



GeoContext:

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Companion Document for “Oceanography and the Slave Trade”

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People: Matthew Fontaine Maury

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This companion guide accompanies the slides for “Oceanography and the Slave Trade.” For each slide, we provide additional context for the content shown. For accessibility purposes, at the end of this document, we provide alternative text for images.

Additional Context for Slides

Slide 2 | The discipline of oceanography developed in the 19th century, with ocean depth sounding and charting of surface currents. This work was largely motivated by improving commercial ship navigation, including slave ships that carried enslaved people to the United States. Over the same time period that oceanography was developing as a discipline, millions of enslaved people traveled across the Atlantic in slave ships. This figure shows how trade routes in the Atlantic line up closely with the North Atlantic Gyre.

Slide 3 | One key early oceanographer, Matthew Fontaine Maury, worked on improving commercial routes by collecting data on surface currents and winds. He published the first modern oceanography textbook in 1855, and was a professor at the Virginia Military Institute until his death. His work spanned oceanography, meteorology, astronomy, and geology.

Slide 4 | During the U.S. Civil War, Maury served in the Confederate Navy and worked hard to convince European governments to support the Confederate side. Before the Civil War, Maury, similar to other proslavery politicians at this time, saw the demise of slavery in the U.S., and advocated instead for U.S. slave owners to own land in Brazil, and continue forced slave labor in South America.

Slide 5 | Maury termed his vision for the continuation of U.S. slavery in Brazil “The Amazonian Republic”. He proposed that U.S. slaveholders would own property in Brazil, which he considered, like the U.S. to be a slave country based on the similar climate and geography of the Amazon to the Mississippi River. Like other scientists of this time (See Landscape Slides),

Maury believed that certain climates or topographies were well-suited for the institution of slavery. Based on the pattern of ocean surface currents, Maury argued that Brazil was a natural extension of the U.S. empire as surface currents would hasten travel between the southern U.S. and Brazil and Caribbean. Maury envisioned a continuation of agricultural production by U.S. owned slaves. The plausibility of this “Amazonian Republic” was tested by U.S. Navy by exploring the navigability of the Amazon River, at Maury’s suggestion.

Alternative Text for Figures

Figure 1 | Location of main sea currents, trade routes, and North Atlantic Gyre in Atlantic Ocean

Schematic showing trade routes for Atlantic Trade Triangle, including manufactures, slaves, gold, pepper, sugar, molasses, fruits, tobacco, furs, lumber. Overlain is location of surface currents in Atlantic and North Atlantic Gyre. Trade paths and surface currents overlap, and this figure shows how commercial bodies, including the slave industry, were interested in mapping out and learning about surface currents for improved ship navigability.

Figure 2 | "Trade wind chart of the Atlantic Ocean," by Matthew Fontaine Maury, 1851.

Illustration by Matthew Fontaine Maury showing location of trade winds in the Atlantic Ocean.

Figure 3 | Statue of Matthew Fontaine Maury in Richmond, Virginia

Statue of a seated Matthew Fontaine Maury. Underneath his feet is written "Pathfinder of the Seas", and above is a statue of the globe with a ship and other figures emerging below the globe, possibly showing a shipwreck.

Figure 4 | Portrait of Matthew Fontaine Maury, U.S. Navy

Formal portrait of Matthew Fontaine Maury in military uniform.