The folk art of seafarers has long been recognized as a fascinating component of America's aesthetic heritage. Collections of scrimshaw, laboriously hand-carved in the days when Nantucket whaling prospered, are included not only in nautical collections but also in art museums throughout America. Surviving ship's figureheads are coveted by the few institutions fortunate enough to have them, and antique ship models are among the most valuable of maritime artifacts. Still, for vast numbers of people the art form most often associated with mariners is tattooing.

There is a profusion of information on modern tattooing, but unfortunately little descriptive material has survived from the past. Only two examples of early naval tattoos have been preserved. One is a crudely drawn mermaid dating from 1808; the other, a nineteenth-century depiction of Adam, Eve, the serpent, and a tree of life, is owned by Guy's Hospital in London. Philip Sparrow, who for years decorated the bodies of sailors in the US Navy, neatly captured the ephemeral nature of the medium with a sign in his Chicago shop that told prospective customers that his work was guaranteed for life--plus six months.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1993 meeting of the Popular Culture Association.

2 Ira Dye, "The Tattoos of Early American Seafarers, 1796-1818," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, CXXXIII (1989), 542, 545-546, maintains that the mermaid tattoo is also at Guy's. But authorities there can only locate the piece of skin bearing Adam and Eve; J.J. Daws (Senior Chief Technician, Guy's Hospital) to author, 6 July 1992.


The origins of tattooing among western European seafarers are obscure. There is some evidence that Englishmen began acquiring indelible skin art shortly after William Dampier returned from a late seventeenth-century privateering voyage with a Pacific island boy whose tattoos created considerable interest. It is uncertain whether his markings were what first inspired mariners to obtain tattoos, but the practice was well established by the mid-eighteenth century, when English sailors were regularly adorned with a grand assortment of shapes and motifs. Many of the men on Captain James Cook’s Pacific expeditions were tattooed, but nothing is known about the designs, their placement, or the frequency with which they were applied. William Bligh, captain of the ill-fated Bounty, compiled one of the earliest surviving catalogues of British sailor tattoos, but his purpose was not to preserve information on artistic expression for future generations but rather to provide a basis for positive identification of the mutineers when they were apprehended.

The only comprehensive study of American sailor tattoos from earlier eras was published by Ira Dye in 1989. Using the vast amounts of data in the 1796-1818 Philadelphia Seamen's Protection Certificate applications at the National Archives in Washington, and the similarly detailed General Entry Books of American Prisoners-of-War, 1812-1815, at the Public Record Office in Kew, he produced an elegant account of the tattoos that adorned American sailors almost two centuries ago. Dye also used more recent records to compare late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tattooing with what occurred a century later. The additional data he incorporated were from the publications of naval surgeon Ammen Farenholt in 1908 and 1913. While Farenholt provided only a summary of the frequency of tattoos among sailors on the USS Independence in the decade before World War I, his incomplete tabulations still contain useful information.

Although Dye maintained that his sources were "the only detailed data on American seafarer tattooing of that or any other time period," in fact there is at least one other data set: the diary compiled by Philip C.

4 Dye, "The Tattoos," 522-523, also includes a brief history of tattooing from prehistoric times to the present century.

Van Buskirk during his service on the USS Adams from 1884 to 1889. To be sure, while this database is far smaller than either of Dye's, it is a useful supplement.

In attempting to find meaning in modest amounts of quantified material, there is often the possibility of alternative methods of analysis. Similarly, conclusions drawn from a body of information as limited as that collected by Van Buskirk must necessarily remain tentative, but when the judgments that follow are incorporated in the much larger study of late nineteenth-century American maritime history on which I am presently engaged, I am persuaded that they are substantially correct.

Philip Van Buskirk held the rank of mate while on the Adams, but his duties were largely those of secretary to Captain Louis Kempff. As the Adams cruised the Pacific and passed extended periods at anchor in various ports, there was little to occupy the mate's time. He spent long hours setting down his observations and entering copies of the captain's correspondence into his diary. Those activities being insufficient to pass the idle hours, he transcribed personnel records of every man officially on board. In all, he compiled, alphabetized, and entered into his diary information on 310 men. In addition, in the years immediately following his departure from the Adams, he entered personal information on four additional men into his diary.

