

September Greetings from Ocracoke Island!

We recently received the following email from one of our island visitors, Patrick Crockett:

"I thought you folks might be interested in these two weather photos from the end of June — I think they were taken on the afternoon of the 26th, 27th or 28th. First, a rainbow; then about 30 minutes later, a waterspout (looked to be on the ocean side of the island, but it moved across to the sound)."

### Rainbow at Oyster Creek



### Waterspout over Ocracoke



Many thanks to Patrick for sharing his photos with us. Ocracoke Island and her people have always had a close connection with the weather. Sometimes the weather is severe, but so far the island has fared rather well, even during the late summer, early fall hurricane season. We hope this year remains storm free, as it has the last two years.

This month I share with you an Ocracoke story that captured the attention of island children of a generation or two ago. I hope you enjoy it.

### Old Diver

© Philip Howard, 2002

Before the middle of the twentieth century the road that passed by the old Howard and Williams graveyards on Ocracoke Island was an unpaved sand lane. Trees and thick underbrush surrounded the graves and even in daylight the area seemed mysterious and fearsome. At night it was ominously dark and foreboding. Moonlight shining on the ancient,

moss-covered live oaks would cast eerie shadows across the stone markers.

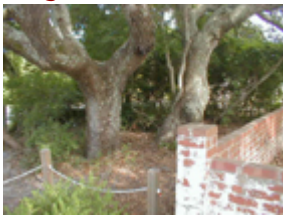
During World War II a British vessel, the H.M.S. Bedfordshire, was torpedoed off shore. No one survived, but the bodies of four of the British seamen washed ashore on Ocracoke's beach. The story of their burial next to the Williams graveyard is well known on the island. To this day an annual ceremony, attended by British and American dignitaries, honors the ultimate sacrifice made by these men and others like them during the war years.

Another grave also lies nearby. This small unmarked plot contains the remains of an Irish sailor, Augustus Abner McGuire. But this man lost his life, not because of war, but because of an accident at sea.

The date was September 23, 1913. McGuire was a diver aboard a Norwegian ship which sprang a leak while passing off shore of Ocracoke Island. The captain sent McGuire down to inspect the damage. He descended a second time, intending to repair the puncture. It soon became apparent to his support crew on deck that something had gone dreadfully wrong. Some suspect that the boy in charge of the pump and air hose walked away, leaving McGuire without oxygen. Others think McGuire had a heart attack. At any rate when he was pulled to the surface they found him unresponsive. The captain and crew did all they could for McGuire, but to no avail.

Instead of conducting a burial at sea, Captain Weatherspoon decided to contact David Williams who was in charge of the Ocracoke Lifesaving Station. Keeper Williams secured land for a single gravesite just outside his own family graveyard.

#### Augustus McGuire's Unmarked Gravesite:



The Methodist preacher was informed and he arranged for a simple but dignified funeral for Augustus McGuire. A choir was hastily called together and the captain and crew were joined by sympathetic islanders who gathered on that September afternoon to pay their last respects to a man they never knew.

A cedar post was placed at the head of the grave and McGuire's diving boots at the foot, among yaupon and myrtle bushes. They remained there for years, in silent testimony to

another life lost at sea. Eventually the post deteriorated, and the boots were removed.

With time some of the details of Augustus McGuire's fate faded from memory, but his story was reinvented. "Old Diver," as he came to be called, became a symbol of mystery and suspense, especially for the island children. Older boys would often hide behind the Howard family tombstones and wait for unsuspecting younger children to venture by. The ghost of Old Diver, imagined still attired in his cumbersome suit and brass and glass helmet, was invoked to send the youngsters scampering away in fear.

Eventually a mantra was established. As children approached McGuire's grave they would chant, "Old Diver, Old Diver, what do you say?" After a poignant pause, they would intone, in a deep, somber, and drawn-out voice "And...he...says.....'Nothing.'"

