

The Whydah



A Ballad Opera

By Tommy Byrnes

The Story

She could never have known during the long, awful night that come the dawn all hope for a good life would be drowned.



On the evening of April 26, 1717 Mary Hallett sat hunkered down to wait out the worst storm anyone could remember. She knew she was in a bad way. Her little dwelling stood amongst the fields of poverty grass on the sand cliffs overlooking the Atlantic in what is now Wellfleet, Massachusetts on Cape Cod. Back then it was still part of Eastham.

Mary had come to live in this inhospitable place alone and an outcast from her town. She was jailed then banished for several crimes and suspicions including bearing a child out of wedlock, murder of said child, consorting with devious types including the devil, and witchcraft. Some of these charges were not without merit.

At the Crosby Tavern in the spring of 1715, the 16 year old Mary met a handsome sailor newly arrived in town. His name was Samuel Bellamy from Devon, England. A skilled seaman, Bellamy decided to spend the warm summer months in port working the packet ships that ferried cargo up and down the New England coast. He also spent the warm summer months in a torrid love affair with the young Mary. She was beautiful and willful, he was charming and dashing. They made quite a pair. The affair soon turned to love and Sam asked Mary's parents for her hand.

The Hallett family were successful farmers and well known in the small seaside community and along the Cape coast. While her father John liked the raven-haired young man he was none too keen on letting his daughter tie the knot with a poor sailor. He would not allow them to marry until Sam was of a better station. Undaunted, Sam pledged to make his fortune and return to claim his true love as his bride.

Shortly thereafter at the Crosby, Bellamy sat over ale with his dear friend Palgrave Williams. Williams was the black sheep of a wealthy, prominent Rhode Island family. His father was the colony's former Attorney General. He was 13 years older than Bellamy's 26 years with a wife and children but his life as a goldsmith and jeweler was dull and he craved adventure. They had one in mind.

News, rumors and stories travel fast amongst sailors in a maritime town and the two had caught wind that a laden Spanish treasure fleet had recently sunk off Florida's eastern coast in shallow water. The Spanish colony was a hub for shipping bringing the riches of the Americas back to Spain.

They hatched a plan to take a ship financed by Williams to Florida and dive on the wrecks. If they got there soon enough they just might strike gold, literally. The two friends decided to travel south and find their fortunes, one way or another.

As preparations were made to get under sail Sam once again told Mary he would return a wealthy man and marry her. The thought was pleasing to the girl. She imagined a bright future with this adventurous man.

And with the tide he was gone.



Bellamy and Williams arrived in Florida in early fall. They met with no success in their endeavor. The ships did wreck but by the time they arrived the sight was heavily guarded by the Spanish. With little prospects and no Spanish gold to be found they had few options outside of returning to New England empty-handed. The two went "on account", they turned pirate.

In April 1716 the pair joined the crew of well-known pirate Benjamin Hornigold and his first mate Edward "Blackbeard" Teach. Hornigold, who captained the sloop Mary Anne, was a feared ambush predator who plundered the Caribbean shipping lanes.

Bellamy took to his new profession with gusto. He proved himself as a very capable seaman and quickly rose in favor with the crew. With Hornigold the young sailor raided many ships in the Caribbean and the West Indies that spring and summer.

But Sam and the crew were growing unhappy with Hornigold's refusal to attack English ships because of loyalty to their sovereign. Bellamy proclaimed they should be able to attack anyone they damn well pleased which was a very popular position to take with the other

pirates. A pirate ship operated as a democratic society. It didn't matter what color you were or where you came from. If you had the moxie for it you were an equal. The crew voted Hornigold out as captain and Bellamy in.

When the new captain and his crew took the galley Sultana he made Palgrave Williams captain of the Mary Anne and took the Sultana as his flagship. They allied themselves with the French pirate La Buze for a time and the small pirate fleet plundered over 50 ships from early summer through the fall and winter of 1716 amassing quite a take from their victims.

They were making a name for themselves. Bellamy was being referred to as "Black Sam" for eschewing the day's fashion of powdered wigs in favor of simply tying his long pitch black hair back in a pony tail. He was also given the moniker The Prince of Pirates for his fairness and mercy. Not a cut-throat like some others of his day Bellamy was well known to offer leniency to his victims. His crew called themselves Robin Hood's Men.

