

# Life as a Colonial Sailor

In Colonial Charles Town, known today as Charleston, sailing was a big part of life. In a time before airplanes, people used ships to get across the ocean, to mail items to other countries, and to explore the world.



## Merchant Ships

Carolina Colony sold **exports** like indigo, rice, timber, and deerskins. **Merchant ships** took these items to other countries. The colonists also needed to buy a lot of items from England that they could not get in the colony. Ships brought items called **imports** into the colonies. **Merchants**, the people selling **goods**, used their ships to move items across the ocean.

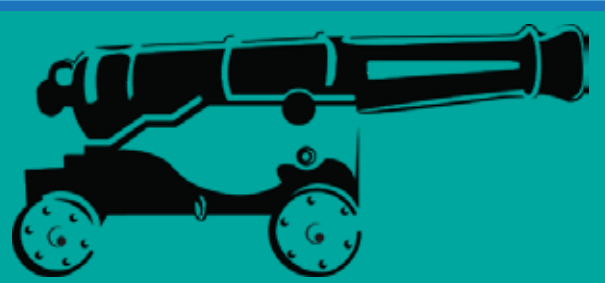
Before we set sail, you need to pick a job.

Some sailors worked as a cook, minister, doctor, carpenter, boatswain (worked the sails), and a quartermaster who kept an eye on the supplies. Captains were in charge of everything!

Ahoy mateys!

I'm Peaches, the Carolina Parakeet.

Are you ready for an adventure on the high seas?



## Navy Ships

During colonial times, British, French, and Spanish settlers fought often. These country's ships patrolled the waters to protect their own towns or to attack others! Smaller navy boats, called scouts, searched the seas for enemies.



## Pirate Ships

Arrrrr! Some sailors worked on pirate ships because they needed jobs and the idea of adventure sounded like fun. Pirates stole items and sold them to the colonists for less money than the British charged. Sailors made more money as a pirate than they did working on a **merchant ship** or a **navy ship**.

Choose Your Adventure



**Caption 1:** An exact prospect of Charlestown, the metropolis of the province of South Carolina.  
Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Why did sailors use their ships?







Sailors had to pack enough food and water to last the entire trip across the ocean. Since there were no refrigerators, sailors packed food that would not spoil and they preserved meat in salt. With no variety in meals, dinner could get very boring!



| The allowance for one man every day in the week |               |      |       |               |                      |               |      |       |
|---|---------------|------|-------|---------------|----------------------|---------------|------|-------|
|   | Sun.          | Mon. | Tues. | Wed.          | Thurs.               | Fri.          | Sat. | Total |
| Bread (lb)                                      | 1             | 1    | 1     | 1             | 1                    | 1             | 1    | 7     |
| Beer (gal)                                      | 1             | 1    | 1     | 1             | 1                    | 1             | 1    | 7     |
| Beef (lb)                                       | 0             | 0    | 2     | 0             | 0                    | 0             | 2    | 4     |
| Pork (lb)                                       | 1             | 0    | 0     | 0             | 1                    | 0             | 0    | 2     |
| Peas (pt)                                       | $\frac{1}{2}$ | 0    | 0     | $\frac{1}{2}$ | $\frac{1}{2}$        | $\frac{1}{2}$ | 0    | 2     |
| Oatmeal (pt)                                    | 0             | 1    | 0     | 1             | 0                    | 1             | 0    | 3     |
| Butter (oz)                                     | 0             | 2    | 0     | 2             | 0                    | 0             | 2    | 6     |
| Cheese (oz)                                     | 0             | 4    | 0     | 4             | 0                    | 4             | 0    | 12    |
| Half allowance all provisions                   |               |      |       |               | 3 pence              |               |      |       |
| Beer excepted                                   |               |      |       |               | $2\frac{1}{4}$ pence |               |      |       |
| Two-thirds allowance all provisions             |               |      |       |               | 2 pence              |               |      |       |
| Beer excepted                                   |               |      |       |               | $1\frac{1}{2}$ pence |               |      |       |
| Drinking water                                  |               |      |       |               | $1\frac{1}{2}$ pence |               |      |       |

