

Sailor's Story  
*Boy David Debias*

## I am a ship's boy

My name is David Debias. I am eight years of age, and a free-born Bostonian. I am a Boy: that is my rank on the ship. Some of the other ship's Boys are not boys at all, but men of 16 or 17. They are still called boys, for they have not yet learned enough to become Seamen.

The Sailing Master, Nathaniel Leighton, writes this down for me, for I do not yet know all my letters.





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**“Do this, Do that, Debias”**

I am Mr. Leighton's servant. I wash and sweep and mend for him, and bring him his meals. I am also supposed to learn all I need to know to become a seaman. But boys are the lowest rank on the ship. Everyone looks down on us. So oftentimes I do tasks nobody else wants, such as cleaning out the stinky chicken coop.



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## I have a brush and a slate

I work with brushes and cloths and mops and buckets. I study as well, so I also use a slate and a horn-book. I hope soon to be able to sign my name, for this would make me better than most other seamen on board! However, learning letters is not easy. Even when I am studying with the other Boys, there seems to be some nasty chore to be done. I am *always* the one picked out to do it. Why me?





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## Carrying powder

Gun drill is my favorite time, for then nobody kicks or shouts at me. I fetch charges for a 24-pounder from the After Magazine. From there I pass them up the companionways to seamen who ferry the powder to the gun deck. Charges can't be stored there, in case a spark sets them off. As I pass powder I hear the guns booming above my head, and I long for the time when I am old enough to join a gun crew myself.





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## **I was captured by the enemy!**

When we captured HMS *Levant*, I went on board as part of the prize crew. This was my undoing, for the British recaptured the ship, and I was sent to a prison in Barbados. In peacetime I continued as a sailor for many years, but in 1838 when coming into Mississippi I was mistaken for an escaped slave and deprived of my freedom.



*David Debias protested that he was a free man, and that his naval record would prove it, but we do not know whether he escaped enslavement.*