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The “King’s Negroes”: Enslaved Workers in Royal Navy Yards in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This article explores the Royal Navy’s unique use of enslaved labour in its naval yards in Jamaica during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, highlighting how the Crown’s pursuit of naval supremacy was built in part on the forced labour and skills of the African diaspora. Beginning in 1729, under the direction of Rear Admiral Charles Stewart, the Royal Navy shifted from hiring enslaved workers from local populations to purchasing them outright for Crown use, establishing a workforce that included both men and women. Stewart’s pronatalist policy aimed to secure a self-replenishing labour supply by encouraging the birth of children who would also be enslaved in service to the navy. Over more than a century, these “King’s Negroes” were trained in European shipbuilding and maintenance, transferring valuable technical knowledge while enduring harsh conditions and a life of bondage. The article provides a microhistorical lens on the Atlantic world, focusing on the lived experiences of these enslaved individuals and their unintended role in bolstering Britain’s naval power. By examining the origins, conditions, and legacies of this workforce, the article contributes to broader discussions on slavery, imperialism, and the global reach of military-industrial enterprises in the Atlantic era.

Keywords: Royal Navy; Slavery; Maritime Labour; Eighteenth Century; Early Modern

Introduction

During the eighteenth century, the Royal Navy was one of the largest military-industrial enterprises the world had ever seen.¹ The need to build, arm, and supply ships led to a network of yards across the Atlantic world.² These yards required workers, skilled in a number of trades, to service ships. In 1729 Rear Admiral Charles Stewart, the commander-in-chief in Jamaica, decided to purchase enslaved workers for the Crown to fulfil this requirement. The decision started more than a century of naval training, leading to knowledge transfer, for the enslaved African diaspora of the Caribbean naval yards. Stewart also attempted a pronatalist policy by including enslaved women, with the aim of using any children born to them as enslaved workers in the yards. This article will focus on the establishment of the Royal Navy as an owner of enslaved people before looking at the work carried out by the enslaved, the conditions they faced, and the continued use of enslaved workers throughout

¹ N. A.M. Rodger, “From the ‘Military Revolution’ to the ‘Fiscal-Naval State,’” *Journal for Maritime Research* 13:2 (November 2011), 119–28.

² Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *American Historical Review* 111:3 (2006), 741–57.

the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In doing so, I aim to tell an Atlantic microhistory focusing on relatively small groups of enslaved people in one location, many of whom had been forcibly transported from Africa to the West Indies through the transatlantic slave system. Once enslaved on behalf of the Crown and taught European ship maintenance skills, they would unwittingly and unwillingly assist Britain in becoming the leading naval power of the time.³

The “King’s Negros,” as the enslaved workers were called, are unique in British maritime history and potentially in the history of the Atlantic world.⁴ They were created to ensure an unlimited supply of workers through a pronatalist policy of enslaved men and women who would produce children born into Crown service for the rest of their lives. There are many examples of enslaved maritime workers in the Americas, but most of them were used by their owners to generate a tangible profit through paid service. They were hired out, and their owners received their pay. The navy had previously hired enslaved workers from local people in a similar fashion, and Rear Admiral Stewart had complained of this practice in his justification to establish the navy’s own enslaved workforce.⁵ Unlike other enslaved people in military use, the enslaved workers of British naval yards were purchased specifically to be trained as craftsmen and skilled workers, or, in the case of the women, to have children and work as unskilled labourers.⁶

Across the Atlantic world there are examples of enslaved people owned by monarchs, and previous work has explored their lives. In the Spanish Americas there were the “royal slaves” of Cuba in El Cobre and Havana, while in Callao and Guayaquil, state-owned enslaved people worked in shipyards.⁷ The French had state-owned enslaved people in New Orleans, as did the Dutch in Berbice. However, these examples were under state-owned organisations geared towards profit through monetary gain.⁸ The Royal African Company, another state-owned organisation, had “castle slaves” in West Africa, but they were paid a wage and held more autonomy than the enslaved of the Americas, and this company also sought to generate profit for its owners, including the monarch. Most of these examples used the physical strength of the enslaved in laborious tasks such as mining, sawing wood, building, and rowing boats, with very few working in “skilled” trades.⁹ A skilled trade would be defined as one that requires a high degree of training, normally through an apprenticeship

³ Lara Putnam, “To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Social History* 39:3 (2006), 615–30; John-Paul Gbubrial, “Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian,” *Past & Present* 242:14 (2019), 1–22; Maxine Berg, “Introduction: Global Microhistory of the Local and the Global,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 27:1–2 (2023), 1–5.

⁴ “& distinguishd on the ships books as Kings Negros.” The National Archives (hereafter TNA) ADM 106/832/118, Letter from Rear Admiral Stewart to Navy Board, 10 March 1731.

⁵ TNA ADM 1/231, Stewart to Admiralty, 29 December 1730. Further evidence of Royal Navy use of enslaved labour hired from owners has been found in Antigua, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, Bermuda, and even Charlestown. See Jeremy Young, “Les marins noirs dans la Royal Navy au XVIII^e siècle,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, no. 177 (2017), 1; James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁶ Richard H. Hall, *Occupations and the Social Structure* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

⁷ María Elena Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670–1780* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Clayton Lawrence, *Caulkers and Carpenters in a New World: The Shipyards of Colonial Guayaquil* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980); Frederik Bowser, *The African Slave In Colonial Peru, 1524–1650* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974).

⁸ Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: New Press, 2020).

⁹ Rebecca Shumway, “Castle Slaves of the Eighteenth-Century Gold Coast (Ghana),” *Slavery & Abolition* 35:1 (2 January 2014), 84–98.

system.¹⁰ Across the Americas state-owned, for-profit ventures exploited enslaved people as both skilled and unskilled workers.

