April 2006

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Seeking Freedom in the Atlantic World, 1713–1783

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In 1717 William Burgis completed a six-foot-wide panoramic illustration of New York’s waterfront. The picture provided a vivid depiction of the central place that the maritime industry played in the city’s economic and social lives. Burgis showed a harbor filled with sloops, brigantines, and schooners, as well as wharves and shipyards bustling with activity associated with New York’s coastal and overseas trade. Merchants of the time saw the prominence of ships and buildings in *The Burgis View* as a reflection of their social status and wealth, while tradesmen, such as coopers and shipwrights, saw in Burgis’s work an acknowledgment of their significance within a critical component of the city’s economy. For most New Yorkers, the harbor’s bustle illustrated by Burgis signified New York’s increasing importance within the British Empire as the city became an important trading port. The vessels pictured in *The Burgis View* were likely to have come to New York from London, Charleston, Boston, and a wide variety of West Indian ports. The city’s maritime industry and trading networks depicted in Burgis’s work had quite a different connotation for New York’s slaves than it did for the city’s merchants and tradesmen. Trading relationships between New York merchants and West Indian planters and merchants brought many of the city’s slaves to New York’s slave market at Wall Street.¹ The wharves, dockyards, and shorefront

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¹ New York’s strong trading relationship with the West Indies resulted in more than three thousand slaves being imported into New York in the first four decades of the eighteenth century. After the 1741 conspiracy trials, this once profitable trade
artisan shops in Burgis’s picture were where numerous New York slaves labored as stevedores, draymen, ship carpenters, and sail makers. Thus, for New York’s slaves, the maritime industry depicted by Burgis was not simply the muscular, vibrant, economic engine that most other New Yorkers understood it to be, but rather the means by which they were enslaved and kept so.

However, in the seventy-year period between the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht and the Treaty of Paris, slaves, both those living in New York and those from distant rural regions, came to see New York City’s maritime industry as also being a potential portal to freedom. This perception of the city’s harbor and its ships being a door to freedom for slaves was due to the size and strength of New York’s maritime industry, slaves’ maritime skills, and the city’s large transient and multicultural population providing ample opportunities for fugitive slaves to hide themselves while they sought berths on the numerous ships docked at the wharves cluttering the East River from the Battery north to Corlears’ Hook. 2 These opportunities for freedom through New York’s harbor expanded and contracted during the eighteenth century due to factors such as economic booms and recessions, and imperial trade policies, which were beyond the control of both slaves and their masters. It was, however, the exigencies of warfare and struggles between Great Britain and its imperial enemies, with the resulting maritime labor shortages, that provided the greatest opportunities for fugitive slaves. Thus, while in the two decades following the end of Queen Anne’s War a relatively small number of fugitive slaves fled enslavement by seeking berths on ships, during the wars of the mid- and late-eighteenth century—the War of Jenkin’s Ear, King George’s War, the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution—the number of runaway slaves who obtained, or at least attempted to find, freedom by employment on the numerous vessels berthed in New York harbor increased dramatically.

In 1712 “hard usage” of the city’s slaves led to an insurrection in which two dozen of the city’s slaves attempted to kill New York’s whites and take control of the city. Among those participating in the uprising were three Spanish Indians—Hosey (Jose), John (Juan), and Ambrose—from New Spain

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who had been captured by English privateers and sold into slavery some time after 1706. The harshness of English slavery must have been especially hard for these men, having been accepted as free so recently by another European nation and able to travel the Atlantic. Despite the participation of these men experienced in the ways of European warfare, the insurrection was unsuccessful. Although the slaves set fire to several buildings, murdered eight whites, and wounded more than ten others, the city’s militia swiftly suppressed the insurrection, capturing those revolting slaves who did not kill themselves. In the aftermath of the uprising, city officials responded quickly, convicting twenty-one slaves and executing eighteen. This response to the uprising vividly reinforced for the city’s slaves the brutality of slavery in New York and the difficulty of successful violent resistance in an urban environment with an armed militia, notwithstanding that New York’s slave population was the largest of any colony north of Delaware. In the ensuing seventy-year period, while slaves in the New York region occasionally attempted to obtain permanent freedom by violent means, most slave resistance took on a less violent nature. This relative lack of violent resistance may have been a reflection of slaves’ assessment that freedom was not likely to be obtained in colonial British North America through violent uprisings. Such an assessment led New York slaves to partake in other forms of resistance. Some New York slaves participated in criminal gangs such as the Geneva Gang that burglarized the homes of whites. Others sought a more permanent and lasting solution to their unhappiness being enslaved. For a number of fugitive slaves, both expe-
rienced mariners and landlubbers, this search for permanent freedom brought them to New York’s wharves and docks.3

With a black population that prior to the American Revolution never was less than 14 percent of the city’s total population and that included free blacks who often worked alongside slaves and white indentured servants, New York City provided an ideal environment for a fugitive slave to blend into. The nature of work in the city also assisted fugitives in escaping. Rather than being used as agricultural workers, numerous slaves worked as artisans or at other skilled trades. Some of these tradesmen were able to “pass as free men” in urban areas. New York’s skilled slaves understood that their skills were transferable elsewhere and they could utilize New York’s role as a port city to flee their masters.4

Slaves who successfully escaped enslavement often could speak multiple languages. Fugitive slave advertisements that contained references to fugitive slaves’ linguistic abilities indicate that this was true for New York City fugitive slaves. Even after 1741, when the overwhelming majority of slave imports to New York came from Africa, only one advertisement for a New York City fugitive slave mentioned that a runaway spoke an African language. In contrast, more than 70 percent of such advertisements in which a fugitive’s linguistic abilities were noted characterized the fugitive slave as speaking English. In addition, a number of the fugitives were also able to speak another European language. Such linguistic abilities enabled fugitive slaves to forge passes, pass as free blacks, avoid capture, obtain ship berths on boats leaving New York for ports throughout the Atlantic world, and eventually settle in foreign ports.5


From the first decades of the eighteenth century, blacks’ involvement in New York’s maritime industry was not limited to their significant presence on New York’s wharves as sailmakers and shipwrights. Slaves in New York were employed in maritime-related occupations such as shipmasters, pilots, and ferry crewmembers and utilized their maritime abilities to engage in resistance.\(^6\) In the mid-eighteenth century one out of every four or five New York adult men was a seaman. While there are not definitive numbers for the city’s slave mariners, fugitive slave advertisements indicate that a substantial portion of the city’s fugitives were mariners or were familiar with maritime matters. For example, almost one-quarter of New York City fugitive slave advertisements contained warnings to masters of vessels not to harbor runaway slaves, while almost 14 percent of such advertisements indicated that the runaway’s master was engaged in some aspect of the maritime industry.\(^7\)

Many of the city’s slaves came to New York knowledgeable in maritime matters, having been mariners in the West Indies or Africa. By the early decades of the eighteenth century, the West Indian market was a critical component in the city’s economy. New York and the other ports of the Mid-Atlantic and New England so dominated trade with the West Indies that one London ship owner remarked in 1751 “traders at the Northern Colonies have all the West India business to themselves.” Not only did New York receive sugar, spices, and rum from West Indies, but in the first half of the century a significant portion of the slaves imported into the province came from those islands. Fugitive slave advertisements indicate that a substantial majority of the city’s fugitive slaves—70.6 percent of slaves who came from outside British North America—were born in the West Indies. Slave importation data also indicates that more than 55 percent of New York’s slaves in the period from 1715 to 1741 came from the West Indies.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Charles Nicoll Day Book, New-York Historical Society (N-YHS); and New-York Mercury, April 17, 1758.


