

From Bristol to the West Indies and Back

James DeWolf and the Illegal Slave Trade

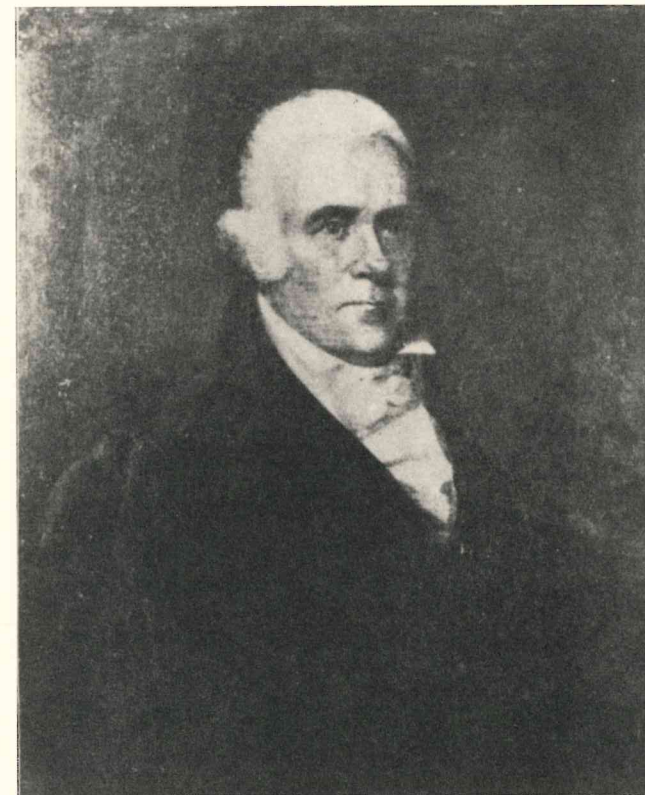
JAMES DEWOLF, of Bristol, Rhode Island, was a wealthy and infamous early figure in the American slave trade and had established himself as a major player in the unlawful trade by the turn of the nineteenth century. Unlike other slave traders, DeWolf organized a vertically integrated empire from which he controlled all aspects of the business, which ranged from, but were not limited to, insurance for vessels, rum distilleries, plantations in Cuba, and the transportation of kidnapped Africans. Not only did DeWolf own the enterprise and its ancillary divisions, but he also captained many of the voyages and was personally responsible for transporting a sizable percentage of enslaved people to American shores. Because of this tightly held control, DeWolf evaded local and federal authorities by wielding the considerable power that he had amassed as a key player in Bristol's economy. Even today, the nature of DeWolf's deeds have been greatly overlooked in history.

During the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, Rhode Island slave traders purchased and sold more enslaved than all other slave traders in the United States. In 1750, Rhode Island was recognized as a center of the slave trade, even though most enslaved were sold at other destinations in the West Indies and the American South. By 1774, Newport was known as the most active city in the slave trade of any town on the continent.¹ But after 1807, Newport was eclipsed by Bristol's DeWolf family and its leader, James. Between 1784 and 1807, DeWolf had launched four times more voyages than his closet rivals. Beginning in 1808, the year that slave trading became illegal, he began substantially increasing that number and,

in doing so, demonstrated a willingness to do almost anything to continue amassing economic and political power.²

The eighth of nine boys and twelfth in the line of fifteen children, James followed his father and uncle into the slaving business. With an entrepreneurial spirit, DeWolf became the sibling who was depended upon to maintain the family's lifestyle of wealth and power. Two of his older brothers and his younger brother assisted him in nearly every aspect of the empire. Finding it increasingly difficult to control his destiny as a result of state and federal restrictions on the international slave trade, DeWolf became actively involved in politics. He served as a member of the House of Representatives in the State of Rhode Island for multiple terms and ultimately as a United States senator. Showing no rectitude during his campaign, DeWolf changed his political affiliation from Federalist to Republican in support of Jefferson's quest for the White House. This move was calculated, as DeWolf had long-range goals in mind for reciprocation.

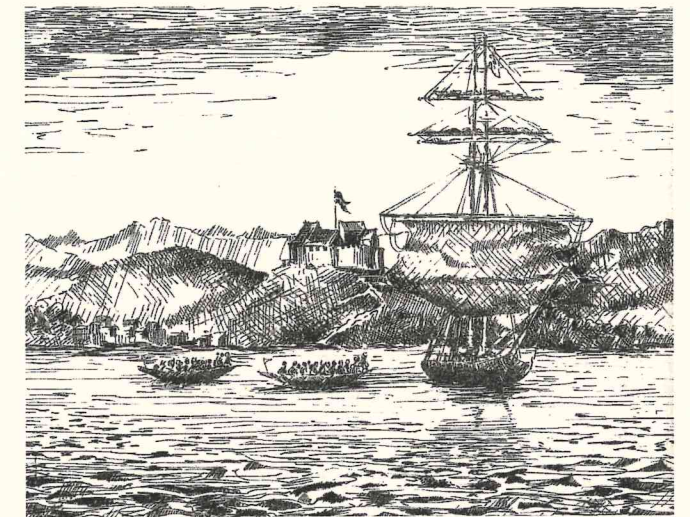
DeWolf's early career activities set the tone for what kind of slaver he would be. In 1790, DeWolf sailed from Africa to Havana, Cuba, on his ship, the *Polly*, with a new load of enslaved. As an experienced captain, DeWolf had knowledge of navigation, the possibilities of bad weather, the danger of encountering pirates, and the potential for illness among the crew and the human cargo.³ Early on in the voyage, one of the enslaved women became ill with smallpox. DeWolf quarantined her on the top deck away from the others to avoid infecting the ship's population. To ensure that she did not expose her illness to his crew, DeWolf



James DeWolf Portrait, Reverend Calbraith Perry, *DeWolf Genealogy*, 1902, with permission and rights owned by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.

ordered that she be tied to a chair to keep her from wandering about. It was reported that DeWolf noticed that the woman, still tied to a chair, had become progressively worse. He then made the determination that she needed to be killed.⁴

Initially, DeWolf asked for a volunteer to carry out the task of murder, and, according to a deposition from the court, the entire crew refused, telling him that they would have nothing to do with it. DeWolf then commanded the crew to help him by ordering a crewmember to draw down a hoist with a grappling hook and assist him with the device. A gag was tied around the woman's mouth to silence her and to ensure that if she screamed for help, the other enslaved people below deck would not hear her. He then blindfolded her as well. DeWolf next gave orders to help him with the hoist. The hook was placed into the rope at the back of where she was seated, and the woman was lifted into the air. DeWolf then ordered a crew member to help



The *Polly* taking on cargo of enslaved from the Guinea Coast, September 15, 1788, Jens-Peter Kemmler, artist.

him swing her over the side of the ship and drop her into the sea, alive. Crewmembers later reported that once the woman dropped into the sea, DeWolf stated how sorry he was to have lost such a good chair.⁵

Once the voyage ended and the *Polly* returned to Bristol, DeWolf wrote an account of the sales from his cargo of enslaved. Meticulously listing each person and the price he collected. At the bottom of his ledger, DeWolf noted that 109 enslaved people were sold for profit, that he had personally kept ten, that one was documented as infirm at the conclusion of the voyage, and that one woman was noted to have died during the voyage. DeWolf had no compulsion to hide the fact that a death on the voyage had occurred.⁶

