

2000

Review of Black Jacks: African American seamen in the age of the sail.

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Recommended Citation

Kugler, Anne, "Review of Black Jacks: African American seamen in the age of the sail." (2000). *History*. 34.
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Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail. By W. Jeffrey Bolster.
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Pp. viii, 299. \$14.95.)

A vibrant and engaging work of rediscovery, *Black Jacks* restores to the historical record African American seamen's contribution to the Atlantic economy and the contribution of seafaring to the construction of African American identity. Spanning the period from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries and imaginatively using an extraordinary variety of sources, W. Jeffrey Bolster convincingly argues that black men, both slave and free, made up a significant segment of the seafaring community, and that maritime occupations offered these men a degree of freedom, confidence, cosmopolitanism, and egalitarian interaction otherwise unattainable. Bolster's positive view of life at sea does not mean, however, that this is a simply celebratory work. The author offers a complex and nuanced portrayal of agency, slavery, the sailing life, and the cultural as well as economic interactions of the Atlantic trading network. He articulates the ambivalencies, ironies, and costs of shipping work, demonstrating that while it provided black men an opportunity for relative autonomy, seafaring was also dangerous, exploitative, and often restricted African Americans to low-status positions in the on-board hierarchy.

The first part of the book is structured geographically, beginning with a discussion of black sailors in plantation America. In particular, it elucidates distinctions between coastal and deep-water seafaring and their implications for the experiences of black sailors. Bolster then focuses in on life aboard a ship, vividly describing the social and technological environment in that simultaneously rigid and liberating world. In his most ambitious chapter, the author explores the seafaring traditions of West Africa, not only in terms of technical achievements but also in terms of spiritual meanings and the contributions of these traditions in both skill and symbolism to the wider Atlantic world. Bolster both furthers the theme of cross-pollination and points out its boundaries in the chapter on the experience of black and white naval prisoners in Dartmoor Prison in England during the War of 1812. This chapter is not as well integrated as the others into the overall structure of the book, but it does bring into relief the limits of interaction by tracing the separation of white and black prisoners and the distinct forms of self-regulation devised by each of these two groups. The last chapters address changes in this maritime system over time, first discussing the impact of the American and Haitian Revolutions on African American consciousness and liberation strategies and then explaining how the Vesey Rebellion, Negro Seamen Acts, changing labor demands, and new employment practices led to a decline in the number of black sailors, even as this occupation offered a precarious chance for a fortunate few to support families.

A very few faults--occasional repetition, too-enthusiastic reveling in sailing terminology, and incautious assertions of what was on the minds of these historical actors--mar only slightly this innovative reassessment of the relationship between African Americans and the sea. *Black Jacks* will be impossible to overlook in any future discussions of Atlantic culture in this period.

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