

## Masters of the Market: Ship Captaincy in the British Atlantic, 1680–1774

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Between 1680 and the 1770s, ship captains crisscrossed the Atlantic making the communities they touched more market-oriented and connected. Captains and their communities created that transformation, some eagerly, some resentfully. This dissertation examines captains as masters, traders, informers, productivity producers, and investors. Throughout the early modern period, captains could be all of these things or only one. Buffeted by uncertainty, but wielding the power granted by their title of shipmaster, captains were always masters of markets. Though some captains clung to the safety of well-traveled routes, others were entrepreneurial and traded to new places, creating new forms of consumption, making exportation possible, and transforming the illicit into the quotidian.<sup>1</sup> Some sought new paths out of necessity while others embraced opportunities as simply one more potentially lucrative risk in a string of risky decisions that defined their lives. Captains' mastery and mobility positioned them perfectly to exploit new opportunities. As they sailed from port to port, lading cargo and engaging in the daily practices of commerce, their efforts simultaneously globalized trade and deepened shorter-distance connections that strengthened Atlantic markets.

By examining ship captains over an almost one-hundred-year period, this dissertation analyzes the power structures and personal ambitions that enabled and created economic change between the 1680s and 1770s. While excellent work on merchants has strengthened a characterization of the early modern period as an era of merchant capitalism, this dissertation examines a group of people subordinated in this work but essential to it.<sup>2</sup> Often described as rough, violent, blundering, and swashbuckling absentees by contemporaries and recent scholarship, captains of the period often appear in the historical record and modern media as caricatures. This dissertation challenges this distortion by finding captains' voices and

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1. Wadhvani and Lubinski argue that entrepreneurs embrace three processes by “envisioning and valuing opportunities, allocating and reconfiguring resources, and legitimizing novelty.” Many captains embraced these processes and pursued new trading opportunities that transformed the Atlantic. Wadhvani and Lubinski, “Reinventing Entrepreneurial History.”

2. Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*; Matson, *Merchants & Empire*; Matson, *Economy of Early America*; David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*; Zahedieh, *Capital and the Colonies*; Smith, *Merchants*.

situating them in the littoral spaces through which captains moved. The portrait that emerges from these fragments reveals ambitious, skilled, shrewd, and precarious men on the move and on the make. Their mobility and commitment to commerce forged a more connected, productive, and brutal Atlantic world by the dawn of the American Revolution. Yet, at every point, financial and literal death loomed beyond the horizon.

Trade to the British Caribbean and Virginia forms the heart of this dissertation because these two regions exported the most lucrative crops in the British Atlantic: sugar and tobacco.<sup>3</sup> However, mobility defined the careers of captains, which necessitates a broader geographic frame. While captains made repeated voyages to familiar ports and specialized in particular routes to some degree, they responded to the opportunities they found. While the trade in sugar and tobacco to the British Caribbean and Virginia forms the dissertation's starting point, following captains honestly renders it a much broader Atlantic history.

*Masters of the Market* rests on two forms of archival evidence: statistical data extracted from the naval office shipping returns and descriptive evidence from letters, logbooks, depositions, and shipping papers. This mix of source material allows for an examination of the small-scale business practices that forged large-scale economic change and transformed the Atlantic world. On the individual level, the descriptive evidence illuminates how trade operated. Captains, sailors, and merchants, and occasionally their wives, mothers, friends, and children appear in these descriptive sources, revealing their views of the Atlantic marketplace. The quotidian reports in logbooks, descriptions of danger and negligence in depositions, intimacies, and explanations of exchange in letters, and unelaborated shreds of evidence surviving in receipts, bills of lading, portage bills, and ships' accounts provide the archival source base that makes re-creating captains' lives possible.

While archival sources of the daily practices of trade can clarify the causes of productivity change, only statistical evidence can establish the actual productivity change. To demonstrate that the loading times, or days in port, declined significantly over the eighteenth century, this dissertation uses the 30,821 records that form the population of data points available in the surviving naval office shipping lists for Virginia. The data provides an opportunity to explore factors that shaped this productivity change and to follow particular captains' careers and movements around the Atlantic. *Masters of the Market* focuses on Virginia because (1) unlike many British colonies in the Caribbean and continental America, the records survive largely intact, and (2) Virginia represents broader social trends in the British Atlantic.<sup>4</sup> Like the colonies to the south, Virginia traded in major commodities, and large planters dominated the colony's social, political, and economic culture. Like the colonies to the north, Virginia traded in provisions and possessed a population of smaller farmers to the west that wielded growing influence. While Virginia is representative of broader trading trends in many ways, it possesses some central differences that impact the data. Most importantly, the Chesapeake's riparian geography facilitated direct connection between shippers and planters, which had implications for captains' days-in-port measures.

3. McCusker and Menard, *Economy of British America*.

4. Greene made the argument that the Chesapeake set the pattern of American social change, and the other colonies evolved over the eighteenth century to emulate it. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*.

