THE 'BLACK ATLANTIC COMMUNICATION NETWORK': AFRICAN AMERICAN SAILORS AND THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE CONNECTION

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Francis Seymour, a curly headed nigger from the land of stars and stripes, was brought up for having shown a little too much of the Yankee spirit of independence... He became refractory, refused to do any [work], demanded a sovereign from Mr. Neethling, said....that if he did not get the sovereign he would knock it out of [him]. His abuse was very unsparing, and he was only prevented from "knocking it out" by the opportune appearance of Mr. J. J. Meintjes, who procured a police officer, and the "man of independent mind" was given into custody.[1]

While on its homeward passage in 1813, the whaling ship *William Penn* was intercepted off the island of Trinidad in the South Atlantic by a British frigate, boarded, and informed of the existence of war; and that the American seamen were prisoners of H.M.S. *Acorn*. Within a half hour, the *Acorn* and its prize (now manned by English sailors) were underway, heading off southeast for the Cape of Good Hope. After a passage of forty days they anchored in Table Bay. Once ashore, the group of eighteen American POWs was mustered into line and escorted under guard to prison, where they found several hundred of their fellow countrymen. The *William Penn* and its cargo were auctioned at the Cape; the profits accrued to the British treasury.

This tiny incident is important less for what it illustrates about the penalties inflicted upon hostile shipping during the War of 1812, than for pointing up a fact that has gone almost unnoticed by historians, namely that throughout the duration of this conflict American sailors were imprisoned in South Africa. For me the most salient aspect of this historical episode is that seven of the sailors forcibly removed from the *William Penn* were African Americans, a fact compelling enough to encourage the suggestion that black seafarers formed a significant element in the Cape of Good Hope POW population. What is the relevance of this to both the study of Diasporan history and the history of South Africa?

The prominence of American and European sailors, including black maritime workers, in the radical street politics of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century is well-documented. Most recently our attention has been drawn to how, during the 1790s, "Afro-North American" sailors from the United States and the Caribbean gathered news and disseminated accounts about the revolution in

Saint Dominique. The intelligence relayed by word of mouth along trade routes inspired resistance in the slave communities throughout the region; the reverberations from which were still being felt in distant parts of Afro-North America in the late 1820s.[2]

We are presented here with an opportunity to speculate on the activities of these "mobile black observers" who had begun to arrive in South Africa around the time of these crucial happenings; and to briefly explore the question of the extent to which the struggles of the free black and slave populations at the Cape of Good Hope may have been influenced by connections to this "black Atlantic communication network."

It is difficult to determine with any degree of exactness when black American sailors first made contact with South Africa. Our earliest reference from the late seventeenth century stands isolated. Only after the signing of the Peace of 1783, at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, when Americans promptly capitalized on their newly won status by despatching a series of merchant ships and whaling vessels to the southern extremity of Africa, as well as to the Spice Islands and the Far East, do we begin to get abundant but widely dispersed and fragmentary evidence of their ongoing contacts in the area.

Recent research discloses that virtually every American vessel plying the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans bound for the Cape of Good Hope and the eastern markets had at least one black sailor on board. Nor was it untypical for African Americans to comprise 40% to 50% of the seafaring force of whale ships cruising the waters around Saldanha, Walvis and Delagoa bays, as well as Port Natal; in some instances similar percentages of black personnel were employed on commercial carriers.

American whalers as well as merchant men also came to Table Bay for provisions and to give their crews liberty; Yankee masters whose instructions were to by-pass the Cape en route to the Indies were nonetheless often forced to stop for emergency repairs or to discharge the injured and sick, who, depending upon the seriousness of their condition, were left behind to recuperate.

Cape Town was not restricted to a particular group or category of persons; and the fact that this open port was underpoliced meant the authorities were limited in their ability to detect or prevent the influx of new factors,

especially radical ideas. In the day to day operations of the town a regular intercourse developed among local whites, free blacks and slaves, the latter of whom dominated the skilled occupations, and were also employed as stevedores, in small fishing and various retail enterprises, and service oriented jobs. Over a generation or more before the War of 1812, a transient population comprising many nationalities including African American (and probably West Indian) seamen mingled indiscriminately in the grog shops, eateries, lodging houses and bordellos with both the black and white, free and slave inhabitants. The war years (1812-1815) perhaps offer the first significant evidence of a period of sustained contact between these foreign black sailors and the black port residents.