In 1790, one year prior to DeWolf's offense, the first federal Crimes Act had been passed, making it a federal offense to commit murder or other crimes upon the high seas. This act empowered the federal courts to

deal directly with violators of federal laws and included no exceptions for slaveholders or slave traders. Unbeknownst to DeWolf, after the *Polly*'s return to Rhode Island, crew members from the fated voyage had anonymously reported the incident to the local authorities. At the first session of the federal grand jury of Rhode Island, June 15, 1791, a deposition was taken from Thomas Gorton and Jonathan Cranston regarding what they saw.⁷ According to the deposition, the enslaved woman suffering from smallpox was brought above deck and tied to a chair by both DeWolf and Gorton. The crewmen stated that she received some water to drink but that the crew paid marginal attention to her for fear of spreading the highly infectious disease. After two days of being tied to a chair and exposed to the elements, it was noted that she became increasingly ill. The deposition concluded with the following summary of DeWolf's crime:

... [DeWolf] not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil ... did feloniously, willfully and of his malice aforethought, with his hands clinch and seize in and upon the body of said Negro woman ... and did push, cast and throw her from out of said vessel into the Sea and waters of the Ocean, whereby and whereupon she then and there instantly sank, drowned and died.⁸

According to this deposition, DeWolf had committed a crime that was recognized by the federal government as an act of piracy and murder on the high seas.⁹ If found guilty by a jury, the crime was punishable by

death.¹⁰ Consequently, the federal grand jury in Rhode Island charged him with violation of a federal crime, and on June 16, just one day after the grand jury's hearing, Attorney General John Jay, under the direction of President Washington, issued a warrant for DeWolf's seizure. But, although it had been less than 10 days since the crew members gave their deposition, DeWolf could not be found. Nine days later, on June 25, 1791, a brief article on DeWolf's murder charge appeared in the *Providence Gazette*:

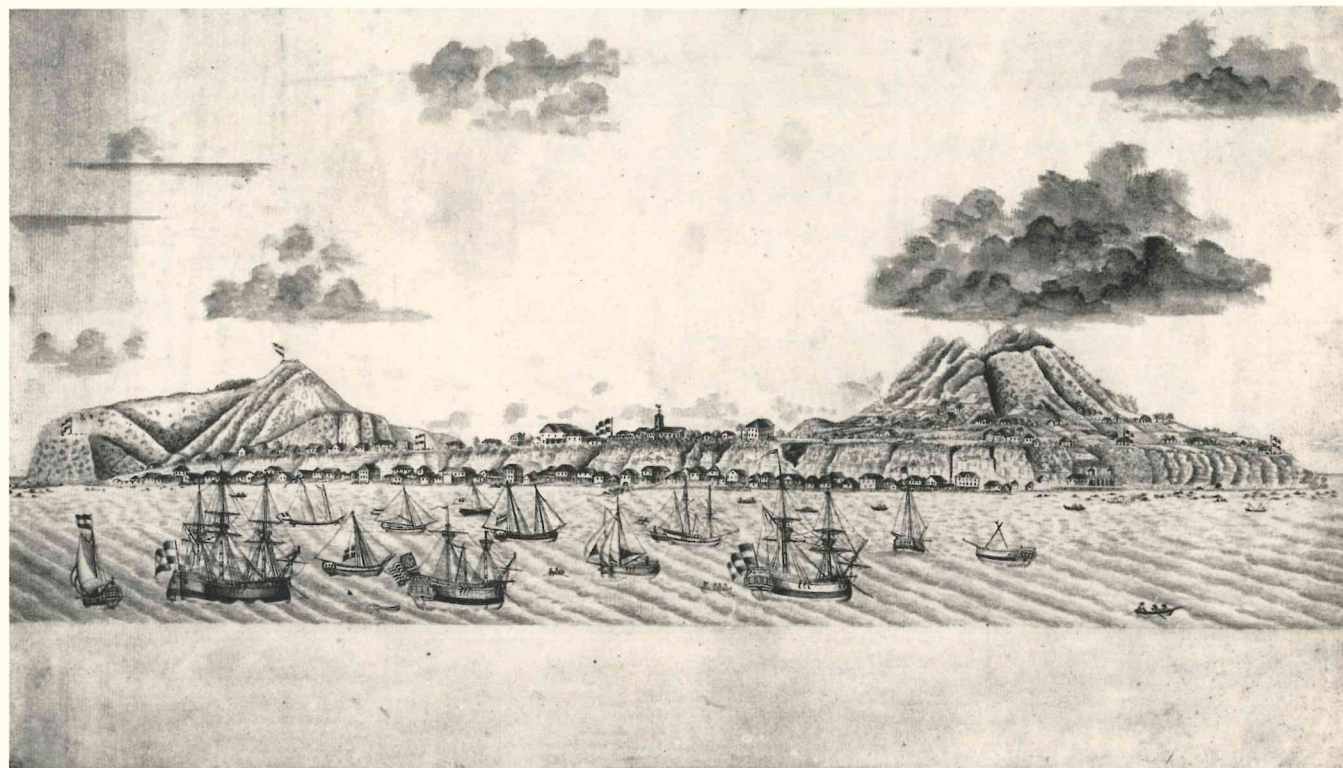
The Grand Jury found a bill against James DeWolf of Bristol, in this State, for the willful murder of a Negro Woman on a late [African] Guinea Voyage. There was not a trial on this bill as Capt. DeWolf had quitted [departed] the United States immediately after his arrival from the said voyage.¹¹

For the next four years, 1791-95, Marshal William Peck, who was the first federally appointed Marshal in Rhode Island, reported twice a year to the Rhode Island federal court system that he was continuing to attempt to serve the arrest warrant but that he could not find DeWolf to do so.¹² DeWolf remained at large.

Yet, while DeWolf continued to elude the authorities, being charged with the murder of an enslaved person was a serious impediment to his business. This charge was an unusual accusation, as it was well-known that captains of slaving vessels executed enslaved people with impunity. In this context, DeWolf's case is particularly puzzling; perhaps because of his visibility, he seems to have been made an example of.¹³

Account Sales of Bark Pollys Cargo of Slaves

		Dollars	cts
Jan 20	3 men @ 280 Dollars	840	
	one Boy	230	
21	13 women @ 160	2080	
	one Girl - 165	165	
	3 men @ - 280	840	
22	2 D. @ - 280	560	
		550	
24	2 D. @ - 275	550	
	1 woman - 170	170	
	1 Girl - 130	130	
	1 Lick Boy 35	35	
25	1 man - 280	280	
	1 D. - 280	280	
26	1 D. - 280	280	
	2 Girl @ 155	310	
		280	
Feb 28	1 man	175	
7	1 woman	280	
8	1 man	560	
9	2 men @ 280	275	
10	1 D. @ 275	275	
15	1 D. - 280	220	
	1 Boy	280	
18	1 man	380	
March 1	10 men at 220 4 boys @ 200	150	
	1 small Boy	140	
2	1 Girl	160	
6	1 woman	165	
8	1 D.	160	
	1 small Boy	210	
10	1 Boy	840	
24	4 men @ 210		
26	43 Slaves 13 men 4 boys 20 women & 6 girls to Mr. Gorge	4300	
	White @ 100 Dollars		
	109 Slaves sold for		
	1 Boy Clinch & Chick		
		18200	



DeWolf's family was privy to his whereabouts. Upon leaving Bristol, DeWolf could have gone to any number of locations. He was familiar with Spanish-controlled Cuba, where he was known to conduct business, but he may have feared that Cuba would be a logical place for authorities to seek him out. Instead, he chose the Dutch island of St. Eustatius, known as "Statia," not too far away from St. Thomas in the north-east corner of the Caribbean. The second smallest in a constellation of three northern islands, Statia was a Dutch-owned leeward island in the Lesser Antilles archipelago. Made from volcanic activity with broken physical features, it had areas of lush tropical vegetation but relied on commerce from the outside world.¹⁴ The island was a logical choice for DeWolf because its residents were fluent in English and, more importantly, it was active as a slave depot—and one he had visited before.¹⁵

