

“I never had any better fighters:”

Black Sailors in the United States Navy During the War of 1812

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Jesse Williams joined *USS Constitution* in Boston as an ordinary seaman on August 2, 1812. At 40, he was older than most of his shipmates. Besides his advanced age, he fit right in. Born in Pennsylvania, Williams stood 5 feet, 7 ½ inches tall, was stoutly built with a round face and black hair. During the battle with *HMS Guerriere*, Williams served as the first sponger for the number three long gun on the gun deck. Soon after the battle, the navy transferred Williams to the Great Lakes, where he was wounded, captured, and sent to the infamous Dartmoor prison. In recognition of his service on the Lakes, the state of Pennsylvania awarded Williams, along with all the other Pennsylvania natives who served there, a silver medal in 1820. Jesse Williams' story was familiar to any one of the thousands of sailors who served in the United States Navy during the War of 1812, with one exception: Jesse Williams was a black man.

The history of black seamen in American naval service goes back at least to the colonial navies of the French and Indian War period.¹ During the Revolutionary War, the Provincial naval forces “used black sailors quite extensively aboard [their] naval vessels, some of whom were native sons and others acquired from captured British ships.”² Despite this tradition of black naval service, in August 1798, Benjamin Stoddert, the secretary of the United States' new navy, declared that “no Negroes or Mullatoes are to be admitted” into the service.³ This followed similar regulations promulgated by the Marine Corps and the army in March of that same year.⁵ Despite this seemingly official prohibition, it is clear that blacks maintained a consistent presence in the US Navy throughout the Early Republic and especially during the War of 1812.⁶

When war broke out between the United States and Great Britain in June of 1812, the American navy needed to swiftly bring its ship's complements up to full strength. Navy captains, competing with the

¹James Barker Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans, Culture, Ethnicity, and Nation Series* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 109, 110.

²*Ibid.*

³Qtd. in Farr, 114.

⁴Langley, 275.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Langley quotes Edward Preble from 1803 informing a lieutenant that he was “not to Ship Black Men” [Qtd. in 276]. Also, in 1807, three of the four seamen impressed by the British warship *Leopard* from the *USS Chesapeake* were black [276]. Langley also includes a quote from Dr. Edward Cutbush, a surgeon in the US Navy, who wrote a book for other naval surgeons. In it, Cutbush wrote that sailors should be encouraged to dance during their leisure time, and he remarked that “there will be no difficulty in procuring a ‘fiddler,’ especially among the coloured men, in every American frigate, who can play most of the common dancing tunes” [Qtd. in 277, Italics in text].

more lucrative positions offered by privateers and merchant ships, struggled to find skilled seamen willing to sign on.⁷ Race often became, therefore, a secondary issue to the need to enlist a crew.

Unfortunately, it is unclear how these naval recruits fared aboard ship. Gerard T. Altoff, a naval historian with the National Park Service, argues that black seamen faced “varying degrees of racism and were denied unconstrained liberty and equality because of their color.”⁸ However, Altoff does not provide specific examples to illustrate his argument. W. Jeffrey Bolster, the preeminent scholar of the black experience in the merchant service, argues that black sailors on board merchant ships were integrated with their white counterparts.⁹ Naval surgeon Usher Parsons remembered that, immediately after the war in 1816, white and black seaman messed together on USS *Java*. Parsons also recalled that, at that time, one in six or eight sailors were black men. The same was true, he wrote, on USS *Guerriere* in 1819, where “the proportion of blacks was about the same in her crew [and] there seemed to be an entire absence of prejudice against the blacks as messmates among the crew.”¹⁰ He continued, “What I have said applies to the crews of other ships that sailed in [U.S. Navy] squadrons.”¹¹ It should be noted, that Parson wrote these description in 1862, in the midst of the Civil War. It is possible, therefore, that the nation’s current climate influenced his memory of events almost 50 years in the past.^{12 13}

Of course, hierarchy ruled on naval vessels, and race relations may have been determined to some extent for the sailors by their commanding officer. To my knowledge, only one example of forced segregation exists from the War of 1812, though other, similar examples may also have existed. In the “Internal Rules and Regulations” of the US Frigate *Constellation*, written about 1813, both petty officers and “colored” men are ordered to mess “by themselves.”¹⁴ Here is an example of a white officer, the *Constellation*’s commander, establishing a policy of separation. [Note: was Gordon from the South?] How this segregation affected race relations aboard ship is unknown.¹⁵ However, it is important to note that this separation only applied to messes, implying that white and black sailors interacted during their other daily activities aboard ship. Indeed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for one group to be isolated from another on board a heavily-manned frigate.

