History of Black Pirates

Piracy has enjoyed a long, illustrious history. Despite the current efforts from law enforcement agents, pirates continue to flaunt violence and fear on the oceans and seas of the world, capturing cargo and ransoming those captured.
The earliest records of piracy date back to the writings of Greek historian Polybius around 140 BCE, who coined the term pirate (peirato).
Known as the People of the Seas, early pirates (whose origins have only been hypothesized, never confirmed) terrorized cities along the Aegean Sea and Egypt's coast.
Early civilizations of the Tyrrhenians, Thracians and Illyrians also have been associated with piracy. These seafaring societies wreaked havoc on the trade routes of the Roman Empire, from its infancy through its Golden Age and decline. Historians have attributed a contributing role in the eventual fall of the Roman Empire to the land-based pirates, the Vandals.

Pirate ships usually carried far more crew and weapons than ordinary ships of a similar size, easily outnumbering their victims.
The most famous pirates had a terrifying reputation. They flaunted this by flying gruesome flags including the “Jolly Roger” with its images of skull and crossbones that often led victims to surrender quickly, not fight at all.
As the European powers increased exploration, the expansion of sea trade routes and colonization, piracy in the Caribbean came to be known as the Golden Age of Piracy.
Half the pirates had ties to the British Isles, while a quarter came from colonies in the West Indies and North America.
Another group of men also entered into this number, but they tended to receive only cursory mention in history books.
These were the Black Pirates.
Pirates, as many people know, sailed under a black flag. What the general public doesn't know, however, is that many pirates were as Black as the flags they flew.

The Golden Age of piracy was also the heyday of the Atlantic slave trade. The relationship between piracy and the slave trade is complex and ambiguous. Some pirates participated in the slave trade and shared their contemporaries' attitude to Africans as commodities for exchange.
However, many judged the Africans more on the basis of their language and sailing skills – their level of cultural attainment – rather than their race.
Piracy represented a way out, and a way to challenge the very system that made slavery possible. Most of these black pirates would have been runaway slaves, either joining with the pirates on the course of the voyage from Africa, deserting from the plantation, or sent as slaves to work on board ship.
Seafaring in general offered more autonomy to blacks than life on the plantation, but piracy in particular, could. Although it was risky, it offered one of the few chances at freedom for an African in the 18th century.

Black pirates would often lead the boarding party to capture a prize. The Morning Star had "a Negro Cook doubly armed" in the boarding party, and more than half of Edward Condent's boarding party on the Dragon were black. Some black pirates even became quartermasters or captains.
In the 17th century, blacks found on pirate ships were not tried in the courts with the other pirates because it was assumed they were slaves, but by the 18th century they were being executed alongside their white 'brethren'. Still the most likely fate for a black pirate, if he was captured, was to be sold into slavery.
Despite the actual waves of violence and destruction following in a pirate's wake, pirates have been admired by fiction lovers regardless of medium, throughout time.
Books like James Fenimore Cooper's "The Water Witch" and Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island" or film classics like "Adventures of Captain Fabian" and "Blackbeard the Pirate" are inspired, albeit romantically, by actual pirate excursions.

Books such as *Treasure Island* and movies like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, portray white pirates not as hateful criminals, but as lovable rogues, capable of cruelty, but also somehow admirable, even lovable.

It became imperative, then, for the established powers of the European world to conceal the fact that many pirates were in fact people of color. It would have caused havoc if slaves knew that freedom was just offshore, riding the waves, flying a black flag.
Pirates were "marginal men" driven by desperation and rage to vengeful acts of theft, terrorism and violence against an oppressive society.

Early 18th-century Europe was in the throes of severe economic, social, political and religious changes that did not benefit all sectors of society equally. If it can be said that many lives were thus "sacrificed on the altar of progress," then pirates belong in the ranks of those men and women who refused to die quietly.

Blacks were an important part of most pirate crews, and statistical evidence suggests that 25 to 30 percent of an estimated 5,000-plus pirate's active during the years 1716 to 1726 were of African descent.

Tough enough and smart enough to escape bondage, a runaway slave could be counted on to fight to keep his freedom. Indeed, at least two crews were entirely black, with the exception of a single white man apiece.

Piratical racial tolerance did not proceed from a vision of the fundamental brotherhood of man but rather from a spirit of revolt against political, economic and social oppression.
Mutual feelings of marginality meant that the primary allegiance of pirates was given to their brethren. It is hardly surprising that so many blacks--confronted with far worse prospects by existing within the European or American social order--chose piracy.

Black Caesar

The black pirate most often written about is Black Caesar. Legend identifies him as a tall African chief with great strength and keen intelligence. A conniving captain lured him and his warriors aboard a slaver with a gold watch that fascinated Caesar. Once on board, the captain and his men plied the Africans with food while enticing them with musical instruments, jewels, silk scarves, and furs. With his focus on these unusual treasures, Caesar failed to notice that the slaver put to sea. Upon learning the truth, he and his men fought the ship's crew, but the slavers eventually subdued the Africans.
During his confinement, Caesar refused to eat or drink.

