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"Curtin's Atlantic Slave Trade:
An Analysis From Two Perspectives"

by

Robert T. Brown and David L. Chandler

An Introduction by the Editors

In order to place Philip Curtin's Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (Madison, Wisconsin, 1969) into some perspective, the editorial staff of the Journal decided to solicit reviews from scholars who would be capable of analyzing the book in terms of its accuracy and significance in their fields of study. Two such individuals agreed to provide such a review; this essay is the result. Robert T. Brown, who holds a Ph.D from Syracuse University, is responsible for the African perspective, and David L. Chandler, who holds a Ph.D from Tulane University, is responsible for the Latin American perspective. Dr. Brown has done extensive research on aspects of the suppression of the slave trade, and Dr. Chandler has been involved in a study of the introduction of disease by the slave trade in Latin America.

The African Perspective

This ambitious work belongs to that select group of writings that mark major interpretive swings in historical thought. Generally such works produce immediate "schools" which in turn are criticised by further revisionist arguments. Considering the range of suggestive conclusions offered by Curtin, it is there-

fore surprising that there has been little response from the scholarly community. His revised figures on the volume of the Atlantic slave trade are quoted in new texts as possibilities, but then so are the earlier pronouncements which the author has conclusively shown to be based on little data. Since the book appeared in 1969 the reviews have been good. Curtin has been praised for his ambition in attempting so herculean a task. The population figures he presents have not been seriously questioned and his cautious, though convoluted methodology, has drawn little adverse comment. All reviews conclude that THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE is a work of great importance within some context, but exactly what the importance is is usually left to the reader.

Curtin repeatedly emphasizes that the book "is not intended to be a definitive study, only a point of departure that will be modified in time as new research produces new data, and harder data worthy of more sophisticated forms of calculation." With that reservation he proceeds to revise the numbers involved in the Atlantic slave trade from estimates of fifteen to fifty million transported down to his new estimate of from eight to ten and a half million. The bulk of this trade, he says, was in the prime importers. The yearly export of Africans reached a peak in 1810 and from that date until the 1840's remained stable with

no evident change resulting from either suppression activities or the expansion of European markets for tropical raw materials. Finally, in a concluding chapter, Curtin offers evidence to suggest a downward revision of the ship-board mortality rates of slaves. Contrary to the abolitionist propaganda, it would appear to have been much more dangerous to cross the Atlantic as a sailor on a slave ship than as part of the cargo.

Within this broad outline of numerical revision Curtin cautions his audience to treat numbers as relevant only for the purposes of generalization. He says that the value of numbers "is not in being correct, but in being correct enough to point out contradictions in present hypotheses and to raise new questions for comparative demography and social history." It is on this very point that his work is most fascinating and the reluctance of historians to respond most disturbing.

The entire institution of New World slavery needs a fresh look in light of Curtin's projections. For instance, he believes that during the four centuries of slave trade, the United States took only 4.5% of total imports, or slightly more than four hundred thousand slaves. In addition, he declares that no more than fifty thousand of those were brought in after 1808 when importation was constitutionally outlawed. However, by 1950 that small group of slaves had grown to constitute 31% of the New

World estimated population partly or entirely of African descent. The Caribbean, on the other hand, while importing some 43% of the slaves had less than 20% of the total black population in the same base year. Epidemiological considerations for those figures are ruled out because Curtin produces demographic evidence that some small parts of Latin America had growth patterns like those of the United States.

Obviously some important questions about New World slavery still need answering. What caused the rapid population growth among North American Slaves? Why were death rates so low? Why were so few slaves imported during the 1808-1860 period when prices for slaves rose so rapidly? Rapid population growth, particularly during the nineteenth century, can only suggest large numbers of females, an unusual condition among plantation slave populations. (Indeed census figures from as early as 1790 show more black females than males.) Was there a special market in America? Was there something in American slavery that "softened" the system, allowing for this unusual growth? Certainly if Curtin's material stands the test of extended examination, it becomes necessary to revive the old controversy of the "Tannenbaum thesis."

