

In the Wake of the Privateer's Cruise:

The Social Fabric of Privateering in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, 1798-1803

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On November 26th, 1799, Simeon Perkins (1735-1812), merchant, magistrate, and investor, watched the privateer brig *Charles Mary Wentworth* disappear over the bar from Liverpool, Nova Scotia; carrying with her not only his financial investment, but the hopes and anxieties of a community increasingly reliant on the spoils of war. Meanwhile, the other members of the Liverpool community, the families left ashore, watched as the eighty-two men and boys—many of whom were their kin, neighbours, and colleague—departed for the unpredictable Atlantic and tumultuous Caribbean waters, both relieved for the quietness after rowdy nights at the local taverns, yet concerned for their loved ones' well-being. Perkins meticulously logged the venture's progress, yet, beyond his diary laid the harsh realities faced by the motley crew driving Liverpool's perilous wartime gamble, and the subsequent social impact on the community.¹

By the turn of the nineteenth century, Liverpool, a town situated on Nova Scotia's south shore, was a community deeply enmeshed in the rhythms of the Atlantic. Its economy, like much of maritime British North America, rested precariously on fishing, shipbuilding, timber, and vital trade with the West Indies.² The outbreak and intensification of the Napoleonic Wars brought profound economic disruption—seen clearly in the severed trade routes between British North America and the Caribbean—which drove up insurance rates and increased the dangers of seafaring from enemy action.³ Within this turbulent environment, Liverpool decisively turned

¹ Simeon Perkins, "Monday, November 25" and "Nov. 27th (26th)", *The Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, eds. Charles Bruce Fergusson, (The Champlain Society, 1978), 200-201. "Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth", Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society & Nova Scotia Archives, MC 20 vol. 215 no. 10. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, (Verso, 2000), 212.

² Julian Gwyn, *Excessive Expectations: Maritime Commerce and the Economic Development of Nova Scotia, 1740-1870*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 43.

³ *Ibid*, 158.

towards privateering as a response to wartime economic pressures, which had drastic social repercussions for those involved.

While the economic necessity, strategic function, and legal significance of privateering in the British Maritimes have been explored, the profound impact on the social lives of privateersmen and maritime communities, such as Liverpool, remain elusive. Despite this, privateering functioned as a defining social phenomenon which permeated Liverpool life, shaping both the privateersmen at sea and the community ashore. Contrary to broader Atlantic narratives often blurring lines with piracy, Liverpool's privateering was characterized by a crucial interplay between shore-side management, as a regulated and sanctioned enterprise integrated into local life, and the high-risk world of the crew aboard. Furthermore, the town's profound economic reliance on wartime privateering fostered a pragmatic, though often strained tolerance for social disruption, including health crises, social disorder, and violence that accompanied it.

An examination of the lived realities of Liverpool's privateersmen, and the greater social impact on Liverpool, relies primarily on two key primary sources offering complementary perspectives: the diary of Simeon Perkins, which provides an invaluable shore-side view from the standpoint of a prominent merchant and privateering investor, and the logbook of the *Charles Mary Wentworth* during its cruise from November 1799 to May 1800, written by the Lieutenant of Marines, Benjamin Knaut, whose work offers a rare glimpse into the daily realities of the crew.⁴ These documents allow a study of Nova Scotian privateer culture through documenting the dangers they faced, their position within the Atlantic maritime system, along with the social consequences of privateering that tested the town's tolerance and resilience. Such analysis offers a localized and nuanced understanding of the social impact of privateering in the Napoleonic Atlantic, while also illuminating the complex social adaptations and pressures that shaped communities in colonial British North America during a period of intense imperial conflict.

The study of Nova Scotia privateering has significantly evolved. In the 1920s, early accounts of romanticized narratives of daring captains and heroic exploits blended research with

⁴ While rich, these sources filter the past through the viewpoints of Liverpool's elite.

legend, emphasizing the same spirited interest in privateers that often attracts public and professional curiosity in pirates.⁵ Daniel Conlin, one of the foremost scholars on Nova Scotian privateering, argued that popular romantic narratives have long overshadowed scholarly analysis, and at times has led to the dismissal of privateering's historical significance by historians.⁶ However, Conlin's assertion that more recent works—although now outdated—such as John Leefe's *The Atlantic Privateers* (1978) follow such traditions of casting privateersmen as “noble outlaws and good-guy pirates”⁷ is perhaps an exaggeration. Leefe's book, as part of Project Atlantic Canada, was designed to be read by school children; Leefe covered some daring exploits of privateering, yet still ensured that readers understood that privateering was “a reasonable occupation carried on by reasonable men, ... not comparable to piracy.”⁸

Conlin's own work, alongside that of Faye Kert, began to shift focus towards privateering's crucial wartime economic functions and maritime strategies in the Atlantic. Kert argued that since privateering was a legal and licensed enterprise that caused annoyance and economic loss to the enemy, at very little cost to the government, privateering was a pivotal counterweight to both the British and American navies during the War of 1812.⁹ Conlin effectively articulated the economic function of privateering during wartime disruptions to Atlantic trade, noting its inherent risk and possible pay off.¹⁰ Similarly, Julian Gwyn has demonstrated the crucial yet volatile dependency of Nova Scotian colonies along the southern shore with the West Indies. Exports of fish, lumber and provision to the West Indies alongside imports of rum, sugar, molasses, coffee, and specie in return, were vital for the community's

⁵ Daniel Conlin, “A Historiography of Private Sea War in Nova Scotia,” *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 1 (1998), 80. Conlin suggests authors such as Edgar Maclay, Howard Chapin, E.P. Statham, Charles Henry Snider, and more are responsible for a whole host of popular romantic privateering narratives.

⁶ Ibid, 81.

⁷ Ibid, 81.

⁸ John Leefe, *The Atlantic Privateer*, (Petheric Press, 1978), 53.

⁹ Faye Kert, “‘True, Publick and Notorious’: The Privateering War of 1812,” *London Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 1 (2021), 56.

¹⁰ Daniel Conlin, “A Private War in the Caribbean: Nova Scotia Privateering, 1793-1805,” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 1996, 81-82.

economic success.¹¹ This further reinforces the reliance on privateering when trade routes were interrupted in times of Atlantic warfare.

Further nuance towards the study of privateering, comes from legal and political historians who have worked to disentangle it from piracy. While N.A.M. Rodger meticulously traced the legal origins and language surrounding privateering in contrast to piracy, Bryan Mabee situates privateering within the political economy of state-building, arguing its sanctioned violence was perceived as politically useful to mercantilist powers.¹² Despite the progress to understand economic and legal frameworks of privateering, the specific social dimension demonstrated through the lived experiences of the crews, and the impact on the communities who launched them, remain under-explored.

