

Introduction

This paper argues that during the eighteenth-century ship captains and sailors performed valuable labor while in port, upending the notion that contracting days-in-port is a reliable proxy for productivity measures. While work focused on demonstrating long-run intensive growth has pointed to contracting days-in-port as a clear signal of productivity improvements, this work rests on modernist assumptions that understand management as a landed process and navigation as the primary function of captains and sailors.¹ This paper upends this notion by exploring the labor captains and sailors performed while in port to undermine the characterization of days-in-port as “wasted days.” Understanding these days as “working days” opens up a discussion of the circumstances in which maritime men’s management might be more productive than landed management of shipping businesses. This updated moniker allows a more accurate discussion of the necessary labor that mariners performed in port and reveals the contested vessel management that gave days-in-port different meanings for sailors and shipmasters than the landed merchants whose perspectives are solely reflected in the “wasted days” characterization. This paper will explain days-in-port as a measure, explore how the communication constraints and cultural organization of long-distance trade in the eighteenth century influenced decisions around days in port, and close with a discussion of how captains’ use of days in port influenced their career trajectories.

Days in Port

Merchants and shipmasters all agreed that minimizing days in port ensured the profitability of a voyage. Each day in the port increased the wage and provisioning bill, minimized the number of profitable voyages a vessel could take per year, and depreciated the vessel. Captains and merchants agreed about the need to load the vessel as quickly as possible and exerted their efforts to minimize days-in-port. The sailors did not always agree on the desirability of leaving port quickly because landed spaces provided safety from oceanic dangers and some increased freedom. But even if they were not eager to depart, as they rowed barrels between wharf and ship, heaved the barrels of molasses and hogsheads of tobacco below deck, and strained their eyes and hands repairing the sails, mariners knew that these days in port were not “wasted days.” They were backbreaking and onerous working days.

Despite stationary merchants and mobile captains’ agreement that they should minimize days in port, the letters and actions of ship-masters reveal that they had different understandings of the costs associated with minimizing days-in-port. On the whole, stationary merchants discussed days in port as a process of loading and unloading. Though merchants’ letters occasionally convey in passing the labor captains performed in port, their letters functioned primarily to testify to the writers’ own diligence and solicitude. As a result, they frame labor in port as primarily their concern and assured their epistolary contact that they would “do the most for your interest.”

¹ Douglass C. North, “Sources of Productivity Change in Ocean Shipping, 1600-1850,” *Journal of Political Economy* 76, no. 5 (September 1, 1968): 953–70; James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade, and the Economic Development of Colonial North America*, (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1972).

However, occasional references in stationary merchants' letters, captains' own letters, and the depositions captains made in before notaries public and court officials reveal captains' conflicting understanding of the labor they performed and the opportunity costs of minimizing days in port. Captains also traveled between plantations, shops, coffee rooms, taverns, local races, and print shops soliciting outbound cargo, selling goods from the vessel, and making mercantile connections. Because merchants undervalued the importance of the labor captains performed in port, stationary traders assessed the value of each additional day in port as lower than captains. Documents from captains show that they considered each additional day in port highly necessary for the profitability of the vessel and, thus, considered the value of each additional day to be higher than merchants. Modernist assumptions that reduce the labor in port to relatively straightforward loading and unloading have amplified merchants' understanding of the opportunity costs and minimized masters' understanding of the opportunity costs. Thus, to understand the viability of days-in-port as a productivity measure, we must explore the value of the labor captains performed in port.

Commercial Intelligence

One significant challenge when assessing the labor captains performed in port is the difficulty of valuing the information captains provided. In the eighteenth century, mercantile success required a mixture of on-the-ground responsiveness and access to market intelligence. The person who acted on behalf of a distant trader, be it a ship captain or stationary agent, provided the on-the-ground responsiveness. Conversations with ship captains and the letters and newspapers these captains transported provided the market intelligence. Between conversations, epistolary contacts, and newsprint all promising the "freshest advices" traders gleaned the information they required to do business.

Traders of all types from the wealthiest merchants to the peddlers hawking their wares on street corners required commercial intelligence, albeit of different types. The breed of stationary merchants who grew increasingly powerful, influential, and wealthy over the eighteenth century relied on commercial intelligence to eke out an advantage. As capital outlays grew and markets became increasingly integrated through licit and illicit trading activities over the eighteenth-century, stationary traders required detailed information to turn a profit.

The commercial intelligence stationary traders craved came in a few tantalizing flavors. Their letters, newspapers, and conversations (alluded to in written sources) reveal that they cared about five broad categories of information: (1) goods, (2) ships, (3) geo-politics, (4) debts, and, most abstractly, (5) reputational intelligence.

