W. Jeffrey Bolster

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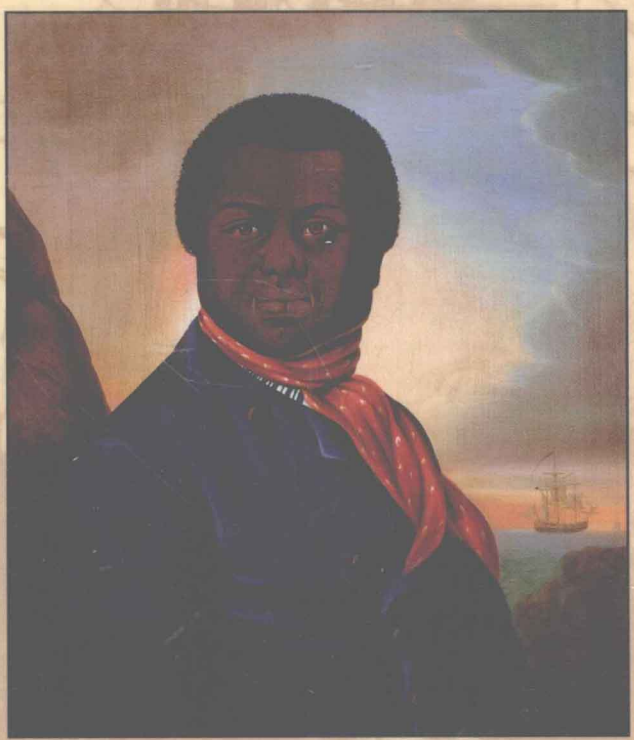
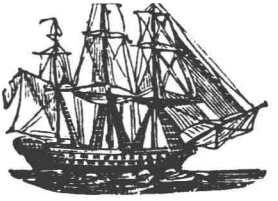


African American Seamen in the Age of Sail



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African American Seamen in the Age of Sail

W. JEFFREY BOLSTER

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PREFACE

HISTORIANS once strove for objectivity, veiling themselves in books whose sources alone were meant to tell the tale. Fashions change. Today, as scholars openly mediate among themselves, their readers, and their subjects (and strive to comprehend their own biases), confessionals seem more appropriate. It may be germane that I am not black; again, possibly germane that I am a seaman of sailing ships.

For ten years I followed the sea to many of the places explored here. Along the way I listened to stories told by veteran skippers and seamen, many of them black West Indians recounting with the longing of old men their youthful exploits—carrying cattle under sail from the eastern Caribbean to Santo Domingo; careening their schooners at Grenada; jamming a sloop hard on the wind from Virgin Gorda to St. Martin; and steering by the stars long before those islands had looming electric lights, and longer still before they had ever graced a souvenir t-shirt. One night in the 1970s, as we were rolling before the northeasterly trades on a passage to Cape Haitian, a shipmate aboard the schooner *Harvey Gamage* lent me the remarkable eighteenth-century autobiography of an accomplished slave sailor named Olaudah Equiano, who himself had once sailed that route. Where, I asked, was the bridge between historic slave sailors and the old black schoonermen I knew? How could one understand early black America without recognizing that plantations were connected to a larger world of black people, as well as to world markets, by black

seamen? And given seaports' historic function as crossroads for people and ideas, what roles had sailors played in the formation of black America?

When I left the sea I returned to those questions about African Americans' maritime history. This book is my answer.

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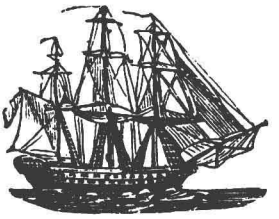


INTRODUCTION: TO TELL THE TALE

Half the story has never been told.

