18th–Century Piracy, Plantations, & Global Markets: A Changing Climate for Piracy

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Introduction

This lesson opens at the dawn of the eighteenth century, c. 1700, and considers why new English anti-piracy laws met with limited success. To do so, it explores that changing politics and economics of the global English empire in the early eighteenth century, alongside the changing realities of the Atlantic world. The lesson asks students to consider the impact on colonial societies of endless years of imperial warfare in the Atlantic throughout this tumultuous period. After the transitional years of the 1690s (when King William's War offered legal employment as privateers to many former Atlantic pirates, but then saw them "turn pirate" again when war concluded and legal maritime employment dried up), the island of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean became a pirate haven (c. 1690-1720.) Meanwhile, as the Atlantic became an increasingly anti-pirate zone, North America-based pirates headed to the Indian Ocean and Red Sea, attacking Muslim Mughal ships headed to the port of Jeddah on their pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. We will review a case study of one of the era's most famous English pirates, Henry Every, and think about how his case reveals change and continuity in official and popular English and colonial American attitudes towards piracy.

Social Changes in the Late Seventeenth Century and Shifting Ideas About Piracy

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, a series of social and cultural transformations in the English Atlantic world changed how people learned and thought about politics on land and at sea, including acts of piracy. New institutions and practices emerged to facilitate the spread of ideas: for example, European production and consumption of books begins to grow significantly and prices of printed material fell. Newspaper culture in England and its colonies became extraordinarily vibrant. Moreover, the types of books people read changed dramatically: demand for books on secular topics such as history and law stayed constant, while demand for religious literature declined. Literacy rates, meanwhile, were also rising and expanding beyond the realm of elite men. In other words, more people were reading more materials, in new ways. Printed accounts of piracy, which we began to discuss in the previous lesson, were part of this boom in secular literary production. The most famous works about piracy during the period covered by this module—Alexander Exquemelin's Buccaneers of America, first published in Dutch 1678, and Charles Johnson's A General History of the Pyrates, published in 1724—were wildly popular. The success of these books revealed a widely shared early modern interest in colorful tales of violent adventure and empire, as well as a fascination with the character of the renegade pirate. Their popularity underscored an increasingly noticeable disconnect between popular interest in—and admiration for—pirates and increasingly harsh anti-pirate policies that began to take effect in the Atlantic in the early eighteenth century.

Key Terms:

King William's War

Red Sea and Indian Ocean

Ottoman and Mughal Empires

English East India Company

Henry Every

Gunj-i-Suwee

British Royal Navy

As noted in the reading for the previous lesson, by the late seventeenth century, power struggles in Europe intensified rivalries for Atlantic commercial control. From the perspective of stockholders of the era's various European overseas trading firms, piracy stopped being either an appealing way of acquiring wealth or an amusing tale of violence and bravery. For traders and diplomats invested in the safe traffic of valuable goods across the ocean, tales of theft and murder on the high seas became something to fear, not celebrate. England, alongside other European powers seeking to protect safe commerce, increasingly sought to discourage piracy through restrictive measures and harsh punishments for people who disobeyed them.
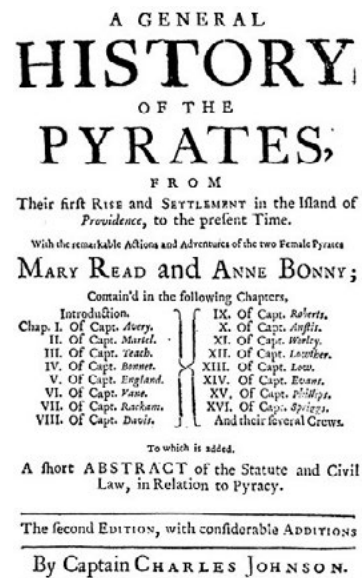
Cover page of Charles Johnson's A General History of the Pyrates, 1724

