

Coasting Through the Age of Steam: Commerce and Community along the Gulf Coast

Kevin Grubbs

This article examines the persistence of the Gulf Coast's coasting trade during the late nineteenth century, revealing how sail and steam coexisted within a shared maritime world. Coasting schooners linked small ports, islands, and inland markets, sustaining older traditions of labor and community even as industrialization reshaped global trade. By tracing these local networks of work and exchange, the article argues that maritime modernity along the Gulf was uneven and negotiated rather than uniform. The Gulf emerges as a liminal space where sea and shore, sail and steam, and tradition and modernity continuously intersected.

Cet article traite de la persistance du cabotage sur la côte du golfe du Mexique à la fin du XIX^e siècle, qui révèle la coexistence de la voile et de la vapeur au sein d'un même univers maritime. Les goélettes de cabotage reliaient les petits ports, les îles et les marchés intérieurs, perpétuant ainsi les traditions ancestrales de travail et de vie communautaire, alors que l'industrialisation reconfigurait le commerce mondial. En retraçant ces réseaux locaux de travail et d'échange, l'article fait valoir que la modernité maritime le long du Golfe du Mexique était inégale et construite plutôt qu'uniforme. Le Golfe apparaît ainsi comme un espace liminal où mer et rivage, voile et vapeur, tradition et modernité se croisaient constamment.

In 1877, a small schooner, the *Kate Gandy*, sank just outside the port of Galveston, Texas. Its belly held a load of lumber from Florida destined for the Gulf, Colorado, and Santa Fe Railroad. The captain and crew valiantly tried to save both the vessel and their cargo, but to no avail. The crew and passengers

managed to survive by using the lumber as makeshift rafts, floating toward the shoreline. In a curious twist of fate, the crew were succored on shore by none other than the ship's part owner, who happened to live nearby. The sailors of the ship ended up staying in their employer's house for several days. It was pure coincidence, but it reflects the close relationship between commerce and community along the Gulf Coast.¹

The study of maritime communities is a regular topic of scholarly discussion. The existence of a maritime culture that feeds these communities has also been a mainstay of maritime history. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Eric Sager examined the sailing communities of Canada, denoting the ship as a place of both work and community that encompassed sailors' lives at sea. Maritime work was a formative experience that shaped sailors' demeanors and outlooks throughout their lives. Sailors connected with other workers in their industries, working towards common goals and objectives. In the early 2000s, Marcus Rediker expanded the field with his research on pirates, arguing that they developed a culture characterized by "collectivism, anti-authoritarianism, and egalitarianism." Since then, a growing body of scholarship has linked maritime life and social history. Paul Gilje connected maritime communities to collective political action during the Age of Revolution, demonstrating the potential, as well as the limitations, of maritime work. Christopher Magra connected revolutionary endeavors in New England to the cod fisheries, showing the strategies that New England fishermen used to help secure American independence. A plethora of recent scholarship has shown the impact of the maritime community on its terrestrial counterpart and vice versa.²

Along the meandering southern coastline, barrier islands, and dangerous marshes, the distinction between life on land and sea was complicated. By following the coasting trade through the late nineteenth century, we can see that the age of steam coexisted uneasily with the age of sail. The persistence of small sailing craft, the mobility between sea and shore, and tight-knit coastal communities all point to a maritime modernity that was uneven, negotiated, and deeply local. In recovering this history, the Gulf emerges not as a

¹ *Galveston Daily News*, 17 August 1875.

² Lydia Carol-Decker, "Maritime Culture: A Sociological Perspective," *International Journal of Maritime History* 30, no. 2 (May 2018): 312; Eric Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820–1914* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 222; Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Beacon Press, 2004), 26; Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 97; Christopher Magra, *The Fisherman's Cause: Atlantic Commerce and the Maritime Dimensions of the American Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.

peripheral backwater but as a site where the boundaries between land and sea, steam and sail, and tradition and modernity were constantly redefined. Rather than treating ships as isolated worlds unto themselves, this study highlights how coasting linked maritime and terrestrial life, revealing a working world sustained by both mobility and community. Those who lived and worked on the Gulf spent their lives in the estuary, working on the sea but proximate to the land, weaving between barrier islands and adjacent shores. Sailors embarked on shorter voyages, found more reliable work, and had greater presence in port cities and towns than their deep-water counterparts. They were not isolated but rather showed remarkably deep connections with other maritime workers and with terrestrial communities. Coasting proved a critical linchpin that helped form a liminal Gulf community that persisted both at sea and on land.

