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# “Our Rights Are Getting More & More Infringed Upon”

American Nationalism, Identity, and Sailors’ Justice in British Prisons during the War of 1812

ELIZABETH JONES-MINSINGER

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In March 1815, American prisoners of war at Dartmoor Depot in Devon County, England, paraded a straw effigy of a man dressed in pantaloons and a cravat across the prison grounds to the roof of Block Number Seven. After a brief trial, during which the straw man confessed his numerous crimes, the prisoners fastened a halter around the effigy’s neck and an executioner hanged him until “dead.” After cutting the effigy down, a small group carried the body to a convenient spot in the yard where they burnt it to ashes and scattered the remains to the wind. The prisoners conducted the execution in silence while British guards looked on. Perhaps the guards would have interrupted the proceedings if the effigy had been of the English king or the governor of the prison, Thomas Shortland. Instead, the victim was the prisoners’ own benefactor, Reuben Beasley, the American Agent for Prisoners of War in England.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The execution of the straw effigy is recorded in several prisoners’ narratives. These include Benjamin F. Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer, Privateer-man: While a Prisoner on Board English War Ships at Sea, in the Prison at*

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The execution of Reuben Beasley's effigy does not mean that these prisoners had abandoned their identity as loyal Americans. Rather, it highlights the complicated relationship that existed between American prisoners during the War of 1812 and a government that could not always provide them with what they needed. Prisoner narratives and letters from American prisoners to their agents reveal deep feelings of loyalty and patriotism, but also instances of frustration and anger at what they perceived as neglect from their government. Despite the comparatively strong central government created with the Constitution, the United States lacked effective, top-down mechanisms for addressing the needs of its imprisoned citizens. The government often presented a human face to American prisoners of war. Just a handful of men acted as agents for prisoners, monitoring the well-being of sailors held in prisons in Nova Scotia, England, Bermuda, and elsewhere. When these men performed their duty with care and diligence, they projected the image of a sympathetic government. When they faltered—due to the intransigence of British officials, the bumbling of the American government, or their own ineptitude and lack of interest—prisoners interpreted their missteps as proof of the government's indifference to their situation. The Dartmoor prisoners' execution of Reuben Beasley's effigy was the result of a confluence of factors: the glacial pace of organizing transportation home following the peace settlement, the surly attitudes of British prison officials and guards, and Beasley's perceived neglect of their needs throughout their imprisonment.

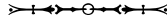
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*Melville Island and at Dartmoor* (New Haven, CT, 1914), 172–73; E. G. Valpey, ed., *Journal of Joseph Valpey, Jr. of Salem, November, 1813–April, 1815* (Detroit, MI, 1922), 25; Charles Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs, or Dartmoor Prison; Containing a Complete and Impartial History of the Entire Captivity of the Americans in England, from the Commencement of the Last War Between the United States and Great Britain, Until All Prisoners Were Released by the Treaty of Ghent* (New York, 1852), 85–87; Benjamin Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man of Massachusetts: Late a Surgeon on Board an American Privateer, Who Was Captured at Sea by the British, and Was Confined First, at Melville Island, Halifax, then at Chatham, in England, and at Last at Dartmoor Prison; Interspersed with Observations, Anecdotes, and Remarks, Tending to Illustrate the Moral and Political Characters of the Three Nations; To Which Is Added, a Correct Engraving of Dartmoor Prison, Representing the Massacre of American Prisoners* (Boston, 1816), 183; and Josiah Cobb, *A Green Hand's First Cruise, Roughed Out from the Log-Book of Memory, of Twenty-Five Years Standing: Together with a Residence of Five Months in Dartmoor*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1841), 2: 191.

Because imprisoned sailors had limited interactions with the small number of U.S. government officials appointed on their behalf, they were left to their own devices in constructing methods of internal governance and ideas of loyalty to their nation. Prisoners participated in patriotic rituals while incarcerated, but remained skeptical of the American government's efforts to secure their release. They raised American flags over their jails and over the rails of their prison hulks, celebrated George Washington's birthday with three huzzahs, and made patriotic orations on the Fourth of July, but they expected something in return from the government for their continued loyalty. These expectations were shaped by their understandings of republican government, their seafaring experiences, their perceptions of their own character in comparison to foreigners, and, perhaps most importantly, their observations of foreign prisoners' interactions with their own national governments. Despite their insistence on having their "rights" respected, American prisoners had trouble articulating exactly what those rights were. Their expectations varied greatly, ensuring that both the British and American governments would never meet them.

In his study on American Revolutionary prisoners, Jesse Lemisch argued that "to say, simply, that the seamen were nationalists says nothing about the *content* of their nationalism—what it was they thought they were being loyal to when they were loyal to 'America,' the values which they fashioned to their nationalism and expressed through it." Likewise, American prisoners during the War of 1812 entertained numerous ideas about their rights and obligations to their country. Their nationalism incorporated ideas based loosely on the American constitutional tradition, but also included elements of customary sailors' justice practiced at sea. The rhetoric of "free trade and sailors' rights," employed by the United States government to build support for the War of 1812, made the protection of seafarers a key element in the fight for American sovereignty. But when the American government failed to make this rhetoric a reality, imprisoned sailors took matters into their own hands. They set up committees within prison blocks to ensure that order was preserved within their ranks. They petitioned their agents for redress of grievances. And when their pleas went unanswered, they burned effigies and threatened violence. Their nationalism was performative, pragmatic, situational, and conditional, used to champion their rights before combative British and American officials. Most maritime prisoners adamantly asserted their loyalty to the United States. However, when they felt that

the American government had forgotten them, they did not hesitate to employ threats of defection. With limited oversight from their own government, American maritime prisoners constructed a boisterous form of nationalism that gave them some internal cohesion, but made it difficult for both British and American officials to control or appease them.<sup>2</sup>



During the War of 1812, American sailors made up a disproportionately large number of those imprisoned by British forces. Approximately 14,000 American naval and private seamen—14 percent of the nation’s seafaring manpower pool—were held as prisoners for at least part of war, compared to just several hundred U.S. Army soldiers. American prisoners were held in permanent depots in Halifax, Nova Scotia and Devon, England as well as on prison hulks in English rivers, off the coast of Bermuda, and at various locations around the Atlantic Ocean. In many ways, American prisoners during the War of 1812 were better off than their predecessors during the American Revolution. From the outset, the British government considered them prisoners of war rather than rebels or civil prisoners. Although some sailors during the War of 1812 were imprisoned in hulks, sailing vessels that were converted into stationary jails in various ports, most were quickly transferred to terrestrial prisons. Due to the interminable Napoleonic Wars, the British had constructed an extensive network of prisons to incarcerate their French foes. Disease, poor food, cold winters, and overcrowding killed several hundred prisoners during the war but imprisonment was no longer a death sentence, and most American prisoners survived their ordeal.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Jesse Lemisch, “Listening to the ‘Inarticulate’: William Widger’s Dream and the Loyalties of American Revolutionary Seamen in British Prisons,” *Journal of Social History* 3 (Autumn 1969), 1–29. On the long history of sailors’ rights, see Paul A. Gilje, “‘Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights’: The Rhetoric of the War of 1812,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 30 (Spring 2010), 1–23; Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812* (New York, 2013) 1–7. David Waldstreicher describes nationalism as a “set of practices” or a “political strategy” employed by certain groups to promote their own interests over those of other groups. Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 3, 6.

3. Ira Dye, “American Maritime Prisoners of War, 1812–1815,” in *Ships, Seafaring, and Society: Essays in Maritime History*, ed. Timothy J. Runyan (Detroit, MI, 1987), 293 and 310n2. Sheldon S. Cohen, *Yankee Sailors in British Gaols:*

American prisoners still encountered many difficulties during the War of 1812. Prisoner exchange was sporadic, and negotiations between the belligerent nations frequently broke down. Throughout the war, the British held more American prisoners than vice versa, limiting the possibility of exchange. Debates over citizenship remained unresolved, as demonstrated by the furor over British impressment of American sailors. The United States had been asserting and shaping the boundaries of citizenship for almost forty years, employing multiple strategies to establish citizenship based on performative allegiance, ideas of national character, and paper documents, but rarely birth. However, the British government continued to act as the *de facto* arbiter of American citizenship for many sailors, frequently attacking mariners' bodies as well as their identification paperwork. The assertion of American sovereignty was part of the rationale for the war itself, and sailors often bore the brunt of that struggle.<sup>4</sup>

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*Prisoners of War at Forton and Mill, 1777–1783* (Newark, DE, 1995), 17, 180. On the status of American Revolutionary prisoners of war, see Francis D. Cogliano, "‘We All Hoisted the American Flag’: National Identity among American Prisoners in Britain during the American Revolution," *Journal of American Studies* 32 (Apr. 1998), 19–37; Cogliano, *American Maritime Prisoners in the Revolutionary War: The Captivity of William Russell* (Annapolis, MD, 2001), 43; and Edwin G. Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots: The Untold Story of American Prisoners During the Revolutionary War* (New York, 2008), 37, 180. For problems with prison hulks, see Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, 164, x–xi; Robin F. A. Fabel, "Self-Help in Dartmoor: Black and White Prisoners in the War of 1812," *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (Summer 1989), 165–90. On the construction of British prisons during the Napoleonic Wars, see Dye, "American Maritime Prisoners of War," 296. On mortality rates at Melville Island and the Dartmoor Depot, see Faye M. Kert, *Privateering: Patriots and Profits in the War of 1812* (Baltimore, 2015), 105; Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 17; John Mitchell to John Mason, Oct. 18, 1813, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 7, Folder 3, National Archives, Washington, DC.