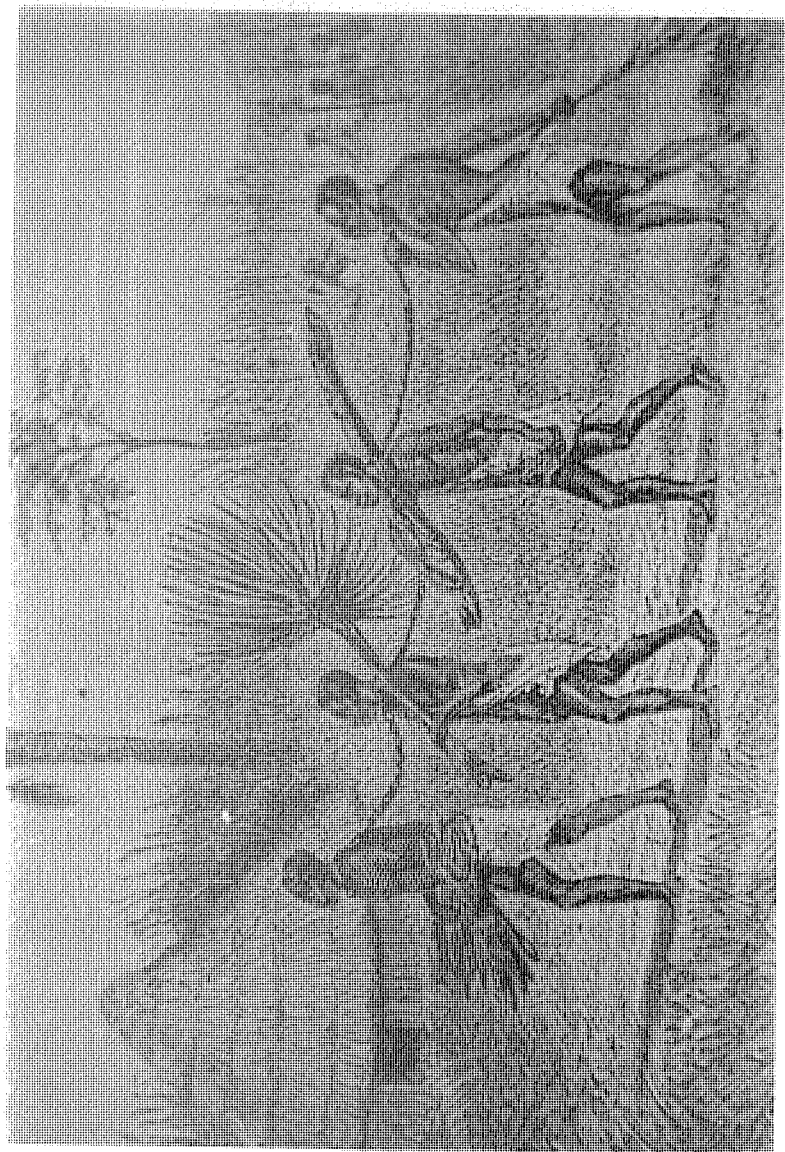
It is not only necessary to reconsider the slave system of the Americas, but also to restudy Africa's role in the export

