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June 2010 Newsletter

The Loss of the Slave Ship *Fly* at the Florida Keys in 1789

By Gail Swanson*

The archipelago named the Florida Keys begins just south of Miami at the end of the mainland Florida peninsula and continues down and westward to the Dry Tortugas. Offshore of the islands is a living coral reef which has long proven very dangerous to shipping. The sea lane past the Keys leads to the Gulf Stream, and for centuries has been traveled by nearly all vessels leaving Havana, the Gulf of Mexico, the western Caribbean and northern South America (Fig. 1). There are perhaps a thousand shipwrecks off the Florida Keys. Seven are known to be the remains of “slavers” – vessels used in the transport of individuals abducted into slavery. Only two, the “Ivory Wreck” and the British slaver *Henrietta Marie*, lost unladen in a storm in 1700, have been discovered.

This article examines the history of one of the undiscovered wrecks – that of a British ship named the *Fly*, in route from Jamaica directly to Sierra Leone when she was lost in 1789. Because of the documentation of this vessel’s construction, voyages, and wrecking, and especially because of a related narrative by the great abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, this shipwreck would be of great interest if ever located. The sight in Bristol, England, of a sloop named the *Fly*, which later was wrecked at the Florida Keys, led to a thorough examination of that vessel by Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), who employed data concerning such ships in advocating the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Figs. 1, 2).

The *Fly* was built at Bristol in 1785, and sailed on a slaving voyage from there on October 13, 1786. James Rogers was the owner, and the vessel had two captains that voyage, Richard Rogers and John Kennedy, with a crew of nine. The *Fly* was registered as being of 27 tons, about half the size of Columbus’ smallest ship, the *Nina*. In the voyage the ship obtained a

human “cargo” of 68 captive Africans at Sierra Leone and delivered them into slavery at Antigua in the Caribbean (Figs. 1, 2). Only 53 captives survived the voyage. The *Fly* returned to Bristol June 2, 1787, and Clarkson observed and examined the ship there in that same month. He does not refer to this ship by name, and there are confusing aspects to his documentary records, because he had examined another slave ship several months earlier, a much larger one, also named the *Fly*, commanded by Capt. Colley. That vessel was U.S. built and was anchored at another location along the Thames River.



Figure 1. Map showing Caribbean locations related to voyages of the *Fly* (image by C. Fennell).

The Key West public library’s collections include a documentary record, written in Spanish, on the wrecking of the *Fly* (Florida Papers, microfilm no. 148). The information in this

Spanish-language document agrees with Robert F. Marx's work on shipwrecks in his 1985 book *Shipwrecks in Florida Waters*. His source was a British record.

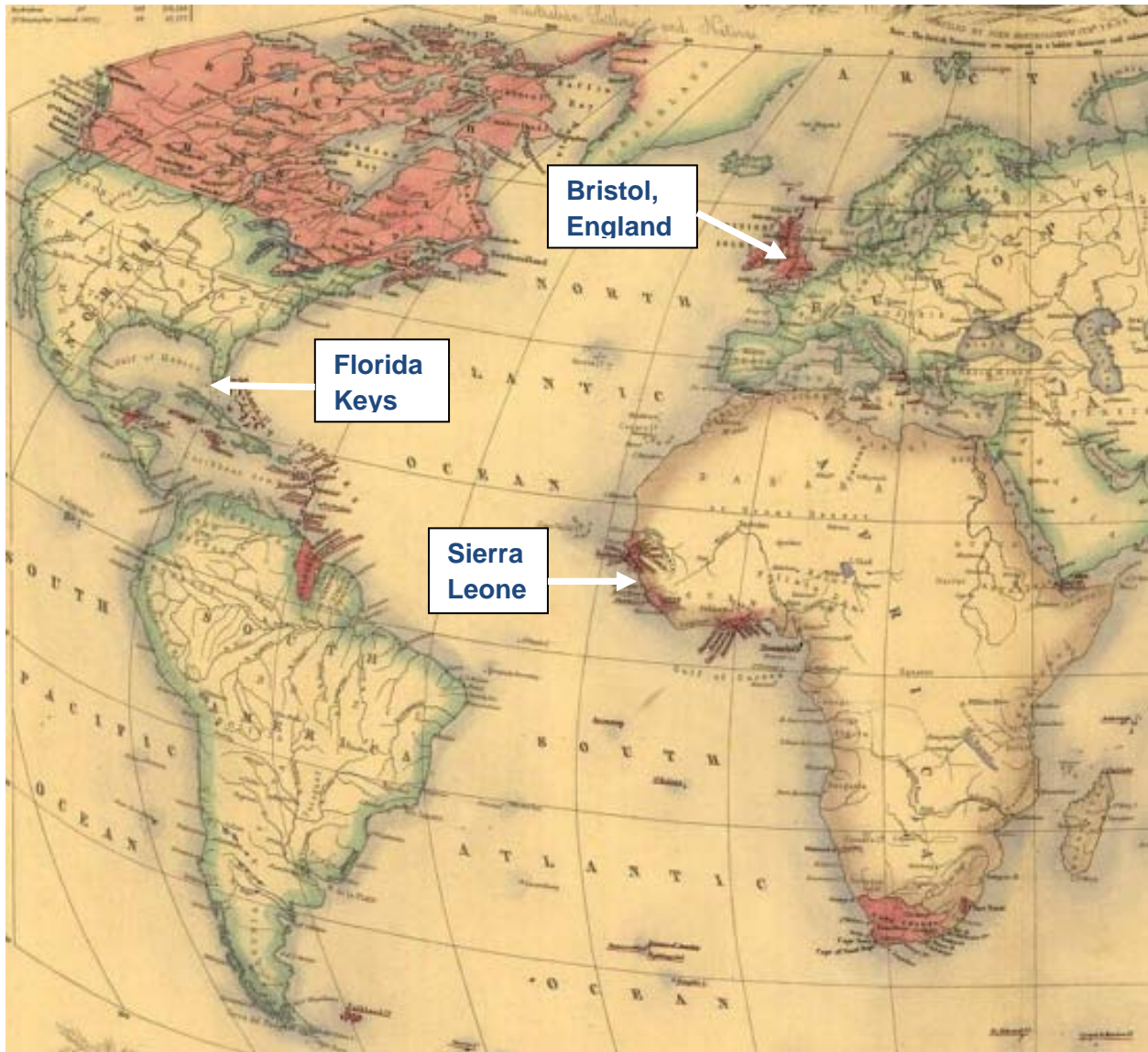


Figure 2. 1852 Map of Atlantic, showing locations of Bristol, Sierra Leone region, and Florida Keys (image by C. Fennell).

Historian Roger Hughes of Illinois, researching the same vessel, has provided this author with more material on the *Fly*. Much of it, he wrote, was from David Richardson's *Bristol, Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade to America; Vol. 4, The Final Years 1770-1807*. Hughes knew the *Fly* had wrecked, for Richardson gave a summary of her final voyage, part of

which reads, “reported lost on the Martyns in the Gulf of Florida on its way to the coast, its crew saved.” The “Martyns” are the “Martyrs,” the old Spanish name for the Keys. The “Gulf of Florida” was the British term for the Florida Straits.

Marcus Rediker wrote in his 2007 book, *The Slave Ship, A Human History*, that “one of the small vessels [Clarkson observed] may have been the *Fly* . . . which departed Bristol” two months after returning, either on August 5 or August 7, 1787. Rediker’s analysis agrees with the facts associated with the 14 vessels that left on slaving voyages from Bristol in 1787. Those voyage records are provided in the *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, edited by David Eltis and others, and now available online at www.slavevoyage.org. No other vessel that sailed for Africa from Bristol in 1787 was anywhere near the tiny size of the *Fly*.

In 1785, while a student at Cambridge, Thomas Clarkson entered and won a Latin essay competition. The subject, set by a professor, was (in English) “Is it lawful to enslave the unconsenting?” This event began his intense study of the slave trade. “It was time some person should see these calamities to an end,” he later wrote of his thoughts at the time. Clarkson felt that goal was a calling, and devoted his long life to the abolition of the slave trade and then to the abolition of slavery itself. Clarkson published his essay in English in 1786: “An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the Africans”

The anti-slave trade movement had already been advanced by a number of advocates, including Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic. With the publication of Clarkson’s book-length essay, abolitionist views were further enhanced. Twelve founding members of the non-denominational “Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade” included nine Quakers and three pioneering Anglicans -- Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Clarkson. That same year, Clarkson began collecting as much information as possible on the horrors of the trade, leading then to his observation in June 1787 of the *Fly*.