**Caption 2:** Table of Allowances for the Royal Navy, 1729, printed in *The Mariner's Mirror*. Courtesy of the SCHS Collection

## What food groups are missing?



## Sick or Hurt

Diseases quickly spread between sailors because they lived in small, dirty spaces together. Working on a ship was dangerous, and if a sailor got sick or hurt, they only had the doctor onboard to help them. There were no hospitals in the middle of the ocean and it was a long trip to the shore.



Eating lots of fruit filled with **Vitamin C** kept sailors from getting sick with **scurvy**.

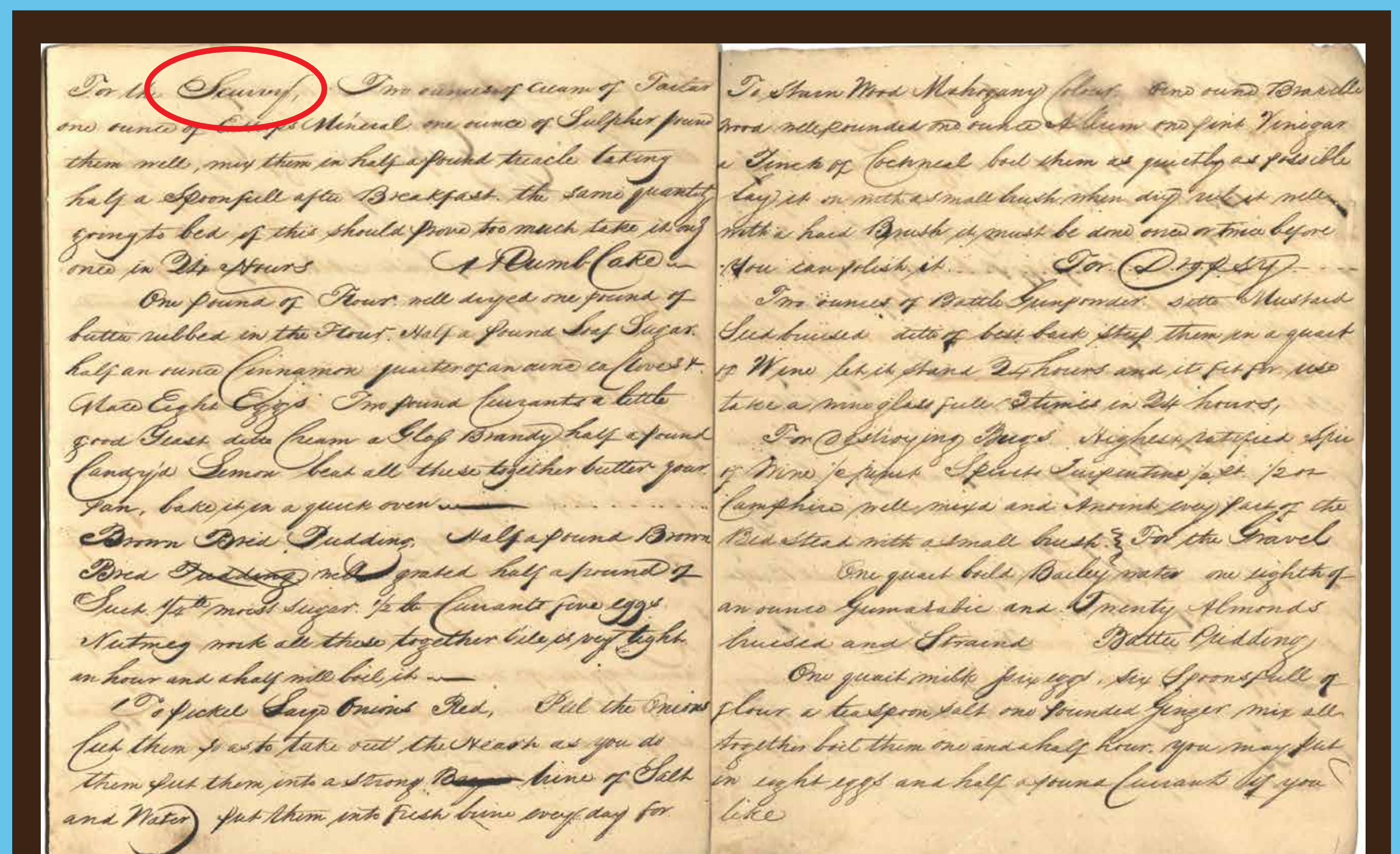
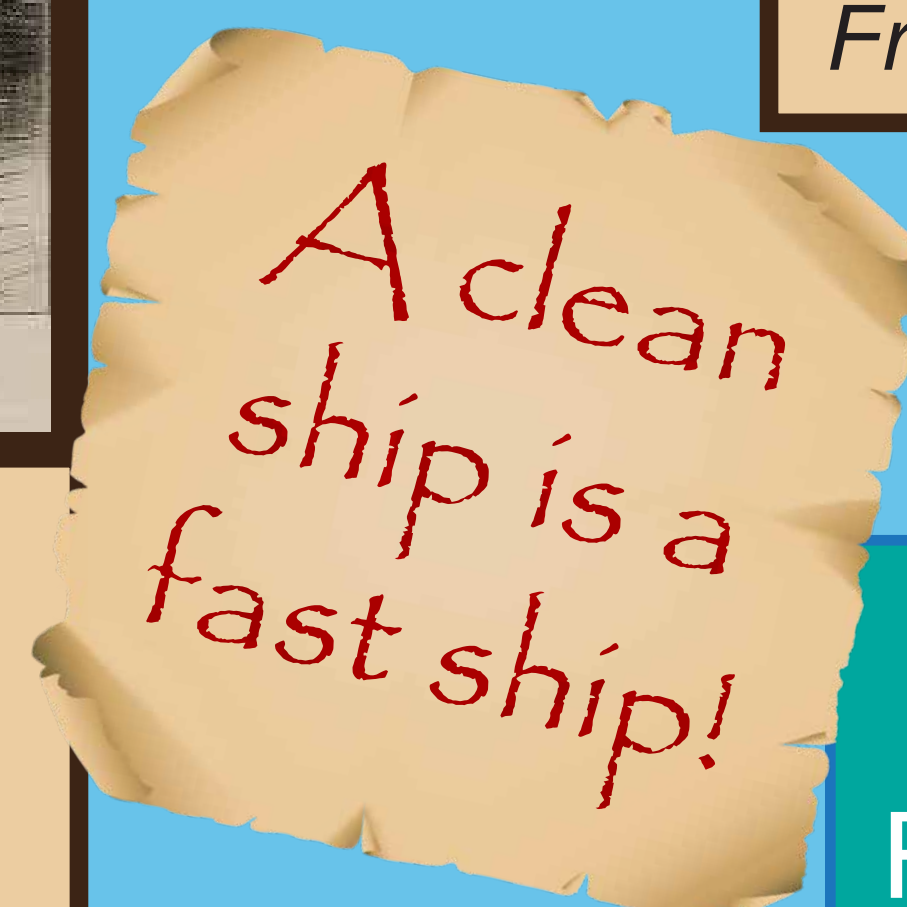
Scurvy caused sailors to lose their teeth, which made eating meat very difficult.

At least they had plenty of soft peas!



**Caption 4:** Since the bottom was underwater, sailors had to careen the ship using ropes to turn it sideways. Print by L.D. Eldred, 1914.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress



**Caption 3:** Sailors often had scurvy and needed to find a cure. Isabella Timmons, the wife of a Charleston merchant, wrote about a cure for scurvy in her recipe book. From the SCHS Collection

## Rats and Worms!

Rats lived on ships, and these rodents carried many diseases which made the sailors sick. The Tereido worms burrowed into the ship's wood, ruining the ship or slowing it down.