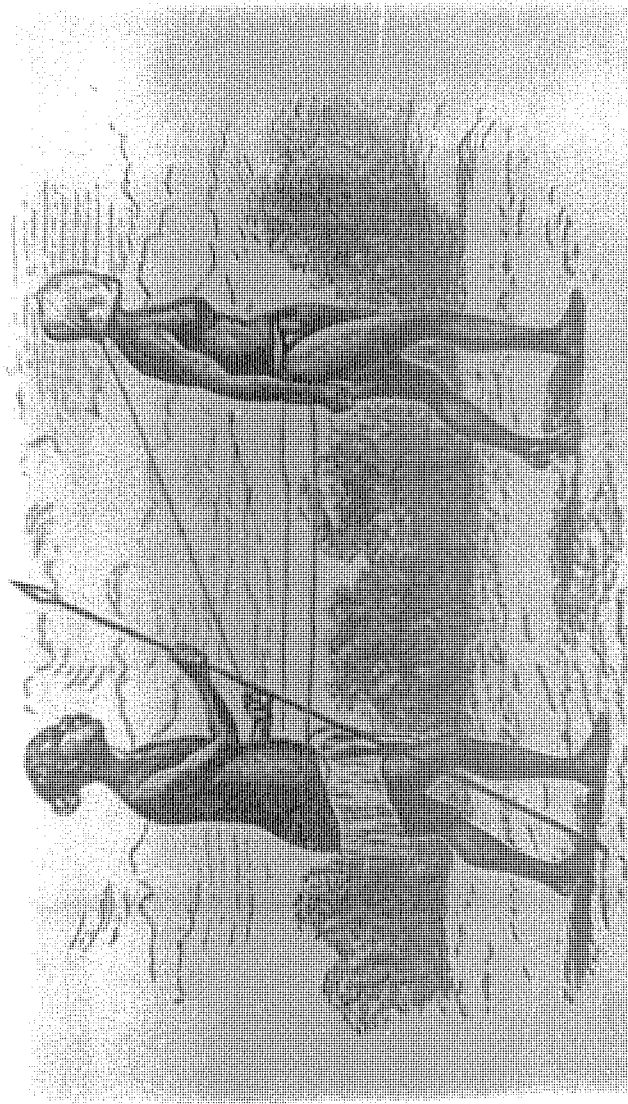
trade. Again, the author's cautions must be kept in mind when considering the striking implications of his statistics. The slave trade has been blamed for everything, both productive and unproductive, that occurred on the African continent in the last few hundred years. Yet the impact of the removal of eight to ten million people over a period of four hundred years may have had significant impact of only local importance. Even then, determining just what the effect was becomes nearly impossible. For instance, two of the greatest sources of export were the Bights of Benin and Biafra on the present Nigerian coast and the south western coast from the Congo River to Luanda. In the latter region the population is very thin today, leading to the conclusion that this depopulation was caused by the voracity of the slave trade. However, southern Nigeria is one of the most densely populated regions of the continent.

In his chapters dealing with the export of slaves Curtin shows that each slave trader had certain areas of the coast that he depended on for his supplies. These supply markets varied over the centuries. Although he does not comment directly, there is an evident correlation between the export of slaves from any one area and the local details of African history. Why is it that one area was suddenly able to produce great numbers of people for sale and then become a minor source for

generations? Other areas, such as Angola, appear to have served as a major supplier for centuries. One conclusion, often proposed, ties the volume of export to the growth of centralized political power among Africans. Thus in the nineteenth century Benin and Dahomey were said to be the most blood-thirsty of slaving states. The evidence provided suggests just the opposite. The actual volume of slaves exported from any one area appears to have declined upon the advent of strong local government. Along this same line of thought is the often made charge that the European presence was the strongest inducement to the sale of slaves. Every history of the trade makes much of the slave holding trade castles of various European powers along the old Gold Coast. Curtin's figures show that this area generally provided smaller numbers of slaves than most of the rest of West Africa. Clearly then, there were other reasons than the search for slaves accounting for the concentration of European power along that short stretch of coast.

As these few points suggest, THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE could prove to be an extraordinarily important work in the study of the African diaspora. There is still much to learn about the impact of slave society upon both white and black in Africa and the New World. Though Curtin does not provide answers to these questions, he does provide the data needed to help obtain answers.





Slave-Deer and New

The next morning Cameron received an informant who

What is now needed are individual examinations of primary source material to substantiate his conclusions. If his statistics are found to be generally correct then we all have much more work to do. As of yet few have taken up the task.

The Latin American Perspective

Convinced that revision of the history of the Atlantic slave trade is long overdue, Philip Curtin challenges and re-evaluates most of our knowledge on that subject. He shows how estimates of the numbers of slaves imported into the Americas originated as mere guesses to be quoted and requoted by historians until they became accepted as positive authority. By applying survey methods and statistical analysis to several independent bodies of data he seeks more valid answers to the questions of how many blacks crossed the Atlantic, when they came, where they came from in Africa and where they were delivered in the New World. Thus American slave imports, economic productivity and slave population growth are weighed against slave exports from Africa, European goods exported to Africa and European shipping potential.

These painstaking calculations whittle the number of slaves imported from 15 million to less than 10 million and challenge traditional ideas about geographic and ethnic origins. Curtin also revises notions of the numbers and distribution of slaves

imported during various periods of the trade, suggesting that fewer (3% instead of 7%) arrived in the 15th and 16th centuries, that more (63% instead of 50%) were landed in the 18th century, and that 90% of all slaves were delivered to the Atlantic fringe of tropical America from Brazil through the Guianas and Caribbean coasts and islands.