Within military histories, the US Navy used enslaved labour in Florida, again for the physical strength of enslaved people as opposed to their skill, this time for building fortifications, although this notably did not seek to generate profit but to save costs in a similar fashion to the “King’s Negroes.”¹¹ The West India Regiments of the British Army, as enslaved soldiers placed into regiments in the West Indies, constitute another example of British military enslavement. Once again these were formed to use the physical strength of the enslaved people, although some training was required to ensure use of weapons and the ability to drill effectively as a unit.¹² This article seeks to add to the large body of literature on military slavery whilst presenting a new investigation of a topic rarely mentioned in the literature.¹³ The enslaved workers of the Royal Navy were not unique because they were state-owned, supported the military, or because they were to be trained in skilled work. The uniqueness of the Royal Navy’s enslaved workforce comes from a combination of these factors and one further reason: The “Kings Negroes” are potentially the only recorded occasion of state-owned enslaved people being purchased solely to be taught skilled trades through a pronatalist policy. Although this policy would fail within twenty years, more than twenty children would be born into this world of Crown ownership, and enslavement within the world of the Royal Navy would last for over a hundred years.¹⁴ The investigation of these groups of people is therefore worthy of research.

Establishing the Royal Navy as an Owner of Enslaved People

By purchasing enslaved people, Stewart intended to create a pool of skilled labourers to meet the needs of a naval yard. This was necessary because the Admiralty had failed to entice sufficient men from Britain to work in vital trades.¹⁵ In many parts of the Atlantic World, hiring British workers to serve overseas was difficult because of disease or the perception of people in Britain that these areas were particularly deadly. Jamaica had both

¹⁰ Hall, *Occupations and the Social Structure*.

¹¹ Thomas Hulse, “Military Slave Rentals, the Construction of Army Fortifications, and the Navy Yard in Pensacola, Florida, 1824–1863,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 88:4 (2009), 497–539.

¹² David Lambert, “[A] Mere Cloak for Their Proud Contempt and Antipathy towards the African Race’: Imagining Britain’s West India Regiments in the Caribbean, 1795–1838,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46:4 (4 July 2018), 627–50.

¹³ Dan Baugh and Duncan Crewe include details on enslaved people in the Royal Navy’s Jamaican ports in their books, but do not pursue the matter. Baugh published transcribed letters from the Admiralty records which mention enslaved workers in his book *Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole*, and Crewe dedicates a few paragraphs to the subject in a chapter on manpower in the Caribbean yards in his book *Yellowjack and the Worm*. Jared Hardesty has spoken on the topic in the 1730s at conferences, and Maria (Lissa) Bollettino has covered the topic in the context of the Seven Years’ War as part of her PhD, whilst also giving papers at conferences about the key events of the 1730s which I will discuss here. I am indebted to both Jared and Lissa for their help when I first began researching the subject. I’m also indebted to Aaron Graham for discussions on the topic. Aaron was writing an article about the enslaved naval workers in the latter part of the eighteenth century when he tragically passed.

¹⁴ In 1738 at least twelve children had survived birth: George, Brompton, Penny, Mary, Diana, Abba 1, Joan, Betty, Abba 2, Mimba, Juda, and Stoud were aged from three months to five years. TNA ADM 106/906/23, G. Hinde, Port Royal. Account of King’s Negroes at the yard, 8 November 1738. A further list from 1748 reveals thirteen more: Stewart, Cato, Quaco, Charles, Quashy, Yeaho, Cudjoe, London, Mariah, Phebe, Vimba, Silvia, and Jenny were aged between seven and fifteen years old. TNA ADM 106/1061/63, A list of the Officers, Artificers, Seamen and Negroes employed at H.M. Yard on Navy Island, Port Antonio. Other lists and footnotes in letters relay the birth of children, which women had children, and unfortunately the death of some of these children too.

¹⁵ TNA ADM 1/3645, Letter from Navy Board, 19 September 1730.

a high death rate and a well-deserved reputation for this.¹⁶ When added to a shortage of skilled workers in Britain, as merchant and military yard growth outpaced the workforce, this led to a crisis.¹⁷ As a result the Admiralty continually struggled to incentivise naval yard workers to practice their trades there.

The requirements of naval yards were similar in any part of the world, wherever wooden men-of-war were serviced. Naval warships were the most complicated feats of engineering of their age, a mixture of architecture and engineering designed to carry a floating arsenal anywhere on the seas. However, in their simplest form they were made up of quite basic materials that required skilled people to create, and equally importantly, repair them. The ships themselves were merely wood held together by metal, pulled by sails, secured by rope. Yet craftsmen and skilled artificers combined to create something that was greater than the sum of its parts. Those same workers were required for the life cycle of ships to keep them operational.¹⁸ Once the workers were in place, most stores for repairs could be ordered from Britain, such as rope, cable, anchors, masts, and sails.¹⁹

Stewart's plan, with the Admiralty's support, was intended to provide skilled workers to fill labour gaps and eliminate the cost of hiring local workers or enticing workers from Britain. Shipwrights and house carpenters worked wood and were able to make repairs on the ship. This role was the most skilled of the trades taught to enslaved workers. Caulking was one of the main occupations that the enslaved workers learned, which involved plugging gaps in joins of a ship with hemp and tar to prevent leaks. The mixture was heated using pitch.²⁰ Smithing was another skilled trade, although only a few enslaved workers were apprenticed to the smiths as a result of the small number required. Working metal and wood would have placed smiths and carpenters in the category of craftsmen whereas the caulkers would have been skilled workers.²¹ As well as skilled labour, there was a requirement for manual labour, and although this could be provided by sailors from ships if required, there was often a hesitancy to put experienced sailors in danger of contracting tropical diseases.²² The carpenters required sawyers to cut their wood, and the caulkers required oakum to be used for caulking, not to mention general carrying and moving of masts, sails, cables, provisions, and any other type of stores required to support the maintenance of a ship.²³

To understand how the enslaved people in naval yards contributed, we must look at the administrative set-up of the Royal Navy and its yards. This is important to demonstrate the close involvement the most senior echelons had with the minutiae of daily decisions.

¹⁶ Trevor Burnard, "'The cuntry continues sicklie': White Mortality in Jamaica, 1655–1780," *Social History of Medicine* 12:1 (1999), 45–72.

