

## **The 17<sup>th</sup> century Midwestern slave trade in colonial context**

Paper presented at 2007 Midwest Archaeological Conference  
Oct. 4-6, 2007, Univ. of Notre Dame

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### **Abstract**

Starting in the late 1660s direct observations by the French in the western Great Lakes describe an extant economy based in part on down-the-line trade in European goods, including guns. The Illinois Indians were enthusiastic participants in this trade, acting as the pre-eminent middlemen between the Great Lakes and the areas to their west and south. One part of the return trade included captives from the Great Plains. French sources in the earliest decades of documentation frequently comment on both the slaves being carried to market and the guns that gave the Illinois military superiority over their neighbors. A continental overview of middle and late 17<sup>th</sup>-century slaving and social disruption is required to put the militarization of the Illinois into perspective and advance our understanding of social change in the decades of earliest European contact.

### **The Midwestern slave trade**

The fact that there was an early and vigorous Midwestern trade in slaves for Europeans goods that pre-dated the arrival of Europeans has been well-known many years. Over ninety years ago it was noted “before the French established themselves in the Mississippi Valley there was a trade in slaves carried on by the Indians of that area” (Surrey 1916:226-230). Nearly twenty years ago, Wiegiers (1988) provided a balanced overview of the evolution of this trade, its geographic extent, and commented upon the ways it changed native perspectives on captivity. The Illinois were foremost among those supplying slaves to the Ottawa middlemen in the western Great Lakes and the slave trade can be observed to have operated concomitantly with the Illinois’ militarization, which occurred as soon as plentiful guns were introduced into the western Great Lakes in the 1660s.

Nonetheless, the intimate linkages between slaving and guns (and the vigor of the market in both) has not been generally acknowledged in more recent overviews of the western Great Lakes fur trade history and archaeology. The degree to which the Illinois actively positioned themselves to control this trade, the speed and extent of militarization, the extended effects of slaving in space and time, and the hybridization of meanings driven by a market economy in slaves juxtaposed against continued traditional destinations and use for most of those slaves have been little commented on.

In fact, this perspective is in stark contrast with prevailing fur trade era historical scenarios in the Great Lakes. Richard White's popular and influential history of the "Middle Ground" entirely suppresses the militarization of Illinois Indians specifically and the western Great Lakes in general. He renders the influx of guns in the 1660s to a mere trickle, says the Illinois had "virtually no guns" in the 1680s and asserts the Great Lakes Indians did not generally trade for guns but were rather sparingly presented them. Nor does White mention the presence of a commercial slave trade. Trade goods in White's Middle Ground were acquired relatively late and at a "surprisingly gradual rate." As a result, social change in White's narrative of negotiation occurs at a manageable rate beginning after 1680 when the French arrive (White 1991:131-135).

Likewise, Cleland (1992) describes a gradually developing trade via social networks through which guns were obtained and captives exchanged. This is entirely at odds with a reconstruction of early militarization and market exchange of slaves for guns and trade goods. Certainly, the exchange of guns and slaves was effected through symbolic modes that followed prevailing social and political mores, but the volume of guns distributed prior to 1680 and so frequently commented on by the earliest accounts of

the Illinois, as well as the descriptions of them carrying numerous slaves as commodities to the Ottawa, are hardly congruent with gradual change. As Table 1 shows, slaves were a dependable and recurrent commodity accepted for trade goods. Further, we can calculate that the Illinois alone had, in all probability, between 250 and 500 guns by 1680 and their use was routinized in war as well as hunting.

