

Tales from Tombstones

Real-life Stories of Specter Ships and Souls Lost at Sea



The Old Manahawkin Cemetery and Baptist Church.

Everyone loves a good ghost story, particularly near All Hallows' Eve. And because of over five thousand shipwrecks off the Jersey Coast, tales of violent weather and wrathful seas can be found on tombstones at many of the Shore's historic cemeteries.

With a keen eye, a little research, and an inquisitive respect for the past, even the most unassuming grave marker can reveal a story of loss and survival caused by the combination of wicked gales and furious waves.

The *Elmina*, January 1884

"Eight men perished in darkness and silence, amidst a doleful monotony of tempest..." —1884 Annual Report of the U.S. Life-Saving Service

According to the 1884 Annual Report of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, the *Elmina*, from Salscombe, England, sailed from Brazil and was en route to New York City carrying a cargo of sugar when it wrecked on January 8, 1884 off Long Beach Island. A violent east-southeast gale produced torrential rain and raging waves.

Near dusk, local brothers Charles and Thomas Crance went to haul their fishing skiff off the sand at Long Beach (between Harvey Cedars and Surf City) when they noticed what appeared to be a red light in the distance over the sea. They estimated that a vessel had struck a sand bar about two hundred yards off the beach.

After alerting the nearby Long Beach Life-Saving Station, as well as some of the locals about the wreck, rescuers tried to help but watched in dismay for hours as gigantic waves pummeled the specter-like vessel stranded in the surf. Several attempts to fire a rescue line failed, but one finally reached the foretopsail. Despite the crewmen's cheers that reached the shore riding the gusts, the line became taught after an hour of rigging, which meant that the boat could not be set free from the sandbar by those on land; "...hardly any occurrence could have been more dreadful," the report documents. The wind suddenly calmed and a pall of stillness settled over the rescuers.

From the report, which reads almost like it was penned by Edgar

Allan Poe: "This cessation of the airy tumult induced a sense of stillness, despite the noises of the surf and sea... the men could only stand in a sort of stupor, gazing out into the roaring gloom at that specter, the mere shadow or rough sketch of a vessel, which could be seen through the quietly-descending screen of rain with her masts sharply slanting to the northward from the dark riot of the waters on her hull... in all probability there was no help for the wretched beings clinging invisibly to those black spars."

The crew had sought refuge in the rigging, but the storm intensified again. Those onshore suddenly heard the ominous crashing of timbers as the vessel broke up and disappeared. While clinging to false hope that at least one survivor could be pulled from the waves, lifesavers worked from 7:30 PM to 4:30 AM. But in the early daylight hours of January 9, debris from the *Elmina* littered the beach, which reportedly smelled like sugar for days after as the cargo dissolved in the seawater.

Bodies of the crew eventually washed up on shore as well. On January 10, members of the Loveladies Life-Saving Station recovered the body of a man from the surf during their night patrol. The coroner identified it as one of the crew. Reports suggest the bodies were buried at Old Manahawkin Cemetery, where a gravestone for a man by the name of "H Wickholm," and a small flag from Sweden, can be found within the burial site for unknown victims of the sea. The gravestone reads:

H. WICKHOLM
BORN IN
WESTRAS, SWEDEN
SEPT. 8, 1861
DROWNED ON THE WRECK
OF THE BRIGANTINE ELMINA
BARNEGAT BEACH
JAN. 2, 1884

BURIED BY STRANGERS BUT NOT
FORGOTTEN BY FRIENDS AT HOME



Gravestone of H. Wickholm at Old Manahawkin Cemetery.

Despite the discrepancy between Wickholm's date of death engraved on his tombstone and official records noting the date of the wreck as January 8, 1884, his stone is a permanent reminder of the ocean's potential wrath and a symbol of a much larger loss.

It was later determined that the *Elmina's* crew did not properly connect the lifeline that had reached the vessel, and that most of the crew were overtaken with exhaustion and dropped one by one into the sea.

Attempting to Rescue the *Kraljevica*, February 1886

"And now came the fatal moment; the boat was half way in from the wreck and the brave little band were doing their best in the wild turmoil of waters when to their utter dismay, and to the horror of their comrades who were watching them from the shore, a towering wave reared its frowning crest close astern and so hollow that the boat could not rise to it." —1886 Annual Report of the U.S. Life-Saving Service

On the morning of February 11, 1886, the Austrian bark *Kraljevica* wrecked near the Barnegat Life-Saving Station, which was located three-eighths of a mile south of Barnegat Light. The vessel was bound from Marseilles to New York with a crew of fourteen men, including the captain, and a cargo of salt. She was traveling with all sails set into a strong northeast wind and dense fog, which is described in the 1886 Annual Report of the U.S. Life-Saving Service as *"a ghostly cloud of canvas."*

