Introduction

America began as a maritime nation. Before expansion across a continent and the mythology of the western frontier captured imaginations, Americans traversed the deep Atlantic, and were entranced by the oceanic eastern frontier. Before settlement and urbanization scarred the landscape, commerce and the specter of the seascape transfixed the nation. Before Americans proclaimed their mastery of industrial technology, they built incredible sailing machines that spread across the globe. Americans have all but forgotten their maritime origins.

To Swear Like a Sailor seeks to resuscitate that memory by exploring the intimate connections between maritime and mainstream cultures. In *Liberty on the Waterfront* I traced the impact of the age of revolution (1750–1850) on the people of the American waterfront, examining how their world was and was not changed by the ideals of liberty and equality.[1] When I finished that book, I wished to study further certain issues and questions concerning how to decipher the diverse sources I had been examining. I therefore started writing *To Swear Like a Sailor* as a series of semiautonomous essays on how historians can gain insight into the world of Jack Tar – the deepwater sailor – through creative reading of the types of documents at our disposal. If the chapters in this book began as semiautonomous, they have not remained that way. This book has become more than a study of the methodologies in "reading" maritime culture. As I wrote chapter after chapter I came to realize that, although there is much that is unique and peculiar to the world of Jack Tar, the bigger story was that despite many differences, maritime culture was merely one component of a larger Anglo-American culture coated with saltwater. Perhaps this relationship is most evident in material not in this book. When I started to write about the political slogan "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights," I discovered that I had so much to say that it

quickly ballooned into a book on its own. That work centers on the welding of Enlightenment ideas about political economy espoused by many of the Revolution's leaders – the Founding Fathers – with the practical concerns of personal freedom by common seamen – the Jack Tars – in one catchphrase that emerged at the beginning of the War of 1812.[2] If this connection is evident in a maritime motto used in politics in a discussion not included in this volume, it can also be seen in the chapters that are. Moreover, the relationship between mainstream and maritime culture demonstrated both change and continuity over time that manifested itself in several different areas, including ideas about gender and class, the movement toward American independence, the democratization of society, and the alterations in the cultural landscape and seascape that accompanied the shift from Enlightened rationalism to Romantic sentimentalism.

Scholars, of course, have examined the maritime world and noted its role in early American history. Several of these historians have illuminated a complex nautical heritage and emphasized the variety of experiences of the men who went to sea. Some sailors were fishermen who repeatedly sailed from the same port and were closely connected to the land-based community. Others became whalers who journeyed to distant oceans for years at a time. Still others became itinerant seamen with no single base of operations. Some sailors cruised aboard coastal vessels; others served on privateers and naval ships in times of war. Any given seaman might engage in one or more of these activities. Each of these experiences also entailed an array of labor conditions dependent on ship category and crew size. The nature of maritime activity changed over time in the period under consideration in this book. Indeed, compounding distinctions in blue-water navigation was the growth of brown-water navigation on rivers and bays in the nineteenth century as well as on the proliferating canals that began to crisscross the nation in the 1820s and 1830s, and the emergence of a separate shipping industry on the Great Lakes. Deepwater vessels became larger and more complex, trade routes expanded, and voyages lengthened. Moreover, race and place of origin had an impact on what it meant to be a sailor. Although I have often relied on and have been informed by the work of the historians who have amplified these distinctions, and while I appreciate the important variations of the maritime experience, my book focuses on a larger, overarching cultural nautical world centered mainly on blue-water sailors involved in long distance coastal or cross-ocean voyages. The aim here is to articulate a generic American maritime culture – identified with the

ubiquitous Jack Tar – and trace how this world reflected, intersected, and interacted with the rest of society.[3]

I have also been influenced by several other important currents of scholarship on the American Revolution and the early republic. I began my career with an interest in what in the 1960s and 1970s was called the "new social history." This field sought to extend our understanding of the past by looking at those individuals – poor people, women, African Americans, and Native Americans – who had been previously ignored in the traditional story of the big shots. As a graduate student in the 1970s I eagerly embraced this field and wrote about riots. Since that time I have remained committed to the study of the "inarticulate" – a term sometimes used to describe the subjects of the "new social history" – as any perusal of this book and of my previous publications will show.[4]

