

Written by Rebekah Roberts

Touching History

The Story of the *Henrietta Marie*



Onboard a Slave Ship

Where would you look for information about the slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Historians often use newspapers, letters, legal records, and artifacts or relics of the times. In the story that follows, a fictitious teen named Sam takes us along on his tour of relics from the English slave ship *Henrietta Marie*, which sank off the coast of Florida in 1700. She was returning to England after delivering slaves from Africa to the New World, a voyage called the Middle Passage. In 1983, artifacts were salvaged from that wreckage and displayed to help explain the brutality of the Middle Passage.

Sam tried to get comfortable on the bus. He and his classmates from his ninth-grade history class, their teacher Mr. Bell, and two parent chaperones had left their hometown of Jacksonville, Fla., at five o'clock in the morning. They were on their way to the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society and Museum in Key West to see some of the seven thousand artifacts found on the sunken slave ship, the *Henrietta Marie*.

For the past few months the class had been studying about the transatlantic slave trade. They learned that in the 1600s and 1700s at least fifteen thousand Africans a year were kidnapped from their homes in Africa and sold as slaves in places such as Jamaica, Barbados, South Carolina, and Virginia. Over the same two centuries the total number of African slaves grew into the millions. "That's more than the entire population of Jacksonville, which is only about 806,000 people," Mr. Bell told his class.

No one had ever found a sunken slave ship in U.S. waters before the *Henrietta Marie* was found in 1972. No other sunken ship in the entire world had so many preserved artifacts from the Middle Passage either. Divers started bringing up those artifacts in 1983.

"What are you thinking about, Sam?" Mr. Bell asked as he sat in the seat next to Sam.

"I was thinking how small the ships were back then and how long it took to sail across the Atlantic," he answered.



Shackles Used in Slave Trade

Discussion or Essay Questions

The story talks about all the trade goods the *Henrietta Marie* carried to Africa. Trading one item for another, i.e., beads for a slave, is called bartering. Why do you think that products were often more valuable to the African chieftains than money? If the bartering system was used instead of money today, what would you trade and for what items?

In the story it is mentioned that the Middle Passage could take anywhere from six weeks to fourteen weeks. Using the Internet or library resources, find out what some of the reasons were for the difference in amount of time that it could take to travel from Africa to the West Indies.



Want to Read More?

MIDDLE SCHOOL

The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo
by Tom Feelings

HIGH SCHOOL

Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730–1807 by Emma Christopher

