

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Pirates *in a Hurry*

The real golden age of piracy

Max Brocklesby

BOOKSINAHURRY.COM

Contents

The Whole Thing in One Page 4

Why You Should Care 6

The Core Ideas 8

How It Actually Works 21

What People Get Wrong 32

Use It 37

Terms 42

Go Deeper 45

Notes and Sources 48

Bibliography 58

The Whole Thing in One Page

The pirate you know is a finished costume: black flag, buried chest, wooden leg, parrot, bottle, accent. Most real pirates were temporary participants in a violent maritime economy, and the costume hides the machinery that made their voyages possible. They did not rise from an empty sea. They emerged from empires that had spent generations teaching private shipowners and sailors to rob enemies under licence, colonial ports that bought stolen goods when the price was right, and merchant and naval labour systems harsh enough to make mutiny or desertion attractive to some men.

There was no single Golden Age with clean edges. The useful story has three overlapping generations. Caribbean buccaneers attacked Spanish possessions from the middle of the seventeenth century, often with colonial approval. In the 1690s, raiders crossed from the Atlantic into the Indian Ocean, where some Mughal ships carried exceptionally valuable prizes. After the peace settlements of 1713, discharged naval men and privateers joined other mobile populations around the Bahamas: earlier raiders, armed treasure salvagers, private vessels commissioned to hunt pirates and displaced logwood cutters. Weak government, rich traffic and permissive markets turned that convergence into the short, famous black-flag peak, roughly 1716 to 1726.

Their business depended on avoiding battle. A pirate ship needed speed, information and a reputation frightening enough to make a merchant crew surrender before cannon fire ruined hull, cargo or people. Most prizes held no royal treasure. They carried food, cloth, sugar, tobacco, liquor, tools, rigging, medicines, coin and enslaved human beings. Loot became useful only when a harbour supplied water and timber, a merchant bought the cargo, an official looked away and someone warned that a warship was coming. Every pirate ship had a shore.

Inside the crew, armed men needed rules. Articles fixed shares, defined authority, compensated injuries and punished theft, desertion or dangerous behaviour. Captains could be chosen and removed; quartermasters

checked their power; decisions might go to a vote. These arrangements could be more participatory than life on a merchantman or naval vessel, but they were contracts among recognised crew members, not declarations of universal equality. Captives had no vote. Recruits might be forced. Pirates sold enslaved people, and racial status varied with circumstance, usefulness and coercion. Two famous women, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, matter because women at sea were rare, not common.

The same empires that had cultivated useful ambiguity later narrowed it. Peace made licensed plunder harder to excuse. A royal pardon split crews. Woodes Rogers restored British government at Nassau in 1718. Colonial courts tried pirates locally. Governors, merchants, informers and naval patrols raised the cost of repair, sale and refuge. There was no single imperial switch and no final eradication. The famous concentration collapsed as safe choices, trusted harbours and willing buyers became harder to find together.

The Golden Age was therefore real, brief and manufactured. States licensed the skills, commerce supplied the targets, mobile maritime workers supplied much of the labour, ports supplied the market, and enforcement broke the links among recruitment, refuge, repair and sale. The pirate became immortal only after the pirate economy had failed, when trials, newspapers, a successful 1724 book, novels and films converted armed robbery into freedom with scenery.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

On 26 July 1718, Woodes Rogers entered Nassau with warships, soldiers, supplies and a commission to restore British government to the Bahamas. The harbour had been a pirate base for years. Charles Vane chose departure, taking about ninety followers. Some three hundred pirates stayed and submitted to the new administration; people ashore also welcomed restored government. The pirate republic did not die as one political community defending outlaw freedom. It divided because pardon, trade, food, property and order mattered differently to people who had never formed one people.

That scene matters because piracy is a clean example of history replaced by its own marketing. The familiar story puts free men against oppressive states. The working story is less flattering and more useful. Pirates existed inside the same Atlantic world as navies, plantations, merchants, slave traders, colonial governors and dockside creditors. They borrowed its ships, guns, habits, routes and labour. A man could privateer during war, sail as a merchant seaman after peace, turn pirate when wages failed, take a pardon as risk rose and hunt former companions for government pay. The categories were legal and political before they became moral identities.

The subject also changes how power looks. Violence at sea was valuable because distance made direct government expensive. A crown could authorise private investors to attack an enemy and share the proceeds. The arrangement projected force without paying for the whole fleet, but it produced ships, skills and markets that outlived any one commission. Post-war contraction mattered, yet it did not act alone. Nassau drew together former privateers, older raiders, pirate hunters who crossed into predation, wreck salvagers and displaced logwood cutters. The Golden Age grew when armed, skilled men from several routes met weak government and rich traffic, not when one queue of demobilised sailors changed jobs.

Pirate crews then expose a harder question about freedom. Their articles could restrain captains, distribute shares, compensate injury and give

ordinary seamen a voice. Those facts deserve attention. So do the people outside the contract: captured crews, coerced recruits, colonial civilians and enslaved Africans treated as cargo, labour or possible shipmates according to circumstances they did not control. A group can govern itself fairly while preying on everyone beyond its boundary. Internal equality is not the same thing as justice.

The pirates also understood reputation with unusual clarity. Fighting damaged the asset they hoped to steal and risked the labour needed to sail it. A frightening flag, a known name and selective brutality could make resistance collapse before a shot. Their violence worked through expectation, so image mattered during their lives and gave later legend material already cultivated.

Piracy also shows how quickly a mobile population can assemble and dissolve. The famous companies were not a separate people waiting offshore. They drew on sailors, soldiers, fishermen, servants, salvagers, logwood cutters and privateering veterans moving among forms of work and coercion. Their interests overlapped enough to provision ships and take prizes, but not enough to create a durable commonwealth. The same mobility helps explain why the peak surged within a few years and why pardon, wages, ordinary trade and restored government could pull it apart.

Finally, their defeat is a lesson in enforcement. Governments did not end Atlantic piracy by condemning it more sincerely. They changed incentives and infrastructure. Pardons divided crews. Local courts reduced the protection created by distance. Naval presence made pursuit credible. Merchants became less willing to fence cargo. Governors who had profited from ambiguity faced pressure to choose. Nassau stopped being a place where a stolen ship could become a repaired, provisioned and saleable one.

The result explains how states outsource violence, illegal markets depend on legal ones, workers build rules under pressure, freedom stops at a boundary, and enforcement succeeds by attacking support rather than costume. The skull and bones are the least interesting part. The real subject is the network beneath the flag.

The Core Ideas

The Line Moved with the Flag

Piracy looks like a natural category only after governments have decided where to draw it. At sea, the same act could be lawful service, tolerated violence or hanging crime depending on the commission in a captain's chest, the nationality of the target, the date of the latest peace and the court that judged the prize.

A privateer was a privately owned armed vessel authorised by a state to attack specified enemies. Its letter of marque did not make robbery respectable in the abstract. It made particular seizures lawful for one side during a particular conflict. Captured ships and cargoes were supposed to enter a prize court, which tested whether the commission and seizure fitted the rules before dividing proceeds among investors, officers, crew and government. Practice was untidy. Captains exceeded instructions, commissions arrived late, neutral ships became tempting, documents were manipulated and colonial officials often preferred profitable ambiguity to a clean legal answer.

That ambiguity was useful. Early modern states wanted maritime force but could not maintain enough public ships to patrol every coast, escort every merchant or attack every enemy. Private investment supplied hulls, guns, provisions and crews. The crown supplied legal permission and a shareable enemy. During war, privateering could employ large numbers of sailors and draw commercial energy into violence. It also taught them how to find prey, assess cargo, compel surrender, handle prizes and turn captured goods into cash.

The Caribbean buccaneers grew inside this arrangement. The word came from hunters on Hispaniola who smoked meat on wooden frames called boucans. French, English and Dutch adventurers then attacked Spanish shipping and settlements, sometimes under commissions and sometimes without them. Colonial governors could praise them as defenders when Spain threatened, issue papers broad enough to reward aggression, and

disown them when diplomacy required cleaner hands. Henry Morgan's attacks on Portobelo and Panama became famous because they sat inside that unstable border. After Panama and peace with Spain, he was sent to England in disgrace amid diplomatic embarrassment. Within three years he had been appointed lieutenant-governor of Jamaica, knighted and returned to the colony. The violence did not change. The political weather did.

The line also moved from the other direction. A privateer whose commission remained valid might be a hero at home and a pirate to the enemy. A sailor captured without acceptable papers could insist he had served a sovereign while prosecutors described a common robber. The phrase *hostis humani generis*, enemy of all humanity, gave piracy a grand universal sound, but states still applied the category through their own interests and institutions.

Communication made the border more unstable. News of war, peace, revoked commissions and changed alliances crossed the Atlantic at sailing speed. A captain could act under yesterday's legal world while a ministry had already entered tomorrow's. Distance did not excuse every seizure, but it gave interested men room to present delay as innocence and aggression as loyal service.

This does not mean piracy was merely a label placed on innocent trade. Pirates seized ships, imprisoned and beat people, tortured for information, killed resisters and destroyed livelihoods. It means the system that produced them cannot be divided into lawful states on one side and spontaneous criminals on the other. Governments built a market for licensed predation, widened or narrowed its permissions, then inherited the men and methods when policy changed.

The first condition of the Golden Age was therefore not lawlessness. It was law that moved. A sailor could learn violence under a flag, keep the skill after the flag changed, and discover that the sea offered more continuity than the statute book.

Every Pirate Ship Had a Shore

The romantic pirate disappears over the horizon and lives beyond society. The working pirate returns to harbour. A wooden ship consumed food, water, cordage, sailcloth, timber, pitch, powder and human labour. Worms attacked the hull. Fouling slowed it. Storms opened seams. Masts cracked, men deserted and wounds turned septic. No crew could remain an independent floating republic for long. It needed a coast where a vessel could be careened, a carpenter could be hired, barrels filled, intelligence bought and cargo sold.

This changes the map. A pirate base was not merely a hidden cove. It was a relationship between raiders and people who found them useful. Colonial merchants bought goods below normal prices. Tavern keepers, chandlers and craftsmen sold services. Fishermen and small traders supplied provisions. Officials delayed warrants, leaked warnings, issued commissions or accepted gifts. Investors might have financed the earlier privateering voyage from which the pirate enterprise grew. A harbour became a pirate nest when enough legal residents could profit without bearing the full risk of capture.

Port Royal in Jamaica was a leading seventeenth-century case. English Jamaica faced Spanish power, weak official resources and a hunger for trade. Buccaneers brought money and goods into a young colony, while their attacks diverted Spanish attention. The relationship changed as England sought more regular commerce and diplomatic accommodation. The port did not become moral overnight. Its balance sheet changed.

