USS Constitution Museum

Black Sailors During the War of 1812

Lauren McCormack, 2005

Revised by Kate Monea and Carl Herzog, 2020

A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston

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Introduction

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, free black men from the northeastern United States, struggling to make their way in a highly discriminatory American society, went to sea in the merchant marine and the U.S. Navy, including aboard USS *Constitution*. By no means did shipboard life completely extract them from the prejudices of a white-dominated culture, but it often provided them with better opportunities than they had on land. Like their fellow white sailors, black seamen in the Early Republic could count on stable pay with the benefit of room and board. For many, sea service and its pay provided a path to a better life ashore.

Because race was not specifically noted in U.S. Navy personnel records at the time, much remains unknown about these men. However, a survey of the status of life for free blacks on shore sheds light on why some may have found seafaring an attractive opportunity. Moreover, anecdotal evidence, research into individual sailors, and extrapolation from British Prisoner of War records provides a better window into the lives of free black sailors in the War of 1812.

Free Blacks in the Post-Revolutionary American North

Following the American Revolutionary War, there was a growing opposition toward slavery in the northern United States. While Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont quickly outlawed slavery, the institution held fast in southern New England and the Mid-Atlantic States.[1] Even among northern abolitionists, though, there was a distinct separation between anti-slavery beliefs and notions of equality. These disparate forces and opinions determined the social and economic environments in which free northern blacks conducted their lives in the Early Republic and Antebellum north.

The end of the Revolutionary War did not mark the end of slavery for all the blacks in northern states. Those who were emancipated, though, faced a difficult assimilation into the white-dominated, free society. Freed blacks often stayed in the households of their former masters, continuing to act as domestic servants or laborers.[2] Unskilled free blacks who wished to leave the site of their former enslavement had to fend for themselves, finding their own employment or artisanal training. Even blacks who had learned skills while enslaved found it difficult to find work in their trades since most white employers would hire blacks only for unskilled, menial jobs.[3]

This unofficial restriction of free blacks to menial jobs was a result, in part, of northern whites' racial mindset. Even those who supported emancipation, such as Boston's Harrison Gray Otis, mistrusted blacks, feared them, or generally felt disdain for them.[4] According to Winthrop D. Jordan, white northerners wanted equality in law but not in society, and continued to view blacks as little more than "beasts of burden."[5] Perhaps the greatest influence on northern whites' attitudes towards blacks was Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, an extremely popular book at

[1] In practice, slavery in New Hampshire lasted for at least 15 years after the American Revolutionary War ended. See: Mark J. Sammons and Valerie Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004), 77.

[2] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 238.

[3] Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, 245.

[4] Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, VA by the University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 328.

[5] Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 329 and quoted in Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 322.

the time, in which Jefferson argues for the inferiority of blacks.[6]

The persistent fear of slave revolts also tainted northern whites' view of their black neighbors. It did not seem to matter that free northern blacks did not participate in slave uprisings in the south; the mere threat of violence slowly chipped away at the Revolutionary ideology of equality that drove the post-war abolitionist and integrationist movements.[7]

The fear and prejudice led to widespread segregation and discrimination. For the most part, blacks were kept out of local schools or were forced to form their own separate educational institutions that either did not receive public funding or received less than white schools in the area. Some whites considered black education a waste of time and money while others did not believe that blacks had a right to education. There was also great resentment among whites toward the idea of a black franchise.[8]

As a result of this white mindset, blacks were very aware of their public image and often encouraged their communities to maintain and project moral, upright, hard-working, and typically "American" lifestyles. Blacks strove for this ideal so as not to provoke whites against them, who, in turn, might take away their already meager rights.[9] By the end of the War of 1812, black leaders began to cite black Americans' war records as proof of blacks' patriotism, usefulness, and rights to full citizenship. Black men, such as William C. Nell, Russell Parrot, and others, lectured and published works celebrating black participation in the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.[10]

Nevertheless, leading up to and during the War of 1812, blacks struggled to overcome the obstacles placed in their way by whites. Faced with stiff competition from an influx of Irish immigrants and a general desire on the part of whites to keep blacks in the same or similar subservient positions they held as slaves, blacks had difficulty finding a place in society. Often times, blacks found it necessary to segregate themselves by forming their own communal institutions because of the inequality practiced in white-controlled religious, educational, and social organizations. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, blacks in the major cities throughout the north established black churches, schools, mutual aid

[6] Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 429.

[7] Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 329, 375, 401.

[8] Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 355, 413.

[9] Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Free Antebellum Communities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 88, 89.

