

Island of the Blue Dolphins
Life on a Ship during the Early 1800s (Nineteenth Century)

Grade Level

Middle School: Sixth through Eighth Grade,
High School: Ninth Grade through Twelfth Grade

Subject

Literacy and Language Arts, Social Studies

Common Core Standards

6–8.RH.1, 6–8.RH.2, 6–8.RH.4, 6–8.RH.6, 9–10.RH.1, 9–10.RH.2, 9–10.RH.3, 11–12.RH.1, 11–12.RH.2, 11–12.RH.3

Background Information

The goal of this lesson is to build students' understanding of everyday life and labor on board a nineteenth-century ship.

For the common sailor, life on board a ship was difficult and physically exhausting. Sailors were expected to do as the captain ordered. Because a good captain knew that sailors would cause less trouble if they were kept busy, the captain gave lots of orders and kept the men working around the clock.

This selected reading is from *Two Years Before the Mast*, a book written by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. and first published in 1840. Dana had been a Harvard College student before he decided to go to sea as a way to recover from his ill health. After his two years as a common sailor, Dana returned to his studies and became a lawyer and politician.

In *Two Years Before the Mast*, Dana recounts his experiences on board a ship involved in the hide and tallow trade (that is, the trade in cow hides and animal fat). The hide and tallow trade flourished in California during the first half of the 1800s (nineteenth century). Dana's experiences on board ship would in many ways have been similar to those of men hunting maritime animals like sea otters, seals, or whales.

Materials

- Copy of selected reading, Chapter III of *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. for each student (provided)
- Copy of activity sheet for each student (provided)
- Chart paper (for graphic maps activity)
- Pens/markers

Procedure

1. Prepare materials and familiarize yourself with the text.
2. Give students background on the text. Point out that Dana sailed on the *Pilgrim* in 1834, a period coinciding with early chapters of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

3. Introduce the hook: The year is 1835 and you have just been offered a job on a brig. There are many positions available and the Captain is hiring. What job(s) would you sign up for?
4. Pass out the selected reading (Chapter III) from Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, as well as the student activity sheet.
5. Divide the class into three or six groups and assign each group one of the questions on the student activity sheet. Student groups that complete the first activity should be directed to begin the word bank. Ask students to complete activities 1–3.
6. Have group speakers share and describe their group's graphic maps. Ask students to explain their choice of map design.
7. Have the class come together for a whole-group discussion. What job(s) did students choose? Why?

Enrichment Activities

Further reading: The complete edition of *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. is [available in a digitized version free of charge](#) through the Library of Congress.

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Selected Reading from *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840)
by Richard Henry Dana, Jr.

CHAPTER III

(a)

As we have now had a long “spell” of fine weather, without any incident to break the monotony of our lives, I may have no better place for a description of the duties, regulations, and customs of an American merchantman, of which ours was a fair specimen.

The captain, in the first place, is lord paramount. He stands no watch, comes and goes when he pleases, is accountable to no one, and must be obeyed in everything, without a question even from his chief officer. He has the power to turn his officers off duty, and even to break them and make them do duty as sailors in the forecabin. Where there are no passengers and no supercargo, as in our vessel, he has no companion but his own dignity, and few pleasures, unless he differs from most of his kind, beyond the consciousness of possessing supreme power, and, occasionally, the exercise of it.

(b)

The prime minister, the official organ, and the active and superintending officer is the chief mate. He is first lieutenant, boatswain, sailing-master, and quartermaster. The captain tells him what he wishes to have done, and leaves to him the care of overseeing, of allotting the work, and also the responsibility of its being well done. The mate (as he is always called, *par excellence*) also keeps the log-book, for which he is responsible to the owners and insurers, and has the charge of the stowage, safe-keeping, and delivery of the cargo. He is also, *ex officio*, the wit of the crew; for the captain does not condescend to joke with the men, and the second mate no one cares for; so that when “the mate” thinks fit to entertain “the people” with a coarse joke or a little practical wit, every one feels bound to laugh.

The second mate is proverbially a dog's berth. He is neither officer nor man. He is obliged to go aloft to reef and furl the topsails, and to put his hands into the tar and slush, with the rest, and the men do not much respect him as an officer. The crew call him the “sailor's waiter,” as he has to furnish them with spun-yarn, marline, and all other stuffs that they need in their work, and has charge of the boatswain's locker, which includes serving-boards, marline-spikes, &c., &c. He is expected by the captain to maintain his dignity and to enforce obedience, and still is kept at a great distance from the mate, and obliged to work with the crew. He is one to whom little is given and of whom much is required. His wages are usually double those of a common sailor, and he eats and sleeps in the cabin; but he is obliged to be on deck nearly all his time, and eats at the second table, that is, makes a meal out of what the captain and chief mate leave.

