Tracking the Brig Uncas in Historic Newspapers

One of the most useful sources for doing historical maritime research are local newspapers. Just like today, newspapers in the 18th and 19th centuries were sources for all kinds of information, ranging from national and international news, to local rumors and gossip, to advertisements and other public announcements. From a surviving ship manifest, we know that Franklin & Armfield sent 92 enslaved people from Alexandria to New Orleans aboard the Brig Uncas in the fall of 1833. Using historic newspapers, we can better reconstruct the voyages of specific ships as they moved from port to port.

The advertisements published in historic newspapers can tell us about the businesses that were operating in the past. On October 30th, 1833, the same day the Uncas left Alexandria for New Orleans, Franklin & Armfield published this ad in the Alexandria Gazette, advertising the services of the firm’s two ships, the Uncas and the Tribune, and regular service between Alexandria and New Orleans. During the shipping months (the fall, winter, and spring), these ships would travel back and forth between Alexandria and New Orleans, carrying enslaved people to New Orleans and goods and commodities like sugar back to Alexandria.

Alexandria and New Orleans

PACKETS.

The Brig TRIBUNE, Captain Wm. Smith, and Brig UNCAS, Capt. Joseph C. Moore. The Tribune is now ready for sea, and will sail as soon as the health of New Orleans is restored. The Uncas will follow in fifteen or twenty days thereafter. Should the Potomac keep open, one of the packets will sail from this port as above every thirty days throughout the shipping season. These vessels are commanded by experienced and accommodating officers—will at all times go up the Mississippi by steam—and every exertion used to promote the interest of shippers and benefit of passengers. For cabin or steerage passage, only, apply to

FRANKLIN, ARMFIELD & Co.

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Port town newspapers published lists of arriving and departing ships. Sometimes appearing under the heading “Marine Lists,” “Marine Intelligence,” “Marine Journal,” or simply “Ship News,” these pieces would list the names of vessels coming into or leaving port and often included the names of their captains and where they were going/coming from. On October 31, 1833, the Alexandria Gazette reported that the Brig Uncas, captained by [Joseph] Moore, departed Alexandria the day before, on October 30, 1833, for New Orleans.

On Wednesday, November 13, word had already reached New Orleans, as reported in the New-Orleans Commercial Bulletin, that the Brig Uncas had sailed from Alexandria and was on its way. The paper uses the date the departure was announced in the Alexandria Gazette, not the date the ship left port.

A week after the Uncas left Alexandria, it was reported in the Alexandria Gazette [11-6-1833] that the ship had made it to Hampton Roads at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay.
On Friday, November 29, 1833, four weeks after the Uncas departed Alexandria, the brig finally arrives in New Orleans. This notice, while difficult to read, appeared in the *New-Orleans Commercial Bulletin* the following day and tersely states, “Brig Uncas, Moore, from Alexandria,” noting that it was towed into port by steam tow boat Huntress.

While this marine list makes no mention of the 92 enslaved people known to have been aboard the Uncas, the next time the brig lands in New Orleans on February 7, 1834, the does note, “Brig Uncas, Moore, from Alexandria, via Norfolk, with slaves to Franklin, and to order.”
While no New Orleans newspapers could be found online for December 1833 to document the Uncas’s departure from that city, the comings and goings of ships was newsworthy enough that some papers frequently published regional or even national arrivals and departures of ships. Listed on December 18 as the very last line in this two-column list, the *Charleston Courier* in South Carolina notes the Brig Uncas of Alexandria left New Orleans two weeks prior on December 7.

Finally, on the last day of the year, the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that the Brig Uncas arrived back in port from New Orleans two days earlier. The paper also reported that it was carrying a cargo of sugar belonging to Edward Dangerfield and that the trip took 14 days, about half the time of the journey there.

Combining information published in historical newspapers with other kinds of documents (like ship manifests) helps us reconstruct the movement of specific ships and trace the domestic slave trade between places like Alexandria and the rest of the country.