

Captain John Perkins

HAMILTON, Douglas <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1754-2386>>

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Citation:

HAMILTON, Douglas (2019). Captain John Perkins. Trafalgar Chronicle. [Article]

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Captain John Perkins (c. 1750-1812)

Douglas Hamilton, Sheffield Hallam University

When Horatio Nelson disembarked *Lowestoffe* (28) in Jamaica in July 1777, he found himself at the heart of a multinational, multi-ethnic maritime world comprising people of African and European origin, free and enslaved, desperately poor and fabulously wealthy. In all, Nelson spent a little over three years in Jamaica, returning to the Caribbean to serve on the Leeward Islands station in 1784.¹ In Jamaica, it is highly likely that he encountered another would-be naval captain, John Perkins.² Like Nelson, John Perkins was young and ambitious and renowned as a skilled sailor. Perkins also received praise in the British press for his exploits in defeating the French. Yet Perkins' background was very different and his rise to the officer class was even more remarkable.

John Perkins was born in Clarendon parish, Jamaica around 1750, probably to an enslaved woman. Over the next half century or so, he rose to become a captain in the navy. In itself, that is remarkable enough. Thousands of black people served in the Royal Navy, both afloat and ashore, but none bar Perkins reached officer rank, which raises the question why that ought to be the case.³ If the navy was happy to employ skilled black people, why was only one of them promoted?

By the early nineteenth century, the then Captain Perkins was a visitor at the Jamaican governor's home for both business and pleasure.⁴ He also came to own property and slaves in the island. In these senses, he appears as a member of Jamaica's naval elite: his official and social status was confirmed by his rank. Yet he remained acutely of his place as a black man in a white elite and aware of the attitudes of many of that elite towards black people, free and enslaved.

¹ Roger Knight, *The pursuit of Victory: the life and achievement of Horatio Nelson* (London: Penguin-Allen Lane, 2005), pp 46-60.

² A fuller account of Perkins' life, and its significance can be found in Douglas Hamilton, 'A most active, enterprising officer': Captain John Perkins, the Royal Navy and the boundaries of slavery and liberty in the Caribbean', *Slavery and Abolition*, 39:1 (2018), pp 80-100.

³ Charles S. Foy, 'The Royal Navy's employment of black mariners and maritime workers, 1754-1783', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 28: 1 (2016), pp 23, 33.

⁴ Lady Nugent, wife of Lieutenant-Governor Nugent, recorded a number of these visits: Frank Cundall (ed.), *Lady Nugent's Journal: Jamaica one hundred and thirty-eight years ago* (London: West India Committee for the Institute of Jamaica, 1939), pp 72, 223, 250.

Little is known of his very early childhood (though it might be imagined from the detailed literature on Jamaican plantation life) until he arrived in Kingston as a carpenter's servant, a position that implies he was still enslaved.⁵ His owner, William Young, took him into naval service, joining *Grenado*, a bomb vessel, on 22 June 1759. The practice of taking black boys aboard was far from unique: Perkins served alongside another, John Middleton. When Young moved to *Boreas* (28) on 7 March 1760, there were as many as seven others. The muster book records five other servants who were joined by two captain's servants in June. Perkins spent more than two years on *Boreas* (not to be confused with Nelson's ship in the 1780s) and saw action at two particularly important battles: the capture of Martinique and the siege and capture of Havana, both in 1762.⁶

It is likely that Perkins left Young's service after the end of the Seven Years War and began to pursue a maritime rather than a carpenter's career. His experiences afloat had inspired him to become a ship's pilot, guiding shipping through the dangerous waters on the approach to Kingston harbour. He developed a growing reputation as a civilian pilot and in 1771 he re-entered naval service aboard *Achilles* (60), Captain Richard Collins. His service was short-lived: he was 'rendered incapable of [serving] as Pilot in any of His [Majesty's] Ships' in December 1771 having run *Achilles* ashore coming into Port Royal.⁷ He returned to civilian service after his court martial but, despite his youthful mistake, found himself again in naval service in late 1775. He appears in the muster book as a pilot on *Antelope* (50), Admiral Gayton's flagship on the Jamaica station.

