The Slavery, Law & Power Project

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What is the Slavery, Law & Power Project?

The Slavery, Law, and Power (SLP) project focuses on how policies made justice and injustice during a critical period in the British empire and its American colonies.. It seeks to increase access to historical sources that focus on debates and struggles over racial slavery and power and to show how those debates impacted political and social institutions and individual lives. It interrogates, in particular, the connections between ideas and practices of governmental authority (the structure and organization of government) and of authority within the so-called "household," the legal category with which slavery was often legally correlated. It examines fundamental questions about the connections between slavery and governance, and the extent to which the governing structures behind it can be categorized as more or less authoritarian or democratic. It connects racial slavery to larger debates over power and justice in principle as well as practice, interrogating who supported slavery, with what arguments, and who challenged it. Who supported such a system that required so much effort to deprive so many of rights, and why and how did they legally do so? . By bringing to light new manuscript materials, which enable broader connections, it opens up different and contextual answers to help us understand the emergence of "American slavery" more broadly, within a deeper and more complex power structure, and as part of broader arguments about power and its legal embodiment.

So much scholarship on these questions has been based on well-known texts, mostly published, that focus on documents and on individuals singled out by earlier generations of scholars as progressive or enlightened. So many manuscript sources, as well as many printed books, remain underexplored that would bring new insight to this critical period. This project focuses on identifying important manuscript materials from various archives, reconnecting them, and making them easily accessible to scholars from a variety of disciplines.

SLP's primary focus is making available underutilized and/or relatively unknown sources, that we and our advisory board and institutional collaborators identify as particularly important, and which have often been difficult to find, read, or access. We thus provide a gateway for scholars to conduct innovative and original research and for students and the general public to engage with the primary sources which are cited and referred to in important historical and philosophical debates. The collection augments and complements work of other existing Atlantic slavery digital humanities projects (such as Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade, Slave Voyages, Native Bound Unbound) by making legible the legal mechanisms and policies that supported slavery, particularly of Africans and those of African descent, as well as those that challenged them. In the process we pay particular importance to manuscript sources in an era when censorship of published documents was so widespread. We pay attention to local officials, imperial officials, to judges and to planters and to those enslaved. While other projects tend to focus more on individuals, ours complements and interacts with these projects by focusing more on how imperial policies impacted local laws and practices, and vice versa. Slavery was not an institution that could emerge without substantial legal structure. It had the power of the military (from navy to militias) behind it, as well as legal logics, however twisted. This project explores those connections.

Most of our documents concern the early modern English/British Empire and the new United States, especially during the 17th through 19th centuries. These documents explore slave and servant codes in the colonies and imperial court decisions that impact slavery in the colonies. They explore how debates over slavery connected to larger ideas about power, and impacted imperial policies. How did policies such as royal proclamations granting 50 acres of land to any (colonist) who purchased an enslaved laborer– impact enslaved and free peoples, especially African and indigenous peoples? How did it impact the consolidation of land and power in such colonies? How and why did England increasingly expand their role in the slave trade, and what role did the royal navy play in upholding colonial governments and suppressing resistance? How do local laws connect to larger power structures? Given that racial slavery emerged coincidentally with efforts to establish human rights and government based on the consent of the governed, how did they connect? Was it more of a cooperative agreement or a struggle over priorities, a series of actions and reactions? And why did slavery emerge so differently in separate colonies? How were lands legally granted, and people legally enslaved? What was the logic behind such policies, and who challenged them? Who supported them, and by what means? Who was co-opted and compromised? Who was silenced, legally and in terms of the archives, and how was such silencing accomplished? Who resisted, and by what means? Who was injured, broken, or killed? How did the American revolution impact such policies, not only in the individual colonies that became the United States, but in the rest of Britain's empire in the Americas (another 27 colonies)?

