



**Loss of the American Brig Commerce, Wrecked on
the Western Coast of Africa, in the Month of
August, 1815: With an Account of Tombuctoo, and
of the Hitherto Undiscovered Great City of
Wassanah**

Capt James Riley

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James Riley (1777, Middletown, Conn. – 1840 at sea) was the Captain of the United States merchant ship Commerce. Riley led his crew through the Sahara Desert, after they were shipwrecked off the coast of Moroccan Western Sahara in August 1815, and wrote a memoir about their ordeal. This true story describes how they came to be shipwrecked and their travails in the Sahara Desert. The book, published in 1817 and originally titled Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig 'Commerce' by the "Late Master and Supercargo" James Riley, is modernly republished as *Sufferings in Africa*. The book struck the nineteenth century reader because it was a startling switch on the then-usual master-slave relationship, which was white owners and black slaves. Lost in this unknown world, Captain Riley felt responsible for his crew and their safety. He told of the events leading to their capture by marauding Sahrawi natives who kept them as slaves. Horribly mistreated, they were beaten, sun-burnt, starved, and forced to drink their own and camel urine. A slave would be worked until close to death and then either traded or killed. Once back on shore, Riley devoted himself to anti-slavery work but eventually returned to a life at sea, where he died of sickness in his sixties. The lives of his crew were foreshortened, no doubt, from complications caused by their hardships in the African desert. The last surviving crewman was the cabin boy, who lived to be 82. In 1851, G. Brewster published the Sequel to Riley's Narrative: Being a Sketch of Interesting Incidents in the Life, Voyages and Travels of Capt. James Riley, from the Period of His Return to His Native Land, After His Shipwreck, Captivity and Sufferings Among the Arabs of the Desert, as Related in His Narrative, Until His Death. Captain James Riley's story has served as the basis for several relatively recent published books: "Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival" by Dean King, published in 2004; and "Sufferings in Africa: The Incredible True Story of a Shipwreck, Enslavement, and Survival on the Sahara" published in 2007. This pre-1923 publication has been converted from its original format and may contain an occasional defect from the conversion or from the original publication.

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