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The Maritime World of the American South,
1820-1860

Teddy Stahl

Denison University

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To my family

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Introduction

Many were sailors who were in the midst of their brief waterfront sojourn. Others were dockworkers, stevedores, and the like who, in all probability, had served in the forecastle. They had managed, at least for the time being, to break away from the ocean. Yet they clung to the sea breezes and the sight of wooden ships. Together, the sailors and these other dockside workers made up the world of the waterfront.¹

Waterfronts are typically at the edges of our experiences. They are places where most cross to reach into the sea, usually for pleasure. If one walks along a waterfront today, they are typically doing so to get from one location to the other or to simply enjoy the recently redeveloped scenery. This is a remarkable transformation from what waterfronts once were.

A waterfront, as I will use the term in this work, is the space connecting a city to the sea encompassing the docks and accompanying businesses, attractions, and people attached to the water. In the age of sail, waterfronts were a medley of activities. Waterfronts were hubs of economic activity where cargo was loaded and unloaded. Waterfronts were centers of globalization as people from across the ocean got off and others going across got on. Waterfronts were where innovations in steam technology and transportation took place. On a waterfront, one could never be so sure what would happen or who one would run into. These attributes make waterfronts as equally interesting to study today as they were for the citizens who lived beside them.

I am not the first to explore a waterfront though, that honor goes to Paul A. Gilje. Gilje, in an article and subsequent book, lays out the early American waterfront as a community that

¹ Paul A. Gilje, "On the Waterfront: Maritime Workers in New York City in the Early Republic, 1800 – 1850," *New York History* 77, no. 4 (1996): 397.

had shared values, particularly liberty, and faced similar challenges, such as impressment.²

There are some points I take issue with in Gilje's understanding, but his overall framework of an integrated waterfront community that lies at the edge of American urban life is at the center of my study.³

In a certain sense, I am close to Isaac Land who has been out in front theorizing about histories of the coast, even coining the term "coastal history," and has his own tripartite idea of what constituted the "urban amphibious" arena that is my waterfront.⁴ His theory, though valuable for boldness, smacks of presentism in his use of examples mostly from today's headlines rather than past issues and controversies.⁵ For much of the past a port city's "urban foreshore" and "urban estuary" to use Land's terminology were combined and the "urban offshore" was not in use. A unified space, the waterfront, is what truly defines the world of interactions between land and sea at port.

While many scholars are not wedded to Land's theory, they have been using an even older category, sailortown, to describe the space where a seafarer, the term often used to describe those who work on the ocean, spent his days between voyages.⁶ Sailortown was a district supposedly in every port city where all forms of pleasure (gambling, drinking, whoring, etc.) could be found under the control of crimps, whose primary function was to bilk a sailor of

² Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), xii-xiii

³ Gilje, "Waterfront," 399.

⁴ Isaac Land, "Tidal Waves: The New Coastal History," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 731-43; Isaac Land, "The Urban Amphibious," in *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond*, ed. David Worthington (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 31-48.

⁵ Land, "Tidal," 34-43.

⁶ For more on the terminology used to describe the workers who spent their careers at sea see Valerie Burton, "The Myth of Bachelor Jack: Masculinity, Patriarchy and Seafaring Labour," in *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour* (Fredericton, N.B: Acadiensis Press, 1991), 179-98.

his coin through the provision of said pleasures and ship him off onto his next voyage. The genealogy of sailortown can be traced back to Stan Hugill, a folklorist and former shantyman.⁷ His idea has been refined past his crude understanding into a more nuanced description of a place that was in part myth and part reality but that did appear on many docksides around the world.⁸

Yet, the classic spaces sailors prowled were often far more dispersed within a city than the sailortown framework would suggest. Bars, alehouses, and brothels were sometimes all spread out along several streets somewhat near the docklands. New research has also shown seafarers' "experience of life ashore was not necessarily limited to sailortown or the obvious haunts within 'staggering distance' of the dock gates."⁹ Furthermore, some places sailors frequented like the Pacific isles lacked space for a sailortown and instead were just beaches. We increasingly need to move beyond the sailortown paradigm if we want to gain a fuller appreciation of the diverse spaces in which sailors found themselves ashore.

With that we must see the local social configurations and nuances of each port city or group of port cities where sailors are staying in any one period of time. Sometimes if these ports are great producers of sailors their shore bound activities will take place in the context of their community networks.¹⁰ If not, the boarding house, a hostel specifically designed for sailors to stay between their voyages, might be much more prominent which is perhaps why the keepers

⁷ Stan Hugill, *Sailortown* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967).

⁸ For a more updated version of sailortown as a framework for nineteenth century seafarers' landward activities see Graeme J Milne, *People, Place and Power on the Nineteenth Century Waterfront: Sailortown* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

⁹ Robert Lee, "The Seafarers' Urban World: A Critical Review," *International Journal of Maritime History* 25, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 33.

¹⁰ Lee, *Urban*, 40.

of such houses in international port cities like New York were “[t]he nobility of the waterfront, at least as far as the sailor was concerned.”¹¹ In other ports, evangelical reformers, a presence on the docks since the early nineteenth century, could challenge sailor boarding houses, especially when the reformers were able to build one of their vaunted Sailor’s Homes or a “morally refined” boarding house, in port.¹² Port cities were thus a diverse set of spaces for seafarers to navigate with each individual seaport putting forth its own structures and power dynamics for the seafarer to navigate.

Finally, we need to engage seafarer’s experiences ashore with the literature of port cities. So far port cities have mostly appeared through the lens of their roles as key facilitators of globalization and nodes of imperial control.¹³ A recent literature has emerged bringing together the cultural aspect of sailortown with the port city.¹⁴ However, as we move beyond the paradigm of sailortown we must also move beyond a simple idea of the primacy of sailortown in the cultural relationship between an urban space and the maritime frontier. By looking at waterfronts of the Old American South, I will show the diverse nature of seafarers’ lives in urban-maritime spaces.

Why the Old South?

The Old South’s seaports, nicknamed “cotton ports” for their main export, are not the most obvious location to try and prove such theses. For one, the South failed to produce many

¹¹ Gilje, “Waterfront,” 399; for the importance of New York as an international maritime city see Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *The Rise of New York Port: 1815-1860* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1939).

¹² Milne, *Power*, 8.

¹³ Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James, eds., *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c.1700-2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 1-2.

¹⁴ Brad Beaven, “‘One of the Toughest Streets in the World’: Exploring Male Violence, Class and Ethnicity in London’s Sailortown, c. 1850–1880,” *Social History* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 1–21; Brad Beaven, “The Resilience of Sailortown Culture in English Naval Ports, c. 1820–1900,” *Urban History* 43, no. 1 (February 2016): 72–95.

seafarers, historian of black seafarers W. Jeffrey Bolster makes clear “all the numerous seamen of color shipping from cotton ports had roots and responsibilities elsewhere.”¹⁵ The origins of white seamen in cotton ports, according to our best accounts i. e. sailor memoirs, seem to conclude “most of these men were Irish or French-Canadians” as well as some Englishmen.¹⁶ Trade in these ports was also highly seasonal as the cotton ports relied primarily on their titular crop to bring in ships during the winter and send them out with full loads of cotton. Finally, there was a much greater degree of control expressed by the state on the waterfront compared to other seaports at this time through southern legislators’ enactment of the Negro Seamen’s Laws. These laws jailed any free black seafarer entering into cotton ports.¹⁷ Far and away, these laws were the most controlling of waterfronts that states in the Atlantic had enacted until the twentieth century. All of which added up to make the cotton ports unique places for seafarers to put ashore.

Yet, these peculiarities to the cotton ports also make them the perfect laboratory to study the nuances of waterfronts from port to port. Most port cities that have been studied for the social lives of seafarers in the North Atlantic were producers of seamen whether a smaller port town like Salem or a major port city like London.¹⁸ These ports opened themselves up well to network analysis or studying how a seafarer fit into his local community and family. A seafarer stepping ashore in Mobile would lack many of the same networks. He would also be

¹⁵ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA, United States: Harvard University Press, 1997), 200.

¹⁶ Hugill, *Sailortown*, 176, 182.

¹⁷ Michael A. Schoeppner, *Moral Contagion: Black Atlantic Sailors, Citizenship, and Diplomacy in Antebellum America*, Studies in Legal History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2.

¹⁸ Daniel Vickers and Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 5; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 24-27.

stepping ashore only during the shipping season which lasted roughly from “October and ended late in the following spring.”¹⁹ Whereas many ports in the North operated year-round. These would have affected how the sailor and the many businesses supporting him interacted given the latter’s need for alternative means of money for the rest of the year. Lastly, the sailor working in a cotton port between voyages would have found a keen sense of surveillance as any of his shipmates of color before would be jailed in short order once docked in port. Even as other states were developing means of control and surveillance centered on seafarers, no other state in the Atlantic created as rigorous a regime for controlling any sort of seafarer that early.²⁰ Through antebellum cotton ports, we can see how early interventions by governments changed the nature of life ashore for seafarers. The sailor visiting a cotton port would have found himself in an especially unique place compared to his likely traditional home in the Atlantic and therefore a different set of circumstances that social historians of seafaring need to engage.

The Urban Southern Gentlemen

As I am engaging the literature of seafarers in a specific place my research will also contribute to the literature of urban life in the Old South. This literature has typically been interested in the unique role slavery played in urban Southern life at the time for good reason. However, little of that same literature engages the maritime dimension of southern life as other than as a footnote until very recently with a renewed focus on the maritime dimensions of the underground railroad as well as labor on the docks and waterways of the Old South.

¹⁹ Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *Square-Riggers On Schedule: The New York Sailing Packets to England, France, and the Cotton Ports* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938), 69.

²⁰ For the development of the surveillance state with regards to seafarers see Milne, *Power*, 179-212.

Richard C. Wade opens the discussion of urban life in the American South with a focus on slavery in the antebellum period. His work albeit groundbreaking, takes some accounts on their face value that he should not have leading to his incorrect conclusion that slavery at the end of the antebellum period was in decline in the urban areas of the Old South.²¹ His mistake is quickly corrected by Claudia Dale Goldin in her book *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860*. Instead of declining, she shows how urban slaves were largely “sold from the cities, especially from 1850 to 1860, even if the demand for their services had been increasing at a rate greater than that for rural areas” because of the highly elastic demand for their labor.²² Robert Starobin furthers the conversation of slavery in the urban south by looking at industrial slavery as a specific part of the larger patterns of political economy and slave labor in the Old South.²³ Starobin is doubly important to this study for his acknowledgement of the importance of slave labor to urban maritime work in positions manning keelboats and later steamboats.²⁴ Fewer studies afterward tackle urban life throughout the south, scholars will instead use one or two cities as a means to speak to larger questions. A final work that bucks the trend is *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* by Frank Towers. Towers looks at free white laborers in southern cities, specifically the three largest Baltimore, St. Louis, and New Orleans, and how their politics were unique to their situation as free laborers in slave societies.²⁵ Furthermore, Towers exposes how secessionists used their politics “to articulate their concerns

²¹ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1967), 4.

²² Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South 1820-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 9.

²³ Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), vii-viii.

²⁴ Starobin, *Industrial Slavery*, 29-30.