The 1690s Pirate Round depended on a longer chain. Captains sailed from North America or the Caribbean around the Cape of Good Hope towards Madagascar, the Red Sea approaches and the western Indian Ocean. Rich shipping connected the Mughal Empire, Arabia, East Africa and India. Madagascar offered water, food, local exchange and places beyond easy European control. American colonies could supply crews and ships at the beginning and absorb goods at the end. The voyage crossed oceans, but its viability still rested on shore communities.

Nassau made the missing pillar visible. The Bahamas lay beside routes through the Florida Straits, close to busy American and Caribbean commerce. Effective government had collapsed. The harbour was shallow enough to frustrate larger warships but useful to fast sloops. After storms wrecked much of a homeward Spanish treasure fleet along Florida in 1715, salvagers and armed private vessels gathered in the region. Some vessels commissioned to hunt pirates or protect salvage crossed into robbery. Spain's destruction of English logwood settlements on the Yucatán coast displaced cutters towards the Bahamas. Established raiders, former privateers, salvagers, cutters and traders occupied the same space without becoming one society.

Calling Nassau a pirate republic captures the collapse of regular government and the influence of leading crews. It can also mislead. There was no durable constitution ruling a stable pirate citizenry, and the groups ashore did not share one long-term aim. The population included families, traders, enslaved people, labourers, former privateers, displaced cutters, men waiting for pardon and crews prepared to follow whichever power secured food and sale. When Woodes Rogers arrived in 1718, many did not defend outlaw sovereignty. They accepted the new administration because a functioning harbour offered advantages that another voyage no longer did.

The shore explains both rise and fall. As long as pirates could repair, resupply, sell and receive warning, a naval victory removed one crew and left the system intact. When merchants faced prosecution for receiving stolen goods, governors lost tolerance, courts sat locally, patrols watched exits and secure bases disappeared, the ship became brittle. Its freedom had always depended on land.

The same point changes who belongs in the history. A dockyard carpenter who repaired a suspect sloop, a merchant who bought unreceipted sugar and a governor who delayed a warrant could matter more to the survival of piracy than a minor captain whose name entered a newspaper. Support rarely required ideological sympathy. Profit, fear, kinship, weak alternatives and uncertainty about the law were enough.

A Prize Was Won Before Boarding

Pirate stories concentrate on battle because battle makes good cinema. Pirates preferred surrender. A broadside could tear the hull they hoped to capture, ignite valuable cargo, disable the rigging needed to sail the prize and kill skilled seamen who might be forced or persuaded to join. Even victory could leave the attacker too damaged to escape the next naval vessel. The profitable fight was the one the merchant crew decided not to have.

That made speed and information more valuable than weight of metal alone. Pirates favoured vessels such as sloops because they were fast, manoeuvrable, shallow-draught and able to work among islands and coastal waters where larger ships struggled. They removed bulk that slowed a captured vessel, altered rigging, added guns where the hull allowed and carried unusually large crews. Numbers mattered during pursuit and boarding. A merchant captain seeing a crowded deck of armed men could calculate that resistance might fail even if his ship carried respectable weapons.

Pirates gathered intelligence from captured crews, friendly pilots, harbour gossip and the papers of prizes. They wanted routes, sailing dates, convoy arrangements, cargoes and naval movements. A captured vessel could be released after its charts, provisions and news had been stripped. Another might be kept because it sailed better than the pirates' own ship. Piracy was therefore a sequence of selection. Find a target worth the chase. Close before it reaches protection. Convince its crew that surrender is safer. Search it efficiently. Decide whether hull, cargo, people or information are the most useful prize.

Flags belonged to this calculation. There was no single universal Jolly Roger. Surviving descriptions record black fields carrying skulls, skeletons, weapons, hearts, hourglasses and other signs of death. Designs were associated with particular crews in contemporary reports, though later books and films assigned neat personal flags more confidently than the evidence allows. A black flag generally communicated pirate identity and demanded

submission. Red could signal a harsher intention, though meaning varied and no colour code governed every encounter.

Reputation did the work at a distance. Edward Teach, whose surname appears in records in several spellings including Thatch, became Blackbeard in public memory and cultivated an appearance designed to make men imagine the worst before testing him. The famous picture of burning matches or slow fuses around his head comes from the 1724 *General History of the Pyrates*, a source written for effect and not a neutral witness. Yet the larger mechanism is secure. Blackbeard's name, large crew, heavily armed ship and theatrical conduct made resistance look costly. The later claim that he killed no one before his final battle is no safer: silence in an incomplete hostile archive cannot establish a clean record. Terror could save a pirate from fighting, but the surviving evidence cannot turn restraint into a personal rule.

Selective cruelty supported the same system. Pirates might treat compliant captives tolerably, invite useful sailors to join, punish a captain accused of abusing his crew, or release a ship after taking what they wanted. They might also beat prisoners, burn property, torture for hidden valuables and kill those who resisted. Consistency was unnecessary. The threat worked because the target could not know which version would appear.

The flag was therefore a piece of operating equipment. It compressed stories of past violence into a signal that saved powder, timber and time. Pirate reputation became capital, but it depreciated if nobody believed the threat. The safest surrender had to remain imaginable, and the dangerous refusal had to remain credible.

Most Treasure Was Cargo

A pirate opening a captured hold was more likely to find barrels than jewels. Atlantic trade moved bulky, ordinary things: flour, salted meat, sugar, tobacco, cocoa, indigo, textiles, hides, timber, tools, wine, rum, medicines, gunpowder, rope and sailcloth. Ships also carried coin, silver, gold, gems and valuable personal goods, but spectacular treasure was unevenly distributed. The famous chest became the symbol because it is easy to picture. A stack of wet hides has never sold a cinema ticket.

The distinction matters because a prize had several values. Some goods kept the pirate ship alive. Fresh water, food, medicine, spare canvas, cordage, arms and powder could be taken even from a poor vessel. Clothing mattered to men whose own garments had rotted. A carpenter's tools or navigator's instruments might be more useful than a luxury item. A better hull could replace the current ship. Skilled captives could repair, pilot or sail it. Information could identify the next target.

The rest required liquidation. Sugar was valuable in a market, not while filling a hold that slowed escape. Stolen textiles needed buyers. A captured vessel needed papers or a place where questions were optional. Coin divided easily and carried high value in small space, which made it ideal, but most commerce did not travel as portable specie. Pirates therefore depended on fences, corrupt merchants and ports willing to absorb cargo into legitimate circulation. The price was discounted because the seller needed speed and secrecy. The buyer's profit paid for the risk.

This helps explain the attraction of Indian Ocean shipping in the 1690s. Mughal vessels connected Surat with Red Sea ports and carried merchants, pilgrims and high-value goods. In 1695 Henry Every's crew captured the *Ganj-i-Sawai* after a brutal attack. The prize made Every famous and provoked a diplomatic crisis because the Mughal emperor could pressure the English East India Company, whose trade in India mattered far more than one pirate crew. Every's accepted fate remains unknown. His treasure survived as story, while merchants and governments dealt with the damage.

William Kidd reveals the opposite problem. Commissioned to hunt pirates and enemy French shipping, he crossed into disputed and then prosecutable seizures. His capture of the *Quedagh Merchant* brought a rich cargo but also owners, political interests and documents capable of challenging his legal case. On returning to America in 1699, Kidd entrusted John Gardiner with a box, bales and other goods to keep and conceal on Gardiners Island; officials later recovered them. This unusual deposit helped create the general myth that pirates buried treasure. In business terms, concealment marked a failure of sale.

Human beings were cargo in this economy too. Pirates captured slave ships, stole provisions and trade goods intended for purchasing Africans, took enslaved people aboard, sold them, abandoned them, compelled labour or sometimes admitted individuals into crews. No single rule governed status. The same pirates who resented brutal captains could profit from Atlantic slavery. Any account that turns pirate plunder into harmless redistribution has removed the largest coercive market around them.

Treasure, then, was whatever could be consumed, divided, used, sold or converted into another voyage. The hold tied piracy to ordinary commerce. Pirates attacked the system from outside its contracts while depending on its prices, ports and buyers. The chest of coins was the cleanest prize because it needed no explanation. Almost everything else led back to shore.

Armed Men Needed a Contract

A pirate captain commanded men who had weapons, knew how ships worked and could leave or kill him. Naval discipline rested on law, hierarchy and the state. Merchant discipline rested on ownership, contracts, withheld wages and the captain's authority. Pirates had discarded those external supports. They needed a substitute strong enough to coordinate violence without recreating the arbitrary command many sailors had escaped.

The substitute was the articles. Surviving codes differ sharply, and many are preserved through trials or the 1724 *General History*, so no universal pirate constitution can be reconstructed. Crews borrowed, revised and

contradicted familiar provisions as circumstances changed. Their recurring functions are clearer. Articles divided shares, specified authority, regulated food and drink, required weapons to be ready, controlled lights and smoking near powder, settled disputes and defined penalties for theft, desertion or fraud against the crew. Men commonly swore or signed before a voyage. The agreement converted a crowd with guns into a temporary enterprise.

Distribution reveals its purpose. A captain might receive one and a half or two shares while ordinary crew received one, with officers and skilled men taking intermediate amounts. That was unequal, but compressed beside naval and merchant hierarchies. There was often no wage. Everyone depended on successful prizes. Shares aligned risk and reward while making concealment from shipmates a serious offence. Stealing from an outsider was the business. Stealing from the common stock attacked the business itself.

Compensation for injury did the same. Some articles assigned fixed sums for the loss of an arm, leg, eye or finger before remaining proceeds were divided. The figures varied by crew and source, and they were promises payable only if sufficient plunder existed. Even so, the principle mattered. A man disabled while creating the prize should not bear the whole loss alone. In a world without reliable pensions or medical care, the crew built a crude insurance pool because fighting depended on men believing the enterprise would not discard them after injury.

Authority was divided. Captains usually dominated chase and battle, when delay could destroy everyone. Quartermasters oversaw provisions, shares, discipline and daily interests of the crew, checking the captain outside combat. Some captains were elected or deposed. Major questions could go to a vote. This was governance by people whose labour and consent could not be taken for granted, and it offered ordinary seamen more voice than most had known afloat.

It was also unstable. Voting could produce indecision. Popular captains still accumulated followers and intimidation. Crews divided over targets, routes, pardons and appetite for risk. Articles threatened marooning, whipping,

shooting or loss of shares because agreement needed punishment behind it. Men could sign under pressure. A captured sailor's claim that he had been forced aboard might be true, partly true or the defence most likely to save him at trial.

