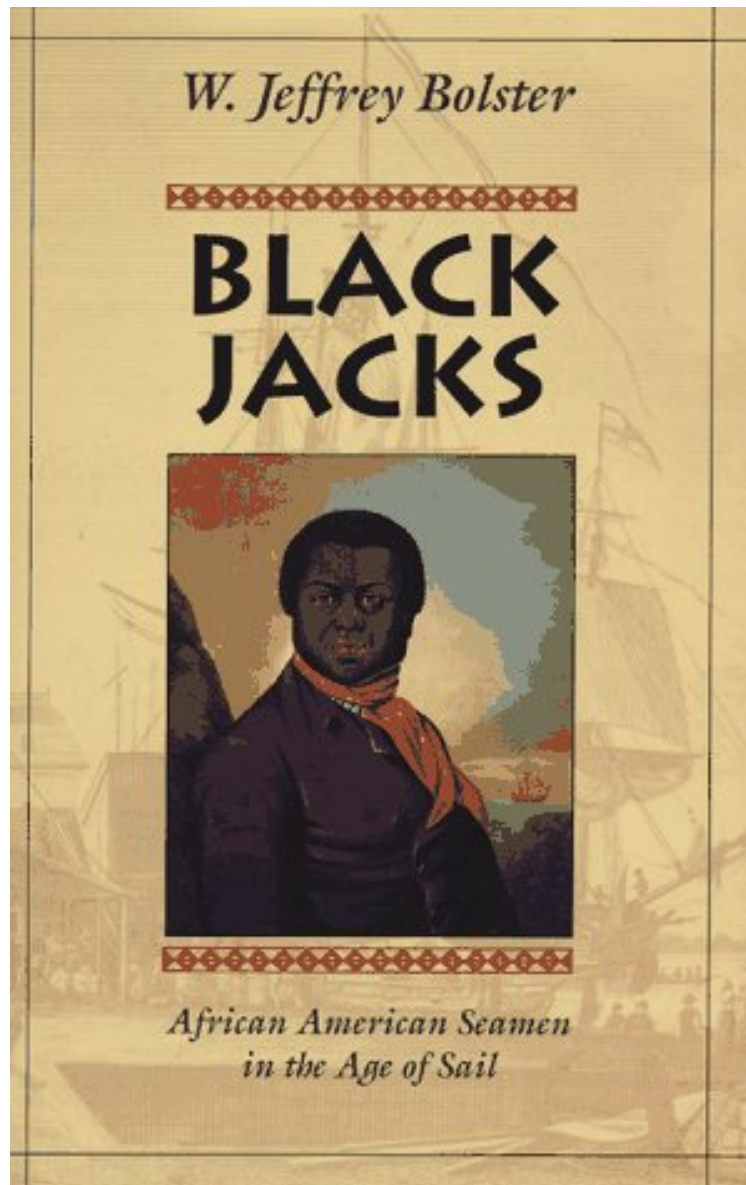


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Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail

W. Jeffrey Bolster

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W. Jeffrey Bolster : Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. completely unknown to me and a great example of a self-organized black community existing side-by-side with ...By GardeneroH found this book extremely ifascinating and helpful. If

you are interested in the Aubrey/Maturin series, as I am, read it for another side to the Age of Sail. Highlights: The way black seamen spread and learned about the varieties of black communities across oceans and countries; the racial dynamics of the naval prisoner-of-war prison in England during the War of 1812; completely unknown to me and a great example of a self-organized black community existing side-by-side with self-organized white communities (seriously; check it out); that Frederick Douglass dressed as a seaman for his escape because black seamen existed and were known to have independent lives. True, the writing is not over-the-top amazing, but it serves. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Good information. By eOrsino Good information. Not always an exciting read but glad that this stuff was put together in one book. Most interesting is how things changed so much after the civil war was over. A great book for research on this topic, especially if you are interested in black seaman during break the 1700's. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great read By Customer I understand that it was written for a US audience and a knowledge of US history is assumed but as an Australian I would have appreciated more details on some of the events that are described (even just a year to help put it into perspective).