²⁵ Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 1.

about the tension between the democratic principle of majority rule and the hierarchical society that racial slavery supported.”²⁶

The more specialized studies of single cities breakdown into two general patterns: those that focus on the economic life of a city and those that focus on a city’s black community. In the former category lies books like *Savannah in the Old South* by Walter J. Fraser Jr. In the first of a two-volume series, Fraser follows the story of economic development in Savannah from the founding of the city until the end of the Civil War.²⁷ Seth Rockman takes a different tack along a similar track in *Scraping By*. Rockman follows the everyday unskilled menial laborers of Baltimore from 1790 to 1840 as a sort of underbelly to the increasing economic and social dynamism shown in early America.²⁸ Harriet E. Amos Doss moves away from the previous two approaches, following the rapid development of Mobile through the export that the city was singularly dependent on: cotton. Amos Doss continues unto the Civil War where she makes the case that as sectional tensions mounted the city’s “national and international commerce dictated moderation, while sectional loyalty promoted separation.”²⁹ An interesting social picture emerges of southern urban life when we turn to the latter pattern that of black urban communities. First up to bat is Bernard E. Powers Jr. with his *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885*. Powers, although mostly interested in post-Civil War and Reconstruction Era Charleston, does trace much of the institutional strength of the black community from its

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Savannah in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

²⁸ Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 2-3.

²⁹ Harriet E. Amos Doss, *Cotton City: Urban Development in Antebellum Mobile* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), 5.

origins in antebellum Charleston.³⁰ Following soon after is Whittington B. Johnson who looks at the whole black community of Savannah undivided by their status as slave or free through the black church. Johnson goes further arguing an autonomous black community emerged in Savannah “unlike that enjoyed in any other black community in the Lower South” because of the leadership of the black church.³¹ Finally, Christopher Phillips in his book on Baltimore’s black community finds a community that gradually transitioned from a society of a transients into a “community of commitment” in the form of institutions like “benevolent associations, fraternal organizations, churches, [and] schools.”³² While both of these strains of scholarship provide valuable insight into urban life in such a unique setting they do not relate their histories to the maritime nature of port city life.

Fewer works deal with dimensions of life in the south. Resulting in maritime historiography in the Old South being more scattershot. If a work does deal in southern maritime history, the author typically works through the lens of race and class for dockworkers rather than their relationship with the sea and seafarers. Michael Thompson’s *Working on the Dock of the Bay: Labor and Enterprise in an Antebellum Southern Port* is a standout in this category. Thompson expertly charts the rise of class-conscious dockworkers in the antebellum American South through the dockyards of Charleston for success in the post-civil war Charleston.³³ Outside the Southern urban maritime nexus, work has been done chronicling the

³⁰ Bernard E. Powers, *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 9-72.

³¹ Whittington B. Johnson, *Black Savannah 1788-1864* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 6.

³² Christopher Phillips, *Freedom’s Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 3.

³³ Michael D. Thompson, *Working on the Dock of the Bay: Labor and Enterprise in an Antebellum Southern Port* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 2.

important role of black people on waterfronts across the South. David S. Cecelski is key here with his monograph *The Waterman's Song* which follows the story of black maritime workers in antebellum North Carolina.³⁴ More recently, new histories of the underground railroad and the significant maritime dimensions contained in the railroad are shifting previous conceptions of how the railroad operated. Exemplar in its class is the edited volume *Sailing to Freedom: The Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad* which examines the maritime aspects of the underground railroad across the cities of the South.³⁵

This study will recenter an important character to any maritime history: the seafarer, i. e. the men who sailed the deep-water vessels coming into port. Understanding the seafarer's role in the South's urban maritime world will advance our ability to relate southern history and maritime history helping to bridge the current gaps between the two.

A Tour of the Salty South

Now, a brief tour of maritime life in the antebellum South is in order. The urban waterfronts of this period need time to be understood to get a good hold of the seafarer's place within them. Just as well the economic relations which pushed many a seafarer to take a trip down South and stay there for a few weeks before returning home are necessary background to any exploration of a seafarer's life ashore here. Afterwards, the two chapters making up the main body of this study will each delve into an important aspect of seafarers' lives ashore in the South. The first will go into how the seafarers who wound up on the docks were thought of by

³⁴ David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), xii.

³⁵ Timothy D. Walker, ed., *Sailing to Freedom: The Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021).

the middle-class newspapermen and their fellows. The second chapter will tackle the laboring patterns of seafarers as in what work seafarers did on the waterfront, who they interacted with, and at what times they worked these occupations. Finally, I will conclude by challenging some of the nostalgia that has seeped into modern maritime history about these spaces as well as suggest new avenues of research for maritime histories of the shore.

Cotton ports are known for their titular export in the antebellum period. Cotton itself became king through innovations like the cotton gin and the insatiable appetite for the good among the textile millers of Europe and the North. Bringing cotton to the factories meant transporting it by sea. Before the period under study, shipping goods out of the south had to be done under perilous conditions due to the never ceasing wars that raged on the Atlantic through the eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries. Soon after the end of the Napoleonic Wars the first packet ships could begin sailing.

The packet ships inaugurated the regularization of transoceanic trade especially in goods like cotton. Packet sailing lines began in 1818 with an announcement in New York of four ships going from New York to Liverpool on a regular service.³⁶ During the 1820s, these would expand to four coastal packet shipping lines in the cities of Mobile, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans.³⁷ When manufactured goods were not brought down and cotton out by these ships, transatlantic steamship lines would take over. The lines helped to service a great deal more cotton to consumers than before but also took the trade in odd directions such as a regular divergence to bring cotton into the port of New York before bringing imports back to the cotton

³⁶ Albion, *Schedule*, 20.

³⁷ Albion, *Schedule*, 53-60.

ports when a direct route would have done just as well.³⁸ Regardless, manufactured goods brought seafarers into these ports and cotton brought them out.

Major southern ports besides the big four with packet lines were Baltimore, Norfolk, and Pensacola. Each city had their own quirks which affected seafarers, but we can make generalizations to most of them during the antebellum period. First, most of the cotton ports were experiencing rapid growth at the time. Second, these ports were all chiefly dependent on one good. In almost all cases this was cotton, but timber made for a surprising runner up. Third, their trade was dominated by Yankees who brought the coastal packets down along the coast and back up to New York where export awaited.

This was a time of rapid expansion across the US and cotton ports are an invaluable part of this trend. Cotton ports grew to accommodate the need to export more under rapid organizational and technological change for the shipping industry. Mobile went from a population of 1,500 in 1820 to 30,000 by 1860.³⁹ Even Charleston which is often viewed as having fallen behind only did so *relative* to other rapidly growing ports in the South.⁴⁰ Steamships began to line the docks as soon as they were available and sent the cotton shipping process into overdrive in the lead the up to the Civil War.

The dependency on cotton varied from port to port but even in the more diversified cotton ports the titular crop remained king. Higher order cotton ports like Mobile “had almost nothing else to offer except cotton and a few hides.”⁴¹ A larger diversified port like New Orleans

³⁸ Albion, *Schedule*, 50.

³⁹ Amos Doss, *Cotton*, xvi.

⁴⁰ Thompson, *Dock*, 5-6.

⁴¹ Albion, *Schedule*, 70.

was able to supply several other goods including tobacco, sugar, and notably lead. New Orleans' prime position at the entrance to the Mississippi River meant that these goods could travel downstream and onto ships departing the city.⁴² Even a diversified port like New Orleans still did not have enough goods to make for a year-round service. Instead, packet shippers made "the accepted practice to send the packet on one transatlantic trip a year," i.e., to Europe instead.⁴³ Less diversified ports like Charleston and Savannah had other goods, rice, and firewood, but their seasons ran parallel to the cotton season thus keeping shipping confined to that part of the year.⁴⁴ Only Pensacola escaped the cotton ports' dependency by becoming dependent on timber.

Yankees controlled every cotton port's trade. Maritime historian Robert G. Albion explained how Yankees

many of them originally hailing from Connecticut, penetrated every nook and cranny of the field where a dollar was to be made. They settled as factors in inland towns, advancing money to the planters and handling their cotton bales as they appeared. These would be sent down to other Yankees at the ports and they would ship some of the bales northward to New York and a larger amount direct to Europe.⁴⁵

Cotton was thus shipped through a network of agents from the North down from their plantations in states like Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina to ports on the coast. There the cotton is overseen by New York agents. Then cotton is loaded and stowed by Irish, English, and enslaved blacks onto a Yankee owned ship, most likely captained by a Yankee,

⁴² Albion, *Schedule*, 70-71.

⁴³ Albion, *Schedule*, 59.

⁴⁴ Albion, *Schedule*, 71-72.

⁴⁵ Albion, *Schedule*, 52.

and brought to either Europe or New York.⁴⁶ The process varied little from port to port, but each port city is worth reviewing for a brief whirlwind of the transformations these ports underwent.

Beginning with Charleston, the most important port in the South before the Antebellum period. Gradually, the city fell to third by the end of this period.⁴⁷ Charlestonians tried to realize the natural advantages of their port via the building of a railroad in the early 1830s which helped bring cotton in from the upcountry.⁴⁸ When that failed to bring in the desired level of commercial activity, the city undertook a project to dredge the harbor and lower the draft of the sandbar blocking many larger ships. This project lasted until 1860 when 190,000 cubic yards of silt were cleared and “ships of full draft were using the port on a regular basis.”⁴⁹ For most of the antebellum period only ships with a draft of less than fifteen feet could access Charleston’s harbor. Charleston was also engaged in various plots to become the head of a new direct transatlantic steamship service. Repeated failures put this dream to pasture. In many ways, Charleston was a city trying to keep up with their peer ports but struggled to find their footing. Still the city was an important hub of cotton, rice, and timber exports and any man found on the wharves there would be working in one of the most important ports in the US at the time.

Savannah was an intense rival of Charleston but always remained behind its erstwhile neighbor. The city was in the grips of an economic depression which lasted from the 1820s through to the 1830s only really releasing with the beginning of the Central of Georgia railroad in 1843.⁵⁰ Once finished a massive boom in cotton, timber, and rice began launching the city

⁴⁶ Albion, *Schedule*, 156-157.

⁴⁷ P. C. Coker III, *Charleston’s Maritime Heritage 1670-1865 an Illustrated History* (Charleston, South Carolina: CokerCraft Press, 1987),

⁴⁸ Coker, *Heritage*, 178.

⁴⁹ Coker, *Heritage*, 185.

⁵⁰ Walter J. Fraser Jr., *Savannah in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 242.

into economic prosperity. The city rapidly gained prominence in the maritime world as well with the dredging of the Savannah River by 1857.⁵¹ Savannah became so prosperous in fact that by the beginning of the Civil War “[m]ore than five oceangoing vessels flying the colors of various shipping companies and countries entered or cleared the river daily by the mid-1850s.”⁵²

Mobile grew rapidly throughout the antebellum period solely on the back of cotton. “How rapidly” was always the key question though. The first few decades saw the high-water mark of Mobile’s growth as the cotton trade took off and the city took on immigrants from England and the North, many of whom established their own businesses. Later on, the city’s demographics would change again as Irish and Germans came aboard toward the end of the antebellum South though with much less success than the previous wave of immigrants.⁵³ A similar phenomena came with the panic of 1837 which crippled Mobile’s growth. The city still grew at a rate above the rest of the US, but a sense of stagnation was creeping in as the period drew to a close.⁵⁴ Even so, a sailor would find himself in a veritable boom town if he was stowing cotton on the wharves of Mobile.

New Orleans was the big fish in the small pond that was the cotton ports. Strategically located at the mouth of the Mississippi River, New Orleans had all the needed ingredients to become the preeminent port of the American South. By 1835, New Orleans had shipped a total of 15,429 bales of cotton far and away the most shipped out of a cotton port by that time. For comparison, the closest competitor Mobile, shipped only 11,534 bales.⁵⁵ By the 1840s, New

⁵¹ Fraser Jr., *Savannah*, 247.