To understand the social implications of privateering on the community of Liverpool requires engaging with the broader realities of the British North American colonies and the Napoleonic Atlantic. Here again, Gwyn's work on Nova Scotia's maritime commerce underscores the colony's economic vulnerability and reliance on maritime economics and West Indies trade. Simultaneously, the ever-present threat of Royal Navy impressment to British North American ports, detailed by Keith Mercer, formed a crucial and sometimes violent backdrop to all maritime activity, including privateering.¹³ Elizabeth Mancke and Colin Grittner's work on masculinity provides further social context for the town of Liverpool, highlighting the tension between social obligations to the community, versus personal success in the port town.¹⁴ Similarly, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker provide a rich social history of maritime labour, particularly in their concepts of the diverse "motley crew" and the dynamics of "hydrarchy", which offers an invaluable tool for analyzing shipboard life.¹⁵ However, their primary focus on

¹¹ Kert, *Excessive Expectations*, 52.

¹² N. A. M. Rodger, "The Law and Language of Private Naval Warfare," *Mariner's Mirror* 100, no. 1 (2014). Bryan Mabee, "Pirates, Privateers and the Political Economy of Private Violence," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 21, no. 2 (2009).

¹³ Keith Mercer, "Northern Exposure: Resistance to Naval Impressment in British North America, 1775-1815," *The Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (2010), 202.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Mancke and Colin Grittner. "From Communal to Independent Manhood in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, ca. 1760-1820," *Histoire Sociale* 52, no. 106 (2019), 261.

¹⁵ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 212.

resistance and revolutionary potential contrasts the sanctioned nature of Liverpool's privateering ventures. Nevertheless, their framework proves essential for interpreting the specific conditions and culture of privateering crews examined later.

This study, therefore, builds upon the economic and legal scholarship of privateering by centering social history, through the use of detailed local primary sources to explore the interplay between regulated private maritime warfare, community impact, and the experiences at sea and ashore. Addressing the relative neglect of these social dimensions, particularly in the context of the British North American Maritime colonies, offers a critical addition to existing narratives of privateering.

Liverpool and Napoleonic Privateering: An Overview

Established in 1759 within Queen's County, Nova Scotia, Liverpool was initially a fishing port founded by New England Planters after the expulsion of the Acadians. By the mid-1760s, its population numbered approximately 500 residents.¹⁶ The arrival of Loyalists, including notable families like the Perkins, further stimulated Liverpool's growth; by 1792, the population had more than doubled, to just over 1,000 people.¹⁷ This expansion marked a significant transformation, as by the 1790s, Liverpool evolved from a fishing outpost into a bustling port town, boasting a considerable fleet of merchant vessels and becoming a developed participant in maritime trade, controlled by an elite group of Planters and Loyalist families.¹⁸

¹⁶ James F. More, *The History of Queens County, N.S.* (Nova Scotia Printing Company, 1873), 14.

¹⁷ Dan Conlin, "Privateer Entrepot: Commercial Militarization in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, 1793-1805," *The Northern Mariner/ Le Marin du nord*, VIII, no. 2 (1998), 22.

¹⁸ Janet Mullins, *Some Liverpool Chronicles*, (Lancelot Press, 1941), 5.

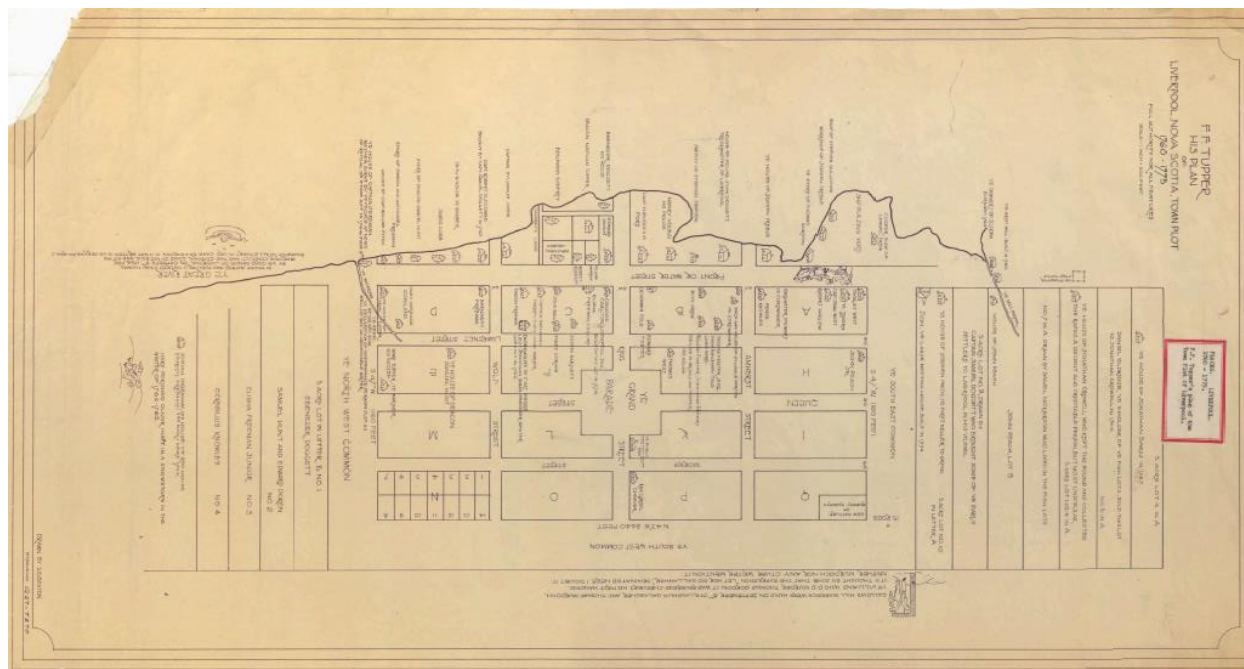


Figure 1: F.F. Tupper, Plan of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, Town Plot, 1760. Nova Scotia Archives Map Collection: V7 239 Liverpool, Nova Scotia.

During the protracted conflicts of the Napoleonic Wars (c. 1793-1815), privateering was a significant feature of Atlantic maritime warfare, particularly for colonial ports. Distinct from piracy, privateering was a sanctioned practice wherein privately owned and armed vessels received government authorization through a commission titled a Letter of Marque (LoM), to attack and capture enemy merchant ships.¹⁹ This system effectively outsourced naval warfare, which allowed for Great Britain's Royal Navy to hinder enemy commerce at little cost. When privateers captured vessels, known as “prizes,” they were first brought to the home port of the privateer, then brought before the Vice-Admiralty Court for legal condemnation.²⁰ It was only after a judgement was passed—legitimizing the captured vessel as a prize—that both vessel and goods aboard could be sold, with revenue being divided amongst the privateer's owners, captain, crew, and a required percentage to the government. While privateering surged in Liverpool

¹⁹ Rodger, “The Law and Language of Private Naval Warfare,” 6.

