

Rooted in the Earth

RECLAIMING
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN
ENVIRONMENTAL
HERITAGE

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The Atlantic Ocean

CURRENTS OF LIFE AND DEATH

The ocean is calm as an aged woman sitting in the shade of her wraparound porch, then fearsome as a man with a gun battling in the trenches at war, and later truculent as a two-year-old child writhing on the floor demanding she have her way. Zeus, a young black boy enslaved in Alabama, knows the idiosyncrasies and uncertainties of seafaring life. In 1771 Matthew Samford gave his brother, Captain Marshall Samford, the seven-year-old Zeus, to the heartache of Zeus's parents, Joseph and Lois. To these white men, Zeus was just another enslaved child sold off or given away as a gift, simply chattel.

The boy begins his travels as a personal servant twenty miles north of Mobile, boarding the merchant ship *Pegasus*. At first, Zeus's duties are limited to tending to the needs of Captain Samford, who requires constant attention, including grooming, cleaning, and feeding. As the boy grows older, his duties shift to those of chief cook. He is fortunate in that, before he was given away, he had sat in the kitchen with his

mother and picked up cooking skills, duties most often confined to women on farms and plantations. Only men compose the ship's crew, so Zeus's cooking skills are welcomed as he supervises the chief steward and steward's assistant in the galley.

Blacks are often limited to cooking and cleaning on ships, but Zeus dreams of being one of the few blacks to captain his own ship, envisioning himself at the helm of a vessel cutting through the choppy waters of the Atlantic. He cooks in large pots over the stoves in the blistering galley in the Caribbean's tropical zone. Alternately, when the *Pegasus* sails through the cold, dark waters off the shores of England, he finds a bit of warmth by the stove. Thankfully the rolling waters do not trigger seasickness. Zeus stands on the deck in the worst weather with the wind driving rain into his chest. He sees spinner dolphins and humpback whales rising to the surface from the deep Caribbean waters and watches for hours the jumps, spins, flips, and turns of these sea creatures.

During his shore leaves in the Kingston harbor in Jamaica, Zeus wanders through the fishing shanties. The fishermen live on the edge of the harbor and walk quickly to their small boats, which are filled with nets and hooks. Wading on the beach, Zeus sees a two-foot parrot fish in the shoals, shallow sandbanks. Its mouth is white and black, and its upper body, from the dorsal and caudal fins down to the lateral line, is a brilliant blue; the remainder of the lower body to the pectoral and pelvic fins is yellow and red. Zeus also spends his downtime sleeping on the white sand, which is covered in seashells and skittering crabs. He sometimes finds extra work like caulking ships so he can earn money to purchase his freedom in the future.



For this one imagined tale there are many true maritime narratives by and histories of African Americans, such as that of Olaudah Equiano, who braved the Arctic, and Nancy Prince, a black woman who ventured to Russia and Jamaica. Other African American adventurers on the high seas include Harry Dean, James Forten, Paul Cuffee, John Jea, and William B. Gould. People of the African diaspora purposefully took to the Atlantic Ocean currents, including the North Equatorial and South Equatorial, on every manner of vessel from canoes to sloops, men-of-war, schooners, and whalers. According to the whims and desires of whites, others of the diaspora were also scattered across and tossed along the currents that drew ships to the Americas and Europe—all part of the Atlantic slave trade.

In *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, W. Jeffrey Bolster argues that for many seafaring blacks, the ocean represented livelihood, empowerment, and identity, not enslavement and victimization. “An image of manacled ancestors crammed together aboard slave ships has triumphed as the association of African Americans and the sea,” writes Bolster. This image of African Americans as victims rather than survivors with power is much different from the reality of black sailors during the Civil War who, Bolster argues, “were central to African Americans’ collective sense of self, economic survival, and freedom struggle—indeed central to the very creation of black America.” The legacy of black sailors persisted beyond the Civil War to the present: African Americans have continued their seafaring as part of the modern United States Navy.

The Atlantic slave trade from the late sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century spanned the Middle Passage and the Civil War, with its naval battles during the age of sail, and ushered in a nascent maritime globalization through commercial, whaling, and military seafaring. Africans on commercial passenger and merchant ships dramatically and irrevocably expanded the boundaries and meaning

of environment as they pushed off from African shores and stepped onto landscapes that were new to them in the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. Their travels on the Atlantic Ocean were complicated as they sought adventure, experienced oppression, and resisted subjugation.¹

Seafaring supported a global economic system of mercantilism based on silver and gold bullion in exchange for American and European goods. The labor of enslaved Africans and African Americans supported this economic system into the nineteenth century. From this labor, whites cultivated cotton, tobacco, sugarcane, and indigo that they traded to Europeans. These goods were transported by ships on which blacks were free or enslaved crew members. Black sailors worked in an exploitative and racist economic system in which whites profited at the expense of others.

Seafaring blacks were at times victimized, but they also aimed to control their destinies. For example, they served as cultural conduits, traveling the oceans and connecting blacks to one another on land. London was the economic center of the Atlantic slave trade and the hub for information carried by word of mouth and through objects gathered by black seafaring people. Blacks used the ocean as a low-tech Internet of sorts to carry foreign goods and news, including the latest on the abolition movement.

Long before the age of sail, ancient Africans paddled and rowed small and large canoes and navigated their own ships on the waters, many of the latter fitted with sails. Africans arrived by ship in Central and South America, predating the Spanish and Portuguese invasion of the Americas and the Caribbean.

In the early fourteenth century, Abubakari II, a ruler of Mali, conferred with and was influenced by scholars at the University of Timbuktu who argued the world was round, countering medieval European scientists and philosophers, many of whom supported the world-is-flat theory. Ivan Van Sertima in *They Came Before Colum-*

bus: The African Presence in Ancient America says, “Water fascinated Abubakari the Second—spacious, mobile, brooding bodies of water. Water was like stored grain at Niani, for it took a full day for the servants to fill the royal jars in the river Kala and return with them to the palace.”² The fruit of Abubakari’s oceanic fascination was a fleet set to sail on the Atlantic Ocean into the unknown. Abubakari’s foray speaks to how people, including Africans, were bound by a desire to find and explore new places. The ocean was the means of transport that often took center stage, though voyagers faced danger and perhaps death.

Abubakari sent four hundred ships to the coast from Mali, located in the interior of West Africa, via the Senegal River. They sailed westward, crossing the Atlantic for the Americas. It was a formidable passage, worsened since the final destination was Brazil, at a distance of more than four thousand miles.

Imagine these ships tossing in the churning waves, the rain coming down from above, blinding the Africans manning the sails. The women and children huddled together in the hold against the storms. Keep in mind that, according to Van Sertima, African “men were more terrified of the sea than the vast, blinding plains of the Sahara” and “the Arabs called the ocean ‘the green sea of darkness’” as the Africans ventured forward with nothing but the horizon and water stretching ahead and behind. One captain returned to Mali, frightened when the fleet was hit by a storm. The rest of the fleet might have survived and sailed farther, on to South America after braving the storm.³

Such a setback did not dull the lure of the sea for Abubakari, who continued to gaze westward across the land of Mali to the Atlantic Ocean and the nameless places beyond. He organized a second fleet that he led himself, leaving his brother to rule Mali. As had been true of the last voyage, some of the ships were filled with cargo—enough food and water for shiploads of people on a long journey.