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From Slave Biographies to the Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade

Introduction

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Introduction

This issue features three datasets that were originally published on *Slave Biographies: The Atlantic Database Network* (www.slavebiographies.org): Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's "Louisiana Slave Database," Brian Mitchell's "Free Black Database," and my "Maranhão Inventories Slave Database." Republication in the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* (JSDP) increases the visibility and further ensures the long-term preservation of our pioneering attempt to make available on a single website a suite of distinct datasets developed independently that might otherwise languish in digital isolation. Republication also provides increased functionality, and particularly for cross-dataset queries that include projects that were not part of *Slave Biographies*. Such queries are possible through an approach known as [linked open data](#), which is foundational to JSDP and *Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade* (Enslaved.org).

Work on *Slave Biographies* began in 2013, when Dean Rehberger, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, and I received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for the creation of a digital platform for storing and making widely available information about Africans and people of African descent who were enslaved in the period before the mid-nineteenth century. Rehberger is a historian and the director of [Matrix: The Center for Digital Humanities and Social](#)

[Sciences](#) at Michigan State University (MSU). Hall is a professor emeritus from Rutgers University who was a pioneer in scholarship centered on open-access, online databases that advance understandings of African slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, notably in southern Louisiana. I am a professor of African history at MSU whose research focuses the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the Upper Guinea coast and the trade in slaves from the region to northeastern Brazil.

Our NEH grant application sprang from our observation that over the past few decades there has been a shift in perceptions about what we can know about enslaved Africans and their descendants throughout the Atlantic World (Africa, Europe, North and South America). Scholars long thought that primary source documentation for the study of individuals, and particularly enslaved individuals, in the period of Atlantic slavery was scarce. We are increasingly aware, however, that institutions that perpetuated slavery often produced rich, serialized documentation about many aspects of the lives of the enslaved, from birth to death, and from Africa to the Americas (and, for some, back to Africa). Although they are often uncatalogued and poorly preserved, primary sources about slavery abound in libraries and archives, courthouses, churches, government offices, and private collections spread around the Atlantic's shores. Much of this documentation contains information about the names, ages, genders, African ethnicities, health conditions, and skills of the enslaved and freed. Data in any one source on an individual can be fragmentary, but if those data are linked to other data about the same individual, the story of a person's life can begin to unfold. Moreover, when fragmentary information about many individuals is systematically aggregated in a database, larger inquiries about individual and collective experiences are possible. What Rehberger, Hall, and I proposed to the NEH, then, was funding for a single open-access location on the Internet where scholars, genealogists, and family historians could find information about individuals who were enslaved and perform computer-assisted analyses of broader populations.

Slave Biographies was explicitly a *publishing platform*. Too often valuable historical data that are carefully collected by scholars, and particularly humanists, are subsequently lost. After articles and monographs are finished, scholars may lock the data away in file cabinets or discard them. Publishing such data on Matrix's servers would facilitate preservation and accessibility. It would also address a problem centered on promotion and tenure at universities, where peer-reviewed publication is an important measure of professional accomplishment. Increasingly, scholars are assembling, launching, and maintaining websites that present arguments based on evidence—impressive collections of data arranged in a manner that draws or allows for the drawing of conclusions. And quite often these websites are cited by other scholars, becoming foundational to traditional paper-based journal articles and books.¹ However, most universities do not recognize digital publications for assessment purposes because they are not peer reviewed. *Slave Biographies*, we proposed, would provide double-blind peer review of datasets that the team received, meeting the standard of scholarly book and journal publishers.

¹ A search on Google Scholar reveals that data published in *Slave Biographies* has been foundational to many scholarly articles.

Our project built on a handful of efforts starting in the 1990s to advance our understanding of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade by organizing fragmentary information into databases and making those databases available in digital formats. Among the pioneers was Hall, who in March 2000 contracted with Louisiana State University Press to publish a compact disc containing information about over 100,000 slaves who labored in colonial Louisiana. In 2001, Hall republished much of the same information on the website *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy*, which was sponsored by the University of North Carolina and I-Biblio. An update and revision of the dataset was later incorporated into *Slave Biographies*.

Hall's project centered on individuals, many named, making it of interest to scholars as well as the general public. Genealogists and family historians were seeking ways to trace African-American heritage prior to 1870, which was the first time the U.S. census listed the names of formerly enslaved individuals. Hall's project also demonstrated the links between Louisiana and various cultural, linguistic, and political regions of Africa, since enslaved Africans in many of her sources were referred to as members of African ethnic groups. Thus, in her dataset and among fields for gender, race, age, skills, and much more, Hall created fields for ethnicity. These fields can be sorted to understand the variety of terms used to describe the cultural geographies of enslaved Africans, as well as to query African origins on the continent far beyond ports of embarkation. Scholars using the dataset, including Hall herself, have shown how such data allows for explorations of particular African contributions to the formation of societies in the Americas. Hall's dataset has helped us understand how enslaved Mandinka, Fulbe, Yoruba, Bambara, and others brought with them ideas that shaped economies, cultures, and religious beliefs in the time of slavery. The dataset also assists scholars and slave descendants in understanding the long legacies of African life in the formations of American society.