The contract also ended more easily than a state. Crews split, ships separated, leaders were deposed and men dispersed after a division of plunder. The institution was built for a voyage rather than posterity. Its flexibility helped piracy form quickly and made a permanent pirate commonwealth unlikely.

Calling this democracy captures participation and misses both scale and boundary. Pirate governance was closer to a partnership agreement for an armed expedition. It answered immediate problems of agency: how to stop a captain running away with the prize, make dangerous work worth doing, maintain powder discipline and prevent private quarrels from wrecking common profit. Resemblance among codes came from recurring coordination problems, not proof of one Atlantic ideology. The rules did not grant rights to everyone encountered. Men written off as disorderly could construct institutions quickly when institutions served them.

Freedom Stopped at the Gunwale

Many pirates had excellent reasons to hate ordinary seafaring. Merchant sailors faced hard labour, dangerous weather, poor food, disease, delayed or withheld wages and captains with broad disciplinary power. Naval service added formal hierarchy, flogging and impressment, the forced recruitment of men for war. Privateers might promise prize money and deliver little after owners and officers took their shares. A pirate crew offering a voice, a larger share and the chance to remove an abusive captain could look less like chaos than an improved employment contract.

That labour history is indispensable, but it cannot carry the whole moral argument. Pirates did not abolish coercion. They relocated it. Their own recognised members might share food and vote while captured people were threatened, stripped, imprisoned or forced to work. Crews sought

carpenters, surgeons, pilots, musicians and navigators whose skills were scarce. Invitations to join could range from attractive offers to choices made under a loaded pistol. The line between volunteer and pressed man is difficult because later defendants had every reason to emphasise force, while prosecutors had every reason to deny it.

Race makes the boundary harder. Black seamen appear in pirate crews, and some free Black sailors or fugitives may have found opportunities unavailable in colonial society. Others were enslaved men captured with ships, coerced labourers, servants or people whom pirates sold. West African waters in the early 1720s brought raiders directly into the infrastructure of the slave trade. Pirates attacked slaving vessels for their strong hulls, provisions, trade goods and human cargo. They could disrupt a particular voyage while remaining participants in the wider market.

There is no defensible single statistic for the racial composition or freedom of all pirate crews. Records often identify status poorly, use racial labels inconsistently and survive through hostile officials. A Black man armed on deck might be a full share member, a forced sailor or someone occupying a position between categories that courts later simplified. The right conclusion is not that pirates were colour-blind or that racial hierarchy determined every shipboard relation in the same way. It is that status was negotiated under power, and useful inclusion could coexist with slavery.

Women expose a different distortion. Anne Bonny and Mary Read were convicted in Jamaica in 1720 after sailing with John Rackham. Trial testimony places both in men's clothes during action, armed and participating. Their pregnancy pleas stayed their executions. Read died in prison in 1721. Bonny's later fate is unknown. Much of the colourful biography attached to them comes from the *General History* and cannot be treated as secure fact.

Their fame has been used in opposite ways. One version presents pirate ships as unusually open to women. Another treats Bonny and Read as curiosities who prove nothing. The better reading begins with rarity. Deep-sea piracy was overwhelmingly male, and women were commonly

barred by custom or articles. Women still mattered as tavern keepers, traders, partners, informants, property holders, victims and members of port communities. The two women at sea are memorable because they crossed a strongly gendered boundary, not because the boundary was absent.

Pirate liberty was therefore real for some people in some relations. It could mean relief from a cruel captain, a vote, a share and control over daily life. The seamen's-rebellion interpretation catches an important truth: some companies consciously reversed abuses familiar from naval and merchant work. It fails when enlarged into one Atlantic programme. Articles differed, recruitment mixed choice and force, crews pursued incompatible aims, and solidarity often ended with membership or the voyage. A company could resist arbitrary authority internally and practise domination externally without feeling the contradiction. Freedom often names the area inside a group's fence. The people beyond it tell you what that freedom costs.

The State Changed the Price

Piracy did not end because navies became omnipotent or pirates lost courage. It declined when a loose collection of governments, merchants, courts, commanders and colonial communities made the enterprise harder to sustain. The change was uneven, frequently improvised and never complete. Its force came from attacking several parts of the system at once.

Peace after the War of the Spanish Succession changed both law and work. Commissions expired, naval establishments contracted and some seamen lost wartime berths. Yet demobilisation did not by itself create the peak. Older pirate and privateering populations, armed treasure salvagers, pirate hunters who became predators and displaced logwood cutters also fed the Bahamas world. What these groups shared was not one political purpose but access to maritime skill, weapons and contested routes at a moment when regular Atlantic trade was growing. Peace also made raiding former enemies harder to defend as licensed service, while merchants and governments now had more revenue and political interest tied to reliable routes.

Law reduced the protection of distance. The Piracy Act of 1698 allowed specially commissioned courts to try piracy in colonies and overseas possessions rather than sending defendants and witnesses across the Atlantic to England. It also reached people who knowingly aided, concealed or traded with pirates. Statute did not produce instant capacity. Courts needed officials, evidence, custody and local cooperation. It did make prosecution a problem that could be handled near the harbour where the network operated.

The 1717 royal proclamation added division. Pirates who surrendered by a fixed date could receive a pardon for earlier offences. Rewards were offered for captures and for crew members who helped seize pirate commanders. The design separated men who wanted a route back into legal society from leaders and repeat offenders who needed the group to remain closed. A pardon did not erase every risk, and some recipients returned to piracy. It gave the uncertain majority an alternative.

Nassau shows the combined method. Woodes Rogers arrived in 1718 with a royal commission, soldiers, naval backing, supplies and plans for civil government. Charles Vane withdrew with roughly ninety men. Around three hundred others stayed under the returned government, which some residents welcomed. Rogers fortified the settlement, organised courts and used former pirates against remaining ones. His administration was short of money and depended on private backing. Its success came less from defeating a united republic than from exposing that no united republic existed and making legal trade, food, property and protection more dependable than another voyage.

The campaign continued through local episodes. Blackbeard was killed at Ocracoke in November 1718 by a force sent from Virginia. Stede Bonnet was tried and hanged in South Carolina. Rackham was captured and tried in Jamaica. Bartholomew Roberts was killed off West Africa in 1722, and the mass trial of his captured company demonstrated how naval force, company interests and colonial courts could combine. Fifty-two were hanged, while others were acquitted as forced men, imprisoned, reprieved or sentenced to

servitude. Classification sorted the captured population as well as condemning it.

No single command directed an empire-wide war that removed every pirate by 1726. Naval deployments were limited, governors competed, merchants bargained and Spanish guarda costas created fresh disputes under another legal label. Piracy persisted in the Atlantic and elsewhere. What changed was expected return. Safe harbours narrowed. Buyers became cautious. Trials came closer. Informers earned money. A pardon made desertion possible. Larger pirate companies became conspicuous targets.

The causal loop closes here. States had created mobile maritime violence by licensing private enterprise, tolerating profitable nests and leaving legal categories elastic. They suppressed the famous generation by tightening categories and building enough local authority to make them bite. The pirate was not defeated by the opposite system. He was defeated when the system that had produced him decided he cost more than he paid.

How It Actually Works

The old crime and the new ocean

People robbed ships long before the Atlantic empires existed. Ancient Mediterranean states fought pirates, medieval rulers alternately suppressed and employed sea raiders, and corsairs operated within Christian-Muslim rivalry for centuries. Those histories matter, but they do not form one continuous profession leading neatly to Blackbeard. Piracy appears wherever valuable movement meets weak or disputed control. The Golden Age required a particular version of that condition: oceanic trade expanding across imperial frontiers while states delegated much of their violence to private ships.

Iberian expansion moved American silver and colonial goods through long routes exposed to attack. England, France and the Dutch Republic challenged Spanish claims without possessing enough public naval force to do everything directly. Elizabethan captains such as Francis Drake could

raid Spanish shipping with crown support and return as national heroes, while Spain called them pirates. Their voyages belong mainly to imperial war and exploration, but they established the political habit: a private venture could make war, enrich investors and remain deniable when diplomacy became awkward.

Privateering then became routine. War created commissions, prize courts and markets for captured goods. Peace removed legal cover from many ventures and narrowed some forms of employment, but it did not release one homogeneous pirate class. The men who crossed into piracy came through several maritime worlds.

Hunters become buccaneers

In the seventeenth-century Caribbean, displaced settlers and hunters lived on Hispaniola and nearby islands, smoking beef and pork on boucans. Spanish efforts to remove them pushed many towards Tortuga and other bases. The word buccaneer followed them from the smoking frame to maritime raiding.

Their crews were French, English, Dutch and mixed in origin, united less by nationality than by hostility to Spain and the opportunities of a contested region. Small vessels carried them against coastal traffic and settlements. Raiding a town could yield coin, church plate, merchandise, provisions, prisoners for ransom and information about hidden wealth. Violence on land was often worse than the later shipboard romance admits. Torture, hostage-taking and destruction were tools of extraction.

Colonial governors issued commissions when the raids served defence or policy, then withdrew them under pressure. Jamaica became central after the English conquest of 1655. Port Royal gained trade and protection from buccaneer spending. Henry Morgan's attacks on Portobelo in 1668 and Panama in 1671 displayed what a large, organised expedition could do. The attack on Panama came after England and Spain had agreed the Treaty of Madrid, though news, instructions and legal interpretation crossed the Atlantic slowly and conveniently. Morgan was taken to England, then

knighted and sent back to Jamaica in authority.

The buccaneer age did not vanish at one treaty. It thinned as colonial governments preferred settled trade, plantation revenue and diplomatic control. Port Royal's destruction by earthquake in 1692 supplied later moralists with a perfect ending, but policy and commerce had already been changing the port's function.

The Pirate Round

The richest target was no longer assumed to be a Spanish ship in the Caribbean. From the late 1680s and 1690s, some raiders followed a route from North America across the Atlantic, around southern Africa and into the Indian Ocean. They used Madagascar and nearby waters for repair, supply and exchange, then watched the routes connecting India, Arabia and the Red Sea.

Thomas Tew returned from an early voyage with enough wealth to advertise the route. Henry Every made it notorious. In 1695 his crew attacked a Mughal convoy and captured the *Ganji-i-Sawai*. The assault involved killing, torture and sexual violence. The prize made fortunes for survivors and created a crisis because Mughal retaliation could fall on the English East India Company's factories and Indian trade rather than on the vanished raiders. The Mughal state did not need to chase Every across the ocean. It could pressure merchants who had far more to lose.

