

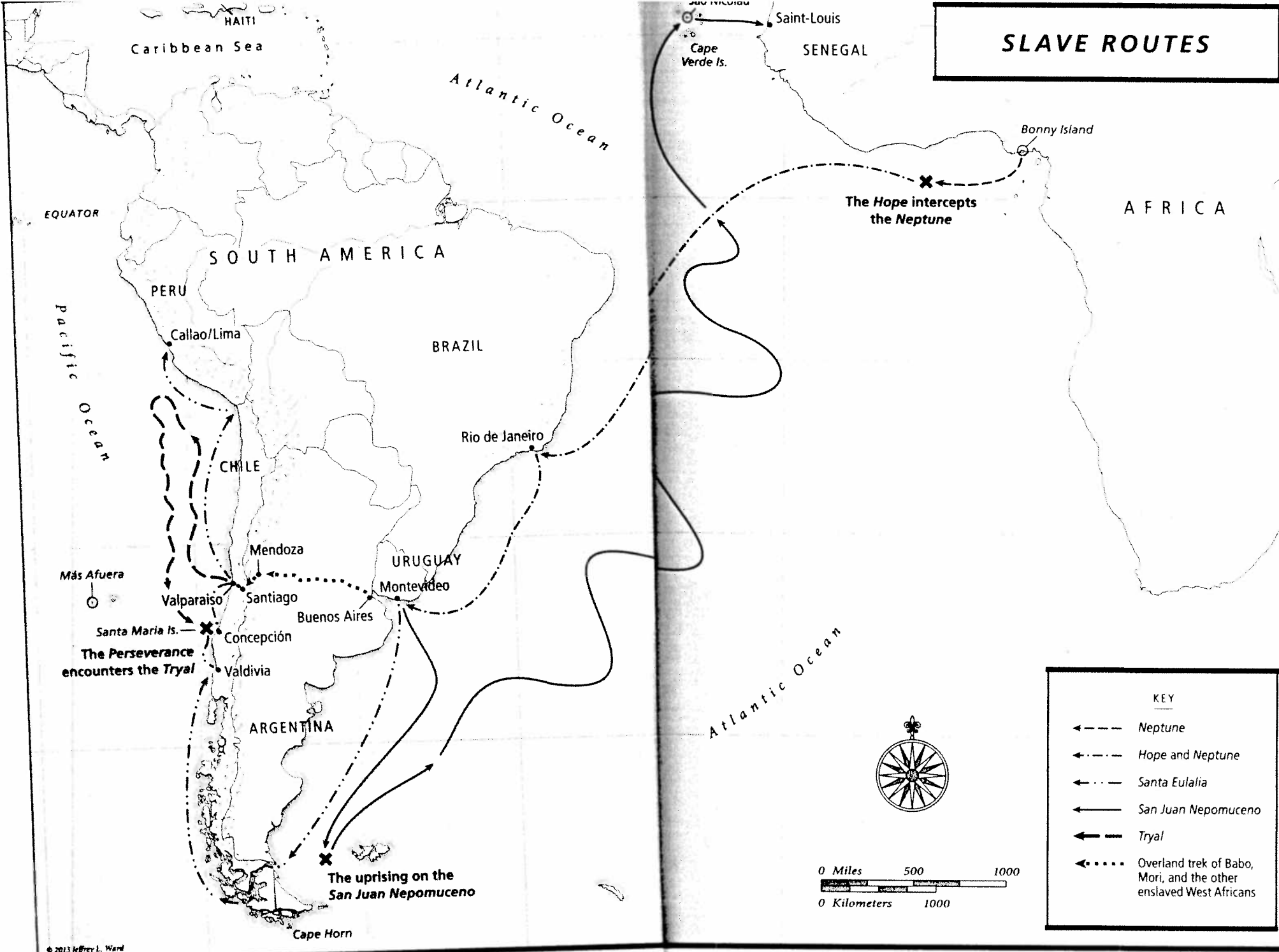
THE EMPIRE OF NECESSITY

**SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND DECEPTION
IN THE NEW WORLD**

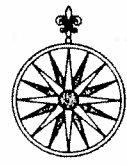
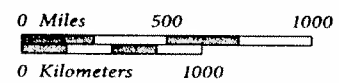
GREG GRANDIN