¹⁷ Roger Morriss, *The Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy: Resources, Logistics and the State, 1755–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Brian Lavery, *Wooden Warship Construction: A History in Ship Models* (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth, 2017).

¹⁹ Some overseas yards had sailmakers including enslaved labourers in Jamaica after 1780. While the stores were ordered from Britain, there is a large body of literature detailing the issues in sourcing these materials from other parts of the world and their shortages.

²⁰ Ian Dear and Peter Kemp, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²¹ Hall, *Occupations and the Social Structure*.

²² Admiral Vernon order to Mr Hinde to employ enslaved people in place of seamen from HM ships for fear of "desertion and sickness," dated October 1739, in Daniel A. Baugh, *Naval Administration: 1715–1750* (London: Routledge, 2019). See also Nicholas Rogers, "Archipelagic Encounters: War, Race and Labor in American-Caribbean Waters," in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

²³ Julian Gwyn, *Ashore and Afloat: The British Navy and the Halifax Naval Yard before 1820* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004).

The Royal Navy was governed by the Board of the Admiralty, which consisted of seven members, who were all politicians.²⁴ The daily running of naval ports and yards was conducted by the Navy Board, which consisted of naval officers and was subordinate to the Board of the Admiralty.²⁵ In home ports and larger bases, the yard was headed by a commissioner, who was a member of the Navy Board but did not attend meetings. Port Royal was never large enough to warrant this post, so instead the yard was managed by the “naval officer,” which was a civilian appointment, although normally from a naval background. The naval officer (also known as the storekeeper), along with the master attendant and master shipwright, would run the yard, although in practice smaller yards such as those in the West Indies would sometimes have only two people filling these positions (Figure 1). Port Antonio had only one civilian officer for much of its existence. The master shipwright would oversee 85 per cent of workers in the yard and was considered senior to the master caulker.²⁶ In Jamaica they were mostly based in Kingston and Port Royal, although at times would stay at Navy Island in Port Antonio on the north coast.²⁷

Separate to the civilian management of the yard was the commander-in-chief of the naval forces, who commanded all ships and men of the Royal Navy on station. The newly promoted Rear Admiral Charles Stewart arrived in Jamaica to take over this position in 1729. As soon as he was ordered to construct a new naval facility, Stewart began to devise a way of employing enslaved people, owned by the Royal Navy, to develop the base. The new yard was the first overseas naval base built from scratch and was located on Navy Island in Port Antonio harbour, which was purchased specifically for the base. In November 1729 he created a set of instructions to the Navy Board outlining his vision, including that “some choice negroes be bought to the [number of] 30” with around twenty being sourced from the next annual “Guinea ship,” and the remaining ten or so to be “seasoned,” that is to have lived on the island for the initial period of years and survived the high mortality of new arrivals.²⁸ Stewart’s plan laid out that “the boys should be apprentices to Master Caulker, Carpenter or Builder.” The plan also stated the aim that they would be “brought up to their several trades as caulkers or ship carpenters.”²⁹ Approval was given by the Admiralty Board and instructions issued in September 1730 stated that they had “given orders to the Navy Board for buying of negroes.”³⁰ The approval by the two highest governing bodies of the Royal Navy demonstrates how widely accepted slavery was. This also overturns the idea of the Royal Navy being “a little piece of British territory in which slavery was improper”; instead slavery abounded in the Caribbean world of the Royal Navy, touching all levels of the Service.³¹ The naval officers under Stewart purchased enslaved people from local contacts, including

²⁴ A mixture of naval officers and civilians who were members of parliament through the House of Commons or the House of Lords.

²⁵ Royal Museums Greenwich, Research Guide B6: Royal Navy, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/research-guides/research-guide-b6-royal-navy-administrative-records>. For further information, see Nicholas A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London: Penguin Books in association with the National Maritime Museum, 2006); Roger Morriss, *The Royal Dockyards during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983); Gwyn, *Ashore and Afloat*.

²⁶ Gwyn, *Ashore and Afloat*.

²⁷ National Archives, Research Guides: Royal Navy Dockyard Staff, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/royal-naval-dockyard-staff/>

²⁸ TNA ADM 106/813/169, RAdm Charles Stewart to the Navy Board, 11 November 1729; Nicholas Radburn, “[M]anaged at First as If They Were Beasts’: The Seasoning of Enslaved Africans in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 6:1 (29 January 2021), 11–30.

²⁹ TNA ADM 2/53, Admiralty Instructions and Orders; TNA ADM 106/813/169, Stewart to Navy Board, 11 November 1729.

³⁰ TNA ADM 2/53, Admiralty Instructions and Orders.

³¹ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Fontana, 1990).