1. They wanted to know what types of goods customers desired, what these burgeoning consumer communities would pay to purchase them, and whether ships recently glutted a market or neglected it.²
2. They wanted to know about ships' movements, seeking reassurance that their vessels and the goods in them survived hazardous journeys. If they couldn't find that reassurance, they might act on the absence of knowledge or shreds of small evidence by seeking additional insurance and hoping the underwriters or brokers didn't share their suspicions.³

² Joseph and Joshua Grafton, "Price Current, Havana," December 25, 1781, Welcom Arnold Papers, Prices Current 1778-1789, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI.

³ Most colonial newspapers had sections reporting the entrances and clearances of vessels see William Cushman to Mr. Samuel Munckley & Co, May 3, 1760,

3. They wanted to hear whispers of war, news of troop movements, and rumors of naval movements that might threaten their trading vessels.
4. While traders operated on long-term credits as a norm, outstanding debts threatened merchants' ability to extend their operations. They sought news about a long-distance debtor's plans and ability to repay.
5. Traders linked the fifth piece of information they sought, reputational intelligence, with news about creditworthiness and the state of distant debts but reputational intelligence had a broader application. Reputational intelligence allowed traders to determine whether a distant man or woman might make an honest and worthy trading partner. While stationary merchants and agents developed a localized sense of reputational intelligence influenced by factors like local honor culture and social position, captains' broad view and more middling place in the social world gave them a different perspective.

In isolation, a report about any of these five pieces of commercial intelligence might not mean much but alongside a thousand other carefully collected details, a shrewd trader might extract the conclusion that could bolster his fortune or, at least, prevent his ruin. News that an army set off for a new port suggested that merchants could anticipate a surge in demand for supplies at that port.⁴ News that a new member of a commercial partnership had the backing of his wealthy West Indian planter family could assuage doubts about the partnership's viability.⁵

Captains operated at the center of this commercial web. They possessed a broad view of the Atlantic world, while the landed stationary merchants they encountered cultivated a deep view of local conditions. Stationary merchants valued this broad view and created and used social spaces around the Atlantic to glean access to commercial intelligence.

Space of Commerce

Captains' duties took them to varied spaces throughout Atlantic ports and these visits provided them with vital information. Their access to commercial intelligence made them, if not welcome guests, invaluable assets to landed elites who invited them into their homes.

John Stevens served as Charles Town, South Carolina's post master general in the late 1760s and early 1770s. His wife operated the local coffee room which Stevens described as "a kind of Lloyd Coffee House," referring to the famous London coffee house where merchants met to conduct business around Atlantic shipping. According to Stevens, the men who frequented the coffee house included all the principal people of the town and the men like captains passing through on their journeys around the Atlantic.⁶ He boasted that "since I have been appointed post Mr. [postmaster] I have all the Early News of the place & am the person Apply'd to on all occasions."⁷ This information he boasted of came not only from the letters that passed through his possession but also from the conversations he had with the captains who delivered them to his office. John Stevens played generous host to various ship captains who passed through port, drinking with them in his home and toasting foreign merchant acquaintances, "with all the

⁴ John Reynell to Nathaniel Cooper, March 20, 1740/1, Vol. 4, Coates and Reynell Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; Samuel Leacock to Mr. Thomas Clifford, May 10, 1760, Clifford Family Papers Letterbooks, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵ Capt. John Harper to Mr. Thomas Clifford, March 23, 1758, Clifford Family Papers Letterbooks, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

⁶ John Stevens to John Stevens Jr., April 29, 1769, John Stevens Letterbooks, Volume 1, Stevens-Cogdell-Sanders-Venning collection, 1734-1982, Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA.

⁷ Ibid.

warmth that could flow from Sincerity & Friendship."⁸ Like other stationary traders hungry for intelligence from abroad, Stevens saw the value of hosting captains in his home.

Elites in ports around the Atlantic overlooked captain's maritime saltiness and welcomed them at table in their homes to gain the "freshest advices." Phillip Vickers Fithian, tutor to the Carters, a Virginia planter family, noted that when Capt. Dobby visited the conversation quickly turned "promiscuous." But Dobby's status as a "Man of much spirit and Humour" did not prevent the Carters from inviting him to dine or Fithian from calling him, an "agreeable, sensible, polite Gentlemen."⁹ The social world that might have been closed to men of similar social rank opened to captains because they possessed commercial intelligence. Captains used these opportunities to solidify their own reputations, sell cargo, and recommend their employers.¹⁰ The vast networks captains formed from their in-person solicitude served them well over the course of their careers.

Captain Careers

As the previous discussion illustrates, the culture of commerce and very real constraints of eighteenth-century communication provided captains with conflicting incentives related to days-in-port. The evidence from a dataset I constructed of 7,270 voyages to the Chesapeake shows how the decisions captains made about days in port changed over the course of their careers.