**Table 1**

YEAR	SOURCE	QUOTE
1669	Dablon	<i>“the Illinois tribes ... number nearly two thousand souls, and repair to this place from time to time in great numbers, as Merchants, to carry away hatchets and kettles, guns, and other articles that they need.”</i> (Thwaites 1900:54:167).
1669	Marquette	<i>“The Illinois are warriors and take a great many Slaves, whom they trade with the Outaouaks [Ottawa] for Muskets, Powder, Kettles, Hatchets and Knives.”</i> (Thwaites 1900:54:191).
1673	Marquette	<i>[The Illinois] also use guns, which they buy from our savage allies who Trade with our french. They use them especially to inspire... terror in their Enemies; the latter do not use guns, and have never seen any, since they live too Far toward the West. They are warlike, and make themselves dreaded by the Distant tribes to the south and west, whither they go to procure Slaves; these they barter, selling them at high price to other Nations, in exchange for other Wares..</i> (Thwaites 1900:59:127).
1673	Marquette	<i>[In Arkansas] We afterward asked them what they knew about the sea. They replied that we were only ten days’ journey from it... that they were not acquainted with The Nations who dwelt There, because Their enemies prevented Them from Trading with those Europeans; that the hatchets, Knives, and beads that we saw were sold to Them partly by Nations from The east, and partly by an Illinois village situated at four days’ journey from their village westward. They also told us that the savages with guns whom we had met were Their Enemies, who barred Their way to the sea, and prevented Them from becoming acquainted with the Europeans, and from carrying on any trade with them</i> (Thwaites 1900:59:155).
1680	“Membre”	<i>“More than half of the warriors [of the Grand Village] had split up and gone off in different directions, quite far... These warriors had carried off most of the guns in the village, where there remained but one hundred men with munitions enough to get off three or four shots, and four or five hundred warriors armed with arrows and war clubs.”</i> (Margry 1876:1:506) [translated by Michael McCafferty]. Also see (Anderson 1901:195).
1680	LaSalle	<i>[Buffalo] “...can be of great use as well as the slaves in which these people are accustomed to traffic and whom they compel to labor for them”</i> (Pease and Werner 1934:10).

Recently, Rushforth (2006; 2003) provided splendid overviews of slavery and political relations in New France and among the western allies of the French. Here though, the focus is on the largely traditional uses to which slaves were put in the native political systems and the emergence of the institution of slavery in the French colony. These topics are important, but the question of the effects of rapid, early militarization that allowed the emergence of market slaving, and the effects upon both its practitioners and their victim populations remain largely unaddressed. A broader geographic perspective puts Midwestern slaving in a clearer perspective.

### **Native American slaves and slaving**

Between approximately 1650 and 1700, the capture and sale of native slaves across the continent reached a fever pitch (Ethridge 2006; Gallay 2002). Necessarily, the native slave trade in North America has many manifestations and transcends any one characterization. Its temporal limits, origins, practices, and intended uses and destinations for captured/enslaved peoples certainly express regional and temporal variability. But the most commonly recurring theme within this period was slave raiding driven by market forces and enacted by groups with guns upon groups without them. Overall, the rapidly increasing military inequalities among native groups interdigitated with sharply increasing competition for resources and a rising demand for slaves in colonial centers. Certainly capture and captivity had been, and continued to be, common practice in North America, but capture of persons for sale in colonial markets (for use as menials, as gifts in diplomatic contexts, as labor on farms and plantations, and even, in no

small numbers, as chattel for export off of the continent) drastically changed the meaning of slavery, the economies it was practiced in, and the fates of captured peoples.

### **Geographic and temporal context**

If we want to understand the economic and social changes associated with the militarized slave trade in the Midwest during the earliest decades of its existence we must minimally frame its historical roots as social practice and situate it within the broader trends of changing power relations as a response to the colonial presences on the continent. Even a portion of the full literature available on the native slave trade in North America would go far beyond the needs of this paper. Fortunately, a number of overlapping syntheses on the subject have been completed recently (Bowne 2005, 2006; Brooks 2002; Ethridge 2006; Rushforth 2003). Beyond these, regional treatments provide additional detail (Bailey 1966; Giraud 1974; Grumet 1995; Perdue 1979; Wedel 1973; Weigers 1988).

Most of the variation of Native American captive taking practiced before there were colonial markets for slaves are encompassed by assimilation models of population replacement and/or servitude of captives (Hodge 1910:2:597-600). The best-known descriptions of these practices are the Iroquois Mourning Wars where selective instances of capture and torture were followed by either execution, ritual adoption, or servitude (Richter 1992:64-74). Boys, girls, and women were especially desirable as captives and were prime candidates for amalgamation in some form or another. These and other captivity practices were widespread across North America, had considerable time depth, and continued unabated through the time in question. But during the middle 17<sup>th</sup>-century the scale and character of the slave trade radically expanded as dependable markets

emerged for slaves, with the sharpest increases being during the 1660s through 1680s (Brooks 2002:124; Gally 2002:314; Rushforth 2003:779). The fact that these markets persisted shows that demand kept pace with or outstripped the supplies of available slaves (Gally 2002:8; Hinderaker 1997:16; Perdue 1979:23; Weigers 1988:188). Short regional reviews will suffice to provide the flavor and schedule of this trade.

