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## **Piracy, Riches, and Social Equality: The Wreck of the *Whydah* off Cape Cod**

**By**

**Sara Schubert**

In the 1700s, an agricultural society that believed in myths, superstitions, and folk tales lived on Cape Cod. It was also home to outcasts, outlaws and sailors. The stories of some of these sailors have been forgotten and washed away like the waves on the beach. Other stories, however, have been passed through generations, to entice wonder and adventure into the lives of Cape Codders and tourists alike. There is one story, in particular, of pirates, adventure, gold, treasure, and undying love, that today still feeds excitement into the minds of all listeners, young and old.

The story of Black Sam Bellamy and Maria Hallett is a tragic “Romeo and Juliet” type of love story. It encompasses many different versions and interpretations, but it always ends as a heartbreaking tale with questionable authenticity. There were always more pirates on the Cape during the eighteenth century than anywhere else in America. None of these colorful individuals was more respected and feared than Black Sam Bellamy. He was called Black Sam only after he became a pirate and began to sail under the black flag. Before that, he was just Sam Bellamy, an unemployed seaman from Plymouth, England, who moved to Cape Cod looking for work in the New World. The story is condensed as follows, based on Barry Clifford’s *Expedition Whydah: The Story of the World’s First Excavation of a Pirate Treasure Ship and the Man Who Found Her*:

Bellamy was from the bottom rungs of English society and therefore worked hard to survive. His mother died at childbirth, and he had probably been out of the house and supporting himself from the age of ten. Discouraged with the English class system, Bellamy left for America to get a fresh start.

Bellamy arrived in Cape Cod in 1714, when he was twenty-four years old. He initially lived with relatives who had already migrated to the Cape. During this period he met the two people that changed his life. One of them was Paulsgrave Williams, a jeweler who lent him the money necessary to buy a ship. The second was Maria Hallett, the woman he would love until the day he died.

Maria was a beautiful woman, with long hair the color of straw and eyes as deep and blue as a freshwater pond. Sam met her one perfect June day as he was walking past the cemetery in the town of Wellfleet. She was sitting underneath an apple tree covered by a white mist of apple blossoms. He slowed and then stopped. Wherever he was going was no longer important. He had to meet this beautiful young woman. Bellamy introduced himself and soon the two were talking like old friends. Maria was only sixteen and excited by the worldly stories that this young Englishman told her. He told her of his difficult childhood in Plymouth, and how hard it was to be raised only by his father. Maria immediately admired Bellamy. He was cocky and not ashamed of being poor. Though her clothing made it obvious that she was from a family with money, Bellamy talked proudly of his lower-class upbringing in England. He was confident and seemed to be driven to succeed, and Maria liked those qualities. From this first meeting Maria could tell that she wanted to see more of this forthcoming young man.

Bellamy also talked of going to sea in his teenage years to work in the Queen's Merchant Fleet and how thousands of seamen had been laid off because the war with the Spanish had ended and the size of the navy had been reduced. Bellamy also told Maria of his hopes of succeeding in the colonies, where a man could control his own destiny instead of working himself to death. Then he told her of another plan; a plan to get rich. As many as a dozen Spanish ships loaded with chests of gold and silver had sunk in a storm near Florida. The wrecks were

supposedly in shallow water, and rumor had it that the gold was available to anyone who could beat the Spanish to the spot. The news was causing a minor gold rush in the colonies, with ships leaving Atlantic ports daily and heading south to the wreck site. There was a good chance that a man could get rich if he got to the site quickly. It was a chance Bellamy wanted to take.

Maria's parents were not happy with their daughter's new friend. They were successful farmers with high hopes for their beautiful daughter. They thought her interest in this sailor -- someone who would be gone at sea most of his life -- meant she was deciding on a life of solitude. Against her parent's wishes, Maria continued to see Bellamy. He spent a good deal of time at the Great Island Tavern, an establishment that was more than a tavern. Located on an island about two miles from Wellfleet, the Great Island Tavern was difficult for many customers to reach. In reality, it was a temporary warehouse for stolen or smuggled merchandise.

Bellamy frequented the tavern with his uncle, Israel Cole. Eventually Maria also became a visitor to the remote outpost. Bellamy and Maria spent their days helping the tavern's owner conduct the bustling business of buying and selling black-market goods. When they were not busy in the tavern, the couple shared their thoughts and feelings in the deep green of the forest that covered the Great Island. This was a place of solitude, one where the two could be alone among the trees and indulge in romance on a mattress of soft and mossy grass.

