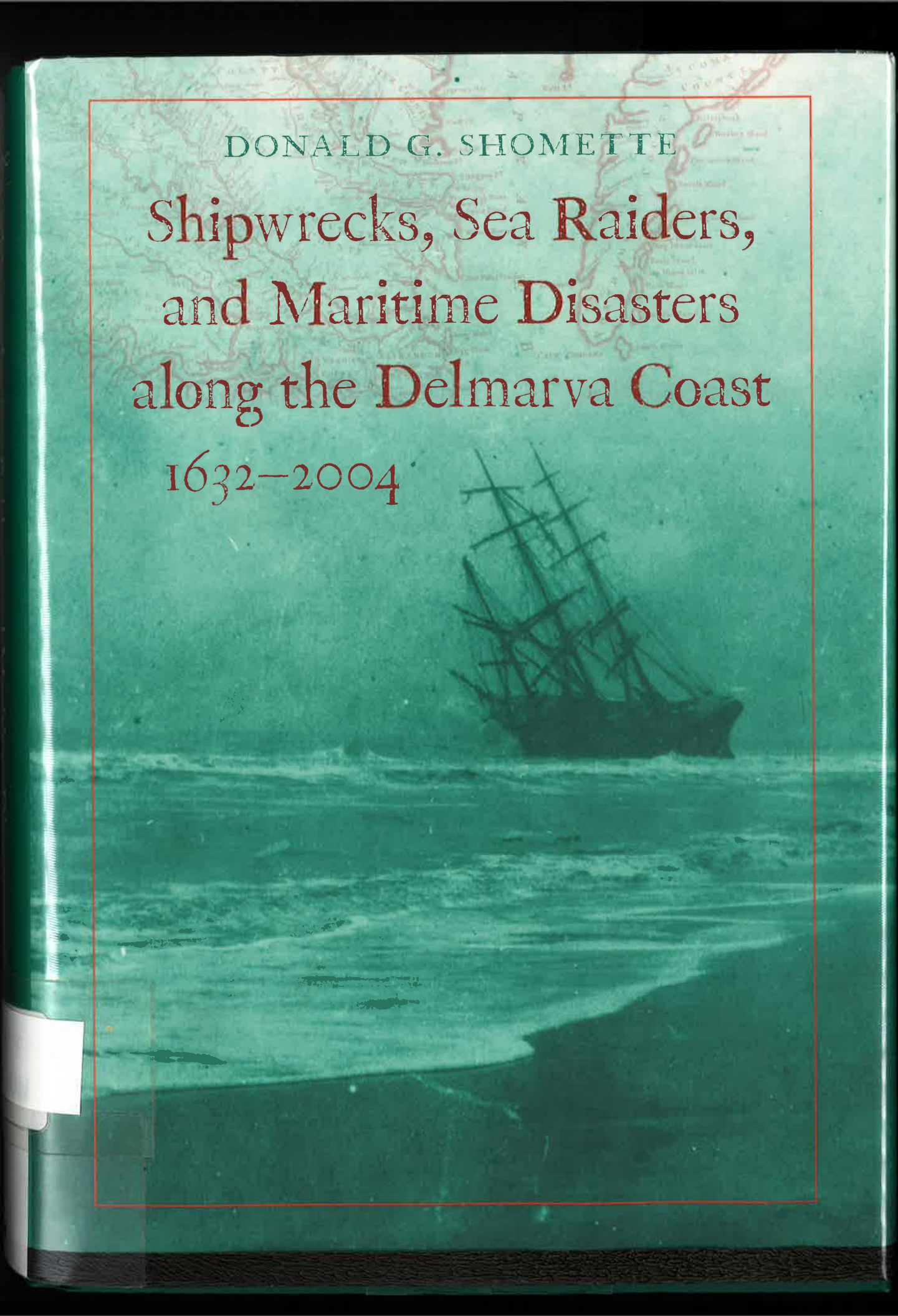
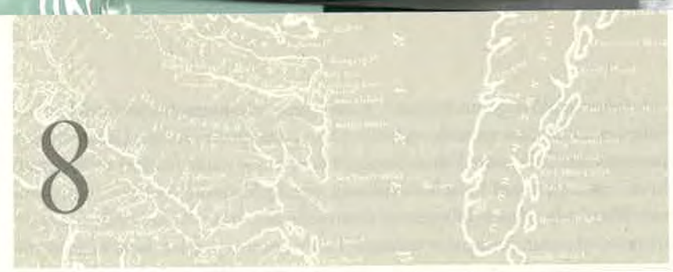
DONALD G. SHOMETTE