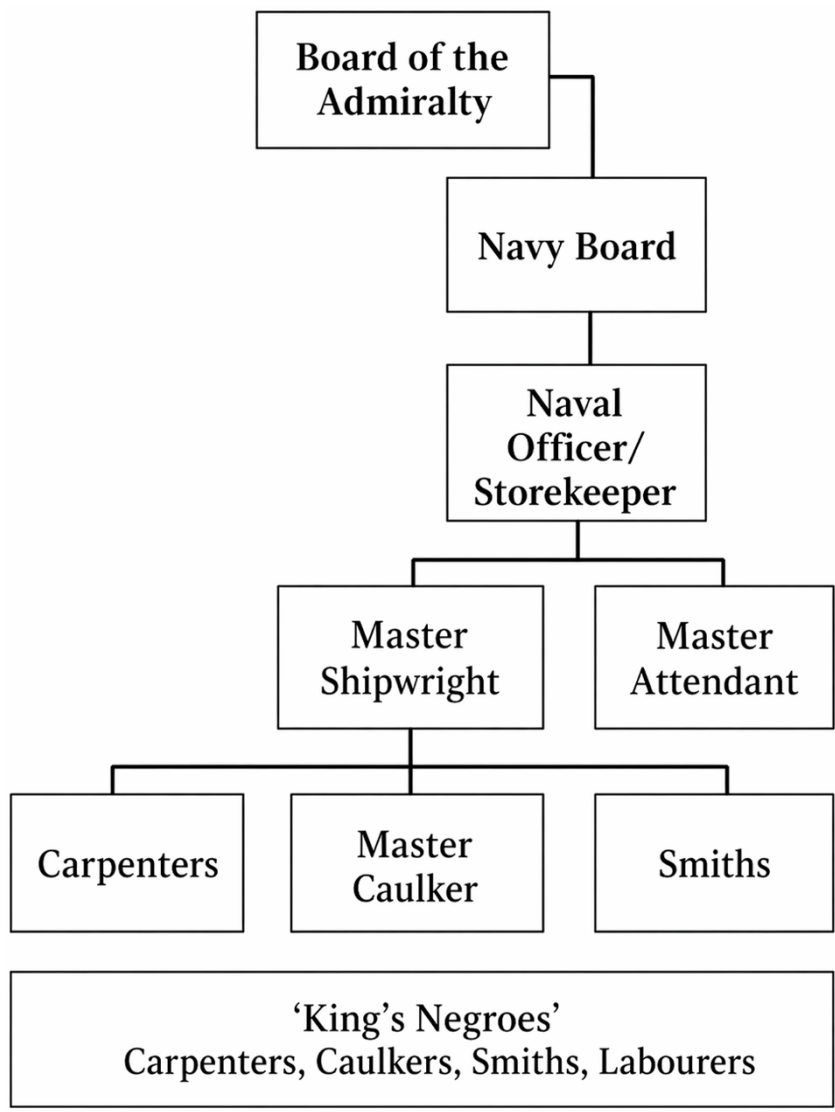


Figure 1. A simplified diagram of a yard's management hierarchy. The enslaved workers were apprenticed to more senior workers in their trade.

fellow naval officers and the island's elite.³² These included Robert Hunter, the governor; Robert Needham, one of the largest slaveholders of eighteenth-century Jamaica; and

³² The naval officers were Henry Reddish and William Boys, although Boys may have been working for the South Sea Company or a plantation at the time. Both would go on to serve in the fleet that attacked Cartagena in 1741. Reddish died in 1742, but Boys rose to the position of commodore and became lieutenant governor of Greenwich Hospital. N. A. M. Rodger, "Boys, William (1700–1774), naval officer." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 3 January 2008, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-64849>; Paul Martinovich, "The Georgian Post Captain List," *Navy Records Society Online Magazine*, 10 April 2016, https://www.navyrecords.org.uk/magazine_posts/the-georgian-post-captain-list/.

Table 1. Payment to shipwrights and caulkers

Task	Pay	Additional Information
Shipwright	£1 12s per month (add 3s per day when working with tools)	Borne on Southampton Hulk
Caulker	£1 12s per month (add 3s per day when working with tools)	Borne on Southampton Hulk
Instructing enslaved apprentices	4p a day	First Year
Instructing enslaved apprentices	5p a day	Second Year
Instructing enslaved apprentices	6p a day	Third Year
Instructing enslaved apprentices	7p a day	Fourth Year

'Officers may have it in their power after the first year to advance one penny or two pence a day to the said allowance where they observe the care of the artificer and improvement of the boy in such encouragement according to the practice of his majesties yards at home'.

Edward Pratter, member of the Jamaican Assembly and agent of the South Sea Company.³³ With this the Royal Navy became a slaveowner, a situation that would endure for the next century.³⁴

The orders issued by the Admiralty Board stated that they were “directions ... relating to the breeding up ... and ... the tuition” of the enslaved people.³⁵ The Navy Board was clear that Stewart’s objective was to train skilled workers for the benefit of the Crown. They explained that waiting on the annual “Guinea ship” would cause delays and so he should purchase locally from Jamaica. In his response Stewart stated, “I am glad their lordships are come to a resolution to buy negros, as the King has been the only person in this country not served by them.”³⁶ Indeed he felt that, the king, through the Navy, had for years been training enslaved people belonging to local owners, having “paid dear for the education of those he has been obliged to hire for ... ten shillings a day.”³⁷ Stewart was commenting on the situation that had persisted for some time whereby the navy had trained hired enslaved workers in skills only to then have to pay for their hire from their local owners. Stewart’s plan promised to save the cost of day-hire, on which the navy had long depended, and to develop a long-term supply of skilled labour.

With the approval to purchase enslaved workers, the Navy Board also offered instructions into how much to pay the shipwrights and caulkers for training enslaved apprentices (Table 1). In England masters of apprentices received two thirds of their apprentice’s pay, but as enslaved workers would receive no pay, suitable recompense was required.³⁸ This measure highlights the lengths to which the Navy had to go in order for British workers to serve in Jamaica. The instructions ended with the Navy Board’s main goal made plain: “We hope at the end of the four years boys so instructed may be able to perform a good days work and made fit to be employed amongst gangs of men under the inspection of an officer for

³³ Trevor G. Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650–1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³⁴ TNA ADM 106/823/301, Stewart to Navy Board, 29 December 1730.

³⁵ TNA ADM 2/53, Admiralty Instructions and Orders.

³⁶ TNA ADM 1/231/147, RAdm Charles Stewart to Admiralty Board, 29 December 1730.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ J. M. Haas, “Work and Authority in the Royal Dockyards from the Seventeenth Century to 1870,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 124 (1980), 419–28.

the intire benefit of the Crown.”³⁹ The Royal Navy had taken Stewart’s plan, endorsed it, and then given further instructions which detailed how British workers were to be rewarded for the training of their enslaved apprentices. All of this led to the hope that they would reduce the strain on the Navy to source labour from Britain or from ships on station. All measures were taken to benefit the Crown, and despite the amount of money on offer to shipwrights and caulkers, it must not be forgotten that this was an exercise in saving money by creating a pool of free labour for the Royal Navy.