Atlantic "Pirates" in the Indian Ocean

When King William's war concluded in 1697, many former pirates who had served as privateers during the conflict found themselves out of a job. With piracy increasingly persecuted in the Atlantic, many of these men decided to head east. Sailing from North American colonial ports such as Boston and New York, these seasoned maritime actors often joined up with inexperienced first-time seamen to seek their fortunes along the West Coast of Africa and in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean. They found safe harbors along the way where they could restock and upon return, sell their ill-gotten goods. Between 1695 and 1700, at least 1,500 English pirates sailed in Indian Ocean waters. The Island of Madagascar became a new pirate lair, where crews would stop to resupply and rest. In the late 1690s the East India Company asked the English Privy Council to send a fleet to deal with the pirates based on Madagascar and in 1698 the crown sent a squadron. The Island of Saint Marie was another pirate hotspot, where at least 45 pirates settled in 1697.
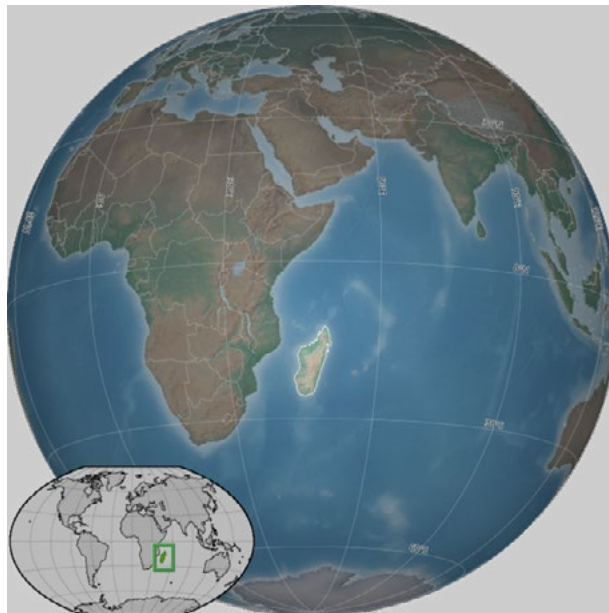
Map locating Madagascar

Map of the Ottoman Empire (above); and Mughal Empire (below)

From their island bases, these men continued to pillage passing shipping (including both Muslim and English East India Company ships) and became active participants in the slave trade and in the resupply trade with merchants based in New York. These North America-based pirates often collaborated with people from the territories and islands they passed by on their voyages, leading to multiracial global networks of traders who helped goods and enslaved people move from east to west. Some of these men made tremendous fortunes and while most did not, the work of being a pirate paid better than legal employment as a sailor. A sailor in these years could expect an annual salary of about £10, whereas a pirate or privateer could make between £10 and £60 per ship taken.

Although this network of pirates moving between Atlantic and Eastern waters was supported by many wealthy merchants in North American ports, there were many English traders based in the Indian Ocean world who were deeply unhappy to see the arrival of Atlantic pirates in the region. Having long cultivated commercial ties to the Islamic Ottoman and Mughal Empires these businessmen were profoundly alarmed by the presence of Atlantic pirates whose predations threatened the alliances upon which their business depended.

A classic strategy employed by these pirate newcomers was to sail the waters that marked the entrance to the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean, waiting for Muslim pilgrim boats on their way to the Red Sea port of Jeddah (where they would travel overland to Mecca and Medina). These pirates had only a hazy understanding of Islam and viewed their attacks on "Moors" through the lens of Christian-Muslim rivalry and piracy in the Mediterranean. But this ignorance would prove costly.

The "moors" on which the Atlantic pirates preyed in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea were in fact Muslim pilgrims, not pirates: they did not attack Christian shipping (as the so-called Barbary corsairs did in the Mediterranean) and they had very powerful governments who took immediate action to express their displeasure with these assaults. On the receiving end of these official objections to the actions of English pirates, it did not take long for English merchants (who, unlike English pirates based in Newport, Charleston, or Philadelphia, spoke many languages and distinguished between many ethnic and religious

Map of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean

groups) to realize that piracy in these lucrative eastern maritime trade routes posed a serious threat to their longstanding commercial operations. So, although colonial American consumers welcomed the arrival of ships bearing exotic Indian Ocean booty, prosperous English merchants making money from regional commerce were eager to see the peace kept with Islamic powers.

Eager to make their concerns known, some East India Company officials wrote to their officer based in Madras, India, expressing their fear that "our Servants Lives and our Estates may be in hazard as of late…by the Piracies committed in and near the Red Sea". The local official responded with a packet of letters detailing "fresh advices [meaning "news"] of pirates appearing in one part or another" off the coast of India "committing robberies against all nations without distinction." If pirate attacks in the Indian Ocean continued, English officials living and working in India worried that they would be "cut off by the country people" (meaning their local Mughal associates) because these pirates were also Englishmen. In other words, the English merchants knew they would be considered guilty by association unless the English crown did something to punish the pirates and make clear to Islamic powers that the crown did not support their actions.

