Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America

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HERE comes Jack Tar, his bowed legs bracing him as if the very Broadway beneath his feet might begin to pitch and roll.¹ In his dress he is, in the words of a superior, "very nasty and negligent," his black stockings ragged, his long, baggy trousers tarred to make them waterproof.² Bred in "that very shambles of language," the mer-

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¹ His walk was sometimes described as a "waddle," New-York Gazette; or the Weekly Post-Boy, Sept. 3, 1759. Seamen were often called Jack Tar in England and in the colonies, for example, ibid., Oct. 15, 1770. The term was used more or less interchangeably along with "seaman," "sailor," and "mariner," with the latter frequently connoting "master" (as in Panel of Jurors [n.d.], New York Supreme Court, Pleadings P-2689, Office of County Clerk, Hall of Records, New York City, where seven of ten "mariners" are identifiable as captains by comparison with such sources as The Burghers of New Amsterdam and the Freemen of New York, 1675-1866 [New-York Historical Society, Collections, XVIII (New York, 1886)], passim; N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, passim; and the especially valuable list of privateer captains in Stuyvesant Fish, The New York Privateers, 1756-1763 [New York, 1945], 83-90. In this article Jack Tar is a merchant seaman, a "sailor" is in the Royal Navy, and a "mariner" is the captain of a merchant vessel. If a source calls a man a "mariner" or a "sailor" I have had to have evidence that he was in fact a merchant seaman before I would count him as one. For a useful discussion of terms see I. M. V., "Note," Mariner's Mirror, VII (1921), 351.

chant marine, he is foul-mouthed, his talk alien and suspect. He is Jolly Jack, a bull in a china shop, always, in his words, "for a Short Life and a Merry one," and, in the concurring words of his superiors, "concerned only for the present . . . incapable of thinking of, or inattentive to, future welfare," "like froward Children not knowing how to judge for themselves."

Clothes don't make the man, nor does language; surely we can do better than these stereotypes. Few have tried. Maritime history, as it has been written, has had as little to do with the common seaman as business history has had to do with the laborer. In that mischianza of mystique and elitism, "seaman" has meant Sir Francis Drake, not Jack Tar; the focus has been on trade, exploration, the great navigators, but rarely on the men who sailed the ships. Thus we know very little about Jack. Samuel Eliot Morison is one of the few who have tried to portray the common seaman. In an influential anecdote in The Maritime History of Massachusetts Morison has described a "frequent occurrence" in early New England. A farmer's boy, called by the smell or the sight of the sea, suddenly runs off; three years later he returns as a man, marries the hired girl, and lives "happily ever after." This experience, Morison tells us, was "typical of the Massachusetts merchant marine," where the "old salt" was almost non-existent and where there never was "a native deep-sea prole-


5 The bibliography is endless: a typical recent instance is Edmund O. Sawyer, America's Sea Saga (New York, 1962), foreword, 185, "a tale of unending courage" by a retired lieutenant colonel who now lives in Hollywood where he "plays an active role in the relentless crusade against the Communist conspiracy." Although there is much of use in American Neptune, the magazine's definition of maritime history has been too genteel, dwelling too often on such matters as ship design and construction, yachting, reminiscences, and model-building. On the other hand, even the W. P. A. Writer's Program neglected the seamen in Boston Looks Seaward (Boston, 1941) and in A Maritime History of New York (Garden City, N. Y., 1941).
tariat.” The ships were sailed by wave after wave of “adventure-seeking boys,” drawn by high wages and wanderlust. If they recovered, they took their earnings, married, and bought a farm; if not, these “young, ambitious seamen culled from the most active element of a pushing race” stayed on and rose to become masters in a merchant marine distinguished from its class-ridden European counterparts by easy mobility.6

There is much to support Morison’s tableau. Even if the mystique of the sea has been no more than mystique, still it has existed and exerted a powerful force. Washington, Franklin, and thousands of others did suffer attacks of “sea fever.”7 Seamen were, as Morison says, young men, averaging in one sample slightly over twenty-four, with many like John Paul Jones who went to sea at thirteen and even some who went at eight.8 Many of them “hove in hard at the Hause-hole”9 and became masters of their own vessels; later, while their sons and grandsons added to their wealth, they retired, perhaps to their farms, and wrote proud histories of their successes.10 Some, like Nicholas Biddle, found the navy a better outlet for their ambitions than the merchant service.11 Others, following Morison’s pattern, quit the sea early and turned to farming.12 For many

6 Samuel Eliot Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts (Boston, 1921), 105-107, 111; see also Morison, John Paul Jones, 22-23.


12 “In America ... all sorts of people turn farmers—where no mechanic or
there was mobility between generations and between trades.\textsuperscript{18} Seamen and landsmen might be distinct classes in Europe, but in America, men such as Albert Gallatin who knew both the Old World and the New found no “material distinction.”\textsuperscript{14} So Jack Tar seems to have been simply the landsman gone to sea, indistinguishable from his fellows ashore, and, together with them, on his way to prosperity.

If the seaman was a clean young farm-boy on the make—and likely to succeed—why was Josiah Franklin so apprehensive lest young Benjamin “break loose and go to sea”? Why did Josiah fight his son’s “strong inclination to go to sea” by frantically trying to make of him a joiner, a bricklayer, a turner, a brazier, a tallow-chandler, a cutler, a printer—anything, so long as it would keep him on land?\textsuperscript{15} Why did Washington’s uncle suggest that young George would better become a planter or even an apprentice to a tinker, while explicitly urging that he not become a seaman?\textsuperscript{16}

“All masters of vessels are warned not to harbor, conceal, or employ him, as they will answer for it, as the law directs.”\textsuperscript{17} To a fleeing apprentice, dissatisfied with the “bondage” of work ashore,\textsuperscript{18} to a runaway slave,
the sea might appear the only real shelter. Men with no experience at sea tried to pass for seamen and before long discovered that they had indeed become seamen. Others were seamen, apprenticed in one vessel and fled to another. Still others, deserted soldiers, bail-jumpers, thieves, and murderers, had gotten into trouble with the law.19 And others went to sea entirely unwillingly, originally impressed—perhaps from jail—into the navy, or tricked into the merchant service by crimps.20 These were the floaters who drifted and slipped their moorings, the suicides, the men whose wives—if they had wives—ran off with other men; the beneficiaries in their wills—when they left wills—were innkeepers.21 Hitherto, argued a proponent of a United States navy in 1782, the merchant marine had been "the resource of necessity, accident or indulgence."22

The merchant marine was a place full of forces beyond the seaman's control: death and disease, storms, and fluctuations in employment. Indeed, the lack of "old salts" in Morison's merchant marine might reflect a sombre irony: was the average seaman young because mobility rapidly brought him to another trade or because seamen died young?23 A man in


20 For crimps, see Hutchinson, Press-Gang, 48-49. Hohman, Seamen Ashore, 273-274, dates the development of crimping in America between 1830 and 1845, but there were crimps in Norfolk in 1767. See Captain Jeremiah Morgan to Governor Francis Fauquier, Sept. 11, 1767, Adm. 1/2116, Library of Congress transcript.

21 N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, Sept. 30, 1773; The King v. Jane the Wife of Thomas Dun, Indictment for Bigamy, filed Oct. 26, 1763, New York Supreme Court, Pleadings K-41. Although no statistical conclusions are possible, to a surprising extent the beneficiaries in a sample of seamen's wills are not wives but rather brothers and sisters, friends and innkeepers, Abstracts of Wills, VI, 111, 226; VII, 12, 38, 148, 397; VIII, 98; XI, 194.

22 Independent Chronicle (Boston), Sept. 5, 1782.

23 For some reflections on mortality in the merchant marine see Ralph Davis, The
jail, said Dr. Johnson, was at least safe from drowning, and he had more room, better food, and better company. The Quaker John Woolman was one of the few sensitive enough to see that if the “poor bewildered sailors” drank and cursed, the fault lay not so much in themselves as in the harsh environment and the greed of employers. Nor was the road up through the hawse-hole so easy as Morison asserts. That the few succeeded tells us nothing of the many; only the successful left autobiographies. Perhaps the sons of merchants and ship-masters made it, along with the captain’s brother-in-law and those who attended schools of navigation, but what of the “poor lads bound apprentice” who troubled Woolman, those whose wages went to their masters? What of the seamen in Morison’s own Boston who died too poor to pay taxes and who were a part of what James Henretta has called “the bottom” of Boston society? What of those who went bankrupt with such frequency in Rhode Island? Why,

_Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries_ (London, 1962), 156. As late as the 1840’s Massachusetts seamen, with an average age at death of 42.47 years, died younger than farmers, clergymen, lawyers, physicians, blacksmiths, carpenters, merchants, and laborers. Only painters, fishermen, manufacturers, mechanics, and printers are listed as having shorter lives in Lemuel Shattuck _et al., Report of the Sanitary Commission of Massachusetts, 1850_ (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), 87. For employment see N. Y. _Journal of Gen. Adv._, Oct. 5, 1775; Thomas Paine, _The Complete Writings_, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York, 1945), I, 33; in addition, a kind of unemployment is built into the profession; a seaman ashore is generally unemployed. See Hohman, _Seamen Ashore_, 209.


25 Barney, ed., _Memoir_, 10. For the relative prospects of the sons of merchants and masters as opposed to others in the English merchant marine, see Davis, _Rise of English Shipping_, 117.

26 For such schools see Boston Registry Department, _Records Relating to the Early History of Boston_ (Boston, 1876-1909), XIII, 2, 204; Carl Bridenbaugh, _Cities in Revolt_ (New York, 1955), 377.


