Global history began with sailing ships and those ships have continued to influence our definitions of power, liberty, property, and identity. Before the use of steam power in the first half of the nineteenth century, oceans and wind provided the fastest means of long-distance communication. A massive amount of human history depended on ships with sails: the spread of human population in the Pacific, the growth of empires around the Indian and Atlantic oceans, European colonization of the "new world," the trans-Atlantic slave trade, European charting (and claiming) of seas and territories, piracy, fishing and whaling, scientific exploration of the seas, primordial definitions of freedom and authority. Millions of people's lives were changed by, or depended on, ships' traffic. Yet we ordinarily look at those peoples' histories without looking directly at the sea. What can maritime history reveal that other forms of history cannot?

Rationale

This seminar offers students the opportunity to examine the "age of sail," the roughly three centuries (1550-1850) when European colonization, and resistance to it, violently united the globe, and did so within the social and technological constraints of sailing ships. Students will read sources from the era in question as well as examples from the contentious scholarship in maritime history which examines every conceivable topic, from slavery to the quest for longitude.

The class will also take advantage of some of the many maritime collections at Harvard and in the greater Boston area. We will have three field trips: small (Historic Scientific Instruments Collection, Science Center, Harvard), medium (U. S. S. Constitution), and large (the Peabody-Essex Museum, Salem). Students will write final papers considering some aspect of Boston as a maritime city.

Requirements

Students will submit three two-page response papers over the course of the semester, plus a written prospectus (three pages) in the eleventh week and a final paper of eight to ten pages. They are expected to participate in all discussions and go on all field trips. They will give oral presentations of their final paper topics in the eleventh week of class. No background or previous experience, on or off the water, is necessary for this course.
Week One: Background
A. T. Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783

Week Two: Journals, Sea Logs, Narratives
Extracts from Columbus, Pigafetta, Halley, Cook

Week Three: Learning the Ropes
Richard Henry Dana, Jr., The Seaman's Friend: A Treatise on Practical Seamanship (New York, 1997) [extracts]
*Field trip to U. S. S. Constitution

Week Four: Adventurers
Daniel Defoe [short source]

Week Five: Social Worlds
Lisa Norling and Margaret Creighton, Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920 (Baltimore, 1996) [extract]

Week Six: Race
W. Jeffrey Bolster, Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail (Cambridge, Mass., 1997)
The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-Rom (Cambridge, 1999) [extract]

Week Seven: Empire
Greg Dening, Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theater on the Bounty (Cambridge, 1994).

Week Eight: Science
*Trip to HSI Collection, Science Center
Week Nine: Law
Hugo Grotius, "The Free Sea" [extract]
A. W. B. Simpson, Cannibalism and the Common Law (Chicago, 1984) [extract]

Week Ten: Literatures
Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Two Years before the Mast
Herman Melville, Encantadas

Week Eleven: Student Presentations

Week Twelve: Arts
Shanties, Winslow Homer, scrimshaw
*Field trip to Peabody-Essex