METROPOLITAN BOOKS
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY NEW YORK

SLAVE ROUTES



KEY	
	Neptune
	Hope and Neptune
	Santa Eulalia
	San Juan Nepomuceno
	Tryal
	Overland trek of Babo, Mori, and the other enslaved West Africans



2

MORE LIBERTY

Montevideo was a city of roof dwellers, much like how Nathaniel Philbrick describes Nantucket in the 1800s. Its houses were tightly packed on a small spit of land wedged between a handsome hill and a curved bay, leaving little room for gardens. Women arranged plants and flowers on rooftop promenades, where men in the evenings relaxed over coffee and cigars. From below came the ballads of strolling minstrels. “Love is, in general, the subject of these songs,” one British traveler to the city reported.¹

Another sound rising from the narrow streets was the long, drawn-out cries of itinerant peddlers. These hawkers were all slaves, many of them recently arrived from Africa, a fact they worked into their sing-song pitches for empanadas, sweets, milk, bread, and fish. They switched Spanish *r*'s for African *l*'s and rolled out the vowels in a great lamenting dirge, as if all the pain in the world were needed to announce that the barley cakes were made that morning:

¡Tooltas . . . tooltitas! ¡Toltitas son de cebáa!

(Cakes . . . cakes . . . Cakes made of barley!)

¡Chaá que soy negla boba, pala que tanto glitá!

(I'm a black straight from Africa, that's why I'm shouting!)

Tooltas . . . tooltitas! ¡Ya no me queda ná!

This last sentence meant the item was sold out. But its literal translation is more plaintive, especially considering the circumstances of the vendor's

arrival: *Now I'm left with nothing.* The free people of the city had to have liked this mix of melancholy and commerce, the bittersweet sound of slaves selling their wares, for later residents would remember these rhymes long after the vendors had disappeared from the city streets. Today in Uruguay, children recite them in school pageants.²

Montevideo was smaller than its sprawling sister city, Buenos Aires, which with its cowboys and muleteers still wasn't even sure it was a port town. The waterfront in Buenos Aires was a muddy slope to a shallow river, filled with taverns, drunken sailors, and garbage. The biggest ships couldn't get closer than eight miles to the coast. Cargo had to be put on small tenders, brought near to the shore, transferred again to amphibious carts with large wheels that jacked the wagon bottom over the surf, and then pulled by horses to the beach. Later, after the river had been dredged and adequate docks built, its residents would come to call themselves *porteños*—people who live in a port city. In the very early 1800s, though, most “had their back to the river.” They looked inward toward the pampas.³

Montevideans looked to the sea. Many of the city's sky lounges were crowned with a watch tower and telescope, which, when viewed from the harbor, made Montevideo seem like a ramparted monastery. Merchants would climb their towers like monks up the bulwarks, scanning the sky for storms and the estuary for ships, with “many an anxious feeling for the safety or expected arrival of some vessel.”⁴

Most goods out of and into Argentina, which was fast becoming butcher and breadbasket to the Atlantic world, passed through Montevideo's deepwater bay. Out went hides, lard, dried beef, wheat, brass, copper, wood, cacao, Peruvian bark, yerba maté, and vinegar. In came Havana rum, Boston and British textiles, English furniture and paper, French hats, candy and gilded bracelets from Cádiz, and sugar, tobacco, and hard cane liquor from Brazil.

And slaves. There was a “hunger” for slaves, said an observer at the time, a “thirst.” Montevideo was Río de la Plata's official slave harbor. All slave ships, even if they were bound for Buenos Aires, had by law to stop there and be inspected by the port's doctor and assessed by its tax collector. Slaves headed to upriver ports would be transferred to regularly

scheduled cargo ships connecting the gulf to Paraguay. Most of the slavers that came in were accounted for, their cargo part of an importer's consignment.