BOB MARLEY AND PETER TOSH,
"Get Up Stand Up" (1974)

"THOSE BEAUTIFUL VESSELS, robed in white, and so delightful to the eyes of freemen," wrote Frederick Douglass of the sailing ships he saw daily during his boyhood slavery along the Chesapeake Bay, "were to me so many shrouded ghosts." Douglass contrasted the ships, "loosed from [their] moorings, and free," with his own condition—"fast in my chains, and . . . a slave!" And he swore, "This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom." As a skilled but still-enslaved ship caulker in Baltimore, Douglass worked shoulder to shoulder with black and white sailors and, in his own words, "knew a ship from stem to stern, and from keelson to crosstrees, and could talk sailor like an 'old salt.'" No stranger to waterfront tales of hardship, brutality, and deprivation at sea, he nonetheless persisted in his metaphorical view of ships as "freedom's swift-winged angels," because, unlike the white men who spoke movingly of the "slavery" aboard ship, he knew real slavery firsthand.[1]

As it turned out, Douglass employed a seafaring subterfuge instead of a ship to escape his chains. Rigging himself out in "a red shirt and tarpaulin hat and black cravat, tied in sailor fashion, carelessly and loosely about [the] neck," he borrowed a Seaman's Protection Certifi-

cate from a liberty-loving black sailor and brazenly struck out for Philadelphia by train. He succeeded that September day in 1838 because free black seamen were then so common as to draw few second looks.[2]

As American shipping expanded during the early nineteenth century, employing more than 100,000 men per year, black men like Douglass's benefactor filled about one-fifth of sailors' berths. Black Jacks had long been prominent on quays around the Atlantic. Eighteenth-century black leaders frequently rolled out of the forecastle, a worldly origin eclipsed by the subsequent dominance of the pulpit as the wellspring of black organization. Yet no meaningful African American maritime history has linked prominent mariners like Captain Paul Cuffe, the driving force behind the first black-led back-to-Africa movement, and Denmark Vesey, the mastermind of the largest slave conspiracy in South Carolina's history. More anonymous black sailors have simply sunk from sight, like the slave aboard the Virginian sloop *Jean* in 1779, ritually scarified with "Guinea marks on each of his temples"—reminders of having come of age in Africa—and the free man who told a slave in Savannah during the 1830s "that his home was in New York; that he had a wife and several children there, but that he followed the sea for a livelihood and knew no other mode of life."[3]

In lieu of these politically astute and worldly black sailors, an image of manacled ancestors crammed together aboard slave ships has triumphed as the association of African Americans with the sea. It reinforces whites' belief that blacks were acted on, rather than acting; that blacks aboard ship sailed as commodities rather than seamen. Yet until the Civil War black sailors were central to African Americans' collective sense of self, economic survival, and freedom struggle—indeed central to the very creation of black America.

In 1850 the black abolitionist William Wells Brown grasped the ambiguities of ships within the collective African American imagination, painting several into his *Original Panoramic Views of the Scenes in the Life of an American Slave.* The fifth of his twenty-four-scene traveling canvas depicted the brig *Creole* and the schooners *Pearl* and *Franklin*—slave ships aboard which triumphant slaves mutinied successfully for freedom, or on which other slaves repeated the shackled

passage of their ancestors as they were shipped to markets in the expanding cotton kingdom. If vessels have long represented the union of opposites to all human beings—slavery and freedom, exploitation and exhilaration, separation and reunion—these antipodes have been amplified notoriously for black Americans. Brown honored that. But he neglected black sailors.[4]

Relatively fortunate for black men of the time, seamen of African descent nevertheless navigated a tortuous channel through the North Atlantic. Beset by the deeply felt oppression of race and slavery, by commercial capitalism's sustained exploitation of maritime workers, and by the dangers of the deep during an era of frail wooden ships and uncertain navigational reckoning, black seamen struggled valiantly to free themselves and the race. A black veteran sea-cook remembered facing "the most dreadful whirlwinds and hurricanes," enduring forty-two thirsty days adrift on an unnavigable hulk, and suffering "ill treatment" at the hands of white seamen. "They used to flog, beat, and kick me about the same as if I had been a dog; . . . and sometimes they would call me a Jonah." Yet he persisted for years at seafaring, one of the few occupations open to a free man of color in 1806, because it allowed him to spread the "Methodist evangelicalism, revolutionary egalitarianism, and . . . nascent black nationalism" through which he defined himself and the black diaspora.[5]