²⁰ “British Military and Naval Records Vice Admiralty Court Records, Halifax, Nova Scotia,” Vol. 25, RG 8, IV. Library and Archives Canada.

during the Napoleonic Wars, the practice was not entirely new to the south shore community. Liverpool experienced some privateering, mostly in the form of enemy attacks on their port during the American Revolution, although Halifax remained the main center for Nova Scotian privateers.²¹

An increased scale and intensity of activity, however, began in 1798. That spring, Liverpool merchants including Simeon Perkins, felt the economic squeeze from disrupted trade routes to the West Indies. Perkins himself wrote in his diary on his 36th year anniversary of arriving in Liverpool, “I have been very unfortunate in Business, and by my lenity lost many Large Sums due to me, which together has reduced my Circumstances Very low, and at my time of Life, 63 Years old, I cannot expect to ever retrieve them, especially in the Situation Trade & Business is Now.”²² Prompted by Lieutenant-Governor John Wentworth’s call to disrupt French commerce and his own financial situation, Perkins partnered with Liverpool men Joseph Freeman, Joseph Barss, Snow Parker, Thomas Bennet, and John Roberts, to build the 16-cannon privateer the *Charles Mary Wentworth*.²³

This consortium was a rollcall of Liverpool's merchant aristocracy. Snow Parker, for example, descended from an early Planter settler and, while engaged in the fish trade, saw privateering as the path to his substantial fortune.²⁴ Joseph Barss, another New England Planter who had settled in Liverpool as a boy, was not only a long-standing representative in the House of Assembly but also the proprietor of a significant salmon fishing enterprise. His commitment extended to his own family, with his son, Joseph Barss Jr., serving as second lieutenant on the *Charles Mary Wentworth* before captaining the renowned *Lord Spencer*.²⁵ Far from being a desperate gamble by unknown adventurers, privateering in Liverpool was thus orchestrated and

²¹ Gwyn, *Excessive Expectations*, 38.

²² Perkins, “Friday, May 4th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 93.

²³ Perkins, “Thursday, June 28th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 104. The ship was named by Lieutenant Governor Wentworth after his sickly son, Charles Mary.

²⁴ J. B. Cahill, “PARKER, SNOW,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 7, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–.

²⁵ Catherine Pross, “BARSS, JOSEPH,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 6, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–.

managed by the town's established elite: men of property, political influence, and deep commercial roots.

The *Charles Mary Wentworth's* first cruise in 1789 led to the successful capture of two enemy prizes, and this initial success quickly led to further investment, with captured prize vessels often being converted into new privateers.²⁶ Other ships, often co-owned by Perkins and his partners, the *Duke of Kent*, *Rover*, the *Lord Spencer*, *Nymph*, and the *Francis Mary* had varying success from 1798 to 1803. This peak period, however, quickly waned in 1801 after mounting legal challenges in the Vice-Admiralty Court in Halifax, involving the capture of neutral American vessels.²⁷ There was even further decline following the Peace of Amiens in 1802, with a slow return to peace-time economic opportunities.²⁸ Perkins notes this himself, and although he sends out several more privateer cruises, in July 1801 he wrote "I think Privateering is Nearly at an End" after several unsuccessful voyages.²⁹ Although privateering was largely over in Liverpool by 1803, the town, along with other Nova Scotian ports, returned to the enterprise during the War of 1812, with several successful cruises from the privateers *Retaliation*, and the infamous *Liverpool Packet*, which captured 21 prizes in 1812 alone.³⁰

The *Charles Mary Wentworth's* first cruise in 1798 triggered several years of successful privateering and wartime boom for the town, but it also immediately pointed to social changes and disruptions for both the privateersmen and the town. Before the *Charles Mary Wentworth* was even launched into the Liverpool harbour, disputes among labourers became a problem for Perkins and the town. On July 30th, Walter Manning, auctioneer and tavern-keeper, assaulted Jonathan Phillips, labourer, on the deck of the ship.³¹ Similarly, upon the arrival of the *Nuestro Senior de la Carmen*, a prize ship taken on the *Charles Mary Wentworth's* first cruise, local

²⁶ Charles Bruce Fergusson, "Introduction", *The Diary of Simeon Perkins 1797-1803*, xliii. The *Nosta Seignora del Carmen*, captured by *Charles Mary Wentworth* was renamed *The Duke of Kent*, a privateer owned and operated by Perkins and his partners.

²⁷ Fergusson, "Introduction", *The Diary of Simeon Perkins 1797-1803*, xli-liii. Conlin, "A Private War in the Caribbean: Nova Scotia Privateering, 1793-1805," appendix A.

²⁸ Fergusson, "Introduction", *The Diary of Simeon Perkins 1797-1803*, xli-liii. Conlin, "A Private War in the Caribbean: Nova Scotia Privateering, 1793-1805," appendix A.

²⁹ Perkins, "Wednesday, July 22nd," *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 318.

³⁰ Kert, "'True, Publick and Notorious': The Privateering War of 1812," 58.

³¹ Perkins, "Monday, July 30th," *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 110.

scandal broke out after Liverpool residents James Dogget, Angus Chislon, and John Dexter, robbed the ship of cotton and cocoa and were subsequently captured and jailed.³² These early incidents ashore highlight the immediate social friction generated by privateering, hinting at the complex dynamics and inherent risks that also defined the distinct world experienced by the privateersmen and the Liverpool community.

Life Aboard the Privateer: The World of the “Motley Crew”

Reconstructing the privateersmens’ life at sea relies significantly on the rare perspective offered by the logbook covering November 1799 to May 1800 cruise of the *Charles Mary Wentworth*. To analyze the social dynamics of this environment, we can turn to Linebaugh and Rediker’s frameworks developed in *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000). They identify the Atlantic maritime labour force as a motley crew, a term signifying the multiethnic composition of the ship’s crews, but also a collective identity forged through shared labour, danger, and potential solidarity that extended into waterfront communities.³³ What little we know of the privateersmen hailing from Liverpool confirms the multiethnic nature of crews, as well as the manifestation of their social activities and integration into both the greater Liverpool community.

