

A sea-faring mystery
-conspiracy theories-
By JASON MARGOLIS

The name Mary Celeste has become synonymous with concepts like "The ghost ship from Scooby Doo," but it endures as a true and tragic tale of the sea. The story begins on Nov. 4, 1872, with a friendly dinner engagement between old friends Captain Morehouse and Captain Benjamin Spooner Briggs. Morehouse was captain of the English cargo ship Dei Gratia, while Briggs commanded the American brig Mary Celeste. The two vessels happened to be moored at neighboring piers on New York's East River and the Mary Celeste was due to set sail the next day.

A month and a day later, the Dei Gratia crew spotted a two-masted brig sailing rather erratically in an area of the North Atlantic between the Azores and the coast of Portugal. After attempts at signaling the unknown vessel failed, Morehouse cautiously brought his ship near the other to investigate. He was more than alarmed to discover that the mystery ship was none other than the Mary Celeste.

Crew abandoned ship

Inspection revealed that the Mary Celeste was deserted. Captain Briggs, his wife and daughter and the ship's seven-member crew were nowhere to be found. The lifeboat was missing but all the crew's belongings were still safely secured in their quarters, implying a rather hasty evacuation of the ship. Two of the ship's cargo hatches had been ripped off and one cask of crude alcohol had been severely damaged. The ship had taken on a great deal of water below deck and two sails were missing, but it was still quite seaworthy.

The last entry in the general log of the Mary Celeste was dated Nov. 25--it had sailed without crew for some nine days and managed to travel 700 miles northeast during that time.

Morehouse's first mate suggested that they might salvage the Mary Celeste and collect the sizable salvage fee as a result. Morehouse was somewhat apprehensive, but soon agreed.

The Mary Celeste was known to be an unlucky ship. Her first captain passed away within 48 hours of her original dedication under the name Amazon. Her maiden voyage found the ship suffering hull damage as a result of hitting a fishing weir. Although she later survived fire and a collision in the Straits of Dover that sank the other vessel involved, her fourth captain accidentally grounded her on Cape Breton Island. Eventually, the boat was salvaged, repaired and renamed Mary Celeste.

The Mary Celeste arrived in Gibraltar under its own sails Dec. 13, 1872, right alongside the Dei Gratia. Unfortunately, British officials in Gibraltar suspected some plot between American captains Morehouse and Briggs to scuttle the Mary Celeste in order to claim the salvage fee. Another hypothesis for the ship's condition was a crew mutiny following a night of drinking.

Puritan crew

The British Admiralty Court eventually concluded both outcomes were unlikely. Briggs was a co-owner of the Mary Celeste and stood to lose money in a salvage plot. He was a well-liked captain and as a New England Puritan, maintained a dry ship. The only alcohol on board was the crude alcohol in cargo, which even hard-drinking sailors would know to be rather unpleasant as a beverage. The Dei Gratia's owners were given their due reward for saving the Mary Celeste.

The cursed vessel survived another 11 years, its history forever marked by superstition. A number of crew members subsequently died under mysterious circumstances. The boat was abandoned in the West Indies, left to fall apart on a reef.

There have been several attempts to solve the riddle of the missing crew. Alien abduction is often bandied about and worth consideration--until one realizes that alien presence in the Atlantic Ocean was quite limited in the 19th Century, with the possible exception of a triangular shaped area west of Bermuda.

Famed mystery writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle first made his name with a story on the boat, titled "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement." His conclusion was that the boat had been involved in some sort of racial war and was taken over by black-power activists. It is worth noting that Doyle got several crucial facts wrong concerning the case, most notably the spelling of the ship which he called the Marie Celeste. It can be assumed that his insight on the matter was as flawed as any notion of extraterrestrial involvement.

Alcohol-blowing theory

The best theory behind the disappearing crew comes from the understanding that despite his years of sailing experience, Captain Briggs had never before shipped crude alcohol. His puritanical nature obviously made him suspicious of his cargo. Unfortunately, the temperature change during the ship's voyage would have caused the alcohol casks to sweat, leak and eventually pop their lids due to pressure. This would explain the blown cargo hatches found on the vessel. Panicked by the evil powers of alcohol and fearing that the ship might soon explode, Briggs may have ordered his family and crew into the lifeboat. The sea was clearly calm when they boarded the lifeboat, so Briggs did not take care to rope the lifeboat to the larger ship. As evidenced by the torn and missing sails later encountered by Morehouse's crew, the Mary Celeste soon encountered a storm or two. It is sad but entirely reasonable to conjecture that upon meeting with one of these storms at sea, the lifeboat was cast hopelessly adrift towards a doomed fate. However, because the mystery of the Mary Celeste remains unsolved, it continues to haunt the dreams of sea-faring men and women throughout the globe. Arrr.

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