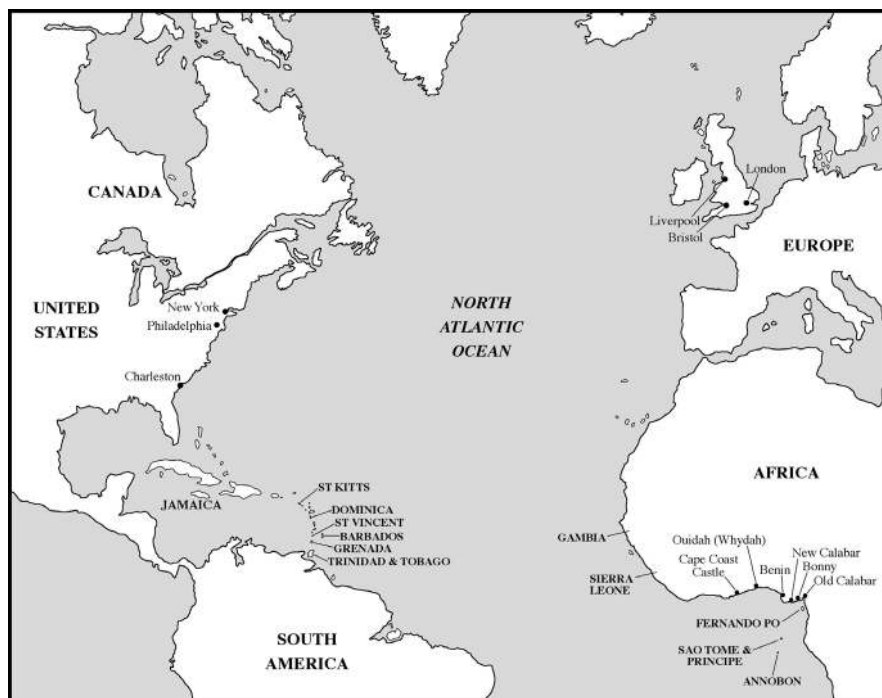


## Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807

Despite the vast literature on the transatlantic slave trade, the role of sailors aboard slave ships has remained unexplored. This book fills that gap by examining every aspect of their working lives, from their reasons for signing on a slaving vessel to their experiences in the Caribbean and the American South after their human cargoes had been sold. It explores how they interacted with men and women of African origin at all of their ports of call, from the Africans they traded with, to the free black seamen who were their crewmates, to the slaves and ex-slaves they mingled with in the port cities of the Americas. Most importantly, it questions their interactions with the captive Africans they were transporting during the dread middle passage, arguing that their work encompassed the commoditization of these people ready for sale.

Emma Christopher gained her PhD from University College London in 2002 and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Historical Studies, Monash University. She has held fellowships from Mystic Seaport Museum, Connecticut; the Huntington Library, California; the National Maritime Museum in London; and the Atlantic World Center at Harvard University. She is the author of several articles on the slave trade and convict transportation. She has travelled extensively in many parts of the world, including wide-ranging travels around areas of West Africa and the Caribbean mentioned in this work.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-67966-4 — Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807  
Emma Christopher  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



The North Atlantic

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-67966-4 — Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807  
Emma Christopher  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

# Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730–1807

EMMA CHRISTOPHER

*Monash University*



Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-67966-4 — Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807  
 Emma Christopher  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India  
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.  
 It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of  
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521679664](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521679664)

© Emma Christopher 2006

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2006

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Christopher, Emma, 1971–

Slave ship sailors and their captive cargoes, 1730–1807 / Emma Christopher.  
 p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-86162-5 (hardback)

ISBN-10: 0-521-86162-4 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-67966-4 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-521-67966-4 (pbk.)

