

# African American Music Spirituals

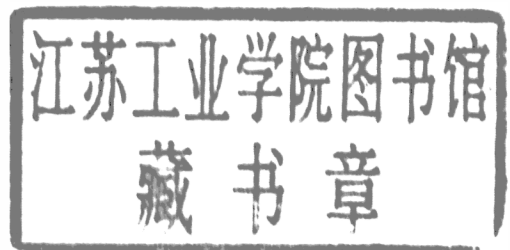
by Hansonia Caldwell, Ph.D.

THIRD EDITION

*AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC*  
*SPIRITUALS*

The Fundamental Communal Music  
of Black Americans

BY HANSONIA L. CALDWELL, Ph. D.



IKORO COMMUNICATIONS, INC.  
CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA

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First Edition, 2000  
Second Edition, 2001  
Academic Edition 2003  
Holman Special Edition 2003  
Third Edition, 2003/Second printing 2004

**ISBN 0-9650441-5-7**

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Book designed by Charles Harriford; Cover art by Biola Shofu

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The cover is the work of Biola Shofu, a talented portrait artist from Mozambique who now works in Los Angeles. She gives it the title *Fettered Freedom*, and it represents a contemporary African Diaspora expression of the combined pain and strength that contributed to the creation of the Spiritual. I also want to acknowledge the encouragement and editorial assistance of Rosemarie Cook-Glover and Dr. J. Harrison Wilson and of my husband and publisher, Charles Harriford. Finally, I must acknowledge my colleagues in the Music and Africana Studies departments of CSU Dominguez Hills, and thank the University for the sabbatical leave that provided the time needed for the initial completion of this project, and the Ford Foundation for providing support for the University's Global Diasporas Project, bringing to the campus distinguished Harlem Renaissance and African Diaspora Music scholars and performers whose expertise helped shape new thinking about this important body of work.

# PREFACE

This publication is dedicated to the members of the Dominguez Hills Jubilee Choir, to students of my African American Music, African Diaspora Arts and Religion, and Arts of Social Protest classes, and to future teachers, singers and audiences, who share in the commitment to understand, preserve and celebrate the songs of African American history. I have spent many years introducing these wonderful 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century songs to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century students and audiences. In so doing, I have presented the perspectives of many of the different writers who have analyzed this repertoire.

Please be advised that a comprehensive overview of the Spiritual must draw upon the work of scholars of many disciplines – anthropology, Africana Studies, history, theology, philosophy, sociology, economics, political science, literature, musicology, and ethnomusicology. And one turns to the voices of performers for a unique understanding of this repertoire. These scholars and artists do not always agree with each other. Sometimes they don't even acknowledge each other. And, over time, their opinions change. This study is intended to provide a concise contemporary synthesis of the thinking of our leading scholars and performers, and to frame the 384-year development of the songs into an accessible presentation. This edition includes research emanating from more primary sources, e.g. slave narratives and interviews. The appendices are intended to be a resource, one that will be useful particularly for the Black history sing-alongs of the multicultural world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My sincere thanks go to the artists, scholars, students and friends who have inspired and contributed to the book. This includes special gratitude to two colleagues – Dr. Albert McNeil, UC Davis professor emeritus, whose dedication to the tradition and dignity of this artform gives continuing affirmation of the need for the research, and to Dr. Maulana Karenga, CSU Long Beach professor of black studies, for his inspiring scholarship and insightful analysis of cultural process. I also must acknowledge members of the Georgia Laster Branch of the National Association of Negro Musicians for their dedication to the collection, presentation and interpretation of this repertoire, and extend many thanks to the various community choirs with whom I have performed these wonderful songs – the Southern California Alpha Kappa Alpha Chorus, the Delta Sigma Theta Choraliers, and the Methodist Male Chorus of Los Angeles, all of whom join voices every January to celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. in song; Los Cancioneros of Los Angeles; The Great Hymns Choir of Baltimore; and the choirs of LA's Holman United Methodist Church and Community United Presbyterian Church, and the Knox Presbyterian Churches of Los Angeles and Baltimore.



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# INTRODUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF THE SPIRITUAL

## Definitions

Spirituals are empowering, living communal songs originally created between c.1720 and 1865 by Africans who were enslaved in the United States.