28 Only three occupational groups exceeded “mariners” in the number of insolvency petitions filed with the Rhode Island legislature from 1756 to 1828. See Peter J. Coleman, “The Insolvent Debtor in Rhode Island, 1745-1828,” _Wm. and
at the other end of the colonies, did Washington's uncle warn that it would be "very difficult" to become master of a Virginia vessel and not worth trying?29

The presence of such men, fugitives and floaters, powerless in a tough environment, makes wanderlust appear an ironic parody of the motives which made at least some men go to sea. Catch the seaman when he is not pandering to your romanticism, said former seaman Frederick Law Olmsted a century later, and he will tell you that he hates the sight of blue water, he hates his ship, his officers, and his messmates—and he despises himself. Melville's Ishmael went to sea when he felt grim, hostile, and suicidal: "It is a way I have of driving off the spleen." No matter what we make of Ishmael, we cannot possibly make him into one of Morison's "adventure-seeking boys." Others, perhaps, but not Ishmael. The feelings of eighteenth-century Americans toward seafaring and seamen, and what evidence we have of the reasons men had for going to sea indicate that there were many like Ishmael in the colonial period, too, who left the land in flight and fear, outcasts, men with little hope of success ashore. These were the dissenters from the American mood. Their goals differed from their fellows ashore; these were the rebels, the men who stayed on to become old salts.30

Admiralty law treated seamen in a special way, as "wards." Carl Ubbelohde says that seamen favored the colonial Vice Admiralty Courts as "particular tribunals in case of trouble," and Charles M. Andrews and Richard B. Morris agreed that these courts were "guardians of the rights of the seamen." The benefits of being classified as a "ward" are dubious, but, regardless of the quality of treatment which admiralty law accorded

Mary Qtd., 3d Ser., XXII (1965), 422n. Mr. Coleman has stated in conversation with the author that the "mariners" appear to be predominantly common seamen.29 Freeman, Washington, I, 199.

30 Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Back Country . . . (New York, 1860), 287. Morison, Maritime History, offers no evidence for the assertion that his anecdote of the adventurous farm-boy is "typical" and that Massachusetts "has never had a native deep-sea proletariat." In the absence of such evidence and in the light of the evidence offered above for the existence of a very different type there is no basis for a claim that either group was "typical." My contention about the nature of the merchant marine is limited and negative. The presence of runaway slaves, thieves, murderers, fugitives, and floaters, in addition to Morison's adventure-seekers prevents any statement about typicality until we can offer quantitative evidence. Meanwhile all that we can say is that both types existed and that it is misleading to view the colonial merchant marine as a homogenous entity.
to seamen, it certainly does not follow that, all in all, the colonial seaman was well treated by the law. Indeed, if we broaden our scope to include colonial law generally, we find an extraordinarily harsh collection of laws, all justifying Olmsted’s later claim that American seamen “are more wretched, and are governed more by threats of force than any other civilized laborers of the world.” There are laws providing for the whipping of disobedient seamen and in one case for their punishment as “seditious”; laws prohibiting seamen in port from leaving their vessels after sundown and from travelling on land without certificates of discharge from their last job; laws empowering “every free white person” to catch runaway seamen. We find other laws, less harsh, some seeming to protect the seaman: laws against extending credit to seamen and against arresting them for debt, and against entertaining them in taverns for more than one hour per day; laws against selling them liquor and prohibiting them from playing with cards or dice; laws waiving imprisonment for seamen convicted of cursing; laws requiring masters to give discharge certificates to their seamen and laws prohibiting hiring without such certificates. Finally, there are laws which clearly do help the

31 Carl Ubbelohde, *The Vice-Admiralty Courts and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1960), 20, 159-160; Charles M. Andrews, introduction to Dorothy S. Towle, ed., *The Records of the Vice Admiralty Court of Rhode Island, 1716-1752* (Washington, 1936), 60; Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1946), 232, 256; Olmsted, *Journey*, 287. Ubbelohde, Morris, and Andrews do not contend that the seaman was well treated by the law in an overall sense. Ubbelohde and Morris show that the seaman was better treated in Vice Admiralty Courts than in courts of common law; but when the focus moves to colonial legislation the hostility of the law emerges as the central fact for the seaman.

32 Hening, *Statutes of Virginia*, IV, 107-108; VI, 26; E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638-1674* (Albany, 1868), 11-12. This law also prevented landmen from going aboard vessels without authorization from the director of the West India Company. On June 13, 1647, two seamen convicted of tearing down a copy of this law attached to their vessel’s mainmast were sentenced to be chained to a wheelbarrow and employed at hard labor on bread and water for three months. I. N. P. Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909* (New York, 1915-1928), IV, 87. Thomas Cooper, ed., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia, 1836-1841), III, 736.

seaman: laws requiring masters to provide "good and sufficient diet and accommodation" and providing for redress if the master refused; laws providing punishment for masters who "immoderately beat, wound, or maim" their seamen; laws providing that seamen's contracts be written.

These harsh or at best paternalistic laws add up to a structure whose purpose is to assure a ready supply of cheap, docile labor. Obedience, both at sea and ashore, is the keystone. Charles Beard at his most rigidly mechanistic would doubtless have found the Constitution merely mild stuff alongside this blatantly one-sided class legislation. Today's historians of the classless society would do well to examine the preambles of these laws, written in a more candid age, by legislatures for which, even by Robert Brown's evidence, most seamen could not vote. Again and again these laws aim to inhibit acts of seamen which may do "prejudice to

of Massachusetts (Boston, 1814), 185; Cooper, ed., Statutes of South Carolina, III, 735, 736; Hening, Statutes of Virginia, IV, 108-110; VI, 25, 28.


35 Eugene T. Jackman, "Efforts Made Before 1825 to Ameliorate the Lot of the American Seaman: With Emphasis on his Moral Regeneration," American Neptune, XXIV (1964), 109, describes legislation for seamen after the Revolution as "paternalistic." As late as 1897 the Supreme Court declared that "seamen are treated by Congress, as well as by the Parliament of Great Britain, as deficient in that full and intelligent responsibility for their acts which is accredited to ordinary adults." Hohman, Seamen Ashore, 214.

36 Morris, Government and Labor, 230, agrees with this statement in a somewhat more limited form.


38 Robert E. Brown, Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780 (Ithaca, 1955), 27-30, acknowledges that the "city proletariat" constituted "the largest disfranchised group" and strongly implies that itinerant seamen could not vote. Even so, Brown has stated the case too optimistically. By including propertied captains under the ambiguous label "mariner," he has disguised the fact, legible in his own evidence, that the "mariners" who could vote were captains and the common seamen could not. See John Cary, "Statistical Method and the Brown Thesis on Colonial Democracy, With a Rebuttal by Robert E. Brown," Wm. and Mary Q.ty., 3d Ser., XX (1963), 257. For Brown's acknowledgement of the error see ibid., 272. Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776 (New York, 1918), 28, includes seamen in a list of those who were "for the most part, unenfranchised." For an assertion that "sailors" could vote based on evidence that masters could compare Jacob R. Marcus, Early American Jewry (Philadelphia, 1953), II, 231, and B. R. Carroll, ed., Historical Collections of South Carolina (New York, 1836), II, 441.
masters and owners of vessels" or constitute a "manifest detriment of ... trade."39 The seamen's interests are sacrificed to the merchants', and even the laws which seem friendly to the seaman benefit the master. Laws against giving credit, arresting, and suing aim to keep the seaman available rather than involved in a lawsuit or imprisoned; the certificates and written contracts seek to prevent desertion and to protect the master against what would today be called a "strike";40 the laws protecting seamen against immoderate punishment and requiring adequate food and accommodation are implicitly weak in that they require that dependents make open complaint against their superiors.41 Sometimes this limitation is made explicit, as in a South Carolina law of 1751 whose stated purpose is "TO DISCOURAGE FRIVOLOUS AND VEXATIOUS ACTIONS AT LAW BEING BROUGHT BY SEAMEN AGAINST MASTERS AND COMMANDERS."42

Thus if we think of Jack Tar as jolly, childlike, irresponsible, and in many ways surprisingly like the Negro stereotype, it is because he was treated so much like a child, a servant, and a slave. What the employer saw as the necessities of an authoritarian profession were written into law and culture: the society that wanted Jack dependent made him that way and then concluded that that was the way he really was.43


40 For instance, Colonial Laws of New York, IV, 484 (later disallowed), required a written contract in order to end such practices as this: "very often when Ships and vessels come to be cleared out ... the Seamen refuse to proceed with them, without coming to new agreements for increasing their wages and many of them will Leave their Ships and Vessels and not proceed on their voyages which puts the owners of such ships and vessels to Great Trouble and Charges." The act also mentions subterfuges of seamen but fails to acknowledge the possibility that masters might also use subterfuge. For a "mutiny" which clearly expressed a labor grievance see below, 406.

41 See the procedure provided in Hening, Statutes of Virginia, IV, 109-110. See also Morris, Government and Labor, 268.

42 Cooper, ed., Statutes of South Carolina, III, 735.

43 For examples of the similarity between life at sea and life on the plantation compare Morris, Government and Labor, 239, 247, 256, 262, 274, and McColley, Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia, 103. For Frederick Olmsted's comments on the similarity, based on his own experience at sea in 1843-1844, see The Cotton Kingdom, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York, 1953), 453. For the image of the sea-
II

Constantly plagued by short complements, the Royal Navy attempted to solve its manning problems in America, as in England, by impressment.44 Neil Stout has recently attributed these shortages to “death, illness, crime, and desertion” which were in turn caused largely by rum and by the deliberate enticements of American merchants.45 Rum and inveiglement certainly took a high toll, but to focus on these two causes of shortages is unfairly to shift the blame for impressment onto its victims. The navy itself caused shortages. Impressment, said Thomas Hutchinson, caused desertion, rather than the other way around.46 Jack Tar had good reasons for avoiding the navy. It would, a young Virginian was warned, “cut him and staple him and use him like a Negro, or rather,

man in literature see Harold F. Watson, The Sailor in English Fiction and Drama, 1550-1880 (New York, 1931), 159-160, and passim.


