

On the Water

Stories from Maritime America

Learning the way of a ship

John Jea describes his confusion and fright on his first voyage from Boston to Liverpool in about 1806.

From John Jea, “The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the Atlantic Preacher,” in Graham Russell Hodges, ed., *Black Itinerants of the Gospel* (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House, 1993), pp. 123-25.

After that time it pleased God to put it into my mind to cross the Atlantic main; and I embarked on board of ... the ship ... *The Superb of Boston*, and the captain's name was Able Stovey, with whom I agreed to sail for seventeen dollars per month. I was quite unacquainted with the sea, and was very much pleased in going on board the vessel; but the case was soon altered, for the first day I went on board to work, and the captain and the men asked me if I came on board to work. I told them yes. They asked me where my clothes were. I said I had them on my back. They asked me if that was all I had. I told them I thought I had sufficient, for I was not certain of staying more than one day, for if I did not like it I would not stay out the month; for I thought that a person going to sea, could go one day, and return the next.

After they had told me what to do, which was to clean the coppers, I went and looked all about the ship, but could not find them, not knowing what they were; at last I asked one of the sailors where the coppers were, for the captain had ordered me to clean them, so he showed me where they were. Those which they called coppers, were a couple of black iron things; and they told me I must make them very clean, and that I was to cook the victuals, being cook of the ship... I



then began to rub the coppers as I was ordered, and the more I rubbed them, the more the rust came off and the blacker they looked. After two hours after I began cleaning them, the captain asked me if I had cleaned the coppers; I told him, I could not get them clean; but he told me I must be sure to clean them well.

During this time the vessel had got under weigh... which was very pleasant, until we got outside of the light-house, when the ship began to roll about very much, which greatly terrified me. The captain coming to me, said, "How do you come on?" I told him that I was tired, and that I wanted to go home. He told me that I should soon get home; and asked me how the sailors' suppers got on. I said, "I cannot get these black things clean; they are certainly not copper." The captain said, "Never mind, let them alone and have another trial tomorrow." But I said within myself, "You shall not catch me here to-morrow, if I can get on shore." The captain seeing how I was, bade me go below, ...and...rest myself...I was going below...but before I got down to the hold I fell down, by the vessel rolling, and all the men sung out, "Hollo, there is a horse down:" and they laughing at me so, made me the more afraid and terrified, and after I had got down into the hold, I was afraid the ship would fall, and I strove to keep her up by pushing, and holding fast by different parts of the ship...when daylight appeared, I was very much tired and fatigued, for I had been holding and trying to keep the ship upright all the night; in the morning I asked the sailors why they did not keep the ship upright... Having been about eight or ten days at sea, I found out what it was, in some measure. The weather was very boisterous, the sea running very high and thundering and lightning very much; the reason of which was, I believe, because they so ill used and abused me ... When they saw me praying to God, they called me by way of derision, a Jonah, because I prayed to God to calm the tempestuous weather. On the contrary, they were making game of the works of the Lord, and said that the old man had fine fire works, for it gave them light to go up on the yards to furl the sails; but to their great terror...it pleased the Lord to send his lightning and thunder directly, which killed two men on the spot. One of them was burnt like a cinder, his clothes were totally consumed, not so much as a bit of handkerchief nor any thing else being left. The other's...body was entirely burnt up, not a single bit of it was to be seen, nothing but the cinders of his clothes, one of his shoes, his knife, his gold ring, and his key.

Seven more were wounded...and appeared to be dead for about ten or fifteen minutes.

