

Pirates and Privateers in the North Atlantic: 1600-1900

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According to legend, Alexander the Great once apprehended a pirate king and demanded to know what the man thought he was doing by infesting the sea. The man replied with noble insolence, "What do you think you are doing by infesting the whole world? Because I do it with one puny boat, I am called a pirate; because you do it with a great fleet, you are called an emperor."

This swift response was no doubt answered with a swifter execution, but it points out an interesting relationship: those who are working against the powers-that-be are outlaws, while those who are doing the same actions on a much larger scale are excused. The fact remains that they both employ essentially the same tactics; but the pirate lacks the power to enforce his particular brand of politics.

There was a time, however, during the colonial period, when pirates *did* have the power and influence to significantly affect politics and international affairs. Interestingly, in 1717, Charles Bellamy declared, "I am a free prince, and I have as much authority to make war on the whole world as he who has a hundred sail of ships at sea and an army of 100,000 men in the field."¹ This statement sounds very similar to the Persian pirate king above, and is likely the true source. In this paper, I will specifically examine the North Atlantic from the rise of pirate power through their peak and eventual decline, and how they interacted with the superpowers of their time.

Early Piracy in the New World

Piracy has likely existed for as long as nautical navigation itself has. Whenever the rewards outweigh the risk of punishment, pirates will begin to appear. Alexander the Great, as we mentioned above, had to deal with the pirates of the Middle East, and piracy in the Mediterranean was a threat to the Romans during early expansion of the Empire. The Vikings also utilized piracy

¹ Botting, Douglas. *The Pirates*. Time-Life Books, Alexandria, VA. 1978. (p. 6)

to great effect, but it was not until Europeans began to cross the Atlantic in large numbers that they began to flex their muscles. The French and the Dutch began the trend, but it was the British, surprisingly, who showed the greatest proficiency for this so-called 'sweet trade.'² In Tudor times, Wales itself was practically controlled by pirates, and many of the Lords in coastal areas ran operations comparable to crime syndicates of today.

As the New World gradually began to be explored and exploited for raw materials and resources, the major European colonial powers sent ships in increasing droves, exploring the coastlines and laying down their claims. Spain had a significant monopoly on territory and trade, controlling large parts of not only the Caribbean islands, but also significant portions of the central and southern Americas, reaching as far north as Florida. Meanwhile, England was sending her colonists further north, claiming the lands along the eastern seaboard of North America, as well as a handful of islands of her own in the Caribbean. France took the far north and interior of North America, and also made her claim on some remaining Caribbean islands, and the three superpowers of the colonial world were left eyeing each other in suspicion. To make matters more dangerous, Portuguese and Dutch settlers also made claims in the area. The unsteady balance of power and volatile situation created the perfect situation for piracy to flourish.

Sir Francis Drake's daring attacks on the Spaniards inspired many other French and British captains to attack the wealthy Spanish shipping. They were often granted letters of marque. These were documents that gave permission for a private captain to arm his vessel for the purpose of attacking and plundering enemy shipping. In essence, these were pirates' licenses. These privateers, as they were called, were allowed to keep whatever plunder they captured, but were not considered true pirates. Of course, the ships that they were attacking surely saw them as no different from any other pirate, regardless of what the foreign government said. Still, privateers soon became a common component of naval warfare during this period. The opposing governments soon found it

² Ibid. (p. 24)

was much cheaper to let someone else attack enemy shipping rather than send their own vessels into harm's way. Of course, many argued that this tolerance encouraged pirate activity, and would cause much regret later on.³

The first increase of piracy in the Caribbean was a direct result of Spanish arrogance. Groups of French settlers had settled on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), and called themselves 'boucaniers,' meaning 'smoker of meat.' Hence, the word *buccaneers*. They lived peacefully of the fruits and animals found on the island until the Spanish came in and drove them out. With nowhere to go, they turned their hand against these new enemies, saying their actions were legal because they were only directed against the Spanish, whereas regular pirates showed no favoritism.⁴

Sir Henry Morgan was one of the most famous buccaneers of this time. He was a Welshman who became an indentured servant for a time in Barbados. After earning his freedom, he made his way to Jamaica to start a new life, but along the way became associated with these displaced buccaneers. His greatest successes were the defeat of the Spanish fleet in 1669, and later, the sack of Panama, Spain's richest American city, in 1671. He was rewarded for these actions with knighthood and a Governorship of Jamaica.⁵

Buccaneering came to an end around 1689, when hostilities ended between England and Spain. However, most buccaneers, rather than return to a normal lifestyle, instead turned to outright piracy. Seaports in the North Atlantic were growing rapidly, and many heavy cargo ships were sailing unprotected, offering a tempting target for the rapidly growing numbers of pirates.

