

The underwater hunt for the lost ship of an American slave trafficker

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By [Terrence McCoy](#) and Photos by Rafael Vilela

ANGRA DOS REIS, Brazil — Gilson Rambelli motored out into the dark waters, thinking of the crime that had haunted him for years. The evidence of it was down there, in the bay's depths. That was where the researcher believed he'd find the Camargo, the long-lost slave ship of Nathaniel Gordon, the only person ever executed in the United States for the crime of trafficking enslaved Africans.

As dense clouds muffled the December morning sky, Rambelli and his research team approached a small island off the coastline of Rio de Janeiro state. There wasn't much to distinguish it from the dozens of others dotting this vast bay. But it was here that the crew dropped anchor.

“This is it,” Rambelli said.

For decades, Rambelli and others have researched the shipwreck. According to contemporaneous accounts, Gordon sailed his American-made vessel into Brazilian waters in December 1852. As authorities closed in on him, Gordon sold his “cargo” — more than 500 enslaved Mozambicans — to the coffee plantations in the mountains beyond. Then he burned and sank his ship somewhere in the bay and escaped arrest dressed as a woman, scandalizing Brazil’s government and leading to its first crackdown on the country’s illegal slave trade.

The remarkable story is part of a forgotten chapter in the history of America and slavery, when American ships and the American flag were used to illegally transport enslaved Africans to Brazil by the tens of thousands.

In the first half of the 19th century, after much of the world had banned the transatlantic slave trade but before the end of slavery, a highly lucrative contraband trade continued to supply Brazil with enslaved Africans. Some of its most important players, according to historians and a Washington Post review of thousands of pages of records, were American merchants and sailors.

They sold ships, captained slaving voyages and ultimately assumed such an active role in the illegal commerce that senior U.S. diplomats at the time suggested it couldn’t have happened without them.

“The African slave trade ‘thickens around us,’” wrote U.S. Brazil Minister Henry A. Wise in an 1845 letter to Secretary of State John C. Calhoun. “Without the aid of our citizens and our flag, it could not be carried on with success at all.”

In all, between 1831 and 1850, American-made ships brought approximately 430,000 enslaved Africans to Brazil — nearly as many as were shipped to the United States during its entire history of slavery, Brazilian historian Leonardo Marques has found. During the latter half of that period, according to Marques’s review of British consular reports, more than one-third of all slaving vessels that made landfall in Rio de Janeiro did so under an American flag.

Hunting in December for one of the most notorious of those vessels, Rambelli and colleague Luís Felipe Santos pulled on their wet suits. This expedition, scheduled to last four days, was their fourth attempt to find the Camargo in two years. All previous efforts to retrieve physical evidence of the ship had failed. Funding opportunities were drying up.

If they didn’t find the Camargo soon, the team worried that the tale could again slip through the cracks of history — and deprive a nearby community of descendants of enslaved Africans of answers about its role in Brazil’s history.

“When our elders told us stories of this ship, we thought it was just another tall tale,” said Marilda de Souza Francisco, a leader of the Santa Rita do Bracuí community in the city of Angra dos Reis. “Now we find out it could be true.”

The men fastened on their compressed air tanks. They pulled down their goggles. Jumping overboard, they vanished beneath the water.

‘Our flag is preferred over any other’

How U.S. nationals became “leaders in fomenting the illicit slave trade” and “permanently transformed Brazil for all time,” in the words of historian Gerald Horne, was largely a function of two historic developments.

The first was a diplomatic dispute. In the early 1800s, Great Britain led an international campaign to end the transatlantic slave trade. It signed accords with several of the world’s naval powers, allowing British patrols to inspect suspected slaving vessels. But wary of British influence, the United States refused to sign on, effectively placing ships sailing under the American flag beyond the reach of the crown.

The second was innovation in American ship engineering. In the early 1800s, shipyards from Maine to Maryland started pumping out ships built for speed. The Baltimore Clipper, which could easily outrun British patrols, grew popular among merchants moving high-profit, low-volume goods. Few were as lucrative as enslaved Africans. Their value skyrocketed upon making landfall in Brazil, where officials did little to impede the commerce.