It was not long before Maria was pregnant with Bellamy's child. Suddenly, Bellamy had a more urgent need for money. Through his uncle, Bellamy approached Paulsgrave Williams for money to buy a ship and head for the sunken Spanish treasure fleet in Florida. Williams was a jeweler, and jewelers played the role of bankers in the early days of colonial America. Williams purchased a sloop that could make the lengthy trip to Florida and even decided to become Bellamy's quartermaster. It would be Williams' job to take charge of any Spanish treasure that they found and make sure that it was divided properly. With a crew of about thirty men, Bellamy sailed south to begin the search. Before leaving, he promised Maria that he would return with a ship filled with gold.

That was not to be. By the time Bellamy reached Florida, the gold was gone. The highly efficient Spaniards had hired local Indian divers to retrieve what they could by dragging the area with grappling hooks. This was frustrating work for Bellamy's crew, as it was for the crews of many other ships in the area, including one captained by Henry Jennings, an English privateer. Jennings was not given to grappling for treasure. When he found that the coins that had been recovered by the divers were being stored in a Spanish fort on shore, he decided to take the money for himself.

When Jennings and his motley troops demanded access to the fort, the Spanish commander tried to bribe him with twenty-five thousand pieces of silver. Rather than accept, Jennings threatened to shoot the commander if the guards did not open the gate. The Spaniards immediately surrendered, and Jennings ransacked the fort, making off with a quarter million silver coins.

With opportunities like that, it proved difficult for some to resist resorting to piracy. Such was the case for Bellamy. Desperate to succeed and with great care, he explained the options to his crew. On one hand, they could return to New England with nothing to show for their efforts. That would subject them to a life of hard work and poverty, since all on board had now gone into debt to make this run for the gold. On the other hand, they could "go on the account," as pirating was called, and become "looters of nations." To do that they needed only to hoist the black flag that a crew member had sewn and Bellamy now held in his hands. "This flag represents not death, but resurrection," Bellamy told his crew. "Never again will you be slaves of the wealthy. From this day, we are new men. Free men." The vote in favor of becoming pirates was almost unanimous.

Bellamy and Williams decided to join Benjamin Hornigold, a great teacher of the pirate arts. Hornigold had just one flaw as far as Bellamy was concerned: he would not attack British ships. Whether out of patriotism or fear, Hornigold drew the line at taking a ship that was flying the British flag. This was not the sentiment shared by most of the men who sailed with Hornigold. They were an international crew that included Englishmen as well as French, Spanish, Dutch, and others. Similar to most other

pirates, Hornigold's crew possessed no loyalty to merchant ships that flew the flags of their nationality. For the men who served under the black flag, all the ships of the sea were fair game.

As was a custom among pirates, they discussed their feelings openly and then held a democratic election for a new captain. Ninety of the crew members, a majority, voted to make Bellamy the new captain. Hornigold was stung by the loss, but left peacefully, taking with him the men who wanted to stay under his command. They included an outrageous young recruit named Edward Teach, who drank heavily and lit his hair and beard on fire during fights so that his opponents would fear he was the Devil. Of course, Teach later became known as Blackbeard.

Bellamy's pirates scoured the seas. They stopped every ship they could find, stealing choice booty. Sometimes, if they liked the look of a ship that they were robbing, they took that too, offering the displaced captain and his crew an opportunity to become pirates or to leave safely on the ship the pirates would be abandoning. Eventually Bellamy acquired choice booty from more than fifty ships, commanded more than two hundred men, and captained a flotilla of five ships to carry them. These ships included the *Whydah*. The *Whydah* was a slave ship captained by Lawrence Prince, a veteran slaver, who had recently sold his human cargo in Jamaica. Before falling into Bellamy's hands the *Whydah* was en-route to England. At the time of its capture, its holds were full of gold and silver and perhaps even one perfect ruby the size of a hen's egg.

The *Whydah* possessed everything that a buccaneer required. She was new and had enough cargo space to carry six hundred Africans to the slave market. She also packed plenty of armament, including eighteen large cannons and about a dozen swivel cannons. These weapons that could be filled with shot and fired at close range, acting as a sort of high-powered shotgun. In addition to her capacity and armament, the *Whydah* was fast. Bellamy had to chase her for three days across a good portion of the Caribbean in order to catch her. When Bellamy finally caught the *Whydah*, he and his crew rejoiced to find that the ship was laden with a treasure of gold and silver. After

eighteen months of plundering vessels on the high seas, Bellamy and his crew could now retire as rich men.

Retirement, however, was the last thing on their minds. In the spring of 1717, they headed north where they could divide their spoils, repair their boats, and decide on their future. They plundered boats all the way up the coast on their way to Maine, where they planned to put in at Damaries Cove near Richmond Island. As they drew up on Cape Cod, Bellamy ordered the helmsman to steer a north-by-northwest course toward the tip of the peninsula. He was heading for Wellfleet and going home to see Maria.

