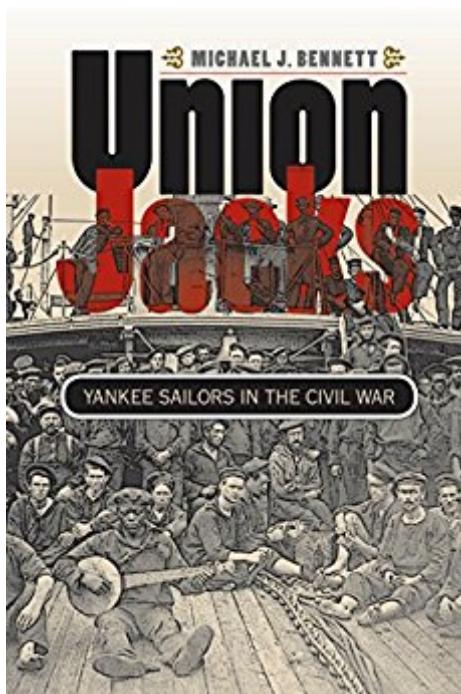


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# Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors In The Civil War (Civil War America)



## **Synopsis**

Historians have given a great deal of attention to the lives and experiences of Civil War soldiers, but surprisingly little is known about navy sailors who participated in the conflict. Michael J. Bennett remedies the longstanding neglect of Civil War seamen in this comprehensive assessment of the experience of common Union sailors from 1861 to 1865. To resurrect the voices of the "Union Jacks," Bennett combed sailors' diaries, letters, and journals. He finds that the sailors differed from their counterparts in the army in many ways. They tended to be a rougher bunch of men than the regular soldiers, drinking and fighting excessively. Those who were not foreign-born, escaped slaves, or unemployed at the time they enlisted often hailed from the urban working class rather than from rural farms and towns. In addition, most sailors enlisted for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. Bennett's examination provides a look into the everyday lives of sailors and illuminates where they came from, why they enlisted, and how their origins shaped their service. By showing how these Union sailors lived and fought on the sea, Bennett brings an important new perspective to our understanding of the Civil War.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Union Jacks is an excellent read on a fairly obscure area of history; enlisted men in the U. S. Navy during the Civil War. It is valuable as a look at the men in the Navy in the years prior to the modernization of the navy in the 1880s and 1890s. As such it sets the stage for that next phase of the life of the Navy.

the book was very interesting as there is not a lot on the sailors during the civil war..My grandfather was on 3 different ships and I got to see what he went through. Very interesting reading.

### Satisfactory

I was excited to come across this book, as the topic is not a common one, and the author certainly did his research. Unfortunately, the prose style reads more like a ph.D. dissertation destined for a university library back shelf than a book available to the general public. I was also disappointed with his approach to some topics. For example, he notes early on that the Union Navy was about five percent 'free blacks' before the war started yet, while he spends a full chapter on the experience of the large number of African Americans who joined after escaping from slavery ('contrabands'), he says virtually nothing about the experience of the 'free blacks', either before or after the contrabands started appearing. Further, while he spends chapters on the reputed vices and bad behavior of these 'Jacks', he says virtually nothing about their performance in actual battle which, according to many more conventional accounts, was quite admirable. All in all, while I learned quite a bit, the book was more disappointing than not.

This book is chock full of information. Unfortunately, the author's 21st century attitudes prevail over the information. He persisted in interpreting attitudes and behaviors in a modern context which created a negative impact on the reader.

This work is based substantially on Bennett's reading of 169 private collections of papers of the families of Civil War Union sailors, including many letters, diaries and similar information. Bennett had a research grant that enabled him to take an entire year to travel around to various historical libraries where these family collections are held. During his project, he even identified some primary such sources not recognized, or not widely recognized, before. No work based upon such hard effort and dedicated scholarship, and so well connected to primary sources, should be taken lightly. Nevertheless, I think that in many key respects, and with depressing frequency, Bennett draws