Building on this work, in the 1990s and early 2000s scholars extended the interest in the inarticulate to politics. Crucial to this development has been consideration of the public sphere. Jurgen Habermas originally defined the public sphere as the expansion of the discussion of politics and ideas to a larger public comprised mainly of the rising middle class in the eighteenth century through print in books, pamphlets, and newspapers. Historians of Revolutionary America have taken this concept and applied it to a wide array of expressions of political culture and to groups beyond the middle class, including lower-class males, women, and African Americans. Even if I do not focus on politics, the chapters in this book discuss the interactions between the maritime and mainstream cultures through language, ideas, behavior, the printed word, images, and material goods that were connected to the public sphere.[5]

Similarly, recent decades have seen an explosion of scholarship in the burgeoning field of Atlantic history which centers on the interconnectedness between the shores washed by the waters of the Atlantic. These historians emphasize cross-oceanic networks and view the Atlantic as a highway that transmitted ideas, goods, and people. Atlantic history is more transnational than national and encompasses both the age of exploration and the age of revolution. As a field, Atlantic history has forced scholars to rethink a host of relationships and allows us to approach the past with a new understanding reaching beyond borders and incorporating politics, economics, ideology, migrations (especially the slave trade), and even the environment. Any study of sailors in the 1750 to 1850 period by definition is in part Atlantic history and must touch on most, if not all, of the key areas of the subject. But many of the characters I have studied not only sailed the Atlantic, they also entered the Pacific,

Indian, and Arctic Oceans. As they traveled the seven seas, they brought with them their cultural baggage and brought back experiences that ran the gamut from the mundane to the exotic. The insights of Atlantic history have helped me to understand that experience, but I also recognize that what I have written is part national history, part Atlantic history, and part global history.[6]

This book, which focuses on the era in which what became the United States moved from a colonial to an independent status, demonstrates the "postcolonial" nature of American culture and the subsequent emergence of an American nationalism during the early republic. Despite the creation of the United States, as the postcolonial studies tell us, there remained a heavy reliance on British culture and taste. My research demonstrates that this colonial dependence continued in expressions of maritime culture. Informed by this scholarship, I will draw connections between the British antecedents of American cultural forms when necessary, and trace the emerging cultural independence that accompanied both the democratization of society and a shift from the reason of the Enlightenment to the sentimentality and passion of Romanticism.[7]

I have written a cultural history that relies heavily on a careful dissecting and reading of evidence. This approach has led me to venture into areas where I was not always comfortable, confident, or perhaps even competent. I know that much of what I have written delves into areas of expertise, like literary and critical studies, as well as the history of language, reading, books, songs, and art, where I am barely a novice. As much as possible I strove to learn something about each of these areas. But I also wanted to push on, write this book, and put my ideas down on paper. To those experts whose territory I have trampled on I ask some tolerance. I seek to establish no imperial claims. Instead, like so many of the sailors I write about, I hope only to sail upon distant seas, write about my impressions, and then report back to others all the wondrous and interesting sights.[8]

I begin my analysis with swearing. Perhaps, given the title of this book, I do not need to comment about my use of certain words. Yet I feel compelled to point out that I use some language that only a few decades ago would have been unprintable, and that even today I am personally uncomfortable using in public. Considering the nature of the subject, I believe that relying on dash marks or writing around such words is inappropriate. So reader be forewarned: you will see some swear words in this book. But also be apprized that whenever I use these words I do so within an "academic" context.

