ORDER IN THE PORT! PIRATES AND MARITIME CULTURE

A PORT OF ENTRY: MERCHANTS, WARSHIPS, PIRATES, AND PRIVATEERS

The British Crown viewed the Port of Beaufort as a strategic hub for repairs, resupply, and shelter. Its geography made it ideal for transferring cargo from deep water ships to smaller vessels traveling inland to towns such as New Bern, Bath, and Edenton. Pirates and privateers also favored the port for these same advantages.



Created Image of a Beaufort Port Tavern, Circa 1780

Unlike British merchants or naval crews, many colonial era pirates practiced forms of radical liberty and democratic governance. They rejected monarchy, elected their leaders, and shared decision making power. As a result, Beaufort's residents were regularly exposed to worldly crews with sharply divided political views, increasing tension between Loyalists, Patriots, and those seeking neutrality.

WHAT WAS MEANT BY *RADICAL LIBERTY* IN COLONIAL ERA MARITIME CULTURE?

On pirate and privateer ships, radical liberty was governed by agreed upon codes:

Consent of the Governed
- Crews elected captains and voted on major decisions.
- Equal voting rights often extended to all crew members, including former slaves.
- Sailors signed ship "codes" outlining rules, rights, and the division of plunder.

Resistance to Monarchy
- Pirates rejected royal authority and operated outside monarchical control.
- During the Revolution, some were portrayed as "patriotic outlaws" opposing the British Empire.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PIRATES AND PRIVATEERS?

After the outbreak of war in 1775, the Continental Congress authorized privateers to disrupt British trade and capture supplies. Many pirates easily transitioned into this role. While privateering aided the Revolutionary War effort, it consequently worsened supply shortages for colonists, deepening economic hardship and political divisions in coastal towns like Beaufort.



Created Image of Revolutionary War Era Battle at Sea, Circa 1782

DID PIRATE CODE STANDARDS INFLUENCE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT?

Some historians argue that pirate governance influenced American political thought, particularly ideas of decentralized power and checks and balances. Sailors' traditions of direct resistance—such as opposing British press gangs—also shaped revolutionary leaders' views on liberty and tyranny.

NOTE: Although the Founding Fathers did not directly credit pirate codes, scholars point to shared values of rebellion against monarchy, democratic decision making, and the strategic use of private force in the fight for independence.

REFLECTION

Famed pirate captains each had very different ways of carrying out honorable Pirate Codes. Some were notoriously more violent than others. Do you think it would have been possible to be a peaceful or kindhearted captain during those times of great chaos worldwide?

Created Image of a Pirate Captain on Deck, Circa 1770