⁵² Fraser Jr., *Savannah*, 252.

⁵³ Amos Doss, *Cotton*, xvii.

⁵⁴ Amos Doss, *Cotton*, xvii-xviii.

⁵⁵ Albion, *Schedule*, 72.

Orleans commerce grew so expansive the city briefly exceeded New York by volume of exports.⁵⁶ New Orleans packets also “rivalled the [transatlantic] ocean packets in size and performance and there was business enough to warrant a gradual increase in their number.”⁵⁷ Eventually, the exports of New Orleans warranted twenty-four packets taking goods and people to and fro New Orleans and New York.

Pensacola is a unique port in the South worthy of some time spent mulling the city’s peculiarities. Pensacola primarily dealt in hard pine timber.⁵⁸ Port wise, the city was flooded with timber ships or droghers. These vessels, unlike the spanking new ships of the packet trades, were usually old ships barely seaworthy enough to bring their cargoes to the next port. An old sailor’s yarn recounts a captain having paid 500 dollars to a stevedore to burn down the ship he had to leave on the next day. His hireling unfortunately lacked sobriety and under the influence of alcohol he burns down the wrong vessel and the captain is forced to sail.⁵⁹ The men who manned them were almost universally Quebeckers either of the French or Irish variety. Though their trade was different these men worked the same labor patterns as those fellows discussed in chapter 2. Also notable is the trade in Pensacola was dominated by Quebecker traders and ships which were sent down, along with the Quebecker stevedores, from the frozen banks of the St. Lawrence.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Albion, *Schedule*, 57.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ F. W. Wallace, *In the Wake of the Wind-Ships* (New York: George Sully, 1927), 66.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Wind-Ships*, 66-67.

⁶⁰ Wallace, *Wind-Ships*, 64.

The South as a region and as a part of the United States was on the upswing. Maritime industries took note. Fleets were expanding. A shipbuilding spree was on with great results already. Steamships took off during this time. All but the latter of which required more seafarers on more vessels to bring more goods in and out of the cotton ports. Seafarers stepped onto southern waterfronts in greater numbers than ever before, and this is reflected in their increasing prominence in the newspapers being distributed at the time.

Chapter 1: Southern Views of the Seafarer

There's always a divide between perception and reality. In the case of seafarers, the divide has often appeared wider than most. That's at least according to historians who have studied both the real seafarers and the stereotypes that have hung over them particularly that of Jack Tar. He was identified first by Jesse Lemisch in his groundbreaking article, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America." Lemisch makes clear that Jack Tar was often depicted by British American society "as jolly, childlike, irresponsible, and in many ways surprisingly like the Negro stereotype" which Lemisch believes happened "because he was treated so much like a child, a servant, and a slave."¹ In other words, the laws and rules of conduct that governed Jack Tar made him appear childlike and in need of society's help and control.

These stereotypes continued long into the early twentieth century according to the next historian to recognize and deconstruct the perception of Jack Tar, Valerie Burton, who went a step further disavowing the usage of Jack Tar in total. For Burton, "Jack Tar is a projection of seafaring life half-glimpsed and filtered through a myriad of prejudices."² Furthermore, his image was constructed and sustained by shipowners as a means of maintaining the poor treatment of seafarers into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³ Additionally, Laura Tabili showcases how the tensions between shipowners and their unionizing workforce as well as between unionized and ununionized seafarers ultimately aided in the construction of

¹ Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1968): 380.

² Burton, "Bachelor," 179.

³ Burton, "Bachelor," 180.

racial difference and the perceptions of race and seafarers in British life.⁴ The subsequent interest in who seafarers actually were led to a dearth of studies into how the seafarer and his (seafarers were overwhelmingly male) adjacent identities were constructed.

A series of studies emerged again in the 2010s looking more broadly at not only the seafarer but his fellows in the sailortowns that emerged in the nineteenth century. Robert Lee was the first to publish on the broader topic of sailors and sailortowns. Lee, through his article “The Seafarers' Urban World: A Critical Review,” takes aim at the image of sailors in port as drunken and disorderly instead noting sailors were not so excessively drunk for the time period and crimes committed by sailors were a small proportion of overall crime in port cities.⁵ Graeme Milne incorporates perception as one of the three threads he tries to weave in his book on sailortown exploring how “the people of sailortown lived in a world of representation, performance and stereotype.”⁶ Brad Beaven delves into the naval ports of Portsmouth and Plymouth as well as their accompanying sailortowns as a culture that “was shunned by civic leaders and exiled to the margins of civic life by the 1850s.”⁷ Furthermore, in a separate book chapter on Ratcliffe Highway, the London sailortown, Beaven argues the Victorian image of the seafarer shifted from a positive depiction of a Jolly sailor to an urbanized proletariat steamship sailor in parallel to the demonization of Ratcliffe Highway which “served as a metaphor for

⁴ Laura Tabili, “The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925,” *Journal of British Studies* 33, no. 1 (1994): 69.

⁵ Robert Lee, “The Seafarers' Urban World: A Critical Review,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 25, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 57-58.

⁶ Graeme J Milne, *People, Place and Power on the Nineteenth Century Waterfront: Sailortown* (Palgrave MacMillian, 2016), 6.

⁷ Beaven, “Resilience,” 73.

wider anxieties of industrial and urban change.”⁸ Karl Bell looks at the religious side of seafarers in Portsmouth arguing “ecclesiastic agents shaped representations of Portsmouth as a site of immorality and heathen ‘otherness’” especially Portsea the location of the sailortown in the city.⁹ Jonathan Thayer, meanwhile, uses a framework of invasion to characterize the fear inherent in so many middle class New Yorkers at the “veritable army of the uncouth [seafarers], fresh off voyages from the far reaches of the earth but uninitiated into the genteel urban society.”¹⁰ Taken together, the body of work produced on perceptions of seafarers characterizes evangelical reformers, Victorian middle classes, and shipowners, each for their own reasons, as perceiving seafarers as depraved, infantilized, and immoral.

Yet, the tie holding back all of the literature so far is a general focus on the North Atlantic. Only a handful of studies on the perceptions of seafarers ashore have been conducted below the city of New York let alone the equator.¹¹ Some like Milne have tried to bring southernly climbs into the story of sailor constructions. His excavation of sailor perceptions as part of his global survey of sailortown is one such attempt but he ends up mostly combing

⁸ Brad Beaven, “From Jolly Sailor to Proletarian Jack: The Remaking of Sailortown and the Merchant Seafarer in Victorian London,” in *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c.1700—2000*, ed. Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 160.

⁹ Karl Bell, “‘They Are Without Christ and Without Hope’: ‘Heathenism’, Popular Religion, and Supernatural Belief in Portsmouth’s Maritime Community, c.1851–1901,” in *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c.1700—2000*, ed. Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 51.

¹⁰ Johnathan Thayer, “Merchant Seamen, Sailortowns, and the Philanthropic Encounter in New York, 1843–1945,” in *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond*, ed. David Worthington (Cham: Palgrave MacMillian, 2017), 70.

¹¹ Although not dealing with the perceptions of seafarers specifically Nigel Worden, “Strangers Ashore: Sailor Identity and Social Conflict in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Cape Town,” in *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c.1700—2000*, ed. Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 13–28, does well to counterbalance so many accounts of seafarers’ experiences in the North Atlantic.

through British newspapers for his perceptions.¹² Interestingly, Lemisch was able to incorporate some of the American South's legal perceptions of seafarers in the colonial period, largely to make a case for the similarity of laws governing seafarers and laws governing slaves. Once again though he makes use of mostly Northern sources and Northern examples. By shifting our perspective Southward, toward the land of cotton where the lords of the lash ruled, we can gain a wider perspective of how sailors were perceived in places beyond the urban centers of international seafaring.

Seeing Southern perspectives also rescues us from a simple one-size-fits-all perspective of middle-class Victorians and their counterparts across the pond in the Northern United States. The men and women who were writing newspaper articles and evangelical tracts decrying the seafarer's supposed immorality and otherness. Supposedly, if such discourses were so uniform as suggested by the present literature, then they would have been just as common in the American South given the significant cultural and economic ties by sea between them and their North Atlantic brethren. I have found a more nuanced picture to be true.

Southern newspapers were a much more variegated crowd than their northern counterparts. Certainly, some middle-class prejudices come to the fore but there's a surprisingly diverse set of tropes associated with seafarers in the early nineteenth century. Yes, this includes those of a young roaring "Jack Tar" stumbling violent and drunk through the waterfront. Yet, there's a surprising number of stories on sailors as romantic heroes, their adventures on the high seas, and as another everyday part of port life. If we expand our search, seafarers often appeared in a series of diverse tropes and stories throughout the early nineteenth century and

¹² Milne, *Power*, 12.

by uncovering the wide-ranging image of seafarers we learn how seafarers were a part of the ports they visited.

Hot Off the Wharves!

Though newspaper editors of the South certainly published stories that only reinforced the stereotypes of “Jack Tar” those stereotypes were by no means universal. Certain kinds of sailors, especially foreigners and non-white men, were singled out as dangerous, the cause of all sorts of ills whether ashore or aboard ship. We should not be blind to the targeting of certain seafarers, but we would also do well to not paint the image of seafarers so broadly. Some newspapers report stories of seafarer romances and adventures. While others report on sailors as a means to support their political agenda. Sailors do not emerge here as merely a menace to be afraid and anxious of but rather a complex series of men engaging in a variety of acts ranging from the depraved to the heroic.

To engage with the full range of seafarers as shown by newspapers we need to engage with the full range of articles in which seafarers take center stage. Each type of article has tropes which help define the genre within newsprint much like human interest and advice columns are staples of news media today with their own well-established tropes. High seas adventures are one such genre defined primarily by taking place on the seas, often appearing as another world unto itself, and something extremely unusual taking place. Political pieces often used sailors to advance their favored political party or persuasion, especially in relation to the War of 1812 era slogan “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights” which still held cache in American

political life until the 1840s.¹³ Romance stories are the standout among the crowd for their positive vision of sailors as romantic heroes. Reports of sailors performing religious acts, usually sent by those associated with evangelical reform movements, were also a regular staple of newspapers. Quite a few also fall under a sort of mundanity that reflects sailors as an everyday fact of life in a port city. These stories are more about the mildly interesting happenings of sailors in a port city. Finally, a significant number of stories fall under something like a “true crime” heading of violence and murder. Most often sailors were the victims as well as the perpetrators of such crimes, however, normally seafarers of color and foreign origin came off the worse rather than seafarers in general. Although the latter set of stories has come to define newspaper writing about seafarers as we will see that was far from the case. Newspapermen would have been aware of all these tropes and known how to use them as part of their work routine. Their stories also came from a wide variety of sources like reformers, reporters, and editors in other cities, and even sailors themselves.

Some stories even appear to be sailors’ yarns, or stories sailors told to pass time and kindle the brotherhood of the forecastle, which suggests that the staff of these newspapers were mediating the voices of seafarers themselves through their papers.¹⁴ Newspapers would reprint these stories, in spite of their dubious nature, because ships coming into port were one of their primary sources of information. The business to get news from seafarers first was so cutthroat at the time that some editors in New York would resort to building “news boats,”

¹³ Paul A. Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8-9.