These records provide interpretive challenges on at least three fronts. First, the statistical records contain gaps.<sup>5</sup> While these gaps do not undermine the conclusions drawn in the dissertation, they do necessitate interpretive caution. The trends are robust, but the presence of some gaps may diminish or amplify specific results. For example, when estimating the impact of captain experience on several parameters, the absence of some records may diminish the measured result. Despite these challenges, the underlying records provide a particularly robust dataset for examining trends in early modern shipping. Second, by re-creating the form of modern data, the statistical evidence seems to offer a sense of certainty and completeness. This is an illusion. To smuggle goods, captains had to fool the naval officers who recorded the data. Naval officers also engaged in guesswork, and subsumed goods under amorphous catchall categories like “sundry European goods” and “etc.” As the dissertation shows, this could operate as a powerful form of erasure. The papers of the Brown Family of Providence, Rhode Island, demonstrate that Capt. Pardon Sheldon, along with Nicholas, Moses, and Joseph Brown, enslaved a man named Corodon and sent him to Virginia. On the voyage between Rhode Island and Virginia, Corodon disappears from the records. The shipping returns do not have a record of Corodon entering Virginia on the vessel, but the naval officer may have placed Corodon’s existence into the “etc.” category that comes at the end of the record, when a naval officer’s cramped handwriting comes to an abrupt halt.<sup>6</sup> These records casually deny the personhood of many people like Corodon, who traveled the Atlantic against their will. While the records contain flaws that shatter any illusions of absolute certainty, the shipping returns nonetheless provide the best evidence to reconstruct colonial shipping.

Finally, while the relative completeness of the records should assuage economic historians’ concerns, work by historians of the Black Atlantic challenges a scholarly focus on how businesses created economic growth and change, which is a central project of business history. The shipping returns at the heart of this project form abstractions that hide the violence inherent in their production. They also hide human features like gender and age that might divulge hints that the people represented by the numbers lived as mothers, fathers, and children—“kin” in Morgan’s words—families who were torn apart.<sup>7</sup> As Fuentes and Morgan have made clear, archival documents re-create the circumstances and silences that colonizers created. Where disempowered people appear at all, archival documents reveal them in seemingly neutral shreds and numbers that minimize their humanity.<sup>8</sup> This dissertation analyzes what concerned the colonizers: productivity, speed, connection, and communication to facilitate wealth formation for people like captains, merchants, shopkeepers, planters, and their families. To some extent, forming the dataset recapitulates the worldview of the colonizers, who viewed enslaved people and sailing laborers as their resources to count and deploy for

5. Notably, almost all the shipping lists between 1707 and 1724 are missing, and few records from 1747 and 1748 remain. Each river’s naval office also has occasional quarters missing.

6. Nicholas Brown & Co. to Pardon Sheldon, December 12, 1763; “Sloop Four Brothers Acct Curtt with Nicholas Brown and Co. Owners,” December 13, 1763, Box 536, Folder 7, Brown Family Business Records, The John Carter Brown Library; “A list of all ships and vessels which have entered inwards in the Port of Hampton Virginia,” December to March 1763, CO5/1449, TNA.

7. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*.

8. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*.

their own purposes. While the dissertation takes some steps to explore how captains' activities shaped the lives of enslaved people and sailors, it is primarily a project that uncovers the logic of traders and should be viewed as one critical piece of a much larger story.

## Chapter Summaries

*Masters of the Market* is structured around the myriad roles captains performed over the course of their careers: masters, traders, informers, productivity producers, and investors. By examining the ebb and flow of these roles, the dissertation embraces two temporalities. The first establishes a chronological organization by examining how the need for these roles shifted between 1680 and 1774. The second examines the course of an effective captain's life and career. Each chapter builds on the next by exploring each consecutive step over the course of a successful captain's career. The chapters explore the contingency of that success by examining the omnipresent failures and risks captains experienced. Together, these chapters demonstrate that captains' mobility enabled them to build a contested but productive Atlantic market.

*Masters of the Market* begins by showing that, for captains, mastery meant navigating the art and science of open ocean sailing and the social spaces that enabled them to obtain positions as shipmasters. To become shipmasters, captains navigated a liminal space between land and sea. They displayed a cultural "saltiness" on land that defied the polite sensibility emerging as a hallmark of the mercantile class in the Atlantic world. This saltiness could either advance or undermine captains' careers. It reminded members of society that captains possessed complex skills and met grave dangers to advance the interests of land-dwellers. However, their saltiness also created a hallmark of difference that captains had to mitigate by demonstrating a sensitivity to landed values. At every step, captains' fragile mastery was upheld through the labor of free and enslaved sailors and the hesitant assent of landed colonizers, who increasingly saw their future in Atlantic markets.

The second chapter demonstrates that captains exercised significant commercial autonomy at the turn of the eighteenth century. Against the backdrop of omnipresent war and piracy, trade became more unpredictable and difficult to direct from afar. An economic downturn also emerged when colonial commodity prices fell. In this environment, investors had to trust captains to make immediate and accurate decisions for the firms' interests. Thus, captains took on responsibility for trading activities and put their talents to work for the investors in their ships. Some investors sought cargo to trade while others wanted the returns from freight. In both cases, captains typically played a significant role in the business functions of the vessel, including selling cargo, soliciting freight, and determining the balance of goods that would serve colonial tastes. Captains moved along a spectrum of authority, adding and shedding responsibility from voyage to voyage and across their careers. In this turbulent environment, firms benefited when they could rely on the mobility and flexibility of captains.

