

The family cemeteries on Howard Street, across from the Village Craftsmen gallery, bear silent witness to some of Ocracoke Island's most colorful former residents and their history & heritage. One tombstone in particular stands out. Edgar Howard, the great-great-great-great-grandson of Ocracoke's colonial owner, William Howard Sr, was born on the island in 1904. He died in 1990. His tombstone with the epitaph, "YOU AIN'T HEARD NOTHING YET," and the image of a banjo elicits much interest and speculation.

In the 1920s Edgar and his older brother Walter (b. 1897), both accomplished self-taught musicians, left home bound for New York City. In short order they made names for themselves on vaudeville stages in the Big Apple and other northern cities.

Edgar played banjo, performing in well-known theaters that hosted national celebrities such as Al Jolson, Gene Autry, Cary Grant, Roy Rogers, and Milton Berle.



Edgar Howard and the Kentucky Mountaineers

Edgar Howard (above, holding banjo), with the Kentucky Mountaineers, poses beside Milton Berle ("Mr. Television"). (Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society)



Edgar Howard and the Milton Berle Show

Edgar Howard (above, left with banjo) poses with Boyd Heath and “Chubby” Chuck Roe, performers on NBC TV’s Saturday Night Jamboree, hosted by Milton Berle. Edgar performed on the show 16 weeks straight. (Photo courtesy Walter Howard, Jr.)

Walter landed a gig playing the Hawaiian slide guitar on the New York radio station WEAf.



Walter Howard



Walter Howard and Dettborn

The first photo above shows Walter Howard in July 1924, wearing a Hawaiian outfit. The caption reads, "Walter Howard, the wandering minstrel who moved the South Sea Islands 10,000 miles nearer to Manhattan when he sang 'Aloha Oe' to his tinkling guitar." The other photo shows Walter Howard, standing, and Charles Dettborn in a publicity photo for their radio show featuring Hawaiian music. (Photos courtesy Walter Howard, Jr.)

In early 1925 Walter Howard made the acquaintance of a harmonica duo. Syd Newman, a brilliant musician, and David Robertson, a vaudeville veteran, were mid-twenty-year-old performers from Brooklyn. Walter Howard, Syd Newman, and David Robertson formed a new group called The College Trio, playing jazzy pop songs. Their attire was sweaters and neckties. The College Trio specialized in novelty instrumentals and featured bluesy sharps and flats on harmonica.



The College Trio

Walter, in the center, played guitar and banjo. Syd Newman is on the right; David Robertson is on the left. (Photo courtesy Walter Howard, Jr.)

In 1925 promoter Ned Nestor added the trio to his list of clients. Nestor brought on Roy King (a creative plectrum banjoist) and Lou Pope (guitar, banjo, and musical saw), and named the newly created novelty and cowboy band the Five Harmaniacs. Wide-brimmed cowboy hats, boots, and chaps comprised their new attire. A cattle ranch backdrop added to the theme.



Five Harmaniacs

Walter (above, standing) played guitar, harmonica, jug, ukulele, and washboard in a vaudeville program of "Round-Up Tunes." The successful and popular band played cowboy and western songs and ballads, as well as blues and vaudeville blues, also known as medicine show music. They soon added cowbells, musical spoons, tin funnels, whistles, teapots, and other unconventional instruments to their act. (Photo courtesy Walter Howard, Jr.)