The Slave Ship: A Human History by Marcus Rediker



Online Articles

The African American: A Journey from Slavery to Freedom

<http://www.cwpost.liunet.edu/cwis/cwp/library/aaslavry.htm>

A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie

<http://www.historical-museum.org/exhibits/hm/sss.htm>

Henrietta Marie Lesson Plan

<http://www.wvculture.org/museum/Marie/henrietta.pdf>

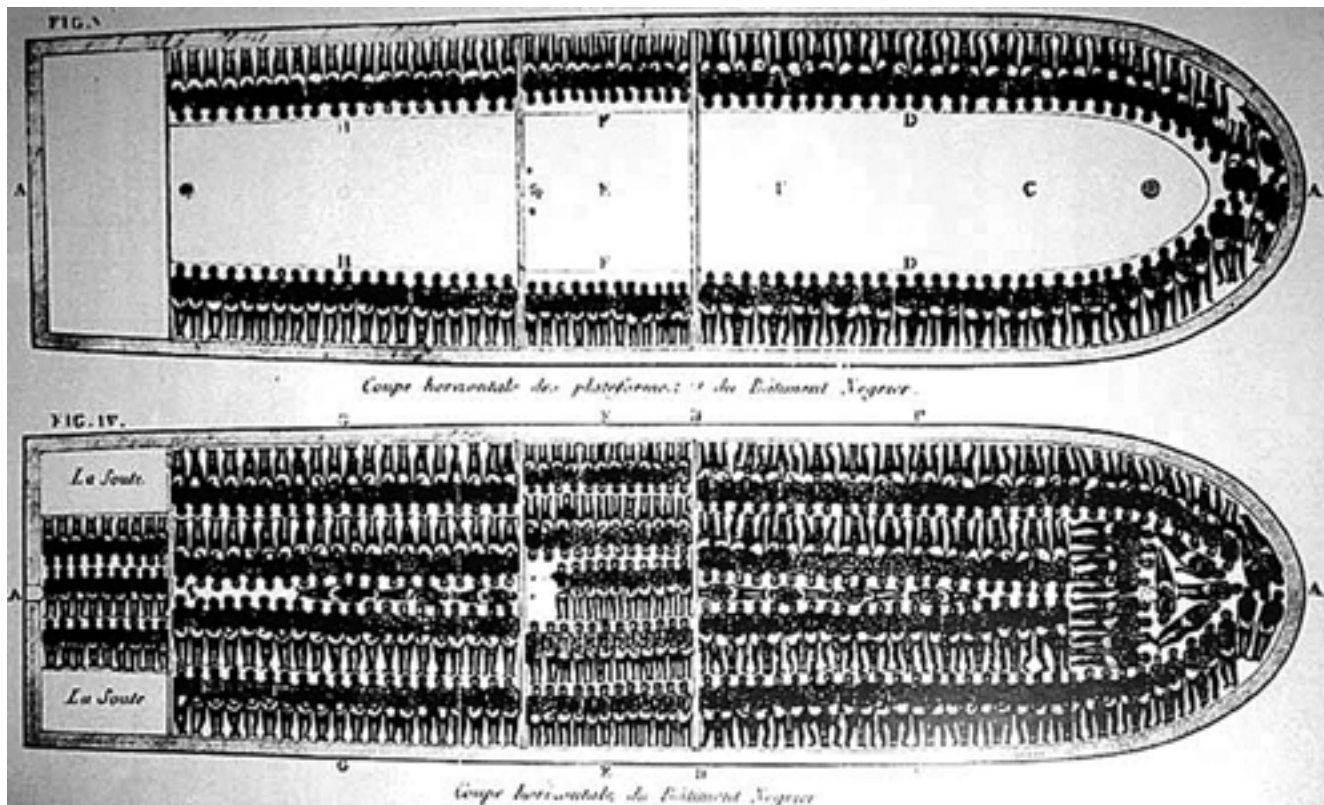


Diagram of Slave Ship

Mr. Bell nodded, adding, "English shipping records from 1698 tell us that the *Henrietta Marie* was sixty feet long and able to carry up to 120 tons of cargo. You could line up about fifteen of the *Henrietta Marie* alongside *one* cruise ship today!

"Wow," said Sam, "that's a really big difference. It must have been terrible being crammed into the hold of a boat that size." He'd soon learn how really terrible it was.

Ship Pictures

The students excitedly entered the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum when they arrived around noon. Immediately they were struck by the pictures of the *Henrietta Marie* lying on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. She had been buried in sand and saltwater for almost three hundred years, but you could tell she was an old wooden ship.

Sam was fascinated by a poster-size picture of the ship's cast iron bell with the words, "The *Henrietta Marie*, 1699," engraved into it. "The bell was new when she sank," whispered Sam to his friend Jake. "It still looks pretty good." For the rest of the afternoon the visiting class was surrounded by history.

Trade Goods

In the first exhibit, Sam examined a display of the trade goods the *Henrietta Marie* took to Africa to exchange for slaves. These goods were supplied by investors such as Thomas Stark, who contributed about \$12,000 in glass beads. African chieftains loved to decorate their head-dresses and clothes, so they eagerly traded entire families they had captured from rival tribes for those beads.

Anthony Turner supplied thirty-three tons of iron bars, and Thomas Winchcombe provided plates, bowls, and tankards made out of pewter. Other investors supplied linen, indigo, and paint for the Englishmen who worked in Africa overseeing the slave trade. The cost of a slave in Africa was about \$25 in cash or goods, but they were sold in the New World for at least \$150. That was a great deal of money back then.

Slave Houses

Sam paused in the next hall to look at drawings of kidnapped Africans chained from their necks to their ankles, and lying in airless five-foot-by-five-foot pits. They were kept there until they were moved to a slave

house. Next to the drawings were some of the real shackles used on the *Henrietta Marie* and a few actual photographs of what was left of the only slave house still standing. It was built in 1526 on Goree Island. Named the Door of No Return, it led to a passageway that went directly from the slave house on the shore to the slave ships in the harbor.

Ship Life

Jake caught up to Sam in the exhibit showing a slave's life during the Middle Passage. Mr. Bell had tried to prepare the class for the terrible things they would see and hear about the trip to the New World.

For example, each African tribe had a different language, making it hard for slaves to communicate with one another on the ship. Families were usually separated, and so they were alone and frightened. They were stacked on their sides on wooden shelves, row on top of row in the dark hold of the ship.

Rats were everywhere, the heat was unbearable, and the Africans very rarely got to move around or get fresh air. They did not get much food and water either, and what they did get was putrid. They stayed in that position for six to fourteen weeks as they sailed to Port Royal in the West Indies.

Shackles and Chains

Sam could not believe how horribly human beings treated other human beings. When he got to the small shackles used on the children, he thought about his little sister at home. They must have been so scared, thought Sam. The museum guides allowed the boys to hold one of the iron chains used on the men to see what it felt like to walk pulling the chain along attached at the ankle. It was incredibly heavy. Sam also held one of the big iron collars that a slave had worn around his neck.

"How could a slave move with this much weight on them?" asked Jake.

"It sure looks like the crew was afraid they would escape," said Sam.

One of the worst tools on exhibit was the sharp prod used to pry open the mouth of any slave who refused to eat. Since slaves were thought of as property and

loss of property meant loss of money, the crew tried to keep slaves alive. The ship's log recorded that sixty of the slaves did die en route to the West Indies in 1699, and they were "tossed overboard." The log also noted that the ship began the trip with 190 slaves: ninety men, sixty women, thirty boys, and ten girls.

Sam passed between two of the salvaged cannons as he left the room, realizing that he had just seen and even touched the real artifacts from the Middle Passage.

Real-Life Experiences

Sam paused at one of the audio exhibits to hear the words of Alexander Falconbridge, a British ship's doctor, explain his experience on a slave ship.

The confined air . . . soon produced fevers and fluxes [diarrhea] which generally carried off [killed] a number of them [slaves] . . . The floor of the hold was so covered with blood and mucus . . . that it resembled a slaughter-house.

Feeling a little sick from the description, Sam walked on to another audio exhibit and heard the words of Olaudah Equiano, who was one of the slaves brought to America on a slave ship.

The wretched situation was again aggravated by the chains, now unsupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.

There was no fairytale ending to the tour. The last display showed a slave auction in Port Royal. The look of agony on the slaves' faces would stay in Sam's mind for a long time. It was almost dinner time when Mr. Bell directed the class to get back on the bus. They were tired, hungry, and very quiet as they returned to their seats. Sam knew that he and his friends were thinking about what they had just seen. It was all real. They had just touched a piece of history. 🏛️

About the author
Rebekah Roberts has taught history in middle school and currently serves as a regional instructional specialist in Prince George's County, Maryland. In 1997 she was awarded the Outstanding Educator Award for the county.