The Man behind the Beard: Unpacking the Myth and Reality in Blackbeard Imagery

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Abstract

Out of all the pirates who terrorized the shores of the Americas during the late 17\textsuperscript{th} and early 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries Blackbeard is the most notorious. He was most successful or the most bloodthirsty pirate that sailed during his lifetime. This goal of this paper is to show that the source of Blackbeard’s fame came from the image that he created for himself. Blackbeard was a product of his environment and other agents had motive to manipulate Blackbeard’s image during his life and after his death. He was an expert showman and the image that he created for himself was embellished on by others to fit their needs. One of the most abhorrent acts attributed to Blackbeard is the marooning of his crew before his retirement in North Carolina. This paper shows that this event can be interpreted differently and that Blackbeard might not be responsible. It will also show that Blackbeard’s power as a captain was limited and that the principles of economics show that many acts that are attributed to Blackbeard were unlikely.
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**Introduction**

On the morning of the December 1, 1718 Captain Edward Teach found himself in a precarious situation. After a night of heavy drinking with a merchant ship captain he found that he and his crew were cornered in Okerecock Inlet by representatives of the royal Navy. Teach was also know by another name, which struck fear into the heart of merchant sailors, Blackbeard. The colonial Governor of Virginia had placed a price of 150 pounds on Blackbeard’s head (the bounty for other pirate captains was 40 pounds) and Lt. Maynard had come to collect his prize.

Daniel Defoe gives a historical account the battle that ensued in his book *A General History of the Pirates.* Lt. Maynard maneuvered a small boat within range of Blackbeard’s and requested to board the vessel. Blackbeard replied by drinking to the Maynard and exclaiming “Damnation seize my soul if I give you quarter, or take any from you.” Maynard’s ship was disabled and Blackbeard’s crew bombarded the deck of the ship with grenades. Seeing that there were few people left on the deck Blackbeard gave the order to board the other ship and “cut them to pieces.”

When the smoke cleared and the pirates boarded Maynard’s ship the battle intensified. Maynard’s crew had been hiding below decks and rushed up to engage the pirates. As his crew battled with the pirates Maynard found himself face to face with Blackbeard. At this point Blackbeard had been shot and cut several times and was bleeding heavily. Both men pulled their pistols and Maynard shot connected but Blackbeard missed, possibly due to the fact that he

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2 Defoe, pg. 78-79.
3 Defoe, pg. 84.
4 Defoe, pg. 85.
5 Defoe, pg. 86.
was intoxicated. The men then engaged each other with swords. Blackbeard broke Maynard’s sword and as he moves in for the kill one of Maynard’s men slits his throat. Blackbeard congratulates the sailor with his dying breath and Maynard cuts his head off. On the return voyage to Virginia Maynard hangs the head as a bloody trophy from the front of his ship.\footnote{Defoe, pg. 87.}

This account of the battle reads more like a movie script than a historical account. It paints a picture of Blackbeard as an almost superhuman figure. It is one of the reasons that of all the pirates that sailed during the golden age of piracy Blackbeard is the most culturally relevant today. There are movies, video games, restaurants, and even amusement park rides that are themed around the slain pirate. Marcus Rediker estimates that there were around five thousand pirates operating in the Americas between 1716 and 1726, yet out of all these pirates Blackbeard is the most famous.\footnote{Marcus Rediker, “Under the Banner of King Death: The Social World of Anglo-American Pirates, 1716 to 1726,” \textit{William & Mary Quarterly} 38, no. 2 (1988): 203.} Blackbeard was not even the most successful pirate in his time-place. This paper will show that the image that Blackbeard created for himself, with the help of others, is the reason for his infamy today.

Appearing fierce was economically advantageous for a pirate crews. As the captain maintaining his image would have been an important part of Blackbeard’s job. I believe that Blackbeard’s notoriety is a direct result of him being exceptionally talented at this part of his job. Blackbeard’s skill at terrorizing led to many violent acts being attributed to him. In this paper I will prove that the image of Blackbeard that was fabricated is unrealistic. Examining Blackbeard through an economic lens will show that the violence that is attributed to him was not economically advantageous, and therefore is most likely an embellishment. I will explain how the power structure of a pirate crew would have affected the decisions that Blackbeard made and
limited his agency. The effect of environmental factors on the creation and spread of Blackbeard’s image will be examined. The perpetuation of Blackbeard’s menacing image by secondary agents, such as authors or government officials, will show that people involved in distributing information about Blackbeard had motive to further embellish Blackbeard’s image. Finally the evolution of Blackbeard’s image overtime will be examined. I will show that Blackbeard’s image is not stagnant but instead that is as been gradually changed by cultural forces over time.

This paper will show that the most famous pirate in history gained his fame through deception. His fame does not come from being the most successful or the most blood thirsty pirate in history. He is a product of his environment, and his dramatic flair struck fear into the hearts of merchant sailors. Blackbeard’s ability to maintain a devilish persona is the reason that he is remembered to this day. The irony is that this persona that Blackbeard created saved the lives of both the members of his crew and the victims that he captured. The goal of piracy was to capture ships without combat through intimidation and this ability to intimidate is what make Blackbeard the most recognizable pirate in history.

*Historiography of the Atlantic*

Understanding the geographic area that Blackbeard sailed in is important when examining his actions as a historical agent. His piratical exploits were confined to the Atlantic Ocean. In his early privateering career he most likely operated off the coast of West Europe and West Africa. I believe that most privateering occurred in this region because privateers made home port in the countries that sponsored them. It makes economic sense to stay as close as possible to the party that authorized your privateering through a letter of marque. A large
portion of the plunder would have to go to the people who financed the privateering vessel. The longer the journey between where the ship were captured and where the plunder was delivered the smaller the profits. When Blackbeard shifted from privateer to pirate he was no longer confined by these economic factors and he moved his area of operations to the American side of the Atlantic.