[10] Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Free Antebellum Communities*, 91, 92.

societies, and social organizations. In an era before strict racial or even class-based housing segregation, blacks often chose to congregate around these institutions, forming, as a result, strong, viable, and relatively independent black communities within and amongst their white neighbors in the north's major urban centers.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, free blacks flocked to northern cities in the hopes of finding, among other things, greater employment opportunities. As a result, the major northern cities became home to large, free black communities, where blacks could be educated, participate in safe and inviting religious activities, and interact with other free blacks in their own social institutions. That is not to say that northern free blacks were isolationists. They worked and even lived alongside whites, and many no doubt had some form of regular interaction with whites be it socially, economically, or both.

Free Blacks in Boston, Massachusetts

In most respects, it seems that Boston's black experience in the first two decades of the nineteenth century largely resembled that of other large, coastal cities, such as Philadelphia and New York. However, Massachusetts was the first state to abolish slavery, doing so in 1783. Therefore, when the War of 1812 began, most of the black seamen from Massachusetts had been born free or spent only a few of their early years in slavery. In this way, Boston's blacks differed from those in New York City, Portsmouth, and the southern cities, where the specter of slavery remained either physically present or a part of very recent memory.

Regardless, Boston's black population of approximately 1,200 faced discrimination in many forms, particularly in the limited opportunities concerning employment.[11] Most blacks were relegated to service positions. Laborer and other unskilled occupations by far comprised the majority of black Bostonians' job titles, though some blacks found skilled work as, among other things, carpenters, painters, and barbers.[12]

Boston's blacks, regardless of occupation, tended to cluster in two areas of town, the North End and the north slope of Beacon Hill. The North End neighborhood of Boston was a convenient locale for those blacks who worked on or near the docks. By the mid-nineteenth century, almost 60 percent of Boston's black sailors lived in the North End.[13] According to historians James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, Boston's black North Enders probably also tended to be single men rather than married.[14] The greatest concentration of black residence by far, however, was on the north slope of Beacon Hill in Boston's West End, between what are now Pinckney and Cambridge Streets and Joy and Charles Streets.[15] In this neighborhood, blacks of all occupations lived side by side, individually and in clusters, with lower-class whites.

[11] Robert C. Hayden, *African-Americans in Boston: More than 350 Years* (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1991), 17.

[12] Barbers were well respected and made a decent, if not quite good, living. See: Jacqueline B. Carr, "A Change 'As Remarkable as the Revolution Itself:' Boston's Demographics, 1780-1800," *New England Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (December 2000): 583-602.

[13] James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, Revised Edition (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979, 1999), 23.

[14] Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, 24.

[15] Ibid and Hayden, *African-Americans in Boston: More than 350 Years*, 17.

Black community services and institutions were in this Beacon Hill neighborhood as well. In 1818, there were three boardinghouses on Southac Street (now Phillips Street) alone.[16] According to Horton, blacks were usually not accepted at white-run boardinghouses, so they established their own. Interestingly, Boston's black families often boarded non-kin individuals in their homes.[17] Therefore, the north slope's boardinghouses may have tended to serve itinerant individuals, such as seamen, rather than those with permanent ties in the community.

It is clear that Boston's blacks developed strong and prosperous communal institutions during the Early Republic. The first black Masonic lodge in Boston, the first such lodge recognized in the United States with a charter from England's Masons, formed in 1784. An "African Society" is alluded to in records from 1797, but unfortunately little else is known about it other than its existence.[18] One year later, as a result of continued segregation and mistreatment in Boston's integrated schools, black parents opened a school for black children. When they requested that the town of Boston support the school, the town refused, citing the ability of black children, if they so desired, to attend the public schools.[19]

Perhaps the most important communal institution developed during this period was a black-run church. During the eighteenth century, blacks were members of and baptized in many of Boston's established churches. However, blacks were not allowed to participate in church governance.[20] As a result, a number of blacks left their churches to form a non-denominational, informal meeting. For a time, the group met at Faneuil Hall. In August 1805, this group established the African Baptist Church and hired a black minister to preside over their services. A year later, the church built its own structure off of Belknap Street (now Joy Street) in the heart of the north slope neighborhood. In 1812, the congregation was accepted into the white Boston Baptist Association.[21] The church and its building provided Boston's black community with a religious and social center in which to continue to develop their burgeoning community, which was soon to be the center of the nation's abolitionist movement.

[16] *1818, The Boston Directory* (Boston: Boston: Printed and sold by John Norman, 1818).

[17] Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, 16.

[18] John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1914) 21.