45 Stout, “Manning the Royal Navy,” 176-177, suggests the possibility of other causes when he notes that desertion was high “whatever the causes,” but he mentions no cause other than rum and inveiglement. The Admiralty made the seamen’s “natural Leivy” another possible reason for desertion. Admiralty to Gov. Thomas on Impressments, 1743, Pennsylvania Archives, 1st Ser. (Philadelphia, 1852-1856), I, 639; see also Massachusetts Historical Society, Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts (Boston, 1919—), XX, 84, 98; Colvill to Admiralty, Aug. 8, 1765, Adm. 1/482; Pares, “Manning the Navy,” 31, 33-34.

like a dog”; James Otis grieved at the loss of the “flower” of Massachusetts’s youth “by ten thousands” to a service which treated them little better than “hewers of wood and drawers of water.” Discipline was harsh and sometimes irrational, and punishments were cruel.47 Water poured into sailors’ beds, they went mad, and died of fevers and scurvy.48 Sickness, Benjamin Franklin noted, was more common in the navy than in the merchant service and more frequently fatal.49 In a fruitless attempt to prevent desertion, wages were withheld and men shunted about from ship to ship without being paid.50 But the accumulation of even three or four years’ back wages could not keep a man from running.51 And why should it have? Privateering paid better in wartime, and wages were higher in the merchant service; even laborers ashore were better paid.52

47 Freeman, Washington, I, 199; James Otis, The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved (Boston, 1764) in Bernard Bailyn, ed., Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776 (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), I, 464. Flogging was universal and men received as many as 600 and 700 lashes. Colvill to Admiralty, Nov. 12, 1765, Adm. I/482. For obscenity the tongue was scraped with hoop-iron. There were punishments for smiling in the presence of an officer. One captain put his sailors’ heads in bags for trivial offenses. Hutchinson, Press-Gang, 31-36. And, of course, the captain might go mad, as did Captain Robert Bond of Gibraltar. Admiral Gambier to Admiralty, Oct. 10, 1771, Adm. I/483, log of Gibraltar, Feb. 10, 14, 1771, Adm. 51/394.

48 Log of Arethusa, Dec. 28, 1771, Adm. 51/59; Petition of Jeremiah Raven, [fall 1756], Letters as to Admission of Pensioners to Greenwich Hospital, 1756-1770, Adm. 65/81, an excellent source for the discovery of the effects of service in the navy on health. See also the items headed “Weekly Account of Sick and Wounded Seamen” in Admirals’ Dispatches, for example, Admiral Gambier to Admiralty, May 6, June 10, July 20, 27, 1771, Adm. I/483; Nov. 9, 1771, Aug. 29, 1772, Adm. I/484.

49 Remarks on Judge Foster’s Argument in Favor of . . . Impressing Seamen, Jared Sparks, ed., The Works of Benjamin Franklin, II (Boston, 1844), 333. Sparks gives this no date; John Bigelow, ed., The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1887-1888), IV, 70, dates it 1767; Helen C. Boatfield of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Yale University, dates it post-1776.

50 Pares, “Manning the Navy,” 31-38; Roland G. Usher, Jr., “Royal Navy Impressment during the American Revolution,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXVII (1950-1951), 686. At the time of the Mutiny at the Nore the crew of one ship had not been paid in 15 years, Hutchinson, Press-Gang, 44.

51 Mr. William Polhampton to Lords of Trade, Mar. 6, 1711, O’Callaghan, ed., Docs. Rel. Col. Hist. N. Y., V, 194. A seaman who deserted his ship would leave an “R”—for “run”—written against his name in the ship’s book. See Hutchinson, Press-Gang, 151, for a song which urges seamen to flee the press-gang and “leave ‘em an R in pawn!”

52 Peter Warren to Admiralty, Sept. 8, 1744, Adm. 1/2654; Mr. William Polhampton to Lords of Trade, Mar. 6, 1711, O’Callaghan, ed., Docs. Rel. Col. Hist. N. Y., V, 194; Admiralty to Thomas, 1743, Pa. Arch., 1st Ser., I, 638-639; Morris,
Thus Stout’s claim that the navy was “forced” to press is only as accurate as the claim that the South was forced to enslave Negroes. Those whose sympathies lie with the thousands of victims of this barbaric practice—rather than with naval administrators—will see that the navy pressed because to be in the navy was in some sense to be a slave, and for this we must blame the slave owners rather than the slaves.53

Impressment angered and frightened the seamen, but it pervaded and disrupted all society, giving other classes and groups cause to share a common grievance with the press-gang’s more direct victims: just about everyone had a relative at sea.54 Whole cities were crippled. A night-time operation in New York in 1757 took in eight hundred men, the equivalent of more than one-quarter of the city’s adult male population.55 Impressment and the attendant shortage of men may have been a critical factor in the stagnancy of “the once cherished now depressed, once flourishing now sinking Town of Boston.”56

Government and Labor, 247-248. The navy’s most imaginative response to the problem was sporadic and abortive attempts to limit the wages given to merchant seamen, but the inviting differential remained. When the navy offered bounties for enlistment, this merely served to induce additional desertions by men who could pick up a month’s pay simply by signing up. Pares, “Manning the Navy,” 33-34; Hutchinson, Press-Gang, 22, 48-49; Remarks on Judge Foster’s Argument, Sparks, ed., Works of Franklin, II, 333; N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, Mar. 31, Apr. 21, 1755, Mar. 11, 1771.


54 At least in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, according to the Independent Chronicle (Boston), Sept. 5, 1782.


56 Boston is so described in a petition of the town meeting to the House of Representatives, Mar. 11, 1745/6, Mass. Hist. Soc., Mass. House Journals, XXII, 204. This petition is but one of many attributing the depletion of Boston’s population in part to impressment. For a table indicating a downward trend in Boston’s population after 1743 see Stuart Bruchey, ed., The Colonial Merchant: Sources and Readings (New York, 1966), 11. I am indebted to Joel Shufro, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, for the suggestion of a connection between impressment and the decline of Boston.
least ninety-two men pressed off Boston in five months of 1745-1746; Gramont received seventy-three pressed men in New York in three days in 1758; Arithusa took thirty-one in two days off Virginia in 1771. Binges such as these left the communities where they occurred seriously harmed. Preachers' congregations took flight, and merchants complained loudly about the "many Thousands of Pounds of Damage." "Kiss my arse, you dog," shouted the captain as he made off with their men, leaving vessels with their fires still burning, unmanned, finally to be wrecked. They took legislators and slaves, fishermen and servants. Seamen took to the woods or fled town altogether, dredging the appearance of a man-of-war's boat—in the words of one—as a flock of sheep dreaded a wolf's appearance. If they offered to work at all, they demanded inflated wages

57 Log of Shirley, Dec. 25, 1745-May 17, 1746, Adm. 51/4341; log of Gramont, Apr. 25-27, 1758, Adm. 51/413; log of Arithusa, Mar. 19-20, 1771, Adm. 51/59. Shirley's haul was not mentioned in the Boston Evening Post or in the records of any American governmental body. Here is but one instance in which the serious grievance of 92 Americans has previously gone unnoticed. Such grievances are nonetheless real and play a causal role despite their invisibility to historians. On the other hand, overdependence on British sources is apt to be extremely misleading. Either because of sloppiness or because of the clouded legality of impressment, official records seem more often to ignore the practice or to distort it than to complement information from American sources. Admiral Charles Hardy neglected to mention the massive press in New York in 1757 in his correspondence with the Admiralty. See May-June 1757, Adm. 1/481. The absence of impressment in Triton's Prize's log in 1706, Adm. 51/1014, is contradicted in Lord Cornbury to Lords of Trade, Oct. 3, 1706, O'Callaghan, ed., Docs. Rel. Col. Hist. N. Y., IV, 1183-1185. Sometimes logs show what seems to be purposeful distortion: Diana, whose log, Apr. 15, 1758, Adm. 51/4162, reveals only that she "saluted with 9 Guns" Prince of Orange privateer, in fact pressed her hands, Montesor Journal, 152. In another instance St. John "received on board a Boat Load of Ballast," log, July 16, 1764, Adm. 51/3961, which seems in fact to have consisted of hogs, sheep, and poultry stolen from the people of Martha's Vineyard, Newport Mercury, July 23, 1764.

58 Boston Evening Post, Sept. 3, 1739, July 6, 1741.
and refused to sail to ports where there was danger of impressment. 62 "New York and Boston," Benjamin Franklin commented during the French and Indian War, "have so often found the Inconvenience of . . . Station Ships that they are very indifferent about having them: The Pressing of their Men and thereby disappointing Voyages, often hurting their Trade more than the Enemy hurts it." Even a ferryboat operator complained as people shunned the city during a press; food and fuel grew short and their prices rose. 63

From the very beginning the history of impressment in America is a tale of venality, deceit, and vindictiveness. Captains kept deserters and dead men on ships' books, pocketing their provision allowances. In 1706 a captain pressed men and literally sold them to short-handed vessels; his midshipman learned the business so well that after his dismissal he became a veritable entrepreneur of impressment, setting up shop in a private sloop. Another commander waited until New York's governor was away to break a no-press agreement and when the governor returned he seriously considered firing on the Queen's ship. 64 In Boston in 1702 the lieutenant-governor did fire, responding to merchants' complaints. "Fire and be damn'd," shouted the impressing captain as the shots whistled through his sails. The merchants had complained that the press was illegal under 1697 instructions which required captains and commanders to

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64 William Polampton to the Lords of Trade, Mar. 6, 1711, Lord Cornbury to Lords of Trade, Oct. 3, Dec. 14, 1706, O'Callaghan, ed., Docs. Rel. Col. Hist. N. Y., V, 194; IV, 1183-1184, 1190-1191. The captain later publicly declared that he hated the whole province and would not help a New York vessel in distress at sea if he met one, Lord Cornbury to Lords of Trade, July 1, 1708, ibid., V, 60. It seems increasingly to have become common practice to press after a public declaration that there would be no press, for example, Boston Evening Post, Dec. 9, 23, 1745; log of Shirley, Dec. 25, 1745-May 17, 1746, Adm. 51/4341.
apply to colonial governors for permission to press. These instructions, a response to complaints of “irregular proceedings of the captains of some of our ships of war in the impressing of seamen,” had clearly not put an end to irregularities. In 1708 a Parliament fearful of the disruptive effect of impressment on trade forbade the practice in America. In the sixty-seven years until the repeal in 1775 of this “Act for the Encouragement of the Trade to America” there was great disagreement as to its meaning and indeed as to its very existence. Did the Sixth of Anne, as the act was called, merely prohibit the navy from impressing and leave governors free to do so? At least one governor, feeling “pinioned” under the law, continued impressing while calling it “borrowing.” Was the act simply a wartime measure, which expired with the return of peace in 1713? Regardless of the dispute, impressment continued, routine in its regularity, but often spectacular in its effects.