Few Americans, black or white, recognize the degree to which early African American history is a maritime history. W. Jeffrey Bolster shatters the myth that black seafaring in the age of sail was limited to the Middle Passage. Seafaring was one of the most significant occupations among both enslaved and free black men between 1740 and 1865. Tens of thousands of black seamen sailed on lofty clippers and modest coasters. They sailed in whalers, warships, and privateers. Some were slaves, forced to work at sea, but by 1800 most were free men, seeking liberty and economic opportunity aboard ship. Bolster brings an intimate understanding of the sea to this extraordinary chapter in the formation of black America. Because of their unusual mobility, sailors were the eyes and ears to worlds beyond the limited horizon of black communities ashore. Sometimes helping to smuggle slaves to freedom, they were more often a unique conduit for news and information of concern to blacks. But for all its opportunities, life at sea was difficult. Blacks actively contributed to the Atlantic maritime culture shared by all seamen, but were often outsiders within it. Capturing that tension, *Black Jacks* examines not only how common experiences drew black and white sailors together--even as deeply internalized prejudices drove them apart--but also how the meaning of race aboard ship changed with time. Bolster traces the story to the end of the Civil War, when emancipated blacks began to be systematically excluded from maritime work. Rescuing African American seamen from obscurity, this stirring account reveals the critical role sailors played in helping forge new identities for black people in America. An epic tale of the rise and fall of black seafaring, *Black Jacks* is African Americans' freedom story presented from a fresh perspective.

.com Among the more intriguing facts that this fascinating book contains is this statistic: by 1803, nearly 20 percent of seamen's jobs were filled by black men, most of them freemen. Historian Jeffrey Bolster, himself a sailor for a decade, covers the story of black sailors from Africa through mid-1800s America. Working as seamen helped blacks support families and helped facilitate communication among widely dispersed people. There were dangers--free blacks could be kidnapped and sold into slavery, and all black sailors were subject to vicious racism. Yet for all the drawbacks, sailing was a profession black men saw as "an occupation of opportunity." From Library Journal Licensed master mariner Bolster (history, Univ. of New Hampshire) writes a descriptively rich, engaging narrative of African American seafarers from the 1740s to the 1860s. He recounts how tens of thousands of African American sailors formed an important sector of the maritime labor force, shaped mariner culture and the identity of free black communities, and linked the Atlantic world of the black diaspora. Both free blacks and slaves found opportunity, dignity, and freedom despite harsh working conditions. They were skippers and captains as well as ordinary and able seamen, pilots, and cooks on merchant ships, warships, whalers, and other coastal and deep-sea vessels. Bolster devotes attention to the construction of race in the interactions among black and white sailors on ship, in port, and in the War of 1812 POW camp of Dartmoor (England) Prison. This excellent study is highly recommended for public and academic libraries. Charles L. Lumpkins, Bloomsburg Univ. Lib., Pa. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. [A] first-rate contribution. Bolster...spent a decade pulling together for the first time two centuries of seaborne black history...[T]he book crackles with enough drama for many novels or plays. (Carla Davidson New York Times Book) For the past 10 years, W. Jeffrey Bolster...has labored obsessively to unearth the rich and long-forgotten history of America's black mariners. His newly published book...may prove the most instructive historical offering of the year. It reminds Americans that black seamen, like black cowboys, labored long and to great effect at one of the cultural linchpins of American history...[W]hat's most remarkable about Bolster's book is both the numbers of black sailors he found in the past and the extraordinary wealth of evidence documenting their lives. (Ken Ringle Washington Post) [An] extraordinary story...Bolster's writing is intelligent and strong, as he stresses his central point that the life of a black sailor in the age of sail was essentially a dignified one...Bolster argues convincingly that for any ambitious African American trapped in the plantation world of the Americas, the life of a maritime sailor represented a huge leap forward in circumstances and possibilities...The real achievement of *Black Jacks* is to remind us that black seafaring in the age of sail was not limited to the middle passage, and that black sailors were the eyes, the ears, and the mouthpieces of the African American community at a time when America was attempting to stifle the community's

