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Black Tars

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Britain's Black Tars

On a wintry day in December 1779 Amos Anderson entered HMS *Loyalist* as an able bodied seaman. The Rhode Island-born black did not find service in the Royal Navy to his liking, deserting the frigate at Charleston the following November.¹ Anderson's time on land proved short-lived; he was impressed back onto the *Loyalist* on March 31, 1781. Three months later, while off Cape Henry, the British frigate was captured by *L'Aigrette*. Anderson reappears in the historical record in April 1784, when his service on the *Loyalist* was the subject of a trial at Old Bailey. John Moseley, a black on the *Loyalist*, was charged with impersonating Anderson in 1783 so as to obtain his wages for serving on the *Loyalist*.² Moseley was able to impersonate Anderson because his shipmate had been 'sold at Martinico' after the *Loyalist* had been captured and was not in England when Moseley engaged in his fraud. Fortunately for Anderson, he was able to escape enslavement, get back to Rhode Island and from there sail on Captain Aaron Sheffield's merchant ship to London in December 1783. Once in England Anderson convinced authorities to arrest and prosecute his former ship mate. Anderson

¹ 'Black' refers to a person of African ancestry.

² Anderson's life is detailed in: HMS *Loyalist* Muster, 1779-1780, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom ('TNA'), ADM 36/8201; Old Bailey Online, <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t17840421-17>; Thomas Binsteed, 11 April 1784, TNA ADM 106/1282/284; HMS *Vengeance* Muster, 1791-1793, TNA ADM 36/11231; HMS *Zealous* Muster, 1799-1800, TNA ADM 36/12511; Wills of Amos Anderson, TNA ADM 48/1/132 (1793) and TNA ADM 48/2/89 (1800); 24 March 1813 Baptism, St. Alsege, Greenwich (reference provided by Audrey Dewjee).

subsequently re-entered naval service in the 1790s, was baptized as an Anglican, and at the end of his life was a Royal Hospital pensioner.³

Anderson's life with its range of maritime experiences – volunteer seaman, deserter, impressed sailor, prisoner, Prize Negro, maritime fugitive and pensioner – helps illustrate the nature of British blacks' lives at sea, the critical role black mariners played in Britain's eighteenth century Atlantic empire and three paradoxes critical to understanding black tars' lives in Britain.⁴ The first paradox was that although British identity was, in part, based upon the legal right to move where one wanted, many British blacks were compelled to work at sea, whether by slave masters, press gangs or Admiralty Court judges.⁵ Secondly, while many enslaved people in Britain's Atlantic empire viewed the United Kingdom as a 'land of liberty,' black sailors migrating to the British Isles faced a significant barrier to obtaining economic independence; when they worked at sea many whites viewed them as appropriate subjects of profit who could be sold as slaves, making long careers at sea a risky endeavor. And although Britain offered blacks freedom and better legal treatment than they experienced elsewhere in Britain's empire, many black sailors who migrated to the British Isles found that they often lacked the connections critical to obtaining social and economic independence.

³ Cassandra Pybus believes Anderson came to England in 1783 on HMS *Loyalist* with Moseley and was there 'shanghaied and taken to the West Indies to be sold'. *Epic Voyages of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 85. However, the *Loyalist* was out of service by 1781, and at the Old Bailey trial Anderson testified he had been sold in Martinique the same year, Captain Sheffield testified Anderson returned to England on his merchant ship in December 1783 and no witness testified Anderson had been coercively carried away from England. Given the prevalence of British black sailors sold into slavery, it appears likely Anderson was condemned by his French captors as a prize good and sold in 1781 into slavery. See, e.g., Historical Society of Pennsylvania, MSS Coll. Box 11A, Folder 1B ('seven prize negroes' sold at Martinique in June 1779).

⁴ 'Prize Negroes' refers to Blacks captured at sea who were then sold by their captors as prize goods. 'Maritime fugitives' refers to enslaved individuals who sought freedom by fleeing via the seas.

⁵ Jack P. Greene, ed., *Exclusionary Empire: English Liberty Overseas, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3.