Individual slaves routinely drew on maritime work to take charge of their lives and to communicate with distant blacks. Born on Maryland's eastern shore and "well known there and in Baltimore," Samuel Johnson matured in the heady days of the American Revolution, when Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, extended the promise of freedom to slaves who deserted to the British. Johnson capitalized on wartime turmoil, making several voyages to the West Indies as a free sailor before his re-enslavement in Philadelphia. The wily Johnson ran away again in 1785. The last his master knew, the strolling sailor was telling some people "that he is free, and others that he has a master in Baltimore, and is going home to inform him of his being wrecked down the bay, carrying him a parcel of goods." Undoubtedly, the freedom-loving Johnson talked with blacks in Virginia, Philadelphia, and the West Indies about more weighty matters during that revolutionary age ablaze with "liberty."[6]

Whether looking for a ship in Philadelphia, loading hogsheads of sugar into moses boats on Jamaica's north coast, sheeting home the mainsail aboard a rice-laden pettiauger on the Waccamaw River, or stewing salt beef in the smokey caboose of a London-bound tobacco ship, free and enslaved black sailors established a visible presence in every North Atlantic seaport and plantation roadstead between 1740 and 1865. As winds and currents kept the ocean itself from stasis, so seafaring men of color stirred black society and shaped Atlantic maritime culture.

Black seafaring thus had social and psychological ramifications far beyond the workplace. In the universe of southern and Caribbean plantation slaves, ships and boats were a pipeline to freedom and a refuge for slaves on the lam. Worldly and often multilingual slave sailors regularly subverted plantation discipline. Among northern free blacks, struggling during the critical first two generations after the American Revolution to create a footprint for freedom, seafaring became one of the most common male occupations. Maritime slaves bought before the Revolution to enhance captains' status and reduce their payrolls had established that precedent, as had those slaves who negotiated with masters the right to hire themselves for voyages. A postwar shipping boom that stretched into the early nineteenth century had created the jobs free blacks so desperately needed. Maritime wages provided crucial support for black families and underwrote organizations such as churches and benevolent societies through which black America established an institutional presence and a voice. Rakes and renegades certainly roamed the waterfront, but many sailors of African descent were prominent figures in free black communities then angling for respectability. The keeper of a boardinghouse for black sailors referred to "one of the Sons of *Neptune*" as "every inch a *man*."[7]

If seafaring in the age of sail remained a contemptible occupation for white men, characterized by a lack of personal independence and reliance on paltry wages, it became an occupation of opportunity for slaves and recent freedmen. Seamen wrote the first six autobiographies of blacks published in English before 1800. Finding their voices in the swirling currents of international maritime labor, seafaring men fired the opening salvo of the black abolitionist attack and fostered creation of a corporate black identity. Blacks joined white seamen in

a common effort to balk the captains and merchants who abused them—although black sailors knew full well that race rarely disappeared, even among shipmates. Actively contributing to the Atlantic maritime culture shared by all seamen, African Americans were at times outsiders within it. That culture created an ambiguous world in which black men simultaneously could assert themselves within their occupation and find with white sailors common ground transcending race, while also being subject to vicious racist acts.

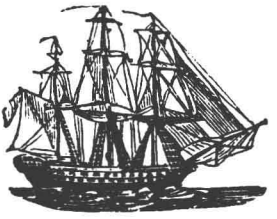
Opportunities or not, shipping-out posed unavoidable problems for men of color. In 1780 seven African Americans from Bristol County, Massachusetts, petitioned the revolutionary legislature of that state, claiming that "we have not an equal chance with white people neither by Sea nur Land." Eight years later another group of Massachusetts blacks protested the dangers free black men faced of being kidnapped into slavery from shipboard jobs: "Hence it is that maney of us who are good seamen are oblidge to stay at home thru fear."[8] Yet discrimination and kidnapping, as blacks painfully knew, were also hazards of shore life. Neither social threats like these nor the violence of the ocean itself kept African American men from following the sea until well into the nineteenth century.

Maritime work not only provided wages and allowed widely dispersed black people a means of communication, but also affected the process through which free people of color shaped their identities. Seafaring addressed squarely the duality of being black and American. Beginning in 1796, the federal government issued Seamen's Protection Certificates to merchant mariners, defining them as "citizens" of the United States, a nicety to which African American leaders pointedly referred during debates on blacks' citizenship status. Black sailors interacted regularly with customs collectors at home and consuls abroad on the basis of their citizenship, and carried papers in their deep sailors' pockets incontrovertibly demonstrating it to wives, sweethearts, and friends. Many expressed a radical African American patriotism, demanding black inclusion (not assimilation) in the United States. Seafaring left other marks. Characterized by long male absences and female-headed households, maritime rhythms became inextricably entwined in the family life, community structure, and sense of self of northern blacks in the early republic.