Statia, nicknamed the "Golden Rock" because of its thriving port, presented certain lawful opportunities favorable to DeWolf.¹⁶ The island was different from others in the Caribbean as it maintained a constant position of political neutrality, making it open

and available to all nations.¹⁷ Also, the Dutch were known to follow a nonrestrictive trade policy, endowing the island with a "free port" mentality.¹⁸ This policy was economically lucrative for the entire island. Additionally, the island boasted "slave warehouses," which allowed Statia to function as a key market in the slave-trade economy. After the grueling Middle Passage, slave captains could drop their sick enslaved people at the warehouse to recover and then pick them up later when they were healthy and therefore would yield higher profits when sold. Over time, a profit-based cycle developed where captains would exchange those previously left behind with captives from the most recent trip and sail on to slave-market ports like Charleston.¹⁹

Although Caribbean law recognized the slave trade as legal and considered all enslaved people as personal property or chattel, it was considered a criminal offense to willfully kill a slave. However, if a man was

ABOVE: Port of St. Eustatius, West Indies, circa 1777? (final number illegible), Courtesy of the Library of Congress, digital call number 2012590109.



Newport Octob 20 1791 Received of Capt John D Wolfe two pound Seventeen Shilling being Due from my Brother James D Wolfe on his Voyage to Africa in the Briguel Polly Received Liberty fifteen Shillings in full Mary Garon £3-12

LEFT: Slave register from St. Eustatius, photo courtesy of Ron Wetteroth, private collection.

ABOVE: Sample I.O.U. between family members on a small slip of paper, photo taken by the author with permission by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.

ported goods to apply for a permit once they landed.²³ Upon his arrival, DeWolf applied for and was granted a permit, giving him the status of burgher (citizen), which allowed him to trade legally from the port of Statia.²⁴

The ambitious nature of DeWolf's entrepreneurial spirit could not be squelched as a result of his sequestration. During DeWolf's four-year hiatus from Bristol, his vessels embarked on nineteen known slaving voyages.²⁵ Additionally, he regularly corresponded with his brother, John, primarily regarding personal financial matters, but he also instructed him on how his household in Bristol should be run and how to care for James's wife and family during James's extended absence. John's signature, found on ledgers from general stores in Bristol, read: "John DeWolf for James DeWolf."²⁶ Interestingly, everything was paid for in cash, despite the availability of credit to the DeWolfs, and everything was meticulously documented no matter how small the transaction. The DeWolfs' personal accounts were always reconciled in tedious detail and IOUs were written on even the smallest slips of paper.²⁷ Of the many DeWolf brothers, John and the two youngest sons, James and Levi, were particularly close. If not for the constant devotion and commitment by younger brother Levi and older brother John to James, the family's income stream that their brother had so diligently

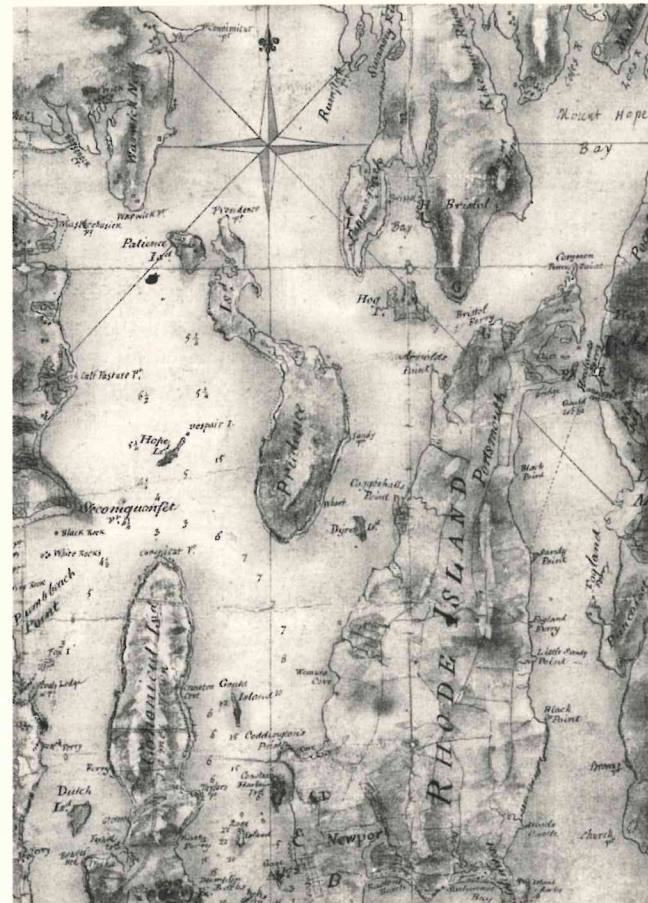
accused of killing an enslaved person, few showed "any willingness to recognize that it was an act of homicide or murder."²⁰ As a result, the crime carried no penalty, heavy or otherwise, and any attempt to protect enslaved people in the Caribbean went largely ignored. Residents in Statia were so ambivalent regarding the laws, even those few written to protect slaves, that most did not recognize that the deliberate killing of an enslaved person was murder.²¹ In the Caribbean, this overarching attitude toward the enslaved supported DeWolf's contention that he had done nothing wrong when he made the decision to throw the captive woman overboard to her death.

While the slave trade remained legal in the Caribbean, Dutch laws required a license for slaving on their islands. Through a licensing system, captains or owners of vessels could be held responsible for all fines and debts that might occur while in port.²² By law, Statia required all captains or owners of vessels who trans-

established would have been severely damaged during his absence.

Bristol's commerce depended heavily on the economic success of DeWolf and his family. The seaport of Bristol, situated in a prime location at the upper end of Narragansett Bay, fostered the town's seafaring trades. With several natural inlets and harbors throughout the state, vessels came and went with great ease. Furthermore, there were two narrow passages that a captain could choose to sail through toward the Atlantic Ocean. One passage was open and visible to Newport Harbor, where the tax collector's office was located. The other passage sailed around Newport and lent itself to discretion, particularly when a ship wanted to avoid the prying eyes of the collector with an illegally outfitted vessel designed for the slave trade. On land, a host of supporting activities, such as distilling and barrel making, also thrived off the seafaring trade and employed many Bristolians as crew members, long-shoremen, and warehouse employees. DeWolf himself owned a distillery that employed local residents and each day turned an average of 300 gallons of molasses into 250 gallons of rum.²⁸ DeWolf's business enterprises thus fueled the town's economy, making Bristol more and more dependent on the shipping industry in general and the DeWolf slave trading empire in particular.²⁹ This fact helps explain why local residents turned a blind eye to the DeWolfs' illegal activities.