The episode revealed the global structure of piracy. A crew recruited and equipped within Atlantic colonies could attack Asian commerce, disturb imperial diplomacy in India and try to launder goods back through American markets. Every escaped capture and became a legend precisely because the record loses him. Most men associated with the voyage were less fortunate, and a worldwide search showed governments learning that one pirate enterprise could threaten a larger commercial system.

Kidd and the shrinking excuse

William Kidd began with elite backing. In 1696 he sailed under commissions to attack French shipping and hunt pirates. The arrangement joined private investment, public purpose and political protection in the standard way. His voyage failed to produce easy lawful prizes. Crew discipline deteriorated, Kidd killed gunner William Moore during a quarrel, and in 1698 he captured the *Quedagh Merchant*, an Armenian-owned vessel carrying goods under passes connected to the Mughal and English trading worlds.

Kidd argued that the ship was a lawful French prize. His backers discovered that defending the claim had become politically expensive. He returned towards New York, placed valuable goods in John Gardiner's custody on Gardiners Island and sought protection. Authorities arrested him and recovered the deposit. Sent to London, he was tried for murder and piracy and hanged in 1701.

His case sits on the hinge. Kidd was neither a storybook innocent framed by enemies nor a simple outlaw from the start. He entered a system designed to reward licensed violence and found that its legal shelter depended on results, documents and political usefulness. Once a disputed prize endangered powerful commercial relations, ambiguity closed around him. The goods placed with Gardiner later supplied fiction with its treasure map, though the documented episode was concealment and custody, not a secure scene of Kidd burying retirement savings for a later return.

The final generation converges

The War of the Spanish Succession began in 1701 and expanded armed employment across the Atlantic. Privateers hunted enemy commerce. Naval and merchant fleets grew. Sailors learned gunnery, pursuit, boarding, navigation and prize handling. Ports learned how to provision armed ventures and sell captures. When the Utrecht settlements began ending the war in 1713, commissions lost force and naval establishments contracted. Some men faced fewer berths and lower wages. That helped supply piracy, but most displaced seamen chose other lives and the pirate concentration cannot be read straight from demobilisation.

Other streams were already moving through the region. After 1708, privateering and piratical crews operated around Caribbean islands beyond firm colonial control. In late 1715 and 1716, the Bahamas governor Archibald Hamilton commissioned private vessels to hunt pirates and protect the salvage of a Spanish treasure fleet wrecked off Florida. Some used the papers, arms and opportunity to attack vessels or salvage beyond any defensible authority. Henry Jennings emerged from this blurred operation, raiding a Spanish salvage camp and carrying treasure to Nassau.

Late in 1716, Spanish forces expelled the cutters and destroyed their settlements around Campeche. Displaced cutters entered the same Bahamas circulation of ships, provisions, rumours and precarious work. They did not arrive as committed pirates, and some sought return or resettlement. Their presence matters because Nassau's population was being made by imperial eviction as well as naval contraction.

Nassau also held established raiders, traders, families, enslaved people and people seeking any authority that could secure property and food. The groups overlapped, quarrelled and recruited from one another. They had no common constitution and little shared purpose beyond making use of a weakly governed harbour.

Fast sloops could work through the islands and the Florida Straits. Rich traffic passed nearby. Salvage, commissions and stolen cargo could be

converted through shore contacts. The peak formed when populations converged on a harbour able to service ships and turn prizes into money and supplies, not when peace created an army of unemployed sailors. They held together for voyages and bargains, not as a nation.

Life between prizes

Piracy still involved more maintenance than combat. A sailing vessel needed watches through day and night, constant work on ropes and sails, pumping, cleaning, cooking, steering and repair. Food and water deteriorated. Tropical heat, insects, wounds and infection reduced crews. Alcohol was common but never replaced the need to keep powder dry, weapons ready and enough sober men capable of handling a sudden squall or chase. Articles regulating lights, smoking and arms were safety rules before they were moral rules. One careless flame could end the enterprise.

Space was crowded. Pirate companies often carried more men than merchant vessels because numbers helped in boarding and supplied crews for prizes. More bodies also consumed stores and made disease, quarrels and discipline harder. A captured ship could relieve the pressure, but keeping it divided strength and required officers the crew trusted. Pirates therefore destroyed, released, stripped or reassigned prizes according to immediate need rather than collecting a permanent fleet.

Time alternated between boredom and compressed decision. A sail on the horizon had to be identified, chased and judged. The target might prove too fast, too poor, too well escorted or politically dangerous. Once captured, crew members searched papers, questioned officers, inspected the hold and decided what could be used. Sailors from the prize might be invited, threatened or rejected. A vessel with useful rigging could be dismantled. Another with superior speed could become the new pirate ship, leaving the old one to be burned, abandoned or handed to prisoners.

Plunder then had to be recorded and divided. Equal access to fresh provisions could coexist with disputes over concealed valuables. Injury compensation and agreed shares mattered because each encounter could

alter a man's earning capacity in seconds. Between prizes, the crew was an armed workplace trying to remain seaworthy. The horizon supplied opportunity, but timber, water, food, health and trust set the length of the voyage.

The black flags, 1716 to 1718

The great concentration was brief. Samuel Bellamy captured the former slave ship *Whydah* in 1717 and converted it into a pirate flagship. Months later it wrecked in a storm off Cape Cod, taking most of the company and its accumulated plunder with it. The site later became one of the few securely identified Golden Age pirate wrecks, offering material evidence where biography is thin.

Blackbeard's rise was equally fast. Serving with or near Hornigold's circle, Edward Teach captured the French slave ship *La Concorde* in November 1717 and renamed it *Queen Anne's Revenge*. The vessel's size and armament supported a large company, but reputation supplied the sharper weapon. In May 1718 his flotilla blockaded Charleston, seized ships and hostages, and demanded a chest of medicines. The object of the blockade was practical rather than regal. Sickness could disable a crew more efficiently than gunfire.

Soon afterwards, *Queen Anne's Revenge* grounded at Beaufort Inlet. Whether the grounding was accidental or helped Teach shed unwanted followers cannot be established. He accepted a pardon in North Carolina, returned to raiding and developed a relationship with Governor Charles Eden that invited suspicion of official protection. Lieutenant Robert Maynard's force from Virginia found him at Ocracoke. Teach died in close fighting on 22 November 1718, his severed head displayed from Maynard's bowsprit.

Stede Bonnet reached the same end by a stranger route. A Barbados landowner with no obvious need to escape wages, he bought a vessel, hired a crew and went pirating. His inexperience led him into Blackbeard's orbit. Captured near the Cape Fear River, he was tried in Charleston and hanged

in December 1718. The poor seaman's rebellion had always contained men seeking adventure, status or profit for other reasons.

Pardon and Nassau

George I's proclamation of September 1717 offered pardon to pirates who surrendered by September 1718 for specified earlier offences. It also offered rewards for capturing pirates and incentives to crew members who helped seize commanders. The policy attacked trust. A man weighing one more voyage now knew that his companions might prefer legal return or bounty.

Woodes Rogers carried the policy to Nassau. A former privateer and circumnavigator, he led a privately backed expedition with royal authority, soldiers, supplies and naval support. When the expedition arrived in July 1718, Vane sailed out with a following estimated near ninety. Rogers inherited a harbour in which roughly three hundred pirates had stayed behind, and in which people ashore could welcome restored rule. The contrast mattered more than any single act of defiance. Nassau did not behave as one political community facing invasion.

Rogers had to build government with inadequate funds. He repaired fortifications, organised administration, pursued holdouts and depended on pardoned pirates, merchants and local residents. Some former raiders became pirate hunters. Hornigold, who had accepted the pardon, sailed against men from the same maritime world. Vane rejected the settlement but was eventually captured, tried in Jamaica and hanged in 1721.

Nassau's conversion removed a service centre. Pirates could still cruise, but losing a harbour where they could recruit, careen, buy, sell and receive warning made every voyage more fragile. Government worked because it offered ordinary life as well as punishment.

Rackham, Bonny and Read

John Rackham, called Calico Jack in later tradition, had served under Vane and then commanded on his own. His career was modest beside the fame attached to it. In August 1720, Rackham, Anne Bonny, Mary Read and others stole the sloop *William* from Nassau and resumed piracy. A Jamaican privateering vessel captured them near Jamaica in October.

Rackham and the men were convicted and hanged. Bonny and Read were tried separately on 28 November. Witnesses described them wearing men's jackets and trousers during attacks, carrying weapons and taking an active role. Both pleaded that they were pregnant, which stayed execution under the law. Read was recorded dead in prison the following year. No secure record settles Bonny's later life.

The trial gives a firm narrow core. The *General History* supplied the childhood disguises, romances, speeches and dramatic personalities that made the pair irresistible. Some details may preserve information unavailable elsewhere; others fit literary types too neatly. Later retellings turned two unusual participants into evidence for whole fleets of female pirates.

Their real importance lies in the boundary they crossed. Ships were gendered workplaces, pirate articles sometimes barred women, and most deep-sea raiders were men. Women nevertheless sustained port economies, exchanged information, managed households and businesses, received stolen goods and suffered pirate violence. Bonny and Read were not the whole female history of piracy. They were the rare women whom a criminal trial placed on deck with weapons.

Roberts and the breaking of the large crews

Bartholomew Roberts entered piracy after his ship was captured off West Africa in 1719. Within weeks he had become a captain. His company moved between West Africa, the Caribbean and Atlantic routes, taking prize after prize and maintaining a scale that made him the leading remaining threat.

Roberts's articles, preserved through later reporting, regulated voting, shares, weapons, lights, gambling and compensation. The order sat beside ruthless predation. His ships attacked commerce linked to the slave trade and sometimes treated captives with extreme violence. The code protected the partnership, not the public.

In February 1722, HMS *Swallow*, commanded by Chaloner Ogle, engaged Roberts's force off Cape Lopez. Roberts was killed by grapeshot early in the action. The captured company was carried to Cape Coast Castle for one of the period's largest pirate proceedings. Seventy-two men received death sentences: fifty-two were hanged and twenty had their sentences commuted to seven years of indentured labour in West African mines. Other defendants were acquitted, reprieved or punished on different terms. The outcomes show a court sorting legal membership and culpability rather than treating every person found aboard as identical.

The destruction of such a large company had disproportionate effect. Pirate crews could still form, and Atlantic violence did not become safe. Edward Low remained active in the early 1720s and became notorious through reports of cruelty, though the evidence for some episodes and for his final fate is uncertain. William Fly's brief career and execution at Boston in 1726 offer a convenient symbolic closing date, not an extinction event.

By the middle of the 1720s, the combination of fewer bases, local trials, pardons, naval pressure and merchant hostility had made large, conspicuous fleets difficult to maintain. The famous generation dispersed faster than it had assembled.