4. On prisoner exchange, see Kert, *Privateering*, 72–73; Cogliano, *American Maritime Prisoners*, 36–37. On citizenship, see Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, *Citizen Sailors: Becoming American in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 5, 10. For attacks on paperwork, see Perl Rosenthal, *Citizen Sailors*, 233–34. For numbers of impressed sailors, see Myra C. Glenn, *Jack Tar's Story: The Autobiographies and Memoirs of Sailors in Antebellum America* (New York, 2010), 54; and Denver Brunzman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville, VA, 2013), 247.

Impressed sailors from merchant vessels comprised a large number of the American seamen confined in British jails. Accounts suggest that somewhere between 2,000 and 2,300 impressed sailors occupied British jails in the closing months of the war. The significance of impressment as a rhetorical device used by the American government to garner support for war with Britain is well-established. However, while most Americans perceived impressment in symbolic terms, relating it to the debate over citizenship and subjecthood, American sailors experienced it firsthand. Impressment meant forced labor, forced migration, and separation from family, friends, and country. American seamen could take few precautions to ensure their protection from English press gangs. British officers were skeptical of documents proclaiming American citizenship, often assuming that sailors forged papers to avoid service in the Royal Navy. With the outbreak of war, many impressed Americans again asserted their citizenship to British officers to avoid meeting their fellow citizens in combat, but their declarations were typically ignored or resulted in imprisonment.<sup>5</sup>

The status of the impressed sailors remained murky throughout the war. Rather than sending impressed American sailors back to the United States on cartels as noncombatants, the British Board of Transport and the Lords of the Admiralty remanded them to prison hulks and depots around the Atlantic basin. Reuben Beasley's attempts to free American citizens from involuntary service and imprisonment usually failed. In a letter summarizing the 230 applications he made on behalf of allegedly impressed Americans in 1813, Beasley noted that the British discharged two men from prison ships at Chatham, deemed one eligible for

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5. For estimates of the number of impressed seamen, see Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 76; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 159; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York, 2010), 363; and Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights*, 375–76, footnote 6 for ch. 13. On impressment as an “act of counterrevolution” that re-established subjecthood, see Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 4. On protests against impressment as a key moment in shaping American citizenship, see Denver Brunsmann, “Subjects vs. Citizens: Impressment and Identity in the Anglo-American Atlantic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* (Winter 2010), 557–86. On British skepticism of American protection papers, see Brunsmann, “Subjects vs. Citizens,” 577. For more information on Seamen's Protection Certificates, see Matthew Taylor Raffety, *The Republic Afloat: Law, Honor, and Citizenship in Maritime America* (Chicago, 2013), 177–79.



exchange, and rejected eighteen for insufficient documentation; 209 applications went unanswered. After more fruitless attempts to gain the release of incarcerated American citizens, Beasley concluded that "perhaps, in the Lordships' view, to send them from detention and service in ships of war to confinement is to release them."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the thousands of impressed sailors remanded to British prisons during the war, an even larger number were captured from privateering vessels. With a small naval force, the U.S. government utilized privateering extensively to wage war on the British. It was a solution that combined patriotism with the potential for profit and required little government expenditure. Privateers were privately owned and armed vessels authorized by the federal government to attack enemy shipping while protecting American trade. Legal privateering required both a declaration of war and a prize act, in which the government issued letters of marque and reprisal against the enemy. While American privateers were successful in capturing enemy ships at the beginning of the war—in part because Britain's delay in issuing a declaration of war prevented the Canadian Maritimes from responding in kind—most privateers came up empty-handed, and many voyages undertaken in the hopes of rich reward ended in imprisonment instead. When Reuben Beasley created a list of the total number of prisoners departing England on American cartels at the end of the war, he recorded 1,347 men belonging to merchant ships and 2,996 to private armed vessels; only 381 belonged to the U.S. Navy.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Reuben Beasley to John Mason, Mar. 24, 1814, and Beasley to Alexander McLeay, Mar. 13, 1813, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 9, Folder 4, and Box 7, Folder 2. Author's emphasis.

7. Kert argues that privateering was "conducted legally for the benefit of the participants and, coincidentally, for the state," but many imprisoned sailors depicted it as a patriotic action. Kert, *Privateering*, 4–5, 7, 38; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 24; Cogliano, *American Maritime Prisoners*, 2. Undated list of American cartels from Reuben Beasley, ca. Feb. 1815, Records of the Adjutant General, Record Group 94, War of 1812 Prisoners, Entry #127, Box 9, Folder 4. William Falconer defines a cartel as "a ship commissioned in time of war to exchange the prisoners of any two hostile powers; also to carry any particular request or proposal from one to another." William Falconer, *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine: or, a Copious Explanation of the Technical Terms and Phrases Employed in the Construction, Equipment, Furniture, Machinery, Movements, and Military Operations of a Ship* (London, 1776), 83.



The position of captured privateersmen was complicated by three factors. First, privateers were on their own once they were at sea with no governing body to coordinate their activities. The tenuous connection between the privateer and the state made it difficult for captured privateers to make claims on their government. Second, while both belligerent nations largely accepted the legitimacy of privateering and distinguished privateers from military vessels, captured privateersmen were not granted the same status as civilian merchantmen. The British asserted that men who chose to enlist in American armed vessels had already declared their allegiance and their status as combatants. This viewpoint was buttressed by imprisoned privateersmen who retrospectively boasted about their defense of the United States. Finally, captured crews and officers of privateers were not given the same privileges as naval sailors. High-ranking naval officers were usually granted parole after capture, during which they could rent private quarters near the prison in exchange for pledging not to escape or take up arms. However, privateer officers were only eligible for parole if their ships carried more than fourteen guns, a criterion few ships met. Furthermore, privateersmen were supposed to be treated like U.S. Navy crews for the purpose of exchange, but were instead placed at the bottom of the exchange list behind naval officers or government officials and those taken on merchantmen. Both the American agents and the prisoners themselves suspected that the British Board of Transport targeted privateersmen for prolonged incarceration. In 1814, imprisoned privateersman Benjamin Franklin Palmer noted in his diary that the British planned to exchange a group of three hundred soldiers captured in Canada, “But for us poor Privateersmen—NO EXCHANGE.”<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, impressed sailors, privateersmen, and other American maritime prisoners were more successful than American politicians in constructing the rationale for the war through their incarceration and subsequent narratives. The everyday experiences of these imprisoned sailors offer a counterpoint to the ambiguous legacy of the war, illustrating how Americans who were engaged closely with their British captors

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8. Kert, *Privateering*, 10, 72; Perl-Rosenthal, *Citizen Sailors*, 72. For a statement of parole made by American prisoners at Melville Island in Halifax, see John Mitchell Papers, Folder 6, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, May 24, 1814, 67, and Sept. 25, 1814, 99.

structured their experiences and, ultimately, incorporated their struggle into their identities as Americans. National allegiance was not a monolithic category, an unchanging set of beliefs shared by all citizens of the United States, but sailors' incarceration within British jails allowed them to claim a more cohesive identity as Americans. The majority embraced American pro-war rhetoric, especially as it related to the fight against impressment by foreigners and protection of sailors' rights. The rhetorical call for "sailors' rights" was ambiguous, and many imprisoned sailors used that ambiguity to make claims on their government. Muting other issues behind the war, maritime prisoners used the rhetoric of "sailors' rights" to assert their place in the body politic.

