

ABSTRACT

“The anticipated rewards of their exertions”:
State Capture and the Economics of Slave Trade Interdiction, 1808-1820

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The British settlement at Sierra Leone was founded in 1787, with an explicitly abolitionist purpose. The settlement’s representatives in London, principally the directors of the Sierra Leone Company, maintained that the settlement would prove that free labourers could produce tropical commodities as profitably and efficiently as slave labourers. However, by about 1800, the Company’s capital was exhausted, and the settlement survived on Parliamentary grants. In 1807, the slave trade was abolished in the British empire. In 1808, the Sierra Leone Company dissolved, and the settlement passed from the Sierra Leone Company to the Crown. Abolition transformed the economy of the new Crown Colony. The principal instruments deployed by Britain for fighting the slave trade in West Africa immediately after abolition were the Royal Navy and the Vice-Admiralty Court at Sierra Leone. The Navy interdicted slave ships and the Court condemned the ships and their goods – including captured slaves – as prizes to the captors, along with a bounty for each liberated slave. These two institutions monetised abolition, and created a new locus of economic activity in Sierra Leone.

In this paper, I explore the explanatory power of ‘state capture,’ a concept borrowed from political science and development economics, in a study of early nineteenth-century Sierra Leone. ‘State capture’ refers to the infiltration of an ostensibly neutral state institution – like the judiciary – by a vested interest. From 1808 until the early 1820s, Macaulay & Babington (a merchant-banking firm whose senior partner, Zachary Macaulay, was a prominent London abolitionist) enjoyed a near-monopoly over the transactions associated with the condemnation and sale of slave ships in the Vice-Admiralty Court. This prominent position in the economic life of the Colony gave Zachary Macaulay considerable influence over the Court and over anti-slavery policy in West Africa more generally. Moreover, the firm’s agents in Freetown exerted significant control over which communities in the Colony received contracts associated with the Court. The main colonial population excluded from the spoils of antislavery were the putative beneficiaries of abolition: the growing number of recently freed former slaves settled in the Colony. Based on sources from archives in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Sierra Leone, I reconstruct the market centred on the Vice-Admiralty Court. In counter-point, I read traces and silences in the archives to show how former slaves struggled to lift themselves above bare life in the shadow of the institution that saved them from the Middle Passage.