Shipwrecks, Sea Raiders, and Maritime Disasters along the Delmarva Coast

1632–2004





8

Plunder till They Could Plunder No More

No one knows for certain when the first coins were found near the entrance to Indian River Inlet. Some say they were discovered by a vacationing Milford, Delaware, resident while surf fishing a year or so after the inlet had been dredged in 1930.[1] The earliest published account, however, states that coins had been found from time to time as far back as 1878, when a beachcombing tourist picked up two gold pieces and a Spanish-milled dollar in the surf line. The first well-publicized find, the one that began to focus the public's fascination on the area, was made at the height of the Depression, on February 22, 1937, when enrollees from a local Civilian Conservation Corps camp picked up several eighteenth-century English pennies and half pennies lying partially buried in the sand. Not surprisingly, a holiday treasure hunt ensued, organized by the corps' local educational adviser, Edward L. Richards. Within days the new finds had made the newspapers, whose reports conjectured that the coins were from the wreck of an old sailing vessel. Moreover, they revealed that coins had "been found in lesser quantities following storms and northeast winds for the past several years."[2]

A week after the CCC hunt, Major Lindsley L. Beach, a retired army officer, and two companions discovered in the surf line "an old sea chest," three feet square, bound in copper and weighing an estimated four hundred pounds. Ever since his retirement, the major had whiled away his hours beachcombing for anything of interest, and near the inlet he had already accrued a collection of nearly one hundred coins dating from 1774 to 1782. All had been English pennies or half pennies. But the sea chest was a beachcomber's dream. Before the incoming tide could halt their investigation, Beach and his companions had pried open one of the "compartments" of the heavy, barnacle-encrusted chest only to find it empty. Unfortunately, there was no holding back Mother Nature, and the chest soon disappeared beneath the incoming tide, never to be seen again. Major Beach was a patient man, however, and continued to patrol the lonely shoreline after every storm. On March 13, following another blow, he discovered a coin dated 1749, the earliest found, and another minted in 1775. The word was out. Soon afterward, youths from Ocean View retrieved more than 150 coins, and Captain A. C. C. Osborne, of the local Coast Guard station, and two of his men, W. J. Cobb and S. B. Savage, found still more.[3] From that time on, the waterfront would bear the deliciously inviting sobriquet Coin Beach, a name that would one day draw tourists, curiosity seekers, and even treasure hunters from far and wide.

But one question was on everyone's mind: where did the coins come from?

John Elliott was an enterprising young man, a pioneer of sorts, born in 1762 in Northern Ireland into a family of means and property. Elliott family tradition holds that John's father had sent him on a family reconnaissance mission to America aboard the ship *Lazy Mary* in 1784. The great American Revolution had finally ended, and many in Ireland who still suffered under British rule longed for the same freedoms that had been won across the Atlantic. An ever-increasing westward flood of Irish emigration began. John's task was to get a feel for the land of opportunity, to see if it was indeed a place for the Elliott clan to begin a new life, free from oppression.[4]

The directives John's father had given him were clear. If, at the end of the year he thought the family should immigrate to America, he was to send coded instructions "to do some impossible thing." That way, if the missive were intercepted and read by authorities in Ireland, they would not deliberately prohibit John's two younger brothers, William and Simon, both of conscription age, from leaving the country. (All young men at the time were obligated to serve a number of years in British military service.) The Elliott family in Ireland was not without some small fortune and possessed a substantial house. John, of course, found America to be a land of more than promise, a place where a man was free to do as he pleased, worship as he chose, and travel anywhere he desired. He thus wrote to his family, outlining the "impossible thing." He wrote that he was incapable of building himself a house in America and entreated his parents to send theirs, clearly a most "impossible thing" to do. They understood that John was recommending that they move to America.[5] The entire extended family, including scores of cousins, nieces, nephews, uncles, and aunts, accepted the challenge immediately.