There is every reason to assume that Van Buskirk's entries are accurate reproductions of the records. Although he had risen from the rank of drummer, he was no semi-literate scribbler. Indeed, his background was far different from most non-commissioned men in the nineteenth-century Navy. He not only attended Georgetown College in Washington but also had been a student at St. John's College in Annapolis before entering military service. In addition to his formal education, he was a compulsive autodidact, studying at various times Latin, French, Chinese, mathematics, penmanship, drawing, physics, and a host of subjects that piqued his interest. Detailed information in his diary correlates closely with other available records, such as ship's logs, his personnel file at the National Archives, and descriptions of events from both primary and secondary sources. On occasion, Van Buskirk

---

copied articles from newspapers; where these can be compared to the originals, the degree of correspondence is astounding. His work is almost perfect, word for word, capital letter for capital letter, misspelling for misspelling, and punctuation mark for punctuation mark. The care he lavished on the roll of Adams' men included in the diary is obvious from even a cursory glance at its seventy-four handwritten pages. At the head of the first sheet is a list of the eleven items of standard information he collected for each man: height, weight, eye and hair colour, complexion, date of last enlistment, previous naval service, the issue numbers of continuous service certificates (if applicable), good conduct badges (if any), previous occupations, and a category called "permanent marks," under which he entered descriptions and locations of tattoos. Van Buskirk headed each entry with the man's name, rank, position on board, date and place of birth, and the reason for departure (transferred, detached, deserted, etc.). He also added extraneous information on many of those included on the muster roll. Here and there he mentioned varicose veins, circumcision, bowed legs, unusually large noses, the absence of pubic hair, and other atypical conditions.

Although there are occasional missing items, the information Van Buskirk provided is substantially complete for every man except the thirty-six officers, warrant officers, naval cadets, surgeons, and several others like himself with administrative positions. He apparently did not have access to these records, and while the names of the men are included in proper alphabetical order, the only information he provided for each was his rank, the date on which he joined the Adams, his previous post, the date he left the ship, and his destination after departure. These men have been excluded from the database used to examine tattooing in the steam navy.

Another category excluded from the database contains records of Asians serving on the Adams as wardroom boys, cooks, waiters, stewards, and in other service capacities. These twenty-nine men formed a shipboard community separate from other crew, and their social imperatives for obtaining or failing to obtain tattoos may well have differed from those of the ship's sailors. Additionally, the entries for

---

7"A Young Woman's Woe," The Examiner (San Francisco), 4 January 1896; "On a Criminal Charge," ibid., 29 March 1896; "Damages for an Arrest," ibid., 12 March 1897. Van Buskirk's copies are located in his diary in notes 1 and 13, immediately following the entries for 1896, and in note 40, after the entries for 1897.
Asians on Van Buskirk's muster roll are not nearly as complete or comprehensive as for men of European and African ancestry. In all likelihood, these lacunae were not the product of Van Buskirk's carelessness but resulted from the officers' well-known propensity for failing to maintain accurate records of Asian seafarers. The purpose of this dereliction, probably more by design than accident, may have been to simplify replacing those who resigned, deserted, or were fired. When Asians departed, it was common practice on American ships to replace them with other Asians without altering personnel records. Detailed physical descriptions obviously would have complicated this handy system. The practice simplified administration both by eliminating the need to explain the departure of any particular Asian and by avoiding the complicated procedure necessary to enrol his replacement. Asians hired to fill vacant posts simply became their predecessors in name and country of origin on the record.

A third group omitted from the database is the compliment of thirty-eight marines. As with Asian service personnel, marines formed a distinct population, apart from, and often hostile to, the sailors. While they were involved in the general maritime milieu, their duties, enlistments, and training differed significantly from other crew, and decisions on whether to be tattooed may have been made for reasons quite dissimilar to those that actuated sailors. Even if the motives influencing marines on tattooing were in fact identical, their effect was experienced within a separate and isolated shipboard community.

The data base created by removing officers, Asians, and marines from the original 314 personnel records contains 211 men. Since Van Buskirk compiled his record almost entirely during a four-year period on a single Pacific cruise, it allows a sharply defined synchronic comparison of tattooed and untattooed sailors. His careful inclusion of almost every man's birthplace also makes it possible to examine native and foreign-born sailors for a number of additional characteristics.