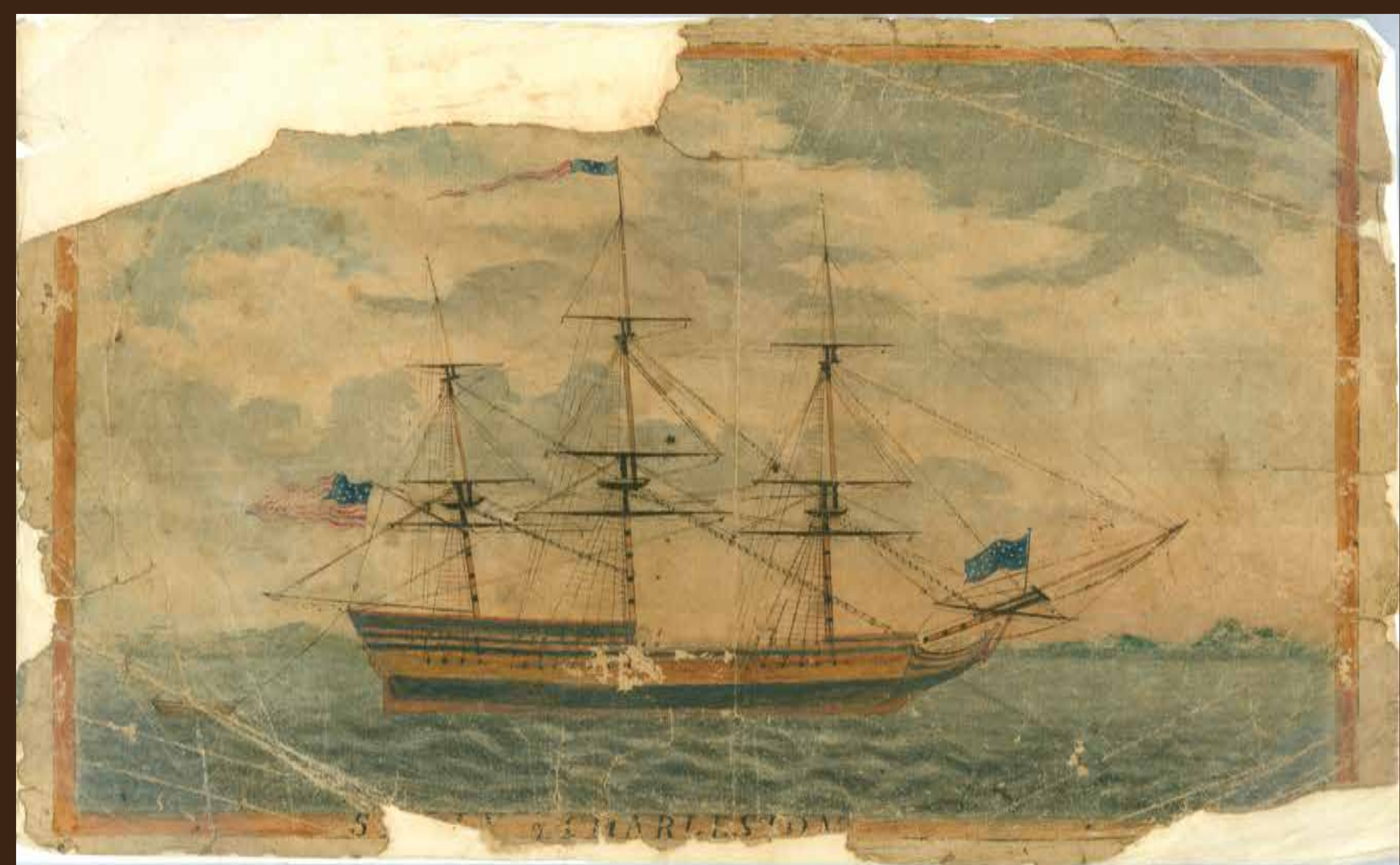


Sailors had to know how to use lots of different tools. They used ropes to raise and lower the sails. When they needed to keep their ship from floating away, they put the anchor in the ocean. To figure out where they were going, sailors used maps when they were near land, and sextants in the middle of the ocean.