A quantitative measure of the slave trade to Spanish America has previously been hazy. The early period of individual licenses, followed by centuries of *asientos* issued to various foreign nations and then by a few decades of relatively free trade have enormously complicated the task of calculating total imports. Extensive smuggling and the practice of recording imports not in numbers of individuals but in the number of prime field hands, or piezas de india equivalent, further complicated the task. The few studies that are available have concentrated on a single nation, time period, or subject. Curtin's book is the first attempt to determine total slave imports for all regions of Latin America throughout the entire period of the slave trade. It also places the Spanish trade in international perspective and suggests ethnic origin of slaves supplied to various regions during different periods of the trade. It is, then, both a synthesis and a careful recalculation of existing knowledge.

Curtin estimates the number of blacks introduced into Latin

America as slightly more than 5 million-- $1\frac{1}{2}$ million for Spanish America and $3\frac{1}{2}$ million for Brazil, an upward revision of nearly 1 million over the most careful estimates of the past. If he is right, Latin America received more than half (54%) of the total Atlantic slave trade rather than a third as formerly thought.

Spanish American slaves came principally from Angola-Congo (33%), Guinea (25%), and Senagambia (23%) until 1550. During the next century sources of supply shifted variously, but Guinea and Angola still supplied 75% of the total. In the 18th century no sources are tabulated for Spanish America, but Brazil was supplied principally from Angola (68%) and Mina (32%). By the 19th century Brazil was still receiving 65% of its slaves from Angola and the Northern Congo, but the remainder came mainly from Mozambique. Cuba, too, received nearly one third of its slaves from Mozambique and another third from the Bight of Benin. Although these findings challenge some traditional assumptions, their main value lies in providing the first overview of the ethnic origins of Latin American slaves.

Curtin's findings are based solely on published data and he warns that his figures approach no more than 20% accuracy and in some cases no more than 50% accuracy. He hopes the book will serve as a point of departure to challenge others to complete and correct its findings. Nowhere is that task more necessary

than in the area of Latin America, where his coverage is weakest. Major areas such as Peru, Bolivia, and Chile appear only in tables and are not discussed, because their slaves were supplied through the internal slave trade. Curtin neither reveals nor evaluates his source of information for the black population of these areas, nor is it clear how the demand for slaves in these regions enters into his calculations for the areas that supplied them.

Curtin bases some of his calculations for Spanish American imports on faulty assumptions. He revises previous figures upward on grounds that *assiento* contracts serve as guides to manpower needs. He assumes that Spanish officials accurately estimated the colonial demand for slaves, expressed it in terms of piezas de india, and issued *asientos* to meet the demand. Since complaints of labor shortage persisted, he concludes that the demand was not satisfied, but assumes that the demand estimated in piezas de india was met in terms of individual slaves delivered. Port records, however, indicate that many *asientos* were not fulfilled even to that degree. Moreover, Spain usually determined the number of piezas to be introduced with an eye to stimulating the economy of various regions, and allowances were likely to be higher than actual need.

Curtin weighs the estimates of slave imports against other data such as economic productivity, but again his calculations

sometimes rest on faulty assumptions. He assumes that economic development of Cuba and Puerto Rico were analagous and therefore calculates the number of slaves imported into Puerto Rico by analogy to Cuban imports. Puerto Rico's economy, however, was not as dynamic as that of Cuba, especially in the period after 1760 to which he refers. Similarly, Curtin errs in basing New Granada's imports after 1773 on those of Venezuela on the assumption that the two colonies were analagous. Venezuela experienced economic growth in the period, while New Granada suffered economic stagnation, especially in the mining industry where most slaves were employed.

Curtin also bases estimates for New Granada partly on the fact that the gold camps were "known to have had an extremely high ratio of men to women," which implied a high rate of natural decrease and would therefore have required high import rates to sustain the slave population. Yet the slave census for the important Choco mining region in 1759 showed a 60/40 ratio of men to women and a high percentage of children (39%).¹ By 1804 the ratio of men to women had reached a normal balance (50.2% women and 49.8% men) and the percentage of children in the slave population (of 4563) was 47%.²

Many of Curtin's errors were unavoidable due to inadequate historical literature, a failing which led him to hope for no

more than 50% accuracy in estimates for some areas in Latin America. Though his calculations for Spanish America do not always command confidence, he probably does as well as could be expected.

