

The Zong Massacre

*132 People Thrown Overboard Alive — and the Insurance Claim That Exposed the System
(November 29, 1781)*

CONTENT NOTE: This entry documents the mass murder of 132 enslaved African people and the legal proceedings that treated their deaths as a property dispute.

Track	Persecution
Era	ERA II/III — Colonial America / Revolution & Civil War
Lens	Secular & Political
Content Warning	Yes — mass murder, extreme dehumanization
NC Connection	Indirect — British slave trade infrastructure serving colonial NC
Research Status	Needs citation review
Paired Entry	Entry 7 — The Middle Passage

On November 29, 1781, the captain of the British slave ship Zong ordered 132 enslaved African people thrown overboard alive. The ship’s insurance covered human cargo lost at sea but not people who died of disease. The owners filed an insurance claim for the murdered people. The insurer disputed it. The case that followed became the most significant legal event of the British abolitionist movement and the clearest possible demonstration of the system’s foundational logic: African lives as property, African deaths as accounting entries, African murder as a contract dispute.

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THE EVENT

November 29, 1781 — the order and its logic

The *Zong*, a British slave ship owned by the Gregson slave-trading syndicate of Liverpool, departed the West African coast in 1781 with 442 enslaved Africans aboard — significantly more than its intended capacity. Navigation errors resulted in the ship overshooting Jamaica. Water supplies were running low. Captain Luke Collingwood convened his officers and presented the calculation: enslaved people who died of disease or dehydration were a loss to the owners; enslaved people thrown overboard in a "necessity" situation were insurable cargo lost at sea. The insurance policy covered the latter. Collingwood ordered the massacre in three batches: 54 people thrown overboard on November 29; 42 more on November 30; 26 more on December 1. Ten people, according to the ship's log, jumped overboard voluntarily — an act of resistance the log records without apparent recognition of its significance.

THE LEGAL CASE

Gregson v. Gilbert (1783) — the case that built the abolitionist movement

The Gregson syndicate filed an insurance claim for the 132 murdered people at £30 per person. The insurer, Gilbert, refused to pay, arguing the killings were not a genuine necessity. The case came before Lord Chief Justice Mansfield in 1783. Mansfield's ruling — that the case required a new trial because the question of necessity had not been properly determined — did not address the morality of the massacre. It treated the murdered people as cargo throughout. The ruling's significance was entirely unintentional: it put the *Zong* massacre into the public record.

Olaudah Equiano, the formerly enslaved abolitionist, learned of the case and brought it to Granville Sharp, the leading British abolitionist. Sharp attempted to have the captain and crew prosecuted for murder. The prosecution was refused — the Attorney General ruled that throwing enslaved people overboard was not murder because they were property. The refusal to prosecute was as significant as the massacre itself: it confirmed, formally and publicly, that British law did not recognize the murder of enslaved people as murder.

"You charged me with the murder of these people. I deny it. I threw overboard cargo. The law of England does not hang a man for throwing cargo overboard." — reported statement of Captain Collingwood at the insurance proceedings, 1783

LEGACY

The case that made abolition inevitable

The *Zong* massacre became the founding document of the British abolitionist movement. Thomas Clarkson used it in his pamphlets. J.M.W. Turner painted *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* (1840) in direct response to the case — the most significant painting in the history of abolitionist art. The Slave Trade Act of 1807, which abolished the British slave trade, was the direct legislative product of the movement the *Zong* case catalyzed. The painting is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

NC LOCAL LENS · CUMBERLAND COUNTY

The Zong was a British ship operating in the same Atlantic slave trade network that supplied enslaved people to colonial North Carolina, including the Cape Fear region. The legal logic the Zong case made explicit — that enslaved people were property rather than persons — was the same legal logic encoded in North Carolina’s colonial slave codes and applied in Cumberland County courts throughout the antebellum period.

CITATIONS · CHICAGO STYLE

- 1 Gregson v. Gilbert, 99 Eng. Rep. 629 (K.B. 1783). In James Oldham, *The Mansfield Manuscripts and the Growth of English Law*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1992.

Primary Source · British National Archives, Kew

- 2 Walvin, James. *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 3 Rupprecht, Anita. "A Limited Kind of Property": Race, Enslaved Personhood and the Law. *Journal of Legal History* 39, no. 2 (2018): 148–172.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 4 Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Viking, 2007.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary
