Slavery—the owning of humans as property—is surely one of the saddest and darkest aspects of U.S. history with impacts we continue to feel today. Most of the records created during the slavery era that named slaves as individuals were state, county, or private records. Yet, a number of federal records that named individual slaves do exist.

The newly released National Archives Microfilm Publication M1895, *Slave Manifests of Coastwise Vessels Filed at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1807–1860* (thirty rolls), is one such body of federal records that names slaves as individuals. The records are part of Record Group 36, Records of the U.S. Customs Service. Let’s look at the reason these records were created before discussing the records themselves.

**Historical background**

Written in 1786, and adopted in 1787, the U.S. Constitution did not mention slavery or the slave trade directly, but only through oblique references. One of those provisions was Article I, Section 9, which states that:

> The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.

This provision was born from the sectional struggle in the Constitutional Convention between the northern and southern delegates over three separate issues that had no logical connection. South Carolina delegate General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney insisted that his state and Georgia could not “do without slaves,” and John Rutledge of South Carolina threatened that the three states of the lower South would secede unless permitted to continue this traffic. The southern states also insisted that export taxes be outlawed and that a navigation act restricting shipping to American flag vessels could only be enacted by a two-thirds majority of Congress. The delegates reached a compromise that forbade federal interference with the slave trade for twenty years, forbade federal taxes on exports, but allowed a navigation act to be passed by a simple majority like any other law.

In 1807, Congress outlawed the African slave trade, effective 1 January 1808 (2 Stat. 426), and in 1820 declared it to be piracy punishable by death (3 Stat. 600–601). Remaining unimpaired, however, were the rights to buy and sell slaves, and to transport them from one slave state to another.

Cotton production grew in economic importance after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. The South nearly doubled its annual production from 1820 to
1830, doubled it again by 1840, and tripled it again by 1860. By the outbreak of the Civil War, more than half the value of American goods shipped abroad was in cotton. A broad belt of Southern land, ranging in width from about five hundred miles in the Carolinas and Georgia to six or seven hundred miles in the Mississippi Valley, was devoted primarily to cotton culture. The lower South’s wealth came chiefly from cotton produced by slaves, although smaller numbers of slaves were also used profitably in the Carolina-Georgia rice fields along the coast, and in the production of Louisiana sugar cane.\(^2\) As cotton growing expanded from Alabama to Texas, the lower South’s need for slaves increased also. At the same time, the planters of the upper South had an oversupply of slave labor. Tobacco-raisers in such states as Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky were suffering from the continued exhaustion of the soil and decline of their export trade. As a consequence, surplus slaves were transported from the one region to the other by slave traders. In 1836, the peak year of this traffic, more than 120,000 slaves from Virginia alone were sold in the lower South. In the 1840s and 1850s, the domestic slave trade slowed somewhat because of a revival of agriculture in the upper South that was partly due to the discovery of better methods of curing tobacco and the introduction of new and superior varieties.\(^3\)

The act of 2 March 1807 (2 Stat. 426), which outlawed the slave trade, also imposed regulations on the coastal transportation of slaves. Effective 1 January 1808, vessels under 40 tons in coastwise trade were prohibited from transporting slaves. The captain or master of vessels over 40 tons in coastwise trade were required to provide a manifest of slave cargo to the collector of customs at the port of departure and at the port of arrival, or to the surveyor if there was no collector of customs at the port. Specifically, the act provided as follows:

Section 9…That the captain, master, or commander of any ship or vessel of the burthen of forty tons or more…sailing coastwise, from any port in the United States, to any port or place within the jurisdiction of the same, having on board any negro, mulatto, or person of colour, for the purpose of transporting them to be sold or disposed of as slaves, or to be held to service or labour, shall, previous to the departure of such ship or vessel, make out and subscribe duplicate manifests of every such negro, mulatto, or person of colour, on board such ship or vessel, therein specifying the name and sex of each person, their age and stature, …whether negro, mulatto, or person of colour, with the name and place of residence of every owner or shipper of the same, and shall deliver such manifests to the collector of the port, if there be one, otherwise to the surveyor, before whom the captain, master, or commander, together with the owner or shipper, shall severally swear or affirm to the best of their knowledge and belief that the persons therein specified were not imported or brought into the United States [after 1 January 1808], and that under the laws of the state, they are held to service or labour; whereupon the said collector or surveyor shall certify the same on the said manifests, one of which he shall return to the said captain, master, or commander,
...and authorizing him to proceed to the port of his destination.

Section 10...That the captain, master, or commander...shall, previous to the unlading or putting on shore any of the persons aforesaid...deliver to the collector, if there be one, or if not, to the surveyor residing at the port of her arrival, the manifest certified by the collector or surveyor of the port from whence she sailed, as is herein before directed, to the truth of which, before such officer, he shall swear or affirm, and...the collector or surveyor...shall thereupon grant a permit for unlading or suffering such negro, mulatto, or person of colour, to be put on shore.

Thus, two copies were made of each slave manifest. Section 9 required one copy to be inspected, certified, and collected by federal officials before a vessel left port. Section 10 required the second copy, which also had been inspected and certified at the port of departure, to be inspected, certified, and collected by federal officials at the port of arrival.