East India Company representatives increasingly made their voices heard in England, emphasizing that distinctions in the Mughal-dominated Indian Ocean World mattered. By the mid 1690s, the East India Company convinced English politicians that something had to be done. In their view, colonial American governors had to be brought into line and forced to stop buying goods brought into their colonies by pirates operating in the Indian Ocean. One India trader wrote: "It is certain that these villains frequently carry their unjust gains" to the colonies "where they are permitted egress and regress without control, spending such coin there, in the usual lavish manner of such persons". If the pirates were allowed to continue their attacks in the Indian Ocean, England's growing reputation as a commercial powerhouse would suffer: "For suffer pirates, and the Commerce of the World must cease, which this Nation has deservedly so great a share in, and reaps such mighty advantage by." In other words: if England wanted to be an imperial power with commercial ties throughout the world's markets, authorities at the center of empire needed to draw a clear line in the sand and put an end to sea marauding. In this climate, London politicians move to crack down on Red Sea and Indian Ocean piracy…but it would prove difficult.

Case Study: Henry Every, East India Company Villain, Popular Hero

The rise and fall of Henry Every, the most celebrated "pirate" of the period, embodied the growing disconnect between official views of piracy and popular support for maritime adventurers who many people viewed as heroic. Every plundered Mughal shipping in spite of laws prohibiting such attacks but was viewed in the popular imagination as a patriotic hero. In 1694, Every captured two royal Mughal ships: an enormous prize. One of them, the Gunj-i-Suwee, had the Mughal emperor's granddaughter traveling on it, along with many other Indian women. The English pirates raped the women over the course of three days and Every was alleged to have "married" the grandaughter and gone to live with her in Madagascar.


Henry Every, shown in scene capturing the Grant Mughal fleet

Although the capture of the ships brought the pirates roughly 35 million dollars in modern currency, it caused a major international scandal. The Englishmen's pillage and rape of these vessels and their crews and passengers enraged Mughal authorities. In India, people rioted against the East India Company and the Mughal emperor embargoed all English ships and forced the East India Company to sign a bond to guarantee the safety of their ships. The East India Company, in turn, brough renewed pressure on the crown to reign in the acts of English pirates in these waters.

In response, the English Privy Council put a bounty on Every's head. Although he was never found (contributing to his fame), most of his crew were captured, brought to trial, and executed in London in 1696—but only after the judge tossed out a "not-guilty" verdict. Their trial and its aftermath revealed the sharp divide between official policy towards pirates and local support for piracy, on both sides of the Atlantic. One colonist complained during the trial that Avery's crew had been treated as folk heroes, claiming they had strutted around the streets of the colonies telling their tales of capturing the Great Mughal's granddaughter on her way to her wedding: "They brag of it publicly over their cups." (I.e., when drunk.) When the six members of Every's crew were at last sentenced to hang in London, their procession to the gallows had to be protected by an unusually large armed guard due to the support of the crowd for the dead men walking. It was not the first or the last time that public opinion would be out of step with the law.

The enduring public support for Every and his men was even more pronounced in the Americas because of the hazy understanding of "Moorish enemies" (discussed earlier in this reading and in Lesson 2). Governing officials and colonial residents saw these rogue sailors not such much as dastardly pirates but rather as social bandits and providers of much needed goods and services. Officially, they may have broken the law, but their behavior reflected the values of their communities and thus local officials tended to protect them. It didn't hurt that the pirates unloaded their haul into the hands of colonists eager for commodities of all sorts, from the Bahamas to Boston.

The English Crackdown on Pirates Gains Speed
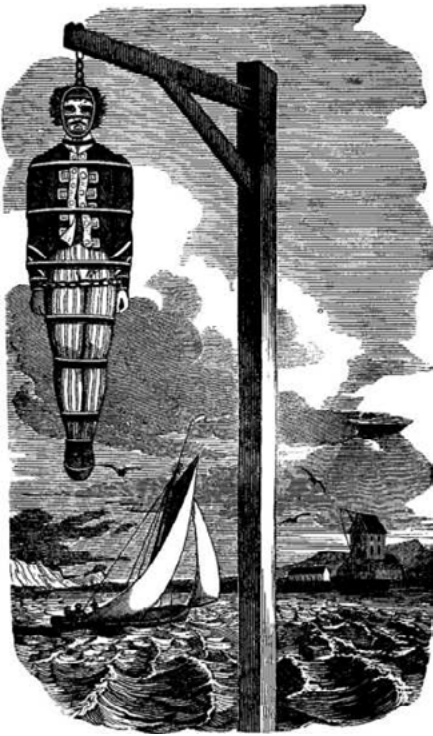
Illustration of Captain William Kidd "hanging in chains," 1837