Still, it is difficult to argue that white sailors, inculcated with racial prejudice on land, could entirely

⁷Gerard T. Altoff, Unpublished lecture given at the USS Constitution Museum, July 2003.

⁸Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men*, 23.

⁹Bolster, “To Feel Like a Man,” 1177.

¹⁰Qtd. in Altoff, *Amongst my Best Men*, 22.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Bolster, “To Feel Like a Man,” 1179. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 75.

¹³Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 74, 79.

¹⁴“Internal Rules and Regulation to be Observed on board the United States Frigate *Constellation*, Charles Gordon, Esqr. Commander,” in Glenn Drayton, untitled memorandum Book, South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

¹⁵Christopher McKee noted that this ship was berthed in the south at this time. Perhaps if the sailors were southern white men, Gordon felt he was protecting his white crewmember’s racial superiority or notions of propriety by segregating the messes.

cast off such feelings on board ship. In fact, one key example seems to prove that prejudice, even if subdued while aboard ship, lingered in the minds of white sailors. By 1814, bleak Dartmoor Prison in England was home to approximately 6,000 American prisoners of war. Of these, about 1,000 were black men from privateers and naval vessels, [same as privateer], as well as sailors who were serving in the British Navy when war broke out and refused to fight against the United States. Once in the prison, white POWs, the same ones who supposedly served without complaint beside their fellow black sailors, requested that their black counterparts be housed separately. British officials agreed to the request.¹⁶ As Robin F.A. Fabel writes, “There is no doubt that segregation sprang from the racism of white prisoners.”¹⁷ If white sailors agreed, perhaps grudgingly, to work, live, and eat alongside their black colleagues at sea, once freed from the cramped, controlled quarters of the ship, they immediately reverted back to the discriminatory lifestyle they were accustomed to onshore. In fact, the white sailors’ request to physically segregate the black prisoners in a separate barracks presents an even stricter separation than most poor, white sailors would have known in America’s coastal cities. In most northern seaports during this period, poor, laboring blacks lived alongside whites of the same class and situation. Why, therefore, did white POWs at Dartmoor demand absolute separation? Perhaps white sailors, now freed from the oversight of their ship’s officers, gave in to their personal prejudices; or, possibly, the white prisoners desired to degrade the black sailors in order to claim some measure of superiority even in the midst of their captivity. Whatever the reason, black prisoners in Dartmoor were often the victims of white taunts and violence.¹⁸ The black experience there poses interesting problems for the oft-cited belief that blacks aboard ship were relatively safe from white prejudice.

However, along with these examples of racial animosity at Dartmoor there are other recorded instances of camaraderie, or at the very least acceptance. Whites and blacks boxed with each other. Occasionally, whites and blacks participated in interracial dancing. Though each race produced their own theatrical events, whites and blacks attended each other’s productions.¹⁹ As one white prisoner, Benjamin Waterhouse, recorded, “however extraordinary it may appear,” whites took fencing, boxing, music, and dancing lesson from black inmates, while other whites chose to live with the black prisoners to avoid white harassment.²⁰ It is unclear how to reconcile these seemingly conflicting aspects of prison life, segregation on the one hand, and integration on the other. Perhaps more than anything these incongruities point to the ambiguous and often enigmatic nature of race relations during the Early Republic on land and at sea.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, all of the first-hand accounts of black service on board US naval vessels during the War of 1812 are from a white perspective. Almost all of these accounts speak

¹⁶Robin F.A. Fabel, “Self-Help in Dartmoor: Black and White Prisoners in the War of 1812,” *Journal of the Early Republic* (Vol. 9 No. 2, Summer 1989, 165-190) 170.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁸Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 12.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 118, 120-122.

