

Finders Keepers: How Prize Laws Affected the Common Sailor in the Late 18th Century

Brooke Barber, Dr. Christine Sears, Department of History

Introduction

After the American Revolution, Americans saw the Atlantic trade as the key to economic success, and thus attempted to re-enter this market. However, other countries blocked the US competition by hiring privateers, mercenaries whose targets were the merchant ships of other countries than their own. These privateers wreaked havoc in the Atlantic, leading to a time when every American knew prize laws by heart. Privateers are now a piece of the past, and we have long since forgotten them (Petrie 2).

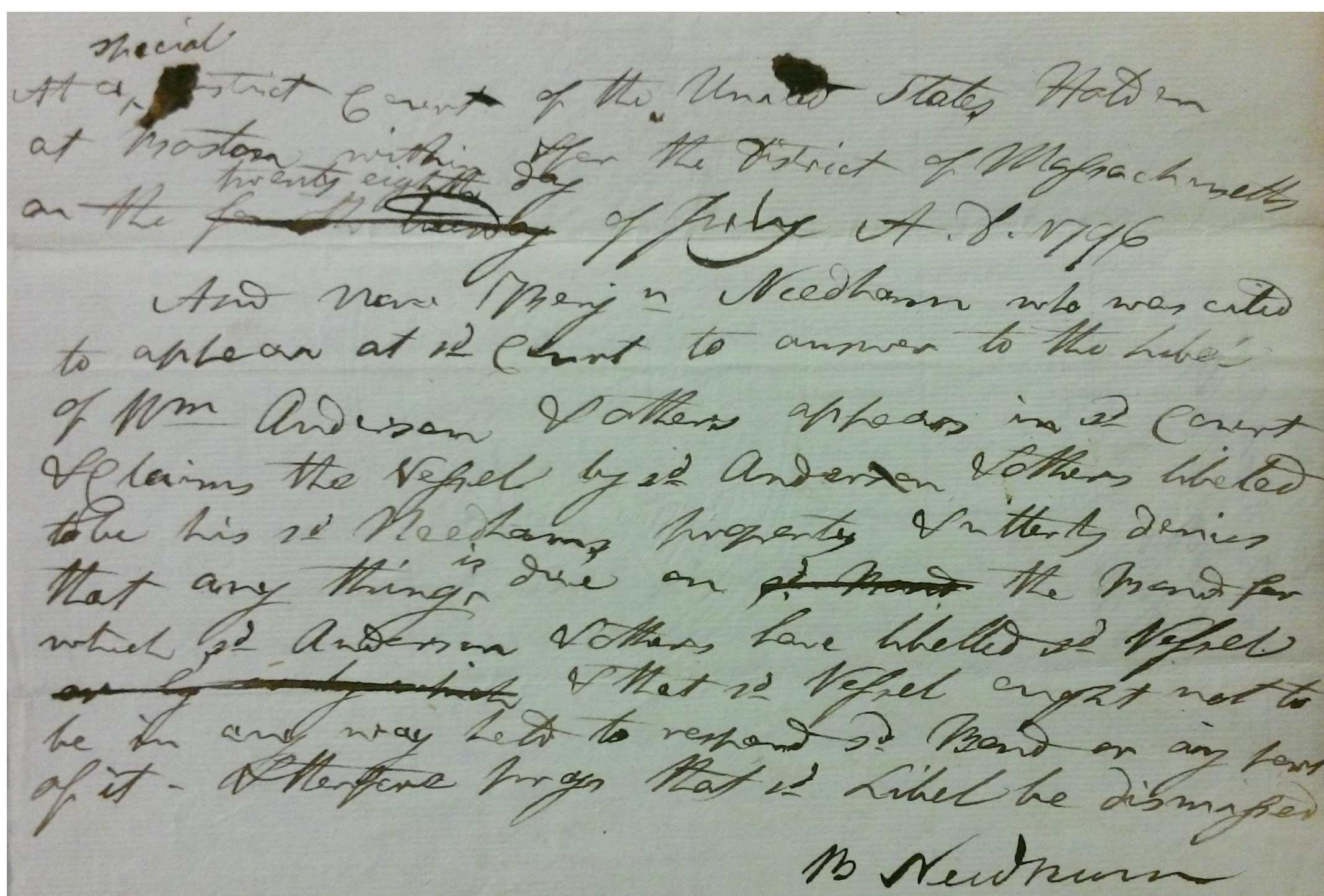


Figure 2

On the other hand, there were a plethora of sources that were written very quickly, which resorted in messy, ink-blotted scrawl as seen in the picture above.