In 1696, in the wake of the Gunj-i-Suwaee disaster, a handful of powerful English elites who wanted to protect eastern commerce decided to commission (on their own account, meaning shouldering the costs themselves) one Captain William Kidd, a former privateer and resident of NYC, to hunt pirates in the Indian Ocean. The North American pirates Thomas Tew, John Ireland, Thomas Wake, William Mayes, all based in New England and New York, were named specifically. Young colonial men flocked to sign up for this mission under the terms of "no prey, no pay".

The idea of a grand maritime adventure that might produce great wealth attracted many people to Kidd's mission: the New York governor reported that "many flocked to him from all parts, men of desperate fortunes and necessities, in expectation of getting vast treasure." But things went terribly wrong when the pirate hunters went rogue and became pirates themselves. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it proved to be much harder than Kidd and his crew anticipated to locate pirate vessels. Having undertaken the lengthy and dangerous voyage from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, the men did not want to go home without a reward and thus began to target lawful shipping, just as Every had. When Kidd returned to New England, he found that he was wanted for piracy. He was imprisoned in New England, sent to London for trial, and hanged in 1701.
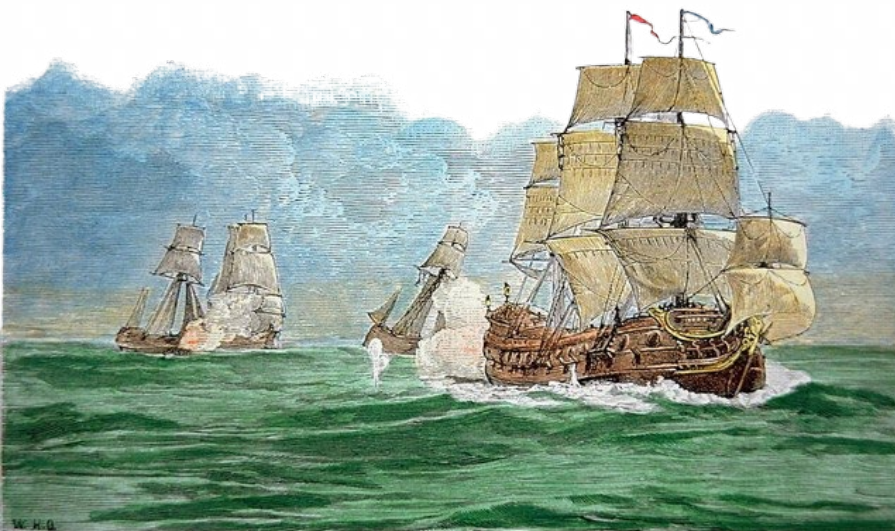

Illustration of Every chasing the Mughal ship, Gunj-i-Suwaee

Warfare and the Growth of the English Navy

Warfare at the dawn of the eighteenth century bought a delay to this changing English attitude to maritime renegades, as men who might otherwise be drawn to a life of piracy were instead swept up into the growing navy. In 1685, the English Navy had just 25 ships, but by mid-1696, it had grown to 234 ships and over 45,000 men. By 1702, the Royal Navy swelled again thanks to the outbreak of war in the aftermath of the collapse of Spanish ruling dynasty (the Habsburgs) and the resulting War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713). This war absorbed nearly all available European and colonial seamen, who were pulled in either as navy recruits or as privateers. Former pirates and buccaneers saw a chance to keep their rough ocean-going lifestyle while returning to the right side of the law, sailing as either officially-commissioned privateers or as members of the British Royal Navy. Former pirate John Quelch, for example, received a commission from the Governor of Massachusetts to attack French and Spanish ships during the war. However, Quelch went too far when he captured several Portuguese ships off the coast of Brazil. When he and his crew returned to New England with their prizes, they were found to have acted beyond the bounds of their commission and were executed for piracy in 1704.

Meanwhile, as war in the Atlantic continued, acts of maritime plunder and violence flourished. Spanish privateers tried to do as much damage as possible to British maritime trade. The French also sent out privateers from their Caribbean islands (Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Domingue), fighting the British who were blocking their ports and attacking their ships. Meanwhile, North Americans colonists organized "pirate" expeditions of their own against Spanish and French ships. There was a large colonial demand for free (or free-er) markets. Neutral ports in the Caribbean became smuggling paradises. Hotspots of illegal or semi-legal activity arose on the neutral Dutch possessions of Curaçao, St. Eustatius, and St. Martin, and on the Danish colonies of St. Thomas and St. Croix. Merchants from these islands regularly traded with the Spanish, British, and French colonies and kept their markets open. These neutral ports became gigantic warehouses of North American goods: flour, lumber, horses, salted fish, cereals, cheese, bread, cakes, beer, cider, tools, iron items, nautical supplies. Why would North American mainland colonists trade with the non-British Caribbean? Because settlers in the Caribbean needed the products made on the mainland, whereas settlers on the mainland sought buyers who would pay a high price for their goods or trade them for that quintessential Caribbean product—a reflection of the unholy alliance between sugar and slavery—rum. People wanted what they wanted, regardless of who their empire was at war with.

Over the course of the conflict the British navy grew to nearly 50,000 sailors and helped to defeat the Franco-Spanish alliance by 1713. At the war's conclusion, the French Bourbon king ascended the Spanish throne but was forced to renounce his claim to French rule. England, meanwhile, made huge gains in the Atlantic, including control of the Asiento—the exclusive right to provide enslaved Africans to Spanish America. But with peace, came many unemployed seamen—and piracy once again plagued Atlantic waters.

Atlantic Contradictions at the Dawn of the Eighteenth Century

Ann Bonny and Mary Read

Deprived of a paycheck and lawful activity at sea, what were battle-tested sailors to do? The British Navy had only 13,000 men in its employ between 1716 and 1726, with enormous repercussions for society at large and for the pirates who operated within it. The years between 1716 and 1722 were particularly dramatic in terms of pirate attacks. The era produced some of the era's most famous pirates (Edward Teach, aka "Blackbeard", Stede Bonnet, Ann Bonny, Mary Read, Bartholomew "Black Bart" Roberts and John "Calico Jack" Rackham. At first, pirates used the island of New Providence in the Bahamas to launch small-scale attacks on Spanish shipping near Cuba. From here, Atlantic pirate operations quickly expanded to prey on all shipping, regardless of nation, throughout the Caribbean, North America, and beyond. Through their wide-ranging attacks on ships of various origins, pirates impacted several areas of British Atlantic trade, instigating numerous complaints to the British state by British merchants and colonial officials who outlined the necessity of eliminating piracy in the Atlantic.

In the face of increasing persecution, some of the most famous pirates of this period took to increasingly violent tactics against those they deemed their enemies. It was during this period that pirates began to fly a red flag (called the "bloody flag") to indicate that they would show no mercy to their prey. The famous Jolly Roger black flag made its first appearance in 1713: the skull and crossbones indicated that they pirate crew had no master but death. Pirates became known for their brutality and vengefulness. Blackbeard was said to have fired his pistol into the knee of his shipmate during a card game.

During one pirate raid, Edward Low was reported to have "sliced the ears from the Captain's head and then supplying salt and pepper to improve the flavor, he gave his prisoner the order to eat them." The pirate Rock Braziliano was said to have sliced off the "arms and legs of bystanders" while raging drunk. These pirates of the golden age famously reserved their most brutal attacks for the men who had been sadistic captains of the ships they had sailed on during their

200-year-old "Jolly Roger" flag

time in the navy. Pirates took pleasure in exacting vengeance on these men for the low wages, poor bad, and brutal treatment they had experienced. For this reason, scholars of piracy have often seen pirates of the golden age as social justice bandits, seeking to right the wrongs they had suffered through whatever means necessary.
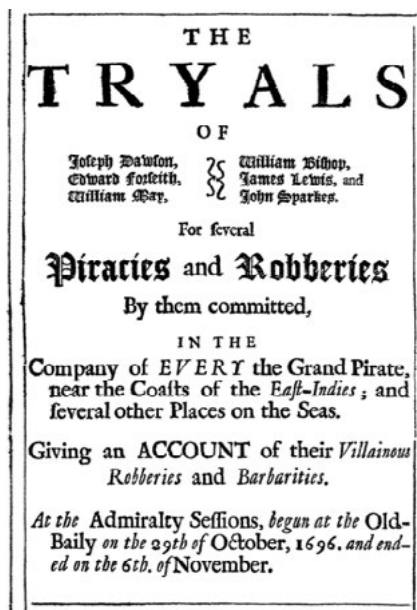
Painting of Royal Navy vessel chasing a pirate lugger

Increasingly, the powerful states of Europe agreed to wage war on piracy: safe seas for commerce was more important. After 1722, Atlantic piracy declined rapidly to the extent that many scholars of piracy have declared that the golden age of piracy ended in 1726. It was certainly true that by the early decades of the eighteenth century, a pirate without a bounty on his head was a rare figure. But did piracy disappear in the wake of this crackdown? In many ways, the British government crackdown on piracy served to reveal just how embedded piracy was within the Caribbean and mainland American communities.