Writing history with the Atlantic Ocean as the unit of analysis can be problematic. In her article "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities" Alison Games addresses historians using the Atlantic Ocean as a unit of analysis. According to Games there are three different ways that historians examine the Atlantic Ocean. There is circum-Atlantic which deals with the Atlantic as a whole, trans-Atlantic which is mainly comparative history, and cis-Atlantic which deals with small parts of the Atlantic Ocean.8 Examining the agency of Blackbeard falls under cis-Atlantic history. The examination of external factors that changed the way Blackbeard was perceived fall under circum-Atlantic and trans-Atlantic history.

Games also believes that there are barriers in Atlantic history that make it difficult to formulate universal truths for the region. The first challenge that Games points out is the vast size and diversity of the Atlantic Ocean. This unit of analysis encompasses four different continents with a variety of climates, languages, cultures. Another issue is that the data that is available for many groups of people in this unit of analysis are incomplete. There are holes in the population and political data, especially for many African and indigenous American groups.9 The large size and diverse nature of this unit analysis coupled with the lack of complete data makes it difficult to find truths that cover the Atlantic as a whole. The last problem that Games

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8 Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities,” American Historical Review 111, no. 3 (2006):746.
9 Games, pg.742.
addresses is a tendency for Eurocentrism. The majority of Atlantic histories are written about North America and Europe there is a danger in Atlantic history of becoming Eurocentric. This Eurocentric view causes historians to focus on the northern hemisphere instead of the relations across the Atlantic as a whole.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Historiography of Piracy}

The British economy relied on maritime trade to transfer raw materials from the colonies to the metropole in exchange for manufactured goods. The vulnerability of these trade routes made piracy a popular topic for authors in the early 1700’s. One of the primary text on pirates from this era is Captain Charles Johnson’s “A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates” that was published in 1724. Captain Charles Johnson was a pseudonym that Daniel Defoe used to give his work more credibility.\textsuperscript{11} In the framework that Games laid out Defoe’s book would be considered colonial cis-Atlantic history. While this book does briefly address piracy in Africa and South America Defoe’s writing is Eurocentric, and more specifically British centric. He mainly focuses on the actions of British pirates in British colonial holdings. Defoe’s two volume work is a compilation of biographies of the important pirate captains. His work is written from a British perspective with an anti-pirate lens. The biographies focus on the violence and debaucheries of pirates and culminate with the story of their defeat or trial. He also has chapters about various pieces of sailing knowledge that pertain to pirates in general. His book also contains numerous engravings of ships and pirates that he commissioned. The main purpose was to entertain readers and make a profit while emphasizing the superiority of the British government over the pirates. This text was influential in the early

\textsuperscript{10} Games, pg.751.
\textsuperscript{11} Defoe, pg.xxi.
The creation of pirate imagery and its impact on Blackbeard’s image will be examined later in this paper.

**The Cultivation of Blackbeard’s Image**

The world view of pirates and merchant sailors created an environment that encouraged embellishments of pirate imagery. The forces that drove people to piracy provide a look into how pirates viewed the world around them. The main draw for pirates was that life as a sailor on a merchant vessel was difficult. A quote from a sailor named Samuel Johnson summarizes this point nicely. He claims that in comparison to sailors “a man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.”

The wages of merchant sailors, though minimal, cut into the profits for the owner of the vessel. This meant that merchant crews were kept as small as possible. Pirate crews were not bound by these constraints in crew size. The crews of pirate ships were much larger due to the fact that a superior number of sailors were required to best another ship in combat. The amount of sailors on a pirate crew vastly outnumbered the crew of a merchant vessel of similar size. This meant that the duties of an individual member of a pirate ship were less that the duties of a merchant sailor.

Captains of merchant vessels often used harsh forms of punishment to keep order amongst their crew. At his trial in front of the judge Cotton Mather accused pirate William Fly used cited abuses by the captain as the reason for the mutiny that began his pirate career. When pirate crews captured a merchant vessel they would often question the crew members on how the captain treated them. If the captain was well thought of by the crew he would be spared,

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and sometimes even rewarded. Negative reports from the crew members would usually result in the pirates dealing out “justice” to the captain, either in the form of torture or execution. The stories of these harsh treatments of the captains would have been spread quickly from the surviving crew members. Stories about this violence without the context would have been one of the sources of the vicious pirate imagery that was being created.

The cultural practices of sailors in the colonial era create a proverbial breeding ground for sensational imagery. The crews on ships were made up of people from a multitude of different areas that had a broad spectrum of religious beliefs. This was especially true in the case of pirate crews. Sailing required people from different backgrounds to work together cohesively. A common saying is that there are two things you cannot talk about at a dinner table, religion and politics. To avoid the controversy surrounding the topic sailors would have used social pressure to stomp out differing religious views. This whitewashing left a spiritual void in their lives and they filled this void with superstition. These superstitions were an integral part of shipboard life. Much like the oral tradition passed on by Native American cultures the stories of the sailors usually contained a moral about how to live life on the ship. Ships of this time period were also at the mercy of the elements and many of the superstitions were rooted in the idea of appeasing the natural world around them. These superstitions made the sailors of the merchant vessels susceptible to the diabolic imagery that Blackbeard used.

Blackbeard would have been well aware of these superstitions and he used them to fashion his image. According to Defoe Blackbeard fashioned an image with a diabolic flair. In

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16 Rouleau, pg. 39.
17 Rouleau, pg.41.
his description of the pirate’s appearance he writes that Blackbeard “struck lit matches under his hat, which appearing on each side of his face, his eyes naturally looking fierce and wild, made him altogether such a figure, that imagination cannot form an idea of a fury, from Hell, to look more frightful.”

Stories told by the captured members of his crew show that the diabolic ties were not regulated to his image in combat. His crew members told stories of Blackbeard becoming intoxicated and then challenging his men to make a Hell of their own and see how long they could take it. He shut himself into the hold with two or three crew members and then light a fire in the middle and then see who could withstand it the longest. Blackbeard always won these contest.

