Robert Ellis, Philadelphia Merchant and Slave Trader

Pennsylvania, in common with other Middle Atlantic and New England colonies, is seldom considered as a trading center for Negro slaves. Its slave traffic appears small and unimportant when compared, for example, with the Negro trade in such southern plantation colonies as Virginia and South Carolina. During 1762, the peak year of the Pennsylvania trade, only five to six hundred slaves were imported and sold.¹ By comparison, as early as 1705, Virginia imported more than 1,600 Negroes, and in 1738, 2,654 Negroes came into South Carolina through the port of Charleston alone.²

Nevertheless, to many Philadelphia merchants the slave trade was worthy of more than passing attention. At least one hundred and forty-one persons, mostly Philadelphia merchants but also some ship captains from other ports, are known to have imported and sold Negroes in the Pennsylvania area between 1682 and 1766. Men of position and social prominence, these slave traders included Philadelphia mayors, assemblymen, and members of the supreme court of the province. There were few more important figures in Pennsylvania politics in the eighteenth century than William Allen, member of the trading firm of Allen and Turner, which was responsible for the sale of many slaves in the colony. Similarly, few Philadelphia families were more active socially than the well-known McCall family, founded by George McCall of Scotland, the first of a line of slave traders.³

Robert Ellis, a Philadelphia merchant, was among the most active of the local slave merchants. He had become acquainted with the

trade in Negroes by 1719, and sold slaves consistently from 1732 to 1741. There were merchants who sold more slaves in and around Philadelphia than he, but for none was the Negro slave trade so large a part of his commercial interests. Ellis imported eleven "parcels" of slaves, and also sold Negroes in other colonies. In South Carolina, where the trade reached its highest level of development, he was well known among some of the largest slave dealers in America.

Just when Robert Ellis arrived in Pennsylvania is not clear, although he may have come over before 1700. He was of Welsh extraction, and possibly one of an early group of Welsh settlers which migrated to Pennsylvania and established homes in Penn's Welsh Barony. The name Ellis appears frequently in early records; a Thomas Ellis, for example, was register general of the province in 1687. Robert Ellis wrote James Oglethorpe, co-founder of Georgia, in 1745 that he had "grown old, Near 70." He may have been exaggerating his age in this letter, since its purpose was to arouse Oglethorpe's sympathy, but if the conservative figure of sixty-five is taken as his age in 1745, it places his birth in the year 1680. It seems certain, therefore, that Ellis was born before Pennsylvania was founded, but whether in Europe or America is not known.

At all events, Ellis was living in the colony by 1706, for in that year his name was affixed to a petition sent by some Welsh inhabitants to Governor John Evans, asking for construction of a road west of the Schuylkill River, and also for a ferry. These improvements were needed so that they could carry their products—"Corn, Mault, Meal, Lumber and other things"—to Philadelphia.

Ten years later, in 1716, Ellis was in debt to an Englishman, James Millington, but for what and in what amount the documents do not reveal. To meet his financial obligations, he mortgaged his lands. Millington solicited the aid of several colonists to collect the debt, among them Isaac Norris and John Moore, who considered throwing Ellis "In a Jail or prevent his going for England." Norris was still

4 See Pemberton Papers, I, 27, Etting Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).
5 Robert Ellis to James Oglethorpe, Nov. 18, 1745, Robert Ellis Letter Book (1736-1748), HSP, hereinafter cited as Ellis Letter Book.
6 "Welsh Petition for a new ferry & Road read 9 ye 30th 1706," Documents of the Provincial Council, Logan Papers, HSP.
7 Isaac Norris to James Millington, Oct. 9, 1716, Isaac Norris Letter Book (1716-1730), HSP.
trying to collect Millington's debt in 1719. Concerning this affair, Norris wrote on November 20: "he [Ellis] declares himself willing and desirous to discharge all his deb[ts] as fast as tis possible for him in his present Circumstances but as I am of opinion that his Stock is not great what he does must arise from his Industry & Success and Some time will be necessarily Required in this Country (as trade is now) to do anything Considerable he declares his good Intention." 

Perhaps Ellis did have good intentions, but these were not translated into action, at least not immediately. Norris reported in 1720 that Ellis was doing all in his power to pay his debt, adding that he was "ye most Bustling Stirring Creature one of ym yt I Know he is fall'n into a Trade to Virga & hope a Little time will Enable him to [pay] Somewt." By 1723, the matter of the debt had become very troublesome to Norris. Ellis had not fulfilled his promises, and Millington's frequent injunctions to press for payment placed Norris in an unpleasant position. Norris therefore washed his hands of the matter in the autumn of 1723; after having "sent to Robt several times and at length (Provok'd) Wrote him a Threatning Lettr he came, Made Appologie & laid his present Circumstances so open to me, that raised Pitty. Ye whole story is too long to tell. . . ." Norris went on, however, to explain that Ellis had become involved with some Madeira traders, who, after loss of a ship carrying a joint cargo, collected on the insurance and withheld from Ellis his share. If this story is true, it would seem that the injustice done Ellis was no more than that he had done Millington, for it appears that Millington never received full payment. Samuel Powel, Jr., commissioned in 1728 to collect the debt, concluded that it would never be paid:

When I arrived here [in Philadelphia] which was in 9ber I Enquired for thy old ffd. R. Ellis who I found was then and Still Continues in Carolina he's married there and whether he Intends to return to Philad. or not I Cannot learn nor Can I perfectly learn how he hath left his Estate here . . . but I believe it is mortgaged . . . but whether it be or not I believe he never will be able to pay thy Debt. . . . If he Comes I will do what I Can for thee. . . .