What Bellamy did not realize was that life had not gone well for Maria. Her pregnancy had made her an outcast in her family. Her parents could not accept the disgrace of their daughter having a child out of wedlock and they forced her to leave. Maria moved into a tiny hut on the beach near Eastham. From there, she could watch the ships sail toward the Cape and wait for Bellamy's return. She actually hid in the hut, emerging only at night to conceal her pregnancy from the unforgiving Puritans.

Seven months after Bellamy left to find his fortune, Maria gave birth to a black-haired boy. She delivered the child herself in the barn of John Knowles, a local resident, and kept the baby hidden in a bed of hay. Several times a day she would sneak back to the Knowles' barn to feed the baby. Then she would carefully conceal him under a pile of hay and return to her hut. One day she opened the barn door to find John Knowles holding the child in his arms, a look of fright in his eyes. The baby was dead, having choked to death on a piece of straw.

The sheriff of Eastham took the frightened and distraught Maria into custody and jailed her for the crime of pregnancy out of wedlock and neglect of her child. A sympathetic jailer, however, left her cell door unlocked, allowing Maria to escape and return to her hut in Eastham. Again, the sheriff jailed Maria, but again the jailer did not secure the door and she returned home. This time she stayed free and was never put on trial.

Some of the local Puritans accused Maria of being a witch, and claimed that the young woman could, at times, be heard conversing loudly with the Devil. Most of the residents avoided

Maria's cabin lest they be cast under a spell that might bring them the kind of tragedy she had suffered. But there was one more tragedy ahead for Maria. Her cabin was within eyesight of the spot where the *Whydah* was wrecked.

As the *Whydah* changed course on the night of April 26, 1717, and came close to the Cape, winds from a frigid nor'easter collided with warm and moist southern winds that had been propelling Bellamy's flotilla up from the Caribbean. The result was one of the greatest storms on record to hit Cape Cod. It could not have occurred at a worse time for Bellamy and his men. Winds were as high as eighty miles per hour and visibility was zero. The seas were probably fifty feet or higher. Even with all the sails down and the anchors dragging, the ship was pushed toward the shore, where the roar of the surf foreshadowed its doom.

The *Whydah* struck a sandbar about two hundred yards from shore and was buried by tons of water that poured over her wooden decks. Sailors were swept into the sea. The ones who managed to hang on were drowned when the ship capsized. Only a few pirates survived the wreck of the *Whydah* and two of the other ships it had captured. Bellamy was not one of them. He had become the most successful pirate of his day, but at the height of his success, he drowned in a freak storm, his body swept overboard practically at the doorstep of his lover.

Legend states that Maria walked up and down the beach searching for Bellamy's body. The bodies of more than one hundred pirates washed up on shore in the days after the wreck and Maria examined every one. She never found her lover and subsequently never found peace. To this day, locals claim that they can still see her wailing for Bellamy from the cliffs of Eastham.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this story is true, perhaps its only part of Cape Cod folklore. The tragic tale of Maria, Bellamy and the crew of the *Whydah* subsequently changed and many other folk stories and legends have

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Clifford, with Paul Perry, *Expedition Whydah: The Story of the World's First Excavation of a Pirate Treasure Ship and the Man Who Found Her* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1999), 4-10.



surfaced over the years. Some sources portray Bellamy as a pirate, but never journeying to the Cape or becoming involved with Maria. They describe Bellamy as an “Englishman whose wife and family still lived near Canterbury.”<sup>2</sup> Some versions of the legend that do include Maria, portray her as going insane after Bellamy did not return. In this version Maria is said to have sold her soul to the Devil and blamed Bellamy for her banishment from Puritan society. She used this new found Satanic power to lure ships toward the dunes of the Cape and their doom. She would then shriek her thanks to the Devil for allowing her to fulfill her vengeance.<sup>3</sup> Some of the versions depict Maria riding a whale’s back across the sea searching for Bellamy with her companions, a black cat and a goat with a glass eye. Alternately, Maria roams the marshes on moonlit nights, waiting for her lover’s promised return.<sup>4</sup> Part of this myth claims that Maria came to hate sailors and, in revenge, caused the sinking of the *Whydah*. She is also held responsible for many of the 2,200 shipwrecks around Cape Cod.<sup>5</sup> One story even depicts Maria obtaining the *Whydah*’s treasure, burying it, and supporting herself with it for the rest of her life.

The oldest versions of these events do not even specifically name Maria. She appears by name in accounts that surfaced during the 1920s. Before that, Maria is mentioned as “Goody Hallett.” This is the result of the fact that men in the New England colonies were referred to as either “Mister Brown” or “Goodman Brown,” depending on their social class. “Mister Brown” would be an upper-class designation, while “Goodman Brown” would be a lower one, such as a farmer. Accordingly, their wives would be known as either “Mistress Brown” or “Goodwife Brown.” Thus the designation, “Goody Hallett,” is a method of

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *The Golden Age of Piracy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1969), 88.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Coogan, “The Tragedy of Goody Hallett,” website (<http://barnstable-patriot.com/sscape/goody.html>).