excessively far-reaching conclusions from what must be admitted to be a very restricted set of information. Bennett repeatedly yields to the impulse to tell a story more powerful and universal than credible in light of its limited evidentiary bases. Quite sweeping conclusions are frequently supported by references to one or two letters or diary entries. You would think that two or three letters by Union sailors would support the conclusion that some sailors did or thought something, that sometimes something happened, or at most that this or that way of thinking or acting seems to have been widely prevalent. But instead, not always but much more often, you encounter Bennett's bald claim that this and only this was the way things were. It only increases one's frustration that Bennett seldom quotes the letters and diary entries that he cites. This, in combination with the extensiveness of his conclusions, gives rise to a certain doubt as to whether the primary sources really tell the convincing story that he claims they do. These doubts are vastly increased by the circumstance that when you check some the sources that Bennett points to in support of some of his claims, they sometimes do not seem to offer any support at all, or even to address a related subject. You must take my word that the entire work is rife with this. To substantiate my claim, I only have space to consider a small part of Chapter 1. On page 13 Bennett says "Although some men joined the navy for many of the reasons that prompted others to become soldiers, most did not enlist out of patriotism, political bias, ambition, or love of adventure." The evidence for this claim is two unquoted letters, presumably written by sailors, and two secondary sources. Since recruiters did not collect data on why individual sailors enlisted, and since "patriotism, political bias, ambition, or love of adventure" covers a vast terrain of possible motivation, you have to wonder how two letters can possibly support Bennett's excluding that terrain from the possible motivation of most sailors.

Turning to the two secondary sources cited by Bennett, one is Reid Mitchell's *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*, pages 14-16. These pages are available on [books.google.com](http://books.google.com), and they do not address, at all, the possible motivations of Union sailors. What they do say is that many Union soldiers felt that the South needed to be taught a lesson, something that was often seen as analogous to the disciplining of children. What support this gives to Bennett's claim that Union sailors didn't care about patriotism, politics, ambition or adventure, I do not understand. The other secondary source is Mitchell's *Civil War Soldiers* which, I regret, is not in my possession and is not able to be accessed on the internet. In the next sentence, Bennett says, "They did not view the war as a chance to preserve or extend their ideological or religious beliefs." The supporting reference is pages 5-13 of James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. These pages are available on [books.google.com](http://books.google.com), and they contain nothing about Union sailors. They mostly have to do with why Union and Confederate soldiers faced combat as well as

they did. They seem to say nothing to exclude ideological or religious beliefs from any soldier's motivations. Indeed if Union sailors shared at all the belief that Mitchell ascribes to most Union enlistees, that the South needed to be taught a lesson, this would seem to reflect both ideological and religious sentiments. In the next sentence, "Men did not ship to free the slaves or to prove their courage." The supporting reference is to pages 20-21 of Gerald Lindeman's *Embattled Courage: the Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*. These pages are also available on books.google.com, and they contain nothing about sailors, nothing about slavery, and nothing about why anyone enlisted. The subject of Lindeman's book is soldiers, not sailors. Bennett says in the next sentence, "In fact, given the limited space Yankee seamen devoted to such subjects in their letters and diaries, they evidently expressed little interest in ideology, patriotism or duty." Read closely, this claim is tautologous, since if seamen wrote little about these subjects, certainly they expressed little interest in them. I am not sure, however, that Bennett is entitled to the conclusion that most people will draw upon reading this, that Union sailors cared little about ideology, patriotism or duty. Those encompass a range of values very often supposed to motivate going off to war, and it would seem quite odd if nothing within that range touched strongly upon the motivation of most sailors, particularly given everything we know about Northern popular consciousness during the Civil War. I doubt these are subjects upon which most sailors or soldiers would discourse at length in diaries and letters home, even if they were an important basis for their decision to serve. If Bennett wanted to draw this conclusion, he should have drawn it more carefully and with greater exposition of evidence. Strangely, to the sentence just quoted, Bennett adds a footnote referencing the Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1866, page 34. You can find this on books.google.com. It concerns postwar naval personnel policy with regard to seamen, but seems to fail in any possible support for the sentence to which it is attached. If anyone will suggest how it would plausibly support Bennett's explicit claim, I will be very surprised. The final sentence in Bennet's paragraph is, "After examining the motives compelling men to enlist in the Civil War, one can conclude that Union Jacks seemed every bit 'the dissenters from the American mood.'" After how examining the motives compelling men to enlist? Nothing going before has constituted such an examination. In subsequent paragraphs, Bennett quotes some letters that reveal what some sailors thought about their service, but none of it reads very plausibly as a full account of enlistment motivation, or even sometimes as a partial account. One sailor wrote to his mother that she need not worry that he was going into danger, and another wrote similarly to his sister. From this Bennett concludes, some sailors enlisted out of belief that naval service was relatively safe. Even if that is true, it does not rule out the patriotic and ideological motivations that Bennett wants to rule out. What, moreover, does Bennett