1. Slave trade – Africa – History. 2. Merchant mariners. 3. Slaves.

4. Race relations. I. Title.

HT1321.C48 2006

306.3'62-dc22 2006000225

ISBN 978-0-521-86162-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-67966-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in  
 this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,  
 or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction	I
PART I SAILORS AND SLAVE SHIPS	
1 Slaving Merchants and Merchant Seamen	23
2 The Multiracial Crews of Slave Ships	51
3 The Bloody Rise of Western Freedom	91
PART 2 THE SLAVING VOYAGE	
4 Life in the White Man’s Grave	125
5 Sea Changes	163
6 Lives for Sale	195
Conclusion	226
<i>Appendix 1 Black Sailors on Liverpool Slave Ships, 1794–1805</i>	231
<i>Appendix 2 Black Sailors on Bristol Slave Ships, 1748–1795</i>	234
<i>Appendix 3 Black Sailors on Rhode Island Slave Ships, 1803–1807</i>	236
<i>Index</i>	239

Illustrations

1. Sailors drinking aboard ship. Notice the black seaman at the back. Reprinted with permission of Mary Evans Picture Library, London.	page 41
2. Image of Africans being marched to the coast, as drawn by Captain Samuel Gamble of the <i>Sandown</i> . From the log of the <i>Sandown</i> , held by the National Maritime Museum, London, and reprinted with their permission.	70
3. “A New Map of that part of Africa called Guinea”. Original in William Snelgrave, <i>A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade</i> (London, 1754). Reprinted by permission of New York Public Library.	126
4. Canoes at Elmina. From John Barbot, <i>A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea</i> in Awnsham and Churchill, <i>Collection of Voyages and Travels</i> (London, 1752) vol. 5. Reprinted by permission of New York Public Library.	150
5. Scene aboard a Slave Ship. Reprinted by permission of New York Public Library.	164
6. “Scene of the Blood Stained Gloria”. From Richard Drake, <i>Revelations of a Slave Smuggler</i> (New York, 1860). Reprinted by permission of New York Public Library.	172
7. Sailors polishing slaves’ skin prior to sale. Original in Mayne Reid, <i>The Maroon, or, Planter Life in</i>	

viii	<i>Illustrations</i>	
	<i>Jamaica</i> (New York, 1864). Reprinted by permission of New York Public Library.	195
8.	Slaves arriving in Suriname. From John Gabriel Stedman, <i>Narrative of a Five Year's Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname</i> (London, 1796). Reprinted by permission of New York Public Library.	225

## Abbreviations

Classifications from the National Archives, UK (PRO)

ADM	Admiralty papers
BT	Board of Trade papers
C	Chancery papers
HCA	High Court of the Admiralty papers
HO	Home Office papers
PL	Records of the Palatinate of Lancaster
T	Treasury papers
TS	Treasury Solicitor's papers
ZHC	Publications of the House of Commons, including some of the House of Lords



## Acknowledgements

As this work began as my PhD dissertation at University College London, I would first and foremost like to thank Rick Halpern, supervisor, mentor and friend through times both bad and good. During the process of writing the thesis and latterly turning it into a book I have incurred many debts and would like to thank Marcus Rediker, Cassandra Pybus, Paul Lovejoy, Martin Klein, Catherine Hall, David Richardson and Phillip Morgan for contributing in a range of ways.

I have benefited greatly from various grants and fellowships, and would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Board for providing doctoral funding; the Royal Historical Society for giving a grant to research in the USA and attend a conference in Nigeria; Mystic Seaport Museum where I was a Paul Cuffe Fellow; the Huntington Library where I held a Mellon Fellowship; the Atlantic World Center at Harvard which awarded me a short-term research fellowship to research in Jamaica; and the National Maritime Museum in London where I was a Caird Fellow. Additionally I am grateful to the history department at the University of Pennsylvania where I was a visiting graduate student and the University of Toronto where I taught during the final year of writing my PhD. Just as this project was being completed for publication I was hired by Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and I am grateful to Barbara Caine and the other faculty there for making me very welcome.

