



Africa Squadron: The U.S. Navy and the Slave Trade, 1842-1861

Donald L. Canney

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Donald L. Canney's study is the first book-length history of the U.S. Navy's Africa Squadron. Established in 1842 to enforce the ban on importing slaves to the United States, in twenty years' time the squadron proved ineffective. To officers and enlisted men alike, duty in the squadron was unpopular. The equatorial climate, departmental neglect, and judicial indifference, which allowed slavers back at sea, all contributed to the sailors' frustration. Later, the most damaging allegation was that the squadron had failed at its mission. Canney investigates how this unit earned a poor reputation and whether it is deserved.

Though U.S. warships seized slave vessels as early as 1800, four decades passed before the Navy established a permanent squadron off the western coast of Africa to interdict U.S.-flag vessels participating in this trade. Canney traces the Navy's role in interdicting the slave trade, Great Britain's pressure on the U.S. government to curb slave traffic, the creation of the squadron, and how individual politicians, department secretaries, captains, and squadron commanders interpreted the laws and orders from higher authorities, changing squadron operations. While famous ships and captains served on this station, none won distinction in the Africa Squadron.

In the final analysis, the squadron was unsuccessful, even though it was the Navy's only permanent squadron with a specific, congressionally mandated mission: to maintain a quasi-blockade on a foreign shore. While Canney exonerates southern-born naval captains, who approached their work as diligently as their counterparts from the north, he demonstrates how the secretaries of the Navy—pro-slavery southern politicians—neglected the squadron.

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