8 Norris to James Millington, Nov. 20, 1719, ibid.
9 Norris to James Millington, Dec. 7, 1720, ibid.
10 Norris to James Millington, Oct. 7, 1723, ibid.
11 Samuel Powel, Jr., to James Millington, May 6, 1728, Samuel Powel, Jr., Letter Book (1724-1747), HSP.
As Norris' correspondence indicates, Ellis had by 1720 entered upon a mercantile life. On July 13, 1719, he had been admitted a freeman under the terms of the charter of the city of Philadelphia, paying 15s. 6d. for the privileges which that station conferred. Dating back to the development of boroughs in England, freemen, according to Philadelphia's charter, were required to be free denizens of the province, twenty-one years of age, resident in the city and possessed of a freehold estate there, or resident in Philadelphia for two years and owners of personal property valued at £50. As a free man and in line with ancient custom, Ellis was entitled to engage in trade and commerce.

He began his career as a Philadelphia trader soon after being admitted a freeman. New York records for the year 1719 show that the sloop Mary, Nathaniel Owen, master, entered that port from Jamaica on December 9, 1719. The sloop had been constructed at Philadelphia in 1715, and among its six owners, all of whom resided there, was Robert Ellis. In 1721, Ellis' name appeared along with those of fifteen other Philadelphia merchants in a statement that for the "Encouragement of Trade and Commerce" they had agreed to accept in payment for all goods "Dollars called Lyon Dollars, at the Rate of five Shillings, The English Crown at Seven Shillings and Six Pence, The Half Crown at Three Shillings and Nine Pence, the English Shilling at Eighteen Pence, and the English Sixpence at Nine Pence, Proclamation Money." Together with a large segment of the Philadelphia business community, Ellis in 1726 expressed his willingness to accept at full value the bills of credit struck at Newcastle in 1723 and 1724.

By 1725, Ellis was well established as a Philadelphia merchant. He owned a wharf located near his house in Water Street, where he conducted his business affairs. Like some other merchants who entered the Negro trade, Ellis had engaged first in the importation
of white servants. In 1725, he advertised in the *American Weekly Mercury* the sale of “A Parcel of very likely Men Servant’s Time.” Three years later, the same paper carried this notice: “To be Sold, By Robert Ellis, a parcel of very likely Servants lately arrived, most of them Tradesmen, at Reasonable Rates for Ready Money or Country Produce.” Although in later years Ellis sold a variety of merchandise in the Philadelphia area, he seldom advertised these goods in the local newspapers. An exception to his practice is seen in 1743 when he notified the public that he had on hand lamp black “either in Pounds, half Pounds, or Small Barrels.” For the most part, he resorted to newspaper advertising only when selling white servants and Negro slaves.17

Ellis’ commercial activities were extensive and varied, for, in common with other slave merchants, the Negro trade was but one facet of his mercantile endeavor. A large portion of his business was with the West Indian islands. Some of his vessels went farther afield, visiting the European ports of Lisbon, Cadiz, Madeira, London and Rotterdam. His American trade was primarily with the colonies of Rhode Island, New York, Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia. With commercial contacts as diverse as these, Ellis found it best to own his own ships. In the period from 1736 to 1746, he had an interest in at least nine vessels, often being the sole owner or half owner. These vessels included the ships *Catherine, Patty, and Merrione;* the sloops *Winyaw, Frederica, Sarah and Elizabeth and Charming Sally;* the brigantine *Lydia;* and the snow *Martha.*18

At Madeira, Ellis traded with the wine merchants Catanach and Murdock. On December 2, 1736, the snow *Martha* sailed for Madeira laden with a cargo of wheat, bread, flour and staves valued at £700. The wines purchased for the home voyage were taken to Frederica, Georgia. In November, two years later, Ellis dispatched the ship *Catherine* to the same port carrying as part of her cargo fifteen barrels of tar which were consigned to Catanach and Murdock. Ellis cautioned these factors to send only “very good” wines on the *Catherine’s* homeward voyage.


