

Historic Ocracoke is most commonly referred to as a traditional fishing village. Although this is partially true, it overlooks an important aspect of the island's maritime heritage. A careful look at census records from the nineteenth century reveals the prominence of seafaring professions among Ocracoke men.

The federal census of 1880 indicates that sixty-six men were employed as sailors, and one as a pilot. In contrast, only thirty-two men are identified as fishermen or clammers. In 1850 thirty-seven islanders were listed as seamen, pilots, or boatmen; a mere five were listed as fishermen.

In the nineteenth century many Ocracokers were involved in coastal shipping. Schooners were the predominant vessels used to carry lumber, coal, molasses, rum, and all manner of "general cargo" along the eastern seaboard, all the way from the West Indies to Maine and Nova Scotia.

A few Ocracoke men were shipbuilders; others were owners and/or captains of schooners. Many were simply sailors, spending weeks or months away from home, often in dangerous weather on stormy seas.

Over the course of many decades, as shipping increased along the east coast, numerous vessels fetched up on the coast of North Carolina.

The first recorded shipwreck on the North Carolina coast was in 1585 when Sir Walter Raleigh's flagship, the "Tiger," ran aground on Ocracoke. Shipwrecks had become so common by 1800 that North Carolina established wreck districts with a local "wreck master," whose job it was to manage the disposition of the stranded vessel and its cargo. Vendues, or auctions, were held to sell the salvaged materials.

Whenever possible, shipwrecked goods (especially lumber & other building materials) were eagerly collected by Outer Bankers. Joe Mobley, in his book, *Ship Ashore*, reports that "Colonial governor Gabriel Johnston referred to the Outer Bankers as a 'set of people who live on certain Sandy Islands lying between the Sound and the Ocean, and who are Wild and ungovernable, so that it is seldom possible to Execute any Civil or Criminal Writs among them.' These people, he claimed, 'would come in a body and pillage the ships.'

Captain Albert I. Lewis, a onetime underwriters' agent, once remarked, "The people on Ocracoke and Hatteras would drop a corpse while carrying it to the grave, and leave it on the road, if they heard "Ship on Beach!"' Still another resident remembered: 'I have known when the signal is given "Ship on Beach," crowds to leave church even during a revival

meeting."

For many years assistance to stranded seafarers along the North Carolina coast was an unorganized affair. Rescues were sometimes attempted by inexperienced volunteers with inadequate equipment. All too often, islanders could merely watch from the shore as hapless victims were thrown into a raging ocean when their ship broke up.

By 1874 construction on a number of US Life Saving Stations was begun along the Outer Banks.

On May 25, 1883 my great-grandfather, James W. Howard (1839 - 1904), at the age of 44, became the first keeper of the newly-established Hatteras Inlet (or "Cedar Hammock") Life Saving Station on the north end of Ocracoke Island, about 1 1/8 miles west-southwest of Hatteras Inlet. Before that date he too had been a sailor. He was intimately familiar with the hardships and dangers inherent in the seafaring life.

Keeper James W. Howard:



In 1917, after the US Life Saving Service was combined with the Revenue Cutter Service to form the US Coast Guard, the original station was replaced by a new building. Unfortunately that station washed away due to ocean-side erosion in the mid-1950s. A row of pilings, now completely surrounded by ocean water and visible from the Hatteras Inlet ferries, is all that remains of this station to remind us of the many gallant rescues performed by scores of these courageous Outer Banks life savers..

The Wreck of the A. F. Crockett

At 7 a.m. on February 17, 1885 surfman William Ellis Howard, on day watch from the Cedar Hammock Life Saving station, saw a schooner stranded on Ocracoke beach about ten miles southwest of Hatteras Inlet. The vessel was the A. F. Crockett, homeport, Rockland, Maine;

master, R. H. Thorndike. She was bound from Savannah to New York with a crew of eight and a cargo of lumber valued at \$1,000.00.