*Northeast:* It was standard 17<sup>th</sup>-century practice in the Northeast for Europeans to enslave native peoples (Grumet 1995:62, 104, 118, 122). For the most part this slaving was for the acquisition of servants and laborers for the colony but also included the sale of people perceived of as inconvenient or dangerous out of the colony. For example, in 1637, hundreds of conquered Pequots were parceled out as slaves to English settlers while others were sent as slaves to Bermuda (Grumet 1995:122, 142). Many of the former eventually regained their freedom. Hundreds of conquered Powhatans were sold into slavery in 1646, and in 1669 all of the remaining Wicommis were sold as slaves to Barbados (Grumet 1995:205, 272). These examples overview a practice that radically expanded once the demand for slaves in the Caribbean provided outlets for slaves as a literal commodity. Likewise, the practice of taking native children from their families accelerated. In mid-century Native American slaves were routinely being sold into plantation slavery on Barbados, where emerging English-owned and Dutch-financed sugar plantations were creating an immense demand for workers.

In spite of the above, it does not appear that the Northeast developed a routinized form of market-driven slave trade similar to those described below until about the 1660s. Meanwhile, shock waves of disruption from the early arming of the Iroquois radiated out

of the Northeast. After tribes allied to the Dutch and English were supplied with guns in the 1640s and 1650s, the Iroquois began decimating, assimilating, and dispersing their neighbors. A remnant of one of these dispersed groups, the Erie, migrated south to the falls of the James River in Virginia and emerged as the Richahecrians/Rickahockans (later known as the Westos). Beginning in the late 1650s, they began prosecuting large well-armed campaigns into Georgia and north Florida and supplying slaves to Virginia plantations (Bowne 2005, 2006). A decade later, when the nexus of eastern slave trade shifted south with the founding of slave markets in South Carolina, the Westo moved to the Carolinas to pursue the same vocation (Bowne 2005; 2006:129; Ethridge 2006:212).

***Southeast and Lower Mississippi Valley:*** Moving south the Westo briefly controlled their monopoly on firearms and the supply of slaves for the Carolina market but were soon eclipsed by other emerging militaristic slaving societies such as the Chiscas, and, after 1685, the Creeks and Yamassees (Ethridge 2006; Worth 2006). The current view of devastation wrought by the slave trade in the Southeast is hard to overstate. Gally (2002:7-8) claims that his study

*“demonstrates that the drive to control Indian labor, which extended to every nook and cranny of the South – was inextricably connected to the growth of the plantations and that the trade in Indian slaves was at the center of the English empire’s development in the American south. The trade in Indian slaves was the most important factor affecting the South in the period 1670 to 1715: its impact was felt from Arkansas to the Carolinas and south to the Florida Keys. It created a swirl of activity that*

*involved almost all, if not all, of the South's many peoples. It forced migrations and realignments, bringing misery to thousands and wealth to others. It existed on such a vast scale that more Indians were exported through Charles Town than Africans were imported during this period."*

As the devastation wrought by the Charles Town slave market spread westward, the Chickasaws entered into the commercial slave trade by the mid-1680s (Ethridge 2006:214; Gallay 2002:103). As we know from Marquette's 1673 quote in Arkansas (Table 1), down-the-line trade in European goods from Illinois and southeastern sources already interdigitated in the Lower Mississippi Valley. At this point we can assume that the entire Southeast was embroiled, to some measure, in the effects of market slavery. Not only were unprotected groups devastated to the point of extinction and large areas, such as peninsular Florida, eventually depopulated, but the slavers themselves were transformed "shifting in just one or two generations from coalescent agricultural chiefdoms... to highly mobile commercial slave hunting tribes with only secondary reliance on agriculture" (Worth 2006:203). Southeastern market slavery directly connected to the Carolina slave market made its way west across the Mississippi River in the 1690s and was well underway by the founding of Louisiana. Carolina traders themselves had penetrated this far by 1699 (Crane 1916:8-9; Ethridge 2006:215-216). In 1701 Canadians opened the route to Carolina and by 1708 French Canadians living with the Tamaroa in Illinois were engaged in the western slave trade and carrying slaves to the Carolina market. This trade continued into the 1710s (Crane 1929:66, 100; Pénicaut and McWilliams 1953:122; Thwaites 1902:331-332; Weigers 1988:192)