Centrality of Black Seamen to Britain's Atlantic Empire

The most prominent image of blacks at sea in the eighteenth century was the 1787 print of the *Brookes*. It depicts hundreds of Africans lying flat tightly packed into the British slave ship's hold. While for millions of Africans their chief experience of being at sea was the horrific Middle Passage, the *Brookes* image does not capture the totality of maritime experiences of British blacks. Rather than objects being moved, considerable numbers of blacks worked as seamen, pilots, canoemen, cabin boys and ordinaries who moved commodities which were the lifeblood of Britain's Atlantic empire. They worked on Liverpool merchant ships, Bermudian blue sea vessels, Bristol slave ships, Jamaican drogers, Royal Navy men-of-war, Rhode Island coasters, and Royal African Company sloops.⁶ With the eighteenth century marked by almost continual warfare, manning the Royal Navy and Britain's merchant and fishing fleets was 'the most serious problem' facing the British government.⁷

The foundation of Britain's eighteenth-century Atlantic empire was its maritime sector. Britain's imperial power was predicated upon its blue water policy of maintaining an extensive merchant fleet while undertaking considerable expansion of the Royal Navy during wartime. This meant having sufficient numbers of seamen in time of war to man Royal Navy ships as well as Britain's merchant fleet. As Denver Brunsman has noted, 'no sailors, no navy; no navy, no empire'.⁸ What often has been overlooked in histories of Britain's eighteenth-century empire is that black seamen were often critical to Britain's mercantile and naval successes, particularly in the Western Atlantic and Africa.⁹ And what helped shape the lives of British black tars was the

⁶ Philip D. Morgan, 'Introduction, Maritime Slavery', *Slavery & Abolition*, 31: 3, 2010, p. 311.

⁷ Daniel A. Baugh, *Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 22.

⁸ Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), p. 9.

⁹ Charles R. Foy, 'The Royal Navy's Employment of Black Mariners and Maritime Workers, 1754-1783', in *International Maritime History Journal*, 28:1, 2016, pp. 8-9.

nature of the British empire: a commercial and political system predicated upon the exploitation of coerced labor, almost unceasing warfare throughout the eighteenth century and transatlantic connections that made the empire successful.

From Francis Drake's early forays into the Atlantic, to the large-scale movement of indentured servants to the Americas and the development of the transatlantic slave trade, Britain's Atlantic empire relied heavily on coerced labor. Its overseas colonies depended upon bonded labor, such as indentured servants working in Philadelphia and black slaves toiling in Caribbean sugar fields. To transport the millions of laborers upon which British colonies and national wealth depended, Britain's blue water policy required large numbers of seamen to man British merchant and fishing ships, privateers and Royal Navy vessels. Many of these men also found themselves coercively forced to work – they were impressed during wartime. And yet, despite both merchant and naval captains' best efforts, in regions such as Africa and the West Indies, where white seamen died at an alarming rate, there often were insufficient numbers of whites to man British ships. The result was that in the Western Atlantic and on the African coast British vessels were frequently manned with large numbers of blacks. Initially the Royal African Company, and then later private slave traders, regularly employed blacks, such as Jack Prince, to help reef sails and steer ships carrying Africans to enslavement in the Americas.¹⁰ In the Western Atlantic, hundreds of Blacks sailed on British merchant ships from British colonial ports. In 1743 alone, a census of North American ships at Kingston, Jamaica disclosed 41 blacks among the vessels' 135 seamen. In Antigua, Bermuda and South Carolina, black boatmen and sailors were often a majority of crews moving tobacco, rice and sugar to markets.¹¹ In Virginia, Thomas

¹⁰ Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), App. 2.

¹¹ Edward Trelawny letter to Lords of Admiralty, 21 December, 1743, TNA ADM 1/3917; David Barry Gaspar, *Bondsmen and rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University

Jefferson and other planters regularly employed slave watermen. And the Royal Navy also employed large numbers of black tars; the *Black Maritime Database* contains records on more than 1,600 black Royal Navy seamen. At the beginning of the eighteenth century there were relatively few blacks such as Captain John Symonds's servant or the free sailor John Guavas on naval ships.¹² But over the course of the century the numbers of black tars increased significantly and came to include Olaudah Equiano, author of a best-selling personal narrative, Joseph Emidy, who became a well-known Cornwall composer, and Francis Barber, Samuel Johnson's servant, as well as lesser-known men, such as the trumpeter James Scipio who served on HMS *Pompee* in 1800.¹³

A considerable number of the blacks who served on British ships were maritime fugitives. Enslaved peoples perceived ships as 'swift-winged angels' that could take them far from their slave masters.¹⁴ Particularly in war time, ship captains showed little hesitation in hiring escaped slaves. Whether Antiguan runaways, English house servants such as Francis Barber, or Rhode Island fugitives, British ship captains valued these men's muscle and skill over their enslaved status. And in

Press, 1985), pp. 110-13; Michael Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 106; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Low Country* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 337-42.

