

THE SEA-MAN'S VADE MECUM, 1707

The following is excerpted from a book called *Vade Mecum* published in France in 1707. Although the book was written to establish basic standards of behavior, punishment, protocol, and procedure on French naval ships, it served as standard policy on board both merchant and naval ships in Europe and the United States throughout the colonial period and the early years of the nation. This list of rules for ships' crews reveals to us what concerns were most pressing on board a ship. The relative harshness of the various punishments tells us which crimes and misdemeanors posed the most serious threat.

The Duty of Sea-men

1. The Sea-men shall be obliged to appear at the Days and Places appointed, to take a Board the Provisions, rig out the Ship, and set Sail.
2. A Sea-man hired for a Voyage, must not leave the Ship, without a Discharge in Writing, till the Voyage is ended, and the Ship moored at the Key and unladed.
3. If a Sea-man leaves a Master without a Discharge in Writing, before the Voyage is begun he may be taken up and Imprisoned where-ever he can be found, and compelled to restore what he has received, and [sic] serve out the time for which he had engaged himself, for nothing; and if he leaves the Ship after the Voyage is begun, he may be punish'd corporally.
4. However, if after the Arrival and unlading of a Ship at the intended Port, the Master (instead of returning) takes a Freight to go elsewhere, the Sea-men may leave him if they please, except it be otherwise provided by their Agreement.
5. After the Ship is laded, the Sea-men shall not go a Shore without Leave from the Master, under Pain of five Livres for the first Fault, and may be punished corporally, if they commit a second.
6. We forbid the Mariners and Sea-men to take any Bread or Victuals, or draw any Drink, without the permission of the Master or Steward, under Pain of the loss of one Month's Wages, and of a greater Punishment, if the Fault deserves it.
7. The Sea-men or others that spill the Drink, destroy the Bread, make the Ship leaky, excite a Sedition to break the Voyage, or strikes the Master, having Arms in their Hand, shall be punished with Death.
8. Any Sea-man sleeping in his Post, or upon the Watch, shall be put in Irons during fifteen Days; and any of the Company finding one asleep, and not acquainting the Master therewith, shall pay 5 Livres.

9. Any Mariner abandoning the Master and the Defence of the Ship in time of Battle, shall be punished corporally.

10. We forbid all Persons to raise, within Extent of our Kingdom and the Land, and Countries under our Obedience, any Sea-men for Foreign Armaments and Expeditions; and we in like manner forbid our Subjects so to engage themselves without our Permission, under pain of exemplary Punishment.

● QUESTIONS

1. Many of these rules (# 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, and 10) are concerned with seamen who do not complete the terms of their contract. It was hard for captains to find men willing to work at sea, and even harder to keep them on the job. Many seamen were forced into the job or stumbled into it while drunk, only to regret it the next day. What punishments were used to keep seamen on the job until the completion of the voyage?
2. What crimes were apparently considered the most serious? How did these actions pose a serious threat to the voyage?