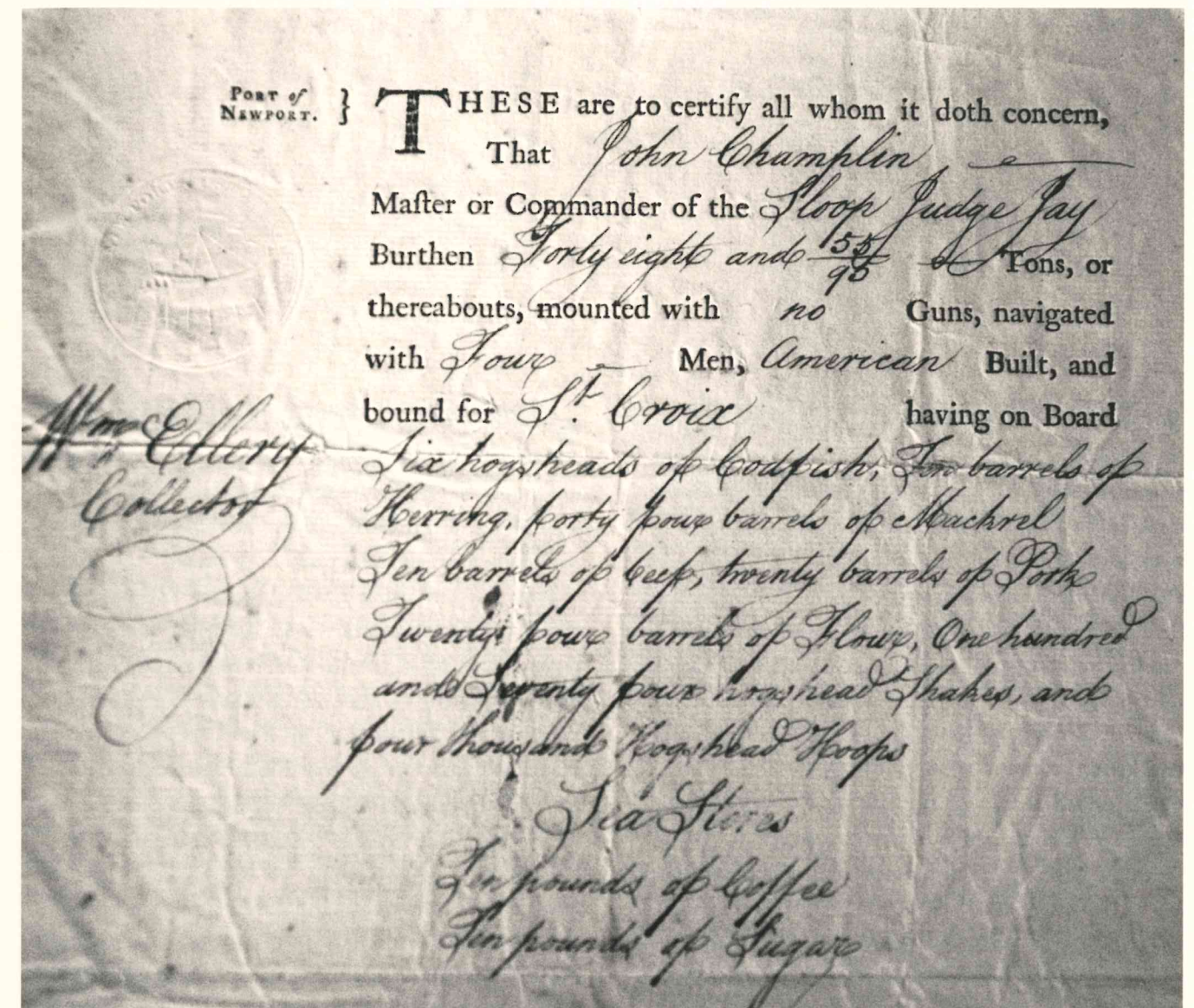
James DeWolf's self-imposed exile in the Caribbean put him in a position of having to rely on his brothers' aid. Each brother had his own area to maintain for James with regard to the family empire. John oversaw all household responsibilities for James's wife and



Narragansett Bay, the islands therein, and Bristol Harbor (to the right of the compass rose) Newport is located at the bottom center, Pen-and-ink watercolor by Charles Blaskowitz, 1777, courtesy of the Library of Congress, digital call number Gm71000684.

OPPOSITE: Customs house clearance from Newport, RI, for the sloop *Judge John Jay*, photo taken by the author with permission by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.

children, William looked after the various businesses, and Levi filled James's shoes as captain during his four years of exile.³⁰ Levi also kept multiple ledgers that outlined the activities of each voyage and sent long letters with full reports to DeWolf in Statia. Much of the correspondence discussed which voyage Levi would go on next and in which vessel, the investors and their personal requests for enslaved people, and what cargo Levi would pick up in Africa and deliver to either Charleston, South Carolina; or Havana or Matanzas, Cuba.³¹ For example, in a letter dated December 16, 1791, Levi reports bartering for some enslaved people from a Portuguese boat. The ship records from this



voyage showed that Levi sold 109 enslaved people for \$28,200. Other letters from James to Levi contained instructions and tactics for avoiding trouble with the law in both domestic and international waters while on his slaving voyages.³²

On August 8, 1792, James wrote a letter to his brother Levi, primarily giving him more instructions but in passing making reference to a letter apologizing for the incident on the *Polly* that he had written to Judge John Jay in Washington D.C., and that had been personally delivered by his father-in-law, Senator William Bradford of Rhode Island. Apparently hoping for federal intervention regarding the Caribbean warrant,

James expressed disappointment to Levi at not receiving a response from Judge Jay. Not coincidentally, at the same time he wrote to Jay, James instructed that a newly named DeWolf vessel set sail July 4 from Bristol on a voyage to purchase slaves. The sloop was named *Judge Jay*.³³

The correspondence between the brothers documented the extent to which James continued to run the DeWolf operations from afar. On August 9, 1793, while in Statia, Levi wrote a letter to his wife informing her that he would sail to St. Croix the next day to meet James, who had written previously to say he would help him sell his cargo.³⁴ Later that month, on

August 31, 1793, James wrote to Levi and told him how to present the enslaved people as a port requirement to the collector in Cuba to purchase sugar. This letter is succinct, quite businesslike, and included useful advice for Levi as he represented his brother James in this transfer of cargo. James outlined all the specifics, including the names of the collector and the agent with whom Levi was to do business. Levi was to first apply for a permit, then to go to the collector and get permission to transfer the sugar to the customs house. James concluded his instructions by telling Levi to request items that James had previously stored at the customs house. At the end of the letter in a postscript, James informed Levi that he would arrive the following morning to meet him. This postscript is extremely important, as it documented the fact that even though James was in hiding, he still had considerable ability to continue his work.³⁵ Subsequent letters also showed that James continued to play a leading role in the family business that he so diligently established.

The following day, September 1, 1793, Levi wrote again to his wife and expressed his frustration at his continued struggle to sell his cargo and told her that he had yet to leave for Cuba. He wrote that James was able to sell about half of the cargo, but that Levi now needed to sail to Havana to sell the rest. Three days later, on September 4, Levi wrote to Lydia once again to say that he was off to Havana and would be meeting not only James but also his brother's family, who was sailing with James to Cuba.³⁶

While James continued to direct his family business from Statia, Isaac Manchester, a Rhode Island slave-trade captain for hire, learned of the pending warrant

against DeWolf in Bristol. Manchester discovered where DeWolf was hiding, traveled to the Caribbean for confirmation, and reported the crime of murder against DeWolf regarding the incident on the *Polly* to Johannes Runnels, the governor of Statia.³⁷

James was informed by the governor, and, knowing that a trial in the Caribbean for his crime was imminent, James asked Levi to send three or four crew members to Statia immediately to act as character witnesses on his behalf. In his letter, James suggested Isaac Stockman as one possibility and requested that Levi find additional willing participants. DeWolf ships were already traveling to Statia and would provide convenient transportation: "... I find a trial may be here if 3 or 4 of them was [sic] here and if they go in one of our Briggs it will be time enough when they git [sic] here."³⁸ There were people in Bristol who would make themselves available to do this for James and for job security.