The crew also told stories of a man who arrived on their ship that nobody knew and then disappeared right before they left port and the crew believed it was the devil. It cannot be said for certain that the captured pirates truly believed what they were saying. The stories about the devil could have been an attempt to put the blame for their actions on Satan and save their necks from the gallows, an effort which they failed at. Defoe believed that these devilish images were the reason that Blackbeard was the leader due to the fact that pirates were “wicked” men and that they would seek out the most “wicked” to lead them. I think Defoe is right in regards to result but wrong in his reasoning. Blackbeard’s devilish image was likely a reason that he was chosen to be captain, but pirates were entrepreneurs not Satanist. Sailors in general were superstitious and they would have seen the imagery as intimidating. They would have either been afraid of him themselves or believed that he could strike fear into the merchant sailors that they attacked. Either way in their superstitious world view it would have been economically advantageous to make Blackbeard captain.

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18 Defoe, pg.85
19 Defoe, pg.85
20 Defoe, pg.85-86
21 Defoe, pg.86
22 Defoe, pg.85
The world views of both the pirates and the merchant sailors created a volatile mixture. Many pirates held harsh feelings towards merchant captains. When they capture a ship they have an opportunity to retaliate for years of abuse with excessive violence. This makes stories of pirate brutality believable and easier to spread. Sailing culture is built on superstitions and exaggerated tales. In this environment victims stories of pirate attacks would spread and become exaggerated quickly.

**Pirate Organization**

The organizational structure of pirate society is another aspect of pirate life that affects the agency of pirates. An examination of the organizational structures shows that Blackbeard was not as powerful of an agent as is often assumed. There are two different levels of pirate organizational structure, the informal organization between the pirate community as a whole and the formal organization of the crews themselves. Rediker’s research shows a genealogical web that makes up the pirate community. The links in this web are made up of pirate captains that sailed their ships together or had common crew members.\(^\text{23}\) Blackbeard fits into this framework perfectly. He began his piracy career in 1716 after being given command of a freshly captured ship from his captain Benjamin Horningold.\(^\text{24}\) Since piracy was voluntary crew turn over would have been high and sailors could easily switch crews in port. This would have left Blackbeard with connections to most pirate crews in the Atlantic.

While there is no official governing body for the pirate community the informal ties created by the links between crew members would have held the pirate captains accountable to


\(^{24}\) Defoe, pg.71.
each other. The strength of these ties is shown in a letter written by Virginia Governor Spotswood written after the death of Blackbeard. In the letter he woefully regrets how he is unable to return home to Britain because he fears retribution from the pirate community for his role in Blackbeard’s death.\(^{25}\) Blackbeard would have been pressured by these ties to participate in acts of retribution against those who threaten pirate society as a whole. An example of this would be when Blackbeard informed the captain of a British merchant vessel that he would have to burn his ship in retaliation for pirate hangings that occurred in Boston.\(^{26}\) Pirates often allowed the crews of merchant vessels to keep their ships and supplies essential for survival to reward surrendering without a fight. The action of burning a ship that surrendered would have been seen as excessive and would have added to Blackbeard’s violent image. When viewed in isolation the story of Blackbeard burning a merchant ship makes the pirate appear excessively violent. In context the story indicates that Blackbeard actions were justified by pirate society and were taken to preserve pirate society as a whole.

The organization within the pirate crew itself further limits Blackbeard’s agency. As stated before, crews were often made up with sailors who had been abused by power hungry merchant captains. In order to protect themselves from the tyranny of a captain, pirates elected their captains democratically. Even though Horningold handed Blackbeard his first command it is likely that Blackbeard’s selection was not far removed from the democratic process.\(^{27}\) If Blackbeard’s captaincy had not been supported by the rest of the crew they would have elected a new captain to replace him. The democratic nature of his leadership meant that would have been constantly been pressured by the needs and desires of the crew. This would have limited the

\(^{27}\) Defoe, pg. 71.
historical agency of Blackbeard due to the fact that many of the decisions that he made were not his own.

As a further precaution against tyranny the pirates created a form of divided government. The captain had supreme control over logistical matters, such as where to sail, and combat situations, but other duties were divided up amongst other officers to limit the captain’s power. Responsibilities such as discipline and the division of loot were given to different officers. This served as a system of checks and balances that made pirate captains much less powerful than their merchant counterparts. The captain had power to make decisions about where to sail but he needed to consult the crew otherwise he might not get paid his share of the plunder. They also did not enjoy the comforts that their merchant counterparts had. They had to share their living quarters with other crew members and they ate the same food as the rest of the crew.\(^28\) The limits put on power and status that pirate captain dealt with would have further limited Blackbeard’s agency. These limits combined with the pressure he faced from other crew members make many of the vicious action that are attributed to Blackbeard unlikely.

### A Vile Act

The most barbarous action attributed to Blackbeard was the marooning of the crew of the Queen Anne’s Revenge. At this time Blackbeard commanded a small fleet of ships and he was operating off the coast of North Carolina. Blackbeard received information that the British had sent fleet of ships to eliminate piracy in the colonies. He also heard that pardons were being

offered by the British government to pirates who renounced their ways. Among the pirates that were receiving pardons was the captain who gave Blackbeard his original command, Benjamin Horningold.\textsuperscript{29} With this information in mind, Blackbeard decided it was time to end his piracy career. Defoe does not address this background information in his book. He claims that the reason that Blackbeard decided to end his pirate career because his crew had grown too large and he wanted to downsize. According to Defoe, Blackbeard devised a plot to escape with the loot and choice members of the crew while leaving the rest of the crew stranded to die.\textsuperscript{30} I disagree with Defoe’s interpretation of these events and I think the story of the marooning can be viewed in a different way.