This is Clarkson’s account of the vessel, from his 1808 book *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, Vol. 1:

In pursuing another object, which was that of going on board the slave-ships, and learning their construction and dimensions, I was greatly struck, and indeed affected, by the appearance of two little sloops, which were fitting out for Africa,

the one of only twenty-five tons, which was said to be destined to carry seventy [slaves]; and the other of only eleven, which was said to be destined to carry thirty slaves. I was told also that which was more affecting, namely, that these were not to act as tenders on the coast, by going up and down the rivers, and receiving three or four slaves at a time, and then carrying them to a large ship, which was to take them to the West Indies, but that it was actually intended, that they should transport their own slaves themselves; that one if not both of them were, on their arrival in the West Indies, to be sold as pleasure-vessels, and that the seamen belonging to them were to be permitted to come home by what is usually called the run.

This account of the destination of these little vessels, though it was distressing at first, appeared to me afterwards, on cool reasoning, to be incredible. I thought that my informants wished to impose upon me, in order that I might make statements which would carry their own refutation with them, and that thus I might injure the great cause which I had undertaken. And I was much inclined to be of this opinion, when I looked again at the least of the two; for any person, who was tall, standing upon dry ground by the side of her, might have overlooked every thing upon her deck. I knew also that she had been built as a pleasure-boat for the accommodation of only six persons upon the Severn. I determined, therefore, to suspend my belief till I could take the admeasurement of each vessel. This I did; but lest, in the agitation of my mind on this occasion, I should have made any mistake, I desired my friend George Fisher to apply to the builder for his admeasurement also. With this he kindly complied. When he obtained it he brought it [to] me. This account, which nearly corresponded with my own, was as follows: -- In the vessel of twenty-five tons, the length of the upper part of the hold, or roof, of the room, where the seventy slaves were to be stowed, was but little better than ten yards, or thirty-one feet. The greatest breadth of the bottom, or floor, was ten feet four inches, and the least five. Hence, a grown person must sit down all the voyage, and contract his limbs within the narrow limits of three square feet. In the vessel of eleven tons, the length of the room for the thirty slaves was twenty-two feet. The greatest breadth of the floor was eight, and the least four. The whole height from the keel to the beam was but five feet eight inches, three feet of which were occupied by ballast, cargo, and provisions, so that two feet eight inches remained only as the height between the decks. Hence, each slave would have only four square feet to sit in, and, when in this posture, his head, if he were a full-grown person, would touch the ceiling, or upper deck.

Having now received this admeasurement from the builder which was rather more favourable than my own, I looked upon the destination of these little vessels as yet more incredible than before. Still the different persons, whom I occasionally saw on board them, persisted in it that they were going to Africa for slaves, and also for the numbers mentioned, which they were afterwards to carry to the West Indies themselves. I desired, however, my friends, George Fisher, Truman Harford, Harry Gandy, Walter Chandler, and others, each to make a separate

inquiry for me on this subject; and they all agreed that, improbable as the account both of their destination, and of the number they were to take, might appear, they had found it to be too true. I had soon afterwards the sorrow to learn from official documents from the Custom-house, that these little vessels actually cleared out for Africa, and that now nothing could be related so barbarous of this traffic, which might not instantly be believed.

In a second known slaving voyage, armed with two guns, the *Fly* sailed from Bristol with James Walker as captain and a crew of 10, again to Sierra Leone, where 35 Africans were stolen from their homes, and were landed at Tortola in the British Virgin Islands (Fig. 1). All survived the voyage. The *Fly* returned to Bristol on August 16, 1788. When the vessel was registered that year it had six guns. The ship's third voyage, from which it would never return, began from Bristol on September 27, 1788. The *Fly* was in route first to Sierra Leone (Fig. 2).

To put the time of her wrecking in some perspective, 1789 was the year the French Revolution began, with the storming of the Bastille in July. Two months before, on the other side of the world, Fletcher Christian took control of HMS *Bounty* from Capt. William Bligh, the American Revolutionary War had been over for just six years, and Florida was a territory of Spain.

