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## LEGEND OF THE WHYDAH

WELLFLEET

- 1717 -



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Captain “Black Sam” Bellamy wasn’t always a pirate. He was born around 1690 in Plymouth, England—a known breeding ground for some of history’s most notorious buccaneers. When one grows up dirt poor, living in the dodgy shadows of the docks, whispers of remarkable wealth and worldly adventures seems an enticing career choice. Bellamy watched and learned as great seafaring bandits such as the grandfather of piracy, Henry Avery, and the crown-sponsored privateers, John Hawkins and Francis Drake, came and went from Plymouth port.

Unhappy with his life in the bottom tiers of English society, Bellamy made his way to the New World for a new beginning. The penniless man arrived in Cape Cod in 1714, at the age of twenty-four. Shortly after, he met and fell in love with a Wellfleet girl named Maria Hallett. While on the Cape, Bellamy clocked a lot of hours at the Great Island Tavern—a smuggler’s den full of black-market goods and rowdy sailors. Luckily, this clandestine pub operated by island-owner Samuel Smith, was situated on a small island two miles from the town of Wellfleet—far from prying eyes. It is here Bellamy heard tales of Spanish treasure sunken off the coast of Florida and decided there were riches to be had at sea.

With little convincing, a local jeweler named Paulsgrave Williams financed Bellamy’s venture. They bought a sloop and gathered a crew, but unfortunately, by the time the *Marianne* reached Florida, the gold had already been recovered by a number of people, including the Spaniards, English privateers, and other pirates of the Caribbean.

Disappointed, but not discouraged, Bellamy rallied his men to become official looters of nations, free men—Pirates! They hoisted the Jolly Roger, a black flag emblazoned with skull and crossbones, and “Black Sam” was on his way to becoming one of America’s most feared and revered pirates.

Bellamy learned the art of high-sea crime from pirate-turned-pirate-hunter Benjamin Hornigold and spent time carousing with another soon-to-be-infamous student, Edward “Blackbeard” Teach. Together, they terrorized the West Indies and by early 1717, Bellamy was the scourge of the Caribbean. With more than 200 men

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under his command, he seized booty from more than fifty ships. At the peak of his terror, Black Sam possessed five ships, including the *Whydah*—his prize, which he personally captained.

Bellamy had spent several days chasing the *Whydah* around the Caribbean, before finally capturing the ship of every pirate's dream: a galley with a huge cargo space full of gold and silver, and loaded with armament. With enough treasure to last a lifetime, Black Sam and his crew decided it was time to retire. The plan was to sail north to Maine after retrieving Maria from Wellfleet, then live off their spoils. No one anticipated the tragedy that would soon befall them all.

As the pack of pirates sailed from the Caribbean along the Atlantic coast of America to Cape Cod, they plundered every ship they encountered. By the early morning of April 26, 1717, the *Whydah* was bursting at the seams with booty: ivory elephant tusks, sweet molasses, and heady rum, not to mention countless precious coins and gold bars. "Could it get any better?" Black Sam thought to himself. Of course it could!

As they approached Nantucket, the crew seized a merchant ship from Dublin, which was carrying 7,000 gallons of Madeira wine. Much to the dismay of the *Mary Anne's* captain, Bellamy's men boarded the ship and forced it to join the *Whydah* on a northwesterly course—but only after indulging in the captain's private stash of booze! The wine was a fine prize, but Bellamy was thinking more of Maria when he steered the ships toward Wellfleet, a fatal move that marked the beginning of the end of the *Whydah*.

As the laden ship lumbered along what is present-day Chatham, thick fog was setting in. Knowing the waters were shallow and the shoals dangerous in this part of the Cape, Bellamy bided his time and waited for a break in the weather. When a small sloop named the *Fisher* slowed down near the *Whydah*, its captain had the misfortune of admitting to knowing the waters. Being late in the afternoon, Bellamy sent a few men aboard to seize the *Fisher* to help navigate the *Whydah* and *Mary Anne* through the potentially treacherous waters.

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Slowly, they made their way up the east coast of the Cape with *Mary Anne* leading the way. The wine-filled, hundred-ton galley was followed by the *Whydah*, with the *Fisher* bringing up the rear. As it grew darker, the fog grew thicker and the waves began rising. The *Mary Anne* started to lag behind, but the *Whydah* persisted. Being mid-April, Black Sam assumed storm season was over so he forced the ships to press on, not realizing a powerful arctic wind blowing down from Canada was about to hit them head on.

