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The Knowles Atlantic Impressment Riots of the 1740s

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ABSTRACT In Britain's wars of the 1740s Royal Navy press-gangs circulated throughout the Atlantic world attempting to force, or impress, British seamen into naval service. Sailors responded, often with the backing of Atlantic seaport communities, by mounting the most spectacular series of impressment riots in the eighteenth century. These disturbances showed that even while impressment helped to forge a common English-speaking Atlantic world, the institution also operated according to separate laws, customs, and traditions in individual regions of the Atlantic. Moreover, the seizing of men produced different consequences depending on the labor markets of particular seaports. Yet, if impressment riots in the British Isles, the West Indies, and North America did not always look the same, they often did share one common element: the presence of Admiral Charles Knowles. In the 1740s Knowles instigated the largest impressment riots in the history of Britain's Caribbean and American colonies. Indeed, the Boston Knowles Riot of 1747 was the most serious disturbance against British imperial authority in the mainland American colonies in the generation before the Stamp Act crisis. Together the Knowles riots and other acts of resistance against press-gangs demonstrated how dangerous forced naval service had become for Britain's Atlantic empire by the mid-eighteenth century.

In May 1748 Admiral Charles Knowles of Britain faced the familiar prospect of having to find recruits for his woefully undermanned Jamaica naval squad-

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ron. For most of the 1740s Knowles had struggled to keep his ships at fighting strength wherever the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739–43) and the War of the Austrian Succession (known in America as King George's War, 1744–48) had taken him. His usual response to the problem had been to impress, or force, British seamen from merchant trading vessels or in British seaports to serve in his Royal Navy ships. But not in the spring of 1748. Instead, Knowles went out of his way *not* to impress. He published an advertisement in Port Royal offering sailors the unusual wartime opportunity to set the period of their naval service and to choose their vessel. The offer attracted three possible recruits, not one of them a sailor—hardly the response needed to fill the squadron's shortfall of five hundred men. Next Knowles offered financial rewards to anyone who turned in a naval deserter and special protections to merchants who shared their labor force, but he still had no takers. Finally, on May 20 the admiral resorted to asking Jamaica's Governor Edward Trelawny for permission to impress sailors. "I assure you I am concern'd at being obliged to make this request," Knowles wrote, "as I know pressing is disagreeable." Governor Trelawny and Jamaica's Council acknowledged the admiral's polite request by allowing him to press for two months to reach his necessary complement of men.¹

By 1748 Knowles had good reason to be "concern'd" at the "disagreeable" nature of impressment. Just months before arriving in Jamaica, his press-gangs had instigated a three-day disturbance in Boston that today bears his name, the Knowles Riot of 1747. Early American historians are familiar with the Knowles Riot as the largest disturbance against British imperial authority in the mainland American colonies in the generation before the Stamp Act crisis.² But few scholars recognize that Knowles left a larger trail of recruiting disasters during his service in the wars of the 1740s. After participating in

and my colonial history students at Wayne State University whom I impressed into service for commenting on earlier drafts of the essay.

1. Correspondence between Knowles and Governor Trelawny is included in the Jamaica Council Minutes, May 24, 1748, Colonial Office Papers 140/32, National Archives of the United Kingdom, London (hereafter CO, NAUK) (formerly PRO).

2. John Lax and William Pencak, "The Knowles Riot and the Crisis of the 1740's in Massachusetts," *Perspectives in American History* 10 (1976): 163–216, remains the best narrative of the incident and has been invaluable in preparing this essay. For other secondary accounts of the riot, see Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 221–24; Douglas E. Leach, *Roots of Conflict: British Armed Forces and Colonial Americans, 1677–1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 154–56; and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The*

humbling defeats to the Spanish at Cartagena in 1741 and La Guayra and Porto Cabello in 1743, he caused an impressment riot in Antigua and contributed to the poisonous atmosphere surrounding the issue in Barbados—all before ever reaching Boston.³

This essay traces Knowles's travels in the British Isles, West Indies, and North America in the 1740s to explore regional variations in impressment riots in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Knowles, whom one leading British naval historian has called "one of the most prickly and litigious [officers] in the annals of the eighteenth century Navy," serves as an ideal constant for such a study.⁴ But the collection of impressment riots discussed here do not simply belong to the great-man (or not-so-great-man) school of history. The disturbances expose how impressment operated according to separate laws, customs, and traditions in individual regions of the Atlantic. To be sure, press-gangs were not popular anywhere, but the seizing of men could have different consequences depending on the labor markets of individual seaports. Impressment thus joined other institutions and practices in the eighteenth century, such as slavery, Protestantism, and royal political culture, that helped to link the British Empire but also took place along an Atlantic spectrum of variation and difference.⁵ For Knowles it was a rude discovery that impressing sailors in London, Antigua, and Boston did not constitute the same process. Violent confrontations between press-gangs and seamen could paralyze the Royal Navy in Atlantic seaports and threatened to disintegrate ties between Britain and its colonial territories. As Knowles knew only too well, the British

Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 215–17.

3. Richard Pares, "The Manning of the Navy in the West Indies, 1702–63," *Royal Historical Society, Transactions*, 4th ser., 20 (1937): 48–49, and Duncan Crewe, *Yellow Jack and the Worm: British Naval Administration in the West Indies, 1739–1748* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 134–35, mention Knowles's manning difficulties in the Caribbean but do not link them to his later troubles in Boston. The admiral's long entry in Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee, eds., *The Dictionary of National Biography* (1892–93; rept., London: Oxford University Press, 1937–38), s.v. Knowles, Charles, ignores impressment. For other assessments of Knowles's naval career, see J. C. M. Ogelsby, "The British Attacks on the Caracas Coast, 1743," *Mariner's Mirror* 58 (1972): 27–40, and Julian Gwyn, "The Royal Navy in North America, 1712–1776," in Jeremy Black and Philip Woodfine, eds., *The British Navy and the Use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988), 136–37.

4. *Ibid.*, 136.

5. Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 741–57, has recently identified geographic variation and cultural diversity as key features of Atlantic history. For studies that

state walked a dangerous tightrope by using impressment to man its navy throughout the Atlantic.

BRITISH ISLES

In the 1740s the only territorial region of the British Atlantic where Charles Knowles did not instigate an impressment riot was the British Isles. But Knowles's clean record at home had more to do with his spending most of the decade away at war in the Western Hemisphere than with a lack of violence in the British Isles. Indeed, the vast majority of all impressments and violent confrontations between sailors and press-gangs took place in the waters surrounding Britain's major ports, particularly in the English Channel. To understand how this pattern of rioting developed, the following pages will provide a brief overview of impressment as it had evolved in the British Isles by the 1740s.

Impressment was a constant in England's past. In 1777 the pamphleteer Charles Butler observed, "It is impossible to point [to] the time when it [impressment] did not exist."⁶ Dating to Anglo-Saxon times, it was a power belonging to kings that functioned according to the principles of feudalism. Select English ports had the duty of providing the Crown with ships and men for naval campaigns in exchange for special trading rights and privileges.⁷ The press-gang became the basic unit of the navy's recruiting system in the Tudor era. A lieutenant, often accompanied by a mate or midshipman, led anywhere between one and ten additional men in each gang; few numbered above a dozen in total. Lieutenants preferred to fill their gangs with sailors, but the navy's manning demands often made them resort to hiring local toughs on land. At sea, press-gangs typically belonged to the crews of individual navy ships. The essential tools of the impressment trade were cudgels

organize regional differences within the British Empire along an Atlantic spectrum, see John M. Murrin, "A Roof without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity," in Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II, eds., *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 333–48; Richard Bushman, "Markets and Composite Farms in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 27 (1998): 351–74; and Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society in British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 44–78.

6. Charles Butler, *An Essay on the Legality of Impressing Seamen* (London: T. Cadell, 1777), 51.

7. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 138, 140–41; Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200–1860: A Social Survey* (London: Collins, 1968), 16–17; Ken Lloyd Gruffydd, "Royal Impressment and Maritime Wales during the Later Middle Ages," *Maritime Wales* 19 (1997–98): 30.



Figure 1. Portrait of Admiral Charles Knowles. Artist and date unknown. This portrait shows Knowles holding a telescope in his right hand and wearing the blue Royal Navy admiral's uniform with gold trim. The painting was most likely completed soon after Knowles's promotion to rear admiral in 1747, the same year he caused the largest impressment riot ever in North America. Reproduced by permission of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

(and sometimes pistols and cutlasses), ready sources of alcohol, and press warrants that gave gangs the legal authority to capture seamen.⁸

For all its seeming timelessness, impressment underwent fundamental qualitative and quantitative changes in the long eighteenth century. Between 1689 and 1815 Britain and France duelled for control of Europe and colonial territories across the globe in a series of intermittent wars known collectively

8. J. R. Hutchinson, *The Press Gang, Afloat and Ashore* (London: E. Nash, 1913), 55–56; “By the Commissioners for Executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of

as the Second Hundred Years' War. At the same time Britain also enjoyed an unprecedented overseas commercial expansion. The joint demands of war and trade put enormous pressure on its seafaring labor market, which led to a hardening of the impressment system.⁹ Before 1689 the regular naval fighting season was between April and September, after which the navy discharged men for the winter. Impressment had then offered a temporary solution for fitting out ships for specific expeditions or summer action. Beginning in the winter of 1692–93, however, the navy began keeping its ships manned year-round until particular wars ended.¹⁰ Rioting was synonymous with the navy's new definition of impressment. In 1692, when the service announced to sailors at Chatham that the fleet would remain manned through the winter for the first time, crews left the dockyard to riot in the town.¹¹ England's sailors had good reason to protest continuous service. Until the Royal Navy stopped impressing sailors in 1815, those who were captured remained in the service until they died, they escaped, or a particular war ended—whichever came first.

After 1689 impressment also expanded quantitatively. Estimates of the total number of seamen in Britain ranged between 50,000 and 100,000 over the course of the eighteenth century. Our most precise numbers today place the figure around 50,000 for the first half of the century and about 75,000 for the second half.¹² In peacetime the navy and merchant marine coexisted comfortably, for the navy enlisted on average only between 10,000 and 15,000 sailors, or around 20 percent of the whole. In wartime, however, the navy's share climbed up to two-thirds of Britain's total supply of seamen. For exam-

Great-Britain, Ireland, &c. . . ." (pressing instructions), London, 1791, Admiralty Papers 7/967/7, NAUK (hereafter ADM, NAUK).

9. For England's joint expansion in overseas naval and commercial activity, see Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (1976; rept., Malabar, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger, 1982), 64–76; Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 22–23; Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 115–17; and Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 148.

10. Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650–1775* (London: Methuen, 1998), 195; Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 124–25; Davis, *Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 116, 323; Daniel A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 231–32.

11. Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 124–25.

12. *Ibid.*, 114; Roland G. Usher Jr., "Royal Navy Impressment during the American Revolution," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 37 (1951): 680; David J. Starkey, "War and the Market for Seafarers in Britain, 1736–1792," in Lewis R. Fischer and Helge W. Nordvik, eds., *Shipping and Trade, 1750–1950: Essays in International Maritime Economic History* (Pontefract, U.K.: Lofthouse, 1990), 40–41.

ple, the navy's needs went from as few as 6,000 seamen during peacetime in the 1720s and 1730s to as many as 50,000 during the wars of the 1740s—a more than 700 percent increase. During wartime the navy raised about half of these seamen through impressments; the rest took advantage of bounties and other inducements offered to volunteers.¹³

Contrary to their reputation for sweeping Britain's jails, streets, and taverns for any available warm body, press-gangs directed most of their energy toward capturing the country's very best sailors, those who received the navy's highest rating of "able seamen."¹⁴ Also known as topmen, able seamen had a working knowledge of Atlantic trade winds and the skill to work aloft on naval and merchant vessels. Controlling a ship's topsails required a combination of skill and strength found most often in experienced sailors in their twenties. They needed a minimum of two years' training and usually began their careers going to sea in boyhood. Britain's overseas colonies contributed to the navy's total supply of topmen, but most topmen belonged to their own professional laboring class and worked out of the British Isles.¹⁵ The navy targeted these professional sailors for impressment because they had less incentive to volunteer than "ordinary seamen" and "landsmen," the navy's two lower ratings. In wartime able seamen had the opportunity to earn much higher wages on private merchant vessels because of the increased costs of shipping and attrac-

13. Starkey, "War and the Market for Seafarers," 30–39; Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 286–89; Carl E. Swanson, *Predators and Prizes: American Privateering and Imperial Warfare, 1739–1748* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 79.

14. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986), has done the most to dispel common myths associated with impressment, although as the evidence in this essay should make clear, Rodger presents an overly benign portrait of press-gangs in the eighteenth century. In particular, his theory that in most cases only navy deserters led or instigated riots against press-gangs does not hold up (Rodger, *Wooden World*, 174–76). See also Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 88–89, 97, for a similar critique of Rodger's ideas on rioting.

15. N. A. M. Rodger has defined the importance of topmen to the eighteenth-century British navy in a number of articles, including "A Little Navy of Your Own Making: Admiral Boscawen and the Cornish Connection in the Royal Navy," in Michael Duffy, ed., *Parameters of British Naval Power, 1650–1850* (Exeter, U.K.: University of Exeter Press, 1992), 83–84; and "Officers and Men" and "The Exercise of Sea Power and Its Challenges," in John B. Hattendorf, ed., *Maritime History*, vol. 2, *The Eighteenth Century and the Classic Age of Sail* (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 1997), 141, 177–78. For the class identity of British seamen, see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

tive profit margins from smuggling. Elite sailors especially resented impressment for denying them the full market value of their labor.¹⁶

The Royal Navy organized impressment in the eighteenth century around the goal of filling at least one-third of its sailing berths with able seamen. Not surprisingly, the service discovered the best place to find accomplished sailors was at sea, especially on ships that belonged to long-distance colonial trades. The trick was to remove topmen from these merchant ships without destroying the empire's overseas trade in the process. To ensure that press-gangs did not fail, numerous laws, customs, and decrees regulated impressment in the British Isles. The most important regulation limited press-gangs to taking men only from inbound ships, which had completed their voyages, rather than from outbound vessels.¹⁷ This simple but intelligent practice kept the navy from crushing trading missions before they had even begun. It also integrated impressment into British mercantilism: press-gangs could have confidence letting outbound ships leave home waters, knowing that under the Navigation Acts roughly the same number of ships would return.¹⁸

A related custom was for naval ships to provide "men in lieu" to help bring emptied, inbound merchant vessels safely into port. The navy learned through trial and error not to leave ships with potentially lucrative cargo stranded at sea after impressing their crews.¹⁹ By the mid-eighteenth century the British Admiralty codified the practice of providing men in lieu in standard instructions it distributed to all pressing officers.²⁰ In effect, the British state promised a merchant ship captain a safe beginning and end to his voyage in exchange for sharing his best sailors. The policy prevented press-gangs from destroying the fruit of their own empire.

The decade of the 1740s was a crucial period for expanding impressment into an Atlantic system. The years between 1713 and 1739 represented Britain's longest period in the long eighteenth century without mobilizing for a

16. See Earle, *Sailors*, 188, and Davis, *Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 135–37, for the economic opportunities available to merchant seamen in wartime.

17. For an early example, see authorization to press from James, duke of York, to John Holmes, June 18, 1672, *Public and Private Business*, vol. 2, 1571–1714, MS. Eng. hist. c. 478, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

18. Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 146; Pares, "Manning of the Navy," 43.

19. "Report of Committee Appointed to Examine the Petition of Arthur Bayly," December 21, 1689, in Leo F. Stock, ed., *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1924–41), 2:11–13.

20. "Instructions for [blank] Appointed to Impress Seamen, &c. for the Service of his Majesty's Ships Now Fitting Out for the Sea," London, [1775?], ADM 7/967/2, NAUK.



Figure 2. *Manning the Navy*. Drawn by Samuel Collings; engraved by John Barlow; published by Bentley and Company, London, June 1, 1790. This print shows a press-gang armed with cudgels and cutlasses on Tower Hill in London, where the navy recruited heavily in the city. The print, however, also reinforced the popular myth that most impressments took place on land. Reproduced by permission of the Guildhall Library, City of London.

major war.²¹ By 1739 the navy's recruiting operations lagged a generation behind new overseas trading networks based outside London. Press-gangs worked quickly, therefore, to establish a presence in and around flourishing British and Irish provincial seaports such as Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Cork. Moreover, gangs came face-to-face with many colonial seamen for the first time because of the unprecedented number of European naval engagements in the Western Hemisphere. The navy's vigorous expansion of impressment in the 1740s helped to inspire more impressment riots in different areas of the Atlantic than at any other time in the eighteenth century.

In the British Isles, at least, most of the pressing and violence took place

21. There had been several minor mobilizations in the period, however. See Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, 151.

at sea, out of public view, and even periodic disturbances onshore did not keep popular enthusiasm for the navy from reaching dizzying heights during the War of Jenkins' Ear. The conflict began as an Anglo-Spanish trade dispute in which the slicing off of a British merchant vessel captain's ear galvanized the nation to arms. Although Britain later experienced spectacular defeats in its attempts to reduce Spanish possessions in the Caribbean, the British public seized on its lone victory, Admiral Edward Vernon's bombardment in 1739 of Porto Bello in present-day Panama. More medals were struck to commemorate the victory than for any other single event in British or American history. Prints, portraits, poems, ballads, ceramics, and the Washington family's Virginia plantation all were adorned with Vernon's name, often with some reference to "Liberty."²² The national anthems "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia" served as a lasting legacy of the public frenzy. Thus, as Britons gloried in proclaiming that they would never be "slaves," the British state established the most comprehensive naval impressment scheme in its history.²³

The war also proved to be a boon to Charles Knowles's career. In 1718 Knowles had entered the peacetime navy at the age of twenty-one as a captain's servant; he later served as an able seaman and a lieutenant, mostly in the Mediterranean and West Indies. In 1739 he joined Admiral Edward Vernon's squadron in the Caribbean as captain of HMS *Diamond*. An expert in explosives, Knowles was the chief engineer of the project to detonate the Spanish castle at Porto Bello in the spring of 1740. His hopes for the War of Jenkins' Ear thus began auspiciously, although he never experienced victory in the war again. Knowles was Vernon's favorite captain in the West Indian expedition and climbed to the ranks of commodore in 1743 and admiral in 1747.²⁴

During that period Knowles visited Britain only in-between defeats in the Caribbean and South America, usually to convoy merchant ships from Jamaica. Though he never faced violent resistance to impressment at home, he

22. Francis L. Berkeley Jr., "The War of Jenkins' Ear," in Darrett B. Rutman, ed., *The Old Dominion: Essays for Thomas Perkins Abernethy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1964), 41, 52–53; Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Trade and Popular Politics in Mid-Hanoverian Britain: The Case of Admiral Vernon," *Past and Present* 121 (1988): 74–109; Gerald Jordan and Nicholas Rogers, "Admirals as Heroes: Patriotism and Liberty in Hanoverian England," *Journal of British Studies* 28 (1989): 201–24.

23. James Thompson, "Rule Britannia," in Roger Lonsdale, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 192.

24. Stephen and Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Knowles, Charles; B. McL. Ranft, ed., *The Vernon Papers* (London: Naval Records Society, 1958), 442.

still experienced difficulties that plagued the recruiting system. On more than one occasion he had to force the East India Company to pay back wages owed to his impressed seamen.²⁵ Knowles's men thanked him by deserting at a constant pace, and in April 1742 a scandal involving impressment protections occurred under his command. After returning from Cartagena, Knowles left four blank tickets for leave on his vessel, HMS *Weymouth*, docked at Plymouth. His opportunistic clerk, James Risby, filled the tickets with names of sailors who had been discharged in the West Indies, forged officers' signatures, and sold them on the black market. Risby raised thirty pounds, enough to buy a home for himself and another for a surgeon's mate, his likely accomplice in the affair.²⁶

What influence, if any, the scandal had on Knowles's attitude toward his future crews and pressing seamen, we will never know. The trickery was benign compared to more violent incidents that took place in the British Isles while he was away. The metropole of Britain's overseas empire, England and its home waters, was also the capital of impressment and violence against press-gangs. There were two major types of impressment riots, those at sea and those on land. England outpaced the rest of the empire in both types but especially in violence at sea, where most impressment took place. In September 1740, for example, press-gangs in boats from three men-of-war greeted a returning convoy of East India Company vessels in the English Channel. Rather than give up their men, the ships fired on the press-gangs, wounding several men and sinking one of the boats. The East Indiamen's sailors later armed themselves and ran for shore in their own boats. After more violent struggles, the press-gangs ended up capturing 156 men, far below their original expectation of 500.²⁷

In many impressment disturbances, no evidence exists that press-gangs acted outside their legal right to force British subjects into naval service. Any meeting of sailors and press-gangs could result in death. In February 1742 sailors navigating the *John and Elizabeth* merchant vessel into Sunderland's harbor repelled three press boats with anything they could find, including grindstones, shot, billets of wood, crowbars, capstan bars, boathooks, and handspikes. The makeshift arsenal bought the crew ten minutes—before two navy midshipmen fired their pistols and killed a man. Afterward the midshipmen pleaded to “not knowing that there was any balls in the pistols” and got

25. See, for example, Knowles to the Admiralty, *Weymouth*, Spithead, October 3, 1740, and Knowles to the Admiralty, *Suffolk*, Blackstakes, October 29, 1742, ADM 1/2006, NAUK.

26. Knowles to the Admiralty, London, April 8, 1742, ADM 1/2006, NAUK.

27. Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, 178.

off with limited jail sentences for manslaughter.²⁸ Later the same year the crew of the *King William*, an East India merchant ship, duplicated the *John and Elizabeth's* tactics for keeping press-gangs at bay, even throwing broken bottles from their deck. After nearly twenty-four hours, though, a nearby navy ship captain lost patience and fired a broadside into the merchant vessel, killing two men.²⁹

These stories show that sailors faced a losing proposition in resisting press-gangs at sea. Although seamen won occasional victories, the navy held the overall balance of power on the water. East Indiamen, such as the *King William*, were more confident than most Atlantic trading vessels in challenging press-gangs because of the large size of their crews. The company's ships often kept hundreds of men, whereas other long-distance sailing crews numbered in the dozens or even fewer. In September 1743 yet another East Indiaman, the *Britannia*, took on a press-gang, this time off the Isles of Scilly at the southwest entrance to the English Channel. Captain Frederick Rogers of HMS *Dover* reported to the Admiralty that when his ship's pressing boat came alongside the *Britannia*, its men "hove several large pieces of iron into the boat and cut and wounded several of my men." Later the crew shot small arms at the man-of-war, fatally wounding one navy seaman. In response, Rogers ordered several of his men to board the East Indiaman armed with cutlasses. The ensuing fight left five merchant seamen dead, the bloodiest end to an impressment riot on either side of the Atlantic during the wars of the 1740s.³⁰

Not all impressment riots at sea ended in failure. In October 1740 about forty men on the *Endeavour* pressing tender based at Tower Hill rose up against their captors. Pressing tenders were midsize vessels that kept naval recruits in infamously crowded, dank spaces until they could be delivered to ships needing men.³¹ The *Endeavour's* men rioted soon after being transferred to the sloop *Thunder* outside London. According to the description of one navy officer, the sailors "forc'd themselves out of the Sloop into the Tender again, seiz'd the Cutlasses and Pistolls on board that Vessel, and drove the Press Gang and every body belonging to the Tender out of her." The rebellious seamen had to kill one member of the press-gang and beat another three severely enough to toss them overboard to gain control of the tender

28. Quoted in Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 223. See also Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 168.

29. Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 224–25.

30. Rogers to the Admiralty, September 5, 1743, in Daniel A. Baugh, ed., *Naval Administration, 1715–1750* (London: Navy Records Society, 1977), 127–28.

31. Lloyd, *British Seaman*, 127, 141.

before running it ashore. The navy never found the sailors after they reached land.³²

Mutinous riots on pressing tenders were unique to the British Isles, for the navy did not station tenders elsewhere in the Atlantic.³³ All impressment riots shared basic similarities, however. Foremost, whether they took place at sea or on land, the riots were violent. Crowds often committed violence against property and symbols associated with press-gangs, such as pressing boats, barges, and rendezvous houses. Yet, as we have seen, the physical nature of impressment, the act of seizing one's person, also produced a large measure of interpersonal violence in response. For this reason, impressment riots should be grouped among the most violent of eighteenth-century riots, which George Rudé, Pauline Maier, and others have shown usually involved violence against property but not persons. Though rational and goal-oriented, anti-impressment rioters could also be spontaneous and violent. Their unpredictability was the very source of their influence across the Atlantic.³⁴

Impressment also inspired more traditional riots ashore in Britain and Ireland. Although exceptional in their level of interpersonal violence, impressment riots on land shared characteristics with other eighteenth-century community riots. E. P. Thompson's famous formulation of "the moral economy of the English crowd" to describe bread riots, based in part on the work of Rudé, also has application to impressment riots.³⁵ The most impressive disturbances against press-gangs did not necessarily take place in Britain's largest seaports. They happened in communities with a particular economic focus or other interest threatened by impressment, such as fishing, whaling, and transporting coal. In most cases these were short-distance domestic and

32. Andrew Philipps to the Navy Board, Woolwick, October 18, 1740, ADM 106/930, NAUK. See also John Ramkin to the Navy Board, October 18, 1740, and October 22, 1740, ADM 106/930, NAUK.

33. For an example of the form during the Seven Years' War, see N. A. M. Rodger, "The Mutiny in the *James and Thomas*," in Tony Barrow, ed., *Press Gangs and Privateers* (London: Bewick Press, 1993), 5–12.

34. George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (New York: Wiley, 1964); Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 27 (1970): 3–35; Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Jesse Lemisch has more recently argued that the term *crowd*, as employed by Rudé and Maier, has lost much of its original usefulness in "The 'Mob' versus the 'Crowd': The British Marxists and Early American History; and a Word about 'Empiricism' and Theory," in "Communications," *William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999): 231–37.

35. E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136.

European trades with a much lower percentage of able seamen than overseas colonial trades. Parliament and the British Admiralty exempted seamen on whalers, colliers, and fishing vessels from impressment because of their importance to the nation's welfare. The one exception was during times of national emergency, when "hot presses" allowed press-gangs to ignore normal legal protections.³⁶

Therein lay the moral economy of the anti-impressment mob. Rather than allow press-gangs to violate their customary privileges and legal rights, protected seamen, often joined by members of their community, demonstrated against the navy. In the mid-eighteenth century crowds across the British Isles turned out to protect their communities from press-gangs. In March 1742 hundreds of rioting keelmen at Sunderland, who worked in northeast England's vibrant coal trade, managed to haul a pressing tender ashore.³⁷ In March 1755 members of London's whaling community, also numbering in the hundreds, met a pressing tender that had three whalers in its custody at Greenland dock. The mob almost killed three members of a gang while rescuing their impressed comrades.³⁸

Four years later an even larger disturbance involving Greenland men took place in Liverpool. A whaling ship, the *Golden Lion*, returned from a triumphant voyage towing buoys with two whales, one forty feet long and the other forty-five feet. Four boats belonging to the man-of-war *Vengeance* attempted to stop the *Golden Lion*, but the ship's crew used long knives and harpoons from their expedition to resist. With a large audience watching on Liverpool's waterfront, the *Vengeance* opened fire on the whaler as it ran for the docks. Several cannon shot hit the town, one destroying a boat in the builder's yard. The whaling crew made it to shore and went straight to the customhouse to renew their protections against impressment. "Immediately after they had done," the *London Evening-Post* reported, "a large Party of the Press-Gang forced themselves into the Custom-house, fired several Pistols, and committed other Outrages, impressing Capt. Thompson, and five of his Crew; the Rest escaped by various Methods, some jumping thro' the Windows many Yards from the Ground, whilst others got on the House Tops, and over the Walls." A group of women helped some of the men down from the windows and rooftops, and one woman suffered a pistol shot to the leg. When a community stood up to the press-gang, great risks existed for all concerned.³⁹

36. For the connection between impressment protections and sailor resistance, see Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 97–99.

37. Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 215.

38. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 96.

39. *London Evening-Post*, July 31, 1759.



Figure 3. *The Press Gang, or English Liberty Display'd*. English engraving, 1770. This satirical engraving shows the effect that taking men had on seaport communities throughout the Atlantic. The mothers, wives, and sisters of sailors often participated in resistance against press-gangs. Reproduced by permission of the Granger Collection, New York.

Although the level of commotion in Liverpool was not unique, it was unrepresentative of the vast majority of violent incidents over impressment in the British Isles. The ready availability of army or naval reinforcements in Britain kept most uprisings from spinning so far out of control.⁴⁰ Instead, the riot in Liverpool was more akin to disturbances over impressment in colonial Atlantic seaports in the eighteenth century. The greatest difference in the effects of press-gangs in the metropole versus the periphery concerned scale: colonial seaports could not absorb the same level of shock to their fragile labor markets and evolving social and political systems as could more mature British ports. The British public was generally indifferent to the impressing of professional deep-sea sailors, especially when it served the larger goal of expanding colonial trade and empire. If merchants detested impressment, they had no interest in abolishing the practice in place of a system that would have given the government even more control over Britain's maritime labor supply. As it was, the policies of impressing only from inbound ships and providing men-in-lieu to guide ships safely into port cleverly made merchants complicit in a system they did not like. The 1740s impressment riots in waters surrounding the British Isles were the most destructive in the Atlantic world in terms of human life, yet not necessarily in terms of upsetting a community's normal social, economic, and political order. Charles Knowles's brief experiences at home during the decade would have prepared him for the universal unpopularity of impressment in the British empire but not for the exaggerated consequences of the practice that awaited him in the New World.

WEST INDIES

In the 1740s, while press-gangs were causing disturbances in Britain's home ports and waters, they also wreaked havoc in its Atlantic colonies. The movement of press-gangs and seafarers throughout the Atlantic gave impressment riots a level of continuity everywhere. Violent incidents in the West Indies and North America did not happen with the same frequency as in the British Isles, but a higher ratio involved large crowds and spectacular acts of resistance, such as kidnapping press-gangs, burning press boats, and arresting naval captains. Even more than British seaports, Caribbean and American maritime communities resisted press-gangs to defend local economic interests and their perceived rights and liberties within the empire.

During his campaigns against the Spanish between 1739 and 1743, Charles Knowles experienced firsthand why the navy had such difficulty keeping its ships fully manned in the Caribbean. Numerous times his ships

40. Lieutenant Atkinson to the Admiralty, Whitby, February 26, 1793, ADM 1/2739, NAUK; Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 221–22.

fell short of complement because of competition from merchants for sailors. In February 1742 Knowles reported from St. Kitts: "The Great Wages offer'd by the Merchantmen being so tempting, some of the Ships Lost thirty Men."⁴¹ The captain also witnessed disease ravage his crews, although he pursued an enlightened strategy for keeping his men healthy. Knowles halved the navy's normal daily ration of a gallon of beer and a half pint of rum on his ships and served peas to his men with all meat, not only the customary salt pork. Still, he could never serve enough peas to overcome the Caribbean's perilous climate. In March 1743 his vessel, HMS *Suffolk*, was 138 men short of its normal complement of 480.⁴² A month later Knowles joined other captains in the squadron in delivering the message to the Admiralty that disease, several naval defeats, and shortages of provisions and ordnance stores had left the squadron "no longer in a Condition to undertake any further Enterprize against the Enemy."⁴³

For the rest of 1743, 1744, and 1745, a period when Britain shifted the focus of its war effort from Spain to France, Knowles served as a commodore and second in command on the navy's Jamaica station under Admiral Sir Chaloner Ogle. Impressment had long been a source of great controversy in the sugar islands before Knowles accepted his promotion, but the Royal Navy's manning strategy never included pressing large numbers of seamen in the West Indies or North America. Colonial seamen had a situational importance for the navy beyond their numbers. The service depended on them to supplement its regular sailing complements during operations in colonial waters.⁴⁴ In December 1727 Commodore Edward St. Lo stressed to the Admiralty from the West Indies that without impressment, "the service neither could nor can be carried on."⁴⁵ Britain's ability to station vessels in the Western Hemisphere for indefinite periods gave it important advantages over its

41. Knowles to the Admiralty, St. Christopher, February 10, 1742, ADM 1/2006, NAUK.

42. Knowles to the Admiralty, Antigua, January 6, 1743; Currasoe [Curaçao?], March 18, 1743, ADM 1/2006, NAUK.

43. Captains of the squadron to the Admiralty, April 28, 1743, ADM 1/2006, NAUK.

44. See Samuel Hazard, ed., *Pennsylvania Archives* (Philadelphia, 1852), 1:638–41, for the British Admiralty's approach to impressment in the Western Hemisphere and sample directions to ship captains stationed overseas. See also Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 108; Usher, "Royal Navy Impressment," 678; Leach, *Roots of Conflict*, 18, 25; and Swanson, *Predators and Prizes*, 251.

45. Commodore Edward St. Lo to the Admiralty, Port Royal, December 7, 1727, in Baugh, *Naval Administration*, 106.

chief imperial rivals, Spain and France, including protecting trans-Atlantic commerce, helping to enforce the Acts of Trade, and providing a visible symbol of British sovereignty in colonial regions.⁴⁶ By contrast, a recent historical survey has summarized early French imperialism in the Americas as “colonies in search of a navy.”⁴⁷

Britain paid a heavy price for its broad Atlantic naval presence, however. Even in small amounts, impressment had a disproportionate social and economic effect on its western colonies. As a rule Atlantic seaport communities objected the most to press-gangs when they disturbed regional trade and seized local seamen. In Britain this made the coasting trade in coal centered in the northeast ports of Newcastle and Sunderland particularly perilous for press-gangs. But colonial areas were even more vulnerable because of their sensitive labor markets. In 1747, in the aftermath of the Knowles Riot in Boston, the Scottish emigrant William Douglass explained that pressing was so controversial in the colonies because they had “*no spare Hands*.”⁴⁸ Shortages of skilled seafaring labor in the West Indies and North America led to higher wages for merchant seamen and encouraged the navy’s men to desert in wartime. In turn, the navy used impressment to replace deserters, which caused riots and other forms of resistance.⁴⁹ The vicious cycle made seaports in the West Indies and America the most combustible areas for raising seamen in the British Atlantic world.

In the West Indies, in particular, impressment posed a threat to the empire’s stability. In the worst-case scenario, press-gangs had the potential to incite slave insurrections. Slave ships arriving in the Caribbean turned the logic of pressing from inbound vessels on its head. A key determinant of shipboard slave revolts was shortages in crew, and, on occasion, press-gangs nearly caused uprisings by taking sailors before a slave voyage was finished. By custom, therefore, the navy allowed slave ships to dock and unload their human cargo before seizing their crews.⁵⁰ Press-gangs also threatened the

46. Leach, *Roots of Conflict*, 134.

47. James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1670–1730* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 410.