[19] Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes*, 22, 23.

[20] Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, 41, 42.

[21] Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, 42.

Black Participation in the Maritime Trade

From this onshore world, black men throughout the north, in large numbers compared to their total population, enlisted aboard all types of seagoing and coasting marine vessels. When the War of 1812 broke out, some of these men, and probably others who had never before been to sea, joined the United States Navy. There were many reasons for sailors to enlist aboard a naval vessel during times of war and during times of peace.

Among the latter category is the desire for basic necessities. Unlike many occupations on land, seafaring guaranteed shelter, food, and pay for at least as long as a ship was at sea. The food may have been poor quality, but it was served three times a day. The crew's hammocks may have gone unwashed for months at a time and water may have leaked through the deck boards, but every sailor had a place onboard to sleep and to try to keep warm. Onshore, if workers could not afford to buy food on any given day, they went hungry. If they could not afford rent or their home burned down, they went homeless or relied on the charity of others indefinitely. If a man was in any way unsure of his solvency or employment prospects, life at sea probably seemed like a safe and even inviting way of life.

Not only were sailors provided with food and shelter, they were paid for their work as well. However, of the three necessities -- shelter, food, and pay -- the latter element was the most tenuous. In the merchant service, the success of a voyage sometimes determined the mariners' wages. However, a successful voyage, especially during wartime, may have netted an individual a large paycheck, so to speak. In fact, scholars agree that work in the merchant service was more desirable than work in the United States Navy, if only because the merchant sailor was usually better paid.[22] During the first decades of the nineteenth century, there were many Americans, white and black, for whom the guarantee of shelter, food, and pay was a great incentive to enlist onboard a ship.

For many blacks during the Early Republic, factors beyond their control made it especially difficult for them to find sufficient or regular food, shelter, and pay. The problem was especially acute for those with families to support. While the specific challenges differed depending on city or region, generally speaking, racial prejudice kept a great many black workers from jobs and sometimes from the skills to get

22 Gerard T. Altoff, oral interview with Lauren McCormack at the USS Constitution Museum, July 21, 2005.

jobs. Even in those places where slavery was abolished after the American Revolutionary War, and definitely in those places where the institution remained, many whites refused to hire black workers. Those who did hire blacks often gave them only menial, and therefore low-paying, tasks. As William J. Brown, a free black man from Providence, Rhode Island, and community leader, wrote, "To drive carriage [sic], carry a market basket after the boss, and brush his boots, or saw wood and run errands, was as high as a colored man could rise."[23] During this period, white artisans often refused to take on black apprentices, and whites in general did not patronize the relatively small number of skilled blacks who had learned a trade. In addition, most black communities during this period were too small or too poor to support their own black workers and artisans, thus leaving the workers dependent on finding white patronage.

Two factors reduced blacks' options for employment even further, the Embargo of 1807 and European, specifically Irish, immigration. By cutting off the shipping trade, Thomas Jefferson's embargo resulted in high unemployment, especially in the maritime trades and supporting industries. Some larger regions were able to wait out or overcome the setback, but smaller cities, such as Portsmouth, New Hampshire, suffered long-term economic damage. As in most times of economic crisis, the least desirable populations suffered the most. In this case, white employers were more likely to dispense with their black workers. When whites needed to hire workers, they filled the available slots with other whites before turning to the black population. Therefore, when the War of 1812 began, many people, especially blacks, were struggling to find work.

Although the first decades of the nineteenth century did not witness the massive influx of immigrants that a later generation experienced, there was a significant, low-class, usually unskilled, and mostly Irish, immigrant population before the War of 1812. These new immigrants vied with blacks for work, and took the low-paying, unskilled jobs that had previously been reserved only for blacks.

For all of these reasons, it is not surprising that blacks often comprised a higher percentage of the seafaring population than they did of the general population. According to historian W. Jeffrey Bolster, black men filled 17 percent of Philadelphia's seafaring jobs in 1800, when blacks in the Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey area made up only five percent of the total population. In the same year, blacks filled approximately 20 percent of the available seafaring positions in Providence, Rhode Island, when they were only eight and a half percent of the city's population and

23 Quoted in Gerard T. Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812* (Put-in-Bay, OH: The Perry Group, 1996), 7.

only four percent of the state's population.[24] Blacks flocked to seafaring jobs because they were one of the few occupations available to them in which "they might get a hanceum livehud for themselves and theres."[25] Before the War of 1812, seamen's wages often equaled or exceeded wages paid to laborers onshore.[26] In addition, jobs at sea usually lasted several months, providing the black sailor with a measure of job security unusual on shore.[27] Perhaps most significant was that black sailors' wages equaled that of white sailors in the same position.[28] Where they struggled on land, blacks could find work in the maritime industry because, for the most part, ship-owners and captains took any able hands they could find, regardless of race.[29]

24 W. Jeffrey Bolster, "'To Feel Like a Man': Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800-1860," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990): 1173-1199.