Seizing the opportunity, American merchants based in Rio de Janeiro sold U.S.-made vessels to slavers sailing for Africa. The proliferation of the American ship and flag — used by slavers of all nationalities — in the illicit commerce soon provoked alarm among diplomats.

“Our flag is preferred over any other,” complained Gorham Parks, the U.S. consul in Rio de Janeiro, in an 1848 letter.

Half of all enslaved Africans brought to Brazil, estimated U.S. diplomat David Tod in January 1850, “are introduced through the facilities directly and indirectly afforded by the American flag.”

What ultimately ended the involvement of U.S. nationals in the trade was Brazil’s passage in 1850 of a new anti-trafficking law. The legislation was virtually the same as an 1831 prohibition, save one crucial difference. This time, Brazil vowed to enforce it.

An early test of that commitment came in late 1852, when the Camargo neared the Rio de Janeiro coastline. With authorities in pursuit, Gordon dropped anchor at the mouth of the Bracuí River. His human cargo was brought ashore to the farm of Santa Rita do Bracuí. Then Gordon set fire to his ship and fled.

“He escaped in woman’s clothes,” a U.S. diplomat at the time reported, “hastily put on in the cabin.”

The Camargo sank to the depths of the bay, where researchers believed it had sat, undisturbed, ever since.

Diving beneath the current

Embarking on their mission, the aquatic archaeologists were painfully familiar with its challenges. First was the immense size of the bay. Next was the water’s opacity: The thick sediment blinded Rambelli and Felipe, researchers at the Federal University of Sergipe, just feet beneath the surface.

“Like you’re in a grave,” Felipe said.

Then there was the mud. It coated the seafloor in a thick film. The scientists believed the ship’s remains had sunk into the clay, further concealing its location.

But after several fruitless searches, they had a breakthrough. During an expedition in July 2023, they detected what they called an “anomalous” shape using sonographic technology. Sketched out, it looked like an exact blueprint of a historic skipper. They believed it had to be the Camargo.

“The only thing left to do is go down and touch it,” Felipe now boasted, on the second day of the December dive, as he plunked into the dark waters. Sixteen feet beneath the surface, he and Rambelli combed a search perimeter the size of a soccer field, plunging pointed stakes into the muck. After 30 minutes, they surfaced.

Nothing.

They submerged again. Thirty more minutes passed. Again, nothing.

“It’s just mud down there,” Rambelli vented.

Another dive. Nothing.

The men began to get nervous.

“You come in with so much expectation,” Felipe said. “And sometimes, the result isn’t what you’re hoping for.”

Years of diving, and their strongest lead yet hadn’t yielded a thing.

A hunt decades in the making

The search for the Camargo began by happenstance.

In the summer of 1994, historian Martha Abreu was scouring old newspaper clippings at Brazil's national library in Rio de Janeiro, working on her dissertation, when she learned of an untold history that left her stunned. It was, in her understanding, Brazil's first real attempt to crack down on the illegal slave trade. At the center of the tale were an American captain and his ship, the Camargo.

After the ship burned, Brazilian police launched an operation to rescue the Africans sold by Gordon and searched the region's coffee plantations. The action was seen as a direct challenge to Brazil's powerful slaveholding elite and helped establish a new precedent in a country that had allowed enslavers to do as they pleased.

Police ultimately found 75 people whom Gordon had sold into slavery. Most of them were children. The youngest was 11.

The rest were lost.

Abreu published a book chapter on the fallout and moved on to other projects. But she never stopped thinking about the Camargo or its captain. She later learned that Gordon continued his slaving exploits until he was convicted in federal court in New York of slave trading in 1861. The punishment was death. No one had ever suffered that consequence. But this time was different.

“Any man, who, for paltry gain and stimulated only by avarice, can rob Africa of her children to sell into interminable bondage, I will never pardon,” Abraham Lincoln said, according to author Ron Soodalter, denying Gordon’s pleas for clemency.

Nearly 150 years later, Abreu was researching how slavery was remembered along the Rio de Janeiro coastline when, at the mouth of the Bracuí, the story of the Camargo again found her. In the community of Santa Rita do Bracuí, founded by descendants of enslaved Africans on what had once been the farm of Santa Rita do Bracuí, she met a bald patriarch named Manoel Moraes, 85. He told her a story he first heard in his youth. He didn’t know the name of the boat that had gone down. But all the details aligned. Moraes was describing the Camargo.