48. William Douglass, *A Summary, Historical and Political, of the first Planting, progressive Improvements, and present State of the British Settlements in North America . . .*, 2 vols. (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1747), 1:235; emphasis in original.

49. Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York’s Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1997), 17.

50. David Richardson, “Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (2001): 74–76; Pares, “Manning of the Navy,” 32–33, 42. For the navy’s policy on impressing from slave ships, see Ranft, *Vernon Papers*, 72, 168, 416, 418–20.

Caribbean's plantation economy by scaring away shipments of bread, corn, fish, and other items from the mainland colonies that the sugar islands needed for survival.⁵¹ In the early eighteenth century the West Indian merchant lobby made a concerted effort to secure a statutory ban on impressment in the Western Hemisphere. According to the sugar interest, the practice threatened England's mercantile trade by disabling merchant vessels, scaring off supply vessels from the mainland colonies, and deterring permanent settlement on the islands.⁵² In 1707 Parliament responded to the complaints by passing "An Act for the Encouragement of Trade to America," which banned impressment in America and the West Indies except for naval deserters. Known as both the "American Act" and the "Sixth of Anne" (because it came in the sixth year of Queen Anne's reign), the law received the royal assent on April 1, 1708.⁵³

The Sixth of Anne caused the navy headaches for the next half century. The wording of the law did not make clear whether it remained in effect after the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13). After the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, the government sent conflicting signals about the issue.⁵⁴ By the 1740s the West Indian islands, unlike the mainland colonies, seemed resigned to the fact that the Sixth of Anne had expired. In December 1743 Jamaica's Governor Edward Trelawny wrote that he had "never heard any Man of sense here imagin'd that the American Act was still in force." "Tho," he added, "all sensible Men seem to agree in opinion that the reasons that induc'd the Legislature to enact such a Law do still subsist."⁵⁵ In other words, impressment still threatened the sugar and slave trades, and tensions over the issue could bring colonial officials to a boil. In 1742 Admiral Vernon, the paragon of liberty in the British Atlantic world, left the Caribbean with

51. "A Petition of the Agents for the British Sugar Colonies," April 9, 1746, *Commons Journals*, 25:117; General Thomas Wentworth to Admiral Edward Vernon, July 5, 1742, and Vernon's reply, July 6, 1742, CO 5/42, NAUK.

52. For petitions and debate on the proposed ban, see Parliament, *The Manuscripts of the House of Lords, 1706–1708* (London, 1921), 7:99–100, 226–27, 266, and *Journals of the House of Lords*, 18:361–62, 373–74, 390–92, 405–6. For the strength of the West Indian sugar interest, see Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; rept., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 92–97.

53. 6 Anne c. 37, Great Britain, *Statutes at Large from the Tenth Year of King William the Third to the End of the Reign of Queen Anne . . .* (London, 1769), 4:336.

54. Dora Mae Clark, "The Impressment of Seamen in the American Colonies," in *Essays in Colonial History Presented to Charles McLean Andrews by His Students* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), 210–12.

55. Edward Trelawny to the Admiralty, December 31, 1743, ADM 1/3817, NAUK.

his reputation tarnished locally for his aggressive pressing tactics. The same year Vernon's successor, Admiral Ogle, almost brawled with Governor Trelawny over impressment.⁵⁶ In December 1742 Captain Lisle of HMS *Scarborough* wrote from Barbados that "West India Governors are so tenacious of what they call their prerogative that it's difficult to raise any [seamen] from the shore."⁵⁷ Yet, for all this tension, the navy's press-gangs had never caused a major riot on land in the West Indies—that is, until Knowles began station duty in 1743.

When Knowles instigated the Caribbean's largest impressment riot ever, it was not over the Sixth of Anne, governors' prerogative powers, or preserving the trans-Atlantic sugar and slave trades. The tumult was caused by antagonizing the most local wartime trade in the West Indies: privateering. Whereas merchants in England owned most vessels that carried West Indian sugar, owners of privateering ships lived mainly in the islands.⁵⁸ After enduring years of Spanish raids on their shipping, Caribbean merchants celebrated the outbreak of war in 1739 as much as anything for London's authorization of new letters of marque. "Tis said," the *Boston Evening-Post* reported, "that upon the first Advice of a War, all Business will be laid aside in Jamaica, but that of Privateering, the Men waiting with Impatience to have their Hands untied."⁵⁹ The island colonies provided an ideal location for intercepting the richest merchant vessels of the French and Spanish Atlantic empires. In the War of Jenkins' Ear, West Indian privateers accounted for 25 percent of all British colonial privateers, second only to Rhode Island's.⁶⁰ In 1745 the Kingston merchant John Curtain summarized the traditional significance of privateering to the local wartime economy by calling it "the sole preservation of our Trade."⁶¹

The Caribbean Knowles riot emerged out of a larger rivalry between privateers and the navy. In late May 1743 Knowles gave notice to merchants in

56. For Vernon and Ogle's difficulties in the West Indies, see Ranft, *Vernon Papers*, 168, 255, 260–61, 416, 418–20, and Trelawny to the Admiralty, December 21, 1743, ADM 1/3817, NAUK.

57. Lisle to the Admiralty, Barbados, December 11, 1742, in Baugh, *Naval Administration*, 131.

58. Pares, "Manning of the Navy," 48–49.

59. *Boston Evening-Post*, August 27, 1739, quoted by Swanson, *Predators and Prizes*, 12.

60. Swanson, *Predators and Prizes*, 122, 129.

61. "Affidavit of John Curtain," November 28, 1745, enclosed in "Petition of the principal Merchants and Traders in Kingston presented to his Excellency and the Council the Second day of December 1745," CO 137/57, NAUK.

the Lesser Antilles (Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, and St. Kitts) that part of his squadron would be leaving soon to convoy trade to England. But rather than accept his offer of protection, the merchants hired a privateer out of English Harbour, Antigua, to accompany their trade out of the Caribbean. Knowles did not accept the merchants' explanation that they wanted to keep the navy present in the islands "to prevent the Spaniards stealing off their Negroes when the men of Warr were absent from the Island." Feeling snubbed and needing men, he directed Captain Gage of HMS *Lively* to press men from the privateer in question when it returned to English Harbour.⁶²

On June 3, 1743, Knowles's vengeful order sparked retaliation. The privateer's crew overpowered Gage's press-gang, took him and several of his men captive, and ran away with his boat. Kidnapping press-gangs had elements of the traditional eighteenth-century crowd action of role reversal, whereby members of the lower social classes assumed mock positions of authority held by their social betters.⁶³ In the colonial context, however, kidnapping press-gangs often had violent overtones and the purposeful, not symbolic, motivation to get impressed men released. The action demonstrated one way the historian Alfred Young has explained the transfer of plebeian culture from the Old World to the New, "a process of borrowing and amalgamation, the end product of which constitutes innovation."⁶⁴ I have not found evidence of press-gangs being taken hostage in the British Isles until the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15). In May 1813 a press gang in Greenock, Scotland, had to release an impressed sailor to save the life of a midshipman captured by the mob.⁶⁵ In the case of Antigua in 1743, Knowles did not give in to the tactic and instead took a hostage of his own from the privateer, a certain Lieutenant Rouse. Knowles's action had its desired effect of making the mob free Gage and his press-gang.⁶⁶

A few days later, while Knowles worked to commit Rouse to jail, in Anti-

62. "Memorial of Captain Charles Knowles to the Admiralty," [before September 23, 1743], ADM 1/2006, NAUK.

63. For the European tradition of role reversal, a form of plebeian "misrule," see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97–123. For American derivatives of the ritual, see Gilje, *Road to Mobocracy*, 22.

64. Alfred F. Young, "English Plebeian Culture and Eighteenth-Century American Radicalism," in Margaret C. Jacob and James R. Jacob, eds., *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 189.

65. Captain Smith to the Admiralty, Greenock, May 11, 1813, ADM 12/162, NAUK.

66. "Memorial of Charles Knowles."

gua a larger crowd formed consisting of armed privateersmen and townspeople. Local backers of privateering expeditions demanded that Governor William Mathew get the lieutenant released, for “Captain Knowles had Violently taken a Man out of the hands of the Civil Power, and confin’d him under the Military, the highest infringement of the Libertys of the Subject.”⁶⁷ Knowles refused and had to be carried by the governor’s coach to escape the crowd’s wrath. The next day the island’s constables arrested Knowles and Gage for illegally pressing privateersmen and imprisoning Lieutenant Rouse. They remained in jail for two days until posting bail of £12,000 each.⁶⁸

After they were released, Antigua’s privateer merchants procured a writ of habeas corpus to get locally impressed men released from Knowles’s ships. The captain refused, and the merchants threatened additional legal action. When Knowles appealed for help to Mathew, the crowd intimidated the governor, saying the matter was a concern of common law. Knowles escaped further jail time only through the help of Commodore Peter Warren, who placated the merchants by buying a privateering vessel for the government’s service at an inflated price. The unrest then died down.⁶⁹

What did Antigua’s impressment riot mean? Like other naval officers who endured colonial impressment riots, Knowles blamed it on disloyalty and foreign intrigue. “The Persons who Spirited up these Disturbances against the Officers of the Kings Ships,” he wrote to the Admiralty, “are reputed Irish Roman Catholicks, and verry farr from being well affected to His Majestys, and the Peace of the Government of that Island.”⁷⁰ Besides “Rank Papists and Jacobites,” he also accused Governor Mathew of belonging to the “Mobb, for taking part in the Affair.”⁷¹ Warren was less hyperbolic yet also absolved Knowles for doing “no more then what is practis’d, almost every day in England, and passes with Impunity.”⁷² This analysis was right and wrong. Press-gangs did take men from privateers in Britain, but usually only during hot presses because most privateers carried Admiralty protections. Moreover, because they contributed to the navy’s overall effort to destroy enemy seapower, privateers also received customary exemption from impressment. Like

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.; Peter Warren to the Admiralty, May 24, 1744, English Harbour, Antigua, ADM 1/2654, NAUK.

70. “Memorial of Charles Knowles.”

71. Knowles to the Admiralty, *Suffolk*, Spithead, August 7, 1743, ADM 1/2006, NAUK.

72. Warren to the Admiralty, May 24, 1744.

Knowles, navy officers who ignored these customary and legal restraints against seizing privateersmen incited riots at home and abroad.⁷³

Warren was correct, however, that Antigua's impressment disturbance had features unique to the colonial context. If Knowles violated accepted conduct for navy officers in Britain, the mob also broke conventions of responsible crowd action by confining a navy officer and press-gang against their will and threatening Knowles's safety. The most likely reason for the rioters' more daring behavior in English Harbour was simple: they could get away with it. The seaport's smaller size and distance from centers of imperial authority also meant that the multiday affair consumed the attention of Antigua's colonial government to a greater extent than most impressment disputes in the British Isles. Knowles was wrong to question the national loyalty of Antigua's rioters, but their actions did strike a temporary blow to Britain's imperial unity.

Impressment riots also flared up in other Caribbean islands. Perhaps inspired by Antigua's resistance, privateer crews also rioted only days later in nearby St. Kitts. Knowles reported what happened after Captain Abel Smith of HMS *Pembroke Prize* impressed some of the island's men: "the Privateers Crew Joyn'd with People there, in an Arm'd manner, and by Violence came off in the Road, and Seized the Kings Boat . . . and threatned to burn her, if the Captain wou'd not return the Prest Men, which he was obliged to do to save his Boat, and peoples Lives, to the great Dishonour of Kings authority, (especially in Foreign parts,) and after these Pres't Men were released, the Captain was sued in an Action of 500 pounds."⁷⁴ The mob in St. Kitts resembled Antigua's by having a nucleus of armed sailors who gathered support from other colonists. They proved even more successful at using violence as a negotiating tactic by forcing Smith to release men he had impressed.