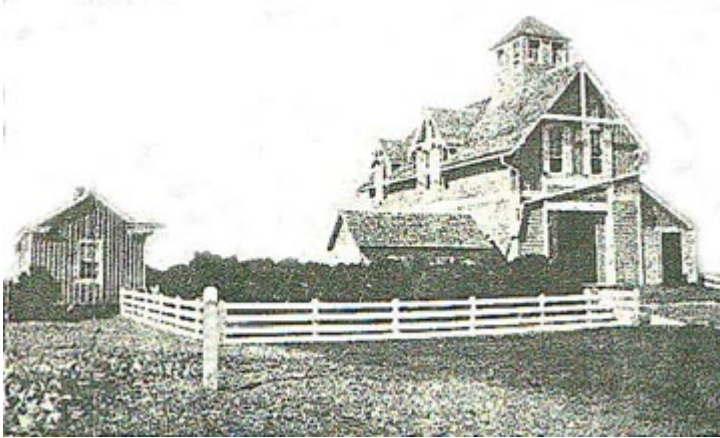
The Crockett struck the beach early in the morning and lay helpless for three hours before surfman Howard spied her. At that time gale force winds were howling, the surf was “full,” and the sea was breaking over the deck.

Shipwreck on Ocracoke Beach:



Howard hurried back to the station, but it took him nearly two hours to make the distance on foot. Immediately after receiving the report keeper Howard ordered that the beach apparatus be manned. The crew’s cart was loaded with a heavy brass Lyle gun, powder, various sizes of line, hawsers, breeches buoy, and assorted other equipment. Underway, the station crew struggled through a heavy surf with the “sea running over [the] beach.” At times the water was “half leg deep.” Without the aid of draft animals the surfmen labored on in a tedious attempt to reach the Crockett before the schooner’s crew panicked and abandoned their vessel.

Cedar Hammock Life Saving Station, 1883:



Conditions were deteriorating rapidly, and keeper Howard's men were quickly becoming exhausted. Howard decided to leave his crew and make for the wrecked schooner, hoping to avert certain disaster. If the schooner's captain and his sailors tried to make it to shore without his aid, keeper Howard was convinced, they would surely all be drowned.

With luck, an islander on horseback, thinking no alarm had been sounded, was rushing to the station with the news of the A. F. Crockett. He willingly gave his horse to the keeper who then proceeded quickly to the wreck.

James W. Howard on Horseback:



Arriving at the scene at 10 a. m. keeper Howard described what he saw as a "dangerous condition." A crowd had gathered on shore but were without the expertise to attempt a rescue. Spying the schooner's small yawl boat washed up on the beach, Howard called for volunteers. His brother, Perry Coleman Howard, as well as five other men, Christopher O'Neal, Zorababel Gaskins, Robert Gaskins, John Gaskins, and W. Williams, responded.

Risking their lives for sailors they did not know, the Ocracokers rowed through the heavy surf, battling an angry sea that threatened to overturn their tiny boat at any moment. In a classic example of understatement keeper Howard recorded the event in his report: "'Was

[sic] successful in saving their lives making two trips.”

After making arrangement to take the rescued sailors to the Life Saving Station where they were given dry clothes and made as comfortable as possible, keeper Howard sent word by horseback to tell his crew that the rescue had been effected and to return to their headquarters. He instructed his men to leave their cart where it was, the “beach being so bad,” and the “crew wore [sic] out.”

Captain Thorddike, in a letter of gratitude to the brave men who risked their lives for him and his crew, wrote on February 30, 1885:

“Gentlemen: It is quite impossible for me to express in words the thanks which are due to each one of you for your noble self-sacrificing efforts to rescue myself and the crew of the schooner A. F. Crockett, so lately stranded at Ocracoke, on the Hatteras coast, and for your kind protection subsequent thereto. The close attention to duty, the bravery and kindness of Captain Howard and his men, are deserving of great credit. Yours, respectfully, R. H. Thokrndike, master.”

(Information about the wreck of the A. F. Crockett was obtained from Captain James W. Howard’s original shipwreck report, and from an article in the “Coastland Times” of December 6, 1983, “Men and the Sea, True Stories of Brave Old Days.”)