Every day, though, merchants would mount their roof towers to see what else the tide brought in, hoping to make a little extra money with the arrival of an unanticipated ship. In late January, one expectant merchant noticed the *Neptune* shortly after it had dropped anchor, its deck filled with what he underestimated to be a "hundred and something" slaves. "I doubt they will permit their sale," he wrote in a note to Martín de Alzaga, among Buenos Aires's wealthiest men, "but I'm sure it will happen anyway."⁵

When Mordeille arrived in Montevideo, its half-moon harbor was filled with moving men and ships sitting low in the water, their holds heavy with cargo and sails struck in repose. There was a busy wharf beach, lighted with fires burning pitch, and back behind that a crescent row of workshops where blacksmiths and colliers, carpenters, joiners, block makers, junk pickers, and caulkers readied vessels for their return to the sea. Stevedores, many of them black- and brown-skinned slaves themselves, hauled casks and crates and other slaves from the newly arrived ships. In the counting rooms of the city's warehouses, clerks and cash keepers in high-backed chairs recorded who owed what to whom in the business of moving humans halfway across the world. They managed the long trail of paperwork—promissory notes, exchange bills, current account books, insurance policies, consignment invoices, freight and tax receipts—that tied the ports of the Río de la Plata to interior cities, Chile, and Peru and, in the other direction, out into the Atlantic, to London, Liverpool, Boston, New York, and trading ports in Africa and Brazil.

This was what historians call Spanish America's market revolution, and slaves were the flywheel on which the whole thing turned.

For centuries, the Spanish Crown had tried to regulate slavery, along with all other economic activity in the Americas, under a system called mercantilism. Spain prohibited its colonies from trading with one another, banned foreign ships from entering American ports, prohibited individual

merchants from owning their own fleets of cargo ships, and limited manufacturing. Selected countries or companies were granted the monopoly right to import slaves, and only into a handful of ports, principally Cartagena in Colombia, Veracruz in Mexico, and Havana in Cuba. The idea was to prevent the development of a too-powerful merchant class in America, making sure its colonies remained a source of gold and silver and an exclusive for goods made in or shipped through Spain.

That was the theory, anyway. The practice was something else. Contrabanding flourished from the early days of the Conquest. The city of Buenos Aires was conceived in corruption. During its early years in the 1500s, its Spanish founders did well skimming off the Andean silver that passed through the city to Spain, and over the centuries smuggling made up a large part of Río de la Plata's trade. When one early Spanish governor tried to stop the smuggling of slaves by Portuguese traders from Brazil, he was poisoned to death. By the late 1700s, illegal, untaxed trade, much of it coming from the new United States or Great Britain, made up nearly half the gulf's commerce. Merchandise flowed in and out of the Atlantic, back and forth through the porous border with Brazil, and up and down the Paraná River, which connected both Buenos Aires and Montevideo to Paraguay.⁶

Africans were often the contraband. They might be unloaded at night on a dark beach down the coast from Buenos Aires and brought unnoticed into the city's market. Or their importer could march them into the city during the day and simply say they were *negros descaminados*—"lost blacks"—found someplace in the interior, which meant their sale was exempt from import licenses or tax receipts. At times, though, Africans were the cover for what was really being smuggled, with merchants using permission to import a small consignment of slaves to mask a hold full of Parisian toilet water or New York pickles. And on some British ships coming into Spanish American ports, black sailors temporarily pretended to be slaves, just long enough to convince customs inspectors that they were the ship's cargo and not whatever it was that was being smuggled.⁷

By the late 1770s, Spain was under increasing pressure to grant its colonial subjects "*más libertad*," more economic liberty. The Atlantic world was becoming more commercialized, with new opportunities for

colonials to engage in contraband and more openings for enemies like Great Britain to make inroads. The Crown therefore needed to find ways to regularize illegal trade, both to keep the loyalty of its colonial subjects and to check London. Madrid also hoped to stimulate the economy and thereby generate more revenue to fight the many fronts in its seemingly never-ending wars with one empire or another.

