

# Slave Ship Rebellions

About: Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rebellious Passage: the Creole Revolt and America's Coastal Slave Trade*,  
Cambridge University Press

*By Thomas Mareite*

---

**In 1841, the *Creole*, an American ship with 139 enslaved people onboard, was hijacked at sea by a group of determined rebels in their midst. Kerr-Ritchie's book sheds new light on this iconic episode of the Revolutionary Atlantic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, telling a tale of successful self-emancipation.**

---

In November 1841, a group of at least 19 enslaved people rebelled aboard the *Creole*, a ship in which 139 bondpeople were forcibly transported overseas from Richmond, Virginia, to New Orleans. Overpowering the crew, they captured the ship and redirected it to Nassau. As the Emancipation Act of 1833 (concerning the British Empire) had abolished slavery in the Bahamas and freedom was formally guaranteed to any enslaved person setting foot on this British soil, they expected to attain liberty in the port city. The ensuing *Creole* affair, as it became known, opened a geopolitical and legal Pandora's box around which Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie's particularly incisive and insightful *Rebellious Passage* is revolving. Utilizing a wide range of primary sources, many of which had remained to date unexplored, this book stands out for its uncommon scrutiny of the material's limitations and biases. Drawing mostly upon official correspondence, consular dispatches, ship manifests, insurance contracts, newspaper articles, court documents, bills of sale and certificates, Kerr-Ritchie's *Rebellious Passage* proposes a comprehensive narrative of the slave revolt which occurred aboard the *Creole* and its geopolitical repercussions, reconstructs the captives' experiences of bondage and freedom,

and provides a detailed examination of the inner dynamics and magnitude of the coastal slave trade from the seaboard states to the Deep South during the antebellum period.

## **Enslaved People in the Revolutionary Atlantic**

*Rebellious Passage* follows the tracks of a flourishing historiography on the maritime slave trade in nineteenth-century America (Schermerhorn, 2014) that has been challenging stereotypical interpretations on the domestic slave trade as an essentially terrestrial enterprise. According to Kerr-Ritchie, the coastal slave trade may have accounted for up to a fourth of the domestic slave trade carried out during the antebellum period (chapter 2). While scholars have laid out evidence of a “domestication” of the post-1808 American slave trade (after 1808, the US banned the introduction of enslaved people coming from foreign countries), ships engaged in the coastal slave trade along Circum-Caribbean coasts such as the *Creole* instead highlighted its hemispheric scope (Rothman, 2004). Inserting the uprising into the “revolutionary Atlantic”, as a scholar once put it in her own account of the *Creole* revolt, Kerr-Ritchie ties the *Creole* affair up with a larger narrative on previous maritime revolts aboard slave ships running the coastal slave trade, namely the *Comet* in 1831, the *Encomium* in 1834, the *Enterprise* in 1835 and the *Hermosa* in 1840 (chapter 3) (Rupprecht, 2013).

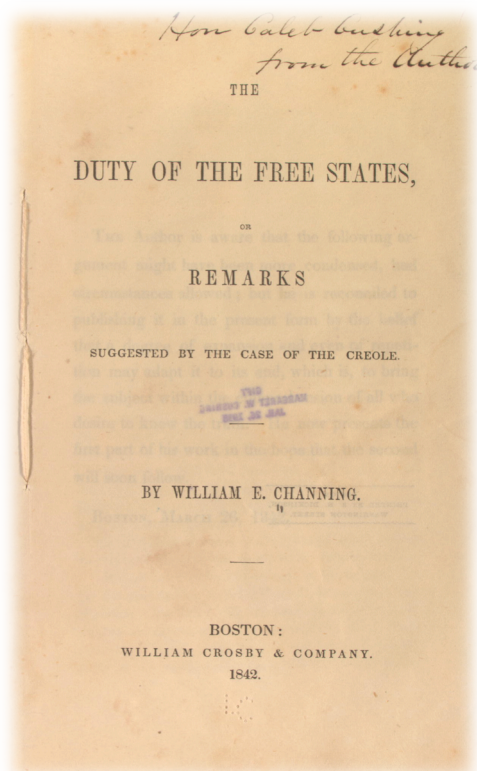
Additionally, *Rebellious Passage* also builds upon recent historical research (such as Matthew Clavin’s *Aiming for Pensacola*) on alternative sites of African American self-liberation in nineteenth-century North America that emphasizes how significant the British Caribbean, Haiti and Mexico became as lands of refuge for enslaved black people from the US South, be it as shipwrecked captives, “sojourning” slaves or self-emancipated men and women (Clavin, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Building upon studies such as Walter Johnson’s 2008 article, Kerr-Ritchie’s engaging account of the *Creole* revolt and its geopolitical ramifications constitutes a new cornerstone of this emerging transnational history of “south-to-south” African American emancipation during the antebellum period (Johnson, 2008).

---

<sup>1</sup> The notion of “sojourning” slaves applies, in this context, to enslaved people from the US South setting foot (often accompanied by their enslaver or a third person) on the non-slaveholding territories that surrounded the US South in North America (Canada and Mexico starting in the 1830s) and the Caribbean (most noticeably Haiti and the British Caribbean after 1833). When back to the US South from these so-called free-soil territories (where slavery had been abolished and enslaved people from foreign countries could expect to be granted freedom), a significant number of these enslaved people sued their enslavers in US courts with the hope to acquire legal freedom.