<sup>4</sup> “‘Pirates’ Vessel Sets Off a Hunt For Booty,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

describing Mrs. Hallett.<sup>6</sup> Older Cape Cod genealogies state that no one named “Maria Hallett” lived anywhere in the vicinity.

There was one woman, however, living in the vicinity of Orleans, Eastham, Wellfleet, or Truro who could have been known as “Goody Hallett.” This “Goody Hallett” was married to John Hallett. Hallett was from a prosperous farming family but apparently spent little time on the Cape. Like other residents, Hallett would have planted his crops and gone off to sea either for fishing or a coastal voyage.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Maria would have had the opportunity to cheat on her husband and perhaps had become pregnant. This adultery would have resulted in Maria’s banishment, for early eighteenth-century Puritan communities dealt harshly with young women in Maria’s condition and exile was usually their fate.

Some legends do not blame Maria, but claim that alcohol wrecked the *Whydah*: “One night, when the pirates were drunk, he [Bellamy] ran his vessel ashore, near Eastham, and the *Whydah* was wrecked.”<sup>8</sup> This may very well have been true, for a few days before the disaster, Bellamy captured the *Agnes* off the coast of Virginia. Bellamy and his men took Madeira wine and rum from this vessel.<sup>9</sup> Between the storm, the alcohol, and perhaps Maria, there was very little chance for the pirates to save the *Whydah*.

Because of all of these variations, the fate of the *Whydah* has raised many questions and has become a story that might involve more fiction than fact. Yet Bellamy remains a real historical figure. Accurate sources describe him as “Black Sam” Bellamy, a raven-haired former English sailor,<sup>10</sup> thought to be in his late twenties who led the pirates of the *Whydah*:

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Kinkor, website ([www.whydah.com](http://www.whydah.com)).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Massachusetts,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1858. Proquest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times* (1851-2001), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford, 256.

<sup>10</sup> Donovan Webster, “Pirates of the *Whydah*,” *National Geographic*, May 1999. Article found online.

He made a dashing figure in his long deep-cuffed velvet coat, knee breeches, silk stockings, and silver-buckled shoes; with a sword slung on his left hip and four pistols on his sash. Unlike some of his fellows, Bellamy never wore the fashionable powdered wig, but grew his dark hair long and tied it back with a satin bow.<sup>11</sup>

Bellamy captained the *Whydah*, which was also authentic. Built in 1715, and “sometimes known as *The Paradise Bird*, the *Whydah* was a fine London-built galley which could be rowed as well as sailed.”<sup>12</sup> The *Whydah* was originally designed to serve as a slave ship: “[It was] built as a merchant slaver by the Royal African Co...”<sup>13</sup> with a compartment to hold at least six hundred captives in a supine position, shackled together on two levels, in an area of approximately thirty by one hundred feet.<sup>14</sup> Thus the *Whydah* had a good deal of cargo capacity, which, of course, was ideal for the storage of treasure. It was named for the West African slave trading port of Ouidah (pronounced WIH-dah), in what is today Benin.<sup>15</sup> “The English factory at Whydah [Ouidah] was on low marsh ground infested with swarms of mosquitoes that transmitted malaria and yellow fever.”<sup>16</sup> Here the English traded muskets and gunpowder to the Africans for slaves. This eighteenth century imperial trade cast Africans against each other. The galley was created to make the trip designated as the “Triangular Trade,” which connected England, the west coast of Africa, and North America. While many Africans died during the four-week journey involved in this trade (the Middle Passage), it remained highly lucrative.

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<sup>11</sup> British Virgin Islands website (<http://www.b-v-i.com/culture/pirates/>).

<sup>12</sup> Barry Clifford, “My Search for the *Whydah* Pirates,” website (<http://www.whydah.com/page.php?id=exp023>).

<sup>13</sup> Joan Vennoch, “Dead in the Water: How Race, Politics, and Business in Boston Converged to Sink the *Whydah* Project,” *Boston Globe*, January 10, 1993, *Sunday Magazine*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Webster.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford, 247.

Bellamy pursued this profit. He chased the *Whydah* for three days near the Bahamas before finally capturing it.<sup>17</sup> The captain of the *Whydah*, Lawrence Prince, surrendered the ship to Bellamy with little resistance.<sup>18</sup> This resulted from an unspoken law among pirates that if a ship gave up peacefully, the captives were treated generously. If the ship put up a fight, there were no limits to the length pirates would go in order to teach their captives a lesson.<sup>19</sup> The perceived scenario of pirate ruthlessness stems from this situation.