25 Stated in a mass petition submitted under African American abolitionist Prince Hall's leadership to the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1788, quoted in Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man," 1174. The petition demanded protections for blacks in response to an incident in which three free black men were lured onto a ship under false pretenses, kidnapped, and likely sold into slavery. The event deterred many black seamen from taking jobs aboard ships for fear of being kidnapped.

26 Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man," 1183.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 According to Bolster, there was a perpetual shortage of sailors in the early nineteenth century. See: W. Jeffrey Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man," 1174.

Life at Sea for Black Sailors in the early United States Navy

The history of black sailors in America, both enslaved and free, goes back to the colonial navies during the French and Indian War, if not before.[30] While some colonies, such as Georgia and South Carolina, drew from slave populations, others, like Massachusetts and Connecticut, also recruited free black men or "others acquired from captured British ships."[31] After its formation in 1775, the Continental Navy recruited both free and enslaved black men during the American Revolutionary War.

Despite this history of black naval participation, Benjamin Stoddert, the secretary of the newly established United States Navy, declared in August 1798 that "No Negroes or Mulatoes are to be admitted" into the service.[32] [33] This followed similar proclamations made earlier by the Marine Corps and the army in March of that same year.[34]

Despite this official prohibition, it is clear that blacks maintained a consistent presence in the U.S. Navy throughout the Early Republic and especially during the War of 1812.[35] When war broke out between the United States and Great Britain in June of 1812, the American navy needed to fill its ranks. Facing competition with the more lucrative positions offered by privateers and merchant ships, navy captains struggled to find skilled seamen willing to sign on.[36] The navy needed men, and the issue of race, therefore, was often secondary to the necessity of enlisting a crew.

[30] James Barker Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans, Culture, Ethnicity, and Nation Series* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 109, 110.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Quoted in Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans, Culture, Ethnicity, and Nation Series*, 114.

[33] Harold D. Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service-1798-1860," *Journal of Negro History* 52, no. 4 (October 1967): 275.

[34] Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service-1798-1860," 275.

[35] In 1803, Commodore Edward Preble informed a lieutenant that he was "not to Ship Black Men" [Quoted in Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service-1798-1860," 276.] Also, three of the four seamen impressed in 1807 by the British warship *Leopard* from USS *Chesapeake* were black [Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service-1798-1860," 276]. Langley also includes a quote from Dr. Edward Cutbush, a surgeon in the U.S. Navy, who wrote in his 1808 book, *Observations on the Means of Preserving the Health of Soldiers and Sailors; and on the Duties of the Medical Department of the Army and Navy: with Remarks on Hospitals and Their Internal Arrangement*, that sailors should be encouraged to dance during their leisure time. He remarked that "there will be no difficulty in procuring a 'fiddler,' *especially* among the coloured men, in every American frigate, who can play most of the common dancing tunes" [Quoted in Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service-1798-1860," 277].

[36] Gerard T. Altoff, unpublished lecture given at the USS Constitution Museum, July 2003.

While the black population was systematically oppressed and regularly discriminated against in early nineteenth century American society, it is unclear exactly how free black recruits fared aboard naval vessels. Gerard T. Altoff, a U.S. National Park Service historian, contends that black seamen generally faced "varying degrees of racism and were denied unconstrained liberty and equality because of their color."[37] Bolster argues that black sailors aboard merchant ships were integrated with their white counterparts.[38] Nineteenth century naval surgeon Usher Parsons, a white man, recalled that white and black seaman messed together on USS *Java* immediately after the war in 1816. Parsons also states that, at that time, one in six or eight sailors on USS *Java* was black. The same was true, he wrote, on USS *Guerierre* in 1819, where "the proportion of blacks was about the same in her crew [and] there seemed to be an entire absence of prejudice against the blacks as messmates among the crew."[39] He continued, "What I have said applies to the crews of other ships that sailed in [U.S. Navy] squadrons."[40] It should be noted that Parsons recorded these recollections in 1862 in the midst of the American Civil War, and the nation's political and social climate of the time may have shaped his memories of events almost 50 years prior.[41] [42]

Of course, hierarchy ruled on naval vessels, and race relations between sailors were determined to some extent by the regulations of the white commanding officers. Examples of forced segregation do exist in records from the War of 1812. In the "Internal Rules and Regulations" of USS *Constellation*, written circa 1813, both petty officers and "colored" men are ordered to mess "by themselves."[43] This is an example of a white officer, *Constellation*'s commanding officer, establishing a policy of racial separation. The implications on race relations between crew members as a result of this segregation can only be inferred. However, it is important to note that this separation applied only to messes, suggesting that white and black sailors engaged in other daily activities aboard ship together.

It is difficult to argue that white sailors, inculcated with racial prejudice on land,

[37] Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 23.

[38] Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man," 1177.

[39] Quoted in Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 22.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man," 1179 and W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 75.

[42] Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, 74, 79.

[43] "Internal Rules and Regulation to be Observed on board the United States Frigate Constellation, Charles Gordon, Esqr. Commander," from Glenn Drayton journal, 1814-1864, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

could entirely cast off such feelings while in service to the navy. One example from the War of 1812 suggests that prejudice, even if perhaps subdued, was ingrained in naval culture. By 1814, Dartmoor Prison in England was home to approximately 6,000 American prisoners of war (POWs). Of these, it is estimated by historians that about 1,000 were black men from privateers, naval vessels, letters of marque, or sailors serving in the British Royal Navy who refused to fight against America.[44] Once imprisoned, white POWs -- the same ones who supposedly served with little complaint beside their fellow black sailors --requested separate housing from their black counterparts. British officials agreed to the request.[45] As historian Robin F. A. Fabel writes, "There is no doubt that segregation sprang from the racism of white prisoners."[46] At sea, white sailors agreed, perhaps grudgingly, to work, live, and eat alongside their black colleagues. Once freed from the cramped, controlled quarters of the ship, however, they immediately reverted back to the discriminatory lifestyle they were accustomed to onshore. The white sailors' request to physically segregate the black prisoners in a separate barracks presents an even stricter separation than most poor, white sailors would have known in America's coastal cities. In most northern, coastal cities during the Early Republic, poor, laboring blacks lived alongside whites of the same class and situation. Why, therefore, did white POWs at Dartmoor demand absolute separation? Perhaps white sailors, now freed from the oversight of their ship's officers, gave in to their personal prejudices; or, possibly, the white prisoners desired to "other" the black sailors in order to claim some measure of superiority in their already weak position. Whatever the case, black prisoners in Dartmoor were often the victims of racially charged harassment and violence.[47] The black experience at Dartmoor undermines the oft-cited belief that blacks aboard ship were relatively safe from white prejudice and discrimination.

However, alongside these examples of racial animosity are recorded instances of camaraderie, or at the very least tolerance, at Dartmoor. Occasionally, whites and blacks participated together in dancing and boxing matches. Though they produced separate theatrical events, whites and blacks attended each other's productions.[48] As one white prisoner, Benjamin Waterhouse, recorded, "however extraordinary it may appear," white inmates took fencing, boxing, music, and dancing lessons from black inmates, while other whites, seeking to avoid their own instances of harassment,

[44] Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans, Culture, Ethnicity, and Nation Series*, 69.

[45] Robin F.A. Fabel, "Self-Help in Dartmoor: Black and White Prisoners in the War of 1812," *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 no. 2 (Summer 1989): 170.

[46] Fabel, "Self-Help in Dartmoor: Black and White Prisoners in the War of 1812," 171.

[47] Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, 12.

[48] Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, 118, 120-122.

chose to live with the otherwise segregated blacks.[49] It is unclear how to reconcile these seemingly conflicting aspects of prison life: segregation on the one hand, and integration on the other. Perhaps they are indicative of the rather ambiguous and often enigmatic nature of race relations during the Early Republic on land and at sea.

Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, all of the first-hand accounts of black service on U.S. naval vessels during the War of 1812 are from a white perspective. And almost all of these accounts speak favorably, if not patronizingly, of black sailors. After his victory over HMS *Guerriere* in August 1812, *Constitution*'s Captain Isaac Hull, using discriminatory language, wrote, "I never had any better fighters than those [black men], they stripped to the waist and fought like devils…seeming to be utterly insensible to danger and to be possessed with the determination to outfight the white sailors."[50] When Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry wrote to Commodore Isaac Chauncey to complain that his crew was "a motley set, blacks, Soldiers, boys….,"[51] Chauncey angrily replied,

> *"I have yet to learn that the Colour of the skin, or cut and trimmings of the coat, can effect a man's qualifications or usefulness. I have nearly 50 blacks on board of this Ship, and many of them are amongst my best men."*[52]