Rescuers onshore heard a sudden crash of breaking wood, and the *Kraljevica* appeared from the fog with the ocean breaking over her

deck. According to the report, the vessel struck on the south side of the Barnegat shoals with *"...the confusion of harsh noises instant and great—the swashing blows of the sea, the violent slatting of the sails, the straining and creaking of the spars, the groaning and grinding of the hull in the gripe of the shoal."* The ocean flooded the cabin, and near 2:30 AM, the captain and crew launched the long-boat and rowed towards shore in calmer seas as the *Kraljevica* began to break up.

Dawn's first light made the shoreline visible through the fog, but as the long-boat neared the sandbar, it endured a second wave of catastrophe as it flipped over and rolled at least six times. Eight men drowned almost immediately as they tried to swim to shore in the winter sea, but the captain and five sailors clung to the capsized boat and, at about 8:30 AM, reached the shore almost dead with exhaustion. They were nearly one mile south of the Ship Bottom Life-Saving Station and nine miles away from where the *Kraljevica* had wrecked.

Unbeknownst to rescuers, who were coordinating efforts with the Barnegat Life-Saving Station to save the crew who they assumed were still clinging to wreckage in the sea, the sailors entered the empty life-saving station where they found food, water, and shelter.

The storm had erased their path of footprints in the sand. Unaware of their survival, a rescue boat from the Barnegat Life-Saving Station with six surfmen aboard entered the shoals and braved the surf. The men had rowed almost halfway to the remains of the *Kraljevica* when their boat was overcome by a massive wave and all crew members were tossed into the sea.

Three of the six surfmen lost their lives in the valiant rescue effort. Their eons of experience were no match for what the surviving surfmen called *"the ugliest surf they had*



Illustration of the rescue attempt of the Austrian bark *Kraljevica*, stranded near the Barnegat Life-Saving Station, which was located three-eighths of a mile south of Barnegat Light.

courtesy of the New Jersey Maritime Museum

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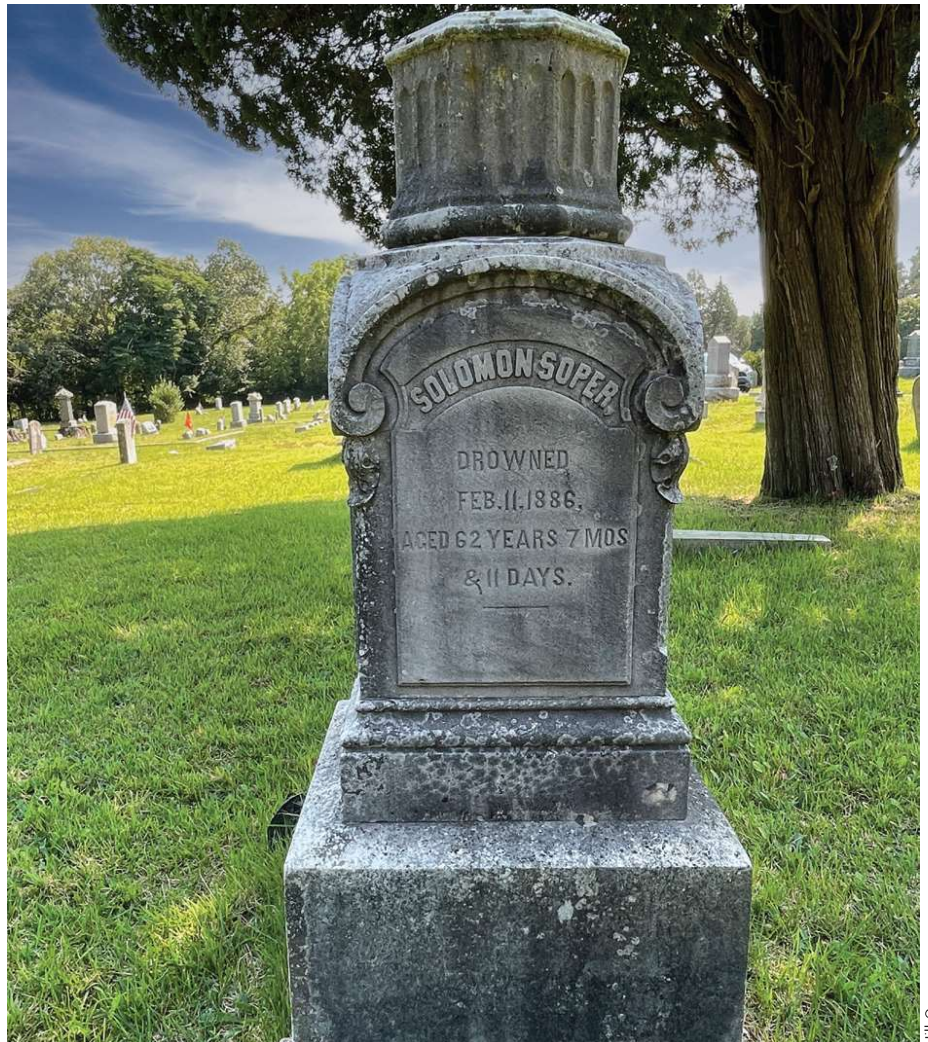
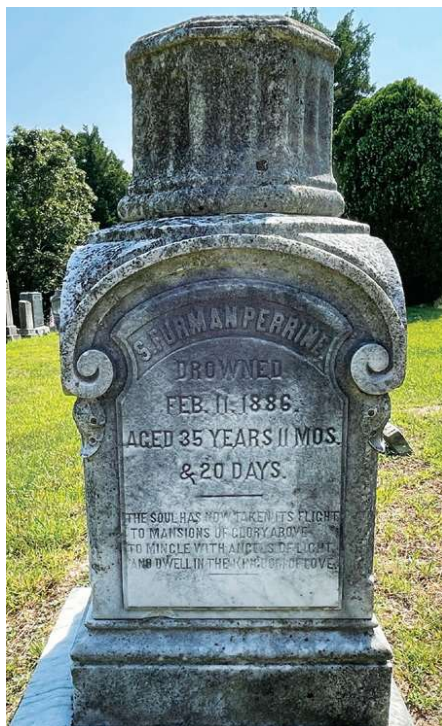
met” and the most disastrous wreck of 1886. All three are buried at Barnegat Memorial Cemetery on Bay Avenue in Barnegat.