¹² *The Slave Families of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. I, p. 23, 35, 212, 266-7, 363; *Post-Boy* (London), 6 July 1701; *London Post with Intelligence Foreign and Domstick*, 6 March 1700.

The *Black Mariner Database* ('BMD') is a dataset developed by the author that contains records for more than 33,000 black mariners and maritime fugitives. The BMD has fifty-one fields of data from archives across the Atlantic and provides 'information we need to assess the typicality' of Blacks' lives in the Atlantic. Geoffrey Plank, 'Sailing with John Woolman', in *Early American Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 51 n. 15. The BMD is not, however, a static dataset. Given the paucity and nature of records concerning black mariners, it is anticipated that conclusions regarding individual sailors will be modified as new information is obtained and integrated into the dataset.

¹³ BMD; HMS *Namur*, Muster, TNA ADM 36/6253; Registers of Allotments, 1797-1799, TNA ADM 27/2/237. The French Navy also had considerable numbers of Black seamen. *Providence Journal and Town and Country Advertiser*, 21 August, 1799.

¹⁴ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 1.

being given berths, maritime fugitives became a critical component in the maritime sinew of British imperial power.¹⁵ The practice of hiring runaways was so prevalent that the *Black Maritime Database* contains references to more than 6,200 maritime fugitives, the vast majority of whom were enslaved in British colonies, although more than 120 fled slave masters in England.

An Anxious Atlantic

While Britain's need for maritime labor provided opportunities for Blacks to work at sea, particularly in the Americas and Africa, British black tars' dark skin put them at risk of being enslaved whenever they went to sea. This could happen by being kidnapped, captured at sea and sold as prize goods, being returned to their former slave masters by the Royal Navy, or being caught in the web of American Seamen's Acts. Such legislation authorized local officials to imprison black sailors while their ship was in port, whether or not they had freedom papers. A single sheet of paper that could be easily lost or stolen, such as manumission papers, was often all that kept black sailors from enslavement. The nature of a world in which they could be enslaved, based on whites' desire for profit, created for British black tars an Anxious Atlantic.

Even experienced black sailors could find themselves victims of whites taking advantage of the legality of slavery in much of the Atlantic basin to kidnap and sell into slavery British black seamen. Former slave William Jackson is a good example of this. Having fled his Virginia master in the mid-1750s Jackson made his way to Great Britain. Living in Liverpool for eight years he 'followed the Sea'. In 1763 Jackson choose to sail with Captain McDaniel from Liverpool to Chesapeake Bay. Upon reaching Maryland, McDaniel placed Jackson in the custody of the local sheriff to be returned to his former slave master. Like a number of other ship captains,

¹⁵ HMS *Stag* Musters, 1758-1759, TNA ADM 36/6755; *Boston Post-Boy*, Apr. 9, 1759; *Newport Mercury*, Apr. 8, 1776; John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1350-1750* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

Captain McDaniel looked upon blacks in his crew as a means for private profit.¹⁶

Whites viewing black seamen as objects of profit began on the African coast where British traders regularly kidnapped African canoemen and sailors.¹⁷ This viewing of black seamen as a means to private wealth came to be widespread in the Anglo-American Atlantic. Kidnappings of black seamen occurred even in regions, such as New England, where in the last decades of the eighteenth century, abolitionism was strong.¹⁸ As one South Carolinian observed, ‘many are kidnapped’ and brought to Charleston to be sold.¹⁹ And despite the efforts of Obadiah Brown and other abolitionists to protect them, British black sailors such as Harry Monroe were regularly kidnapped in the Americas.²⁰ This view that black seamen could be the means to private fortune was not limited to Africa or the Western Atlantic, however: as Equiano so poignantly described in his *Interesting Narrative* and as the abolitionist Granville Sharp’s correspondence evidences, kidnapping of black seamen also occurred in the British Isles.²¹

Kidnapping was something the noted abolitionist Granville Sharp knew first-hand. Sharp regularly sought writs of *habeas corpus* to prevent coercive takings of blacks and maintained contact with seamen he assisted. As Sharp noted in discussing a case where he sent an attorney by coach late at night from London to Deal to catch up with a ship that was coercively transporting a Black to Barbados, ‘a delay of even a single minute’ could be the difference in preventing coerced

¹⁶ *Maryland Gazette*, 24 August 1763.