After the victorious Battle of Lake Erie, Perry changed his tune and praised his black sailors to Chauncey, who in turn remembered, "Perry speaks highly of the bravery and good conduct of the Negroes, who formed a considerable part of his crew."[53]

Though the navy's 1798 restriction on black sailors was not strictly enforced, U.S. Navy officially reversed their policy on March 3, 1813 with the following act:

> *"…That from and after the termination of the war in which the United States are now engaged with Great Britain it shall not be lawful to employ on board any of the public or private vessels of the United States any person or persons except citizens of the United States or persons of color, natives of the U. States..."*[54]

[49] Quoted in Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans, Culture, Ethnicity, and Nation Series*, 70.

[50] Quoted in Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 23. Note that this letter was written when it was still against U.S. Navy regulations to enlist black and mulitracial men.

[51] Quoted in Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 36.

[52] Quoted in Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 37.

[53] Quoted in Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 40.

[54] Quoted in Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 20.

As written, this policy did not take effect until after the conclusion of the War of 1812. However, the intent behind it indicates a relaxation of official policy.[55] In fact, many historians claim that the crews of all of the official American ships involved in the War of 1812 contained at least some black sailors.[56]

The U.S. Navy did not designate race on any official documents, so the number of black sailors serving aboard U.S. naval vessels during the War of 1812 is debatable. Anecdotal accounts from the time period suggest that anywhere from 15 to 50 percent of any given U.S. naval vessel's crew were of African descent. USS *Independence*, while in Boston Harbor in 1814, had 34 black crew members out of its total complement of about 215 sailors [15.8 percent].[57] In an account of the crew of the US Sloop *Hornet*, who were attending a theatrical event in New York City in their honor, a journalist anecdotally wrote, the crew "marched together into the pit, and nearly one half of them were Negroes."[58] Ned Myers, a white American sailor who told his personal story to the American writer James Fenimore Cooper, recalled that at least eight of USS *Scourge*'s 32 crewmembers during the War of 1812, or 25 percent, were black.[59]

The approximate percentage of black sailors aboard naval vessels can also be extrapolated from the Prisoner of War records kept by various prisons and prison ships, but not without caveats. Copies of these records were collected and analyzed by historians Ira Dye and Christopher McKee in their efforts to document the social and cultural history of early seafarers. In December 2005, shortly before his death, Dye donated his extraordinary collection of primary and secondary source materials about sailors, including POW Records and Seaman's Protection Certificates, to the USS Constitution Museum. These records provide richly detailed information about naval and merchant sailors during the early nineteenth century.

Through his research into seaman's protection certificates, Dye found that 17.6 percent of sailors applying for certificates in Philadelphia were identified as black.[60] His

[55] Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-'65* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1890; New York: Arno Press, 1968), 79 and Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 18 [citing Frederick S. Harrod, "Jim Crow in the Navy (1798-1941)," US Naval Institute *Proceedings* (September 1979)].

[56] Ibid.

[57] Edwin C. Bearss, *Historic Resource Study, Volume I and II, Charlestown Navy Yard, 1800-1842* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1984), 154.

[58] Quoted in Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man," 1179.

[59] Percentage is Lauren McCormack's own calculation based on information on Ned Myers and USS *Scourge*'s crew provided in an oral interview with Gerard T. Altoff at the USS Constitution Museum, July 21, 2005.

[60] Christopher McKee, unpublished lecture delivered at the USS Constitution Museum, July 2003 and Ira Dye, "Early American Merchant Seafarers," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 120, no. 5 (October 1976): 349.

compilation of research into English prison depots suggests that a total of 666 U.S. naval sailors were held in English prisons during the War of 1812. General entry books kept by the prison officials included descriptive information about the visage, complexion, hair, and eyes of each imprisoned sailor. Using this descriptive, albeit arbitrary, information on individual physical traits, Dye inferred each prisoner's "race" based on seven racial categories of Dye's own determination; that is, Caucasian, Oriental, African, Mulatto, American Indian, Creole, and East Indian. With this criteria, Dye deduced that 7.36 percent of prisoners fell into the "African" and "Mulatto" categories.[61]

McKee at first contended that black sailors composed an average of 15 to 20 percent of ships' crews.[62] He later amended this figure to approximately 9.7 percent, which was calculated from the average of all black POWs among all the U.S. naval enlisted sailors imprisoned in England during the War of 1812.[63] Together, Dye's and McKee's calculations suggest that the average percentage of black or multiracial U.S. naval POWs in England during the War of 1812 was just over eight percent. Based on the myriad calculations available, both anecdotal and research-based, it is conceivable that the average percentage of black or multiracial American sailors on any given U.S. naval vessel during the War of 1812 was anywhere from seven to 15 percent.