¹⁴ Paul A. Gilje, *To Swear like a Sailor: Maritime Culture in America, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 118.

small craft that would grab correspondents and foreign newspapers off ships coming into port, sometimes up to eighty or one-hundred miles away.¹⁵ Now, Southern newspapers were not so competitive because, unlike New York papers, they were not the first to receive overseas news. This likely gave sailors and newspaper employees more time to chat as they gathered the recent papers from overseas for articles to be reprinted in their own pages. If these correspondents were sitting around on deck waiting to receive the news, no one should be surprised that they listened to and recorded sailors spinning their yarns away while in port. These stories were also respected as a part of print culture. After all what was a sailor memoir except a series of yarns?

The key insight to understanding much of the published work either written by seafarers, like memoirs, or influenced by them, like newspapers, is that seafarers were not merely passive observers to the process of their image formation in the public consciousness, rather they were actively shaping that image. Yarns became the key means by which sailors shaped their own image. Why did these seafarers-turned-writers use yarns? Myra Glenn explains “the majority of these men were impecunious hawkers of ephemeral tales that catered to the public’s appetite for adventure and entertainment.”¹⁶ In other words, seafarers filtered the view of life aboard ship to maximize their profits ashore. Newspapermen would in all likelihood put the same emphasis on the stranger parts of the story given they were under the same monetary pressures as seamen perhaps even more so. We might think of that process today in terms of search engine optimization and the creation of shocking, wild content to maximize the number of clicks. As is the case today, the process tended to bias stories from seafarers to the shocking

¹⁵ Albion, *Schedule*, 178-179.

¹⁶ Myra C. Glenn, *Jack Tar’s Story: The Autobiographies and Memoirs of Sailors in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

and otherworldly rather than the boring mundane work of maintaining a ship sailing the open ocean, however, they are an authentic representation of how sailors or those who wrote about sailors imagined their lives. We would do well then to remember that representations of seafarers were both shaped *for* an audience and *by* seafarers as we follow through the pages which so frequently defined how sailors were viewed by the average Southerner.

Bloody Sailors?

The primary genre of story that tars seafarers was the reporting on murders and violence perpetrated on and by seafarers. Stories of such outrages helped to reinforce the image of the waterfront and by extension sailors as violent and drunken. Oftentimes, in the South at least, the violence and drinking attached to sailors in port were not applied to white American seafarers. Instead, sailors from abroad and those of color were the ones who perpetrated violent acts according to the newspapers. Similarly, press people would report the shore-based violence perpetrated on sailors as committed by sailor boarding house masters who got into disputes with their boarders over the price of drinks and other vices. At sea though, the violence done against seamen was primarily by other seafarers of non-American and non-white varieties. All of which is to say, sailors were not targeted as sailors for disparagement by the press. The press had bigger fish to fry with respect race and nationality as well as a dislike for the boarding house masters with which sailors were entangled.

Foreign seafarers seem to be a particular focus of ire given how many acts of violence are attributed to them. This was an age of nationalism and at times sailor violence, especially

towards other sailors, was a way of enacting foreign policy agendas.¹⁷ Much of the violence in print committed by foreign seafarers can be attributed to a desire to paint foreigners as violent dangers to Americans. Two stories of mutinying seafarers give weight to such an evaluation. Both stories are rather violent. In the first, a sailor finds out there's a good deal of hard currency aboard his ship. Then he conspires with two other specifically foreign seafarers, all three of whom happened to be shipped at Savannah, to take over the vessel. They strike the captain with the cook's axe then "they carried him to the windlass where they chopped off his head with the axe and threw him overboard."¹⁸ They proceed to do the same to the mate and the cook. Another man jumps overboard and drowns rather than being murdered. The mutineers' plot unravels when they get drunk and a remaining passenger with the cabin boy steer the ship to shore and bring notice of the situation to the authorities.¹⁹ The other mutiny story takes place off the coast of Florida, when a group of seven foreign seafarers are shipped out of New Orleans and try to take over the ship. The captain of the ship originally asked for American seafarers, but his wishes were disregarded, unbeknownst to him. When the seven mutinied, they drove the captain and rest of the crew off the ship and beached her. Soon after they murdered the cook and quarreled among themselves. Their quarrels ended with the deaths of three of the mutineers dead and some of the cargo thrown overboard. The mutineers were quickly arrested by a party formed from the old crew along with some local townspeople and prepared for transport back to New Orleans.²⁰ Newspapermen in both stories use mutiny and

¹⁷ Brian Rouleau, *With Sails Whitening Every Sea: Mariners and the Making of an American Maritime Empire*, 1st ed. (Cornell University Press, 2014), 11-12.

¹⁸ "Mutiny and Murder," *Cahawba Press and Alabama Intelligencer*, April 17, 1824, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "Mutiny and Murder," *Charleston Courier*, January 6, 1841, 2.

the accompanying brutal violence as a means to paint foreign seafarers and the shipping of foreign seafarers as an issue in American life especially as both these crews were shipped out of American cities.

Piracy was reported by the press as a typical seaborne crime of the foreign and non-white seaman. A group of insurance company presidents petitioned the US president in the newspapers to crack down on pirate activity against American vessels in 1820. As part of their petition, they list 44 pirate attacks over the last year. Many of the piracies listed are committed by foreigners and non-whites. For example, one of the piracies listed was that of the

Brig Pedlar, of New-York, from Havre, was boarded in lat. 34, by an armed schooner, and a ship in company, mounting 18 guns, full of blacks and mulattoes, under French colors: she boarded with knives, swords, and pistols, drove the captain and crew down the fore-castle, plundered a part of the cargo and every thing of value, and beat the officers and crew, & c.²¹

Although also listing some pirate attacks committed by Americans, all the attacks take place on American waters or the Caribbean. The insurance company presidents are using a sense of threat created by black and foreign seafarers to push their agenda. That they can use such ideas at all suggests a clear assumption of criminality on the part of newspapers toward these seafarers.

Turning to the shore, less in vogue are stories of violence by foreign and non-white seafarers. Instead, much of the ire for violence is linked to boarding houses and boarding house masters. These men and women were intimately associated with crime by the middle classes as backroom managers of the sailor labor market which frustrated sea captains and governments

²¹ "List of Piracies," *Southern Patriot*, January 7, 1820, 2; "List of Piracies," *Southern Patriot*, January 8, 1820, 2.

to no end.²² The profession often necessitated some forms of coercion which could lead to violence especially around the price of drink and other vices. Sailors often come away as the unfortunate victims of the boarding house masters' activities.

The most outrageous cases were of sailors found murdered in or around boarding houses. A newspaper in Baltimore published a piece on the alleged murder of a Liverpool seafarer by a boarding house master over a drink. Even though the alleged murderer and the witnesses are confined to the local jail for questioning, a riot breaks out in front of the house by seafarers dissatisfied with what has transpired.²³ Another outrage was of a murdered white seafarer missing for 6 to 9 weeks last seen at a sailor boarding house with 80 dollars on him and a good set of clothes.²⁴ Further outrage comes when a seafarer is found dead tied up in a tree and the last person who saw him was a sailor boarding house master. Editors to the local newspaper declare the murder "is enough to rouse the resentment of the coldest blood."²⁵ Stories like these, at the very least, implicitly tie violence to boarding house masters both as perpetrators of violence themselves and more broadly the source of urban troubles like rioting.

Other kinds of crime including sex trafficking and assaults that often took place in boarding houses which connected those locales rather than sailors with crime. For example, a fight breaks out in a French sailor boarding house after two Americans enter and one is stabbed.²⁶ That the boarding house brought together multiple nationalities seems to be the

²² Milne, *Power*, 103-104; Judith Fingard, "Masters and Friends, Crimps and Abstainers: Agents of Control in 19th Century Sailortown," *Acadiensis* 8, no. 1 (1978): 22.

²³ "Murder," *New York Evening Star* reprinted in *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, April 29, 1835, 2.

²⁴ "Murder, Though It Have No Tongue, Will Speak, With Most Miraculous Organs.," *Alexandria Gazette*, May 13, 1830, 3.

²⁵ "The Mysterious Murder," *Richmond Compiler* reprinted in *Lynchburg Virginian*, November 19, 1830, 1-2.

²⁶ "Serious Affray," *New York Gazette* reprinted in *Alexandria Gazette*, February 1, 1836, 3.

trouble considering the two men got into dispute “with some French seamen relative to the matter in dispute between this country and France.”²⁷ A second illuminating case is that of a sailor boarding house trafficking women for sex. The boarding house keeper, a man named June, used his wife to trick women to come and work for him in Charleston. There he would trap the women and force them to work as prostitutes for his establishment’s clientele primarily sailors but also others.²⁸ From how the article frames the situation, the sailors appear almost unaware background characters to the human drama of the evil June. Boarding houses come off much the worse being more dens of criminality than sailors are criminals.

Sailors were still part of this tapestry of crime but often as victims or unwitting dupes and the ones who do not tend to be either foreigners or seafarers of color suggesting xenophobia and racism are more at play. Seafarers are often not villains in these stories rather they are victims, not helpless victims by any means, but still caught up in the cycles of shore-based criminality. The often-expressed outrage, backed up by subsequent investigations, at many of these crimes suggests further that there was care about seafarers’ wellbeing that previously went unnoticed. Sailors were not perceived as violent, drunken men as is traditionally thought but were instead thought to be caught up in difficult situations involving drink and crime as part of their profession.

On the High Seas

We can say with some certainty the origins of high seas adventure stories lay almost entirely in sailors’ yarns. High seas adventure stories took place on the waves where only other

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Shocking Disclosures,” *Alabama Intelligencer and State Rights Expositor*, November 14, 1835, 2.

seafarers could confirm or deny the story, unless of course the boat shipwrecked and there was only one survivor. These stories typically have air of pity at the fate of a seafarer to face such dangers or are designed to draw shock at the oddities that pervade on the ocean. Adventurous stories appealed to those middle-class people who saw little to differentiate their day to day. When one figures out how to survive without risking his life all he thinks about is how fun life was before when his neck was on the line. Still though their consistency suggests they struck a chord with a newly domesticated public and often empathized with the pains of seafaring.

A particularly fascinating example comes from a short story of an Irish sailor. He falls from the mizzen top of an American ship and lands on the quarterdeck. Everyone thought he was dead but “[t]he poor fellow however, got up, apparently unhurt.”²⁹ [sic] When asked by the captain where he came from the sailor replies he was from the north of Ireland. While the humorous element may be lost, the sympathy for seafarers is not. The newspaperman here is recognizing the dangers inherent in seafaring as well as the humor that often came with roving the sea with these dangers at the seafarer’s heels. Either that or he was told of this story by a seafaring man who knew these dangers well. The fact the sailor in question was Irish is unusual. Foreign seafarers, as we shall see, were not typically looked kindly upon in the press, the South included. An American newspaper is showing an Irish seafarer in a sympathetic light a powerful rejection of the traditionally dour histories of seafarer depictions.

Another adventure story follows a mutiny on board a German ship with a supernatural twist. The captain, a cruel man, was murdered after ordering the harsh punishment of one of his sailors. After the mutiny, the men got drunk and could not decide who to give authority.

²⁹ “An Irish Sailor Fell,” *Tuscaloosa Chronicle*, October 29, 1827, 1.