¹⁷ Randy Sparks, ‘Gold Coast Merchant Families, Pawning,awning, and the Eighteenth-Century British Slave Trade’, in *William & Mary Quarterly* 70:2, 2013, pp. 325-7.

¹⁸ *Massachusetts Gazette* (Boston), 15 February 1788. The BMD contains more than sixty instances of black seamen being kidnapped.

¹⁹ *New-York Packet*, 13 March 1786.

²⁰ Obadiah Moses Brown Papers, Series I, Correspondence, Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS).

²¹ *London Chronicle*, 27 April 1774; Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 142; Granville Sharp Commonplace Books, Gloucester Records Office (GRO), D3549/13/4/1.

transportation of a black tar from England to enslavement in the Americas.²²

While the possibility of being kidnapped caused British black seamen dread, they probably suffered greater anxiety about being captured and sold as prize goods. With both British and American courts presuming that Blacks captured at sea were slaves and putting the burden on Blacks to prove otherwise, and other nations also declaring captured enemy Black sailors prize goods, hundreds of captured black seamen were sold into slavery during the eighteenth century.²³ Privateers and Royal Navy crews alike viewed black sailors as potential objects of profit. As the Vice-Admiralty Court in Barbados observed in 1795, ‘the practice ... has been to consider Negroes captured from the Enemy as property and consequently condemnable as Prize.’²⁴ And although most captured black seamen were sold as Prize Negroes in the Western Atlantic, some, such as the Negro Boy ‘taken as a prize’ by a Royal Navy vessel off Florida, were sold into slavery in England.²⁵

British black sailors also found themselves re-enslaved due to the actions of the Royal Navy. As a ‘guarantor of the whole system of British Atlantic commerce’, the Royal Navy protected slave forts, slave ships, and slave colonies, including assisting in the suppression of slave revolts. Naval officers often felt bound by local customs in Britain’s colonies, including respecting slave owners’ claims to their runaways.²⁶ The result was that fugitives who obtained berths in the Royal Navy could find themselves discharged for ‘being a slave.’ John Incobs, Kingston, Black Jack, Coffee, James Dick (figure 4.1), Dublin, Polydore

²² 1 August 1787 letter, Granville Sharp letters to Archbishop of Canterbury, Granville Sharp Papers, GRO D3549/13/C3.

²³ Charles R. Foy, ‘Eighteenth Century Prize Negroes: From Britain to America’, *Slavery & Abolition* 31: 3, 2010, pp. 379-93; Deposition of Joseph Dickinson, 5 July 1732, *Bermuda Historical Quarterly* 12:3, 1955, pp. 82-3.

²⁴ Nathaniel Whitting Records, 1773-74, Mss 9001-W, RIHS; Edward Long Vice Admiralty Judge to William Henry Lyttleton, 10 January 1762, TNA CO 137/61, ff. 82-83; Our Lord the King v Twenty-Eight Negroes, 2 February 1795, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK, CAL 127.

²⁵ *Daily Advertiser* (London), 6 October 1743.

²⁶ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2008), 15.



4.1. HM Galley *Arbuthnot* Muster, 1783-6
TNA ADM 36/10426. Photograph by the author.
Courtesy of the National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

and other black Royal Navy tars thus found themselves returned to enslavement throughout the Atlantic.²⁷

In the years after the American Revolution, British black seamen who came ashore in the southern United States also faced a loss of their freedom due to Seamen's Acts. If unable to pay prison fees, blacks could find themselves flogged in a 'merciless' manner. To avoid being imprisoned black seamen often avoided voyages that required disembarking in southern American ports.²⁸ Laws, such as North Carolina's 1788 enactment that allowed for the recapture of manumitted slaves still in the state resulted in black seamen being 'pursued by men with dogs and arms'.²⁹

Simply put, when at sea British black sailors were at risk. They entered a world in which whom they could trust was unclear leaving them constantly on guard: did they have freedom papers with them; would their captains protect or sell them; and would enemies treat them as prisoners of war or chattel to be sold? The anxiety these issues caused black sailors reinforced their status as 'lesser' at a time (the eighteenth century) and in a world (the Anglo-American Atlantic) where blackness left one vulnerable.

