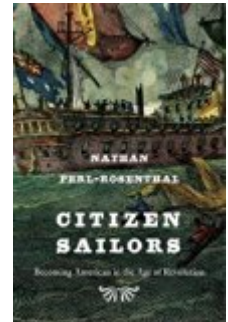


Nathan Perl-Rosenthal. *Citizen Sailors: Becoming American in the Age of Revolution.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2015. Illustrations, maps. 372 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-28615-3.



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In *Citizen Sailors*, Nathan Perl-Rosenthal explores the formation of American citizenship through the experience of mariners at sea in the post-independence era, as the newly formed United States of America made its geopolitical mark in the world during a volatile time of war at sea between the two major world powers, England and France. While national identity is usually discussed in a context of territoriality on land, *Citizen Sailors* offers a delightful shift in awareness and a recognition that this was not always so: much of the formation and codification of “American” identity was constructed around relationships beyond that of national territory and instead, at sea. The book is situated within the broad and evolving question of citizenship itself and roles played by “race,” language, everyday norms of behavior, and self-selection in the construction of a national identity.

In the prologue, Perl-Rosenthal presents the primary question to be answered in the chapters that follow: “What gives someone the status of an

American citizen and how does one tell whether a person has that status or not?” (p. 11). He reminds the reader that the concept of “nationality” is a relatively recent one and that concepts of “citizen” and “subject” have long been associated with local, provincial residence, which is itself closely related to common language and ethnic practices. How, then, to identify who was an American at sea? The rest of the book’s chapters deal with this struggle over a forty-year period from just prior to the American Revolution, when residents of the colony were “Britons,” to the War of 1812. Nicely and appropriately placed throughout the book are historical hand-drawn maps and drawings, such as Hendrik Spilman’s “View of a Shipyard in the Mid-eighteenth Century” and a double-page Blackmer Maps rendition of “The Atlantic World, circa 1776” with major seas and currents.

Chapter 1, “The Common Sense of Nationality,” sets the stage, giving a sense of the mariner’s lifestyle through case studies. It also sets the reader up for an understanding of the commonality of

experience binding sailors together in a primary identity almost more foundational than nationality itself, as “tens of thousands of mariners ... tied the ocean’s shores together” (p. 17). These mariners were enculturated as children at sea around age twelve, were promoted to able seamen in their teens, and had an average shipboard age of twenty-eight. The risks of sudden death (one in three dying at sea) bound them together in shared peril. The author’s wordcraft is revealed early as poetical in its telling of the tale, jargon-free yet rich in expressive vocabulary as he describes “frail floating contraptions of wood, iron, cloth and tar” as the “circulatory system” of empire (p. 16). Were these global mariners citizens of a circulatory system? Not exactly, as the book reveals. As early as mercantilism began, sailors were viewed and monitored as valuable commodities themselves, both at sea and while on land in ports as essentially “wards of the state” to be readily transformed from sailor to soldier as the need arose in times of warfare (p. 27). Their subjecthood was unquestioned and the very idea of citizenship by choice never considered. Modern questions about identity formation or ethno-symbolism did not arise. At times of war, mariners simply became soldiers of their empires as battles increasingly extended to the oceans. It was broadly assumed that birth, language, and subjecthood were identifiable and immutable. This, however, was challenged by the creation of the United States of America. The author introduces in a single statement what appears to be the book’s primary thesis: “The creation of the United States upended every one of the assumptions ... [and] reshaped patterns of sovereignty, culture, and allegiance in the Atlantic world” (p. 44).

Chapter 2, “Britons or Americans?,” lays the foundation for a paradigm shift in the understanding of the relationship between territory, language, and identity. How was American identity to be recognized—and honored—when the language (even dialect at that time), dress, behavioral norms, and all other outward markers were indis-

tinguishable from British identity? The chapter begins with a fascinating case study of Nathaniel Fanning, an American who ended up in a British prison because his American identity at sea was questioned. Prior to American independence, language was the marker to determine the identity of ships and their crews, but now “nobody could rely on their senses” (p. 48). What was left was an examination of nationality by political choices. From here, the author introduces several Admiralty court cases that contributed to the evolution of the concept of “American,” though the chapter gets a bit bogged down by excessive examples that detract from the flow of the narrative. A valuable introduction of the ambiguous concept of “flexible citizenship” and the determination of *chosen* rather than *intrinsic* nationality rounds out the discussion.