(c)

The steward is the captain's servant, and has charge of the pantry, from which every one, even the mate himself, is excluded. These distinctions usually find him an enemy in the mate, who does not like to have any one on board who is not entirely under his control; the crew do not consider him as one of their number, so he is left to the mercy of the captain.

The cook, whose title is "Doctor," is the patron of the crew, and those who are in his favor can get their wet mittens and stockings dried, or light their pipes at the galley in the night-watch. These two worthies, together with the carpenter (and sailmaker, if there be one), stand no watch, but, being employed all day, are allowed to "sleep in" at night, unless all hands are called.

The crew are divided into two divisions, as equally as may be, called the watches. Of these, the chief mate commands the larboard, and the second mate the starboard. They divide the time between them, being on and off duty, or, as it is called, on deck and below, every other four hours. The three night-watches are called the first, the middle, and the morning watch. If, for instance, the chief mate with the larboard watch have the first night-watch from eight to twelve, at that hour the starboard watch and the second mate take the deck, while the larboard watch and the first mate go below until four in the morning, when they come on deck again and remain until eight. As the larboard watch will have been on deck eight hours out of the twelve, while the starboard watch will have been up only four hours, the former have what is called a "forenoon watch below," that is, from eight A.M. till twelve P.M. In a man-of-war, and in some merchantmen, this alternation of watches is kept up throughout the twenty-four hours, which is called having "watch and watch"; but our ship, like most merchantmen, had "all hands" from twelve o'clock till dark, except in very bad weather, when we were allowed "watch and watch."

(d)

An explanation of the "dog-watches" may, perhaps, be necessary to one who has never been at sea. Their purpose is to shift the watches each night, so that the same watch shall not be on deck at the same hours throughout a voyage. In order to effect this, the watch from four to eight P.M. is divided into two half-watches, one from four to six, and the other from six to eight. By this means they divide the twenty-four hours into seven watches instead of six, and thus shift the hours every night. As the dog-watches come during twilight, after the day's work is done, and before the night-watch is set, they are the watches in which everybody is on deck. The captain is up, walking on the weather side of the quarter-deck, the chief mate on the lee side, and the second mate about the weather gangway. The steward has finished his work in the cabin, and has come up to smoke his pipe with the cook in the galley. The crew are sitting on the windlass or lying on the forecastle, smoking, singing, or telling long yarns. At eight o'clock eight bells are struck, the log is hove, the watch set, the wheel relieved, the galley shut up, and the watch off duty goes below.

(e)

The morning begins with the watch on deck's "turning to" at daybreak and washing down, scrubbing, and swabbing the decks. This, together with filling the "scuttled butt" with fresh water, and coiling up the rigging, usually occupies the time until seven bells (half after seven), when all hands get breakfast. At eight the day's work begins, and lasts until sundown, with the exception of an hour for dinner.

Before I end my explanations, it may be well to define a day's work, and to correct a mistake prevalent among landmen about a sailor's life. Nothing is more common than to hear people say, "Are not sailors very idle at sea? What can they find to do?" This is a natural mistake, and, being frequently made, is one which every sailor feels interested in having corrected. In the first place, then, the discipline of the ship requires every man to be at work upon something when he is on deck, except at night and on Sundays. At all other times you will never see a man, on board a well-ordered vessel, standing idle on deck, sitting down, or leaning over the side. It is the officers' duty to keep every one at work, even if there is nothing to be done but to scrape the rust from the chain cables. In no state prison are the convicts more regularly set to work, and more closely watched. No conversation is allowed among the crew at their duty, and though they frequently do talk when aloft, or when near one another, yet they stop when an officer is nigh.

With regard to the work upon which the men are put, it is a matter which probably would not be understood by one who has not been at sea. When I first left port, and found that we were kept regularly employed for a week or two, I supposed that we were getting the vessel into sea trim, and that it would soon be over, and we should have nothing to do but to sail the ship; but I found that it continued so for two years, and at the end of the two years there was as much to be done as ever. As has often been said, a ship is like a lady's watch, always out of repair. When first leaving port, studding-sail gear is to be rove, all the running rigging to be examined, that which is unfit for use to be got down, and new rigging rove in its place; then the standing rigging is to be overhauled, replaced, and repaired in a thousand different ways; and wherever any of the numberless ropes or the yards are chafing or wearing upon it, there "chafing gear," as it is called, must be put on. This chafing gear consists of worming, parcelling, roundings, battens, and service of all kinds,— rope-yarns, spun-yarn, marline, and seizing-stuffs. Taking off, putting on, and mending the chafing gear alone, upon a vessel, would find constant employment for a man or two men, during working hours, for a whole voyage.