Selection Criteria
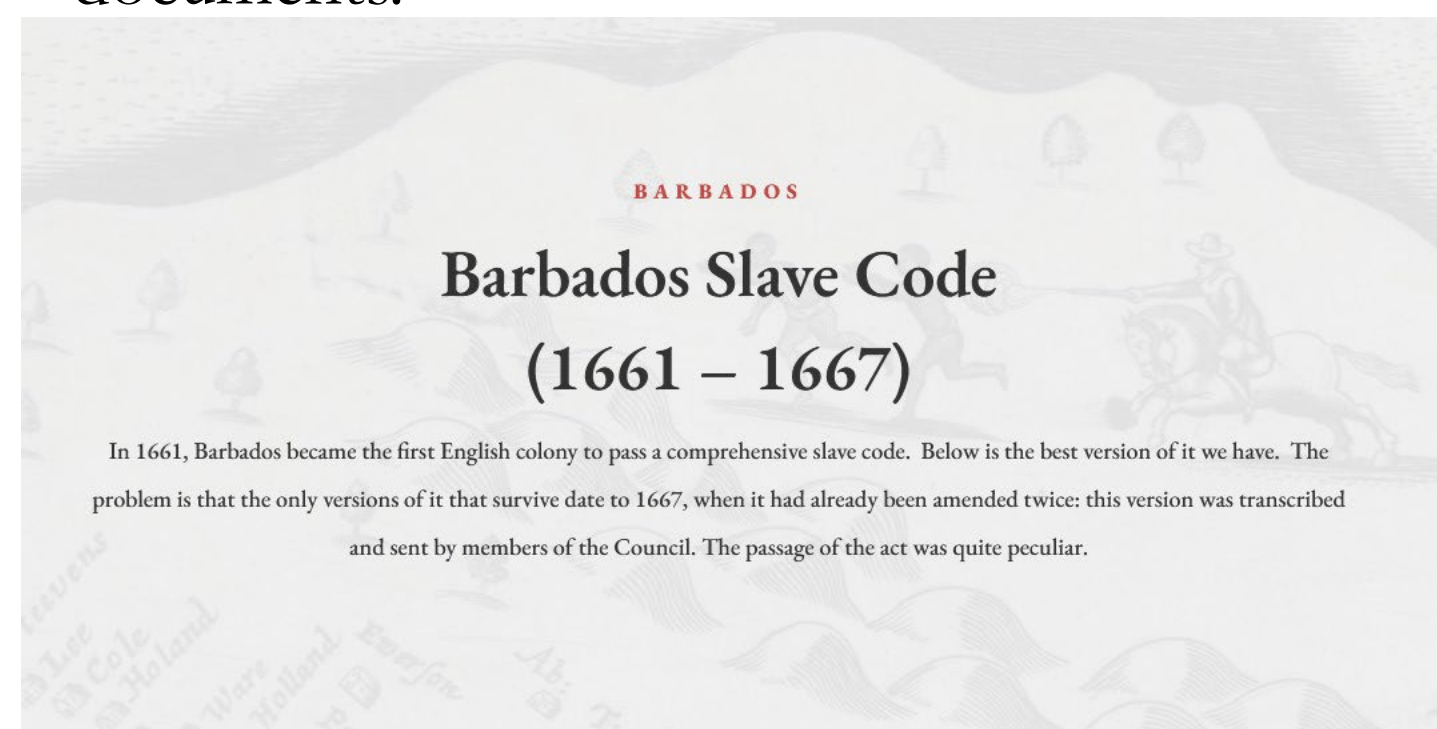In selecting documents, we consider the following criteria:
1. Document was created and/or disseminated within the project's time frame, roughly 1580-1865.
2. Document fits within the geographic scope of the project: the British-Atlantic world in the Americas.
   1. Documents that fall outside this geography but contain content about the Anglo-Atlantic areas, circulating within those areas, or used as inspiration/a foil to documents or policies within the Anglo-Atlantic will also be considered for inclusion.
3. Document content engages with core themes of the project (Slavery, Law, Power, Governance). Document may engage with one or multiple core themes.
   1. Themes may be viewed broadly (i.e. "slavery" as a metaphorical tool) or narrowly (i.e. material, chattel slavery). Race would be part of that theme as well.
   2. Priority will be given to documents that relate to multiple core themes.
4. Document's content engaged with secondary project themes.
   1. These themes include race, resistance, labor, censorship, abolitionism, absolutism/authoritarianism, democracy/representative governance, religion, & empire.
   2. Documents under this criteria are expected to have ancillary connections to the core project themes, and this connection must be spelled out in the introduction crafted for these documents.
5. Documents that are difficult to access will be given special consideration.
   1. This includes unpublished manuscripts and archival materials not otherwise published in print or digital format.
   2. Materials contained in paywalled digital collections or in expensive or out-of-print documentary readers will also fall under this criteria.
6. Documents that are widely available are eligible for inclusion if they meet criteria 1-4 and are central to understanding the nature and intricacies of these debates.
   1. Example: John Locke's *Two Treatises* is widely available in print and open access sites online. Yet this work connects to multiple project themes and is cited, directly or indirectly, in many other materials in the collection.
   2. Documents under this criteria can be excerpted to sections most relevant to the project, with links to the complete work included on the webpage.
   These guidelines are regularly revisited and updated in conversation with the full project team and board.