Isaac Stockman and another sailor, Henry Claning, both natives of Newport, set sail in response to this request. Although James specifically requested Stockman's presence, no evidence confirms that either man had sailed on the *Polly*. Once on the island, Stockman and Claning were registered and classified as transients, since neither was a documented resident of Statia.³⁹ The two men remained in James's employ and on call for the impending trial, which created ample opportunity to "rehearse" their testimony. Slave-ship owners commonly bribed crew members, often for their continued loyalty and discretion regarding illegal slaving matters.⁴⁰ As such, even though Stockman and Claning were not on the *Polly* at the time, they were

vital to James's effort to argue against the charge of murder.

Once Stockman and Claning were made aware of a pending retrial, DeWolf made arrangements for the two men to give a second deposition in regard to the incident on the *Polly*. One of the responsibilities of Governor Runnels of Statia was to handle legal matters on behalf of Judge Advocate Christian Petri of St. Thomas, including depositions. Petri oversaw the magistrate for all the Dutch islands, including Statia, St. Thomas, St. Martin, and Saba.⁴¹ St. Thomas was three times larger than Statia and had a much larger port and more available land. It also was the judicial home for the surrounding islands. The island governed itself similarly to Statia in that it had an economy built by merchants and planters who participated in the slave trade. Many Statia merchants, who included expatriates, had relocated to the island of St. Thomas and made for an audience friendly to DeWolf's side of the case.

With a second deposition in hand and not feeling threatened by this looming trial, DeWolf continued to conduct business from Statia. August 8, 1794, James wrote to his brother John:

... as you are going to England [to sell sugar] ... meet me ... you will not I hope fail to write to me by all opportunity from England on where you may be, that I may the better govern myself how to proceed and when and where I shall meet you in the West Indies, ... give me the earliest notice possible.⁴²

With a trial pending, James may have depended on his

brothers' emotional support as much as their business acumen.

On April 17, 1795, Stockman and Claning were interviewed by Petri in regard to the second deposition. Stockman and Claning falsely testified to Petri that they worked as crew members on the *Polly* for DeWolf in 1791.⁴³ They also gave accounts of what happened to the enslaved woman on board the *Polly* for this new deposition. While the core of the story remained the same, this time, the deposition carried an obvious compassionate undertone regarding DeWolf. He was described as a very sensitive human being, concerned not only for his crew but also for the suffering woman as well. Stockman and Claning also stated that the situation was very unfortunate and that due to the nature of the disease, the crew was concerned for their own safety. Stockman and Claning further testified that DeWolf had no alternative but to save the crew and cargo, which consisted of 142 captives and fifteen crew members, ten of whom reportedly had never contracted smallpox and therefore had no natural immunity to the disease. Both men claimed that the enslaved female, seated on the top deck, had remained there for three to four days, not two, and that she had received constant medical care and attention. They reported that no one believed that the woman would recover and that she was, without malice, thrown overboard. In fact, they argued, she already may have been dead by the time she was thrown overboard. Finally, Stockman and Claning stated that DeWolf and the crew were equally sickened by the circumstances that had compelled them to adopt this disagreeable solution.⁴⁴ These statements were a major revision from

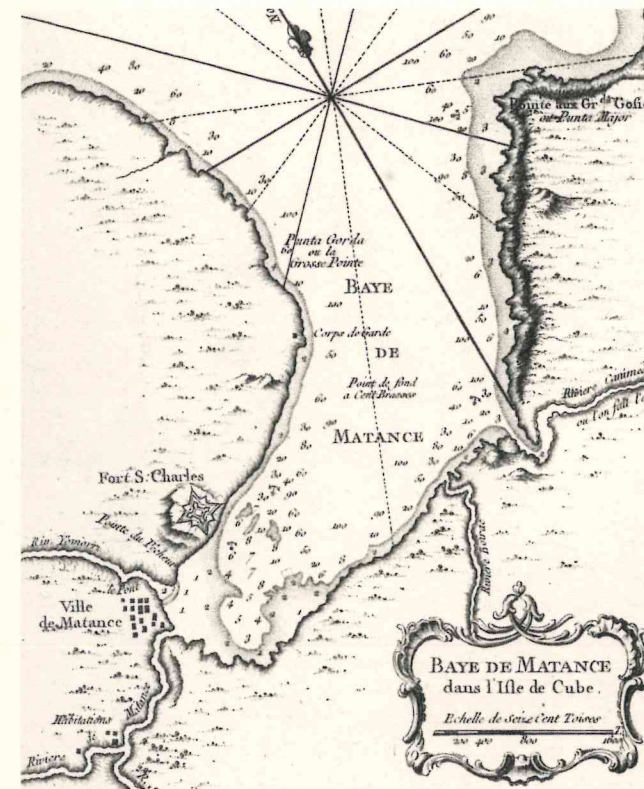
the earlier deposition and ultimately presented an entirely different scenario. It also made no mention of the woman being gagged or tied to a chair, neither of which would have been necessary if she really was dead, nor did it repeat DeWolf's comment that he was sorry he had lost such a good chair.⁴⁵ Due entirely to Stockman's and Claning's testimonies, this second deposition wove a far more perfect and compassionate tale for DeWolf's defense.⁴⁶

DeWolf was notified that Petri was about to hand down his decision on April 29, 1795.⁴⁷ After speaking with Manchester, DeWolf's handpicked witnesses and supposed crew members, and finally to DeWolf, the judge absolved him of any wrongdoing and dismissed the charges.⁴⁸ Although he stated that he had initially felt DeWolf was cruel and had committed a morally evil act of wanton barbarity, the judge ultimately determined that DeWolf's actions were intended to save the lives of his crew. The judge even implied that he felt that DeWolf did the honorable thing in saving his men and believed that DeWolf had done everything in his power to save the poor enslaved woman.⁴⁹ As a result of the undoubtedly well-rehearsed testimonies of Stockman and Claning, the charges of murder against DeWolf were dropped in the Caribbean.

Back in Rhode Island, DeWolf's family worked tirelessly to ensure the dismissal of the charges against DeWolf in Rhode Island. With the murder case regarding the *Polly* dropped in St. Thomas, DeWolf now needed to wait for the federal grand jury in Rhode Island to repeal the warrant for his arrest on the grounds that another court had already exonerated him. DeWolf's family and extended family undoubt-

edly asserted tremendous influence; father-in-law Senator Bradford must have done his part to get the warrant repealed, even though no documentation of his activities has survived. Additionally, Rhode Island Marshal William Peck declared that he could never find DeWolf in order to arrest him. Despite having reportedly searched for DeWolf for multiple years, once the St. Thomas verdict was in, Peck declared that he would stop looking for DeWolf at once.⁵⁰

In late 1795, Judge Henry Marchant reviewed DeWolf's case at the request of his family, who were now in possession of the second deposition. Marchant was Rhode Island's first federally appointed judge and had been placed into this esteemed position by President Washington. He was the one person who stood between DeWolf and his freedom.⁵¹ Ultimately, Marchant decided to let the warrant expire. A combination of factors may account for this decision. Senator Bradford was a very powerful and influential member in politics who had personally attempted to assist DeWolf three years earlier by delivering the letter from DeWolf to Judge Jay. He may have exerted some of this influence on Marchant in some way. The second factor was that Marchant, too, owned an enslaved person and may not have felt DeWolf should be convicted for the murder of a slave.⁵² Once Marchant's decision was made, the DeWolf family was able to send word to James that although the charges for murder had not officially been dropped, the arrest warrant had been, making it safe for him to come home.⁵³ DeWolf returned to Bristol immediately and once again took the helm of the family's empire he had so diligently maintained from afar.