As it turns out, anyone could swear like a sailor. Within the larger culture sailors may have had pride of place in swearing. But how they swore and the reasons for the bad language they used were not strictly wedded to things maritime. Instead, sailor swearing, indeed all swearing during this period, was connected to larger developments within mainstream culture. What, then, did it mean to swear like a sailor? Put simply, it was to call someone a "damned son of a bitch." Today, we recognize many different severe swear words. No doubt, as the dictionary tells us, much of that foul language existed in previous centuries. Why would sailors fight over being called a "damned son of a bitch?" The answer is twofold. First, "damn" was a strong word in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that was tantamount to taking the name of the Lord in vain. Second, "son of a bitch" had a gendered meaning that struck the American seafaring male to his very core – insulting his mother, as well as all that she represented. The potency of this phrase emerged out of changing ideas about class and gender, and the profanity that came to predominate in the forecastle both reflected and affected the profanity the rest of society used.

If anyone could swear like a sailor, was there anything different about the language of Jack Tar? Absolutely. Seamen did have a special argot which became stereotyped over time. Jack Tar emerged as a persona for the generic sailor in the eighteenth century in England, crossed the Atlantic during the colonial period, and was adopted by the newly independent United States. On stage and in the popular press, Jack Tar became a stock figure in mainstream culture and his language could be enjoyed and understood by many people in the rest of society. In the years before the Civil War the dulcet sounds of the sailor were written into literature as they appeared in the exaggerated expressions of fictional characters like Dick Fid in James Fenimore Cooper's *Red Rover* and the maritime preacher, Father Mapple, in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Other published sources, even those written by sailors, may have played up the language for effect. Unpublished journals and letters sometimes contained "sailor language," but often did not. We will never know how much of this sailor language reflected the spoken word and how much reflected the medium. Jack Tar used two types of language. One can be found in the colorful maritime metaphors in the novels of Cooper and Melville; the other was the technical language of the sea which gave birth to those metaphors. Sailors relied on both to set themselves apart from the rest of the culture and to also demonstrate their own expertise. When sailors used the technical language of the sea in their writing, they offered

a testimony to their authenticity as seamen writers. Taking that technical language and applying it in metaphors extended that statement of authenticity to the point of exaggeration. By the early nineteenth century sailors recognized that their language had to fulfill a stereotype if they were to be believable as seamen. But this language was intelligible to the rest of society. Because America was a maritime nation, references to the parts of a ship which we cannot understand were comprehensible to a people who lived almost within hailing distance of the sea.

We will also examine a specific maritime artifact – the logbook. The logbook had nautical origins: it was a means of recording speed, location, and direction that assisted in navigation. It emerged as an invaluable aid to the mariner as he left the close confines of sailing in sight of land and ventured into deep water and across oceans. Indeed, the logbook became a tool of empire, contributing to the success of European overseas ventures. Gradually, however, it emerged as something beyond a recitation of wind, wave, and weather. It also became the sailor's memory tool. As more and more sailors kept sea journals, and as more and more logbooks began to contain personal commentary, logbooks became a way of looking at the world. The idea of thinking about life as some great sea journey did not begin with logbooks. But the logbook helped to give shape to the idea – an idea that became increasingly important in the democratized, sentimental, and Romantic world of the nineteenth century. Ultimately a host of American authors, giant literary figures as well as impoverished chroniclers of a hard life at sea and ashore, brought the logbook of memory into mainstream culture.

Logbooks might have been a way to remember and order a story, but the art of the story went beyond the logbook. Our discussion of spinning yarns examines both the etymology of this wonderfully evocative nautical phrase and the role of storytelling in maritime and mainstream culture. Sailors have always told stories. The nature of their occupation, which sent them across the ocean to face storms, combat pirates, visit distant places, and encounter a host of adventures, lent itself to storytelling. Moreover, seamen honed the skill of storytelling into an art form during long night watches, or in taverns, or in any spare moment that might occur at sea or on land. At some point in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century sailors began to label this art form "spinning yarns," a notion connected to one of the menial tasks seamen had to labor on aboard ship. The metaphor of twisting fibers together to form a longer skein of rope seemed to fit the way sailors told their stories, offering little bits and pieces of information that tied together and formed a

larger narrative. Eventually, through a convoluted passage into the criminal underworld and banishment to Botany Bay, the phrase worked its way into print. By the 1830s it had become a standard part of the published lexicon embraced by Jack Tar and the rest of society. Indeed, the yarn-spinning sailor emerged as a powerful representative of the folklore that became such a central part of the Romantic era. Sailors told all sorts of stories while spinning yarns, and like the logbook, this form of nautical narrative seeped into literature. Before Herman Melville wrote a single novel, he practiced his storytelling skills by spinning yarns.