The *Whydah* was probably the fiftieth vessel that Bellamy and his crew had captured, and it was well worth the effort. Bellamy usually ignored outward bound ships with their cargoes of tobacco, preferring the richer cargoes of those coming from Europe.<sup>20</sup> The *Whydah* had already traded its captives, and was on its way back to England, when Bellamy captured it. The *Whydah* yielded up a treasure which included thousands of silver pieces of eight, gold doubloons, and pouches of gold dust, a casket full of East Indian jewels, including a ruby “the size of a hen’s egg.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to the loot, “Bellamy also seized a dozen men from Prince, then let the vanquished captain and his remaining crew take the *Sultana* [Bellamy’s former ship].”<sup>22</sup>

There was about fifty pounds [weight] of treasure to every man of Bellamy’s crew, 150 persons.<sup>23</sup> There was more than enough loot for Bellamy to return to the Cape. He could now be a respectful husband for Maria and support her for the rest of his life. Still, he kept capturing ships on his way back north.

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<sup>17</sup> Clifford, “My Search for the Whydah Pirates,” [www.whydah.com](http://www.whydah.com).

<sup>18</sup> Webster, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Clifford, 247.

<sup>20</sup> Rankin, 89.

<sup>21</sup> Clifford, “My Search for the Whydah Pirates,” 3.

<sup>22</sup> Webster, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford, 251.

By the time that Bellamy arrived off the capes of Virginia in late March, 1717, his ship, the *Whydah* Galley, was armed with twenty-eight cannons and manned by a crew of near 200 men.<sup>24</sup>

But obviously Sam Bellamy never made it back to Eastham. His ship sank off the coast of Wellfleet, during one of the worst storms recorded in history. “According to eyewitness accounts, gusts topped 70 miles an hour and the seas rose to 30 feet.”<sup>25</sup> The dense fog and wind made it very difficult to navigate the ship. In addition to these factors, “Galleys handle poorly in high winds, and the rising gale coming from the northeast made it virtually impossible for the ship to tack out to sea.”<sup>26</sup> There was nothing that the crew could do to save the ship. Heavy with treasure, the *Whydah* rode very low and started to take on water from the high seas. Bellamy dropped the anchor and the *Whydah* began a slow turn toward the wind, taking on thousands of tons of water over the gunwales as she was swept up by forty-foot waves. Many of the 148 men on board must have been swept over the side at this point.<sup>27</sup>

There has been speculation as to how many of Bellamy’s crew actually survived the wreck. Only two men of Bellamy’s crew survived that night. One was an Indian pilot who quickly disappeared into the mists of history. The other was Thomas Davis, a Welsh carpenter.<sup>28</sup> Exhausted from the shipwreck, both men were easily captured by local authorities. They were charged with piracy and brought before Boston’s Admiralty Court.<sup>29</sup> Davis was acquitted of piracy charges, probably because of his skills as a carpenter, but he was forced to work against his will. Julian, the other man captured, was never tried. It is believed that he was sold into slavery. The same storm caused the sinking of another

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<sup>24</sup> Rankin, 88.

<sup>25</sup> Webster, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford, 264.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>28</sup> Website ([www.geocities.com/Athens/7012/bios/pirates/Bellamy.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/7012/bios/pirates/Bellamy.htm)).

<sup>29</sup> Vennochi, 1.

one of Bellamy's ships, the *Mary Anne*, yet all of her crew survived. Seven of these pirates, including Simon van Vorst, Hendrik Quintor, John Brown, John Shuan, Thomas Baker, Peter Cornelius Hoof, were all captured, convicted of piracy, and hanged.<sup>30</sup>

Davis' testimony concerning the amount and variety of stolen booty on the *Whydah* was dazzling, including his account of 180 bags of gold and silver that had been divided equally among the crew and stored in chests between the ship's decks.<sup>31</sup> This demonstrated one of the most appealing aspects of piracy: money. Piracy was perceived as an easy way to get rich fast. The majority of pirates had been honest sailors in eighteenth century society. They would have worked long, hard hours and been given poor rations. Their pay would have been less than two pounds a month.<sup>32</sup> As pirates, however, these men could live a much easier life, and make enough in one year to last them the rest of their lives. But with the wealth came the danger. Piracy was inherently illegal and treasonous, since pirates undermined the rules and laws of their country. If Bellamy or any other pirate was captured by the authorities of a nation other than England, they would still be tried and most likely executed. Their bodies were often hung from scaffolds in coastal communities for other pirates to see.

For all of its associated danger, eighteenth century piracy remained popular and remarkably multi-ethnic. Multi-racial groups were prevalent in the profession:

A surprising number of Negroes and mulattoes were listed among the members of pirate crews; some were runaway slaves while others were free men. In some companies, as many as one-sixth of the total number of pirates were Negroes.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ken Kinkor, Monday, November 1, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Webster, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Jody Cabot, website (<http://www.jodycabot.com/ari.htm>).

<sup>33</sup> Rankin, 24.