Interestingly, there is much etymological debate about the term “Spiritual,” with the *Harvard New Dictionary of Music* identifying several terms that can be viewed as synonymous: spirituals; Negro-spirituals; African-American spirituals; black spirituals. The word “spiritual” is rarely used in 18th and 19th century documentation. In most of these early references, the songs are identified as slave songs, slave hymns, plantation songs, plantation hymns, cabin songs, or jubilee songs. Twentieth century African American tenor Roland Hayes calls them “Aframerican Religious Folksongs” in the title of his collection, *My Songs: Aframerican Religious Folksongs*, explaining in the Forward that *the term “Negro” is a misnomer when taken to mean that in anything but color the slaves within the borders of the various Southern states, or the various plantations - or even anywhere - were of one universal type* (p. viii). Throughout the twentieth century the title used for this category of song often is directly connected with the political philosophy and the sociological issues of the writer and/or the era of the discussion. The songs are studied and analyzed by historians, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists and ethnomusicologists as “cultural artifacts” or historical documents because of the place and the historical era in which they originated. As “folk songs” they are often identified as “traditional” music, in that, in their original form, they present the customs and beliefs of the community in cultural expressions that are sustained over a very long period of time. They are the voice of our African ancestors. They are the voice of African Diaspora cultural memory.

This enduring body of communal music has emerged with a name that connects them with things that are generically described as holy, divine, sacred and religious, and with lyrics that often are interpreted by theologians and philosophers. Indeed, one notes that a few scholars suggest that the songs were also created within the churches of free blacks of the North, through the leadership of traveling black ministers. There is a strong sacred presence in this repertoire - in its genre title and in much of its lyrics. However, it includes a broad repertoire that, in African holistic cultural tradition, crosses all boundaries, blending and uniting the sacred with the secular. In this case, “Spiritual” is an omnibus term for a rich repertoire that includes sorrow songs, shouts, signal songs, jubilees, work songs, field hollers and children’s game songs.

Over the more than three centuries of its evolution, this body of song has developed from a communal voice into an economically empowering and/or exploited popular voice, and then into an African centered

national and international voice -- a three-part analytical framework that is best articulated in the cultural rootedness component of Kwaiaida philosophy, as expressed by philosopher and Black Studies scholar Maulana Karenga. In his paper, "Kwaiaida Philosophy," presented at the 25th Annual Seminar in Social Theory and Practice of the Kwaiaida Institute of Pan-African Studies, Dr. Karenga establishes this three-part cultural framework, as follows:

- a. *Communal - root culture of a people in process of creating, sustaining and developing itself;*
- b. *Popular Culture - commodified communal culture reshaped for societal consumption; and*
- c. *National Culture - self-conscious thought and practice which extracts and develops the best of communal culture and offers it as most representative of a people.* (See pages 9 - 10)

The Spiritual is the musical expression of African communal culture that has evolved through this three-part cultural framework.

The evolution of the Spiritual over the centuries, has led to significant complexity in understanding the definition of the category. There is extensive writing that grapples with the many parts of the definition of this important repertoire, as articulated in the various perspectives below:

**FOLK SONG:** *Every folk song, verse, and melody is the product of a folk community. The community supplies its themes and its subject matter.... Within the community and nowhere else, are its conventions, its social, moral, theological, and legal principles, its open and hidden prides and prejudices. Many of these run counter to established law and custom in the larger society.....Folk music, both old and contemporary, is representative of the people's ancient traditions as well as an indicator of their current tastes.*

John Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, p.129

**FOLK MUSIC:** *The product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present...[to] the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives.*

International Folk Music Conference, 1954

Cited by John Lovell in *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, p. 12

Note that some contemporary scholars do not use the term "folk song" or "folk music" when identifying and defining the Spiritual, because the music of the "folk" category has been connected to a stereotyping identity coded as "culturally unsophisticated" and lacking in profundity and complexity, as exemplified in the following definition:

**FOLKSONG:** *The musical repertory and tradition of communities (particularly rural), as opposed to art music, which is the work of musically trained composers. It generally develops anonymously, usually among the un-educated classes, and originally was (and may still be) transmitted orally, thereby becoming subject to modification.*