Records description

The records included in M1895 are the “inward manifests” required by Section 10 of this act to be filed upon arrival at New Orleans, as well as the “outward manifests” required by Section 9 of the act to be filed before departure from New Orleans. Not all manifests are extant. No inward manifests have survived from the years 1808–1818 and 1858, and no outward manifests have survived from the years 1813–18, 1837, and 1859. Some manifests may have been lost from the years for which manifests are extant.

Most of the manifests are preprinted fill-in-the-blank forms of various sizes. Most are just a single page, while others consist of several pages. Each manifest includes the name of the vessel, its ports of departure and arrival, dates of certification by the collector of customs or other federal official, the captain or master’s name, and a description of each slave on the vessel, including name, age, sex, height, name of owner or shipper, and color. In addition to the official color designations of “negro, mulatto, or person of colour,” many manifests indicate the slaves’ skin color as black, brown, yellow, tawney [sic], dark, griff e, or copper. It is assumed that the date of certification by the collector (or surveyor) regarding the accuracy of the manifest was the same as the date of arrival or departure. Some single-page manifests have the arrival certification on the reverse side.

The manifests are arranged chronologically, but there may be some disarrangement, and researchers are advised to search an entire year if a vessel’s known arrival or departure on a particular date is not found in the chronological sequence. For the 1821–27 inward manifests, there is a segment of “miscellaneous” manifests following each year’s main sequence of inward manifests.

Ports of departure and intended ports of arrival range as far north as Baltimore, Maryland, on the Atlantic coast, and as far west as Texas ports on the Gulf of Mexico.

Let’s take a closer look at a few manifests.

On 17 October 1835, Robert Benthall, master of the schooner Hunter, presented a slave manifest to the collector and to the naval officer at the “District and Port of Norfolk and Portsmouth” (M1895, Roll 7). The slaves were being shipped by Thomas McCargo for J. & S. Crosby & Co., for delivery to E. Archinard of...
New Orleans. The five slaves transported all had surnames, which was unusual:

James Page, male, age 15, 5 feet 1 inch tall, black
George Christian, male, age 16, 5 feet 3 inches tall, black
Noah Nelson, male, age 15, 5 feet 1 inch tall, black
Jerry Page, male, age 15, 5 feet tall, black
Oliver Peyton, male, age 16, 5 feet 3 inches tall, black

After the Hunter arrived at New Orleans, its cargo was inspected by federal officials on 9 and 11 November 1835.

On the eve of Civil War, on 25 September 1860, M. Callot of New Orleans, the owner of two slaves, and Mr. Talbot, the master of the steamship Mexico, presented their slave manifest to Thomas Shields, Collector of the District of New Orleans (M1895, Roll 30). The manifest named two slaves to be shipped from New Orleans to Galveston, Texas:

Annette, female, age 22, 5 feet 4 inches tall, black
“one infant,” female, 11 months, yellow

The Mexico may have dropped anchor at New Orleans often. On 22 October 1860, J. R. Mott of New Orleans, the owner of several slaves, and W. H. Talbot, the master of the steamship Mexico, presented their slave manifest to A. Buchel, deputy collector for the port of La Salle, Texas (M1895, Roll 16). The manifest named eight slaves to be shipped from La Salle to New Orleans:

James, male, age 60, 5 feet 8 inches tall, griffe
Ellen, female, age 30, 5 feet 3 inches tall, griffe
Cora, female, age 3, griffe
John, male, age 25, 5 feet 8 inches tall, mulatto
Julia Ann, female, age 20, 5 feet 3 inches tall, mulatto
Ned, male, age 4, mulatto
Julia, female, age 24, 5 feet 3 inches tall, griffe
Victorine, female, age 16, 5 feet 2 inches tall, black

Three days later, on 25 October 1860, the Mexico docked at New Orleans, where David Orcutt, “boarding officer,” examined the manifest and the human cargo for the collector of customs at New Orleans.

African-American researchers may find these records useful if they are able to link a specific person in these records to someone specifically named as sold or shipped in non-federal records. Most of the slaves in these manifests lack surnames. Positive linkage between a name in a slave manifest and someone with the same name in other records may prove difficult.

Caucasians with an ancestor who was a ship captain or master may be successful in learning details about the ancestor’s ship name, sailing routes, sailing dates, and human cargo. Likewise, persons researching slave owners and slave traders may be able to learn more about their human property and business. Researchers with an ancestor who was collector of customs, deputy collector, surveyor, etc., may find that ancestor signing the manifest after inspecting the cargo.

Maritime historians and slave trade historians will be able to learn more about this aspect of interstate commerce.

How researchers can use these records

Inbound front side slave manifest from the steamship Mexico, M1895, roll 16.

Inbound reverse side slave manifest from the steamship Mexico, M1895, roll 16.
For more information
M1895 is available for researcher use at the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C., and at NARA Regional Archives at Anchorage, Alaska; Chicago; Denver; Fort Worth, Texas; Kansas City, Missouri; Philadelphia; San Francisco; and Seattle.


Similar slave manifests also exist for the ports of Mobile, Alabama, Savannah, Georgia, and Beaufort and Charleston, South Carolina, but have not been microfilmed. They are located at NARA’s Southeast Region, 5780 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, GA 30260.

Similar slave manifests for the port of Philadelphia have not been microfilmed, and are located at NARA’s Mid Atlantic Region, 900 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107.

Notes
3. Ibid., 497.

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