

# 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