

Nomination of David Eltis for an EUEC Faculty Award of Distinction

When David Eltis joined the Emory faculty in 2002 as the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of History he was already a distinguished scholar. His award-winning books on the African slave trade – most notably The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas (Cambridge, 2000) – had earned him an enviable reputation as an author. Yet greater acclaim was to come to him as a compiler and editor.

Down to the 1990's what could be said about the transatlantic slave trade depended mainly on episodic summaries recorded by government officials of various European nations active in the trade. It was well known that there were some records of particular voyages but no one knew how plentiful or potentially informative they were. David Eltis decided to find out. He became the driving force behind a great international investigation.

In 1992 David began work he hoped might assemble all or most extant records on the slave voyages into a single database, published as a CD-ROM. Such records were not only written in different languages, for different purposes, in different formats, they were scattered over three continents. Recognizing the enormity of the task, from the start David welcomed collaboration with other scholars, especially David Richardson of the University of Hull. As word of the project spread many scholars and researchers volunteered to contribute voyage evidence they had collected. With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities the first compilation was published in 1999 as a CD-ROM: "The Transatlantic Slave Trade." It contained data on more than 27,000 slave voyages, many from the hitherto little studied South Atlantic.

From that day to the present the project has continued to gain momentum and refinement. Major grants from the United Kingdom Arts and Historical Research Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities funded the transition of "The Transatlantic Slave Trade" to an online database: www.slavevoyages.org (2008). This is a free, open access website maintained by Emory. David was joined by co-editors on this central project, and also on four print publications derived from it. These included the Atlas of the Atlantic Slave Trade (Yale, 2010), recipient of the R.R. Hawkins Award (awarded by the American Publishers Association for the most outstanding scholarly work in all disciplines of arts and sciences). Another NEH grant enabled David and co-editors to produce a related database focused on the slave passengers: www.African-origins.org (2011).

After his retirement from Emory in 2012 David continued to work on these databases. The 2011 project had revealed that much more could be done to identify transported Africans (and anyone else involved in the trade). A major grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation in 2018 funded a new project: "People of the Atlantic Slave Trade" (PAST), with David again as co-director. He explained that "Our aim is to extend the primary function of the website from a ship-based record to a people-based record." That record was now to include all those directly involved in the trade, "whether as an enslaved person, an African seller, a buyer in the Americas, a ship owner or a captain." The expanded project will also give more attention to the little studied Intra-American slave voyages. When completed the PAST project will be incorporated into www.slavevoyages.org.

David's outstanding achievements have not gone unnoticed by EUEC. In 2013 he received a Heilbrun Distinguished Emeritus Fellowship. Two years later he received a Bianchi Award for travel to Cambridge for research at Harvard and, remarkably, his induction into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

As word of David's project and his invitation to collaboration spread among scholars many joined in. To date more than fifty have become participants. Once David and his co-investigators had demonstrated the feasibility of the basic project, it was of such obvious importance and complexity that it attracted multiple major grants. To date these grants have totaled more than three million dollars.

No one has benefited more from the project than African-Americans. Before the 1999 appearance of the CD-ROM most African Americans had little or no information about their ancestors before the Civil War. African-American genealogy scarcely existed; its few practitioners were almost never able to trace individuals back to African ancestors. Suddenly a few such connections could be made. Henry Lewis Gates, Harvard professor and since 2012 host of "Finding Your Roots" on PBS, has demonstrated this and explained its importance. Gates narrates an introductory video to www.slavevoyages.org that credits it with revolutionizing genealogical study by descendants of African slaves all over the Americas. He concludes that "The contributions of this website to the self-knowledge of African-Americans, not just in the U.S., but throughout the New World, cannot be overestimated."

Emory University has been honored to have David Eltis -- this great scholar and visionary -- at work among us. He is manifestly deserving of this award.

John T. Juricek