*The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 1969

In this instance, the phrase "musically trained composers" generally refers to individuals who have attended school to study music. The assumption that is built into the *Harvard Dictionary* definition is that their stud-

ies result in “art music.” Individuals who have not attended school for musical education, are dismissed as “un-educated,” thereby invalidating the historic “apprentice” model of training that exists throughout the world. Their creations become known as “folk.” Some scholars find this interpretation to be limited and insulting. Still, not everyone identifies the term “folk” as a cultural insult:

**FOLK ARTS:** *I decided that, as Robeson said, the purpose of art is not just to show life as it is, but also to show life as it should be. And in this context, I found that folk art does exactly that. It not only records life as life is being experienced, but much of the music....is filled with hope, with inspiration and the promise of a greater and a brighter tomorrow.*

Harry Belafonte. “A Musical History of America’s Africans” in the book that accompanies the anthology – *The Long Road To Freedom – An Anthology of Black Music*, page 20.

It is sometimes difficult to define the Spiritual because the definition that scholars use often emerges from their interpretation of the lyrics of the songs. The single word, Spiritual, thereby can mean many things, as evident in this expansive definition:

**SPIRITUALS:** Citing John Lovell, Samuel A. Floyd writes – *They are quasi-religious songs of longing and aspiration as well as chronicles of the black slave experience in America – documents of impeccable truth and reliability – for they record the transition of the slave from African to African American, from slave to freedman, and the experiences that the African underwent in the transition.*

Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. *The Power of Black Music – Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States.*  
Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 40

Over the centuries of their existence, the songs are changed by the people who perform them, leading to some controversy --

**FOLK ELEMENTS OF FOLK MUSIC:** *Folk elements do not necessarily make folk music. Only when pure and in the form originally used by the people for themselves, do they yield us true folk music. This is why real folk music is rare; but it is the most precious musical form we have.*

Alain Locke. *The Negro and His Music.* [1936] Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1968., p. 12

**FOLK SONG DOCUMENTATION:** Guy and Candie Carawan introduce their collection of Civil Rights songs with this Pete Seeger quotation: *One woman on the Selma march saw me trying to notate a melody, and said with a smile, ‘Don’t you know you can’t write down freedom songs?’* The collectors go on to explain *All I can do is repeat what my father once told me: ‘A folksong in a book is like a photograph of a bird in flight.’*

*Sing For Freedom*, 1992, p. 12

**FOLK MUSIC AND NATIONALISM:** *At the root of the problem of uniting national and musical style is the idea that a nation’s folk music must somehow reflect the inner characteristics of that nation’s culture, the essential aspects of its emotional life – its very self. This feeling has at times given rise among the general population as well as among folk song scholars, to a rather politically nationalistic view of folk music.*

Bruno Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents.* Prentice-Hall, 1965. p. 6.

**A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF FOLK MUSIC:** Note that in the early twenty-first century, the Spiritual has become part of a larger, popular, multicultural and commodified repertoire encompassing Spirituals, blues, gospel, traditional country, zydeco, tejano and native American pow-wow, all now given the umbrella title of “American Roots Music.”

Additional perspectives on the Spiritual, its etymology, definition and impact, may be found in Appendix I of this study.

## The Evolution Timeline Overview

**The Foundation**                From the beginning of time in Africa - to 1619 - to 1641 to 1865. The foundation for the development of the Spiritual is established in the flourishing musical practices of Africa and in the development of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

### The Period Of Communal Creation

1720/1760-1865            The folk melodies that become known as the Spiritual are created, including the Ring Shout, the Field Holler, and the Work Songs. The lyrics of the songs are imbued with the theology, sociology, and philosophy of the enslaved Africans.

1750s - 1865                Documentation I - The preservation of the Spirituals begins.

1820 - 1865                The Spirituals provide a significant political voice.

1861 - 1865                The Civil War is waged, the institution of slavery is demolished, and the Period of Creation concludes.

### The Period Of Preservation And Popular Adaptation

1867 - 1930s                Documentation II - The melodies are collected, published and analyzed.

1870 - 1940s                Spirituals emerge in the minstrel show, the Broadway show and the Hollywood musical.

1871 - Present              The Jubilee Singers are established at Fisk University, beginning the collegiate "Jubilee Choir" tradition.