In the third chapter, “America Afloat,” the main arguments of the book are once again presented, but through different case studies. This chapter repeats much of the substance established earlier, probably a natural outcome of the series of lectures that laid the foundation for the book itself. This in no way detracts from chapter 3’s importance because the case studies do highlight subtle and complicating factors beyond the culture-language-nationality question. An interesting side story in this chapter is that of the Muslim Barbary corsairs, who targeted Americans for slavery and ransom. Since the United States was unable to pay, sailors could expediently convert to Islam for freedom or less harsh treatment. This chapter also offers an excellent discussion of the British Admiralty concept of “permanent subjectship” versus the revolutionary American concept of “volitional allegiance.” This became a politically volatile discussion in the United States among both citizenry and politicians as Americans defended the right of British seamen to “become” Americans.

Chapter 4, “Nation in the Storm,” focuses on the French Revolution and the following British-

French War in the early 1790s which tested both American neutrality and American nationality. Here we have a sister revolution in France, a call for neutrality on the seas, and the expansion of navies as “the ocean became a main arena of the war” (p. 112). The problem of distinguishing American from British mariners continued, since both Britain and France still relied on language and manners as identifiers. George Washington declared US neutrality in the war but this was controversial because many Americans supported France due to ideological commonalities. However, at sea, Americans were still commonly associated with the English language and “Britishness.” As the need for sailors increased, so did involuntary impressment (forced enlistment). This chapter is very detailed and includes a four-page case study that essentially illustrates the main issues of language as a marker for identity, in this case to justify impressment. The upshot is that American citizenship of sailors was not honored, despite evidence of oaths and documents.

Chapter 5, “The Crisis,” continues on this theme and brings it to a head in the geographical context of the West Indies and the privateering aspect of warfare, sanctioned by states and empires. Here again, documents “proving” the American citizenship of mariners were routinely dismissed, even though almost three decades had passed since American independence was declared. Within America, the continued impressment and capture of American mariners became intolerable, a rejection of “not only their citizenship but American independence itself” (p. 146). Although chapters 4 and 5 are somewhat bogged down with side stories and examples, the main premises are consistent throughout.

Chapters 6 and 7, “The Struggle” and “Sailors into Citizens,” pull the reader up the other side of the curve into a resolution of American identity at sea. The case study of the American *Somerset*, captured with its crew by the British HMS *Argonaut*, provides a catalyst for a deeper US nation-

al conversation, asking questions that may be still relevant in many ways: “Who was an American? Who had the authority to declare someone to be a US citizen?... How was that status to be documented?” (p. 173). The resultant Custom House certificates, giving legal protection to Americans, eventually considered native-born and naturalized (immigrant) Americans to be equal in citizenship. The British, however, did not recognize the concept of “naturalization” because a British-born person was “still and always a British subject” (p. 187). This was less of a pressing danger to Americans living in the United States, but still a dangerous situation for mariners at sea who often resorted to political tattooing to create a permanent marker of citizenship beyond the more “flimsy” paper of a Custom House protection certificate.

The final chapter, “Paper Citizens on a Paper Sea,” takes the reader from the 1799 rise of Napoleon in France to the War of 1812, during which time the proliferation of paper proofs of citizenship became more accepted and standardized in the maritime world. US President James Madison made protection of mariners against false impressment a patriotic issue, combining it with all of Great Britain’s “violations” against US sovereignty. This chapter has its own conclusion, like the other chapters, but does not read as a conclusion to the book itself. I suspect this is due to the fact that the book is composed of separate lectures. The epilogue also leaves the reader hanging by concluding with a discussion of black mariners and racial citizenship that was mentioned in earlier chapters but not brought to a satisfactory conclusion. These would be excellent topics for another, full-length book.

There are many topics within Perl-Rosenthal’s well-written *Citizen Sailors* that remain part of current discussion and debate over citizenship, native-born versus immigrant citizens, language and ethnicity, and legal obligations. There is the powerful question of primordial identity versus nested identities, especially in the context of mo-

bility in a globalized age. What commonality of experience defines US citizenship? Are we citizens of a “circulatory system” like the mariners of old, or is that just a delightful hyperbole? Citizens are still in many ways subjects, under the control of rules of land-based and territorial societies and governments. The conflation of language with allegiance remains a contested issue within modern discussions of citizenship. A related issue is how to determine American identity when everyone comes from somewhere else. American identity is being currently contested in ways that would not have occurred to early eighteenth-century citizen sailors.

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