In November 1743 rioters in Barbados almost eclipsed the disturbances in Antigua and St. Kitts. Captain Miles Stapylton faced shortages of men and sent a press-gang to search the home of a local merchant, William Moll, for hiding deserters. The gang did not find any but managed to terrify Moll's pregnant wife before carrying the merchant to meet with Stapylton at the island's customhouse. Moll denied harboring seamen, but the captain still beat and detained him on a navy ship for the night. According to Barbados's Governor Thomas Robinson, the next morning "Tumults arose" with the sun. An angry mob "formed of Men of all Ranks, and Distinctions, under Arms" sought Moll's release and revenge on Stapylton. The crowd likely included more representatives from the upper social classes than had previous

73. Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 216.

74. "Memorial of Charles Knowles."

riots because of Moll's status as a wealthy trader. His fellow merchants demanded that Governor Robinson approve a warrant for Stapylton's arrest. The governor agreed and even called out the militia, fearing "a scene of Blood, and Confusion." The crowd's fury abated once Stapylton was arrested and Moll freed. The captain paid one thousand pounds to be released to await trial, but before it could take place the governor negotiated a truce between the navy and local merchants. News that Britain had declared war on France was crucial in temporarily healing the colony's division over impressment.⁷⁵

A year later Knowles entered a renewed atmosphere of mistrust between the navy and colonists in Barbados. In October 1744 he claimed to have "persued the mildest Measures possible" and that "there has not been a hundred Men pressed in the Squadron this last year."⁷⁶ But the island's privateers did not show the same cooperation, enticing dozens of navy seamen to desert. Knowles could not enforce a policy that worked for Commodore Warren in New York: press-gangs would leave privateers alone if they agreed not to harbor navy deserters.⁷⁷ The commodore avoided another disturbance in Barbados, however, if for no other reason than that he soon left. In late 1745 Knowles returned to Britain to serve again under Admiral Vernon in the Channel Fleet. He spent several weeks trying unsuccessfully to use explosives to blow up vessels and batteries in French harbors.⁷⁸

The problems Knowles left behind in the West Indies were larger than one man. The navy and privateers continued to clash over sailors. In April 1757 Admiral Thomas Frankland reported, "the privateers people are very Riotous, even on shore they assemble and break open the jails, and press the Men from the Merchant ships."⁷⁹ Impressment was also more controversial in the western Atlantic than in the British Isles for more deeply structural reasons: the colonies' greater distance from institutions of central imperial authority, their tradition of provincial self-government, and their limited number of skilled sailors. Each of these factors had equivalents in the British Isles, but nowhere else did they form such a potent combination. Britain's

75. Thomas Robinson to the Duke of Newcastle, Barbados, May 10, 1744, CO 28/46, NAUK.

76. Knowles to the Admiralty, *Woolwich*, Barbados, October 15, 1744, ADM 1/2007, NAUK.

77. Compare Knowles's description of relations with privateers in the preceding reference with Peter Warren to the Admiralty, New York, September 8, 1744, ADM 1/2654, NAUK.

78. Ranft, *Vernon Papers*, 442–44, 573, 575–76, 579.

79. Frankland to the Admiralty, Antigua, April 28, 1757, ADM 1/306, NAUK.

larger number of impressments caused an almost constant stream of interpersonal violence between press-gangs and sailors in wartime. But the colonies' distance from British central authority made it easier for sailors, merchants, colonial officials, and seaport crowds to mount larger acts of resistance against the navy. Other than local colonial militias, few established institutions such as the British army existed to maintain order.⁸⁰

The distance from the metropole also encouraged navy officers and press-gangs to misbehave. The historian Eliga Gould has recently called the eighteenth-century British Atlantic a "region of plural legalities" to describe the lack of connection between the rule of law in the metropole and that in colonial settings. In colonies and on the high seas no conception of law had undisputed authority in areas such as smuggling and piracy.⁸¹ The same was true for impressment. Many of the long-held customs and carefully crafted policies that governed impressment in the British Isles fell away in the colonies.

Ultimately, the British state decided that impressment was not worth the risk to its prized sugar colonies. In 1746 Parliament reinstated the Sixth of Anne's ban on impressment, but with two important exceptions. First, the new statute omitted North America from the ban. Second, naval commanders in the West Indies could still impress sailors in times of emergency with the permission of individual governors and councils. Both modifications reflected the navy's overriding concern that it maintain the ability to man ships in the Western Hemisphere when necessary. The House of Lords believed "it was reasonable" to give West Indian governors the responsibility for working with naval officers to keep ships manned, but the government did not trust leaving the fate of its navy ships to the mainland colonies.⁸² Unfortunately for Charles Knowles, the new law added to his impending troubles in North America.

NORTH AMERICA

Knowles did not arrive in North America until 1746, after completing his duty in the West Indies and serving under Vernon in the Channel Fleet. His

80. Baugh, *Naval Administration*, 102.

81. Eliga H. Gould, "Zones of Law, Zones of Violence: The Legal Geography of the British Atlantic, circa 1772," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 485–89, quote on 496.

82. Admiralty Minutes, March 17, 22, and 27 and April 10, 1746, in Baugh, *Naval Administration*, 140–41, quote on 141 (March 22). For petitions and debate about the bill, see Admiralty to the Secretaries of State, Whitehall, May 3, 1746, State Papers 44/226, NAUK, and *Journals of the House of Commons*, 25:117, 127, 130.

timing could not have been worse. Since the early 1740s his fellow officers had had the misfortune of recruiting in America while colonists awakened to the reality that the Sixth of Anne's ban on impressment was not perpetual. By the summer of 1743 the Admiralty wrote to all American colonial governors pleading for cooperation. "Within little more than the Space of a Year past," the Admiralty observed, "Captains have been mobbed, others emprisoned, and afterwords held to exorbitant Bail, and are now under Prosecutions carried on by Combination, and by joint Subscription towards the expense." The letter included legal opinions by a generation of Crown law officers who all contended that the Sixth of Anne expired in 1713. The navy promised not to disturb colonial trade in exchange for the colonies' respecting the service's authority to press.⁸³

The disturbances in the 1740s belonged to a long tradition of rioting against impressment in the American colonies. Press-gangs seized fewer men in America, and impressment riots happened less frequently than in any other region of the British Atlantic. Yet those disturbances that did occur stood out for including broader cross sections of society and for interrupting the normal conduct of social and political affairs to a greater extent than even in the Caribbean. Major riots and other forms of violent resistance to impressment occurred in the mainland American colonies in the 1690s, early 1700s, 1740s, 1750s, and 1760s—every decade that Britain was at war in the long eighteenth century before the American Revolution. Impressment was the most consistent cause of crowd violence directed against imperial officials during this period.⁸⁴

For a number of reasons Boston usually led America's colonial seaports in opposing impressment. Since the 1690s the town had been one of the most difficult places in the British Atlantic for the navy to recruit. Massachusetts viewed press-gangs as outside, even foreign, agents that violated its liberties and tradition of self-rule. It did not help that Boston also had a strong rioting tradition beyond impressment disturbances, including but not limited to Pope's Day riots every November 5 (Guy Fawkes Day).⁸⁵

83. "Admiralty to Gov. Thomas on Impressments, 1743, in Hazard, *Pennsylvania Archives*, 1:638–41, quote on 639.

84. Lax and Pencak, "Knowles Riot," 166–67; Richard Maxwell Brown, "Violence and the American Revolution," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 95, 117–18.

85. See Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765–1780* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 40–84, for Boston's tradition of rioting. For Pope's Day riots, see Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 260–62, and a counter viewpoint in Bren-

Press-gangs also posed a serious economic threat to the town. One reason is that even as Boston became increasingly integrated into the larger Atlantic economy, it also retained the parochial qualities of a smaller maritime community. The historian Daniel Vickers's recent work on Salem provides the most complete portrait we have of American colonial seamen in the Age of Sail and suggests that seafaring in America was primarily a generational and part-time occupation. The majority of Salem's sailors went to sea in their late teens and twenties and often participated in short-distance and regional trades before acquiring at least a small measure of competency as traders, ship's officers, self-employed coasters, small farmers, and waterfront craftsmen. Equally important, when they were not sailing, Salem's young men fished, farmed, and did odd jobs within the colonial household economy.⁸⁶ Vickers's findings fit with how generations of Massachusetts colonial officials and sailors reacted to press-gangs. In the spring of 1709 Massachusetts' Governor Joseph Dudley informed a British ship commander that he could not help replace the navy's deserters "unless I take the Planters from the plough or tradesmen from their stalls."⁸⁷ Colonial communities refused to surrender their young men for the indefinite period, often years, that an impressment could last.

Vickers is careful to distinguish Salem from larger colonial American seaports, and certainly Boston was far more cosmopolitan and had more deep-sea sailors than its close neighbor to the north. Yet America's busiest seaports, including Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston, were nevertheless highly vulnerable to impressment because each depended to varying degrees on the intercolonial coasting trade for food, fuel (usually firewood), and other supplies. Boston relied the most on coasting as an economic lifeline, for its hinterland did not produce sufficient amounts of food, particularly grain, for

dan McConville, "Pope's Day Revisited, 'Popular' Culture Reconsidered," *Explorations in Early American Culture* 4 (2000): 258–80.

86. Daniel Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of the Sail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). See also Vickers, *Farmers and Fisherman: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 167–91, 198–203; Vickers and Vince Walsh, "Young Men and the Sea: the Sociology of Seafaring in Eighteenth-Century Salem, Massachusetts," *Social History* 24 (1999): 17–38; and Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 295.

87. Governor Dudley to the Council of Trade and Plantations, Boston, March 28, 1709, *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies, 1710–11* (London: Majesty's Stationery Office, 1924), 28.

the town to survive.⁸⁸ In 1742 Governor William Shirley identified the “worse Consequence” of impressment in Massachusetts as “the Keeping off the necessary Supplies of Food and Fuel coming in by sea to the town of Boston.” Coasters carried as few as two or three sailors, which meant that the loss of a single man could end a voyage. Even without actual impressment, the fear of press-gangs could debilitate an entire region’s coasting trade.⁸⁹

Behavior typical of press-gangs in the British Isles, therefore, could be economically devastating in the American colonial context. The American situation was not without parallels in the British Isles. Seafaring remained a seasonal or part-time employment in small British coastal towns throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover, America’s top seaports had much in common with Britain’s larger provincial ports, especially those dependent on both long- and short-distance trades.⁹⁰ Impressment also placed a potentially heavy economic burden on these communities. But unlike those in America, novice, part-time, and short-distance sailors in Britain often had the chance to acquire Admiralty and parliamentary protections against impressment. If American sailors had the same opportunity to carry protections, most would have been off-limits to press-gangs.

In the 1740s Governor Shirley tried on repeated occasions to adapt impressment to his colony’s unique social and economic circumstances. Massachusetts deputed its own sheriffs to impress navy deserters, nonresidents of the colony, and noncrewmen of fishing and coasting vessels for its own ships and the navy’s.⁹¹ Shirley also offered warrants to Royal Navy press-gangs

88. See, for example, the *New York Mercury*, March 27, 1758, and September 14, 1761, for the effect of impressment on the town’s coasting trade. For Boston, see House of Representatives to the Governor, Boston, July 25 and 30, 1745, *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1945), 22:76–77; 87–88 (hereafter *Mass. House Journals*), and “William Bollan’s Memorial to the Lords of the Admiralty,” September 9, 1757, William Bollan Papers, folder 16, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston.

89. Shirley to the House of Representatives, Boston, November 19, 1742, *Mass. House Journals*, 20:84.

90. Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea*, 4, suggests usefully that we think of Atlantic seaports as operating along a spectrum organized not so much by geography but according to the scale of their operations. See also Daniel Vickers et al., “Roundtable: Reviews of Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea . . .*,” with a Response by Marcus Rediker,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 1 (1989): 312.

91. Shirley’s press warrants followed the precedent established by Governor Jonathan Belcher’s declaration to sheriffs in Middlesex county, June 2, 1741, Massachusetts Archives, 64:93, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston; Charles Henry Lincoln,

if they limited impressment to non-Massachusetts inhabitants on inbound, non-coasting vessels. The policy brilliantly accounted for the colony's economic needs while also integrating America into the navy's Atlantic recruiting system. In essence, Shirley asked the navy to impress "foreign" sailors, that is, the same deep-sea professionals whom it targeted in Britain.⁹²

The only initial obstacle to the governor's plan came from that constant thorn in Massachusetts' side, Rhode Island. The aggressive targeting of foreign seamen in Massachusetts forced many to leave the Bay Colony for Rhode Island. "I find my endeavors will be to little purpose," Shirley complained to Rhode Island's Governor Gideon Wanton, "whilst all mariners subject to be impressed here into His Majesty's Service, fly to Rhode Island to avoid it (as indeed has long been the practice) and are there sheltered and encouraged, where (I am credibly informed) there are at this time many hundreds of foreign Seamen daily walking the streets of Newport, whilst scarce one is to be found in Boston."⁹³ Shirley discovered that the Atlantic's ablest seamen were also the quickest to adapt to changing impressment conditions.

In 1745 Massachusetts overcame the intransigence of its southern neighbor long enough to lead the successful conquest of the French fortress at Louisbourg. The operation represented the high point of cooperation between the colony and the Royal Navy in the 1740s. The Massachusetts assembly approved 3,000 land and sea volunteers and the impressment of 200 sailors for the attack on Louisbourg. (Connecticut and New Hampshire also contributed units to the mission.)⁹⁴ Commodore Peter Warren played a key role in the successful—and riot-free—expedition. In the spring of 1745 Shirley asked Warren to send warships from Antigua to help convoy troops from

ed., *Correspondence of William Shirley, Governor of Massachusetts and Military Commander of America, 1731–1760*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 1:227n3, 420–23.

92. Lax and Pencak, "Knowles Riot," describes the evolution of Shirley's thinking on impressment.

93. Shirley to Wanton, Boston, June 6, 1745, in Lincoln, *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:227–28.

94. William Pencak, *War, Politics, and Revolution in Provincial Massachusetts* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 119–21; Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, ed. Lawrence S. Mayo, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 2:313–15. Massachusetts later authorized enlisting 300 additional volunteers and impressed seamen on its privateer, the *Vigilant*, for the Louisbourg expedition. See William Shirley to the Admiralty, June 1, 1745, ADM 1/3817, NAUK.

New England and to blockade Louisbourg. On April 29, 1745, the day before he landed on Cape Breton Island, Warren offered amnesty to all navy deserters, promising that “none of them shall be molested or touched.” He also assured all seamen who participated in the capture of Louisbourg, or would be involved with it in the future, “that they shall not be impressed by me, nor any of his Majesty’s ships under my command.”⁹⁵ Because Warren had administered impressment with a light touch in the West Indies, there was no reason to suspect that he could not do the same on the mainland.⁹⁶

Warren’s men, however, did not share his insight. Massachusetts’ triumphant conquest of Louisbourg was tinged with deep irony, for one of the victory’s “spoils” was even more frequent visitations by British men-of-war. The Admiralty established the navy’s first permanent North American squadron under Warren at the fortress (before relocating it to Halifax in 1749), and Boston was the nearest British seaport of any size for repairing ships, providing supplies, raising men, and hospitalizing the sick and wounded.⁹⁷ Within months navy ship captains ignored both Warren’s directive not to seize men who served at Cape Breton and Shirley’s policy to exempt Massachusetts seamen and the coasting trade. In November 1745 the navy surrendered whatever goodwill it had remaining from the Louisbourg campaign when a press-gang murdered two unwilling recruits in a Boston boardinghouse. The men, both natives of Massachusetts, were also veterans of Louisbourg.

In early 1746, while Massachusetts was still reeling from the deaths, Charles Knowles received word in the West Indies that he would become governor of Louisbourg and commander of the Royal Navy’s ships in North America.⁹⁸ Perhaps remembering his friend’s difficulties in Antigua, Peter Warren offered Knowles unsolicited advice about pressing in North America. “When the Chief Command of his Majestys Ships devolves upon you,” Warren wrote his replacement, “you will in pressing to keep them well mann’d, shew what Lenity you can consistent with His Majestys Service, to the people of those Colonys that were instrumental in the Reduction of this place, by

95. Warren to his squadron, *Superbe*, off Louisbourg, April 29, 1745, in Julian Gwyn, ed., *The Royal Navy and North America: The Warren Papers, 1736–1752* (London: Navy Records Society, 1973), 86.

96. See, for example, Warren to the Admiralty, English Harbour, Antigua, February 9 and 25, 1745, in Gwyn, *Royal Navy and North America*, 51.

97. John A. Schutz, *William Shirley, King’s Governor of Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 111. For description of a typical visit by a navy ship to Boston for refitting, see John Rouse to the Admiralty, Nantasket Road, Boston, April 6, 1746, ADM 1/2381, NAUK.

98. Stephen and Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Knowles, Charles.



Figure 4. *British Press Gang, c. 1760s*. Engraving after a drawing by Howard Pyle, 1879. This engraving of a press-gang operating in New York during the years leading up to the American Revolutionary War demonstrates the violence caused by seizing men from America's most densely populated seaports. Reproduced by permission of the Granger Collection, New York.

which and the great Mortality here last winter, they have lost a great number of men."⁹⁹ Knowles would have saved himself, the navy, and Massachusetts an inordinate amount of trouble had he taken Warren's simple advice to "shew . . . Lenity" in administering impressment. Instead, his actions would make Bostonians long for "the universally acknowledged good Character of our late Commodore Sir *Peter Warren*."¹⁰⁰

Warren's plea to respect the accomplishments of the American colonists also fell on deaf ears. At least since Britain's defeat at Cartagena, Knowles

99. Warren to Knowles, Louisbourg, June 2, 1746, CO 5/44, NAUK.

100. Douglass, *Summary, Historical and Political*, 1:236; emphasis in original. After being sued for libel, Douglass removed this and other derogatory statements against Knowles from later editions of his *Summary*. The original version is cited hereafter and can be found in "Knowles v. Douglass," August 1749, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Suffolk County Files, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston. Douglass also published portions in the *Boston Evening-Post*, December 14 and 21, 1747.

had held a very low opinion of American colonists. In 1743 he described American troops in the expedition as the type of “Banditti that Country affords,” and of colonial engineers he said, “worse never bore the Name, or could be picked out of all *Europe*.”¹⁰¹ Once at Louisbourg, Knowles found the base useless for colonial defense, largely because of New Englanders who manned its garrison. He once described them as having “so obstinate and licentious a disposition that not being properly under military discipline there was no one among them in any order.”¹⁰² After Knowles incited controversy in his first month on the job, in part because of pressing by his captains, Warren had to remind him: “Though you are greatly above the reach of such people [the colonists], it is in my opinion better to give them no room for complaints.”¹⁰³ Again, Knowles ignored his predecessor’s counsel, at his own peril.

By the end of the War of the Austrian Succession, even a more diplomatic naval officer would have found Boston’s waterfront an explosive environment for raising men. A number of factors went into making the Knowles Riot of November 1747. The town had suffered eight years of war and numerous disturbances because of impressment. Massachusetts, a colony that had been the most generous in assisting navy press-gangs, now offered none. After the tragic events of 1745 most, if not all, pressing in the colony took place at sea—safe from Boston’s mob.¹⁰⁴ In 1747 all the American colonies also digested the news that Parliament had renewed the Sixth of Anne’s ban on impressment for the West Indies only. Britain’s central government also contributed to the riot in a less direct way. If it had not promoted Knowles again in the summer of 1747, this time as rear admiral and the new commander-in-chief at Jamaica, he would have had no cause for stopping in Boston that fall.¹⁰⁵

Fate also intervened in the new admiral’s journey in more cruel ways. In

101. [Charles Knowles], *An Account of the Expedition to Carthage, With Explanatory Notes and Observations*, 2nd ed. (London: M. Cooper, 1743), 56; emphasis in original.

102. Knowles quoted in Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 183n65. In the same note, Lax and Pencak give evidence that some of Knowles’s decisions were well received in Boston.

103. Warren to Knowles, Boston, July 30, 1746, in Gwyn, *Royal Navy and North America*, 301.

104. See, for instance, the entries in *Shirley Log*, October 21, 1745, to April 24, 1747, ADM 51/4341, NAUK.

105. For his promotion, see Knowles to the Admiralty, August 31, 1747, ADM 1/234, NAUK.

his first letter to the Admiralty from Boston, dated October 3, 1747, Knowles wrote that his ships had met “with the most Violent Storm of wind I ever yet saw in which the *Canterbury* was Oblig’d to throw over Board all her See Guns to save the Ship, and the *Warwick* lost all her Masts; I shall make what haste I can to get the Ships filled again.”¹⁰⁶ Previous accounts of the Knowles Riot have noted that he lost several men to desertion during his time in Boston, but none has said why he stayed so long in the first place or that he arrived undermanned.¹⁰⁷ In mid-November, when his ships were finally ready to sail, Knowles reacted to a series of new desertions by making up his entire shortage of nearly fifty seamen in one continuous pressing operation. Beginning late in the evening of November 16 and continuing into the next morning, his press-gangs replenished his fleet in a matter of hours. The consequences were devastating.¹⁰⁸

More than a generation ago the historians John Lax and William Pencak masterfully pieced together what transpired when Knowles’s style of pressing collided with Boston’s anti-impressment rioters. Their narrative of the three-day Knowles Riot requires only a summary here.¹⁰⁹ On the first day, November 17, a mob assembled and kidnapped a group of Knowles’s officers to keep until the impressed sailors were released. Originally numbering around three hundred people, the crowd next threatened violence against Governor Shirley’s house before he persuaded them to release four of the hostages. In the late afternoon, witnesses estimated that the crowd grew to more than a thousand. The rioters visited the colony’s assembly house, repeating their demand that the impressed men be released. After breaking all the windows on the lower floor of the assembly house, the mob burned a barge on Boston Common. Sometime during the day Shirley had called on the town’s militia to suppress the mob. By evening, when only commissioned officers reported for duty, Shirley retreated to Castle Island in the harbor to wait on the militia and to negotiate with Knowles.

106. Knowles to the Admiralty, October 3, 1747, ADM 1/234, NAUK.

107. As of August 1747, the ships Knowles brought to Boston, the *Canterbury*, *Warwick*, and *Lark*, were respectively twenty-eight, five, and sixteen men below complement. See “An Account of the State and Condition of His Majestys Ships under the Command of Commodore Charles Knowles,” Louisbourg, August 20, 1747, ADM 1/234, NAUK. Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 183, notes the fleet anchored at Nantasket for repairs but does not relate the severity of the situation.

108. On November 17, 1747, the *Boston Gazette or Weekly Journal* included an advertisement offering a twenty-pound reward for apprehending five new deserters from Knowles’s fleet.

109. Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot.”

On the second day Shirley and Knowles exchanged communications. Knowles would not release his impressed men until he knew the fate of all his missing officers. In Boston the mob stopped demonstrating but still held one of Knowles's captains and seized four or five more officers hiding in private houses. On the morning of November 19, the last day of the riot, the colonial assembly received a letter from Shirley at once threatening and begging for help to restore order. The legislators complied by adopting a series of resolutions that condemned the riot and instructed the militia to do its duty. By the next day the militia turned out, the mob disappeared, the kidnapped navy officers walked free, and the impressed inhabitants from Massachusetts returned to their homes.