The Golden Age of Piracy (1690 – 1720)

³ Ibid. (p. 25)

⁴ Ibid. (p. 24)

⁵ Esquemeling, John. *The Buccaneers of America*. Amsterdam. 1678. (pp. 119-232)

Gosse, Philip. *The Pirates' Who's Who*. Rio Grande Press, Glorieta, NM. 1988. (pp. 222-228)

This expansion of the pirate ranks marked the beginning of the Golden Age of Piracy, which lasted for three decades. During this time, the Caribbean was ruled more by pirates than by her own colonial rulers half a hemisphere away. Cities on the American coast such as New Amsterdam began as pirate bases before growing into full-fledged settlements.

The names of pirates during this time have become infamous for debauchery, violence, and the sheer terror they spread in the shipping lanes. Captain William Kidd was a perfect example of one of these cutthroats. Born in Scotland and a successful businessman in New York, he was commissioned in 1695 by King William III of England to hunt the pirates that had become a significant threat. He set out at first in his ship, the *Adventure Galley*, to the area around Madagascar and northward into the Red Sea, where he discovered how profitable it was to board an enemy ship – and how easy. Indeed, many pirate captains were created this way. Initially only attacking pirates and French shipping whom England was currently at war with, Kidd soon began to cruise the Indian, African and Arabian coasts and attacking any merchant shipping he came upon. He was eventually arrested and bound for execution when the Whig party, in a political maneuver, declared amnesty for all pirates east of the Cape of Good Hope. This was an unusual turn of good luck for Kidd, who sailed away from the area and back to the familiar waters of the mid-Atlantic seaboard. During the course of this voyage, however, the Whigs' political gamble failed, and the Tories prevailed. They declared Kidd a fugitive, and his pardon was revoked. He eventually made his way to New York and hid his plunder in different locations in Long Island and New Jersey, to be picked up later, when the attention had died down. Returning to his old home and reunited with his family in 1699, Kidd's return to society was short-lived. The current governor tricked him into sailing to Boston, where he and his crew were once again arrested and sent to London. He was executed in 1701, but his crew was pardoned. They returned to America, divided their captain's treasure amongst themselves, and began respectable and comfortable lives in the colonies.⁶

⁶ Gosse, Philip. *The Pirates' Who's Who*. (pp. 181-184)

Botting, Douglas. *The Pirates*. (pp. 103-127)

Captain John “Calico Jack” Rackam was immortalized by Daniel Defoe’s book, *General History of the Most Notorious Pyrates*, and was best known for his fiery romance with a female member of his own crew, Anne Bonny. Typically, women were forbidden by the pirate code from joining a pirate crew, but Anne Bonny and her friend Mary Read were equally as fierce – if not more so – than most men. Rackam was also responsible for popularizing one of the most feared sights on the high seas – the ‘Jolly Roger.’⁷ Although the skull and crossbones was first flown around the year 1700, Rackam had his own design made of a skull over crossed cutlasses. When his mentor, Charles Vane, was voted out of his captaincy by the crew for cowardice, Rackam was voted into command, and he began to fly the flag. In two years, he captured over twenty ships in the West Indies before being ambushed by a British Navy sloop at Jamaica. He and Anne Bonny were captured and taken back to London where they were tried and hanged.⁸

The most fearsome of all the pirate captains was Edward Teach, better known as “Blackbeard.” Even among his crew, he was often referred to as ‘the devil incarnate,’⁹ and he lived up to this description. He learned his skills as a privateer for the British in the West Indies during the War of Spanish Succession, and when that war ended in 1713, he became a full-fledged pirate. The British were prepared to grant a Royal Pardon to all pirates who had acted as privateers during the aforementioned war, but Blackbeard was not interested. In 1716, he mounted 40 cannons on his ship, the infamous *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, and sailed out of Nassau in New Providence and into the pages of history and legend.