Business at Cadiz was transacted through the house of Mannock and Ryan. At Lisbon, Leyborne, Roffey, and Rockliff acted as Ellis' agent, receiving goods sent by him and acquiring and shipping what he desired in return. Early in 1740, the *Catherine* sailed for Lisbon with "four Bars of Rice & Two Thousand of Pipe Staves for Accot of Masts. Phillip Kollock & Self wch please to dispose of to the Best Advantage." The ship carried 1,700 bushels of wheat and 350 barrels of flour as freight, and part of the freight money was also consigned to the firm. Ellis requested that the ship be sold if a good price could be obtained, although he was careful to add that "we have no other Motive for Selling her then the Risque we Run wth Regard to the Warr." If not sold, the *Catherine* was to be sent home with the "Nete proceeds of her freight Money."20

Ellis kept in close touch with Lawrence Williams, his agent in London, who not only handled his buying and selling in the London market, but also supplied him with maritime insurance on his ships. The balance of trade was such that Ellis was perpetually indebted to Williams; however, their trade relationship does not seem to have had an adverse effect on their personal friendship. Ellis once wrote Williams that he had "Reced more favours by your hands than any of my own Relations."21

The West Indies were often visited by Ellis' ships, and he maintained a steady correspondence with merchants on the islands of Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua and St. Christopher. At Barbados, his commercial contacts were with Codrington Carrington, Bayley and Bedford, and John Yeates, who later removed to Philadelphia. Alexander Porterfield was his agent at St. Christopher, while goods sent to Antigua were consigned to Captain Peter Nikill and, occasionally, to Henry Bonnin. At Jamaica, Ellis traded through the firm of Vanbrugh and Carpenter.22 Through these correspondents, Ellis sold provisions and lumber, as well as other Pennsylvania products, and received in return rum, molasses, sugar, and Negro slaves, which

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19 Ellis to Francis Moore, Dec. 8, 1736; Ellis to Catanach and Murdock, Nov. 30, 1738; Ellis to Cornelius Kollock, Dec. 1, 1738; Ellis to Mannock and Ryan, Nov. 24, 1737, Ellis Letter Book.
20 Ellis to Leyborne, Roffey, and Rockliff, Feb. 23, 1740, ibid.
21 Ellis to Lawrence Williams, Dec. 3, 1741, ibid.
22 Ibid., passim.
he sold in the Philadelphia area. He also handled goods sent on consignment by these West Indian merchants. Like other factors, he was never slow to criticize the shipment of inferior goods. Peter Nikill of Antigua was told curtly and matter-of-factly that "Your Cinamond is So bad that I Cant Sell it, but will put it up at Vendue & Sell it for what it will fetch." 23

As noted, several of the mainland colonies were visited by Ellis' ships. Goods sent to New York were consigned to a number of different merchants—Joseph Royall, Edward Tittle, Paul Richards, Benjamin Whitaker and Colonel John Moore. His correspondents at Rhode Island included Daniel Bateman and Peter Bours. Ellis' trade to the northern colonies, however, was on a relatively small scale. In 1740, he sent Bours eighty-four hogsheads of tar, forty-two barrels of pitch, and some pig iron, asking him to be so kind as to dispose of these goods and to remit in return an anchor of from six to seven hundred "Settled Pounds . . . a good Strong horse, but not a Stallion . . . And Please to Send the Rest in good Mollasses." 24

Much the greater part of his coastal trade was with the southern colonies, particularly with Georgia and South Carolina. He was active in providing Oglethorpe and the early Georgia settlers with provisions. In September, 1736, he informed Oglethorpe that the new sloop Frederica had just sailed carrying provisions valued at £515. Ellis added that he "Should have put more Melassus on Board Could it have been got, in Lieu, thereof have Shiped More Beer than your Orders, but hope it will Prove to your Satisfaction." 25 The Frederica departed again for Georgia late in 1736, with Ellis himself a passenger. The cargo was composed of "Bread and Flower and Bear [beer] Beef and Pork Hemp and Flax and Spining Whels and Sundry others Little odd Ditto, with Some Passengers that Goes with me Purpose to See ye Country." 26 These passengers were thinking of settling permanently in Georgia and wished to inspect the colony. Realizing that the Trustees of Georgia were interested in acquiring settlers, Ellis was anxious that they should know of his endeavors in that direction. They were accordingly told of the Frederica's earlier

23 Ellis to Peter Nikle [Nikill], Aug. 6, 1740, ibid.
24 Ellis to Peter Bours, June 4, 1740, ibid.
25 Ellis to James Oglethorpe, Sept. 13, 1736, ibid.
26 Ellis to James Oglethorpe, Dec. 8, 1736, ibid.
voyage and of the sailing now about to get under way. The sloop "is Now Loaded," Ellis wrote, "and agoing there Again with Severall Passengers Purpose to See ye Country and if they A Prove of it there is Severall able Familyes and Good Husband Men that will go there."27

Ellis' wife Catherine had lived in South Carolina before her marriage; perhaps it was partly through her influence that he developed a considerable trade to that colony. Several vessels were sent there each year, while Ellis himself made almost annual visits to confer with his business associates. The trade he conducted with South Carolina was based on staple products—lumber, bar iron, and provisions from Pennsylvania were exchanged for Carolina rice, turpentine, pitch, tar, and hides. Ellis' associates and correspondents there included Benjamin Savage and Joseph Wragg, both of whom were well-known Carolina traders deeply involved in the Negro traffic.28