In 1740, when this tale begins, deep-sea maritime labor in the

Anglo-American world was largely white, and virtually all seafaring blacks were slaves. By 1803 black men (mostly free) filled about 18 percent of American seamen's jobs. The tide then turned at mid-century. With American Emancipation, when this tale ends, a new and distinct constellation of forces relegated maritime work to a bit part in black life. Freedmen in 1865 could not turn to an expanding maritime industry with a history of color toleration, as had northern black males following the Revolution, because the American merchant marine was in decline. White southerners, moreover, were determined to keep blacks on the land to make a crop. And mid-century changes in waterfront hiring practices already had begun to squeeze African Americans out of the maritime labor force.

Racist exclusion did not keep all blacks from the sea after Reconstruction. There were explorers like Matthew Henson, who shipped out during the 1880s and sought the North Pole with Commodore Robert Peary in 1909; visionaries like Marcus Garvey, who founded the Black Star Steamship Line in 1919; and writers like Langston Hughes, who voyaged to Africa in 1923 and called his autobiography *The Big Sea.* But shipboard work became less significant to black America as a whole after Emancipation. Before 1865 seafaring had been crucial to blacks' economic survival, liberation strategies, and collective identity-formation. Sailors linked far-flung black communities and united plantations with urban centers. Although black sailors' tale has never been told, the rise and fall of African American seafaring in the age of sail was central to the creation of black America.

