

ACTIVITY 1D: JOLLY ROGER — Background Information Sheet

THE JOLLY ROGER

The “Jolly Roger,” also known as “Black Jack” or “The Banner of Death,” was invented by Caribbean pirates around 1700. Its intended purpose was to frighten their intended victim into surrendering. Until then, pirates flew whatever country’s flag would get them the closest to their prey. By the 1720s, the black flag with its white symbols was common with the pirates of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Every pirate crew had a unique flag. The human skull, or “death’s head,” was a common theme, but others symbols on the “Jolly Roger” meant death, violence, and limited time.

When a pirate ship spotted its intended victim, a typical scenario went like this. First, the pirate ship would fly the flag of a non-threatening country until they were close enough to bombard their prey; this was known as flying “false colors.” Next, they would raise the Jolly Roger. This flag was intended to frighten the victim and also give them a chance to surrender. If this offer was refused, the pirates would raise a red flag, symbolizing blood, which meant “no quarter” — death to all.

The skull and crossbones was a common European symbol of death. It was carved into gravestones of the 17th century. Pirates capitalized on this symbol, but other symbols were used. For example, Edward (Blackbeard) Teach had a white skeleton holding a spear pointed to a red heart. Bartholomew (Black Bart) Roberts’ flag portrayed a human body with a cutlass standing on two skulls. This symbolized the governors of Barbados and Martinique, with the initials ABH (A Barbadian’s Head) and AMH (A Martinican’s Head) under each skull.

No one really knows the origin of the term “Jolly Roger.” Some people believe that the term is derived from French buccaneers who referred to the red flag as *joli rouge* (“beautiful red”). Others believe that the “Jolly Roger” is derived from an Indian pirate named Ali Rajah, which British sailors pronounced “Olly Roger.” And a third version says that the name Jolly Roger probably came from the English word “roger” referring to a “begging vagabond” or to the devil (“Old Roger”). Whatever its origin, this flag was intended to strike fear in the hearts of those who saw it on the high seas.

