

# THE MYSTERY OF THE MARY CELESTE


**O**n the afternoon of December 5, 1872, the sailing ship *Dei Gratia* was gliding calmly across the Atlantic towards Portugal. The weather was fair, and *Dei Gratia*'s captain, David Morehouse, was surprised to look out and see a ship he recognized as the *Mary Celeste*. This ship had left New York City a week before him, so it should have been far ahead. As he watched, Morehouse saw the *Mary Celeste* swing around suddenly in the wind as if out of control. This was very strange, for he knew the *Mary Celeste*'s captain, Benjamin Briggs, was a good seaman. He tried hailing but there was only silence.

**F**or two hours, Morehouse surveyed the *Mary Celeste* sailing west, all apparently fine except for its strange yawing to and fro. Eventually, Morehouse could watch no more, and sent his chief mate, Oliver Deveau, across in a small boat to the other ship. Climbing aboard, Deveau found the

*Mary Celeste* absolutely empty. There was no sign of Captain Briggs, his wife Sarah, their two-year-old daughter, or the crew. Yet, aside from some water between the decks and a couple of hatch covers missing, the ship appeared in good condition. Where were they all? That question has intrigued people ever since...

**A**fter discovering the *Mary Celeste* was deserted, Morehouse put three men on board. In a sad mood, they sailed her on to Gibraltar. Immediately, an inquiry was launched to discover what had happened. Morehouse hoped at least to claim salvage for the *Mary Celeste*, but soon found himself in the dock—since the attorney just could not believe they had found the ship drifting unmanned. He was eventually cleared, but the inquiry came to no firm conclusion. So what did happen? For the evidence and the theories, turn the page...





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## The evidence

- ❖ Two hatches were open.
- ❖ The ship's clock was upside down and had stopped.
- ❖ The sextant (instrument for celestial navigation) and chronometer (shipping timepiece) were missing.
  - ❖ The Captain's bed was sodden and there was water between the decks.
- ❖ Under the bed was the Captain's sword, with red stains.
  - ❖ The lifeboat was missing, leaving a frayed rope.
- ❖ The cargo of 1,700 barrels of pure alcohol was intact, except for nine empty barrels.
  - ❖ On board, there was food to last six months.
- ❖ The last entry in the ship's log was about a week old.



## The theories

### Mutiny!

**Theory:** The crew became angry with Briggs' leadership and murdered him and his family, then escaped in the lifeboat.

**Evidence:** The red-stained sword, the missing lifeboat, and the deserted ship.

**Problems:** Briggs was renowned for being a good and fair captain. The stain on the sword turned out to be rust and not blood. Even if there was a mutiny, this does not explain why the crew would jump into a lifeboat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

### Drunken sailors

**Theory:** The crew murdered the captain and his family to get at the alcohol in the cargo, then escaped in the lifeboat.

**Evidence:** The stained sword and the nine empty barrels, which had contained alcohol.

**Problems:** The cargo of alcohol was undrinkable and, like the captain, the crew had an admirable reputation. As we know, the stain on the sword was rust, and the crew would have faced great danger on a small lifeboat in the turbulent Atlantic.

### Rogue wave

**Theory:** The entire crew was swept overboard by a giant wave.

**Evidence:** The water between the decks.

**Problems:** It seems highly unlikely that a single wave would have caught everyone. Even if it had, you would expect a lot more items to be missing than just the sextant and the compass.

### Sinking

**Theory:** The crew thought the ship was sinking, so took to the lifeboat to escape. This was the theory decided by the court hearing at the time.

**Evidence:** Water in the hold.

**Problems:** The ship's pump was working well enough for the sailors from the *Dei Gratia* to pump out the water and take the *Mary Celeste* safely back to port.

### Insurance scam

**Theory:** Briggs and Morehouse conspired in a scam to get the insurance money.

**Evidence:** None.

**Problems:** The ship and its cargo would have to be lost for there to be an insurance claim. Instead, everybody on board was missing but the cargo remained largely intact. So who was supposed to claim the insurance, and for what?

### Poisoning

**Theory:** They got ergot (a fungus) poisoning from the rye bread they were eating. This drove them insane and they left in the lifeboat.

**Evidence:** The bread on the *Mary Celeste* was rye and is poisonous if made from ergot-infected grain.

**Problems:** All the bread found by the *Dei Gratia* crew was fine. Even if they did go insane, why would they want to flee together in the lifeboat?

### The Bermuda Triangle

**Theory:** The crew was abducted by aliens in the Bermuda Triangle.

**Evidence:** None.


**Problems:** The ship was sighted near Portugal and so was nowhere near the Bermuda Triangle.

### Explosion

**Theory:** Alcohol leaking from some of the barrels exploded, frightening Briggs and his crew into abandoning the ship temporarily. The lifeboat then separated from the *Mary Celeste* during a heavy storm.

**Evidence:** The nine barrels may have exploded, blowing off the hatch covers. The missing sextant and chronometer would have been helpful in the lifeboat. The frayed rope that trailed the *Mary Celeste* could have been used to tie the lifeboat to the ship. The water on board could be evidence of bad weather. Recent scientific tests have shown that alcohol can explode without a fire.

**Problems:** There was little evidence of an explosion anywhere on the ship.



You've seen the evidence and you've read the theories, so what do you think happened on board the mysterious *Mary Celeste*?