Captains inhabited a world in which people craved the foreign intelligence they could provide. Captains' access to foreign news and their control over intelligence forged an informed Atlantic sympathetic to their interpretations. Their mobility allowed them to observe market conditions and ask questions of commercial correspondents in distant ports.

Their claim to direct knowledge gave them situational authority. As the boom profits from early trade faded into slow growth, merchants required more coordination and commercial intelligence to succeed. Captains' situational authority established them as Atlantic experts. Newspapers printed their reports, imperial officials consulted them, and merchants requested their opinions. When captains shared commercial information, they could bend local understanding in ways that benefited them, for example by exploiting the inherent ambiguity and risk of early modern maritime trade to develop a plausible defense rhetoric. They used this rhetoric to bolster their own positions. Chapter Three uses a commercial-dispute-turned-affair-of-honor between a ship captain from Virginia and his London-based employer to reveal how the captain's position as a mobile intermediary shaped landed people's understanding of the broader Atlantic marketplace.

Chapter Four uses the statistical evidence provided by the naval office shipping returns to measure shifts in productivity changes for vessels trading out of Virginia between 1698 and 1766. Prior studies of early modern shipping to Virginia emphasized that transatlantic trade carried out jointly by Scottish shippers, shopkeepers, and merchants improved productivity in shipping.<sup>9</sup> The population of data points under examination in this study reveals that Scottish productivity, measured by contracting days in port scaled for tonnage, met but did not exceed London's productivity measures. The growth in intercolonial productivity between Virginia and the Caribbean, New England, and islands in the Atlantic (e.g., Bermuda and Madeira) rivaled the productivity improvements achieved in the Scottish trade. These captains exercised more commercial autonomy than did Scottish captains. They became an increasingly distinct sphere of commercial influence within the American colonies by connecting the continental colonies to the Caribbean islands, where sugar produced by enslaved people powered the British Empire. This led to significant productivity improvements for themselves and their commercial partners.

The final chapter examines captains as wielders of capital. Although they did not possess the wealth of large merchant houses, their wages, cargo privilege, and access to debt provided capital for investments, such as ships, goods to trade, and enslaved people to labor at sea. While captains pursued some landed investments, including property and enslaved people (who labored under the authority of their wives), they typically embraced a saltwater strategy that demonstrated their self-confidence and personal ambition. This strategy relied on the support of their wives, who complemented captains' mobility with their stationary advocacy. Together, captains and their families plowed the profits of their labor and trade back into the high-risk maritime market.

## Core Conclusions

Over the eighteenth century, ship captains shifted British traders away from an imperial market, defined by metropole and periphery, toward an increasingly globalized market. They created a globalizing path defined by two prongs. The first prong was entrepreneurial risk that legitimized

9. North, "Sources of Productivity Change in Ocean Shipping"; Shepherd and Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade*; Devine, *Tobacco*; Price, *Capital and Credit in British Overseas Trade*.

previously unknown trading opportunities within and outside the empire. The second prong was an ethos that equated success with speed, connection, and an outward-looking orientation. With intensified short-distance intercolonial trade, captains encouraged colonizers to produce for the market, and they provided new opportunities to do so. This globalizing ethos embraced market opportunities, and it was directly built through captains' mobility.

*Masters of the Market* shows that access to foreign intelligence gave captains the power to shape commercial conversations and expectations. Captains offered colonizers the "freshest advices" from distant places. Colonists hungrily consumed this information in an effort to avoid risk, anticipate market and geopolitical shifts, and exploit opportunities. The men who provided this information held immense power. Their mobility gave them access to first-hand knowledge from foreign ports, and thus a claim to legitimacy or situational authority. Their reports did not go uncontradicted, but the two most influential alternative intelligence sources, letters and newspapers, could not talk back. Captains presented a view of Atlantic commerce both biased in their favor and inflected with their biases, creating a narrative that emphasized their diligence and shrewdness and an Atlantic brimming with opportunity. Captains played a vital role in forging a broad outward-looking commercial orientation by providing current information.

This dissertation challenges the traditional periodization of business history and proposes that historians take seriously the concept of a long business history. Too often in business history, there is a temptation to discuss the early modern period as "industrializing" or "commercializing," or as "merchant capitalism." While these terms convey something meaningful about scale and process, they also cordon off the early modern from the modern in a counterproductive way that legitimizes the field's heavy focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This dissertation challenges this orientation by showing how much the early modern period pulsed with economic life and a productivity ethos that was effective, though contested. The slavery and hierarchy that defined the period indelibly shaped the colonial economy. That economy displays significant continuity with subsequent economic movements around the world. By examining the microfoundations of the colonial economy, this dissertation demonstrates that business history must interrogate early modern markets as more than a pithy prelude to the real story.

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