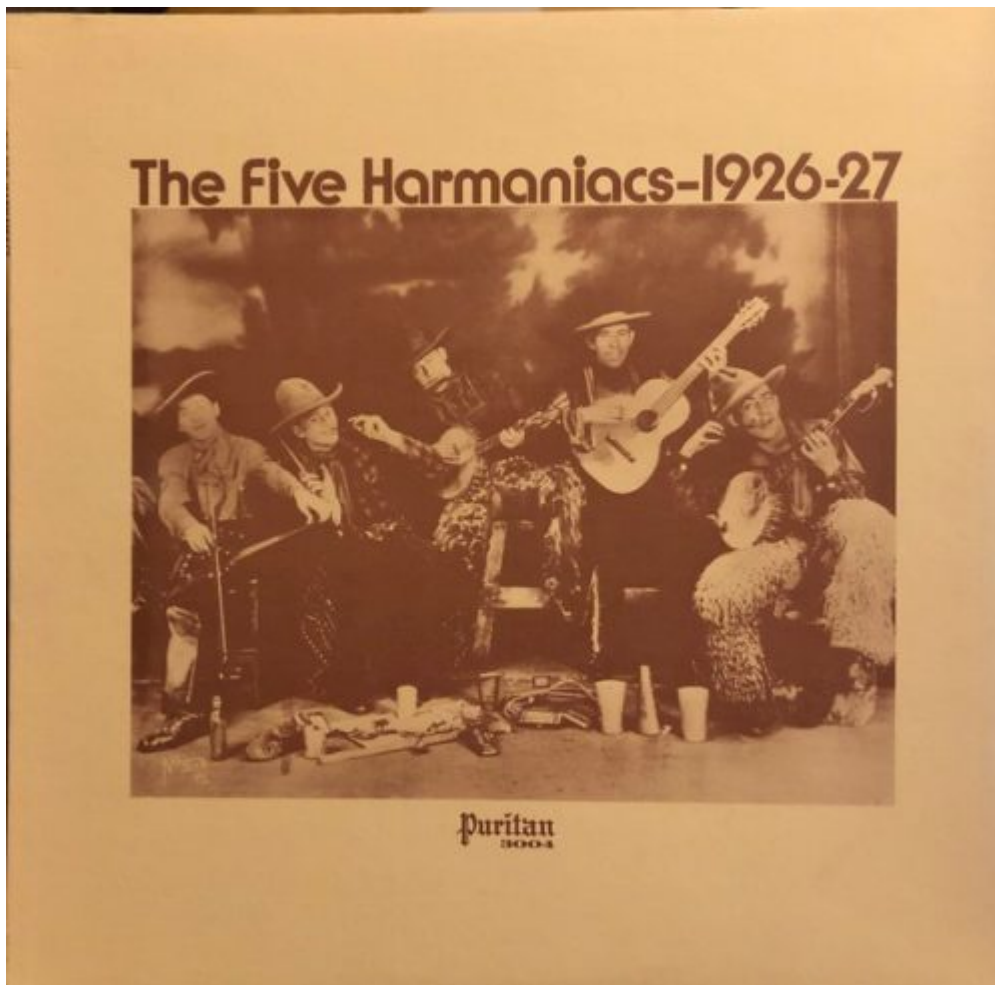
Other members of the band at various times included Jerry Adams (born, Harold Whitacre), Clyde Shugart, Wade Durand, Ned Nestor, Lou Pope, Percy Stoner, and Edgar Howard. Every member of the Five Harmaniacs played harmonica, ukulele, and novelty instruments, often switching from one instrument to the other.

In the fall of 1925 the Five Harmaniacs got their first big break, playing the Roseland Music Hall^[1] in New York City. Soon after, they were the featured act at Poli's 2,476-seat Elm Street Theatre in Worcester, Massachusetts. By October they were headliners for the Keith-Bellevue/Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit, playing over four hundred vaudeville houses throughout the Northeast, the South (Asheville, Atlanta, Miami), and as far as the Midwest. In addition to novelty instruments, the band began adding vocals, comedy, and even tap dancing and softshoe. The Hohner harmonica company provided harmonicas to the band in exchange for on-stage plugs.



Five Harmaniacs Advertisement

The advertisement above features the Five Harmaniacs, who, with "two funsters from the Batcheler-Jamieson Revue," were among the "special artists who will take part in the 'Loew Midnight Frolic,'" a radio show broadcast from Lockport, NY, in 1926. Walter Howard is on the right.



Five Harmaniacs 1926-1927

The album cover above shows The Five Harmaniacs in a New York City studio in the summer of 1925. Left to right are Lou Pope, Syd Newman, Dave Robertson, Walter Howard, and Roy King.

Among other venues, the Five Harmaniacs played at the 1800-seat auditorium, Shea's Theatre^[2] (Vaudeville & Photoplays), on East Second Street, Jamestown, New York. One playbill in the 1920s enthuses about the band, writing that it is, "positively the best vaudeville show in Jamestown's history," "the greatest instrumental act in vaudeville," and "an unmatched assembly of five vaudeville entertainers, instrumentalists, and rollicking comedians."

In the mid-1920s the band cut several records in New York and Chicago for major recording companies. In September 1926 the Five Harmaniacs cut "Sadie Green (the Vamp of New

Orleans),” and made the first ever recording of the now classic “Coney Island Washboard” (composed by band members Wade Durand and Jerry Adams) for the Victor Recording Company.

After their recording session, Jerry Adams and Roy King left the band. Roy King had insisted on traveling with a suitcase full of prohibition-era gin. He was often so drunk that the other band members had to carry him on stage. When the curtain opened he played brilliantly, but had to be carried off stage again after the curtain call. King was eventually forced out of the band. Walter’s brother, Edgar, and Arthur “Satchel” Sullivan replaced them. The Five Harmaniacs continued to play on the vaudeville circuit in the Northeast and Midwest. Back in New York in 1927, they re-cut “Sadie Green” and “Coney Island Washboard.” They also recorded “What Makes My Baby Cry” with Walter Howard on vocals, which Jack Norton, in his 2022 e-book, *Cornstars: Rube Music in Swing Time*, [\[3\]](#) describes as “a showcase for their zany, experimental instrumentation and novel approach to jazz.” Norton considers the music of the Five Harmaniacs as, “simply brilliant, exciting and full of early jazz influence.”

By the spring of 1927, the Five Harmaniacs were back on the vaudeville circuit, touring with the Loew’s chain of movie houses as openers for their feature films. But their touring days were soon over. Moving picture shows had replaced vaudeville. The band’s final performance was in late 1928.

According to Jack Norton, in 1929 Syd Newman recruited Walter & Edgar Howard and Dave Robertson to form a new band, the short-lived “Cowboy Revels.” Three young ladies, Ethel and Marion Mann and Virginia Barrett, joined them to dance, yodel and perform rope tricks.

Walter and Edgar also made a number of radio appearances, including performing on the popular Texaco Star Theater, a comedy-variety radio show that ran from 1938 to 1949.

1978 liner notes for a compilation of the Five Harmaniac’s tunes remarks that “the music [of the band] transcended their era. While many of the best swing and early rock-and-roll bands sound hopelessly locked into their respective decades, the Harmaniacs remain as fresh and vital as ever.”



Sheas Theatre Jamestown NY ca1950

(Shea's Theatre, circa 1950)

Writing in 2015, blogger Herb Shultz noted that “the Five Harmaniacs are cast in a somewhat different mold. [than other jug bands]. Not as strong rhythmically as the jug bands (although they do occasionally use the jug themselves), the Harmaniacs identify more closely with guitar and banjo playing groups such as the New Christy Minstrels.... Their stock in trade was the novelty number.” Shultz’s particular favorites are “Sadie Green Vamp of New Orleans, an old Johnny Dunn tune which extolled the beauties of its heroine in the whimsical hyperbole of the 1920s (viz: ‘She’d make bald men tear their hair!’), and Coney Island Washboard, an original composition of the Harmaniacs which has become one of the standard classics in the repertoire of barbershop quartets.”[\[4\]](#)

Edgar and Walter Howard came home periodically to entertain their fellow islanders. At times, nationally popular entertainers followed the Howard brothers to Ocracoke, often playing at Stanley Wahab’s “Spanish Casino,” a small venue near the present-day Back Porch Restaurant that included a stage, dance floor, and canteen.



Spanish Casino

(The Spanish Casino)

Walter Howard, a talented writer as well as a musician, also penned various essays, one of which recalled the story of the 1837 wreck of the steamboat “Home” on the Ocracoke beach. You can read the gripping and dramatic story [here](#) (Part I) and [here](#) (Part II). Walter also wrote the fast-paced popular Ocracoke Island song, “Paddy’s Holler,” that Edgar often played on the island after moving back home in retirement. These are the lyrics, along with a few comments in footnotes, to clarify the local history.

Paddy’s Holler

Written by Walter Howard

Many, many years ago I can truly tell you so,
There was a spot that wasn’t worth a dollar,
Where the folks were gay, so the people say,
Everybody called it Paddy’s Holler[\[5\]](#) .

‘Twould put us all to shame how the holler got its name.
Legends have been told by the millions,
But the one that I like best was no doubt told in jest,
Told by ol’ fiddlin’ Wid Williams[\[6\]](#)

Wid was on a spree; he had fiddled all night for free,
And they had to hold him up by the collar,
But like a knight of old he grew mighty bold,
And hollered out "Hooray for Paddy's Holler!"[\[7\]](#)

Now in the olden days nobody offered praise
For anybody livin' up the holler.
As the years rolled by, they moved in on the sly,
Now it's "Mrs. Jones"[\[8\]](#) of Paddy's Holler.

Paddy's Holler, Paddy's Holler,
Why, they come from near and far to Paddy's Holler.
And the town is in a lurch, 'cause when they go to church,
They all have to pass through Paddy's Holler.[\[9\]](#)

The Howards, the O'Neals, the Burruses, the Peales,
Why they've all found their way to Paddy's Holler.
Choicest spot in town, nobody seems to frown
When someone hollers, "Let's go up the holler!"

They built a naval base just to give the subs a chase[\[10\]](#)
So everybody there could earn a dollar.
When Uncle Sammy came, he put 'em all to shame,
Paved the only road through Paddy's Holler.[\[11\]](#)

Paddy's Holler! Paddy's Holler,
They come from near and far to Paddy's Holler.
It's the choicest spot in town, nobody seems to frown
When someone hollers, "Let's go up the holler!"

Now folks down there were kind to the sick and blind.
So everybody ponied up a dollar
To build a little home for Maggie all alone,[\[12\]](#)
Livin' on a hill in Paddy's Holler.

