly described, and who was on the Judges in that place, refused to work. He rose up and in his native language made the following speech to the captain, which was repeated to him by the interpreter:

Sir, The brow of our great father, the sun, frowns with indignation on beholding the majesty of human nature abused, as we are, and rendered more brutal than the ravenous wild beasts, as ye are. Feel like mortal man, and what I saw may prevent your spirit from being blotted out forever. You came to our country. You and your friend were treated with hospitality. We washed and anointed your feet. We gave you the best of our wines to drink, our most delicious food to eat. We entertained you with every amusement our country could afford. We prayed for you, burnt incense and offered up sacrifices for you. We gave you presents of gold, ivory, corn, and rice, with many other valuable things; and what return did you make us? You invited us to see your ship. We were credulous, even vigilance was asleep. You traitorously gave us opiates which caused us to sleep. You bound us captives and bore us away to this place. You and your myrmidons ravished our wives and daughters, whipped us with many stripes, starved our children to death, and suffered others to die unnoticed. And now you hold us in bondage and oblige us to work unceasingly. Is this the reward of friendship, hospitality and protection? Are you a christian people? Then do unto us as we have done unto you. Strip us of these chains and conduct us back to our own shores. If christianity will not move you to perform so just an act, look at those little fatherless children whom you kidnapped from their parents — hear their cries, behold their sufferings, think of the bewailing of their bereft parents. Look across the great waters to that village where you were almost idolized — view the

distresses your conduct has brought upon in, & if you have one spark of human sensibility, or even the least shade of humanity, if you are what you profess to be, a christian, repent and let us, whom you call heathens, return to our once happy shores, thereby, if you cannot obliterate, heal us as much as possible the wounds you have made.

On the close of this speech, all was silent for a few minutes, but the captain in his turn made a speech more to the purpose. With a countenance that would terrify a crocodile and a voice like the braying of a jackass, he said:

Oh you impudent, rebellious, treasonable, cowardly, saucy, low, black slave, I will teach you discipline, obedience, and submission, and what is more, I will learn you your duty. You seem to speak as though you thought yourself equal to white people, you Ethiopian black brute, you shall have but twelve kernels of corn per day — your breakfast shall be fifty stripes [lashes] — and if your work is not done, I leave you to the care of this my overseer, who will deal with you as you deserve.

This order was strictly complied with. From Monday until Wednesday following, no one received any other allowance, except water, which we were driven to, in drove, and obliged to lie down and drink. From Wednesday until Saturday, we had each one ounce of biscuit in addition. All began to be subdued and to work according to their strength and abilities. . . .

We remained in this mansion dedicated to the subjugation of our spirits for a few days, during which time many of my bosom friends were sold and sent away and I unable to learn their destiny. At length a most affecting scene ensued. Mahoo, a nobleman's daughter, who was also sent from Yellow Bonga to this country for education, accompanied by her brother two years younger by the name of Bangoo; they had pledged themselves never to part but by death, let whatsoever fate await them, they were to lose their lives for each other, rather than be separated. But alas! Bangoo was sold and called for by the *humane* christian purchaser, who had doubtless been devoted to the covenants of our Lord and Saviour, perhaps had crossed himself before the image of Christ, suspended upon the cross. These poor creatures clung together, and by signs the most impressive that the pure aborigines of Africa could make, entreated the owner to suffer [allow] them to remain with each other. But they forced him away, tied him to a cart and drove it off, dragging him after it. She clung to him until a ruffian ran up and, with the butt end of his whip, struck her such a blow that she fell motionless upon the ground. She lay senseless for sometime. As soon as she recovered, she was taken back to prison and here whipped forty lashes for her offence, or for the terror of others in like case offending. The poor creature was so maimed, that her life hung in doubt for three weeks. Thus were separated forever these two African children . . .

Courteous reader, if you live in civilized society and enjoy the privileges of an enlightened people, under the immediate light of gospel inspiration; or if you are only a moralist and believe that man can be virtuous without the restrictive influence of supernatural operation, ponder well upon these things. Proverbs, chap. 14, ver. 84 — *Righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people.* We read again in sacred writ — Gen. chap. 9, ver. 6. *Who so sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made he man.* — But what does the conduct of our advocates for slavery say to this doctrine or divine decree. — “Not so, my Lord, you did not mean that the African negroes should be included in this, thy Law, because they bear a different complexion from us thy chosen people. You only meant your law should extend to us to whom the regions of the north have given a light complexion and who have the knowledge of thy laws. The poor negroes although they may have descended from the patriarch Jethro, the priest of Midian, who was one of the elders of thy chosen people, shall be cast off from the benefits of thy law and promises of the gospel. Therefore we think the blood of this people will not be required at our hands. We can whip, scourge, torture and put them to death with impunity.”