Conclusions

These documents give historians a better understanding of maritime and Atlantic history by offering a more complete representation of the past. With these sources historians can better understand the effects of prize laws on the common sailor, and the impact these effects had on US economics and foreign trade in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the RCEU staff, the UAH Office of the Provost, and the UAH President and Vice President for Research and Economic Development.

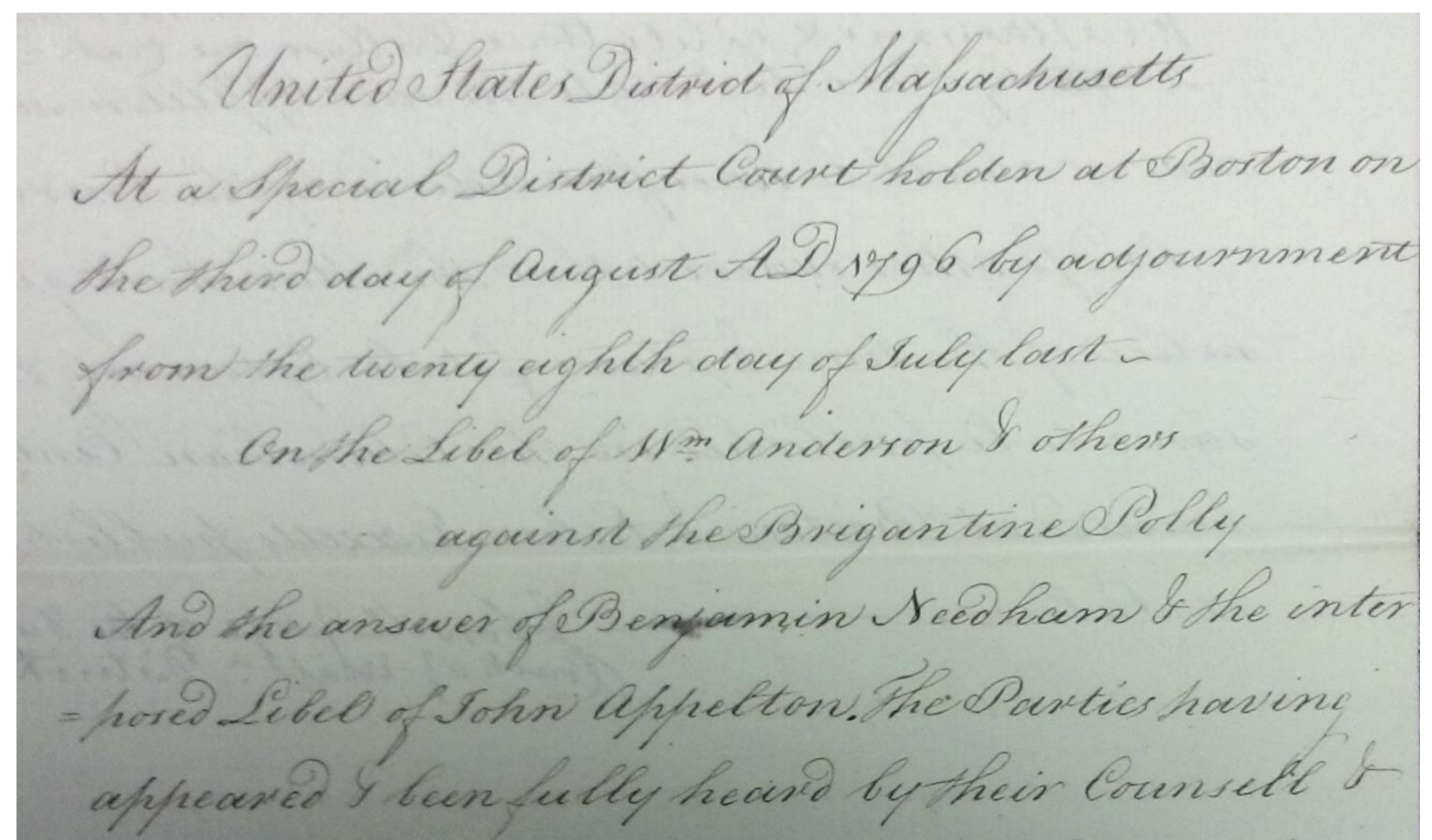


Figure 1

All of these sources are court cases from the Massachusetts District Court, which are held by the Boston National Archives. On one hand, some of the sources were written in elegant and curving script. These were more pleasant to work with.