\(^8\) Foy, “How Conflicts,” Table 1–6. Prior to the 1741 conspiracy trials, New Yorkers were far more likely to desire “seasoned” West Indian slaves than slaves imported directly from Africa. African slaves’ prominent role in the 1712 Slave Revolt and their unfamiliarity with the ways of European settlers in America caused many New York slave owners to prefer slaves from the West Indies who were seen as less
New Yorkers’ desire for West Indian slaves was not limited to the profits to be made from their sale. Traveling West Indian trade routes on a regular basis, New York’s ship captains undertook relatively short voyages in familiar waters with small crews and only a handful of slaves to watch. Such conditions made sea captains on West Indian trade routes likely to use West Indian slaves with maritime skills as members of their crews. The West Indian slaves imported to New York came in groups of between one and four slaves on a ship, averaging just two slaves per ship. Of the 654 ships bringing non-African slaves to New York between 1715 and 1764, 540 of these ships carried seven or fewer slaves. Most of these slaves were young men, making them ideal candidates for ship captains to put them to work as crew members.

During the economic depression Bermuda suffered in the 1730s, exportation of small numbers of Bermudian slaves to New York appears to have been fairly common. Not less than forty-two Bermudian slaves were imported to New York during the period from 1725 to 1749, almost all in lots of one or two. Many of these West Indian slaves had maritime skills. Masters on West Indian islands such as Antigua, St. Croix, and Jamaica used slaves as crewmembers on their vessels, with one-third of Antigua’s ship crews being black mariners.

New York ship captains recognized that West Indian–born rebellious and more acclimated to the ways of the American colonies. As a result, of the 4,361 slaves that are identified in CO5 and TASD as being imported into New York in the years between 1715 and 1741, 3,056, or 70 percent, came from the West Indies. (Cf. James A. Lycod, “New York and the Slave Trade, 1700–1774,” WMQ 35, 2 [April, 1978]: 382, Table 4, which found a total of 3,864 slaves in this time period of which 2,998 came from the West Indies).

9. Lydon, “New York and the Slave Trade,” 384, Table 6 (“six hundred and fifty-four”). See, King v. Falmouth, July 31 and August 3, 1770, Parchments G-334 and K-314, County Clerk’s Office, New York City; Benjamin Douglas to the King, Recognizance Pursuant to the Condition of the Pardon of the Negroe Man Named Falmouth, Misc., Mss. B. Douglas, November 28, 1770, N-YHS; and TNA CO5/1228/7, 56, 64, 73, 94, and 107 for an example of a slave who regularly worked as a seaman for his ship captain master on a New York–West Indies trading route.

10. An example of such importation of West Indies slaves was the Bermudian sloop Mary & Margaret. During the 1730s and the 1740s the Mary & Margaret made regular voyages on the New York–Bermuda trade route bringing to New York a single slave on most trips. The sloop generally had eight or nine men in its crew, making it an ideal candidate to have utilized the single slave it transported on each voyage as an additional crewmember. TNA CO5/1226, p. 43, CO5/1226, p. 90, and CO5/1227, p. 69.

slaves were “the glue of maritime commerce” and used them as crew members. New Yorkers were thus able to save a seaman’s salary. This practice made it more likely the slave would survive the voyage than if he were locked into the small five-by-two-by-four-foot space normally allocated to slaves on such ships.\textsuperscript{12}

The West Indies was not the only region with rich maritime traditions from which slaves were imported into New York. During the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth century when English and French pirates sought Madagascar men as crew due to their seafaring skills, New Yorkers imported significant numbers of Madagascar slaves. In the 1750s, at a time when many Senegambian men had seafaring experience, including on sailing boats with Portuguese sails and rigging, groups of Senegambian slaves were transported to New York. While the numbers of Madagascar and Senegambian slaves with maritime experience who were transported to New York cannot be stated with certainty, it is clear that during the eighteenth century, a number of such slaves could be found in New York.\textsuperscript{13}

When slaves were brought to New York, they encountered social and economic conditions that engendered flight via the sea. Unlike Bermudian slave mariners who rarely ran away due to strong family connections and whose rate of desertion was five times less than the average for British merchant vessels, most of New York City’s fugitives did not have family connections that would have bound them tightly to New York. The typical New York City master owned one or two slaves and did not value slave children.\textsuperscript{14}

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labor, as did most Southern masters, but rather as burdens. New York masters described slave women as “breeding Children not suiting the Family out of which she is to be sold,” or “a likely barren Negro Wench.” With New York City masters frequently opposing slave marriages and adult female slaves representing a significant majority of the city's slave population, such societal opposition to children raised significant barriers to New York's slaves maintaining long-term relationships and nuclear families. As a result of these attitudes by New York's slave masters, many adult male slaves had limited family ties to the New York region. With three-quarters of New York's fugitive slaves being twenty-five years of age or younger, an ideal age for life at sea, many of these young men were not likely to have family obligations, and thus were willing to undertake the risks of life at sea, and to experience other cultures in their attempts to find freedom.15

In contrast to southern plantation slaves who “learned slowly and incompletely about whites and their ways,” New York slaves lived in a cosmopolitan city. Slaves, be they cartmen or chimney sweeps, moved about the city almost at will in the course of their work, bringing them in frequent contact with peoples from throughout the Atlantic world. They often were unsupervised by their masters for extended periods of time. Slaves' movement about the city was also a function of their masters frequently hiring them out to a number of different employers for temporary employment, giving them familiarity with the city's neighborhoods, including its maritime quarters. Slave masters proved willing and at times even eager to hire some of the city's slaves to work on the New York's numerous ships, including its privateers. Thus, when the New York merchant George Janeway lacked work for his two slaves, Sharp and Jackie, he hired them out for two-week journeys on privateers.16


New York’s use of slaves as mariners was not an isolated phenomenon. In colonies as diverse as Bermuda, North Carolina, and Massachusetts, slaves were employed during the eighteenth century in a variety of maritime jobs. A review of Philadelphia, New York, and Newport newspapers and miscellaneous manuscripts has found references to more than seven thousand blacks working on vessels or seeking to do so between 1713 and 1783. The same review has also disclosed references to hundreds of other blacks, free and enslaved, working at the wharves and docks of British North America. While wars and recessions greatly affected the number of berths available for black mariners, free or enslaved, the presence of black mariners was continual through the ebbs and flows in the maritime industry. Colonial officials found blacks on British vessels throughout the eighteenth century. Blacks, free and enslaved, worked on Spanish and French vessels as mariners to an even greater degree. A number of these foreign dark-skinned mariners would find themselves enslaved in New York.

New York slave masters and colonial officials expressed concern as early as


18. The extent of black mariners in the eighteenth century Atlantic world is also made apparent by Spanish and British officials comments concerning their presence. The Spanish Consulado noted that Lima and other Spanish American ports were “filling up with foreigners” seeking maritime employment, while British colonial officials complained of “the wooly haired race” being prevalent on British vessels. Lawrence A. Clayton, “Life at Sea in Colonial Spanish America: The New World Experience,” in Seamen in Society, ed. Paul Adam (Bucharest: Perthes-en-Gâtinais, 1980) 3:22; and Letter from Thomas Franklin to John Cleveland, Esq., April 28, 1757, TNA ADM 1/306. These observations were confirmed by a census of North American ships in Kingston harbor in 1743 that found there were forty-one black mariners among the vessels’ 135 sailors. Edward Trelawyne letter to Lords of Admiralty, December 21, 1743, TNA ADM 1/3917. Moreover, numerous Spanish and French black mariners were captured by British and American privateers. See e.g., Pennsylvania Gazette, January 20, 1730; American Weekly Mercury, October 6, 1743; Boston Evening-Post, February 6, 1749.
1702 that slaves were fleeing the colony by boat. To restrict the steady stream of fugitives leaving the city via the sea, a slave code was enacted that made it illegal for ship captains to assist runaways. This mandate did not succeed, as numerous slave masters throughout the eighteenth century felt compelled to include in fugitive slave advertisements the refrain that “all masters of ships and others are strictly forewarned at their peril from harbouring or carrying [the slave] off.” This concern that fugitive slaves would permanently disappear over the ocean’s horizon deeply distressed New York’s slave masters. The warnings to ship captains indicate that masters understood that many New York City runaway slaves utilized maritime skills and New York’s role as a port city to facilitate permanent escape from enslavement.19

The warnings to ship captains were also an attempt by slave masters to negotiate with those whites, such as sea captains and military recruiters, whose economic interests were not in seeing slaves return to their masters. New York City slave masters were concerned that economic demands for seamen would lead sea captains to ignore the runaway slaves’ status as the chattel property of others and to treat slaves as free. In doing so sea captains provided New York fugitive slaves with opportunities not available elsewhere to move into the free capitalist world inhabited by nonslaves at the same time the captains addressed their own staffing needs.20

Before the end of Queen Anne’s War, blacks were regularly employed in boats plying the waters around the city. In the early decades of the century, fish they caught were shipped to the West Indies and southern colonies. John Cannon, “commander” of the city’s oyster fleet, and other captains on both the New York and New Jersey sides of the bay, used numerous slaves on their oyster boats that throughout the 1720s and 1730s helped harvest the boatloads of oysters that ended up on the plates of many New Yorkers. Other blacks, free and enslaved, were employed, or sought employment, on New

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20. Although one would anticipate that fugitive slaves in other northern port cities such as Boston might have used shipping as a primary tool of resistance, the one study of New England fugitive slaves examines too small a sampling of fugitive slave advertisements (sixty-two) and provides too little information concerning slaves’ use of shipping to draw any definitive conclusions. Lorenzo J. Greene, “The New England Negro as Seen in Advertisements for Runaway Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* 29,2 (April 1944): 125–46.
York’s ocean-going vessels. In the twenty years after the end of Queen Anne’s War, some of these slaves recognized that “seafaring rank[ed] among the best prospects . . . [for] a quick getaway.” For example, several of Cannon’s negro slaves, along with eight Spanish Indians, stole his sloop in 1721 and were believed headed to St. Augustine. The next year, David Lyell’s Indian slave Nim was believed headed to New London to “get on board some Vessel,” and Dick fled his master by “go[ing] to sea.” Ten years later George Goldin took advantage of his mariner master’s death to flee. Twenty-one years after the eight Spanish Indians sailed south with Cannon’s slaves, New York’s oyster commander suffered the indignity of once again having three of his slaves heading south in a sloop stolen from him. Fleeing in the middle of January, a time of year when most ships were berthed at dock due to fierce Atlantic winter storms, these three slaves managed to gain control of the vessel, set sail, and leave New York harbor without being challenged or setting off a hue and cry. A boat leaving New York harbor with an all black crew did not arouse suspicion because such crews were not uncommon. While there are no records of where these three slaves ended up, it would not be unreasonable to speculate that they, like the group of Havana-born slaves who in 1768 seized a schooner and sailed from South Carolina back to Cuba, were able to reach their desired destination. Other black mariners were not as fortunate in finding freedom in the Atlantic world. For example, in the summer of 1725 Peter Van Trump, a free black mariner left St. Thomas on what he believed to be a voyage to Europe only to find that the ship captain steered the vessel to North Carolina where Peter was sold into slavery. Like other black mariners throughout the eighteenth century, Van Trump found himself a victim of the English willingness to equate dark skin with enslaved status and to put the burden on the black mariner to prove his free status.

Between 1729 and 1737 New York, like most other northern port cities,

21. American Weekly Mercury, February 7 and 14, 1721 (“Dick”); TNA COS/1222, 156 (“fish of Negroes”); American Weekly Mercury, April 8, 1736 (“commander”); American Weekly Mercury, February 7 and 14, 1721 (eleven slaves steal Cannon’s sloop), October 12, 1732 (slave crew on oyster Perriaugre), and April 8, 1736 (Negro a sailor on Captain Hews’ oyster boat); New-York Gazette, January 30, 1732 (three slaves stole one of Cannon’s sloops).


suffered serious economic difficulties, with the city’s “shipbuilding industry stagnat[ing] badly.” From 124 ships in 1700 New York’s merchant fleet shrunk to only fifty vessels by 1734. During this time period, unemployment was widespread among shipwrights and others associated with the maritime industry. The unemployment in the maritime industry resulted in there being few opportunities for those lacking maritime experience—white or black—to obtain a berth on a ship out of New York or most other northern port cities. Thus, while Dick, George, Nim, and John Cannon’s slaves may have been able to flee via the sea, very few others were able to do so. One suspects that Cannon’s slaves and the Spanish Negroes stole the oyster commander’s sloops, notwithstanding the difficulties of using such small vessels to reach Florida, in part because of the lack of available berths on vessels, even for slaves like Cannon’s, who had maritime experience. Not until 1737 did northern ports experience an economic recovery. The economic recession of the 1730s led whites to leave the city and resulted in an increased reliance upon slave labor. This caused a significant increase in both slave imports into New York and in the city’s slave population. Despite a significant gender imbalance among the city’s slaves during the 1720s, New York’s slave population increased from 1,362 in 1723 to 1,719 in 1737. This increase was due to annual slave imports into New York increasing by almost 60 percent from approximately 125 annually in the first half of the 1720s to an annual rate of 198 slaves between 1726 and 1735.24

The imperial wars of the mid-eighteenth century resulted in a significant expansion in the American colonial maritime industry, and nowhere more so than in New York. Coming on the heels of the economic recession of the 1730s, the boom that resulted from the imperial conflicts with Spain in the period from 1739 to 1748 was a complete reversal of fortune for New York’s merchants holding reduced assets and an expansion of opportunities for slaves desiring freedom. In comparison to the prewar years, the number of ships clearing New York harbor and the number of seamen on the city’s vessels between 1739 and 1748 increased by almost 400 percent.25 A significant cause

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of this economic war boom was New York’s privateering activities. The presence of numerous privateers in New York harbor during the imperial wars of the mid-eighteenth century greatly assisted slaves in transforming their lives from enslavement to freedom. In the mid-eighteenth century, New York City was America’s premier privateering port. During King George’s War, New York had thirty-five privateers, more than twice the number of privateers sailing from Massachusetts and almost three times the size of Philadelphia’s privateer fleet. Only Rhode Island had a larger privateering fleet. During King George’s War, New York’s privateers had seventy-nine prize ships condemned resulting in prizes totaling £615,000.

With privateer captains often being able to “buil[d] fortunes for their owners,” as well as earn compensation for themselves far in excess of the usual wages paid a merchant vessel master, the city soon came to be infected with what Dr. Alexander Hamilton described as “almost a kind of [privateering] madness.” Owners of privateer ships and privateer captains seeking riches at sea enticed landlubbers with newspaper advertisements and posters nailed at seamen’s haunts such as the Long-Room, the Bunch of Grapes, Ebenezer Grant’s Sign of the Dog’s Head in the Porridge Pot, and John Mackleman’s Blue Anchor on the Dock that called for “Gentlemen Sailors and others” to seek their fortune by signing up for a berth on a privateer. In an era when seamen typically made between £13 and £15 per voyage, Jack Tars, in Captain Thomas Bevan’s crew received £110 in 1746 for capturing a French prize, a small fortune on a single cruise. Often privateer crew prize monies included proceeds from the sale of slaves captured from enemy vessels. With the added incentive of the traditional practice of sharing in a captured ship’s effects, crews like that of the _Stephen and Elizabeth_ might find themselves


and their captain striding ashore in “rich Laced and Embroidered Cloathes taken from the Spaniards.”

That many slaves saw service on New York’s vessels at this time is evident from the ads regularly published indicating that slaves were “fit for sea service.” Some of these slaves then used their maritime experience on privateers as a means by which to obtain berths to escape their masters. In August 1746 Quam, a Jamaican born “young Negro Man,” fled his master, Captain George Hall, the master of the privateer Pollux. The Pollux regularly employed slave crewmembers and Quam was not the only black mariner to flee the Pollux. A year later Strode fled the Pollux, shaving his head so as to pass as a white. It is possible that Quam and Strode sought berths on merchant vessels rather than privateers to avoid being in ships that might sail with their former employer’s ship. But given the explosion of privateering in New York during the period between 1739 and 1748, it is just as likely that these fugitive slaves used their cunning to obtain berths on another privateer calculating that the risk of capture was limited, especially if they enlisted on board just before a privateer left the harbor.

Requiring large crews that averaged eighty-eight men per ship so as to be able to board and seize enemy ships, privateers put “severe pressures on the [city’s] maritime labor market.” By using larger, more heavily manned boats than did ports such as Newport and Philadelphia, New York became the “most successful [privateer port] on a per-privateer basis.” In order to recruit the large numbers of men they needed, privateer captains placed numerous advertisements calling for “Gentlemen, Sailors and others” to sign onto privateers. The “others” frequently turned out to be fugitive slaves such as Quam, Strode, or Mingo, who in 1745 was believed would “make for some seaport, in order to enter on board a privateer” despite his wearing an ozenbrig waistcoat that marked Mingo as a bondsman. (See Figure 2.) Requiring large

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boarding parties to seize control of enemy ships and prize crews to steer captured vessels back to port to be condemned, a step necessary before the boat and its effects could be legally sold, privateer captains were willing and often eager to take on strong, inexperienced blacks. Their willingness to do so was often spurred by the complaints of prominent merchants, such as Gerard Beekman, of the lack of sufficient numbers of seamen to man their privateers. Hiring fugitive slaves enabled masters to use limited numbers of experienced seamen in boarding parties, a strategy consistent with privateer captains’ practice of protecting their best sailors, whether from naval press gangs or the weapons of Spanish sailors. Captains often left port quickly so as not to be found harboring fugitive slaves or deserters from merchant ships. As a result, during times of war privateers hired many inexperienced landsmen, including fugitive slaves, thus transforming fugitives into seasoned mariners by the end of the war. For fugitive slaves, and for free blacks, the monies they could earn on a privateer far exceeded the wages they received for work on land. Although they received only one-half to three-quarters of the prize monies that an able-bodied seamen received, during the wars with Spain inexperienced landsmen, including green fugitive slaves, were eager to serve on New York’s privateers.

Fugitive slaves and slave mariners were each attracted to privateers by the considerable compensation they could receive for their labor. For example, in 1778 a twenty-one-year-old Negro named George Watkins fled the HMS Phoenix’s Tender and it was believed he “may attempt getting on board some of the shipping.” Similarly, the black sailor named Felix jumped ship from the brig Neptune when it was docked in New York harbor in 1783. However, for

runaway slaves the promise of a more egalitarian life aboard a privateer was probably even more attractive than the wages they received. When enlisting on a privateer, crewmembers were required to sign the ship’s articles. In periods such as 1744 when the demand for trained seamen outstripped the supply, ships’ articles were modified to provide crewmembers with a greater-than-normal share of prize loot as well as to limit captains’ right of discipline. The structure of spoils and risk was, of course, quite different from that of the world from which fugitive slaves had fled. Thus, although black and white mariners were subject to difficult working conditions, and not infrequently harsh discipline, the privateer’s forecastle often provided a more amenable residence than the garret of a slave master’s house. Notwithstanding the racist attitudes of many white shipmates, a black crew member who could stand his watch and board an enemy ship was likely to receive more equitable treatment aboard ship than he had gotten from his former master.

The negotiation that occurred between fugitive slaves and privateer captains had different parameters than did the recruitment of seamen for merchant ships. With privateer captains and their crews’ compensation both predicated upon capturing enemy ships—the “prey or pay” principle—privateer ship masters were typically more humane than naval or merchant captains. However, while a privateer captain could offer the promise of riches and a more egalitarian climate, he and the fugitive slaves were both keenly aware that the slave was literally gambling his life on the voyage with approximately one-half of the seamen on New York’s privateers ending up wounded, captured, or dead. Those runaways who had the bad fortune to have served on boats captured by enemy privateers—of which there must have been a considerable number given that 1,300 New York privateers were captured by enemy privateers—not infrequently found themselves sold once again into slavery. Even if runaway slaves on privateers were not reenslaved by Britain’s enemies, if wounded they would often die in enemy jails. Other risks involved in service on a privateer included not only being wounded or killed in battle, but being shipwrecked, drowning, and having difficulty in receiving one’s wages. Even when runaways were on the verge of receiving their share of

December 30, 1782, and New York Weekly Post-Boy, May 25, 1747, June 18, 1752, and November 4, 1775, for other examples of captains hiring deserters.

Figure 2. *Pennsylvania Slave*, 1730 from Peter F. Copeland, drawn by Peter F. Copeland based on advertisement in *Pennsylvania Gazette, Working Dress in Colonial and Revolutionary America*, 91, August 1730. Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn.
prize monies, disease could cause a ship’s crew to be quarantined, delaying receipt of their wages. Those who did not end up shipwrecked, reenslaved, without pay, wounded, prisoners, or dead at the hands of England’s enemies could find themselves victims of a privateer captain’s racist attitudes. Black mariners serving under Captain Morely Harrison and his First Officer Richard Jeffries Jr. of the Hawke hardly found the egalitarian culture privateer articles typically promised potential crewmembers. Harrison and Jeffries were both brought up on charges of beating two of their African-American crewmen, one to death. However, despite such drawbacks, privateering offered freedom, a life outside slavery’s everyday control by others, with the choice of which ship to sign onto, working in a group for a common cause, and the possibility of creating a different and more meaningful life. This proved far too tempting for a number of New York’s slaves, notwithstanding the risk of physical harm.36

The choice of ship to sign onto was never a straightforward question for fugitive slaves. For fugitive slaves, returning to the West Indies came with the risk of being reenslaved. At the same time, the tight labor market in the West Indies, in part caused by disease among the white mariners, often provided the opportunity for runaways to find berths to more hospitable locales, be it England or St. Augustine. Thus, fugitive slaves often faced no easy decision as to which ship to enlist on. Moreover, while they could weigh risks and benefits, ultimately, where a ship went was solely a captain’s determination to make.37

Some of the ever-increasing numbers of slaves who during the 1740s sought to use New York’s role as a port city to permanently flee came to be seen by many whites as not merely depriving masters of their labors, but also being part of a Spanish plot to overturn British control of New York. In the


37. In 1717 one merchant noted “it was & is usual for Marriners of Ships who were & are hired at monthly wages to leave & desert their respective services at Jamaica & other parts in ye west Indies & to ship and enter themselves into ye Service of Ships att much greater wages by the Run.” Mathew v. Lawton, TNA HCA 24/31 (1717).
late 1730s, even before the formal declaration of war with Spain in 1739, privateers operating out of British North American ports were attacking Spanish ships in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Privateer masters, such as New York’s John Lush and Captain Rouse of Boston, brought in parcels of dark-skinned Spanish sailors to be condemned as part of their prize goods.38 While dark-skinned Spanish sailors had been condemned in British North American courts as slaves for decades, had partaken in the 1712 Slave Insurrection, and had been the subject of advertisements seeking their return when they fled, in the 1730s and 1740s there was a significant increase in dark-skinned Spanish sailors being so condemned. They began to regularly appear in ports such as Philadelphia, Burlington, Newport, Boston, and New York, as well as rural areas of Virginia, Carolina, and Maryland. These men were characterized in public records as “Negroes,” no longer being seen as the “Spanish Indians” New York Governor Hunter referred to in 1712.39 Instead, the imperial struggle between Great Britain and Spain took on a racialized perspective whereby the British came to see any dark-skinned Spaniard as a slave. While Vice Admiralty Courts had the power to condemn as prize slaves only those men on a captured ship who had been slaves elsewhere, the courts typically ignored this limit on their jurisdiction. Instead, they generally determined that the mere darkness of the Spaniards’ skin was sufficient proof of their enslaved status. At the same time, these unfortunate men found themselves enslaved in British North America, Spain and England were engaged in a struggle over control of the Florida-Georgia region, as well as over the labor of English slaves in Carolina and Georgia. When in 1741 a series of fires broke out in New York, concerns over Spanish intentions, as well as anti-Catholic bias, caused suspicion of New York’s whites to center on the city’s Spanish slaves. Five Spanish Negroes—Antonio, Augustine, Antonio, Emanuel, and Pablo—were convicted of partaking in a conspiracy to take over the city.

Most Spanish Negroes were multilingual and had experience in the wider Atlantic world. These backgrounds enabled many of the Spanish Negroes to use access to the British maritime industry, in both New York and elsewhere,
to recapture their freedom. Not only did John Cannon’s eight Spanish Negroes flee via the sea, but so did Captain Rouse’s six Spanish Negroes who in 1741, less than a month after being brought into Boston, stole a boat and sailed for St. Augustine. Two years later, in January 1743, a “great number of Spanish and other Prize Negroes” rioted at Newport after having been brought there to be condemned and sold. Throughout the 1740s enslaved Spanish Negroes continued to escape by the sea. For example, in 1749 George, a twenty-six-year-old slave from Burlington County, New Jersey who spoke “indifferent English” was described as having “been a privateering” and “likely may endeavor to get on board some Vessel.” As a “Spanish Mulatto Fellow” George very likely had been captured from a Spanish vessel and like many dark-skinned Spanish captives was condemned into slavery in British North America simply on the basis of the color of his skin. George and other Spanish Negroes who fled by the sea were seen both as individual slaves stealing themselves from their masters, but also as possible agents of Spain’s imperial ambitions.

In the swirl of wars with Spain, the movement of New York fugitive slaves, both Spanish Negroes and others, was often not simply from one’s master’s home to a New York boat and then to freedom in another port city. Negro mariners seized by enemy privateers were often sold as slaves. When William Beekman’s privateer Dolphin in 1745 captured the Anna Florentina it had on board, cargo, cash, and Negroes. The prize and cargo, including Negroes, were sold in Providence, providing William Beekman with £225 for his one-eighth share in the privateer. Similarly, English vessels with black mariners were not infrequently captured by Spanish privateers. Foreign privateer captains, such as the master of the Spanish privateer captured during the War of Jenkins’ Ear that had ten black Spaniards among its crew of nineteen, were also not averse to hiring blacks, be they free or bonded men. English, Spanish, and French privateers all saw Negroes on board enemy ships as valuable prizes to be sold or to be used as crew. Thus, while fugitive slaves from New

40. Their linguistic and seafaring experiences also led a number of the Spanish Negroes to be successful in legal actions in New York courts to regain their freedom. Zabin, “Places of Exchange,” 102; Pennsylvania Gazette, March 3, 1743 (“great number”).


York may have sought to obtain freedom by signing on as a crew member of an English merchant or privateer out of New York, it would not have been uncommon for them to have found themselves reenslaved and sold by an enemy ship captain or compelled to work as seamen on enemy ships.  

While seamen celebrated the capture of a large prize by roasting an ox and drinking a hogshead of punch, they did not similarly celebrate the end of King George’s War in 1748. Although New York did not suffer the same deep economic depression that took place in the 1730s, seamen were put out of work. The six-year period between the end of King George’s War and the commencement of the Seven Years’ War also was not a good period for New York’s slaves who sought freedom on the sea. In this time period, few New York slaves attempted to flee via the sea. Those who did run away either used stolen clothes to “pretend to be free” or sought to hide with acquaintances. Some masters used this slow down in maritime activity to attempt to sell their slaves with maritime experience. In the summer of 1751 the New-York Evening Post ran a series of advertisements indicating that a “young Negro Man, that has been on several Voyages to Sea, and is a tolerable good Sailor” was available for purchase. This period of relative inactivity by fugitive slaves would be followed by another during the Seven Years’ War that provided opportunities for freedom that would rival and ultimately surpass that of the 1739–48 period.

From 1746 to 1762 the city’s maritime industry recovered and soon went through a substantial expansion. In this sixteen-year period ships leaving the harbor increased by 381 percent, while the number of seamen similarly increased from 775 to 3,552. A substantial portion of this increase in maritime activity was due to New York becoming the busiest privateering port in Brit-


46. *New-York Evening Post*, June 24, July 1, 8, 15, 22, August 5, 12, 19 and 26, 1751; *New York Mercury*, January 3, 1757. Similar advertisements can be found in *New-York Gazette*, March 14, 21, 28, April 4, and 11, 1747; and *New York Post-Boy*, March 26, 1762, and August 18, 1763.
ish North America during the Seven Years’ War. The volume and proximity of Bourbon trade in the Caribbean stimulated New York’s privateering in the 1750s and 1760s. New York sent out seventy-four privateers, “half again as many as Rhode Island,” the next most active colony. With privateers needing large numbers of seamen, berths were available for many inexperienced landlubbers, as well as fugitive slaves who had maritime experience. By October 1756 newspaper dispatches indicated that 1,980 men had enlisted on the city’s cruisers, including three hundred sailors who came north from Philadelphia. By the end of the war, New York privateers had more than twenty thousand seamen, the largest body of privateer men in the North Atlantic. These privateers seized prizes worth approximately £1,500,000, an enormous boost to New York’s economy. The level of interest by New Yorkers in privateering caused the state’s governor to characterize New Yorkers’ attitude toward such enterprises as “almost a kind of madness” and led the Earl of Loudon to remark in 1757 that “all [New Yorkers who invested in privateering] make Fortunes.” New Yorkers’ ventures in privateering were not merely limited to investing in shares of privateers. Some served as captains of their own vessels, while others, such as Gerard Beekman, took a “grub-share” in privateer crewmembers’ prospective prize shares. Still others hired their slaves out to work on privateers. Men such as Evert Bancker made considerable monies by purchasing slaves for the purpose of sending them to sea on privateers and receiving the slave’s prize money. These privateering ventures proved to be very profitable as the overall profit for New York privateers was more than 300 percent. Thus, New Yorkers’ privateering “madness” was quite understandable.

A number of slaves in New York used this “privateer craze” to negotiate better working conditions. Some slave mariners were awarded a share, or a portion of a share, in privateer prize monies. Cornelius Wykoop’s slave Fortune was in 1758 to receive a share of £100 for a single voyage. After he returned from this successful cruise Wykoop attempted to frame an agreement whereby he and Fortune would each benefit from the slave taking another privateering voyage. As Wykoop wrote to an associate, “if Capt.

47. Lydon, “The Role of New York in Privateering Down to 1763,” Table 5; New-York Mercury in October 4, 1756; and New-York Post-Boy, October 4, 1756.
Skinner intends for another cruise I shou’d ship him there, and which will be some inducement for Fortune to go once more; any Capt. would be glad to take the negro I mention, as he has follow’d the Seas some time formerly.

Both master and slave were able to construct a method by which each could receive privateering riches.

As was true during the War of Jenkins’ Ear and King George’s War, during the Seven Years’ War fugitive slaves in New York found privateer captains such as Alexander McDougall more than willing to accept them as crew members leading to “large number[s]” of Negroes working on privateers. In 1757 when Captain McDougall steered the privateer Tyger out of New York harbor the vessel had a crew of sixty-two men. Among them were twenty-three men identified as “black” and twenty-four identified as “brown.” The sizable African-American presence on Captain McDougall’s privateer is indicative of the opportunities available to fugitive slaves. Typical of the fugitives who might have found a berth on one of the city’s cruisers was Dennis Hicks’ fourteen-year-old slave. In a May 31, 1756, advertisement shipwright Hicks sought the return of his slave. Wearing a “blue sailors jacket . . . pair of Breeches, an old Hat and Cap,” this young man had left his dockside enslavement and proceeded to try and convince a sea captain that his maritime knowledge qualified him for a berth on a vessel out of New York. Similarly, in 1758 a slave named Ralph was “expected” to “be on board some of the Privateers belonging to this city.” That same year James Swan, a New York ship pilot, forewarned captains of privateers from “harbouring hi[s slave] on board their vessels,” while James Campbell “expected” his slave Ralph to be “on board some of the Privateers belonging to this City,” and Edmund Matthews “thought” his slave would “try and go out in some of the Priva-

50. Cornelius Wynkoop to Evert Bancker, Jr., Bancker Papers, N-YHS.
51. Swanson, “American Privateering and Imperial Warfare,” 368; Lydon, “The Role of New York in Privateering Down to 1763,” 14–15, 244; McDougall Papers, N-YHS, Reel 1, “List of Men Belonging to the Privateer Tyger.” Jeffrey Bolster has indicated that although men of African descent were also described as “brown” he does not include them among his calculations of African-American crewmembers due to the fact that some whites who had been tanned by years of outdoor were sometimes described as “brown.” As Bolster acknowledges, his calculating in this manner results in an undercounting of African-American sailors as brown or tanned sailors could be white, African, or of mixed race. Bolster, Black Jacks, 234; and James Farr, “A Slow Boat to Nowhere: The Multi-Racial Crews of the American Whaling Industry,” The Journal of Negro History 68, 2 (Spring 1983), 164. Hodges, Root and Branch, 149.
teers.” Even slaves new to the city and with limited understanding of English were able to elude their masters for weeks until they could obtain berths on vessels suited to their needs. For example, in 1762 a nineteen-year-old slave named Pero escaped from the city’s hospital. A native of Martinico, he wore no shoes and spoke only a “little English.” Despite these obvious handicaps Pero was able to hide himself in the city for “a Fort’night” while seeking a berth. If a slave who had recently come to New York from the French West Indies was able to obtain a berth, how much easier it must have been to do so for acculturated slaves, who had some such real maritime experience. American-born slaves working in agriculture also believed they could use New York’s maritime industry to obtain freedom. In 1764 an unnamed slave from Morris County, New Jersey, was described as one who “understands all Sorts of Farmer’s Work” and as having “been a little to the Sea.” His owner believed this slave, like many other landlubber slaves, would put his limited maritime experience to escape enslavement.

The life of Pompey, a twenty-five-year-old New York City slave who fled his master Robert Benson in 1756 illustrates the scope of the maritime labor market for fugitive slaves during the Seven Years’ War. Pompey spoke “both Dutch and English” and was “exceedingly well known” for his driving Benson’s beer wagon about the city. Despite being an easily identified figure, Pompey believed he could evade capture by “sculking about the Docks” and finding a berth on one of the many vessels in New York’s busy harbor. And he was apparently successful. A fugitive slave advertisement indicated his master’s widow believed Pompey “to have been carried off some days ago to Stamford in New-England, having been seen on board the Sloop of Abraham Demeld.” Pompey’s life demonstrates a number of important factors concerning fugitive slaves’ use of New York’s maritime industry during the Seven Years’ War. The fugitive slave advertisement seeking Pompey’s return shows the central role that war and privateering played for fugitive slaves in New York City, the advantages that multilingual slaves had in removing the shackles of slavery, the freedom of movement in urban areas that enabled slaves to

55. The Pennsylvania Gazette, August 9 and September 13, 1764.
recognize those whites who would assist them and the excellent opportunities for runaways to permanently escape enslavement that a port city such as New York provided. During the Seven Years’ War, scores of other New York City masters whose slaves fled enslavement placed advertisements seeking assistance in capturing their slaves. The advertisements also illustrate that slaves’ knowledge of the maritime industry and New York’s role as a port city served as essential tools in their obtaining freedom, even for slaves such as Pompey, who lacked maritime experience.

