

# The Ship That Sailed On Without Anyone: The Mary Celeste

**Sample work — iChill Productions.** Concept script written as a portfolio sample. Not commissioned by any client.

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| <b>Format</b>               | Faceless YouTube documentary (narration over B-roll, maps, archival stills)                                                                                                              |
| <b>Target runtime</b>       | About 5:00 at ~160 words per minute                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Narration word count</b> | ~800 words (spoken lines only; bracketed notes not counted)                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Tone</b>                 | Calm, curious, slightly ominous. No gore, no "cursed ship" hype.                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Visual note</b>          | Any reconstruction of the ship or people should be labeled as illustration/dramatization. If realistic AI visuals are used, switch on YouTube's altered or synthetic content disclosure. |

## 0:00 — Cold open (hook)

*[B-ROLL: Slow push-in on a two-masted sailing ship drifting in grey Atlantic swell. Sails ragged. No one on deck. Low wind, creaking timber.]*

**NARRATOR:** On December 4th, 1872, sailors on a Canadian ship spotted a vessel moving strangely through the Atlantic. Zig-zagging. Sails half set. No one at the wheel.

*[SFX: Rope slapping against a mast.]*

**NARRATOR:** When they climbed aboard, the food stores were full. The cargo was almost untouched. The crew's clothes and belongings were still in their cabins.

*[B-ROLL: Empty cabin, a lantern swinging gently.]*

**NARRATOR:** But all ten people who had sailed on her were gone. And not one of them was ever seen again.

*[TITLE CARD: "THE MARY CELESTE"]*

## 0:26 — Setup: who was on board

*[B-ROLL: Map animation. New York to Genoa, Italy. A dotted line crosses the Atlantic.]*

**NARRATOR:** The Mary Celeste was a brigantine, a two-masted merchant ship, freshly refitted in New York. On November 7th, 1872, she left for Genoa carrying 1,701 barrels of alcohol.

*[ARCHIVAL STILL: Period portrait-style illustration of a 19th-century sea captain. LOWER THIRD: "Illustration".]*

**NARRATOR:** Her captain was Benjamin Spooner Briggs. An experienced, respected seaman and a devout man who read his Bible regularly. He brought his wife, Sarah, and their two-year-old daughter, Sophia. Their seven-year-old son, Arthur, stayed home in Massachusetts for school.

*[B-ROLL: A child's toy and a folded letter on a wooden desk.]*

**NARRATOR:** Seven crew members rounded out the ship. Briggs wrote to his mother that he was very happy with both his ship and his crew.

*[RETENTION BEAT — ON-SCREEN TEXT: "Ten people. One lifeboat. Remember that."]*

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## 1:00 — The discovery

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*[B-ROLL: Second ship on the horizon, closing in. Spyglass POV.]*

**NARRATOR:** Eight days after the Mary Celeste left, another ship, the Dei Gratia, set off along the same route. About three weeks later, between the Azores and Portugal, her crew saw the Mary Celeste, sailing badly and answering no signals.

**NARRATOR:** First mate Oliver Deveau rowed over to take a look. Here's what he found.

*[ON-SCREEN CHECKLIST builds one line at a time, with a soft click per line:]*

**NARRATOR:** The ship's only lifeboat was missing. About three and a half feet of water sloshed in the hold. A lot, but not enough to sink her. Two hatches were open. The compass housing was knocked out of place. A sounding rod, used to measure water in the hull, lay abandoned on deck.

**NARRATOR:** And there were about six months of food and water still on board.

*[B-ROLL: Close-up of a logbook page. Pen. Ink blot.]*

**NARRATOR:** The last log entry was from the morning of November 25th. It put the ship near Santa Maria island in the Azores. The Mary Celeste had drifted on, empty, for nearly 400 nautical miles.

*[RETENTION BEAT — slow zoom on the empty davits.]*

**NARRATOR:** So what could make an experienced captain put his wife and baby into a tiny open boat in the middle of the Atlantic?

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## 2:06 — The trial in Gibraltar

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*[B-ROLL: Rock of Gibraltar, old harbor illustration, gavel.]*

**NARRATOR:** The Dei Gratia crew sailed the derelict to Gibraltar, hoping for a salvage reward. Instead, they got an investigation.