Robert Ellis' prominence as a merchant brought him to the attention of the proprietors of Pennsylvania. He corresponded with both John and Thomas Penn, and, although much of this correspondence was of a business nature, seems to have maintained a personal relationship with them. He wrote to James Oglethorpe on September 13, 1736: "Last Night I was in Company with his Honnour our Proprietor, where your Health & Prosperity to the Collony [of Georgia] was Drank by him Selfe & Company with a Hearty Joy and Good Wishes."29 In 1743, Ellis thanked John Penn for some ale sent from England: "The Ale was Exceeding good for which I am Vastly obliged to you & we have often the pleasure of Drinking your Health wth the Rest of the Worthy family to whom I have been under great

27 Ellis to the Trustees of Georgia, Dec. 8, 1736, ibid. Ellis for several years shipped provisions to the colonists at Georgia. William Stephens, sent to Georgia as "Secretary to the Trustees," wrote on Jan. 16, 1738, that "Mr. Ellis, Master of a Sloop from Pensilvania, with Provisions, arrived..." Later that same year (Dec. 28), Stephens recorded the following: "In the afternoon arrived Captain Ellis from Philadelphia, laden with the usual kinds of Provision, wherein he had traded with the Colony for several Years past." On May 25, 1742, Stephens referred to Ellis as "formerly a great dealer here from Pensilvania, but a stranger for some time past..." "Stephens Journal, 1737–1740," in Allen D. Candler, ed., The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, IV, 68, 252; E. Merton Coulter, ed., The Journal of William Stephens, 1741-1743 (Athens, Ga., 1958), 85.


29 Ellis to James Oglethorpe, Sept. 13, 1736, Ellis Letter Book.
Obligations ever Since I had the Honour to be known by.”30 The next year, Thomas Penn interceded in Ellis’ behalf regarding a real estate matter.31

Ellis’ circle of friends included important English and colonial officials. Among them was James Lloyd, captain of His Majesty’s ship Wenselsey and “Comodore for the Virginia fleet.”32 Thomas Gadsden, one of Ellis’ sons-in-law, was customs collector at Charleston, South Carolina.33 Another of his daughters married Jacob Kollock of Lewes in Sussex County, Delaware. Kollock was active in trade and politics, serving for nearly forty years as a representative in the assembly of the Lower Counties.34 Business ventures involved Ellis with some of Philadelphia’s most successful and socially prominent citizens, men like Jeremiah Langhorne, James Logan, Clement Plumsted, William Allen, Joseph Turner, and Israel Pemberton.35

Throughout his lifetime, Ellis manifested an interest in the defense policies of the colony. In 1720, he had assisted in apprehending “sundry Pyrates” who attempted to sail down the Delaware with a stolen vessel. Applying to the Assembly for reimbursement for his expenses in this enterprise, he was granted £8 5s.36 Many years later, in 1742, he joined with other merchants in an effort to circumvent Quaker control of the Assembly and to provide defenses for the colony. In a petition to the king, these merchants (several of whom were slave traders) advanced a number of arguments supporting military preparation, one of which read: “That the Civil Power, without a well regulated Militia, will be too feeble to repel an Insurrection of our Slaves, already grown very numerous, shou’d they

30 Ellis to John Penn, June 23, 1743, ibid.
31 Ellis to Thomas Penn, Aug. 1, 1744, Penn Manuscripts, Official Correspondence, IV (1744–1749), HSP; Thomas Penn to Robert Ellis, Mar. 12, 1744/45, Penn Letter Book, II, HSP.
32 Ellis to James Lloyd, Dec. 1, 1740, Ellis Letter Book.
33 Ellis to Thomas Gadsden, May 28, 1740, ibid.
34 PMHB, VII (1883), 492.
36 Pennsylvania Archives, Eighth Series (Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representa-
tives of the Province of Pennsylvania), II, 1330, 1336.
attempt the Destruction of the Inhabitants, as they have done in some of the Neighbouring Colonys.”

Ellis was an Anglican and had no scruples against the bearing of arms. He was a member of Christ Church, and served as a vestryman in 1719, 1720, 1722 through 1727, and again in 1735. Although active in church affairs, he never participated in politics above the local level. He served on the Common Council of Philadelphia in 1726, and continued to concern himself with civic matters for many years.

By 1723, Ellis was selling in Philadelphia an occasional Negro procured from South Carolina. A decade later he began to import slaves in sizable lots; in 1733, he asked an Antigua correspondent to return the proceeds from the sale of goods valued at slightly over £212 in “good Rum & good Casks & mostly in Young Negroes if to be had any thing near the Prizes [prices] I bought at last Year...” Assuming a price of £15 per head, some fourteen slaves could have been purchased had all the returns gone toward buying Negroes. Ellis must have realized a worth-while profit because he expressed the opinion in November, 1734, that with the coming of spring “Negro boyes will Sell well.” The next year, he wrote that he did “Not Doubt but Young Negroes will Do here Either boys or Girls,” although he warned that “the Sooner they Come here the Better.”