Across all captains trading to Virginia, captains who made more voyages also had on average lower port times than captains who made fewer voyages.¹¹ This finding indicates that there was a weed-out effect in place. Shipowners did not rehire captains who took longer to load their vessels on their first few voyages. A captain's first voyage provided an opportunity for his employers to test his ability to navigate the Atlantic journey, unload his vessel, obtain a cargo, and return. They needed him to make the most of his vessel's capacity and his time in port. Shipowners assessed a captain's performance upon his arrival home and only rehired captains who made good use of their time. Over a thousand captains made only one voyage to the Chesapeake during their careers.¹² These men lingered in port struggling to load their vessels. But for the thousands of captains who made multiple voyages, their days in port measure was consistently lower than captains who made fewer voyages to Virginia.

Though captains who made a higher total number of voyages had lower port times overall than captains who made fewer voyages, captains generally spent more days in port with each additional voyage they made. This finding supports the conclusion that captains took on additional trading functions with each successive voyage, lengthening their days in port in the Chesapeake and undercutting characterizations of the trade as increasingly depersonalized. On a

⁸ John Stevens to William Savage, December 18, 1769, John Stevens Letterbooks, Volume 1, Stevens-Cogdell-Sanders-Venning collection, 1734-1982, Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA.

⁹ "June 21," "June 22," and "July 30," Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1957), 122-23 & 150.

¹⁰ Richard Hutchinson to Mr. Thomas Clifford, November 23, 1759, Clifford Family Papers Letterbooks, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; John Custis to Mr. Cary, 1735, *The Letterbook of John Custis IV of Williamsburg, 1717-1742*, ed. Josephine Little Zuppan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 147; William Fitzhugh to Thomas Storke, August 11, 1690, *William Fitzhugh and His Chesapeake World, 1676-1701*, 265.

¹¹ See Total Voyages per Captain parameter in Appendix 4.1, Table 4.1. It is negative and statistically significant at the 95 percent level.

¹² This number must be treated with caution because the Virginia shipping returns are missing quarters or years at some points.

captain's first voyage, owners commonly solicited a full cargo from their contacts or employed a local agent to locate cargo for the captain's vessel. While merchants and agents still required captains' diligent efforts, captains had less control over their loading and, thus, efficiency measures when owners involved a third party. Captains who made repeated voyages had already cultivated local contacts. Owners and merchants often entrusted these experienced captains with selling goods and soliciting cargo themselves. With each successive voyage, captains renewed their commercial contacts and assessed the continued creditworthiness of borrowers in colonial ports. Performing the functions that proliferated on captains' repeat voyages required time which accounts for the increasing port times with each additional voyage.

Table 4.1: Days in Port

Variable	Days in Port ³			Days in Port with Region Specific Captain Variables ⁴		
	Estimate		SE	Estimate		SE
Vessel Utilization	2.93	***	(.53)	2.74	***	(.52)
Total Voyages per Captain	-0.15	**	(.07)			
Voyage Number (Captain's Experience at time of record)	0.41	***	(.11)			
<i><u>Voyage Number (Captain Experience) By Region</u></i>						
London				0.93	***	(.33)
Outports				0.19		(.28)
Scotland				-0.76	***	(.29)
Atlantic Islands				0.99	***	(.35)
West Indies				0.49	***	(.18)
New England				1.41	***	(.50)
<i><u>Total Voyages per Captain By Region</u></i>						
London				-0.08		(.22)
Outports				0.14		(.19)
Scotland				0.37	*	(.20)
Atlantic Islands				-0.59	***	(.22)
West Indies				-0.33	***	(.11)
New England				-0.72	**	(.30)

Notes:

1) These regressions include year fixed effects to control for high and low supply based on each year's harvest and region fixed effects as a proxy measure for differences between regional business models.

2) *, **, *** denote 90%, 95%, and 99% statistical significance respectively. SE = Standard Error.

3) N = 7,270 R² = .3887

4) N = 7,270 R² = .3915

Conclusion

While the logic of days in port as a productivity measure suggests that more experienced and skilled captains should have spent fewer days in port with each successive voyage, the statistical evidence demonstrates that the opposite occurred. As captains gained experience and autonomy over their vessels, they spent more time in port with each successive voyage. They did so to load their vessels more fully, communicate valuable information to stationary merchants, and deepen their social and commercial contacts. As captains gained experience, they gained autonomy over their vessels and spent additional days in port performing the valuable tangible labor of unloading, selling, and loading and the intangible labor of informing and networking. As

long as owners left some vessel management to captains, days-in-port measures are insufficient to assess productivity improvements in maritime shipping.