The black sailors who served in the United States Navy during the War of 1812 were predominantly able and ordinary seamen. Able seamen, being the most experienced and adept at sail handling and shipboard labor, were the elite members of the enlisted crew. Ordinary seamen typically had some prior sailing experience and knew basic seamanship. Unfortunately, the POW records do not differentiate between these two designations. Regardless, approximately 85 percent of the U.S. naval prisoners identified as black or multiracial were ranked as seamen. Only seven percent were ranked as boys -- an indicator of lack of skill rather than age -- and the remainder were designated as servants or slaves.[64] Most of these black sailors, then, had at least some seafaring experience, and they were not relegated to the lowest

[61] These numbers do not and cannot take into account how many crew members, regardless of race, comprised the original ships' complements, nor how many crew members were killed in action, escaped imprisonment, or were simply not counted. These numbers are also subject to the possible assumptions and prejudices inherent in the prison officials who recorded the descriptive physical information, as well as the researchers who made the determinations of race based on these descriptions. The numbers also do not account for the possibility that non-white sailors could have been imprisoned at a higher rate than their white counterparts.

[62] Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812*, 21.

[63] McKee, unpublished lecture delivered at the USS Constitution Museum, July 2003.

[64] Lauren McCormack's calculations based on data extracted from Ira Dye's database on American Seafarers in the collection of the USS Constitution Museum.

shipboard positions on the basis of race. Racism is evident, however, in the fact that no black sailor served as an officer or Marine during the War of 1812. These ranks required a certain level of education, authority, and social status accessible only to whites at the time.

Where did the black sailors come from? When taken prisoner, British authorities noted the birth state and city of each prisoner. In both McKee's and Dye's data, three states made up the majority of entries recorded for black sailors: New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Men from Delaware, Virginia, Louisiana, and Maryland were also a significant, though smaller, presence. During this period, Philadelphia had a large and important black community and much of that population were involved in seafaring. The same is true for Massachusetts and New York, both of which were home to maritime-oriented cultures and economies. It is understandable that few black sailors would admit to being from southern states, where plantation slavery and stringent race laws were the norm, for fear of being implicated as a runaway.

Black Sailors on USS *Constitution*

For USS *Constitution*, which carried approximately 450 men, seven to 15 percent of the crew translates to approximately 32 to 68 black or multiracial sailors per cruise during the War of 1812. Unfortunately, discovering just who these men were is extremely difficult. The USS Constitution Museum has collected substantial demographic and biographical information for over 200 of the approximately 1,168 sailors assigned to *Constitution* during the War of 1812. Unfortunately, of those 200 or so sailors, only three are identifiable as black.

One is Jesse Williams, a native of Pennsylvania who joined USS *Constitution* as an ordinary seaman in Boston on August 2, 1812.[65] Williams stood five feet, six inches tall and was stoutly built with a round face and black hair.[66] During *Constitution*'s battle with HMS *Guerriere*, Williams served as the first sponger for the number three long gun on the gun deck. He also served aboard during the battle with HMS *Java* on December 29, 1812. Williams was transferred to the Great Lakes in April 1813, where he was wounded in battle and received a share of prize money.[67] Later, while serving aboard USS *Scorpion*, Williams was captured by the British and sent to Dartmoor Prison in England.[68] After being released at the end of the war, Williams made the rank of able seaman in December 1814. He left the navy the following year.[69] Six years later, in recognition of his service on the Lakes, the state of Pennsylvania awarded Williams, as well as other service members from the state, a silver medal.[70]

Another man, James Bennett, had a similar story. Bennett was born free in Duck Creek Crossroads, Delaware in about 1782. In 1810, he, along with his sister, Mary Williams, traveled to Philadelphia to obtain a seaman's protection certificate to serve as written proof of his American citizenship while at sea. The certificate, made out to Bennett from Philadelphia Alderman Alexander Tod, includes a detailed descrip-

[65] Muster Roll(s), USS *Constitution*, T829, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

[66] Dartmoor: Public Record Office, Adm 103/87-91, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, United Kingdom and General Entry Books of American Prisoners of War at Quebec, RG8, C series, 694A-B, Library and Archives Canada, Ottowa, Canada.

[67] Muster Roll(s), USS *Constitution*, T829.

[68] Dartmoor: Public Record Office, Adm 103/87-91.