collective cry of outrage...Bolster shows us that for over a century, while seafaring remained a contemptible occupation for the white man, it was a noble occupation for the black man, and it played a central role in the creation of an African American identity. (Caryl Phillips *New Republic*)Himself a master mariner, Bolster presents us with an area of the African diaspora which has been overlooked even by scholars of African American history. His book is important at a number of levels. It is a most original piece of work, based on careful scholarship, yet it also tells a cracking yarn. The subject may seem, at first glance, marginal. In fact it is central, not least because all Africans who survived into the Americas had themselves endured a major maritime experience. We now know, thanks to Bolster, the degree to which maritime experiences formed a continuing theme in African American life from first conquest until the mid-19th century. (James Walvin *Times Higher Education Supplement*)Black Jacks is one of the most significant historical works published thus far in this decade. That it is about an important group of maritime workers--black seamen--is an added bonus. The fact that it is also a joy to read provides a third excellent reason to recommend this book...[It] is an exhaustively researched, beautifully written volume that cries out to be read by a broad cross-section of historians...All in all, this is a book worth owning and returning to repeatedly. Most important, it is that rare book that deserves to be savoured, literally and figuratively. In short, Black Jacks is a magnificent scholarly achievement that can be commended to readers with no serious reservations. (Lewis R. Fishcer *The Northern Mariner*)This long-overdue book takes us on a voyage of discovery in what we thought were familiar waters as W. Jeffrey Bolster--a veteran seaman and University of New Hampshire associate professor of history--lifts our collective awareness of a little known maritime subject...Bolster eloquently articulates his keen knowledge of 18th- and 19th-century American sea history as it relates to those of African descent, slave and free, seamen, laborers, statesmen, and entrepreneurs...Black Jacks intellectually broadens our perspective by bringing this unsung saga to a bright light and its rightful position on American and sea history's horizons. (Steven W. Jones *Sea History*)This highly readable book and thoroughly researched study offers interesting details of shipboard racial interaction and surprising information on the reception afforded African Americans in Atlantic and Caribbean ports. (John C. Walter *Seattle Times*)A fascinating, untold, and important story. (Geoffrey Elan *Yankee Magazine*)This book is an excellent combination of scholarship and engagement, always informed by the author's first-hand knowledge of the sea. (Frank McLynn *Literary*)In Black Jacks, historian and master mariner W. Jeffrey Bolster tells the long-ignored story of black seamen in this country between 1740 and the end of the Civil War, revealing the critical role that they played in helping to forge a black identity. At the beginning of the this period, Anglo-American deep-sea labor was largely white, and virtually all sea-faring blacks were slaves. By the turn of the nineteenth century, almost one in five U.S. seamen were black, and most of them were free. And at the end of the period, the tide had turned again, and a combination of different factors squeezed most African-Americans out of the maritime labor force. Professor Bolster never loses sight of the larger picture, but he also recognizes the collection of compelling stories that he has gathered--stories of the famous (such as Frederick Douglass, who escaped from slavery disguised as a sailor), of the nameless, and of many more in between. (*Journal of Maritime Law and Commerce*)Black Jacks fills a big gap in Atlantic maritime history. It wonderfully describes the heretofore untold contributions of the tens of thousands of free and enslaved black men who served on board ships in the coastal trade and on deep-sea expeditions in the 18th and 19th centuries. Inspired by the tales of elderly black sailors in the Caribbean heard while he was a tall ship captain, Bolster vividly details the adventures and experiences of African American sailors throughout the seafaring world. (*U.S. Magazine*)Licensed master mariner Bolster writes a descriptively rich, engaging narrative of African American seafarers from the 1740s to the 1860s. He recounts how tens of thousands of African American sailors formed an important sector of the maritime labor force, shaped mariner culture and the identity of free black communities, and linked the Atlantic world of the black diaspora...This excellent study is highly recommended. (*Library Journal*)Many black sailors were sophisticated linguists, entrepreneurs in port, ready raconteurs; and Bolster draws from a range of literate, often lyrical voices in this little-known labor force...[A] well-researched book. (*Publishers Weekly*)In Black Jacks, W. Jeffrey Bolster tells an almost unknown side of blacks and the sea, stories of African American slaves, free men, and runaways who worked as seamen from 1740 to 1865. It's the story, he says, of a phenomenon that in all the generally accepted books and museum exhibits was basically being ignored...[Black Jacks] is thoroughly researched and documented. But Bolster knows that history is story, and he has turned out a highly readable book that focuses on the lives of many remarkable men. The black sailors' dedication to freedom is a recurring theme of the book...Black sailors brought the news of the world, especially the black world, to the plantation slaves when they stopped to pick up or discharge goods, giving the isolated slaves a sense of being part of a much larger community. They provided role models of pride and independence to those who felt beaten down by the rigors of slavery. And they frequently hid slaves aboard their vessels, enabling them to escape to freedom. As Bolster says in his conclusion, black sailors 'contributed to a larger sense of black collectivity...[They] were crucial cultural mediators in the creation of black America. (Pat Parnell King *George Journal*)Ten years were spent in researching and writing Black Jacks, and the result is a major contribution to African-American and American maritime histories. It is unlikely that readers of the book will ever again limit their view of slavery to field hands and domestics or associate blacks at sea only as victims of the dreaded Middle Passage. The overwhelming number of black seamen prior to the American revolution were slaves...In vivid detail, this book

