

“Black Jacks”

By Erin Benz

From the 1740s to the 1860s, black mariners, or “black jacks,” were a notable presence on America’s waters. Though the names of many sailors are undocumented, we do know of a few African Americans from this time who made successful careers at sea despite difficult circumstances. There was Paul Cuffe who started his career as a seaman on a whaling boat, went on to become a wealthy sea captain and ship owner. Robert Smalls was another black mariner who started his life as a slave prior to the Civil War and climbed the ranks to become a ship’s pilot, sea captain, and politician. Eastern Shore native Frederick Douglass, famous abolitionist, worked as a caulker while enslaved in Baltimore. There he became acquainted with a black sailor who loaned him his free papers to aid in Douglass’ escape.

Being a black mariner was relatively unusual, though there were enough black jacks that they made a visible part of the seagoing community. During the Revolutionary War, ten percent of slaves worked as dockhands and on ships and by the 1830s, twenty percent of all maritime workers were of African descent. According to Dr. W. Jeffrey Bolster, “free and enslaved black sailors established a visible presence in every North Atlantic seaport and plantation roadstead between 1740 and 1865.” At

this time, Chestertown was a major port in the colonies and early America, and so black mariners were probably also a common sight here for a time.

The jobs that these men held onboard ships varied. Some were pilots, cooks, or cabin boys while others were stewards, drummers, translators, and more. Just as their jobs varied, so too did the ships on which they worked, which ranged from steamers, to whalers, to merchant ships. A majority of black mariners were slaves lent out to captains to bolster the coin purse of their masters when there was not enough work to be done on the plantation.



A picture of sailor Paul Cuffe

However, being a sailor was also one of the only jobs available to free black men, making it popular amongst freedmen as well. While African Americans were treated more fairly while working onboard vessels compared to those who worked on the land, they still experienced racism almost daily. Despite the grueling work

and unfair treatment they received, the income black mariners earned was usually worth it as they could use their wages to buy their own freedom or the freedom of their loved ones. Unlike their white counterparts, most black mariners had families to support, so they saved their money to feed, house, and free family members.

Being a black mariner shaped the identity for these men in many ways. For example, when the United States issued a Seamen’s Protection Certificates to merchant mariners in 1796 that defined them as “citizens.” In addition, when the tobacco regulation began in Maryland in 1747, African American watermen were able to travel greater distances, as they had to transport the tobacco farther for inspection. Black mariners, both free and enslaved, from both the Western and Eastern shore, experienced liberty like few others of their race.

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