Linebaugh and Rediker adapt the term hydrarchy from Richard Braithwaite to describe the competing organizational forces at sea, with “imperial hydrarchy” representing the state’s attempt to organize and control maritime labour through naval regulation, impressment, and the commissioning of privateers via Letters of Marque. “Oppositional hydrarchy,” on the other hand, referred to the self-organization, distinct culture, and potential resistance sailors developed from below.³⁴ While Liverpool privateersmen deviate from the revolutionary aspects of Linebaugh and Rediker’s hydrarchy, it provides a framework for understanding the unique culture and social experience of privateersmen from crew composition, shipboard routine, systems of order and discipline, inherent risks, and the tension between imposed authority from owners and officers to the crew itself.

³² Perkins, “Wednesday, October 3rd,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 125-126.

³³ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 213.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 144, 154.

The first entry in the logbook of the *Charles Mary Wentworth* provides an important starting point: under the command of Captain Thomas Parker, the ship left Liverpool with 82 men and boys.³⁵ This figure signals a key characteristic of privateers, as they required a significantly larger crew than merchant ships of comparable size, which could operate with a few dozen men. This manpower was essential not only for sailing and handling its armaments, but also for forming potential crews to sail any captured vessels to port. Recruitment for privateers in Liverpool seems to be heavily drawn from the local and regional maritime labour pool, although Perkins also notes that crews were made up from people of diverse backgrounds, noting the “Number of men of all Ages & Countries gathered together” among the privateersmen.³⁶

Conlin’s demographic research of the crew list from the *Charles Mary Wentworth* logbook suggests that most of the crew were men or boys from Liverpool or surrounding villages, while the rest hailed from other Nova Scotia towns such as Lunenburg or Halifax.³⁷ Privateersmen were of mixed social background, but those without officer status reflected the labouring population of Liverpool rather than the elite. Judith Fingard has suggested that “because of the hardness, uncertainty, and transiency of the life, individuals who were tough, vulgar, and even wild” were attracted to seafaring life.³⁸ In times of war and privateering, privateersmen demographics likely followed these same patterns. Similarly, Conlin notes that the ethnic breakdown of the crew was approximately 57% planter families from New England, 18.5% Irish, 12% African, and 4% Loyalists, Scottish, and German, respectively.³⁹ The logbook also lists one Spaniard, although no other ethnicities are specified.⁴⁰ This diverse composition exemplifies the Atlantic motley crew described by Linebaugh and Rediker, a workforce drawn from various backgrounds. Additionally, the motley crew likely often had different motivations for signing up for a cruise. Many maritime labourers were left with few other options due to wartime economic interruptions, but men could also be motivated by other personal means. In

³⁵ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

³⁶ Perkins, “Monday, November 25th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 201.

³⁷ Conlin, “A Private War,” 87.

³⁸ Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 47.

³⁹ Ibid, 88.

⁴⁰ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

February 1799, two men, Medad Tupper and John Flood, were sent back after Captain Joseph Freeman of the *Charles Mary Wentworth* learned that Tupper owed debts, and Flood was already signed to the privateer *Rover*, demonstrating the variety of personal motivations that could inspire men to join a crew.⁴¹

Perkins' diary provides insight into the typical recruitment of privateersmen. Taverns served as key recruitment hubs, and the owners and captain held recruiting parties in the run-up to cruises. The captain and officers were typically assigned by the owners and were mostly comprised of planter or Loyalist men from Liverpool, Halifax, or other port towns.⁴² For the first cruise of the *Charles Mary Wentworth*, which Perkins seems to have been more careful in recording the details of crew recruitment, the captain and officers held recruitment parties at "Mr. Phillips Tavern" and were able to sign sixty men within four days.⁴³ While this demonstrates an eagerness for privateer work, Perkins also notes difficulties in securing full crews, with possible competition from merchant voyages, the fishery, naval impressment, and or from the possible decline of privateering which began in 1801.

Once crews were assembled, a series of comradery-building exercises ashore took place. Perkins' often mentions the parading and cajoling of the privateersmen on a nightly basis leading up to the cruise. On the second night of recruitment for the *Charles Mary Wentworth's* first cruise, Perkins writes that "The Privateer entering men. They parade & march thro the Street to Mr. Philips Tavern, and then to Mrs. West's. break up in Good Season, & very orderly."⁴⁴ These types of nightly marches were common occurrences in Perkins' diary. This may have also served as a recruitment tactic, since the crew list tripled from the 2nd of August to the 4th.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the ritual of marching through the streets to the local taverns reflects the beginnings of forging of collective identity for the motley crew.

⁴¹ Perkins, "Friday, February 1st," *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 147.

⁴² Perkins, "Wednesday, August 1st," *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 111.

⁴³ Ibid, 111-113.

⁴⁴ Perkins, "Thursday, August 2nd," *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 112.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 112.

Once a cruise had set off, privateersmen were subject to the structured and demanding routines common to maritime labour in the age of sailing. Having only the 1799-1800 logbook to reconstruct the lives of the crew, we are given only particular insight as, on this specific cruise, the *Charles Mary Wentworth* returned without any prizes, as well as having incessantly leaked throughout the journey. Regardless, we can still glimpse into some of the everyday on the vessel, with the logbook recording regular tasks associated with the maintenance of the ship: cleaning and exercising the guns, rigging the ship and caring for lines, and provisioning on islands in the Caribbean.⁴⁶ The nautical weather also played an important role in determining the daily lives of the crew. Benjamin Knaut records that the crew were busy, wet, and in misery while sailing from Liverpool towards the Spanish Main, due to large gales and rough seas. However, on the final leg of their journey home in May, during a stint of calm and peaceful weather, he complained, “Wind and Weather much the same. Very lazy times Nothing to do but sleep as much as Possible having no books to read for amusement.”⁴⁷

Beyond the necessary labour, Knaut also reveals elements of the distinct shipboard culture. He hints to specific events that punctuated the daily grind, most notably the traditional maritime ceremony performed upon crossing the equator. He recorded, “at 6 AM Old Neptune paid us a visit when he found 23 of his Children who had not been to see him before, he made them all go thro the usual custom of Shaving & Ducking, gave them his Advice, and then left us.”⁴⁸ This ritual involved a senior crewmember dressing as Neptune, Roman god of the seas, demanding that those who have never crossed the equator before must pay the tax of shaving and ducking. As such, crewmates’ facial hair would be shaved off, their heads dunked into buckets of water, and the ceremony would conclude with celebratory drinking.⁴⁹ A moment of licensed abandon and a communal activity, this episode marks an example of social experiences rooted in long-standing seafaring customs, that temporarily overrode the usual order and daily labour.

⁴⁶ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

⁴⁷ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

⁴⁸ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

⁴⁹ This is a common Anglophone maritime tradition recorded to varying degrees. See George Miller’s *The Traveller’s Guide to Madeira and the West Indies* (G. Miller and Son, 1815) for a particularly rich and dramatic description.