Curtin's work will probably prompt many revisionist studies. He has broken trail by innovative use of methods and sources, but his conclusions need to be confirmed or modified for individual areas and time periods by studies based both on archival research and new methodology. More importantly, his work will probably prompt many new studies. His broad approach in treating the slave trade to the Atlantic basin as a whole points out new directions. The survey and statistical methods, the comparative analysis and the synthetic approach which he used could be employed in studying the institution of slavery in the entire Atlantic basin or in investigating the basin's economic development based on slavery. The same approach could also be used in comparative studies of the individual slave-based economies.

Curtin's findings suggest other intriguing possibilities for research. Far more Africans than Spaniards and Portuguese came to Latin America before 1850. In Brazil and to a lesser degree in Cuba entire schools of thought in many of the social sciences have centered around the Negro and his contributions and have resulted in cultural awakening, yet in most of Latin America our meager knowledge of the African and his contribution begs further

research. Curtin's conclusions about ethnic origins lay the foundation for comparative studies in Latin America and elsewhere of slaves of the similar or diverse ethnic origin in various European colonies. These studies might reveal the degree to which Haiti and Martinique, for example, are products of French culture or African culture, and to what degree modern differences between these two French islands are due to different ethnic origins of their black populations. Comparative studies might also suggest whether differences in ethnic origins of Jamaican slaves, for instance, and Brazilian slaves, have any bearing on cultural differences between these countries.

Curtin's research also poses interesting questions about race relations and demography which only future research can answer. The United States, for instance, received less than 5% of the blacks brought by the slave trade but by 1950 it had almost 15 million blacks, nearly one-third of the Negro population of the Americas. The Caribbean, on the other hand, received 40% of slave traffic, but in 1950 had only 20% of the black population of the hemisphere. Do these striking differences in the ability of blacks to survive refute traditional views that English and North American slavery was harsh? Do they also refute the widely held view of benign Latin slavery, or do they simply reflect differences in health conditions, living

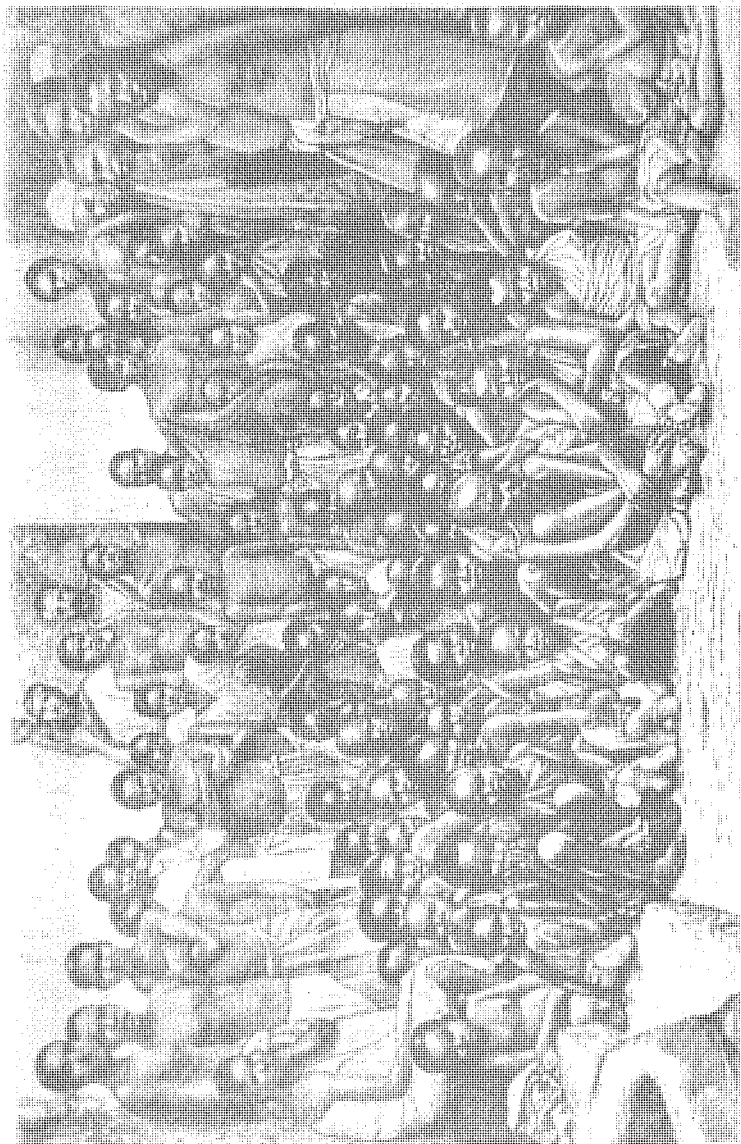
standards, economic opportunity and other factors? National variations also need to be explored. Why did Cuba, which received 7% of the slave traffic, have only 3% of the American black population in 1950, while New Granada, which received only 2% of the trade, have 7% of the black population in 1950. These answers await further research.