1871 - Present              Composers create hymn and concert arrangements of the Spirituals for choirs to perform.

1890s                        Spirituals are used to help develop a voice of nationalism in the concert music of the United States.

1890s - Present            Spirituals inspire African American poets.

1890s - Present            The Blues emerges as the Secular Spiritual.

1901 - Present              Composers create instrumental arrangements of Spirituals for concert performance.

1916 - Present	Composers create art-song arrangements of Spirituals for concert performance.
1919 - Present	Organizations are established to support the preservation of the Spiritual
1920s - Present	Jazz musicians perform interpretations of specific Spirituals and create music directly inspired by Spirituals.
1920s - Present	The all-black professional choir emerges, with the mission to perform the Spiritual.
1921 - Present	Spirituals merge with gospel music.
1925 - Present	The style for the performance of the Spiritual is debated.
1927 - Present	Spirituals provide the music for concert dance ensembles.

#### The Period Of National And International Expression

1930s - Present	Spirituals develop an international voice.
1939 - Present	Spirituals provide the musical voice for protest.
1960s - Present	Professional, amateur and university-based choirs flourish.
1960s - Present	New documentation and dissemination practices emerge as African Americans affirm heritage through music.



## The Foundation

### From the beginning of time in Africa - to 1619 - to 1865

African instrumental and vocal musical practice flourishes on the continent of Africa. An extensive musical practice develops that includes the evolution of many different musical types (e.g. ceremonial music, courtship music, healing music, festival music, warrior songs, praise songs, hunting songs, boating songs, work songs, religious music and recreational music). Sophisticated performance practices evolve, led by griots and various instrumentalists but generally performed by whole communities. These practices are passed down through the centuries via the oral traditions of the communities.

Eventually up to 21 million Africans are kidnapped from various countries in central and west Africa and brought to the Americas. Historians debate the actual number, but the figures of the transatlantic slave trade truly are overwhelming. One of the most recent studies, *The Slave Trade—The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870*, by Hugh Thomas, estimates that the number of Africans transported in chains to the Americas by traders from Portugal, Britain and British North America, Spain, France and the Netherlands, varies between 10 million to 15 million, with an additional 4 million to 6 million perishing en route. The total reaches between 14 and 21 million people.

One notes that there are contemporary historians who recoil at the vagueness of the description of this African Holocaust. Some scholars within the discipline of History attack other scholars from the disciplines of History and Anthropology, describing them as purveyors of speculation and formulators of cultural retention theories based upon “a historical generalizations.” They want to know specifically who was kidnapped, on what date, and, ultimately, where this person was taken. Their scholarly challenges, however, do not seem to invalidate widely accepted conclusions about the retention of “Africanisms” within African Diaspora cultures. There are exciting recent studies being made with the objective of identifying the personal histories of individual captive Africans and, in general, developing more specific documentation of the enslavement experience. Readers are referred to the UNESCO Slave Route Project, launched in 1994 to trace the slave trade from the original points of enslavement in the African interior, through the coastal (and Saharan) sites through which the enslaved Africans were exported from the region, to the areas in the Americas and the Islamic world into which they were imported. (See Paul E. Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion under Slavery,” in *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation, II*, 1997.)

The fact is that history evolves out of a dialogue between the present and the past. These studies actually build on the work of anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits (*The Myth of the Negro Past*), scholar Joseph E. Holloway (*Africanisms in American Culture*), and others, seeking to identify the specific ethnic, linguistic, religious and overall cultural lineage of individuals and, through this study, better understand the Africanisms within the full contemporary diaspora. Meanwhile, even without specific written documentation, it is understood that enslaved Africans bring their musical practices to the new homelands. Booker T. Washington, founding president of the Tuskegee Institute, comments upon this artistic continuum in the 1904 Preface he writes to the Samuel Coleridge Taylor *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies*:

*Negro music is essentially spontaneous. In Africa it sprang into life at the war dance, at funerals, and at marriage festivals. Upon this African foundation the plantation songs of the South were built. According to the testimony of African students at Tuskegee there are in the native African melodies strains that*

*reveal the close relationship between the Negro music of America and Africa, but the imagery and sentiments to which the plantation songs give expression are the outcome of the conditions in America under which the transported children of Africa lived.*

Scholars from many different fields agree. Berkeley scholar Lawrence W. Levine joins numerous others in suggesting –

*Though they varied widely in language, institutions, gods, and familial patterns, they shared a fundamental outlook toward the past, present, and future and common means of cultural expression which could well have constituted the basis of a sense of common identity and world view capable of withstanding the impact of slavery.* (Levine, page 4)

It is known that Africans were often forced to sing while on the ships of the Middle Passage. We don't know who the individual singers were, but we do know that music was used as a tool by the enslavers. As described in the Mannix/Cowley publication, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlanta Slave Trade, 1518 – 1865*.