At Sierra Leone, the *Fly* was in company with the *Ruby*, another vessel from Bristol, which was commanded by Capt. Thomas Walker and a much larger vessel of 101 tons. James Rogers was still the owner and James Walker again was the captain of the *Fly*. Thomas Walker wrote that his trade in Africa with resident European traders James and William Cleveland was "as agreed" and the expected total for the two ships would be 240 captive Africans.

On April 29, 1789 the *Fly* was dispatched for Jamaica, with 45 abducted Africans aboard, and was expected to return directly to Africa for 45 more. On May 14th, Capt. Thomas Walker wrote to James Rogers in Bristol (who had a one-quarter share in the voyage of the *Ruby*) with the information that the *Fly* had sailed, and "as she returns I will dispatch her immediately with her full number, for Jamaica again."

The *Fly* arrived at Jamaica with all of the captives alive, but the agents, Thomas and William Salmon & Company, complained of the miserable condition of the slaves. The agents commented on the poor health of people who had been stowed like sardines for weeks. The captives were sold on July 28th. The *Fly* sailed from Jamaica on July 29th "after a long and

tedious time in gitting men” to serve as new crew members.

Ironically, on August 15th, the day after the *Fly* had wrecked at the Florida Keys, Thomas Walker in Africa wrote that if that vessel did not return he would have to leave 40 captives behind. Was he anticipating a shipboard mutiny by the Africans on the *Ruby*, or was he concerned about the seaworthiness of the *Fly*? At some unknown time that fall, the *Fly* having not returned, the *Ruby* finally set sail, with 175 abducted Africans. The 170 who survived were landed in Kingston on November 18, 1789.

On August 27, 1789, five British sailors appeared in an office in St. Augustine, which was for many years the seat of Spanish power in Florida. The sailors gave a joint statement as to how they came to be there. It was taken down in Spanish, and some names were changed into that language. Also, the sloop *Fly* was recorded in this document as a schooner (“goleta”). The sailors were Diego Roberts, Juan Soursby, Rules, Simon Robertson, and Juan Walker. Their vessel was shipwrecked on “el Cabo Florida” (the translation is “the Florida cape,” a term at the time for the tip of the Florida peninsula) at 9:00 at night on August 14th, they said. The captain, Diego Walker, and one other sailor had been taken aboard a fishing sloop from Providence in the Bahamas. The five men had sailed in the boat of their lost ship to St. Augustine. The vessel, they said, was the *Fly*, owned by Diego Rogers of Bristol in England, and the (human) cargo had been consigned to Seniors Gauntlett and Salmon, merchants of Rio Negro in Jamaica, and they were in route to Sierra Leone on the coast of Africa “to get 45 Negroes.”

It is unknown what happened to these men afterwards, or to the two men taken to the Bahamas; but it is a fact that at least one of the men made it back to England, for the Lloyds Insurance List of December 25, 1789, lists, according to Robert Marx, “*Fly*, Captain Walker, sailing from Jamaica to Africa, was lost on the Florida Keys.” Because of the term Florida Keys, rather than Cabo Florida, that information likely came from the men taken to the English-speaking Bahamas.

Epilogues

James Rogers, not only owner of the *Fly* but owner and part owner of many other slave ships, according to Hugh Thomas in his book *The Slave Trade* (1997), lost his fortune, which he had gained from the miseries of others, in a financial crash in Bristol. Thomas wrote that Rogers

had been “the most vociferous in his denunciations” of abolishing the trade in human beings.

William Wordsworth, a fellow abolitionist, wrote a sonnet to Clarkson when Great Britain’s 1807 anti-slave trade law was passed. It reads, in part:

*Clarkson! It was an obstinate Hill to climb. . . .
The blood Writing is for ever torn,
And Thou henceforth shall have a good Man’s calm,
A great Man’s happiness; thy zeal shall find
Repose at length, firm Friend of human kind!*

It is unknown whether Clarkson ever learned of the end of the miserable little slave ship *Fly*, at the Florida Keys, two years after he had examined that vessel at Bristol. After the 1834 abolition of slavery in Jamaica, the very place the *Fly* delivered Africans into slavery on her final voyage, a settlement of freed people was named Clarksonville, to honor Thomas Clarkson.

Note

* Gail Swanson is an historian whose work focuses on the Florida Keys region. Sources on the life of Clarkson include Adam Hochschild’s *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).

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