On the *Whydah*, for instance, there were between 24 and 50 black pirates.<sup>34</sup> Obviously, at this time the lives of slaves were very difficult, grueling and often traumatic. Any alternative to such a lifestyle would have been more acceptable. As a result, when ships were captured by pirates and the captured crew given a choice to come aboard, many slaves decided to join the ranks of the buccaneers. African freedmen were also welcomed into the ranks of pirate ships. While African freedmen were not slaves, their treatment by white society was less than kind. As a result, many freedmen became pirates. However, if authorities caught non-white pirates, they were immediately sold into slavery, even if they had previously been free. “Going on the account” for all men was an enormous risk.<sup>35</sup>

The most common way to become a pirate was for a ship one was sailing on to be taken by pirates. In this instance, each crew member of the captured ship would receive an offer to join the pirate ship. Everyone would be given the option. Since piracy was illegal, men were given the democratic choice to join the institution. The only way a crew member would be taken forcefully was if the pirate ship needed his services. This might be the case for someone like a carpenter, such as Thomas Davis. The decision to join the pirate ship was a fateful one, for if they agreed, the new pirate crew members gave up all their rights as citizens.

The real lure, implicit in the pirate values, rules, and style of life, was the chance that piracy offered to ordinary sailors: to live as truly free men.<sup>36</sup> Piracy was a way for some to escape the harsh realities of the eighteenth century world. Most of a pirate crew was composed of men, sick of the unfairness of society and class structure. Piracy elevated these poor, working men from their confines. The ship was their new statute of equality.

Officers wore no special uniforms and had no special privileges. Pirates regarded such perquisites, common aboard “honest” ships, as hateful reminders of upper-

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<sup>34</sup> Vennochi, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Frank Sherry, *Raiders and Rebels: The Golden Age of Piracy* (New York: Hearst Marine Books, 1986), 96.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

class despotism most them had to endure in their employment.<sup>37</sup>

On a pirate ship everyone worked together as equals, sharing the duties. The hierarchy of power consisted only on one basic level, for the pirates chose who was to be captain. In some cases, the crew could remove the captain from power with one quick vote. This homogenous balance promoted an equality matched nowhere in western civilization at this time.

While privateers were hired by one nation to rob their enemies, buccaneers worked for themselves.<sup>38</sup> Pirates made up the crew of the *Whydah* and these men worked and were loyal to no one but themselves. By flying the “Jolly Roger,” pirates claimed that they no longer hailed from a particular country. They now hailed from the sea. The “Jolly Roger” was also a means by which a merchant ships recognized pirate vessels.

Unfurling Jolly Roger was not a death threat; it was how pirates defiantly identified themselves as men who were dead in the eyes of the law-men to whom the law no longer applied -- and who now served under the banner of “King Death.”<sup>39</sup>

The original purpose and the classic design of the “Jolly Roger,” the skull and crossbones, was historically used to indicate in the captain’s log the death of a sailor.<sup>40</sup> Pirates used it for identification, indicating to other ships that they were indeed pirates, and to strike fear in the crews of these ships, so that they would surrender easily. The skull and crossbones was also the symbol of death. Each pirate ship had its own distinctive flag. Bellamy, for instance, flew “a large black Flag, with

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> British Virgin Islands website (see footnote #11).

<sup>39</sup> Clifford, 7.

<sup>40</sup> “Pirates: Fact and Legend” website ([http://www.piratesinfo.com/detail/detail.php?article\\_id=59](http://www.piratesinfo.com/detail/detail.php?article_id=59)).



Death's Head and Bone across."<sup>41</sup> The skull symbolized death while the crossed leg-bones meant resurrection. The name "Jolly Roger" is thought to have originated from a nickname for the devil, "Old Roger."<sup>42</sup> Early pirate flags were red, but in any event, the black flag with a skull or skeleton theme had all but replaced the earlier red pennant as the symbol of the pirate confederacy by the end of the 1690s.<sup>43</sup> When merchant ships spotted the sinister "Jolly Roger" unfurled from the mast, they knew to give up or be intensely brutalized.

Since pirates perceived that society was incredibly unfair, they claimed they were doing no wrong by capturing rich merchant ships. The ruling class was getting what it deserved. Pirates maintained that the "Brotherhood of Piracy" was akin to the "Robin Hood Scenario." They were stealing from the rich to help themselves, the poor.

When Bellamy's prisoner, Captain Beer of the Royal Navy, upbraided him for leading the life of a pirate, Bellamy in reply set forth his philosophy, as also that of "respectable" pirates and highwaymen of all countries in all ages, in these words: "They [the merchants] vilify us, the scoundrels do, where 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."<sup>44</sup>

In their minds they were doing what was morally right for pirates. They did not perceive their actions as illegal. Stealing from slave ships, which were making money from the sale of human beings, was actually liberation. Not only did the pirates take the profits the merchants had made, they also sometimes freed the slaves. Subsequently, the pirates justified themselves as abolitionists.