On July 9, 1785, the core Elliott family— the father, two sons, and five daughters—boarded the good ship *Faithful Steward* at the port of Londonderry. They were accompanied by 237 other passengers, many of them, such as the Lees, Stewarts, and Espeys, blood relations and all bound for the port of Philadelphia. More than one hundred of the passengers were women and small children.[6] The Lee clan, numbering fifty members, was as plentiful as any aboard. James Lee, born in County Donegal in 1759, was typical of the young family leaders charged with shepherding his own extended kin to the Promised Land. His party consisted of no less than three brothers, two beautiful sisters, three sets of uncles and aunts, thirty-three cousins, and assorted other relations.[7] Among the many Espeys aboard were Hugh and Mary Stewart Espey who, accompanied by their own five children, were sailing to join their eldest sons William and Hugh Jr., awaiting their arrival in Pennsylvania.[8] For all aboard the crowded ship, the allure of America was the same. As John McIntire Jr., one of the emigrants

aboard, later stated, they were bound for "a country where the banner of freedom waved proudly; a country where heroes lived; where genius expanded to full perfection; where every good was possessed."[9]

Faithful Steward was a large three-masted vessel, 150 feet in length, 350 tons burthen, and said to be capable of enduring the worst the Atlantic could throw at her. John Maxwell Nesbitt, James Campbell, and William Allison, all Philadelphia merchants, owned the ship. Her commander, Connoly McCausland, was a rough, hard-drinking mariner who commanded an equally tough crew of twelve. The ship carried not only an overly large number of passengers, most of whom were squeezed into cramped, black quarters below decks, but also a "very considerable" amount of their property, sufficient enough to help securely establish them in the new nation.[10] Unlike many transoceanic voyages of the eighteenth century, *Faithful Steward*'s had been blessed with excellent sailing. Many on board later reported that they "had a very favourable passage, during which nothing of moment occurred, the greatest harmony having prevailed amongst them."[11]

By September 1, after a tedious voyage of a month and a half, they were nearing their destination, Delaware Bay, and everyone was buoyant with expectation. When a young couple named Gregg announced that it was also their first wedding anniversary and they wished to celebrate the occasion with a dinner, Captain McCausland readily gave his consent. The captain, mates, and a number of passengers, of course, were invited to join in the festivities. Following the meal, which was attended with considerable goodwill, there was a party with "music, dancing and every description of mirth." As evening fell and the spirits began to flow ever more freely, a "most intemperate carousal was the closing scene of the day." Among the most heavily intoxicated of the celebrants were the captain and the first mate, "who were borne insensible to their cabins."[12]

It was, unfortunately, a most inauspicious time for the ship to be without a commander, for even as McCausland and the first mate, Mr. Standfield, were being placed in their beds, a nasty wind had sprung up from the east. The ship's speed was accelerated through the water, driving her much closer toward the Delaware capes than the navigator had earlier computed when plotting his course after taking a sighting of the evening star. Second mate Gwyn, the only officer left sober and on duty, grew concerned. At 10:00 P.M. he nervously ordered the leadsman to take soundings and was stunned to find the ship skimming along through the darkness in only four fathoms. Instantly he ordered the helm thrown over and hauled all sails to bear off the bank, but it was too late.[13]

With a sickening grinding sound the ship struck bottom. Many aboard, lying in their crowded hammocks and bunks, were thrown to the floor. Two small children were instantly killed by the fall. In the pitch-black darkness below decks, sheer panic ensued. The horror can only be imagined, as husbands sought to find their screaming wives and children while others tried to rush topside all at once. Those who got there first were not encouraged, for in the obscurity of night they could see no land. Yet the ship was unquestionably stranded near the beach, for they could hear the frightening roar of breakers crashing against the unseen shore. Though they could not confirm it at that moment, their bow was indeed pointed landward and the sterncastle toward the open ocean. High waves, propelled by increasingly heavier winds, began washing over the stern and soon contributed to the panic.[14]

Second mate Gwyn instantly dispatched a seaman to awaken the captain. McCausland was immediately shaken and roused from his drunken stupor, although inebriation still blanketed his senses. When informed of the situation, he growled ferociously, slurring his words, to the bearer of bad tidings: "The man that takes my command, I will hang in Philadelphia." The consternation and astonishment that prevailed is easier conceived than described. Young John McIntire later recalled "the shrieks of the women and the cries of the children were insufferable." The worst was still to come.[15]

By the onset of the first gray morning haze, it was ascertained that *Faithful Steward* had struck ground between 100 and 150 yards from the shore on the Mohoba Bank (also called by Irish immigrants Mahogan's Bay), four leagues south of Cape Henlopen and nearby Indian River Inlet. The ship was in desperate shape for throughout the seemingly endless night the waves had pounded her ceaselessly, breaking over her deck and carrying off anything and anyone that was not tied down. The incessant assault had already broken the ship's smallboats and longboat free during the night when a group of men had tried to reach the shore. A single vessel, sans occupants, survived but had been driven onto the beach, terminating any immediate hopes for an escape by boat. The crew made an effort to cut away the ship's masts lest she be forced over on her side, but when the masting fell into the sea, it remained firmly affixed to the wreck by a spider web of rigging that had not been cut. Then, without warning, the ship suddenly rolled onto her side. Many were thrown into the water and perished instantly; others, trapped below deck, drowned in utter darkness and confinement. Those men, women, and children who had somehow survived now clung to whatever purchase they could find, growing weaker by their ordeal but somehow still clinging to life.[16]

As one horrible disaster was unfolding, a second one, unseen, was just beginning nearby. A French brig from Ostend bound for Philadelphia had been caught in the same rough weather. Within sight of the stranded immigrant ship, the unidentified vessel had suddenly filled and foundered, driving her terrified crew to their boats. Although it was later learned they had managed to successfully shove off from the doomed ship without loss, their ultimate fate was unknown. All were presumed to have been lost.[17]

As daylight began to define the shoreline, four brave sailors aboard *Faithful Steward* plunged into the brine apparently hauling a line from the ship with them. Somehow they succeeded in swimming to the beach in a desperate attempt to retrieve the sole surviving longboat. All of the men reached the surf line and then labored heroically to manhandle the boat to the water. Once they had run lines out to *Faithful Steward*'s bow, they began to pull the boat along the line and through the waves. Then, when the little vessel was almost within reach of the ship, the rope gave way against the violent surge. The sea instantly swal-

lowed the boat. And with it went all prospects of salvation for scores of helpless men, women, and children.[18]

With seemingly no other hope before them, many of those stranded on the wreck now abandoned all caution and tried to swim for the beach. Few succeeded as the sea was still running exceptionally high. Some struggled to hold onto pieces of the flotsam that were broken free by the violent action of the waters. Others, too timorous to venture forth, or not knowing how to swim, clung to the wreck as best they could. Some were simply swept overboard and drowned. Throughout that long, horrible day, as the ship was gradually being beaten to pieces, the cries for help, the weeping of women as their babies disappeared beneath the waves, and anguished screams of men at the loss of their wives, children, parents, sisters, brothers, cousins, nieces, and nephews rose above the sounds of the pounding surf.[19]

By late afternoon, the waves began to subside and the tide to ebb, encouraging fresh attempts by some to swim ashore. A few sought to climb along the masts that now lay half submerged in the water between the wreck and the shore, anything to get them a few feet closer to the beach. Some made it; others did not. Moved by his own family's entreaties to hazard the attempt, John McIntire Jr. climbed out onto a mast lying still attached to the ship only by a tangle of rigging lines, which brought him a few precious yards closer to the shore. At the tip of the mast, he leaped into the sea and swam with all his strength, until there was no more left in him. Miraculously, he was able to close with the beach, but had one of the ship's sailors who had already made it ashore not waded through the breakers to tow him in, he too would have perished.[20]

During the course of the day word of the disaster spread along the sparsely inhabited coast, and local residents began to arrive on the beach in ever-increasing numbers. Little girls and old women, farmers and watermen, and townsfolk from as far away as Lewes arrived to offer assistance.[21] Many with less than humanitarian interests sought to profit from the misfortune of the victims by scavenging the dead lying along the beach, within yards and clear sight of their relatives still struggling for their lives aboard the wreck. When John McIntire Jr. reached the beach, he was stunned as he watched the locals "stripping the lifeless bodies of their clothing, matching everything of apparent value, heaping the plunder on wagons and hauling it away." He was distressed as some inhabitants came "not to aid in the cause of humanity, not to rescue their fellow beings from the ruthless waves, not to console the bereaved or administer to their wants. No, but solely to plunder till they could plunder no more . . . Many looked with eyes of disappointment whenever they found a person both dead and naked, or alive and clothed; as, in either case, there was no hope of gain."[22]

Dazed, McIntire wandered aimlessly along the beach searching among the living and dead for his family. Suddenly he came upon his father, John Sr., who was alive but senseless. "We then lay together for some time in a state of almost equal inactivity," he later recalled, "while many persons continued to pass and repass along the shore, while numbers were still arriving from the wreck, and numbers [more] still uttering a cry for help. A cry terrific in the extreme, and a cry that has rung in my ears to the present day. Among those who came ashore in the night

was a sister of mine. Adhering to a plank in company with another female she was discovered by two young passengers of her acquaintance who carried her to me. It was a meeting of inexpressible joy, though I learned she had received many wounds by collision with the ship's timbers."[23]

By the following morning, the beach presented a panorama of destruction as far north as Cape Henlopen. The bodies of drowned men, women, and children lay in the surf line washing to and fro with every wave. Other corpses, pale and bloated with water, lay higher on the sands, carried there by the last high tide. Clothing, sea chests, suitcases, and other personal items—the flotsam of humanity—as well as rigging, decking, and the artifacts of disaster that had yet to be scavenged, were strewn along with the bodies as far as the eye could see. Local inhabitants buried many of the dead in the sand where they lay; others were interred in common graves well above the normal high-water mark. On the shoal beyond, the broken and lifeless carcass of *Faithful Steward* shivered with every swell.[24]

When news of the disaster reached Philadelphia, several humane and public-spirited gentlemen of the city set about raising a subscription "for the relief of the unhappy people who were saved from the wreck, and there can be no doubt of their meeting with great success from the benevolent inhabitants, who have never been backward in generously affording assistance to the distressed." Though only seven women had been saved, many of the survivors were children. Several were taken in and raised by large landholders and important families in the neighborhood such as the Rodneys and Fishers. A man named Gordon temporarily took in the three surviving members of the McIntire family, John Jr., his father, and his sister Rebecca. But McIntire's mother, brothers, and another sister had been lost, leaving forever inscribed on his soul a vision of the despicable inhumanity he had witnessed on the beach on that terrible day.[25]

Several days after the disaster, while young John was recuperating in Lewes, he saw a man walking down the street wearing a vest that had once belonged to someone in his family. Enraged, he demanded its return. A fight ensued but was fortunately stopped by a justice of the peace before mortal damage could be inflicted. Young McIntire swore a formal oath attesting to his claim, and the garment was returned. There were, undoubtedly, other such incidents, but none was recorded.[26]

When the final death toll was in, the statistics were staggering. Of the 249 passengers and thirteen officers and crewmen aboard, there were only sixty-seven known survivors. One hundred and ninety-five people had lost their lives. The exact number, however, may never be known as it was later reported that several survivors eventually died from their injuries. Captain McCausland and his men all survived, but of the fifty members of the extended Lee family, only James and four cousins had made it ashore. Like the rest of the survivors, the disaster had left James in dire straits, for "as the passengers consisted chiefly of families, who had previously defrayed every expense of the voyage, with a design of settling in this country," all were now penniless, friendless, and beleaguered in a

foreign land where the bodies of their dead families had been stripped of every dignity. James Lee would eventually make his way to Maryland, where he would be obliged to work as a common laborer, and then to Pennsylvania to live out the remainder of his life.[27]

