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Abstract

Years after being kidnapped from his native Ibo village as a young boy, Olaudah Equiano vividly recalled his wonder at seeing a European ship for the first time. Although he failed to realize it at the time, that same ship, and the Atlantic currents it navigated, would shortly transport him and millions of his countrymen to lives of slavery on the far shores of a distant continent. In addition to providing a convenient avenue for the initial transport of slaves, water enabled the development of a trade network linking scattered plantations in the Caribbean to centers of trade in North America and Europe where the products of coerced black labor were bought and sold. Even more detrimental to African identity than the systematic exploitation the sea enabled was the insurmountable barrier it presented to the continuance of native customs and identities. Like the slave ships that traversed the ocean currents, however, black culture eventually subverted the rigid order imposed by nature. The presence of black sailors onboard the ships which sustained the colonial Atlantic World created an unparalleled opportunity for strengthening black identity. The seamen assumed the roles of cultural ambassadors, spreading word of the diverse cultures and patterns of life they encountered in their travels to their brothers and sisters in bondage. Capitalizing on the inherent inequality of shipboard life to assert their identities as autonomous equals, black sailors brought hope and, occasionally, freedom to American slaves, all the while undermining the efforts of slaveholders to create a docile labor force.

Keywords

black sailors, slavery, United States

CURRENTS OF LIBERTY, SEAS OF CHANGE: BLACK SAILORS AS SUBVERSIVE AGENTS OF FREEDOM IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC



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Years after being kidnapped from his native Ibo village as a young boy, Olaudah Equiano vividly recalled his wonder at seeing a European ship for the first time.¹ Although he failed to realize it at the time, that same ship, and the Atlantic currents it navigated, would shortly transport him and millions of his countrymen to lives of slavery on the far shores of a distant continent. In addition to providing a convenient avenue for the initial transport of slaves, water enabled the development of a trade network linking scattered plantations in the Caribbean to centers of trade in North America and Europe where the products of coerced black labor were bought and sold. Even more detrimental to African identity than the systematic exploitation the sea enabled was the insurmountable barrier it presented to the continuance of native customs and identities. Like the slave ships that traversed the ocean currents, however, black culture eventually subverted the rigid order imposed by nature. The presence of black sailors onboard the ships which sustained the colonial Atlantic World created an unparalleled opportunity for strengthening black identity. The seamen assumed the roles of cultural ambassadors, spreading word of the diverse cultures and patterns of life they encountered in their travels to their brothers and sisters in bondage. Capitalizing on the inherent inequality of shipboard life to assert their identities as autonomous equals, black sailors brought hope and, occasionally, freedom to American slaves, all the while undermining the efforts of slaveholders to create a docile labor force.

In the eighteenth century, the first generation of manumitted blacks quickly discovered that the promise of freedom obtained in the wake of the American Revolution did not extend to equality. While African Americans still toiled under the lash in the South, their northern counterparts vainly searched for economic opportunities through which they could support fledgling families and prove their dignity as human beings. While deeply entrenched racism closed many occupations to them, black males consistently found employment on the sea. Ultimately, myriad economic, social, and historical factors account for the acceptance of black labor by the maritime industry. In the most immediate sense, black labor served an essential function in the chronically undermanned merchant marine. More important than their mere availability, however, were the skills many blacks had acquired through a vibrant seafaring

¹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, ed. Robert J. Allison (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995), 53.

tradition. Even before the massive demographic reorientation of African Americans around port cities following 1790, black faces had been a common sight in American dockyards.² In northern and southern coastal cities, slaves like Briton Hammon petitioned their masters for the right to hire themselves out for voyages and runaways had traditionally sought illicit employment on seagoing vessels. Although their heritage of seafaring gave blacks the skills to attract potential employers, the nature of shipboard life ultimately secured their acceptance.

Unlike the plantation economy and many other land based industries, seafaring offered little opportunity for the physical segregation of the races. The physical confines of the sailors' living space inevitably compelled blacks and whites to live in close proximity and the communal aspects of their work, as well as its shared dangers and discomforts, only strengthened their solidarity.³ For all the egalitarian qualities of life before the mast, however, seafaring was characterized by a rigid hierarchy defining each sailor's specific duties and the degree of social consideration he deserved.⁴ However, as W. Jeffrey Bolster has shown, race alone did not predestine blacks for the lowest duties. Rather, a host of other qualifications determined their placement within the maritime hierarchy.⁵ Through their talents and initiative, black men rose through the ranks to become officers and some eventually commanded their own vessels.⁶