Blackbeard was known especially for his long and bushy beard for which he was nicknamed. He braided it before battle, and often stuck lighted wicks in his hat. In addition to a bandolier with cocked and loaded pistols, he had additional pistols, a cutlass, and a dagger in a belt around his waist.

⁷ Ibid. (p. 48)

⁸ Gosse, Philip. *The Pirates’ Who’s Who*. (pp. 252-254)

⁹ Botting, Douglas. *The Pirates*. (p. 137)

A compulsory drinker, he looked near-demonic in battle, with his long and tangled beard, flames proceeding from his head, and covered with weapons of various lethality.

After leaving Nassau, Blackbeard sailed up and down the American and Mexican coastline, from Virginia as far south as Honduras, capturing ships and taking cargo. In January of 1718, he made a deal with the governor of North Carolina and set up his base at Ocracoke Inlet. In May of that same year, Blackbeard sailed to Charleston, South Carolina, and blockaded the port for a week. He succeeded in capturing several ships before the governor of the state gave in and paid Blackbeard in medical supplies. By June, he commanded a fleet of four ships and over 400 men. However, the citizens of the nearby town of Bath had grown tired of the pirate presence and reported the location of Blackbeard to Governor Spotswood of Virginia.

In public, Governor Spotswood posted rewards for Blackbeard's capture, but in secret, he was putting details together to depose Blackbeard himself. He spied on Blackbeard for several months, and in November of 1718, decided to put his plan into action. Spotswood had available two men-of-war, the *H.M.S. Pearl* and the *H.M.S. Lyme*, and he dispatched them to Ocracoke. Blackbeard was warned of the plan, however, by his friends in the North Carolina governor's office, and had his ship fully armed when the British warships arrived. He shouted from his deck that no quarter would be given, ran up his flag, and fired a broadside into one of the approaching ships. He then turned against the other ship and let a second broadside fire – composed of small shot and shrapnel, which cut the British crew to ribbons. Blackbeard and his crew pulled up alongside and boarded the *H.M.S. Pearl*. Its captain, Lieutenant Maynard, was directly in his path. They pulled their pistols at the same time and fired, but Blackbeard's shot, unsteadied by his incessant drinking, went astray as Maynard's shot went into his chest. Surprisingly, he was unfazed. He came charging on, swinging his cutlass like a madman. Others of the British crew threw themselves at him with their own swords and pistols, but he could not be stopped. Finally, drawing another of his pistols, he seemed to sway precariously on his feet before toppling over dead. After the other pirates were

taken prisoner, his body was examined and 5 bullet wounds and 20 sword wounds were found. His death marked the final end of outright piracy along the American coast.¹⁰

The pirates were not completely destroyed, however, but were driven for a time out of the North Atlantic. Captain Howell Davis left the Bahamas for Africa where he mentored Bartholomew “Black Bart” Roberts, who is considered the greatest and deadliest pirate of the Golden Age.

After Davis was killed by the Portuguese off the coast of Africa in July 1719, the dread pirate Roberts went on a rampage through the new world. After destroying the Portuguese fleet at anchor, he sailed his vessel, the *Royal Rover*, across the Atlantic to another Portuguese colony: Brazil. There they happened upon an unprotected convoy. After relieving the most heavily laden ship of her valuable cargo, Roberts headed north for the Caribbean. The Royal Navy and her privateer lackeys prevented him from landing, though, so he plotted a new course due north – to Newfoundland. In July 1720, the *Royal Rover* sailed into the crowded port of Trepassi. Despite the fact that the port had good defenses, most of the defending ships’ crews fled, terrified by the unexpected arrival of a famous pirate in this far northern harbor. Roberts leisurely plundered 26 merchant ships, and sunk handfuls of fishing ships merely out of spite. To replace his aging ship, Roberts commandeered a British galley as his new ship, the *Royal Fortune*. He turned south and promptly captured another six French ships and a convoy of English transports. By September of 1720, he had returned to the Caribbean. He wanted to return to African waters, but the winds and currents were not favorable, so in his frustration, he embarked on a new campaign of death and destruction in the Lesser Antilles. His cunning strategy and fierceness had nearly brought shipping in the Caribbean to a halt by the spring of 1721, and without an abundance of prey, Roberts turned his ships east again, toward Africa. In February a year later, he was surprised by two British warships near the equator