The surviving McIntires also made their way to Pennsylvania, destitute and reliant on their own will to survive. Forty-six years later, John McIntire Jr. would record the bitter memories of that tragic day in a local newspaper and then die a forgotten man. Other families had suffered in like manner. Hugh and Mary Espey and two of their boys had been lost. Yet brothers Robert and John; John's wife, Jean Morehead; and a sister named Mary had been rescued, albeit at great cost. Mary died the next day of exposure, and Robert was crippled for life. He would live out the remainder of his days with his brother Hugh Espey Jr. near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Of the eight members of the Elliott family that had boarded *Faithful Steward* in Ireland, only Simon and William made it ashore alive. The family's chests full of valuables and every other belonging had been lost with the ship. But the Elliotts would go on and eventually settled with their brother John in Washington County, Pennsylvania. They would later marry and emigrate as pioneers again, this time to the Ohio and Illinois country.[28]

In the formidable history of the Elliott family and their extended kin in an America that they helped settle against all odds is recorded this sad ballad:

The Elliotts and the Lees
And Stewarts of great fame,
They may lament and mourn
For the lands they've left behind.
They may lament and mourn
As long as they have days,
For the friends and relation
Lie in Mahogan's bays.[29]

The loss of *Faithful Steward* would become one of the most enduring tales of the Delmarva coast. In time, it would be woven into the fabric of legend and associated with the numerous coin finds that would be made on the beaches near the loss site. By the late twentieth century, in the lore of Delaware, *Faithful Steward* had evolved into a veritable treasure ship, the lure of which would draw fortune hunters from near and far. Yet the historic proportions of the loss of so many lives, no matter how obscured by the distortion of time, could not be ignored.

In 1985 a deputy attorney general of Delaware named Peter Hess, representing the Delaware Natural Resources and Environmental Commission, drafted a resolution to memorialize the grievous loss of *Faithful Steward* with a historical marker at the approximate site of its destruction. The resolution was formally introduced to the Delaware General Assembly and readily passed. On Labor Day, September 2, 1985, hundreds of vacationers watched the formal dedication of the historic marker on what had been, two centuries before to the day, the scene of the worst single maritime disaster in Delaware history.[30]

9

So Much for Attending Congress

On the first Monday in December 1790, the day on which the First Congress of the United States of America was to open its winter session at Philadelphia, a shining new era in the history of the world was about to commence. Congressman Aedamus Burke of South Carolina, who was to serve as one of the first elected representatives from his state to participate in the proceedings of that august body, anticipated that it would be one of the most important days in his event-filled life. Barely a year and a half earlier, on May 23, 1788, his state had been among the last to ratify the new Constitution of the United States but had done so overwhelmingly. Not long afterward, George Washington took the presidential oath of office on the steps of Federal Hall in New York City. On September 25, 1789, the Bill of Rights had been adopted. On August 31, 1790, Congress had authorized the transfer of government to the City of Philadelphia. It was a heady time for America and for the revolutionary Irish-American from South Carolina who had helped make it happen.

Aedamus Burke was born in Galway, Ireland, on June 16, 1743. Like many of his colleagues in the new Congress, he was a learned individual, a man of law, and a soldier. He had been educated at the theological college at St. Omer, France, before emigrating first to the West Indies and then to the colony of South Carolina. But it was in the great emerging seaport of Charles Town that he chose to put down his roots. It soon became his home, and he fought hard to preserve it, serving in the South Carolina Militia and later in the Continental Army during the Revolution. In 1778 he was appointed judge of the State Circuit Court and performed his duties with distinction until British forces overran the region. The following year he was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives and served in that capacity for nearly a decade. In the meantime, he found time for military service when his country and state had called. When the courts were reestablished in South Carolina after the war, he was quickly reappointed to the bench and in 1785 was named one of three state commissioners to prepare the first digest of state law. It was, perhaps, natural that in 1788 he was chosen to serve as a member of the state convention assembled to consider ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Late in May, after seemingly endless debate, the South Carolina convention voted 145–46 for ratification.