Ironically, however, the same career that offered black seamen a tantalizing taste of equality and freedom frequently placed them in the power of officers who tried to deprive them of both. In their survey of the laboring class that formed the backbone of the burgeoning Atlantic World, Linebaugh and Rediker identify the ship as the forerunner of the modern factory.⁷ Although this interpretation helps to contextualize the brutality employed by captains in the eighteenth century in order to secure the submissive obedience of their crews, it overlooks its parallel to the oppressive measures leveled against slaves laboring in agricultural production. Like planters, sea captains intimidated the men in their power with arbitrary displays of violence. Some practices, like the public flogging of sailors with an instrument specifically designed to cause excruciating pain, so closely mirrored the tactics of slaveholders that white seamen frequently referred to themselves as negroes.⁸ In addition to corporal punishment, owners of maritime labor encouraged restrictive legislation designed to emulate the discriminatory stipulations of southern slave codes. Laws were enacted limiting the mobility of sailors unless they could present positive proof of employment and a law, in language reminiscent of the Fugitive Slave Act, empowered citizens to apprehend runaway seamen.⁹

² Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers," in *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labor* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Acadiensis, 1992), 40.

³ Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 77.

⁴ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), 155.

⁵ W. Jeffrey Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man: Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800-1860," *The Journal of American History* 76 (1990): 1173-1199.

⁶ Martha S. Putney, *Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalers Prior to the Civil War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 52.

⁷ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 150.

⁸ Harold D. Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service 1789-1860 1798," *The Journal of Negro History* 52 (October, 1967): 273-286.

⁹ Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (July, 1968): 378.

One of the planters' primary tactics against black revolt was the intentional sundering of African linguistic ties. When Africans were loaded upon ships bound for the Americas, a contemporary observer explained,

The means used by those who trade to Guinea to keep the Negroes quiet is to choose them from severall parts of ye Country, of different Languages; so that they cannot act joyntyly, in soe farr as they understand not one another.¹⁰

Even as the Africans learned the language of their captors, planters attempted to curtail communication between plantations by restricting the mobility of their slaves.¹¹ In addition to the systematic suppression of black communication, many planters consistently discouraged any emergent self-respect in their slaves by denying them the opportunity to practice skilled trades. Although many blacks resignedly submitted to their masters' dominance, the sea provided an alluring avenue of escape for the intrepid few which dared to attempt escape.

Port cities became havens for runaway slaves because their cosmopolitan compositions often camouflaged black fugitives from detection. In addition to allowing the slave to demonstrate his or her own ingenuity by eluding slaveholders in a bustling crowd, ports often brought slaves into contact with sympathetic sailors. Such men, regardless of their race, evidently saw in fugitive slaves a poignant reminder of their own fragile liberty and frequently aided runaways to freedom. Few historiographical surveys document the impact of individual runaways on planters' authority. Quite possibly the effect of such subversive labor tactics was so significant that planters hesitated to acknowledge it in writing. Whether or not accounts of runaways were ever committed to paper by literate blacks, their escapes undoubtedly figured prominently in discussions between slaves. Each runaway dealt both a tangible blow to his or her owner's purse, as well as a subtle symbolic blow to his absolute authority.

If a runaway slave damaged his or her master's image, the appearance of an autonomous black male within the plantation economy eroded the image of racial inferiority slaveholders so diligently instilled in their chattel. Whereas the majority of manumitted slaves in the South were old and feeble, black sailors typified masculine virility.¹² Even more galling to Southerners was the presence of black sailors in recognized positions of authority. Prior to 1822, ships with all-black crews, commanded by black masters, frequently docked in southern harbors. The mere existence of these men among the enslaved exposed the deceitful teachings of slaveholders and kindled black resistance to enslavement. Even when slaves dutifully returned to their masters after spending time at sea, they were likely to display behavior deemed unsuitable. As one Caribbean planter observed, "[He] never knew a Boy, who had been at Sea, of any use on a Plantation."¹³ More dangerous than their blossoming autonomy in the planters' view was the

¹⁰ David Simson as quoted in Rediker, 48.

¹¹ Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial America 1619-1776* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 61.

¹² W. Jeffery Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 213.

¹³ Scott, 38.

tendency of black sailors to disseminate Republican ideals of liberty and natural rights among the enslaved. In 1826, the Bahamian House of Assembly noted that the number of black slaves employed around the island were certain to, “disseminate among the slave population generally a taste for many of the comforts of civilized life.”¹⁴ However black sailors may have defined the “comforts of civilized life,” they almost certainly held that slavery was hindering their attainment.