The Research Process

- First, the student read maritime libel cases from the late 1700s and early 1800s from Boston.
- Then, transcribed the source word-for-word so that it could be more legible.
- Last, an abstract of the source, and its details were compiled into a database which will be used in future research.

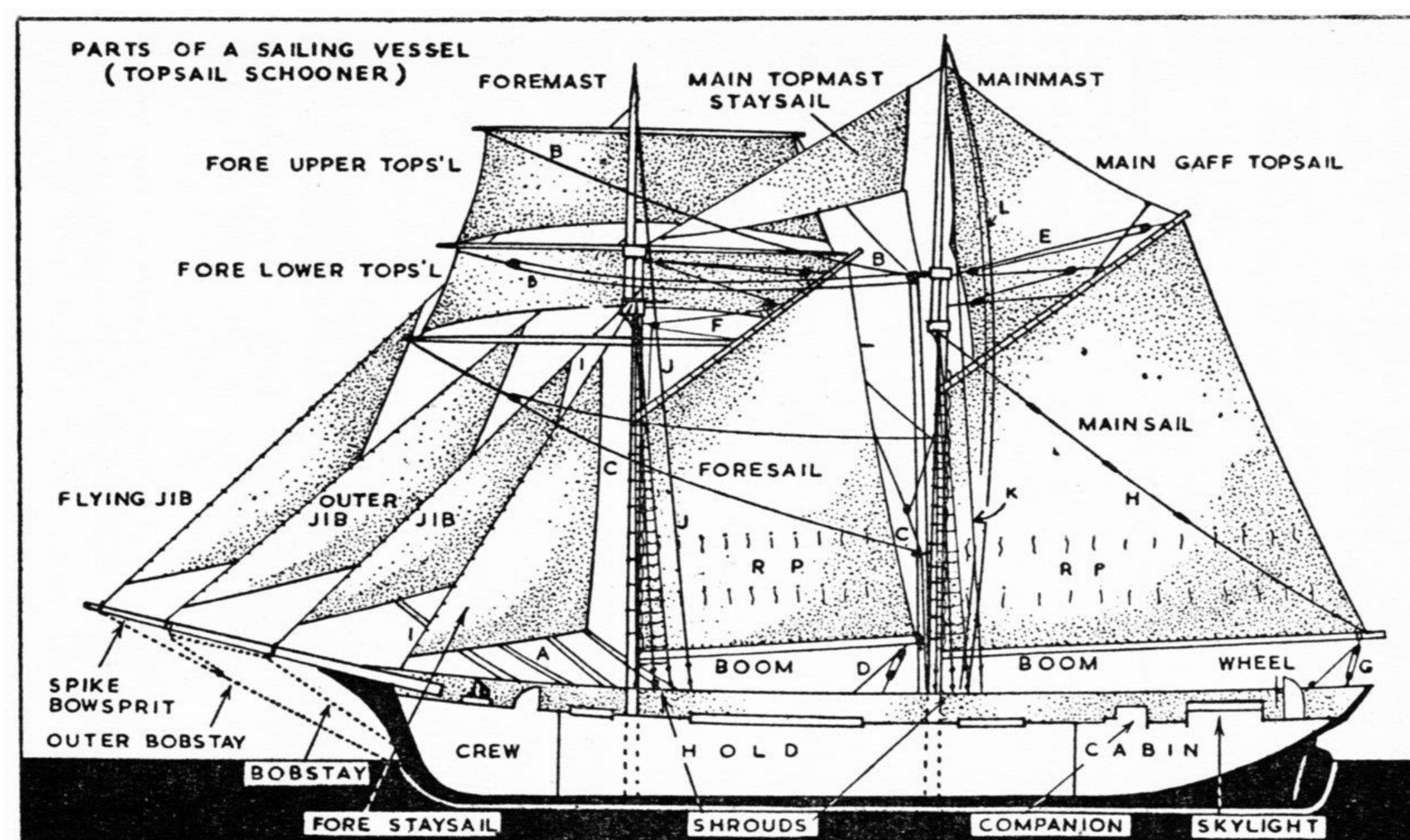


FIG. 42.—Parts of a sailing vessel

Figure 3

This is a diagram of a Schooner, the type of ship that would typically be used on trading voyages from port cities like Boston to ports in the Caribbean. The cargo on these ships varied, but the most frequent goods that arrived from the Caribbean were sugar, molasses, and salt.