Work Carried Out by the Enslaved

In early 1731, having received permission to purchase enslaved artificers and instructions on how to train them, Stewart wrote that “Naval officers have purchased two negros, one sawyer the other has begun to learn to caulk, who I have ordered to be perfected onboard my own ship, they cost ninety five pounds.”⁴⁰ Stewart was paying attention to the orders of the admiralty in providing “tuition,” and by 1732 he was justifying the purchase of more enslaved workers to labour on the new fortifications being built at Navy Island, and also for maintaining ships through careening. He wrote, “I think it will be the most frugal to enlarge the number of negros there who will serve as labourers for carrying on the fortifications as well as careening the ships.”⁴¹ Careening involved pulling ships onto their side by placing ropes around the masts and was often damaging to ships. In lieu of drydock facilities, it was the only way to access ship’s hulls and enable them to be cleaned, caulked, and sheathed with extra wood to prevent worm damage as much as possible. This process was extremely important as ships could only survive for a few months in Caribbean waters without any protection from the *Teredo navalis* worm.⁴²

Enslaved workers were involved from the very start, clearing the island and erecting the required buildings. Work sheets list “an account of work done on the navy island from February 21 1732 to August 19 1732” showing eight people employed as carpenters, four of which – Cojo, Robin, Dover, and Quashy – were enslaved. It is often easy to spot enslaved workers in the list, as they lacked a surname, but on this occasion the author also added, “Note where there is put one single name ... they are negroes.” The lists tell us that this workforce, half of whom were enslaved, built and shingled storehouses, made frames for an alarm bell, and worked on the wharf.⁴³

The “King’s Negroes” performed a variety of jobs in the yards, as we can see from muster lists for Jamaica in the 1730s. These are supplemented through several letters to the Navy Board describing work by, and lists of, “Kings Negroes” which highlight the trades of individuals. In October 1732 a list sent by Edward Chiles of “His Maj(esty’s) negroes on Linches Island Training up to the Several Trades” included “Caulkers: Jamaica, Peter, Jack, Shipwrights: Will, Dick, House Carpenter: James, Hugh, Sawyers: Mingo, Stonemason: Harry, George” and a “Free negro sawyer: John Stewart.”⁴⁴ In many of the later port muster lists throughout the 1740s, there are descriptions of work in the yard and on ships completed by white artificers and enslaved workers. These lists make no distinction between work done

³⁹ TNA ADM 1/3645, Letter from Navy Board, 19 September 1730.

⁴⁰ TNA ADM 106/832/118, Stewart to Navy Board, 18 March 1731.

⁴¹ TNA ADM 106/842/14, Stewart to Navy Board, 15 March 1732.

⁴² Duncan Crewe, *Yellow Jack and the Worm: British Naval Administration in the West Indies, 1739–1748* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 9; Dear and Kemp, *Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*; Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 303.

⁴³ TNA ADM 106/839/19, Stephen Stringer, Master House Carpenter, Navy Island letter to Navy Board dated 1732.

⁴⁴ TNA ADM 106/839/12, Edward Chiles to Navy Board, 6 October 1732.

by white artificers or work done by enslaved people, most likely as a result of enslaved workers doing the same work as their white counterparts. The work lists detail construction of the new hospital near Kingston and work on various navy ships. Some records again list the trades of enslaved men, such as bricklayers, sawyers, house carpenters, “ocham” (oakum) boys, hammer men to the smiths, and caulkers.⁴⁵

Free people such as John Stewart were able to use their skills to earn money from the navy working as sawyers or in other trades. Skilled enslaved people have been deemed the “elite enslaved workers” by some authors, and possessing a skill would have increased both value while enslaved and opportunities in freedom.⁴⁶ A 1726 letter from the Navy Board to the Admiralty Board discussing pay for workers in Jamaica indicated that shipwrights and caulkers cost 10 shillings a day to hire whereas unskilled enslaved labour was 5 shillings a day.⁴⁷ Once taught a trade, the value of a day’s work would be doubled, although as the enslaved workers who were hired by the navy found, this would go to their owners unless they gained their freedom. The trained enslaved workers would have been valued by the navy for their skills. This led to opportunities to slightly improve their situation, as it has been argued occurred in the Antigua naval yard and in other maritime occupations elsewhere.⁴⁸ As will be demonstrated below, on several occasions the naval officers gave concessions to the enslaved workers following complaints.

Conditions of the Enslaved

Besides the opportunities offered by learning skills, there is evidence that the enslaved workers were able to influence their situation through petitioning for changes in their conditions surrounding food, drink, and accommodation. The petitions began as soon as the first enslaved people were purchased, and we have evidence of three successful attempts to improve their situation. The first was in 1731: when Charles Stewart originally laid down what food would be provided, he added, “but they complain that allowance is too small therefore have added an extra piece of pork ... per week.”⁴⁹ Next, the enslaved people who were moved to Port Royal in 1737 complained of their accommodation, and it was reported to the Navy Board that “the negros belonging to his majesty’s yard have by their continual complaints desired a place to lodge inn.” James Crowcher, the civilian officer, suggested that a “shed at the North East part of the yard against the wall ... will be little expence.”⁵⁰ In December Commodore Charles Brown, the commander-in-chief, wrote to the Navy Board on a number of matters, and finished the letter with a request to “erect a lodging place for the King’s negroes, which is a conveniency they are much in want of.”⁵¹ Attached to this letter was a drawing of the proposed building measuring 60 feet in length and divided into 9 partitions with doorways. The partitions would mean each space was 6 feet 8 inches by 6 feet in width and depth, measuring 6 feet in height.⁵² In the last letter to mention housing, the naval officers told the Navy Board that homes were required for the enslaved people,

⁴⁵ TNA ADM 42/2272, Jamaica Pay Lists.

⁴⁶ Carpenters, sawyers, and blacksmiths are among other trades named in the elite enslaved workers category. Jenny Shaw, *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Baugh, *Naval Administration*, 336.