Although the French took a qualitatively different stance on commercial export of slaves, Louisiana provided yet another domestic market, willingly purchasing native slaves for labor in the colony. In the decades after 1700 slaves most commonly delivered to Mobile were referred to as Paducahs (Commanche) and “Pawnee” (possibly Wichita?) and a clandestine slave trade developed between Louisiana and Carolina. Although some Native American slaves were sold to France’s Caribbean colonies the numbers were apparently relatively low compared to the commercial export of slaves from Carolina (Giraud 1974:69, 173, 177-180, 317).

***Southwest:*** Both before and after the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 slavery was a vital concern to New Mexico’s population and government. Decades before 1680 the northern Apaches were bringing Quiviran (Wichita) captives to sell as slaves to the colony (Brooks 2002:30). Market slavery was “rampant” during the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, and justified under law as a “just war doctrine” carried out and popular practice as “rescate” (the ransoming of captives so that they could be baptized and assimilated). Brooks’ analysis goes to some lengths to clarify that the predominate effect of slavery in the Southwest was not only to capture labor, but create kin-based relationships – “vital, violent webs of interdependence” (Brooks 2002:39, 125).

In most cases, slaves in New Mexico were not destined for the most brutal forms of chattel slavery, especially if they were baptized as Christians as required by rescate. As early as 1620 the Spanish captured Apaches and Utes as laborers, sometimes sending them to the silver mines. But enslaving Native Americans without assimilating them into the social system via baptism was apparently rare in New Mexico. Likewise slaves were

sometimes used as gifts to political allies (Brooks 2002:49-50). By far the main use of slaves sold into both Spanish colonial and Native American contexts in the Southwest was as labor and mates. This type of servitude typically incorporated them, albeit with low status, into the household and/or families of colonial society. Conversely, captured Spaniards and Native Americans from the colonial centers were also being taken into native societies of the colonial hinterlands.

Southwestern Plains Indians sold into the New Mexico colonial sphere were typically Quivirans (Wichita), Apaches, and Utes, and records indicate that by the late 1600s over 20 percent of the colony was made up of these converts (Brooks 2002:50). During the 1700s, the Spaniards increased purchase of northern Indians (Jumano, Apache, Pawnees) who were bought from the Navajo, Commanche, and Kiowas. Many thousands were indentured for 10 or 20 years or effectively enslaved for life by this technique (Brooks 2002:123-125).

To summarize, Brooks characterizes the indigenous and colonial practices in the Southwest as “joined to form a slave system in which victims symbolized wealth, performed services for their masters, and produced material goods under the threat of violence.” The Commanche, Kiowa Apache, and Navajo (those supplying slaves) had a “raid and trade network ...as far south as Sonora and Durango, Mexico, as far west as the Colorado River, as far north as Yellowstone, and eastward nearly to the Mississippi” (Brooks 2002:31, 33). The treatment of slaves varied greatly, but the presence of a ready and permanent market in New Mexico remains the most pertinent aspect of this trade for the purposes of this paper.

***The Midwest and the Plains:*** In the Midwest we have strong evidence that a market-driven slave trade was present by the 1660s in the western Great Lakes, Upper Mississippi River Valley, and eastern Plains (Rushforth 2003; Weigers 1988) in spite of a lack of direct contact with Europeans. Not only were the Illinois carrying slaves from their south and west to the Great Lakes market, but there is evidence that there may have been an incipient down-the-line commodity chain supplying these slaves in return for the goods the Illinois carried to their neighbors (Thwaites 1900:54:167, 191; Wedel 1973).