¹⁰ Ibid. (pp. 144-154)
Gosse, Philip. *The Pirates’ Who’s Who*. (pp. 291-295)

and was killed in battle. His crew was tried and hanged, and the Golden Age of Piracy had come to an end.¹¹

Pirate Lairs

There were several significant strongholds of pirate activity in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, but there were some that stood out in infamy. The first pirate haven was the island of Tortuga, northwest of Hispaniola. When the buccaneers were driven out by the Spanish, they settled here and began to plan their revenge. The island was ideally situated to prey on shipping not only from Hispaniola, but also to and from the Bahamas, Cuba, and Jamaica.¹² This base was never discovered, but was abandoned little by little as its residents began more prosperous and comfortable settlements.

The town of Nassau on the island of New Providence in the Bahamas could be considered the capital of piracy in the North Atlantic. Governor Spotswood of Virginia called it a second Madagascar, after the infamous pirate haven of the Indian Ocean, and was more correct than he likely even knew, for Madagascar had finally been cleansed of piracy by the Royal Navy, and New York in its turn had all its pirates driven out. In 1701, it seemed piracy was on the verge of collapse – until the establishment of New Providence and a renaissance of privateering and piracy. By 1715, there were an estimated 2,000 pirates living on the island or on ships in the harbor, and the burnt-out hulks of over 40 captured ships.¹³ Many of the most famous pirate captains spent at least some time here, and with their massive resources, were able to ravage a large area of the seas, from Maine to Florida, to the Greater Antilles, and even down to Mexico and Honduras. The simple presence of so large a pirate presence in the area demanded that every convoy, no matter how large or small, had a naval escort. Insurance rates skyrocketed, and trade in the Caribbean was nearly paralyzed.

¹¹ Botting, Douglas. *The Pirates*. (pp. 160-173)

Gosse, Philip. *The Pirates' Who's Who*. (pp. 261-265)

¹² Esquemeling, John. *The Buccaneers of America*. (pp. 14-22)

¹³ Botting, Douglas. *The Pirates*. (pp. 128-135)

The Royal Navy ultimately had to send in a task force to eliminate the threat in 1718, and to their misfortune, most of their quarry escaped.

Blackbeard was one of those who had escaped, and he retreated to his establishment at Ocracoke Island in the North Carolina barrier islands. In defiance of the British, Blackbeard and Charles Vane hosted a *saturnalia*, a feast which ended up being the largest gathering of pirates on the North American mainland. It was here in the shallow waters of Ocracoke Inlet that Blackbeard eventually met his doom as well, in his last stand against British authority.

After the cleansing of New Providence and Ocracoke, the only major pirate strongholds remained in Africa's Barbary Coast and Gulf of Guinea.

Pirate Decline

After the successful defeat of Bartholomew Roberts, the British began to employ the successful strategy of bounty hunters, especially those skilled specifically in chasing down pirate ships and sinking them. This contributed greatly to pirate decline, as many pirates were perfectly willing to turn in their captain in exchange for English reward money. In addition, over the next 50 years or so, European military might continued to increase as they vied with each other for control. Privateering saw a comeback during the American Revolution, when the impoverished Colonial Congress issued over 2,000 letters of marque.¹⁴ Thousands of citizens took to the sea with the intent to harass British shipping, and caused maritime insurance rates in London to more than double, and each attack caused the British to lose more political support for their campaign. John Paul Jones capitalized on this by sailing the *Bonhomme Richard* and its squadron in a tour around Ireland and England.