relates the contributions black jacks made to African-American society as sources of pride in accomplishment, as dispensers of knowledge of a world beyond the sea, and as contributors to the formation of a distinctive black culture in America. Bolster has produced a work of sound scholarship that tells a very important story in a most exciting fashion. (Frederick M. Binder *Journal of the Early Republic*) Jeffrey Bolster's personal seafaring experience lends vibrance to his gorgeously detailed account *Black Jacks*. This deserving analysis of Africa-American sailors, who totaled twenty thousand men and composed one fifth of the United States' maritime labor force by the early nineteenth century, illustrates important ways of conceptualizing both early African-American and maritime history... These is no doubt that *Black Jacks* will have a powerful impact on the field. Bolster's portrayal of maritime work culture is a significant contribution to our understanding of early African-American work settings. His imaginative research and use of sources, neglected in this review, set a high standard for future work in maritime history. Most importantly, as interest in the fields of both African-American and Atlantic history continues to surge, Bolster has written the best overall assessment to date of African-American seafarers. *Black Jacks* introduces Bolster as an important figure in these vibrant fields of research. (Thomas Buchanan *Journal of Social History*) W. Jeffrey Bolster charts new ground by examining in detail the role and experiences of African-American seamen in a crucial phase of American history. To support his main argument that 'the rise and fall of African American seafaring in the age of sail was central to the creation of black America,' Bolster skillfully teases out from numerous primary sources material on African-American mariners in Africa and the diaspora... [His] important book provides a fascinating glimpse of the experiences of African-American seamen. His interesting and detailed description of the thousands of captured black sailors held at Dartmoor Prison during the War of 1812 recalls the dangers that often accompanied these individuals, for whom no eighteenth or nineteenth-century society had a clearly defined legal position. Rather than being simply maritime history, this is social history at its most eloquent... By successfully mining many traditional sources, [Bolster] has helped us understand the multifaceted nature of the African-American community. (Edward L. Cox *American Historical*) Almost nothing has been set down on the important role both slaves and free blacks played in the maritime trades in the 18th and early 19th centuries... Jeffrey Bolster has now moved to fill that notable gap with a volume sure to make its mark in maritime history. Well researched, carefully documented, precise in its distinctions and pleasantly readable, this book will stand as a tribute to America's seagoing blacks, as well as to its author... As a bonus--reflective of Bolster's 10 years at sea--it vividly portrays life before the mast... For a vicarious experience of life on a sailing vessel... during America's days of sailing glory, this book is the one to read. (James M. Morris *Newport News*) *Black Jacks* is more than the story of African American seafarers between 1740 and 1865. It is a vivid account of the fluid and multi-dimensional nature of black identity... Bolster's book is a marvelous and readable account of a previously neglected segment of American history. It convincingly forces us to reconsider the roles blacks played in forging the modern identity of America. Take together with Luraghi's *History of the Confederate Navy*, these important studies are worthy additions to the bookshelf of anyone who professes an interest in southern history. (Gene A. Smith *Journal of Southwest Georgia History*) From time to time, a new book