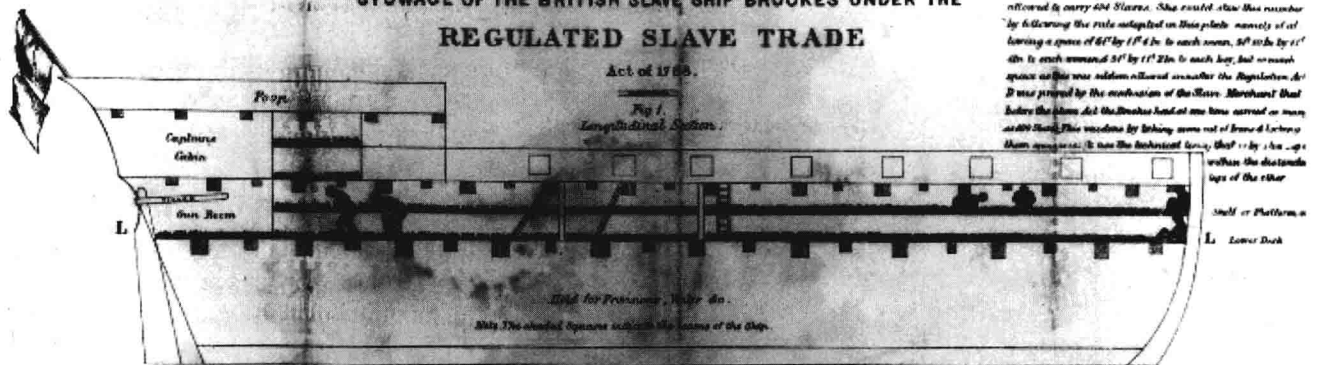
*They sing, but not for their amusement. To stave off melancholy that often led to revolt or suicide, the captain ordered them to sing, and they sang songs of sorrow. Their sickness, fear of being beaten, their hunger, and the memory of their country, are the usual subjects.* (p. 114)

The African musical continuum emerges in a new land because, over a 250-year-span of time, the Peculiar Institution of enslavement is established and maintained on the land that eventually becomes known as the United States of America. Africans arrive in the Western Hemisphere as early as 1492 with Christopher Columbus; however, the significant population flow of Africans into the United States begins in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 – resulting in the Atlantic Slave Trading that establishes the impetus for the creation of the Spiritual. Large-scale, profitable slave trading emerges between 1640-1680, and continues throughout the next two centuries, with a particularly significant flow of African humanity occurring between 1780 and 1810. Note that while the African slave trade is outlawed in various individual northern states beginning in 1783, the practice of slave trading continues throughout the south until the Civil War. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits estimates the number of Africans who are enslaved in this country between 1808 and 1860 reaches two and one-half million. Many come into the Georgia Sea Islands as late as 1858. From a cultural perspective, then, during this time span there is a continuous renewing connection to the African homeland. Over this period of two and one-half centuries the enslaved Africans develop the musical practices that become the foundation for the music of this country.

# STOWAGE OF THE BRITISH SLAVE SHIP 'BROOKES' UNDER THE REGULATED SLAVE TRADE

Act of 1788.

Fig 1. Longitudinal Section.