Visit Our Page

Document Pages
Each entry contains a scholarly introduction with further readings and guiding questions. Whenever possible, we include side-by-side images of the original manuscript together with our transcription. We are increasingly working to include full scholarly annotations for all documents.
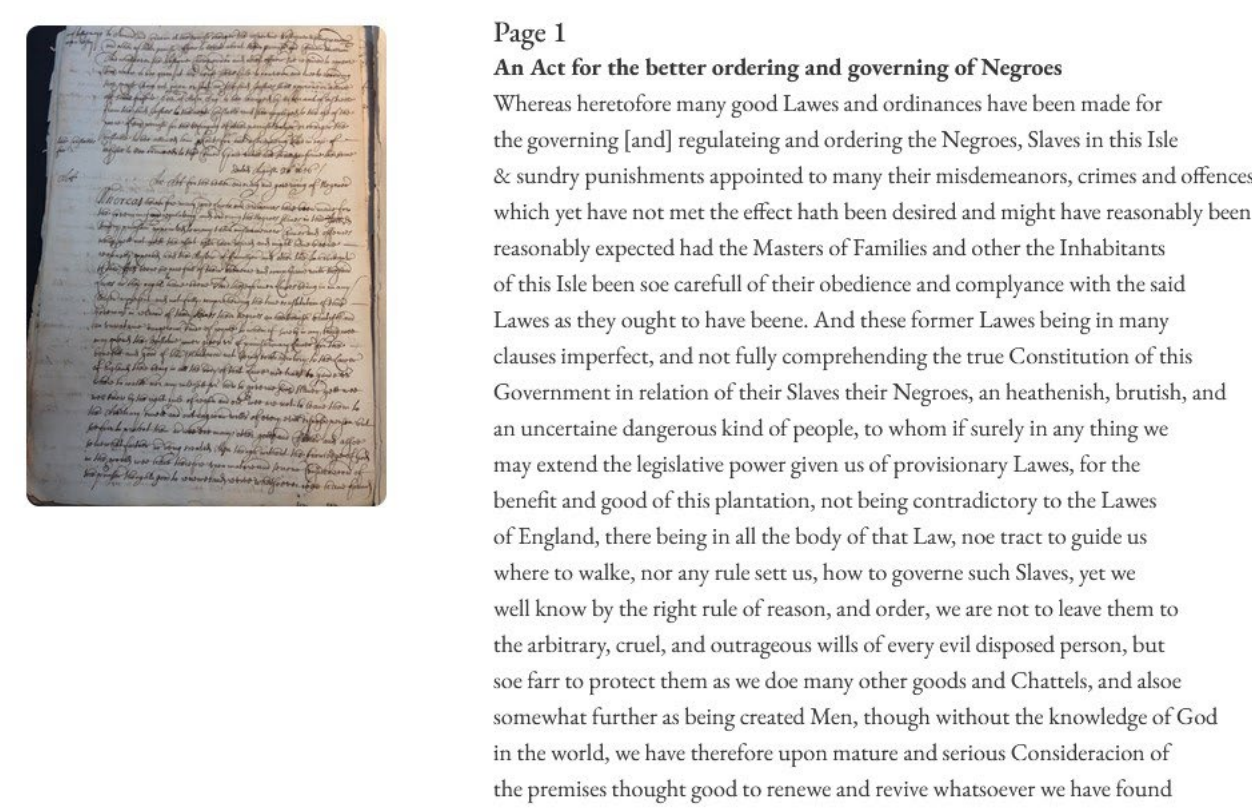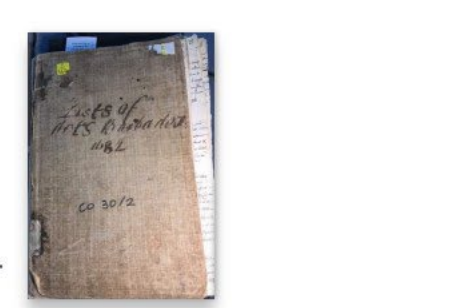

