



Throughout 2001, *The Dolphin* featured articles on the influence of African Americans in our maritime industries. The following is Part I of a two-part series by Brendan Foley.

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SLAVES IN THE AMERICAN MARITIME ECONOMY, 1638 - 1865

ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL ROLES

By Brendan Foley

July 28, 1741 — Aboard the Privateer Revenge,

Latitude 31° 59'N Longitude 73° 6'W

About 5 a.m. spied a sail under our lee bow, bore down on her, and when in gunshot fired one of our bow chasers. She immediately lowered all her sails.... We sent our lieutenant aboard, who reported that she was loaded with Pork, Beans, Live Hogs, &c., and a horse, & had on board 2 Englishmen; the Master, who is a Frenchman born, but turned Spaniard; 3 [mulatto] Spanish slaves, & one negro.¹

African slavery in the Americas is a much studied subject, but a clear picture of many of its facets has yet to come into view. American and Caribbean slaves often have been portrayed merely as unskilled agricultural field hands and domestic servants. However, as Stanley Engerman and Robert Fogel point out, "the common belief that all slaves were menial laborers is false;" similar to slaves in other eras and cultures, bound laborers in the colonies and early United States worked at a multitude of semi-skilled and skilled professions.² In some trades, enslaved blacks worked side-by-side with white wage workers. This was especially true in the maritime economy, where slaves labored as boatmen, lightermen, shipwrights, caulkers, riggers, sailmakers, coopers, mariners, and pilots. Ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass worked as a caulker in a Baltimore shipyard in the 1830s and commented on this curious fact: "Until a very little while after I went there [to the shipyard], white and black ship-carpenters worked side-by-side, and no one seemed to see any impropriety in it. All hands seemed to be very well satisfied. Many of the black carpenters were free men. Things seemed to be going on very well."³

Maritime employment for slaves was more than just an economic opportunity for them, it was an economic necessity for the colonies. Without slave boatmen plying the creeks, rivers, and bays of the South, the transportation network would have completely broken down. More im-

portantly for the growth of a distinct black American culture, maritime employment offered a chance for black empowerment in a racist society. Maritime work for slaves was often skilled work, conducted away from the watchful eyes of the master. It brought bonded black laborers in close contact with free white and black workers, and facilitated transmission of information among the slaves — and later abolitionists — in different geographical regions. These factors must have sparked feelings of self-worth and self-reliance in the black men working in shipyards and on watercraft. When those empowered slaves reached their emotional breaking points, they escaped or led insurrections in far greater proportions than unskilled agricultural slaves.

Like Douglass, many slaves preferred maritime work to other types of labor foisted upon them. In 1794 Virginia governor Richard Henry Lee looked to hire slaves around Norfolk for public works projects, but discovered that "laborers cannot be got by the Publick Agents" because the slaves believed that "working on board ships and about the wharves is more agreeable and less onerous."⁴ Among the many paradoxes of American slavery was the fact that some owners allowed their slaves a high degree of autonomy to pursue these maritime careers, even granting them leave to sail to foreign ports.

More than half a century ago, Eric Williams argued that slavery and the slave trade played crucial roles in financing the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Since *Capitalism and Slavery* was published, economists and historians have debated the accuracy of his assessment. Most academic attention has focused on slave production of staple crops such as sugar, cotton and tobacco. Although the maritime slaves were far outnumbered by agricultural and domestic slaves, the economic contribution of maritime slaves largely has been overlooked. The reasons for the lack of scholarly attention to these men are not difficult to fathom. They have been doubly ignored: first because American historical examinations of blacks were seldom written before the 1960s; and second, because with few exceptions the study of sailors and shipyard workers has been an even more recent phenomenon. Gary Nash noted that *white* merchant mariners "are perhaps the most elusive social group in early American history because they

moved from port to port with greater frequency than other urban dwellers, shifted occupations, died young, and, as the poorest members of the free white community, least often left behind traces of their lives on the tax lists or probate records."⁵ Black sailors are also difficult to trace but they are extremely important figures in American history, not least because they were economic and cultural role models in the black communities of urban colonial seaports.⁶