In August, 1736, the Pennsylvania Gazette announced that there were “Very likely Negro Boys and Girls, to be Sold by Robert Ellis.” He had been in South Carolina during the preceding months, and

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37 “The Humble Petition of diverse Merchants and others Inhabitants of the Province of Pennsylvania in America, in behalf of themselves and great numbers of others, residing in the said Province,” Board of Trade Papers, Proprieties (1697-1776), XV (1740-1742), T. 57, HSP.


39 Minutes of the Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, 1704 to 1776, 263, and passim.


41 Ellis to William Graham, Mar. 28, 1733, Miscellaneous Correspondence (1711-1736), Hildeburn Papers, HSP. Ellis had sold a “Parcel of very likely Negroes” in 1732; see American Weekly Mercury, May 18-25, 1732. It is likely that Ellis received Negroes on the return shipment, for in July he advertised the sale of “Several likely Negroe Boys and Girls.” Later that same year he announced the sale of a “parcel of very likely Negroes, Men, Women and Boys.” Ibid., July 5-12, and Oct. 11-18, 1733.

42 Ellis to Edward Tittle, Nov. 24, 1734, and Apr. 18, 1735, Miscellaneous Correspondence (1711-1736), Hildeburn Papers.
these slaves no doubt accompanied him on his return voyage to Philadelphia. The cargo probably consisted of about twenty-five or thirty Negroes. On September 18, Ellis wrote that the Negroes were moving fairly well, even though some were where still unsold. He sent a Mr. Shaw four of the slaves, asking Shaw to “Dispose of them If you Can Not Less than Twenty Six Pounds Each Ready Money or good Hands that will Pay in a Month,” and adding that he had “not Sould Any under Eight and Twenty Pounds Yet I have Sould four this weake.” The newspaper notice announcing the sale of these slaves first appeared early in August and ran for four consecutive weeks, indicating, along with the communication to Mr. Shaw, that some of the Negroes remained unsold for longer than a month.43

While in South Carolina the next summer (1737), Ellis purchased “Fourty Odd Negroes of Mr. Paul Jenis and Mr. Savage,” both Charleston merchants. These slaves arrived in Philadelphia on the snow Martha before Ellis’ return, and were probably sold by his wife, who advertised their sale.44

Ellis spent the winter of 1737–1738, and the following spring, in South Carolina, and while there made arrangements with a number of Charleston merchants for the joint sale of slaves in Pennsylvania and elsewhere. On June 12, 1738, for example, when returning to Philadelphia, he entered the Nansemond River in Virginia on the sloop Frederica, with a cargo of sixty-seven slaves, the joint property of Ellis, Thomas Gadsden, and the firm of Cleland and Wallace of Charleston. It is probable that James Osmond of Charleston also had an interest in these Negroes. Reporting on the Virginia venture, Ellis said that two of the Negroes had been left behind because of sickness and that two others had died of smallpox. The slaves who reached Virginia “Prov’d to be very weak wanting Provisions Enough A Board of ye ship.” Still, Ellis believed “The Negroes Sold very well.” He was pleased with the voyage despite the fact that his vessel had arrived in Virginia simultaneously with four other ships, all laden with Negroes. The slaves were sold in exchange for beef and pork, which “Except the Length of the Time of payment” seemed satisfactory to him. It was April, 1740, before the sloop Charming

43 Pennsylvania Gazette, Aug. 7–12, 1736; Ellis to Lawrence Williams, Sept. 11, 1736; Ellis to Mr. Shaw, Sept. 18, 1736, Ellis Letter Book.
44 Ellis to Lawrence Williams, Nov. 3, 1737, ibid.; Pennsylvania Gazette, June 23–30, 1737. Catherine Ellis handled her husband’s business affairs during his visits to South Carolina.
Sally was dispatched to Virginia to take in the beef and pork “that is the remainder part of the Produce of Negroes.”

In selling slaves in Virginia, Ellis was not neglecting the local trade in Pennsylvania. Nearly six weeks before his arrival there, a cargo of Negro boys and girls had reached the colony. John Ryan, a business partner, handled the sales. Reaching Philadelphia on July 1, Ellis was disappointed to learn that no more than “near half the Negroes” had been sold; “the Sails is Not So Quick as I Expected,” he wrote. Ryan, too, had been concerned that the Negroes were not moving more quickly. Before Ellis’ arrival, and after the slaves had been available almost a month, he had announced that “Three or four Months Credit will be given on good Security, or an abatement of 20s. a Head in each Slave on Prompt Payment. Most (if not all) the Slaves have had the Small-Pox.”

