

# CALICO JACK

John "Calico Jack" Rackham was a swashbuckling English pirate (and sometime captain) who sailed in the Caribbean and the Southeastern coast of the United States during the so-called "Golden Age of Piracy (1650-1725)." He earned the nickname "Calico Jack" because of his taste for clothes made of brightly colored Indian Calico cloth.

In his 1722 classic, *A General History of the Pyrates*, Charles Johnson tells of Calico's adventures as a pirate and pirate captain. Rackham wasn't a great pirate. Most of his piracy victims were fishermen and lightly armed traders.

His brief tenures as captain were marked more by daring and bravery than pirating skill. His best prize, the Spanish ship *Kingston*, was only in his power for a few days, and he never had the impact on Caribbean and transatlantic commerce that other pirates like Blackbeard, Edward Low or "Black Bart" Roberts did.

Rackham is primarily remembered today for his association with Ann Bonney and Mary Read, two fascinating historical figures. It is safe to say that if it were not for them, Rackham would be but a footnote in pirate lore.

Rackham did leave one other legacy, however: his flag. Pirates at the time made their own flags, usually black or red with white or red symbols on them. Rackham's flag was black with a white skull over two crossed swords: this banner has gained worldwide popularity as "the" pirate flag.

Anne Bonney was born in the late 1600s in Ireland, the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy lawyer, William Cormac, and his housemaid. Cormac bought a plantation near Charleston, S.C. and immigrated there with his new family. As a headstrong young woman with a ferocious temper Anne eloped with a young ne'er-do-well, James Bonney, against her father's wishes. James took her to a pirates' lair in the Bahamas where he turned informant against the pirates...

Anne was disgusted with James' cowardice and fell in love with the flamboyant pirate, Captain Calico Jack. Disguising herself as a male, she began pirating with him, preying on ships off Cuba and Hispaniola.

Mary Read was born in England about 1690. After Mary's father disappeared at sea, her mother took her to London to appeal to her husband's mother for financial help. The old woman disliked girls, so Mary's mother dressed her as a boy. The mother-in-law was fooled and gladly helped support Mary and her mother.

As a teenager, Mary was hired out as a male servant to a wealthy French woman. Growing bored with this work, Mary, still disguised as a male, enlisted in the Belgian army first as a foot soldier and later in the cavalry. In the cavalry, she fell in love with and married a fellow soldier. She now dressed as a female and she and her new husband became innkeepers, owning the well-known Three Horseshoes in Holland. Unfortunately, Mary's husband died young and her fortunes dwindled.

Knowing life in the 1700s was easier as a man, Mary reverted back to men's clothing and joined a merchant ship as a sailor. After a few years, Calico Jack and his pirates commandeered Mary's ship and she joined his pirates, still disguised as a man. Since Anne Bonney was already part of Jack's pirate crew, Mary and Anne discovered each other's "secret" and became close friends. The two women became the most ferocious fighters on the pirate ship.

Eventually, the British Navy captured Calico Jack and his ship. All of the pirates were tried and sentenced to hang. When asked if they had anything to say for themselves, Anne and Mary said "we plead our bellies." Both women were pregnant. Their hangings were delayed until after the babies were born. After this their history becomes vague. Some accounts say Mary died in prison. Some say she faked her death and escaped to raise her child in Jamaica. One account says Anne's father ransomed her from prison and both she and Mary raised their children on a Caribbean island or in Louisiana.

- Robert Hanson