

SHIPWRECKS,
SEA STORIES
& LEGENDS
OF THE
DELAWARE
COAST

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ground where those whose bodies washed up anonymously on the beaches around Cape Henlopen were given a proper burial.

If you cared enough to choose this book to read, we thank you. You probably know about all that has just been said. Perhaps you will not be as familiar with that which is to follow.

This book does not pretend to be a history book. While its facts and details have been checked and re-checked, it is presented as a narrative on Delaware's coastal history. It is designed for you to read, ponder, and remember.

The next time you bait your hook after leaving Mispillion, romp in the Rehoboth Beach surf or walk the decks of the Cape May-Lewes Ferry, you will gaze to sea or into the bay with, we hope, a new appreciation for what has come before you.

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A TREASURE WRECK

Wreck of the Faithful Steward

September, 1785

It has been called the "Coin Beach," that slender strand of sand that extends south from Rehoboth Beach to Fenwick Island.

It is Delaware's seacoast. It is admittedly short and lacking any of the features that make those shorelines of Maine and the Carolinas the storehouses of legend that they are.

But it is no less filled with exciting tales of wreck and ruin, and the full range of human emotion associated with that magical barrier where land meets the sea.

They call it the Coin Beach because it has yielded, over the years, a substantial number of 18th century coins that have washed their way along the sandy bottom to dry land.

Often, after storms, these coins lie propped up on pedestals of sand, resembling mushrooms. The wind erodes their underfooting and exposes the pennies and ha'pennies for eager beachcombers to find.

From gold guineas and Spanish dollars to copper discs dating to the reign of King George II of England, the discovery of these coins has drawn many treasure hunters to Delaware's share of the shore.

The 1930s seem to be the peak era for coin "shooting" on the beach. It is said that Coast Guardsmen at the Indian

River Inlet station collected buckets full of copper coins, as did the young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps who worked in the CCC camp at Lewes.

Rumors even persisted that a barnacle-clad sea chest narrowly escaped the grasp of a treasure hunter before crashing waves pounded it back into the deep surf.

Well-known ships, supposedly laden with payroll money and freshly-minted coinage of the realm, were presumed to be the sources of the windfall. The deBraak and the Juno, which both wrecked within a fair distance of the Delaware coast, were the main suspects.

While the cargoes of these vessels may well have found their way to the "Coin Beach," it is far more likely that the wrecks of two other earlier ships are responsible for the coins.

Little is known about one of the first recorded shipwrecks in the history of the shore of what is now Delaware. It was the brig, "Three Brothers."

The British ship was supposedly carrying tons of copper, silver and gold coins that represented the payroll of the king's soldiers based in Pennsylvania.

On a stormy night in 1775, the Three Brothers sailed out of control and into a sand bar just off the beach. It is not known how many, if any, survived the wreck, but it is generally regarded that the ship was a total loss, battered to submission by the surf. It is also held that the coins in her belly were spread into the sand.

It was ten years later, May 20, 1785, that the sturdy three-masted ship, the "Faithful Steward," set sail from Londonderry, Ireland. Filled with a valuable cargo and 249 passengers and crewmen, she was bound for Newcastle and then the long voyage west to America.

The Londonderry Gazette described the 150-foot ship-rigged vessel, typical of many crafts that carried both cargo and immigrants to the New World, as "a new ship, high between decks and a remarkable good sailor."

Furthermore, the ship's master, Capt. Conolly M'Causland, was regarded as a reputable leader.

As sturdy as the Faithful Steward was considered, and as upright as its captain may have been, something went terribly wrong for the 249 passengers that summer.

The passengers shared the cramped space aboard the ship with tons of copper coins minted by the British for the coffers of its colonies. Why the coins were bound for the United States is anyone's guess.

Nothing untoward was reported during the Faithful Steward's trans-Atlantic voyage. At about ten o'clock the night of September 1, 1785, the captain and crew of the ship knew land couldn't be far away. The sight of shore birds and that uncanny "smell" of land known to men of the sea indicated as much.

Carefully groping their way toward the expected landfall, the crewmen were surprised to come upon shoals. Frantically, they tried to tack away from the dangerous sand bars, but it was too late. The keel of the Faithful Steward scraped along the sand and ground deeply into the shallow bottom until the ship shuddered to a halt.

At virtually the same time of the grounding, the weather began to worsen. The seas built in intensity and the wind began to whirl around the doomed ship.

Those aboard the Faithful Steward did not believe they were doomed. In short order that night, the drastic measure of chopping down the mainmast was taken and the ship managed to work free from its murky grip.

The next morning, attempting to find safe harbor at Lewes even as the storm was becoming more savage, the Faithful Steward once again beached. This time, the sea would have its way.

On the beach, would-be rescuers watched helplessly as the storm smashed waves into the bulkheads of the ship and panic-stricken passengers howled and shrieked for help before they, too, were overwhelmed by the waves.

Nearby, a French brig, the "Ostend," was foundering in the surf. Although it survived the maelstrom, its crewmen watched as the masts of the Faithful Steward crumbled and listened as the howl of the wind and roar of the surf silenced the screaming.

It was high drama in the surf as hundreds of people tried in vain to swim ashore. Because the ship's masts were down, there was no rigging that could serve as a haven during the anxious hours.

The lifeboats that could be launched all capsized, and when the storm abated, only 68 of the 249 people aboard the ship could be accounted for, with half of those who perished being women and children. The family Lee itself lost 42 of the 48 family members on board.

There were unattributed accounts shortly after that the master and his first mate were staggering drunk the night of the wreck, and the second mate was in charge at the time. However true, it is known that Captain M'Causland and ten crewmen did survive.

Rumors spread quickly on the Delaware shore that the passengers on the Faithful Steward were a relatively affluent lot, and there were lurid tales handed down in the days following the sinking that some beachcombers stripped the corpses of any valuables as they washed up on shore.

Rumors circulated that the ship also carried a "secret" cache of a half-million British pounds in gold, further fueling the legend.

It cannot be denied, however, that after the shattered timbers of the Faithful Steward melted into the sea and sand and after the corpses of the wreck's victims were carried from the beach just north of Indian River Inlet, the beach was at times littered with Irish Halfpennies with mint marks between 1766 and 1782.

Long after the reality of that gruesome night in the Delaware surf was forgotten, the mystique of the "Coin Beach" lived on.

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1788: The Santa Rosalea, a spanish freighter bound to Havana from Philadelphia, foundered and was a total loss just off Cape Henlopen.

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1789: On October 30, the Pomona, a British merchant vessel, sank in the Delaware Bay.

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1793: In the Delaware Breakwater, the Philadelphia-bound Industry, fell victim to a storm and sank.

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1794: The Peggy, headed for Savannah, Georgia from Philadelphia, sank in a fierce winter storm in the middle of the Delaware Bay.

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1794: Ice floes in the Delaware Bay claimed the Spanish freighter San Josef.

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1795: The ship Lively was lost near Lewes.

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1796: Bound for Philadelphia from Spain, the Favorite went down in the Delaware Bay.