Due to their past invisibility to historians, several questions regarding enslaved maritime laborers have not been closely examined. How dependent was the Atlantic economy upon the labor of maritime slaves? How important were maritime trades to the economy of the slaves? Were slave laborers in shipyards allowed to climb from unskilled to semi-skilled and even skilled trades? Were skilled workers able to pass their knowledge on to the next generation of slave shipbuilders? What status did these skilled and often well-traveled slaves hold among the leaders of black communities? Did economic opportunities for slaves vary among the colonies? How widely did white attitudes vary over time and place to affect the opportunities available to these men? Why did racism develop even in the North's maritime workplaces in the nineteenth century? If Southern whites feared black sailors for their ability to spread information and antislavery propaganda, why did they allow slaves to remain employed in maritime trades? How many slaves escaped bondage by stowing away on ships or posing as free black sailors? And why did slave-owners along the coast continue to allow their chattel access to these routes to freedom? Definitive answers to many of these questions will not be reached without more research, but answers to some may be distilled from the works already published by economists, historians, and sociologists.

The Importance of Maritime Slaves

The rare maritime history works composed before the 1960s invariably neglect black sailors, and more recent histories typically give scant credit to their endeavors. Arthur Pierce Middleton details the remarkable quantity and variety of inshore craft used in the Chesapeake Bay colonies, but dismisses their crews by quoting Maryland's Governor Gooch: those crews "can't properly be termed seamen, being the most part planters with negroes." Marcus Rediker fails to mention black mariners, free or slave, in his social study of eighteenth century blue-water merchant sailors, but of merchant seamen in general he remarks, "They were an absolutely indispensable part of the rise and growth of the North Atlantic economy." Studies of slavery are equally guilty of ignoring enslaved maritime workers. Eugene Genovese writes only one line regarding black watermen in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: "On the eastern seaboard and the Mississippi River slaves continued to excel in making, manning, and piloting boats and ships...." In *Without Consent or Contract*, Robert Fogel discusses the occupational patterns of New World slaves without once mentioning their involvement in maritime industries.⁷

Although maritime slaves were far outnumbered by bound agricultural workers, as skilled and informed men they might have had a disproportionate influence on their communities. While never specifically addressing maritime slaves, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman do highlight the position of the skilled slave elites in their communities:

While slavery clearly limited the opportunities of bondsmen to acquire skills, the fact remains that over 25 percent were managers, professionals, craftsmen, and semi-skilled workers....It was out of this class of skilled workers that many of the leaders of the slave community arose....This upper occupational stratum may have provided, as a number of historians have argued, a disproportionately large share of the leaders of protests, desertions, insurrections and rebellions.

Two scholars have recently stressed the centrality of eighteenth and antebellum nineteenth century black sailors — many of them slaves or former slaves — to the formation of distinct black cultures in the Atlantic world. Sociologist Paul Gilroy wrote about the duality of Anglo-African consciousness:

The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations, and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations....It is particularly significant for the direction of my overall argument that [two of the black historical figures studied by Gilroy] had been sailors, moving to and fro between nations, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity. Their relationship to the sea may turn out to be especially important for both the early politics and poetics of the black Atlantic world that I wish to counterpose against the narrow nationalism of so much English historiography.⁹

Historian W. Jeffrey Bolster believes that black merchant marines were the key to shaping a distinct Afro-American society and that they contributed greatly to the antislavery movement. He points out that seamen wrote the first six English-language autobiographies of blacks before 1800, demonstrating a strong sense of personal and cultural identity. In addition, Bolster spotlights the vital part black men played in the maritime trades of the Atlantic economy: "...free and enslaved black sailors established a visible presence in every North American seaport and plantation roadstead between 1740 and 1865...[and]...black sailors worked in virtually every aspect of the colonial maritime trades...."¹⁰

Black sailors also played a part in fomenting the American Revolution, as Jesse Lemisch muses about the Boston Massacre: "What John Adams described as 'a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and mulattoes, Irish teagues and out landish jack tarrs,' including twenty or thirty of the latter, armed with sticks and clubs, did battle with the soldiers. Their leader was Crispus Attacks, a mulatto seaman; he was shot to death in front of the Custom House."¹¹ Though Attacks was not a slave, the resistance to force he exhibited was a characteristic also evident among enslaved mariners.