So starting with the American Revolution, Spain responded to each burst of insurrectionary ardor, each declaration of the rights of man, by issuing yet another decree allowing freer trade, including the “free trade of blacks.”⁸

In November 1776, after the signing in July of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, Spain opened Cuban ports to North American ships, including slave ships. Following the French Revolution of 1789, the Crown allowed individual Spaniards and foreigners to bring slaves into the ports of Caracas, Puerto Rico, Havana, and Santo Domingo. After the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, Madrid added Montevideo to the growing list of free-trade slaving ports, lowered taxes on the sale of slaves, and allowed merchants to set their prices according to the “principle” of supply and demand, selling their Africans with the “same liberty” that they could “any other commercial good.” In 1793, the year the French executed their king, Spain again lowered export duties on goods traded for slaves, exempting slave ships from sales and registry taxes, and permitted colonies to trade among themselves, as well as with Portuguese Brazil, to acquire slaves.⁹

Then, in January 1804, Haiti became an independent nation, having defeated French troops trying to restore slavery on the island. “We have dared to be free, let us be thus by ourselves and for ourselves,” its leaders declared, shocking those who would use the word *freedom* to mean freedom to buy and sell Africans as they would. A few months later, Spain extended the right of its American subjects, as well as that of any other resident in its dominion, to sail their own ships to Africa and “to buy blacks wherever they were to be found.”*

* Neither Spanish American merchants, when they called for more “liberty” and “more free trade,” nor the Crown, when in response to those calls it deregulated the economy, tended

The gulf’s merchants were notoriously grasping, and when they did get freer trade they used corruption as the thin edge of the wedge to get more. Each concession Spain made to its American subjects only provided new opportunities to skirt revenue collectors. For instance, Madrid eventually allowed merchants to buy foreign-built vessels and either trade directly with neutral countries or sail straight to Africa, buy Africans, and bring them back, practically tax free. But many Río de la Plata merchants found it cheaper to conspire with Boston and Providence shippers than to spend money to build up their own fleets. New England captains, upon approaching Montevideo or Buenos Aires in ships laden with Manchester broadcloth, New Haven pistols, or Gold Coast slaves would lower the stars and stripes, raise the royal Spanish standard, ready their counterfeit papers, and prepare to tell port authorities that the ship they were sailing was owned by a local Spaniard. A “sham sale” was how New Englanders described the practice. And thus with the extension of free trade, slavery, an institution already founded on a lie, became, with this trick and those mentioned earlier, even more associated with illusion.

By the time Mordeille arrived on the *Hope*, with the *Neptune* following behind, slave trading in Río de la Plata had become a free-for-all. More African slaves arrived in 1804 than in any previous year. Buenos Aires was growing by a third every year, Montevideo was doubling, and by 1804 Africans and African Americans made up more than 30 percent of their populations.¹⁰

Slavery was the motor of Spanish America’s market revolution, though not exactly in the same way it was in plantation zones of the Caribbean, coastal Brazil, or, later, the U.S. South. As in those areas, Africans and

to invoke the idea of individual rights. Rather, they used the language of “utility,” of achieving a greater “good,” as needed to increase the prosperity of the empire. Spanish theologians did recognize that individuals possessed what they called a *fuero interno*, a realm of inner sovereignty, and they even had come to believe, as did English-speaking Protestant religious thinkers and philosophers, that the pursuit of personal gain could generate public virtue. But the Crown didn’t accept the subversive natural-law idea that individual self-interest was itself a virtue.

African-descendant peoples might be used to produce commercial exports for Europe, mining gold, for instance, diving for pearls in the Caribbean and the Pacific, drying hides, or cutting cane.¹¹ But a large number, perhaps even most, of Africans arriving under the new “free trade in blacks” system were put to work creating goods traded *among* the colonies.