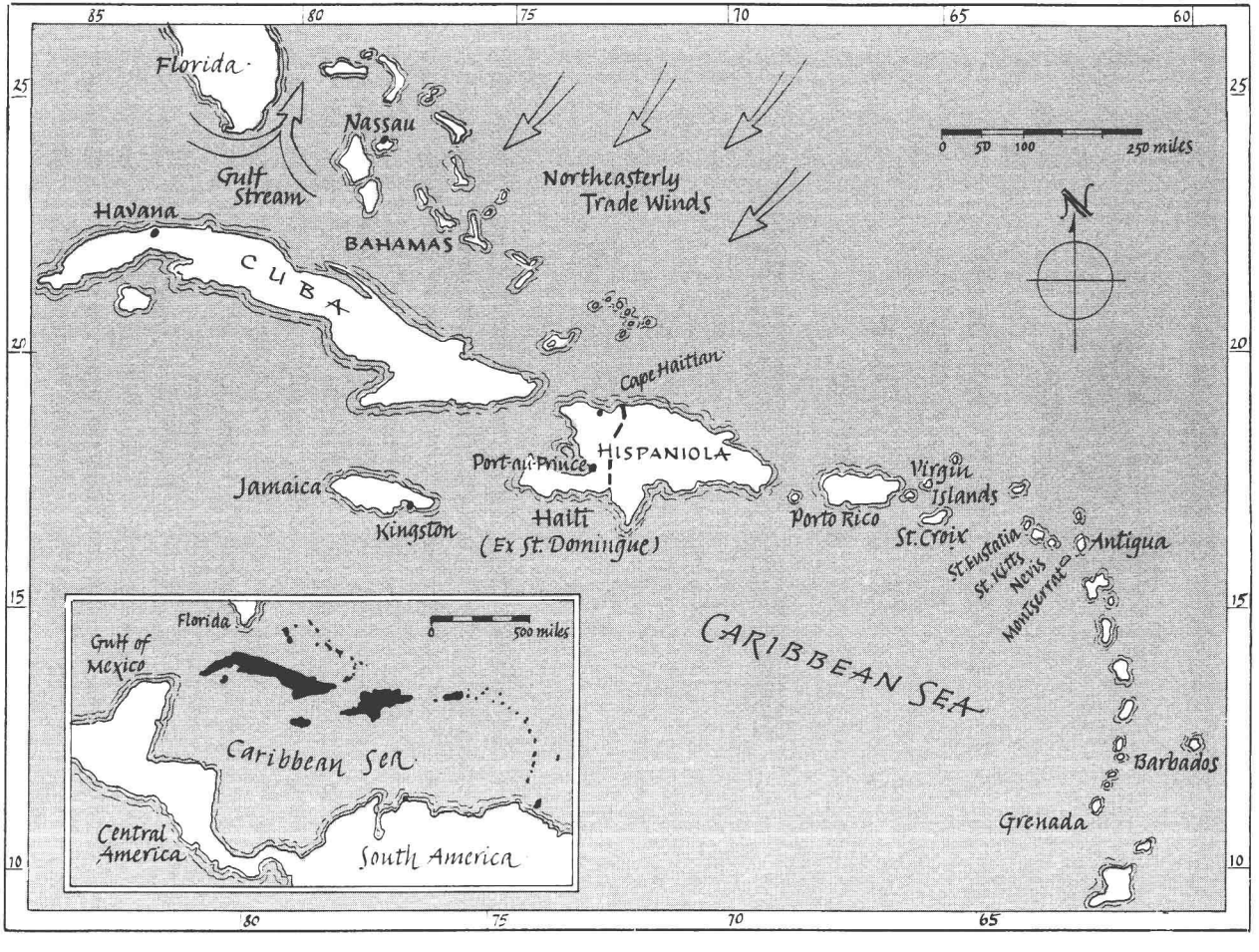


1. THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK SAILORS IN PLANTATION AMERICA

I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores.

JAMES BALDWIN,
The Fire Next Time (1963)

ON A DECEMBER DAY IN 1747 Briton Hammon, a slave to Major John Winslow of Marshfield, Massachusetts, walked out of town with, as he put it, "an Intention to go a voyage to sea." Tucked into the sandy bight of Cape Cod Bay, some thirty miles south of Boston, and reeking of tidal flats and Stockholm tar, Marshfield was a minor star in the galaxy of Britain's commercial empire, and only a short walk from Plymouth, where Hammon shipped himself the next day "on board of a Sloop, Capt. John Howland, Master, bound to Jamaica and the Bay" of Campeche for logwood. Experienced at shipboard work, as were approximately 25 percent of the male slaves in coastal Massachusetts during the 1740s, Hammon had not run away. But like all black people in early America who wrought freedom where they could, nurtured it warily, and understood it as partial and ambiguous at best, Hammon seized the moment. Prompted by memories of luxuriant Jamaican alternatives to sleety nor'easters, he negotiated the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Porto Rico
Virgin Islands
St. Croix
St. Eustatia
St. Kitts
Nevis
Montserrat
Antigua
CARIBBEAN SEA
Barbados
Grenada
Florida
Gulf of Mexico
0 500 miles
Caribbean Sea
Central America
South America

right for a voyage when his master Winslow's frozen fields were untillable, and earned a brief sojourn in the black tropics—the productive heartland of the Anglo-American plantation system. Winslow, of course, pocketed most of the wages.[1]

Hammon's *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man,* the first voyage account published by a black American, indicates the extent to which enslaved sailors and nominally free men of African descent rode economic and military currents to every corner of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Hammon's voyage launched him on a twelve-year odyssey embracing shipwreck, Indian captivity in Florida, imprisonment and enslavement in Cuba (where he toted the Catholic bishop's canopied sedan chair and "endeavour'd three times to make my escape"), Royal Navy service under fire against the French during the Seven Years War, hospitalization in Greenwich, dockwork in London, and a near voyage to Africa as cook aboard a slaver. Hammon, his black shipmates, and those with whom they conversed were citizens of the world.

Men of African descent had sailed the Atlantic from the time Europeans began their piratical forays and plantation settlements, mustering in the ranks of Columbus, Balboa, and Cortez at the birth of the Atlantic system. Other Africans, including mariners, had traveled to Europe even earlier, both as slaves and as free men. A Venetian oil painting of black waterfront workers in 1495 suggests that no fifteenth-century Mediterranean seaman would have been startled by Africans on the quayside. By 1624, the year British planters settled Barbados, a black seafaring tradition had taken root within the embryonic Anglo-American world. "John Phillip, a negro Christened in England 12 yeers since," told the Council of Virginia in 1624 "that beinge in a ship with Sir Henry Maneringe, they tooke A spanish shipp aboute Cape Sct Mary." In 1625 a "negro caled by the name of brase" helped Captain Jones work his ship from the West Indies to Virginia. The historian Ira Berlin has labeled men like Phillip and Brase "Atlantic creoles"—people of African descent who originated neither in the heart of Africa nor in colonial America, but in the expanding commercial world linking the two, black men who often arrived in America not in chains, but as sailors or linguists on commercial ships. "Atlantic creoles" were as accustomed to the foredeck as to the field.

They faced fewer liabilities because of color than would their black descendants in the New World slave societies that developed later, and in which race became even more cramping.[2]

During the middle of the seventeenth century, western European governments stepped up state-sponsored support of private enterprise, creating a highly profitable Atlantic plantation system built on "European capital, American land, African slave labor," and maritime transportation. Unwilling plantation laborers in Virginia, Barbados, and elsewhere produced commodities such as sugar, tobacco, coffee, and rum for which the wealthy, and later the workers, of Europe developed insatiable cravings. Plantations and ships were peas in the pod of commercial capitalism, separate yet dependent on each other. No other part of the global economy relied as heavily as New World plantations on maritime transportation to import supplies, people, and food, and to export the crop. Colonial plantations transformed the palates of European consumers, redefining as staples the sweetness and smoke that once had been luxuries. Plantations were also central to the "Commercial Revolution" that eroded England's customary agricultural economy, and set into motion wrenching new forms of labor organization on both sides of the Atlantic—dominated by slavery on an unprecedented scale.[3]

European statesmen then assumed that the natural order of things was a world in which nation-states competed for what Sir Josiah Child called "profit and power," not only with force of arms, but through overseas production and trade. As feudalism gave way to capitalism in Europe, privatization of various means of production, notably land, allowed entrepreneurs to accumulate capital. That spurred commercial growth. Legal justifications for the appropriation of producers' surpluses conditioned merchants to think less of that capital's human cost than of its investment potential, often in the plantations in which slaves, sailors, and slave-sailors played such important roles.[4]

The sanction of profit, the severance of mutual obligations between employer and employee, the international influence of racial thought, and the availability of slaves in African markets all seemed to condone the immoral practice whereby certain white individuals in England (along with those in the colonizing states of France, Holland, Portugal, Denmark, and Spain) could attain property rights to other individuals—specifically blacks who worked in plantation colonies. This pres-

ence of slavery within capitalism, explains Sidney Mintz, "gave to the New World situation its special, unusual, and ruthless character." Saluted by coldly admiring eighteenth-century Englishmen as "the mainspring of the machine which sets every wheel in motion," the trans-Atlantic slave trade peaked from about 1760 to 1780, when a torrent of approximately 65,500 Africans arrived annually in the Americas, a fraction of the approximately 10,000,000 who arrived in chains. The nefarious traffic did not cease until the final smuggler made landfall during the late nineteenth century, long after African Americans had forged themselves into a new people.[5]

Heroic in proportion and tragic in its human particulars, the Commercial Revolution's plantation system was a pan-Atlantic phenomenon. Ships and sailors not only followed the setting sun in a linear track from the Old World to the New, bringing capitalism and captive Africans to the Americas, but continuously cross-pollinated an emerging Atlantic world of new ecological, social, and racial relationships. Black sailors emerged from the confluence of forced black labor and maritime transportation that defined the plantation system. As conduits between the new centers of black population on the western rim of the ocean, sailors helped define and connect a new black Atlantic world.

Seamen recognized a daunting kinship between vessels and plantations. Both manifested harshly exploitative elements of feudalism and capitalism, combining in one workplace the virtually unchecked personal authority of the feudal lord and the impersonal appropriation of workers' labor so fundamental to capitalism. One captain, white sailors complained in 1726, treated them as if they were "bought Servants"; another "refused to Supply them with a Necessary quantity of Provisions," reducing them "to the Utmost Extreamity." Beatings to enforce discipline aboard the sloop *William* in 1729 "did Occassion Great Effusion of Blood." Yet seafaring nevertheless appeared desirable to black males whose alternative in the European-dominated Atlantic world remained debilitating field labor with heavy hoes or billhooks and the substantially more savage discipline of laws designed to regulate slaves. Freedom beckoned—inconsistent and illusory though it became aboard the tempestuous ships of an expanding commercial economy.[6]

By the late seventeenth century, enslaved seamen worked in even