[69] Muster Roll(s), USS *Constitution*, T829.

[70] "Correspondence Relating to Medallists, 1812-1814," *Pennsylvania Archives, Sixth Series* IX (ca. 1734-1847): 248-304.

tion of the sailor. Alderman Tod wrote:

> *"Negroe, born free -- five feet 11 7/8 inches high, with his shoes, Black complexion, Black hair, 28 years of age, marked with scar over his right eye brow, mark of inoculation on his left arm, mark by a burn on his right elbow, mark on the palm of his left hand by being laid open, left knee crooked."*[71]

Bennett enlisted in the U.S. Navy in April 1811 and joined *Constitution*'s crew as an ordinary seaman, promptly becoming a member of the carpenter's crew.[72] He sailed on a diplomatic voyage to France and Holland, and remained aboard for the first two cruises of the War of 1812. During the victorious battles over HMS *Guerriere* on August 19, 1812 and HMS *Java* on December 29, 1812, Bennett, with the rest of the carpenter's crew, labored deep in the ship's hold to plug holes made by enemy shot. For his effort he received a portion of the $100,000 in prize money awarded to the crew in addition to his monthly pay. When the ship returned to Boston, Bennett was drafted to the Great Lakes to serve under Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry at the Battle of Lake Erie. Unfortunately, Bennett suffered a mortal wound during battle and never made it home.[73] In 1857, his wife, Sarah Bennett, appealed to Congress for his back pay and prize money, but her plea was rejected.[74]

The third black sailor identified from *Constitution*'s War of 1812 crew is David Debias. Debias was born in Boston on August 9, 1806. He lived with his parents on Belknap Street (now Joy Street) on the north slope of Beacon Hill.[75] On December 17, 1814, Debias' father entered him on board *Constitution*.[76]

At eight years old, Debias was rated a boy -- a rank designated for the least skilled, though not necessarily the youngest, sailors -- and assigned as servant to Master's Mate Nathaniel G. Leighton. He was aboard for the battle with HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant* on the night of February 20, 1815, and was subsequently placed on the captured *Levant*, along with Master's Mate Leighton, as part of the prize crew. However, *Levant* was soon recaptured by a British squadron on its way back to the

[71] Tyrone G. Martin, "Ship's Company," *Captain's Clerk*, last modified September 30, 2019, http://captainsclerk.info/.

[72] Muster Roll(s), USS *Constitution*, T829.

[73] Ibid.

[74] War of 1812 Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, ca. 1871-ca.1900, RG15, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

[75] Thomas Falconer, letter to Secretary of the Navy, March 16, 1838, M124, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

[76] Muster Roll(s), USS *Constitution*, T829.

United States, and Debias was imprisoned in Barbados until May. Upon his release, he returned home and was reunited with his family. Debias was discharged and paid off in July 1815.[77] In 1821, he joined the U.S. Navy again, sailing once more on *Constitution* to the Mediterranean Sea.[78] He returned to the United States in 1824 and joined the merchant service.[79]

In 1838, Debias left his ship in Mobile, Alabama, started walking north, and was picked up as a runaway slave in Winchester, Mississippi.[80] His plight caught the attention of a local lawyer named Thomas Falconer, who was convinced that Debias was a free man. Falconer wrote to Secretary of the Navy Mahlon Dickerson seeking proof of Debais' status. Falconer's letter to Dickerson pleads Debias' case, describing his service to his country and requesting Debias' naval records.[81] Dickerson complied with Falconer's request and sent proof of Debias' service, but no confirmed records of his fate have yet been found.[82] Unfortunately, Debias' story, much like the story of many black sailors from the War of 1812, is incomplete.

[77] Ibid.

[78] James Renshaw, letter to Secretary of the Navy, March 4, 1821, M147, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

[79] Tyrone G. Martin, "Ship's Company."

[80] Thomas Falconer, letter to Secretary of the Navy, March 16, 1838.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Department of the Navy, letter to Thomas Falconer, April 17, 1838, RG45, Entry 6, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Citing this publication

APA

McCormack, L. (2020). "Black Sailors During the War of 1812." USS Constitution Museum. https://www.usscm.org/publications/black-sailors-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf.

MLA

McCormack, Lauren. "Black Sailors During the War of 1812," USS Constitution Museum, 2020, https://www.usscm.org/publications/black-sailors-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf.

Chicago

McCormack, Lauren. "Black Sailors During the War of 1812," USS Constitution Museum (2020): https://www.usscm.org/publications/black-sailors-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf.