



Cape Cod Shipwrecks: Graveyard of the Atlantic

Theodore Parker Burbank

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Thousands of Shipwrecks off Cape Cod So many ships have piled up on the hidden sand bars off the coast between Chatham and Provincetown that those fifty miles of sea have been called an "ocean graveyard" containing an estimated 3,500 shipwrecks including that of the Whydah Gally, the famed pirate ship of Black Sam Bellamy that went down with over 4.5 tons of gold, silver, jewels and other treasures off Marconi Beach. In fact, between Truro and Wellfleet alone, according to the U.S. Lifesaving Service, there had been more than 1,000 wrecks from 1850 until the Cape Cod Canal was opened in 1918. Ship Ashore! When a storm struck the Cape in the early days, no one was surprised to hear the alarm: "Ship ashore! All hands perishing!" The townspeople would turn out on the beach, but usually the surf was too high for them to attempt a rescue; and by the time the storm was over, there was usually no one alive to rescue. The First Recorded Wreck The first recorded wreck was the Sparrow-Hawk which ran aground at Orleans in 1626 after successfully the sailing more than 3,000 miles from England to Cape Cod. The 25 people aboard the tiny 29 ft craft were able to get ashore safely, and the ship was repaired. But, before it could set sail, the ship was sunk by another storm, buried in the sand, and wasn't seen for over two hundred years. In 1863, after storms had shifted the sands again, the skeleton of the Sparrow-Hawk reappeared briefly. So the ocean takes and gives back and takes again. (The ribs of the ship are now on display at the Cape Cod Maritime Museum). The stories of heroism, bravery, treachery, valor and sadness behind the scores of shipwrecks are chronicled here in graphic detail.

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