
Activity 8: Case Study: The Trial of the Zong Slave Ship

The Zong slave ship was owned by two wealthy merchants from Liverpool, George Case and William Gregson. Captain Luke Collingwood set sail on the Zong from São Tomé in West Africa in September 1781 with 442 enslaved Africans onboard.

The ship was heavily overloaded and was not carrying enough provisions for the number of people onboard. Captain Collingwood lost his way in the Caribbean Sea, meaning the voyage took longer than planned, and within a month disease and malnutrition ravaged both the crew and the enslaved Africans.

Collingwood found himself in a difficult position; many of the enslaved Africans had died of illness and neglect and the others were so badly diseased or malnourished they would not fetch a good price. He knew the ship's insurance company would not pay any compensation, and he would be held responsible for losing a great deal of money. Collingwood acted swiftly, telling the crew that the ship's water supply was running out and that throwing enslaved people overboard was the only course of action left to him in order to preserve the crew. 55 enslaved Africans were thrown overboard at first; the next day there was a heavy downfall of rain so the supplies of fresh water were replenished. However, he continued to throw more people overboard, reaching a total of 133 in a three day period. More enslaved Africans jumped overboard voluntarily seeing it as their only means to avoid this brutality.

Collingwood died before the slave ship returned to Britain. The owners of the Zong ship, William Gregson

and George Case, demanded that the insurers pay £30 for each enslaved African or 'slave' thrown overboard as compensation. The insurance company sensed that something was not quite right with the Zong case and refused to pay, so the case was taken to court. The insurers had also discovered that when the ship had arrived in Jamaica there were 420 gallons of water spare, so Collingwood's claims that it was a necessary act because of water shortage were not true.

Initially when the case went to court in 1783 it was backed by the King's Bench and the insurers lost the case. They then petitioned the Court of the Exchequer and lost again. It is reported that Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice for the case, compared the loss of the 'slave cargo' to the loss of horses, viewing the enslaved as property. It was also deemed acceptable for enslaved dying of natural causes (either through disease or suicide) to be thrown overboard.

It came to the attention of abolitionist Granville Sharp, who by that time had a track record of supporting enslaved Africans in court cases. He went around the country visiting every bishop about this case; most of them joined the abolition movement as a result. He spoke about the Zong case in public speeches across the country and it quickly became a topic for public debate.

The fact that the enslaved were being viewed as nothing more than cargo or merchandise became a turning point in the public's support for the abolition of the slave trade. Sharp argued that the ship owners and crew should be charged with murder and not insurance fraud.

The case did not result in a change in the law and always remained a case of insurance fraud rather than murder, but it was very significant in gaining support nationally for the abolition movement.

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Points to consider:

What do you think of Lord Mansfield's judgement on this case? Do you think this would have been an acceptable view at the time?

Why do you think Granville Sharp became so passionate about this particular case?

What effect do you think Granville Sharp's involvement in this case had?

What do you think would have been the reaction from the general public at the time?

What do you think was the main reason Collingwood decided to take that action?

Suggested Activity:

You could hold a classroom debate or discussion; looking at the possible motives and arguments for the ship owners, the captain, the crew, the insurance company, the law courts, and Granville Sharp.



This painting by J.M.W. Turner, is thought to be inspired by the Zong atrocity.

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Joseph Mallord William Turner, English, 1775–1851
Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying,
Typhoon Coming On), 1840.
Oil on canvas
90.8 x 122.6 cm (35 3/4 x 48 1/4 in.)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, 99.22