think that a young man would say, in a letter to his mother or his sister, about the degree of danger that he is facing? Does Bennett really suppose that either of these young men thought he was safe from the risks of combat? I could go on and on, but this is already a long review. You must either read the book yourself and consider critically how well it justifies its conclusions, or take my word that the rest proceeds in much the same manner as that just shown. Before closing, I must observe that Bennett's treatment of the reception given by Union Caucasian sailors to escaped slave enlistees, which became quite numerous after mid-1863, is deficient far beyond its willingness to draw strong conclusions based upon scanty evidence. Bennett treats this reaction as primarily a racist one, yet as remarked upon by another reviewer, his account ignores the presence in naval service, already in 1861, of numerous free Negroes. If enlisting escaped slaves gave rise to so much discontent and dissension as Bennett claims in Chapter 7, and if as he claims, this was mostly engendered by racism, why wasn't there corresponding, earlier disention vis-a-vis free Negro sailors? Bennett also fails to explain how, if the dissent was really as great as he seems to claim, the navy continued to function after mid-1863 just as well as it did before. I do not dispute Bennett's claim that escaped slave enlistees were met by a very racist reception, but I doubt that it was quite as universally severe, and as corrosive to naval discipline, as Bennett depicts it. [Technical point: Negro sailors being forced to stand punishment on top of the capstain or the pilot house, as described in Bennett's sources, cannot have been doing so, as assumed by Bennett on page 176, at the mere instigation of other sailors. Regardless of how some sailors might have interpreted them, such public punishments could only have been administered by ship's officers. These cases therefore do not confirm Bennett's assertion that Caucasian sailors arbitrarily meted out harsh punishments to Negro sailors.] Lastly, Bennett should have stayed away from the overwrought social criticism implicit in such unverifiable claims as that Caucasian sailors were sensitive to the enlistment of escaped slaves because of the resemblance of their own condition to that of slaves; or that minstrel shows arose as expressions of working-class fear of dependence upon the performance of wage labor, or that they expressed Caucasian sailor's fear of Negro ones. In this and many other ways, the book, in spite of the very thorough research that it embodies, is severely marred by over-reachingness and doubtful use of sources. Indeed I think that Bennett has performed a kind of scholarly disservice, by requiring that someone else go back over the same sources and see what they really do permit us to conclude about the sailors of the Union Navy.

After reading on the civil war for 40 years or more, one complaint I've had is that no one writes of the Union navy beyond the officers from admirals downward. Since I served in the U.S. Navy from

1961-1967, it isn't strange that I would hold some interest in these earlier shipmates. So I eagerly awaited the University of North Carolina to issue this book. I purchased a copy and was not disappointed. I feel the book to be well worthwhile if one is interested in the union jack or blue jackets of that era. Some reviewers may have found the book not quite to their liking, but my humble opinion is that with the paucity of books available on this subject, one should be thankful for almost anything that is written on the area. One of the more interesting items in this book are the pictures and illustrations. What did these men really look like? The appearance of their hats and uniforms? Here and there, some photographic books do give a clue. But I've encountered few that had as their entire subject the blue jacket of that day. It would seem from the pictures, that one need was to have had at least one banjo on board the ship. And curiously the numbers of navy men barefoot on board. And it was also of interest the number of African American sailors serving on board many of these ships. The Navy welcomed their service at least a year before the Union army, and by war's end upwards of 18% of all Union Navy men were African Americans, honorably serving their country. With the author's notes covering almost the final 100 pages of this book, it appears very well documented. And as with any Civil War America book from Chapel Hill, you know it is solid history. I applaud this attempt by my fellow Ohioian for his efforts to give these mostly ignored and forgotten men an open hearing. Sadly, they too seemed aware their efforts were lost to history, with the combat armies often being remembered at their expense. For me, this book is a very good first step in the direction of revealing these men and their naval service to our contemporary readers. I await even more of their stories. Semper Fi.

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