⁴⁸ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael J. Jarvis, “Maritime Masters and Seafaring Slaves in Bermuda, 1680–1783,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 59:3 (July 2002), 585; Henry Snow, “Fugitive Harbour: Labour, Community, and Marronage at Antigua Naval Yard,” *Slavery & Abolition* 42:4 (2 October 2021), 803–26.

⁴⁹ TNA ADM 106/832/133, Charles Stewart to Navy Board, 9 June 1731.

⁵⁰ TNA ADM 106/895/221, James Crowcher to Navy Board, 24 November 1738.

⁵¹ TNA ADM 106/895/222, Cdre Charles Brown to Navy Board, 6 December 1738.

⁵² TNA ADM 106/895/223, Cdre Charles Brown to Navy Board, 6 December 1738 Enclosure.

“as they have families,” and so the shed was intended for family units who would share the floorspace of a modern UK super king bed.⁵³ The enslaved workers may have used their position to leverage more from Commodore Brown and the naval officers, as three months before they secured housing, the men received an uplift of rum. Brown told the Navy Board that the naval officers and master shipwright had received complaints “for some time past” that “some addition ought to be made to their present allowance of rum.”⁵⁴ The rum ration was raised to half a pint of rum per day, representing a threefold increase which the naval officers noted was “the same allowance as the white men.”⁵⁵ The ability of the enslaved workers to petition officers and have those requests raised to the higher echelons of the Royal Navy demonstrates how they leveraged their value as skilled workers and accessed the same complaint system as workers in Britain’s yards.⁵⁶

Any benefits of working in naval yards were matched by disadvantages, as the yards could be dangerous places. Enslaved people often fared better than their European counterparts with regard to yellow fever and malaria but were sometimes struck down by smallpox or other diseases.⁵⁷ On top of the diseases which were endemic to the islands, industrial accidents could also occur. Conditions at Navy Island were poor, and at times work on ships was done at night as the weather was so bad during the day.⁵⁸ Deaths through industrial accidents were often only mentioned in passing in correspondence. The death of one of the enslaved named Cuffe was explained by mention of an accident on HMS *Kingston* when the ship was being heaved down. Capstans were used to wind ropes around to pull down ships. They were surrounded by bars which men pushed against to tighten the rope. On this occasion the tension of the ship against the capstan was too much and it gave out. As the capstan spun, released from the tension, some of the bars flew out and killed Cuffe, whilst injuring twenty-five other people (both white and Black).⁵⁹ We have less information around other deaths, but we can glimpse them in the margins of official correspondence. In 1733 the naval officer at Port Antonio wrote that they had “lost one negro man and one boy,” and also mentioned that one of the enslaved had venereal disease.⁶⁰ In response to an enquiry from the Navy Board concerning the enslaved people in 1749, the naval officer at Port Royal mentioned that all of the men listed in 1745 were still there, “except six that are since dead,” although no details were given as to how they died.⁶¹ One specific death we have minor details for is noted in the pay book for Port Antonio. The letters DD for “discharge dead” are noted against the name of an enslaved man named Bob, on 8 August 1750, noting “Drowned” in the entry. Whether his drowning was work related is not specified.⁶² The evidence does not give us enough information to say whether the enslaved had a higher death rate than British workers once disease is taken into account. However, one thing that is clear, even through the limited evidence we have, is that the work undertaken by enslaved people ended many of their lives early.

⁵³ TNA ADM 106/901/4, Crowcher & Hinde to Navy Board, 11 December 1738.

⁵⁴ TNA ADM 106/895/157, Cdre Brown to Navy Board, 20 August 1738.

⁵⁵ TNA ADM 106/901/18, Crowcher and Hinde to Navy Board, 13 October 1738.

⁵⁶ Ken Lunn and Ann Day, “Deference and Defiance: The Changing Nature of Petitioning in British Naval Dockyards,” *International Review of Social History* 46:S9 (December 2001), 131–50.

⁵⁷ TNA ADM 106/829/36, Edward Chiles to Navy Board, 3 June 1731.

⁵⁸ Baugh, *Naval Administration*, 362.

⁵⁹ TNA ADM 106/859/115, Edward Chiles to Navy Board, 2 April 1734.

⁶⁰ TNA AFM 106/848/46, Jacob Lamb to Navy Board, 10 July 1733.

⁶¹ Caird Library ADM 354/142/230, dated 9 March 1749.

⁶² TNA ADM 42/2356.

Despite Stewart's original intentions to create a stable workforce, reduction of naval budgets led to the Navy Board's decision to sell some of the enslaved people in 1737.⁶³ We have two accounts from Mr Hinde, civilian naval officer, and from Captain Thomas Fox, captain of HMS *Dunkirk*. Mr Hinde described a visit to Port Antonio where they chose who would stay and who would be sold, "such ... as, in the best of our judgements, we thought would sell best, upon ... inspection ... into ... ages, qualities and what else we could learn of them." The officers left, "thirty ... Artificers and the best of the labourers... wives & children ... who, ... should not be disposed of without their husbands, who are many of them the best slaves."⁶⁴ Hinde then proceeded to take those chosen to a public auction in Kingston in October 1737. In his letter he described the auction, explaining that despite trying 3 or 4 times, nobody would bid the £30 asking price. Only one person was sold, a man named Simon. He explained that £30 was the cost of newly arrived enslaved people, and those belonging to the navy were thought "more valuable" by the naval officers.⁶⁵ Despite the need to reduce the workforce, the naval officers were selective in who the best workers were, and in the value that they placed on those they tried to sell. The navy treated the enslaved as investments, and having trained them, knew they would be valuable to future owners who could charge the navy to hire them back.