The following pages will attempt to contribute to our understanding of the Knowles Riot by placing its now well-known events in an Atlantic context. Lax and Pencak saw elements of social and imperial conflict in the disturbance, yet they ultimately determined that it best represented "consensual communalism," or traditional eighteenth-century crowd action.¹¹⁰ While correct in broad outline, this interpretation underestimates the raw power, unpredictable violence, and general unpleasantness of the mob. The Knowles Riot shared the same violent character as other Atlantic impressment riots. The crowd's aggression reflected social and emerging class tensions, but it was driven mostly by anger at British press-gangs and Governor Shirley's policy of cooperating with them. In this sense, the riot was highly political. It also included three qualities characteristic of impressment riots in the Western Hemisphere: misbehavior by press-gangs, unique crowd tactics, and a mob with a broad social composition.

The Knowles Riot was prompted by press-gang behavior that could have instigated violent resistance anywhere in the British Atlantic world, but the violation of local pressing customs figured most prominently as a cause of the disturbance. What offenses did Knowles commit? His worse transgression was not discriminating among the sailors he impressed. Knowles's gangs took Massachusetts residents as easily as foreigners, and they impressed from outbound vessels as well as inbound ones. Finally, his men seized at least three non-sailors (ship carpenter apprentices), perhaps on Boston's wharf.¹¹¹

To the uninitiated, Knowles's behavior might have seemed unworthy of bringing the Massachusetts government to a standstill for three days. Indeed,

110. *Ibid.*, 165, 214.

111. Hutchinson, *History of the Colony*, 2:330, is the only contemporary account of the riot that claims Knowles pressed on land. See Lax and Pencak, "Knowles Riot," 184.

his actual deeds never matched rumors that spread throughout Boston that he had taken three hundred (not fifty) men and that most were local residents.¹¹² Even Thomas Hutchinson, who was sympathetic to the rioters, believed Knowles's actions were in line with the navy's everyday recruiting practices: "However tolerable such a surprize might have been in London it could not be borne here. The people had not been used to it and men of all orders resented it, but the lower class were beyond all measure enraged and soon assembled with sticks, clubs, pitchmops, &c."¹¹³ Hutchinson was wrong about Knowles's behavior being normal for Britain but right that it elicited a response in Boston different from what it would have been in London. Knowles broke customs that had varying amounts of significance in different regions of the British Atlantic.

In London Knowles's most controversial act would have been taking men from outbound vessels, which broke the most important custom for adapting impressment to mercantile trade. Josiah Gains, second mate of a vessel bound to Madeira, responded to Knowles's gang in Boston harbor as any sailor might in a similar situation in the British Isles: "[I] told them said Ship was Outward bound they Damned him & Order'd him to go Immediately into their Boat, or they would drive him, he then said if you press me you must take charge of the Ship they Damned me again & said their Orders from the Commodore was to take every Man Except the Captain out of the Ship."¹¹⁴ In his retort to the press-gang, Gains showed familiarity with the navy's rule for bringing emptied ships into port (the men-in-lieu policy). The practice would have also been second nature for Knowles and his men. In the Western Hemisphere, however, away from the Admiralty's close oversight, they engaged in behavior that would have drawn a reprimand or instigated violence at home.

The decisive factor for most Bostonians who rioted was Knowles's reckless pressing of Massachusetts' resident sailors. Impressment of colonial inhabitants in Boston was the equivalent of disrupting privateering in Antigua or stopping outbound merchant ships in Britain: the action was more likely than any other to trigger violence. According to Benjamin Hallowell, one of Knowles's

112. William Shirley to the Duke of Newcastle, Boston, December 1, 1747, CO 5/901, NAUK; Shirley to the Lords of Trade, Boston, December 1, 1747, in Lincoln, *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 1:417.

113. Hutchinson, *History of the Colony*, 2:330.

114. "Deposition of Josiah Gains," in John Noble, "On the Libel Suit of Knowles v. Douglass, 1748, 1749," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 3, *Transactions, 1895–1897* (1900): 234.

men on the *Canterbury*, Knowles told him he “would not keep a man that belonged to the town or the Colonys; he wanted nothing but strangers.”¹¹⁵ Yet the more reports Knowles received about the mob’s actions, especially the taking of his officers, the less inclined he was to release the twenty or so impressed locals. On November 20, 1747, rioting ended in Boston even though Knowles still held—and would never give up—another twenty sailors foreign to Massachusetts.¹¹⁶ The rioters let it pass. Having helped force the return of their fellow colonists, the mob’s work was done.

The Knowles Riot was also specific to the Western Hemisphere in some of its crowd tactics. Boston’s mob, like Antigua’s during the impressment riot in June 1743, pushed the acceptable limits of role reversal. In Boston the crowd took more navy officers hostage, at least ten in all, and kept some for longer periods, for up to two days, than had ever occurred before. According to Shirley, the kidnappings raised more of a “Temper” in Knowles than any other aspect of the riot.¹¹⁷ The Knowles Riot also included a more typical role reversal that served as a safety valve for the crowd’s anger. After attempting without success to enter the governor’s house on the first day of the riot, the mob captured a deputy sheriff and set him in the stocks. According to Hutchinson, this “afforded them diversion and tended to abate their rage and disposed them to separate and go to dinner.”¹¹⁸

The most original tactic used by Boston’s anti-impressment rioters was the burning of a barge they mistook for the press-gang’s. In fact, the vessel belonged to a Scottish shipmaster who was in the mob. They first dragged the barge to the courtyard in front of Shirley’s house but then moved it to the Common to avoid being shot or burning down the town.¹¹⁹ Torching press boats built on the tradition in Britain of parading instruments used by gangs, especially small watercraft, in public displays. The practice of burning navy boats carried over into other American colonies during the Revolutionary era; it later appeared in another provincial area of the British empire, Scotland. In the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815), Greenock was the only other known place where it was repeated.¹²⁰ The link between

115. “Deposition of Benjamin Hallowell,” *ibid.*, 235–36.

116. William Shirley to the Duke of Newcastle, Boston, December 1, 1747; Shirley to the Lords of Trade, Boston, December 1, 1747, 1:418–19.

117. William Shirley to the Duke of Newcastle, Boston, December 1, 1747.

118. Hutchinson, *History of the Colony*, 2:330.

119. *Ibid.*, 2:331; Shirley to the Lords of Trade, Boston, December 1, 1747, 1:416; Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 190.

120. Hutchinson, *Press Gang*, 215; Captain Brown to the Admiralty, Greenock, June 5, 1810, ADM 12/147, NAUK. J. R. Hutchinson believed the 1793 incident was the only one ever outside America. The 1810 case involved the burning of three

America and Scotland was more than a coincidence but less than a case of direct transfer. Resistance tactics against press-gangs developed interdependently in the British Atlantic; differences in local customs and imperial authority prevented the exact same result in any two locales.

Finally, the broad composition of Boston's mob made the Knowles Riot similar to other colonial impressment riots. Rather than inspire resistance by a particular interest within the community, Knowles's actions mobilized the community itself. All accounts of the riot agree that sailors and other maritime workers led the effort; the integration of some foreign, especially Scottish, seamen in the mob helped to give it continuity with other Atlantic impressment riots.¹²¹ But what distinguished the Knowles Riot, even from other colonial disturbances, was the broad participation of the town. By the afternoon of the riot's first day Hutchinson estimated the crowd at "several thousand people," in a community with about 16,000 inhabitants.¹²² Shirley hinted in his directives during the riot that the real reason Boston's militia did not turn out was that its members had joined the mob. The crowd, therefore, likely contained at least some "middling sorts," such as craftsmen, shopkeepers, and small property owners. Women and merchants who were affected by Knowles's actions or just troubled by impressment also likely joined the mob.¹²³

Beyond its actual rioters, Boston's crowd also had the backing of colonial elites. From Castle Island on November 19, Shirley claimed "reason to apprehend the Insurrection was Secretly Countenanc'd and encourag'd by some ill minded Inhabitants and Persons of Influence in the Town."¹²⁴ The next day he was more blunt about the legislature's role, saying he hoped its votes to condemn the riot "will go far towards wiping off any Imputation upon the Government on Account of this extraordinary Affair; which in my Opinion they can't take too much Care to do."¹²⁵ Lax and Pencak argue persuasively that members of the General Court, including Hutchinson (then Speaker of the House), indeed condoned the riot. In what Shirley called an "accident," on November 17 the assembly exited the Council Chamber just minutes

boats. I found evidence of it by chance, which means there may be still more examples.

121. Lax and Pencak, "Knowles Riot," 196–97.

122. Hutchinson, *History of the Colony*, 2:331; Lax and Pencak, "Knowles Riot," 188.

123. William Shirley to Josiah Willard, Castle Island, November 19 and 20, 1747, *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 14, 1747; Lax and Pencak, "Knowles Riot," 188.

124. Shirley to Willard, Castle Island, November 19, 1747.

125. Shirley to Willard, Castle Island, November 20, 1747.

before the mob arrived, making it possible for rioters to occupy the ground floor. Hutchinson then helped to persuade Shirley to negotiate with the crowd. Saying in his official report to London that it was “against my Inclinations,” the governor was deeply embarrassed about agreeing to represent the mob’s wishes to Knowles.¹²⁶

If elite backing helped to facilitate the Knowles Riot, the mob’s violence truly drove its events. Participants disagreed about why Shirley fled Boston. He claimed two reasons: that he felt dishonored by the militia’s not heeding his call and that he wanted to be closer to Knowles to communicate with him. Knowles stated that the governor left for his personal “Safety.”¹²⁷ Regardless of his exact reasoning, Shirley would not have left Boston without the crowd’s general disturbance and willingness to use physical violence. After the riot the governor worked hard to erase any memory that he had given in to the crowd’s pressure. His reports to the Board of Trade and the Duke of Newcastle, secretary of State for the Southern Department, were identical except that his version to the board omitted the entire section describing his two days away from Boston negotiating with Knowles to release the impressed men. Shirley trusted only Newcastle, his longtime friend and patron, with details about how he had done the mob’s bidding.¹²⁸

This raises the question, then: at what point did the mob become too powerful, its violence too unpredictable? The turning point seems to have been Shirley’s letter on November 19 to the council and legislature. Besides chastising the town for not acting to suppress the riot, the governor for the first time gave Bostonians a sense of how angry Knowles was at the events.¹²⁹ At one point during the disturbance Knowles aligned his fleet to fire on Boston, saying, “by God I’ll now see if the Kings Government is not as good as a Mob.”¹³⁰ Most important, Shirley delivered the news that he would be staying in the harbor indefinitely, until militias from neighboring communities could restore order in Boston. In Hutchinson’s words, “Some high spirits

126. William Shirley to the Duke of Newcastle, Boston, December 1; Shirley to the Lords of Trade, Boston, December 1, 1747, 1:415; Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 188–89.

127. Knowles to the Admiralty, *Canterbury*, St. Kitts, January 18, 1748, ADM 1/234, NAUK.

128. William Shirley to the Duke of Newcastle, Boston, December 1; Shirley to the Lords of Trade, Boston, December 1, 1747, 1:412–19. For Newcastle’s longtime support for Shirley, see Schutz, *William Shirley*, 4–5, 11–13, 43, 64.

