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Brig St. John - Tragic Cohasset Shipwreck

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Irish emigrants escaping famine, persecution, and eviction from their homes in their own country risked everything to cross the sea to America for the hope of a better life. Men, women and children boarded the Brig St. John in the Port of Galway in 1849 for their voyage to a new life.

“They had experienced very bad times,” said Catherine Shannon, Professor of History at Westfield State University, on those who uprooted their lives to sail to America. “This was really their last hope, their last option.”

The ship had a safe passage until it rounded Cape Cod and was hit by a nor'easter. In the early hours of October 7, the ship was smashed on the rocks along the Cohasset coast and 99 people lost their lives.

“The wreck of the Brig St. John is the worst shipwreck in South Shore history,” said John Sullivan, a member of the Father Murphy, Division Nine of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. It is especially tragic because those who drowned died within sight of land; the place where they were going to start a new life.”

One of the ironies of the voyage is that had the ship not stopped over for a night in Connemara to pick up more passengers and retrieve more water, they might have missed the storm and made it safely to Boston. “The need to get fresh water in Connemara was important because the water supply in Galway had been contaminated by cholera. The captain was taking every precaution for a safe voyage. The stop delayed their departure for America for about 24 hours, which could have been the difference between life and death,” Shannon said.

Though there was a terrible loss of life, there were several survivors of the Brig St. John. More women than men survived; but about people twenty lived.

The people of Cohasset responded valiantly to the tragedy, going out in boats to try to save those in the waves. Other Cohasset residents took survivors who came onto the beach at Sandy Cove into their homes. “Only about five or six of those who survived remained in the U.S.,” Shannon said, “most returned to Ireland.”

The remains of 45 people lay at rest in a mass grave in Cohasset Center Cemetery and several bodies washed up in other places, and there are four to six people from the wreck buried in Scituate. Many of the bodies were never recovered.

It took a long time for Irish Americans to come to grip with the hardships of the famine and the tragedy of the Brig St. John voyage, Shannon said. The event was not marked until 1914 when the Ancient Order of Hibernians, as well as the Ladies Auxiliary (today called the Ladies AOH), dedicated a memorial at the mass grave site in Cohasset to those lost in the shipwreck. This was really the first significant memorial to the Irish victims of famine.

There is an Annual Brig St. John Memorial Mass held in Cohasset which continued this past October 2024 followed by a short speaking program at Saint Anthony's Parish Center. “We will then proceed to the Celtic cross in Cohasset Central Cemetery for a short wreath-laying ceremony followed by a dedication of a granite bench, just recently placed near the final resting place of some of the victims of this tragic shipwreck,” Sullivan said.