Nearing the conclusion of his term of office, President James Buchanan on December 3, 1860, confidently reported to Congress that “since the date of my last annual message not a single slave has been imported into the United States in violation of the laws prohibiting the African slave trade.”¹ Until recently, few historians have believed Buchanan’s assertion. In fact, the consensus has been that clandestine slave importations were enormous during 1858 and, particularly, 1859. William E. Burghardt Du Bois, for example, maintained “that the slave-trade laws . . . were grossly violated, if not nearly nullified, in the latter part of the decade 1850–1860.”² More recently, Harvey Wish confessed that Stephen A. Douglas’s confidential estimate that over 15,000 Africans were illegally imported during 1859 “seems credible in the light of contemporary evidence.”³

As these historical observations clearly illustrate, Buchanan’s administration has received minimal (if any) credit for the ultimate suppression of the African slave trade to the United States. In point of fact, President Abraham Lincoln often receives full credit for terminating the barbarous traffic.

Modern research has convincingly demonstrated, however, that although Lincoln’s government did much in this respect, it is mistaken to suppose that effective action against the slave trade began with his inauguration. Actually, the five years of Lincoln’s tenure were no more vital to the suppression of the illegal traffic than the four preceding years. Under Buchanan, for example,

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¹ Senate Executive Documents, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., No. 1, Pt. 1 (Serial 1078), 24.
the enforcement of all slave-trade legislation was centralized in the Department of the Interior, an administrative change usually credited to Lincoln. Additionally, greatly increased congressional appropriations and a largely successful effort to perfect naval enforcement of the laws demonstrate Buchanan's genuine desire to end the African slave trade to the United States.4

Wishing to determine the effectiveness of these measures and the extent to which illegal slave-trading activities were continuing, the Buchanan administration sent a secret agent, Benjamin P. Slocumb, into the South in late 1859. Slocumb left Washington on September 16 on what was to become a two-month espionage mission. His subsequent fourteen-page report to Jacob Thompson, secretary of the interior, is printed below.5

WASHINGTON, D. C.,
Nov. 21st 1859.

Hon Jacob Thompson,
Secretary of the Interior,
Srn,

"With a view to obtaining correct information, in respect to the extent of importations of negroes direct from Africa, into the Southern States," I was appointed by you on the 14th of Sept. last, to make the necessary investigations, and was instructed to "proceed immediately to Wilmington, N. C., and from thence to Georgia and Florida; and, having made the proper investigations, thence through Alabama, Mississippi & Louisiana, to Galveston or Indianaola, Texas." I was also directed to visit Vicksburg and Memphis, on my return to this city.

Under these instructions, I have the honor to inform you that I left Washington on the 16th of Sept. last, and, on the morning of the 17th, reached Wilmington. There I remained three days, and was diligent in my inquiries and investigations touching the Subject of my mission. Besides conversing with a number of gentlemen of intelligence, I visited the Slave Depot of Southerland & Coleman,6 but neither Saw nor heard of any native Africans. On the contrary, I was convinced


5 The original letter is located in Miscellaneous Letters Received, Records Relating to the African Slave Trade and Negro Colonization, 1851-72, Department of the Interior, Record Group 48 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.); hereinafter cited as RHAST, RG 48.

6 D. J. Southerland and James C. Coleman were well-known slave traders in Wilmington and in Mobile, Alabama, where they maintained another slave depot. See Frederic Bancroft, Slave-Trading in the Old South (Baltimore, 1931), 238n.
that there were no negroes of that class in Wilmington, and had not been of late years. Neither could I learn or hear of any landings of slavers on the North Carolina Coast, or upon the banks of any of her rivers. Here let me say, that at Wilmington, as Subsequently at other places, I hailed from Mississippi, and conducted my conversation and investigations as one in Search of slaves; only making known my official character to Such U.S. officers as I thought could furnish me with information. Leaving Wilmington, I proceeded to Charleston, S. C., where I remained two days. There I was told by a gentleman Somewhat prominent as an advocate of the African Slave trade that the reports concerning the landing of Africans, except in the case of the yacht “Wanderer,” were unreliable, in fact mere fabrications. There was not a native African negro in Charleston for sale, and so far as I could learn, had not been; not even one of the Wanderer’s cargo. The gentleman before referred to, as an advocate of the slave trade, told me a circumstance illustrative of the numerous reports which were so freely circulated by the newspapers during last Summer. A New York sharper went to Charleston about the 1st of Sept., and in a subdued whisper informed some brokers that his father was about to land four hundred negroes at Beaufort; that they were just from Africa, and must be landed at once, in the accomplishment of which he solicited their aid. A bargain being struck, a boat was chartered by the brokers to effect the landing, when, by an accident, the Sharper was “smoked out,” his imposition detected, and he was treated to a cold bath for his attempted swindle. This incident was substantiated by other persons, who were cognizant of the facts. Had a correspondent of Some unscrupulous newspaper obtained the Swindler’s story and published it before it exploded, it would doubtless have obtained credence throughout the North, and no explanation of its falsity would have been believed.

