



ACTIVITY

List of Sailor Superstitions

Sailors often believed in superstitions, which were circumstances that brought them good luck or bad luck at sea. Use this list to learn some of them and have students brainstorm or research additional superstitions.

List of Sailor Superstitions

Whistling for a Wind

Does the wind have ears? Ships like *Constitution* were powered by the wind. If there was no wind, the ship did not make progress. If you're a sailor whistling for a wind, the noise carries out across the ocean. Sailors would whistle trying to attract the wind to the Ship. The expression "whistling for a wind" has come to mean to attempt a futile endeavor.

Scratching a Backstay

Scratching a backstay, a thick rope that held up the masts, was said to give you a favorable wind in the direction needed.

Coins under the Masts

Sailors believed placing a coin under the mast brought good luck or a profitable voyage. The coins were placed under the masts of a ship as it was being built. The tradition began with the ancient Romans, who placed a coin in the mouths of the dead enabling them to pay a mythological ferryman to transport them across the River Styx to embark on their afterlife. Many cultures believe in a voyage to the afterlife after death. As the superstition goes, if a ship and her sailors were lost at sea, then the coins under the masts ensured that the dead's fares across the River Styx were paid.

Hex marks and amulets

Geometric scratches called hex marks and amulets (pendants made from spoons) warded off evil spirits.

Unlucky to set sail on a Friday

Friday was named after the Norse goddess Frigg, or Frigga. The goddess of love and fertility, she was the wife of the god Woden, after whom Wednesday is named. In early times, Friday was regarded as a lucky day, and an especially good one on which to get married. But in early Christianity, Frigga was regarded as a witch; her day unlucky because it was the day of the week Jesus was crucified. Becoming a deeply-rooted superstition among sailors, it became bad luck to set sail on a Friday.

A sick man won't die until high tide

Fletcher S. Bassett writes in his *"Legends and Superstitions of the sea and sailors in all lands in all times"* that, "On Cape Cod, and in many other districts along the New England coast, it is firmly believed that a sick man cannot die until the ebbtide begins to run. Watchers by beds of sickness anxiously note the change of the tides, and if the patient lives until the flood begins to set in again he will live until the next ebb."