What is remarkable about the American POWs' experience in South Africa was the leniency of their incarceration. This contrasted dramatically with the severity of treatment endured by the majority of captives held on prisons hulks (the "floating hells of Britain"), and in the main detention centers in Nova Scotia and in England. For one thing, the Cape POWs were granted paroles in order to work for wages in the town and in the country. Daily jaunts about Cape Town were also permitted under a soldier's guard, however that privilege was revoked when in a drunken spree a party of Americans destroyed the fench of a resident. Later, small groups of POWs repeatedly challenged their confinement by escaping from prison to roam about the town for days.

Considering the Americans' well-earned reputation for mutinous conduct, and taking into account that two Irish sailors had been implicated in the Cape slave revolt of 1808,[3] it is surprising that the British had no specific policy to guard against the possibility of the POWs (particularly the prisoners who hired out their labor) forming bonds of union with the free and slave populations in the town and rural districts. A fair presumption is that the labor crisis caused by the abolition of the slave trade was deemed sufficiently great to warrant setting this risk aside.

Aggressively self-assertive, American sailors during the war (and post-war) years were contemptuous of the British and demonstrated at every turn an irreverence for white authority. Their demeanor, from the very way they talked in defiant, boastful language, to their brash, pompous swaggering about the streets of Cape Town, was bound to make the strongest impressions, especially on the unfree segment of the population. What stories might have arisen among this latter group about the "kafirs who came from the sea" can only be guessed, but it would be a good guess that at the heart of their perceptions of the "sea kafirs" (both terms were employed by Cape Town blacks in referring to African American sailors) were men very much like Francis Seymour, whose presence certainly evoked vivid images of militancy.

What we also want to know is whether or not, during these early decades of the nineteenth century, conscious alliances were formed between black American sailors and the free black and slave populations at the Cape? What information and experiences did they share? How often did

these seafarers recount the story of the burning of Port au Prince? And what responses did this and similar reports elicit from the bondsmen? It may at least be urged that we re-investigate from a diasporic perspective the factors leading, for example, to the Great Cape Town Fire of 1798. It is something worth thinking about, too, that the years of simmering discontent among the slaves in South Africa coincided with the period (1806-1832) of slave agitations in the British West Indies and in other distant parts of Afro-North America. We know of one reference that strikingly demonstrates an awareness of these broader developments: cited as a factor contributing to the Cape slave uprising in 1825 was the news of slaves taking up arms in Demerara (British Guiana) two years earlier.[4]

If there is anything to be concluded from these preliminary observations, it is the need for an enlarged view of this early black Atlantic communication network; for these international connections had already stretched beyond the boundaries of Afro-North America and deep into the South Atlantic by the time of the revolution in Saint Domingue. The evidence, although still incomplete, is sufficiently abundant to support this contention. Thus it can be said that far from being isolated from the broader Atlantic world during this period of immense events, the Cape of Good Hope was strategically positioned at the southernmost end of a great commercial and information highway. It carried a flow of news—including sensational rumors foretelling immediate emancipation, whispered intelligence of slave insurrections, and possibly continuous updates on Saint Domingue, whose very existence was not only an argument for rebellion but a source of black pride—which would have aroused in the slave populace feelings of excited anticipation and further encouraged a mood for revolt. Much of this subversive information was conveyed we believe by "sea kafirs" from the African Diaspora, as well as by other representatives of the "Atlantic working class."[5]

Notes

1. Although this evidence is later than the period under consideration, the characterization of Francis Seymour, an African-American sailor who was discharged from his ship at the Cape, is consistent with the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century depictions of black 'jack-tars' in other foreign ports.

2. Julius C. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers," in Colin Howell and Richard Twomey, eds., *Jack Tar in the History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour*, Acadiensis Press, 1991.

3. Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa*, London: Routledge and Kegan Hall, 1983, pp. 97-104.

4. Ibid, page 105.

5. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, "The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century," in Howell and Twomey.

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