



Nantes  
June 2014

### **The black slave trade**

Letter from the corvette captain Gaël de la Bretonne from the 16th of May 1795.

Back in the harbor of Nantes, I noticed that there was a lot of agitation, a sudden moment of folly had taken over the people.

As soon as my feet touched the quay, I learned that the king had his head cut off by a slicing machine called guillotin. We had a lot of trouble unloading our freight. The crowd had lost its mind and wanted to snatch our honourably conquered spoils. Some were climbing onto the ship and we had to chase them away using a bludgeon.

I let my second in command deal with the freight and made my way through the crowd escorted by four strong men to go directly at my ship-owner's. By honour I owed him the fortune of our trip. Indeed he had bought the ship and provided all things necessary for the 8 months perilous trip going in a triangle between Nantes, Africa and America. Stepping into his home I saw him as flat as a negro facing a mechanical elephant from the jungle. He was muttering his words, his brain in the grip of an itch that I had never seen in him before.

He simply said to me: "I have friends in high places, the city is under the orders of Monsieur Charrier who sends each night common peoples on small boats that he sinks, drowning those unfortunates in the Loire.

It is a daily sight that a lot of people witness.

All this is appalling and gloomy.

Sir, keep the goods and hurry out of France which today has become the worst of countries...."

He disappeared and left me here alone in the immense meeting room, situated quai de la Fosse.

So I left that place with a disturbed mind and went back to the ship. Ready to properly share our duly gained money with our current crew.

One of the loyal negro I had chosen to sell him to some family told me:

"Sir, this is the revolution, set me free".

My blood which is usually controlled hit me with so much violence that I grasped a walking stick and hit him on the face "You rat!", I cried, "whip this monkey 10 times with a lash!".

Which the crew executed immediately. "Get the other 12 out and treat them the same way."

Meanwhile a group of parliamentarians climbing on the rail wearing feathery hats on their heads and tricolor cockades were glaring at me without respect; they were armed. One of them took out a sealed paper from his pocket which he unfolded: "Citizens! In the name of the temporary government and its absolute authority we consider your ship as belonging to the people of France, it is therefore requisitioned for the welfare of the Republic".

It astonished me! "I am captain Gaël de la Bretonne, this building belongs to the crown of France and its ship-owner leaving place de la Petite Hollande.

We, at the risk of our lives, have crossed the sea from Nantes to Africa filling a freight of negroes: more than 700 hundreds rebels bind by the feet in the cages of the ship to get to the Americas and sell our goods in the island of Santo Domingo.

The pestilential smell of those rats was an inconvenience for us during all the crossing and we lost half of the freight, putting up with the moans, the suffocating and the begging cries of that herd. Despite all that we managed to get a good price which we are bringing back today in the harbor of Nantes.

We had to suffer storms where many times the boat almost sunk.

Only our courage and our loyalty were able to get us through those predicaments, furthermore we suffered two attempts of rebellion in the crew because of how extreme the conditions of this transport were for each of us.

Water was rationed.

Everyday we were losing bondmen that we were throwing into the sea.

The conditions were lowering the duly earned money.

We halted on the island of XXX for a week to make our negroes fit to be seen.

Again some were thrown in the water far too exhausted to be presented on the market.

Those black hunks were bothering our minds. We had to take them out on the deck in little groups so that they would regain some vitality.

After examination of the bodies, only a quarter of the freight could be properly put for sale.

The others too damaged were sold off in groups.

In spite of everything, that trade had provided for the crew's salary. And we were finally able to come back to the harbor of Nantes. After terrible adventures here we are at the end of the triangle; exhausted from having been through those torments we are proud of having accomplished a sales duty."

"Sir", said the policeman, "your words belong to a navy of which we are grateful that today is in other hands, the hands of the government of the Republic and no matter what title you have you are in our eyes nothing but a citizen at the service of the people.

Keep your blacks, we are battling against England.

Cut heads are flourishing on the pavement of Nantes and if you wish to keep yours, disappear from this building with the crew and let us handle the goods.

We are the march towards democracy: we will interrogate you, and if your convictions meet ours, you will be commissioned again to resume your services with commissaries of the people.

Those black-skinned monkeys are not of our business in any way! Meanwhile, I command you to lower your colours to replace them with these ones."

Someone then got took out a flag with blue, white and red stripes that we had to hold up in place of the one of the kingdom of France.

Raising my eyes I saw hundreds of ships displaying the same flag.

As they had no way of directing the crew, they dragged our negroes into the hold and made them into pieces that they threw in the harbor.

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