²⁰Qtd. in Farr, 70.

favorably of black sailors. After his victory over HMS *Guerriere* in August 1812, USS *Constitution*'s captain Isaac Hull wrote, using the discriminatory language of the day, "I never had any better fighters than those niggers, they stripped to the waist and fought like devils... seeming to be utterly insensible to danger and to be possessed with the determination to outfight the white sailors."²¹ When Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry wrote to Commodore Isaac Chauncey to complain that his crew was "a motley set, blacks, Soldiers, boys....,"²² Chauncey angrily replied,

*'I have yet to learn that the Colour of the skin, or cut and trimmings of the coat, can effect a man's qualifications or usefulness. I have nearly 50 blacks on board of this Ship, and many of them are amongst my best men.'*²³

After the Battle of Lake Erie, Perry changed his tune, praising his black sailors to Chauncey, who remembered, "Perry speaks highly of the bravery and good conduct of the Negroes, who formed a considerable part of his crew."²⁴

Though the Navy's 1798 restriction against black sailors does not appear to have been strictly enforced, the Navy officially reversed its policy on March 3, 1813 with the following act:

*'...That from and after the termination of the war in which the United States are now engaged with Great Britain it shall not be lawful to employ on board any of the public or private vessels of the United States any person or persons except citizens of the United States or persons of color, natives of the U. States....'*²⁵

As written, this policy did not take effect until after the War of 1812 ended. However, the intent behind it indicated a relaxation of official policy.²⁶ In fact, many historians claim that all of the official ships involved in the War of 1812 contained at least some black sailors.²⁷

Since the US Navy did not designate race on muster rolls or other official documents, the average number of black seamen who, served aboard US naval vessels is debatable. Christopher McKee argues that blacks composed an average of 9.7% of ships' crews.^{28 29} USS *Independence*, while fitting

²¹Qtd. in Altoff, 23. NOTE: this letter is written while it was still against Navy regulations to enlist blacks and mulattos.

²²Qtd. in Altoff, 36.

²³Qtd. in Altoff, 37.

²⁴Qtd. in Altoff, 40.

²⁵Qtd. in Altoff, 20.

²⁶Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-'65* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1890; New York: Arno Press, 1968) 79 and Altoff, 18 [cites from Frederick S. Harrod, "Jim Crow in the Navy (1798-1941) US Naval Institute Proceedings (September 1979)].

²⁷Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-'65* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1890; New York: Arno Press, 1968) 79 and Altoff, 18 [cites from Frederick S. Harrod, "Jim Crow in the Navy (1798-1941) US Naval Institute Proceedings (September 1979)].

²⁸Altoff, 21.

²⁹Christopher McKee, unpublished lectured delivered at the USS Constitution Museum, July 2003.

out in Boston Harbor in 1814, had 34 black crewmembers out of their total complement of about 215 [15.8%].³⁰ In an account of the crew of the US Sloop *Hornet*, attending a theatrical event in New York City held in their honor, a journalist wrote that the crew “marched together into the pit, and nearly one half of them were Negroes.”³¹ Ned Myers, who told his personal story to James Fenimore Cooper, recalled that at least eight of USS *Scourge*'s 32 crewmembers, or 25%, were black.³²

Perhaps the most reliable sources for determining the percentages of black sailors aboard naval vessels are the Prisoner of War records from various prisons and prison ships collected by historians Ira Dye and Christopher McKee. These records provide richly detailed information about naval and merchant sailors during the early nineteenth century.

Of the 666 naval prisoners in Ira Dye's database, 7.36% were recorded as black or “mulatto.”³³ Christopher McKee, using a slightly smaller sample of 546 naval prisoners, found 51, or 9.34%, black and “mulatto” prisoners. Together, these percentages average out to just over 8%. Based on these calculations and the ones mentioned earlier, it is probably safe to assume that anywhere from 7 to 15% was the average percentage of blacks on any given naval vessel. [Compare that to Ira Dye's merchant sailor research, which found that 15-20% of merchant sailors were black, and perhaps we see the effect of the navy's prohibition and/or commanding officers' personal racial politics.]

