

## Travel to the New World

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The distance between travail and travel can be measured in vowels or centuries. In some opinions the "t" words are antonyms. Others argue that they are synonyms. All attitudes aside, these close cousins share a common ancestor, the Old French *travailler*, meaning arduous effort or anguish. An individual standing here in St. Mary's City three and one-half centuries ago, who was not American Indian, was likely to have suffered a near-death experience to get here. For him or her, the space between travel and travail was very, very small. It's unlikely any travelers in the seventeenth century anticipated a pleasurable, comfortable, or enlightening journey. Travel was solely the means to an end.

For many of the Englishmen who flocked to the colonies of Virginia and Maryland during the 17th century, travel offered relief from poor economic conditions, high unemployment, and a troubled political situation in England. They were sailing towards the glowing descriptions of the New World that were circulated at home in England. The opportunity must have made the risks of the journey seem worthwhile. Once they were aboard ship though, it may have seemed like less of a bargain, for travel was most unpleasant.



In the 17th century, a trip across the Atlantic involved weeks or months without sight of land. To some extent, the rigors of an ocean voyage depended on who you were. High or low status, all shared in the risks of an ocean voyage -- pirates and enemy warships, storms and shipwrecks, disease and accidents. More common than these though, was the grinding boredom and monotony of day after day on the rolling sea with no change in the scenery, only the endless waves, the creaking of the hull, and the sound of the wind in the rigging.

Passengers were normally kept in the 'tween deck of a ship. Headroom of four to six feet was often the rule and a great deal of stooping and crouching was required of most people. Not only was the space low, it was also probably quite crowded, not only with people, but supplies and cargo as well. An indentured servant might be lucky to have enough space to lay a straw bed tick to sleep on.

Worst of all was the lack of ventilation. Passengers of lesser rank were not normally allowed on deck except at certain times of the day so that they would not get in the way of the sailors working the ship. Their only ventilation came from the main cargo hatch and the smaller hatches that were used for access. In fair weather these were opened or covered with gratings that allowed air to circulate. In foul weather they were sealed tight to prevent water from entering. Diseases such as typhoid or dysentery often spread rapidly. Even in fair weather the stench from seasick landsmen crowded together in tight quarters must have been appalling. One of the names sailors called passengers in the era was *pukestockings*.

Food added to the misery. Depending on the size of the vessel, passengers might bring their rations to the ship's hearth to be cooked or they might have small wood or iron, sand-filled, cook boxes on which to prepare their meals. Cooking could only be done in fair weather. When the seas became too rough, all fires were extinguished because of the obvious risk and food had to be eaten cold. Either way, the

food was the same day after day, salt beef or pork that was often half rotten or so long in the cask that it resembled rock more than meat. Ship's biscuit, known in the 19th-century as hardtack, served as bread. The ship's biscuit was nothing more than flour, salt and water mixed and baked until hard as a rock. Ship's biscuit would last almost forever, unless it got wet, but the hardness of the biscuit did not deter weevils and the wise knocked their biscuits on the table to drive the weevils out. Before they ate the biscuits, sailors would soak them to try and soften them up, so as not to lose a tooth. Other fare on a ship might include flour, oatmeal, and dried peas, bean, or rice. The most common drink was beer, since it keeps well. Water goes stale quickly. After a few weeks in the cask, water generally had to be strained through one's teeth to get rid of the algae and bugs that filled the cask. Fresh water was generally used to freshen the meat, that is, to try and soak some of the salt out to make it softer and more edible.

Wealthy passengers also suffered from boredom and seasickness, but, like the officers, could afford more in the way of extra provision, or petty tally. Dried fruits, nuts, and spices made the salt meat and ship's biscuit a bit more palatable, while goats, chickens, pigs, and sheep provided fresh milk, eggs, and fresh meat now and again. Wines provided a change from beer. Higher-ranking passengers also had cabins, although they might be no larger than a small closet, usually in the stern area where the motion of the ship was less pronounced. Most importantly, they were commonly allowed to share the quarterdeck with the ship's officers and master in fair weather so that they had more access to fresh air and sunshine.



The sentiments of travelers through the ages were given voice by Thoreau, who wrote, "Far travel, very far travel, or travail, comes near to the worth of staying at home." In the span of a few generations, improvements in transportation have changed the majority from reluctant to ready travelers. The petty irritations of modern day travel, hardly travails, pale in anticipation of touring and visiting, seeing the world from three miles up, or watching miles of ocean sail by at dizzying speeds from a raft in a swimming pool on a cruise ship. Travel is still the means to an end -- but speed, comfort, and affordability have made some trips destinations unto themselves.