A host of friends, too numerous to mention, have made the years of writing this book a pleasure. I'm especially grateful to Julia Drake, Enrico Dal Lago, Frank Deserino, Ralph Kingston, Arlene Hui, Susan Guy, Hilde Kempenaers, Pandora Hay, Tammy and Shaun McMahon, Ros Kane, and Bruce and Nicky Johnson. Susan Guy and Hilde Kempenaers also

played host to me when I returned to London, as did Laurie Walters in New York, Georgiana Cunningham Reynal in Washington, D.C., and Peter and Margaret Turner when I was researching in Bristol. Hans de Klerk helped with the calculations of the overall number of seamen on slave ships. Amanda Pearse and Craig Kelly have provided love, laughter and boundless friendship and I would be lost without them. I would also like to thank my sister Sarah Hill and my nephew and niece Edward and Aletheia Hill for providing a very welcome distraction at various times, and my brother Richard Christopher for his ongoing encouragement and lately his shared love of history.

My largest debt though is to my parents, Brian and Barbara Christopher, who have provided never-failing support of all kinds through the long years of writing this work. Their input to it went well above and beyond the call of duty, and although it is an extremely inadequate return on my debt to them, it is, nevertheless, for them with much love.

## Preface

The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West.

W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>1</sup>

As the three hundred or so captive Africans wallowed below deck, chained two by two, stifling in the heat, the crew of the *Lady Nelson* forgot their imprisoned cargo for a while and began the elaborate maritime ceremony common to the ships of many nations. Sailor Samuel Robinson wrote in his journal that “the old god of the sea is constantly on the lookout for greenhorns” and the ship had to welcome Neptune aboard. Any men who had not crossed the equator before had to perform a forfeit or make a payment of alcohol. This crossing the line ceremony was an essential piece of seaman’s lore and ritual, and to them was not just “childish, foolish, stupid” or any of the other adjectives their officers, and landlubbers, used to describe it. It celebrated a world turned upside down, of authority challenged for a day and replaced by power based on sailors’ own value system. Instead of the captain being in charge, “Neptune”, the oldest and/or most experienced man, held sway for the duration of the ceremony. Seafaring skill rather than social standing, warrant or appointment was the basis of authority. Besides being actors in the “magnificent drama” of slave trading, sailors also performed theatre all of their own as slave ships crossed the ocean.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (London: Frank Cass, 1966) 727.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Robinson, *A Sailor Boy’s Experience Aboard a Slave Ship* (Wigtown: G.C. Book Publishers, 1996) 25–6; Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh’s Bad Language: Passion, Power and*

As in other nautical trades, crossing the line differed between slave ships and over time but it always involved satirizing the hegemony of the ship's rulers. Power and authority were ritually lampooned, along with brutality, inhumanity, and even the omnipresent risk of death. Seamen were engaged in the parody of their own working lives. There were several common elements to the ceremony. Firstly those who had not crossed the equator before would be tried by a mock court, during which they were subjected to "insults, humiliations, injustices, erotic oaths, and compromising choices".<sup>3</sup> With the sentences set, each man would then be shaved "by Neptune's barber" as Samuel Robinson recalled. William Butterworth, another slave trade sailor who appears frequently in this book, reported that the "shaving foam" used on the *Hudibras* in 1786 comprised "tar, oil, and the excrement of fowls".<sup>4</sup> Souse and resin were also sometimes added to the mix.

The next element to the ceremony was commonly ducking the "green-horns" into the deep blue sea. A ducking stool attached to the yardarm was used to lower the men into the water in a parody of hanging. A ship's officers would avoid punishment by paying alcohol or other goods to Neptune, while a sailor might pay off a part of his sentence. For the common seamen though, the number of duckings they withstood was a matter of boasting and pride, an assertion of their right to be accepted into the body of seafarers who were "old salts" and who had ventured widely across the oceans. Meanwhile, the alcohol which was paid to Neptune as forfeits was "merrily drunk by all the rest that had been there before".<sup>5</sup>

Quite what the 300 or so slaves on the *Lady Nelson* or the 360 aboard the *Hudibras* made of these strange rituals is hard to imagine. Probably known to most of those who made the middle passage as captives only as a new and different set of terrifying noises coming from deck, nevertheless the implications of a "world turned upside down" were profoundly changed by the context of transatlantic slavery. Not least, the racial stratification that the slave trade fostered – one unified white race and one

*Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 76–80; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 186–9.