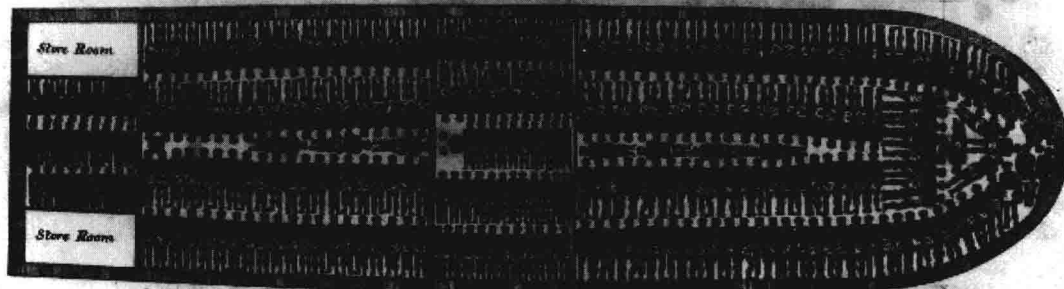


Note: The 'Brookes' after the Regulation Act of 1788 was allowed to carry 404 Slaves. She could stow this number by following the rule adapted in this plate, namely of allowing a space of 6' by 1' 6" in each room, 5' 6" by 1' 6" in each women's 3' 6" by 1' 6" in each boy, but no such space as this was seldom allowed under the Regulation Act. It was proved by the evidence of the Slave Merchants that before the above Act the 'Brookes' had at one time carried as many as 600 Slaves. This was done by taking some out of berths & lodging them upon the shelves, that is by 1' 6" up within the distance of the other shelf or platform.

## PLAN OF LOWER DECK WITH THE STOWAGE OF 232 SLAVES

150 OF THESE BEING STOWED UNDER THE SHELVES AS SHOWN IN FIGURE 2 ABOVE.

Fig 2.



PLAN SHewing THE STOWAGE OF 150 ADDITIONAL SLAVES ROUND THE WINGS OR SIDES OF THE LOWER DECK BY MEANS OF PLATFORMS OR SHELVES (IN THE MANNER OF GALLERIES IN A CHURCH) THE SLAVES STOWED ON THE SHELVES AND BELOW THEM HAVE ONLY A HEIGHT OF 2 FEET 7 INCHES BETWEEN THE BEAMS: AND FAR LESS UNDER THE BEAMS. See Fig 3.

Fig 3.

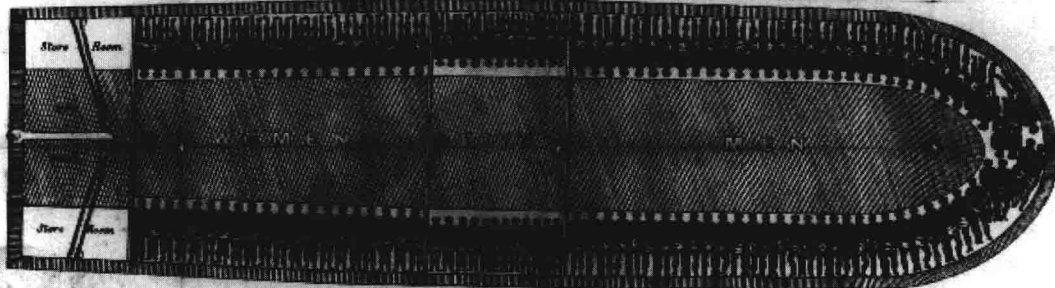


Fig 4. Cross Section at the Poop.

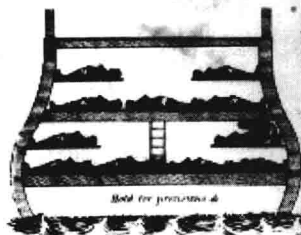


Fig 5. Cross Section amidships.

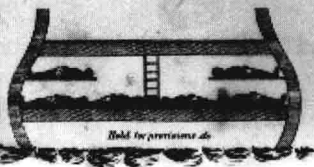


Fig 6.

Lower tier of Slaves under the Poop.

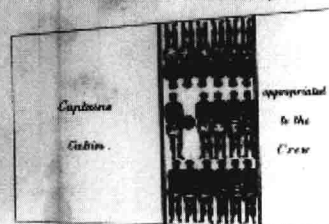
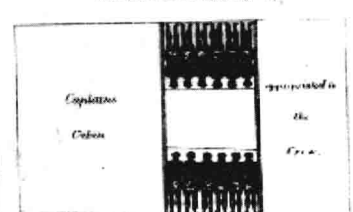


Fig 7.

Upper tier of Slaves under the Poop.



Scale of Feet