Similarly, Knaut records instances of social rituals with crews of other vessels, such as Captain Parker often dining with other captains. On one occasion, Knaut records a specific example of crew socialization while on anchor off the coast of Hispaniola, when Knaut and Parker took a boat to dine with the Captains of privateers *Nelson* and *Lord Spencer*, and “some of the Nelson’s Crew took our boat & returned on board the Charles, to see their friends.”⁵⁰ Such events, alongside shared work and close quarters, contributed to the forging of collective social experiences among the crew, distinct from the purely functional demands of the privateering venture itself. Although the ship was a place of structure and hierarchy, there remained space for the crew’s social interactions, the forging of solidarity and customs, as well as elements of the operating hydrarchy.

Maintaining social order among such large and diverse crews—combined with high-risk ventures compounded by possible riches, punctuated by periods of boredom or danger—presented inherent tensions between imperial and oppositional hydrarchy, or, the owners’ and officers’ attempts to impose discipline for the venture’s success, versus the crew’s potential to resist control. Disobedience could manifest before a cruise even properly began. In July 1800, Perkins wrote that “The *Duke of Kent* goes over the Bar with about 20 men. The Crew are Scattered & difficult to git them togeather. The *Rover* is to git all on board at the wharf tomorrow.”⁵¹ These acts of tardiness, disorganization, or at worst avoidance, challenged the captain’s authority. Perkins noted a similar moment of disorder in 1799, when several privateers sheltered in a cove off the coast of Liverpool waiting for a weather window. He reported, “I hear Capt. Freeman has Some disorderly people on board, & Turned one Back on Shore, & had another in Irons at the Cove.”⁵² This instance of unspecified disorder involved direct physical restraint and a clear exercise of disciplinary power from Freeman. Similarly, Perkins notes in March 1800, that an Officer from the *Lord Spencer* had been sent home on another ship on

⁵⁰ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

⁵¹ Perkins, “Monday, July 14th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 239.

⁵² Perkins, “Monday, February 4th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 148.

account of “Some Riot on board the *Spencer*,” in which two other men were sent ashore in St. Kitts for the same reason.⁵³

Desertion, a classic form of resistance within the Atlantic world, was also a reality amongst Liverpool privateers.⁵⁴ Knaut notes that the ship’s surgeon, Andrew Collins, had “gone ashore to stay without leave from the captain,”⁵⁵ a significant breach by an officer. Moreover, while in Antigua, four privateers deserted. First Lieutenant Enos Collins pursued them and “At 12 returned on board without bringing any of them with him, having caught them all four, in a Negro house dancing. But they afterwards gave him the slip, in bringing them Down to the boat, and never saw them afterwards.”⁵⁶ This incident vividly illustrates both the crew’s desire for autonomy and the limits of officers’ ability to enforce return.

Perhaps the most pointed record of disobedience on a Liverpool privateer was an internal conflict that happened between Captain Freeman and John Galvin, Master of Sails, on the *Charles Mary Wentworth*’s first cruise. The unrecorded incident resulted in Galvin being stripped of his position and brought home as a “passenger”, relieved of his position on board the privateer.⁵⁷ Although the details of the conflict are unknown, the demotion of a skilled officer signifies a serious breakdown in the relationship, or a significant challenge to the captain’s authority that was met with a decisive result. These instances—ranging from tardiness and desertion to interpersonal conflict and physical restraint—demonstrate that shipboard life, while structured, was far from placid. From the collective foot-dragging to internal disputes, these examples illustrate that order aboard the privateer was not easily imposed, but continuously negotiated, revealing the persistent tensions between the vessel’s hierarchy and the individual privateersmen.

Privateersmen were also subject to anxieties sprouting from constant threat of peril. Beyond challenges of internal order and anticipated naval warfare, they also confronted constant

⁵³ Perkins, “Thursday, March 20th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 219.

⁵⁴ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 151.

⁵⁵ “Cruise of the *Charles Mary Wentworth*”.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Perkins, “Monday, December 18th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 139.

threats inherent to their occupation which shaped their social world at sea. There was concern for illness, drowning, random instances of violence, wreckage, and naval impressment.

Communicable diseases spread rapidly among large crews. Upon the first few days of the 1799-1800 cruise of the *Charles Mary Wentworth*, Knaut reported that several crewmembers were ill. This was made more difficult by the leaky ship and terrible weather, with Knaut writing that “the people [were] complaining with perils.”⁵⁸ In May 1799, George Forbes Vaughan, the surgeon master of the *Charles Mary Wentworth*, had returned sick from the cruise and had subsequently succumbed to his illness shortly after.⁵⁹ Prior to the cruise recorded in the logbook, the *Charles Mary Wentworth* had returned early from a cruise due to severe illness on board: nearly 40 privateersmen were sick at once, combined with at least two deaths.⁶⁰

Drownings or random acts of violence were also of concern. Perkins noted the sad death of a young boy named John Hume, who was lost at sea after falling overboard on the prize vessel *Fabius*, on its voyage to Liverpool.⁶¹ In a shocking incident while cruising the Spanish Main, Knaut reported that Enos Collins had taken a group to cruise in the cutter, leaving the boatswain and a boy named Mathew Dazy to mind the boat while the rest were ashore. The two were jumped by a group of twelve men: Dazy was thrown overboard, and the boatswain was badly wounded.⁶² Additionally, wreckage was also a constant worry. Knaut recorded an incident where the ship struck a reef, but they were able to get free with the assistance of the *Lord Spencer* and the *Duke of Kent*, although it caused further damage to the already leaky hull.⁶³ Shortly after, the *Lord Spencer* was lost by running a reef on rocks in the Spanish Main. Fortunately, all the crew were saved.⁶⁴ However, these instances demonstrate the unpredictability and constant danger of life onboard, demonstrating the profound uncertainty to the lives of privateersmen.

Naval impressment, the practice of forcible conscription into military service, was also a considerable concern. Impressment was a common practice in coastal areas of British North

⁵⁸ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

⁵⁹ Perkins, “Tuesday, May 28th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 167.

⁶⁰ Perkins, “Wednesday, 11th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 188.

⁶¹ Perkins, “Tuesday, December 16th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 271.

⁶² “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

⁶³ “Cruise of the Charles Mary Wentworth”.

⁶⁴ Perkins, “Saturday, May 10th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 227-228.