65 Lieutenant Governor Thomas Povey to Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, July 20, 1702, Memorial of Thomas Povey, [July, 1702], Deposition of Nathaniel Holmes, July 18, 1702, Deposition of John Arnold and John Roberts, July 18, 1702, C.O. 5/862.


68 In 1716 the attorney-general declared, “I am of Opinion, that the whole American Act was intended ... only for the War,” Massachusetts Gazette (Boston), June 17, 1768. Governor Shirley of Massachusetts agreed in 1747, despite the fact that, along with other colonial governors, he was still instructed to enforce the Sixth of Anne and had indeed sworn to do so, The Lords Justices to William Shirley, Sept. 19, 1741, Lincoln, ed., Correspondence of Shirley, I, 74-76; Stout, Royal Navy, 391. Twenty-two years later Governor Hutchinson feared that John Adams might publicize the act. The Admiralty continued to instruct American commanders to obey the act after Queen Anne’s War, for example, see Admiralty to Captain Balcher, Mar. 9, 1714, Adm. 2/48, but ceased so to instruct them in 1723, Clark, “Impressment of Seamen,” in Essays to Andrews, 211. Of course, the act’s repeal in 1775 indicated that it had been on the books, if no place else, all that time.

69 Stout’s claim in Royal Navy, 366, that the navy began pressing again only in 1723 illustrates again the dangers of over-reliance on British sources in such controversial matters. That the Admiralty continued to instruct commanders not to press does not mean that they did not in fact press. Shark pressed in Boston in 1720,
Boston was especially hard-hit by impressment in the 1740's, with frequent incidents throughout the decade and major explosions in 1745 and 1747. Again and again the town meeting and the House of Representatives protested, drumming away at the same themes: impressment was harmful to maritime commerce and to the economic life of the city in general and illegal if not properly authorized.\(^{70}\) In all this the seaman himself becomes all but invisible. The attitude towards him in the protests is at best neutral and often sharply antagonistic. In 1747 the House of Representatives condemned the violent response of hundreds of seamen to a large-scale press as "a tumultuous riotous assembling of armed Seamen, Servants, Negroes, and others... tending to the Destruction of all Government and Order." While acknowledging that the people had reason to protest, the House chose to level its protest against "the most audacious Insult" to the governor, Council, and House. And the town meeting, that stronghold of democracy, offered its support to those who took "orderly" steps while expressing its "Abhorence of such Illegal Criminal Proceedings" as those undertaken by the seamen "and other persons of mean and Vile Condition."\(^{71}\)

Protests such as these reflect at the same time both unity and division in colonial society. All kinds of Americans—both merchants and seamen—opposed impressment, but the town meeting and the House spoke for the merchant, not the seaman. They opposed impressment not for its effect on the seaman but for its effect on commerce. Thus their protests express antagonism to British policy at the same time that they express class division. These two themes continue and develop in American opposition to impressment in the three decades between the Knowles Riots of 1747 and the Declaration of Independence.

During the French and Indian War the navy competed with privateers for seamen.\(^{72}\) Boston again protested against impressment, and then

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\(^{71}\) Ibid., XXIV, 212; Boston Reg. Dept., Records of Boston, XIV, 127. Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt, 117, sees the law of 1751 for suppressing riots as in part a response to the Knowles Riots; he calls the law "brutal" even for its own day and a "triumph for the reactionaries."

considered authorizing the governor to press, "provided said Men be impressed from inward-bound Vessels from Foreign Parts only, and that none of them be Inhabitants of this Province." In 1760 New York's mayor had a naval captain arrested on the complaint of two shipmasters who claimed that he had welched on a deal to exchange two men he had pressed for two others they were willing to furnish. With the return of peace in 1763 admirals and Americans alike had reason to suppose that there would be no more impressment. But the Admiralty's plans for a large new American fleet required otherwise, and impressment began again in the spring of 1764 in New York, where a seven-week hot press was brought to a partial stop by the arrest of one of the two offending captains. In the spring and summer a hunt for men between Maine and Virginia by four naval vessels brought violent responses, including the killing of a marine at New York; another fort, at Newport, fired on another naval vessel.

Along with the divisions there was a certain amount of unity. Seamen who fled after violently resisting impressment could not be found—probably because others sheltered them—and juries would not indict them. Captains were prevented from impressing by the threat of prosecution.

74 Capt. George Ant. Tony to Admiralty, Mar. 1, 1760, Depositions of Peter Vail and Singleton Church, Jan. 15, 16, 1760, Adm. 1/2588.
75 Admiral Colvill, Journal, Mar. 19, 1764, Adm. 50/4; Colvill to Admiralty, May 19, 1764, Adm. 1/482; N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, July 18, 1765.
76 Stout, Royal Navy, 72-73, citing Admiralty to Egremont, Jan. 5, 1763, State Papers Group, Class 42, Piece 43, Public Record Office. Hereafter cited as S.P. 42/43; Captain Jno. Brown to Admiralty, May 16, 1764, Adm. 1/1494; log of Coventry, Mar. 31, 1764, Adm. 51/213, indicates impressment on that date; compare Stout, Royal Navy, 379, 393n.
77 Admiral Colvill, Journal, June 4, 1764, Adm. 50/4; Colvill to Admiralty, June 18, 1764, Adm. 1/482. On the violence at New York see log of Jamaica, June 8, 1764, Adm. 51/3874; N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, July 12, 1764; Report of the Grand Jury, Aug. 2, 1764, New York Supreme Court Minute Book (July 31, 1764-Oct. 28, 1764), 7. On the violence at Newport see log of St. John, July 10, 1764, Adm. 51/3961; Captain Smith to Colvill, July 12, 1764, in Colvill to Admiralty, Aug. 24, 1764, Adm. 1/482; John Temple to Treasury, Sept. 9, 1765, Treasury Group, Class 1, Piece 442, Library of Congress transcript.
And in 1769 lawyer John Adams used the threat of displaying the statute book containing the Sixth of Anne to frighten a special court of Admiralty into declaring the killing of an impressing lieutenant justifiable homicide in necessary self-defense.79

There were two kinds of impressment incidents: those in which there was immediate self-defense against impressment, usually at sea, and those in which crowds ashore, consisting in large part of seamen, demonstrated generalized opposition to impressment. This is what the first kind of incident sounded like: a volley of musketry and the air full of language, grapeshot, round shot, hammered shot, double-headed shot, even rocks. "Come into the boat and be damned, you Sorry Son of a Whore or else Ile breake your head, and hold your tongue." Small arms, swords and cutlasses, blunderbusses, clubs and pistols, axes, harpoons, fishgigs, twelve-pounders, six-pounders, half-pounders. "You are a parsill of Raskills." Fired five shots to bring to a snow from North Carolina, pressed four. "You have no right to impress me ... If you step over that line ... by the eternal God of Heaven, you are a dead man." "Aye, my lad, I have seen many a brave fellow before now."80

Here is hostility and bloodshed, a tradition of antagonism. From the beginning, impressment's most direct victims—the seamen—were its most active opponents. Bernard Bailyn's contention that "not a single murder resulted from the activities of the Revolutionary mobs in America" does

2, 1764, New York Supreme Court Minute Book (July 31, 1764-Oct. 28, 1767), 7; Colvill to Admiralty, Aug. 5, 1766, Adm. 1/482.


80 The King v. Ship Sampson, Examination of Hugh Mode, Pilot, taken Aug. 19, 1760, N. Y. Supreme Court, Pleadings K-304; N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, May 1, 1758, Aug. 7, 1760; Captain J. Hale to Admiralty, Aug. 28, 1760, Adm. 1/1895; William McCleverty to Admiralty, July 31, 1760, Adm. 1/2172; Howard Thomas, Marinus Willett (Prospect, N. Y., 1954), 3-4; Deposition of John Gullison, July 17, 1702, Deposition of Woodward Fay, July 17, 1702, C.O. 5/862; log of Magdelen, Apr. 6, 1771, Adm. 51/3984, describing the loss during a press "by Accident" of a sword and musquet—apparently a common accident; see also log of Arethusa, Apr. 18, 1772; Weyman's New-York Gazette, Aug. 25, 1760; Admiral Hood to Admiralty, May 5, 1769, Adm. 1/483; paraphrase of log of Shirley, Jan. 17, 1746, Adm. 51/4341; "Inadmissible Principles" [1809], Adams, ed., Works of Adams, IX, 318.
not hold up if extended to cover resistance to impressment; there were murders on both sides. Perhaps the great bulk of incidents of this sort must remain forever invisible to the historian, for they often took place out of sight of friendly observers, and the only witness, the navy, kept records which are demonstrably biased and faulty, omitting the taking of thousands of men. But even the visible records provide a great deal of information. This much we know without doubt: seamen did not go peacefully. Their violence was purposeful, and sometimes they were articulate. “I know who you are,” said one, as reported by John Adams and supported by Thomas Hutchinson. “You are the lieutenant of a man-of-war, come with a press-gang to deprive me of my liberty. You have no right to impress me. I have retreated from you as far as I can. I can go no farther. I and my companions are determined to stand upon our defence. Stand off.” (It was difficult for Englishmen to fail to see impressment in such terms—even a sailor doing the pressing could feel shame over “fighting with honest sailors, to deprive them of their liberty.”)