Table 1 suggests little substantial difference between the thirty-eight percent American-born and the sixty-two percent foreign-born components of the Adams's crew on the matter of tattoos. The difference of 3.6% is insignificant in so small a sample.

---

8The two or three men of African ancestry whose records were copied by Van Buskirk were not tattooed. Removing them from the database for any of several reasons would not affect the conclusions drawn from the material.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Untattooed</th>
<th>Tattooed</th>
<th>% Tattooed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Sailors</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American-Born</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Birthplaces of three of the 174 untattooed men cannot be ascertained.

Source: See text.

In his examination of the Seamen’s Protection Certificates issued from 1796 to 1803, Dye found that 20.6% of the men were tattooed, but he also discovered a steady decline in this practice among American mariners during the first half of the nineteenth century. Only five percent of his sample were tattooed after the War of 1812, and Seamen’s Protection Certificates for 1840 indicate a similarly small percentage. The reasons why sailors gradually abandoned the practice are obscure, but in the post-Civil War era tattooing again became fashionable. The percentage of men wearing tattoos by Van Buskirk’s reckoning corresponds to the rate for the years 1796-1803. Although naval surgeon Farenholt tabulated his data in a manner that does not facilitate easy comparisons with the figures compiled by Dye or Van Buskirk’s record, his findings indicate that the popularity of tattooing continued to grow among mariners in the decade after the turn of the century. He discovered not only that twenty-three percent of those enlisting in the Navy for the first time were tattooed but also that slightly over half of those signing-on for a second tour wore tattoos.9

As table 2 indicates, there was no significant difference in the mean age of American or foreign-born sailors, whether tattooed or not. Although untattooed men born in America were separated from similarly

unadorned men of foreign birth by 3.3 years, this difference is even less significant than it appears. A number of the foreign-born sailors were brought to the US as boys, and by the time they went to sea may well have become as American as native-born recruits. It is impossible to estimate the proportion of men and boys in the database that fall into the category of "substantially Americanized mariners of foreign birth," but Van Buskirk included notations with his entries on four foreign-born youths indicating that they had parents or guardians resident in the US. There may have been many among the 128 foreign-born sailors similar to eighteen-year-old John Fraiser, a native of Pictou, Nova Scotia whose family migrated to Lowell, Massachusetts, or nineteen-year-old Charles Gustave Lindstedt, born in Sweden but whose parents some time before the late 1880s established their home in Brooklyn, New York. The number of such sailors and the age at which they immigrated undoubtedly affected their acculturation and diminishes to an undetermined extent the distinctions between foreign- and American-born sailors.

Table 2
Untattooed and Tattooed Sailors,
Average Age,
American and Foreign-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Untattooed</th>
<th>Tattooed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Sailors</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American-Born</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: See table 1.

The number of sailors who faced courts-martial according to Van Buskirk's record (see table 3) is also too small to make the differentials significant. It is only the number of tattooed, American-born deserters that is conspicuously elevated. Still, the numbers in the four categories of deserters are small. The greater desertion rate of Americans is probably attributable to the proximity of home, family, and other familiar features. One possible reason for the high percentage of tattooed American deserters is that the figure reflects the sort of wide variation
that can result in small samples. It is quite possibly a fluke produced by an additional two or three men in that particular category.

Table 3

| Untattooed and Tattooed Sailors, Disciplinary Records, American and Foreign-Born |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Untattooed & Tattooed            | % of n¹         | Tattooed & % of n |
| Courts-Martial, American-Born   | 6               | 2               | 12.5            |
| Courts-Martial, Foreign-Born    | 17              | 2               | 9.5             |
| Deserters, American-Born        | 8               | 7               | 43.7            |
| Deserters, Foreign-Born         | 4               | 4               | 19.0            |

Notes: The country of birth cannot be ascertained for three untattooed sailors. Thus, for computing percentages, n = 107 for foreign-born and untattooed. For untattooed Americans, n = 64. For tattooed American-born sailors, n = 16. For tattooed foreign-born sailors, n = 21.

Source: See text.