We can probably assume that the main volume of this slave trade does not much predate the 1660s since neither plentiful French goods, nor the guns that gave the Illinois superiority over their western and southern neighbors, were present. Although this time frame lacks robust documents such as those clarifying the effects of slaving in the Northeast and Southeast, we have to consider whether the effects of market slaving in the Midwest, which was directed at the Plains and central Mississippi Valley, had similar effects (i.e., the disruption and extinguishment of smaller polities, depopulation of significant areas, and amalgamation of refugees into remnant populations). Its a notable indication of the degree of pre-contact disruption that slaves from central Plains groups such as the Wichita are documented as being sold in New Mexico, Illinois, and Mobile alike.

The Illinois continued to trade in slaves into the early 1700s. Participation of French Canadians increased and a portion of the trade shifted illegally towards the lucrative Carolina markets (Pénicaut and McWilliams 1953:122; Weigers 1988:192). Many of the slaves passing through the hands of the Illinois were headed for traditional captivity among Great Lakes tribes, but it is the effects of commodification, rather than

the end use of the slaves, that is of primary interest here. Increasing numbers of slaves were sold to the French, especially after about 1700, when they began incorporating Native American slaves into their society and emulating Great Lakes tribes' use of slaves for diplomatic purposes (Rushforth 2003, 2006). Presaging French policy and practice in Louisiana, New France pursued a mixed vision and less brutal version of market slavery than the English, but native slaves bound for New France nonetheless made their way east through a commercial market.

Most slaves entering in the western Great Lakes came from the Great Plains and are known to include Kiowa Apache, Wichita, and "Pawnee." In 1701 the Sauk/Potawatomi mentioned that they had captured a slave they were presenting to the French from "a land where they travel on horses" and in 1705 the Ottawa indicated their plans to get slaves "among the (Dakota) Sioux" (Rushforth 2003). In both New France and, after 1700, in Louisiana, the French acknowledged a strong need for slaves (Rushforth 2003). But their colonial policies conflicted with this desire. From the Assiniboin in the west to the Five Nations in the east, down the Mississippi Valley to Louisiana, and in the western portion of the Southeast, the French saw broad alliances that attempted to keep peace and allow commerce as the best policy (Giraud 1974:177-181; Rushforth 2003). Militaristic market slaving ran counter to this policy, so it was best if the slaves for New France and its native allies came from outside the networks of alliance that the French were actively balancing. Nonetheless, an external supply of slaves served to support French political sensibilities and kept both French habitants and allied tribes satisfied.

## **Modes of native slavery in colonial context**

Helms' (1983:190-191) study of the Miskito in Central America identified four conditions that enabled their shift to a slaving society. Helms suggested that the stage for slaving is set when:

- 1.) there is a previous pattern of raiding and captive taking,
- 2.) the pattern is augmented by the addition of guns,
- 3.) there are vulnerable populations,
- 4.) and captive taking is made lucrative by presence of a market for slaves.

This exactly matches the conditions emerging throughout much of the eastern two-thirds of North America soon after the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century. Just as colonial interstices were closing and the "first-contact frontier" was rapidly retreating, we have a convergence of factors that predict the emergence of slaving. The final pieces tipping the balance of the formula were guns and markets (e.g., Worth 2006:203), both of which became widespread in the western Great Lakes and the Southeast in the 1660s to 1680s (Smith 1987:53; Waselkov 1989:121). Southwest slaving societies did not get guns until later, and then only through French trade networks (Bannon 1970:126, 169).

In *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz (1985:43), reviewing perhaps the most brutal slave trade the world has known (i.e., the Caribbean plantation system within the Atlantic slave trade), called slaves a "false commodity" because "*a human being is not an object, even when treated as one.*" As appealing as this denial is, it remains secondary prophylaxis, and not helpful as an explanatory device. Characterizing the status of people sold in a slave trade as a false commodity does nothing to change their status in practice as alienable property. Slaves sold within a market system are not only

commodities but are highly fetishized (Baptist 2001:1625, 1650) and set in a field of power relations so extreme that whatever point Mintz wanted to gloss is lost in comparison.