As military operations during the Seven Years’ War shifted to the West Indies at the end of 1760 and beginning of 1761 privateering declined significantly. At the same time, British naval enforcement against smuggling activities constricted New York shipping activities. Notwithstanding these developments, numerous slaves continued to flee via the sea. Slaves like Prince still believed that the city’s shipping sector provided opportunities to change their lives. Working for noted privateer Captain Samuel Bayard in 1761, Prince shopped himself on the city’s docks. Others with less maritime experience were still able in the 1760–64 period to find ship berths. Sam, a “well-known” cook in a tavern was believed to have fled by the sea, while the owners of Jack and two Negro men who spoke no English believed each had sought berths on New York’s ships. Whether these slaves were successful in their attempts to flee cannot be said with certainty. What is apparent is that their chances of success would have been much less than their counterparts who had the good fortune to flee earlier during the height of the city’s privateering craze.

By 1765 the New-York Post Boy declared that “Trade in this part of the world is come to so wretched a pass that you would imagine the plague had been here.” Merchants fretted over unpaid bills and were compelled to bring legal suits to recover debts and seamen sat in taverns unemployed, longing for the days when warfare gave them steady work. Slave owners released their elderly slaves from bondage so as to avoid the costs of feeding them. Slaves seeking to flee found their options limited. With shipping slowing down, only two fugitive slaves are known to have attempted to flee via the sea in the

57. Examples of the numerous fugitive slave advertisements include New-York Gazette, March 3, 1755, January 12, 1756, July 26, 1756, November 8, 1756, May 30, 1757, November 21, 1757, May 8, 1758, September 13, 1758, August 13, 1759, February 18, 1760, June 18, 1761, April 29, 1762, March 5, 1763, and February 20, 1764.


One of the two, a twenty-two-year-old man named Bill, appears to be a particularly determined and capable runaway. Speaking good English and fluent Dutch, Bill escaped with an iron collar around his neck. This clear demarcation of bondage was not a deterrent to a man who his owner thought would find assistance to remove the collar and use his linguistic abilities to obtain a berth. The second runaway, Charles, could also speak two languages to assist him to escape onto a ship. Living on Dock Street across from the city’s many wharves, Charles was likely to have personally known ship captains, a helpful tool in negotiating his way to freedom.\footnote{New-York Gazette, May 1, 1766 and June 26, 1766.}

While Bill and Charles are notable for their abilities to find opportunities in the city’s maritime industry, their experiences were the exception, not the rule, in a period that saw little movement of slaves out of New York to freedom by the sea. With New York’s nonimportation agreement in effect from the summer of 1768 to mid-1770, the city’s maritime industry remained firmly closed to slaves who wished to flee.

With the lifting of the importation ban slaves began to view the sea again as a means to obtain freedom. In the next four years, a number of fugitive slaves used shipping to escape their bondage. This increase in slaves fleeing by the sea can be partly attributed to a rebound in the maritime industry. With ships again crossing to England and the West Indies trade picking up again, opportunities for crew berths increased. Probably just as important a factor in the increased presence of fugitive slaves on New York’s wharves was the rhetoric of liberty that filled the streets of the city. The shouts of “Liberty, Liberty” that rang out in the city’s streets as the Sons of Liberty and other Patriots demonstrated against British legislation surely were heard by slaves. While many of the Patriots had no desire to see the city’s slaves freed, some of the Patriots’ rhetoric directly called for slaves to take steps to free themselves. At least one of the Patriots’ pamphlets called for slaves to flee to “that happy Territory where slavery is forbidden to perch.”\footnote{New-York Gazette, October 15, 1770, September 2, 1771, November 5, 1771, January 5, 1773, October 13, 1774 and November 7, 1774; Burrows and Wallace, Gotham, 201; and Hodges, Root and Branch, 136.} This reference to a “happy Territory” clearly was intended to mean England where recent legal developments made it a far more hospitable place for slaves than New York and may have spurred some slaves to seek a ship to England.

In 1772 Lord Chief Justice Mansfield held in the \textit{Somerset} decision that slavery could only be supported by “positive law,” which England lacked. He therefore decreed that James Somerset, a slave originally brought to England
from Massachusetts, could not transported to the West Indies as a slave. Justice Mansfield’s decision emphasized that slavery was defined differently within the Atlantic world, not merely as between different nations, but as well as between the English metropolis and its colonial possessions. Although Justice Mansfield’s decision was ambiguous in its reach, slaves throughout the colonies came to believe, as did many of their masters, that if a slave reached Great Britain he or she would be freed. New York slaves were among those that shared and acted upon this understanding that England was a land of liberty.62 For example, in May 1776 the Danish sloop Lawrence proceeding from New York and the West Indies to Copenhagen was forced to dock at Portsmouth to make repairs. Four slaves on the Lawrence demonstrated an understanding that Justice Mansfield’s decision might form the basis for their becoming free men in England when they took advantage of the Lawrence being in England to petition “not [to] be carried out of the Realm.” By petitioning for freedom, the enslaved mariners on the Lawrence showed that they understood that the English legal system now could be used as a means to ensure that for American slaves, England could truly be a “Happy Territory.”63

While some fugitive slaves on the eve of the American Revolution set out for England, others sought closer havens. When twenty-six-year-old Constant, a gentleman’s servant, fled his master in 1774, he would not have appeared to have been an ideal candidate to undertake an ocean voyage as a crew member. Still, his master was convinced he was headed for New York “with a view of procuring a passage to the West Indies.” With an ability to play the fiddle, Constant had at least one skill that was often highly valued among mariners and with which he perhaps was able to leverage as his ticket to the West Indies.64 Constant and the Lawrence’s black mariners show that for fugitive slaves, havens of freedom could be found in a variety of locales throughout the Atlantic world.65

63. TNA CO5/148, folio 70–71 (May 17, 1776) (“relate”), folio 75 (May 19, 1776), folio 86d (May 2, 1776), and folio 92–93 (May 21, 1776). I want to thank Christopher L. Brown for having provided me with materials concerning the Lawrence matter and for the reference to England as a “land of liberty.” This case is the subject of my forthcoming article, “Atlantic Connection, Atlantic Liberties: The Case of Black Sailors on the Lawrence in 1776.”
With the start of the American Revolution maritime labor needs once again offered opportunities for slaves to flee bondage. Many of them took advantage of these opportunities. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a considerable number of New York City slaves fled their masters. Despite Virginia’s slave population being more than nine times larger than New York City’s, the number of fugitive slave advertisements for New York City slaves was almost twice that published in Virginia. Britain’s struggles both to put down the rebellion and have sufficient manpower to do so led Lord Dunmore in 1775 to decree that “I do hereby declare all indentured servants, negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty’s troops as soon as may be.” This decree led slaves throughout the colonies to flee their masters to join the British armies and navy. With English takeover of New York in 1776, numerous slaves crossed to the British lines, with some joining the British navy or privateers in the harbor. Men like Cato, Castor, Caesar, and Prince took advantage of this situation and the Dunmore proclamation to seek berths on British vessels. They were but three of scores of slaves who made their way to New York’s docks during the Revolutionary War seeking berths. Fortune, James, Bristol, Alicak, Jem, Sam, Robert Kupperth, Tom, Jack, Toney, Charles Macaulay, and many others joined black mariners like Patrick Dennis, Lewis Montie, and Peter Bush on naval ships and Cato Ramsey, Daniel Fisher, and Luke Wilson on privateers.

New Yorkers demonstrated a fierce interest in privateering during the American Revolution with approximately six thousand New Yorkers crewing on British privateers out of New York City. Many of the crew members of these privateers were black fugitives as “ship captains were hardly choosy about hiring black sailors.” This desire to go privateering was encouraged

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57. *New-York Gazette*, July 29, 1776; and *New-York Mercury-Gazette*, August 19, 1776, January 6 and 13, 1777; *Royal Gazette*, January 2, 1778, May 16, 1778, August 18, 1777, August 2, 1779, March 29, 1780, April 11, 1780, May 13, 1780, June 17, 1780, August 16, 1780, May 5, 1781, October 3, 1781, July 17, 1782; and TNA ADM 36/7910.

by Lord Germain, who saw it as a means to cause wavering Americans to support the king and foster desertion from the Continental army through the lure of riches from service privateers operating under British letters of marque. These slaves included Caesar, who was trained as a sail maker and had previously hired himself out for voyages at sea, and twelve-year-old York, whose master believed he fled by sea and described him as already having "been out in the privateer Pollux," and could be found among privateer crews. Slaves worked regularly on certain privateers such as the Pollux throughout the war. Masters, like most New Yorkers of the time, were aware that privateer captains were willing and even eager to take runaway slaves onto their ships. They were also aware that many of their slaves had prior maritime experience that would make them attractive to privateer captains.

The attraction that the city’s maritime industry had for fugitive slaves is well illustrated by the experience of Dr. Donald M’Lean’s teenage slave Tom. Fourteen-year-old Tom fled from his master in September 1777. Eight days after Tom escaped during the chaotic swirl of the British occupation of the city, Dr. M’Lean placed an advertisement in which he “earnestly requested and presumed no gentlemen will harbour the said run away Negro.” Whether through the assistance of the city’s “gentlemen,” luck, or other means, Tom came to be reenslaved by Dr. M’Lean by early 1780 only to quickly flee once again. Dr. M’Lean’s April 1780 advertisement stated his hope that “none of his friends in the navy or army will countenance the above Negro and all masters of vessels are strictly forbid to harbour him upon any pretense.” Dr. M’Lean’s flattering of his friends did not succeed. After being reenslaved a second time, in the summer of 1780 Tom again ran away. Dr. M’Lean’s next advertisement dropped any reference to the “gentlemen” of the City or “flatter [ry] . . . of his friends” and simply warned that “all masters of vessels are strictly forbid [den from] harbouring this Negro.” Amazingly, Dr. M’Lean was once again successful in recapturing his slave. The doctor’s success was, however, short-lived. The following spring Tom ran away for the fourth time. After four years of struggle, Tom and Dr. M’Lean had developed skills in how best to escape and how best to recover a fugitive slave. While the 1781 fugitive slave advertisement characterizes Tom in terms similar to the earlier advertisements, in it Dr. M’Lean was certain that “Master of Transports, 

69. New York Colonial Documents, 8: 737.
70. Royal Gazette, May 20, 1780; and Royal Gazette, August 25, 1781.
71. New-York Gazette, September 22, 1777 (in this advertisement Dr. M’Lean is referred to as ‘M’Lane’); and Royal Gazette, April 15, 1780.
72. Royal Gazette, August 5, 1780.
Privateers, and Merchantmen” were those most likely to harbour his persistent fugitive.73

Dr. M’Lean’s understanding that the maritime industry held out the best hope for Tom to escape is reinforced by the frequent description in advertisements of fugitive slaves wearing sailor clothes. Escaping enslavement by shipping out was not a means of resistance embraced only by those slaves with maritime experience. Numerous New York slaves who had never been seamen saw the sea as an efficient and expeditious means for obtaining freedom, a place where they had some voice in how they led their lives.74 Fugitive slaves’ adaptation of sailor clothes not only allowed them to emulate free sailors, but also provided them with a means by which society would confirm their maritime skills or to take on the indicia of such a valuable trade.

Dunmore’s Proclamation served to not only free slaves who served on British vessels, but also slave mariners serving aboard American ships. When rebel vessels were captured, some British officers interpreted Dunmore’s decree to require them to free any slave on such vessels. When the American privateer Mercury sailed from Connecticut in 1781 among its crew was Romeo, a slave cook. Captain Lathrop’s privateer had little luck being quickly captured by the British and brought into New York harbor. While Lathrop and the entire crew were imprisoned on the infamous prison ship the Jersey, Romeo initially found himself impressed onto the HMS Monk. However, he soon was “Set at Liberty being a Slave.” Within a week of Romeo being set free, four slaves on the privateer Liberty were similarly set free for “being a slave.” Thus, for some American slave mariners, being sent to sea by their masters during the Revolution could result in freedom not through dint of service for a ship captain, but rather the capture of their ship. This hardly was a recipe to have encouraged masters to hire out their slaves onto American privateers.75

In October and November 1783 alone not less than thirteen blacks were known to have fled their masters to seek berths on ships in New York harbor. From the young boy Jess to the forty-five-year-old Flora, men, women, and young boys each saw sails in the harbor as sheets of freedom that could transport them away from their bondage. Some, if not all of these former slaves,

73. Royal Gazette, May 2, 1781.
74. New-York Weekly Post-Boy, November 4, 1745, and July 26, 1756; and New-York Gazette, March 6, 1758.
75. Louis F. Middlebrook, Undated biographical sketch of Elisha Lathrop, G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport, VFM 405; and TNA ADM 36/1999 (August 5, 1781).
Visual images of black American eighteenth-century sailors are rare. This portrait puts a face on the largely anonymous fugitive slaves who sought berths on privateer, merchant, and naval ships in New York harbor. Other material evidence of these men’s lives include the anchor buttons found in the African Burial Ground, which were believed to have come from a British naval officer’s jacket.
feared being reenslaved when Sir Guy Carleton and British forces left the city. Carleton had taken a strong stand on behalf of slaves who had fled their owners and came to British lines. With British forces preparing to leave the city at the end of November, many blacks, both those who had served the British military and those who did not, were concerned that without the protection of the British forces they would lose their freedom. For these men and women, British ships were the one sure means to freedom.

In the period between 1713 and 1783, New York City slaves saw all ships, be they a large Atlantic merchant ship, a privateer, or a small sloop plying the waters between New York and Boston, as effective tools in their efforts to obtain freedom. Fugitives were largely assisted in reaching their goal of freedom by sea captains more concerned with being able to leave port as soon as possible with a full crew than they were with legal niceties that said they should not employ another man’s bondsman. In sum, captains’ economic self-interest trumped societal restrictions on the use of slave labor.