America during the Napoleon Wars, but a variety of strategies allowed men on shore to resist or avoid service.⁶⁵ However, when Royal Navy ships met with privateering vessels operating with a letter of marque from the British crown, there were only few ways to resist possible impressment. For the privateersmen, it meant longer voyages at sea, a higher risk of injury or death, and a loss of freedom. Knaut recorded the impressment of seven of the *Charles Mary Wentworth's* crew on the Spanish Main: Captain Parker was forced to return to Liverpool early on a cruise on the *Duke of Kent*, and “twenty of his best men” were impressed by Captain Frederick Watkins in the Royal Navy Ship *Néréide*.⁶⁶ What was unique to the threat of impressment, was that it was not a danger from the enemy, but from the British state itself.

Life aboard a Liverpool privateer emerges as a complex social world defined by contradictions. It was a space where a diverse motley crew—drawn together by economic pressures and the lure of prizes—navigated the strict routines and hierarchical demands of the privateering venture, known as the “imperial hydrarchy.” Yet, within this structure, they forged their own collective identity through the “oppositional hydrarchy”: through shared maritime rituals, social interactions, and persistent, although often subtle, challenges to authority. This social dynamic unfolded against a backdrop of constant peril, where sickness, unpredictable violence, and the threat of naval impressment were as tangible as the dangers of enemy engagement. Ultimately, the privateersman's world was one of structured labor punctuated by unique cultural expressions, inherent disorder, and pervasive risk, all far removed from the shore.

Upset in Liverpool: Weaving Privateering into the Social Fabric of the Town

While the privateersmen navigated the perils and unique social dynamics of life aboard ship, the town of Liverpool experienced the impact of their voyages in different ways. Ashore, privateering was not just an abstract maritime venture, but a force that permeated the community's economic calculations, social interactions, and collective consciousness. Used as a tool for Liverpool's elite and mariners seeking economic opportunity, privateering was a vital

⁶⁵ Mercer, *Northern Exposure*, 104.

⁶⁶ Perkins, “Saturday, October 4th,” *Diary of Simeon Perkins, 1797-1803*, 255.

tool for the town's wartime commerce.⁶⁷ Examining the town's perspective reveals how Liverpool elites sought to regulate the practice, how the community grappled with both the benefits and social frictions of the privateering boom.

While some historians have emphasized the shared characteristics between privateering and piracy, evidence emerging from Liverpool during the Napoleonic Wars suggests a distinctly different practice. This historical association of privateering and piracy have several explanations. John Coakley describes that the terms were both linguistically and legally conflated, initially in a seventeenth-century Caribbean context, but then it spread outward into the greater British Empire.⁶⁸ Kardulias and Butcher argue that the status of privateer versus pirate was historically fluid, and individuals moved between roles as necessary which increased the tension between the two.⁶⁹ Hahn demonstrates the legitimacy of the blurred lines between illegal and legal activity in his case study of Richard Tookerman in the early eighteenth-century.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, insight from Perkins' diaries and the Vice-Admiralty Court records suggests that, in the context of Liverpool, privateering was a sanctioned, commercially structured, and locally managed enterprise.

Perkins' himself, a respected merchant, magistrate, and holder of various public offices, embodies this legitimacy in his personal investment and organizational role in Liverpool's privateering. Historians Elizabeth Mancke and Colin Grittner describe Perkins as a social patriarch and "communal man," dedicated to public service, community welfare.⁷¹ Perkins' standing was best reflected through his meticulous approach to the privateering business, with the assurance that all those involved adhered to required legal processes. As such, the legitimacy of Liverpool's privateering venture is clear in his records; to Perkins, privateering was a business, emphasizing his partnerships, calculations of shares, and eventual profit or losses. Ever

⁶⁷ Conlin, "A Historiography of Private Sea War in Nova Scotia," 80. Mabee, "Pirates, privateers," 139.

⁶⁸ John Coakley, "The Piracies of Some Little Privateers," Language, Law and Maritime Violence I the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean," *Britain and the World* 13, no.1 (2020), 6.

⁶⁹ Nick Kardulias and Emily Butcher, "Piracy in a Contested Periphery: Incorporation and the Emergence of the Modern World-System in the Colonial Atlantic Frontier," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 22, no.2 (2016), 549.

⁷⁰ Steven Hahn, "The Atlantic Odyssey of Richard Tookerman: Gentleman of South Carolina, Pirate of Jamaica, and Litigant before the King's Bench," *Early American Studies* 15, no. 3 (2017), 590.

⁷¹ Mancke and Grittner, "From Communal to Independent Manhood," 275.

present in his diary is not only the securing of official commissions, but also the mandatory processes of the adjudication of prizes in Halifax.⁷²

The subsequent public auctions of condemned prize cargoes, often overseen by Perkins, further demonstrate the integration of privateering proceeds into the legitimate colonial economy.⁷³ This aligns more clearly with historian N.A.M. Rodger's interpretation of privateering: operating under distinct legal rules, rather than on the margins like piracy. Folks from the town seem to have understood privateering in the same way, anxiously awaiting the arrival of prizes, hoping that any ship that came across the horizon was a returning privateer with good news.⁷⁴ Thus, despite the inherent violence of maritime plunder, Liverpool's overwhelming perception of privateering was that it was a regulated, lawful—albeit dangerous—extension of the town's wartime maritime economy.

Privateering's appeal to Liverpool stemmed directly from its potential to counteract the severe economic hardships caused by wartime disruptions to typical trade, especially that with the West Indies. Successful cruises brought valuable prize cargoes of sugar, coffee, rum, dry goods, and the ships themselves, into port.⁷⁵ The subsequent sale of these goods injected vital revenue and commodities into an otherwise struggling colonial wartime economy. This influx provided not just profits for investors like Perkins, but also crucial wages in the form of prize shares for the privateersmen and their families, who found economic opportunity when other maritime work was scarce. While the distribution of profits reflected the town's social hierarchy, with owners and officers receiving the lion's share, the overall economic activity generated by privateering provided a powerful incentive for the community. The vulnerability of West Indies trade for Nova Scotians, following the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, had the potential to

⁷² Examples are plentiful throughout his diary. See Perkins, "Wednesday, January 30th," 147, for a case of a prize being released from condemnation and returned to its owner, demonstrating Perkins' adherence to the law.

⁷³ Perkins, "Tuesday, September 17th," *Simeon Perkins Diary, 1797-1803*, 190. "British Military and Naval Records Vice Admiralty Court Records, Halifax, Nova Scotia," Vol. 25, 27, 28, 29, 73, & 115. RG 8, IV. Library and Archives Canada.

⁷⁴ Perkins, "Tuesday, September 18th," *Simeon Perkins Diary, 1797-1803*, 122.