Although the British held prisoners at various points in Canada, England, and around the Atlantic Ocean, the greatest numbers were concentrated in Halifax, Nova Scotia and the Dartmoor Depot in Devonshire, England. The Halifax prison was constructed on Melville Island (actually a peninsula in Halifax Harbor) which consisted of about five acres of land. Benjamin Waterhouse described the prison as a two-story, wooden structure of about 200 by 50 feet, where officers were segregated out of the general prison population and housed on the second floor with the dispensary and infirmary. Escape was common enough that the residents of Halifax were concerned by the proximity of enemy prisoners. American captives exploited this fear. When a rumor emerged that the prisoners were planning an attack on the town, the captives deliberately stoked local fears "by whispering together, pointing our fingers sometimes E. and sometimes W. and sometimes N. and sometimes S. and rubbing our hands and laughing and affecting to be in high spirits." The inmate population peaked at about 1,300 captives in July 1814, after which numbers declined to between 600 and 1,000. By fall 1814, the British government decided to move all American captives who were not eligible for parole to the Dartmoor Depot. Many of the imprisoned sailors who published narratives of their experiences were transferred to Dartmoor in the fall of 1814.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 12, 25. Although this narrative is presented in the first person, it was recorded and published by eminent New England physician Benjamin Waterhouse in 1816. Kert identifies the author as Dr. Amos Babcock, a privateer's surgeon during the war. Kert, *Privateering*, 105–106. For more information on Waterhouse, see James William Marshall, Jr., "Reuben Beasley in London: American Consul and Agent for Prisoners, 1811–1815," MA thesis, Kent State University, 1972, 106. Alan Taylor briefly describes

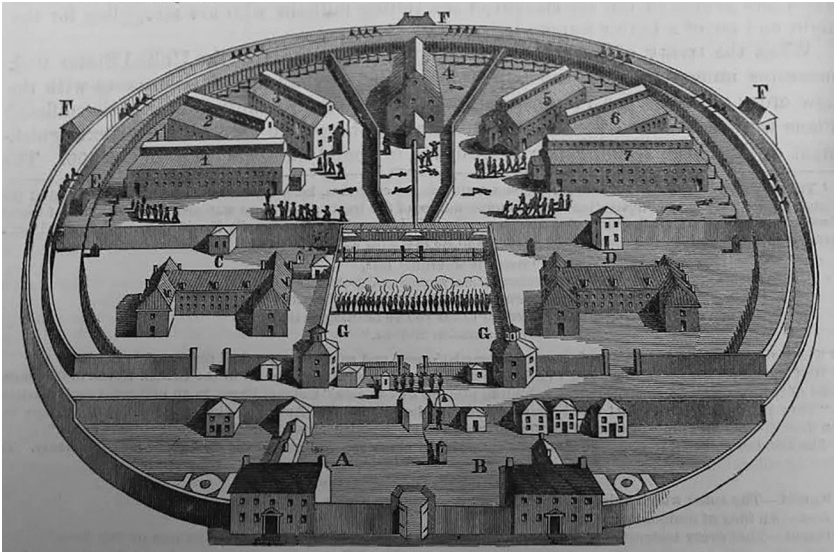


Figure 1: Image of Dartmoor Prison. Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812; Or, Illustrations, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the Last War for American Independence* (New York, 1869), 1068.

The prison at Dartmoor, located about twenty miles northeast of Plymouth, was constructed specifically as a depot for prisoners of war in 1806. Unlike the Melville Island prison, this complex consisted of numerous stone buildings, including seven prison blocks arranged in a semi-circle, all enclosed by a stone wall. (See Figure 1.) The historian

Melville Island, noting that it was primarily a maritime prison. Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 354. Numbers of prisoners at Melville Island taken from a “Report on State of American Prisoners of War Victualled in Small Stores at Melville Island,” John Mitchell Papers, Folder 4. Benjamin Palmer was sent from Melville Island to Dartmoor in August 1814. Both Joseph Valpey and Amos Babcock arrived at Dartmoor in the fall of 1814. Josiah Cobb, whose privateer was captured in December 1814, arrived at the prison after the peace settlement, but did not sail for the United States until July 1815. Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin Franklin Palmer*, 94; Valpey, *Journal of Joseph Valpey, Jr.*, 12; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 139–44; Cobb, *A Green Hand’s First Cruise*, 2: 5, 281. Marshall discusses the British plan to move captives to Dartmoor and notes that by October 1814 they had over 5,000 prisoners housed there. Marshall, Jr., “Reuben G. Beasley in London,” 91.

Robin Fabel estimates that 6,500 American prisoners passed through Dartmoor's gates during the war, a figure that is supported by Josiah Cobb's assertion that he was prisoner number 6,632 when he arrived after the peace settlement in January 1815. Americans at Dartmoor, housed together in prison blocks approximately 250 feet long and 60 feet wide, constructed a rich prison culture that stressed self-reliance, at least in part because their agent offered them little support.<sup>10</sup>

The experience of the American prisoners depended heavily on the character and conduct of their agents. Philadelphian John Mitchell served as American Agent for Prisoners of War in Halifax and Reuben Beasley, a diplomatic consul from Virginia, served in England. Both men encountered obstacles immediately. Lacking clear orders from their government regarding exactly what their position entailed, Mitchell and Beasley attempted to establish themselves as the highest American governmental authorities in their respective locations. While Mitchell appears to have devoted himself fully to prisoner affairs, Beasley spent much of his time reporting to Secretary of State James Monroe on political affairs and handling American commercial matters. Mitchell and Beasley fumbled in their attempts to identify their correct superiors. Mitchell wrote to both the secretary of state and the secretary of the navy before settling on John Mason, the Commissary General of Prisoners, as his proper superior. Beasley wrote to both Mason and Secretary of State Monroe throughout the war, apparently making no attempt to establish the proper chain of command.<sup>11</sup>

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10. On the construction of the prison, see Dye, "American Maritime Prisoners of War," 306. For numbers of prisoners, see Fabel, "Self-Help in Dartmoor," 165; and Cobb, *A Green Hand's First Cruise*, 2: 5–6. The dimensions of the prison blocks also come from Cobb.

11. On the status of American agents, see Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 365; and Marshall, Jr., "Reuben G. Beasley in London," 27. John Mitchell was formerly consul at Santiago, Cuba (St. Jago de Cuba). See Anthony George Dietz, "The Prisoner of War in the United States During the War of 1812," PhD diss., The American University, 1964, 24. On the chain of command for American consuls, see Dye, "American Maritime Prisoners of War," 300. On the ambiguous status of American consuls abroad in the antebellum period, see Raffety, "'Our Man in Liverpool': The Consular Service and American Citizenship," *The Republic Afloat*, 151–73. Beasley wrote to both Monroe and Mason regarding American prisoners from 1813 to 1815. However, it does appear that Beasley kept in closer contact with Mason towards the end of the war. Reuben Beasley's letters, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners,

Mitchell and Beasley faced even more daunting challenges from the British policy they encountered on a daily basis. Beasley's predecessor, charge d'affaires Jonathan Russell, recommended deference to the British, advising him to "make representations in a dispassionate manner and with the expression of a proper confidence in the benevolent feelings of those [to] whom you reply" as a way of urging the British toward "a proper reform" of conduct. However, dispassionate pleas for "a proper reform" did not suit the needs of the languishing prisoners. Fearing that British guards would tempt desperate American prisoners into His Majesty's Service, Beasley issued a circular in May 1813 to prisoners in England assuring them that there had not "existed any indifference towards their unfortunate situation," rather, that they had "been a subject of repeated representations and remonstrances with the British government." Placing the blame for their continued neglect with the British government, Beasley reminded the prisoners that any who entered the enemy's service would earn "the scorn of mankind" and would "expose themselves to the punishment due to traitors." Beasley played to the prisoners' patriotism (and fear of punishment for treason) because he realized he had few other avenues open to him. His appeals were risky, however, since they allowed the British to remind him of his limited status as agent for prisoners and "gave them a ready excuse not to treat with him any time he became too vociferous on behalf of American rights."<sup>12</sup>

Mitchell chose not to champion prisoners' rights in such a public and flamboyant manner, but he diligently engaged with British officials to secure the adequate treatment of American prisoners in Halifax. Disputes frequently erupted over acts of retaliation by the two governments. When a report reached Halifax in January 1814 claiming that the Americans

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Box 2, Folders 1, 2, and 4; Box 3, Folder 5; Box 7, Folder 2; and Box 9, Folders 3 and 4.

12. Jonathan Russell to Reuben Beasley, Sept. 14, 1812, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 2, Folder 2. See Raffety on Thomas Jefferson's instruction to the consuls "not to fatigue the government in which you reside." Raffety, *The Republic Afloat*, 157. Circular issued by Reuben Beasley to American prisoners in England, May 31, 1813, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 7, Folder 2; On being "too vociferous on behalf of American rights," see Marshall, Jr., "Reuben G. Beasley in London," 38.

failed to provide bedding for British prisoners, the British governor of Melville Island Prison, William Miller, ordered the withdrawal of all bedding except hammocks and straw from American prisoners in the depths of the Nova Scotian winter. Mitchell was forced to scramble for blankets in Halifax, but believed that smugglers had snatched them up and carried them to the United States. The British in Halifax retaliated directly against Mitchell on several occasions. When the U.S. government prevented the Agent General for British Prisoners, Thomas Barclay, from residing in New York City, British Admiral John Borlase Warren took aim at Mitchell. Warren ordered Mitchell to move a minimum of one mile outside of Halifax within seven days of his announcement. Warren also told William Miller to prevent Mitchell from visiting Melville Island Prison without Miller's permission. At such a distance, Mitchell could exercise little control over prisoner exchange, which the British increasingly dominated. Finally, in November 1814, the British admiralty gave Mitchell ten days' notice to vacate the province of Nova Scotia entirely. Appointing two senior naval officers on parole in nearby Dartmouth to perform his duties, the disgruntled Mitchell left Halifax for the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the difficulties Mitchell encountered and his ultimate expulsion from Halifax, he seems to have performed his duties with care and diligence. Mitchell wrote constantly to his superiors in Washington detailing the health of the prisoners, asking for greater funds to furnish clothing and medical supplies, and identifying noncombatants wrongly captured by British forces. Following his removal from Halifax proper,

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13. On the removal of blankets, see John Mitchell to William Miller, Jan. 31, 1814 and Mitchell to John Mason, Jan. 31, 1814, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 3, Folder 5. In his second letter, Mitchell appealed to Mason for supplies. On Mitchell living outside Halifax, see John Borlase Warren to William Miller, Aug. 13, 1813, and Miller to Mitchell, Sept. 8, 1813, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 3, Folder 1. On Mitchell's removal, see Admiral Edward Griffith to John Cochet, Nov. 13, 1814, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 3, Folder 4. The British Board of Transport ordered Reuben Beasley to remove himself from London to Brentford, Middlesex, in the summer of 1814, but never enforced their decision. See Beasley to Mason, Aug. 12, 1814, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 9, Folder 4.