My own interest in databases grew from this engagement with *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy*. While undertaking research under a Fulbright-Hays fellowship in Maranhão, Brazil, in the early 2000s, I created a database that contains information about almost 8,500 enslaved people from 1767 to 1832. I discovered the documents that are the basis for the project in the Arquivo Histórico do Ministério das Finanças in Maranhão, where they are stored uncatalogued in boxes rarely viewed by professional historians. The documents are plantation inventories, which were recorded by the state when planters in the region died. Among other things listed in the inventories are details about the quantitative and demographic scope of slaveholding as well as the qualitative dimensions of slave life including the naming practices, ethnic affiliation, occupational skills, and physical health. The documents provide rare details of slave populations recorded in a standardized way beginning in an early period of the development of northeastern Brazil as a colony. My dataset has provided information to scholars interested in tracing slaves' African origins, exploring slaves' marriage patterns, examining slave pricing, and detailing the differences in the gender ratios of captives from various regions of Africa. The dataset was foundational to publications in which I argue that a majority of enslaved people who arrived in Maranhão after the mid-eighteenth century came from a small region of Africa

near the ports of Cacheu and Bissau. Evidence for this argument can be found in ethnonyms recorded in plantation inventories. Those ethnonyms (Mandinka, Fula, Balanta, Papel, Bijago, and more) point to specific places on the West African coast and allowed me to draw conclusions about slaving patterns and the ways in which Africans reproduced specific cultural elements under slavery in the Americas.

In 2011, I approached Hall and Rehberger about updating *Afro-Louisiana* and making its data available from a second location—servers at MSU—to better ensure long-term preservation. I also proposed making the dataset I had created, the *Maranhão Inventories Slave Database*, publicly available by placing it on a website with Hall's dataset. In 2013, the collaboration among Hall, Rehberger, and I resulted in an award from the NEH and, ultimately, the digital platform known as *Slave Biographies*.

The *Slave Biographies* team was fortunate to receive in 2017 as its first submission for publication *The Free Black Database*, which is the product Brian Mitchell's work with the Mayor's Register for Free Blacks in the City of New Orleans from 1840 to 1864. Mitchell was an assistant professor of History at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock. His research has focused on urban slavery. Mitchell transcribed and translated the volumes, which are in French, into a dataset with 55 fields and information about almost 3,000 individuals. Users can determine the number of manumissions from a particular notary or time period and find data to assist with questions about the race, gender, and skills of free blacks in the city. The database also serves as a finding aid for collections; it lists dates of filing and specific baptism records, and it has been correlated to specific emancipation records where applicable. Mitchell's database dovetails well with Hall's, and when viewed together the two databases give a more holistic view of slavery in Louisiana. Finally, Mitchell's submission allowed us to test our peer review process, and we honed that process for the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation*.

Importantly, the initial NEH grant also brought Paul Lachance, a historian from the University of Ottawa who has expertise in slave studies and database methodologies, to Michigan State University for a series of discussions with Catherine Foley, a digital librarian and the *Slave Biographies* project manager. Together, Foley and Lachance forged a foundational document that details core fields common to the datasets created by Hall and me. Those core fields are also found in Mitchell's dataset and became central to thinking about construction of *Enslaved: The Peoples of the Historical Trade*. Foley and Lachance also advanced *Slave Biographies* by defining metadata. With Foley's guidance, the best practices and metadata have been refined by the team responsible for the construction of and can be found on Enslaved.org.

Slave Biographies was a pioneering project for a number of reasons. First, for the humanities broadly, it demonstrated the utility of an open-access digital repository for preserving and making widely available independently produced scholarly data that would otherwise be unknown to scholars and the general public. Second, it produced standards for best practices and a metadata scheme for databasing information about individuals who were subject to slavery and slave trading. In revised form, those best practices and the metadata scheme are

foundational for projects that are being linked through Enslaved.org. Third, it pioneered an approach for peer review of humanistic digital scholarship, which is critical for professional assessment at universities in the United States and across the globe and which offers scholars an incentive to engage in open-access digital publishing. Finally, the project's approach, which centered on open-access databases in which individuals are the primary unit of analysis, resonated with approaches being applied by other scholars. Those scholars began to meet at conferences and to discuss ways to collaborate to advance the study of slavery and the slave trade with new digital tools and methodologies. Those scholars became the [founding partners](#) for Enslaved.org, which launches with the publication of this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation*.

The centrality of scholarly collaborations to *Slave Biographies* and Enslaved.org cannot be stressed enough. If the humanities are to advance in transformative ways in this age of globalization, humanists must find new ways to collaborate—to work together on large, international projects. Collaborative work around online digital projects has allowed black and mixed-race minority (and in many parts of the Americas, majority) populations to better reconstruct their own history. It has highlighted the significance of Africans in the creation of the world we live in today. And it has led to greater understandings of the nature of inequalities (racial and economic, particularly) that have long plagued societies. The descendants of Africans in the Americas want more information about their own past. Public history projects like *Slave Biographies* and Enslaved.org are models of how collaborative projects can foster that understanding.

Cite this Introduction

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