Although his very appearance in the South subverted the artificial racial stratification planters had nurtured for centuries, the very nature of a sailor’s profession made him capable of posing an even greater threat to slaveholding society. Through their travels, black sailors helped to regenerate the connections between the far-flung communities of their people rendered asunder by slavery and transmit information about alternative ways of life that the enslaved could only imagine. The importance of the merchant marine as a newsmonger can only be determined by an examination of the extent to which slaveholders attempted to suppress unfavorable news before it reached their slaves. One of the most contentious events in the colonial world, the slave insurrection in St. Domingue, was also one of the most alarming to Southerners. Fittingly, news of the initial carnage sweeping the island was first carried to Charleston by a merchant vessel on September 9, 1791.¹⁵ Slaveholders quickly mobilized to neutralize the reports of racial rebellion in their press and personal correspondence in order to allay the enthusiasm of their own slaves for a similar bloodletting. Although the American South rarely regarded the fledgling Republic of Haiti with anything less than wary suspicion, the region’s newspapers were more charitable towards the initial revolutionary violence than the subsequent attempts of the black nation to govern itself. Whereas papers published lurid accounts of black atrocities on the island, which probably inspired more than one black slave in Charleston to harbor murderous designs, they consistently ridiculed the Republic of Haiti as symbol of economic decay and further proof of the dependency of African-Americans.¹⁶ In addition to racially biased press coverage, southern states attempted to censor the events on St. Domingue by placing limitations on the import of slaves from the region and the immigration of refugees, especially the gens de couleur.¹⁷

In contrast to the pitiful scenarios depicted by the southern press and planters themselves, black sailors heralded the Republic of Haiti as an achievement which proved their racial equality with whites. The extraordinary mobility of the sailors frequently outpaced the free flow of information in the South, and they played an increasingly important role as sources of information about the true nature of the Republic. The sailors consistently pointed with pride to the nation which had managed to throw off the burden of tyranny much as the American colonies had done decades earlier, and heralded the formation of a government on the island as a vindication of their ability to wield political power. Although their positive endorsement

¹⁴ Quoted in Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 135.

¹⁵ Scott, 42.

¹⁶ Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 20, 89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

of the efforts on St. Domingue directly challenged the rhetoric of slaveholders, black sailors occasionally went to even greater lengths to sabotage the hegemony of white southerners.

One of the most epic attempted slave revolts in American history had its genesis in the ideas of equality and self-worth promoted by the service of black seamen. Denmark Vesey had been a sailor in his youth and had acquired the cosmopolitan views and worldliness that so characterized his fellow black compatriots. In addition to introducing him to exotic cultures and ways of life, however, Vesey's voyages helped him become proficient in French, Gullah, and Creole.¹⁸ Prior to the restrictions leveled at French émigrés by the southern states, Vesey probably freely conversed with Haitian refugees in their native language. In addition to the ideological debt Vesey owed to his seafaring experiences, they figured very prominently in his planned slave uprising in Charleston. Subsequent testimony given at the trials of the conspirators revealed that Vesey had established open contact with the Republic of Haiti through a black sailor, and planned to sail with his followers to the island after they had reduced Charleston to rubble.¹⁹ Although planters had always resented the subversive influence of black sailors, the trial of Denmark Vesey quickly educated them as to how dangerous the seamen truly were. Of the 35 conspirators condemned to death, over half were employed in Charleston's port.²⁰ In the wake of the trial and execution of the slaves involved in Vesey's attempted uprising in 1822, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana passed the Negro Seaman Acts in an effort to curtail the freedoms of black sailors.²¹ Ships entering ports in these states were required by law to incarcerate black crewmen in city jails. In addition to relinquishing black sailors to the authorities during the duration of the stay in port, captains were compelled to offer proof that they intended to reclaim all their crewmen before departure. If they were not claimed by their officers, black seamen could be sold into slavery to recover the expense of their imprisonment.²² Although moderately successful in isolating black sailors from the slave populations, the seamen continued to transmit information from their prison cells and, with their very presence, undermine the authority of white planters.

In the crucible of inequality that was the ship, black sailors managed to forge positive identities for themselves and their race. By ceding control of their fates to the caprices of captains and subjecting themselves to a form of exploitation akin to that endured by their brothers and sisters in bondage, black sailors won a degree of autonomy. Through their willing and unwilling voyages to the far corners of the world, they experienced different cultures and peoples, which they enthusiastically transmitted to those bound to the earth of the plantation through an undisrupted network of communication. Although their numbers would steadily decline as the economic centers of America shifted towards factory production, blacks continued to form a

¹⁸ Edward A. Pearson, introduction to *Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822*, ed. Edward A. Pearson (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1999), 29-30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 231-232, 238.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹ Philip M. Hamer, "Great Britain, the United States, and the Negro Seaman Acts, 1822-1848", *The Journal of Southern History* 1 (February, 1935): 3-28.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

visible presence in American shipping through the Civil War. Ultimately, the host of unnamed and largely unsung heroes of the sea forged identities for themselves characterized by a degree of liberty disproportionate to their actual autonomy onboard ship. They fashioned themselves into models of what colonial slaveholders most feared: skilled, self-aware, cosmopolitan freemen—symbols of hope and racial pride, and prophets of resistance for millions of enslaved blacks.