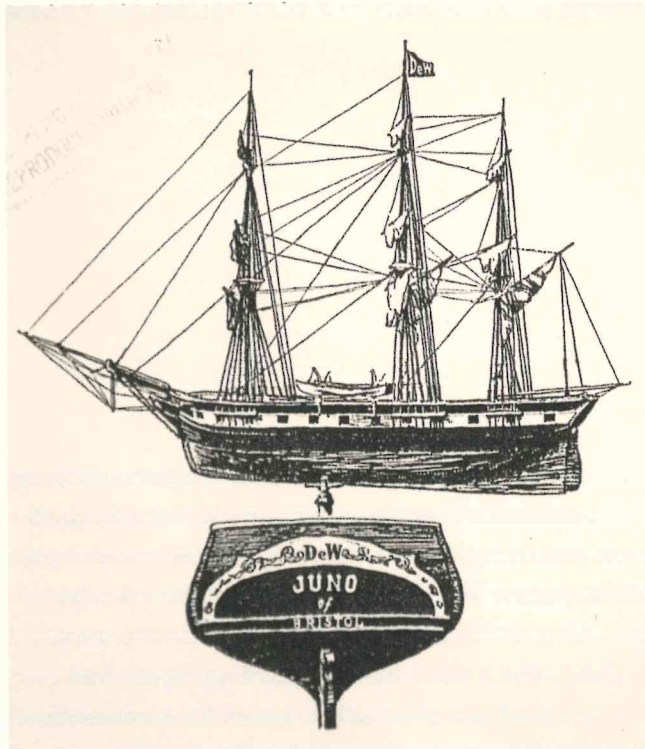
Bay of Matanzas, Cuba, created by Jacques Bellin, 1764, courtesy of the Library of Congress, digital call number 73697700.

Once DeWolf arrived home in 1795, he did not waste any time reestablishing himself as a visibly prominent capitalist in his community. Two days after his return, DeWolf received a letter from his uncle Simeon Potter containing explicit instructions on how to circumvent the most recent slave laws that had been passed in his absence. Potter advised DeWolf to go straight to Georgia to sell his enslaved people to avoid violating the Slave Trade Act of 1794. Congress had passed the act to prohibit the transport of enslaved people from the United States to any foreign country and to make it illegal for American citizens to outfit a ship for the purposes of importing slaves. Potter's letter continued with a recommendation that DeWolf hire an agent and stated that this approach would guarantee the highest prices for his slaves.⁵⁴ With this advice in hand, DeWolf was able to expedite his return to slaving while he avoided further trouble.

That same year, DeWolf, who understood that the laws in Spain still allowed the foreign slave trade to exist, began to pursue a new business strategy. Stay-

ing one step ahead of the law, DeWolf began registering his vessels with Spanish papers, employing a Spanish crew, and flying a Spanish flag. These actions allowed him to pursue his business legally, if under a foreign flag. Also, at this time, DeWolf turned his attention to Cuba, which was a Spanish territory. Spain had resisted abolition in Cuba because of the tremendous need for slaves on its sugar and coffee plantations. Legal slavery in Cuba brought heavy slave-trading traffic to the ports of Havana and Matanzas. It also inspired DeWolf to invest in three separate plantations of his own, the Mariana, Nueva Esperanza, and New Hope.⁵⁵ For the next two decades, and despite the act of 1794, DeWolf continued selling slaves in Havana and in various ports in the southern United States, including Charleston. Ultimately, the 1794 law had little impact, and very few convictions were recorded under its authority.⁵⁶

Laws aside, and with his new business strategy in place, DeWolf became more powerful than ever. On December 4, 1795, his ship the *Juno* sold seventy-five enslaved people valued at \$19,390 at an undisclosed location in the West Indies. Then, on January 9, 1796, the *Juno* landed in Havana and sold the remaining enslaved people from the same voyage, valued at \$25,105. The next entry on the ship's log documented that DeWolf had subcontracted with thirty-five different individuals to fulfill their requests for enslaved workers. In addition to the price of the enslaved people, DeWolf typically charged an average forty-dollar consignment fee for each enslaved person ordered along with a 5 percent commission paid on the value of the enslaved person at the time of delivery.⁵⁷ For



Sketch of the vessel *Juno*, commissioned by DeWolf, photo taken by the author with permission by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.

example, if an enslaved person were purchased for \$500, DeWolf's fee would be forty dollars plus 5 percent, for a total of \$560. Under this system, DeWolf brought in huge sums of money on each slaving voyage. Occasionally, he did have his disasters. On one terribly costly voyage in 1796, DeWolf described his losses:

... 3 slaves were dead on arrival, 1 was near death, 2 were very ill, 2 were sick, 1 was very weak, 2 had become very thin, 1 was too old, 2 were very young, 1 very small, 1 had to be carried off the ship...⁵⁸

DeWolf was later heard stating that the death of several of those enslaved people had ruined the voyage for him.⁵⁹ But mostly, such losses were rare, and there is no further mention of such a personally catastrophic voyage in DeWolf's lifetime.

As time passed, DeWolf and his brothers began to develop new strategies to protect his empire. In 1797, James and William founded the Bank of Bristol to safeguard the family's money. Housed in an elegant

*Abstract of Ship Juno's Sales, to H. 4th
Decr 1795 - - - - -*

Nov. 18. 25 Negro Men @ 300 ^d	7500-"
" " 6 ^d " @ 280 ^d	1680-"
" " 2 Men Boys @	545-"
" " 6 ^d " @ 260 ^d	1560-"
" " 3 Boys @ 240 ^d	720-"
" 19-1 Small Girl @	180-"
" " 4 Negro Men @ 280 ^d	1120-"
" 20-1 Small Boy @	220-"
" 21-1 ^d " @	210-"
" " 1 Negro Man @	265-"
" 23-1 Small Girl @	180-"
" 24-3 Negro Men @ 265 ^d	795-"
" " 3 ^d Woman @ 220 ^d	1760-"
" " 4 ^d Small Girls @ 170 ^d	680-"
" 25-1 ^d " @	170-"
" 26-1 ^d " @	170-"
Decr. 1. 1 Boy @	220-"
" 2. 1 Negro man @	250-"
70 Slaves over -	Colld 18225-"

Juno list of enslaved, December 1795, photo taken by the author with permission by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.

OPPOSITE: Bank of Bristol, circa 1900, photo courtesy of Mary Millard, private collection.

three-story Georgian-style brick structure that is still extant today, the bank also served as the counting house, or accounting department, for James's and William's other enterprises, all of which involved the slave trade in some capacity. James and William purposely located the bank on the DeWolf wharf, which was owned by William.⁶⁰ William, in turn, leased the land to the Bank of Bristol for \$150 per year. The bank's stockholders included two generations of DeWolfs.⁶¹

In 1800, with \$50,000 in capital, the Bank of Bristol was officially chartered as Bristol's first public bank, in compliance with federal banking regulations.⁶² The DeWolfs appointed as their first president James's father-in-law, Senator William Bradford. Bradford was followed later by James's older brother, John. Initially, small local banks were designed to accept



deposits and to offer interest-bearing loans. Over time, they began providing other services, such as issuing banknotes (checks), exchanging heavy coins for paper money, and exchanging currencies from other countries. James's counting room was originally located on the ground floor of the bank. Interestingly, James shortly thereafter started a second bank, located just two buildings north, and named it Mount Hope Bank. James was listed as the first president of this financial establishment.⁶³