Eventually, the man whose punishment caused the mutiny, Sturm, and the captain's son are cast off on their own boat by the choice of Sturm. A delirious Sturm sees the ship of the dead. Sturm knows the ship is a sign his death approaches and falls into unconsciousness. Instead of dying, Sturm is awoken in Newfoundland by an older gentleman with the captain's son still alive. The two eventually make off the island and Sturm raises the boy who is able to reclaim his father's fortune. For his good work raising him, Sturm is awarded a place to live out his days in peace on the boy's estate.³⁰ While certainly a very blood curling story for an early nineteenth century reader, the article illustrates an awareness of the harsh conditions of seafaring with a view toward empathizing with seafarers. Found within the article are many references to the thoughts and feelings of Sturm as he has been put out to sea and hallucinates the ship of the dead. The depression, the terror, and the fear all are explicated thoroughly as in the following passage: "[f]ear, exhaustion, and the fumes of spirit, too powerful for his weakened frame, produced the torpor which most resembles death."³¹ Sturm is a sympathetic character despite his violence and because of his acceptance of his fate and his work to keep the captain's son alive. As to the captain of the vessel there is little to sympathize. He is a violent man who only used "[g]estures, furious grimaces, and blows, [as] his usual cloquence, even to his wife and child."³² The writer and editor of this story clearly knew sailors faced awful abuse by their officers and understood the challenges seafarers faced in working under those conditions. Sturm is not an infantilized man nor a villainized one, but rather someone caught in a difficult situation and managed to survive.

³⁰ "The Ship of the Dead," *City Gazette*, July 18, 1820, 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

While Sturm turned out alright, high seas adventures occasionally ended in death. A seafarer recounts one such death of a cabin boy in the service of US navy vessel. His account is sardonic and quite stoic. He even recalls “we did our duty, and corrected our Navy Lists whenever any one happened to die over us, with some such expression as ‘one ratline higher;’ or ‘he was a clever fellow, but here goes the black mark!’”³³ His account is likely playing into the trope of seafarers as stoic men unafraid of tides and waters, accepting of the dangers inherent in the sea. The narrator is however somewhat sad at the death of the cabin boy who he laments was “as promising an officer as ever was sacrificed in these beautiful and necessary, but dangerous little craft.”³⁴ There’s a certain tragedy to these lines which again suggest a deeper sympathy to seafarers and the dangers they face aboard ship than was previously realized.

While certainly not all positive, much of the high seas adventure genre of article is at the very least sympathetic to the struggles of seafarers and cognizant of the risks seafarers face at sea. Whether death, delirium, or abuse by the upper ranks, seafarers’ struggles are well documented in these stories and seafarers are often pitied without removing their agency in these situations. In high seas adventures at least, seafarers are not children lost at sea but rather men harmed by their time at sea.

The Romance of the Waves

To get beyond that dour view we must look at romances. Seafaring romances had a clearer structure to them than high seas adventure along with a strong set of tropes. Typically, they follow the story of a seafarer saving a life or several lives through their quick thinking and

³³ “A Leaf from ‘A Reefer’s Log,’” *Mobile Mercantile Advertiser*, October 7, 1833, 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

determination. The seafarer protagonists of these stories end up as beloved heroes rewarded with love, money, and status. While we can be fairly certain that high seas adventure stories were taken from sailors' yarns, given some of these stories were quoted from seafarers themselves, other stories like romances are harder to parse in origin and in how they were shaped by sailors themselves. What we do know is the sailors in these stories are not dregs of society but valued heroes who save the lives of distressed maidens and unfortunate crews.

Take the story of sailor John Johnson who meets a certain Mana Miller, the daughter of a rich planter, while working on her return trip from England. Just as they are getting underway, Miller falls overboard into Liverpool's harbor and sinks to the bottom. Fortunately for her, after others had given up, "our hero [Johnson], however, did not abandon the search."³⁵ She was soon discovered and Johnson "instantly plunged to the bottom, seizing her by the hair, and brought her to the top."³⁶ Afterwards, the two fell in love and exchanged promises of marriage to one another. They later married following Miller's subsequent illness.³⁷ Johnson in this romantic narrative was not a dreg of society nor a mere child which must be kept away from disorderly activities. Instead, he is a noble heroic man able to act in a dangerous situation, be rewarded with love to a rich planter's daughter, and move up the economic ladder. Romantic narratives like these moved sailors away from the traditionally infantilizing tropes that are predominant in histories of sailor images.

Another romance story follows a French pilot named Broussard. He sees a ship making for Rochelle in stormy weather that another pilot cannot reach. The ship was closing into port

³⁵ "Romance in Real Life," *Daily Alabama Journal*, May 8th, 1850, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

when the hull crashes just 180 feet from the pier. Broussard takes decisive action and ties one end of a rope onto the pier and the other end to himself. He jumps into the water and swims against the heavy tides of the sea to save several sailors. After bringing one to shore himself, Broussard ties the rope around those who still have strength and drags them to shore. Once ashore, the pilot faints. Only for him to be revived and dive once more into the ship to save a passenger! All in all, “[o]f ten men who had been in the ship, only two perished and their bodies were found the next day.”³⁸[sic] Soon after Broussard receives a financial reward and given an audience with the king for his good deed. Broussard like Johnson was a hero and richly rewarded as such. He also took action was not in need of help to prevent his damnation.

Romance stories give us a view through the looking glass into how sailor-as-heroes appeared in newsprint. These men were admired for their deeds. Their workplace was recognized as a dangerous place both for men to travel upon and especially for men to work upon. However, these men were believed to have done heroic deeds of their own volition out of the goodness of their hearts. They were also able to climb the social ladder with Johnson marrying into the high echelons of Southern life and Broussard paying off his debts and visiting the king of France. Sailors in these stories were not patronized or thought of as sources of depravity rather they were sources of inspiration and examples for others to follow.

Sailors as Political Prop

While romances and adventures make seafarers either objects of heroism or sympathetic men to be pitied, political articles used the imagery of seafarers to promote their agenda and preferred politicians. These stories were likely untouched by the words and

³⁸ M. Carey, “A Romance of Real Life,” *Alexandria Gazette*, February 27, 1835, 2.

thoughts of sailors. Instead, they were written by partisans of the political parties to further their goals. As previously mentioned, American political newspapers were especially fond of using the old War of 1812 phrase “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights!” On some level, the use of the phrase was a call to Northern sailors and their relations to vote for a party as *the* defender of the phrase which still held currency within seafaring circles into the 1840s and 1850s.³⁹ More likely though the phrase was used to tap into the broader memory of the War of 1812 as part of a surge of patriotic nationalism in the US.⁴⁰ Even so, the usage of the phrase, along with the image of seafarers in the US, suggests seafarers were seen as an important part of the national community whose voice was to be respected in national conversations.

The *Clay Banner* a pro-Henry Clay newspaper in Mobile, Alabama worked tirelessly to appropriate such imagery. Henry Clay was the leader of the Whig party, one of the two main political parties of the day, and a perennial candidate for president, though he never successfully won the office. One article, reporting on a visit to Charleston by Clay with a parade held in his honor, describes how “at the head of the procession there was a schooner-rigged boat, manned by sailors, and drawn on a car, with a banner bearing the inscription-”Henry Clay, the advocate of sailors’ rights”- followed by a large body of seamen.”⁴¹ By declaring him the advocate of sailors’ rights Clay’s newspaper editors sought to bind his cause and that of sailors. Far from suggesting the infantilization of sailors, Clay’s supporters saw sailors as a key constituency to be aligned with their man. Moreover, their depiction marks sailors as a valued

³⁹ Gilje, *Rights*, 325-326.

⁴⁰ Gilje, *Rights*, 327-329.

⁴¹ “Reception of Henry Clay,” *Charleston Courier* reprinted in *Clay Banner*, April 13, 1844.

part of the national community as no other group of laborers takes as prominent a place in the procession as sailors.

Sailors' prominence in the national consciousness also helps explain the concern for their welfare in newspaper political discourse. An article in the *Mobile Gazette and Commercial Advertiser* by someone under the pseudonym Impartial, calls for the next representative to the state legislature to, among other actions, take greater concern for the welfare of seamen in the port of Mobile. Specifically, Impartial calls out the lack of "place to offer [sailors] in the hour of their sickness and distress, in the shape of an hospital."⁴² The importance given to seafarers' welfare in this regard suggests a serious concern driven by valuable role of seafarers in national life. Also, the use of seafarers as an issue of concern is underlined by an understanding of seafarers' role in maintaining economic life in the US.

In an article from the 1850s, the purpose of the War of 1812 is reasserted as "to secure the rights of American sailors on the high seas."⁴³ If into the 1850s, newspapermen were still asserting the primacy of seafarers as a cause of the war suggests seafarers never lost their national prominence. Rather than becoming a marginalized part of American life, seafarers remained an important component to the national consciousness whose economic contributions were valued as was their presence in political life. Certainly, they were still just one among many kinds of important workers in American life in this period, but they were a prominent and valued one nonetheless. They were thought of not as disfavored workers but as American citizens doing valuable work for the American economy.

⁴² IMPARTIAL, "For the Gazette," *Mobile Gazette and Commercial Advertiser*, July 20, 1820, 2.

⁴³ "Won't Support a Federalist," *New Orleans Daily Creole*, July 19, 1856, 2.

Sleeping in Port

A fourth image of sailors cultivated in the press was as a normal part of port city life. Oftentimes, these local papers struggled to put out stories that related to the everyday life of their readers which often left them scrounging around town for unusual stories of everyday happenings. Frequently, port city newspapers would find sailors as an object of interest to whirl their readers with tales of their deeds and times in port. To a certain extent this was a form of othering, however on the whole the mundane stories of seafarers in port make them appear a normal part of the background to urban life on the coast. We should instead see these stories of the interesting deeds of sailors as part of port urbanites placing seafarers into the complex human patterns that made up their home.

Particularly interesting are short stories of sailors' wit. These are often but a few quick sentences and tell a quick joke about seafaring or emphasize some aspect of a typical seafarer in port. A typical version of the article is "A Sailor's Wedding." The story tells of a sailor who upon coming back from sea decides to marry a woman he has become acquainted with. At the altar the parson explains there was not enough money to pay the fees for the two to get married. To which the sailor replies "Never mind, brother, marry us *as far as it will go*."⁴⁴ The joke could be referring to the practice of sailor's wives, or sailors taking on a monogamous relationship with a woman ashore for the duration of their stay.⁴⁵ Regardless, the humor suggests a sort of casualness or everyday delight that comes from having sailors in town even if they could not afford their own wedding. Another article explains the story of Yorkshire

⁴⁴ "A Sailor's Wedding," *Alexandria Gazette*, January 20, 1835, 2.

⁴⁵ Margaret S. Creighton, *Dogwatch and Liberty Days: Seafaring in the Nineteenth Century* (Salem: The Peabody Museum of Salem, 1982), 61-62.

gentleman accosted by a poor sailor telling him to go to hell. The sailor replies that he just came from there. The gentleman shocked by what he just heard asked the sailor “what were they doing when you left?” The sailor replied, “Just what they are doing here... taking in the rich and turning the poor away!” He receives a shilling from the gentleman for his wit.⁴⁶ The article is an example of humanizing the seafarer and satirizes those who are unsympathetic to his plight. Overall, these pithy and laconic stories give human features to seafarers and makes them a part of normal port life.

Another strain of this type of newspaper writing is toward the odd ball stories of seafarers’ activities in the local port. One example comes in the shape of a local paper’s story of two tobacco shops next to the river fighting for the business of seafarers coming into port. The two businesses compete with their signage each promising better tobacco than the last sign until one puts out a sign reading “Far better tobacco than the best tobacco by Farr,” Farr being the name of the competing tobacco shop’s owner. After this sign is put out all the seafarers go to his shop and Farr is forced to close down.⁴⁷ Other examples include an article cataloging a sailor saving a pig from a sewer after the animal gets stuck down in a gutter pipe during a rainstorm. The pig was treated like a prize by the sailor and put on display in the boarding house said sailor was staying.⁴⁸ These stories while seemingly mundane and uninteresting actually humanize seafarers for a general audience making them a normal part of the local port rather than a strange “other” whose presence is not welcome.