Returning to North America, one thing abundantly clear is that, in both pre-contact and contact/colonial settings, unfree persons existed in a great variety of social contexts, ranging from lifelong and inherited status as chattel slaves with essentially no rights to captives with every prospect of regaining social mobility. In the North American colonial centers and the Atlantic world beyond, colonial laws often created legal fictions under which more brutal forms slavery were practiced. These regionally and socially varied practices are, of course, vitally important subjects, but there are a few pertinent attributes of this trade that make it useful to the subject of this paper. These are:

- The peak period of market-driven slaving is the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century.
- Widespread violent struggle for hegemony combined with the commodification of captives rendered the motivation, practice, and effects of slaving in this period significantly different from previous Native American practices. This is true even in cases like the Midwest where the slaves carried to market for the most part were cycled back into the native demand.
- Social change created by the convergence of these processes extended easily across distance and significantly transformed all the societies within its venues.
- Interconnectivity (the effective abatement of geographic isolation) is both a result and a furthering agent of slave-trade induced social changes.

Most slaving raids were carried out by native groups upon native groups. And, inescapably, many of the areas affected by this trade in North America are beyond the pale of contemporary European documentation. It would be partly correct to appeal to earlier practices and direct our discussion of the practice towards pre-existing realms of native meaning, pliable identities, and the pathways of violence. Likewise, the uses of slaves in the European colonies varied considerably. Similarly, we must acknowledge that some of the effects of 17<sup>th</sup>-century slavery and slaving continued and extended earlier native practices. We see this especially in New Mexico. One could argue that the continuation of these practices alongside new forms of late 17<sup>th</sup>-century enslavement disaggregates some of the causality of the change argued for here.

But there is no denying that these practices picked up momentum and brutality in the middle 17<sup>th</sup>-century when slaving began to be powered by inequality in weaponry and driven by fixed demand for highly valued slaves in colonial markets. The end result is suggested to be not only an epidemic of violence, dislocation, and the liquidation of entire polities, but reformulation of political structures and social networks. In the Northeast and Southeast, options other than militarization or retirement to questionable safety at the margins of a colonial center were non-existent (Ethridge 2006). And then, the practice that most differentiates the colonial native slave trade from earlier practices in the Northeast and Southeast is the exportation of some captives to off-shore plantations, where levels of oppression were institutionalized. These exportation practices can then be linked back to lesser genocidal episodes and more general policies which with side effects the Europeans found broadly favorable to their colonial programs

- widespread depopulation, dependence of native populations on market economies, and a persistent climate of death, aggression, and fear among Native Americans.

Stephen Silliman (2005) recently published an in-depth criticism of “contact period” archaeology with one main point being that culture contact archaeologies and the persisting after effects of acculturation theory perspectives impair our ability to interpret power relations. But power relations are the primary arbiter of interpreting colonial interactions. Since the extended effects of the slave trade were projected into areas we tend to view as just beginning to feel the effects of down-the-line trade, these concerns are of obvious importance. If we conceptualize an era as characterized by a theme of initial contact (for instance “the dawn of history”), if our mode of interrogating social change in that era is aided by differentially available documents, and if we measure that change with a combination of those documents and a metric of change intimately related to assemblages of material goods, then it can be very difficult to properly assess social change. In the case of the slave trade and militarization, we cannot afford to exclude pointed consideration of changing power relations. Therefore it is useful to carefully interrogate the conditions under which already widespread internecine raiding and captive-taking accelerated into market slavery.

The devastating effects of slave raiding upon vulnerable populations are best documented in the Southeast and lower Mississippi Valley, to which Etheridge (2006) has extended Eric Wolf’s (1997:230) term of “shatter zone.” Since we have no reason to assume that either the level of historical documentation or the frequency of trade goods in populations victimized by this raiding (or for that matter the raiders themselves) are in any way adequate measures of the cultural processes (including extinction) underway

(Worth 2006), we must turn to different measures of evaluating the processes underway across much of the continent. Coalescence, defensive consolidations, changes in settlement patterns, and disappearance are some examples that come to mind.

Admittedly, slaving practices had varying complexions and geographic extents, but what part of the eastern two-thirds continent could not be considered entangled in colonial power relations once this situation prevailed?

In the Midwest we must incorporate the fact that these changes came about in advance of Marquette and Jolliet's "Voyage of Discovery" and acknowledge that the interior of the continent as well as the entire South had been, and continued to be, swept by extraordinary change even as LaSalle first found his way down the Mississippi River.

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