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<sup>41</sup> Rankin, 88.

<sup>42</sup> "Pirates" website (see footnote #40).

<sup>43</sup> Sherry, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Cyrus H. Karraker, *Piracy Was a Business* (Rindge, NH: R.R. Smith, 1953), 62.

The institution of piracy was one that utilized a great deal of diplomacy. “Incongruous as it might appear, the cutthroats, who brutalized captives and who scoffed at the rules of society, were passionately democratic.”<sup>45</sup> Although seen as social and cultural outcasts, pirates were, in fact, more socially equal than the rest of eighteenth century society. Not only did pirates choose to become part of the institution, “pirates governed themselves democratically, shared their loot equally, and even had a primitive form of social security.”<sup>46</sup> Pirates also had an early system of workers compensation. If a member of the crew was hurt on the job, that person would be adequately compensated for his loss. If a pirate lost a leg, he would receive five hundred Spanish pieces of eight. An eye brought one hundred.<sup>47</sup>

The pirates in Sam Bellamy’s crew were able to vote him in as captain and vote him out if he was not doing what they expected. They were also allowed to choose when to anchor, when and where to go out on an expedition, and what ships to attack. Every pirate on the ship received the same amount of the whole ship’s profit. The captain did not receive any more than a deck hand, and a pirate that chose to come aboard did not receive more than one who was taken. Most surprisingly, racial differences did not disrupt this equality. The “English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and British colonials” and “French, Dutch, Spaniards, Swedes, Native Americans, African-Americans and Africans” all shared in the profits.<sup>48</sup>

No sailor was better than another under the pirate system and the pirates subordinated their individuality to the good of the crew. They did not see each other as being “multicultural;” they only perceived their mutual standing as pirates. As a result, they were all equal and received the same shares and exercised the same democratic voting power.

Pirates lived together and they also died together. When a ship like the *Whydah* went down, the event sealed the entire crew’s fate, as almost all aboard the vessel died. Historical records show the bodies of 102

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<sup>45</sup> Sherry, 122.

<sup>46</sup> Clifford, “My Search for the *Whydah* Pirates,” 2.

<sup>47</sup> Cate McQuaid, “Piracy’s Rich and Brutal New England History,” *Boston Globe*, October 26, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth J. Kinkor, “Men Under the Black Flag,” [www.whydah.com](http://www.whydah.com), 2.

pirates washed from the *Whydah* galley ashore, leaving 78 to 108 missing.<sup>49</sup> For days after the wreck, local residents flocked to the shores to rob these dead pirates of their possessions. Dead bodies, of all different races, lined the coast line for miles. Locals stripped the bodies of their jewelry, weapons, shoes and clothing, and left them to rot naked in the sand.

Within forty eight hours of the wreck, the governor of the Massachusetts province, Samuel Shute, sent Captain Cyprian Southack, a well-known cartographer, to salvage the ship.<sup>50</sup> British law still had authority over the claim, so Southack went to retrieve the treasure for the Crown. By the time Southack reached the ship it was already beaten into the sand. Consequently, bad weather and the fact that the ship had capsized kept him from retrieving anything of value from the wreck. Southack did not have the capabilities to dive or stage a recovery effort, so all he could do was to retrieve the objects that washed up on shore. He tried to exercise his authority over the locals by banning them from the beach and requiring that they return any salvaged pieces. Only some of the locals gave any of their findings to Southack.

Frustrated because his salvage went poorly, Southack placed an article in the local newspaper stating his claim:

Whereas...His Excellency the Governor hath Authorized and impowered me the subscriber, to discover & take care of S.Wreck & to Impress men & whatsoever Else necessary to discover & Secure what may be part of her...with Orders to go into any house, Shop, Cellar, Warehouse, room or other place, & in case of resistance to break open any doors, Chests, trunks & other packages there to seize & from hence to bring away any of the goods, Merchandise, Effects belonging to S.Wreck, as also to seize her men.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "Bone Thought to Be From Pirate Is Found In 1717 Shipwreck," *New York Times*, March 16, 1986.

<sup>50</sup> Clifford, 30.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

The citizens of Eastham and those within a thirty mile radius were then searched for *Whydah* possessions.

In fact, salvaging shipwrecks was a way of life on the Cape.<sup>52</sup> Locals even had a prayer for this occasion: “We pray to thee, Oh Lord, not that wrecks should happen, but if any shall happen, Thou wilt guide them onto our shores for the benefit of the inhabitants.”<sup>53</sup> Cape locals looked forward to obtaining possessions from shipwrecks. Thus their reticence to return such possessions to Southack. The citizens all hid their belongings in the woods or buried them somewhere for safekeeping. “Some locals handed back some wooden beams, guns, and a few gem-studded rings cut from the fingers of dead pirates.”<sup>54</sup> They maintained that these objects belonged as much to them as they did the British government across the sea.