⁴⁶ “A Yorkshire Gentleman,” *Southern Recorder*, February 24, 1847, 1.

⁴⁷ “Sign-Post-Wit,” *Alexandria Gazette*, July 27, 1835, 2.

⁴⁸ “A Strange Story,” *Charleston Courier*, February 2, 1841, 2.

Sailors in these stories are not surviving harrowing adventures, saving maidens from drowning, or advocating for Henry Clay but they are a part of port life. Instead of seeing seafarers as transient outsiders, these stories brought sailors onto the streets of port cities like Alexandria and Charleston. Their sailors were normal people who went to sea but always returned home to the land provided they did not die of the dangers out on the big wide blue.

We're Southward Bound for Home Once More!

While the oft-studied North Atlantic perspective may show a drunken, roaring Jack Tar, the perspective of the American South shows a more fractured image. Newspapers had many different depictions of sailors grace their pages. If we take a broader view many are more positive and less patronizing than those depictions seen in the North. Furthermore, the less positive depictions tend to target seafarers of color and foreign seafarers suggesting that seafarers are not the primary target of this kind of sullied image.

Our view of seafarers as seen by those outside the waterfront makes clear that Jack Tar was but one kind of seafarer. Many other images of seafarers coexisted alongside him. We should instead follow the fractures, the divides, that exist between all these images of seafarers if we hope to understand the seafarer as he was thought of by landsmen. We would also do well to acknowledge and explore the geography of differences in perception. If the American South's perspective is at least somewhat different from those Northern Atlantic ports, then in all likelihood the perception of seafarers is even more so in other ports around the Atlantic and by extension the world. Our mission in the future should be to follow these divisions to see where they lead us and ideas about the seafarer in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 2: Along the Waterfront

Charles Nordhoff was just a cabin boy when he first arrived in Mobile, Alabama. More specifically Mobile Bay, Alabama as he like many a seafarer in the port never reached the shore. Instead, Nordhoff bunked aboard the ship he came in on along with “the two mates, the cook, one seaman, and [himself].”¹ His time in Mobile was remembered fondly with little work to do and much fun to be had. Nordhoff even recalls “every favorable day was spent in the boat, fishing, or racing, or making pic-nics ashore, in company with the boats’ crews and officers of other vessels.”² His experience differed wildly from the sailor Charles Erskine, who did nothing but work his entire time ashore in nearby New Orleans.³ Erskine also lived ashore during most of his stay.⁴ Of the two, Erskine’s experience was far more common. Nordhoff even says so, declaring “The men who yearly resort to Mobile Bay to screw cotton, are, as may be imagined, a rough set. They are mostly English and Irish sailors, who, leaving their vessels here, remain until they have saved a hundred or two dollars.”⁵ While traditionally “shore leave” has been thought of as a time primarily defined by leisure, usually of the drunken licentious variety, for those seafarers staying in the cotton ports their time on the waterfront was centered around labor.

There’s was a very peculiar situation compared to ports in the North Atlantic. Seafarers in Northern Atlantic ports have had their time ashore defined by leisure and family albeit

¹ Charles Nordhoff, *Nine Years a Sailor: Being Sketches of Personal Experience in the United States Naval Service, the American and British Merchant Marine, and the Whaling Service* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wiltach, Keys & co., 1857), 37.

² Ibid.

³ Charles Erskine, *Twenty Years before the Mast, with the More Thrilling Scenes and Incidents While Circumnavigating the Globe under the Command of the Late Admiral Charles Wilkes, 1838-1842* (Boston: Morning Star Press, 1890), 296-298.

⁴ Erskine, *Twenty*, 298-299.

⁵ Nordhoff, *Nine*, 43.

constricted by various exploitative actors, typically within the larger sailortown paradigm. Isaac Land in his study of London's sailortown argues "we should acknowledge the predatory behaviour, but place it alongside the networks of pleasure, mutual aid, friendship, and even civic cooperation that shaped the sailortown experience."⁶ Daniel Vickers also places seafarers' experiences in Salem, Massachusetts inside a sailortown paradigm defined by familial ties.⁷ Yet, as I have said before, if we want to understand the full breadth of seafarers experiences ashore we need to look at the peculiarities of each port city seafarers were to be found.

Although the waterfront was a unified space, as in all activities related to the seaborne industries existed within its confines, seafarers' working lives in cotton ports were defined by division. The most obvious division was race. Free black seafarers, if they dared to take a voyage to a cotton port at all, likely experienced the city entirely from the barred window of a jail cell. At the beginning of the antebellum period, southern states enacted the "Negro Seaman's Acts," a series of laws which ordered the arrest of every free black seafarer who came into a southern port city.⁸ This made the crews that remained noticeably more white.⁹ Interestingly that is not where the racial divide ended. Even as white seafarers worked many of the same jobs as enslaved blacks, especially stevedoring, their work gangs were almost entirely segregated as well with some seafarers not even acknowledging blacks as stevedores in their memoirs. Though there were still some opportunities to interact especially when enslaved blacks were attempting a desperate escape or free blacks were trying to drum up commercial business, by

⁶ Isaac Land, "The Humours of Sailortown: Atlantic History Meets Subculture Theory," in *City Limits: Perspectives on the Historical European City*, ed. Glenn Clark, Judith Owens, and Greg T. Smith (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 326.

⁷ Vickers and Walsh, *Young Men*, 133.

⁸ Schoeppner, *Contagion*, 1-2.

⁹ Bolster, *Jacks*, 200.

and large the color line was solid with little room for interactions between seafarers of both races and people of the other race ashore.

While the black-white divide was particularly striking, two other key divisions made the cotton ports different for seafarers. For one, seafarers took many different forms of lodging when staying in a cotton port besides the typical sailor boarding house. These came in the form of a ship which many like Nordhoff slept on, a sailor's home or boarding house run by evangelicals, or even coming together to rent their own shanty. For another, cotton ports were highly seasonal locales with a clear shipping season lasting from October to late Spring centered around their titular crop. Combine this with the lack of kinship networks in the cotton ports and most seafarers would only ever come to these ports in large numbers for a specific part of the year. All of which is to say, cotton port waterfronts were unique zones for seafarers to find themselves working in and that in itself was a different mode of activity from those found in the ports of the North Atlantic.

A Shore Divided Against Itself

The racialized order of the American South is far from a secret. What is less clear and less well known is that order's relationship and effects on the waterfront. Certainly, the ocean was a conduit for freedom, but also a *recognized* conduit for freedom which meant access points to the ocean were heavily monitored to prevent the intermingling of black freedmen and escaping slaves with free black seafarers. In other words, a location people have so often imagined as a meeting place was actually a dividing line between integrated worlds as a response to the people's imagination.¹⁰

¹⁰ Land, "Waves," 732.

First though we need to see the threat provided by the coast to the order imposed by slaveowners. Black seafarers often moved strongly against slavery and connected various parts of the black diaspora in the Atlantic. As Cecelski has expounded “[n]o pattern [has] emerged more forcefully than that of black watermen serving as key agents of antislavery thought and militant resistance to slavery.”¹¹ Meanwhile, Julius Scott explored how knowledge of events around the slave rebellion of Saint-Domingue was brought to the South via ship and black seafarers in particular were great conduits for information on the rebellion.¹² Even more directly threatening, the open ocean was also a means by which many enslaved people could escape which did occur. The previously mentioned *Sailing to Freedom* volume describes many of the various routes via the sea escaped slaves took out of the antebellum south. One such example is that of Louis Hughes who attempted to escape to freedom twice by sea. In his narrative, Hughes describes another enslaved man on his plantation escapes by forging a pass necessary for him to be hired on board a steamer bound for New Orleans and then on to Boston.¹³ Still despite the dangers to the slave system provided by the sea, the ocean was the vital economic lifeline by which cotton and other slave grown crops were exported to Europe and the northern United States. Furthermore, black labor was sorely needed in maritime trades like fishing and stowing cotton. Since these industries brought plenty of profit to slaveowners, connections to the sea and the employing of enslaved black laborers both on the sea and along the coast would need to be maintained.

¹¹ Cecelski, *Song*, xvi.

¹² Julius Scott, “Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers,” in *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour*, ed. Colin Howell and Richard J. Twomey (Fredericton, N.B: Acadiensis Press, 1991), 42-50

¹³ Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave. From Bondage to Freedom*. (Milwaukee: South Side printing company, 1897), 80-85, 87-89, 103-105.

At the same time, the threat needed to be controlled. While concerns over free black seafarers had been broiling in the background for quite a while, they finally exploding in 1822 with the foiling of an alleged conspiracy by freed black and ex-mariner Denmark Vesey.¹⁴ Thus, beginning in South Carolina, Southern slaveowners enacted the Negro Seaman's Acts. A South Carolina newspaper lists out the main provision of the new law rather briskly in a report on the bills passed in the most recent legislature: "A bill has passed the House, prohibiting all vessels having free persons of color on board from approaching within 150 yards of the shore, and to load and unload with lighters, under a penalty to the captain of \$1000. – Vessels manned by Lascars excepted."¹⁵ At first these laws were not even enforced, but just a year after the law went into effect both legitimate authorities and vigilantes began to enforce the law sending black and sometimes other non-white seafarers to jail.¹⁶

These laws and their enforcement soon spread throughout the coastal south and nearly prevented the intermingling of the local enslaved population and the free black seafaring population along the coast. As word spread of the seamen's acts, many black seafarers simply avoided cotton ports altogether. The threat of jail cutting off black seafarers' wages back to their dependents in the North was too much for many and after the acts were passed in states like Georgia black seafarers went from making up about 15% of sailors in Savannah to dropping "to 9 percent; and within a few years, to 4 percent, 3 percent, and 2 percent."¹⁷ Of that small percentage that remained many thousands ended up in jail, at least 10,000 by the estimates of

¹⁴ Schoeppner, *Contagion*, 19-23.

¹⁵ "South Carolina Legislature," *Georgian*, December 22, 1825.

¹⁶ Bolster, *Jacks*, 195-196.

¹⁷ Bolster, *Jacks*, 200.

W. Jeffrey Bolster.¹⁸ Often times though black seafarers were placed in the same jail as escaped slaves turning the law in practice into pointless farce. Regardless, free black seafarers' experiences were still left segregated.¹⁹

On the rare occasions when these populations did interact on the waterfront there was always quite a bit of tension as free black seafarers sought to keep a low profile and not end up in jail. An interaction recorded in the slave narrative of John Andrew Jackson is quite telling in this regard. Jackson is trying to escape slavery by stowing away on a steamer to the North. To do so, he hops aboard and tries to convince the free black cook to help him stowaway. The cook initially agrees but makes Jackson swear to not "betray" him to a white man because "we black men have been in jail ever since the vessel has been here; the captain stood bond for us yesterday and took us out."²⁰ Jackson comes back a day later after the cook has found a place for him to hide but the cook finally refuses on the belief that Jackson was sent by white people to betray him. Only in the rare instances when free black seafarers are close relatives does the tension between them and enslaved people seem to disperse. Harriet Jacobs recounts when she was hiding from an abusive master her aunt's husband who was a seafarer hid her on board his ship without either party feeling any particular fear about the other.²¹

As a final note, even though free black seafarers could not legally walk onto the waterfronts of cotton ports, they could legally walk off. Free black seafarers made for the perfect disguise to escape slavery. The Negro Seaman's Acts were designed to prevent free black

¹⁸ Bolster *Jacks*, 214.

