

HMS Wasp - Slave Trade Incident

In 1845 in Plymouth at the Guildhall there was a remarkable court case taking place:

"On 27 February 1845, HMS Wasp had been patrolling the west coast of Africa just off Lagos, Nigeria. During its patrol, HMS Wasp encountered a ship called the Felicidade flying a Brazilian flag and which the commanding officer of HMS Wasp, Lieutenant Stupart, suspected of being fitted for the transporting of slaves. HMS Wasp intercepted the Felicidade and detained the crew. Lt. Stupart was correct – the Felicidade had been fitted for slaves, however, there were none on board at the time.

A day later, another ship, the Echo, also flying a Brazilian flag and looking likely to be another slaver vessel was sighted by HMS Wasp and successfully captured. Upon inspection, it was discovered that the Echo had 434 slaves on board who had been starved for over 48 hours. Lt. Stupart moved nine members of the Echo's crew to the Felicidade to join the imprisoned crew on that ship. Midshipman Thomas Palmer, who was only 16 at the time, and nine other members of HMS Wasp's crew were placed in charge of the Felicidade and the prisoners, whilst Lt Stupart remained aboard the Echo to feed and care for the 434 slaves. Not long after the imprisoned crews of the two Brazilian ships broke free on the Felicidade and stormed the deck so that they might escape. During the storming, Felicidade's cook Majaval, stabbed Midshipman Palmer, whilst the other prisoners killed the rest of the British seamen and threw their bodies overboard.

Lt. Stupart realised something was amiss when cannon fire was heard coming from above deck. The Felicidade began firing on the Echo whilst the prisoners attempted their escape. Soon another British ship, HMS Star, joined in and helped subdue and recaptured the Felicidade recapturing the crew. The prisoners: eight Brazilians and two Spaniards were brought to Plymouth Guildhall, where they were charged with wilful murder on the high seas. Seven of them were found guilty and sentenced to death. The Court Case was recorded in a local newspaper including depictions of the defendants and the 2 key Naval witnesses."

With thanks to the [Devonport Naval Heritage Centre](#) [Devonport Naval Heritage Centre](#) for the image and information.

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<https://www.britishempire.co.uk/.../plymouth/felicidade.htm>

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