picks up a long-neglected thread of history and carefully traces the way it is delicately interwoven with the rest of the fabric. To read such a work is not only to appreciate the author's skill and perception, it is to never look at the fabric the same way again. Such a book is *Black Jacks*, by W. Jeffrey Bolster, seaman and historian... A careful researcher and a level-headed writer, he offers perceptions that bring this history alive. (Tom Jackson *Wooden Boat*) *Black Jacks* investigates a substantial and largely unexamined African American presence aboard Anglo-American coasting craft, 'blue water' merchants, privateers, pirate ships, whalers and naval vessels... Specialist and general readers will surely share Bolster's sense of the importance of his subject and warm to his lively and evocative presentation. (Peter Thompson *English Historical*) One more of the gaps in African-American history has been filled, thanks to Jeffrey Bolster's book, *Black Jacks*. Here, Jacks is short for jacktar (colloq., sailor'). In any given year between 1800 and 1850, Bolster estimates, shipping employed more than 100,000 American males; one-fifth were black... [This] is a seaman's book. (James H. Bready *Baltimore Sun*) W. Jeffrey Bolster's purpose here is to urge people to rethink black maritime history... [He] admirably reveals the richness of Africa's legacy to America as it was fashioned over centuries by mariners who endured deprivation and hardship but seized their opportunities with imagination and courage. (Sari Hornstein *William and Mary Quarterly*) This book breaks new ground in seeking to explore and explain trends in employment of blacks, free and enslaved, in the American merchant fleet up to the Civil War... Both maritime historians and historians of American slavery will learn much from Jeffrey Bolster's most useful study. (David Richardson *Labour History*) This deeply researched and elegantly written book... is impressive... an important... substantial work of historical scholarship. Students of early America, African America, slavery, and maritime history cannot afford to ignore it. (Frank Cogliano *Borderlines*) Bolster has done a fine job in illuminating an important part of American maritime history. He makes a valuable contribution to standard antebellum American history by looking at a major period of change from the black sailor's perspective. He is to be congratulated for shedding light on a too-long neglected subject. (Tom Costa *International Journal of Maritime History*) This [is] a lively exploration of a neglected chapter of American history. (Michael Kenney *Boston Globe*) *Black Jacks* does stand out as a landmark: the first published history of the American black men that documents their lives as sailors in a broadly conceived Atlantic world *Black Jacks* is thought provoking work that builds upon the studies of slaves and

free blacks outside the plantation systems. Bolster applies the insights of the authors of these works to an understudied area in black history. (Craig T. Marion *Journal of World History*) *Black Jacks* provides a nuanced account of black maritime life and labor in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries...Bolster writes with the authority of a seasoned seaman and the sensitivity of a well-trained social historian. Drawing on these aptitudes his account is particularly rich in its explorations of the dynamics of race and class, the generation and play of cultural styles and forms, and the politics of meaning that might be inferred from the descriptive traces of past actions he so ably recovers from his sources...*Black Jacks* is a well-written, impressively documented, handsomely produced book that certainly does offer a convincing corrective; a book that should appeal to undergraduate and non-academic readers as well as to specialists. (Charles V. Carnegie *New West Indian Guide* 1999-01-01)