¹⁹ Bolster, *Jacks*, 202-203; Schoeppner, *Contagion*, 5.

²⁰ John Andrew Jackson, *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1862), 26.

²¹ Harriet A. Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Pub. for the author, 1861), 170.

seafarers from *entering* cotton ports but not from *leaving*. Hence why Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and others are able to escape slavery by boarding vessels with documents declaring their freedom or ability to work aboard ships and serving on them until they dock in a free port.

While interactions involving free black seafarers are pretty rare, the opportunity for enslaved blacks and white seafarers to connect coastwise still remains. White seafarers could be found all along the dockside unrestricted by the laws of any state. They often came and left with the cotton exporting season only to return for next year's crop. Two of the primary ways they accomplished this goal was cotton screwing and timber stowing.

Cotton screwing in particular has been described at length by Charles Nordhoff, observing the process during his time as a cabin boy, and Charles Erskine, who worked as a cotton screwer for a week. Both describe similar features in the labor process of cotton screwing. Both also fail to mention the presence of any black workers as being a part of that process. F. W. Wallace, an able authority on Canadian sailing if there ever was one, also lacks information on black laborers in his discussion of the cotton ports and cotton screwing. That does not mean enslaved blacks did not take part in cotton screwing, they certainly did and given the high wages cotton screwers commanded both slaveowners and shipowners would be mad not to use slave labor. Yet, slaves often worked and were hired out in their own gangs. Michael Thompson relates the story of James Carr, a New England ship captain, who hires out "four gangs of five slave dockworkers for five days to "work on board the ship stowing cotton" bound for Liverpool."²² Before trying to escape, John Andrew Jackson works with "a gang of negroes

²² Thompson, *Dock*, 18.

working on the wharfs, and received a dollar-and-a-quarter per day.”²³ Meanwhile white work gangs were formed by seafarers and hired themselves out separately from black work gangs. Erskine describes the process of quite well: “The day after our arrival the crew formed themselves into two gangs and obtained employment at screwing cotton by the day.”²⁴ With few black shipmates and of the ones who were there, fewer willing to go ashore, the labor patterns of cotton screwing were reliably segregated.

A similar phenomenon took place in timber stowing another common trade taken up by seafarers in the cotton ports, where much the same processes occurred as in cotton screwing. Though Wallace discusses French-Canadian timber stowers and cotton screwers in the same breath his account is still useful: “these screw-gangs were a hard crowd, and I do not suppose such fellows as the Quebec timber-and-cotton-stowers are to be found in any sphere of labour to-day.”²⁵ These men, in Wallace’s mind, worked in an environment devoid of black laborers. That black laborers were employed in timber stowing was attested by Henry Schroeder, a cabin boy trying to get back to England at the time, in his memoirs. While docked beside a plantation along the coast of Georgia, Schroeder noted “the timber, &c. furnished by [the plantation owner] Mr. Quin was put on board by his contented negroes.”²⁶ Putting aside the question of the supposed “contented”-ness of enslaved people on Mr. Quin’s plantation, black enslaved

²³ Jackson, *Experience*, 25.

²⁴ Charles Erskine, *Twenty Years before the Mast, with the More Thrilling Scenes and Incidents While Circumnavigating the Globe under the Command of the Late Admiral Charles Wilkes, 1838-1842* (Boston: The author, 1890), 296.

²⁵ Wallace, *Wind-Ships*, 66.

²⁶ Henry Schroeder, *Three Years Adventures, of a Minor, in England, Africa, the West Indies, South-Carolina and Georgia*, *Adventures of a Minor* (Leeds: T. Inchbold, 1831), 196.

labor was employed similarly if the only difference being in this case their employment was to their owner rather than to another who hired out their labor from their owner.

Despite the segregation of seafarers in labor, they often did interact with black people along the waterfront. These men and women were a mix of businessowners, slaves, and other laborers. The slave narrative of Thomas Jones is a particularly interesting view of the interactions that went on between white seafarers and enslaved people. Jones, who works as a stevedore in Wilmington, North Carolina, finds his family is under threat of enslavement again and decides to send his family North. After keeping a good lookout for a ship to take, he found “one, and made a bargain with the captain to take on board for New York a free colored woman and her three children” for 25 dollars.²⁷ Later on, Jones decides to leave for his family and “bargained, while my master lay sick, with the steward of the brig Bell, to stow me away in the hold of the ship, and take me on to New York” and paid him 8 dollars to do so.²⁸ Though Jones is a successful story of how these interactions could lead to successful escape, many such interactions could turn sour effecting all involved. Schroeder becomes entangled in one such interaction when he is given a directive by the mate of his ship to go search for someone to wash his linens. He is recommended a black washerwoman “who kept a number of females to get up linen” and brings her and her husband, also black, to retrieve the mate’s linens. Unfortunately for everyone involved, the linens fall into the waters between the wharves and Schroeder’s ship after a dispute over payment. The mate flatly refuses to pay afterwards and says so to both the washerwoman and her husband. Schroeder himself is shaken about by the

²⁷ Thomas H. Jones, *The Experience of Thomas H. Jones, Who Was a Slave for Forty-Three Years* (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 35.

²⁸ Jones, *Thomas*, 43.

mate.²⁹ These interactions show there were still opportunities for cooperation but just as often the shore proved a poor mediator for anything beyond desperate escapes to freedom.

Shorelines were thus colored lines that few dared to cross. Black and white maritime laborers almost never worked together. Black seafarers were prevented from being ashore by the law, leaving Southern ports largely the domain of white seafarers. There were some interactions between blacks and white seafarers, but they seem to be mostly relegated to attempts by enslaved blacks to escape and the occasional commercial interaction. Division by color was therefore the general rule ashore.

Ashore Far from Home

Cotton ports are an interesting breed of seaport in that they produced very few seafarers themselves. American seafarers usually came from towns in the North especially New England, New York, and Philadelphia. As previously established, the men who rolled into a cotton port were typically of towns in Ireland, England, and Canada meaning when they disembarked, they lacked the family and community networks that often defined their experiences elsewhere.³⁰ This was the case for black seamen as well which is one reason why the Negro Seamen's Acts were effective at decreasing free black seafarers numbers in cotton ports, since in jail they could not provide for their families and communities back up north.³¹ Dislocated from their usual homes, seafarers in the cotton ports had to find alternative living arrangements, not just in boarding houses. Their time spent ashore could also be much more dangerous as ports sailors were unfamiliar with often were. Far from family and at risk of

²⁹ Schroeder, *Minor*, 186-189.

³⁰ Fingard, *Port*, 3-4; Lee, *Urban*, 35.

³¹ Bolster, *Jacks*, 200.

dangers on the waterfronts of these ports meant that seafarers ashore found the geographic division from their usual networks a concerning situation.

Family ties were typically of paramount importance to seafarers in their homeports. Family was where most seafarers spent their time at home. Family often provided the support networks needed after long difficult voyages at sea.³² Before globalization really took hold in the shipping industry around mid-century, seafarers often shipped with fellow kinsmen of that same network.³³ A sailor's support networks also received help from him in turn often when he was on foreign shores. Robert Lee notes sailors made liberal use of pathways for sending remittances to loved ones such as the facilities set up by seaman's missions and sailor's homes in the nineteenth century.³⁴ Finally, family networks were something seafarers repeatedly returned to throughout their careers at sea, whether that consisted of but a few voyages or an extended period of their working lives.³⁵

Without family in the cotton ports seafarers often resorted to other means for survival sometimes in boarding houses. Usually, in ports with plenty of local sailors, running a boarding house was one role a sailor transitioned into from seafaring life. When not drawn up from the ranks of seafarers on the docks, boarding house masters ran other businesses and moved into keeping a boarding house as another line of income. Judith Fingard lists out the primary businesses of many such boarding house masters in Saint John, New Brunswick as follows:

10 grocers, 5 grocery and liquor dealers, 9 liquor dealers and tavern keepers, 5 tailors, 10 clothiers, 7 seafarers, 9 ship labourers and stevedores, 4 shoemakers and dealers, 2 butchers, 2 clerks (probably living with widowed mothers), a dry goods dealer, a hat and

³² Vickers and Walsh, *Young*, 133.

³³ Vickers and Walsh, *Young*, 105-106; Fingard, *Jack*, 4.

³⁴ Lee, *Urban*, 40.

³⁵ Vickers and Walsh, *Young*, 111-112.

fur dealer, an oil clothing manufacture, a druggist, oil company agent, a lumber dealer, a shipbuilder, a blacksmith, a cutter, and a drayman.³⁶

Most boarding house masters, given the lack of native seafarers in the port, can be assumed to have come from similar origins. Sometimes the relationship between the sailor and his boarding house master could be quite cordial. Sailors recognized boarding house masters as their employment agents, who got them their next ships. Many times, though the relationship could turn sour particularly if the price of vices and amenities provided to the sailor was in dispute.³⁷ In ports where sailors were well acquainted with the community, they often had the power mitigate the worst aspects of their relationship with boarding house masters. If not or if they were “novice, intemperate, and non-English-speaking sailors” they would “suffer most at the hands of their boarding masters.”³⁸ When these disputes did arise, they could turn violent, Fingard catalogues two such instances in nineteenth century Canadian seaports.³⁹

Perhaps this one reason is why stories of violent disputes between sailors and boarding house masters fill so many pages of newsprint in cotton ports. In Norfolk, a sailor boarding house master was murdered by her son-in-law, a boatswain in the US Navy, for no apparent reason.⁴⁰ Another sailor, last seen by a boarding house master, is found dead tied up in a tree.⁴¹ Several further violent stories of seafarers and boarding house masters can be found if one looks hard enough.

³⁶ Fingard, “Masters,” 23.

³⁷ Fingard, “Masters,” 25-26.

³⁸ Fingard, “Masters,” 26.

³⁹ Fingard, “Masters,” 25, 26.

⁴⁰ “Shocking Murder,” *Alexandria Gazette*, October 4, 1834, 2.

⁴¹ “The Mysterious Murder,” *Lynchburg Virginian*, November 19, 1830, 1-2.

Given the risks inherent to using boarding houses, no one should be surprised sailors found and made use of other accommodations. Schroeder, Erskine, and Nordhoff all make arrangements other than boarding houses while docked at cotton ports. Erskine in particular goes quite off the beaten path while staying in New Orleans. At first, Erskine and his shipmates are offered to make the ship they just worked on their place of residence by the captain. Erskine and company agree while they work as cotton screwers. After a week of this set up, Erskine quits cotton screwing and begins painting boats. At the same time, he becomes one of “[a] party of five, one an old shipmate of [his], hired a small shanty and kept bachelor’s hall.”⁴² The five men maintain their bachelor’s hall for five weeks but decide to move out as “we poor mortals were unable to endure so much prosperity.”⁴³ Erskine ships out to Cincinnati on a steamboat soon after. Nordhoff and Schroeder as cabin boys both make homes out of their ships while parked in cotton ports.⁴⁴ Far from home and in a dangerous world, sailors appear to have stuck to safer abodes than the classic sailor boarding house.

There was a fourth option for seafarers unsatisfied with any of the above residencies: Sailors’ Homes. Starting in the 1830s, Sailors’ Homes quickly spread all throughout Atlantic rim.⁴⁵ They were typically established by evangelical reformers for the purpose of providing an alternative to sailor boarding houses and their accompanying crimps, drinks, and women. In the reformers’ minds these would be respectable Christian institutions able to uphold the sailor’s morals right in the center of the most vice ridden streets on the wharves. These Homes were

⁴² Erskine, *Twenty*, 296-298.