Ultimately, the *Whydah* sat in the ocean for years, becoming more and more incased with sand and debris. Henry David Thoreau stated that he was told by local Cape Codders “At times to this day the violence of the seas move the sands on the outer bar, so that at times the iron caboose of the ship at low tide has been seen.”<sup>55</sup> As time passed, the sand shifted, changing and redepositing the wreck. Along with the wreck, the stories matured, causing a search for the truth of the *Whydah*.

Visions of the *Whydah* and its riches filled the minds of men until 1900. About this time, Captain Webster Eldridge found two cannons off the coast of the Cape, claiming that they were from the *Whydah*. Actually, these cannons dated back to the Revolutionary War.<sup>56</sup> In 1947, Edward Rowe Snow staged another more inclusive search for the *Whydah*. He stated that he had found the ship 1000 feet off the coast of Eastham, fully intact. After diving, he found a cannon and some gold coins. Many failed attempts at diving, cold water temperatures, bad weather and high expenses ended the expedition. Snow stated that “It will be a very lucky treasure hunter who ever does more than pay

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Webster, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (Penguin Books, 1987), 186-187.

<sup>56</sup> Clifford, 30.

expenses while attempting to find the elusive gold and silver still aboard the *Whydah*.”<sup>57</sup>

This lucky man was Barry Clifford. Upon being introduced to the *Whydah* story during his childhood, he was obsessed with finding the pirate ship. He purchased a vessel, the *Vast Explorer*, hired a crew, and journeyed to find it. In 1983, Clifford discovered the *Whydah* off the coast of Wellfleet.<sup>58</sup> Through long, tedious hours, legal problems, and what he thinks is the curse of the pirates of the *Whydah*, Clifford has discovered “loads” of “treasure” from the bottom of the sea.

Underwater treasure hunting and expedition are very different from basic archeology. Moving the site ruins the historical significance of its intact layout and it is impossible to keep a site uncompromised as the water and sand are moving around. Finding and locating artifacts underwater is difficult, for a modern ship has to carefully comb an area with what amounts to a high-powered metal detector, called a magnetometer.<sup>59</sup> Any “hits” the magnetometer records are then “dug out.”

Instead of digging through many feet of bottom water debris, weeds and sand, the crew of the *Vast Explorer* used “mailboxes” to blow holes into the sand. These “mailboxes,” named for their appearance, created craters in the ocean floor which could then be searched.<sup>60</sup> Divers went down to the ocean floor, and searched for artifacts dating from 1717.

Two hundred and fifty years later the *Whydah*'s wood is mostly gone, and its cargo, consisting of pieces of eight, gold dust, iron cannons, and brass fittings, is scattered and buried under about five feet of shifting sand a mile off the cape.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel A. Grech, “Pirate Ship Hunters Says Dig May Have Hit Pay Dirt,” *Boston Globe*, July 27, 1998.

<sup>59</sup> Clifford, 125.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew L. Wald, “States Pursue Sunken Loot,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1987.

Stated one account of the salvage operation:

Mr. Clifford said he has already pulled up more than \$12 million worth of gold, silver, pewter plates, brass buttons and cannons in regular dives to the wreckage. And he predicted that in the wreck up to \$400 million more in thousands of pounds of undiscovered silver, gold, ivory and jewels could be found.<sup>62</sup>

The incredible array of *Whydah* artifacts not only cast light on a little-known period of maritime history, but also provided a rare insight into the everyday lives of a very secretive subculture, the pirates.<sup>63</sup> As pieces are continually found and restored, they are put on display at the *Whydah* Museum on the Wharf in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Although not the most lucrative, the most spectacular and important find Barry Clifford made was the ship's bell in October, 1985. Its inscription, "The *Whydah* Gally 1716" silenced skeptics, who believed that the artifacts were from some other vessel that had met its doom.<sup>64</sup> The bell gave light to the true spelling of the *Whydah* Gally, which until this time had been spelled "Whido." This find gave historical evidence to the truth behind the myth of the *Whydah*, wrecked in 1717.

Clifford's treasure hunt was the conclusion to the epic of Sam Bellamy and the *Whydah*. The expedition solved a legendary mystery and added historical relevancy to the equality and diplomacy of piracy. The expedition at this point has been going on for twenty years and there is still much more to be found and restored. The treasure of the *Whydah*, like the truth of the legend, will probably never all be found, for with time the shifting sands will always hold their secrets.

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<sup>62</sup> "1717 Wreck of Galleon Off Cape Yields Treasure and Hints at Pirates' Lives," *New York Times*, October 26, 1986.

<sup>63</sup> Clifford, "My Search for the *Whydah* Pirates," 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.