⁷⁵ Perkins, "Tuesday, September 18th," *Simeon Perkins Diary, 1797-1803*, 122. The records from "British Military and Naval Records Vice Admiralty Court Records, Halifax, Nova Scotia," Vol. 25, 27, 28, 29, 73, & 115. RG 8, IV. Library and Archives Canada have lists of goods and value of possessions taken by the privateers.

cripple colonial merchants.⁷⁶ Consequently, the perceived economic necessity of privateering may help explain Liverpool's pragmatic tolerance for the social disruptions that privateering caused.

The economic vitality privateering brought to Liverpool was often accompanied by significant strains on the town's social order and safety. The most typical and ever-present disruption was the privateersmen's gatherings. Privateersmen often paraded the streets together and gathered at local taverns in the evenings, which while intended to build camaraderie, contributed to a rowdy atmosphere in the small port town. Perkins made regular references in his diary to this disruption, noting things like: "some little disturbance or rangling in the Street by the Privateersmen" or "The privateersmen were very Noisey in the night, about the wharves, some fighting or rangling."⁷⁷ This behavior, an example of what Linebaugh and Rediker identify as distinct shipboard culture, with their own "language, storytelling, and solidarity" brought ashore, created the boiserous atmosphere upon a privateer's return.⁷⁸ For the townspeople of Liverpool however, the behaviour of the privateersmen reinforced what Fingard labelled society's view of sailors, as "members of the disreputable poor."⁷⁹

More serious disruptions stemmed from internal conflicts spilling over from the vessels or the inherent dangers of the enterprise. Recall the dispute between John Galvin, the demoted Master of Sails from the *Charles Mary Wentworth's* first cruise. The shipboard dispute between Galvin and Captain Freeman had repercussions ashore in Liverpool. Galvin, after another shipboard run-in with Freeman, challenged him and Thomas Parker to a duel. Perkins wrote, "In the Evening he [Galvin] Challenges Capt. Josphe Freeman to meet him on the Mill pond, or pond Ear Esq. Thomas, tomorrow morning at 8 o'Clock, to decide Some past grievances."⁸⁰ No duel ensued, and Perkins, having had out a warrant to apprehend Galvin, found him parading the streets with his pistols calling Freeman "a damnd Coward."⁸¹ Galvin, refusing to give himself up

⁷⁶ Gwyn, *Excessive Expectations*, 39.

⁷⁷ Perkins, "Sunday, May 12th," *Simeon Perkins Diary*, 164. Perkins, "July 8th," *Simeon Perkins Diary*, 238.

⁷⁸ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 14.

⁷⁹ Fingard, *Jack in Port*, 93.

⁸⁰ Perkins, "Wednesday, Jan. 23rd," *Simeon Perkins Diary*, 145.

⁸¹ Perkins, "Thursday, Jan. 24th," *Simeon Perkins Diary*, 145.

as Perkins wrote, “got to Mr. Phillips Tavern, and hired a room, and Locked himself in, and threatened So highly.”⁸² Galvin’s violent behaviour had even more detrimental impact on the community, as Perkins recorded, he “was walking the Streets, I conclude, with his pistols, as usual. My Daughter Lucy & Nancy Rogers were Riding in my Slay. He got in & drove them from the Burying hull to the point & back Some distance, & then to my House.”⁸³ This particularly dramatic shoreside event exposed the community, especially Lucy Perkins and Nancy Rogers, to potential violence stemming directly from shipboard grievances. The escalation in Galvin’s behaviour also reveals the potential breakdown of social control ashore, when shipboard conflicts were no longer contained. Galvin’s defiance can be understood within the broader context of maritime labour, as Linebaugh and Rediker suggests, where privateering crews could exhibit forms of “oppositional hydrarchy” or react strongly to perceived injustices.⁸⁴

Furthermore, the pressure and volatile fortunes associated with privateering sometimes resulted in tragic consequences for the Liverpool community. Perkins sadly documented the suicide of William Brocklesby, whose distress was linked to alcohol dependency, and as according to Perkins, “he got with the Privateers people at Mr. Boyle’s and got in Liqueur, and has ever Since been very intemperate.”⁸⁵ After being at the local tavern for “some days,” Brocklesby eventually went home, where he was then discovered to have hung himself.⁸⁶ Perkins suggested that Brocklesby’s relapse of intemperance began after he joined the privateersmen in local taverns, explicitly linking their drinking culture to the tragic outcome for a Liverpool community member. This also reinforces the tavern and its culture as the locus of the privateersmen’s social space, where their presence could be strongly felt. Fingard confirms that the troupe of the drunken, loud sailor was an expected one in port towns, as “intoxicated sailors in trouble or misbehaving were a common sight in the ports. They left no doubt that they preferred the tavern to the ship”⁸⁷. The loudness, “rangling,” and drinking that happened between

⁸² Ibid, 146.

⁸³ Perkins, “Saturday, Jan. 26th,” *Simeon Perkins Diary*, 146.

⁸⁴ Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 229.

⁸⁵ Perkins, “Saturday, December 14th,” *Simeon Perkins Diary*, 204.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 205.

⁸⁷ Fingard, *Jack in Port*, 139.

privateersmen in the taverns suggest an environment where excessive drinking was encouraged and enabled, contributing to Brocklesby's personal crisis.