Congress, in its earliest sessions, had recognized the importance of trade to the young nation. In the 1790s, Congress legislated strict delineations between blue water (i.e., international) trade and coasting or domestic trade. To count as a coasting vessel and avoid more strict taxation, vessels had to limit themselves to American ports. Though simple in theory, the reality was far more complicated. Across the Gulf, coasters regularly violated territorial regulation, trading and traveling across the Caribbean at will. Government onlookers complained that coasting schooners were “in the coasting trade today and in the foreign trade tomorrow,” despite the clear intent of the law.³ Later, the Navigation Act of 1817 stated that officers aboard American vessels must be American citizens, creating an American monopoly on coasting, but again these laws were largely ignored or subverted. Such protectionist laws were intended to keep an American presence at sea, creating continuity among the coasting population and an ever-present naval reserve in times of war. Despite the best intentions, the captains and mates were frequently the only ones that engaged in multiple voyages together, developing tight working relationships, assuming they were not business partners or even relatives.⁴

In Galveston and other cities across the postbellum South, independent

³ *Report of the Merchant Marine Commission: Together with the Testimony Taken at the Hearings. Volume III. Hearings on the Southern Coast and at Washington, D.C.* (Government Printing Office [hereafter GPO], 1906), 1788.

⁴ Walter MacArthur, *The Seaman's Contract, 1790–1918* (James H. Barry Co., 1919), 5, 47; US Treasury Department, *Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine Hospital Service of the United States 1875* (Washington, DC, 1876), 234; US Treasury Department, Collection District of New Orleans, Records Relating to Shipping Articles, 1840–1872, Records of the US Customs Service, Record Group (hereafter RG) 36, National Archives at Fort Worth, TX (hereafter NAFW); Samuel W. Bryant, *The Sea and The States: A Maritime History of the American People* (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 334.

captains found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet in the face of industrialization. Larger and larger steamships traveled along so-called “rails at sea” between larger metropolises, with few stops at smaller ports along the way. For a time, coasters filled in the gaps created by steam lines. Large ports served as nodes, connecting small ports to the commerce of the world via access to steam liners, but the work of transporting goods and people from these smaller ports fell to more lightly drafted coasting vessels. Three-masted schooners, manned by nine or 10 men under a single officer, came to typify coasting vessels. These ships were cheap to build, used readily available lumber, and moved swiftly enough to satisfy local markets. In the case of more isolated locales, coasting vessels had little competition from larger ships throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1870s, between 30 and 60 schooners were engaged in regular trade between the small Louisiana community along the shores of Lake Charles and the primary port in Galveston. Even internationally, islands in the Bahamas relied on American coasting vessels for trade and communication well into the 1890s.⁵

Coasting work remained based on personal networks, and therefore older traditions prevailed. The work of coasting in a confined geography limited the availability of potential workers and potential customers. In Galveston and other cities, independent captains found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Larger shipping companies bought out more coasting ships every year. However, captains did not leap headfirst into the world of corporate capitalism. Instead, they held onto older business strategies even as they nominally accepted employment. Captains insisted on maintaining control over the day-to-day affairs on board their vessels at sea as well as in port. Even when their vessels were regularly chartered for months at a time by the same company, captains still selected their own crews from the available labor pool rather than surrendering recruitment to corporate managers. Masters chartered for six months or even a year still desired to maintain personal control over recruitment.⁶

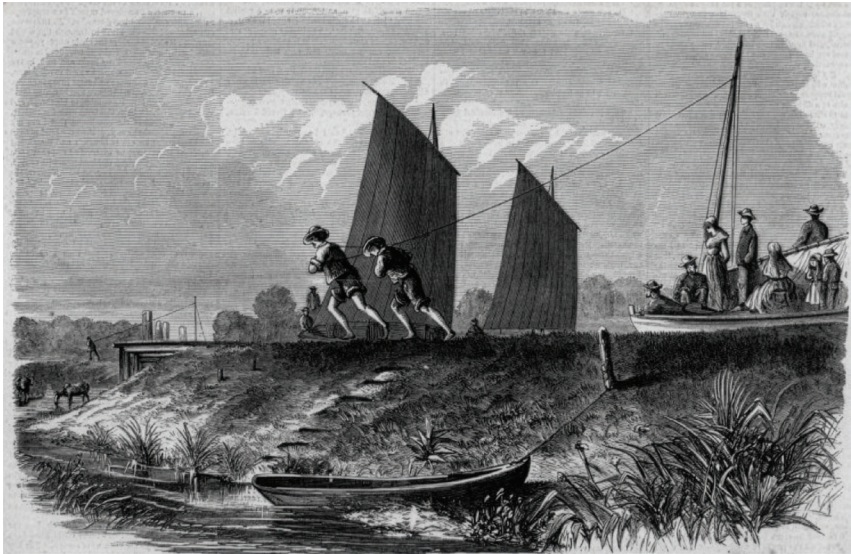
Coasting vessels also maintained well-established approaches to compensation, such as pre-voyage advances and shares rather than set wages. Larger steamship companies had drifted away from these traditions. This was partially because steamships spent less time in port. Consequently,

⁵ “Trade and Industries of the Bahamas,” *The Miscellaneous Documents of the House of Representatives for the First Session of the Fifty-Second Congress, 1891–’92*, vol. 35 (Washington, DC, 1892), 636; *Galveston Daily News*, 14 November 1879; Bryant, *The Sea and The States*, 335.

⁶ US Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *Report of the Commissioner for 1885*, part 13 (Washington, DC, 1887), 282.

the employees spent less money in port. Steamship companies went out of their way to isolate sailors aboard larger vessels. Furthermore, the corporate structure of large steamship companies also found bookkeeping simpler if the employees were paid regularly. Sailing vessels, on the other hand, spent more time in port, especially if the wind turned awry. In such cases sailors might have extra days or even weeks on shore, waiting for their chance to cast off.⁷

Coasters took advantage of the blurred boundary between shore and sea when they could. The barrier islands, bays, and marshes that characterized the Gulf Coast were notoriously porous. In Louisiana, coasting vessels broke



Two men use a *cordelle*; A.R. Waud, "Acadians Hauling Boats - A Scene on the Bayou Lafourche, Louisiana," *Harper's Weekly* 10, no. 511 (13 October 1866): 645.

through the marshes or took advantage of small canals to reach inland trade. Small canal boats, or *canots*, moved through these waterways with the aid of the *cordelle*, a rope used to haul vessels forward when there was no wind, often by donkeys, mules, or even longshoremen along the towpath. Some of these boats effectively served as floating general stores, leaving weekly with groceries and supplies and making the rounds of isolated farms and settlements in the bayous. At each stop, they could load valuable sugar and molasses while selling their own cargo before returning to the open Gulf and voyaging on. From the Louisiana coast, they could travel anywhere along the Gulf Coast or

⁷ *Sailors' Magazine and Seamen's Friend* 48, no. 2 (February 1876), 33.

into the broader Caribbean basin.⁸

Coasting work was not simply its own niche, however. The various maritime industries overlapped. The coastal fisheries provided the nursing ground for coasting. Notoriously finicky sailing vessels, such as those employed in the Gulf fishing industry, required experienced hands to operate them. For instance, a young African American man in Reconstruction Florida began his maritime career by pestering Key West sponging vessels to give him occasional work, before later transitioning to subsequent careers in the merchant marine and the US Navy. The skills that young men acquired in one job could frequently apply to other areas of maritime work, including a stint in the navy before working in the merchant marine. The work of sailing was a skill that could be used on other vessels. One report even suggested that steamship sailors deserted to work in the coasting industries.⁹

For many, coasting was a part-time job, making up some of the deficit during the off-seasons for fishing. Fishers, spongers, and other workers of the sea often went to work on short coasting voyages for a limited duration. During the frozen winter months, mariners from the northern states occasionally traveled all the way to the Gulf Coast to work in warmer climes. By the turn of the century, veteran sailors from the Great Lakes journeyed to the small port of Scranton, Mississippi, working in the lumber trade while ice inhibited navigation. Even those who worked near the water rather than on it occasionally ventured into coasting. Longshoremen, who interacted regularly with sailors, were occasionally persuaded during hard times to work on coasting vessels, though they seemed to have preferred their land-bound occupation when possible. The reverse was also true, though the more organized longshoremen typically closed ranks against this sort of invasion. For men who wearied of a migratory lifestyle, coasting provided a gateway to more stable forms of marine employment, such as that offered aboard tugs and pilot boats.¹⁰

⁸ T.B. Thorpe, "Sugar and the Sugar Region of Louisiana," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 7, no. 42 (November 1853): 746–67.

⁹ *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, vol. 3, *Florida Narratives* (Library of Congress, 1941), 311–26. Writers and politicians referred constantly to a connection between the merchant marine and naval enlistments; see the *Proceedings of the Gulf Coast Convention, American Shipping and Industrial League, Birmingham, Alabama, November 8, 9, 10, 1887* (Birmingham, 1887), 26; and *Harper's Weekly* 35, no. 1799 (13 June 1891): 446.

¹⁰ *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Convention of the International Seamen's Union of America held in Milwaukee, Wis., December 1–6, 1902* (The Union, n.d.), 12; P.H. Bailhache, "Report on the Hygiene of the Merchant Marine with Recommendations," *Annual Report of the National Board of Health. 1879* (Washington, DC, 1879), 266; J.H. Merryman to Hugh McCulloch, 7 June 1866, Letters Received, 1804–1899, Box 20, RG 36, NAFW; T.H. Glenn,

Just as the transferable skillset that mariners developed helped blur the boundaries between fishing, piloting, and shipping, the vessels themselves were also multipurpose. Larger ships served as fishing vessels but also carried freight. Other captains involved in the coasting trade hired fishing boats directly. The inshore boats sold their harvest directly to the coasting vessels, with some “running to the larger markets of Florida, while others go directly to Havana and other points in the West Indies.”¹¹ Domestic trade followed a similar pattern. Northern coasting vessels looking for cargo knew to head south to trade with local fishermen. As they approached the oystering grounds of Maryland and North Carolina, coasting schooners hoisted an “empty bucket or a small flag” upon arrival, a clear sign that they were ready and willing to purchase the oysters that smaller ships brought to them. Before long the hold of the larger vessel was full, and it sailed off toward northern cities to reap the reward and begin the process anew. The oyster schooners themselves were theoretically limited to working the oyster bays for only a few months out of the year. In the off season, the ships would set out running fruits and vegetables up and down the eastern seaboard. Louisiana oysterers followed a similar pattern, transporting fruit and other “country produce” from the coastal plantations in the summer and oystering in the winter. In Galveston local freight ships would make several fishing trips during the slow months to catch red snapper. The rhythm of the seasons affected those at sea, as a clever captain would be aware of what crops were coming in.¹²

The lines blurred further when the trade in question consisted of fish, one of the coast’s largest products. Fish were marketable products and independent fishing vessels had to consider market variations in their choice of destination. Contracted vessels took their cargo directly to a specific port, accepting a pre-set rate on their catch, but independent vessels had the ability to set their own priorities. Oyster ships from New Orleans, called “freight boats” by the oystermen themselves, purchased oysters from the fishermen along the bayou as long as the market could bear, but when the price dropped enough, roughly

The Mexican Gulf Coast on Mobile Bay and Mississippi Sound (Mobile, AL, 1893), 43.

¹¹ George B. Goode, ed., *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1887), sec. 5, vol. 1, 566.

¹² Bailhache, “Report on the Hygiene of the Merchant Marine,” 266; *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Convention of the International Seaman’s Union of America*, 22; W. Wyman, “Hardships of the Coasting Trade, and Particularly of the Chesapeake Bay Oystermen,” in American Public Health Association, *Public Health Papers and Reports*, vol. 10 (Concord, NH, 1884), 275; *Galveston Daily News*, 19 January 1878; US Census Bureau, *The History and Present Conditions of Fishery Industries* (Washington, DC, 1881), 160, 162, 198; Charles H. Stevenson, “Report on the Coast Fisheries of Texas,” United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *Report of the Commissioner for 1889 to 1891* (Washington, DC, 1893), 401.

to 50 or 60 cents per barrel, the “oystermen stop running until a rise occurs.”¹³ During that time the ship might be put into dock or find alternative avenues of income. Sponge fishers made their own calculation, despite enjoying a more captive market. Sponge vessels “eagerly hail outward-bound vessels” on their voyages back to the Florida coast with constant queries for market prices.¹⁴ A subsection of fishing vessels ventured into international trade, deciding that their cargo would be better received in Cuba. Smacks along the Florida coast made “twelve or fourteen trips a year” to Havana, providing snapper or grouper to the plantations. For a few, selling fish to Havana became the backbone of their business, contracting with Cuban businesses for 50 cents per fish, nearly double what they were worth in the US. On their return, they loaded up with Havana brandies, wines, and spices to sell in Key West.¹⁵

In the tightly knit world that coasters occupied, the lines between commerce and community frequently blurred. While some coasting vessels limited themselves to regular routes and predictable cargo, others took on whatever opportunities arose. Most ships transported both goods and people, with some travelers promising to work in exchange for passage. To evade local inspection, captains often listed these passengers as crew members. Coasters carried whatever cargo was in demand, from lumber and railroad ties to cotton, fruit, and livestock. The *Verbena*, a Galveston schooner, exemplified this flexibility, shifting its cargo from voyage to voyage while navigating the Gulf’s unpredictable markets. Over the course of a year, it transported beef and livestock, oil cakes, salt, fruit, sugar, and, of course, cotton.¹⁶

Coasters worked on the narrowest of margins, where delays or damages equaled economic disaster. “Innumerable small craft coming from the bayous, rivers, and bay coasts from other small ports” carried whatever diverse cargo they believed they could sell in port. These small-time merchants and would-be captains gambled that they could make enough profit to support themselves and their crew. Many of them could not even afford to hire tugs to bring them safely into port, with captains navigating the bays illegally or gaining pilot’s

¹³ Goode, *Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, sec. 5, vol. 2, 459.

¹⁴ Kirk Munroe, “Sponge and Spongers of the Florida Reef,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 12, no. 5 (November 1892): 646.

¹⁵ Goode, *Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, 589, 592; *Annual Report of the National Board of Health. 1879*, 393; Milos M. Vujnovich, *Yugoslavs in Louisiana* (Pelican Publishing Company, 2000), 109.

¹⁶ S.L. Norton to J.D. Crawford, 2 November 1891, Miscellaneous Letters sent by the Collector of Customs, 1890–1891, Box 19, RG 36, NAFW. The arrival of vessels and their cargoes were regular features in portside newspapers; see *Galveston Daily News*, 12 April, 4 June, 25 October, and 11 December 1874.

licenses for themselves. Nevertheless, they served an important purpose, giving to the city “varieties of fruits and products that are essential to domestic life.”¹⁷

The competition for coasting work primarily came from other coasters. As work became scarcer, coasting ships competed harder for what cargo was available. In a few instances, coasting vessels tailed each other, “under the excitement of competition,” looking to take advantage of any opportunities that arose, while depriving rival vessels of their cargo. Sometimes a ship’s misfortune was an opportunity for profit as well. Wreckers along the Florida coast made a business out of tending to stranded vessels, with such practices common elsewhere along the Gulf Coast as well. Even smaller vessels had to rely on the kindness of strangers when they got stranded, and those good Samaritans would take a cut of the cargo. In addition to wrecking, salvage cases regularly appeared before the courts as coasters spotted abandoned or lost cargo along the coastline. If no owner could be proven, the courts would sell the salvage with 50 per cent of the proceeds going directly to the coasters, which was typically divided amongst the crew. Most ships along the coast kept an eye out for floating salvage as an opportunity for free profit. Lizzie Farrier, the widow of a fisherman, decorated her home with salvage, including a salvaged mirror that she and her husband received as a wedding gift. She went on to explain that all fishermen “got things off the wrecks from time to time.” If sailors discovered larger caches of salvage than they could handle in one load, they would call in ships that they were friendly with so that others could benefit from the bonanza. Pilot ships off the coast of New Orleans divided and salvaged 12 bales of abandoned cotton. An unidentified bark also got in on the action. In a more dramatic case, one vessel sailed 200 miles off course to collect bales of cotton floating off the Bermuda Islands.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Galveston Daily News*, 1 May 1880.

¹⁸ “Harriss, F.L., Sazdler, and Massengill (interviewers): Fisherman’s Widow,” 27 December 1938, document case 10, folder 506, 8, Federal Writers’ Project Papers, Collection ID: 03709, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. *Galveston Daily News*, 18 January 1876. Wrecking cases were frequent along Florida’s coasts. Documents created as a result of this litigation can be found in the records of the US District Court for the Southern District of Florida, Records of the District Courts of the United States, RG 21, National Archives at Atlanta, GA. The volumes in this series were microfilmed as “Admiralty Final Record Books of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida (Key West), 1987–1987,” M1360, Publications of the National Archives, RG 64, National Archives at College Park, MD. M1360 was digitized as “US, Admiralty Records, Key West, 1829–1911” by Fold3, a database and digital repository of government and military records. The website <https://www.fold3.com/publication/1/us-admiralty-records-key-west-1829-1911> provided data for the following cases: Samuel Malone v. American Ship

Coasters were part of a broader community that reflected their work and their backgrounds. In point of fact, coasters served as one of the lynchpins of the maritime community, linking land and sea. Coasters spent more time in fewer ports than their deep-water brethren and created long-term relationships. Despite the refrain from reformers that sailors were an at-risk population that was constantly being taken advantage of, the reality was more complicated. Coasting sailors were much more likely to have a “home port” that they returned to on a regular basis, even if they had not been born in that port. They left families and friends behind and spent their hard-earned wages on keeping those connections alive. Exact numbers are difficult to account for, but one businessman felt confident in stating that the regular crews coasting between Texas and Louisiana were “mostly citizens of Galveston,” rather than migratory transplants, while a customs house commissioner in New Orleans noted that the crews of French ships frequently resided in the city. The captain of one such ship, the report noted, had a permanent residence on Bourbon Street, where his wife worked as a milliner and dressmaker.¹⁹

The geography of the Gulf helped inculcate other relationships. The whims of nature paid little heed to shipping timetables. Smaller sailing vessels waited hours, days, and sometimes even weeks for favorable winds to assist them in leaving port. The barrier islands and shallow waters oftentimes forced captains to hire pilots to bring the larger craft into port, even if they were not required to do so. Pilot vessels had their own crews, typically made up of veteran sailors, who all lived locally. In fact, the pilots formed their own communities, living in tight-knit groups. The ease with which they moved from ship to shore proved a regular hassle and made quarantines nearly impossible to enforce. Health inspectors blamed such movement for a yellow fever outbreak in Pensacola in 1882, though it would have been impossible to stop such movement. The pilot in question traveled to the infected vessel to “procure liquor.”²⁰ Even when they were not working, coasters maintained long-term connections, reflecting their more stable lifestyles. Coasters were more likely than transnational sailors to maintain long-term lodgings. For instance, a Pensacola city directory for 1900 recorded 56 marine workers as “seaman,” in contrast with fisherman or bayman

Pedro, 1878; Absalom Albury v. Spanish Schooner Anita, 1888; Adolphus Russell v. Steamship Tregurno, 1892; and Harry M. Davis v. Twelve Bales of Cotton, 1879.

¹⁹ *Galveston Daily News*, 22 August 1879; J.D. Crawford to William Grant, 12 September 1891, Miscellaneous Letters sent by the Collector of Customs, 1890–1891, Box 20, RG 36, NAFW.

²⁰ *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Convention of the International Seaman's Union of America*, 22; R.B.S. Hargis, “The Pensacola Yellow-Fever Epidemic of 1882,” *Annual Report of the National Board of Health. 1883* (Washington, DC, 1884), 105.



A.R. Waud, "Ferry-boat to Brashear City, on Berwick Bay, Louisiana," *Harper's Weekly* 10, no. 512 (20 October 1866): 664.

(i.e., those who worked in nearby fisheries), though it is almost certain that many of those listed as fishermen engaged in coasting for at least part of the year. Unsurprisingly, most of those 56 lived in close proximity to the wharves, with seven of them living on Government Street alone. Of the 56, 38 were listed as married, reflecting the longer-term ties that coasters maintained with their home communities. Modest as they are, those numbers do not reflect the absolute sailing population of Pensacola, as the publishers themselves noted that they only recorded about one-third of the total population living in the city at that time. The Galveston city directory for 1875 recorded only 10 residents of the city as a "seaman," but all of them lived on the Strand, in close proximity to the wharves. Again, the number of residents listed as seaman underrepresents the actual figure for Galveston maritime workers, as many of the respondents in the city directory did not include their occupation or were listed simply as "laborer." This was especially true for the African American population. Given that between 30 and 60 schooners traveled between Galveston and New Orleans alone, the number of sailors living in the city was undoubtedly much higher.²¹

²¹ *Maloney's Pensacola 1900 City Directory* (Atlanta, 1900); *Fayman & Reilly's Galveston City Directory for 1875-1876* (Galveston, 1875).

When not in their home port, they were much more likely to sleep as the guests of local sailors than in boarding houses, for instance. They had connections with local neighborhoods and spent their free time in pursuits outside the stereotypical drinking and carousing. These connections caused occasional difficulties for captains who could not keep their crew. Coasting sailors could find alternative sources of income, either on other ships or on land. In one instance, a captain reported one of his sailors missing only to find that the man in question had taken alternative employment in an ice cream parlor.²²

Of course, the connection between sailors and cheap boardinghouses could not be denied. Even among the more stable coasting population, plenty spent their shore leave in sailors' boarding houses, institutions generally decried as houses of sin and criminality. Reformers and government officials insisted that boarding houses posed a moral and frequently a legal problem, as owners had reputations for kidnapping and shanghaiing innocent sailors. The solution they imagined was more regulation and more morality. The men themselves, however, disagreed. The disdain that sailors had for reformers was evident. So-called "holy joes" dictated a lifestyle that was simply unrealistic to the sailing community. What reformers failed to note was that sailing boarding houses were part of the broader maritime community as well as part of everyday city life. For instance, Robert Webber of Galveston not only owned one of the sailors' saloons but also owned the wharf they docked at and served as a city jailor, a wise connection for a sailor to cultivate. Another popular sailors' boarding house in Galveston, the Old Dublin House, advertised a dance and raffle to the community at large, with the winner receiving a "fine French clock." Sailors not only met with each other, but also with permanent residents, lining up work and companionship while on shore.²³

These terrestrial communities were not just social but were an economic necessity for both captains and men. The ties between mariners and landsmen could become quite tight and those interested in maritime matters frequently shared news. In the salvage case cited above, the captain of the ship had heard about the bales of cotton while in port at Key West. When successful salvage and wrecking voyages occurred, talk of the incoming bounty spread as the state prepared to auction off the unclaimed goods. Reports of successful wrecking ventures even attracted Native American traders from the Everglades "to secure

²² Robert D. Murray, "Yellow Fever at Key West in 1875," US Treasury Department, *Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine-Hospital Service of the United States for the Fiscal Year 1875* (Washington, DC, 1876), 129.

²³ *Coast Seamen's Journal* 18, no. 2 (1904): 3; *Galveston Daily News*, 10 January 1874; *Morrison & Fourmy's General Directory of the City of Galveston, 1886-87* (Galveston, 1886).

a portion of the plunder.”²⁴ Word of mouth carried news of other opportunities as well. Coasters decided on where to journey based as much on news from other coasters as any newspaper. Nor was the sharing of information limited to just coasters. Merchant ships advised fishing vessels on where to find abundant fishing grounds.²⁵

In addition to terrestrial communities, sailors formed maritime communities based on their shared experiences. The view of sailors as members of a temporary but isolated community while at sea is a misleading one. While sailors did spend much of their time aboard ships underway, there were still opportunities to interact with the outside world. Those opportunities were even greater for sailors engaged in coasting rather than trans-oceanic travel. Coasters were rarely more than a few days or weeks without some outside contact. Ships coming into or leaving port were swarmed by smaller boats, looking for trade, or providing transport for “friends and strangers.” Coasters traveled near enough to the shore that one vessel, the *W.A. Watson*, was able to ask people on shore for directions to the nearest port.²⁶

Interactions with vessels underway also provided limited opportunities for communication and trade. The proximity of other coasters, fishing, sponging, and oystering vessels, and even larger ships working in foreign trade meant they all came into contact at one point or another. This fact was part of the ubiquity of coasting and part of what made coastal sailors so hard to track. Sailors jumped from one ship to another, taking advantage of temporary proximity for their own diversion and profit. This nearly led to disaster in an instance inside the Galveston harbor when six sailors overturned their boat while traveling from an English bark to a local fishing smack. A local captain happened to witness the scene and quickly sent his yawl to their rescue. The practice of trading with other ships was so prevalent that even border enforcers threw up their hands at the practice, noting that it was nearly impossible to prevent such activity.²⁷

²⁴ *Weekly Floridian* (Tallahassee), 1 December 1887.

²⁵ Harry M. Davis v. Twelve Bales of Cotton, 1879, “US, Admiralty Records, Key West, 1829–1911,” Fold3, <https://www.fold3.com/publication/1/us-admiralty-records-key-west-1829-1911>; J.W. Collins, “The Gulf Fishing Grounds and Fisheries,” US Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *Report of the Commissioner for 1885*, 279.

²⁶ James Grey to W.L. McMillin, 12 December 1891, Transcripts of Miscellaneous Letters, 1891–1893, Box 2, RG 36, NAFW; Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies* (New York, 1890), 35; *Annual Report of the United States Life-Saving Service for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1881* (Washington, DC, 1881), 167.

²⁷ *Galveston Evening Tribune*, 15 November 1886; “Key West Quarantine ... Report of Operations,” US Treasury Department, *Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine-Hospital Service of the United States for the Fiscal Year 1895* (Washington, DC,



"In Quarantine," *Harper's Weekly* 17, no. 883 (29 November 1873): 1069.

