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*Dear Shipmates,*

It's been three weeks since the last Maritime Museum update with the main thing to report that we are not open yet, but we anticipate being open the beginning of July.

In the meantime, while making all the preparation to reopen, those of us on site have also been close witness to some of the recent demonstrations. The experience of watching thousands of people a short distance away from one's place of work while the same thing was and continues to take place across the nation was extraordinary to say the least. Of that experience I can report that even though there were episodes of vandalism and looting elsewhere the evening of the largest protest, there was never an instant when our ships themselves were threatened or the subject of hostility from participants, bystanders, or anyone else.

But that is only a self-interested spectator's perspective. Because we serve a public obligation to talk about history, albeit within the realm of maritime history, it would be negligent not to try to put the historic events we witness daily into some kind of context if it offers an avenue to try to make sense of our world. Many organizations choose to issue a statement. I suppose it's been my way to try to get there with a story instead, if such a story can be found. That's indeed what was unfolding with the episodes of my story about the role of disease, seafaring, and the advent of an international scientific establishment, and it's a story I hope to return to. But now, it seems appropriate to examine if somehow Black Lives Matter fits into a story of the sea.

Seafaring is essentially the technological means by which society is projected, in microcosm, onto the blank slate of the sea to move people, things, and ideas. In the stories of the sea that emerge, there is plenty of inspiration to be found, but since it is society we are talking about after all, there is also more than enough tragedy and atrocity. Some maritime stories form the embodiment of atrocity itself, as occurred over more than three centuries by the abduction of fifty million Africans to toil in the Americas, subjecting them to the horrific Atlantic middle passage under appallingly inhumane conditions, and ending, for those who survived, with lifelong enslavement for them and their descendants. That story takes us to a place of seemingly no hope. But we also can find reason to believe that the quest for human dignity continues to survive, no matter how desperate the circumstances and grim the place, and in the particular irony that while ships sailed millions of people across the sea to a horrific fate, in a few cases they also offered to some of them and their descendants a form of refuge and escape.

Seafaring is perhaps the earliest and among the most rigorous of meritocracies and the most physically unforgiving, and therefore less tolerant of hierarchy and authority based on considerations other than skill and knowledge. It's not to say that racial discrimination was absent among the run of professional seafarers



historically, only that the irrational association of status to race was in past centuries systematically challenged more severely at sea than elsewhere. My friend and fellow tall ship Captain, Dr. W. Jeffrey Bolster has written in his book *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* how the sea offered to a few a slender pathway of escape from a life of race determined subservience. In keeping, Black sailors who found themselves bound to a ship on passage had some opportunity for status and advancement won through their skill, judgement, and usefulness to the rest of their crew and officers. If this offered them more social and economic mobility than society ashore, they also had more physical mobility than almost anyone else on land had at the time, with the opportunities that also provides. Not surprisingly, some of them became accomplished seamen and advanced through ranks of occupational specialty to become ship's officers. There are even documented cases where some black seamen rose to become master mariners, commanding ships ranging the oceans of the world, conducting commerce, and exercising absolute authority over crews of diverse background and situation while they themselves, according to laws of the day, nominally remained slaves and chattel property. To say that their lives transcended the cruel definitions imposed by race is an understatement. Such stories provide as powerful evidence for the triumph of human spirit over unimaginable adversity as anything the history of the sea can offer.

If we were to follow the course of just one mariner, we would start around the middle of the eighteenth-century with a man of mixed African and Native American descent born in Framingham Massachusetts and recorded as the slave of a town Deacon. (Slavery in Massachusetts was finally abolished in 1783). In 1750, while in his twenties, he escaped his situation to one of the ships lying in nearby Boston harbor and took up the life of a merchant seaman. From there he spent two decades sailing in a variety of vessels, including whalers, when in 1770 he found himself back in Boston after a passage from the Bahamas and about to embark next on a vessel bound for North Carolina, evidently with a bit of time on his hands and looking for something interesting to do. Boston at that period provided fascinating diversions of all kinds, including spontaneous uprisings.

