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NOAA, Partners, Launch New Website Highlighting African-American Maritime Heritage

By National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Posted online February 1, 2011 by NOAA.



NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, in partnership with Murrain Associates, Inc., and the National Association of Black Scuba Divers (NABS), today launched Voyage to Discovery, a new website and education initiative highlighting untold stories of African-Americans and the sea.

Aimed at everyone from students to adults, the Voyage to Discovery website offers feature stories, interviews, and videos about African-

American seafaring achievements since the period of pre-Civil War to today. Information about marine careers will also be available.

The website is part of a broader NOAA initiative to build public awareness about the legacy of African-American maritime heritage and engage a broad spectrum of Americans in the stewardship of the country's coastal and ocean resources through education, archaeology, science and underwater exploration.

Daniel J. Basta, director, NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, said the Voyage to Discovery education initiative honors African-Americans' deep connection to the sea and highlights the continuing, historic role of the ocean in the security, stability and prosperity of the nation.

"Our economy and way of life are inextricably linked to the health and productivity of the global ocean," Basta said. "Through this initiative, African-American youth can learn about their maritime heritage and the various educational and career opportunities that exist in the 21st century global economy."

Michael H. Cottman, a NABS member and author of "The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie," said he hopes Voyage to Discovery will inspire young adults to identify with their maritime roots and consider careers in marine science and oceanography.

"Minorities are the fastest growing population in the country, but are vastly underrepresented in science and technology fields," Cottman said. "In order for the U.S. to maintain its competitive edge, the future workforce will need to draw on the minds and talents of all its citizens."

As far back as the American Revolution, blacks have been involved in virtually every aspect of maritime work. Despite an uncertain and sometimes dangerous racial climate, blacks worked as skippers and captains as well as whalers, lobstermen and fishermen. They also managed lighthouses, steered paddleboats and warships, along with owning sea industry businesses. The Underground Railroad used ships to spirit slaves to freedom, and black mariners helped shaped the identity of free black communities.

Among the people profiled on the website: Captain Absalom Boston, a free black born in 1785 who led an all-black crew aboard the whaling schooner *Industry* and amassed substantial real estate holdings. Robert Smalls, a slave who became a Civil War hero in the Union Navy and served as a congressman from South Carolina during Reconstruction. Rear Admiral Evelyn Fields, the first African-American and first woman to become director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officers Corps, the nation's seventh uniformed service.

Bill Murrain, founder of Murrain Associates, said the ocean and marine environment provides a wealth of services that are vital to communities nationwide.

"The rich, untold history that is chronicled throughout this project is a reminder that all of us have a responsibility to keep our ocean and waterways healthy so future generations will continue to reap the benefits," he said.

The National Association of Black Scuba Divers was established in 1991 to foster camaraderie among black divers and to address the unique problems and concerns of the African-American community. The organization has more than 2,000 members across the country and internationally. Membership is open to anyone regardless of race, color, gender, physical challenges or diving agency affiliation.

Murrain Associates Inc. is a management consulting firm with a focus on strategic planning, project evaluation, community development, health services planning, assessment and management. Murrain Associates consists of three members of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers who have shared experiences in marine biology, marine archaeology, slave ship exploration,

history, law, journalism and marketing. The founder of Murrain Associates is Bill Murrain, a lawyer based in Atlanta, Ga.

NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries manages a system of 14 marine protected areas covering more than 150,000 square miles of ocean and Great Lakes waters. The Maritime Heritage program promotes appreciation and protection of the country's maritime heritage resources including historic shipwrecks and prehistoric archaeological sites, archival documents, oral histories, and traditional seafaring and ecological knowledge of indigenous cultures.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources.