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Black Hands, White Profits: The Critical Role Black Laborers Played in Rhode Island's Maritime Economy, 1750–1800

Charles R. Foy

Over the past two decades scholars have shown that life at sea provided blacks mobility and a degree of freedom often denied them when working on land.¹ Building on such scholarship and by utilizing the author's *Black Mariner Database (BMD)*, a dataset containing information on more than 27,000 eighteenth-century black mariners and maritime fugitives, this essay addresses the questions of whether Rhode Island's black mariners and maritime workers in the second half of the eighteenth-century achieved what Frederick Douglass termed "self-made manhood," and how white merchants' interests shaped black workers' independence. To consider the tension between blacks' desire for independence and white merchants' drive for profits, this paper analyzes the mercantile operations of Aaron Lopez, the Brown family, and Welcome Arnold, and

¹ W. Jeffrey Bolster's *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) remains the most complete survey of black maritime life in North America. More recent scholarship on Anglo-American eighteenth-century black mariners includes: Charles R. Foy, "The Royal Navy's Employment of Black Mariners and Maritime Workers, 1754–1783," *International Maritime History Journal* 28, no. 1 (February 2016): 6–35; Kevin Dawson, "Enslaved Ship Pilots in the Age of Revolutions: Challenging Notions of Race and Slavery between the Boundaries of Land and Sea," *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 1 (fall 2013), 71–100; Michael J. Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680–1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Charles R. Foy, "'Unkle Somerset's freedom': Liberty in England for Black Sailors," *Journal for Maritime Research* 13, no.1 (spring 2011): 21–36; Philip D. Morgan, "Maritime Slavery" *Slavery & Abolition* (hereafter "S & A") 31, no. 3 (September 2010): 311–26; Charles R. Foy, "Eighteenth-Century 'Prize Negroes': From Britain to America," *S & A* 31, no. 3 (September 2010): 379–93; Clarence Maxwell, "Enslaved Merchants, Enslaved Merchant Mariners, and the Bermuda Conspiracy of 1761," *Early American Studies* 7, no. 1 (spring 2009): 140–78 (hereafter cited as *EAS*); Philip D. Morgan, "Black Experiences in Britain's Maritime World," in *Empire, the Sea, and Global History: Britain's Maritime World, c. 1763–c. 1840*, ed. David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 105–33; Cassandra Pybus, "Billy Blue: An African American Journey through Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century," *EAS* 5, no. 2 (fall 2007): 252–87; Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Charles R. Foy, "Seeking Freedom in the Atlantic World, 1713–1783," *EAS* 4, no. 1 (spring 2006): 46–77; and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

the lives of the blacks who worked for them doing maritime labor on land and at sea.²

As Gary Nash has noted, mariners were "the most elusive social group in early American history because they moved from port to port with greater frequency than other urban dwellers, shifted occupations, died young, and...least often left behind traces of their lives on the tax lists or probate records."³ Black mariners are a particularly difficult group of individuals to trace. Relatively few muster or equipage rolls for eighteenth-century British and American merchant ships have survived, and not until 1764 did the Royal Navy require that the birthplace of crew members be noted in naval musters.⁴ The frequent sale of slaves and their usual lack of surnames mean that detailing the lives of enslaved seamen is often an exercise of analyzing fragmentary information that, at best, provides speculative basis for historical conclusions.

The Brown, Lopez, and Arnold mercantile operations offer the means to understand the lives of mariners and maritime workers, as well as how Rhode Island merchants profited from their labor. Each of the three enterprises was active in most sectors of Rhode Island's maritime economy and employed sizable cohorts of African American seamen and

² The *BMD* contains fifty-three fields of data on each of the more than 27,000 individuals. It includes references from ship musters, court records, fugitive and slave sale advertisements, newspaper dispatches, merchant records, and governmental records from more than thirty archives across the Atlantic. Originally developed to support the author's doctoral dissertation concerning how North American fugitive slaves used the maritime industry to obtain freedom, the *BMD* has been expanded to include black mariners and maritime fugitives from other regions within the Atlantic basin. The strengths of the *BMD* are that its size and comprehensiveness enable us to determine if an individual black sailor's life was unique in the time and region where he was employed. Cf. Harold D. Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service, 1798–1869," *Journal of Negro History* 52, no. 4 (October 1967): 275 (author had "uncovered no particular evidence of Negro sailors"). The *BMD* is not a static dataset; over time conclusions may be modified as new information is obtained and integrated into the dataset. Despite its limitations, the *BMD* provides "information we need to assess the typicality" of black life in the Atlantic. Geoffrey Plank, "Sailing with John Woolman," *EAS* 7, no.1 (spring 2009): 51 n15. Terry Baxter, *Frederick Douglass's Curious Audiences: Ethos in the Age of the Consumable Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 105.

³ Gary Nash, *Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 16.

⁴ Even after 1764 many naval ship captains failed to provide the required place of birth information often critical to determining if a particular seaman was of African ancestry.

maritime workers (*Table 1*).⁵ And all created extensive Atlantic networks that enriched them while shaping black workers' lives.⁶ Their mercantile activities also generated considerable documentation regarding black tars and maritime workers. Aaron Lopez's and the Brown family accounts contain numerous references to black maritime labor, while Welcome Arnold's "Labourers Books" offer not simply listings of the scores of blacks employed repairing, loading, and sailing ships, but a good deal of information about the work experiences, finances, and living arrangements of these men. Together these mercantile operations present a unique opportunity to analyze how changes over a half-century in one colony's maritime economy affected black workers.

While John Brown and Aaron Lopez were supportive of slavery, Welcome Arnold actively fought to end Rhode Island's involvement in the African slave trade. For Brown and Lopez the slave trade was a means to diversify their commercial activities. Despite the differences among the three mercantile operations regarding slave trading, in the face of changing economic conditions each modified its business practices and in doing so increasingly relied on black maritime labor in the later years of the eighteenth century.⁷ All three engaged in privateering

⁵ The numbers contained in *Table 1* were compiled based on a review of Boxes 1–14 (Portage Bills, Shipping Records, Articles of Agreement, Correspondence, Accounts and Invoices, 1752–1787) of the Aaron Lopez Papers, Jewish History Center, New York, N.Y. (hereafter cited as JHC), Portage Bills (1758–1778) in the Brown Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, R.I. (hereafter cited as JCBL); and eight Labourers Books (1779–1797) (*Figure 1*), Portage Papers (1778–1797) and Ships' Papers (1778–1797) in the Welcome Arnold Papers, JCBL. (The first two Labourers Books are worm infested and could not be thoroughly reviewed. As a result, the vast majority of blacks identified as working for Welcome Arnold come from the period 1788–1797). The author thanks Michael Tuttle for providing him with much of the Brown family documentation. The lack of racial information in many of these records means it is likely *Table 1* undercounts mariners and maritime workers of African ancestry.

⁶ Holly Snyder, "English Markets, Jewish Merchants, and Atlantic Endeavors: Jews and the Making of British Transatlantic Commercial Culture," in *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800*, ed. Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 72; Bruce Bigelow, "Aaron Lopez: Colonial Merchant of Newport," *New England Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1931): 769 (hereafter cited as *NEQ*).

⁷ Lynne Withey, *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island: Newport and Providence in the Eighteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 94; Seth Rockman, "Slavery and Abolition along the Blackstone," in *Landscape of Industry: An Industrial History of the Blackstone Valley* (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2009), 113.

Table 1. Black Mariners and Maritime Workers Employed by Aaron Lopez, the Brown family, and Welcome Arnold, 1750–1797.

	Black Mariners	Black Maritime Workers	Total
Lopez:	31	126	157
Brown:	21	46	67
Arnold:	70	15	85
Total:	122	187	309

and whaling, with whaling ventures becoming an important component of their businesses in the last quarter of the century.⁸

This analysis divides the second half of the eighteenth century into three distinct time periods: 1750 to 1775, when black maritime employment was largely characterized by enslavement; the American Revolution, when black maritime life was distinguished by the large-scale flight of enslaved men onto naval and privateer vessels; and 1784 to 1800, when the large majority of Rhode Island's black seamen and maritime workers were free.

1750–1775

In the twenty-five years prior to the American Revolution both Aaron Lopez and the Brown family made considerable profits in coastal trading and selling whale oil and candles, activities in which each employed slaves on land and at sea. Although the Browns' first attempt in the African slave trade was unprofitable, eventually they, particularly John Brown, came to profit from it.⁹ Slave trading also helped make Aaron Lopez wealthy. In twenty-one voyages to Africa Lopez's ships brought an estimated 2,290 slaves to the Americas.¹⁰ Lopez's and the Browns' slave trade profits were increased by their use of enslaved mariners, including Negro Cezar, who worked on their slave ships. Such employment

⁸ *Ships and Shipmasters of Old Providence* (Providence, R.I.: Institute for Savings, 1920), 35; Robert A. Geake, *A History of the Providence River: With the Moshassuck, Moonasquatucket, and Seekonk Tributaries* (Charleston, S.C.: History Press, 2013), 35. When Lopez left Newport during the Revolution, he sent out at least two whaling ships from Massachusetts. Lee M. Friedman, "Some Further Sidelights on Aaron Lopez," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 45, no. 4 (April 1955): 275.

⁹ *Trans-Atlantic Slave Database* (hereafter cited as *TASD*), <http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/UUjEms5Z>; "The Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally," Brown University, <http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/sally/>.

¹⁰ *TASD*, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyages/2N8gfzSU>.

of enslaved mariners on slaving voyages was not unusual; the same was true on slave ships throughout the Atlantic.¹¹

Lopez and the Browns employed considerable numbers of blacks to outfit, repair, load, and man their ships; it was the rare ship they sent to sea that black hands had not shaped. In assigning slaves to perform such work, they were like many other Rhode Island merchants who used blacks to outfit and sail their ships.¹² The Browns' and Lopez's maritime workforce also frequently included hired bondsmen. The slaves of Christopher Champlin, the Malbones, William Goddard, and a score of other Rhode Islanders all performed maritime jobs for the Browns and Lopez. Prince Sanford, Cato Thurston, and Negro Briggs worked alongside the Browns' and Lopez's slaves and white maritime workers. The use of slaves provided shipowners with a more reliable source of labor than free whites, who had the option to seek other employment. The temporary hiring of enslaved workers afforded further labor flexibility,



Figure 1. Welcome Arnold, Labourers Book, No. 3. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

¹¹ See, e.g., Benjamin Freebody 1784 Letters, Mss 9003, vol. 16: 97–103, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, R.I. (hereafter cited as RIHS); Christopher Champlin Papers, 1700–1840, RIHS; Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730–1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*; Ty M. Reese, “Company Slaves at Cape Coast Castle, 1750–1807, *S & A* 31, no. 3 (September 2010): 367–68; Sarah Deutsch, “The Elusive Guineamen: Newport Slavers, 1735–1774,” *NEQ* 55, no. 2 (June 1982): 234; *BMD*.

¹² See, e.g., Christopher Champlin Papers, 1700–1840, RIHS.

enabling owners to quickly respond to market demands while proving less costly than the purchase of additional slaves. This reliance on black maritime labor also extended to the Browns and Lopez, who had slaves repair their ships while in other ports, be it Kingston, Surinam, Curacoa, or Charleston.¹³

In hiring slaves such as Samuel Warner's Tobey Negro, the Browns and Lopez sought to maximize their profits. But their power to do so was not without limit. They sometimes felt it necessary to grant their slave mariners privilege, i.e., permission to bring on board goods to trade.¹⁴ None of their enslaved mariners was able, as had been Olaudah Equiano, to accumulate sufficient funds through trading to purchase his freedom, however.¹⁵ The explanation for this appears to be that no enslaved mariner working for the Browns or Lopez was employed for more than two voyages, whereas Equiano was regularly posted at sea by his West Indies master.¹⁶

While Rhode Island's shipowners sought profits through black maritime labor, enslaved individuals saw maritime labor as a door to possible permanent freedom. Colonial newspapers reported Rhode Island slaves with “designs to get off to Sea,” engaging in a “conspiracy” to flee via the sea, having “gone to New York” to seek a berth, “supposed to escape by Sea,” fled wearing “Sailors Trowsers” or “much tarred” breeches, or having “went off on board the Sloop Free Mason.”¹⁷ Such maritime flight led to legislation forbidding slaves to board ferries alone and allowing slave masters to search ships for their runaway bondsmen.¹⁸ These measures were largely ineffective in stemming the flow of maritime fugitives. Instead, slaves' ability to flee via the sea made some

¹³ See, e.g., Aaron Lopez Papers, Brigantine *Charlotte*, Box 1, Folder 11, p. 081, and Box 1, Folder 13, p. 009.

¹⁴ Copy of Vice-Admiralty Court, New Providence, Decree, dated 4 July 1760, Obadiah Brown and Co. Papers, Box 633, Folder 3, JCBL; 26 November 1761 Samuel Warner invoice, Obadiah Brown and Co. Papers, Box 549, Folder 5.

¹⁵ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London, 1790), 169–75, 188–91. Nor did the Browns' or Lopez's enslaved workers obtain freedom through the fortunate draw of a lottery. Cf. John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730–1830* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 78.

¹⁶ In contrast, W. Jeffrey Bolster found that in the early nineteenth century 21 percent of blacks made three voyages in a seven-year period. Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 178.

¹⁷ *Boston New-England Weekly Journal*, 3 May 1731; *Boston Post-Boy*, 21 January 1740; *Boston News-Letter*, 4 February 1743; *Boston Evening-Post*, 11 June 1744; *New-York Mercury*, 21 March 1763, 24 November 1764; and *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, 1 July 1769, 3 November 1770.

¹⁸ John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10 vols. (Providence, R.I.: A. C. Greene, 1859), 4:159.

slave owners more willing to negotiate with their slaves over both conditions of enslavement and, on occasion, manumission.¹⁹

During the Seven Years' War the Browns and Lopez engaged in privateering, an activity "the whole business" of Rhode Island was devoted to.²⁰ Privateering was seen by these men as an opportunity to enrich themselves. Yet it was a risky endeavor. Profits were made only if privateers were fortunate enough to capture an enemy ship, get it back to port, and have an admiralty court condemn the vessel as a properly seized prize. Moreover, in sending privateers to sea, shipowners faced losing their vessels and their entire investments to enemy naval ships and privateers. To mitigate these risks they often sold shares in their privateer ships to others and/or insured their vessels.²¹ In contrast, blacks sent privateering by their masters could not obtain insurance to protect themselves or their families should they be wounded or killed. And ironically, while British officials at times collected the Seamen's Sixpence for enslaved mariners, no Rhode Island black mariner, enslaved or free, benefitted from the program by drawing a pension or being cared for at the Greenwich Hospital.²²

The Browns and Lopez also appear to have been careful regarding the risks involved in where their enslaved mariners sailed. Each rarely employed slave sailors on voyages to Europe; among the sixty-seven voyages taken by black sailors on Brown or Lopez ships from 1750 to 1775 for which the ports they sailed to are known, only two were to European ports. This is undoubtedly a reflection that most Rhode Island shipping prior to the Revolution was in the Western Atlantic. But it was also likely to have been a strategic decision by shipowners to avoid sending their bondsmen to free ports. Whatever the reason for where slave mariners sailed, the effect was to keep them away from ports where they might have been able to claim freedom.²³ The net result was that in this period, although scores of enslaved Rhode Island seamen sought permanent freedom via the sea, the vast majority of enslaved mariners and mar-

¹⁹ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 95.

²⁰ 10 October 1756 letter from Rufus Hopkins, Box 3, Folder 9, Brown Papers, JCBL.

²¹ See, e.g., 11 December 1760 letter from Francis and Relfe to Obadiah Brown and Nicholas Brown, Box 7, Folder 2, Brown Papers, JCBL.

²² Foy, "The Royal Navy's Employment," 17–18; Lopez Papers, Ship *Cleopatra*, Box 3, Folder 10, p. 27. The applicability of the Seamen's Sixpence to slave seamen was not always clear to colonial officials. Some, such as Alexander Thompson, argued that collection of the assessment for work performed by slave mariners was appropriate as employing slaves "prevents the growth of white Seamen." On the eve of the American Revolution the customs commissioners notified Thompson that the duty was "not demandable" as slaves were not "intitled to Wages, or shares of Profits." Joseph R. Frese, "Henry Hulton and the Greenwich Hospital Tax," *American Neptune* 31, no. 3 (July 1971): 205–6.

²³ For an example of how European ports could provide opportunities for freedom, see Foy, "Unkle Somerset's freedom," 22–29.

itime workers in Rhode Island had, at best, very limited opportunities to obtain it.²⁴

American Revolution

The American Revolution dramatically altered Rhode Island's maritime economy. With maritime insurance rates rising precipitously and British ships blockading Narragansett Bay, the usual modes of maritime profit were perilous. As did Salem fishing shipowners, the Browns, Arnold, and other Rhode Island shipowners turned their attention to privateering, believing it to be a "most profitable business."²⁵ The Browns were particularly aggressive in attempting to profit from the war. Purchasing ships for privateering even before Congress authorized the issuance of privateering commissions, the Browns made considerable monies privateering during the Revolution, as did Welcome Arnold.²⁶

Aaron Lopez was not successful in the changed circumstances the Revolution brought. While Lopez on the eve of the war had been Newport's richest resident, British occupation of Newport resulted in his suffering monumental losses. Lopez, the Browns, and all Rhode Island slave owners faced the additional difficulty of controlling bondsmen in this period of confusion and fluidity.²⁷ To their owners' consternation slaves often took advantage of these circumstances to flee to the Royal Navy seeking permanent freedom.

Lord Dunmore's Proclamation in 1775 promised freedom to enslaved people who fought for the British. In response hundreds of slaves fled to British forces.²⁸ When Royal Navy vessels entered a river, bay, or an inlet, be it in Virginia, South Carolina, New York, or Rhode Island,

²⁴ Manumitting a slave in colonial Rhode Island required the posting of a substantial bond. As a result, few manumissions were issued. Most slaves manumitted were either too old to work or freed upon their owner's death. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 232; Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 280–98. Maritime flight did not always provide runaways with economic independence. For example, when two of John Brown's slaves fled, they eventually returned to him "miserable and naked." Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 57.

²⁵ A. B. Leonard, "The Pricing Revolution in Maritime Insurance," 19, <http://eh.net/eha/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Leonard.pdf>; Rappleye, *Sons of Providence*, 201–2; Christopher Magra, *The Fisherman's Cause: Atlantic Commerce and Maritime Dimensions of the American Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁶ Geake, *A History of the Providence River*, 35.

²⁷ Elaine Forman Crane, *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island, in the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 161.

²⁸ Cassandra Pybus, "Jefferson's Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (April 2005): 243–64 (hereafter cited as *WMQ*).

slaves regularly escaped to them. While this occurred more frequently in southern states, northern slaves also took advantage of the presence of Royal Navy vessels. Efforts of white masters and politicians to deter slaves from seeking freedom at sea were frequently ineffective.²⁹

HMS *Rose* demonstrates this well. In 1775 the *Rose* was posted at Rhode Island. No fewer than 25 blacks, or between 21 percent and 26 percent of the frigate's crew, served on the *Rose* between 1775 and 1777, none of whom appears to have been on board when it arrived in Rhode Island. Fugitive slaves entering the *Rose*, such as Prince Brown and Tall Weaver, often came aboard as "friends of the government." This enabled some runaways, like Weaver, to serve and eventually become Able Bodied Seamen. Other maritime fugitives, like Prince Brown, were not so fortunate and were recaptured by American forces.³⁰

The movement of Rhode Island fugitive slaves onto naval and other vessels during the Revolution did not result in their finding complete freedom. As Daniel Vickers has observed, all mariners were required to "resign their spirits to continuous subordination." Ships' rigorous maritime hierarchy did not tolerate dissent, particularly from black men.³¹

Despite the war's cutting off African slave imports and many of their slaves running away, Rhode Islanders continued to rely upon enslaved maritime labor. As did colonists elsewhere, the Browns increasingly hired others' slaves during the war.³² And they found a ready source of enslaved labor in captured black enemy seamen, who were regularly condemned as prize goods and sold into slavery.³³ Ezek Hopkins, Commander in Chief of the Continental Navy; shipowners such as the Browns; and seamen saw in captured black sailors a means to enrich themselves.³⁴ Just as importantly, prize proceedings also offered the Browns and other Rhode Island merchants a method to obtain coerced laborers at a time

²⁹ Foy, "Seeking Freedom"; *BMD*. See, e.g., HMS *Brune* Muster Rolls, 1776–1777, TNA ADM 36/7756; HMS *Sphinx* Muster Roll, 1776, TNA ADM 36/10011; HMS *Perseus* Muster Rolls, 1777, TNA ADM 36/8171; Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 6:65.

³⁰ HMS *Rose* Muster Rolls, 1775–79, TNA ADM 36/7947–50.

³¹ Daniel Vickers, "Nantucket Whalers in the Deep-Sea Fishery: The Changing Anatomy of an Early American Labor Force," *JAH* 72, no. 2 (September 1985): 285.

³² Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, N.Y.: University Press, 1966), 50.

³³ Foy, "Eighteenth-Century 'Prize Negroes,'" 385–89. After 1776 Massachusetts was the notable exception to Americans' willingness to treat captured black mariners as prize goods. *Ibid.*, 386.

³⁴ See, e.g., *Newport Mercury*, 16 September 1776; *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, ed. William Bell Clark, 10 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 4:669 and 7:85, 642–43.

when scores of slaves were fleeing to British ships in Narragansett Bay.³⁵

With the arrival in 1780 of the French Navy off Newport most Rhode Island slaves lost their best opportunity for freedom. With Royal Navy ships no longer accessible, as they had been in the early years of the Revolution, the opportunity to find permanent freedom by maritime flight largely ended for Rhode Island's slaves.

Early National Era, 1784–1800

The end of the Revolution meant Rhode Island was no longer a British colony. But did Rhode Island's status as an American state result in new freedoms and economic independence for its black mariners and maritime workers? The answer is not so clear as it would at first blush appear.

In 1784 Rhode Island passed a gradual abolition law providing that males born thereafter to slave women would be freed once they served twenty-one years of servitude. Slave trading, however, was not abolished. As a result, slavery, although on the decline in Rhode Island, survived. As of 1790 there still were almost 1,000 slaves in the state. Thus, while most black mariners and maritime workers in the Early National Period were free, some remained enslaved, and blacks continued to be treated as lesser people. Analysis of Welcome Arnold's operations demonstrates the nature of life for free Rhode Island black mariners and maritime workers in the post-Revolution era.

After the Revolution whaling became an important component in Rhode Island's economy and for both Welcome Arnold and the Browns. This change meant that blacks were now compelled to be at sea for extended periods of time as ships hunted whales in distant locales, such as the Falkland Islands. While black whalers, like George Quam, maintained contact with their families by letter writing, these long voyages put considerable stress on family life.³⁶ Welcome Arnold's Labourers Books indicate that only 3 of his 70 black sailors were married. Whether this was due to choice, being young, or the stress of long whaling voy-

³⁵ *Newport Mercury*, 16 September 1776; *Freeman's Journal*, 21 September 1776. During the Revolution residents of Pennsylvania and New Jersey purchased captured enemy black mariners. Foy, "Eighteenth-Century 'Prize Negroes,'" 388.

³⁶ Arnold, Labourers Book, No. 4 (1790), 91, Welcome Arnold Papers, JCBL. Slave literacy rates were the highest in New England during the colonial era and from the mid-eighteenth century increased in a sustained fashion. Antonio Bly, "'Pretends he can read': Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730–1776," *EAS* 6, no. 2 (fall 2008): 269. In the Early National Era impressed black seamen frequently wrote letters seeking release from service in the Royal Navy. W. Jeffrey Bolster, "Letters by African American Sailors," *WMQ* 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 167–82. It is therefore reasonable to believe that although Quam was the only black whaler to have purchased paper and ink from Welcome Arnold, this is not an accurate reflection of letter writing among Rhode Island's black whalers.

ages is not clear. But such low numbers of married black whalers reinforce maritime historians' understanding that whaling was not an occupation many married men willingly chose.

Arnold's whaling ships also had a higher percentage of blacks than did the crews on his merchant ships. This was in line with the tendency in the late eighteenth century that American whaling ships had higher numbers of black mariners than did merchant ships, no matter which port they sailed from. This circumstance enabled many of Arnold's white mariners to avoid the harsher working conditions on whalers.³⁷ It should be noted, however, that Arnold generally paid his black whalers wages equal to that of his white seamen. As the life of Sweet Luther demonstrates, Arnold was likely to rehire blacks for voyages over multiple years if they proved to be good seamen. Initially serving on Arnold's merchant sloop *Fox* in 1786, Luther thereafter sailed on at least four different whaling voyages for Arnold. Sweet Luther, however, was the sole black mariner among Arnold's seamen who became an officer. Such limited upward mobility for black mariners was also commonplace in other Atlantic labor marketplaces.³⁸ And unlike Luther, most blacks working on Arnold's ships did not have extended careers; the majority only went on one voyage for Arnold.

After the Revolution Rhode Island's trade with the West Indies did not regain its "prewar importance."³⁹ Instead, Rhode Island merchants, such as the Browns and Welcome Arnold, more frequently traded with Europe. As a result, in the Early National Period free blacks frequently found work on ships to Europe. Thus, when one of Welcome Arnold's brigs sailed to Copenhagen in 1785, among its crew were Polidore Gardner and 3 other black seamen.⁴⁰ Gardner and his colleagues were hardly unusual; another 13 Rhode Island black seamen shipped to London, Londonderry, Hamburg, St. Petersburg, Amsterdam, and Ireland. From 1784 to 1798, 61 out of the 113 identified black seamen on Rhode Island vessels either shipped to Europe or went whaling. In being more likely to sail to ports where slavery was not legal, these men were not exposed to

³⁷ Arnold, *Labourers Books*, Nos. 1–8 (1779–1797). From 1784 to 1790 not fewer than 36 black seamen, or more than 40 percent of the blacks employed by the Browns and Welcome Arnold, served on whalers.

³⁸ Arnold, *Labourers Book*, No. 3 (1788–1789), 37; Box 3, Sloop *Fox*, Ship's Papers, 1785 October–November, Portage Bill, September 1785; Box 13, Brigantine *Rebecca*, Ship's Papers, Portage Bill, 1786 May and Portage Bill, 1787 August, Welcome Arnold Papers, JCBL; Box 15, Brigantine *Rebecca*, Portage Bill, 1786 and Ship's Papers, 1788, Welcome Arnold Papers, JCBL; Foy, "The Royal Navy's Employment," 15–16.

³⁹ Rappleye, *Sons of Providence*, 301.

⁴⁰ Box 20, Misc. Ships' Papers, Portage Bills, 1786, Welcome Arnold Papers, JCBL.

being seen as slaves simply due to the color of their skin, as they continued to be in much of the Western Atlantic.⁴¹

While the ports they sailed to may have offered protection for free black sailors, some white Rhode Islanders, like Captain Smith of Providence, still desired to profit from selling black tars into slavery.⁴² Such enslavement of free black mariners sailing out of northern ports was hardly unknown, and it illustrates that although hundreds of black mariners worked at sea and never were kidnapped or sold into slavery, the threat of such an occurrence continued to shape their lives after the Revolution.⁴³ And at the same time, Arnold seamen, like Limbo Robinson, who shipped to Charleston and other southern ports, were imprisoned pursuant to Seamen's Acts. For Robinson, his payment of prison and police fees meant that at the end of an eight-month voyage in 1798 he received no wages, only sundries worth \$11.20.⁴⁴

Given these circumstances, what was it like to be a black employed by Welcome Arnold in the 1780s and 1790s? Arnold regularly hired whites and blacks for repairing his ships, working on the docks, and as seamen.⁴⁵ He retained blacks on an as-needed basis, typically for specific jobs, such as fitting out a ship or manning a particular vessel, with better employees being rehired. Workers also moved among maritime, distillery, or candle-making tasks. Whites and blacks labored side by side for similar wages. So despite there being an apparent glass ceiling to their promotion on ships, blacks engaged by Arnold appear to have been treated well and had opportunities for economic independence.⁴⁶ When compared to life under slavery prior to the Revolution, this did constitute

⁴¹ Barbados Admiralty Court Sentence Upon Captured Negroes, 2 February 1795, *Our Lord the King v Twenty-Eight Negroes*, Opinion of John Straker of the Vice Admiralty Court, Papers of Admiral Sir Benjamin Caldwell, National Maritime Museum, CAL 127 ("the practice...has been to consider Negroes captured from the Enemy as property and consequently condemnable as Prize").

⁴² Dr. Samuel Hopkins to Moses Brown, 9 March 1787, in Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1930–35), 3:341.

⁴³ 4 September 1788 Petition of Philip Johnston, David Library of the American Revolution; Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780–1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 95–96. This risk was understood by whites and blacks alike. Elizabeth Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane, 3 vols. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 3:1898.

⁴⁴ Arnold, *Labourers Book*, No. 5 (1790), 280. The following decade Robinson could have found himself whipped if he had sung "aloud indecent songs" in Charleston. Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 51.

⁴⁵ The Browns also employed a mixed-race maritime labor force in the Early National Era. See, e.g., Providence, R.I., *United States Chronicle*, 22 August 1793.

⁴⁶ Such a ceiling on the promotion of black mariners was hardly limited to Rhode Island ships. Foy, "The Royal Navy's Employment," 15–16.

a significant improvement in black mariners' and maritime workers' lives. But was it the "self-made manhood" that Douglass sought?

A review of Arnold's Labourers Books indicates that an element of dependency characterized many of his black workers' relationship with him. Almost every one of them regularly purchased supplies from Arnold. Sugar, shoes, salt port—the list of items is extensive.⁴⁷ Many times black workers' wages were paid, in part or in full, not in cash but in goods. The prices Arnold charged his workers were not out of line with those charged by other suppliers. And yet a number of his black workers, such as Mintus Martin, were unable to pay their monthly bills. For Plato McClellan, who worked irregularly for Arnold on the New Wharf, and for a score of others, this was undoubtedly because their purchases were almost exclusively limited to rum, for Plato generally a pint a day but sometimes a quart.⁴⁸ Such drinking may have been part of black seamen's letting go on shore and part of their rejection of maritime hierarchy.⁴⁹ But it also made men such as McClellan financially dependent upon shipowners when again on land. Thus, while there is no indication these men fell into debt peonage, for example, litigation to enforce these debts or pledging family members as collateral, it does appear that many struggled to find independence from their employer.⁵⁰

The picture that Arnold's Labourers Books shows of his black mariners' and maritime workers' lives was not one of unalloyed struggle. Several of these men had sufficient monies to buy themselves pleasure items, chocolate, or a handkerchief. Prince Arnold bought ladies' shoes and a pair of boys' stockings, indications of being able to provide for family or kin, while Cato Johnson bought silk scarves for his wife. Several of Arnold's black workers lived together. In a period when boarding-houses were not yet commonplace and other Arnold black workers lived in their employer's housing, such a living arrangement appears to be a sign of men's providing fraternal association and support to each other.⁵¹

It might be best to consider the last quarter of the eighteenth century in Rhode Island as a transitional moment for black mariners and maritime workers. The period between the Treaty of Paris and 1800 saw Newport and Providence begin to fill with black mariners, such as William Fry and his fifteen-year-old son William and the Warwick-born Lippitt family. In moving into Rhode Island's ports, these men found mar-

⁴⁷ Arnold, *Labourers Books*, Nos. 1–8 (1779–1797).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 4 (1790), 91.

⁴⁹ Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 6–7.

⁵⁰ David Silverman, "The Impact of Indentured Servitude on the Society and Culture of Southern New England Indians, 1680–1810," *NEQ* 74, no. 4 (2001): 641–52.

⁵¹ Christy Mikel Clark-Pujara, "Slavery, Emancipation and Black Freedom in Rhode Island, 1652–1842," Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 2009, 197.

itime employment opportunities for multiple generations, escaped the tyranny of masters' control that demarcated the colonial era, and often did not have to bear the economic cost of paying to emancipate family members, a burden that frequently limited free blacks' economic opportunities in earlier decades.⁵² Despite these changes, they still faced enormous roadblocks to fully independent lives. Few of these men could count on regular work. As Welcome Arnold's Labourers Books illustrate, black maritime workers and mariners led transitory lives in which obtaining regular work was a challenge.⁵³ Many became part of the "wandering poor," warned out of towns.⁵⁴ But more importantly, their rights to own property, freedom of movement, and exercise of political rights were very limited. When at sea, they were subject to re-enslavement. When in southern ports, they were imprisoned. When at home in Rhode Island, their rights to intimate relations were constricted; in 1789 interracial marriages were banned in Rhode Island.⁵⁵ Nor did they have full political rights. As "freeborn people of color," they occupied an ambiguous status while living in a state in which slavery was still legal.⁵⁶ For most of Rhode Island's black mariners and maritime workers, full "self-made manhood" was not to be achieved during the eighteenth century.

⁵² Rockman, *Scraping By*, 184.

⁵³ In this regard they were like many common laborers of the era and not dissimilar to black maritime workers in New York during the American Revolution. Rockman, *Scraping By*, 75; Foy, "The Royal Navy's Employment," 21–24.

⁵⁴ Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 157–63.

⁵⁵ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 181.

⁵⁶ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 77.