"Black Sam" himself was a dashing figure. Tall, strong and well-mannered, accounts tell of his love of fine clothing, long velvet coats and silver-buckled shoes. He was known to carry a sword over his hip and 4 dueling pistols in his sash. Pirates were big news and accounts of their adventures were printed in the Colonies' newspapers and broadsides.

In February of 1717 Bellamy overtook the ship to which he would be forever tied. After a three day chase the small armada captured the slave ship The Whydah Galley. The Whydah, a full-rigged, three-masted galley was named after the slave port of Ouidah (pronounced WIH-dah) in West Africa. She was on the final leg of the Golden Triangle, the name given to the route taken by English ships engaged in the sale and transportation of human cargo. England to Africa to the Caribbean and back to England.

In early 1716 the Whydah left London on its maiden voyage heading toward Africa. After loading 367 slaves, gold and ivory in cargo she headed to the Caribbean. With the surviving Africans sold into servitude the Whydah filled her hold with payment of gold, gold dust, indigo and 30,000 pounds sterling. She had just begun the last leg of her journey along the Triangle when they caught up with her beyond the Westward Passage near Bermuda. Pirates had their spies too and he knew where to find her.

The Whydah was a good ship, newly built and very fast. And she was laden.

Captain Lawrence Prince of the Whydah surrendered without a fight, peacefully turning over his ship and cargo. Bellamy, true to his reputation, took the Whydah as his new flagship and then gave the Sultana and £20 to Captain Prince and his crew as a gesture of goodwill, although many of Prince's crew elected to join Bellamy's fleet.

With his new 18 gun flagship refitted with additional cannon Bellamy and the pirates captured many more vessels including a sloop commanded by Captain James Beer. As was usual Beer and his crew were invited to join with the pirates but Beer refused the invitation. Bellamy wanted the captain to at least retain possession of his ship but the pirate crew voted to burn it. True to the democratic Articles pirate crews adhered to Bellamy was forced to go along with his men.

"Black Sam" then made his now famous speech as quoted by Beer:

"I am sorry they won't let you have your sloop again, for I scorn to do any one a mischief, when it is not to my advantage; damn the sloop, we must sink her, and she might be of use to you.

"Though you are a sneaking puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by laws which rich men have made for their own security; for the cowardly whelps have not the courage otherwise to defend what they get by knavery; but damn ye altogether: damn them for a pack of crafty rascals, and you, who serve them, for a parcel of hen-hearted numbskulls.

"They vilify us, the scoundrels do, when there is only this difference, they rob the poor under the cover of law, forsooth, and we plunder the rich under the protection of our own courage. Had you not better make then one of us, than sneak after these villains for employment?"

When Beer replied he would not join in piracy which would break the laws "of God and Man" Bellamy said,

"You are a devilish conscience rascal! I am a free prince, and I have as much authority to make war on the whole world as he who has a hundred sail of ships at sea and an army of 100,000 men in the field; and this my conscience tells me! But there is no arguing with such sniveling puppies, who allow superiors to kick them about deck at pleasure."

In March of 1717 the fleet sought the Gulf Stream and began to journey north. Bellamy was rich beyond imagining and felt it was time to return to New England and his lover Mary. It had been a year and a half since he left Eastham.

After raiding along the Delaware coast the pirates entered familiar waters. Palgrave Williams disembarked the Mary Anne to visit his family on Block Island. He and Bellamy agreed to meet up later off the coast of Maine to attack merchant ships beginning their Spring voyages.

The Whydah headed towards Cape Cod and into legend.



On April 26, 1717 a Nor'easter as strong as a category one hurricane roared into New England. It remains one of the worst storms on Cape record. The ferocity of the storm was such that it cut Cape Cod in half by creating a floodwater canal on the Eastham/Orleans border. The Whydah slammed right into the murderous storm. 70 mile per hour winds and thirty to forty foot waves forced her toward shore while Bellamy desperately tried to bring her back out to sea.

The Whydah was laden with tons of treasure, 60 cannon, an enormous cache of ammunition and 144 sailors. She was heavy and rode low. Just after midnight the foundering ship was driven onto a sandbar in 15 feet of water. 15 minutes after she beached the relentless storm broke her mainmast and its sails were caught by the wind. That pulled her into 30 feet of turbulent ocean where she capsized.