Date		Vessel	Type	Manner	Location
	—	HMS *Magdalen*	Sch	WL	Parramore Island, VA
1781	Sept 5	HMS *Terrible*	SoL	C-WL	Off Cape Charles, VA
1782	Feb 2	*Diligente* [Fr]	Frg	S	On the point of Cape Henry, VA
	Feb	Unidentified	Brig	S	Willoughby Point, Chesapeake Bay, VA
	Dec 27	Unidentified	Cut	WL	Near Cape Charles, VA
	Dec 29	Unidentified	Ship	B-WL	Near Cape Charles, VA
1783	Feb 12 (p)	*Digby*	U-P	RA-WL	Near Cape Charles, VA
	Mar 3	*Morris*	U	Cap	Off the Delaware capes
	Apr	*Mentor*	U	S-WL	"Within the capes of Delaware"
	Apr	*Prince William Henry*	Ship-P	RA-WL	Virginia
	Oct (p)	*Success*	Ship	L	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Oct 7	*Count de Ducat*	Brig	L	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Oct 7	*Patriot de Roum*	Brig	L	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Oct 7	*Sophia*	Brig	L	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Oct 7	Unidentified	Brig	L	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Oct 7	Unidentified	Slp	L	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Oct 7	Unidentified (3)	Sch	L	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Nov 12	*Philadelphia Packet*	Brig	S	On Sinepuxent Bar, MD
	Nov 12	Unidentified	Sch	Cap	Off Sinepuxent Bar, MD
	Dec 12 (p)	*Tabitha*	U	S	On Eastern Shore, Northampton Co., VA
	Dec 25	*Adventure*	Sch	L	Off Wreck Island, VA, N of Cape Charles
	Dec 25	Unidentified	Snow	S	Off Wreck Island, VA, N of Cape Charles
	Dec 30	*St. Eustatia* [Du]	U	F	Off Gull Shoal, near Assateague
1784	Jan 1	*Merchant*	Sch	S	Cape Henlopen, DE
	Jan 7–14	*Betsy*	Brig	S	"On bar between Morris Listen's and Reedy Island," DE
	Feb 9 (p)	*Liberty*	Brigt	S	Lynnhaven Bay, VA
	Feb 12	*Alexander*	Brig	S	"On the bar near the mouth of Lewistown Creek," DE
	Feb 13	*Minerva*	Ship	S	2½ miles S of Cape Henlopen Light
	Mar 10	*Maria Johanna*	U	S	On the inside of Cape Henlopen, DE
	Apr 8 (p)	Unidentified (3)	U	S	On Assateague Island
	Apr 30	*Mary and Betsey*	U	S	Between Cape Henry and Williamsburg, VA
	May 28 (p)	*Cox*	U	S	On Assateague Island
	June 8	*Peace*	Ship	S	Hog Island, VA, N of Cape Charles, VA
	Nov 2	*Brilliant*	Trsp	S	½ mile N of Hen and Chickens Shoal, DE
1785	Feb 23	*Le Courier*	Brig	S	"On the inlets of Accomack county," VA
	Feb 24	*Tabitha*	U	L	Near Cape Henry, VA
	June 14 (p)	*Grange*	Ship	S	Off Cape Charles, VA
	Aug 20	*Ariel*	Brigt	S	Assateague Island
	Sept 2	*Faithful Steward*	Ship	S	On "Mohoba Bank near Indian River" Inlet, 100 yards off shore
	Sept 2	Unidentified	Brig	F	At the Delaware capes
	Sept 22–25	*Nancy*	Brig	L	On or off the coast of Virginia
	Sept 22–25	Unidentified	Brig	L	Lynnhaven Bay, VA
	Sept 22–25	Unidentified	Ship	L	On or off the coast of Virginia
	Sept 22–25	Unidentified (30+)	U	CA	On the Virginia coast
	Sept 24	Unidentified [Du]	Ship	AS	Off the Virginia capes
	Sept 25	*Crown Royal of Prussia*	Ship	AS	Off the Virginia capes
	Sept 25	Unidentified	Ship	W	Off the Virginia capes
	Sept 30	Unidentified	Slp	S	Cape Charles, VA
1786	July 25	*Maryland Packet*	Sch	S	On Cape Henry, VA
	Sept	*Mary*	Brigt	F	Off the Virginia capes