## Fighting for Self-Emancipation

The book offers a careful reconstruction of the experiences of confinement, rebellion, trial, emancipation and freedom. Its analysis of the role of African American leadership, planning and strategies (beyond naïve or outright racist views of the *Creole* uprising as a spontaneous and organic rebellion) used to successfully carry out the revolt is especially insightful to scholars interested in the interplay between self-emancipation, logistic skills and “geopolitical literacy” (chapter 5) (Troutman, 2004). Moreover, one of the main innovative aspects of *Rebellious Passage* lies in the author’s close analysis of the relationships forged between black Bahamians in Nassau and the enslaved people transported aboard the *Creole* (chapter 6), as well as the liberated people’s experiences of self-emancipation and freedom in the Bahamas (chapter 7), especially with regard to how they pressed for their own formal liberation. This way, *Rebellious Passage* compellingly demonstrates how much the enforcement of free-soil principles was forced upon British officials by enslaved people themselves in their fight for their own freedom. In so doing, Kerr-Ritchie skillfully and critically navigates hegemonic narratives by challenging British officials’ accounts of freedom as benevolently granted to the captives as a liberal gift, American overstated views of British interference, but also some of the most romanticized and sanitized representations of the revolt produced by abolitionists.



Source: Library of Congress [Channing, William Ellery, and Thomas Waterman Pamphlet Collection. The Duty of the Free States; or, Remarks Suggested by the Case of the Creole. Boston, William Crosby & Co, 1842. Pdf. [https://www.loc.gov/item/46033267/.](https://www.loc.gov/item/46033267/)]

*Rebellious Passage* successfully breaks away from previous studies that have focused primarily on the British-American diplomatic side of the revolt (Downey, 2014). Instead, Kerr-Ritchie places the experiences of the enslaved people at the core of his narrative. Yet the still relatively large space dedicated to consuls, representatives, traders and lawyers in *Rebellious Passage*, by comparison with the information provided on the captives/liberated African Americans (though remarkably substantial), suggests that such an epistemological enterprise irremediably remains conditioned upon still limited and fragmentary sources (for instance, what happened with the former captives displaced to Jamaica?). At any rate, this book abounds with valuable fresh insights that set it apart from existing studies of the revolt. For example, as a complement to its close analysis of influential coastal slave traders, shippers and consignees, *Rebellious Passage* provides captivating evidence on the intersection of slave trading and maritime insurance policies and practices (chapter 4 and 10).

## Conclusion

While the *Creole* revolt has received less scholarly and popular attention than the *Amistad* affair (1839), *Rebellious Passage* forcefully provides a comprehensive social history of the self-emancipated bondspeople's experiences out and aboard the *Creole* intertwined with a global contest over slavery and freedom between expanding empires in North America and the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> Through the *Creole* case, this book delves into the contested nature of free soil policies across North America and the Caribbean, especially with regard to debates on the doctrine of international comity and clashes between purported property rights in slaves and human rights (especially in chapter 1, 8 and 9). *Rebellious Passage* represents an exercise in transnational and Atlantic history that binds the US, the Caribbean and Great Britain beyond disconnected national narratives of empire, colonialism and slavery. Furthermore, apart from examining international controversies generated by the uprising, this book retraces how the *Creole* affair fed sectional differences within the US by spurring antislavery radicalism among the enslaved and abolitionist circles as well as fuelling proslavery activism throughout the US South (chapter 9), thus prefiguring in many ways the climax of the 1850s with regard to the politics of slavery.

---

<sup>2</sup> Two years before the *Creole* case, another revolt broke out at sea aboard the *Amistad*, a slave ship illegally transporting enslaved Africans from present-day Sierra Leone to Cuba. Taking control of the ship, the self-emancipated Africans sailed towards the US northern states, coming across a US brig off the coast of Long Island. After lengthy judicial proceedings (including up to the US Supreme Court) that elicited considerable political and popular attention, the self-liberated men and women of the *Amistad* were officially declared free in March 1841.

Extremely well-researched and compellingly written (with the exception of some far-stretched—albeit absolutely valid—digressions on contemporary politics), *Rebellious Passage* is therefore bound to elicit further interest and research into a wide historical field, especially for the history on slave revolts and black liberation, the intersection of slavery and maritime capitalism, conflicting imperialisms in the Caribbean, as well as South-North sectional divisions.

Published in booksandideas.net, 21 November 2019.

### Further readings:

- Clavin, Matthew J., *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Downey, Arthur T., *The Creole Affair: the Slave Rebellion that led the U.S. and Great Britain to the Brink of War*, London, Rowman and Littlefield, 2014.
- Johnson, Walter, “White lies: Human Property and Domestic Slavery aboard the Slave Ship *Creole*”, *Atlantic Studies*, 5:2, 2008, 237-263.
- Rothman, Adam, “The Domestication of the Slave Trade in the United States”, in Walter Johnson (ed.), *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004, 32-54.
- Rupprecht, Anita, “‘All we have done, we have done for freedom’: the Creole Slave-Ship Revolt (1841) and the Revolutionary Atlantic”, *International Review for Social History*, 58, 2013, 253-277.
- Schermerhorn, Calvin, “Capitalism’s Captives: the Maritime United States Slave Trade, 1807-1850”, *Journal of Social History*, v.47, 4, 2014, 897-921.
- Troutman, Phillip, “Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt”, in Walter Johnson (ed.), *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004, 203-233.