Hinde was not quite finished there, and wrote the following month of his plan to eventually sell the enslaved people who were now at Port Royal: "What I have acted with regard to the King's Negroes, in not suffering them to be sold under thirty pounds a piece, I hope will meet with your approbation, but as soon as the wharf is filled up, and the merchants see we don't want to sell them, I don't doubt of their fetching a better price."⁶⁶ He also explained that nobody would bid on the Royal Navy's enslaved people because the Navy fed them naval provisions rather than having them grow their own food, and they were not used to being as fatigued as enslaved people on a plantation.⁶⁷ Here we have a view of the perception of Jamaican plantation owners regarding the "Kings Negroes," an opinion completely at odds with plantation owners in Antigua, who had complained that the Royal Navy worked their enslaved people too hard when they had been made to loan them to the yard at English Harbour.⁶⁸ The psychological effect of the attempted sale of someone should be considered here, and how this would have impacted the women, men, and those children old enough to understand what was happening. Jennifer Morgan has highlighted how enslaved people offered for sale were "repeatedly resituated in the market." Whilst the enslaved people could try to carve out lives, the attempted sale was a reminder of their commodification.⁶⁹

In 1745 some of the enslaved were once more offered for sale. Reducing cost was again the reason, with the repairs of a devastating hurricane the year before further stretching naval budgets, but there were also complaints about the women and children. This demonstrates that the value of the enslaved people was always contextual. Just as men were valued when their skills were required and disposed of when they were no longer needed, the women found that when they passed child-bearing age, the navy was quick to release

⁶³ Baugh, *Naval Administration*; R. J. B. Knight, A. W. H. Pearsall, N. A. M. Rodge, G. Till, and John B. Hattendorf, eds., *British Naval Documents, 1204–1960* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁶⁴ TNA ADM 106/892/8, Mr Hinde to Navy Board, 16 October 1737.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ TNA ADM 106/892/12, Mr Hinde to Navy Board, 8 November 1737.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Snow, "Fugitive Harbour."

⁶⁹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021).

them. In a letter from the naval officer it was stated the women “were of no use and created great disturbance among the workmen.”⁷⁰ Admiral Davers, the commander-in-chief, additionally wrote of the need to “remedy the evils which attends his majesty’s service by the rendezvous and commerce carried between ... negro women and children and the workmen, seamen and others in Port Royal Yard.”⁷¹ No further details survive of the interactions carried out by enslaved women, but it is clear they were penalised for trying to improve their situation as people who were able to navigate the dockyard and who would be aware of the requirements of incoming crews. The women and children at Port Royal were sold in July 1745 at public auction in Kingston, eight years after the original attempt, having survived for almost a decade past the decision to sell them. With this the only women remaining were at Navy Island, and the decision to close the yard after twenty years and thousands of wasted pounds marked the end for their time on the island. Five years later in 1750, seven of the remaining women and girls were sold to multiple buyers that year, while the others who remained there were moved to Port Royal. Jenny, the youngest of the girls, was just nine years old at the time of sale when she was sold on her own to Henry Chapman.⁷² Despite the original intention of the naval officers not to separate husbands and wives, the sale of only the women and children in 1745 and 1750 must surely have destroyed families, and it also destroyed the Royal Navy’s attempts at a pronatalist policy of enslavement, and Stewart’s vision of a succession of children born under the Crown to work in the yards.

Continued Use of Enslaved Workers into the Nineteenth Century

What became of the enslaved workers that remained? A list of “unserviceable” workers from 1767 lists around 14 names that match those of a 1750 list, and at least 5 from the original list of 1732: Caesar, Guy, George, Harry, and Dick. These men would have been between 54 and 60 years old, having served the Royal Navy for 35 years, including through the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years’ War. Two years later Commodore Forrest, commander-in-chief, complained to the Navy Board: “I observe there are orders that negros when wanted should be hired and no more negros to be purchased. ... They are now totally decayed and it would be a work of time to bring this matter to bear again.”⁷³ Forrest would have been quite the expert, owning 3,000 acres in Jamaica and over 400 slaves, including one named Wager who featured prominently in Tacky’s revolt, a major rebellion in 1760–1.⁷⁴

As the original enslaved group grew too old to work, and the navy faced the continuous problem of recruiting workers, they replenished the ranks of the enslaved workers, reviving efforts to create a trained, enslaved workforce. In 1780 the Navy purchased 74 enslaved men in Jamaica between the age of 20 and 45, all of whom had trades listed next to them, including 40 caulkers, 28 labourers (including a bricklayer and one capable of heating pitch), 3 sailmakers, 2 sawyers, and a smith.⁷⁵ The pronatalist policy was dropped, and no more women would come under Royal Navy ownership. Orders issued in 1784 for officers of his majesty’s foreign yards included instructions on “the government of negroes,” such as directions for boys to be purchased at 12–14 years and accommodated with their

⁷⁰ Caird Library and Archive ADM/B/142, John Cleveland letter, 19 March 1750.

⁷¹ Caird Library and Archive ADM/B/142, Copy of Orders from Adm Davers, 30 May 1745.

⁷² TNA ADM 42/2356.

⁷³ TNA ADM 106/1177/203, Forrest to Navy Board, 12 August 1769.

⁷⁴ Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2022).

⁷⁵ TNA ADM 106/1257/159–161, Mr. Holman, Greenwich, Jamaica, Duplicate notice of the issuing of bills to a number of persons for the purchase of 74 negroes in accordance with the valuations certified by Vice Admiral Sir Peter Parker, 27 May 1780.

“white artificer shipwrights or caulkers,” who would receive £10 a year for training them. Further guidance was given that “boys found at the end of the first five years diligent and expert in their business shall be allowed 3 s[hillings] per week as an encouragement for their industry.” Despite the instructions, there was some hesitation to pay the enslaved for fear of causing problems among enslaved workers who were not covered by these orders. In 1785 the naval officers from Antigua wrote that James, Amba, Bashee, and Ben had come to the end of their five-year apprenticeship, and with James and Amba becoming shipwrights, Bashee a caulker, and Ben a sawyer, they would be entitled to three shillings per week. The naval officers were worried about enslaved workers who had previously completed five years but didn’t fall within the new orders, and questioned what should be done. They noted they were withholding payment until orders were received explaining how to proceed. Unfortunately the response to the query has not survived. The orders were clear that boys should only be employed for naval work, never personal use, and should only be punished by the naval officers, and usually through confinement out of working hours. They were only to be flogged for crimes, and only in line with naval punishments. Any officer found to disobey the orders on mistreatment was threatened with discharge or criminal prosecution, “it being the intention to have them treated in every respect as white men.”⁷⁶ Finally there were provisions for teaching the enslaved to read in order to understand the Bible, although later documents from 1824 claim they were never taught to read and nobody within the yard in Jamaica had attempted to do so.⁷⁷