²⁷ HM Galley *Arbuthnot* Musters, 1783-86, TNA ADM 36/10426; *Daily Courant* (London), 23 January 1710; HM Galley *Scourge*, Musters, 1779-85, TNA ADM 36/10427; Letter of Francis Holburne, Portsmouth, 18 December 1758 to John Cleveland, TNA ADM 1/927.

²⁸ *The Oracle of the Day* (Portsmouth, NH), 9 January 1794; Limbo Robinson, 1798, Welcome Arnold Laborer Books, Vol. 7, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island; *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (Charleston), 17 September 1788.

²⁹ Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), pp. 185-8.

British Black Tars' Maritime Opportunities

Regular warfare during the eighteenth century and the resultant burgeoning maritime labor market provided plentiful opportunities for Blacks to find work at sea. Yet these opportunities were not equal to those whites found on Britain's ships. Instead, Blacks faced strong limits to their advancement and encountered racist attitudes among ship mates.

Among the more than 1,700 blacks known to have served in the eighteenth-century Royal Navy, only one, Jack Perkins, was a captain, and only three others were midshipmen. These men were exceptional. Perkins and Edward Young, a black midshipman on the ill-fated HMS *Bounty*, each had patrons who pushed higher ups in the Admiralty to recognize the men's talents. Most blacks were not so fortunate. Lacking both the navigational and literacy skills required to become officers, most blacks also did not have connections with elites, such as Commodore Ford, to support their careers. The barriers to blacks' advancement became even more significant when in the early nineteenth century the Admiralty issued a directive 'to dismiss from the service all Midshipmen, surgeons, etc. of colour', formally barring blacks' advancement in the Navy.³⁰

In addition to rarely being given supervisory roles, blacks also were frequently assigned as officers' servants, stewards, cooks or rowing galleys. Service as servants, stewards and cooks, typically considered 'feminine' labor, reinforced perceptions of black men's lower status. Similarly, the 170 blacks assigned to British naval galleys, were compelled to perform work that in other navies was typically done by enslaved individuals. Ironically, many of the seamen impressed onto Royal Navy galleys were free blacks. Performing such servile-like work starkly reinforced for them how thin

³⁰ Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories; Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660-1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 80; Douglas Hamilton, "A most active, enterprising officer": Captain John Perkins, the Royal Navy and the boundaries of slavery and liberty in the Caribbean', *Slavery & Abolition*, 39:1, 2017, pp. 80-100; Foy, 'The Royal Navy's Employment', pp. 15-16

a line there was in the Anglo-American Atlantic between free and coerced labor.³¹

Black sailors' opportunities were also limited by racial antagonisms among whites on British ships. In 1780 Barlow Fielding requested a transfer owing to the crew on HMS *Orepheus* having 'taken a Dislike' to his 'Colour' and the ship's captain believing it impossible 'for me to remove [this] Particular Prejudice'. Similarly, at the beginning of the century a black tar was reprimanded for use of 'provoking words' to a Captain whom the records imply had abused the sailor. While common interests and the need for team work among seamen may have created a greater bond among white and black sailors than between workers on shore, whites' racial animus towards blacks did not disappear when men were employed at sea.³² To counter such hostility, black seamen often shared messes on board. When blacks worked on a ship in numbers, such as the six who did on HMS *Stag* in 1762, their numbers offered support for individual black tars.³³

One benefit British black seamen could receive that land-based Britons did not was pension and disability benefits. Paying six pence a month to the Greenwich Hospital fund made them eligible for such benefits. However, while Briton Hammon wrote of receiving a pension for his maritime service and Amos Anderson was an in-pensioner at the Greenwich Hospital, they were the rare blacks

³¹ David Kazanjian, "'Ship as Cook': Notes on the Gendering of Black Atlantic Labor," *Radical Philosophy Review* 5:1/2, 2002, pp. 12-13; Charles R. Foy, 'Compelled to Row: Blacks on Royal Navy Galleys During the American Revolution', in Don N. Hagist (ed.), *Journal of the American Revolution, Annual Volume 2019* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2019), p. 261. The 170 Blacks serving on galleys was more than twice blacks' representation on other Royal Navy vessels in the Americas.