For USS *Constitution*, which carried approximately 450 men, 7-15% would mean that between 32 and 68 of her sailors were black or mulatto. Unfortunately, discovering just who these men were is extremely difficult. In the course of our research into the lives of all of *Constitution*'s War of 1812 crewmembers (approximately 1300 men), we have found substantial demographic and personal information on over 450 sailors. Unfortunately, of those 450, we have definitively identified only three black sailors. One is Jesse Williams, whose history was recounted at the beginning of this paper. We have a short pension application for a sailor named James Bennett, who was born in Delaware and killed on the Great Lakes in 1814. The third is David Debias, who we will be discussing in length later. However, the treasure trove of information from the POW records allows us to draw a composite picture of the “average” black naval sailor during the War of 1812 and compare that composite to the “average” non-black naval sailor.

³⁰Bearss, Edwin C. *Historic Resource Study, Volume I and II, Charlestown Navy Yard, 1800-1842* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1984) 154.

³¹Qtd. in Bolster, “To Feel Like a Man,” 1179.

³²My own calculations. Information on Ned Myers and the *Scourge* crew given in personal conversation with Gerard T. Altoff, July 21, 2005.

³³However, for each ship's captured crew recorded in these records, the percentage of captured black crewmembers ranges from less than 1% to 100%. All calculation done by author based on Ira Dye's list of US Navy sailors in English Prisons during the War of 1812. NOTE: for the calculations of percentages of black prisoners from captured crews, these number do not and can not take into account, how many crewmembers, white and/or black, comprised the original ships' complement, as well as how many white and black crewmembers were killed in action, escaped, or were not counted. Also, these number include any human error on the part of the prison officials who recorded information and who, individually, made the determinations of race. For the 100% figure, only one person, a black man, was recorded in the books for US Brig *Vixen*, therefore, the percentage was 100%. These calculations MUST be taken in context of the prejudices inherent in the available information from which they are based.

The black sailors who served in the United States Navy during the War of 1812 were predominately able and ordinary seaman. Able seamen were the most experienced enlisted men, and were more adept at sail handling and the other duties on the ship. Unfortunately, the POW records do not differentiate between the two. Approximately 85 % of the black and “mulatto” naval prisoners were seaman, whereas only 7% were designated as servants and slaves and only 7% were labeled boys [an indicator of lack of skill rather than age]. Most of these black sailors, then, had at least some seafaring experience, and they definitely were not kept in the lowliest shipboard positions because of their race.

Where did these men come from? When taken prisoner, British authorities required the men to give their birth state and city. Though these cannot be entirely trusted, in both McKee and Dye’s data, three states made up the majority of entries for black sailors: New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Men from Delaware, Virginia, Louisiana, and Maryland were also a significant, yet smaller, presence. With few exceptions, most notably for Pennsylvania, the percentages are similar to those for non-black/mulattos POWs. It must be recalled that, Philadelphia during this period had a very large and important black community, many of whose members were involved in seafaring. The same is true for Massachusetts and New York, both of which were home to maritime-oriented cultures and economies. But in the case of Pennsylvania, the numerical influence of black sailors is clearly shown. Also, more southern states are represented in the listing of white sailors’ birth states. It is not surprising that there is a dearth of black sailors from states where plantation slavery and stringent race laws were the norm. It is quite possible that black sailors would never admit to being from the southern states for fear of being labeled runaways.

The average age of black and “mulatto” sailors is almost the same as that of white naval sailors: 24.6 years (black/mulatto) vs. 26.5 years (white).

Here then, we have reached the limitations of the information offered by the few details provided by Britain’s prisoner of war records for the War of 1812.

The fact that we have no direct evidence of racial prejudice aboard naval vessels is not proof of its absence. It can only be assumed that officers and fellow sailors’ racial attitudes determined the black sailor’s experiences. What is most telling, black naval sailors during the War of 1812 routinely held the rank of seaman, either ordinary or able. That put them on par, at least on paper, with the majority of their white shipmates. However, the reality of these black sailors’ lives largely remains a mystery.