Sailors were among the few categories of people in the Atlantic world with the personal time available to loiter around the waterfronts of seaport towns. They tended to congregate in crowds, and as sailors were also known for being contentious and abrasively protective of their rights, the crowds they formed were also sometimes contentious and this seemed especially to be the case for Boston crowds. So, it had been, for instance, twenty-three years earlier, when mobs of sailors objecting to the recent illegal impressment of some of their colleagues into HM's Men-of-War by Sir Charles Knowles, 1st Baronet rioted for three days and essentially shut the port down. On this particular early evening of March 5<sup>th</sup> 1770, a group of loitering sailors including the black seaman mentioned, reinforced by animated townsmen, decided to pick a confrontation with a sentry from the British 29<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot (recently posted to Boston) who had chastised a local boy for complaining of a British officer who cheated him of some money. As the argument gathered

momentum, a company of the regiment's soldiers mustered in support of their comrade in a square next to the Old State House and soon the enlarging crowd of protesters began to provoke the soldiers and then pommel them with snowballs and debris. Whatever the precipitating cause of these altercations, the larger issue always seemed to be infringement of citizen's rights as Englishmen, enforced by a military establishment that habitually gave little consideration to the rights of *colonial* Englishmen it was sworn to defend.

The soldiers formed up in ranks, wearing the uniform of the nation they all belonged to, with clear intention to suppress the crowd's rising anger through domination and intimidation. Angry English sailors of the time did not disperse easily just because someone wearing a red coat told them to and neither did this crowd. Neither did they disperse when the soldiers leveled their Brown Bess muskets. But, unlike previous episodes when similar things happened, on this occasion when soldiers of the 29<sup>th</sup> Regiment fired into the crowd, in an instant they transformed the protesters, and us, from English subjects into Americans. When the smoke cleared, the black sailor whose life we've briefly followed, Crispus Attucks, who was born a slave but ranged free over the oceans of the world, lay dead with two rounds in his chest, killed along with four others. It's believed that Attucks was the first to succumb. The event came to be known of course, as the Boston massacre, which every one learns in history class, and the name of Crispus Attucks is likewise familiar to millions of students who are pretty sure it's going to appear on a test.

So, what can we take from this?

First, a reminder that our country was born in moments of protest. When you see protestors at a demonstration, you have also opened a window into the past experience of our nation. The wanton destruction of property may well be counterproductive, uncalled for, excessive, and penalizing people who have nothing to do with what the real issue is about. That's certainly what was also once said about crates of tea thrown into Boston Harbor.

Second, when the military is used as a tool to solve civil unrest, it takes a toll on the military from sacrifice of legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens they confront. Armies are intended to defeat foreign enemies. The British army transformed Colonial America from a set of unconnected English provinces into a united national enemy of Britain. This concept seems well understood and ardently expressed (which itself is historically uncharacteristic) by virtually every prominent U.S. Military Officer to have recently held high office in our military/civilian establishment.

Third, in the case of Crispus Attucks, did *that* black life matter?

The analogy is not direct. Crispus Attucks was not killed by British soldiers because he was black. But that's not the point. It's that we *remember* him because he was black, and dying as a black man in the first moments of our country has made him famous far beyond any recognition afforded him in life.

Why? Was his life more precious to him, his family, and his shipmates than the other four people killed in the Boston Massacre whose names few can now recall? Did his life *matter* more in an absolute sense from some inherent superiority?

Hardly, but his life, specifically the manner in which it was lost clearly *did* matter more in its useful application to the story we tell about ourselves, the story of American history that, despite missteps, backsteps, and divisiveness, is a story that follows an underlying groundswell of ever more inclusion. It's the national story that throughout our history we have continued to nurture, that we clearly prefer and that we take comfort in through the darkest of times, and that in our aspirations, we console ourselves that we strive ever to become better examples of.

In the response to "Black Lives Matter" that "all lives matter," does anyone really imagine it's being argued that black lives lost to the excessive use of lethal force by the police matter more in a literal sense, for instance, than other lives including other black lives, lost to traffic accidents, chronic illness, natural causes, or the epidemic? The issue is that those lives lost to a pervasive injustice we all understand and the manner in which they are lost *do* matter more in their forcing us to confront the story we like to tell about ourselves and in forcing us to face how our reality may have fallen short of that story. The losing of those lives in such circumstances forces us to ask ourselves, however uncomfortable it might make us if, as individuals or a nation, we have lived up to the aspirations and expectations expressed in our most sacred documents, and in keeping faith with all the lives lost on foreign fields and distant seas in the defense of those sacred words, that we in this moment are willing to be forever judged by.

Because at some level we also must realize that when our moment is gone, that story will be the only part of us that is left.

So stay below and stay safe!

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