Mitchell continued to visit the prisoners of Melville Island once a week. In his narrative of his captivity, Benjamin Palmer noted how the prisoners ran to the gates to watch Mitchell's carriage approach and doffed their hats upon his entrance into the prison. Palmer observed that "all hands muster[ed] round to hear the news" from Mitchell, and that although each prisoner had some grievance to relate "the old Gentleman answer[ed] each one in his turn." While Mitchell could not prevent the British from sending Palmer and his crew to England, he and a group of prisoners wrote the agent acknowledging that he had "endeavor[ed] as far as possible to ameliorate the distresses always incident to a state of imprisonment. We likewise, particularly, thank you for your exertions (Alltho fruitless) to prevent a number of prisoners being sent to England." Palmer's sentiments suggest that the prisoners recognized Mitchell's efforts and bore him no ill will.<sup>14</sup>

The prisoners' assessment of Reuben Beasley's conduct was not so sanguine. Palmer included in his narrative a letter to James Monroe from the prisoners of Dartmoor detailing Beasley's lone visit to the depot. Instead of asking about the situation of the prisoners, Beasley interrogated each one regarding where he was captured, in what type of vessel he was captured, and where he was born. While Beasley was probably assessing the number of impressed sailors inhabiting Dartmoor Depot, his line of questioning shocked the prisoners. The letter writers remarked that "his whole conduct in this instance was marked more with the appearance of a Master of an English Press-Gang than a man sent to ameliorate the sufferings of upwards of Three Thousand of his unfortunate countrymen." Beasley failed to answer the prisoners' letters for months at a time, and when he finally condescended to visit, he showed little interest in their welfare. Once Beasley had freed American sailors from the British Navy and helped them to establish their citizenship, he seemed to lose interest in their day-to-day needs, despite their continued imprisonment. Writing about the same incident at Dartmoor, prisoner Charles Andrews observed that "when we expected from him the language of consolation and relief, he only uttered, in a careless tone to his clerks, 'that he did not think the number [of prisoners] had been so great!'" Unlike Mitchell, Beasley seemed unable to sympathize with the prisoners, causing them to further doubt his efficacy and abilities. His

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14. Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 59, 247.



inability to appear sympathetic led some prisoners to doubt the sincerity of the U.S. government's efforts to secure their freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Beasley's sole visit to the prisoners at a prison hulk in Chatham was not any better. Beasley requested additional sentries to accompany him on board the ship, which the prisoners interpreted as fear of getting too close to them. Although the agent allowed the prisoners' elective committee to ask him questions, he provided no answers. After a brief interview, he "hastily took his departure, amidst the hooting and hisses of his countrymen, as he passed over the side of the ship." One prisoner asserted that they "made every possible allowance for [the] gentleman," arguing that he may have lacked funds or received instructions that prevented him from intervening on their behalf. However, he had no excuse for failing to visit the prisoners and insulting their feelings when he made his brief appearance. This prisoner was horrified that Beasley had "mortif[ied] us in view of the Frenchmen, who saw, and remarked that our agent considered us no more than so many hogs" left to root for themselves. The incident assured the prisoners' inveterate hatred of Beasley, but also reaffirmed their belief that self-reliance was the best avenue to the redress of their grievances.<sup>16</sup>

Benjamin Franklin Palmer recognized that his fellow prisoners were his best means of attaining justice. Soon after a British frigate captured his privateering vessel, Palmer found himself confined in a prison hulk off the coast of Hamilton, Bermuda. Denied sufficient rations, Palmer recorded his frustrations in a diary entry dated February 14, 1814: "Our rights are getting more & more infringed upon; think it is time to demand redress. Chose a Committee to petition the Capt. [to] issue our full allowance of provision." Palmer's language and course of action consciously echoed the rhetoric and tactics employed by dissatisfied colonists during the American Imperial Crisis. For Palmer, as well as many other American prisoners of war, the elective committee was the key to British redress of grievances.<sup>17</sup>

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15. *Ibid.*, 251–52; Marshall, Jr., "Reuben G. Beasley in London," 45; Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 26. Marshall notes that Beasley married in May or June of 1814 and took his honeymoon in Europe, placing his aide Peter Irving in charge while he was gone. Marshall, Jr., "Reuben G. Beasley in London," 75–76.

16. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 61–62.

17. Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 19. Proper provisions were outlined in the 1813 *Cartel for the Exchange of Prisoners of War* as the following:

In depots and prison hulks in Canada, England, and the Atlantic Ocean, American prisoners of war formed elective committees to present petitions to their British captors, communicate with American Agents for Prisoners of War, inspect rations, and mete out justice to those who violated self-imposed codes of conduct. Prisoner-created legislation and governments expressed “an active rather than a passive response to their situation,” incorporating rules for moral conduct that indicated “their culture [was] not fully explicable simply in terms of the minimal necessities for group survival.” Instead, prison committees sought to approximate the civil society found on American soil, or least that found on American sailing vessels. While aspects of the elective committee resembled the workings of the American government and long-held beliefs in the rights of “the people,” these committees also incorporated ideas of customary sailors’ rights and justice nurtured over generations of experience at sea. Furthermore, the prevalence of these elective committees must not overshadow competing models of prison governance that emerged in this particular context.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence suggests that prison committees found some success in petitioning their British captors for redress of grievances. For example, John Mitchell informed his superiors that the Melville Island prison committee refused a bad supply of beef on Friday, April 2, 1814. The committee continued to refuse their meat ration until the following Tuesday, at which point the British replaced the contractor who procured the bad supplies. Mitchell was pleased that the prisoners had the power to secure good provisions since he had met with little success in solving the problem himself.<sup>19</sup>

Elective committees frequently acted as intermediaries between the general prison population and the American Agent for Prisoners of War, a figure who had limited contact with the prisoners. The committee at

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“one pound of beef, or 12 ounces of pork; one pound of wheaten bread, and a quarter pint of pease, or six ounces of rice, or a pound of potatoes, per day to each man: and of salt and vinegar in the proportion of two quarts of salt, and four quarts of vinegar, in every hundred days subsistence.” *Cartel for the Exchange of Prisoners of War, between Great Britain and the United States of America*, Washington, May 14, 1813, Article Seven, John Mitchell Papers.

18. Lemisch, “Listening to the ‘Inarticulate,’” 22.

19. John Mitchell to John Mason, Apr. 9, 1814, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 3, Folder 1.

Stapleton prison in England asked for, and received, the value of their sugar and coffee rations in hard currency because it was cheaper to purchase cooked food from the French prisoners, who had access to local markets, than to obtain sufficient rations from British prison wardens. When Reuben Beasley wrote to the prisoners at Dartmoor, he addressed his correspondence to the prison's elective committee. In doing so, he recognized these committees as the legitimate representatives of prisoner interests.<sup>20</sup>

Some prisoners viewed their committees as the national government in miniature, embodying certain features of their constitutional tradition. On board a prison hulk in the Medway River near Chatham, England, the prisoners elected a president and twelve counselors every four weeks, rather than every four years. One prisoner claimed that this form of governance "adhered to the forms of our own adored constitution." However, the committee also punished moral failings that traditionally undermined shipboard order. An elective committee at Dartmoor constructed a set of regulations specifying punishments for gambling, theft, and uncleanness and outlining the form the prison's judicial system would take. Any money collected in fines would defray the costs of pens, ink, and paper in the prison.<sup>21</sup>

Punishments promoted by elective committees emerged from ideas of sailors' justice rather than constitutional tradition. Committees often recommended corporal punishment for behavior that threatened the health and safety of other prisoners. Nearly all committees punished prisoners for instances of uncleanness for fear that bad hygiene would spread lice or, worse, smallpox. Those found guilty of uncleanness, theft, or treachery could be whipped. Charles Andrews, a prisoner at Dartmoor, noted that guilty parties could receive up to "twenty-four lashes, equally as severe as is given at the gangway of a man-of-war ship."

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20. Reuben Beasley to John Mason, Mar. 24, 1814, and Beasley to Committee of American Prisoners of War at Dartmoor, Mar. 31, 1815, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 9, Folder 4. The Americans were granted market privileges during the summer of 1814, after the French prisoners were evacuated. Andrews claimed that the American prisoners could obtain market goods from the French, but were forced to pay 25 percent above market price. See Marshall, Jr., "Reuben G. Beasley in London," 93; Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 17.

21. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 53; Fabel, "Self-Help in Dartmoor," 188; Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 244-46.