Beyond his periodic appearances in the naval records throughout the 1770s, relatively little is known of Perkins' peacetime life. Nonetheless, the navy's continued interest in him speaks to its awareness of his skills as a sailor, which were also apparent to others. In 1778, just as France entered the American War of Independence, he secured his first civilian

⁵ Among a very extensive literature see, B. W. Higman, *Plantation Jamaica 1750-1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2005); Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Richard S. Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labour in Jamaica and Virginia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁶ The National Archives, Kew (TNA), ADM 36/5690 Muster Book, *Grenado* Bomb; ADM 36/5045 Muster Book, *Boreas*; ADM 33/606 Pay Book, *Boreas* 1759-1762.

⁷ David Syrett, *The Rodney Papers: Selections from the Correspondence of Admiral Lord Rodney, Vol. 2, 1763-1780*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp 71, 75, 86-7, 90

command, *Punch*, a private schooner. Although he was a civilian, he provided the navy with news of French shipping off St Domingue, a colony which came to be central to his future career. It was also around this time that Nelson began his rapid ascent under Sir Hyde Parker, commanding on the Jamaica station, who was also an admirer of Perkins. Perkins' focus was on Hispaniola to the east of Jamaica, while Nelson was sent primarily west and south towards the Bay of Honduras and the Moskito shore.⁸ There is no firm evidence of the two men meeting, but it is likely that their paths crossed in the polygot chaos of Port Royal in the late 1770s, when both had growing reputations and a common patron. By 1781, Perkins had harried French shipping to such an extent that he was sought out by Admiral Parker and appointed to command *Endeavour* (8).

He remained in naval service until the end of the American War. After it, he was placed on half pay and returned to private shipping. The sight of black-captained and crewed merchant vessels was common throughout the eighteenth-century Caribbean, and played important roles in inter-island trade, sometimes as far as Bermuda or the southern states of the new United States.⁹ He also, contrary to some accounts of his life, visited Britain twice in the middle 1780s. They were not happy experiences. Throughout his life, Perkins was afflicted by asthma and had several periods of absence from active service. He found the British weather worsened his condition and there is no evidence of his having otherwise enjoyed his British sojourns in 1784 and again in 1786: 'I felt the cold to such affect [sic]', he wrote, 'that I was obliged to quit England in the month of October, and beleve [sic] it would have been the death of me had I not left.'¹⁰ The fact that he reported it in his own hand, albeit later in 1803, reminds us that Perkins was not, as some have suggested, illiterate.

In May 1791, the Haitian Revolution (also known as the St Domingue slave revolt) erupted in the French colony of St Domingue. It was one of the defining events in the making of the modern Atlantic world and it dominated Perkins' life and reputation.¹¹ During the 1770s and

⁸ Knight, *Pursuit of Victory*, pp 48-51.

⁹ For the role of free black and enslaved mariners in vessels of this type see Michael J. Jarvis, 'Maritime masters and seafaring slaves in Bermuda, 1680-1783', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59: 3 (2002), pp 585-622.

¹⁰ National Maritime Museum, MRK 102/5/13 Markham papers, Perkins to Markham, 8 May 1803.

¹¹ Among the huge literature see especially Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the new world: the story of the Haitian revolution* (2005); Julia Gaffield, 'Haiti and Jamaica in the remaking of

80s, Perkins had sailed the waters around Hispaniola and knew the harbours and inlets of St Domingue as well as any British sailor. Soon after the revolution broke out, however, Perkins found himself ashore. As a naval officer on half-pay, it is far from clear on whose authority he was there but the French were in no doubt what he had been doing. He was arrested and charged with supplying guns to the insurgents. Two naval vessels, *Diana* (32) and *Ferret* (14), were despatched to free him. In February 1792, with Perkins facing imminent execution, Captain Nowell commanding *Ferret* demanded his release, warning the French of 'a destruction you are little aware of'.¹² Given that Britain and France were not yet at war, this bellicose display of British force, which ensured that Perkins escaped the noose, suggests that he was there with the knowledge of the Royal Navy and that the accusations of gun-running and espionage may well have been true. The British, after all, had a Janus-faced approach to the Haitian Revolution: officially they were appalled, but neither did they see any harm in undermining France's richest colony and in pursuing ties with the revolutionaries. Regardless of the outcome, Britain wanted to back the winner and ensured it gathered intelligence and support from both sides.¹³

An international incident averted, Perkins returned to Jamaica aboard *Diana*. With another French war imminent, Perkins was given the command of a newly captured schooner – *Spitfire* (4) – by Commodore Ford. He was specifically tasked with monitoring French shipping off Cap François and Port-au-Prince. With the coming of war in May 1793, his role extended to attacking, rather than just monitoring, French ships, and his exploits quickly attracted press attention in Britain. Significantly none of the coverage at this stage identified him as Jamaican; readers were left to assume he was a brave white British naval officer.