One sailor showed Caesar kindness, and the two eventually became friends. When the slaver wrecked on the reefs off Florida, the sailor freed Caesar, and the two escaped in a long boat loaded with supplies and ammunition.

Caesar and his friend decided to attack passing ships. Whenever one was spotted, they rowed the long boat near the vessel and pretended to be shipwrecked sailors. Once aboard their victim, they seized control and took their treasure ashore.
Caesar slew his friend in a fight over a beautiful woman and took the woman for himself.
Alone, he continued his piratical raids until he acquired a number of ships and men, attacking passing ships, then escaping into the coves and inlets where their prey could not pursue them.

In 1718, when the Royal Navy attacked the legendary pirate Blackbeard, and his crew, near Ocracoke Island, under his captain's orders, Caesar stood in the powder room with a lit match with which to blow up the ship, if the navy succeeded in subduing the pirates. He was about to do just that when two prisoners, whom Blackbeard had stowed below during the fight, stopped Caesar.

He was taken to Virginia and danced the hempen jig in Williamsburg. Caesar was the only one of the five black pirates – James Black, Thomas Gates, Richard Stiles, and James White being the others – arrested who refused to give evidence against his comrades.

Laurens de Graff, a Dutch pirate was described as tall, blonde, mustached and handsome. Born Laurens Baldran, he was later to be known by the name of Laurens de Griffe or Laurens de Graff.
He was one of the foremost of the buccaneers in the late 17th century and was heralded as possibly the greatest buccaneer by his peers including Sir Henry Morgan.
Historians of the day never commented that he was black simply because of what might happen should the slave population of the Caribbean find out about his success.
Laurens de Graff was the material of legends. A successful, well-cultured pirate, he is said to have been genteel and refined and kept musicians aboard ship to entertain himself and crew.

Over his 30-year career, de Graff was one of a handful to defeat a British Naval vessel in combat, and attack and capture nearly every town on the Spanish Main, notably Vera Cruz, Campeche and Puerto Bello among others. He was awarded The Order of St Louis by the French.

In 1682, de Graff had become so successful that, in an ironic turn, Henry Morgan, in his official capacity as Governor of Jamaica, sent the frigate under command of Peter Haywood, pirate hunting with de Graff as his primary quarry.
Laurens de Graff accepted a commission in the French navy by Governor Pierre-Paul Tarin de Cussy in 1687. He also engaged in a ship battle off southern Cuba with a Biscayan frigate and the Cuban guarda del costa, sinking several piraguas and taking a small ship as prize.

In January 1691 he attacked near Santo Domingo and was soundly defeated by a Spanish force three times the size of his French force, narrowly escaping with his life.

The English responded in May 1695 by attacking Port-de-Paix, sacking the town and capturing de Graff's wife and two daughters.
The last known whereabouts of Laurens de Graff was in the area of Louisiana where he went to help set up a French colony near Biloxi, Mississippi. Some sources claim he died there, others claim locations in Alabama.

John Julian

During the 17th and 18th centuries as many as 30 percent of sailors were African-American. At sea, African Americans worked as cooks, musicians, skilled sailors, and unskilled workers.

African Americans also worked on pirate ships.
John Julian piloted the pirate ship *Whydah* (WID-uh).

Pirates threw the law of the land overboard. That was good news for John Julian, a half-blood Mosquito Indian who joined Samuel Bellamy early in his brief, brilliant career. On land, Julian's skin made him nobody. On water, his skill made him somebody. He eventually piloted the Whydah, which was the leading ship of Bellamy’s fleet. Julian was one of 30 to 50 people of African descent in the pirate crew - all treated as equals.
Julian's life took a nosedive after he survived the Whydah wreck in 1717. He was bought by John Quincy—whose grandson, President John Quincy Adams, became a staunch abolitionist.
A purported "unruly slave," Julian the Indian was sold to another owner and tried often to escape. During one attempt he killed a bounty hunter who was trying to catch him. He was executed in 1733.

As the Golden Age of Piracy came to an end, the act of piracy was considered a capital offense. Once regional heroes, pirates became despised criminal offenders, receiving harsh punishment for their crimes.
Blacks became pirates for the same reasons as other men did, but they also sought the freedom often denied them elsewhere.

It isn’t known how many of the estimated 400 pirates hanged for their crimes between 1716 and 1726 were black, for the historical record fails to show this.
Recognition of the black man's role in the maritime world of pirates has been slow to enter America's perception of its past. Like their brethren who weren’t given the chance to stand trial, but were sold into slavery, these pirates remain lost to history.

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