Enslaved Africans and African Americans slaughtered cattle and sheared wool on the pampas of Argentina, spun cotton and wove clothing in textile workshops in Mexico City, and planted coffee in the mountains outside of Bogotá. They fermented grapes for wine at the foot of the Andes and boiled Peruvian sugar to make candy. In Guayaquil, Ecuador, enslaved shipwrights built cargo vessels that were used to carry Chilean wheat to Lima markets. Throughout the thriving cities of mainland Spanish America, slaves worked, often for wages, as laborers, bakers, brickmakers, liverymen, cobblers, carpenters, tanners, smiths, rag pickers, cooks, and servants. Others, like Montevideo’s doleful itinerants, took to the streets, peddling goods they either made themselves or sold on commission.

It wasn’t just their labor that spurred the commercialization of society. The driving of more and more slaves inland, across the continent, the opening up of new slave roads and the expansion of old ones, tied hinterland markets together and created local circuits of finance and trade. Enslaved peoples were at one and the same time investments (purchased and then rented out as laborers), credit (used to secure loans), property, commodities, and capital, making them an odd mix of abstract and concrete value. Collateral for loans and items for speculation, slaves were also objects of nostalgia, mementos of a fixed but fading aristocratic world even as they served as the coin of a new commercialized one. Slaves literally made money: working in Lima’s mint, they trampled quicksilver into ore with their bare feet, pressing toxic mercury into their bloodstream in order to amalgamate the silver used for coins. And they were money, at least in a way. It wasn’t so much that the value of individual slaves was standardized in relation to currency. Slaves were the standard: when appraisers calculated the value of any given hacienda, slaves usually accounted for over half its worth, much more valuable than inanimate capital goods like tools and millworks.

The world was changing fast, old lines of rank and status were blurring, and slaves, along with livestock and land, often appeared to be the last substantial things. Slaves didn’t just create wealth: as items of conspicuous consumption for a rising merchant class, they displayed wealth. And since some slaves in Spanish America, especially those in cities like Montevideo and Buenos Aires, were paid wages, they were also consumers, spending their money on items that arrived in ships with other slaves or maybe even, in a few instances, with themselves.¹²

French privateers like Hippolyte Mordeille made the promise of “free trade in blacks” a reality, both because the smuggling they excelled at was an application of the principle and because Spain, as an ally of Paris in the Napoleonic Wars, tended to allow them to sell their British-taken prizes in Spanish American ports. The romance of pirates often imagines them as anarchists, sailing the “ever free” sea bound to no law and respectful of no property. In fact, they were vanguard merchant capitalists, or at least they were in the case of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Starting in 1800, the local commercial guild collected an informal tax from its members to fund corsairs to protect their freight against enemy ships. The guild then began issuing its own private letters of marque, authorizing pirates to seize and sell enemy merchandise. Soon, individual merchants were entering into formal, contractual relations with privateer companies incorporated in France.¹³

Mordeille, who had been sailing to the Río de la Plata for nearly a decade, worked closely with commercial houses in Cádiz, Spain, and merchants in Montevideo and Buenos Aires. He is credited with pioneering Río de la Plata’s comprehensive privateering contracts, which stipulated the rights and obligations of all involved—merchants, captain, and crew—and the percentage each would get from the seizure of “good prizes,” distributed according to the “onboard hierarchy and the importance of tasks each performs.” Money was raised, loans were advanced, weapons and munitions purchased, crews assembled, and ships outfitted and dispatched to seize the cargo of merchant vessels flying the flags of enemy nations. The Frenchman brought whatever cargo he might take

off British ships into Montevideo, including guns, tools, textiles, as well as luxury items like silk shawls, fine handkerchiefs, Brittany linen, Flemish lace skirts, ornate fans, pearls, silver mirrors, gold combs, and filigreed rosaries. But by a large margin, Mordeille's most valuable cargo was slaves.¹⁴

Even in this new world of freer trade, Mordeille still needed royal permission to convert his plunder into salable commodities. So shortly after arriving in Montevideo that January of 1804 with the *Neptune* in tow, he sat down and wrote a letter to the Spanish viceroy, Joaquín del Pino, whose residence was across the water in Buenos Aires.