There are some examples of the naval officers manumitting the enslaved, although the evidence suggests it was more widely practised before the 1784 orders were issued. In 1765 a letter to the Navy Board petitioned for the freedom of Samuel Stuard, a foreman to smiths. Samuel goes on to say that he has been injured in service of the navy and requests his freedom. Samuel gained his freedom, and was required to be employed in a similar way to hired enslaved people, except that he would receive the wages he earned, unlike his enslaved colleagues.⁷⁸ Despite having the knowledge gained from working as a smith, it is questionable whether Samuel could be employed following his injury. Not all Royal Navy officers agreed with the manumission of some of the enslaved. Commodore Forrest complained about orders to free enslaved workers. Giving his opinion on the matter in 1769 he noted “one has lately been manumised by your orders, which I fear will have a bad effect on the others.”⁷⁹ In his next letter to the Navy Board, Forrest explained how his concerns had been confirmed when, “Cato or Sam Smith manumised by your order ... thought himself independent of all, first behaving saucily to the master shipwright, and now absented himself entirely. He was before a useful fellow and is now lost to the service ... besides the bad example set to others. Such is the gratitude of negros.”⁸⁰ As a slave owner Forrest held some extremely prejudiced views, but the idea that the enslaved owed any service to their old master once free, and would show ingratitude by using that freedom, is striking. These views from naval officers may have influenced the Navy Board and led to the orders of 1784.

The remaining administrative documents show the influence that individual officers had on the lives of enslaved workers. Some valued them and others preferred to hire enslaved workers, such as Rear Admiral Parry who complained that the enslaved workers owned by the navy were frequently sick and unfit for duty and quickly “become invalids.” Hiring from locals “would be much better ... than to depend on the Kings Negroes.”⁸¹ The personal

⁷⁶ Admiralty Library Mss 141, Duty and instructions to officers of the dock yards.

⁷⁷ TNA ADM 42/2309, Jamaica lists of persons entered, dead or discharged.

⁷⁸ TNA ADM 106/1143/144, Petition of Samuel Stuard to Navy Board, 8 November 1765.

⁷⁹ TNA ADM 106/1177/203, Forrest to Navy Board, 12 August 1769.

⁸⁰ TNA ADM 106/1177/210, Forrest to Navy Board, 9 September 1769.

⁸¹ TNA ADM 106/1170/206, Admiral Parry to Navy Board, 26 June 1768.

predilections of officers along with the fluctuating demand for workers throughout the frequent bouts of war and peace meant that the purchase, rental, or sale of enslaved workers under the Crown continued for the rest of the century and into the next. The Royal Navy would continue to hire and purchase enslaved men until the full abolition of slavery in the British Empire in the 1830s. This represents a century of knowledge transfer from the Royal Navy to its enslaved workers both owned and hired. For the most part the only benefit gained was to the Royal Navy and the owners of those it hired. There were some minor benefits to the enslaved such as a slightly better life than they may have faced on a plantation, but being enslaved under any conditions was a terrible experience. The people involved in the yards of the Royal Navy across the time span we have examined number in the hundreds.⁸² The navy's attempt to exploit enslaved people to solve its inability to hire maritime workers will have passed on knowledge of maritime trades to a large community of enslaved workers.

With the gradual abolition of slavery across the British Empire in the 1830s, the final workers were in a position to exploit this knowledge through work in naval, and potentially civilian, yards. The pay lists for Port Royal in 1833 show that several enslaved shipwrights, sailmakers, house carpenters, smiths, and at least one caulker were employed in the yard after they were manumitted by the Crown. Under the line, "from whence," many were noted as native. At least one, a caulker named George Smith, was noted as being "late a slave to the crown." On the 31 December 1833 a large cross next to his name showed that he had made his mark and earned £23 5s for the Christmas quarter.⁸³ Smith's ability to earn money did not allow him to progress beyond the yard though, and on 22 May 1834 he was invalided and added to the former enslaved workers who lived in the yard into old age. The other five invalided people – Peter, Jack, Ben, Tom, and Frederick – had all been freed but had nowhere else to go, having been part of the second wave of workers that were enslaved in 1780. The 1784 orders had instructed that there was to be work for those too old to continue in their trades. They should "be employed in sweeping and keeping the yard clean, picking ocham [oakum], sorting light stores, watching the yard, or any easy work that is within their strength."⁸⁴ As a result of this order, the five infirm, formerly enslaved workers had been at Port Royal for fifty-four years in 1834. Tom was marked as "discharge dead" in 1839, with Ben also passing away in 1840, having lived and worked in the yard for six decades. In the same pay list, four shipwrights, a sailmaker, and a smith, having entered employment in the yard on 1 August 1833 when slavery was abolished across the British Empire, were still using the knowledge and skills they had learned to earn a wage seven years after they had been freed.⁸⁵ One hundred and ten years after Admiral Stewart decided to train enslaved workers for the Georgian Crown, the knowledge and skills taught to enslaved workers were still being used for the benefit of the Royal Navy in the early Victorian fleet. However, it now had some benefit to a small number of the formerly enslaved.

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⁸² Exact numbers of those purchased by the Royal Navy, or born to enslaved mothers, are hard to work out, as a result of the limited records remaining. Between 1732 and 1750 around 150 people are named in lists in Jamaica. A further 74 are listed in 1780. Countless more were hired during this time. Work to find an exact number continues.

⁸³ TNA ADM 42/2295, Jamaica Pay Lists 1833.

⁸⁴ Admiralty Library Mss 141, Duty and instructions to officers of the dock yards.

⁸⁵ TNA ADM 42/2298, Jamaica Yard Muster Book 1839.

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