

# On the Water

## Stories from Maritime America

### Slave ship

Joseph Hawkins describes bringing slaves to a ship and preparing to sail from Africa to the West Indies in 1795.

From Joseph Hawkins, *A History of a Voyage to the Coast of Africa, and Travels into the Interior of that Country*. (London: F. Cass, 1970 reprint of 1797 ed.), pp. 140–49.

...The slaves that I had purchased were young men, many of whom being eager to escape from their bondage in EBO, preferred the evil that they “knew not of” to that which they then felt; but the majority were evidently affected with grief at their approaching departure.

They were tied to poles in rows, four feet apart; a loose wicker bandage round the neck of each, connected him to the pole, and the arms being pinioned by a bandage affixed behind above the elbows, they had sufficient room to feed, but not to lose themselves, or commit any violence...

...we at length arrived at the place of our embarkation; two boats had been brought up, as the shallop drew too much water; the slaves were put on board, and necessarily in irons brought for the purpose.—this measure occasioned one of the most affecting scenes I ever witnessed...a change from the cordage to iron fetters, rent their hopes and hearts together; their wailings were torturing beyond what words can express, but delay at this crisis would have been fatal... and they were all safely embarked... We reached the ship in five days...where we were received with much satisfaction...

The whole number of slaves that we now had on board, I found about 500, of whom above 50 were then lying in a dangerous state of illness...We cleared the Capes without any further event worthy of notice...except the increased severity of the disorder that raged on board; it was an inflammatory fever, attended with symptoms of dysentery in some, but mostly with a violent inflammation and swelling of the eyes and eyelids, with a discharge of fetid rheum. The slaves were almost uniformly afflicted with this disorder of the eyes, even more than had been seized with the dysentery. Both diseases soon communicated to the crew...

...The fever attacked me, and my eyes swelled to such a degree that I could



scarcely open them...the light of the sun became to my eyes, as indistinct and dark as the gloom of death; the beauties of nature to me were “blotted out for ever,” and in my 23d year, when I looked forward to days of ease and comfort...my path is shut up and the world become a blank of indistinctness and uncertainty.