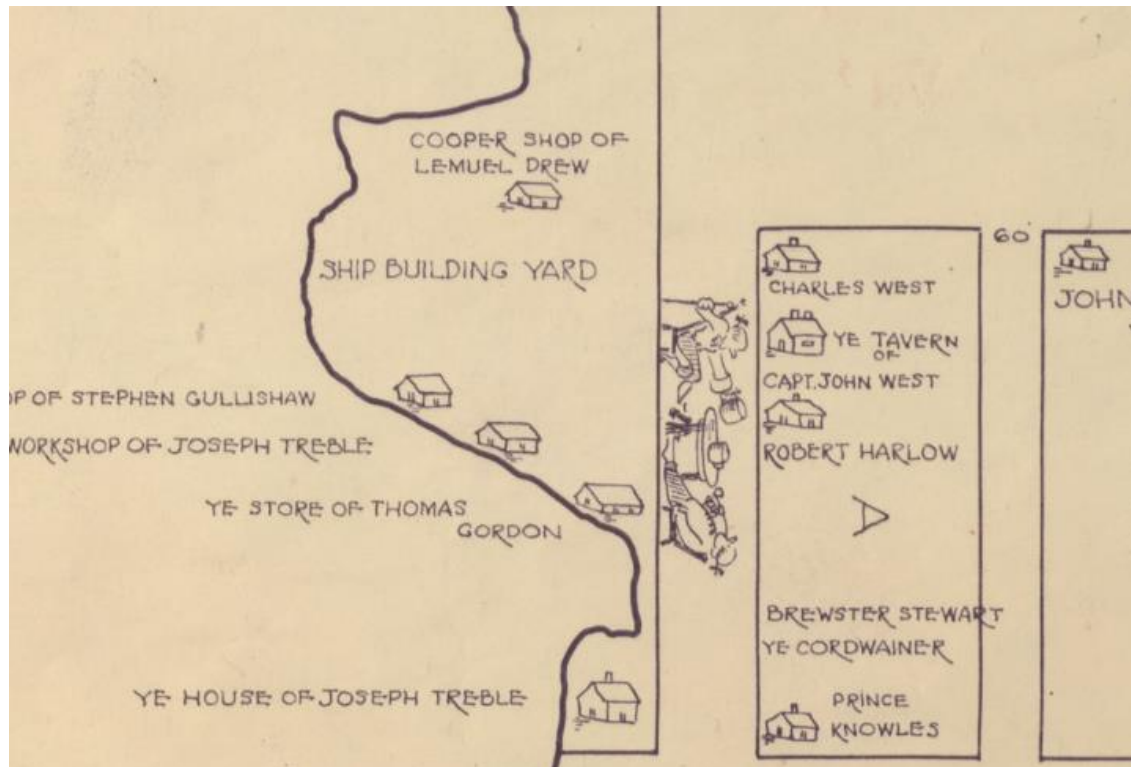


Figure 2: Close up of the original Liverpool shipyard by F.F. Tupper, Plan of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, Town Plot, 1760. Note how associated with the ship building yard and docks is a drawing of two men leisurely having a drink, further demonstrating the deep social connection between dockyards, sailors, and taverns.

These incidents, ranging from public disturbances and armed threats to personal tragedies, illustrate the varied social costs that strained the fabric of Liverpool society, during its intense engagement with privateering. The economic necessity of privateering for wartime Liverpool encouraged the social disruptions, threats of violence, and personal tragedies to be accepted, albeit perhaps grudgingly, as a necessary cost of profit. This pragmatic tolerance is evident by how privateering continued to dominate community life, even amidst its negative consequences. The constant circulation of news and rumours about departures, sightings, captures, or losses, indicate a shared financial and emotional investment which permeated the

community.⁸⁸ The collective energy around privateering was palpable in Perkins' diary.⁸⁹ He recorded moments of "great joy" or excitement upon the arrival of prizes and the return of privateers. Conversely, news of losses, deaths, or impressments also generated concern for the community.⁹⁰

Public rituals also reflected privateering's integration into the community fabric. For example, the elaborate military funeral for George Forbes Vaughn, surgeon of the *Charles Mary Wentworth* in 1799, served as public acknowledgement of those who participated in privateering. Perkins' description of the funeral included Vaughn's interment with "Military Honours," attended by owners, officers, and at least thirty crewmembers—combined with the ship's colours laced over the coffin, volleys fired, and a parade.⁹¹ These shared social dynamics, the collective swings between anxiety and celebration, and the public marking of events, all demonstrate how privateering was deeply embedded into Liverpool's social life.

Additionally, George Forbes Vaughn's public funeral highlights how privateering reinforced the social hierarchy in Liverpool. Death was always a possibility for privateering crews, and Perkins details several of them through warfare, accidents, and other means of violence. However, no funerals were held for the many deaths of the labouring privateersmen. Instead, as Vaughn was the Master Surgeon of the *Charles Mary Wentworth* and a "respectable" man of the Liverpool elite, he was given a funeral with full military honours, to demonstrate his high social status. Social life in Liverpool for the privateersmen further reinforced this social hierarchy, conditioned by the town's perception of the crews.⁹² Privateersmen were often found at the tavern, higher positions—captains, officers, and owners—would have private meals either in elevated and or private spaces.⁹³ While captains and officers of the privateer held the same elite social status as owners, the privateersmen remained within the lower social strata.

⁸⁸ Perkins often received his news about prizes coming over the bank from community members via word of mouth or daily letters.

⁸⁹ Perkins, "Tuesday, September 18th," *Simeon Perkins Diary, 1797-1803*, 122.

⁹⁰ Perkins, "Friday, August 30th," *Simeon Perkins Diary, 1797-1803*, 186.

⁹¹ Perkins, "Thursday, May 30th," *Simeon Perkins Diary, 1797-1803*, 168.

⁹² Fingard, *Jack in Port*, 93.

⁹³ Perkins, "Friday, December 21," *Simeon Perkins Diary, 1797-1803*, 139.

Conclusion

Simeon Perkins' diary and Benjamin Knaut's logbook, though offering limited perspectives, provide a window into the profound social impact of privateering in Liverpool during the pivotal years of 1798 to 1803. Privateering functioned not merely as an economic strategy but as a defining social phenomenon, characterized by the crucial interplay between its management ashore as a regulated, legitimate enterprise versus the distinct, high-risk realities faced by motley crews at sea. While Liverpool's elite, embodied by Perkins' integrated the venture into the town's commercial and legal structures, consciously distinguished it from piracy, the community's economic reliance on its success fostered a pragmatic tolerance for the significant social costs involved.

Life aboard the privateer was a complex social world; it brought together diverse crews, whilst subjecting them to structured and hierarchical discipline. Yet, within this framework, sailors forged their own culture through shared maritime rituals, sometimes challenging authority through disorder or desertion. This contested social dynamic unfolded under the constant shadow of peril: from enemy action, the ravages of disease, unpredictable violence and weather, and lastly, the threat of impressment.

Ashore, the town of Liverpool grappled with the consequences of this vital enterprise. While the influx of prize goods provided an essential economic lifeline during wartime trade disruptions, this dependency came at a price. The presence of privateersmen contributed to social friction, ranging tavern rowdiness to armed threats spilling over from shipboard conflicts, and even personal tragedy linked to the privateering milieu. Public events like funerals integrated privateering into community life but also subtly reinforced the town's social hierarchy. Liverpool's continued embrace of privateering, despite these evident strains, highlights a community navigating the difficult calculus of wartime survival, where perceived economic necessity seemingly outweighed the associated social disruptions.

Altogether, this localized study of privateering in Liverpool contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the social experiences of privateersmen and port towns. It reveals how a colonial community adapted to imperial conflict, integrating a risky venture into its social and

economic fabric, while managing its inherent risks and tensions. Through focusing on the lived experiences documented in sources like Perkins' and Knaut's records, this study underscores the importance of exploring the social history beneath the surface of economic and military narratives, illuminating the complex ways in which war, commerce, and community life intersected on the British North American maritime frontier. Further research into this social history, especially as it relates to class, gender, and social movement, holds the potential to reveal how the privateers' pursuit of prizes reshaped the very fabric of society in the British North American Maritimes.

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