It is not until tattooed and untattooed sailors are compared by job description (table 4) that substantive distinctions appear.¹⁰ There was a wide range in the rates of tattooing among the various occupational groups on board the Adams. Of the men who actually sailed the ship — seamen, ordinary seamen, apprentices, and landsmen — 28.9% were tattooed. In like manner, some 17.9% who laboured below decks tending the massive steam engines wore tattoos. Those with more arduous, physically-demanding, or dangerous jobs — the duties most often associated with seafaring — were much more inclined to mark their bodies permanently with symbols of their pride in being mariners. The

¹⁰The assignment of several occupations to the various categories in table 4 might be considered somewhat arbitrary. Any changes made in the classification of occupations such as armourer, bayman, coxswain, coxswain’s apprentice, carpenter, or sailmaker’s mate, however, would not affect the conclusions. Only one man, a carpenter, in the six occupations was tattooed.
situation was far different among those in service or supervisory occupations. Only one of the twenty-five men who provided specialized services displayed tattoos, and only one of the twenty-four enlisted personnel in positions of authority was tattooed.

Table 4
Untattooed and Tattooed Sailors, Occupations, American and Foreign-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Untattooed</th>
<th>Tattooed</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Foreign</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men Sailing the Ship</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47*</td>
<td>72*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Plant Operators</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men Assigned Service Functions</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men in Positions of Authority</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined Occupation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Country of origin cannot be determined for three men. "Men sailing the ship" includes seamen, seamen apprentice (1st, 2nd and 3rd class), ordinary seamen, and landsmen. "Power plant operators" include coal heavers, fireman (1st and 2nd class), jacks-o-the-dust, machinists, oilers, and water tenders. "Men assigned service functions" include apothecaries, armourers, baymen, blacksmiths, carpenters, cooks, coxswains, coxswain apprentices, lamp lighters, messenger boys, painters, sailmaker's mates, schoolmasters, stewards, tailors, writers, and yeomen. "Men in positions of authority" include boatswain's mates, chief boatswain's mates, captains (hold, tops, afterguard, forecastle), ship's corporals, chief gunner's mates, quarter gunners, masters-at-arms, chief quartermasters, and quartermasters.

Source: See text.

In the case of service personnel on the Adams, the almost total absence of tattooing may reflect a choice not to identify themselves as sailors to the same degree as those who worked the sails, served the guns, or operated the engines. At least some were undoubtedly drawn from social and educational levels above the ordinary sailors; perhaps they sought to avoid unnecessary (and indelible) associations with those they considered "maritime rabble." Their identities were established and
their status confirmed by their specialized training and the unique niches they occupied as apothecaries, writers, armourers, or other sorts of specialists. There is also the possibility that they simply did need to demonstrate their masculinity by selecting jobs associated with physical strength and endurance. Then, too, bearing the sharp, pricking, painful sensation of inked needles tracing patterns over their skins may have held little appeal for them.\(^\text{11}\)

The only tattooed man in the ship’s service sector was a twenty-five-year-old American carpenter with no previous seafaring experience who obtained his position because of training as a woodworker. The tattoos he wore may have been the result of a wish to identify himself as the mariner he was not, but it is as likely that they were acquired before he went to sea, since there is nothing particularly nautical about either of them. He bore the initials R F H, for Roe F. Hartwig, on his right forearm; on the left forearm was a design resembling the Roman numeral XX, but with the two characters overlapping slightly.\(^\text{12}\)

The absence of tattoos on twenty-three of the twenty-four mariners in positions of authority is more difficult to understand. The leaders were on average eight years older than the mean for the remainder of the database and had for the most part risen from the ranks. There was in all probability little about their previous maritime occupations to suggest softness or a desire to secure safe and comfortable berths as nautical tailors, ship’s schoolmasters, messenger boys, or the like. They had in almost every case compiled impressive naval records. The twenty-three untattooed leaders held twenty of the sixty-eight continuous service certificates awarded to men on the \textit{Adams}. The twenty-fourth leader, the much-tattooed master-at-arms, held another of the certificates.

A similar pattern prevailed with the issuance of good conduct badges. Of the thirty-four badges held by men in the database, twenty were awarded to untattooed shipboard leaders. John Thompson, a captain of the afterguard, was the holder of nine badges. Two men in supervisi-

\(^{11}\)I am indebted to my daughter, Jenny Anne Burg, for describing the sensation of being tattooed.