In Defoe’s interpretation of the events begins with Blackbeard maneuvering his fleet into a cove to careen the hulls of the ship. Careening was a practice that pirate crews did periodically to increase the speed of the ship. Speed was essential for a pirate crew because it allowed them to catch up to escaping merchant ships and run away from military ships. The process required a captain to intentionally run his ship aground so that his crew can clean debris off the hull.\textsuperscript{31} According to Defoe Blackbeard’s plan was to wreck his ships during the careening and escape with the loot on a small ship.\textsuperscript{32} He first wrecked his flag ship the \textit{Queen Anne’s Revenge} on a sand bar and cracks the mast. Then in a coordinated move with his first mate Israel Hands his second ship the \textit{Adventure} gets stuck on a sand bar attempting to free the \textit{Queen Anne’s Revenge}. The next part of his plan involved the former pirate captain Major Bonnet. Bonnet was an ineffective pirate and Blackbeard took over Bonnets ship the \textit{Revenge} and put one of his men in

\textsuperscript{29}Robert Earl Lee, \textit{Blackbeard the Pirate: a Reappraisal of His Life and Times}, 2nd ed. (John F Blair Pub, 1974), 50-51.
\textsuperscript{30}Defoe, pg. 75-76.
\textsuperscript{32}Defoe, pg.75-76.
charge. Bonnet was onboard Blackbeard’s ship during the marooning and he is convinced by
Blackbeard to receive a pardon from Britain and become a privateer in an upcoming war against
Spain. Blackbeard offers to return the Revenge to Bonnet he sends him out on a small boat to get
his pardon. While Bonnet is gone he instructs his crew to prepare the Revenge for Bonnet and to
remove his ship the Adventure off the sand bar. The members of the remaining crew hear rumors
that Blackbeard is going to maroon them and 25 men rise up against Blackbeard but 40 crew
members remain loyal and the 25 mutinous men are left on the sand bar to die as Blackbeard
sails away on the Adventure loaded with the plunder from the other ships. When Bonnet and his
crew returns he is infuriated to find his ship the Revenge stripped of valuables with the marooned
members of Blackbeard’s crew.33

Defoe’s account displays Blackbeard as cold blooded and greedy. When combined with
the knowledge of pirate organization the facts paint a different picture. The first flaw in Defoe’s
argument is in the motivation behind the suspected marooning. The problem with Defoe’s
interpretation is that it would be difficult for a pirate crew to become oversized. Piracy was
voluntary and the men on the ship could leave whenever they pleased. This means that the laws
of economics would keep the crew size at a manageable level. If the crew got too large, and the
loot spread too thin, the risks of piracy would outweigh the rewards. When this happened some
members of the crew would no longer see piracy as economically advantageous and would split
into smaller crews, similar to when Blackbeard was given a ship by Horningold, or quit pirating.
This shows that Defoe’s interpretation of Blackbeard’s motivation is inaccurate. Blackbeard’s
motivation makes a difference in how he is portrayed in this situation. If he is stranding his crew
because it is too large he then the events that unfolded in the cove appear malicious. If

33 Lee, pg.52-53.
Blackbeard moves into the cove with the intention of seeking a pardon the events can tell a different story.

If Blackbeard received information about the pardons that were being offered and the increased pressure that was being put on pirate from the British Royal Navy it is safe to assume that the other members of his crew had this information as well. Ships at this time were small and it would have been difficult for Blackbeard to have conversations with sailors from other ships without someone from the crew listening in. With this information the conversation amongst Blackbeard’s crew would have been debating whether to retire or continue piracy. A captain’s power is derived from his crew and a sizable portion of his crew would have been considering retirement. This meant Blackbeard would have had to take steps to prepare for retirement whether he felt like retiring or not. A logical step for preparing for the retirement of at least part of the crew would be taking inventory of the ships condition and their cargo. They would have needed to assess the damage to the ship and value of the cargo if they were going to split their plunder fairly between the men that were retiring and the men who were remaining pirates. Careening would have provided a perfect opportunity to inventory cargo and make sure that all of the ships in the fleet were in good repair, either for sale or continued piracy. This shows that careening was a logical move by Blackbeard, and if it hadn’t been his crew would not have went along with it.

It is possible that Blackbeard pulled his fleet into the harbor with the honest intention of careening. If this is the case the grounding of his ships could have been an accident. Careening requires that the ship be maneuvered in shallow waters and intentionally ran aground. During this maneuvering Blackbeard’s wreck of his flag ship could have been an actual accident. His second ship could have easily gotten stuck trying to free his flag ship. His crew was made up of
experienced sailors and it would have been extremely difficult for him to intentionally make poor navigation decisions with two separate ships without his crew discovering what he was doing. This maneuver would have been further complicated with the limited communication he had with the second ship that was commandeered by Hands. If this was truly an intentional marooning Blackbeard would have had to have detailed knowledge of the cove that no one else in his crew had, maneuver his boat in a place that would allow for two boats to wreck simultaneously and look like an accident, coordinate an accident that would do enough damage to incapacitate the ship but not enough to damage the cargo, and he would have had to coordinate the whole maneuver with another ship secretly from the deck of his ship while surrounded by his crew. The level of complication of this plan and the slim margin for error makes it more likely that Blackbeard simply made a mistake that caused his two ships to be wrecked. Even if the plan was easier to enact, the intentional destruction of a ship does not make economic sense for Blackbeard. The ship would have likely gone come into consideration when dividing up assets between the retiring men and the men who were continuing piracy. The value of the ship that the men who were not retiring would use could be taken into account when distributing loot and the other ships could be sold. Wrecking the ships destroyed assets that were too valuable to be used as disposable pawns in a plan.

Now that it has been shown that the grounding of his fleet could have been an accident, the actions that Blackbeard took afterwards can be examined through a different lens. Even if the wreck was an accident Blackbeard is still charged with betraying and marooning part of his crew. I offer a different interpretation of these events that shows this marooning might not have been a premeditated plan. According to Lee, Blackbeard planned to abandon part of his crew so that he and his chosen crewmembers would have less people to share their final plunder with.
When word of this spread throughout the crew 25 members of his crew attempted to mutiny. This mutiny was suppressed the 25 men were the men who were left stranded on the sand bar.\textsuperscript{34} Deciding on his own to betray his crew to gain higher profits would have been a callous move by Blackbeard, but a look into pirate organization shows he was not the sole maker of this decision. Blackbeard left with 40 men which is a majority of the crew.\textsuperscript{35} Because nobody is compelled to follow him, and his power is based on his popularity with his men, it stands to reason that the decision to abandon a section of the crew would have been made by the majority of the pirates. Blackbeard control was limited and he would have had to at least have had the support of the other officers onboard the ship to maroon their fellow shipmates. The selection of 25 men that was agreed upon by the rest of the crew implies that either the crew was deeply factionalized or this group of men were seen as untrustworthy or undeserving by a majority of their peers. Another possibility is that what the men heard were rumors and that this section of the crew staged an unfounded mutiny.

After the men mutinied Blackbeard’s best option was to maroon them. He could not travel to seek his pardon with men who believed that he had wronged them. If he had released them on the mainland they could have alerted the British authorities of the location of the pirates who had not yet received their official pardon. They also could have rallied local people together and ambushed Blackbeard to take the spoils for themselves. Blackbeard was forced to leave them on an island with no source of food so that they would not interfere with his plans. This would appear like Blackbeard was sentencing these men to a slow death by starvation, but none of the men left on the island died. They were rescued by none other than Major Bonnet two

\textsuperscript{34} Lee, pg.52.  
\textsuperscript{35} Lee, pg. 52.
days later.\textsuperscript{36} Defoe makes this appear like a coincidence, but Blackbeard knew Bonnet was coming back. Bonnet had to return for the \textit{Revenge} that was promised to him by Blackbeard. Blackbeard did make good on his promise and he left the ship for Bonnet, but not before he stripped it of valuables. This scenario creates a new perspective on Blackbeard. It shows that it is unlikely that the events that unfolded in the cover were an elaborate plot to betray and murder crewmembers for monetary gain. What is more likely is that an accident occurred and Blackbeard and a majority of his crew made the best of it. The actions that they took were undoubtedly greedy but deceitful, but they were pirates and that is to be expected. Unlike Defoe’s depiction this interpretation shows that this was an instance of making the best of a situation and not premeditated murder.

\textbf{Blackbeard in Literature}

In the early 1700s Blackbeard was a household name in Great Britain and its North American colonies. His existence was common knowledge but few people had interacted with him in person. His notoriety was in a large part due to writings about his exploits that were circulated through the empire. One of the pieces of literature that circulated about him was his obituary in London’s \textit{The Weekly Journal or Saturday’s Post}. The structure of the article is intriguing. It could be expected that the article would discuss the bloody battle that resulted in Blackbeard’s defeat, but instead the first half of the writing is dedicated to explaining why Governor Spotswood made the decision to attack the pirate. The rest of the piece is a short description of the battle followed by a description of the sentencing of Blackbeard. The focus on the Governor’s role in the defeat of Blackbeard shows that this article is a piece of propaganda supporting the wisdom of British rule in the colonies.

\textsuperscript{36} Lee, pg. 53.
There are a number of discrepancies between the obituary and the official account from Lt. Maynard. The biggest difference in the accounts is the manner of Blackbeard death. Maynard claims that Blackbeard was beheaded by a sailor while he was in hand to hand combat. This newspaper account claims that he was captured and brought to the shore and hanged the next morning.\textsuperscript{37} Changing the manner of Blackbeard’s death serves two purposes. First the image of Blackbeard hanging from the gallows is a deterrent for people plotting against the British Empire. Secondly this story has the connotation of a man being executed for a crime instead of a man dying in an attack. The author of the obituary most likely had connections to the British government and his biases show that external parties were interested in perpetuation Blackbeard’s villainous image. This is an example of how the elites, who were the class most affected economically by piracy, used print media to spread anti-pirate sentiment.

Authors who were independent of the crown also took advantage of violent pirate imagery. One of the authors that profited most was Daniel Defoe. As mentioned earlier, Defoe’s work on pirates was well circulated in the early 1700’s. The issue is that Defoe was a journalist not a historian and as a result he was more interested in selling books than writing objective history. The modern notion of journalist today and the notion of journalist in Defoe’s time are very different. Journalistic integrity and a responsibility for the truth took a back seat to telling a good story. Most of his source material came from newspaper articles, interviews of sailors, and stories that he had collected as a journalist.\textsuperscript{38} These sources are laden with bias and exaggeration, and since Defoe was interested in entertainment more than universal truths he did not use these sources objectively. The result is a book that is a mixture of fantasy and fiction.

\textsuperscript{37} The Weekly Journal or Saturday’s Post (April, 11, 1719) quoted in Cooke, Arthur. “British Newspaper Accounts of Blackbeard’s Death.” The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 61, no.3 (1953), 304.

\textsuperscript{38} Defoe, pg.xxxii.
majority of the events in the book are accurate in regards to the timing and agents involved but the details are elaborated on fictitiously. One fact that shows how unreliable Defoe’s work is that he wrote biographies of three captains that likely didn’t exist.\textsuperscript{39} Defoe’s work took the image that Blackbeard created for himself and presented it to a new audience. Blackbeard crafted his evil persona because it was economically advantageous. After Blackbeard’s death Defoe saw that the image that Blackbeard created was entertaining and it would hook readers into his book. He took an image that was based on sea stories and embellishment and placed it into a writing that people saw as a scholarly work. This gave the image validity and allowed it to spread rapidly.

In an effort to increase his profit margin Defoe not only validated Blackbeard’s image but he expanded on it. An example of this is the engraving that he commissioned from Benjamin Cole for his chapter on Blackbeard. This portrayal of Blackbeard contains many historical discrepancies that Defoe would have been aware of.\textsuperscript{40} This engraving is from the early editions of his book so it serves as a base line to compare the engravings of subsequent editions to.

\textsuperscript{39} Defoe, pg.xxxviii.
\textsuperscript{40} Defoe, pg.73.
The most prominent part of image is Blackbeard standing in the middle. One of the most noticeable things in the picture is the large amount of weapons that he is carrying. He has a sword held in his hand and one strapped to his back. He also has six pistols in a sash across his chest. He has a stern facial expression and lit fuses are connected to the hair that is coming out from under his hat. All of these attributes paint Blackbeard in a violent and menacing manner.

Further examination of Blackbeard’s attire created a different outlook on his image. At first glance all of his clothing appears fashionable. He has a fancy coat, shoes, with a hat and is wearing some kind of undershirt beneath his jacket. His beard is braided and tucked into the undershirt giving him an almost gentleman like visage. A second glance at his clothing shows that his jacket sleeves are too short suggesting that the coat is stolen. His clothing makes it appear like he is attempting to be an upper class gentleman but he doesn’t measure up.

Inaccuracies in the background of the image have an interesting connotation as well. First of all the landscape of the background consist of palm trees and volcanic mountains. This is inconsistent with the colonial landscape the Blackbeard operated in. In the cove behind Blackbeard there is a naval battle taking place between three ships. One of the ships is in the process of sinking and one seems to be the sight of an ongoing hand to hand battle while simultaneously burning. The third ship appears unharmed. Pirates would not have battled in this manner due to the fact that sinking a ship made it impossible to plunder, and setting fire to ship that you were boarding was suicidal. These inaccuracies paint Blackbeard as an exotic and senselessly violent person.

Defoe was experienced in writing about naval issues so these errors would have been glaringly obvious to him. The fact that he would know better leads me to the belief that the
errors were intentionally used to create an image. The errors existence is proof that Defoe’s main interest was telling a story that his readers would want to hear and not objective history. The image that Defoe created presents an interesting dichotomy in the way Blackbeard is perceived. On one hand the image vilifies him by portraying excessive violence, but on the other hand he romanticizes him by showing him attempting to be civilized. This is important because this work would go shape the future interpretations of pirates. Robert Lewis Stevenson’s work *Treasure Island* was influenced by Defoe’s accounts of pirates that were presumed to be based on fact. Many modern film and literature depictions of pirates trace their roots back to *Treasure Island*. This lineage of inspiration shows that the exaggerations of Defoe have had a lasting imprint on the image of piracy, and more specifically Blackbeard.

**External Factors**

Pirates and authors were not the only agents who benefited from expanding Blackbeard’s ruthless image. The system of government that the British used to control their American colonies and the distance between the colonies and the metropole created lucrative opportunities for many agents in the colonial system. The vast size of the British Empire meant that government officials could not actively monitor the entirety of the empire. Their lack of intelligence gathering abilities forced them to rely mainly on hearsay to gather information about happenings in the colonies. The size of the empire and the reliance on hearsay meant that when agents reported back to the British government there were few people in the position to dispute their claims. This lack of accountability allowed agents to paint events in the best possible light for personal gain without fear of informational inaccuracies being uncovered. An example of this would be the account that Lt. Maynard gave about his attack on Blackbeard. The account

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portrays Blackbeard as a drunken scoundrel and Lt. Maynard and his crew as war heroes. Lt. Maynard and Blackbeard’s crew were the only people that observed what happened that morning and history is written by the victors. Lt. Maynard’s account was the only firsthand account that the British government received which meant that there was no voice contradicting his interpretation of what happened.

Creating spectacles by exaggerating the threat of piracy was a religious practice as well.
Cotton Mather, a well-known Puritan minister, took part in manipulating the stories about pirates to promote his agenda. Cotton Mather set to make an example out of pirates and made the trial and execution of pirates a spiritual affair. Mather saw the pirate as a dual threat. First they represented a spiritual threat by profiting from the sins of rebellion, robbery, and murder. The second threat that he saw was danger to the political system in the British colonies. The average pirates were lower class sailors that banded together to overthrow an upper class master so that they could rule themselves as a collective. Mather would have seen this as symbolic of an overthrow of the colonial governor system by the lower class colonist. This meant that an example needed to be made of captured pirates to deter future sinful and revolutionist activity.

Mather would visit condemned prisoners in jail and convince them to repent of their sins and to save their souls. The salvation of the soul of the criminal was not his only goal. An execution was a social event, and it was accompanied by a sermon. This sermon gave Mather, and other religious leaders, an opportunity to show their congregations the consequences of a life of sin. Piracy was a trendy and exciting topic in the colonies and this made Mather particularly interested in the executions of pirates. During execution sermons he would retell the crimes of the pirate in detail and stage the whole event down to how the pirate was supposed to act during

\[42\text{ Williams, pg.235.}\]
the execution.\textsuperscript{43} He took personal satisfaction from having men who cursed him request that he gave their execution sermon.\textsuperscript{44} He used the pirates as examples of how even the worst sinners could be redeemed through repentance. To reach a larger audience he began publishing the execution sermons that he delivered. These writings culminated in \textit{Instructions to the Living from the Condition of the Dead} in which he included graphic details about the pirates’ imprisonment and death. In his journal he reflected on how these writings on pirates had the potential to make him wealthy.\textsuperscript{45} Mather’s writing relished in the details of the pirates’ crimes and the gruesomeness of their demise. With their immortal souls in the balance most pirates would have told Mather whatever he wanted to hear. The spread of these sensationalist accounts from respected religious leaders would have gave increased validity to piratical fear mongering.

Government officials in the colonies were involved in pirate propaganda as well. The governors benefited politically and economically from making pirates seem as vicious as possible to the government officials back in Britain. By making the threat of piracy seem worse than it actually was the governors could receive increased support from the British Navy to help them defend their shipping from piracy. The governors also benefited from adding to the reputation of individual pirates that preyed on their waterways. If the actions of a governor led to the capture of a pirate the political clout that he gained would be directly related to the level of threat that that pirate posed to British interest. These factors made embellishing the exploits of pirates an advantageous practice for colonial governors.