Sixteen of the Negroes were sent on to Lewes to be sold by Jacob Kollock, Ellis’ son-in-law. Kollock sold the slaves, but proved reluctant to deliver the money. Ellis sailed again for Carolina on November 29, 1738, leaving Ryan behind to collect for the Negroes. That done, Ryan was to load the goods received for the slaves and proceed to Carolina, where the accounts with the Charleston merchants who had invested in the enterprise would be settled. Growing impatient with Kollock, Ryan wrote asking that he send returns for the Negroes sold. “There are Others Concern’d wth us,” he explained, and

Mr Ellis & I who have been at Vast Pains & Trouble in Bringing e’em here & Selling em up & down in Severall Parts of the Country won’t nor can Pretend to Charge More than 5 p cent Commisn It was at Mrs Ellis’s Instance I gave y[ou] the Trouble of e’em for I Coud easily dispose of them few, as well as of the Many I have Sold, & be in Cash and Now to Make Proper and Timely Returns for the Concern’d, however am farr from Begrudging y[ou] the Common Reasonable Comn wch I hope is all y[ou] will Expect. . . . Mr Ellis assur’d me at his departure I may Reckon on About £400 from y[ou] But as yet Saw but About £40 of It.

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45 Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 201; Ellis to Thomas Gadsden, July 1, 1738; Ellis to Cleland and Wallace, July 1, 1738; Ellis to James Osmond, July 1, 1738; Ellis to George Tayer, Apr. 22, 1740, Ellis Letter Book.
46 Ellis to James Osmond, July 1, 1738, *ibid.; Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 18–25 and June 15–22, 1738.
47 Ellis to Lawrence Williams, Nov. 29, 1738, Ellis Letter Book.
48 John Ryan to Jacob Kollock, Jan. 25, 1739, *ibid.*
It was Ryan's hope that he and Kollock would "have an Opportunity of Setting Together half an hour to Settle that Accot to Our Mutuall Content, for I must Carry all the Negroes Accots wth me to Carolina." In a postscript, a final plea was made for payment on the slaves: "It may be Very hurtfull in future to Both Mr Ellis & me, if we Shoud Not be Able to furnish Accots and Timely Returns for those Negroes." Ryan seems to have been pleading in vain, however, for Kollock did not send returns for the Negro sales. Indeed, Ellis was without his money for several years; as late as October, 1741, he wrote Kollock, saying, "If you have any Money for me for my Negroes be So good to Send it up."\(^49\)

A total of £400 for sixteen slaves would indicate that Kollock was selling at an average price of £25 per head. If that was the going price, Ellis' dissatisfaction with the cost of the twelve Negroes who arrived on the brigantine Anna from South Carolina on July 24, 1738, is understandable. According to Benjamin Burleigh, whose letter accompanied the slaves, the Negroes cost £25 per head, causing Ellis to remark that "If So There Dear Bought."\(^50\)

Still another group of slaves was sold in 1738. Ellis was equally interested in this transaction with the Charleston merchants Benjamin Savage and Joseph Wragg. Near the end of October, Ellis wrote them an account of the Negro sales, remitting to each a part of their one-third interests. He pointed out that "we have Not yet Compleat'd the Sales, but Shall in About three Weeks," and that "we are Oblig'd to Take Iron and Bread for Payment of them." Savage was sent thirty barrels of ship bread and "Two tun & Eight Pound" of bar iron amounting to just over £93, while Wragg received bread and iron valued at almost £75.\(^51\)

Ellis' correspondence during the summer of 1738 with Robert Pringle, another influential Charleston trader, illustrates the limited slave market which existed in Pennsylvania. Ellis and Pringle were jointly involved in the sale of two Negro women, apparently brought to Philadelphia by Ellis on his summer voyage to Pennsylvania. Late in July, Pringle was informed that "the Two Negroes Are yet Unsold and Negroes Don't go of So Well as I thougt They Would By having So Many here at Wonst. . . ." The slaves remained

\(^49\) Ibid.; Ellis to Jacob Kollock, Oct. 7, 1741, ibid.
\(^50\) Ellis to Cleland and Wallace, July 25, 1738, ibid.
\(^51\) Ellis to Benjamin Savage, Oct. 30, 1738; Ellis to Joseph Wragg, Oct. 30, 1738, ibid.
unsold until October, when Ellis dejectedly reported that “This Day One of the Negroe Women Dyed of the Small Pox and the Other is Sold for Thirty Pound we Shall Make But a Misarable Hand of our Venture.”

Still Ellis was far from discouraged with the Pennsylvania slave trade. Even a lengthy stay in South Carolina, prolonged because of illness and lasting from December, 1738, to February, 1740, did not prevent him from sending Negroes to the Philadelphia market. During the summer of 1739, he sent north a “parcel” of South Carolina slaves who were sold at his house in Water Street. After his return to Philadelphia, Ellis sought to acquire Negro slaves from other areas, including Antigua, St. Christopher, and Barbados, as well as from South Carolina. Near the end of April, 1740, his sloop Charming Sally sailed for Virginia, where the captain, David Hall, was to receive two hundred and fifty barrels of pork and thirty-eight barrels of beef from Theophilus Pugh. Thus laden, he was to continue on to either Antigua or St. Christopher and “Dispose of the Same to the best of my Advantage.” The proceeds from the sales were to be laid out in “Young Negroe Boys & Girls, if to be purchas’d but not Exceeding Sixteen pounds $ head.” In the event that slaves were unavailable, Hall was told to buy rum if at Antigua, and rum and molasses if at St. Christopher, “or any thing that you’ll think will Turn Out most to my Advantage.”