The efforts of the United States to enforce border control also created opportunities for sailors to develop broader relationships. The United States and other nations deployed irregular quarantines to try to stop the spread of infectious diseases such as yellow fever. These quarantines were widely decried by merchants and businessmen who depended on speedy trade, but the halt in shipping provided opportunities for sailors faced with unexpected leisure time. During quarantines, sailors were left to while away their time as best they could. They gathered in boats for fishing or went hunting, joined by crew members from other ships. Along the Gulf Coast, quarantined ships were held at barrier islands, within sight of land and occasionally cities. The temptation to hop across the intervening distance was always present, as one quarantine officer stationed off Pensacola complained bitterly. Incoming sailors made a habit of stealing quarantine boats to have a drink in the city, violating the law with abandon.²⁸

Even criminal activity reflected the communal ties that sailors developed. Along the coast, acts of rebellion, such as desertion, still depended on broader social networks if they were to succeed. An examination of desertions in the city of New Orleans for the years 1870 and 1880 reveals that sailors largely deserted in groups rather than individually. For the year 1870, single individuals committed only 14 per cent of desertions. At the same time, groups larger than three accounted for more than 55 per cent of desertions. In Galveston, a group of six sailors deserted at the same time, hiding out in a nearby warehouse for more than a week before looking for new work. Along the coast it was entirely possible for crew members to steal lifeboats to desert, confident that another ship would pick them up in short order.²⁹

Coasting vessels also played a key role in the most notable criminal activity along the coast: smuggling. While small-scale smuggling by individual sailors was almost inevitable, coasting vessels also played a key role in larger, international smuggling rings. Smuggling along the coast relied on the maritime community that coasters maintained. Coasters held detailed knowledge of the

1896), 287; Report to Collector, 5 February 1869, Letters Received, 1868–1885, Box 3, RG 36, NAFW.

²⁸ William Martin, "Report on the Yellow-Fever Epidemic of 1882 at Pensacola, Florida," *Annual Report of the National Board of Health for 1883* (Washington, DC, 1884), 74; "Key West Quarantine," 287; William Henry Davison, "Diary," 1 June–21 November 1876, 3, 19, 62, M1968-11/47, Archives and West Florida History Center, John C. Pace Library, University of West Florida.

²⁹ "Key West Quarantine," 287; US Treasury Department, Collection District of New Orleans, Records Relating to Shipping Articles, 1840–1872, RG 36, NAFW; *Galveston Evening Tribune*, 5 November 1889.

meandering Gulf and found “safe retreats at many different points.” They used that knowledge to deliver illicit cargo hidden from the eyes of the authorities. They acted as liaisons between foreign ships and their customers, unloading them away from port. At that point, merchants in on the schemes would come to collect their merchandise and transport it into the interior. In other instances, foreign ships “dropped” cargo overboard right next to coasting vessels, which returned with the goods as legitimate salvage.³⁰

The disparate coastal communities across the Gulf were tied together by a shared maritime world that endured throughout the late nineteenth century. In 1900, the United States produced more coasting watercraft than any other variety, even as steamships overtook sail. As the nation claimed its status as a maritime empire, coasters continued to ply the Gulf, employing the traditions and relationships of an older maritime economy. These smaller craft moved goods and people through short-haul routes, linking small ports and islands to the larger currents of commerce. Yet the age of coasting was nearing its end. Independent captains and fishers were gradually displaced by railroads and corporate shipping. After the turn of the century, the Gulf’s coasting trade slowly faded from view. Still, its persistence reveals that industrial modernity along the Gulf was an uneven process. The small schooners that threaded a course between marshes and islands carried not only cargo but a way of life that blurred the lines between sea and shore, sail and steam, tradition and change.

Kevin Grubbs is an assistant professor of history at McLennan Community College. He earned his PhD from the University of Southern Mississippi in 2023. His work examines the interplay between brown and blue water work in the postbellum South. Previous publications include “Pathways of Escape: The Interstate Slave Trade and Runaway Slaves in Mississippi.” This article won the Clark G. Reynolds Student Paper Award in 2022.

³⁰ Report to Collector, 5 February 1869, Letters Received, 1868–1885, Box 3, RG 36, NAFW; John P. Wall, “The Yellow Fever in Tampa, Plant City, Manatee, and Palmetto,” in US Treasury Department, *Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine-Hospital Service of the United States for the Fiscal Year 1889* (Washington, DC, 1889), 61.