Older residents remember clearly, as children, running as fast as they could through the sandy lane to avoid the ghost of Old Diver. Even today there are those who walk warily past this spot.

Today, the grave is unidentified. No post or stone marks the spot. One of the diving boots, however, is on display in the David Williams house, now the Ocracoke Preservation Society Museum.

### Old Diver's Boot



The road has been widened and paved. In the age of tourism, automobiles and mercury vapor lights not everyone remembers the story of Augustus McGuire, and children sometimes ignore Old Diver as they pass by, even in the dark of night. But those who risk a glance in the right direction, beyond the last row of graves in the old family cemeteries, and especially when the moon is full, often report seeing the glint of a reflection from the glass face plate on Old Diver's helmet.

In 1994 Augustus McGuire's granddaughter, Patricia McGuire Hospador, visited Ocracoke from her home in New Jersey. Although she knew about her grandfather's accident at sea, and that he was buried on the island, she knew little else. Until her visit, few on the island remembered Old Diver's real name, or the story of his death.

Today, there is talk of placing a new marker at Augustus McGuire's grave. It will be fitting tribute to Mrs. Hospador's grandfather, and to a unique island legend.

Mrs. Hospador was kind enough to share a letter from W.P. Small, M.D., who was serving Ocracoke in 1913, and who sent a letter of condolence to McGuire's widow. A transcription follows:

Ocracoke, North Carolina  
Wednesday, Sept. 24, 1913

Mrs. Augustus A. McGuire,

I was called yesterday to render aid if possible to your husband, but found upon examination that he had expired some time previously. The ship upon which he was employed having received a puncture in her hull, the crew, in charge of Capt Weatherspoon, were endeavoring [to] repair the leak.

Mr. McGuire went down in a diving suit, made an examination, remaining under water only a few moments. He repaired to go down again—but Capt. Weatherspoon urged him not to as he seemed nervous and fatigued—but he persisted in his purpose to go down again. Getting into the diving suit he descended. At the end of about three minutes the men at the life line thought they received a signal to pull him up which they did promptly. His arms were hanging by his side, denoting an unconscious or helpless condition. The glass in the helmet was instantly broken to give him air. The helmet and suit [were] removed but Mr. McGuire was dead—heart disease had caused his death.

The officers and crew of the ship did all in their power to revive him but in vain. The diving apparatus was tested before being used—and found to be in perfect condition.

All this I learned on my arrival to the ship a short while after Mr. McGuire was brought up, from Capt. Weatherspoon, Mr. McCoy, the chief engineer, and others.

Great regret and sympathy were felt and shown by all on board.

No embalming could be obtained as it was Capt. Weatherspoon's desire and intention to ship the body to his house, so the body was buried here, on this island.

Great respect and sympathy were shown by the people here. The Methodist minister, Mr. Earnhart, conducted the funeral service, assisted by a volunteer choir of ladies and gentlemen.

The burial took place at the end of a beautiful day—the sun low in the West shed a soft light over the beautiful green foliage. Nature seemed in accord with the sad but beautifully simple service. As the last sod fell on the resting place of the deceased the choir sang "Blest Be the Tie that Binds Our Hearts in Christian Love."

The body lies in a beautiful spot shaded by the evergreen foliage of the live oaks, a fit resting place for the best of us.

I have written this as a brother Mason knowing that our deceased brother was a member of that order in good standing.

Capt. Weatherspoon is ready to ship the body to his house, at a suitable time if you so desire.

And in closing let me assure you that everything that was possible for human beings to do was done in an intelligent and sympathetic manner, both to preserve his life and afterward to lay his body to rest.

Very respectfully yours,  
W.P. Small, M.D.

P.S. I enclose a sprig of evergreen which I took from the wreath of flowers placed upon [his] casket by sympathetic friends.

Yours,  
W.P.S.

Until next time, all the best to you from,

Philip and the gang at Village Craftsmen