Current Document Selections Include:
- 1661-1667 Barbados Slave Code
- 1664 Jamaica Slave Code
- Original 1629 Charter for Carolina
- Excerpts from Milton's *Eikonklastes*
- 1641 Act Abolishing the Kingly Office
- Documents about the 1675 Barbados Slave Rebellion
- Excerpts from Richard L'Estrange's *In Order to the Regulation of the Press*
- *Butts v. Penny* (1677)
- *Chamberlain v. Harvey* (1697)
- Jefferson's Notes on the 1732 Debt Recovery Act
- George III's letters on the slave trade
- Queen Anne's 1712 speech on the Assiento
- 1705 Virginia Slave Code
- Corwin Amendment
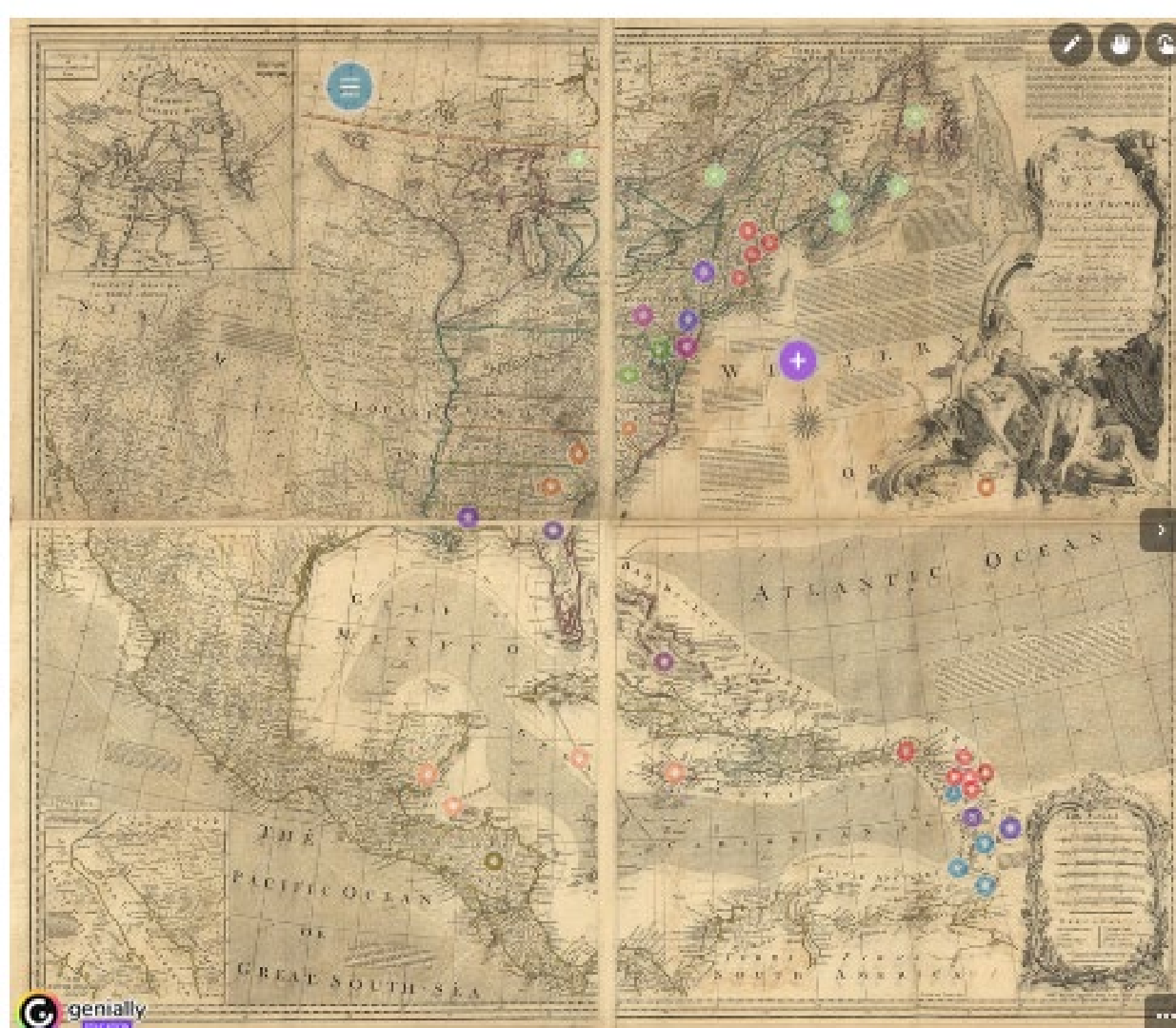
Interactive Features:
Royal Geographic Pastime.
Play an actual 1770 board game, akin to Chutes and Ladders, that taught players about Britain's farflung empire.
Image courtesy of British Library.
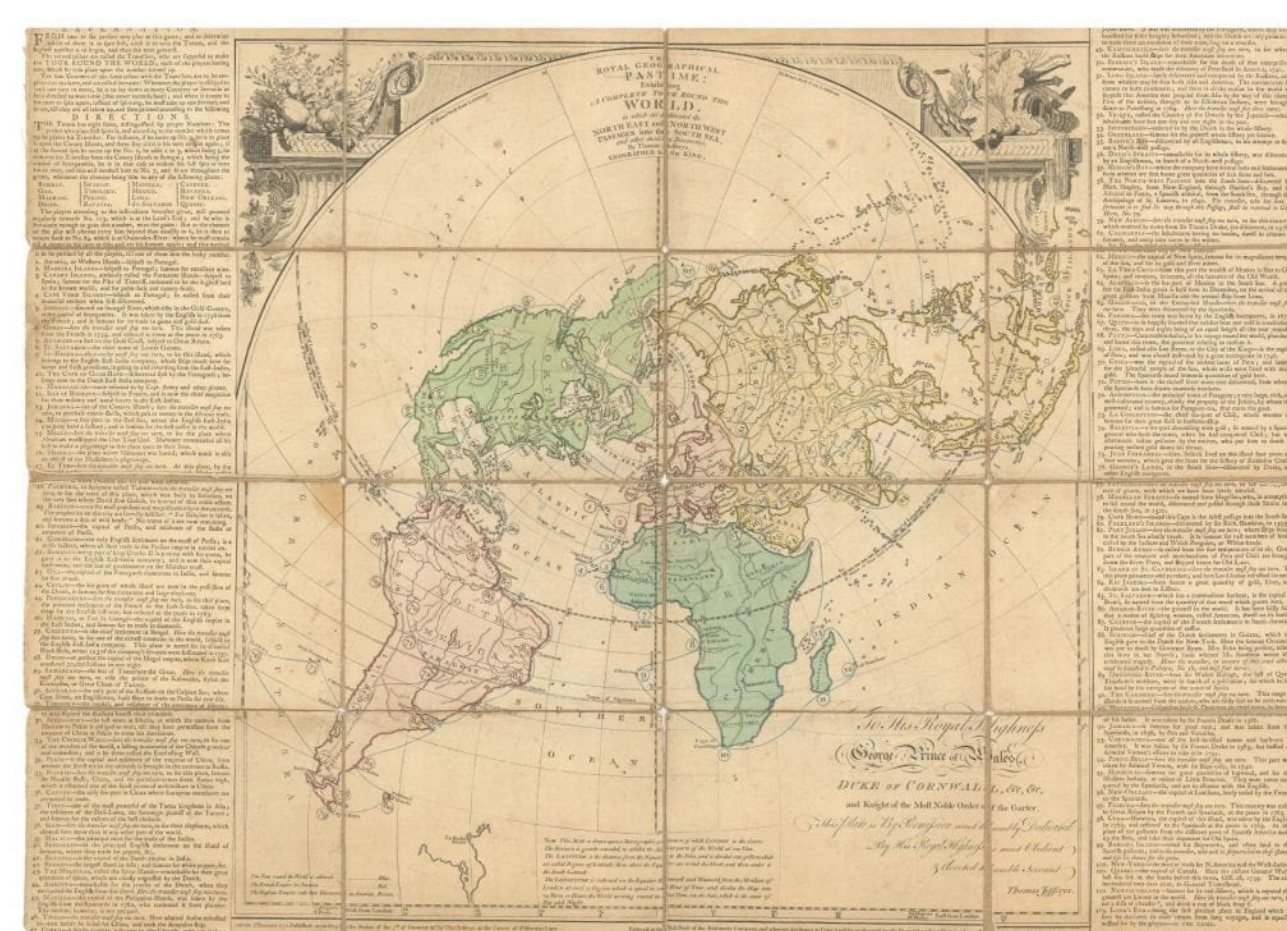
How Many Colonies in the Americas?
An interactive map of Britain's 40 American colonies in 1776.
Image courtesy Library of Congress.