The piratical fear mongering of the governors makes it seem that pirates were in an adversarial relationship with the governors. While this statement holds true when discussion

\textsuperscript{43} Williams, pg.235.
\textsuperscript{44} Williams, pg.237.
\textsuperscript{45} Williams, pg.236-7
pirates and governors in general, it does not tell the whole story. The truth is that individual pirates and governors had symbiotic relationships. To understand this relationship it is important to remember that at this time each colony views itself as a separate entity with its own self-interest.

Pirates cannot be at sea 365 days a year, they needed a safe place to harbor their ship. To procure a safe place to pull into port pirates had to create unofficial alliances with colonial communities. Creating alliances with colonial communities had economic benefits as well as safety benefits. Modern depictions of pirates often show them plundering cargo containing gold and silver. This depiction is not historically accurate. While gold, silver, and other luxury items were seized by pirates a majority of the ships they boarded were transporting other trade goods. The ships that pirates captured commonly carried raw goods, such as sugar and tobacco, manufactured goods from Europe, or slaves. Unlike silver or gold which can be used as currency universally, the raw materials, manufactured goods, and slaves had to be sold or traded. The agreements with colonial communities gave pirates a place to sell their plunder.

After the wreck of his flag ship The Queen Anne’s Revenge Blackbeard forged a relationship with Governor Eden. Eden gave Blackbeard and roughly twenty of his crew a royal pardon. On paper and to the eyes of the British government Blackbeard and his crew renounced their pirating and retired to settle down in Bath, North Carolina. Blackbeard and his crew settled in Bath and Blackbeard built a house across from the governor’s residence. He became a local celebrity and hosted dinner parties while regaling guest with tales of his exploits. Blackbeard became an important social figure in the small community. He and his crew spent

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46 Lee, pg.54.
47 Lee, pg.67.
money generously in the town and sold their plunder at reasonable prices. The small community of Bath became a busy trade center for people looking to purchase foreign goods.\textsuperscript{48} It did not take long for the crew to cause disturbances in town and Blackbeard made the decision to go back out to sea so that his crew could burn off some energy. Eden secured a clear title for the ship \textit{Adventure} for Blackbeard and his crew and provided them with official papers for an honest trade trip to St. Thomas.\textsuperscript{49} Blackbeard and his crew began pirating small vessels and selling the supplies back in Bath. They shared their plunder with Eden and he provided them with governmental support. The most famous instance of this support was when Eden convinced the Vice Admiralty Court to give Blackbeard salvage rights to a French ship that he captured and brought back to Bath claiming he found it adrift.\textsuperscript{50} This symbiotic relationship between Blackbeard and Eden along with Blackbeard’s ability to climb the social ladder in Bath contradict the idea that Blackbeard was a blood-thirsty killer.

The relationship between Eden and Blackbeard shows how the relationships between governors and the pirates were lucrative for both parties involved. Even though they were profitable, these relationships did not mean that pirates and colonial officials were not at odds with each other. Not all governors created agreements with pirates, and those who did created the agreements on an individual basis. The governors that did tolerate piracy only tolerated the pirates that they had agreements with and not the pirate community as a whole. Governor Spotswood of Virginia ran an aggressive anti-pirate campaign with the assistance of the British Navy. He posted a bounty on Blackbeard’s head and sent out the mission that defeated him.

Even during his first sailing journey after his pardon Blackbeard arrived in Philadelphia, a port

\textsuperscript{48} Lee, pg.66.
\textsuperscript{49} Lee, pg.77.
\textsuperscript{50} Lee, pg.80.
that he frequented, only to find that the governor of Pennsylvania had issued a warrant for his arrest. Although the attempted arrest at Philadelphia shows that Blackbeard had enemies in the colonies it also demonstrates that there must have been many people who supported him. Philadelphia was the largest city in America at the time and Blackbeard, as a large and highly recognizable figure, would not have been able to frequent the port without a large support network.

The lack of animosity towards Blackbeard in his places of refuge in the colonies further proves that the pirate image of Blackbeard was a crafted persona. The people in Bath were not afraid of Blackbeard or his pirate crew. Having a person of Blackbeard’s fame increased the status of the community. The goods that he brought in to trade turned Bath into a merchant hub. The liberal spending habits of Blackbeard and his crew were also economically beneficial to the colonist. To them Blackbeard’s crimes were against wealthy owners of merchant vessels and his spending money in the community gave the colonist a Robin Hoodesque view of him. In rural Colonial America piracy was respectable and stylish criminal enterprise. The image that the people in Bath had of Blackbeard is paradoxical to the persona that Blackbeard projected in his pirating exploits. His ability to drop the devilish persona melded into civilized society immediately when he retired shows that Blackbeard’s image was something that he fabricated for economic benefit.

**The Evolution of Blackbeard’s Image**

Blackbeard’s image has changed drastically in the time period between his death and the present. While the unit of analysis for this paper is the early 18th century, the interpretation of

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51 Lee, pg.76.
52 Lee, pg.66-7.
Blackbeard’s image in later time periods shows how the image that Blackbeard created during his life was a product of a specific time-place. In 1798 John Cross wrote a musical entitled *The Captive Princess* with a surprising protagonist, Blackbeard the pirate. In this musical Blackbeard falls in love with a princess and saves her from murder plot concocted by his jealous wife. His crew sing joyfully about the bohemian lifestyle that they lead. While the musical does have contain multiple battles, audiences leave with the perception that Blackbeard and his merry men are misunderstood symbols of freedom instead of symbols of greed and murder.\(^53\)

This musical was well received in London and it ran had a four month run time which was unprecedented at the time.\(^54\) Events that are unfolding at this time make it difficult to believe a positive portrayal of pirate would be approved of by the public. The golden age of piracy had come to an end in the colonies, but Barbary pirates were actively capturing ships off the coast of North Africa, enslaving sailors, and demanding ransom payments. The apparent disconnect between public opinion and real life events can be explained by examining who is affected by piracy. British officials, merchants, and sailors are all affected by the existence of pirates in their day to day life, but these people do not make up a majority of the British population. The increase in cost and taxes caused by piracy is spread throughout Britain which means that the average Englishman does not feel the economic impact. With the exception of certain region the threat of being taken captive by pirates while travelling has become remote. This removal from the effects of piracy has caused the people in London to view pirates as a curiosity and even a symbol. The past generation’s criminals have become the next generation’s caricatures. Although this example is not directly from the region of analysis that is being examined, I believe that the observations involving the disconnect between the views of the


\(^{54}\) http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/douglass/music/album-blackbeard.html
elites and the views of the lower class can be transferred to explain what is going on in the United States at this time.