Ashore, seamen and others demonstrated their opposition to impressment with the only weapon which the unrepresentative politics of the day

81 Bailyn, ed., Pamphlets, I, 581. Six Englishmen of varying ranks were killed while pressing in the 1760's. In addition to the incidents just discussed in which a lieutenant of marines was murdered on June 8, 1764, while pressing at New York and in which John Adams’s clients-to-be, accused of murdering a lieutenant off Cape Ann Apr. 22, 1769, got off with justifiable homicide in self-defense, four sailors were shot to death at New York, Aug. 18, 1760. Cadwallader Colden to Lords of Trade, Aug. 30, 1760, O’Callaghan, ed., Docs. Rel. Col. Hist. N. Y., VII, 446; The King v. Osborn Greatrakes and the King v. Josiah Moore, Oct. 24, 28, 30, Nov. 11-17, 1760, New York Supreme Court Minute Book (1756-1761), I, 16, 200, 209, 215; The King v. Ship Sampson, Examination of Hugh Mode, Pilot, taken Aug. 19, 1760, N. Y. Supreme Court, Pleadings K-304; Capt. J. Hale to Admiralty, Aug. 28, 1760, Adm. 1/1805; Weyman’s N-Y. Gaz., Aug. 25, 1760; Dawson, Sons of Liberty, 51-54. Governor Cadwallader Colden called the last incident murder, but the jury refused to indict. For some instances of Americans killed while resisting impressment see deposition of William Thwing, Nathaniel Vaill, and Thomas Hals, July 15, 1702, C.O. 5/862; Governor Hunter to Secretary St. John, Sept. 12, 1711, O’Callaghan, ed., Docs. Rel. Col. Hist. N. Y., V, 254-255 (conviction of murder); Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt, 114-115; N-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, Aug. 7, 1760. There is every reason to suppose that this list is partial. See above n. 57.

82 “Inadmissible Principles” [1809], Adams, ed., Works of Adams, IX, 318, quotes Michael Corbet, commenting that Corbet displayed “the cool intrepidity of a Nelson, reasoned, remonstrated, and laid down the law with the precision of a Mansfield.” Hutchinson, History of Massachusetts-Bay, ed. Mayo, III, 167n, notes that Corbet and his companions “sware they would die before they would be taken, and that they preferred death to slavery.”

offered them—riot. In Boston several thousand people responded to a nighttime impressment sweep of the harbor and docks with three days of rioting beginning in the early hours of November 17, 1747. Thomas Hutchinson reported that “the lower class were beyond measure enraged.” Negroes, servants, and hundreds of seamen seized a naval lieutenant, assaulted a sheriff and put his deputy in the stocks, surrounded the governor’s house, and stormed the Town House where the General Court was sitting. The rioters demanded the seizure of the impressing officers, the release of the men they had pressed, and execution of a death sentence which had been levied against a member of an earlier press-gang who had been convicted of murder. When the governor fled to Castle William—some called it “abdication”—Commodore Knowles threatened to put down what he called “arrant rebellion” by bombarding the town. The governor, who, for his part, thought the rioting a secret plot of the upper class, was happily surprised when the town meeting expressed its “Abhorrence” of the seamen’s riot.84

After the French and Indian War press riots increased in frequency. Armed mobs of whites and Negroes repeatedly manhandled captains, officers, and crews, threatened their lives, and held them hostage for the men they pressed. Mobs fired at pressing vessels and tried to board them; they threatened to burn one, and they regularly dragged ships’ boats to the center of town for ceremonial bonfires. In Newport in June 1765, five hundred seamen, boys, and Negroes rioted after five weeks of impressment. “Sensible” Newporters opposed impressment but nonetheless condemned this “Rabble.” In Norfolk in 1767 Captain Jeremiah Morgan retreated, sword in hand, before a mob of armed whites and Negroes. “Good God,” he wrote to the governor, “was your Honour and I to prosecute all the Rioters that attacked us belonging to Norfolk there would not be twenty left unhang’d belonging to the Toun.”85 According


85 Newport Mercury, June 10, 1765; Captain Jeremiah Morgan to Governor Francis Fauquier, Sept. 11, 1767, Adm. 1/2116; log of St. John, July 10, 1764, Adm. 51/3061; Remarks of Thomas Hill in Colvill to Admiralty, July 26, 1764, Colvill to Admiralty, Jan. 12, Sept. 21, 1765, Adm. 1/482; log of Maidstone, June 5, 1765, Adm. 51/3897; Captain Smith to Colvill, July 12, 1764 (extract) in Colvill to Admiralty, Aug. 24, 1764, Adm. 1/482; N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, July 12, 1764;
to Thomas Hutchinson, the Liberty Riot in Boston in 1768 may have been as much against impressment as against the seizure of Hancock’s sloop: Romney had pressed before June 10, and on that day three officers were forced by an angry crowd “arm’d with Stones” to release a man newly pressed from the Boston packet. Romney pressed another man, and on June 14, after warding off “many wild and violent proposals,” the town meeting petitioned the governor against both the seizure and impressment; the instructions to their representatives (written by John Adams) quoted the Sixth of Anne at length. On June 18 two councillors pleaded with the governor to procure the release of a man pressed by Romney “as the peace of the Town seems in a great measure to depend upon it.”

Thomas Laugharne to Admiral Colvill, Aug. 11, 1764 (extract) in Colvill to Admiralty, Aug. 24, 1764, Adm. 1/482; Stout’s contention, “Manning the Royal Navy,” 185, that “there is no recorded case of impressment on shore during the 1760’s and 1770’s, although the Navy did capture some deserters on land” is inaccurate. See Captain Jeremiah Morgan to Governor Francis Fauquier, Sept. 11, 1767, Adm. 1/2116, and Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser (Philadelphia), Oct. 26, 1767.

For impressment by Romney, see log, June 10, 1768, Adm. 51/793; Mayo, ed., Hist., III, 139. Oliver M. Dickerson, The Navigation Acts and the American Revolution (Philadelphia, 1951), 238, sees the riot as growing out of the seizure and has the support of most sources. Massachusetts Council to Governor Gage, Oct. 27, 1768, Bowdoin-Temple Papers, I, 120, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Admiral Hood to Admiralty, July 11, 1768, Adm. 1/483; Hutchinson, History of Massachusetts-Bay, III, 136. On the other hand Thomas Hutchinson also spoke of impressment as adding “more fewel to the great stock among us before.” Mass. Hist. Soc., Proceedings, 1921-1922 (Boston, 1923), 283. Clark, “Impressment of Seamen,” in Essays to Andrews, 219, describes the rioting as a response to impressment alone by a mob “which seemed to be always ready to resent any infringement of American liberties.” Dickerson, Navigation Acts, 219-220, attributes the burning of a boat belonging to the customs collector to the mob’s failure to locate Romney’s press boat. In 1922 G. G. Wolkins, “Seizure of Liberty,” 250, speculated that “impressment of seamen, rather than the seizure of John Hancock’s goods, was perhaps the genesis of what happened.” L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, eds., Legal Papers of John Adams (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), II, 179n, summarize: “Boston’s position was that the employment of the Romney, already despised for the impressment activities of her captain, brought on the riot of 10 June.” The riot seems to have been caused by a combination of factors among which impressment has been given too little attention.

Boston Reg. Dept., Records of Boston, XX, 296; [Thomas Hutchinson], State of the Disorders, Confusion and Misgovernment, which have lately prevailed . . . in . . . Massachusetts, June 21, 1770, C.O. 5/759, Pt. 4; Report of Resolves Relating to Riot of June 10, June 14, 1768, James Bowdoin and Royall Tyler to Jno. Corner, June 18, 1768, Bowdoin-Temple Papers, I, 102, 104; Mass. Gaz. (Boston),
There were other impressment riots at New York in July of 1764 and July of 1765, at Newport in July of 1764, at Casco Bay, Maine, in December 1764. Incidents continued during the decade following, and impressment flowered on the very eve of the Revolution. Early in 1775 the practice began to be used in a frankly vindictive and political way—because a town had inconvenienced an admiral, or because a town supported the Continental Congress. Impresses were ordered and took place from Maine to Virginia. In September a bundle of press warrants arrived from the Admiralty, along with word of the repeal of the Sixth of Anne. What had been dubious was now legal. Up and down the coast, officers rejoiced and went to work.

Long before 1765 Americans had developed beliefs about impressment, and they had expressed those beliefs in words and deeds. Impressment was bad for trade and it was illegal. As such, it was, in the words of the Massachusetts House in 1720, “a great Breach on the Rights of His Majesties Subjects.” In 1749 it was a violation of “the common Liberty of the Subject,” and in 1754 “inconsistent with Civil Liberty, and the Natu-
eral Rights of Mankind."\textsuperscript{94} Some felt in 1757 that it was even "abhorrent to the English Constitution."\textsuperscript{95} In fact, the claim that impressment was unconstitutional was wrong. (Even \textit{Magna Charta} was no protection. \textit{Nullus liber homo capiatur} did not apply to seamen.)\textsuperscript{96} Instead impressment indicated to Benjamin Franklin "that the constitution is yet imperfect, since in so general a case it doth not secure liberty, but destroys it." "If impressing seamen is of right by common law in Britain," he also remarked, "slavery is then of right by common law there; there being no slavery worse than that sailors are subjected to."\textsuperscript{97}

For Franklin, impressment was a symptom of injustice built into the British Constitution. In \textit{Common Sense} Tom Paine saw in impressment a reason for rejecting monarchy. In the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson included impressment among the "Oppressions" of George III; later he likened the practice to the capture of Africans for slavery. Both "reduced [the victim] to . . . bondage by force, in flagrant violation of his own consent, and of his natural right in his own person."\textsuperscript{98}

Despite all this, and all that went before, we have thought little of impressment as an element in explaining the conduct of the common man in the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{99} Contemporaries knew better. John Adams

