“Most Obedient and Loving Subjects:”
Impressed Seamen and the Rhetoric of Citizenship

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In July 1813, a group of sailors imprisoned at Chatham assured President James Madison that they were the “Most Obedient and Loving Subjects” of the United States. As “obedient and loving subjects,” they required the US government to free them from the British or, at the very least, to support them while they were imprisoned.¹ Like countless other early nineteenth century impressed American seamen, these sailors insisted that native born Americans, especially those who had served their county and fulfilled a citizen’s duties, deserved the US state’s intervention on their behalf.

Over the last decades, historians built on the work of Jesse Lemisch to advance our understanding of sailors and the maritime world. As part of that work, scholars have investigated the legal, economic, and nationalistic meanings of impressment. Despite this attention, we still know relatively little about those impressed or their families and friends. The British impressed thousands of American sailors leading up to and during the War of 1812. This affected the sailors’ friends, relatives, and families, which constituted a large swath of the American population.²

As I read the 1813 petition and others much like it, I started wondering about citizenship. How did those at the bottom conceptualize citizenship and what expectations did they place on their new state? This paper represents my first attempts to sort out these issues. I hope that your feedback will help me as I proceed with this project.

Impressed seamen and their supporters, like much of the American public, wanted the US state to protect seamen, to guarantee “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights.” But the US did not

¹ Unidentified Sailors to President, Nassau Prison Ship at Chatham, 24 July 1813, Miscellaneous Correspondence Regarding Impressed Seamen, RG59: Records on Impressed Seamen, 1794-1815, Box 1, Folder Impressed Seamen, Not Identified, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.
² Joshua Wolf, “‘To Be Enslaved or Thus Deprived’: British Impressment, American Discontent, and the Making of the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair, 1803-1807,” War & Society 29, no. 1 (2010), 4-5.
possess the naval power to prevent British conscription of their men. Impressed American seamen were therefore *de facto* subject to British definitions of American citizenship. Today, I examine the rhetorical devices used by sailors, their families, and patrons when trying to elicit their release from British impressment between 1809 and 1815. Drawing on petitions and correspondence, I explore how sailors reacted to competing British and American definitions of citizenship and what the demands they made of the State indicated about how they characterized the relationship between a State and its citizen-subjects.

When writing to the US government, impressed American seamen unequivocally claimed to be subjects and citizens—terms they and others employed interchangeably—of the US. But proving who was and was not legally a citizen proved difficult. According to US law, individuals born in the US were citizens. In theory, if a sailor could prove his native birth, his citizenship was secure. Naturalization required a period of residency: initially two years; revised in 1795 to five years (briefly 14 years with the Naturalization Act of 1798 passed with the Alien and Sedition Acts); and by 1808, again five years.

However, these legal guidelines failed to completely separate British subject from American citizen. Because most Americans hailed from Great Britain or descended from those who did, they shared language, customs and culture with their recently estranged British cousins. British and American captains, consuls, and other officials had trouble deducing whether all those who claimed to be American were in fact American. The US issued Seamen’s Protective Certificates, but could be—and were—easily forged.³

To make matters more complex, the US and Great Britain famously/infamously differed on exactly what legally constituted a citizen or subject. Before the American Revolution, officials on both sides of the Atlantic relied on Blackstone’s *Commentaries* for concepts such as citizenship and national allegiance. Blackstone declared that a subjects’ allegiance to his State was “implied, original, and virtual.” That is, one’s natural allegiance to one’s king could not be

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“forfeited, cancelled or altered by any change of time, place, or circumstance, nor by any thing but the united concurrence of the legislature.”

When Americans asserted that one’s allegiance could be shifted to a new state, then, Britons denied their subjects this legal out, insisting that once a British subject, always a subject. British law classified those born on American soil as US citizens. But even native born Americans were claimed as Britons if they served on a British ship at any time, lived in Great Britain for two years or more, or married an English person.

American sailors rejected Great Britain’s right to determine their status. Instead, they referenced US law as the legitimate authority. Seaman Isaac Allen thus protested his January 1810 impressment as “contrary to my Protections and the Lawes of my Country” while Francis Bailey, who was seized in 1808 “contrary” to his “Protections,” wanted to be cleared “from a service that I am by no means Entitled to.”

Regardless of how the British or US officially categorized them, Allen, Bailey, and the unidentified prisoners of war declared that they were US citizens and because they had fulfilled their side of the social contract, demanded that the state protect them from extralegal, unjust treatment.