When the Whydah flipped over the cannon and shot in the hold came crashing down with all their weight and ripped through her capsized decks. Her back broke and she split apart. The Whydah sank taking Bellamy and 142 of her 144 man crew with her. She wrecked in 30 feet of water less than 500 feet from shore.



Today the area where the Whydah came to die is called Marconi Beach, named in honor of the first trans-Atlantic wireless radio transmission in 1903 and the man who made it. In 1717 the beach sloped gently towards the fragile 80 to 90 foot high sand cliffs that bore witness to the ravages of that spring Nor'easter. Near those cliffs, overlooking the beach below stood a small dwelling in which a young girl was riding out this most horrific of storms. She was alone and an outcast. She was waiting for her lover to return to her from the sea. Her name was Mary. She did not know her lover was only 500 feet away.



When Mary Hallett awoke the following morning she beheld a most terrible sight. There, on the beach below, strewn like flotsam were the drowned and mangled corpses of 102 of the Whydah's crew. Some people heard the ship's bell frantically ringing during the night and by morning the sight was overrun with what were locally called "mooncussers", notorious wreckers who plundered the many shipwrecks of those waters. Only two of Bellamy's crew survived the disaster and they were quickly apprehended and jailed.

The Mary Anne had also wrecked in the Nor'easter further north and only 7 of her crew survived. They too were captured. Palgrave Williams avoided the disaster as he left the Mary Anne in Rhode Island.

The nine pirates were tried in court and 6 of the 9 were convicted and hanged for piracy. Cotton Mather himself oversaw the executions. The ship's carpenters Thomas South and Thomas Davis were found innocent because they were conscripted by Bellamy and had not freely joined the crew. Another was a Miskito Indian named John Julian, the ship's pilot. He was not tried but sold into slavery, possibly to the father of John Adams.

Davis' account of life with Bellamy and the pirates was detailed. He told of the treasure that was onboard and the news quickly spread that there was a king's ransom laying on the sandy bottom just offshore. The news also spread who was the captain of the sunken pirate ship.

As she watched from the cliffs Mary knew all hope for a good life was drowned.

Mooncussers below could see her standing on the cliffs as they scoured the wreckage. They knew whose ship it was and they knew who was above them. They knew the story.



When Sam left his lover in the fall of 1715 he left her with child. A young, unwed girl made pregnant by an itinerant sailor was truly scandalous and she knew she was in trouble. Mary managed to hide her pregnancy through the long winter and early spring before she snuck into a barn to deliver her baby. She placed the newborn boy under the straw to keep him warm while she crept out to find something to eat. When she returned she found her child had suffocated in the hay.

She was arrested, thrown in jail and charged with the murder of her bastard son. The scandal grew even more salacious when the news of Black Sam's piracy became known. They knew it was his baby Mary had carried.

She was held in detention for some time while here fate was being decided. After thinking it through and with the probable financial intervention of her father, the town council decided the best thing was to run the ruined girl out of town with the stipulation she would never come back or that would be the end of her. She was not wanted back at home. She wasn't wanted anywhere.

She took up dwelling in a small abandoned building in the scrublands near the dune cliffs of what was called Lucifer Land and tried not to starve to death while she waited for Sam to come home and take her away.

Then the Whydah wrecked on her doorstep.

It wasn't long after rumors began circulating about her. She had been seen on the dunes yelling at the wind and the sea with her arms outstretched. Maybe she caused the storm that sank her lover's ship. Maybe she's been cavorting with the devil. To be sure she's a witch. At any rate they were positive she was no good. They began to call her The Witch of Wellfleet.

This was all too much for a young girl to handle. She knew Sam's body had not been recovered. There was still a chance he survived the wreck and escaped. He may still return to me, she believed. He will have pirate's treasure and he will take me from this place. That thought would help sustain her for the rest of her life.

As the years passed Mary became a highly skilled weaver and even though they were forbidden to do so townspeople would occasionally make the several mile trip to see whom they now referred to as Goody Hallett and buy her weaving which was considered some of the finest on the Cape.

She tended to sick animals and did odd jobs for the few who weren't wary of her and salvaged what she could from the beach below. Her beauty was weathered away by the sun and relentless Atlantic air. She became more and more eccentric but remained willful and strong enough to endure that environment for so many years.

And, whenever storm or shipwreck or a dead calm visited those sandy shores the locals were positive Goody Hallett, The Witch of Wellfleet had something to do with it.

And she waited.