“I got goose bumps,” Abreu said. “I said, ‘It’s not possible.’”

Then Moraes, now deceased, provided a bit of information even more tantalizing: He knew where the Camargo had sunk.

“People often talked about that boat,” he said, “because it was a good spot to fish.”

“It sank at the point of an island” named Cunhanbebe.

A community in the mist, long ignored

For generations, the people of Santa Rita do Bracuí have told and retold the story of the Camargo. Their version, recounted in spartan homes set against a misted mountain, included details not found in any historical text. The sinking of the Camargo was more chaotic than recorded. Many of the captured Africans perished. The fate of those who survived was little better.

“They were brought into the mountains beyond and put to work up there,” said Flavia da Silva Adriana, who’d heard the tale from her grandmother. “But first, they were brought here.”

The land on which this village was built was then a crucial entry point in Brazil’s illegal slave trade. The Souza Breves family, among Brazil’s largest enslavers, had used its Santa Rita farm to receive and revive newly arrived enslaved Africans. Many came ashore so emaciated, Moraes once told researchers, that “they’d lost their value” and had needed a “fattening station” before being sold into labor.

This story and others, told in informal settings, helped form a cultural framework through which the community came to understand its place in Brazil’s history. But many of the tales were impossible to prove.

“They were myths,” said Emerson Luís Ramos. “We didn’t have any documents.”

As a result, residents said, the community had always been easy to ignore. The people never secured official ownership of the land, and a federal highway cleaved it in two. Many have only known poverty and struggle.

But then, several years ago, came a new story, this one told by visiting researchers: The Camargo was not a myth. It was real. And the evidence was there in the bay, waiting to be found — proof of the historic injustices suffered and witnessed by the people of Santa Rita do Bracuí.

“If God wills it,” said Adriana, “we will find the ship.”

Desperation, then sudden hope

With time running out, the researchers remembered Abreu’s research and the clue provided by Moraes. They had initially discarded it. For one, there were two islands in the bay named Cunhanbebe — Big Cunhanbebe and Little Cunhanbebe. And in an area known to attract illegal treasure hunting, where fisherman eyed outsiders with suspicion, they’d had trouble corroborating the lead.

But they felt they had to try again. They called a local man affiliated with Santa Rita do Bracuí, who had once told them he'd fished over the Camargo as a child. The man, Jorge de Almeida, soon brought them to the spot he remembered, near Little Cunhanbebe. But again, nothing.

As the prospect of failure hardened into reality, a fisherman approached their vessel.

"I know what you're looking for," the man shouted. Then he continued on, without stopping to talk.

The next morning, on the last day of the expedition, the researchers again saw the fisherman. This time, he did stop. He said his name was Luiz Henrique de Freitas. He'd grown up on Big Cunhanbebe, where his family had lived for generations, and had fished the bay's waters his entire life. He knew where the Camargo had sunk and, after hours of conversation, agreed to lead the researchers there.

They motored to the northeast lip of Little Cunhanbebe — just 500 meters from where they'd looked the day before — and dropped anchor.

There, on their first dive, they came upon something, buried in the muck. It was a hard, wooden. They grabbed a few pieces of the debris. What they saw when they emerged elicited shrieks of euphoria. The wood was blackened and charred. The sunken ship they'd discovered had been burned.

“We found it!” Rambelli yelled.

In the weeks to come, the researchers would alert government authorities and designate the area as an official excavation site to ward off potential treasure hunters. They'd test the wood fragments, revealing traces of copper — the material that had encased the Camargo's hull. And in partnership with the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and George Washington University researchers, they would plan another expedition in May to further examine the remains, to study the hull and engineering and hopefully render a final conclusion on whether it's the Camargo. The true scholarly work was only now just beginning.

But for this moment, they sat on the boat, cherishing the discovery and what it meant.

“This is an answer for the communities here, that the stories they’ve always told were true,” Felipe said.

“They weren’t just stories.”

Marina Dias in Brasília contributed to this report.

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article incorrectly said the divers were using oxygen tanks.

They were using compressed air tanks. The article has been corrected.