Suggestive approach, imaginative methods and important new conclusions make Curtin's book a significant contribution that will no doubt point the way to a more meaningful appraisal of the slave trade and related subjects. We join the author in the hope that others will complete and correct his findings.

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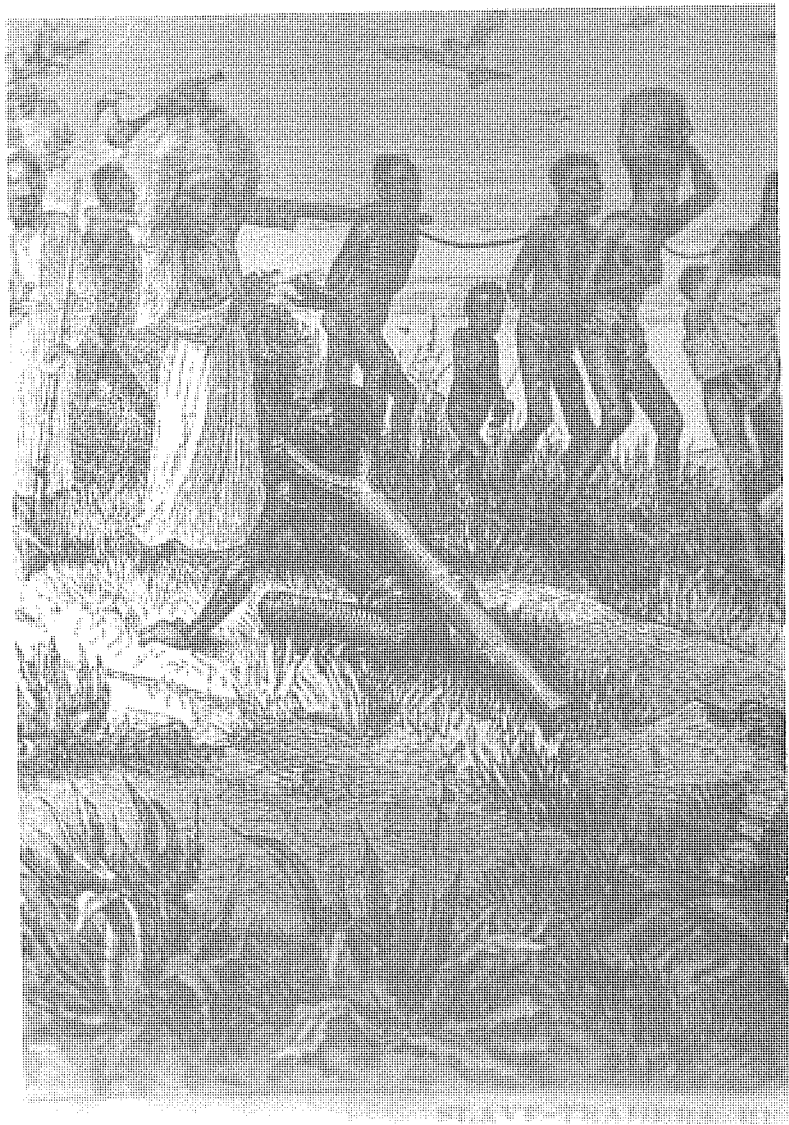
¹Archivo Historico Nacional de Colombia, Negros y esclavos del Cauca IV, foli. 558-91.

²Ibid., Visitas del Cauca V, n. fol. "Visita de la Provincia del Chocó por el Sr. Gobernador Dn. Carlos de Ciaurriz."



SLAVES FROM SUGAR CAPTURED BY THE UNION.





STAY-FRAME, III