This example highlights the close connection between prison governance and codes of conduct established aboard American naval ships and privateers. To maintain order, elective committees employed harsher forms of punishment than those available to their British captors, who were prohibited from administering corporal punishment by a cartel signed in May 1813.<sup>22</sup>

British prison officials were unlikely to intervene in prisoners' affairs unless they were a threat to the prison guards, the prison, or themselves. Most prisoner narratives stress the success of the elective committees, highlighting their ability to punish forms of malfeasance that the British guards were unable, or unwilling, to check. Despite the frequent use of corporal punishment, prisoners often emphasized the mercy of the prisoner courts and their strict adherence to proper judicial procedures. When prisoners at Dartmoor charged several men with giving the British guards information about the prisoners' intentions to escape, they were hauled before the "court of judicature." Prisoner Charles Andrews observed that although "very strong circumstantial evidence" pointed toward the defendants' guilt, the crime was "of a capital nature," and therefore required positive and direct evidence to convict. Lacking such evidence, the men presumably went free. An incident that occurred a few days later, however, called into question the power of the prison courts. When two men "walked out in the open day, before all the prisoners then in the yard" and told the prison turnkeys that their fellow inmates had been digging tunnels below their cells, no judicial system could save them. If the British guards had not spirited one of them away, Andrews noted, the other prisoners "should scarcely have tried him, but should have torn him in atoms before the life could have time to leave his traitorous body." In such cases, spontaneous action trumped the sobriety of due process.<sup>23</sup>

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22. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 24. Shipboard flogging was not criminalized in the United States until 1850. Raffety, *The Republic Afloat*, 55. *Cartel for the Exchange of Prisoners of War, between Great Britain and the United States of America*, Washington, May 14, 1813, Article Seven, John Mitchell Papers. Although this cartel was never ratified by the British Board of Transport, I have found no evidence that British prison guards meted out corporal punishment to American prisoners.

23. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 63–65.

Not all American prisoners of war constructed the same types of governing bodies. Nor did they consider all of their fellow prisoners to be their equals. At Halifax and Dartmoor, and perhaps elsewhere, white prisoners segregated themselves from black prisoners as soon as there was space available to do so, arguing that it was "impossible to prevent these [black] fellows from stealing, although they were seized up and flogged almost every day." W. Jeffrey Bolster asserts that a strong egalitarian impulse existed in seafarer culture where "overtly racist actions by other sailors [at sea] were often subordinated to the requirements of shipboard order." It is clear, however, that these egalitarian sentiments were not always reproduced under other circumstances. The practice of racial segregation at Melville Island in Halifax is captured in a poem composed by an American prisoner and recorded by Benjamin Franklin Palmer in his diary:

"The White are separate from the blacks—  
 And yankee lads from Monsier Jacks—  
 Now hunger calls aloud for rations—  
 The one thing needfull in all nations."

Once French prisoners evacuated Dartmoor Depot, white American prisoners petitioned the British guards to separate out the black prisoners. The British complied, sending the black prisoners into Prison No. 4, which had its own separate yard.<sup>24</sup>

No elective committee emerged in Prison No. 4. Instead, this was the realm of King Dick. Described in various reports as a six-foot, seven-inch tall "Ethiopian giant" who made his prison rounds in a large bear-skin cap carrying a club, King Dick was probably Richard Crafus, a

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24. Ibid., 38; W. Jeffrey Bolster, "'Every Inch a Man': Gender in the Lives of African American Seamen, 1800–1860," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920*, ed. Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (Baltimore, 1996), 146, 149; Fabel, "Self-Help in Dartmoor," 170–71; Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 228. There was a precedent for this type of racial segregation. During the Revolutionary War, the British separated out the black prisoners at Mill Prison, an act of physical exclusion that Cogliano describes as "symbolic of the exclusion of African Americans from the national identity constructed by the majority within the prisons." Cogliano, "'We All Hoisted the American Flag,'" 34–35.

black privateersman from the eastern shore of Maryland. King Dick ruled his domain with an iron fist, personally meting out punishment to gamblers, thieves, and traitors. It is no coincidence that white prisoners described Crafus as a despotic monarch. This description allowed white prisoners to simultaneously deny the ability of black Americans to form democratic governments and equate the tyranny of Prison No. 4 with the British monarchy. One white prisoner commented on the relationship between King Dick and a black minister, noting that “Dick honors and protects him, while the priest inculcates respect and obedience to this *Richard the 4th*. Here we see the union of church and state in miniature.” Another white prisoner, Josiah Cobb, believed that the British guards saw in King Dick a reflection of their own monarch and therefore allowed him to pass through the gates of the prison, occasionally visit the nearby town of Princeton, and return at will. It is more likely that the British granted Crafus special privileges because he maintained order among the prisoners under his watch, unlike those represented by fractious elective committees. King Dick earned the begrudging respect of many white prisoners, who flocked to Prison No. 4 to attend Crafus’s boxing, music, and fencing schools or came to see the black prison’s biweekly theatrical performances. With these opportunities available, total segregation was not an option.<sup>25</sup>

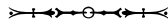
Although elective committees and prison-led judiciaries could usually maintain order within the individual prison blocks at Dartmoor Depot, problems that involved multiple block houses could lead to jurisdictional disputes or even necessitate British intervention. In January 1815, inmates from Prison No. 7 stole a set of wooden shutters from No. 6, causing Dartmoor’s governor, Thomas Shortland, to close the daily market to all prisoners until the thieves were brought to justice. Frustrated by their inability to purchase coffee and other necessities, committees from Prisons 1, 3, 4, and 5 sent letters to Prison No. 7 informing them

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25. On Crafus, see Cobb, *A Green Hand’s First Cruise*, 2: 43–44; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 164; Bolster, “‘Every Inch a Man,’” 155. On Crafus as a monarch, see Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 165. On Crafus’s special treatment, see Cobb, *A Green Hand’s First Cruise*, 2: 44. On the schools in Prison No. 4, see Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 167, 170. Cobb observed that Prison No. 4 was “occupied exclusively by the blacks, except a few whites who [had] been driven from the other prisons by their bad conduct.” Cobb, *A Green Hand’s First Cruise*, 2: 43.

that if they did not deliver the fugitives up to Shortland, they would come and take them by force. Without waiting for a reply, King Dick led a mob of sixteen hundred men into Prison No. 7, grabbed the fugitives, and delivered them to a bewildered Shortland, "who refused to take them, saying he only wanted their names." The market opened as scheduled the next day. If any of the white prisoners felt discomfort with the brute force exercised by the self-styled monarch or regrets about the democratic failure, they did not record these emotions.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the black prisoners under the autocratic rule of King Dick, another group of prisoners evaded the control of the elective committees at Dartmoor. Styling themselves the "Rough Allies," these men acted as extra-legal regulators, dispensing violence and plundering supplies. The Rough Allies were a "gang of hard-fisted fellows" who "assumed to themselves the office of accuser, judge, and executioner." While the Rough Allies occasionally intervened in prison disputes, they were more interested in regulating market prices. When the prisoners accused a local shopkeeper of swindling, "having sold 1 Inch of tobacco for a penny," the Rough Allies destroyed his shop. Although the Rough Allies seemed to operate on the margins of prison society, they performed key roles in protests against American agents and British prison wardens. The Rough Allies received the dubious honor of burning the remains of Reuben Beasley's effigy after the other prisoners executed it. They also led the protest for better bread that sparked the infamous Dartmoor Massacre.<sup>27</sup>



The prison culture of American sailors did not develop in a vacuum. Americans imprisoned at depots and on board prison hulks were surrounded by thousands of French, Danish, and Italian prisoners whose

26. Valpey, ed., *Journal of Joseph Valpey, Jr.*, 19; Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 138–139.

27. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 162. On the destruction of the shop, see Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 152. On the effigy-burning, see Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 183. Josiah Cobb notes that the Rough Allies organized the protest against the poor bread the prisoners had been receiving on Apr. 5, 1815 and succeeded in breaking down the prison gate to the market. Cobb, *A Green Hand's First Cruise*, 2: 212.



interactions with their own governments influenced American expectations. The War of 1812 was a sidebar when set against the larger backdrop of the French Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic Wars. For the British, near-constant battle with the French necessitated the development of extensive infrastructure and bureaucracy to sort and house tens of thousands of prisoners. The British quickly integrated American prisoners into this system without much regard for their distinctive “Yankee Character.”<sup>28</sup>

By the time the British opened their general entry books to American prisoners of war, French prisoners had embedded themselves deeply into British prison culture. French prisoners at Dartmoor Depot dominated the mechanical arts as well as the cookhouses, barber shops, and coffee houses. They also enjoyed exclusive access to outside markets; the British governor at Dartmoor Depot only granted the American prisoners market privileges when the French evacuated in 1814. When Charles Andrews entered Dartmoor in 1813, he found several French prisoners busily counterfeiting notes from the Bank of England to pass on to unsuspecting guards. French prisoners at depots and on prison hulks constructed wheels of fortune and billiard tables designed to bilk Yankees of their limited cash funds. One prisoner, perhaps a little light in the pockets due to gambling with the French, asserted that the French prisoners created these gaming tables to prey upon the unsuspecting American Jack Tar, rather than “forming a constitution, and making a code of laws, and defining crimes.” To maintain order, the British guards at Melville Island Prison in Halifax divided the Americans out from the French in the lower level of the prison. Here, some of the French had resided since 1803, but “few of them were confined in prison. The chief of them lived in, or near the town of Halifax, working for the inhabitants, or teaching dancing, or fencing in their own language.” These American prisoners believed that the French wore their chains lightly.<sup>29</sup>

Observing the apparent *joie de vivre* of the French prisoners, and

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28. Marshall, Jr., “Reuben G. Beasley in London,” 58. The term “Yankee Character” or “Yankee Ingenuity” seems to describe all positive characteristics found in the American seamen, even if these characteristics were deemed loathsome when manifested by other nationalities.