<sup>3</sup> Dening, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* 77.

<sup>4</sup> William Butterworth, *Three Years Adventures of a Minor in England, Africa, the West Indies, South-Carolina, and Georgia* (Leeds: Edward Baines, 1822) 14.

<sup>5</sup> Dening, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* 76–80; Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen 1650–1775* (London: Methuen, 1998) 96–7; British Library Add Mss 39946; John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750–1754* Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (eds.) (London: The Epworth Press, 1962) 9.

*Preface*

xv

unified black race – was both mirrored and disregarded during the ceremony. Free black seamen or cooks were generally greeted by Neptune just as any other crewmember would have been, while the vast majority of the Africans present – those condemned to the doom of the marketplace and perpetual enslavement – were excluded from the entire event. While the “world” of the ship “was turned upside down”, they were locked below decks, beneath that world, a symbolic representation of their future place in the slaveholding societies of the Americas.

Although the historiography on the transatlantic slave trade is vast, traditionally there has been little place for mention of such maritime rituals. This is understandable, as in trying to untangle the motives, effects, and data of the trade, all of which have had such a profound effect on the modern world, the fact that seamen continued their rites while working aboard slave ships seems irrelevant at best, sickening at worst. Encapsulated in these rituals, however, are some truths about these men who were so central to the slave trade. Seamen created a world turned upside down because they were traditionally abused, lowly and powerless. In some ways they continued to see themselves as such aboard a slave ship – and indeed these factors were exaggerated by the conditions of the trade in human beings – although the reality was that they had a great deal of power over those they transported as captives for sale.

The loyalties, opinions, attitudes and motivations of slave trade seamen are the focus of this book. My starting point is the gap between the image they have in the history of the slave trade and the way they are described in the literature on seamen in all trades. In the first they appear rarely, and then mainly as adjuncts to the will of the captain, as his subordinates in the violence and cruelty inflicted on the millions of African captives transported as cargo across the Atlantic Ocean. While in no way denying the wrongs sailors did to members of their human cargoes, this view is contradictory to the view of seafarers working in other maritime trades in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> As will be shown, there were steadfast divisions operating in the slave trade which decisively separated sailors from their captains and senior officers. Faced with the perilous event of a slave revolt, sailors threw these divisions to the winds to save their own lives as well as, in the process, securing the merchants’

<sup>6</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil*; Marcus Rediker, “Common Seamen and the Histories of Capitalism and the Working Class” *International Journal of Maritime History* 1 (1989); Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York’s Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland Press, 1997).

profits. In less extreme situations, however, the common sailor generally had few allegiances to his captain's worldview, much fewer still to those of the trade's financial investors.

Outside of slave trade historiography, the image of eighteenth-century white sailors is one of men who, united by class and professional loyalties, could be more accepting of having black men as colleagues than their non-seafaring peers. Clearly this is hard to reconcile with popular ideas about the seamen who worked aboard slaving vessels. Yet the maritime workforce had always been multiracial in nature as it enticed men from all around the edges of the seas into it in a variety of roles. Combined with a "morbid attachment to their profession" and an ersatz kinship system among sailors, this led to an occupation which often confounded the prevailing racial categorizations in an era when increasingly impermeable divisions of black and white were being formulated.<sup>7</sup> Historians such as Jeffrey Bolster, Julius Scott and David Cecelski have shown how white and black seamen worked alongside each other from Canada down to the Caribbean in ways which sometimes defied the strict racial divisions of eighteenth-century America.<sup>8</sup>

While the focus of Bolster, Scott and Cecelski's work is primarily black seafarers – their interaction with white sailors is largely a secondary concern – the work of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker takes the image of seaman and slave as colleagues, co-conspirators and allies much further. Building on their earlier work and the tradition of the radical Atlantic, in *The Many-Headed Hydra* they argue that seamen and slaves worked together around the ocean's littoral to oppose the rise of

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, *A Sailor Boy's Experience* 32–3; Rediker, *Between the Devil* 243–4.

