

Black Sailors
in the War of 1812

by Dale Jones

Scene 1

NARRATOR

(ENTERS WITH ENERGY!)

PUTS ON GLASSES, CLEARS THROAT, READS PROCLAMATION

Whereas, ~~many persons now resident in the United States~~, slaves, may be disposed to emigrate from the United States, will with their families, be received on board of His Majesty's ships and will have their choice of either entering into his Majesty's sea or land forces, or of being sent as free settlers, to the British possessions in North America or the West Indies,

REMOVES GLASSES, ADDRESSES AUDIENCE

Welcome to the Maryland Historical Society and to this wonderful exhibit “In Full Glory Reflected: Maryland during the War of 1812.” I am Roderick Howard III, and I am a member of the Maryland Historical Society Players. I’ll be your guide and actor today.

When I started doing research on African Americans, sailors and the War of 1812, I found that proclamation I just read, issued by Admiral Cochrane of the British Navy, inviting “persons of color” to emigrate for their freedom. There were also thousands of Black sailors who fought for the Americans against the British and could only be described as patriots.

Those two concepts – slaves escaping to the British for freedom, and black sailors fighting to preserve liberty and freedom for America, where they had little freedom – puzzled me.

What would I have done? Would I have escaped if I were a slave? If I were free would I have enlisted in the Navy or for a privateer?

Before we get into that, what do you think about my costume? (HE SHOWS HIS COSTUME) I'm a black jack. Any idea what a black jack is? (SOLICITS ANSWERS)

I'm a sailor, or jack. I'm a tar because that's what sailors put on their clothing. Tar. To make it waterproof. So --- I'm a jack tar. I'm also a black man – a black jack.

The War of 1812. African Americans. Black jacks. Bet you never thought of those together before.

Sir (or Ma'am) I've got a question for you. Roughly how many American sailors in the War of 1812 were African American? A. 5%, or 1 of every 20; B. 20% or 1 of every 5; or C. 50% or 1 of every 2. (PLAY THIS WHOLE THING LIKE A TV GAME SHOW. HE CAN POLL THE AUDIENCE OR ASK HIS PARENTS FOR HELP. FIFTEEN TO TWENTY-FIVE PERCENT IS THE ANSWER.) That's right! (GET 20% OF THE AUDIENCE TO STAND) If the crew was this big, the number standing would be African Americans. There were a lot of them. Approximately 18,000.

This story is more than the history of Black sailors -- which is an incredible tale in itself. This story is about freedom. That's what being a seaman could get for a black man. Freedom.

No, no, not freedom. A little bit of it, a taste of it. Because a black jack took the same risks and abuse and tolerated the same horrible conditions as white sailors, and in those ways was the equal of the white sailor. He traveled to ports throughout the world. He was the eyes and ears of the Black world before papers, TV, radio, the Internet. People in

his community respected him. Sometimes he commanded ships, even as a slave -- but still he didn't have freedom. He had just a taste of it. That's what this program should be called. A Taste of Freedom: Black Sailors in the War of 1812."

You should hear this from someone who knows about freedom. Just a moment.

Scene 2:

(HE BECOMES FREDERICK DOUGLASS) Back when I was a young man, when I was a slave in Maryland, before I changed my name to Frederick Douglass, we respected slave-sailors for their worldliness. My cousin Tom was sometimes a cabin boy on board the sloop *Sally Lloyd*. When he came home from Baltimore he was always a sort of hero amongst us.

I would watch the ships, sailing up and down the Chesapeake Bay. Those beautiful vessels, robed in white, and so delightful to the eyes of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts. The ships were cast away from their moorings, and free, and me, fast in my chains, and a slave! I remember those ships. They had taken black sailors to ports all over the world and shown them sights my poor eyes would never see.

I called them freedom's swift-winged angels, and eventually they did bring me freedom, through the black men who sailed them.

You see, when I escaped, I dressed in clothes borrowed from a free black seaman. A red shirt, tarpaulin hat, black cravat, and, most importantly a Seaman's Protection Certificate, that identified me as a free black man. I boarded a train from Baltimore and set out to Philadelphia. And freedom. Because I wore clothes, like these. (HIS CHARACTER ENDS)

Scene 3

AS NARRATOR:

The War of 1812 was fought over an issue of freedom. Some said it was our second war for independence. And black jacks were some of the best fighters in that war.

Commander Oliver Hazard Perry had a great victory on Lake Erie, and afterwards said of his black crewmen: "They seem to be absolutely insensitive to danger. "

As the war expanded in the Chesapeake Bay, the British Navy quickly took control and began conducting raids in the Bay, eventually invading and burning Washington D. C. They then headed up to Baltimore to put an end to ~~that "nest of pirates," as they referred to~~ Baltimore and its privateer clipper ships.

There is one extraordinary character who I think is better suited to tell you about all this war in the Chesapeake -- he had first-hand experience. Charles Ball was born in slavery in Maryland, sold to a South Carolina plantation, escaped, eventually enlisted in Joshua Barney's flotilla, and was a black jack for a short time.

Mr. Charles Ball (HE INTRODUCES HIM AS HE BECAMES BALL) ---

Scene 4 Charles Ball