How They Lived

Piracy's Golden Age

There have been pirates as long as ships have carried cargoes worth stealing. Between about 1660 and 1725, the crime became a major problem for merchants in the colonial trade.

A pirate is a seafaring armed robber and usually a murderer, at least as an accomplice. Pirates were rapists infrequently only because they preyed on merchant ships—where the goods were—and a woman was rare aboard such vessels.

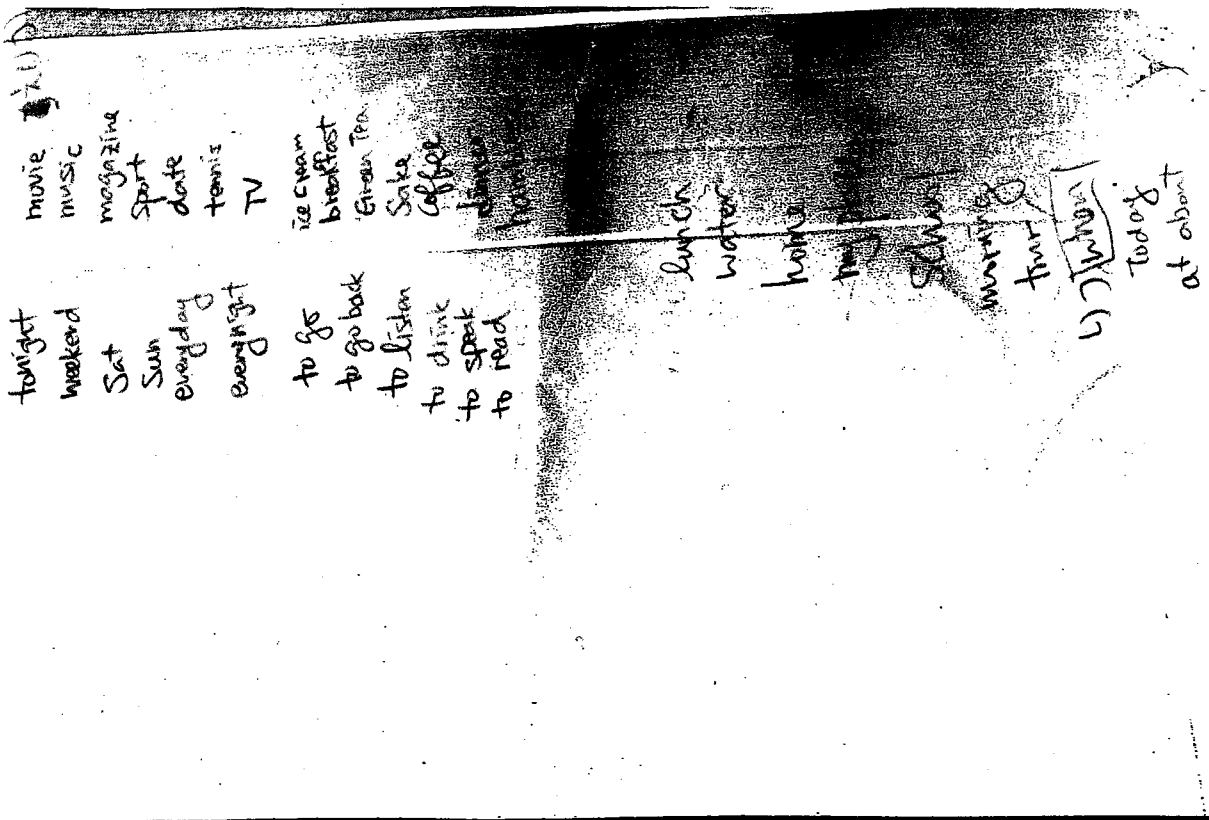
From the Collections of the Library of Congress

Pirates in American waters were called "buccaneers" because the first of them were riffraff from Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) who lived by hunting before they turned to the sea, cooking their meat by slow-smoking it (*boucaner* in French). The commercial wars of the era contributed to the growth of the profession when, to save money in their naval budgets, France, Holland, Spain, and England commissioned privateers, well-armed privately owned ships, to seize (at a percentage of the take) the ships of the countries they were fighting. Privateering could be lucrative. In 1668, Henry Morgan took a break from seizing Spanish ships, captured Portobelo in Panama, and collected a ransom of 250,000 pesos from Spain.

When peace treaties were signed, some privateers found it difficult to give up the business. They continued to raid ports and steal from ships at sea without regard to the flag their victims were flying. In 1701, Captain William Kidd, a New Yorker, was hanged by the British. Just a few years earlier, they had issued him the privateer's Letters of Marque and Reprisal.