Seamen insisted that the US state shield them against wrongful seizure and ensure they were legally treated. In 1812, Robert Godman complained that the British treated him unjustly when they pulled him off an American schooner around the “island of Dominick.” Because his “Protection was torn to peaces [sic] by the officer that pressed me,” the English Admiralty court declared him and three other American sailors with him British subjects. As a “native of America and a Citizen,” he felt it his duty to inform "President Mederson [sic]" that "this was the way


5 Isaac Allen, Miscellaneous Correspondence Regarding Impressed Seamen, RG 59: Records of Impressed Seamen, 1794-1815, Box 1, NARA, College Park, Maryland; Francis Bailey, 19 February, 1808, RG59, Box 1, NARA, College Park, Maryland. My sense is that Americans’ rights-based rational against impressment were similar to British subjects’ reasons that they should not be impressed. British citizens derived their rights from their unwritten constitution and the Magna Carta, particularly the thirty-ninth chapter. Wolf, 6-7.
that American Seamen is used in the West Indies by England.” Because the men were “native born Citizens of America,” he presumed that the US would free them from the British.6

Those unidentified prisoners of war at Chatham, who wrote to the President in 1813, surrendered to the British when war broke out, as international law dictated that they should. But the British failed to treat them justly. Rather, the sailors were threatened with “Hanging—confinement in Irons, and in some Instance Flogging” if they did not enroll in His Majesty’s Navy. Other Americans were sent to British Men of War “by force of Arms,” which, the Americans assured the President, “alone could have induced them to “Sail under the British Flag.”” 7

These men had been “dragged on British ships” and “cut off from all communications and resources.” In their eyes, impressed men were illegally seized and then threatened with violent abuse, and cut off from those who might save them. The US failed to prevent their treatment, which they considered illegal, unjust, and abusive. But because they were “real Citizens” of the US, the US state should be assisting them so that they could enjoy “the Sweets of Liberty in that Country that gave them Birth.” They were understandably personally outraged by impressment, but, they pointed out, this appalling and unchecked treatment of US citizens was, they pointed out, a “well known fact in the Eyes of the Civilised World.”8

Seamen and their families expected the US government to protect and liberate its citizens from such depredations. Seamen like James Brown. Originally impressed off an American schooner in Jamaica in 1807, Brown was imprisoned for 18 months on a British war ship and his protections confiscated. He escaped, only to be re-impressed by a British crew while in Lisbon looking for an American ship bound to the US. After his 1811 escape, he informed Secretary of State James Madison of a “great many Americans here,” who, like him, required that the “government would take some method to clear their seamen from this tyrannical service.” Sadly, Brown died after he was discharged but before he returned to his home.9

6 Robert Godman, Haslar Hospital, 25 February 1812 to President Mederson, President of the United States via Rueben G. Beasley, American Consul in London, Miscellaneous Correspondence Regarding Impressed Seamen, RG59, Box 5, NARA, College Park.
7 24 July 1813, Nassau Prison Ship at Chatham, Unidentified Sailors to James Madison, President of the US.
8 24 July 1813, Nassau Prison Ship at Chatham, Unidentified Sailors to James Madison, President of the US.
9 Initial letter marked insufficient; later letter marked sufficient. James Brown, Misc. Correspondence Regarding Impressed Seamen, RG59, Box 2, NARA, College Park.
Sailors emphasized that their native birth made them worthy of their state’s intervention to ensure legal and just treatment. But many sought to prove their loyalty and service to the US. They contended that their native birth and service to country demanded the attention of their government. For example, Robert Godman acquainted “President William Medersen [sic]” of his family’s long service to the US. His father served in the Maryland Assembly while he had been the Clerk of the General Court Office.10

Sailors hoped the US state would save them from forced British service. The unidentified POWS at Chatham, facing yet another winter on their dreary prison ship, touted their “arduous…Struggle to emancipate ourselves from the Bowels and tyranny of a British man of War.” After resisting English service, it would be a shame if they were “Forced to serve in the British service” in order to survive.11 Instead, seamen longed for freedom so that they could “revenge” themselves “on those that now tyrannize over me.”12 William Chohoon begged Secretary Madison to secure his release in 1813 for as he “served [his] County in Peace,” he longed “to Fight for it in War.”13

In their petitions and correspondence, sailors, their relatives, and patrons, articulated their understanding about the duties of citizens and their state. Sailors offered their service and loyalty to their country. In return for being the “most Obedient and Loving Subjects,” they expected the US state to protect the rights specified by US law and ensure they were treated lawfully and justly, even by the powerful British. Godman and the three other signers of his petition promised that even if the US did not correct the “ungentlemanly and cowardly acts of the English,” they would still “Ever Strike true to the thirteen Stripes as the English calls it for we shall ever think that our duty.” The unidentified POWs concurred, though they pointed out how costly the state’s failure to fulfill its duties was to its citizens: Without help from the “County that gave them Birth,” they waited only for the “Welcome hand of death.”14

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10 Robert Godman, 1812, marked insufficient, NARA, College Park.
11 Unidentified Sailors, Nassau Prison Ship at Chatham, 24 July 1813.
12 Brown, Box 2; marked sufficient.
13 William Chohoon to the Secretary of State, 22 July 1813, Miscellaneous Correspondence, RG59, Box 3, NARA, College Park, Maryland.
14 Unidentified Sailors, Nassau Prison Ship at Chatham, 24 July 1813; Godman, 1812.