Connected to storytelling is the ability to sing. Ballads about seamen have a long tradition in Anglo-American culture. A huge body of literature exists on songs used by sailors. Much of it is on songs and shanties from the second half of the nineteenth century. Antecedents, however, reach back at least to the seventeenth century in an English ballad tradition that expressed key ideas about the seaman as a defender of the nation and as a purveyor of commerce. These ballads cast a popular image of the mariner as the jolly jack who caroused ashore, but could also show him forming more meaningful land-based attachments. These themes were carried over into the eighteenth century as reflected in song and on stage. The sailor became a standard character of the period's theater in both England and America. This importance was connected to the rise of nationalism in the United Kingdom and in the United States. In Great Britain the sailor came to stand for the ability of the British people to prevent invasion and to establish an overseas empire. This image and this sense of nationalism were transferred to the colonies and then the United States. The common seaman became increasingly important to American identity in the 1790s and early 1800s. But who was this American Jack Tar? The answer goes to the heart of the sailor's self-identification. These popular tunes, often borrowed directly from the British and then adapted to the American setting, were important to seamen. Sailor music went beyond patriotism and nationalism. Used for both work and entertainment, the themes of this music also included sex, sentimental images of women, pirates, and shipwrecks. Although a persistent thread connected these songs through the centuries, by the antebellum era the raunchiest lyrics were largely relegated to the emerging category of work songs we call shanties.

Reading, too, was important to the sailor. And what he read was not all that different from what the rest of society read. Sailors loved stories about pirates. But so did most everyone else. *The Pirates Own Book*, which first appeared in 1837, was immensely popular even as it was

condemned by some as frivolous and dangerous because it seemed to idealize the life of the pirate. *The Pirates Own Book* built on a long tradition of sea stories and was part of a larger print revolution based on spreading literacy, changes in publishing technology, enhanced illustration, and new methods of marketing. Sailors, like landsmen and landswomen, read a wide variety of books. Indeed, seamen even read literature written by and about women. Religious groups also took advantage of the print revolution to reach and to reform seamen. In short, we will explore what sailors read, ranging from the outrageous to the quotidian. Our aim will be to gain insight into the worldview of sailors, as well as to examine the intersection between that worldview and the rest of society.

The tar-stained images of seamen are an important component of this analysis and reinforce the interconnections between what happened on land and what occurred at sea. We will begin with the image of sailors in the popular media in the eighteenth century and trace a shift from portraying the sailor as something of a buffoon and clown, as appeared in British caricatures during the Anglo-French wars, to emerging as a proud symbol of the American nation. We will then turn to an examination of images created by sailors. Seamen accepted the new vision of the sailor in the nineteenth century and used that image when depicting themselves for others. But when it came to a sailor's personal art in his journals or on his body a mariner was more interested in noting the world around him or the world he left behind. In this context pictures of his ship were more important than portrayals of himself or other seamen. When it came to crafting scrimshaw or other material goods he might create images of the ideal sailor because he frequently made these goods for others, and for domestic use at home.

Packing and unpacking a sea chest forms a convenient way to summarize the interaction between maritime and mainstream culture. Although the size of the sea chest might vary and some of the goods kept in its confines changed over time, this physical object reminds us of the continuity of Jack Tar's world. Contained within the wooden walls of this box were all of the mariner's personal possessions, ranging from the clothes he wore to everything he held precious. The sea chest accompanied the sailor as he traveled across the wide ocean, and returned with him when he came back home. This connection between land and water that the sea chest represented reveals how in the great age of sail America was truly a maritime nation.