\textsuperscript{96} Hutchinson, \textit{Press-Gang}, 57.
\textsuperscript{98} Paine, \textit{Writings}, ed. Foner, I, 11. For later attacks on impressment by Paine see \textit{ibid.}, I, 449, II, 476. The complaint in the Declaration of Independence alludes to impressment after the outbreak of fighting: "He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands." Carl L. Becker, \textit{The Declaration of Independence} (New York, 1958), 190, 156, 166. Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Thomas Cooper, Sept. 10, 1814, Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., \textit{The Writings of Thomas Jefferson}, XIV (Washington, 1907), 183.
\textsuperscript{99} James Fulton Zimmerman, \textit{Impressment of American Seamen} (New York, 1925), esp. 11-17, treats the practice as almost non-existent before the Revolution, giving the pre-revolutionary phenomenon only the briefest consideration, and concluding, on the basis of speculative evidence, that impressment was rare in the colonies. The author does not understand the Sixth of Anne and thinks it was re-
felt that a tactical mistake by Thomas Hutchinson on the question of impressment in 1769 would have "accelerated the revolution. . . . It would have spread a wider flame than Otis's ever did, or could have done." Ten years later American seamen were being impressed by American officers. The United States Navy had no better solution for "public Necessities" than had the Royal Navy. Joseph Reed, President of Pennsylvania, complained to Congress of "Oppressions" and in so doing offered testimony to the role of British impressment in bringing on revolution. "We cannot help observing how similar this Conduct is to that of the British Officers during our Subjection to Great Britain and are persuaded it will have the same unhappy effects viz., an estrangement of the Affections of the People from the Authority under which they act which by an easy Progression will proceed to open Opposition to the immediate Actors and Bloodshed." Impression had played a role in the estrangement of the American people from the British government. It had produced "Odium" against the navy, and even six-year-olds had not been too young to have learned to detest it. The anger of thousands of victims did not vanish. Almost four decades after the Declaration of Independence an orator could still arouse his audience by tapping a folk-memory of impressment by the same "haughty, cruel, and gasconading nation" which was once again trying to enslave free Americans.

pealed in 1769. Clark, "Impressment of Seamen," in Essays to Andrews, 202; Paine, Ships and Sailors of Salem, 65; George Athan Billias, General John Glover and his Marblehead Mariners (New York, 1960), 31; Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt, 114-117, 308-310; Bernhard Knollenberg, Origin of the American Revolution: 1759-1766 (New York, 1961), 12, 179-181, all see impressment as contributing in some way to the revolutionary spirit.

100 Adams, ed., Works of Adams, II, 226n. Neil Stout, "Manning the Royal Navy," 182-184, suggests that impressment did not become a "great issue" of the American Revolution because American "radicals" did not make an issue of it and especially because of the failure of John Adams's attempt to make a "cause celebre" in 1769. Stout's approach sides with the navy and minimizes the reality of impressment as a grievance. Its implication is that the seaman had in fact no genuine grievance and that he acted in response to manipulation.

101 Pres. Reed to Pres. of Congress, 1779, Oct. 21, 1779, Pa. Archives, 1st Ser., VII, 762. Reed renewed his complaint of these "Oppressions" in the following year, Reed to Pennsylvania Delegates in Congress, 1780, ibid., 1st Ser., VIII, 643.

102 Colvill to Admiralty, Aug. 8, 1765, Adm. 1/482; Sherburne, Memoirs, 68.

103 William M. Willett, A Narrative of the Military Actions of Colonel Marinus Willett, Taken Chiefly from his own Manuscript (New York, 1831), 149-151. On the level of leadership impressment was not a major cause of the American Revolution. But the extent to which the articulate voice a grievance is rarely an adequate measure of the suffering of the inarticulate. Since it is unrealistic to suppose that
III

The seamen's conduct in the 1760's and 1770's makes more sense in the light of previous and continued impressment. What may have seemed irrational violence can now be seen as purposeful and radical. The pattern of rioting as political expression, established as a response to impressment, was now adapted and broadened as a response to the Stamp Act. In New York General Gage described the "insurrection" of October 31, 1765, and following as "composed of great numbers of Sailors." The seamen, he said, were "the only People who may be properly Stiled Mob," and estimates indicate that between a fifth and a fourth of New York's rioters were seamen. The disturbances began among the seamen—especially former privateersmen—on October 31. On November 1 they had marched, led primarily by their former captains; later they rioted, led by no one but themselves. Why? Because they had been duped by merchants, or, if not by merchants, then certainly by lawyers. So British officials believed—aroused by these men who meant to use them, the seamen themselves had nothing more than plunder on their minds. In fact, at that point in New York's rioting when the leaders lost control, the seamen, who were then in the center of town, in an area rich for plunder, chose instead to march in an orderly and disciplined way clear across town to do violence to the home and possessions of an English major whose provocative conduct had made him the obvious political enemy. Thus the "rioting" was actually very discriminating.\footnote{General Gage to Secretary Conway, Nov. 4, Dec. 21, 1765, Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., The Correspondence of General Thomas Gage . . . 1763-1775 (New Haven, 1931), I, 70-71, 79; N.Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, Nov. 7, 1765, estimates that there were four to five hundred seamen in the mob; Nov. 1, 7, 1765, Montresor Journal, 336, 339, estimates the total mob at "about 2000" and is the only source describing the participation of a professional group other than seamen, estimating 300 carpenters; R. R. Livingston to General Monckton, Nov. 8, 1765, Chalmers
Seamen and non-seamen alike joined to oppose the Stamp Act for many reasons, but the seamen had two special grievances: impressment and the effect of England's new attitude toward colonial trade. To those discharged by the navy at the end of the war and others thrown out of work by the death of privateering were added perhaps twenty thousand more seamen and fishermen who were thought to be the direct victims of the post-1763 trade regulations. This problem came to the fore in the

Manuscripts, IV, New York Public Library, for a noted signed “Sons of Neptune”; Lieutenant-Governor Colden to Secretary Conway, Nov. 5, 9, 1765, O’Callaghan, ed., Docs. Rel. Col. Hist. N. Y., VII, 771-774; New York Mercury, Nov. 4, 1765. For additional information on the leadership of privateer captains, especially Isaac Sears, see William Gordon, History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the United States of America (London, 1788), I, 185-186. The navy continued to press during the crisis. See log of Guarland, Apr. 22, 1766, Adm. 51/386; Apr. 21, 1766, Montresor Journal, 361. Impressment also limited the navy’s activities against the rioting.

“As most of our men are impress,” wrote a captain in answer to a governor’s request for men to put down a mob, “there is a great risk of their deserting.” Marines were needed as sentries to keep the men from deserting. Archibald Kennedy to Cadwallader Colden, Nov. 1, 1765, The Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden (N.-Y. Hist. Soc., Coll., L-LVI [New York, 1918-1923]), VII, 85-86.

105 For a fuller account of the seamen’s opposition to the Stamp Act see Lemisch, “Jack Tar vs. John Bull,” 76-128.

106 N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy, May 19, 1763; “Essay on the trade of the Northern Colonies,” ibid., Feb. 9, 1764. Even admirals were worried about the prospects of postwar unemployment, Colvill to Admiralty, Nov. 9, 1762, Adm. 1/482. During the French and Indian War 18,000 American seamen had served in the Royal Navy, Annual Register . . . for 1778 (London, 1779), 201, and a large additional number had been privateersmen. Fifteen to twenty thousand had sailed in 224 privateers out of New York alone, 5670 of them in 1759, Fish, New York Privateers, 4, 54-82; Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt, 62. A New York merchants’ petition of Apr. 20, 1764, expressed the fear that seamen thrown out of work by the Sugar Act might drift into foreign merchant fleets, Journal of the Votes and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Colony of New York (New York, 1764-1766), II, 742-743. On the eve of the Revolution maritime commerce employed approximately 30,000-35,000 American seamen, Carman, ed., American Husbandry, 495-496; John Adams to the President of Congress, June 16, 1780, Francis Wharton, ed., The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States (Washington, 1889), III, 789. I am presently assembling data which will allow more detailed statements on various demographic matters involving seamen, such as their numbers, comparisons with other occupations, their origins and permanence. For some further quantitative information on seamen in various colonial ports, see in addition to the sources cited immediately above, Evarts B. Greene and Richard B. Morris, A Guide to the Principal Sources for Early American History (1600-1800) in the City of New York, 2d ed., rev. (New York, 1953), 265; E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., The Documentary History of the State of New York, I (Albany, 1849), 493; Governor Clinton’s Report on the Province of New York, May 23, 1749, Report of Governor Tryon on the Province of New York, June 11, 1774, O’Callaghan, ed., Docs.
weeks following November 1, 1765, when the Stamp Act went into effect. The strategy of opposition chosen by the colonial leadership was to cease all activities which required the use of stamps. Thus maritime trade came to a halt in the cities.\textsuperscript{107} Some said that this was a cowardly strategy. If the Americans opposed the Stamp Act, let them go on with business as usual, refusing outright to use the stamps.\textsuperscript{108} The leaders' strategy was especially harmful to the seamen, and the latter took the more radical position—otherwise the ships would not sail. And this time the seamen's radicalism triumphed over both colonial leadership and British officials. Within little more than a month the act had been largely nullified. Customs officers were allowing ships to sail without stamps, offering as the reason the fear that the seamen, "who are the people that are most dangerous on these occasions, as their whole dependance for a subsistence is upon Trade," would certainly "commit some terrible Mischief." Philadelphia's customs officers feared that the seamen would soon "compel" them to let ships pass without stamps. Customs officers at New York yielded when they heard that the seamen were about to have a meeting.\textsuperscript{109}

Customs officers had worse luck on other days. Seamen battled them throughout the 1760's and 1770's. In October 1769 a Philadelphia customs officer was attacked by a mob of seamen who also tarred, feathered, and nearly drowned a man who had furnished him with information about


\textsuperscript{107} See, for example, James and Drinker to William Starkey, Oct. 30, 1765, James and Drinker Letterbook; \textit{N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy}, Dec. 19, 1765.