A view of the port of Bridgetown, Barbados with extensive shipping (c. 1695-1715)
National Trust. At Dyrham Park, home of William Blathwayt.

Selected Current Editorial Projects
- Early Carolina slave codes (1690, 1696, 1722, 1735, 1740, etc.)
- Versions of the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina
- Selected policy papers, official documents, and letters from the William Blathwayt papers
- Selected Royal Africa Company charters and petitions

Selected Future Editorial Projects
- American Revolution era discussions of slavery and slave trade
- Trial records of important early slave revolts
- Proposals for British West India Company charters
- Unsuccessful attempts to pass British empire slave code

Other Initiatives
- Open Access handwriting text recognition
- Curricular tools for college and high school classrooms
- Expanded social media platform

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Technology and Process
- All documents are manually transcribed by team members in From The Page, a transcription software which allows simultaneous TEI / XML encoding.
- Every document undergoes multiple reviews for accuracy, including at least once by a PhD holding Associate Editor or the Project Director. Critical introductions and other contextualizing materials (annotations, further readings, guiding questions) undergo a similar review process.
- All images, transcriptions, and scholarly materials are backed up to the project Google Drive, the University of Maryland's digital repository (DRUM) and the Open Science Framework. Digital files are preserved in one of the following formats: TIFF, JPEG, JPEG2000, PDF (Images, scanned books or photographs); XML/DOC/XLS (Transcriptions/numerical datasets/spreadsheets)
- Our website uses Wordpress with the Divi-theme, which allows great adaptability while being fairly straightforward to use without a coding background. Several features have required supplemental coding.

Get Involved!

We would love to hear from people interested in getting involved with our project at any level. Please write us at slaverylawpower@gmail.com.
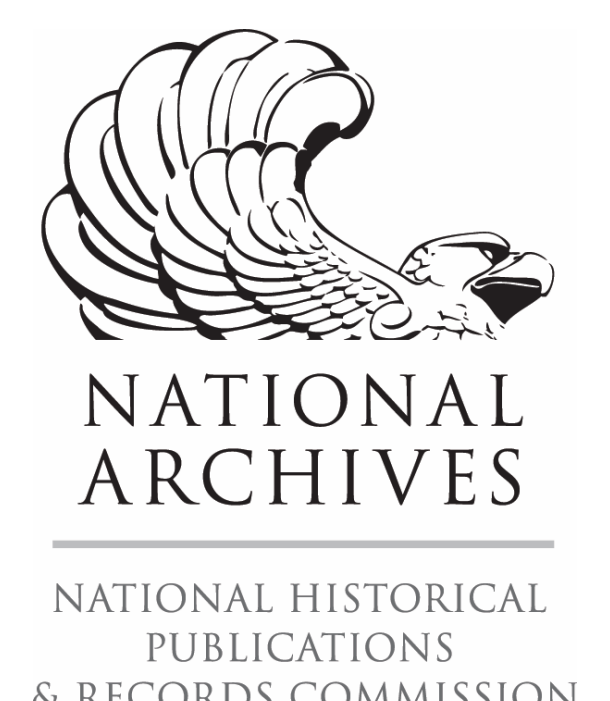
We welcome suggestions of primary source documents to include through our submission form (QR code).

For Bibliography, see our site:

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