The second life

The pirates became characters almost at once. Trials drew crowds. Execution sermons converted crime into warning. Newspapers circulated captures, speeches and rumours. In 1724, a writer calling himself Captain Charles Johnson published *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*. Its biographies preserve indispensable material and mix it with moralising, invention and dramatic arrangement. The author's identity remains uncertain. The book created much of the cast while some of them were barely dead.

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, published in book form in 1883, fixed the map, buried hoard, one-legged seaman, parrot and much of the emotional world of piracy. Film supplied the sound. Robert Newton's performance as Long John Silver in Disney's 1950 adaptation exaggerated his West Country speech into the pirate voice now mistaken for history.

The legend succeeded by selecting the parts that can be enjoyed without their system. It kept the flag, rum, defiance and tropical horizon. It reduced merchant labour, imperial policy, slavery, torture, cargo markets and colonial courts to background. The Golden Age lasted about a decade in its sharpest form. Its second life has lasted three centuries because fiction removed the shore and left freedom on the deck.

How we know

Pirates left little self-authored evidence. Even literate participants had strong reasons not to preserve papers that could incriminate them, and many records vanished with short-lived voyages. The archive therefore comes mainly from people trying to stop, judge, employ, insure or describe pirates: Admiralty correspondence, governors' letters, merchant petitions, naval logs, newspapers, proclamations, trials, depositions and execution accounts.

These sources have interests. Defendants claimed force because coercion could save a life. Prosecutors stressed willing membership. Governors blamed rivals or concealed local complicity. Merchants enlarged losses.

Newspapers sold drama. The 1724 *General History* is indispensable and unsafe, strongest where independent records confirm its sequence and weakest where it supplies private dialogue, secret motives or perfect theatrical scenes.

Archaeology offers a different filter. The wrecks of *Whydah* and *Queen Anne's Revenge*, together with port sites and material finds, test claims about armament, cargo and daily equipment, but two wrecks cannot represent every crew. The surviving record is hostile, selective and unusually fascinated by a small number of names. A responsible history uses the famous pirates as documented cases, not as a census of the sea.

What People Get Wrong

“Pirates buried their treasure”

Most plunder was meant to be used or sold. Food spoiled, cloth mildewed, sugar needed a buyer and a wooden ship demanded continuous repair. Coin could be divided at once. Burying portable wealth on an island, drawing a map and trusting armed partners to wait for a future return would turn a successful seizure into a storage problem.

William Kidd placed valuables in John Gardiner's custody on Gardiners Island in 1699, asking that goods be kept and concealed, and officials recovered them after his arrest. The evidence does not require a scene of Kidd digging a chest into the ground himself. This rare deposit became general practice in later imagination. Kidd was seeking political protection and preserving valuable goods, not establishing a pension fund. Robert Louis Stevenson then made buried treasure the engine of *Treasure Island*, and the exceptional case became the profession's defining habit.

The correction matters because cargo reveals the system. Pirates needed markets, merchants and harbours. A chest hidden beyond society supports the fantasy of independence. Barrels sold through a colonial port show dependence on the legal economy.

The map marked with an X is also later storytelling rather than known pirate practice. Real navigational knowledge was valuable and often kept in rutters, charts, bearings and pilots' memories. A theatrical treasure map converts commercial information into a child's puzzle and removes the buyers who made plunder spendable.

“Piracy was ordinary crime at sea”

Piracy was a crime, but the category was not simple. A privateer could lawfully seize enemy shipping under a commission, subject to prize law. A buccaneer might hold papers from a colonial governor whose authority or wording another state rejected. A captain could leave port licensed, take an uncertain prize after peace had been agreed and return to find the political protection gone.

The confusion became persuasive because later states wrote a cleaner boundary into law and later stories divided the sea into naval heroes and pirates. Early modern governments preferred elasticity when private force was useful. Henry Morgan could attack Spanish possessions, be sent to England in disgrace after diplomatic conditions changed, then return to Jamaica as a knight and lieutenant-governor.

This does not excuse violence. It identifies its institutional parentage. Treating pirates as creatures outside the state hides how states financed, authorised, tolerated and finally reclassified the same skills.

The test is temporal. Ask what commission existed when the ship sailed, what peace or alliance existed when the capture occurred and what court judged it afterwards. The answer may still be piracy, but it will explain why participants could claim otherwise and why sponsors sometimes abandoned them.

“Pirate ships lived by battle”

A damaged prize was worth less, and a damaged pirate ship might not survive the next storm or patrol. Cannon fire tore sails, rigging, hulls and bodies. Skilled sailors were difficult to replace. Pirates therefore benefited when speed, numbers, flags and reputation persuaded a merchant captain to strike without a serious fight.

Battle dominates surviving drama because resistance produced testimony and spectacle. Quiet surrender left fewer memorable details. Later illustration and film then made every boarding a sword fight, though many seizures involved chase, warning shots, intimidation, search and release.

Pirates could be brutally violent, especially when they believed valuables were hidden or resistance challenged their authority. The correction is not that they were gentle. Their violence was strategic. Reputation allowed past cruelty to do present work. Fear was most profitable when it removed the need to damage the asset being stolen.

The large pirate crew was itself a weapon. Merchant vessels often carried only enough hands to operate economically, while raiders concentrated men for pursuit and boarding. A captain who saw armed decks crowded beyond normal commercial need was being shown the likely result before choosing whether to resist.

“The articles made them democracies”

Pirate articles could give crew members votes, restrain captains, divide proceeds by agreed shares and compensate injury. Quartermasters often checked a captain's daily power. Compared with naval or merchant hierarchy, this was a striking transfer of authority towards ordinary seamen.

Calling the arrangement democracy becomes misleading when it suggests universal rights or a political programme. Articles governed recognised members of one armed venture. They did not protect captured crews, coerced recruits, colonial communities or enslaved people. Voting might apply to destinations and discipline while the captain held concentrated

authority in chase and battle. Penalties could include marooning, loss of shares or death.

The better comparison is a partnership contract made necessary by armed labour. It proves that men labelled lawless could design institutions. It does not prove that their institutions were liberal, stable or morally expansive.

Nor did every crew use the same code. Surviving articles were copied through hostile records and popular print, which favoured unusual detail. Similar rules often answered similar risks, but comparison across 1660 to 1726 reveals borrowing, alteration and contradiction rather than one Jamaica discipline or shared political constitution. One captain's provisions or injury tariff cannot be promoted into a programme for thousands of men across decades.

“Pirates were enemies of slavery”

Some Black sailors served as armed crew members, and some fugitives may have gained room aboard pirate ships that colonial society denied them ashore. Pirates also attacked slave ships and disrupted particular voyages. These facts have encouraged a picture of the black flag as an anti-slavery banner.

The wider evidence will not carry it. Pirates stole slave-trade goods, used captured vessels, compelled Black labour, sold enslaved Africans and treated people as cargo. West African cruising brought crews directly into slaving infrastructure. Status varied: a Black person aboard might be free, enslaved, fugitive, coerced or recognised as a share member, and official records often flatten the difference.

Pirate equality, where it existed, stopped at crew membership. The correction matters because opposition to one hierarchy does not imply opposition to every hierarchy. Men could resent impressment and captaincy while profiting from slavery without contradiction in their own minds.

This is why the colour of the flag cannot settle the politics beneath it. The same company might admit one Black sailor to a share, force another to

labour and sell a third. Inclusion based on usefulness or comradeship could exist inside a market organised around racial enslavement.

“Women pirates were common”

Anne Bonny and Mary Read are famous because the evidence places two women on one pirate vessel, dressed for action, carrying weapons and convicted in 1720. Their pregnancy pleas stayed execution. Read later died in gaol; Bonny disappears from secure documentation.

The rest of their familiar biographies depends heavily on the 1724 *General History*, which supplied disguises, romances, duels and speeches with the confidence of a novelist. Later retellings multiplied their exceptional presence into a general culture of female piracy.

Deep-sea raiding was overwhelmingly male. Women could be barred by articles and faced legal, social and physical constraints on maritime employment. Yet women were present in the system as traders, innkeepers, partners, informants, property holders, receivers of goods and victims. Calling women pirates common is false. Reducing women's history to two armed exceptions is also false. The shore held more female agency than the deck.

The legend survives because Bonny and Read satisfy two appetites at once: they make piracy look socially open and supply exceptional heroines to a male story. Their secure achievement needs no invented duel or romantic speech. They entered an armed maritime workplace that was structured to exclude them.

“Walking the plank was standard punishment”

There is little good evidence that Golden Age Atlantic pirates routinely forced captives to walk a plank. The ritual became useful to theatre and film because it creates a clean stage, a waiting sea and time for a speech. Historical violence was less choreographed.

Pirates marooned offenders, threw people overboard, beat them, shot them, tortured them, abandoned ships and left captives exposed to hunger or

wreck. Articles sometimes prescribed marooning for theft or desertion, usually with a weapon, ammunition or minimal provisions. Naval and merchant punishment supplied other brutal models.

The myth matters because stylised cruelty can make real cruelty feel playful. The plank turns killing into a game with scenery. Historical pirates did not need a signature ceremony. Their power rested on uncertainty, immediate force and the knowledge that no nearby authority could intervene.

The same distortion affects parrots, hooks and the theatrical pirate voice. Injured seamen and shipboard animals existed, but fiction assembled scattered possibilities into a uniform. Robert Newton's West Country performance in the 1950 film *Treasure Island* did more to standardise pirate speech than any eighteenth-century crew.

Use It

Ask who authorised the violence

When an armed actor is described as lawful, criminal, irregular or heroic, inspect the authority behind the label. Golden Age piracy grew because governments granted commissions, colonial officials stretched them and enemies rejected them. The same seizure could be a prize in one court and piracy in another.

The useful question is not whether law exists. Law is usually present in abundance. Ask who wrote the permission, what conduct it covered, when it expired, which tribunal could test it and whose recognition mattered. A paper carried across an ocean did not enforce itself. Its value depended on institutions willing to honour it after the result was known.

This lens separates rules from power without pretending rules are fake. Letters of marque changed legal consequences and recruited investment. They also allowed states to enjoy violence at a distance while shifting cost and blame. Whenever authority is outsourced, inspect what happens when the sponsor wants the capability but not the responsibility.

Find the shore behind the outlaw

An outlaw who appears independent is often the visible end of a respectable supply chain. Pirate ships required food, repair, intelligence, credit, buyers and officials prepared to hesitate. Their sea power rested on ports. Naval pursuit mattered, but closing a market or reclaiming a harbour could do more lasting damage than sinking one vessel.

