Slave Ship Artifacts Exhibited


Over 7,500 artifacts recovered from the British slave ship Henrietta Marie were exhibited from February through May of this year at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida in Miami. This exhibit had previously sparked controversy during an engagement in Los Angeles, where local activists had complained that it overemphasized African participation in the slave trade.

In 1701 the Henrietta Marie set sail from London bound for Calabar, West Africa, now part of Cameroon. There the ship's crew exchanged beads, weapons, and metal for African captives. It took 14 weeks to ferry the human cargo to Kingston, Jamaica. A total of 188 people were exchanged for sugar, spices, and rum before the Henrietta Marie set sail for home. The return cargo also included a significant quantity of beads and pewter that had not been successfully traded in Africa. It is thought that the ship fell victim to a hurricane as it passed through the Florida straits. Pushed onto a reef, it sank in 40 feet of water near Key West. Nine British crew members perished.

The wreck was first discovered by divers in 1972. However, the newspaper account provides no detail concerning the investigation of the site.

The exhibit included 90 pairs of shackles, pewterware, elephant tusks, firearms, and an extensive collection of glass trade beads. While the artifacts were presented in glass display cases, a reproduction pair of shackles was included that visitors could handle. The exhibit also included a postscript: the story of a group of African-American scuba divers who placed a monument at the ship wreck site in 1992 to honor the memory of all Africans who suffered during the slave trade.