**NARRATOR:** The attorney general, Frederick Solly-Flood, was convinced a crime had happened. Maybe the crew got drunk on the cargo and killed the captain. Maybe the rescuers were in on it.

*[B-ROLL: Magnifying glass over a sword blade, then wood grain.]*

**NARRATOR:** Inspectors pointed to cuts on the bow and stains on the captain's sword. But tests showed the stains were not blood. An American naval officer argued the marks on the bow came from the sea itself.

**NARRATOR:** There was no evidence of a fight, and pirates would have taken the valuables. The court found nothing. The salvagers were paid, but far less than expected, and a shadow of

suspicion stayed with them.

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## 2:51 — How the legend grew

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*[B-ROLL: Victorian magazine pages flipping. LOWER THIRD: "Cornhill Magazine, 1884".]*

**NARRATOR:** Then fiction took over. In 1884, a 25-year-old doctor named Arthur Conan Doyle, years before Sherlock Holmes made him famous, published a story about a ship he called the "Marie Celeste." He changed the names, added passengers and invented a murderous plot. Readers took it as fact, and his misspelling stuck.

**NARRATOR:** Fake "survivor" accounts followed for decades. Most got basic names wrong.

*[RETENTION BEAT — ON-SCREEN TEXT: "Strip away the fiction. Two theories hold up best."]*

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## 3:14 — The theories

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*[ON-SCREEN TEXT: "THEORY 1: THE FUMES"]*

**NARRATOR:** In Genoa, nine of the 1,701 barrels turned out to be empty. One long-standing theory says leaking alcohol vapor rumbled or flared in the hold. Briggs, fearing an explosion, ordered everyone into the lifeboat, maybe meaning to wait on a towline until it was safe.

*[B-ROLL: Lab footage, a quick blue flash in a model box. LABEL: "Illustration".]*

**NARRATOR:** In 2006, chemist Andrea Sella tested a version of this for television. His model blast produced a wave of flame but left no scorch marks. That matters, because the Mary Celeste showed no fire damage.

*[ON-SCREEN TEXT: "THEORY 2: THE BROKEN PUMP"]*

**NARRATOR:** A 2007 Smithsonian Channel documentary suggested something quieter. A pump was found taken apart. Coal dust from an earlier cargo and debris from the refit may have clogged it. After two weeks of rough weather, Briggs may simply not have known how much water he was taking on.

**NARRATOR:** Their research also suggested his chronometer was off, putting him about 120 miles west of where he thought he was. If Briggs finally sighted Santa Maria, feared his ship was sinking, and saw land within reach, abandoning ship might have felt like the safe choice.

*[B-ROLL: Tiny rowboat on a huge grey sea, camera pulling away.]*

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## 4:19 — What we actually know

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**NARRATOR:** Here's the honest answer. Nobody knows. Most investigators agree on one point: something frightened a sensible captain badly enough to leave a seaworthy ship. Whatever it was, the lifeboat and everyone in it disappeared.

**NARRATOR:** The ship's story didn't end there. Nobody wanted her after the scandal, and she changed hands at a loss. In January 1885, her last captain deliberately ran her onto a reef off Haiti as part of an insurance scam. She never sailed again.

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## 4:48 — CTA

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*[B-ROLL: Slow fade on the drifting ship.]*

**NARRATOR:** Fumes, a faulty pump, or something else? Tell us your theory in the comments. And if you like real mysteries told without the hype, subscribe for the next one.

*[END SCREEN: Two video slots + subscribe button. Music resolves.]*

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### Fact-check sources (checked Oct 24, 2026)

- Wikipedia, "Mary Celeste" (citing Begg 2007, Fay 1942/1988, Hastings 1972, Hicks 2004): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Celeste](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Celeste)
- Smithsonian Magazine, "Abandoned Ship: The Mary Celeste" (Nov 2007): <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/abandoned-ship-the-mary-celeste-174488104/>
- Sources disagree on the exact hour of the last log entry (5 a.m. vs 8 a.m.) and the salvage share (one-fifth vs one-sixth). The script avoids both specifics on purpose.