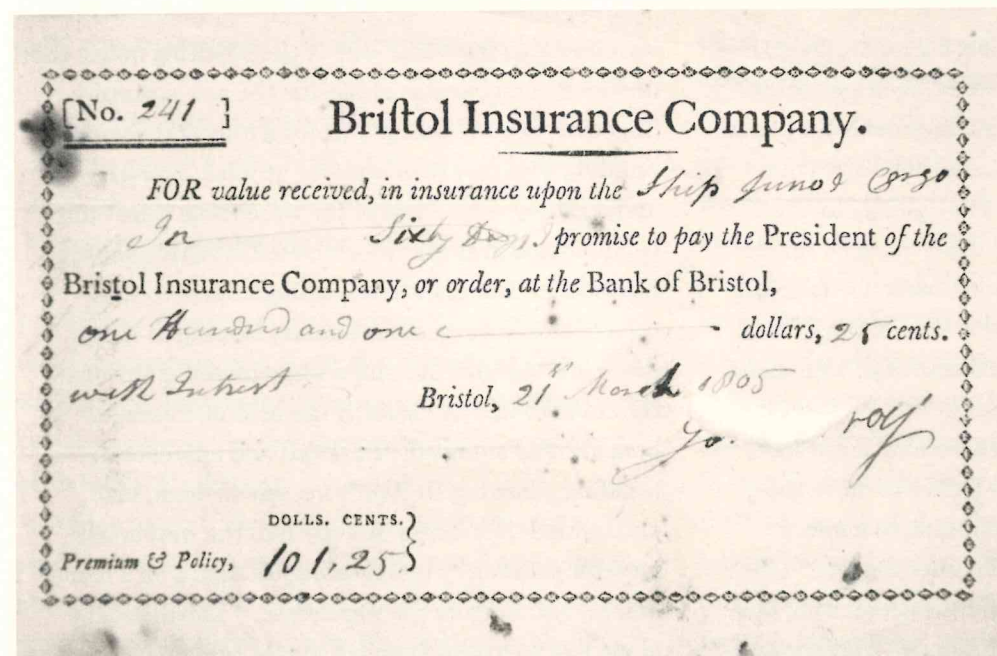
By 1801, as the Bank of Bristol became more successful, it became necessary for James to move the counting house from the bank building to another building directly next door on Thames Street.⁶⁴ This action separated the banking and the accounting portions of DeWolf's enterprises. Later, DeWolf added a

warehouse to the water side of the counting house that included vessel access alongside the new structure. Together, both buildings formed a long and narrow building with two stories above ground, a basement, and a gabled roof. Parts of the warehouse were built from red and gray granite collected in Africa and the Caribbean. The granite was brought back to Bristol in DeWolf's vessels as ballast, helping to weigh down and stabilize his ships while traveling through the trade route, particularly the Middle Passage.⁶⁵ A boat slip ran alongside the wharf and adjacent to the building, allowing DeWolf's vessels to dock, load, and unload their cargo directly into the warehouse. DeWolf's distillery was located just south on Thames Street, not far from the warehouse.⁶⁶ The distillery alone was successful enough for DeWolf to accumulate

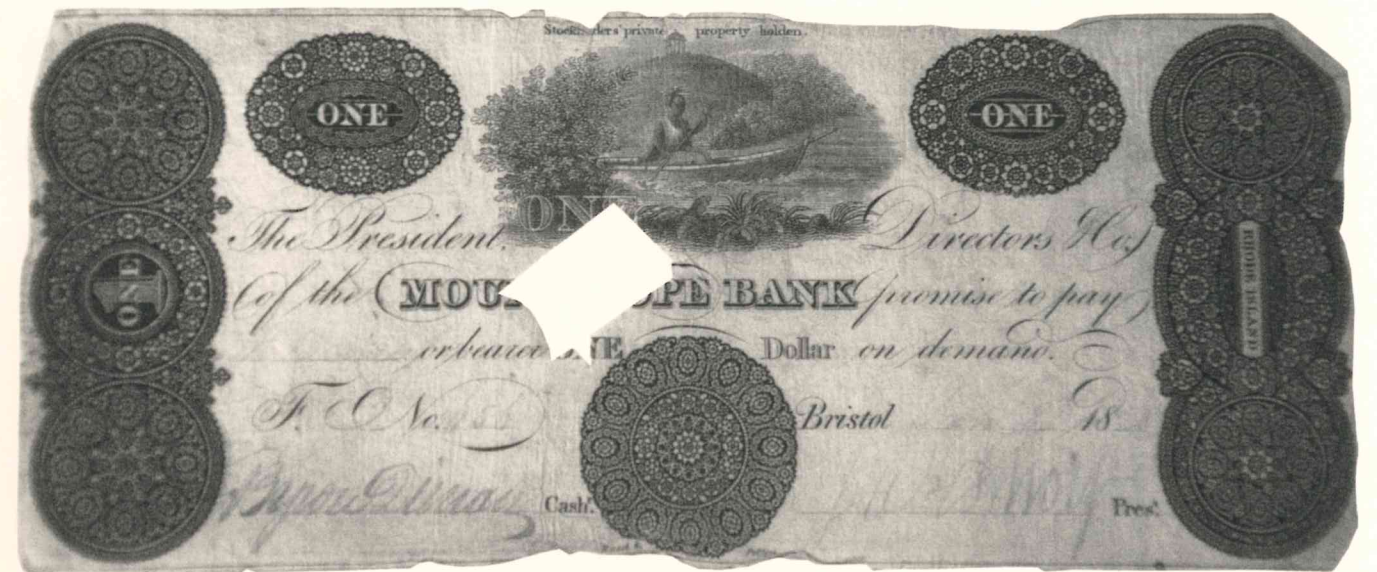
an abundance of wealth to sustain him for the rest of his life.⁶⁷ In addition to the distillery, warehouse, and wharf, the DeWolfs owned many retail stores throughout Bristol.⁶⁸

As his empire developed, DeWolf continued to add to his business enterprises by opening a local insurance company. Joined by his brothers and naming his new business venture after his estate, DeWolf established the Mount Hope Insurance Company and served as president.⁶⁹ The company had a dual purpose: it made the government-mandated insurance coverage available to local mariners, and it insured all DeWolf ships.⁷⁰ The political environment, maritime slaving laws, war, or threat of war were factored in and contributed toward the total cost and value of insur-

ance policies.⁷¹ Insurance policies covered all vessels, including those participating in the slave trade, against damage or total destruction from shipwreck, loss of the ship or cargo to piracy, confiscation at a foreign port, or disease that killed a certain predetermined percentage of slaves.⁷² Once the threat level was determined and the losses reached the minimum percentages of 5 to 25 percent, an estimated repayment would be established. The amount of the overall coverage would then be determined, a contract written and signed, and the premium paid in full.⁷³ At the family's height of financial power, the DeWolfs made considerable profits from the sale of policies to other ship owners that covered the vessels if a catastrophic event occurred.⁷⁴



Bristol Insurance Company receipt (run and owned by the DeWolfs identical to Mount Hope Insurance Company), photo taken by the author with permission by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.



One dollar banknote from the Bank of Mount Hope, photo taken by the author with permission by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.



Diman Counting House, circa 1900, photo courtesy of Mary Millard, private collection.

By today's legal standards, insuring one's own vessels could be construed as insurance fraud, as sound business practice negated the logic of insuring one's own vessels. The DeWolfs risked bankruptcy or extensive payouts that could create a tremendous amount of personal debt both to the insurer and the insured. For example, one insurance policy for a DeWolf vessel, issued in 1801, determined that the "cargo" was to be insured at a 15 percent loss, with the premium settled at \$600 if the cargo was lost. Fortunately for James DeWolf, he personally never lost a vessel or a substantial amount of cargo. Additionally, it is likely that the purchase of insurance by the DeWolfs for their vessels existed on paper only.