Tools  
Sailors  
Used



**Caption 5:** “An accurate map of North and South Carolina, with their Indian frontiers, showing in a distinct manner all the mountains, rivers, swamps, marshes, bays, creeks, harbours, sandbanks, and soundings on the coast,” by Henry Mouzon and others, 1777.  
Image courtesy of the SCHS



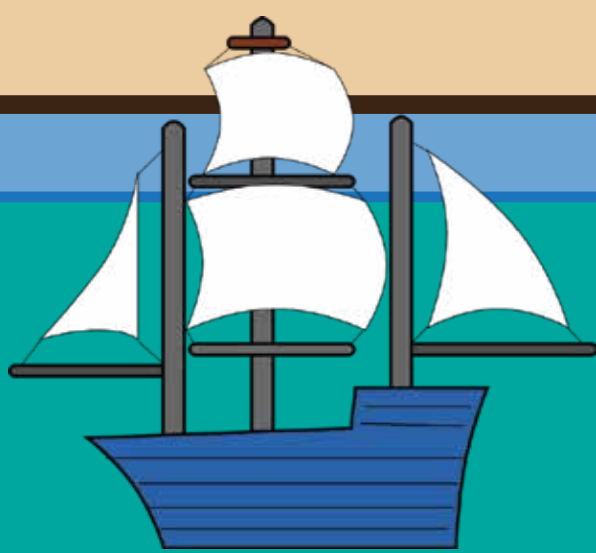
**Caption 6:** Example of a three-masted schooner.  
From the SCHS Collection

## Maps



Sailors used maps to decide where they needed to go. Some even included tips for sailors like the words “rocky fishing ground” or the numbers to show the water depths.

## Ships



Sailors used two or three masted ships. A **schooner** is a sailboat with at least two masts. Schooners were fast and were easier to control than other ships.

## Sextant

Sailors used a **sextant** to draw a triangle from the ship, the horizon (where the Earth and the sky meet) and the stars. This triangle helped them find their place in the ocean.



horizon

Sailors measured the depth of water in **fathoms**.