Who were the buccaneers? In the early 1720s, 98 percent of those who were captured had started life as "honest seamen," mostly on the merchant ships upon which they came to prey. A large number said that liquor led them to opt for their life of crime. Indeed, according to the records, life on a pirate vessel can seem to have been one long drunken revel so that, on a given day, a large proportion of the crew was incapacitated.

There were other reasons young men (almost all pirates were in their 20s or younger) became pirates. The honest seaman's life was dull, brutalized, poorly paid, laborious, and likely to terminate in an early death. Piracy was exciting, eternally an attraction to young men vexed by frantic hormones. Pirates might risk their lives during their robberies, and the gallows was their fate if they were caught. But each job filled their purses, and, whether or not they were drunk nonstop between hits, they did not work very much. A merchant sloop (a small vessel with one mast) of 100 tons was sailed by a crew of about a dozen; the same vessel under the black flag of piracy had 80 men aboard to handle the same tasks. Even then, with so little to do, pirates who captured slaves put them to work while they looked for buyers. Captain Kidd spoke of stealing 12 slaves whom his crew "intended to make good use of to do the drudgery of [their] ship."



Pirate crews were so large because their numbers were one key to their success. They were robbers. They did not want to destroy the ships they attacked with their cannon (which they carried for defense). They wanted to board their victims' vessel with the loot undamaged and take what was worth taking. The captain of a merchant ship with 12 seamen who were not fighting men was a fool to resist when faced with 80 vicious pirates armed with cutlasses, knives, and pistols. Few did. Merchant captains knew that those who gave up without a fight were usually spared the hideous cruelties of which the pirates were capable. The principle was the same as the advice given today to the unlucky soul confronted on a dark street by a thug with a knife: Give him the wallet.

Another key to success in piracy was speed. Pirates needed to catch target vessels in order to exhibit the size of the force they had aboard. So while a few famous pirates like Bartholomew "Black Bart" Roberts and Edward "Blackbeard" Teach had large 40-gun ships, most pirates sailed sloops, large enough to accommodate a hundred drunken cutthroats but fast.

Of course, treasure, such as "pieces of eight" (Spanish currency), was the most desirable booty. Slaves were probably the second favorite; they could be readily sold. When pirates tortured captives who had given up without resisting, it was usually to learn where any money aboard was hidden. Mostly, however, pirates took the food and drink they wanted for their own use and whatever cargo was aboard, even hogsheads of tobacco. Selling the contraband could be a problem. Unlike licensed privateers, pirates could not sail into a port and advertise for buyers. There were a few wide-open pirate towns in the Bahamas and Belize, and in Port Royal in Jamaica, where the governor liked having armed pirate ships in the harbor to discourage Spanish attack. Blackbeard was looking for a site for a new development on Ocracoke Inlet in North Carolina when he was trapped and killed in 1718. But none of the sanctuaries lasted very long. The wildest of them, Port Royal, was destroyed by an earthquake in 1692, to the satisfaction of moralists.

Curiously, pirate vessels were more democratic than New England town meetings. Where to hunt prey, from Newfoundland to the West Indies, was determined by majority vote, as was the decision whether or not to attack a vessel the pirates spotted. The captain (who was elected and could be voted out) claimed a far smaller proportion of booty than the masters of merchant vessels or whalers received, and his allowance of food and drink was equal to that of other crewmen. Only when "fighting, chasing, or being chased" did he have the absolute authority of the commander of a naval vessel.

Pirates in American waters were of a dozen nationalities, although, during the "golden age," most were British or colonials, including blacks. In his last stand, Blackbeard was backed by 13 whites and 6 blacks. In 1722, Black Bart's force of 268 men was captured; 77 of them were African Americans. Observing that the pirate community was entirely male, a few historians have claimed that it was a gay society, but the evidence indicates homosexuality was uncommon among pirates.

The golden age of buccaneering came abruptly to an end during the Long Peace, when the colonial powers could direct their warships against the pirates. In 1720, between 1,500 and 2,000 pirates in about 25 vessels worked the Caribbean and the North American coast. By 1723, their numbers were down to 1,000; by 1726, to 200. There were 50 attacks on merchant vessels in American waters in 1718 but just 6 in 1726. Relentless pursuit of pirates, followed inevitably by hanging, ended the threat. Moreover, men were lured out of the profession by announcements of pardons. Many pirates had, they claimed, been forced into the life when, as "honest seamen," they were captured. The large number of pirates who applied for pardons implies they were telling the truth.