

## Ordinary seaman Jesse Williams

### Ordinary is ordinary here

I am Jesse Williams. I am forty years of age, so I am much older than most of *Constitution's* Ordinary Seamen. Nobody holds this against me, though, for on a ship, what counts is what you do. I am as skilled as any other Ordinary, and work harder than most. Any respect I get, I have earned. It is different ashore, where a free black man like me might earn respect and get none.



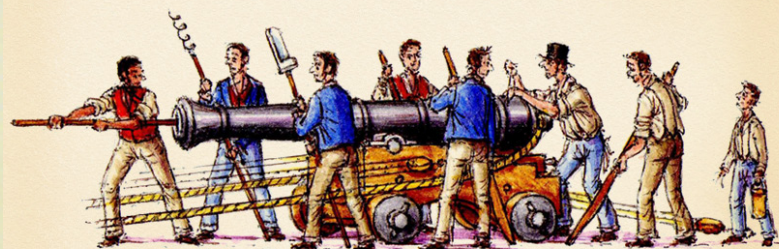
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### I risk my life with each cannon shot

In battle, I am one of the spongers on the third 24-pounder. When we load the gun I must stand before the gun-port. There I am more exposed to the enemy's shot than most of the other twelve men on the gun crew. So far, the Lord has protected me from injury, and each night I pray that he continues to do so.



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### I love the smell of black powder

Though my work as a sponger is dangerous,  
nothing I do when the guns are silent  
compares with it. For the way they shake  
the ship as they fire thrills me, and I long to  
hear them roar once more. Our crew have  
practiced until we can fire our gun with our  
eyes tight closed, yet we have never yet had  
the enemy in our sights – more is the pity.

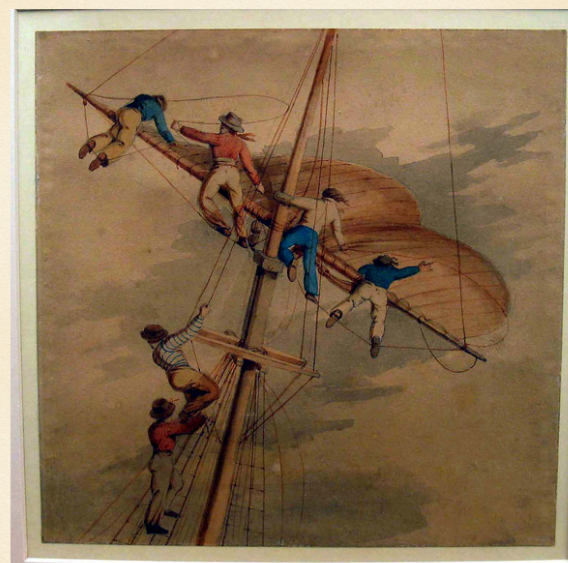




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### We all depend on each other

I am not the only black man on board the ship. Half the messes have one. On land I may have been free, but it was a sour freedom. The sea, however, makes everyone equal. If a sailor on the yard-arm loses his footing, what does he care whether the hand that pulls him to safety is black or white? So here all races work, and eat, and are paid – or punished – just the same.



USS Constitution Museum Collection



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### On to the Great Lakes

I fought on *Constitution* in our great battles against *Guerriere* and *Java*, then in April 1813 I was transferred away to the *Lawrence* on the Great Lakes. The victories against the British on both ships won me THIRTY MONTHS wages in prize money! More than this, I also got a silver medal from my home state of Pennsylvania. Normally only officers are honored with these and I wear it proudly.



*Jesse William slips out of history in 1830, when he was living alone in Strasburg Township, Pennsylvania.*