There are doubtless men in Charleston, as in New York and Boston, ready to engage in the African Slave trade, but they are few, and are generally deterred from active operations by fear of incurring the penalties of the law. So far, at least, the operation with the New York swindler seems to have been the only African negro speculation which has been actually engaged in by the enterprising men of Charleston.

Leaving Charleston on the 21st of Sept., I proceeded to Eastern Florida. At Jacksonville, on the St. Johns river, I conversed with a Mr Sylvester, of Welaka, Fla., who informed me that about two months before that time, (22d Sept.) he had heard of a cargo of Africans

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1 The Wanderer deposited a cargo of some four hundred Africans off the coast of Georgia in November 1856. Most modern authorities agree that the venture of the Wanderer was the last successful large-scale importation of slaves into the United States. On this, see Tom H. Wells, The Slave Ship Wanderer (Athens, Ga., 1967), passim.
being landed near the mouth of Indian river; that the vessel had been burnt, and the negroes taken to a place near Lake Istokpoga, and put to work on a plantation; that the captain and crew of the vessel were Spaniards; that he (Sylvester) had staid all night at a hotel in Enterprise, Fla., with a Spaniard believed to be the aforesaid Captain; but that he could not talk with him. Sylvester referred me to a man named Luffman, on Indian river, as one interested in the African business, but he could tell me nothing more.

At St. Augustine I was told by Col. Dancy, U. S. Surveyor General,8 that a rumor was very prevalent, and he himself believed, that Africans had been landed on the Florida Coast, early in June last, near Lake Worth, or Jupiter Inlet. He referred me to a Mr Canova, living near Ft. Arbuckle, in Brevard Co., Fla., as a competent guide, and as one interested in the Africans. I was also told by Col. Rodgers, a lawyer, of Ocala, Fla., that there was no doubt in his mind but that 350 negroes had been landed on the Florida coast within the last 2 or 3 months. He said some Africans had been offered to him at a low price, and I could find them if I wanted to purchase. He referred me to a Mr Hiram T. Mann, a Mr Giles and a Mr Smith of Ocala. Said the negroes were not at Ocala, but the agents there would take me to their place of rendezvous. Mr Andrew, Editor of the St. Augustine Examiner, professed to believe the statements to be true which he had published in his paper of July 23d 1859, viz: that a cargo of negroes had been landed between Gilbert and Jupiter Inlets some time in June. All these statements seemed to corroborate each other, yet it is remarkable that none of these parties had seen the negroes said to have been landed, and none of them had any better ground to go upon than rumor. It is true, Col. Rodgers said Africans had been offered to him, but when it is remembered that a large portion of the Wanderer’s cargo was taken to Florida, the presumption is very strong that these were the Africans offered to Col. Rodgers. Upon an examination of the files of the St. Augustine Examiner, I found a statement in the number of Aug. 20th 1859, to the effect “that cargoes of Africans are constantly landed in the United States in pursuance of an Agreement entered into between a Rhode Island Captain, one Miller F. Wickham, commanding the Brig “Favorite,” and a firm on the coast of Africa, under the name of Lewis & Boyd.” The Examiner goes on to publish the “Agreement” by which Lewis & Boyd engaged with Capt. Wickham to deliver him 80 “fair and merchantable negroes,” &c., &c., which negroes, quoth the Examiner, “were landed and no mistake; that the large planters made no objection to the landing of said negroes, and that as a general thing they were pur-

8 Francis L. Dancy, former colonel in the Florida Volunteers, was United States surveyor general for Florida, 1858-1861. George W. Catlin, Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy... to 1850 (3 vols., Boston and New York, 1891), I, 369.
chasers!" Observing that the date of the aforesaid "agreement" as printed was blurred, I asked Mr. Andrew to let me see it. He very politely withdrew it from a pigeon hole, and handed it to me. I found it to be an old, moth-eaten document, bearing date "April 25, 1804." In publishing it, the Editor, who is quite a wag, had purposely blurred the figures "04" to create some excitement, and as he remarked, "to bamboozle the Northern abolitionists." This is the "agreement" which you will remember was copied from the Examiner into the columns of the New York Times of 1st Sept., 1859, and other Eastern papers of about that date, accompanied with fierce political Editorials.9 It was a fine dish for abolitionists.

At Pilatka, Fla., I met with one John H. Newman, an elderly man, a negro trader, who said his home was in Louisiana, but stated that he was engaged in the African Slave business and was associated with an organized company, of which Hiram T. Mann, of Ocala, was a member. Said he had taken as many as 15 Africans to Mobile; 24 to Nashville, Tenn.; and 24 to his own plantation, in the State of Louisiana. Said a cargo of Africans had been landed on the Florida coast since the 15th of June last. Said he had a place at Mobile, at New Orleans, and at Nashville where he could house his negroes. Said Mann had sold a lot of 15 Africans at Pilatka about 10 days before, and a few, (10 or 15) near St. Augustine. These were of the Wanderer's cargo. He told me, also, that about 40 of the Wanderer's cargo were in the neighborhood of Savannah, Ga.; that they were for sale, and I could find them by calling upon a Mr. Lamar of Savannah.10 Said there were no other Africans in or about Savannah. He also assured me that there were none in Charleston, S.C.

