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Slavery-Era Disclosure and Atlantic Commerce

By Keith R. Allen and Jelmer Vos

For more than a decade, many historians have been caught up in a rising tide of interest in the connections between big business and National Socialism. A good deal of this interest may be traced back to the U.S. legal system, where the possibility of legal action led some companies to fund research on their predecessors' activities in Nazi-occupied Europe. This coming to terms with the past via the U.S. legal system extends to other historical eras. Less well known—but arguably no less relevant—are new U.S. municipal and state laws compelling corporations to disclose their historical relationships to Atlantic slavery.

In late 2005 and early 2006, we set out to establish historical connections between a Dutch bank, ABN AMRO, and slavery in the Atlantic world. We did so formally on behalf of LaSalle Bank Corporation, at the time a part of the ABN AMRO group, as consultants to History Associates Incorporated (HAI), an American for-profit research entity with experience conducting similar investigations in the United States. Representatives of the Dutch parent company played an important role in defining our project, going beyond the requirement specified in the City of Chicago ordinance requiring entities conducting business with that city to disclose historic profits from, or investments in, African slavery in the United States. Instead, over the course of five months, our small group of historical consultants was charged with the more daunting task of locating and evaluating records of all Dutch predecessors in light of slavery connections *throughout the Americas*. To make matters more complicated, we were also called upon to find and examine the “slavery-era” records of select foreign subsidiaries in Brazil, England, France, Germany, and Sweden.

The first steps were taken by Keith Allen, who had moved from Washington, D.C., to Berlin several weeks earlier to establish

HAI's business in Europe. Allen enlisted as consultants several postdoctoral researchers, the most important of whom was Jelmer Vos, whose professional experience with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD) and command of relevant languages made him central to the project. Keith Allen and Jelmer Vos, together with two other first-rate consulting historians, Johan Joor and Arno Bornebroek, immediately set out to review records of pre-1888 ABN AMRO predecessors in the Netherlands (in 1888, Brazil became the last American nation to outlaw African slavery, hence this cutoff year). Allen rented a project office at the Dutch National Archives in The Hague, where the records of several predecessors were located; the building is next to the Dutch National Library, which offered us access to secondary literature. He spent much of his time during those first weeks ensuring we had left no stone unturned in searching for Dutch predecessors and their records, listen-

ing carefully to consultants in one-on-one conversations in archival reading rooms, attempting to understand the day-to-day challenges of their prodigious task and relaying their—at times rather critical—findings back to the ABN AMRO Historical Archives, LaSalle Bank in Chicago, and HAI's home office. During this period, Vos and Allen also drafted a brief research primer on Dutch involvement in Atlantic slavery. As is often the case when work needs to be done in a hurry, our group pulled together quickly, reviewing documents and making face-to-face inquiries at more than 75 repositories in the United States, Europe, and South America. In April 2006, our commissioned report was published on the ABN AMRO web site.¹

The swirl of Atlantic commerce during the period of investigation produced a wide range of connections between African slavery in the Americas and the world of international finance. This is in itself little surprising, knowing that many financiers

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of that era were also heavily involved in commercial and manufacturing activities. Indeed, many of the ABN AMRO predecessors were merchant bankers, rather than purely financial institutions. As such, some were involved in slavery-related businesses to varying degrees, from the trade in tropical produce to the financing of plantations on which these commodities were produced.

We have chosen here to highlight the most significant results of our queries. First, using the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database we established several links between ABN AMRO predecessors and the trade in African slaves to the New World, most notably through the purchase of stakes in slaving voyages, the supply of credit, and maritime insurance.² Outfitting a slaving expedition required large outlays of cash, more than most individuals could afford alone. Most voyages were

therefore mounted by a group of investors, each of whom held a certain "interest" in the voyage. Typically, the profits or losses of the voyage were distributed among the investors based on the amount of their interest in the voyage. At the Centre des archives du monde du travail in Roubaix, France, we substantiated claims by Swiss historian Herbert Lüthy that a number of 18th-century Protestant bankers, including an ABN AMRO predecessor, held such stakes in slaving voyages.³ Comparing entries from the account books of Mallet Frères with vessel names in TSTD, we determined that this French predecessor held interests in several vessels connected with the transatlantic slave trade during the late 1700s.

Similarly, the house of Mallet as well as another French predecessor, Banque André, had business dealings with numerous

persons and firms which TSTD identified as outfitters of slaving voyages. For example, the Nantes houses of Ambroise Perrotin, Auguste Simon, and Fruchard Fils all received substantial loans from Mallet at the time they organized slaving voyages to Africa. Meantime, in 1819 the bank of André negotiated a loan of 15,000 French Francs with trader Vasse-Mancel from Le Havre, who organized a slaving voyage to Senegal five years later; in 1823, they arranged payments on behalf of Philippon & Cie from Le Havre for purchases in Liverpool (including cowries) for a slaving voyage to West Africa and Brazil.

The business of transporting goods by ship to Africa for the slave trade could be profitable, but there was always a large risk of losses, too. One method of counterbalancing this risk was to organize a group of wealthy investors willing to insure the vessel's expensive cargo, usually in return for a portion of the profits. In the Municipal Archives of Rotterdam, we found evidence that one Dutch predecessor, Chabot, was a broker of maritime insurance, which included merchandise carried to Africa to purchase slaves. Surviving logbooks of the Chabot firm indicated that in 1774 it negotiated the insurance on cargo carried by the *Vrouw Maria Isabella*, among other vessels. The slave trade database identified this ship as a slaver, which that year set out on a voyage to Africa and Surinam. It is worth pointing out that the role of merchant bankers in the maritime insurance business has so far received only cursory attention in the historiography of the Dutch in the Atlantic slave trade.

Meanwhile, our research has shown that contemporary bankers in the Netherlands were most commonly involved in American slavery through a peculiarly Dutch credit system that was innovative in Europe at the time.⁴ To finance colonial activities in the Americas, Dutch financiers developed a unique type of loan instrument called a "*negotiatie*." These loans were financed by a syndicate of shareholders and granted to planters in the form of a mortgage on the plantation and its assets, including slaves. Several ABN AMRO predecessors were indirectly involved in these credit arrangements, either by selling and buying plantation bonds on behalf of their clients, or by dealing in these securities on their own account. For one particular predecessor, we found evidence that it acted as a broker and administrator of *negoti-*

Award for Scholarly Distinction

Call for Nominations for the 2009 Awards

The AHA Council established the American Historical Association Award for Scholarly Distinction in 1984 to honor senior historians in the United States. Since then, the award has been conferred on 60 eminent scholars.

AHA members are now invited to submit nominations for the 2009 awards. According to the selection criteria, recipients must be senior historians of the highest distinction who have spent the bulk of their professional careers in the United States. Generally, they must also be of emeritus rank, if from academic life, or equivalent standing otherwise. Under normal circumstances the award is not intended to go to former presidents of the Association; rather, the intent is to honor persons not otherwise recognized by the profession to an extent commensurate with their contributions.

A nominating jury appointed by the AHA Council will review the nominations and will recommend up to three individuals for approval at the Council's spring 2009 meeting. The honoree(s) will be announced at the Association's 124th annual meeting to be held January 7–10, 2010, in San Diego.

A complete nomination should include (1) a letter of nomination that contains specific details addressing the criteria listed above and (2) a two- to three-page c.v. of the nominee with a summary of major publications and career highlights. Additional letters of support can also be submitted, provided the total number of pages stipulated below is not exceeded. The entire package should not exceed 10 pages in length. Please send the material to Sharon K. Tune, Assistant Director, American Historical Association, 400 A Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003-3889.

atie loans to plantation owners in the Dutch Guyana region. The records of Ketwich & Voombergh, located in the Amsterdam Municipal Archives, contain information regarding plantations in the Guyanas offered as collateral on loans between 1772 and 1810. We also discovered two instances where Ketwich & Voombergh became partial owners of a plantation after the original owner defaulted on his or her debt.

In a program broadcast on Dutch radio in May 2006, a month after the release of our report, University of Leiden historian Gert Oostindie expressed concerns about restrictions placed on research by ABN AMRO, which, in his view, had an interest in concealing past activities in Surinam, Holland's main plantation colony during the 18th century. Oostindie furthermore stated that the findings presented in the report lacked historical context.⁵

In fact, we enjoyed unfettered access in carrying out our investigations and writing our final report. Surinam does not figure prominently in this report because we found little archival evidence of any predecessor's direct involvement with slavery in this colony. The research described in our publicly available report was written for a highly literate, nonacademic, professional audience. That said, we believe the report is of some academic interest. Through detailed research we have explored links that existed between—mainly Protestant—Parisian bankers and numerous merchants in the port towns of the French Atlantic coast. In the Netherlands, our research in the ledger account books of several banking firms from the 18th and 19th centuries has demonstrated the various levels of interest that Dutch financial institutions and their clients held in the *negotiatie* loan system, a form of finance that remains poorly understood. Participation in commissioned research sharpened our knowledge of a fascinating set of archival sources, pointing toward research academic scholars might develop in greater detail as they explore connections between slavery and the world of Atlantic commerce.

Keith R. Allen works as a consulting historian in Berlin, Germany, where he also teaches at the Berlin Fachhochschule für Wirtschaft und Technik. His most recent essay considers applied history in the United States and Europe (to be published in a German-language volume edited by Wolfgang Hardtwig).

Jelmer Vos is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centro de História de Além-Mar in Lisbon. He is the coauthor of "The Dutch in the Atlantic World: New Perspectives from the Slave Trade with Particular Reference to the African Origins of the Traffic," in David Eltis and David Richardson (eds.), Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Notes

1. www.group.abnamro.com/about/history/themes/slavery/chicago.cfm.
2. The second edition of the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (first published on CD-ROM by Cambridge University Press in 1999)

will become freely accessible online in 2008 under the name Voyages.

3. Herbert Lüthy, *La Banque Protestante en France de la Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes à la Révolution*, 2 vols. (Zurich: NZZ Verlag, 2005).

4. For further details, see Marten G. Buist, *At spes non fracta: Hope & Co. 1770–1815. Merchant Bankers and Diplomats at Work* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974).

5. <http://geschiedenis.vpronlprogrammas/3299530afleveringen/27322186items/28359567/>. A brief summary of Oostindie's comments appeared in a Dutch national newspaper. See "Bank weigerde vrij slavernijonderzoek," *De Volkskrant*, May 13, 2006.

The Beveridge Family Teaching Prize (K–12)

Established in 1995, this prize honors the Beveridge family's longstanding commitment to the AHA and K–12 teaching. Friends and family members endowed this award to recognize excellence and innovation in elementary, middle school, and secondary history teaching, including career contributions and specific initiatives. The prize will be awarded on a two-year cycle rotation: in even-numbered years, to an individual; in odd-numbered years, to a group.

The 2009 prize will be awarded to an individual either for excellence in teaching or for an innovative initiative applicable to an entire field.

The prize carries a \$1500 cash award (plus travel expenses to the annual meeting) and will be awarded at the 124th annual meeting, January 7–10, 2010 in San Diego, CA.

Each letter of nomination must include the name and address of the nominated individual. After receipt of this nomination letter, this individual will be contacted and asked to submit (electronically or by mail) the following: vita (no more than 3 pages) of the primary participants, an essay of no more than five pages in length describing the contribution or product, discussing the achievement or innovation in approach, development, and impact and summarizing the historical scholarship utilized. Up to ten pages of appropriate supporting materials can be included (i.e. letters of support and course materials, excerpts from a text book, or other evidence of contribution).

Only the letter of nomination should be mailed (no faxes) to:

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The deadline for the letter of nomination is **March 17, 2009**.