³² Philip D. Morgan, 'Black experiences in Britain's maritime world', in David Cannadine (ed.), *Empire, the Sea and Global History: Britain's Maritime World, c. 1763 – c. 1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 122-3; Court Martials, TNA ADM 1/5261, ff.273-276; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), pp. 228-34, 328; Arne Bialuscheski, 'Black People under the Black Flag: Piracy and the Slave Trade on the West Coast of Africa, 1718-1723', *Slavery and Abolition* 29: 4, 2008, p. 469.

³³ HMS *Stag* Muster, 1761-1762, TNA ASDM 36/6759.

who benefited from making Seamen's Sixpence payments. A more common experience was that of black seaman Joseph Johnson, who was denied a pension due to not having served in the Royal Navy. The records for Greenwich Hospital, Chatham Chest, as well as local Trinity Hospitals, contain few references to blacks receiving benefits for their maritime labors.³⁴

Migration of Black Tars to Britain and their lives there

The overwhelming majority of black seamen working on British ships in the Atlantic were born, lived and or worked in Africa or the Americas, regions in which most of them were enslaved. Over the course of the eighteenth century, increasing numbers of blacks migrated to the British Isles such that in the second half of the eighteenth century there were an estimated 10,000 blacks in the United Kingdom. The overwhelming majority of these blacks appear to have come to the British Isles not as slaves but as seamen and soldiers.³⁵ Justice Mansfield's 1772 *Somerset* decision, holding that slave masters in England lacked the power to detain and deport their slaves, may not, as some contemporaries contended, have caused slaves from the Americas to 'flock over in vast numbers'. However, in the three years after *Somerset* decision the number of maritime fugitives in the Americas more than tripled from the prior three years. Men such as Bacchus, a 19-year-old Virginia runaway 'imagine[d]' that he would 'be free' in England. He and many other maritime fugitives attempting to reach England, did so having learned of the *Somerset* decision from colonial newspapers.³⁶ So too did enslaved black tars, such as the four sailors on the *Lawrence*,

³⁴ Charles R. Foy, 'The Royal Navy's Employment', pp. 17-18; John Thomas Smith, *Vagabondia, or Anecdotes of Mendicant Wanderers through the Streets of London* (London, 1817), Guildhall Library, Corporation of London, 33-4; Records of Scarborough Trinity House, 1752--1775, ZOX 10/1 North Yorkshire Records Office.

³⁵ There is much uncertainty regarding the size of Britain's eighteenth-century Black population. Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales During the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660-1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 25-34.

³⁶ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), 30 September 1773; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon), 30 June 1774.

who in 1776 upon docking in Portsmouth harbor quickly asserted perceived rights to freedom under *Somerset*.³⁷

England as a land of liberty held a strong hold on the imagination of enslaved peoples in British Atlantic colonies. In 1797 Jack Ghost was an Antiguan slave whose master sent him in a canoe to get turtle grass and put it on board the ship *Brook*. After doing so ‘a tho’t struck him, that such an opportunity would probably never offer again for his getting to England’. Having made two voyages to Liverpool as a seaman, Jack believed that getting to England would secure him freedom. Serendipitously stowing away on the ship, Jack secreted himself in an empty water barrel. Upon being discovered, the captain put Jack’s prior maritime experience to advantage, having the stowaway work as a seaman on the *Brook*. Five decades earlier a Virginian slave named James similarly set out to ‘get a passage in some vessel to Great Britain’.³⁸

Definite information on the background of eighteenth century black British seamen is hard to come by. However, newspapers, ship musters, court records and parish records do offer us a window into their lives by which we can draw some conclusions regarding the nature of life for British black tars. A number of black seamen became residents of Britain after having deserted ships on which they served as enslaved sailors. Cambridge and Cuffee, who in 1758 deserted ships in London two weeks apart, are typical of this cohort.³⁹ These black tars were part of a larger group of enslaved sailors who took the opportunity to flee in ports throughout Europe, particularly in the second half of the eighteenth century when the legal status of slavery in Europe came under increasing scrutiny. Flight by slave seamen, such as the unnamed Negro on the *Windsor Prize* found hiding in Ireland, was not uncommon. The attempts of enslaved seamen to find freedom in British ports led some American slave owners, such as Aaron Lopez of Newport, to avoid having slave sailors work on ships sailing to Britain in the years before the American Revolution.⁴⁰

³⁷ Charles R. Foy, “‘Unkle Somerset’s’ Freedom: Liberty in England for Black Sailors’, *Journal for Maritime Research* 13:1, 2011, pp. 21-36.