129. Shirley to Willard, Castle Island, November 19, 1747.

130. “Deposition of James Barnard,” in Noble, “On the Libel Suit of Knowles v. Douglass,” 231.

in the town began to question whether his retiring should be deemed a desertion or abdication.”¹³¹ As William Pencak has argued, “desertion” and “abdication” could mean only one thing to Anglo-Americans in the eighteenth century: that Shirley had fled Massachusetts just as King James II had left England during the English Revolution of 1688–89. The House of Representatives and council acted quickly, quashing any possibility of a Massachusetts “Glorious” Revolution of 1747, by denouncing the disturbance and calling for Knowles’s officers to be released; the riot soon ended. On November 30 Knowles became the latest in a series of Royal Navy officers to sail away “to the joy of the rest of the town.”¹³²

In his wake Knowles left behind the strongest evidence yet of the destructive potential of impressment in the British Atlantic world. The Knowles Riot showed what could result when the violence of Atlantic impressment riots combined with the communitarian ethic of American colonial societies and weak systems of imperial law enforcement. Writing in the mid-1760s, Thomas Hutchinson called the riot “equal to any which had preceded it.”¹³³ Knowles and Shirley each referred to it as an “Insurrection.”¹³⁴ After arriving in Jamaica, the admiral also blamed the 1746 act banning impressment in the West Indies for the riot: “the Act . . . filld the Minds of the Common People ashore as well as Sailors in all the Northern Collonies (but more especially in New England) with not only a Hatred for the King’s Service but a Spirit of Rebellion each claiming a Right to the same Indulgence as the Sugar Colonies and declaring they will maintain themselves in it.”¹³⁵ Knowles made the same mistake as he had in Antigua in conflating colonial opposition to impressment with “Rebellion” against the Crown, but he was correct that American colonists considered the 1746 law an extreme violation of their liberties. The law helped to guarantee that impressment remained most unpopular in the region of the British Atlantic where it occurred the least.

Although political rebellion or independence was never a motivation for

131. Hutchinson, *History of the Colony*, 2:332.

132. William Pencak, “Mob or People, Riot or Insurrection: Was There a Revolution in Massachusetts in November 1747?” in Roberta Kvelson, ed., *Law and the Human Sciences: Fifth Round Table on Law and Semiotics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 285–300; Hutchinson, *History of the Colony*, 2:333.

133. Hutchinson, *History of the Colony*, 2:330. Hutchinson’s account of the Knowles riot in the second volume of his *History of the Colony* was first published in 1767.

134. Knowles to the Admiralty, *Canterbury*, St. Kitts, January 18, 1748; Shirley to Willard, Castle Island, November 19, 1747.

135. Knowles to the Admiralty, *Canterbury*, St. Kitts, January 18, 1748.

the rioters, one can imagine how events could have deteriorated even further. Knowles was in the position to levy the most destruction, and Bostonians took seriously his threat to bombard the town. After the riot William Douglass pondered what would have happened if Knowles had carried out the action. “Such a dangerous Experiment,” Douglass concluded, “might have occasioned a general Insurrection of the Province.”¹³⁶ For all its damage, the Knowles Riot could have caused still more division in the British Empire.

The riot hurt imperial unity as a whole, but it brought Boston’s colonial society together—at least temporarily. Ironically, some of the strongest evidence that a broad coalition of Bostonians had united to oppose Knowles’s press-gangs consisted of statements afterward to the contrary. Boston elites and Massachusetts political institutions raced to cover up any hint of their participation. The Boston Town Meeting, the institution with members most implicated in the riot, also gave the strongest denunciation: “That the said Riotous Tumultuous Assembly consisted of Foreign Seamen, Servants Negroes & other Persons of mean & vile condition.”¹³⁷ The historian Paul Gilje has shown that such language in official statements about colonial riots was usually a dead giveaway that the disturbances involved middling people and even those higher up in society.¹³⁸ In other words, by the mid-eighteenth century Boston was deeply stratified, but rioting against impressment was not an expression of its division. This was one time Bostonians worked together in a common cause.

If anything, social discord was a byproduct of the Knowles Riot. In addition to blaming each other (and outsiders) for the disturbance, Boston’s residents debated over when, if ever, mob activity was legitimate. The strongest defender of crowd action was the twenty-five-year-old Samuel Adams, fresh out of Harvard, where his master’s thesis was “Whether it be lawful to resist the Supreme Magistrate, if the Commonwealth cannot be otherwise preserved.” The Knowles Riot gave Adams a real-life laboratory for exploring the ideas he had been studying. He was the likely author of an anonymous pamphlet published days after the disturbance that used Lockean reasoning to defend rioting against impressment: “For when they are suddenly attack’d, without the least Warning, and by they know not whom; I think they are treated as in a State of Nature, and have a natural Right, to treat their Op-

136. Douglass, *Summary, Historical and Political*, 1:238.

137. Resolution of the Boston Town Meeting, November 20, 1747, printed in the *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, December 21, 1747.

138. Gilje, *Road to Mobocracy*, 31.

pressors, as under such Circumstances.”¹³⁹ This was the first time in the American colonies that a natural rights argument was used to justify mob activity. For the next two years Adams and a small group of friends explored similar radical ideas and attacked Governor Shirley in their own newspaper, the *Independent Advertiser*.¹⁴⁰

Adams battled an unlikely foe in the pages of his newspaper on the issue of riots: William Douglass. A fellow enemy of Charles Knowles and impressment, Douglass criticized the admiral so harshly after the riot that he was sued for libel; the suit dragged through the colonial courts for almost two years. He opposed impressment with such fervor in part *because* it caused rioting. In December 1747 Douglass warned: “The least Appearance of a Mob (so called from Mobile Vulgar) ought to be suppressed, even where their Intention in any particular Affair is of itself very good; because they become Nurseries for dangerous Tumults.”¹⁴¹ On February 8, 1748, Adams wrote an open letter to Douglass in the *Independent Advertiser* again defending riots as a natural right and attacking Douglass’s call for severe new riot acts. This and later exchanges with Douglass showed that Adams’s thinking on British imperial matters had yet to evolve. When he discussed how impressment reduced individuals to a state of nature, for example, Adams mainly reserved criticism for the colonial government for not protecting its people. He also blamed abstract “Press-Gangs” for the travesty, not the British Empire or even the Royal Navy.¹⁴² The Knowles Riot and its aftermath contributed to political forms and ideas used in the American Revolution, but the event in itself was not a step toward independence.

CONCLUSIONS

In the 1740s the Royal Navy caused more impressment riots throughout the British Atlantic world than at any other time in the eighteenth century. With

139. *Amicus Patrie, An Address to the Inhabitants of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New-England; More Especially To the Inhabitants of Boston; Occasioned by the late Illegal and Unwarrantable Attack Upon their Liberties, and the unhappy Confusion and Disorders consequent thereon* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1747), 4. See Pencak, “Mob or People,” 292–94, for the intriguing argument that Adams’s natural rights arguments most likely came from Thomas Hobbes, not John Locke.

140. Lax and Pencak, “Knowles Riot,” 203–5, provides compelling but not conclusive evidence for Adams as the author of the pamphlet. Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 216–17, embrace their argument. See Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 487n111, for an alternative view of the pamphlet’s authorship.

141. *Boston Evening-Post*, December 21, 1747. See also Noble, “On the Libel Suit of Knowles v. Douglass,” 213–40.

142. *Independent Advertiser* (Boston), February 8, 1747.

violence as a common denominator, the riots reflected an Atlantic spectrum of different regional maritime cultures. In the British Isles, where impressment was most common, there was continual violence between sailors and press-gangs, especially at sea. Disturbances on land involving non-sailors were not unknown, but they constituted a small percentage of all impressment riots. In the West Indies, by contrast, anti-impressment mobs took advantage of their distance from institutions of central imperial authority to stage larger disturbances ashore. But participants came mainly from the world of maritime commerce: sailors, privateersmen, and, occasionally, ship captains and merchants. Finally, in North America impressment mobs matched the size of those in the Caribbean while also including a broader cross section of colonial society. In the regions of the British Atlantic where press-gangs seized the fewest seamen, the practice inspired the highest percentage of large riots.

The riots exposed the great risk taken by the British state in relying on impressment as a universal way to man its navy. The government increased the danger by not establishing clearer guidelines for raising men in sensitive colonial labor markets. Even as impressment helped to unite Britain and its Atlantic territories in a common system of maritime defense, it also threatened to destabilize individual seaports and drive whole colonies away from the metropole. In 1746, speaking of the institution's effect on his town, John Osborne, a Boston resident, asked, "What can be more unnatural than for one part of his Majesty's good subjects to be weakening and pulling down what another part is building up and supporting?"¹⁴³ By arousing violent fury in Britain, its western colonies, and places in-between, impressment was indeed a divisive influence in Britain's early empire.

Admiral Charles Knowles bears more personal responsibility than anyone else for the riots of the 1740s. He engaged in behavior that broke well-established pressing customs on both sides of the Atlantic, and perhaps no evidence speaks more to the power of the Knowles riots than his personal evolution after leaving Boston in November 1747. The story that opened this essay shows the extreme caution with which he approached impressing on his new assignment in Jamaica. Although he was merely following the guidelines of the 1746 act that banned impressment in the West Indies, he had never let laws or regulations get in his way of seizing sailors before. In 1758 further proof appeared that Knowles was a changed man, at least concerning impressment. An anonymous pamphlet attributed to him outlined perhaps

143. John Osborne to William Pepperrell and Peter Warren, Boston, February 5, 1746, in Gwyn, *Royal Navy and North America*, 212.

the most utopian plan ever proposed to solve Britain's naval manning problem. To encourage sailors "to serve their Country chearfully," Knowles suggested building hundreds of free houses in Chatham, Portsmouth, and Plymouth where navy seamen could live with their families. While seamen's wives worked as nurses, their sons would begin sailing at an early age and daughters would sew navy colors and clothing. To get the plan off the ground, Knowles wanted to begin using materials confiscated from foreign ships to build the houses. Though his manning proposal would not have fully eliminated impressment, it would have dramatically cut the navy's dependence on the practice.¹⁴⁴

The admiral gave no hint that causing tumultuous riots in the West Indies and North America influenced his efforts to reform impressment. Certainly, the riots did not tame all aspects of his character. Knowles left a long record of lawsuits, courts-martial, and even duels with his former captains until he accepted a command in the Russian navy in 1770.¹⁴⁵ Yet in the period immediately following the 1747 Boston impressment riot, at least, Knowles proved capable of getting along with his hosts. In August 1749 Boston newspapers reprinted the Jamaican assembly's appreciative address given to the admiral when he left the colony. Samuel Adams's *Independent Advertiser* sarcastically reminded his readers of the opposite circumstances under which he departed Boston two years earlier: "What a Tide of generous Passion must overflow the Breasts of those, who are obliged to part with a fond Father, or a kind Benefactor!"¹⁴⁶ Having endured a three-day riot instigated by Knowles's actions, Bostonians had good reason to be cynical. But in the years ahead seaports throughout the Atlantic could have benefited from the admiral's new and enlightened approach to naval recruiting.

144. Philo Nauticus [Charles Knowles], *A Proposal for the Encouragement of Seamen to Serve More Readily in His Majesty's Navy, for Preventing of Desertion, Supporting Their Wives and Families, and for the Easier and Quieter Government of his Majesty's Ships* (London: A. Millar, 1758), 5. The pamphlet is reprinted and attributed to Knowles in J. S. Bromley, ed., *The Manning of the Royal Navy: Selected Public Pamphlets, 1693–1873* (London: Navy Records Society, 1974), 104–13.

145. Stephen and Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Knowles, Charles; Gwyn, *Royal Navy and North America*, 433. Knowles won lawsuits against Captain James Gambier for carrying on an affair with his second wife and against the famous novelist Tobias Smollett for libel. In Russia Knowles pursued mostly administrative duties in St. Petersburg before returning to Britain in 1774; he died in London in 1777.

146. *Independent Advertiser*, August 21, 1749.