THE
TRYALS
OF

Joseph Dawson,
Edward Forseith,
William May,

William Bishop,
James Lewis, and
John Sparkes.

For several

Piracies and Robberies

By them committed,

IN THE

Company of EVERY the Grand Pirate, near the Coasts of the East-Indies; and several other Places on the Seas.

Giving an ACCOUNT of their Villainous Robberies and Barbarities.

At the Admiralty Sessions, begun at the Old-Baily on the 29th of October, 1696. and ended on the 6th. of November.

Report on the trials of members of Henry Every's crew, 1696

Endless imperial warfare continued into the eighteenth century and the unprecedented growth of the British war-making capacity served in many ways to bolster imperial pride. At the same time, there was also so much inequality, abuse, and violence through the British empire that many people grew increasingly resentful of the government. And while the period saw the hardening of official rivalries among imperial powers based in Europe, at the same time, it witnessed increasing colonial interdependence among Spanish, French, British, Danish, Dutch, and Portuguese colonies. Smuggling was rampant as colonists on all sides of the era's political divides went to whatever necessary lengths (legal or not) to get the goods they wanted and desired.

Smuggling and piracy were, after all, "sister industries"— both reflected flaws in the supply and demand chain. In addition to the inefficiencies that characterized the movement of commodities throughout the Atlantic world, the persistence of piracy and smuggling also reflected the profoundly violent and unequal social and economic context of the Americas. The piracy persecutions of the 1720s occurred in an Atlantic world characterized by a brutal racial order, the ever-louder drumbeat of importations of enslaved Africans, and rising colonial discontent. Resistance to slavery among the enslaved was constant and white objections to slavery also were also growing. Furthermore, increasing global ties brought economic and political exchange that proved destabilizing to ruling powers around the world, as ideas about freedom, sovereignty, and the sharing of power spread far and wide. Meanwhile, increased Atlantic trade fueled the political ambitions of the colonists. If Atlantic piracy had long reflected inequalities and inefficiencies in an emerging and increasingly interconnected world, then that reality did not change, no matter how much governments sought to discourage pirates and piracy through persecution at sea and in the courts.

Romanticized depiction of buccaneers dividing loot

In fact, armed commerce at sea continued throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, despite the attempts of authorities to eradicate piracy. The commonly-held position that maritime predation was a legitimate and time-honored trade persisted throughout the Atlantic world. People remained deeply suspicious of powerful states' claims that they had the right to regulate and disallow certain commercial practices as they saw fit. It was not until the 1830s and 1840s that piracy really disappeared from the Atlantic, thanks less to violent persecution at sea than to the reduced profitability of raiding and smuggling. Atlantic cargoes declined in value in the eighteenth century—ships now carried more fish, sugar and consumer goods, as well as enslaved people, rather than gold and silver. In this context, would-be pirates turned their attention to other oceans with richer prizes on offer. Even more important to the eventual decline of piracy was the expansion of peaceful trade, made possible through diplomatic negotiations, cheap insurance, and better convoy protection for ships.

Shifting military and economic realities in the early nineteenth century also contributed to the decline of Atlantic piracy. Centuries of warfare in the Atlantic had created endless opportunities for pirates and illegal traders to do profitable business at sea and on land. With the advent of peace, black market dealings became less profitable. Meanwhile, in the following decades, British tariffs fell dramatically and then were in most cases abolished altogether. These new free-trade policies helped to make piracy and smuggling unnecessary and/or unprofitable. The violent campaign against piracy waged by the British government in the early decades of the eighteenth century took a toll on pirate communities while also generating enduring tales of pirate heroics — but in the end, it was peace, not policy or persecution, that brought a close to the "golden age" of Atlantic piracy.

Illustration depicting the capture and execution of buccaneers off the coast of Algiers, 1684

Further Reading

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