Nearly four months later, in mid-August, Hall returned, and Ellis advertised “A Parcel of likely Negro Boys and Girls just arrived in the Sloop Charming Sally, David Hall Master, and to be sold by Robert Ellis, in Water-Street, for ready Money, Flour or Wheat. . . .” This notice ran for only two weeks, suggesting that the slaves were disposed of rather quickly. Ellis’ correspondence would also support the conclusion that these Negroes sold well, for he made numerous efforts to acquire more slaves for sale in the Quaker colony.

The Charming Sally, after completing a short voyage to Rhode Island in October, 1740, was again sent to the West Indies via Virginia. Captain Hall was consigned goods whose total value

53 American Weekly Mercury, July 19-26, 1739.
54 Ellis to Capt. David Hall, Apr. 22, 1740, Ellis Letter Book.
55 Pennsylvania Gazette, Aug. 21 and Sept. 4, 1740.
56 Ibid., Oct. 9, 1740.
amounted to nearly £133 and which were to be disposed of in Virginia, where Hall would obtain whatever he thought proper for the West Indies market. Instructed to sail to “Barbados or Any of the Leward Islands, where you Shall here of the Best Markets,” Hall was asked to “Purchase good Likely Negroe Boys and Girls not Exceeding Sixteen years Old if to be had and if no Negroes to be had I Leave you at your Liberty to Purchase Rum Sugar or Mollasses or anything you Shall think Best for my advantage.” If Hall put in at Barbados, he was to apply to Bayley and Bedford “to Acquaint them if they have any Negroes or Other goods for me that you will Take Them on bord and Take Care of them fore me.”

Ellis continued to believe that the local slave market would yield profits. When describing to Joseph Wragg the state of trade in Pennsylvania in April, 1741, he said that “Every Thing is Very Deare . . . , I believe Yong & Likely Negroes will Sell well this Spring if Any fall in your [hands.]” In May, 1741, he shipped sixty barrels of turpentine, ten hogsheads of ship bread, and ten barrels of pork to Barbados. Joseph Marks, to whom the goods were consigned, was directed to “Dispose of them to My Best Advantage, & Bring the Neat Proced in Good Likely young Negroes if Cheap or if none to be had Cheap, bring me good Rum, but I Rather Young Negroes.” Having a combined value of £140, these goods would probably have purchased eight or nine Negroes in the islands.

Similar efforts were made in succeeding years to purchase slaves for Pennsylvania. Bayley and Bedford were requested to ship Negroes from Barbados in the spring of 1742, while in May, 1743, Ellis sent three tons of iron to the same firm, stating that the returns could be sent in rum and sugar, although “I wou’d Rather have all in Negroes if you meet wth Likely Healthy Ones.” One month later, Mrs. Peter Nikill of Antigua was asked to ship him some “Negroe Boys and Girls.”

Despite Ellis’ attempts to import slaves after 1741, it does not appear that he was successful in having Negroes shipped northward.

57 Ellis to Capt. David Hall, Nov. 22, 1740, Ellis Letter Book.
58 Ellis to Joseph Wragg, Apr. 17, 1740 [1741], ibid.
59 Ellis to Joseph Marks, May 12, 1741, ibid.
60 Ellis to Bayley and Bedford, Dec. 3, 1741, and May 19, 1743; Ellis to Mrs. Peter Nikill, June 13, 1743, ibid.
His correspondence, however, coincides with a growing demand for slaves in these years, a demand associated with the War of the Austrian Succession and the practice of enlisting white servants.\(^{61}\) So far as is known, the last cargo of slaves sold by Ellis arrived in Pennsylvania late in June, 1741.\(^{62}\)

About this time Ellis' commercial activities had taken a turn for the worse, and he was struggling to improve his financial affairs. In 1744, he again became involved in the Durham Iron Works, an enterprise which he had helped to build up in 1726 when he joined a company formed to erect an ironworks at Durham on the Delaware River in Bucks County. The company acquired 6,000 acres of land in that area and built the works in 1727.\(^{63}\) Evidently, Ellis remained affiliated with the group for about ten years.\(^{64}\)

From 1744 on, Ellis devoted his limited energies to developing the Durham works. To Joseph Wragg he wrote that he was "Very Offten out of Town at an Iron Works I am Concern’d in," while another correspondent, also at Charleston, was informed that "I have got now a furnace and Forge at Work which obliges me to be out of Town very Much."\(^{66}\) John Swift, who lived for some time with the Ellis family, reported in 1747 that "I now keep house by my self, Mr & Mrs Ellis and all the family except a Negro woman being gone to Durham. . . ."\(^{66}\) Apparently, Ellis did not find the Durham works profitable, for he complained that the "Iron Works has been very expensive to me. . . ." To add to his worsening financial condition, he lost several vessels with their cargoes in 1744.\(^{67}\)