**One fathom is 6 feet deep.**

**Can you find something that is 6 feet?**



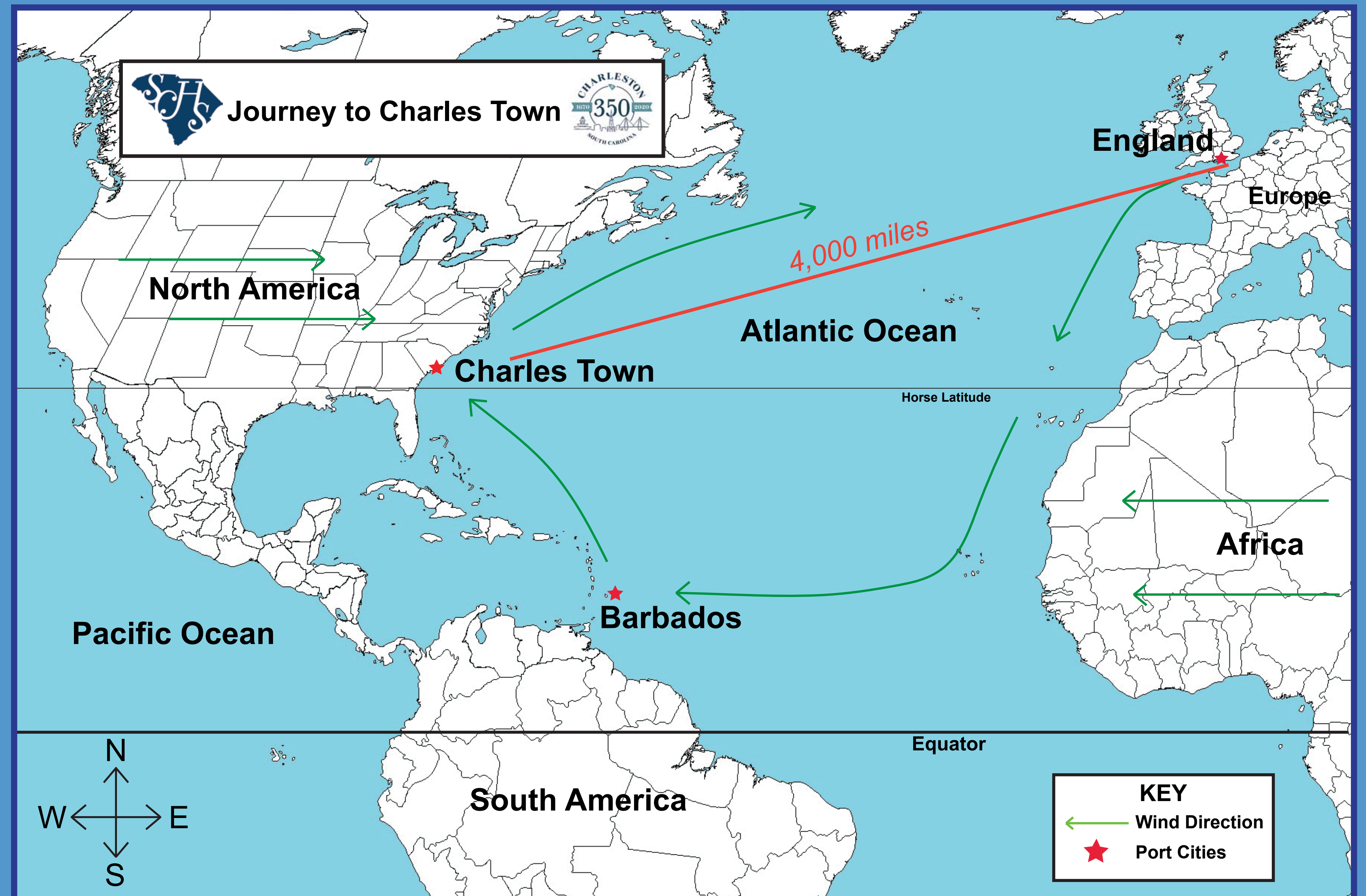


# The Science of Sailing

A straight line from England to Charles Town is about 4,000 miles. However, sailors needed the wind to push their ships so they took a longer route. In the north Atlantic Ocean, these winds blow in a circular, clockwise direction (green arrows). This trip took two to three months; that's a long time to be away from home!



**Caption 7:** South Carolinians have rebuilt the Morris Island Lighthouse several times since 1766. This view is from 2017.  
*Courtesy of the Library of Congress*



When ships got close to land, they looked for the lighthouse to help them get safely into port. King George III of England told South Carolinians to build the Morris Island Lighthouse. Soon over 800 ships a year sailed into Charles Town and the lighthouse made the harbor safe.

## The Route



Ships needed wind to sail, so sailors followed the **Trade Winds** (green arrows). They sailed south from **England** towards the coast of **Africa**, then turned west to **Barbados**, and finally turned north to **North America**.

When the ship stopped in Barbados, the sailors sold goods like spices, clothing, and furniture to the people living on the island. Next, the sailors loaded the ship with barrels of fresh food and water for their trip, and barrels of sugar and coffee to sell in Charles Town.



The trip across the ocean was a long and dangerous adventure. The sailors didn't know when they would arrive in Charles Town.

**What things might make the trip take longer or cause problems for the sailors?**