One of the surfmen’s bodies, that of Samuel Furman Perrine, drifted off in the current and was recovered an hour later by members of the Life-Saving Service in Loveladies. An ugly bruise across his face, which may have been the result of violent contact with wood from the boat or an oar, suggested he was killed instantly, although he is officially recorded as being drowned. Perrine went by his middle name, Furman, and left behind his wife, Ellen. They had two children, both of whom previously died very young, Stephen (January 1873 - August 1873) and Ida (May 1876 - October 1877). One side of his gravestone reads,

S. FURMAN PERRINE
LOST HIS LIFE WHILE TRYING
TO RESCUE TO CREW OF THE
BARK KRALJEVICA

and the other reads,

S. FURMAN PERRINE
DROWNED
FEB. 11. 1886.
AGED 35 YEARS 11 MOS.
& 20 DAYS
THE SOUL HAS NOW TAKEN ITS FLIGHT
TO MANSIONS OF GLORY ABOVE
TO MINGLE WITH ANGELS OF LIGHT
AND DWELL IN THE KINGDOM OF LOVE



Above: Gravestone of Solomon Soper at Barnegat Memorial Cemetery in Barnegat. Below: Gravestone of Samuel Furman Perrine, also at Barnegat Memorial Cemetery.

Another surfman, sixty-two-year-old Solomon Soper, lost consciousness as the boat capsized and drowned soon afterwards. He was most likely exhausted from fatiguing labor at the oar before the long-boat’s demise. Solomon left behind his wife, Nancy Elizabeth. One side of his gravestone reads,

SOLOMON SOPER
LOST HIS LIFE WHILE TRYING
TO RESCUE TO CREW OF THE
BARK KRALJEVICA

and the other reads,

SOLOMON SOPER
DROWNED
FEB. 11. 1886.
AGED 62 YEARS 7 MOS
& 11 DAYS.

Known for being an excellent swimmer, the third surfman, John I. Soper, was within fifty yards of

shore when he was swept out by the current, ultimately succumbing to exhaustion then drowning. John was survived by his wife, Charity, and a daughter, Johnetta, who was born four months after his death in June 1886, but died in August 1887, at just over one year old. One side of John’s tombstone reads,

JOHN I. SOPER.
LOST HIS LIFE WHILE TRYING
TO RESCUE TO CREW OF THE
BARK KRALJEVICA

and the other reads,

JOHN I SOPER
DROWNED
FEB 11, 1886.
AGED 47 YEARS 3 MOS
& 1 DAY.
ALL IS DARK WITHIN OUR DWELLING
LONELY ARE OUR HEARTS TODAY
FOR THE ONE WE LOVED SO DEARLY
HAS FOREVER PASSED AWAY.