³⁸ *The Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia), 7 February 1798; *Maryland Gazette*, 17 August 1749.

³⁹ *Public Advertiser* (London), 14, 28 November 1758.

⁴⁰ *London Evening Post*, 18 March 1758; Aaron Lopez Papers, Jewish History

Although black seamen eagerly fled British colonies in the Americas for life in Great Britain, they often found freedom in the British Isles did not always equate with greater economic opportunities. This is evident in the lack of opportunities for Blacks to progress up the British maritime hierarchy. Black ship captains were a rarity in ships sailing from the British Isles. The only black ship captain discussed in a British newspaper was a master named Bell. When the unfortunate skipper had his snow cast away off the Isle of Wight in 1760, the *Somerset Weekly Advertiser or Lewes Journal* reported that he had been ‘driven to the last Extremity’ and had hanged himself. Nor did blacks, with the exception of Jack Perkins, serve as captains in the Royal Navy.⁴¹ In contrast to this almost complete absence of black commanders in ships from British ports, in British American colonies black ship masters were common. Tony, Ben, Simon, Steven were among the scores of Patroons who directed rice and tobacco schooners along the rivers of the Carolina Lowcountry and the Chesapeake. In the West Indies blacks commanded pilot boats and privateer ships, while in Halifax they served as captains of merchant vessels. The willingness of slave masters in British colonies to have blacks command their vessels is reflected in how they spoke of their ‘negro Patroon[s]’. as ‘skillful honest fellow[s]’ or as ‘well acquainted with the Bay and most of the Rivers in Virginia and Maryland’.⁴²

While slavery did not have the same legal status in the British Isles that it did in the Americas, particularly after the *Somerset* decision,

Center, New York, NY.

⁴¹ Chater, *Untold Histories*, p.236; Foy, ‘The Royal Navy’s Employment’, pp. 15-16.

⁴² Philip D. Morgan and George D. Terry, ‘Slavery in Microcosm: A Conspiracy Scare in South Carolina’, *Southern Studies* 21: 2, 1982, p. 132; *South-Carolina Gazette* (Timothy), 29 July 1745 and 20 August 1753; *South Carolina Gazette and American Country Journal*, 10 November 1767; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 11 April 1771; *South Carolina Gazette*, 29 October 1737; *Maryland Gazette*, 17 November 1791; *Salem Gazette*, 9 February 1798; *New-York Weekly Journal*, 8 July 1734; Kenneth J. Donovan, ‘Slaves in Île Royale, 1713-1760’, *French Colonial History*, 5, 2004, p. 32. Blacks also captained British vessels on the African coast. David Eltis, ‘Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation’, *American Historical Review* 98:5, 1993, p. 1401.

black sailors did encounter hostility in Britain. This hostility, which occasionally may have been race-based, was more frequently often based upon class or xenophobic attitudes.⁴³ And yet while overt racism toward black mariners may have been limited, some black tars undoubtedly encountered in Britain the hostility Ukawsaw Gronniosaw experienced from whites who resented having to economically compete with Blacks. This hostility can be seen in ‘Anglicanus’ expressing concern that blacks were replacing white workers as well as efforts to bar all foreigners or non-natives from apprenticeships in London. Such barriers resulted in blacks experiencing difficulties finding regular work. Thus, although many black tars who came from the Americas had experience in ship yards, naval dockyards in Great Britain employed very few of them. By the mid-1780s there were considerable numbers of black seamen among London’s close to 2,000 destitute blacks. Former black tars, such as Joseph Johnson, took to busking at London’s markets in order to survive.⁴⁴

Despite these considerable hurdles for black tars to achieve economic independence in eighteenth century Great Britain, communities of black seamen did develop in Britain’s larger ports. The *Black Mariner Database* has records for seventy-four black Bristol seamen, forty-three Liverpool black tars and 147 London black sailors. Among these men were cooks, foremast men and ordinaries. Although some, such as the Bristol seamen Antonio Franario and John Quaco, who spent fourteen and twenty-one years at sea, found regular employment on ships, most black sailors appear to have been to sea for only one or two voyages.⁴⁵ Thus, the stability of their economic lives appears to have, for the most part, been shaky.