29. Andrews, *The Prisoners’ Memoir*, 28–29; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 12, 17, 55. It is likely that the French prisoners residing in Halifax proper rather than prison were on parole.

comparing it with their own misery over imprisonment, many Americans decided that the French were fundamentally different. In his description of the French shopkeepers at Dartmoor, Andrews mused that "they buy and sell, and are, apparently, as happy as if they were not imprisoned." The Americans, however, could not content themselves while "they long[ed] for that land of liberty, so dear to them, and sigh[ed] for their distant home." The Frenchmen's apparent comfort and serenity not only revealed a deep character flaw, but also confirmed the inferiority of the French state to the budding American republic. If the French could be satisfied with prison life, how much more freedom could they possibly enjoy at home? American prisoners were pleased when outside observers commented on their difference from the French, even when those observers were British. One American prisoner noted that an English sailor "said that the French were always busy in some little mechanical employ, or in gaming or in playing the fool; but that the Americans seemed to be on the rack of invention to escape." Rather than worrying that one of his guards noticed the American tendency to hatch escape plots, this prisoner rejoiced that his captor recognized the American propensity for freedom. If the French were fatalists, waiting for events to befall them, the Americans were proactive risk-takers that chose their own destinies. They sought freedom within the law, rather than freedom to fritter away time and money on the questionable activities enjoyed by the French.<sup>30</sup>

Still, despite their unflattering depictions of the French character, the American prisoners recognized that they shared a common enemy. While

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30. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoir*, 13; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 52. Charles Andrews's memoirs were not published until 1852, nearly forty years after the actions he described. This distance certainly changed his recollections and feelings about his imprisonment. Myra Glenn "cautions historians against accepting at face value self-narratives purportedly written by former sailors," and highlights the "multiple agendas" they had for publishing their work, sometimes years after the events described. However, she notes that these prisoners' diaries "are crucial historical documents precisely because their authors reinterpreted rather than exactly recollected their past." Imprisoned sailors continued to draw on their experiences to assert their place in a rapidly changing nation and polity, and perhaps to finally gain financial compensation. The narrative published by Waterhouse just after the war, as well as the diaries by Palmer and Valpey published in the early twentieth century with little editorial intrusion, include similar depictions of the French. Glenn, *Jack Tar's Story*, 7-11.

one prisoner admitted that he did not like the French prisoners personally, he admired them generally, and wished “their nation to possess and enjoy peace, liberty, and happiness.” Many American prisoners sympathized with their French compatriots as they hungered for news of their Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte. Hearing of the possibility of Napoleon’s surrender, Benjamin Palmer noted that there were “various reports in circulation about Boney but I rather think he has not submitted willingly to the tyrannic yoke of Great Britain.” When sources confirmed Bonaparte’s defeat and Louis XVIII’s ascension to the French throne, the French prisoners were distraught. The British guards at Dartmoor handed out white cockades to the French prisoners to symbolize the royal restoration. Charles Andrews was pleased to see that the French prisoners retained their tricolor cockades, attaching “the white ones on the heads of the dogs that ran about the yards.” In all, while the American prisoners often distinguished the French disposition from the Yankee character, they were always happy to join together against authorities of the British Empire.<sup>31</sup>

For all their assertions about the superiority of the American government and boastings about the unique Yankee character, the American prisoners did not hesitate to petition their agents for better treatment when they believed that other national groups received more from their governments. The American prisoners used the French and others as a yardstick by which they could measure their satisfaction with their own government. Writing to James Monroe, Reuben Beasley noted that prisoners complained about the “insufficiency of allowance” they received from the American government. While they received the same provisions as the French prisoners, they reminded Beasley that the “Danish government allow[ed] something in addition to its subjects.” In response, Beasley displayed a rare act of sympathy and paid two and a half pence per day to each American prisoner, which they could use to purchase clothing, extra rations, soap, or tobacco.<sup>32</sup>

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31. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 55; Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 65; Andrews, *The Prisoners’ Memoirs*, 43.

32. Reuben Beasley to James Monroe, Feb. 10, 1813, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 2, Folder 1; Cobb, *A Green Hand’s First Cruise*, 2: 172. According to Cobb, the prisoners were paid a lump sum every 32 days. This would equal 80 pence (6 shillings and 8 pence), slightly less than one American dollar in this period.

American prisoners also eagerly assumed the activities and positions vacated by the departing French prisoners. American prisoners washed clothing, assisted doctors in the prison hospitals, and cooked all sorts of stews and burgoos to sell to their fellow inmates. Many happily took up the "mechanical arts" that they had derided the French for pursuing. At Dartmoor, "those rough-fisted, weather-beaten sailors" worked leftover beef bones into ornaments that Josiah Cobb compared favorably with porcelain exported from China. According to Cobb, these men could expect very little money in return for their work, but "they will think themselves amply paid, as employment, and not gain, is their object." Most American prisoners depicted French industry as little more than cheating gullible Yankees or as a distraction from more worthwhile pursuits, such as constitution-writing, but at the same time characterized American industry as ennobling, making the best of a bad situation. In fact, French and American prisoners were doing precisely the same activities that opportunity allowed. When American prisoners assumed the French practice of counterfeiting British currency, most observers simply shrugged their shoulders and cited it as yet another example of Yankee ingenuity.<sup>33</sup>

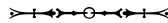
Although American prisoners often grumbled about the deviant behavior of the French inmates, they drew the greatest distinction between themselves and their British captors, contrasting American mercy with British brutality. Some commenters acknowledged that the cultural similarities between the British and Americans made this division unnatural. While the French were separated by different customs, language, religion, and manners, this was "not so with the English. Our language, religion, customs, habits, manners, institutions; and above all, books have united to make us feel as if we were but children of the same great family, only divided by the Atlantic Ocean." Although this perspective echoed the loud refrains of the Patriots some forty years earlier, the War of 1812 seemed to be splitting apart this British American "family" all over again. The prisoners argued that British barbarity drove a wedge between seemingly natural allies.<sup>34</sup>

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33. Cobb, *A Green Hand's First Cruise*, 2: 40; Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 77.

34. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 9. Burrows notes that following the American Revolution, the "three American negotiators [Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson] understood that the new nation must pledge itself to treat future prison-

Other observers believed in a more fundamental division between Americans and their British captors. At a time when the United States was experimenting with a definition of nationality based on political behavior and choices rather than a quality fixed by birth, it is ironic that so many American prisoners asserted that their national character was innate and immutable. Aside from individual acts of kindness performed by sympathetic guards, many prisoners, resentful of their incarceration, viewed their British captors as barbarians. Extrapolating outward from the behavior of individual guards and officers, American prisoners attributed this barbarism to a flaw in the English character. Incarcerated on a prison hulk in Bermuda, Benjamin Palmer seethed at his treatment, stating that “British Humanity is here displayed in its most conspicuous collours. Let no one hereafter accuse the British of Humanity a name they detest and abhor so much that they have erased it from their minds and are now utter strangers to the word.” The treaty ratified in the winter of 1815 restored peace between the two nations, but Palmer argued that “there will ever exist that same hatred and animosity between them and us who has suffered like Marters.”<sup>35</sup>



Not all American prisoners waited patiently for their government to free them from British jails. To gain release from British depots and hulks, American prisoners had two choices. In the first scenario, they could declare their allegiance to the British, join His Majesty’s Service, and possibly go on to fight their former American compatriots. While this option offered prisoners immediate relief, it presented them with an uncertain future and required a denial of their American identity. Defecting meant forfeiting one’s ties to home; it is unlikely that the American government, or their local communities, would welcome traitors home with open arms.<sup>36</sup>

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ers of war with the decency and humanity never accorded them by the British—that what set it apart from the former mother country was *only* this commitment to basic human rights.” Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, 196.

35. On definitions of nationality, see Perl-Rosenthal, *Citizen Sailors*, 49. Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 13, 151.

36. Sailors’ attitudes towards defectors can be inferred from their treatment of impressed Americans who waited until after the peace treaty to assert their citizenship. See Valpey, ed., *Journal of Joseph Valpey, Jr.*, 18; Andrews, *The Prisoners’ Memoirs*, 77; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 181.

