

THE AGE OF SAIL

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Proposed Freshman Seminar, Fall Term

"a . . ship was my Yale College and my Harvard"
(Herman Melville, Moby-Dick)

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.

(Extremely Rough) Schedule

Week One: Background

A. T. Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783

Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, "The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves and the Atlantic Working Class in the 18th-Century," Journal of Historical Sociology, 3 (1990), 225-53.

Week Two: Journals, Sea Logs, Narratives

Extracts from Columbus, Pigafetta, Halley, Cook

Thomas Nickerson, Owen Chase, and Others, The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale (New York, 2000).

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

Diana Preston and Michael Preston, A Pirate of Exquisite Mind: The Life of William Dampier (New York, 2002).

Daniel Defoe [short source]

Week Five: Social Worlds

N. A. M. Rodgers, The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy (New York, 1996)

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).

Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," William and Mary

Quarterly, 3d ser., 25 (1968), 371-407.

Week Eight: Science

Dava Sobel, Longitude . . . (New York, 1996).

Helen M. Rozwadowski, "Small World: Forging a Scientific Maritime Culture," Isis, 87 (1996), 409-29.

*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