

**Real Pirates**  
**The Untold Story of the Whydah from Slave Ship to Pirate Ship**  
The Field Museum, February 27, 2009 - October 25, 2009

**Real Pirates: Fact vs. Fiction**

**MYTH:** Pirates wore eye patches due to battle scars.

**FACT:** The image of the maimed pirate was popularized through Robert Luis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and it unintentionally expressed an important truth: seafaring was a terribly dangerous line of work. Sailors routinely lost eyes, hands and legs to flying splinters and chunks of wood in naval battle and to accidents on board the ship (i.e., shifting cargo, falling gear, etc.)

**MYTH:** A pirate captain ran the ship and its crew like a dictator.

**FACT:** Pirates actually operated on a fairly democratic system of government, where all crew mates were equal, no matter what their background, age, race or religion. In fact, a pirate ship would elect its captain through a vote. Other matters, such as where the ship might sail, such as whether or not to engage in battle or put into port, also would be decided by a vote, with the majority ruling. Captains could and did influence voting by expressing their opinions. But votes still carried the day, sometimes in opposition to elected captains and officers.

**MYTH:** "Walking the plank" was a typical form of punishment by pirates.

**FACT:** Very little evidence exists to support the notion that pirates made victims "walk the plank" as common punishment. The few depictions that show this practice are from the 1820s and beyond, but no evidence of plank-walking exists from the Age of Piracy (18<sup>th</sup> century). The idea of walking the plank was introduced to society in 1887 in a Harper's Weekly article on buccaneers and again propelled into pop culture with J.M. Barrie's stage production of *Peter Pan* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**MYTH:** A pirate crew was comprised mostly of thieves, vagrants and men without real skill.

**FACT:** Pirates were typically former sailors. There also were a number of craftsmen and a smaller number of adventurers. These communities of sailors were generally skilled. Many pirate ships also employed an on-board surgeon, considered a highly valued shipmate. In addition to the surgeon, a pirate ship crew normally included a carpenter, an artillery master, a navigator, and a pilot.

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**MYTH:** The parrot became the signature pet of pirates because of its ability to fly and seek out other ships or dry land.

**FACT:** Both sailors and pirates had pets on board their ships including dogs, cats, monkeys and parrots. And in truth, many seafaring people did acquire parrots, less for the bird's abilities than as a symbol of their cosmopolitanism – they had traveled to the ends of the earth and they wanted to show off a bit.

**MYTH:** Pirates were all middle-aged white men.

**FACT:** Historians have cited that pirates came from many countries and that nearly 30 percent were of African descent. It may be surprising to know that some pirate crews also included women and young children.

Sources: BBC, Bonaventure-UK, Golden Hind Museum Ship, Dr. Marcus Rediker, Professor of History, University of Pittsburgh

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