The second scenario, escape, not only offered prisoners a more honorable means of achieving freedom, but it also allowed them to utilize many of the cooperative skills they had gained in daily prison life. While prisoners often made solo attempts at escape, they tacitly assumed that their fellow inmates would aid them in their venture, or least remain silent in the face of British questioning. When eleven prisoners escaped from Melville Island in August 14, 1814, John Mitchell found that "all the messes to which they belonged had on that day had their allowance of beef stopped." The British assumed that the escapees' messmates were complicit in the plot, although all refused to inform on the potential whereabouts of their friends. The prisoners at Dartmoor Depot planned to dig several tunnels under their cell blocks to reach the heaths beyond the outer wall of the prison, some two hundred and eighty feet away. After several weeks of digging, the prisoners of No. 5 invited individual messes into their confidence, forcing them to take an oath upon the Bible stating that they would say nothing to the British guards about the plan. Benjamin Palmer made it clear that "if any one should be detected in giving the enemy information it would be certain Death."<sup>37</sup>

Soon, inmates of Dartmoor's other prison blocks began constructing their own tunnels, making a mortar out of the excavated dirt, plastering the walls, and white-washing over their work every night. Presumably acting on an anonymous tip, the prison attendants quickly located one of tunnels by tapping on the prison floors with crowbars. Work on the remaining tunnels continued until two prisoners alerted the prison guards to their compatriots' endeavors. Possibly hoping to gain their freedom by informing on the other inmates, these men only escaped certain death at the hands of the other American prisoners through British intervention. Such traitorous activity illustrates the breakdown of cooperative actions and shows how prisoners could weigh immediate benefits against long-term ramifications, and individual action against collective resistance.<sup>38</sup>

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37. On cooperative skills and escape, see Lemisch, "Listening to the 'Inarticulate,'" 20. John Mitchell to John Mason, Aug. 29, 1814, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 7, Folder 3. Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 121. Palmer even writes the information regarding the tunnels backwards in his diary for an added layer of secrecy. See also Fabel, "Self-Help in Dartmoor," 185.

38. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 62, 64–65.

Surprisingly, the British prison guards did not punish the intrepid tunnel-diggers, requesting only that they fill in the holes they created. Perhaps the British realized that it would be impossible to throw hundreds of prisoners into the dungeon. Or perhaps, as historian George Anthony Dietz has suggested, the British viewed escape as a “natural act for a prisoner and one which did not run counter to the rules of war or the laws of nations.”<sup>39</sup>

American prisoners had the added option of colluding with sympathetic guards to escape. Josiah Cobb noted that the sentries at Dartmoor would help inmates over the outer walls for a pound or two sterling. Even if prisoners at Dartmoor managed to travel the twenty miles from the prison to Plymouth, they became likely targets for English press-gangs in the port city, so many may have sought to escape their incarceration for only a short period of time. Lance Lt. David Perry managed to escape from Melville Island prison into the city of Halifax in March 1813, only to be retaken in November of that year. It is unclear if local protectors decided to turn Perry in for a cash reward or if Perry returned of his own volition before the Nova Scotia winter set in.<sup>40</sup>

What happened when American prisoners denied their own citizenship for a chance to escape British capture? Following Britain’s victory over Bonaparte and his allies, Thomas Shortland released the remaining French prisoners at Dartmoor Depot. Charles Andrews noted that the British did not keep good records regarding which French prisoners had died, allowing Americans who could speak French to pass out under the names of the deceased. Given the international scope of their profession, many American seafarers learned at least a smattering of several foreign languages, allowing them to pass as citizens or subjects of other nations.

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39. Dietz, “The Prisoner of War in the United States During the War of 1812,” 125.

40. On prisoners colluding with guards to escape, see Cobb, *A Green Hand’s First Cruise*, 2: 225. In his study of Revolutionary War prisoners, Jesse Lemisch argued that “if most prisoners displayed a great deal of courage and ingenuity in their escape attempts, some were merely in collusion with guards, turnkeys, or civilians, splitting the five pound reward [for their recapture], sometimes after a night and a day of sex and liquor in a civilian’s home on the outside.” Lemisch, “Listening to the ‘Inarticulate,’” 19. “Perry, David,” in Harrison Scott Baker II, *American Prisoners of War Held at Halifax During the War of 1812, June 1812–April 1815*, 2 vols. (Westminster, MD, 2005), 2: 312.



Andrews observed that "this order released many Americans, who were acquainted with different languages, and could make a plausible story: the Yankees were citizens of all nations whose language they knew." Positing a fluid definition of citizenship based on linguistic ability, Andrews contradicted the definition of American citizenship that existed inside prison walls, which emphasized immutable characteristics. However, in passing as French captives, American prisoners drew on their privateering experience, where they frequently utilized forged identification papers and false flags to capture prizes. Impersonating foreign citizens and subjects during the war was a practice that benefited U.S. trade, lined individuals' pockets, and, in this instance, robbed the British of prisoners. Was there any better example of "Yankee ingenuity"?<sup>41</sup>

Ideas of loyalty and patriotism were not always enough to prevent prisoners from joining the Royal Navy. Although the number of defectors was low, some prisoners chose the short-term benefits of release from prison—and induction into the British Navy—over the long-term goal of returning home to the United States. In his circular, Reuben Beasley warned against treason "for the sake of escaping the inconvenience of temporary captivity," but he also recognized that the poor conditions of the prisons provided a strong motivation for defection. In addition to these motivations, many British officers did not hesitate to actively recruit from the American prison population, although they often did so surreptitiously. Beasley noted that these prisoners were "taken in the night, after the others have retired to rest," a fact corroborated by Charles Andrews, who stated that the governor of Dartmoor Depot would contact "any one [who] was known to be disposed that way." If the prisoner accepted the governor's offer to enlist, he was invited to the guardhouse, "where the other prisoners could have no communication with him; here he was kept till a number sufficient for a draft was collected, then sent to Plymouth."<sup>42</sup>

41. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 47, 38. The British also released prisoners belonging to any nation with whom the French were in alliance. On false flags, see Kert, *Privateering*, 22.

42. Defection rates are difficult to ascertain, but Charles Andrews appends a list of about 210 men whom he states defected into His Majesty's Service from Dartmoor, Chatham, and Stapleton between April 1813 and June 1814. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 30, 138–42. Circular issued by Reuben Beasley to American prisoners in England, May 31, 1813, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 7, Folder 2; Reuben

In Halifax, John Mitchell did the only thing he could to prevent the defection of American prisoners: He attempted to force desertion into public view. When he received word that a number of prisoners had declared their British subjecthood, Mitchell suspected that the British had forcibly impressed them, and that the men would recant their declaration once he exposed them in front of their peers. Therefore, he recommended to the governor of Melville Island prison, William Miller, that these prisoners should make their declaration to their officers or their representative agent. In case his suspicions were not obvious, Mitchell added an inscription at the end of his letter: "I do not believe one man either soldier or sailor on the list voluntarily delivered himself up as a British subject." There is no evidence to suggest that Miller implemented Mitchell's suggestion.<sup>43</sup>

Although Beasley and Mitchell's pronouncements may have dissuaded some American prisoners from defection, their fellow inmates offered the strongest means of prevention. Most prisoners actively worked against recruitment into British lines, with both elective committees and *ad hoc* coalitions dispensing punishment. Regardless of their diverse experiences, the imprisoned sailors had a set of beliefs concerning defection. While this ethos contained elements of patriotism and national loyalty, it also equated defection with a lack of masculinity. When a number of impressed Americans waited to give themselves up as prisoners of war until after the signing of the peace treaty, many of the inmates at Dartmoor scoffed at them, arguing that they should have remanded themselves to prison in the first place and "stood it like a man."<sup>44</sup>

Some prisoners recognized that the potential defectors had to weigh the benefits of national and group loyalty against the instinct for self-preservation. Charles Andrews noted that self-preservation was "the first law of nature," and that many reasoned that "if detected by their country, their death was distant, but here [in prison] it was speedy and certain."

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Beasley to John Mason, Mar. 24, 1814, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 9, Folder 4.

43. John Mitchell to John Mason, Sept. 1, 1813, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General, Entry #127, War of 1812 Prisoners, Box 3, Folder 5.

44. On prisoners' ethos about defection, see Lemisch, "Listening to the 'Inarticulate,'" 16. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 75.

Despite this concession to the survival instinct, Andrews did not condone defection. Instead, he actively took part in its prevention. He stated that he and the prisoners at Dartmoor "on discovery of the intention of any one to enlist into [British service], fastened him up to the grating and flogged him severely, and threatened to dispatch them secretly if they did not desist." Like other crimes outlined by the elective committees, defection warranted corporal punishment. However, it is not clear if prisoners always utilized the judicial process to prosecute desertion. As Andrews's example illustrates, the judicial process may not have suited the immediacy necessary to punish potential defection since the defendant would have time to escape to the British.<sup>45</sup>

The prisoners reserved the most brutal punishments for those who served in the British Navy during the war, fought their American brethren, and then gave themselves up as American citizens after the declaration of peace. Most did so hoping to avoid imprisonment, but since American prisoners in England remained at Dartmoor well into the summer of 1815, the newly imprisoned Americans were delivered into the lion's den. Joseph Valpey noted laconically in his diary that he "went over to Number one prison to see a fellow prisoner have two large Letters put [burned] into his Cheeks for being a Traitor to his Country and damning the flag." It is likely that Valpey refers to the branding of two prisoners recently delivered from British service following the armistice. Andrews recorded that the prisoners "seized and took the traitors into prison, and fastened them to a table, so that they could not resist, and then, with needles and India ink, pricked U.S. on one cheek, and T. on the other, which is United States Traitor."<sup>46</sup>

The Dartmoor prisoners also pursued swift and retributive justice against three formerly impressed American seamen who bragged about fighting their own countrymen. After the Rough Allies "kicked and cuffed them about unmercifully," they seized one of the men and led him to a lamp iron projecting from one of the prisons. They probably would have hanged him if the prison's governor had not intervened. One prisoner observed that "they had fixed a paper on the fellow's breast, on

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45. Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 8, 30.