The next point to be considered is, that all the "small stuffs" which are used on board a ship— such as spun-yarn, marline, seizing-stuff, &c., &c.— are made on board. The owners of a vessel buy up incredible quantities of "old junk," which the sailors unlay, and, after drawing out the yarns, knot them together, and roll them up in balls. These "rope-yarns" are constantly used for various purposes, but the greater part is manufactured into spun-yarn. For this purpose, every vessel is furnished with a "spun-yarn winch"; which is very simple, consisting of a wheel and spindle. This may be heard constantly going on deck in pleasant weather; and we had employment, during a great part of the time, for three hands, in drawing and knotting yarns, and making spun-yarn.

Another method of employing the crew is “setting-up” rigging. Whenever any of the standing rigging becomes slack (which is continually happening), the seizings and coverings must be taken off, tackles got up, and, after the rigging is bowsed well taut, the seizings and coverings be replaced, which is a very nice piece of work. There is also such a connection between different parts of a vessel, that one rope can seldom be touched without requiring a change in another. You cannot stay a mast aft by the back stays, without slacking up the head stays, &c., &c. If we add to this all the tarring, greasing, oiling, varnishing, painting, scraping, and scrubbing which is required in the course of a long voyage, and also remember this is all to be done in addition to watching at night, steering, reefing, furling, bracing, making and setting sail, and pulling, hauling, and climbing in every direction, one will hardly ask, “What can a sailor find to do at sea?”

If, after all this labor,— after exposing their lives and limbs in storms, wet and cold,—

“Wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch

The lion and the belly-pinched wolf keep their furs dry,”—

the merchants and captains think that the sailors have not earned their twelve dollars a month (out of which they clothe themselves), and their salt beef and hard bread, they keep them picking oakum— ad infinitum. This is the usual resource upon a rainy day, for then it will not do to work upon rigging; and when it is pouring down in floods, instead of letting the sailors stand about in sheltered places, and talk, and keep themselves comfortable, they are separated to different parts of the ship and kept at work picking oakum. I have seen oakum stuff placed about in different parts of the ship, so that the sailors might not be idle in the snatches between the frequent squalls upon crossing the equator. Some officers have been so driven to find work for the crew in a ship ready for sea, that they have set them to pounding the anchors (often done) and scraping the chain cables. The “Philadelphia Catechism” is

“Six days shalt thou labor

and do all thou art able,

And on the seventh,—

holystone the decks and scrape the cable.”

This kind of work, of course, is not kept up off Cape Horn, Cape of Good Hope, and in extreme north and south latitudes; but I have seen the decks washed down and scrubbed when the water would have frozen if it had been fresh, and all hands kept at work upon the rigging, when we had on our pea-jackets, and our hands so numb that we could hardly hold our marline-spikes.

I have here gone out of my narrative course in order that any who read this may, at the start, form as correct an idea of a sailor’s life and duty as possible. I have done it in this place because, for some time, our life was nothing but the unvarying repetition of these duties, which can be better described together. Before leaving this description, however, I would state, in order to show landsmen how little they know of the nature of a ship, that a ship-carpenter is kept constantly employed, during good weather, on board vessels which are in what is called perfect sea order.

Name _____

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Activity 1: Reading and Note-taking

Work in groups to answer the questions assigned to you on a separate piece of lined paper. When ready, begin working on the second activity.

Group 1

From parts (a) and (b):

What was the role of the captain? What power did he have?
Who were the officers on board, and what were their duties and responsibilities?
What was the “log-book,” and what information was recorded in it?

Group 2

From parts (c) and (d):

How were sailors divided into groups? How was the work divided?
Describe the work shifts, or “watches.”
What was the “dog-watch?” What did sailors do during the dog-watch?

Group 3

From part (e):

What kinds of jobs did sailors perform on board ship?
How hard was this work, according to Dana?

Activity 2: Maritime Vocabulary

Identify the vocabulary terms below that appeared in your group's assigned reading. Use context clues in the reading itself as well as outside sources, if necessary. Record your answers on a sheet of paper. Remember, knowing a sailor's language is key to understanding the maritime way of life.

Maritime History Word Bank

captain	forecastle	mates
log-book	watch	dog-watch
quarter-deck	chafing gear	small stuffs
"Philadelphia Catechism"	holy stone	Cape Horn

Activity 3: Using Graphic Maps to Illustrate Relationships

In your group, create a graphic organizer or map that illustrates the jobs and responsibilities of the captain, the officers, and the crew, as well as their relationships to one another.

Next, select a group speaker. Once all of the groups have completed their tasks, the groups' speakers should briefly share their maps with the class. Each group speaker should be able to defend his/her group's choice of mapping design.

Activity 4: Choosing a Job

The captain has offered you a three-month job on board a brig hunting sea otters. Here are the positions available:

- Mate
- Second mate
- Steward
- Cook
- Sailor

On a sheet of paper, individually answer each of the following questions:

1. What are the pros and cons of each job?
2. Which job would you take?
3. What skills and personality traits do you have that make you a good candidate for the job you have selected?