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Maritime Slavery in Colonial America: A World of Movement and Shifting Status

A world in which black mariners were regularly employed on Atlantic ships and hundreds of enslaved men obtained permanent freedom by fleeing via the sea. For many Americans, whose mental image of slavery is a gang of enslaved blacks working in cotton fields; this description of American colonial slavery is a bit jarring. And yet that is exactly my research has demonstrated.

Having had a successful legal career -- litigator for the City of New York, General Counsel of the City's Department of Buildings and a partner at a major New York City law firm -- becoming a historian was not something my former clients anticipated. But thirteen years ago I decided to return to a question that troubled me as an undergraduate. If northern colonies were typically thought of as bastions of freedom in contrast to the southern colonies' reliance upon enslaved labor how was it that some had such a large slave populations -- one in five New York City residents were slaves -- and what was the nature of slavery in northern colonies?

In approaching this question I sought to utilize my legal skills and research court cases in which slaves were tried. But as many historians can attest, intelligently constructed research work plans do not always bear fruit.

The musty drawers of the New York City Municipal Archives did contain colonial court records. Unfortunately, the records were quite limited and the numbers of slave cases were few. Frustrated I then reexamined other records I had already read to see if perhaps northern slavery could be analyzed from a different angle. In this moment of frustration was borne what would become the core of my research for the past decade -- the idea that the sea and America's maritime economy created a more fluid and diverse world for northern slaves than had previously been understood.

A simple phrase at the bottom of dozens of northern fugitive slave advertisements led me to this conclusion. After describing a runaway these ads contained warnings such as "Captains and masters of are forewarned not to employ or harbor said fellow at their peril."

Why the need for these warnings? What would cause ships captains to conceal or employ fugitive slaves?

To answer these questions I considered who placed the ads and how slaves in northern ports were employed. A review of the fugitive ads quickly demonstrated that a wide variety of whites placed such ads. Merchants, artisans, government officials, farmers all sought the return of their slaves who were believed to have fled via the sea.

My review of these ads found that many northern slaves were not performing agricultural tasks, but were instead employed in the maritime sector. And it also indicated a willingness of one group of whites -- ship captains and ship owners -- to undermine slave owners' rights to further their own economic interests.

These conclusions were reinforced by a review of merchant account books and slave sale ads. The account books and sale ads characterized hundreds of northern slaves as "used to the sea" or "bred a sailor." At the same time, British naval records listed hundreds of enslaved men employed caulking warships at New York and other Atlantic ports. And when sufficient numbers of white artificers could not be found in the West Indies northern ship owners sent northern enslaved caulkers, ship riggers and sail makers to the Caribbean.

In looking at this research what stood out was significant increases in the numbers of black seamen and runaways who fled via the sea during the frequent wars of the eighteenth century.

With the start of wars navies of all nations needed to quickly expand their fleets and find trained seamen. Captains of all types of ships, naval, merchant and privateering, became willing to have landlubbers without experience join their crews. Many ship captains did not closely question black men whether they were free or enslaved when they showed up on a dock seeking a berth. Instead, the pressing need to move ships out to sea quickly resulted in large numbers of blacks joining ship crews during wartime.

Captain McDougall who during the Seven Years War manned his New York privateer *Tyger* with twenty-three blacks among a crew of 62 men was hardly unusual in his employment of blacks during wartime.

But was this maritime world that I uncovered a one-way street to freedom and satisfying maritime employment? Hardly.

The most striking characteristic of black seamen was their continued vulnerability to re-enslavement. While white ship captains might be willing to employ free and enslaved blacks, most whites in the 18th century equated dark skin with enslavement. Thus, black seamen regularly faced the prospect of being enslaved if captured by an enemy ship. Admiralty Courts throughout the Atlantic readily condemned captured black sailors as captured chattel that could be sold into slavery.

Black mariners' vulnerability was not limited to their sale into slavery by enemy ships. Black mariners from Newport and other Atlantic ports also found themselves kidnapped while on land and sold in foreign ports. Throughout the eighteenth century, British ship captains enriched themselves through the sale of captured enemy mariners. French and Spanish ship captains, while many times employing larger numbers of black mariners than their British and American counterparts, also sold captured enemy black mariners into slavery.

This selling of black mariners into slavery has led me to conclude that the 18th century Atlantic can be best characterized for black seamen as comprising a series of transition zones. These zones were places in which blacks moved regularly between enslavement and freedom, or from freedom to enslavement.

One such transition zone was the New Jersey coast during the American Revolution. Hundreds of blacks on British ships sailing from New York were captured and sold into slavery in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Many of these blacks had fled enslavement and found freedom behind British lines. American patriots were quite eager, particularly with the slave trade being cut off due to British blockades, to re-enslave these black mariners. Similar transition zones could be found in a variety of locations and time periods, particularly during wartime.

In addition to enabling me to write ten articles on maritime history this research has also resulted in the creation of a Black Mariner Database (“BMD”), a compilation of information on more than 23,500 18th century black mariners. The range of individuals in the database is diverse, both in terms of their maritime experiences, their nationality, and their race. They include North American maritime fugitives, Canadian Negro fishermen, South Carolina slave pilots, Bermudian blue-water sailors, Royal Navy able-bodied seamen, cooks on merchant vessels, members of privateer boarding parties, slave-ship sailors, free Spanish Negro mariners captured and sold into slavery in North America, and African canoe men.

The movement of men such as Anthony Mingus, a free black seaman from Spanish America, will be seen as never before thanks to the BMD. Mingus’ movement north to fight the British Navy, his capture by the British off the Virginia coast, his incarceration on British naval ships and then his subsequent seven-year career in the British Navy across the Atlantic will become readily available through the BMD’s search engine and GIS imaging.

The BMD will offer scholars and the general public a tool to open up a heretofore hidden world in which the movement of black mariners will sharply contrast with the stereotypical image of a black picking cotton.