

BACKGROUND:
Black and white crew posing on
deck of the *Rathdown* (1892)
Courtesy of National Park Service
Pg3-065, Series 11, File Unit 9, Item
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To date there are no available
historic photographs of Black
sailors from Newburyport. The
image on this sign generally
illustrates Black sailors during
this era.



Black Mariners during the Age of Sail

Seafaring was one of the main occupations for Black men in Newburyport and New England in the 19th century. Black sailors faced significantly more threats than their white crewmates, especially in Southern ports.

IN THIS ERA, SEAFARING ENTAILED HARDSHIP AND DANGER.

“DISASTERS” were published every day in local newspapers’ shipping journal reports – heavy gales knocking seamen overboard; sailors falling from aloft to their death; crippled ships drifting and running out of provisions; ships burning, colliding, or found floating bottom up; ships running aground, dashed to pieces, killing all on board.

About half of Newburyport’s population of Black men worked as mariners during the mid-19th century. Although numbers varied by port, nearly one in five American sailors was Black, and, during the American Civil War, one in four Navy sailors was Black. Black mariners were drawn to the trade for the wages and independence. The opportunities at sea often outweighed the hardships and risks, including kidnapping and enslavement of free Black sailors and other people (including here in Newburyport) in what is now called the “Reverse Underground Railroad.”

The busy southern ports posed particular dangers for Black mariners. From 1822 until the end of the Civil War, nearly all the southern coastal states codified the “Negro Seaman Acts” which required the incarceration of all Black sailors and passengers upon arrival in port at the expense of their ship’s captain. Most Southern politicians greatly feared contact between enslaved people and world-traveling free Black sailors. If the captain refused to pay the fees or left without them, these sailors were jailed indefinitely and sometimes sold into slavery. Thousands of Black sailors were imprisoned.

Freedom was precarious. Nevertheless, Black sailors persisted.

In 1863, the Newburyport-built merchant ship *Sonora* was sailing with an all-Black crew and white Newburyport officers when a Confederate privateer called the *Alabama* attacked her off the coast of Malaysia. In reports published in the *History of the Marine Society of Newburyport*, the captain and first mate described how the privateer not only plundered and burned the ship, but, employing racial slurs, cast the officers and Black sailors adrift in small crowded boats rather than landing them safely on shore. They had to make their way 80 miles to the port of Malacca as reported by a Black sailor named Charles S.

In 1866, an all-Black crew manned another Newburyport-built ship the *Montana* as it launched from Newburyport’s City Wharf near where this sign stands. The local newspaper tracked the ship’s year-long journey to Mobile, Alabama, then across the Atlantic Ocean to Liverpool, England, around Africa to Calcutta, India, and back to Boston. The captain sent a telegram home noting that he and his crew had accomplished the “shortest passage ever made by a sailing vessel” between Liverpool and Calcutta, a journey of over 8,600 nautical miles, in 85 days.

There are many stories hidden in the archives about the Black mariners in this era who braved turbulent seas and turbulent times.

Text by Geordie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner, and Cyd Raschke (2024)



ABOVE:
The *Montana* was constructed in 1866
by John Currier Jr. in Newburyport
Painting by William Gay Yorke (of the *Montana*
entering the port of Liverpool England),
Courtesy of the Custom House Maritime Museum



ABOVE:
Map of the *Montana*’s
1866-1867 maiden
voyage with all-Black
crew of sailors.

RIGHT:
Shipping Journal report of the
all-Black crew for the *Montana*’s
maiden voyage, *Newburyport*
Daily News, February 2, 1866, p.3
Courtesy of the Newburyport Public
Library Archival Center

