

Preface

Although I hope to bring new information and insights to the “Revolt of the Whip”—a spectacular revolt in the Brazilian navy by largely black crews against an all-white officer corps in 1910—I am writing for a primarily American audience. Such readers might wonder whether there are similar events in the history of the United States. Unsurprisingly, there are no precise parallels in the American experience to the events described in the following pages, but three incidents in our own history deal with similar racial themes on the high seas or in the US Navy. Two of them concerned uprisings of captives aboard slavers—in 1839 on *La Amistad*, a Spanish-chartered vessel, and in 1841 on the *Creole*, an American ship.¹ Both ended in court cases, the first in Connecticut, and the second on Nassau, in the Bahamas. Both, but especially the first, fired the abolitionist movement in the United States. In the *Amistad* case, ex-president John Quincy Adams defended the self-liberated slaves before the US Supreme Court, and Steven Spielberg told the story to the world in his movie *Amistad*. Though considered mutinies rather than cases of piracy, the *Creole* and *Amistad* incidents were revolts by captives rather than crew members, and in both instances the slaves ultimately walked free.

An incident more directly resembling the Brazilian rebellion occurred in World War II at Port Chicago, California. The mutiny there was more unambiguously a race-based rebellion than the Brazilian revolt studied here. Like the US Army, the navy had remained segregated throughout World War II. At Port Chicago the black seamen’s assignment had been to load munitions onto cargo ships in the war against Japan. On July 17, 1944, a terrific explosion occurred at the loading dock: 320 men were

killed, of which 202 had been black enlistees. Another 390 other men were injured; two-thirds of them were African Americans. These numbers amounted to 15 percent of all black casualties in World War II. The blast was equivalent to five kilotons of TNT, about one-third the force of the Hiroshima explosion. Port Chicago was the worst disaster on the American homefront during the war.

Blame was placed not on the white officers in charge of the loading, but on the black sailors who were killed.² Fearing another explosion, a seaman named Joe Small, who had been an informal broker between officers and men, led a work stoppage on August 9, 1944. As a result, 258 African Americans were imprisoned. Under threat of a charge of mutiny, four-fifths of the accused decided to return to work; despite this, all 258 were court-martialed. They were charged with mutiny, an offense that implies intent to take power, though their action was in fact a work stoppage to protest the perilous conditions in which they were forced to work. The sailors had no lawyers to represent them. The chief counsel of the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall—later to become the first African American on the US Supreme Court—took up their cause, although as a civilian, he could not represent them in a court-martial. Fifty men—those who had defied the threat of court-martial—were declared guilty of mutiny and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. Punishments were subsequently reduced, but initially not that of Small and nine others. Following the United States' victory in the Pacific, Small and others were released in 1946 and discharged from the navy in July, two years after the "mutiny" at Port Chicago. Perhaps the perceived injustice in the handling of the Port Chicago rebels contributed to the navy's decision to abandon segregation in 1947; it was the first of the US armed services to do so.

Although the Brazilian revolt of 1910 occurred on ships afloat rather than loading docks, there were a number of similarities with the Port Chicago events. For one thing, both rebellions were implicitly working class. For another, the leaders of the Brazilian movement, like Joe Small, were older than their followers, but most, like Small, were still in their early twenties. And again, like the American Small, the three principal Brazilian leaders between them had sufficient skills and enough education and experience to earn the trust and obedience of their comrades. Furthermore, both Brazilian and American rebels were motivated by outrageous grievances—in the American case, the mass death of their fellows and the threat of impending death for the survivors, and in the Brazilian

case, the persistence of flogging, associated with the recently abolished institution of slavery. To be sure, the Brazilian uprising was unique, and it played a memorable role in the history of resistance to oppression, not just of blacks, but of other lower-class people as well. In what follows I do not seek to create heroes or burnish the reputations of courageous men; some previous accounts have done this. Rather, my intention is to tell a good story, faithful to the known facts, about real people—sailors and the elites who ruled them—and their triumphs and failings.