The transformation from historical person to symbolic figure has transformed the way Blackbeard is depicted today. Modern uses of the image of Blackbeard focus on the mysticism and fantasy surrounding Blackbeard and ignore the information of who he was as a man. He has transformed into the token pirate and pieces of his identity are removed and added to fit him into various context. Today Blackbeard is a symbolic chameleon. He is a folk hero in the Carolinas, and a villain or hero in a multitude of books, cartoons, movies, and videogames. Through popular culture who Blackbeard was has become so ambiguous, that many people do not know that he was an actual historical person.

**Conclusion**

A pirate attack leaves much to the imagination. They occur far off the coast and they are only witnessed by the crewmembers of the ships that were involved. Piracy was an illegal enterprise which meant that pirates rarely left behind a record from their perspective. The main source of firsthand accounts from pirates are confessions in trial transcripts, which were given under coercion and are heavily biased. The only other primary accounts come from merchant sailors and naval sailors who combated pirates. Both of these sources have a strong bias as well. Most merchant sailors were superstitious and overly susceptible to pirate imagery and naval sailors had incentive to embellish their exploits to gain power and status. This leaves no source of objective accounts of pirate attacks.
The inaccuracies caused by the lack of reliable sources are compounded by the agendas of the agents that are interpreting the sources. Authors, British officials, religious leaders, and military leaders all benefited from portraying pirates in the worst possible light. These agents painted pirates as godless and bloodthirsty cutthroats. The colonial citizens had limited interactions with pirates which led to public opinion of them being shaped by word of mouth and the literature available to them. Both of these forms of communication were subject to bias and exaggeration that inserted inaccuracies to the way pirates were portrayed.

This paper does not dispute the fact that Blackbeard committed acts of robbery, torture and murder. To be an effective pirate Blackbeard would have pillaged ships, killed men in combat, and tortured people for various reasons. The argument of this paper is that Blackbeard was not the bloodthirsty savage that he was portrayed as being. As a captain he operated under economic and political restraints that limited his agency. He was democratically elected captain and he had to answer to his crew. His actions were also influenced by the pirate community as a whole. If Blackbeard’s actions were not in the best economic interest of the crew he would have been replaced as captain.

Blackbeard gained the reputation of being a drunken devil from Hell that aggressively pursued combat and indulgence. The diabolic imagery that he used was merely a façade. He was able to drop this persona and integrate back into civilized society when he retired. The sources who spoke loudest against piracy were people who shared the interest of the wealthy merchants or feared the disregard for authority that pirates represented. Many rural colonist interest were not aligned with the merchants which led them to tolerate and even support the practice of piracy. The public opinion of Blackbeard during his lifetime was based on
perspective and economic interest. The fear that he spread as the scourge of the Atlantic did not transfer to the average British colonist.

Over time as the actually threat of piracy diminished Blackbeard and his pirate compatriots are transformed into symbols. Oppressed lower class people who yearn to break free of the upper class powers that control there life begin to relate to the plight of the pirates from a bygone era. Pirates become a symbol of breaking free from oppression and finding your own path. Due to his skills as a showman Blackbeard is the most recognizable pirate and he becomes the patriarch of these new symbolic pirates. As a symbol his image has been twisted to fit the needs of whoever is him. The casualty in this process is the knowledge of the actual life that the historical person Edward Teach led. Blackbeard’s place as a pop culture icon is all the result of intimidation tactics that were used to make his pirating more efficient in the Atlantic 300 years ago.
http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/douglass/music/album-blackbeard.html

This site provides background information on *The Captive Princess*. It contains plot summaries, musical scores, and engravings of the production.


Defoe catalogues the stories of various pirate captains. He poses no real argument. His book provides insight into how the public viewed pirates.


This article discusses the interaction between pirates, the British Empire, and the public. The argument is that English embarrassment changed the way pirates were viewed. When looking at Blackbeard’s image the public and government view of pirates is important.


Games examines how the Atlantic has been viewed as a unit of historical analysis. She argues that many difficulties arise when using the Atlantic as a unit of analysis. Provides insight into how others have wrote about the area I am researching.


This book is an examination of Blackbeard with a focus on the later parts of his career and his retirement. This source shows some bias showing Blackbeard’s marooning in a negative light. This source contains a plethora of information on Blackbeard’s time in North Carolina.


Leeson examines piracy through an economic lens. He argues that pirate actions were economically motivated. This book shows how economic factors drove pirates.


Moore’s article describes how Robert Lewis Stevenson’s work *Treasure Island* was influenced by Defoe’s work on pirates.

Rediker examines the social and cultural world created by pirates. He argues that the pirates formed an unofficial fraternity. Helps explain Blackbeard’s reaction to the actions of other pirates.


In this article Rouleau examines the role of superstition in colonial sailor’s lives. He argues that the superstitions replaced religion on the ships and held moral values. Most of the accounts of Blackbeard are from a sailors’ perspective, so seeing how they perceive the world is important.

Sanderson, James, J. C. Cross, and Thomas Greenwood. 1798. *Blackbeard, or, The Captive Princess.* (London)

This is a stage performance from 1798 that received public support in London. This source show that even while piracy was a serious problem for the elite that the other classes no longer saw piracy as a threat. It also demonstrates how Blackbeard’s image begins to take on symbolic meaning