Editor's Note: The conclusion of this article will be published in the Spring 2001 issue of The Dolphin.

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Endnotes:

¹ Peter Vezean, "Journal of a Privateersman, Begun June the 5th, 1741," *Atlantic Monthly* (Sept.- Oct. 1861), p. 357. A prize crew of master, mate, and four hands was put aboard the captured vessel. A crew of five or six would have been necessary to man such a craft; the mulatto slaves were no doubt part of this company.

² Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1974), p. 40.

³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* Edited with an Introduction by David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 91.

⁴ Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers," in Colin Howell and Richard Twomey (eds.), *Jack Tar in History; Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Acadiensis Press, 1991), p. 41.

⁵ Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 16.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the role of free black sailors as well as the neglect of historians to address their role, see W. Jeffrey Bolster, "'To Feel Like a Man': Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800-1860," *Journal of American History* 76 (1990), pp. 1173-1200.

⁷ Arthur Pierce Middleton, *Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era* (Originally published in Newport News by the Mariner's Museum, 1953. Reprinted Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 242, 289; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 290; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 390.

⁸ Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, p. 40.

⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 1, 12.

¹⁰ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 4, 17, 20, 27, 37. Lois E. Horton and James Oliver Horton comment on the importance of black sailors to the black economy: "...a substantial number of black businesses were sustained by black sponsorship or patronage, and if they were not always the most financially stable, from the standpoint of black community needs, they were often the most significant. The most common black business enterprises were clothing dealerships selling new and used clothing to a largely seafaring clientele, boardinghouse keeping, many also serving seamen, and barber and hairdressing shops." Lois E Horton and James Oliver Horton, "Power and Social Responsibility: Entrepreneurs and the Black Community in Antebellum Boston," unpublished conference paper presented at "Entrepreneurs: The Boston Business Community, 1750-1850," May 21, 1994, Boston (Mass. Historical Society), p. 7.

¹¹ Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968), p. 399.

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GLOSSARY OF MARITIME TERMS USED IN THE TEXT

Sources:

The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976);

Sailor's Word Book: A Dictionary of Nautical Terms (First printed 1867 - current edition London: Conway Maritime Press, 1991)

- *blue-water* — trans-oceanic or deep-water. A colloquial term derived from the fact that in certain waters several miles from shore the ocean appears to be a deep blue color rather than green.
- *boatman* — a semi-skilled operator of a small boat, such as a canoe, skiff, barge, or lighter.
- *brigantine* — a two-masted vessel, square-rigged on the foremast and fore-and-aft rigged on the mainmast.
- *capital ship* — a term used in navies to denote the most important type of warship in the national fleet.
- *caulker* — a semi-skilled shipyard worker responsible for driving oakum or rope into the seams of a wooden ship's decks or sides in order to render them impervious to water.
- *coasting* — voyages conducted within close range of shore, though not necessarily within sight of land. In the American context, a vessel plying routes from New England to the Chesapeake, lower South, and even the Caribbean islands is considered to be engaged in coasting trades
- *fo'c'sle* — forecandle, the space beneath the short raised forward deck of a ship. It is used as the generic term to indicate the living space of the crew aboard ship.
- *inshore* — the connected waterways consisting of creeks, rivers, and bays which lead to the ocean
- *lighterman* — a semi-skilled worker who mans a lighter, which is a barge or similar vessel used for the conveyance of cargo from ship to shore, or vice-versa.
- *merchantman* — a generic term used to describe a trading vessel
- *pettiauger* — colloquial term, probably derived from *periagua*, used to describe a canoe formed from the trunk of a large tree.
- *privateer* — a privately owned vessel armed with guns which operated in time of war against the trade of an enemy.
- *rigger* — a semi-skilled worker employed on board ships or in shipyards to fit or dismantle the standing and running rigging of ships.
- *ropewalker* — a semi-skilled worker employed in the manufacture of rope.
- *shipwright* — a skilled ship carpenter or ship builder.