46. Valpey, ed., *Journal of Joseph Valpey, Jr.*, 18; Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 77.

which was written in large letters, *A Traitor and a Federalist*.” The prisoners’ anger hinged not only on the men’s traitorous behavior but also on the fact that they avoided the hardships of prison during the war by remaining in the British Navy.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the collective disdain for defection into British service evinced by the American prisoners, on at least one occasion the prisoners used the threat of mass defection as a bargaining chip against an unresponsive American government, represented by Reuben Beasley. Tired of meager rations and angry at Beasley for ignoring their previous petitions for relief, the prisoners’ committee at Dartmoor threatened to “offer [their] services *en masse* to the British government” unless the agent met their demands. Furthermore, they would “at the same time transmit to the United States a copy of all letters from us to him, and set forth to Congress all our reasons for doing so, which would most undoubtedly cast all the blame on him.” The prisoners trusted that the United States government would forgive their actions in light of the circumstances—or perhaps relied on Beasley’s fear that the government would take their side over his. This incident not only highlights the conditional nature of the prisoners’ loyalty to the American government but also shows that many prisoners did not believe that Beasley represented the true wishes of the federal government. The Dartmoor prisoners even tried to bypass Beasley and the U.S. government entirely in a letter addressed to “US. Citizens from Prisoners at Dartmoor.” The letter’s authors wondered if it would “be asserted that those captured in Private armed Vessels were not in service of their country” when they sailed “under a commission from the executive” and “distressed the enemies commerce more than in tenfold Ratio to what has been done by the Navy.” When met with indifference by agents of the American government, they emphasized their patriotism and valor to the country at large.<sup>48</sup>

The prisoners’ frustrations with Beasley culminated with the execution of his effigy. By March 1815, the American government had ratified the treaty ending the war, but most American prisoners in England remained incarcerated. The prisoners accused Beasley of delaying the

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47. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 181. In light of Federalist opposition to the war, supporters used the words “Traitor” and “Federalist” to similar effect.

48. On threatening to defect *en masse*, see Andrews, *The Prisoners’ Memoirs*, 34. Letter reproduced in Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 241.

cartels that would take them home. Furthermore, Beasley had suspended the per diem payment to prisoners, possibly because he had no orders to continue payments after the establishment of peace. Forced to subsist on scant British rations without their customary extras, the prisoners' wrath increased each day. One prisoner asserted that "if [Dartmoor's Governor Thomas] Shortland and Beasley were both drowning, and only one could be taken out by the prisoners of Dartmoor, I believe in my soul that *that* one would be Shortland; for as I said before, he has the excuse of an enemy." At this nadir in the prisoners' confidence in Beasley, they identified their agent as their bitterest enemy, the main obstacle standing between them and freedom.<sup>49</sup>

The prisoners' preference for Shortland over Beasley attenuated quickly. Following their execution of Beasley's effigy, the Dartmoor prisoners became increasingly incensed over the poor quality of the rations their British captors provided. When they were rationed hard biscuits instead of soft bread on April 5, 1815, the prisoners took action. A group of prisoners, led by the Rough Allies, broke down the gate separating their prisons from the storehouse. As the prisoners chanted for bread, the panicked guards rushed out, begged them to be peaceable, and promised to restore their normal ration of bread during the night. Satisfied, the inmates returned to their prisons. Everything appeared calm once again.<sup>50</sup>

On the following day, the already rattled soldiers guarding the prison witnessed some prisoners heaving pieces of turf at each other. That evening, Shortland discovered a hole in the inner wall separating several of the prisons from the soldiers' barracks. Someone sounded an alarm, and the prisoners rushed to the main gates. Some witnesses claimed that the prisoners provoked the soldiers by yelling, hurling insults, and daring them to fire. A few soldiers insisted that the prisoners pelted them with rocks, a charge the prisoners denied. As the prisoners became increasingly raucous, the soldiers fired. Eyewitness accounts disagree on whether or not Thomas Shortland gave the order to shoot. The prisoners scattered, many racing back to their prison to take cover. When they

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49. Cobb, *A Green Hand's First Cruise*, 2: 190; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 182.

50. Cobb, *A Green Hand's First Cruise*, 2: 210–12; Andrews, *The Prisoners' Memoirs*, 91–92.

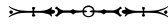
reached their prisons, most found the doors locked from the inside. Some soldiers fired from the inner walls while others marched into the prison yards with bayonets fixed. Prisoners recounted acts of utter brutality, insisting that the soldiers fired at close range on prisoners begging for their lives and bayoneted the wounded. The official report issued following the inquest confirmed that the soldiers fired at close range into Prison No. 3, where inmates had hoped to shield themselves from the melee. By the end of what the prisoners would call the “Dartmoor Massacre,” another echo of the American Revolution forty years earlier, at least seven inmates lay dead and dozens were wounded.<sup>51</sup>

The joint Anglo–American inquest found Shortland guilty of justifiable homicide, deciding that the prisoners posed a strong enough threat to warrant the use of force. The prisoners were shocked, insisting that this was a miscarriage of justice. Soon, some British officers circulated a report that the bread riot and subsequent violence resulted from the prisoners’ dissatisfaction with their government and the neglect of Reuben Beasley. The sailor who had so recently placed Shortland’s life over Beasley’s, asserted that “whatever negligence Mr. Beasley may have been guilty of, respecting the affairs of the prisoners, he should be totally exonerated from all blame respecting the massacre.” When Beasley asked Dartmoor’s committee of American prisoners about these rumors, they assured him of their falsehood. They admitted that some prisoners had “censured [him] as being dilatory in [his] preparations” of cartels to carry them home, but argued that this “want of confidence in [his] exertions” could “in no way be construed to have any collusion or connection with the late event.” The committee did not mince words regarding their confidence in Beasley’s abilities as their agent, but they assured him of his innocence in this affair and their continued loyalty to the American government. When Josiah Cobb’s detachment marched out of Dartmoor with a “raw-head-and-bloody-bone” standard, it read “Shortland the murderer,” not “Beasley the ditherer.”<sup>52</sup>

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51. Cobb, *A Green Hand’s First Cruise*, 2: 214–18; Valpey, ed., *Journal of Joseph Valpey, Jr.*, 27; Palmer, *The Diary of Benjamin F. Palmer*, 179–80; Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 187–98; Charles King and Francis Seymour Larpent’s Report, Plymouth, Apr. 18, 1815 in Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 201–206.

52. Charles King and Francis Seymour Larpent’s Report, Plymouth, Apr. 18, 1815 in Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 201. The investigators did conclude that the attack on inmates in Prison No. 3 was unwarranted, asserting that



Despite the American government's reliance on the rhetoric of "free trade and sailors' rights" during the War of 1812, it often failed to provide imprisoned sailors with adequate support. However, the relative absence of governmental support gave American prisoners ample space to create a form of nationalism that stressed self-reliance, cooperative action, aggressive masculinity, and occasional violence and deceit. The American prisoners embraced broad ideals associated with freedom to petition and protest, and the expectations of a right to necessity and even some comforts. But these prisoners also introduced a maritime twist. Prisoners adopted a mixture of sailors' justice and what they identified as American political and civil rights to govern themselves. The inmates constructed democratically elected committees that offered protection against their British captors, and they introduced new forms of punishment and control with seafaring roots. White prisoners used a language of rights to gain concessions from British wardens and American agents, but they denied these same rights to black prisoners, believing that they thrived under a despotic monarchy rather than a democracy. In this way, the prisoners replicated the racial relations found on American soil, rather than those implemented to maintain shipboard order. American prisoners drew a clear distinction between themselves and prisoners of other nationalities, even as they sought from their own government the customary extras enjoyed by these foreigners. Although they identified defection to the British service as treasonous behavior, many tried to escape even it meant denying their identity as American citizens. To gain concessions from their own government, the prisoners employed a wide-ranging language of rights, but viewed their patriotic obligations in more modest terms. As they saw it, their main duty was to remain in prison and out of the British military. In return, they expected sufficient rations, tolerable conditions, and, perhaps most importantly, recognition of their continued service. The world American sailors created in British prisons was not always orderly, and was only partially grounded in an American national ideal, but it offered its creators a range of pragmatic strategies to assert their importance in the fight for American sovereignty and identity.

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"there was nothing stated which could, in our view, at all justify such excessively harsh and severe treatment of helpless and unarmed prisoners, when all idea of escape was at an end." Report, 206. Waterhouse, *A Journal of a Young Man*, 189 and 199. Cobb, *A Green Hand's First Cruise*, 2: 269.