<sup>8</sup> W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); W. Jeffrey Bolster, "To Feel Like a Man': Black Seamen in the Northern States 1800–1860" *Journal of American History* 76 (1990) 1173–1199; W. Jeffrey Bolster, "An Inner Diaspora: Black Sailors Making Selves" Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel and Frederika J. Teute (eds.) *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 419–448; Julius S. Scott III, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution" Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Duke University (1986); Julius S. Scott, "Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, Sailors and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century" Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman (eds.) *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 1996); Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers" Richard Twomey and Colin Howell (eds.) *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labor* (New Brunswick: Acadiensis Press, 1991); David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

*Preface*

xvii

capitalism. Along with various other dispossessed groups of people, they view seamen and slaves as having shared loyalties and understandings which they used to unite in opposing the wealthy merchants and planters who oppressed them. Linebaugh and Rediker's argument is multifaceted and their time scale and scope far greater than mine, but nonetheless positioning these arguments within the history of the transatlantic slave trade is challenging.<sup>9</sup>

In trying to understand how these diverse schools of thought apply to the men who worked aboard slaving vessels, this book explores how slave trade sailors expanded their cries for liberty because of their working conditions and terms of employment. As has been acknowledged in other settings, those who experienced slavery in close relief often came to recognize the importance of liberty all the more. Sailors fought any comparison of their condition with that of African captives and took that fight into their larger battle for better pay, fair treatment and liberty from the naval press and merchant crimps around the Atlantic world. At the same time, during the dread middle passage, seamen used their own brutalization and turned it, redoubled, onto those they had under their command. So often under the coercive rule of a slave ship captain, a common seaman could suddenly conceive himself as powerful when standing guard over the hatch of a stinking, fetid, slave hold. Regularly himself ordered to strip off and endure the lash, a sailor rarely showed restraint when ordered to flog a member of the captive cargo.

In participating in the business of the slave trade, seamen were undoubtedly implicated in the formation of racial designations in the late eighteenth century, which created a notion of racial supremacy that ran counter to the way in which seafaring in general operated. The historiographical debate into the formation of "white" as a meaningful racial category consequently has implications for seamen's work aboard slaving vessels. As historians such as David Roediger, Theodore Allen, Matthew Frye Jacobson and Eric Lott have argued, working-class men came to see their white skin as meaningful when they were in close contact with racial slavery in North America.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, white seamen could obviously see

<sup>9</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London: Verso, 1997); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy*

the value of their own skin colour, because, whatever their own lack of liberty, it was what ultimately protected them from the slave markets of America and the Caribbean.

Yet white seamen's workmates aboard slaving vessels were of many different ethnic origins and included African, African-American and Afro-Caribbean co-workers. In Africa and the Caribbean sailors formed alliances across the colour-line as that line came to be conceived in the plantation societies to which they sold their human merchandise. The slave trade swept countless Africans and their descendents into the Atlantic labour force as maritime workers, creating allegiances among the seafaring community which could confound the larger racial stratification of plantation societies and were often seen as threatening by the authorities. Just as the paradigm of "transatlantic" has more recently been exchanged for a "circum-Atlantic" viewpoint, so the history of slave trade sailors suggests that their influences and motivations often led simultaneously down multi-directional, and sometimes contradictory, channels.<sup>11</sup>

Exploring his concept of the "black Atlantic", Paul Gilroy describes a ship as "a living, microcultural, micropolitical system in motion" and urges his readers to get aboard. Following in his wake, I can only ask readers to do the same.<sup>12</sup> "The sea" as Derek Walcott declared, "is history".<sup>13</sup>

*of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History" David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (eds.) *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 16-18.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History" *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).