Apply the same discipline to any mobile illegal enterprise. Trace where equipment comes from, how value is converted, which legal businesses absorb the proceeds, where participants recover and who supplies warning. The weak point may sit far from the dramatic act. A raider can replace a gun more easily than a trusted buyer.

The lens also guards against false wilderness. Nassau looked beyond normal government, yet it contained households, traders, enslaved people, property claims and competing interests. Spaces called ungoverned are often governed through arrangements that outsiders have not mapped or do not recognise.

Separate rule-breaking from alternative rules

Pirate articles correct the lazy belief that people outside official law want no order. Crews regulated shares, authority, injury, weapons, food and discipline because common action was impossible without rules. Their institutions were designed around the risks of one enterprise.

That does not make alternative rules admirable. Ask four questions. Who counts as a member? What problems do the rules solve? What coercion enforces them? Who bears costs without representation? Pirate codes look participatory inside the crew and predatory from the deck of the captured ship. Both views are true because the boundary changes the answer.

This is a better test than asking whether a group is hierarchical or egalitarian in the abstract. Institutions distribute voice by domain. A pirate captain could be constrained over provisions and dominant during battle. A crew could vote on destination and deny every right to a captive. Map the decision

rather than attaching one label to the whole group.

Change the return, not the rhetoric

Governments suppressed the famous pirate generation by changing the likely return from each stage of the enterprise. Pardons offered an exit. Rewards encouraged betrayal. Local courts reduced delay. Patrols increased the chance of interception. Pressure on merchants and governors made sale and refuge less dependable. No measure worked alone, and none required the sea to become perfectly controlled.

This suggests a practical way to analyse enforcement. Break an enterprise into stages and ask how each intervention changes revenue, cost, delay, trust and replacement. A severe penalty with little chance of application may matter less than a moderate, credible interruption at a bottleneck. The Piracy Act mattered because it made trial near the point of capture possible, not because its prose frightened men in advance.

Moral language can support enforcement, but condemnation is not a mechanism. Pirates had been denounced for years. Their position worsened when ordinary commerce, functioning ports and divided crews made compliance or defection more attractive than another voyage.

Enforcement can also displace rather than solve. A patrol may move raiding to another coast; a closed market may create a new intermediary; a harsh law may encourage crews to kill witnesses. Track the full response, including adaptation by the target and costs shifted onto bystanders. The decline of one famous pirate centre did not make maritime predation disappear from the world.

Treat reputation as operating capital

A pirate flag worked because it carried remembered consequences. If a merchant crew believed surrender would preserve life and resistance would invite ruin, the pirate could capture value without damaging it. Reputation replaced some expenditure of powder, timber and blood.

This capital had two requirements. The threat had to be credible, and

submission had to retain some advantage. Random violence could frighten targets, but it could also make resistance rational if surrender promised the same death. Pirates therefore developed reputations through a mixture of menace, selective restraint, theatrical appearance and stories spread by survivors.

When reputation affects behaviour, ask who transmits it and whether the signal is costly to fake. Blackbeard's name travelled through crews, ports, newspapers and later print. The pirate flag was a message before it was decoration. Image was not separate from operations. It changed the terms of an encounter before the ships met.

Read hostile records against their purpose

Much of pirate history was written by prosecutors, governors, merchants, naval officers, ministers and moralists. Their records are indispensable because pirates preserved little. They are also attempts to secure convictions, recover losses, defend administrations or turn executions into lessons.

Do not respond by reversing every judgement. A hostile source can describe a real atrocity, and a defendant can lie. Instead, identify what the document needed to prove. Trial testimony may be strong on who stood armed on deck and weak on a private motive. A pardon list can count surrender while saying little about inward loyalty. A governor's letter can reveal administrative fear while exaggerating a rival's failure.

Then compare source types. Material evidence, ship records, newspaper reports and separate depositions can confirm or unsettle the printed story. The aim is not to reach a source without interests. It is to make the interests visible enough that the surviving fact is no broader than the evidence.

The limits

Piracy offers strong models of delegated violence, illegal markets, labour governance, reputation and enforcement. It does not supply a universal theory of crime or freedom. The Atlantic Golden Age occupied a particular world of sail, imperial rivalry, colonial expansion, slavery, weak communications and prize-based warfare. Modern piracy off Somalia, in the Gulf of Guinea or in Southeast Asia arises from different states, technologies, cargoes, shore politics and international law. Similar words do not prove the same system.

The archive also resists firm social arithmetic. We cannot calculate a reliable percentage of voluntary recruits, Black share members, coerced sailors or women across all crews. Famous articles survive because authorities and publishers preserved them, not because they were average. Named captains occupy far more space than ordinary seamen or people harmed ashore.

Nor should efficient pirate governance be confused with moral progress. A system can solve coordination well and direct the result towards robbery, torture and enslavement. Institutional skill describes capacity. It does not settle purpose.

The one thing to keep

Keep the shore.

The flag, captain and ship are what piracy wanted observers to see. The shore explains why the spectacle could continue. Someone provisioned the crew, repaired the hull, disclosed the route, bought the sugar, accepted the coin, ignored the warrant and decided whether the commission still counted. When those relationships held, a captured pirate ship could be replaced. When they broke, even a famous captain became a hungry group on damaged timber.

That changes the Golden Age from a romance of men escaping society into a history of men exploiting connections within it. Their autonomy was partial,

their democracy bounded and their rebellion supplied by the economy they robbed. States did not stand outside the story. They licensed the skills, benefited from colonial nests, changed the legal category and then built enough local capacity to enforce the change.

So when a dramatic threat appears to live beyond ordinary institutions, look away from the dramatic threat for a moment. Find the harbour, payroll, workshop, market, insurer, official and customer that make it repeatable. The visible outlaw may be difficult to catch. The system that keeps him afloat leaves accounts, dependencies and choices on land.

Terms

Piracy. Robbery or other violent depredation at sea outside accepted state authority. Historical definitions varied by jurisdiction, treaty and period, so the label must be read with the court applying it.

Privateer. A privately owned armed vessel, or its commander and crew, authorised to attack specified enemies. Privateers operated for profit under public permission and were expected to obey prize law.

Letter of marque. A commission permitting private capture of enemy ships or goods under stated conditions. Its date, issuer, target and wartime validity could decide whether a seizure became prize or piracy.

Prize. A captured vessel, cargo or both, claimed as lawful wartime seizure. A prize did not become legal property merely because it had been taken; adjudication was normally required.

Prize court. A tribunal deciding whether a maritime capture complied with commission and law. It examined papers, ownership, nationality and conduct before condemning, releasing or distributing the seized property.

Buccaneer. Originally a hunter in the Caribbean who smoked meat on a boucan, later a raider attacking Spanish shipping and settlements, often within the blurred permissions of colonial warfare.

Corsair. A sea raider, especially one associated with Mediterranean conflict

and state or religious rivalry. The term can describe licensed privateering or piracy depending on viewpoint and legal recognition.

Freebooter. An adventurer who raids for private gain, from a Dutch word for free booty. It captures the profit motive but says little about whether a commission protected the venture.

Going on the account. A contemporary phrase for entering piracy or joining a pirate voyage. The account was the shared enterprise through which risks, rules, expenses and proceeds were reckoned.

Pirate Round. The late seventeenth-century route from Atlantic colonies around southern Africa into the Indian Ocean, targeting rich shipping and using places such as Madagascar for supply and exchange.

Pirate nest. A port or coastal community where merchants, officials, craftsmen and residents supported raiders through markets, repair, information and protection. The term shifts attention from ship to shore.

Sloop. A small, fast, usually single-masted sailing vessel valued in Caribbean waters for manoeuvrability and shallow draught. Pirates favoured speed and access to coastal passages over heavy construction.

Brigantine. A light, fast sailing vessel whose rig varied across period and region. Pirates and privateers used such adaptable craft for pursuit, coastal operation and escape rather than line-of-battle fighting.

Careening. Heeling a vessel over to expose part of its underwater hull for cleaning and repair. Removing weed, barnacles and damage restored speed but required a safe shore and labour.

Broadside. The simultaneous or grouped fire of guns along one side of a ship. It could compel surrender, but firing risked damaging the hull, rigging, cargo and crew pirates hoped to take.

Quarter. Mercy granted to an opponent who surrendered, usually protection from immediate killing rather than a guarantee of kind treatment. The possibility of quarter made intimidation and negotiated surrender useful.

No quarter. A declaration or understood threat that surrender would not preserve life. Pirates used terror strategically, but a universal no-quarter reputation could make targets fight because compliance offered nothing.

Jolly Roger. A later general name for pirate flags, especially black designs bearing death symbols. Golden Age crews used varied images, and there was no single official skull-and-crossbones standard.

Black flag. A pirate signal commonly demanding submission and communicating the crew's identity or reputation. Specific designs and meanings varied, and later writers assigned personal flags with excessive confidence.

Red flag. A threatening maritime signal often interpreted as indicating severe or unqualified violence. Its precise use was not governed by one pirate code, so context matters more than colour alone.

Articles. A crew's agreed rules covering authority, shares, discipline, weapons, provisions, injury and conduct. Surviving examples reveal practical governance but cannot be assumed to represent every pirate company.

Quartermaster. The officer who often supervised provisions, shares, discipline and the crew's interests, checking the captain outside combat. Duties varied, but the office helped divide authority aboard pirate vessels.

Share. A proportional claim on net plunder rather than a fixed wage. Ordinary crew commonly received one share, while captains and specialists received more under ratios fixed before the voyage.

Marooning. Abandoning a person on an island or remote coast, sometimes with minimal provisions or a weapon. Pirate articles used it as punishment for theft, desertion or betrayal of the crew.

Impressment. Forced recruitment into naval service, especially during war. Fear of the press and resentment of naval discipline formed part of the labour world from which pirates recruited.

Pardon. Official forgiveness for specified past offences, usually conditional on surrender by a deadline. The royal offer of 1717 divided pirates by creating a route back into lawful society.

Vice-Admiralty court. A colonial maritime court handling matters including prizes, seizures and piracy under imperial authority. Overseas trial capacity reduced the delay and difficulty of sending defendants to England.

Hostis humani generis. Latin for enemy of humankind, a phrase used in legal thought to describe pirates as outside ordinary protection. States still prosecuted them through particular laws and interests.

Execution Dock. The place at Wapping on the Thames traditionally used for executing pirates and maritime offenders convicted by the Admiralty. Bodies could be displayed as warnings along the river.

Fence. A buyer or intermediary who converts stolen goods into money or legitimate circulation. Pirate cargo needed fences because value in a captured hold was useless until somebody accepted the risk.

Go Deeper

Four books open different parts of the subject: an inviting survey, the source that built the cast, a strong labour interpretation and the shore-based imperial model that corrects sea-only history.

David Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates* (1995)

Begin here for the broadest accessible route through both history and legend. Cordingly spent years at the National Maritime Museum and writes with the objects, ships and later cultural image in view. The book moves beyond the narrow 1716 to 1726 peak, which is useful for comparison but means its scope is wider than this account. Read it for orientation, famous cases and the distinction between what pirates did and what novels taught us to expect. Its museum-trained attention to images and objects makes it especially good on the process by which scattered historical details became one recognisable costume.

Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, edited by Manuel Schonhorn (1972 edition of the 1724 work)

This is the dangerous primary source behind much of the modern pirate cast. It preserves articles, trials, names and episodes that may otherwise be lost, then supplies dialogue, motive and theatrical design with far more confidence than the evidence permits. Schonhorn's scholarly edition gives the text and editorial apparatus needed to read it critically. Use it beside independent records. Do not treat its vividness as authentication, and do not assume the unknown Captain Johnson witnessed the private scenes he describes. Read one biography beside a surviving trial or official correspondence and watch the secure sequence acquire speeches, motives and symmetry as it enters print.

Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (2004)

Read this for the strongest compact case that piracy grew from the brutal labour world of the Atlantic and that pirate crews created a rebellious, multicultural and comparatively egalitarian counter-order. Rediker makes articles, shares, resistance and seamen's experience central. The interpretation is influential and illuminating, but it can give cohesion and political meaning more weight than every crew or surrender pattern will bear. Pair it with the next book and ask where shipboard solidarity ends. The value lies less in accepting every political implication than in refusing to write seamen out of a history too often organised around governors, captains and naval campaigns.

Mark G. Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740* (2015)

Hanna puts the shore back into the story. His large study follows merchants, colonial officials, families, ports and imperial policy to show why piracy could be openly supported before it became intolerable. It is the best next step for understanding how legal commerce and maritime predation developed together. The book is long and works across almost two centuries, but that range prevents the famous black-flag decade from pretending it created its own ships, markets or political conditions. It also explains why suppression required changes among respectable colonists rather than courage from naval officers alone.

Notes and Sources

Scope and the Golden Age

Periodisation. There is no universally accepted date range for the Golden Age of Piracy. Popular museum and general histories often use roughly the 1680s to the 1720s. Marcus Rediker centres the sharp Atlantic peak on 1716 to 1726. This book uses three overlapping phases because they explain more than one date bracket: Caribbean buccaneering from the middle seventeenth century; the late seventeenth-century Pirate Round into the Indian Ocean; and the post-Utrecht black-flag concentration from roughly 1716 to the middle 1720s. Earlier Mediterranean piracy and later Atlantic, Asian and African piracy are acknowledged without being folded into one continuous Golden Age.

The central model. Mark Hanna establishes the importance of colonial support, merchant interests and pirate nests. Matthew Norton analyses the transformation of piracy from a category managed through ambiguity into one treated as intolerable and policed more sharply. David Wilson shows that early eighteenth-century suppression was not one centrally directed imperial war but an uneven accumulation of local, commercial, judicial and naval action. Nathan Jopling's 2023 comparison of pirate articles challenges the idea of one coherent Jamaica discipline, while his 2026 article reconstructs the weakly bonded populations that converged around Nassau. These works support the model of piracy as an activity produced within imperial maritime systems rather than beyond them.

Privateering, law and the movable line

Pirates and privateers. Privateering commissions, prize adjudication and the legal uncertainty surrounding captures are treated through Hanna, Norton, Wilson, Margarette Lincoln, Guy Chet and Robert Ritchie. A letter of marque did not legalise any seizure by its holder. Authority, enemy status, timing, conduct and prize adjudication mattered. The book therefore avoids calling every state-backed raider a pirate or treating every commission as conclusive.

Hostis humani generis. The phrase has a long legal history and is often translated as enemy of all humankind or common enemy of humankind. It supplied a universalising description, but actual prosecution remained tied to statutes, courts, commissions, sovereignty and evidence. The glossary uses it as a legal idea rather than claiming one stable doctrine across all states and centuries.

Piracy Act. The statute commonly called the Piracy Act 1698 is 11 Will. III c. 7, titled *An Act for the more effectual suppression of Piracy*. Its regnal dating can cause modern catalogues to place passage or royal assent in 1700. Its material importance here is the creation of procedures for overseas piracy trials by specially commissioned local courts and the extension of liability to knowing aid, concealment and receipt. The book does not imply that the statute produced instant or uniform enforcement.

Buccaneers, Port Royal and Henry Morgan

Origins of buccaneer. The connection to the boucan, the smoked-meat frame used by hunters in the Caribbean, is standard. The transition from hunting communities to maritime raiding was gradual and involved French, English, Dutch and other actors. Buccaneer, privateer and pirate overlapped in contemporary practice but are not treated as synonyms.

Jamaica and pirate nests. Hanna gives the fullest account of colonial hinterlands and support. Port Royal benefited from provisioning, spending and resale associated with private raiding while Jamaica lacked resources and faced Spanish hostility. Support changed as plantation interests, regular commerce and diplomacy gained weight. The 1692 earthquake is not used as the cause of the policy shift or as divine judgement.

Morgan. The attacks on Portobelo in 1668 and Panama in 1671, the 1670 Treaty of Madrid, Morgan's dispatch to England amid diplomatic embarrassment, his appointment as lieutenant-governor in March 1674, knighthood in November and return to Jamaica in January 1675 are securely documented. Precise claims about whether news of peace had reached particular participants or exactly which commission covered the

Panama expedition remain contested. The text uses the episode to show changing political classification, not to settle every legal defence Morgan advanced.

The Pirate Round, Every and Kidd

The route. Ritchie, Hanna, Cordingly and Rediker support the account of Atlantic-based voyages around southern Africa into the Indian Ocean, with Madagascar and neighbouring waters used for supply and exchange. The term Pirate Round is a retrospective label for a set of routes and practices, not a timetable followed identically by every crew.

Henry Every and the *Ganj-i-Sawai*. The 1695 capture and the resulting Mughal pressure on the English East India Company are secure. Contemporary and later evidence also supports killing, torture and sexual violence during the assault. Exact values of the prize and later stories of Every's fate vary and are not retained. The manuscript states only that he escaped the known pursuit and disappears from reliable documentation.

William Kidd. Ritchie's *Captain Kidd and the War Against the Pirates* is central to the account. John Gardiner's statement records Kidd entrusting him with a box of gold, bales and other goods to keep and conceal on Gardiners Island. Officials later recovered the deposit. The evidence does not establish the familiar scene of Kidd personally burying a chest. Kidd sailed with anti-piracy and wartime commissions, captured the *Quedagh Merchant*, was sent to London, convicted and hanged in 1701. The ownership, passes and legal character of the captured vessel made the case more complex than either the innocent-martyr or simple-outlaw legend.

War, labour and the post-Utrecht surge

Demobilisation and convergence. The War of the Spanish Succession expanded naval, merchant and privateering employment. Peace settlements from 1713 reduced some wartime opportunities and invalidated privateering commissions while Atlantic commerce continued. Rediker's labour history and Wilson's institutional history support treating this as an important pressure rather than a complete explanation. Jopling's 2026 reconstruction identifies several connected but distinct Nassau populations: earlier raiders and off-grid privateers, vessels commissioned in 1715 and 1716 to hunt pirates or protect treasure-fleet salvage, and logwood cutters displaced from the Yucatán coast. Most demobilised seamen did not become pirates, and none of these groups can be treated as a unified class-conscious public.

Harsh maritime labour. Rediker's *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* supplies the broad account of wages, discipline, danger, work and class formation among Anglo-American seamen. Conditions varied by vessel, voyage, employer and period. Impressment belongs especially to naval mobilisation and cannot be treated as the normal recruitment method of every merchant ship.

The 1715 wreck fleet. Spanish treasure ships wrecked along the Florida coast in 1715, and salvage activity drew armed men and opportunists to the region. Henry Jennings's raid on a Spanish salvage camp helped connect wreck salvage, privateering habits and Nassau. The text avoids a precise count of ships or treasure value because fleet composition and popular retellings vary.

Nassau and the limits of the pirate republic

Nassau before Rogers. The Bahamas had lacked effective government for years, and Nassau offered shallow-water access, position near major routes, repair, recruitment and intelligence. Jopling reconstructs a convergence of weakly bonded populations rather than one settled pirate nation. His archival figures describe particular groups and administrative moments, not a census of everyone in the Bahamas. The phrase pirate republic is useful for the breakdown of ordinary colonial rule and misleading if it implies a durable constitution, unified citizen body or common long-term purpose.

Rogers's arrival. Wilson and Jopling support the arrival date of 26 July 1718 and the broad figures used. Contemporary estimates place about ninety men with Vane's departure and roughly three hundred pirates under the new administration. These are contemporary administrative estimates, not a census or evidence of inward loyalty. Jopling's evidence that people ashore welcomed restored government is retained because it directly challenges the memorable picture of one cohesive outlaw commonwealth. The fireship story is omitted because it is unnecessary to the mechanism and carries greater narrative than evidential weight.

Hornigold. Benjamin Hornigold moved from privateering and piracy into acceptance of the pardon and service against former associates. His trajectory demonstrates changing incentives but does not prove that all pirates lacked loyalty or that self-interest explains every decision.

Ships, chase, flags and reputation

Vessels. The technical description of sloops, brigantines, shallow draught, speed, careening and large crews follows maritime reference material from Royal Museums Greenwich, Cordingly and the documented practices in trials and contemporary narratives. Rig terminology changed across time and region. The glossary therefore avoids one rigid definition of brigantine.

Battle avoidance. Leeson's economic model is useful for explaining why pirates preferred intimidation and surrender when fighting risked cargo, hull

and crew. Cordingly, Rediker and contemporary testimony support the wider pattern. The text does not claim that battles were rare enough to quantify or that every pirate captain followed one rational strategy.

Flags. Contemporary descriptions support varied black and red flags using skulls, skeletons, hearts, weapons and hourglasses. Later culture standardised the skull and crossbones and assigned neat personal designs more confidently than surviving evidence allows. The book does not reproduce a supposedly authentic Blackbeard flag because the familiar horned-skeleton design lacks secure contemporary attribution. Red as a signal of severe intent is presented as a recurring interpretation, not a universal code.

Blackbeard's performance. The slow-match or burning-fuse image comes from *A General History of the Pyrates*. It may preserve contemporary reputation but is not independently established as a witnessed routine. The manuscript attributes the image to the source and relies instead on secure facts about the size of his company, the capture of *La Concorde*, the Charleston blockade and his final battle.

Cargo, markets and slavery

Ordinary plunder. Trial inventories, merchant complaints and the secondary literature show that pirates took provisions, clothing, textiles, sugar, tobacco, liquor, tools, cordage, weapons, medicines, ships and information as well as specie. The manuscript avoids pretending that a representative statistical cargo profile survives for all regions and decades.

Fences and buyers. Hanna is the main authority for the relationship between pirates and colonial merchants, officials and port economies. The word fence is modern shorthand for receivers and intermediaries who knowingly or ambiguously absorbed stolen goods. It is used for reader clarity, not as a claim that every contemporary used that occupational label.

Piracy and slavery. Arne Bialuschewski's 2008 and 2011 articles are central. They document pirates' interactions with free Black sailors, enslaved seafarers, captured Africans and the West African slave-trade

system. Pirates could admit Black men to crews, force them to work, abandon them or sell them. No robust percentage describes the status or racial composition of all Golden Age crews. The book therefore rejects both a colour-blind pirate utopia and a single unvarying racial rule.

The *Queen Anne's Revenge*. Blackbeard captured the French slave ship *La Concorde* in November 1717 and renamed it. Archaeological and historical research from the Queen Anne's Revenge Project supports the ship's identification and connection to the French slave trade. Exact gun and crew totals changed over the vessel's pirate service and are not used as fixed facts.

Articles, shares and authority

Surviving codes. Pirate articles associated with Bartholomew Roberts, John Phillips and other crews survive chiefly through hostile legal records and *A General History*. E. T. Fox's thesis provides a focused study of articles and their social function. Rediker emphasises participatory labour governance, while Leeson models articles as solutions to agency and coordination problems. Jopling's 2023 comparison shows that supposed Jamaica-discipline articles could be borrowed, altered or diametrically opposed according to context. Similar provisions therefore support recurring coordination needs, not one coherent ideology spanning 1660 to 1726.

Shares and injury compensation. Ratios and tariffs differed. The text uses only bounded examples and does not state one universal schedule. Johnson's account gives Phillips's captain one and a half shares and lists compensation for lost limbs, while other crews used other ratios. Such promises depended on a successful common stock and should not be confused with funded insurance.

Captain and quartermaster. The division of authority is well supported as a recurring pattern, especially captaincy in chase or battle and quartermaster influence over provisions, shares and crew interests. Offices varied among companies. The book avoids turning the pattern into a constitutional rule followed by every pirate vessel.

Voluntary and forced membership. Trial records contain many pleas of coercion. Some are corroborated; some may have been strategic because proof of force could lead to acquittal. The Cape Coast proceedings after Roberts's defeat, where many were acquitted as forced men while others were condemned, show that courts attempted to classify participation. They do not provide a reliable general rate of forced recruitment.

Women and gender

Anne Bonny and Mary Read. The strongest evidence is the Jamaican trial printed in 1721. Bonny and Read were tried separately from Rackham's male company on 28 November 1720. Witnesses described them in men's clothing during attacks, armed and participating. Both pleaded pregnancy, which stayed execution. Read's burial is recorded in Jamaica in 1721. Bonny's later fate is not securely documented.

Later biography. Childhood disguises, military careers, romances, duels, private conversations and famous speeches derive largely from *A General History*. They are omitted as facts. John Appleby's study places women in the wider systems of English piracy as partners, traders, receivers, family members and victims, while showing the strongly gendered limits of deep-sea raiding.

Pardon, trials and suppression

The 1717 proclamation. The London Gazette printed the royal proclamation in September 1717. It offered pardon to pirates surrendering by 5 September 1718 for piracy committed before 5 January 1718, subject to its terms. It also announced rewards for capture and incentives to crew members who helped seize commanders. The wording and dates are taken from the proclamation rather than later summaries.

Woodes Rogers. Wilson supplies the most detailed recent institutional account of the Bahamas expedition, its private finance, inadequate resources and political effects. Rogers did not arrive as the head of an overwhelming permanent naval occupation. His importance came from restoring government, splitting the population, fortifying the port and

combining pardons with pursuit.

Blackbeard. His surname appears as Teach, Thatch and in other spellings. The capture of *La Concorde* in 1717, Charleston blockade in May 1718, grounding at Beaufort Inlet in June and death at Ocracoke on 22 November are secure. Whether the grounding was deliberate remains disputed and is left open. The popular claim that Blackbeard killed no one before his final battle converts silence in an incomplete and hostile archive into a clean personal record. The manuscript rejects that negative inference rather than repeating it as qualified fact.

Bonnet, Rackham and Roberts. The Bonnet and Rackham trial printings support convictions and basic sequences. For the Roberts proceedings, the body retains the best-supported sentencing totals: seventy-two death sentences, fifty-two executions and twenty commutations to seven years of indentured labour in West African mines. Other defendants received acquittals, reprieves or different punishments. Exact headline totals vary across summaries and categories, so they are not combined into a false census. The case shows legal sorting, not the population structure of piracy as a whole.

Late survivors and closing dates. Edward Low's early 1720s activity is secure at a broad level, while lurid episodes and accounts of his death differ across sources. William Fly was hanged at Boston in 1726. Rediker uses that year to close the sharp Atlantic Golden Age; this book treats it as a useful boundary rather than the disappearance of piracy.

No single war on piracy. Wilson's central corrective is retained. Naval force mattered, but the decline emerged through local courts, merchant pressure, colonial government, pardons, rewards, loss of bases and selective patrols. Chet shows that Atlantic piracy and limits on state authority persisted beyond the famous decade. The manuscript therefore describes suppression of the Golden Age concentration, not final elimination of piracy.

Myth, print and material evidence

Johnson's *General History*. First published in 1724 under the name Captain Charles Johnson, it is the most influential early collection of pirate biographies. The author's identity remains unresolved. Daniel Defoe was once widely credited, including in Schonhorn's edition, but that attribution is not treated as settled. The source is used where independent evidence supports it or where the book is explicitly analysing legend.

Buried treasure. John Gardiner's statement documents Kidd entrusting goods for concealment on Gardiners Island. It does not require Kidd personally to have dug and buried a chest. General burial practice is unsupported. *Treasure Island* supplied the map and buried-hoard pattern that later culture projected backwards.

Walking the plank. Strong evidence for a standard Golden Age practice is absent. Marooning, throwing people overboard, beating, shooting, torture and abandonment are documented. The correction removes a theatrical ritual without softening the violence.

Pirate speech. Robert Newton's performance as Long John Silver in Disney's 1950 *Treasure Island* drew on his West Country accent and became the dominant screen pirate voice. The book treats this as a history of performance, not a claim that no historical pirate came from the West Country.

Archaeology. The *Whydah* wreck and the site identified as *Queen Anne's Revenge* provide material evidence for armament, cargo, tools and life aboard. Archaeology is selective: two famous wrecks cannot establish an average pirate vessel. The *Whydah* identification rests on artefacts and documentary fit; work on *Queen Anne's Revenge* is conducted by North Carolina's state archaeology programme.

Verification date. Bibliographic metadata, current institutional descriptions and the 2026 Jopling article were checked on 4 September 2026. The history itself concerns completed past events. The newest important research used is Jopling's article, published online on 27 February 2026.

Bibliography

Primary sources and contemporary printed evidence

British Parliament. *An Act for the More Effectual Suppression of Piracy*. 11 Will. III c. 7. Royal assent 11 April 1700; conventionally cited as the Piracy Act 1698.

Brooks, Graham, ed. *Trial of Captain Kidd*. Edinburgh and London: William Hodge & Company, 1930.

Johnson, Captain Charles. *A General History of the Pyrates*. 1724. Edited by Manuel Schonhorn. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972.

The London Gazette. Issue 5573, 14-17 September 1717. Royal proclamation dated 5 September 1717 concerning the surrender and pardon of pirates.

The Tryals of Captain John Rackam, and Other Pirates. Jamaica, 1721. Digital copy held by The National Archives, United Kingdom.

The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet, and Other Pirates. London, 1719. Digital copy held by the Library of Congress.

Modern works

Appleby, John C. *Women and English Piracy, 1540-1720: Partners and Victims of Crime*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013.

Bialuschewski, Arne. "Black People under the Black Flag: Piracy and the Slave Trade on the West Coast of Africa, 1718-1723." *Slavery & Abolition* 29, no. 4 (2008): 461-475.

Bialuschewski, Arne. "Pirates, Black Sailors and Seafaring Slaves in the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1716-1726." *Journal of Caribbean History* 45, no. 2 (2011): 143-158.

Chet, Guy. *The Ocean Is a Wilderness: Atlantic Piracy and the Limits of*

State Authority, 1688-1856. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.

Cordingly, David. *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Fox, E. T. "‘Piratical Schemes and Contracts’: Pirate Articles and Their Society, 1660-1730." PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2013.

Hanna, Mark G. *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

Jopling, Nathan T. "The Jamaica Discipline and the Epochal Nature of English Atlantic Privateering and Piracy, 1660-1726." *International Journal of Maritime History* 35, no. 2 (2023): 170-185.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/08438714231153693>.

Jopling, Nathan. "Off Grid: The Problem of Early-Eighteenth-Century Caribbean Sinew Populations." *International Review of Social History*, First View (2026): 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859026101242>.

Leeson, Peter T. *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Lincoln, Margarette. *British Pirates and Society, 1680-1730*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

Norton, Matthew. *The Punishment of Pirates: Interpretation and Institutional Order in the Early Modern British Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023.

Rediker, Marcus. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Rediker, Marcus. *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

Ritchie, Robert C. *Captain Kidd and the War Against the Pirates*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Wilson, David. *Suppressing Piracy in the Early Eighteenth Century: Pirates, Merchants and British Imperial Authority in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021.

Institutional resources

Library of Congress. Digital copy and catalogue record for *The Tryals of Major Stede Bonnet, and Other Pirates*. Checked 4 September 2026.

North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, Queen Anne's Revenge Project. Archaeological and historical research on the Beaufort Inlet wreck. Checked 4 September 2026.

Royal Museums Greenwich. "Death of Bartholomew Roberts" and reference material on the Golden Age of Piracy, pirate myths, flags, Blackbeard, Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Checked 4 September 2026.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Entry on Sir Henry Morgan, including appointment and knighthood chronology. Checked 4 September 2026.

The National Archives, United Kingdom. Digital record for *The Tryals of Captain John Rackam, and Other Pirates*. Checked 4 September 2026.

UK legislation and parliamentary records. Text and catalogue information for 11 Will. III c. 7. Checked 4 September 2026.

Whydah Pirate Museum and associated archaeological publications. Reference material on the wreck and recovered assemblage of *Whydah*. Checked 4 September 2026.