The New Jersey Senate passed a resolution on April 15, 1886 commending the “heroic promptness” of the Barnegat Life-Saving Station’s crew in their rescue attempt and honoring fallen Life-Saving Service members Furman, Soper, and Soper: “...that the legislature hereby extends its sympathy to the bereaved families of the men who so gallantly perished while striving to save their fellow men...and thanks to the surviving members of said Life-Saving crew for their noble attempt to save life, and to all members of the Life-Saving Service who so sacrifice the comforts of home and life itself in the humane endeavor to save the lives of others.”

The original, framed resolution is on display at the New Jersey Maritime Museum in Beach Haven.

The Loss of the *Amanda Winants*, September 1874

“The most fearful gale in this city since 1854” — Charleston News and Courier, September 29, 1874

A fast-moving, deadly hurricane struck the waters off the Carolinas on September 28, 1874 and left towns and cities, including Charleston, with major damage.

The storm also caused the steamer *Amanda Winants* to sink somewhere between Georgetown, South Carolina and Cape Hatteras. Sixteen men lost their lives on the ill-fated steamer (built in Keyport, New Jersey in 1863) including eighteen-year-old Irvie Newbury, who was from New Jersey and is buried at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Waretown.

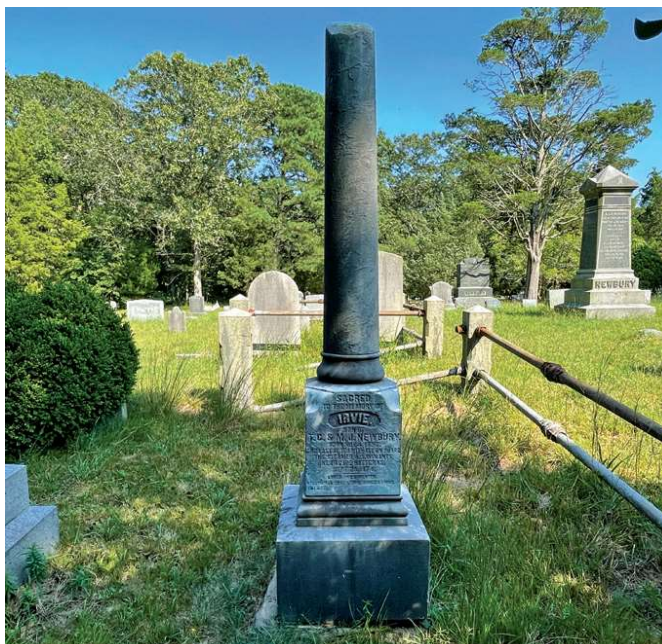
The loss of the *Winants* took place before the U.S. Life-Saving Service was established (and more accurate records were kept), so details sur-



Gravestone of Capt. William H. Chambers at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Waretown.

rounding its demise are not known. Newbury’s tombstone reads,

SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF
IRVIE.
SON OF T.C. & M.J. NEWBURY.
BORN NOV. 4, 1856.
AND LOST AT SEA WITH ALL ON BOARD
THE STEAMER A.A. WINANTS.
NEAR CAPE HATTERAS.
SEPT. 28, 1874.
LOVED AND LAMENTED.
HIS SUN HAS GONE DOWN WHILE IT WAS
YET DAY.



Captain Chambers and His Son

One double-sided tombstone just steps away from Irvie Newbury’s grave at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Waretown memorializes both a father and a son who never returned home from the sea. One side contains an inscription in memory of Captain William H. Chambers, who was lost at sea on August 17, 1879 at sixty-seven years old.

ERECTED
TO THE MEMORY OF
CAPT. WILLIAM H. CHAMBERS
SON OF
RALPH H. &
ANN CHAMBERS.
BORN JAN. 17, 1812.
LOST AT SEA
AUGUST 17, 1879.
IN THE 67TH YEAR
OF HIS AGE.

The other side’s inscription is to the memory of his son, Clark H. Chambers, who was born on November 22, 1839 and buried at sea on September 6, 1856 at just seventeen years old, twenty-three years before his father’s death.

ERECTED
TO THE MEMORY OF
CLARK H. CHAMBERS
SON OF
CAPT. WILLIAM H. &
MARY CHAMBERS
BORN NOV. 22, 1839.
DIED AND WAS BURIED AT SEA.
SEPT. 6, 1856.
IN THE 17TH YEAR
OF HIS AGE.

Extensive attempts to uncover the details surrounding the tragedies at sea of captain and son have thus far proven fruitless. However, the details of their demise, forever preserved on both sides of the stone, elevate their story into Jersey Shore legend.

—Jill Ocone

Tombstone of Irvie Newbury at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Waretown.