\(^{12}\)Tattooed initials were common among mariners, presumably to aid in identifying their bodies, but it is uncertain if these can be considered "maritime tattoos." There is nothing uniquely nautical about them, as is the case with tattoos of fouled anchors or ships. Neither is there any information on the prevalence of tattooed initials on men with no connection to the sea for comparison.
ory positions had each received four, another was the possessor of two, and thirty-one-year-old ship’s corporal Andrew J. Janssen of Westerwick, Sweden, had one. The only good conduct badges held by a tattooed man were the three belonging to the master-at-arms. The eleven additional badges were distributed among a quartet of untattooed men: a carpenter’s mate, cook, coxswain, and machinist.

The concentration of continuous service certificates, good conduct badges, and long years of previous service among older, untattooed men in positions of authority is anomalous. As a cumulative phenomenon, the number of tattoos worn by sailors might be expected to increase in a way that would suggest some manner of relationship to length of service. The longer a man served at sea the greater his exposure to the possibility of being tattooed; thus, per capita tattoos in groups with extensive service could be expected to be higher than in groups with less service. This in fact was not the case among the Adams’ men. The median age of untattooed leaders, most of whom had extensive prior service, was thirty-eight years. Untattooed sailors in non-leadership positions, many of whom had little or no previous service, were on average ten years younger. The thirty-six tattooed mariners without supervisory posts, also a group with little previous experience at sea compared to the boatswains, gunners and quartermasters, averaged 30.7 years, only slightly more than the untattooed crew members without supervisory status. The one tattooed leader was forty-eight when Van Buskirk compiled his record.

Leadership by enlisted personnel on the Adams was the province in almost every case of older mariners with extensive service. Except for the master-at-arms, every man who held a position of authority was untattooed. The reasons for their absence on these seasoned mariners are not entirely clear, but Van Buskirk’s record suggests at least a partial explanation. The data indicate that most men were tattooed early in their careers but abandoned the sea before gaining the necessary experience to qualify for supervisory posts. Over half of the thirteen men with single tattoos had been marked before reaching their thirty-first birthdays. Of the thirteen who had two tattoos, half received them before the age of twenty-seven. Even for sailors with three, four, or five tattoos, the modal age was just thirty-one, only slightly above the mean age for all sailors in the database. The only exception concerns three men, each with six tattoos. Within this small group, what could logically be expected actually occurred: these men, with a total of eighteen tattoos, all had extensive naval service. Their average age was 38.7 years.
The record indicates not only that tattooed men obtained tattoos early in their careers but also that they were not the types to spend long years in the Navy. The previous service of ninety-six crew in the database can be gleaned from Van Buskirk's diary. Although a few entries may have been omitted, they are not sufficient to affect the results substantially. The average length of service before joining the Adams was 4.7 years for un tattoed men with previous naval experience, while the mean for experienced mariners with tattoos was 1.7 years. Those with tattoos did not re-enlist after their first or second cruises with the same frequency as those without tattoos. Among men in authority, the trend to re-join was particularly notable. The average length of previous service for un tattoed leaders before joining the Adams was 9.6 years. Mariners who returned to shore after only one or two voyages, it appears, obtained tattoos far more frequently than those destined for long-term naval service and ultimate promotion to supervisory positions.

Although neither age, birthplace, nor disciplinary record bears any discernable relationship to obtaining tattoos, two factors — occupational category and length of previous service — seem to some extent to separate the two groups. Personnel in service positions were largely untattooed, and it is not difficult to speculate on the reasons. Men who operated the engines and sailed the ship were frequently tattooed, but there is nothing that distinguishes the tattooed among them from the untattooed, except for the tattoos themselves. The shipboard leaders, however, present a puzzle. They were drawn from the most heavily tattooed occupations, yet they were almost entirely bereft of tattoos. Searching for even a single feature that might bear on this puzzle and in addition cast light on why sailors decided to become tattooed or not is hazardous, but data from the Adams suggests some of the psychodynamics involved. Shipboard leaders were not fundamentally distinct from men who sailed the ship or tended its power plant in the way that apothecaries, carpenters, and those of similar ilk were separate from others in the database. Those in supervisory positions were identical to the men they superintended in terms of background, training, and vocation. It was only the power they exercised that kept them apart from their men. These leaders were for the most part drawn from the two occupational groups they directed, sailors and engine operators, and they asserted their authority by virtue of their superior knowledge of precisely the same skills possessed by the men they supervised. What distinguished these untattooed leaders from tattooed mariners, and to a lesser extent from other untattooed mariners, was their commitment to naval service,
evidenced not only by their large number of certificates and badges but also by the average of 9.6 years of previous service accumulated before joining the *Adams*.