⁴³ Erskine, *Twenty*, 299.

⁴⁴ Nordhoff, *Nine*, 36-37; Schroeder, *Minor*, 185-189

⁴⁵ Milne, *Power*, 153.

imposing institutions that literally overshadowed the low-down sailor boarding houses next door.⁴⁶ While there was certainly some distance just by the nature of founders and those they were trying to “uplift” and as Graeme Milne notes only “a tiny proportion of the ordinary seafarers on shore at any one time were accommodated by them,” a good number of seafarers did stay at the local Sailors’ Home.⁴⁷ Reports published in the New York-based evangelical periodical the *Sailor’s Magazine* list the number of sailors who stayed in each Sailors’ Home in each cotton port. Some of the numbers are enlightening here. In Mobile, Alabama the Sailor’s Home had 915 boarders from December 6, 1846 to April 5, 1847 out of the 15,000 sailors who, by the *Sailor’s Magazine’s* own estimates, docked in Mobile each year.⁴⁸ That same year, the Sailor’s Home at Savannah, Georgia had 412 boarders along with 262 “lodgers” or seafarers “who took meals on board their vessels” for a total of 674 sailors who stayed at the Home.⁴⁹ Charleston, meanwhile, had a Sailor’s Home that over the course of six months had over 300 seafarers stay in their quarters.⁵⁰ While obviously not the most desired destination for seafarers in port, Sailor’s Homes were utilized by many men whether pious, fraudulently pious, or otherwise. Most likely, in ports like Mobile many men stayed simply because they were outside of their usual networks and looking for a safe place while they earned income between voyages for their return to their true home.

With such a smattering of alternatives, the sailor’s living arrangements ashore were quite diverse and diffuse on a cotton port waterfront. Your average seafarer lacking a network

⁴⁶ Milne, *Power*, 153-155.

⁴⁷ Milne, *Power*, 159.

⁴⁸ “Twentieth Annual Report,” *Sailor’s Magazine*, June 1848., 296-297.

⁴⁹ “Twentieth,” 296.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

typical of his home port could be found in a sailor boarding house, but also in a bachelor hall kept by him and his friends or lodging in the ship he came in on. In this way, he was more tied to the shoreside than the nightlife on the docks. However, he was also only along that shoreside for a short period of time.

'Tis the Seafaring Season

Cotton Ports' rhythm was defined by the seasons of their titular export, which left sailors only in such ports for a period of time lasting roughly from October to April in any given year.

Thompson gives a good overview of how seasonality affected Charleston's dockside:

The wharves boomed with activity when there were cotton, rice, and other exports to be shipped, and slid into relative sluggishness during the growing season when cash crops were yet to be harvested. The shipping season began in October when bales of cotton and tierces of rice began flowing into the port, and roared on until Christmas when waterfront commerce momentarily came to a standstill. But with the New Year also arrived the annual peak of the trading season, which continued into the spring and through the end of April.⁵¹

Of course, few if any seafarers ever spent the whole shipping season in a Cotton Port. For most, a number of weeks probably not adding up to more than two months would suffice. The average seafarer could then return home to Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, or wherever he hailed from.

Historians of the social lives of seafarers often noted the seasonality of their subjects' work, but few have examined how that played out in any given port. In most ports, when one trade would dry up for a season another would take that trade's place allowing for a year-round flow of commerce in Northern US ports, Canadian ports, and the ports of Europe. However, Cotton Ports were unable to provide such trades which meant most seafarers would have to

⁵¹ Thompson, *Dock*, 12.

find a ship out before the season was over or another way back to their families. When a seafarer got into port even affected his decision to jump ship or not. When Nordhoff first rolled into port, much of the crew deserted. Nordhoff wished to join them but stayed on the advice of the mate and his crewmates “who, while evidently desiring [him] to go with them, would not conceal... that Mobile was a poor place to get a ship, and that a boy would of course, have a poorer chance than a man.”⁵² Erskine & co. left their ship without a second thought as they “heard the glad news that cotton was king, freights high, and that nearly every ship was taken up, and men very scarce.”⁵³ Given shipping was only a season long that meant many of the industries supporting seafarers could only last a similar length of time. Seasonality could be another explanation as to why so many sailor boarding houses were doing so as additional stream of revenue to their real businesses. Similarly, the seasonality of seafaring helps explain the dearth of numbers in reports from Southern Sailor’s Homes in the period outside December through April. Maritime life in the American South was thus divided again this time along a temporal rather than familial or racial line.

A Workforce Divided

The nature of Southern ports created by the conditions of trade and politics at the time often meant that seafarers stepping into the peculiar arena of a cotton port were in a place whose working conditions divided them from their racial counterparts and families. The seasonality of the ports’ titular crop meant that the average seafarer’s time in these ports was further divided into a singular shipping season. A sailor’s laboring life ashore was divided in

⁵² Nordhoff, *Nine*, 36.

⁵³ Erskine, *Twenty*, 296.

Southern ports. Waterfronts here were places of division rather than the connection traditionally provided by liminal spaces between the water and the land. Also, unlike the more unified waterfronts in the North Atlantic where such a space was often a place for many to come together in leisure, cotton port waterfronts were a place of work. A seafarer in a cotton port would thus have had a unique experience compared to other port cities and waterfronts in the Atlantic much less the world. As the study of seafarers' social lives ashore continues apace, we would do well to be increasingly mindful of the divisions between different port experiences throughout the Atlantic and the rest of the maritime world.

Conclusion

While waterfronts were an essential space for seafarers during the early nineteenth century, their time has long passed. Gradually, sailortowns rose in the mid to late nineteenth century and were documented in great detail as with much of the declining but suddenly romanticized sailing culture of the day. With time, they fell out of fashion too. Now, seafarers operate in securitized ports with barbed wire fences around them to prevent pilfering, far away from the eye of the ordinary citizen.¹ Next door, the seafarer's traditional waterfront haunts got a makeover as "the destruction of the inner city premises housing beershops, lodging-houses and tenement accommodation" got underway.² The process of signing on seafarers became formalized as well with the creation of Meanwhile, the beaches that existed next to the docks have become little more than a site for leisure, never for work.

Historians of late seem to have grown nostalgic and teary eyed at the sight of the sea turning on one hand into a securitized workspace free from any influence from landward people and on the other hand a tourist trap. Take this passage from David Abulafia's *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans*:

The classic ports of past times have been displaced by container ports, many of which are not centres of trade inhabited by a colourful variety of people from many backgrounds, but processing plants in which machinery, not men, do the heavy work and no one sees the cargoes that have often been brought from far away and are sealed inside their big boxes.³

¹ Valerie Burton, "Boundaries and Identities in the Nineteenth-Century English Port: Sailortown Narratives and Urban Space," in *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City since 1850*, ed. Simon Gunn and Robert J. Morris (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 144.

² Ibid.

³ David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 907.

Hopefully, as I have shown we can do away with much of this nostalgia. Although their depictions may have not troubled seafarers so much, for many of the men who made their lives passing through these ports the waterfronts they lived on were a place of work. Their work was often incredibly difficult and done far away from home. Moreover, even if “a colourful variety of people” inhabited the waterfronts in question, there was no guarantee they would interact together. For a variety of reasons, that never happened in the cotton ports.

Cotton ports were a unique place. One whose waterfronts do not fit into many of the paradigms developed so far for understanding seafarers’ lives in port. Yet they were one among many throughout the world. Instead of trying to fit seafarers’ experiences into broad “global” or even “Atlantic” paradigms, we should seek to uncover the locality and nuance which made really made sailor experiences in a diverse, variegated nineteenth century. Waxing nostalgically about them does more to obscure than reveal about the lives of seafarers and the waterfronts they lived on or near for most of their lives.

In fairness, Abulafia is far from the first to mourn the switch to industrialized shipping and securitized port life. Some of the first writers on sailortown did the same thing. Hugill, ever the romantic, ends his survey of sailortown on the downbeat note that “the once wild sites of the old-time Sailortowns are now the hunting grounds of tourists.”⁴ We should not mourn the oft times dangerous, violent, and heavily controlled waterfronts that existed before. At the same time, there might be something to be said for the way waterfront regeneration programs have neglected the communities that have long been forgotten by society right next door to them as these places were where the former sailortown districts, and sometimes also

⁴ Hugill, *Sailortown*, 340-341.

waterfront districts, existed before the modern seaport came into being.⁵ Being a Massachusetts native myself, I cannot help but notice the contrast between the poverty of a waterfront neighborhood right across the bridge from the newly redeveloped Boston Seaport District. If there is enough will to refurbish those old Seaport buildings into beautiful new apartments and condos, there must also be enough to care for the people who live right next door.

Just the same, while seafarers' lives today are not perfect, they are also not nearly as at risk of death and violence both on their ships and on shore. The dangers on shore were often very real. Yet when there was nothing to fear, life on the docks, especially in the cotton ports, was defined by back breaking labor. Erskine recalls at the end of just four days of cotton screwing he earned "eight silver Spanish dollars" and afterwards he "came to the conclusion that they were the hardest eight dollars [he] had ever earned."⁶ The former difficulty of seafaring life should not be mourned any more than the violent places in which much of that seafaring life happened. Even so, we would do well to acknowledge their lives remain difficult particularly when they are left abandoned and stranded, sometimes for years, on their ships due to legal troubles between shipping companies, the crew's country or countries of origin, and the current country where their ship is docked.⁷ In other words, seafarers' struggles today are also very real and deserve concerted efforts by journalists, citizens, and other actors to bring those struggles to light and get measures done to resolve said struggles. By seeing the nuance,

⁵ Milne, *Power*, 227.

⁶ Erskine, *Twenty*, 298.

⁷ Jenni Henderson and Amos Roberts, "Abandoned: The seafarers stuck at sea for two years," *Aljazeera*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/7/6/abandoned-the-seafarers-stuck-onboard-for-two-years>.

recognizing the problems in both eras, and finding ways to care for those long-suffering waterfront districts and the seafarers who still follow the seven seas today we can find a way toward a better tomorrow starting from yesterday.

Back to the South

As for the South and their waterfronts much more is left to be said. I looked at a rather narrow set of archives in this study, mostly newspapers and memoirs left by former slaves and sailors, which gave but an opening glimpse into the maritime dimensions of Southern life. Very little of my study was devoted to the boarding house keepers, evangelical reformers, and wharf officials who also became important tentpoles of the waterfront. These figures are increasingly important in narratives about seafarers ashore including in Judith Fingard's "Masters and Friends, Crimps and Abstainers: Agents of Control in 19th Century Sailortown" as well as Graeme Milne's *People, Place, and Power on the Nineteenth Century Waterfront: Sailortown*. Studying each set of characters in isolation, either in the cotton ports or beyond, could open wonderful new avenues of research, especially in relation to these characters interactions with seafarers. I also believe we are in need of more studies of more diverse waterfronts. Seafarer centric tales of Northern European and Atlantic ports have been useful in uncovering the social lives and rhythms of port life in that region, however, more needs to be done as we seem to know frighteningly little about South American, African, and Pacific waterfronts where sailors' lives likely varied even more from the standard established by studies of North Atlantic ports. Finally, historians of seafaring need to grapple with the waterfront as less of a place of leisure and more a site of work. Far from escaping the difficult life of a seafarer, distant waterfronts were at times a place where seafarers went to find more work to support families and

communities back home. The fracture and locality dependent nature of waterfront life for seafarers is a key to understanding their social lives in port. As always further study is needed, and I wait with anticipation to see where the seas will take the field of maritime social life next.

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