

Regrettable history revealed at the Museum of Mobile

By MYRA FAYE TURNER

A visit to a museum changes people. This is the motto of Shelia Flanagan, assistant director at the Museum of Mobile. *Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Americas*, currently on exhibit at the museum, will change you.

On May 31, 2007, the state of Alabama passed a resolution express-

ing its "deep regret" and issued an apology for the role it played concerning slavery in the United States. *Captive Passage*, which runs through Sept. 3, makes clear why such a gesture was morally necessary.

Using more than 200 objects and images, *Captive Passage* depicts in harrowing detail "life" aboard a slave ship during an era that spanned more

Captive Passage: The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Making of the Americas

than four centuries.

Captive Passage is an educational exhibit. It recounts the story of the Africans brought to America and the impact they had on America. It is, in essence, the story of America, and unflinching in its narrative.

Flanagan noted that *Captive Passage*, created by the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, VA and three years in the making, was one of the most ambitious exhibits for the museum board – and that it nearly got derailed by Hurricane Katrina.

"We are the only venue in the deep South to host the exhibit," Flanagan said. "Naturally, that was jeopardized by our being flooded by Katrina. The exhibit was supposed to come last year but fortunately we were able to reschedule."

Captive Passage offers a comprehensive overview of the entire slavery experience, organizing the exhibit into five sections: Departure, Middle Passage, Arrival, Abolition and Legacy.

Some of the items on display are ugly but the institution of slavery was ugly. Visitors entering the exhibit receive a take-home study guide. A six-minute video serves as a brief introduction to the slave trade and will help visitors navigate the exhibit.

The infamous Middle Passage was an experience shared by all enslaved Africans. Exactly how many survived the Middle Passage to become slaves is unknown. Historians originally theorized as many as 100 million, but the consensus is between 11 and 13 million. This figure does not include Africans who died en route or shortly after arrival. When these figures are added, the total could reach 20 million.

As *Captive Passage* reveals, space on the slave ships was tight. The captives were packed on separated decks like books on an over-crowded shelf. Usually, each slave had between five-and-seven sq. ft. of space. Day after day, month after month, they



lay shackled together, the left foot of one bound to the right foot of the other, breathing the same stale recirculated air. Women were sometimes released from their shackles as the journey progressed, while children usually roamed about without restrictions.

Many of the captives became ill with diseases including smallpox, malaria and scurvy. Ships sometimes ran short of food causing the crew to ration what they had. This often meant starvation for the captives.

Punishment was brutal and many slaves revolted. Some engaged in hunger strikes while others committed suicide by jumping into the sea. Women were the victims of sexual abuse by the crew. Many babies were born during the Middle Passage and shortly after arrival in the Americas.

The Departure section shows visitors what life was like on the West African coast before the arrival of the Europeans. In the Middle Passage section, visitors will see a model of the slave schooner *Dos Amigos*, giving a birds-eye view of how the captives were crowded onboard slave ships.

Visitors can witness the Arrival of the Africans in America and learn how they were scattered to places like the Caribbean islands, Brazil and Europe. Finally, the rich Legacy left by these brave men and women is discussed.

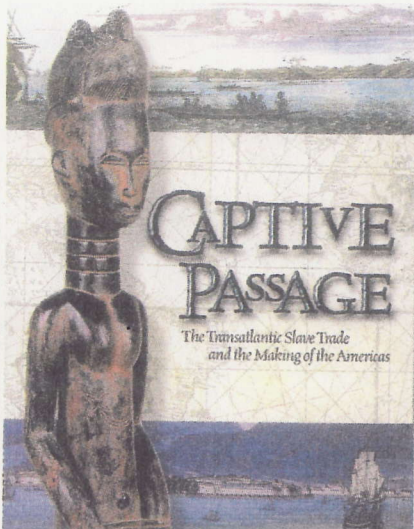
Some of the more graphic items include naval nail guns used to maim or kill slaves. Loaded with nails, small round shots and pieces of metal, these guns were discharged into the hold of the ship killing or injuring captives as a way to squelch rebellion.



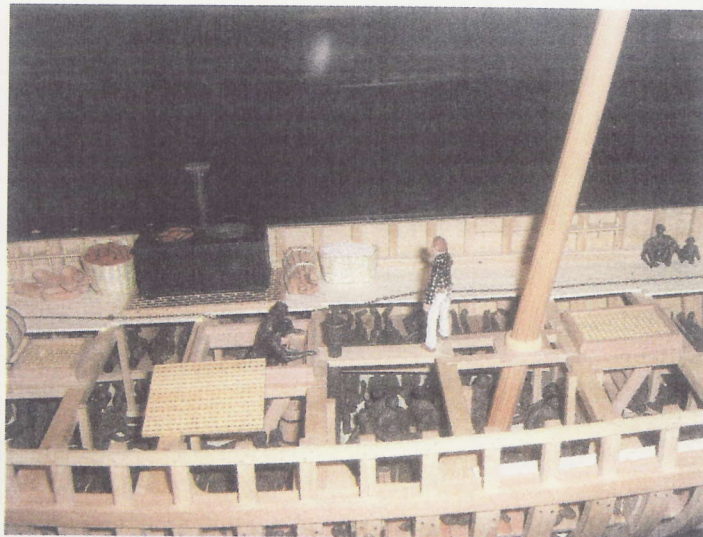
Some other items showcased are a branding iron, used to mark captured Africans with the name or initial of the slaving company that purchased them. These irons were later used to brand the slaves with the initial of their owners. Visitors are encouraged to pick up a butterfly slave collar and shake it. These collars had rattles inside that would signal when a slave was trying to run away.

Visitors will learn in 1808, the slave trade was outlawed but slavers continued illegally transporting enslaved Africans to the United States. Of particular local interest, the last group of full-blooded Africans brought to America landed here in Mobile in 1860 on the schooner the *Clotilda* (sometimes written *Clotilde*).

They arrived courtesy of Mobile businessman Timothy Meaher, who bet he could bring slaves illegally into Mobile without being detected. Cudjoe Lewis, the last surviving slave from that trip, died in 1935 but many of



his descendants and the descendants of his fellow captives still live in the area settled by their ancestors in the Plateau neighborhood of Africatown. The Museum of Mobile is located at 111 Royal St. In addition to chang-



ing exhibits, the museum features permanent exhibits and a "please touch" discovery area for kids. Several day camps are being offered in July for children entering grades 4 through 6. Call 251-208-7510 for more infor-

mation.

Admission is free the first Sunday of each month. For more information about the museum, call 251-208-7569.



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