There is no clue to why the men in authority, whether native- or foreign-born, were so strongly bound to naval careers. Perhaps they chose the sea because few other options were available. They may simply have held a common vision of seafaring as a permanent livelihood, or there may have been a profusion of these and other reasons for their devotion that cannot now be discerned. With tattooed men, in contrast, the relative inexperience shown by their lack of previous service indicates that the opposite may have been the case. These were not men unalterably committed to the sea, and without any abiding sense of purpose or commitment they needed something to bind them to their fellows; for some, acquiring tattoos early in their careers affirmed their membership in the brotherhood of mariners and proclaimed their identities not only to all and sundry but also to themselves. After the expiration of their first or second enlistments, their lack of commitment to the Navy, whatever its nature or origins, made it easier to leave the service and undertake employment elsewhere.

While the heavily tattooed master-at-arms had fifteen years service before coming to the *Adams*, this is not the paradox it seems. At first glance it would appear that he was a seafarer with no insecurities and little need to advertise his nautical credentials. He was an experienced mariner, held Continuous Service Certificate No. 1793, and had been awarded three good conduct badges. On 28 December 1887 he was discharged, but re-enlisted the following day. Neither does it seem that he needed artistic devices to affirm his masculinity, if indeed such an affirmation can be obtained through tattoos. If he performed his duty as ship’s disciplinarian in the manner for which masters-at-arms were famous, it is likely that he daily demonstrated nineteenth-century mariners’ notions of manhood: physical strength, hardness, and occasional brutality. The two scars across his forehead perhaps signified to those who served with him that he was a man not easily humoured. Such was the reputation of masters-at-arms: they were appointed precisely because they could not be intimidated or easily manipulated.

Still, what little information survives about the master-at-arms of the *Adams* indicates that he had an abiding need to intensify his identification with his fellow mariners, a need so profound that it could not be met through exemplary service and the requisite tattoos. The record indicates that while he was born in Campeche, he claimed Barce-
B.R. Burg

Iona as his birthplace in what seems an attempt to obscure his Indian ancestry. His complexion, noted as "swarthy" by Van Buskirk, may have made him uneasy in a Navy where the vast majority of men were northern Europeans or of northern European extraction. Like so many who came to America before and after, he changed his name in an effort to blend in. Sometime during his career in the Navy Pedro Pereira became Peter Perry, and in a final effort to belong, he made an irrevocable commitment to the nation he served. Between the dancing girl on the right biceps and the tattooed chain around the wrist he exhibited a third tattoo, the United States' coat of arms.

Insecurities engendered by a lack of commitment to lengthy sea service, in addition to suggesting why some may have chosen to be tattooed, might also provide an alternative explanation for the unusually high percentage of tattooed American deserters in table 3. The 43.7% figure, instead of a statistical fluke resulting from a slight numerical variation in a restricted sample, could well be a consequence of the men's lack of attachment to their seafaring environment. Not only could these Americans flee from the navy to nearby homes, families, and familiar surroundings, as could their untattooed countrymen, but beyond that, the fact that their commitment to seafaring was less solid than their untattooed comrades made desertion a more acceptable option.

In contrast to men who signed-on to naval ships, obtained their tattoos, and then abandoned the service after a cruise or two, some who went to sea had abiding emotional commitments to maritime careers, limited perceptions of alternative vocational choices, or some combination of these and other factors that irrevocably stamped them in their own estimates as seafarers for all their days. Their identity settled and secure, there was no need for re-enforcement. Inked designs tracked permanently over their bodies were not necessary to affirm to themselves or others who they were. They were indubitably sailors. When their enlistments were over, they simply re-enlisted. After years at sea a portion advanced to positions of authority. They became the gunners, boatswains, and captains of the tops, the men charged with superintending the hard and dangerous work of sailing the ship, manning the guns, and securing victory in the event of battle on the high seas. It was these men, absolutely committed to naval careers and never doubting their identification as seafarers, who had no need of tattoos to proclaim them as man-of-war's men.