Black Sailors in the Civil War: A History of Fugitives, Freemen and Freedmen Aboard Union Vessels

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Compared to Black soldiers who served in units of the Army’s United States Colored Troops (USCT), who are now fairly well documented in the literature, the Navy’s Black sailors linger in obscurity, perhaps due to their smaller numbers, and the infrequency of decisive engagements in the monotonous blockade duty that dominated the Navy’s experience of the war. The topic has strong potential, as it was impossible to segregate sailors on cramped ships to the same degree as in forces ashore, opening up avenues for interracial cooperation and potentially a path to greater inclusion in the post-war Navy. These are themes readers might expect Bruns to tackle at length in a book on Black Civil War sailors. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, the work falls short of the mark in this and several other critical areas.

Bruns has spent a lifetime in the museum studies field, mostly at the U.S. Postal Museum, but briefly as the director of the Navy’s museum system. The apparent lack of formal training in the history discipline is evident throughout the work, most notably in the lack of a coherent argument (p. 49, “black sailors saw action in all these operations?”), the limited research base (only 11 works in the bibliography), and the overreliance on a paucity of sources (one chapter sources 32 of 34 footnotes from the 1930s-era WPA Slave Narratives). The result is a book that more or less traces the Navy’s experience of the war, with occasional digressions into the conditions of slavery ashore (which, to be fair, might serve as a motivation for Black enlistment in the Navy) and narratives of naval engagements with brief mentions of the
percentage of black sailors aboard each ship. The result is that the purported topic of the book disappears completely for long stretches, especially in the chapters on naval commanders, including Foote, Porter, and Farragut. The narrative is not especially well-crafted, as it jumps chronologically in too many places. The chapter on Mobile Bay moves forward and backward through the action, and the chapter on the Red River campaign spends a disproportionate amount of time on Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, though the digression into diplomacy with Russia to counterbalance England and France is interesting. Far too often, the book careens between a topical and chronological organization (including a one-page “chapter” on coffee). In places, the editing is distractingly slipshod—such as on p. 167, when Rear Admiral John Dahlgren receives an “urgent massage” (message)—and when the author repeats verbatim the same quote from Welles on pages 150 and 156.

The book also contains many factual errors and contradictions—p. 61 references an engagement near “Jacksonville, Louisiana,” which could be the Battle of Olustee (near Jacksonville, Florida), p. 145 mentions 150 mortar shells per day falling on Vicksburg, a rate of “about two every minute both day and night” (it would take 2,880 shells daily to achieve this volume of fire) and p. 165 includes the Pawnee and Osage alongside the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws as “other southeastern tribes” subject to the Indian Removal Act and placed on the “Trail of Tears,” replacing the Chickasaw and Seminole usually included among the “Five Nations” forcibly exiled to Oklahoma. And he argues that black sailors had “promotion opportunities (58) but also that black sailors were limited to the rank of “boy” (57) yet thirteen (and only thirteen!) advanced to the petty officer rank (65). Worse, there are hints of racial stereotypes, including that black sailors were “used to discipline” from slavery, and therefore better able to withstand the rigors of shipboard life, and possessed “exceptional endurance and
strength,” (63) the same tropes enslavers used to justify keeping people of African ancestry in bondage.

The book’s few positives include a chapter on Robert Smalls, a Black mariner who sailed a Confederate vessel out of Charleston harbor, and for whom the Navy renamed the USS Chancellorsville (CG-62) in early 2023, replacing the name of a Confederate battlefield victory, in the Department of Defense’s long overdue effort to finally remove Confederate commemoration and memorialization from ship and base names across the services. And Bruns does highlight the substantial number of Black sailors (almost 20 percent of the Navy by the end of the war) and their service in every theater (riverine operations, coastal raids, and bluewater blockade duty). Instead of the brief conclusion on the immediate postwar period, readers might appreciate some analysis on Jim Crow’s strange naval career, and how Black sailors who were fully integrated into gun crews and other combat roles in the Civil War-era Navy became relegated exclusively to mess duty (as cooks and stewards) by the outbreak of World War II.

Unfortunately, the book’s few positives and attention to an otherwise worthy topic do not outweigh its many technical and organizational flaws, and Bruns is likely not the final word on the subject. Scholars seeking a balanced, if brief, treatment of the successes and challenges of Black sailors in the Civil War would be better served by consulting Joseph Reidy’s “Black Men in Navy Blue during the Civil War,” from the National Archives’ Prologue magazine.¹

Christopher M. Rein, a former naval officer and Navy ROTC instructor, is the author of Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State (LSU, 2019) and The Second Colorado Cavalry: A Civil War Regiment on the Great Plains (Oklahoma, 2020). He is currently the managing editor at Air University Press in Montgomery, Alabama.