\textsuperscript{109} Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan, \textit{The Stamp Act Crisis} (Chapel Hill, 1953), 162. For a fuller account of the nullification of the Stamp Act, see \textit{ibid.}, 159-179. The seamen's strategy may have been more effective in bringing about repeal than was the strategy of the leaders. Commenting on Parliament's secret debates, Lawrence Henry Gipson, "The Great Debate in the Committee of the Whole House of Commons on the Stamp Act, 1766, as Reported by Nathaniel Ryder," \textit{Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography}, LXXXVI (1962), 10-41, notes that merchant pressure was only the "ostensible cause" of repeal and that many members were influenced by the violent resistance in America. I am indebted to E. S. Morgan for calling Ryder's notes to my attention.
illegally imported goods. A year later a New Jersey customs officer who approached an incoming vessel in Delaware Bay had his boat boarded by armed seamen who threatened to murder him and came close to doing so. When the officer’s son came to Philadelphia, he was similarly treated by a mob of seamen; there were one thousand seamen in Philadelphia at the time, and according to the customs collector there, they were “always ready” to do such “mischief.”

This old antagonism had been further politicized in 1768 when, under the American Board of Customs Commissioners, searchers began to break into sea chests and confiscate those items not covered by cockets, thus breaking an old custom of the sea which allowed seamen to import small items for their own profit. Oliver M. Dickerson has described this new “Invasion of Seamen’s Rights” as a part of “customs racketeering” and a cause of animosity between seamen and customs officers.

Many of these animosities flared in the Boston Massacre. What John Adams described as “a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues and out landish jack tarrs,” including twenty or thirty of the latter, armed with clubs and sticks, did battle with the soldiers. Their leader was Crispus Attucks, a mulatto seaman; he was shot to death in front of the Custom House. One of the seamen’s read-

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110 John Swift to Commissioners of Customs, Oct. 13, 1769, Customs Commissioners to Collector and Comptroller at Philadelphia, Oct. 23, 1769, John Hatton, A State of the Case, Nov. 8, 1770, John Hatton to John Swift, Nov. 9, 1770, Customs Commissioners at Boston to Collector and Comptroller at Philadelphia, Jan. 1771, John Swift to Customs Commissioners, Feb. 11, 1772, John Swift to Customs Commissioners, Nov. 15, 1770, Collector and Comptroller at Philadelphia to Customs Commissioners, Dec. 20, 1770, Philadelphia Custom House Papers, X, 1205, 1209, 1286, 1288; XI; XII; X, 1291-1292; XI, Hist. Soc. Pa. Swift made the customary contention that the seamen rioted because their captains told them to. For a qualification of this contention see Arthur L. Jensen, The Maritime Commerce of Colonial Philadelphia (Madison, 1963), 152. For a mob which attacked a collector of customs and others at the time of the Stamp Act and which may have been led by a seaman, see Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 191-194; log of Cygnet, Aug. 29, 30, 1765, Adm. 51/223; Captain Leslie to Admiral Colvill, Aug. 30, 31, 1765, Adm. 1/482.


112 On the participation of seamen in the Boston Massacre see testimony of Robert Goddard, Oct. 25, 1770; Ebenezer Bridgham, Nov. 27, 1770; James Bailey, Nov. 28, Dec. 4, 1770; James Thompson, Nov. 30, 1770; all in Wroth and Zobel, eds., Legal Papers of Adams, III, 57-58, 103-106, 114-115, 115n-120n, 188, 189n, 268-269; also Frederick Kidder, History of the Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770 (Albany,
sons for being there has been too little explored. The Massacre grew out of a fight between workers and off-duty soldiers at a ropewalk two days before.\textsuperscript{113} That fight, in turn, grew out of the long-standing practice in the British army of allowing off-duty soldiers to take civilian employment. They did so, in Boston and elsewhere, often at wages which undercut those offered to Americans—including unemployed seamen who sought work ashore—by as much as 50 per cent.\textsuperscript{114} In hard times this led to intense competition for work, and the Boston Massacre was in part a product of this competition. Less well known is the Battle of Golden Hill, which arose from similar causes and took place in New York six weeks before. In January 1770 a gang of seamen went from house to house and from dock to dock, using clubs to drive away the soldiers employed there and threatening anyone who might rehire them.\textsuperscript{115} In the days of rioting which followed and which came to be called the Battle of Golden Hill, the only fatality was a seaman, although many other seamen were wounded in the attempt to take vengeance for the killing.\textsuperscript{116} The antipathy between soldiers and seamen was so great, said John Adams, “that they fight as naturally when they meet, as the elephant and Rhinoceros.”\textsuperscript{117}

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\item \textsuperscript{114} \textit{The Times}, Broadside, 1770-21, New-York Historical Society, New York City; Morris, \textit{Government and Labor}, 190n.
\item \textsuperscript{115} \textit{N.-Y. Gaz.; Weekly Post-Boy}, Feb. 5, 1770, reports on the gang of seamen which went from dock to dock turning out soldiers. \textit{The Times}, N.-Y. Hist. Soc. Broadside, 1770-21 describes what could only be the same group and adds the threat of vengeance.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Wroth and Zobel, eds., \textit{Legal Papers of Adams}, III, 262. See also John Shy, \textit{Toward Lexington} (Princeton, 1965), 309.
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IV

To wealthy Loyalist Judge Peter Oliver of Massachusetts, the common people were only “Rabble”—like the “Mobility of all Countries, perfect Machines, wound up by any Hand who might first take the Winch.” The people were “duped,” “deceived,” and “deluded” by cynical leaders who could “turn the Minds of the great Vulgar.” Had they been less ignorant, Americans would have spurned their leaders, and there would have been no Revolution.118 I have tested this generalization and found it unacceptable, at least in its application to colonial seamen. Obviously the seamen did not cause the American Revolution. But neither were they simply irrational fellows who moved only when others manipulated them. I have attempted to show that the seaman had a mind of his own and genuine reasons to act, and that he did act—purposefully. The final test of this purposefulness must be the Revolution itself. Here we find situations in which the seamen are separated from those who might manipulate them and thrown into great physical danger; if they were manipulated or duped into rebellion, on their own we might expect them to show little understanding of or enthusiasm for the war.

To a surprising extent American seamen remained Americans during the Revolution. Beaumarchais heard from an American in 1775 that seamen, fishermen, and harbor workers had become an “army of furious men, whose actions are all animated by a spirit of vengeance and hatred” against the English, who had destroyed their livelihood “and the liberty of their country.”119 The recent study of loyalist claimants by Wallace Brown confirms Oliver Dickerson’s earlier contention that “the volumes dealing with loyalists and their claims discloses an amazing absence of names” of seamen. From a total of 2786 loyalist claimants whose occupations are known Brown found only 39, 1.4 per cent, who were seamen (or pilots). (It is possible to exclude fishermen and masters but not pilots from his figures.) In contrast, farmers numbered 49.1 per cent, artisans 9.8 per cent, merchants and shopkeepers 18.6 per cent, professionals 9.1 per cent, and officeholders 10.1 per cent. Although as Brown states, the poor may be underrepresented among the claimants,

118 Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, eds., Peter Oliver’s Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View (San Marino, Calif., 1961), 65, 94-95, 48, 158, 39, 162, 165.
"the large number of claims by poor people, and even Negroes, suggests that this is not necessarily true."\textsuperscript{120}

An especially revealing way of examining the seamen's loyalties under pressure is to follow them into British prisons.\textsuperscript{121} Thousands of them were imprisoned in such places as the ship Jersey, anchored in New York harbor, and Mill and Forton prisons in England. Conditions were abominable. Administration was corrupt, and in America disease was rife and thousands died.\textsuperscript{122} If physical discomfort was less in the English prisons than in Jersey, the totality of misery may have been as great, with prisoners more distant from the war and worse informed about the progress of the American cause. Lost in a no-man's land between British refusal to consider them prisoners of war and Washington's unwillingness in America to trade trained soldiers for captured seamen, these men had limited opportunities for exchange. Trapped in this very desperate situation, the men were offered a choice: they could defect and join the

\textsuperscript{120}Dickerson, Navigation Acts, 219, offers no explanation of the extent or method of his search. Wallace Brown, The King's Friends (Providence, 1965), 263, 287-344. Although Brown states that those listed pages 261-263 "make up 100 per cent of the claimants," he has excluded those whose occupations are unknown without noting the exclusion. He has also made some minor errors in his calculations, ibid., 261-263, 295, 300, 313. The figures given in the text are my own computations based on corrected totals. I would like to thank Mr. Brown for his assistance in clearing up some of these errors. My own examination of New York materials in Loyalist Transcripts, I-VIII, XLI-XLVIII, and Lorenzo Sabine, Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution with an Historical Essay (Boston, 1864), turned up very few loyalist seamen, some of whom were obviously captives. See for example, Alpheus Avery and Richard Jenkins, Loyalist Transcripts, XVIII, 11-15, XLIII, 495-504. Brown, King's Friends, 307-308, also finds five out of a total of nine New York loyalist "seamen" are masters.

\textsuperscript{121}See Morison, John Paul Jones, 105-166. "The unpleasant subject of the treatment of American naval prisoners during the war afforded fuel for American Anglophobes for a century or more, and there is no point in stirring it up again." For a plea that the horrors of the prisons not be forgotten see New Hampshire Gazette (Portsmouth), Feb. 9, 1779. The following brief account of the prisons in England and America summarizes my full-length study, "Jack Tar in the Darbies: American Seamen in British Prisons during the Revolution," to be completed shortly.

\textsuperscript{122}On the prison ships the standard work at present is James Lenox Banks, David Sproat and Naval Prisoners in the War of the Revolution with Mention of William Lenox, of Charlestown (New York, 1909). This contains many useful documents, but the commentary is a one-sided whitewash written by a descendant who was not above ignoring evidence that Sproat elicited favorable accounts of conditions in Jersey through threats and bribery. Compare ibid., 12-14, 81-84, with Danske Dandridge, American Prisoners of the Revolution (Charlottesville, 1911), 419-423.
Royal Navy. To a striking extent the prisoners remained patriots, and very self-consciously so. "Like brave men, they resisted, and swore that they would never lift a hand to do any thing on board of King George's ships." The many who stayed understood the political significance of their choice as well as the few who went. "What business had he to sell his Country, and go to the worst of Enemies?" Instead of defecting they engaged in an active resistance movement. Although inexperienced in self-government and segregated from their captains, on their own these men experienced no great difficulties in organizing themselves into disciplined groups. "Notwithstanding they were located within the absolute dominions of his Britanic majesty," commented one, the men "adventured to form themselves into a republic, framed a constitution and enacted wholesome laws, with suitable penalties." Organized, they resisted, celebrating the Fourth of July under British bayonets, burning their prisons, and escaping. Under these intolerable conditions, seamen from all over the colonies discovered that they shared a common conception of the cause for which they fought.