In the meantime, a group of pirates had established themselves on the Mediterranean coast of Africa, in territory controlled by the Ottoman Empire, who permitted their existence. They were

¹⁴ Symonds, Craig L. *Historical Atlas of the U.S. Navy*. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD. 1995. (p. 14)

called the Corsairs of the Barbary coast, and they demanded tribute from the various nations who passed through the Mediterranean, threatening otherwise to sink all shipping. Predominantly Muslim, they justified their actions as part of a war against the infidel Christians. For most of the European powers, the paltry tribute was much cheaper than sending a military escort with shipping. The United States had to pay \$56,000 for peace with Tripoli, the main corsair fortress, in what is modern day Libya. However, in 1800, the Corsairs demanded a yearly tribute, which the fledgling nation could not afford. Thomas Jefferson had only been president for a few days, and he immediately sent a squadron to the Mediterranean to dissuade the Corsairs from attacking American shipping. When the frigate *Philadelphia* ran aground on a reef near Tripoli and was captured by the Corsairs, Commodore Edward Preble took action. In February 1804, he had another frigate sail into harbor looking damaged, in a Trojan horse strategy. As soon as it was close enough, American soldiers leapt out and set fire to the *Philadelphia*, depriving the Corsairs of their prize. Preble then proceeded to blockade the harbor for a year. The next spring, another Corsair port called Derna was captured, and the Corsairs agreed to withdraw all demands of tribute from American shipping.¹⁵ The various nations of Europe, emboldened, soon began flexing their own military muscle, and it was not long before the Barbary Corsairs were forced to find other occupations.

Almost a hundred years after the end of the Golden Age of Piracy, there was still significant pirate activity in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. Captain Jean Lafitte had formed a colony of smugglers at the mouth of the Mississippi delta, south of New Orleans. He attacked Spanish shipping and soon began to attack American, British, and French shipping as well. He was chased away, however, and in 1817 he became the governor of the Mexican territory of Texas.

The U.S. Navy turned its attention to the renewed threat of the Caribbean pirates. Commodore David Porter took command in 1823, and replaced the bulky and slow ships-of-the-

¹⁵ Ibid. (pp. 28-30)

line with ten Chesapeake Bay schooners. He took this 'mosquito squadron' and succeeded in again suppressing piracy in the Caribbean.¹⁶

Privateering had one final hurrah during the United States Civil War in the 1860s. The United States had refused to sign the Declaration of Paris in 1856, which proclaimed privateering as illegal, and the Confederate government took advantage of this and issued letters of marque to what they called Commerce Raiders. In the early months of the war, these raiders were very effective, the most famous of which were the *Alabama* and the *Shenandoah*. However, as the Federal navy grew in number and influence, the weakened Confederate navy eventually had to submit.¹⁷

In the modern day, piracy is very rare. Mostly occurring in the Orient, bandits or terrorists board pleasure yachts or oil vessels and hold the crew and passengers for hostage, or steal valuables and take off. According to international law, privateering is an unacceptable strategy, and any pirate activity is viewed by most nations as an affront to their sovereignty.

The Long-Term Effect

Looking back, it can be clearly seen that the advent of piracy in the North Atlantic had a profound impact on the geopolitical development of the New World, but also of the mother countries in Europe. Spain definitely suffered the brunt of pirate malice, and the years of greatest pirate activity saw France and England step forward as the dominant superpowers in Europe. Spain's armies, which had run rampant through much of Latin America, now had to divert attention toward protecting their own traders and away from further conquest.

Piracy also transformed the old methods of trade and exploration. No longer could single ships go sailing off toward the horizon, in an idealistic cruise of discovery and glory. No longer could ships burdened down with wealth sail unprotected. No pirate captain could hope to conquer one of the European powers, but these pirates were a large enough threat that the European powers had to do *something*. They had to draw up more military, to protect against their enemies, but also against those who had no allegiance.

¹⁶ Ibid. (p. 62)

¹⁷ Ibid. (p. 102)

Ultimately, piracy reawakened the fact that just because one is born into particular circumstances does not mean they have to stay there. We are born into a certain society, class, and under a given government. But if we are not satisfied with our situation, there are plenty of ways to improve our lot in life. Of course, there is significant risk associated with everything in life, and the more *unsavory* the actions, the greater the risk is likely to be...