The multitude of enterprising businesses DeWolf established occurred because he was able to take advantage of the positive economic climate in Bristol. DeWolf also had the tenacious ability and savvy business sense to take his family to a level of financial prosperity that far exceeded that of many successful families in Rhode Island and beyond. Initially, the entire DeWolf legacy was built solely on his connection with the slave trade, but it evolved into an indisputable empire that ultimately included textile mills, sugar and coffee plantations in Cuba, and multiple properties held in various states. DeWolf owned all of his vessels outright. Over time, DeWolf also held 75 percent interest in many other vessels, primarily those owned by his brothers and extended relatives.⁷⁵ All of these business ventures provided consistent income for DeWolf and his family, along with employment for many in the community.

In 1803, the anti-slaving law of 1794 was repealed in

Documentation of co-partnership of D'Wolf, Packard, and D'Wolf, New York, January 1, 1818, photo taken by the author with permission by the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society.

South Carolina, giving a green light to the insatiable demand for enslaved workers throughout the area.⁷⁶ In reality, Charleston had been a port of delivery for enslaved people for many years, despite the state and federal laws that prohibited the trade. But once the law officially allowed slave sales to resume, Charleston quickly filled with competing opportunistic vessels. Rhode Island slavers, who already transported between 80 to 90 percent of the enslaved sold throughout the nation, immediately took advantage of this opportunity.⁷⁷ Beginning in late 1806 and continuing into 1807, a period of only seven months, the DeWolfs sent at least 18 vessels to Charleston carrying a total of nearly 2,300 enslaved, if not more.⁷⁸ Curiously, one of the vessels was named the *Monticello*, after President Thomas Jefferson's famed estate.⁷⁹

The pro-slavery climate in South Carolina inspired DeWolf to form a business partnership with a man in Charleston named Charles Christian. DeWolf arranged for the sale of large numbers of enslaved people from the family's ships to Christian. This shrewd business move took DeWolf's empire to an entirely new level. DeWolf, in partnership with this well-established Charleston merchant, opened a commission house for all of his cargoes, naming the firm "Christian and D'Wolf."⁸⁰ DeWolf's nephew, Henry, oversaw the Charleston business and its slave sales. DeWolf also established an office in New York to deal with the financial end of the Charleston business and placed his oldest son, James, Jr., or "Gentleman Jim," in charge of honoring all financial drafts sent to him by his cousin Henry.⁸¹ This scenario further demonstrated DeWolf's savvy business mind and his ability

Car. Charles Wilson
Bristol
R.I.

New-York, January 1, 1818.

Dear Sir,

The Co-partnership of D'Wolf, Packard, & D'Wolf, being dissolved, I shall henceforward continue the business of a Commission Merchant, in this City, in my own name, and in that way beg leave to offer you my services.

I am prepared to offer every facility to those who may favour me with their commands, by making advances on consignments, &c. when required.

I am, respectfully,

Your Obedt Servt,
James D'Wolf, Jr.

I hereby guarantee to all persons who shall make consignments to my son, James D'Wolf Jr. his solvency and correct accountability until the year 1825.
J. D'Wolf

to expand his already well-developed vertically integrated empire by utilizing trusted family members.

With the passing of the 1807 federal Slave Trade Act, which went into effect on January 1, 1808, many Rhode Islanders continued their tenacious fight to ensure that the state's commerce continued to take

advantage of slave-trading activities, legal or not. DeWolf already had put into place a plan to circumvent the newly revised regulation with his land ownership in Cuba.⁸² While his investment in three plantations of sugar and coffee ensured consistent income and employment for the family and Bristol

residents, it also created a need for ceaseless replenishment of enslaved labor.

In 1829, DeWolf was reelected to his position in the House of Representatives in Rhode Island, where he intended to exert political influence to the benefit of his business ventures. Most certainly he could not have imagined that his life would end a mere eight years later. Bishop Alexander V. Griswold delivered DeWolf's memorial sermon, stating that the congregation should forgive DeWolf for his chosen occupation. At the same time, Griswold acknowledged that his industry, and the town of Bristol, benefited greatly as a whole from his success in the slave trade. This push and pull between dishonorable work and high profit has obscured the nature of James DeWolf's role in American history.⁸³

NOTES

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Through the transition of multiple laws and numerous presidential administrations, James DeWolf remained a powerful and influential figure, in both national politics and as a leader of the people of Bristol. He also presented a persona that provoked an ambivalent relationship with those around him as he did not create a dependency on slavery in Rhode Island but rather a dependency for Rhode Islanders on his continued success in human trafficking. Ultimately, DeWolf had the innate ability to circumvent any law that was put into place and to successfully continue his involvement in the transatlantic slave trade from 1784 until his death in 1837. He and his family are responsible for the delivery of thousands of Africans into the life of slavery.

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29. James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 269.

30. James DeWolf business records, BHPS.

31. Mary Millard, private collection, Bristol, Rhode Island.

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NANCY KOUGEAS

Building the San Juan Plantation

A Bristol Family in Cuba, 1818–41

It is impossible for any man, however theoretically opposed to the practice of slavery, to become either planter or merchant in the island of Cuba without giving his countenance directly or indirectly to a system which has happily been for ever abolished throughout the widespread dominions of the British Crown.

BRITISH ABOLITIONIST DAVID TURNBULL¹

ON FEBRUARY 21, 1818, Captain Joseph Oliver Wilson was in Havana, Cuba. While sugar was being loaded onto the *Orizombo*, he wrote to his employer and friend, John DeWolf, in Bristol, Rhode Island: "I am determind to settle here and Tomorrow I shall go into the country in search of land."² Wilson quickly found a plantation to his liking, returned to Bristol, and by May 22, 1818, his wife, 11-month old son, and other family members were on their way back to Cuba—to the San Juan Estates, a coffee and sugar plantation in Matanzas province.

The history of Bristol's involvement in the slave trade has centered primarily on the DeWolf family, the town's undisputed leaders. But the DeWolfs did not act alone—they needed captains, seamen, agents, merchants, carpenters, shoemakers, and tradesmen of all sorts for their businesses to thrive. Wilson was one such necessary person. He initially arrived in Bristol to take command of DeWolf's privateer *Yankee* during the War of 1812. By war's end, he had married a Bristol native and continued to work with the DeWolfs, participating in the slave trade and then following their lead by purchasing a plantation in Cuba.

The Cuban plantations owned by the Bristol residents have been little studied; the scarcity of documents has been an impediment. In addition to the toll that time has taken, families have destroyed or removed documents that mention slavery. Those that have survived are scattered in many repositories. The letters written by Oliver and Sarah "Sally" Wilson, written over an approximately 20-year span, are an exception. They offer a detailed view of life on one plantation that, while told from Wilson's vantage point, also yields insight into the lives of the enslaved. The years during which the Wilsons lived on the San Juan Plantation were ones of great change in Cuba. While other countries were abolishing slavery, Cuba was moving in the opposite direction, encouraging settlers and allowing the slave trade to continue. The Wilsons were one family among the many who moved to Cuba during this time. Their letters tell their story.

Wilson had become a local hero during the War of 1812. His two cruises on the *Yankee* made a fortune for many back home in Bristol.³ He was then given command of a new DeWolf ship, the *MacDonough*. But the war ended ("too soon," as they said in Bristol), and he was forced to give back the prizes—the ships he had seized from the British and the cargoes they carried. By the war's end, he had married Sarah Sabens, to whom he had been introduced at a ball given by John DeWolf. She was 15, and he was 26.⁴

The end of the war meant financial struggles for many in Bristol. The enormous profits made in the slave trade and in privateering made it hard for men like Wilson to think of a future moving legitimate cargo from one port to another. So, in December 1815,