Leaving Florida, I retraced my steps to Savannah, Ga., and from there proceeded to Montgomery and Mobile, Ala. I could hear nothing of Africans at Montgomery, saving the current rumors of the day, relative to the movements of the Wanderer's cargo. At Mobile, I visited all the negro depots in the place; among the rest, that of John McClusky, represented to me by J. H. Newman, as his depot in Mobile. I found no Africans, and McClusky, who appeared to be an honest man, and who I found sustained that reputation, told me that no Africans had been in the city, except two companies of the Wanderer negroes, in transitu, one of 23 and one of 6. The 23 had been housed in his establishment, and were taken from there to Louisiana. Said he was acquainted with John H. Newman. Went out to Florida with him about the 1st of last June, for the purpose of getting some

10 Newman was probably referring to Charles A. L. Lamar, a well-known and wealthy citizen of Savannah, who was one of the leading sponsors and beneficiaries of the Wanderer voyage in 1858. See Bancroft, Slave-Trade, 223n, 300; and Wells, Slave Ship Wanderer, passim.
Africans which Newman said were about to be landed. After remaining some time, and no cargo being landed, he became discouraged and returned to Mobile. Since then he has had no reliable information of any landings; does not believe any landing has been effected, and has certainly seen no evidences thereof. Said he did not think Newman a reliable man, and would not believe him on oath.

Proceeding to New Orleans, I visited all the negro depots in that city. Although I felt pretty well "initiated," I could find no Africans, and was assured by the negro traders that there were none in town; it was not deemed a "safe business." Was told that about 100 had been sold in and about New Orleans last Spring, and hurried away. This was told me by Joseph Bruin, and one or two other negro traders. Bruin, who is from Alexandria, Va., assured me that there were now no Africans in New Orleans, and have not been since last Spring. Several prominent citizens of New Orleans assured me of this.

Mr Collector Hatch stated that, under his direction, U. S. Cutters, had been for months scouring the Louisiana & Mississippi coasts and inlets, but without detecting a single Slaver.

Leaving New Orleans, I visited Galveston, Indianola, and Port Lavaca, Texas, but could hear no rumors of landings of Africans on the Texas coast. All I could learn, by the most diligent inquiry, was that 20 of the Wanderer's negroes were on a plantation on the Colorado

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11 Although McClusky is not mentioned in James B. Sellers's excellent study of slavery in Alabama, the author does point out that "A well-organized ring did a thriving business running stolen slaves from Florida to Alabama. This ring, or another like it, also ran slaves stolen in Alabama to other areas." See Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama* (University, Ala., 1950), 150-57. It may well be that McClusky, together with Newman, Hiram T. Mann, and the "organized company" Newman mentioned to Slocumb participated in clandestine activity along these lines. This becomes even more plausible since none of these individuals were well-known slave dealers or brokers in Florida, Alabama, or Louisiana. On this, see ibid., passim; Joe C. Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1903), passim; and Edwin L. Williams, Jr., "Negro Slavery in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVIII (October 1949); January 1950), 93-110, 182-204.

12 Newman's credibility seems shaky at best. He claimed to be a Louisiana slave trader and to have owned a plantation in Louisiana, but neither of these assertions is substantiated by contemporary records. Cohen's *New Orleans and Southern Directory for 1856* (New Orleans, 1855), for example, does not include Newman among the dozens of "brokers," "auctioneers," and "dealers" of New Orleans and Baton Rouge who participated in the slave trade. Moreover, although a J. H. Newman is listed as a cotton planter in Cohen's "Directory of the Planters of Louisiana and Mississippi," his state of residence was given as Mississippi, not Louisiana.


14 Slocumb is referring to F. H. Hatch, collector of customs in New Orleans. Hatch was subsequently directed by Secretary Thompson to "exercise the utmost vigilance in preventing if possible the landing of . . . Africans at any point or points on the coast of either Mississippi, Louisiana or Texas." Thompson to Hatch, December 29, 1859, Letters Sent, RAST, RG 48.
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whole number of Africans I could hear of as having been sold or actually known to be in the country, amount only to 338l—a number less than that of the Wanderer's cargo.

In conclusion I will add that, So far as I could learn, the expressions and sentiment of the masses of the Southern people are hostile to the revival of the African Slave trade; and the rumors which were so current last Spring and Summer, relative to the practical revival of the African slave-trade in the South, were wholly founded upon the movements of the Wanderer negroes, or else they were mere fabrications, manufactured and circulated for political effect, or to fill a column in a sensation newspaper.

With great respect,
Your ob’t sv’t,
Ben. F. Slocumb.