

# *On the Water*

## Stories from Maritime America

### **Rats aboard ship**

Samuel Kelly describes his encounters with shipboard vermin on a voyage to Philadelphia in 1787.

From Crosbie Garstin, ed., *Samuel Kelly, An Eighteenth Century Seaman*. (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), pp. 139–40.

He had now bought a vessel for the Philadelphia trade and I was informed that I might have the chief mate's berth if I wished it. I readily embraced the proposal, and as soon as she began to load I removed my bedding from the brig to the *Thetis*. The first night I slept on board the vessel I was much annoyed with a vast number of rats and was obliged to take my clothes into bed to prevent their being injured, being well acquainted with these animals in different ships and having had the horn buttons destroyed of my jacket. After taking on board a quantity of fine salt we leveled it, to stow other goods thereon, but on viewing the surface of the salt in the morning it was marked all over as if sheep had been treading it all night.

After being laden, we sailed for Philadelphia, about the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1787. I soon found my captain, though a civil man and an excellent seaman, had nothing more of a gentleman about him than what was confined to his clothes; his whole delight was vulgarity in the extreme, and not only associated with the seamen but played at halfpence with the boys. Nothing particular occurred on our passage out, but experiencing very rough weather until we struck soundings on the American coast about the middle of May following. We now stood in for the land about 30 miles to the southward of the Delaware, when in a fog we threw the lead over and



found only 14 fathoms of water, which made us try again, when we found about 8; we immediately tacked and providentially escaped being wrecked on Jink, a teek shoal, but not laid down in our chart, although it lays several miles off the land. In about two days more we got a pilot and entered the Delaware; the land being low towards the sea, the first that appears are the tops of trees like a fleet of ships. Our pilot was a young man from whom I wished to draw information respecting the shoals in the Delaware Bay, but he gave me to understand that whatever he knew of these things was not to be communicated to a British subject.

Having hauled into a wharf, our salt was soon bargained for and we began to discharge. Having got some lettuces on board and recollecting that rats were fond of vegetables, I baited the trap with the leaves and caught eleven at once.