123 For instance, computations based on a list of prisoners in Mill Prison from May 27, 1777, to Jan. 21, 1782, from the Boston Gaz., June 24, July 1, 8, 1782, indicate that 7.7\% of 1013 men entered the king's service. This figure may be slightly distorted by the presence of a small number of non-Americans, but there is almost precise confirmation in Adm. 98/11-14 which lists only 190 out of a total of 2579 Americans, 7.4\% entered from all English prisons. This figure is slightly inflated. See Adm. 98/13, 108. See also, John Howard, The State of the Prisons in England and Wales, 3d ed. (Warrington, Eng., 1784), 185, 187, 188, 192, 194. I am indebted to John K. Alexander, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, for these figures and for valuable assistance in connection with the prisons.

124 Charles Herbert, A Relic of the Revolution (Boston, 1847), 157. See also entry for Aug. 19, 1778, Marion S. Coan, "A Revolutionary Prison Diary: the Journal of Dr. Jonathan Haskins," New England Quarterly, XVII (1944), 430. Clearly there is plagiarism here, as there is in many other, but by no means all, entries in the two journals. For a contention that Haskins is the plagiarist, John K. Alexander, "Jonathan Haskins' Mill Prison 'Diary': Can it be Accepted at Face Value?" ibid., XL (1967), 561-564.


126 Sherburne, Memoirs, 81. For a prisoners' committee in Forton Prison see Jan. 27, 1779, Adm. 98/11, 442-444; for a trial in Mill Prison for "the crime of profanely damning the Honrbl. Continental Congress," see Mar. 4, 1778, in Coan, Revolutionary Prison Diary, 305. For self-government in Jersey, see Dring, Recollections, ed. Greene, 84-86.

127 For example, Dring, Recollections, ed. Greene, 97-116; Herbert, Relic of the Revolution, 142; Russell, July 4, 1781, Paine, Ships and Sailors of Salem, 142. For a celebration of the British defeat at Yorktown, see Benjamin Golden to Benjamin Franklin, Dec. 2, 1781, Franklin Papers, XXIII, 94.
At the Constitutional Convention Benjamin Franklin spoke for the seamen:

It is of great consequence that we shd. not depress the virtue and public spirit of our common people; of which they displayed a great deal during the war, and which contributed principally to the favorable issue of it. He related the honorable refusal of the American seamen who were carried in great numbers into the British prisons during the war, to redeem themselves from misery or to seek their fortunes, by entering on board of the Ships of the Enemies to their Country; contrasting their patriotism with a contemporary instance in which the British seamen made prisoners by the Americans, readily entered on the ships of the latter on being promised a share of the prizes that might be made out of their own Country.128

Franklin spoke against limiting the franchise, not for broadening it: he praised the seamen, but with a hint of condescension, suggesting that it would be prudent to grant them a few privileges. A decade later a French traveller noticed that “except the laborer in ports, and the common sailor, everyone calls himself, and is called by others, a gentleman.”129 Government was still gentleman’s government: more people were defined as gentlemen, but Jack Tar was not yet among them.

V

Bernard Bailyn has recently added needed illumination to our understanding of pre-Revolutionary crowd action. Bailyn has disagreed with Peter Oliver and with modern historians who have concurred in describing pre-Revolutionary rioters as mindless, passive, and manipulated: “far from being empty vessels,” rioters in the decade before the outbreak of fighting were “politically effective” and “shared actively the attitudes and fears” of their leaders; theirs was a “‘fully-fledged political movement’”130 Thus it would seem that Bailyn has freed himself from

130 Bailyn, ed., Pamphlets, 581-583, 740, n. 10; Bailyn quotes the last phrase from George Rudé, “The London 'Mob' of the Eighteenth Century,” Historical Journal, II (1959), 17. Bailyn is here contending that the post-1765 crowd was more highly
the influential grasp of Gustave Le Bon. But Bailyn stopped short of total rejection. Only in 1765, he says, was the colonial crowd “transformed” into a political phenomenon. Before then it was “conservative”—like crowds in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, aiming neither at social revolution nor at social reform, but only at immediate revenge. Impressment riots and other “demonstrations by transient sailors and dock workers,” Bailyn says, expressed no “deep-lying social distress” but only a “diffuse and indeliberate antiauthoritarianism”; they were “ideologically inert.”

Other historians have seen the colonial seamen—and the rest of the lower class—as mindless and manipulated, both before and after 1765. The seeming implication behind this is that the seamen who demonstrated in colonial streets did so as much out of simple vindictiveness or undisciplined violence as out of love of liberty. Certainly such motiva-


182 Bailyn, ed., Pamphlets, 581-583, citing Max Beloff, Public Order and Popular Disturbances, 1660-1714 (London, 1938), 33, 153, 155, calls Beloff “the historian of popular disturbances in pre-industrial England,” thus bypassing at least one other candidate for the title, George Rudé, whom he describes as “an English historian of eighteenth-century crowd phenomena.” Rudé has shown in The Crowd in History and elsewhere that the crowd was purposeful, disciplined, and discriminating, that “in the eighteenth century the typical and ever recurring form of social protest was the riot.” Rudé finds in Beloff echoes of Burke and Paine. Thus, the European foundation for Bailyn’s interpretation of the pre-1765 American crowd is somewhat one-sided. Compare with Bailyn R. S. Longley’s extremely manipulative “Mob Activities in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” New Eng. Qtly., VI (1933), 108: “Up to 1765, the Massachusetts mob was not political. Even after this date, its political organization was gradual, but it began with the Stamp Act.”

183 For a further discussion see Lemisch, “American Revolution,” in Bernstein, ed., Towards a New Past, passim. Bailyn, ed., Pamphlets, 581, is not entirely clear on the situation after 1765. He denies that “Revolutionary mobs” in America were in fact “revolutionary” and questions their “meliorist aspirations.”
tion would blend well with the traditional picture of the seaman as rough and ready. For along with the stereotype of Jolly Jack—and in part belying that stereotype—is bold and reckless Jack, the exotic and violent.\textsuperscript{134} Jack \textit{was} violent; the conditions of his existence were violent. Was his violence non-political? Sometimes. The mob of seventy to eighty yelling, club-swinging, out-of-town seamen who tried to break up a Philadelphia election in 1742 had no interest in the election; they had been bought off with money and liquor.\textsuperscript{135}

Other violence is not so clear-cut. Edward Thompson has seen the fighting out of significant social conflict in eighteenth-century England "in terms of Tyburn, the hulks and the Bridewells on the one hand; and crime, riot, and mob action on the other."\textsuperscript{136} Crime and violence among eighteenth-century American seamen needs reexamination from such a perspective. Does "mutiny" adequately describe the act of the crew which seized \textit{Black Prince}, re-named it \textit{Liberty}, and chose their course and a new captain by voting? What shall we call the conduct of 150 seamen who demanded higher wages by marching along the streets of Philadelphia with clubs, unrigging vessels, and forcing workmen ashore? If "mutiny" is often the captain's name for what we have come to call a "strike," perhaps we might also detect some significance broader than mere criminality in the seamen's frequent assaults on captains and thefts from them.\textsuperscript{137} Is it not in some sense a political act for a seaman to

\textsuperscript{134} For rough and ready Jack see Watson, \textit{Sailor in English Fiction}, 45, 159-160; Hohman, \textit{Seamen Ashore}, 217.

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Pa. Archives}, 8th Ser., IV, 2971, 2987, 2995-2998, 3009; "Extracts from the Gazette, 1742," Labaree et al., eds., \textit{Papers of Benjamin Franklin}, II, 363-364. Yet even these men can be shown to have had some ideas; their shouts, which included attacks on "Broad-brims," "Dutch dogs," and "You damned Quakers, . . . Enemies to King GEORGE," are similar to those of the European "Church and King" rioters. See Rudé, \textit{Crowd in History}, 135-148; E. J. Hobsbawm, \textit{Primitive Rebels} (New York, 1965), 110, 118, 120-123.


tear off the mast a copy of a law which says that disobedient seamen will be punished as "seditious"?

Impressment meant the loss of freedom, both personal and economic, and, sometimes, the loss of life itself. The seaman who defended himself against impressment felt that he was fighting to defend his "liberty," and he justified his resistance on grounds of "right." It is in the concern for liberty and right that the seaman rises from vindictiveness to a somewhat more complex awareness that certain values larger than himself exist and that he is the victim not only of cruelty and hardship but also, in the light of those values, of injustice. The riots ashore, whether they be against impressment, the Stamp Act, or competition for work express that same sense of injustice. And here, thousands of men took positive and effective steps to demonstrate their opposition to both acts and policies.

Two of England's most exciting historians have immensely broadened our knowledge of past and present by examining phenomena strikingly like the conduct and thought of the seamen in America. These historians have described such manifestations as "sub-political" or "pre-political," and one of them has urged that such movements be "seriously considered not simply as an unconnected series of individual curiosities, as footnotes to history, but as a phenomenon of general importance and considerable weight in modern history." When Jack Tar went to sea in the American Revolution, he fought, as he had for many years before, quite literally, to protect his life, liberty, and property. It might be extravagant to call the seamen's conduct and the sense of injustice which underlay it in any fully developed sense ideological or political; on the other hand, it makes little sense to describe their ideological content as zero. There are many worlds and much of human history in that vast area between ideology and inertness.

138 See above, 390.
139 Thompson, Making of the English Working Class, 55, 59, 78; Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels, 2, 7, 10.