Hopelessly in debt after 1744, Ellis made yeoman attempts to recoup his financial losses. He had never collected on some cargoes

\(^{62}\) *American Weekly Mercury*, June 35–July 2, 1741.
\(^{64}\) See Samuel Powel, Jr., to Robert Ellis, Dec. 21, 1737, Samuel Powel, Jr., Letter Book (1727–1739), HSP, in which Powel writes: "As thou hast secured a Mortgage part of Durrum Iron Works to me in part of a Debt due from thee to James Millington. . . ."
\(^{65}\) Ellis to Joseph Wragg, Dec. 20, 1744; Ellis to Daniel Laroche, June 26, 1745, Ellis Letter Book.
\(^{66}\) John Swift to his uncle, July 30, 1747, John Swift Letter Book (1747–1751), HSP.
\(^{67}\) Ellis to Roger Moore, Nov. 15, 1745; Ellis to Benjamin Savage, Mar. 11, 1747, Ellis Letter Book.
shipped to Georgia, and he sought to obtain the money which he considered due him. Oglethorpe was informed of the conduct of the Trustees of Georgia and asked to do all he could “to deliver me the Mony . . . for the goods brought by the Ship Ceasar into Savannah & sold at Vendue, it is a great Hardship upon me to be kept so Long out of my money.” 68 Two years later, Oglethorpe was reminded of the debt and told that Ellis had “met with a great many Misfortunes this Warr,” making it necessary that he have his money if at all possible. 69

Ellis had also been attempting to raise the money in England through Lawrence Williams. While “fearfull of Success,” Williams nevertheless told Ellis in 1742 that he could “be assur’d yt my utmost Care shall be employed for yr Service in this affair.” 70 The next year, Williams wrote encouragingly:

I have ye pleasure to acquaint you yt Mr Oglethorpe has succeeded in his Application to Parliament, in so much yt all his bills will be pd, as I believe. I saw him two days ago, when he told me yt your affairs were referr’d to a Select Committee, & he wou’d preside there, & take care you had Justice done you, & wou’d Serve you to ye utmost of his Power, but these things will take up time, & you may be assur’d yt yr Affairs Shall not be neglected. 71

The years slipped by, but the Georgia account was not settled. Finally, Catherine Ellis, who had always been actively interested in her husband’s affairs, made use of her own influence. On her behalf, John Swift wrote to his uncle in London:

Mrs Ellis desires I will again repeat to you what I have mentioned in a former letter, wch was to desire you would get what information you can from Mr Williams abt Mr Ellis’s accts with Genl Oglethorpe, and that you would use your Interest with him to prevail on him to get the Accts Sett[led]; and as she thinks you have more leisure than Mr Williams she desires that you would take the Trouble to inform her how the Case is Circumstanced, and what is to be expected of it. 72

Swift was well aware of Ellis’ failing fortunes, and thought it best to inform his uncle: “Mrs Ellis tells me she intends to write to you

68 Ellis to James Oglethorpe, Oct. 3, 1743, ibid.
69 Ellis to James Oglethorpe, Nov. 18, 1745, ibid.
70 Lawrence Williams to Robert Ellis, Feb. 22, 1742, Miscellaneous Correspondence (1711–1736), Hildeburn Papers.
71 Williams to Robert Ellis, Mar. 22, 1743, ibid.
about a project she has in her Head; she never told me what it was, and therefore I think it will be proper to inform you, that I have a great deal of reason to believe it is very low water with Robert, that you may be upon your guard." Swift had previously loaned Mrs. Ellis sums of money, a friendly gesture which he later repeated.\textsuperscript{73}

Ellis tried various expedients to meet his expenses, but without success. When he drew an advance on the account of Lawrence Williams and his partner, it earned him a stern rebuke:

\ldots we are greatly concern'd you should draw on us in this manner at a time you are sensible we cannot be in Cash for yr account another bill for £120\$ having appeared of yours since what we Wrote you which we were Obliged (counter to our inclination) to refuse acceptance of we hope our old Friend believes we are allways ready to render him all the reasonable Service in Our Power & at the same time must allow that advancing such Sums of mony at this critical time, cannot be expected.\textsuperscript{74}

There was no respite for Robert Ellis. He died in 1750, an old and apparently broken man. Property he owned in Philadelphia was seized and sold at public auction.\textsuperscript{75}

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\textsuperscript{73} Swift to his uncle, Nov. 29, 1747, memorandums dated Nov. 11, 1747, and Feb. 14, 1749, ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} Williams and Rockliff to Robert Ellis, Apr. 8, 1747, Miscellaneous Correspondence (1711-1736), Hildeburn Papers.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}, Apr. 12 and Nov. 15, 1750.