While often struggling economically, British black tars engaged in public action to assert political rights. Whether it was Negro London,

⁴³ Chater, *Untold Histories*, 164-172; Grezina, *Black London*, 27.

⁴⁴ Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *Wonderous Grace Display’d in the Life and Conversion of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw* (Bath, 1770), 1712; *Gentleman’s Magazine*, XXXIV (1764), 495; Foy, ‘Royal Navy Employment’, p. 19; Foy, “‘Unkle Somerset’s’ Freedom”, p. 30; Chater, *Untold Histories*, pp. 231-2; Grezina, *Black London*, 140.

⁴⁵ Stephen D. Behrendt, ‘Human Capital in the British Slave Trade’, in David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz and Anthony Tibbles (eds.), *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 79; Bristol Musters, Muster #156, 1777-1778, Bristol Records Office SMV/9/3/1/8.

who in 1721 took part in a mutiny complaining of having to ‘work too hard’, or Sam in ‘sailor’s habit’ who was among the mob of seamen who in 1768 protested after the Massacre of St. George Field, black tars in Britain made efforts to have their voices heard.⁴⁶ Being able to do so without the threat of a master’s lash clearly distinguished their lives in Britain from that they and their fathers experienced in the Americas. However, it was not until the Reform Act of 1832 that a few of them would have access to the ballot box.

A chief characteristic of life for British black seamen was that many of them lacked family connections. Very few black men migrated to Great Britain in the eighteenth century with family members. Black men of all occupations had a lack of black female companions — approximately 80% of black Britons were men. In port cities with large populations of black mariners the number of women was even smaller.⁴⁷ The result was that many, if not most, black tars were single and those that did marry, such as Olaudah Equiano or Adam Darkman of HMS *Lenox*, often married white women.⁴⁸ Nor did many black seamen have family members accompany them to the British Isles. In this respect, Amos Anderson was typical. Cut off from his Igbo mother and never knowing his father, Anderson lacked kinship connections in England. Like most black seamen, Anderson resided in a large port. Rare was the black tar, such as Robert Slaves of Scarborough, who resided in a small British port.⁴⁹ As did many British black tars, Anderson turned to shipmates, black and white, for

⁴⁶ Jesse Lemish, ‘Jack Tar in the Street’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 25: 3, 1968, pp. 371-407; New Cross Radical History Walk, www.alphabetthreat.co.uk/pasttense/walks/newxwalk.rtf (accessed 8 November 2019); *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London), 9 June 1768.

⁴⁷ Chater, *Untold Histories*, p. 30; Stephen D. Berrendt & Robert A. Hurley, ‘Liverpool as a Trading Port: Sailors’ Residences, African Migrants, Occupational Change and probated wealth’, *International Journal of Maritime History*, 29: 4, 2017, p. 889 (12.05% of 639 Blacks in Liverpool parish records were women).

⁴⁸ Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 386-387. Darkman married Mary Ann Wicherly at Halverstroke in 1771. Information regarding Darkman’s marriage was provided by John Ellis.

⁴⁹ *Brotherly Love Muster*, 1757-1758, Scarborough Muster Rolls, 1754-1765, TNA CUST 91/112.

companionship and community. The two wills he executed, one in 1793 and a second in 1800, reflect this. In each, Anderson bequeathed his worldly possessions to his shipmates, John Horton and John Raymond, men who he deemed ‘trustworthy friends’.⁵⁰

When migrating across the Atlantic to Great Britain black tars shed the shackles of slavery. To do so, they often gave up family, kin and connections that had supported them. Thus, while free in ways they never could be in the Americas, they needed to form new connections and identities to sustain them. Becoming members of religious communities in Britain was one method many, such as Amos Anderson, chose. A second method that all black tars engaged in, was the creation and presentation of identities of their own choosing. Some, such as Olaudah Equiano, emphasized being African. Many others chose surnames that reflected names of Royal Navy ships they served on, as did the Congo-born Thomas Arbuthnot of HM Galley *Arbuthnot*. In doing so, they, as had Joseph Johnson when busking with a headdress of HMS *Victory* on his head, clearly asserted their Britishness based upon having served the king. These men understood that their status in British society was tenuous and sought to cement their place in Britain by reminding others of their central role in the creation of Britain’s maritime empire.

⁵⁰ Wills of Amos Anderson, TNA ADM 48/1/132 (1793) and TNA ADM 48/2/89 (1800).