By nightfall, the *Whydah* was out of sight of the *Mary Anne* and the *Fisher*, both of which had run aground. Their crews were arrested the next morning and jailed in Eastham. The *Whydah* had to keep going north, since this particular type of ship, a galley, could not handle high winds. Sailing due north, however, was impossible. The seventy-mile-per-hour winds drove the ship west toward land, into the dangerous breakers.

Over and over, the words “Breakers! Breakers!” were screamed above the howling rain. Bellamy ordered the men to turn the boat around and drop the main anchor, hoping they could ride out the storm without hitting land. The crew made several valiant attempts to turn the ship into the waves to avoid being capsized. It worked a few times, but inevitably, the strength of Mother Nature was just too much for the 146 mortals aboard the *Whydah*. The ship ran aground only 500 feet from shore and a little before midnight on April 26, 1717, the ship rolled, sealing the fate of all aboard, including that of Black Sam Bellamy.

Waves began heaving over the boat, dumping tons of water onto the deck and sweeping many of the men out to sea. The main mast broke off and floated away. Water quickly filled the cargo area below. Anyone lucky enough to escape being drowned below deck would not have lasted more than a few minutes in the frigid water, and then any survivors would have had to struggle 500 feet to shore and up the steep, sandy hillside.

As the *Whydah* flipped over, all the valuables in the cargo space crashed about the

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ship. Many of the crewmen were crushed. Even worse than death by gold bullion, is being pinned to the bottom of the ocean by cannons or other heavy, quick-sinking objects. The pirate's spoils became their headstones. In the blink of an eye, 144 lives were lost.

The next morning, more than a hundred bodies washed ashore—mutilated, swollen, and unrecognizable. It is rumored only two men survived. Did the Pirate Prince go down with his ship or was Black Sam one of the survivors? No one knows for sure. As for the pirates sent from the *Whydah* to seize the *Mary Anne* and the *Fisher*, their fate was no better than those aboard the doomed ship. On October 22, 1717, the group was tried in the Boston Courthouse and eventually hung for piracy.

The treasure of the *Whydah* remained a legend for more than 250 years. It took Barry Clifford, a dreamer who grew up on Cape Cod, to continue the *Whydah*'s story, which is told later in “Ghost Ship Rising.”



## EXPERIENCE

This experience introduces one of Cape Cod's hidden natural gems, but requires a bit of planning and preparation. Dig out your sturdy boots to hike the seven-mile trail around Great Island, which today, is actually a peninsula protecting Wellfleet Harbor. Three centuries ago, this small finger of land was a legitimate island, but over the centuries sandbars grew and marshes filled in what was once a watery moat, dividing the Great Island from Wellfleet center.

According to legend, this playful poem welcomed thirsty patrons to the now non-existent Tavern on Great Island:

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*Samuel Smith, he has good flip,  
Good toddy if you please,  
The wav is near, and very clear,  
'Tis just beyond the trees.*

Begin your trek from the parking lot where there are picnic tables and portable restrooms. The marked trailhead leads out past the protected strip of sand known as “the Gut” and “beyond the trees,” to where the poem once lured Black Sam out onto the Great Island. The beach and wooded trails surrounding the Gut are fairly rugged. This particular stretch is one of Cape Cod’s longest, continuous expanses of undeveloped beach. Embark on this experience expecting less than pristine moments, biting flies, and the occasional dead bird. The trade-off? Respite from the overcrowded oceanfront beaches, great outdoor exercise, and on a clear day, sweeping views into Provincetown.

A few words of care: it might be tough, but try not to step on fiddler crabs as this protected area teems with shellfish and the sea birds who feast upon them. Never give in to the temptation to loot exposed oyster beds. Wellfleet’s clam cops take this very seriously and will seize your booty and impart a hefty fine.

The remoteness and serenity of Great Island will certainly make you feel like Robinson Crusoe, if not a pirate. The seven-mile round trip trail leads through dunes and forest, and past the site of Great Island Tavern and a Wampanoag monument. Plan to bring your own food and drink, as all that remains of Samuel Smith’s swashbuckling pub is a plaque and splendid views of Wellfleet Harbor. Despite beautiful water everywhere, there is not a drinkable drop of water along this trail.

Travel as light as you can, especially when hiking to the southern most point known as Jeremy’s Flats. During low tide, one is able to walk all the way out to Jeremy’s Point. Save room for bug spray, particularly in summer months. This is not an option,

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as gnats, flies, and ticks are equally drawn to Great Island. But most importantly, pay attention to the tidal charts. Even though the water rolls in and out twice a day in a timely manner, a little “creative hiking” might be required if the tide unexpectedly catches up with you during your return trip. With proper planning (and lots of insect repellent), this is one of the most magical—and potentially thrilling—hikes on the Cape. Take the trail less traveled.