In 1794, by now in command of the French prize *Marie Antoinette* (10), he was with Ford's squadron that took Port-au-Prince. Again, Haiti loomed large, as it did after his promotion to *Drake* (14) in 1797 in which he served until it was taken out of commission in March 1799. One of its roles was to support the British invasion of Haiti and then, after May 1798, to assist with its evacuation.

the early nineteenth-century Atlantic world', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 69: 3 (2012), pp 583-614.

¹² Hamilton, 'A most active, enterprising officer', pp 180-81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

Although his skills and experience, particularly in relation to Haiti, were greatly valued by a succession of commanders on station, Perkins' formal promotion remained slow. Having been first designated lieutenant by Admiral Rodney in Jamaica in 1782, he was not confirmed at that rank until the start of the French Revolutionary War. He had command of a number of small vessels but further promotions eluded him until September 1800, when he was made post-captain and appointed to *Arab* (28). He spent much of the next six months patrolling the Leeward Islands and took part in two notable actions.

In March 1801, in the wake of the Russian, Danish and Swedish alliance of armed neutrality, the navy received orders to detain all Russian and Scandinavian shipping. Within days, Perkins, along with *Experiment*, tried to intercept the Danish brig *Lougen*. *Lougen* made for harbour in Danish St Thomas. It managed to inflict damage on the *Arab* and made it safely into port under the protection of the battery at Charlotte Amalie. As with his previous setbacks, this reverse inflicted no lasting damage on Perkins' reputation, which was bolstered further by his actions in the capture of St Eustatius and Saba in April 1801. They were reported in the British press, again without reference to his race. He was rewarded with the command of *Tartar* (32) in 1802.

Tartar was the largest vessel Perkins commanded, and in it he achieved his greatest influence. With the resumption of hostilities with France, Perkins cruised off Hispaniola and took part in the blockade of St Domingue. The blockade had a two-fold function: to ensure that French supplies and trade were interrupted by keeping reinforcements *out*; and to keep the revolution and the revolutionaries *in*, and safely away from Jamaica, little more than 100 miles to the west. In preventing reinforcements reaching French troops and in blocking their means of escape, General Rochambeau found himself hemmed in at Cap François, where he capitulated at the end of November 1803.

The declaration of Haitian independence in January 1804 prompted Britain to send an envoy from Jamaica to secure favourable trade terms. The envoy, Edward Corbett, sailed from Port-au-Prince with Perkins in *Tartar*. It was surely not coincidental that the British sent their only officer of colour on the mission to the first independent black republic in the Americas. As well as Corbett, Perkins carried guns. The weapons had been seized by the navy at the French capitulation and were now being sold back to Haiti. Corbett was outraged. What he did not realise when he complained after the second voyage was that

5000 had been transported on the first mission a matter of weeks earlier. Perkins had form, of course. He was certainly known to the Haitian leaders and was acquainted with several of them. But he also acted with the sanction of Admiral John Duckworth, commanding at Jamaica, even if the governor seemed in the dark. The navy, it seems, pursued its own strategy towards Haiti.¹⁴

Perkins' presence in Haiti also made him one of the first witnesses to the brutally violent aftermath of independence. In reporting the attacks of white colonists, however, Perkins was careful to emphasize that the killings were committed by a handful of individuals. He presented them as sporadic atrocities rather than as systematic, racialised violence.

In doing so, he addressed the paradox at the heart of his career. He was a black man and former slave who made a career in the navy whose principal role in the region was the defence of British slave colonies. He experienced discrimination and prejudice – sometimes from other officers – yet he also became a slave owner.¹⁵ He overturned a host of conventions by ordering the punishment of white sailors. This was perfectly in line with naval regulations, but utterly transgressive in Jamaican society.

Perkins' career was extraordinary. Yet the fact that he was unique among the thousands of black mariners suggests that his exceptionalism proves a more general rule: that black people (neither free or enslaved) were not expected or encouraged to reach that exalted rank in the eighteenth-century navy.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp 190-92.

¹⁵ TNA, PROB 11/1617/236 (291v-292v) Will of John Perkins.