But one was mighty bold, his heart set on gold,
His mind was on the almighty dollar.
Some said "listen here, don't put that line post there!
'Cause that's the choicest spot in Paddy's Holler!"

In 1988 National Park Service Ranger, Amy Glass, interviewed Edgar Howard along with fellow islander and musician, Maurice Ballance. Maurice had this comment about Edgar:

“You know, Edgar says he’s the one that got Roy Rogers his job. Yep. They had the same agent. Gene Autry and Edgar’s band had the same agent. So when Gene Autry went in the Army in World War II, his agent was traveling around drinkin’ a few beers one night and asked [Edgar] if he knew anyone who had a good voice. So Edgar said, ‘Well I know a guy from Cincinnati.’ Said, ‘He’s got a pretty good voice, you know.’ So, he said, ‘Well send him down.’ And a couple of days later when he auditioned, he did, and he hired him. That’s what he says. He couldn’t play guitar, couldn’t ride a horse, but he made a big star out of him. [laughter].”[\[13\]](#)



Edgar Howard and Jack Sharkey

Above, Edgar Howard poses with former world heavyweight champion Jack Sharkey

(1902-1994). (Photo courtesy Walter Howard, Jr.)

In a personal interview, island natives, Fowler and Chloe O'Neal, commented on the Howard brothers' talent and intelligence. They mentioned several long-forgotten songs that Walter and Edgar often played. Some of their songs were bawdy barroom tunes, but one, *The Irish Jubilee*, was a peppy and spirited ditty that reflected the island's Irish heritage.

In 1977 musicologist and folklorist, Karen Helms, collected sixteen examples of Outer Banks traditional music that were included on a vinyl record, *Between the Sound and the Sea*. This album was sold on the Smithsonian's "Folkways" label. Edgar plays his banjo on four numbers.

Between the Sound and the Sea is now available on CD and may be purchased at <http://www.folkways.si.edu/between-the-sound-and-the-sea-music-of-the-north-carolina-outer-banks/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian>. You can also listen to selections of the songs on the Folkways web site.

By the 1950s Walter stopped playing music professionally, and retired to Norfolk, Virginia. He returned home to visit Ocracoke periodically where he was admired for his intelligence and prodigious vocabulary. He was especially remembered for his ability to recite Robert Green Ingersoll's poem, "After visiting the Tomb of Napoleon."^[14] Walter Howard died in 1960, shortly after moving to Miami. His ashes were scattered at sea.

Edgar also retired to Miami, but returned home to Ocracoke in the late 1970s. He entertained islanders at variety shows, church events, and fundraisers. In April 1979 Edgar's son, Ronnie Howard, opened Howard's Pub. It had been 50 years since alcohol had last been sold legally on Ocracoke Island. The grand opening was the talk of the village. Edgar noted that "we'll have hard-core hippies, hard-core Yankees, and hard-core Southerners. We're going to mix them all and I hope they all get along." The venture was an instant success, and Edgar was often present to entertain customers.

Edgar died in 1990, and was buried on Howard Street. His epitaph, "You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet!" are the words that Al Jolson, self-billed as "The World's Greatest Entertainer," and one of the United States' most famous and highest-paid vaudeville stars of the 1920s, told his audience before performing additional songs.

We can only imagine what Edgar's and Walter's encores will be.



Edgar Howard Tombstone

(Photo: Philip Howard)



Edgar Howard photo by Charles Martin



Walter Howard 1926

(Edgar Howard with banjo: photo by Charles Martin, courtesy of Valerie Howard Willis; Walter Howard in 1926, photo courtesy Walter Howard, Jr..)

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roseland_Ballroom

[2] After being closed for some years, Shea's Theatre was fully refurbished and reopened in 1969. In 1989 the theatre was renamed the Lucille Ball Little Theatre of Jamestown in honor of the comedienne's hometown connection.

[3] See Chapter 9 for more information and additional photos.

[4] <http://scratchyattic.blogspot.com/2015/10/jugs-washboards-kazoos.html>

[5] The Ocracoke village area, roughly parallel to, and between, the Back Road & Howard Street, from about the intersection of Fig Tree Lane and Back Road, past the back yards of houses now facing Back Road, then turning on a foot path behind the Methodist Church & Howard cemeteries and joining Howard Street and Lawton Lane, and/or continuing past the back of the Health Center to the schoolhouse.

[6] Ocracoke's most celebrated old-time fiddle player.

[7] Some local sources suggest that Paddy's Holler was named after a Philadelphia tap room popular with Ocracokers who had moved up north to work in the early 20th century.

[8] Mrs. Jones was Mary Ruth Kelly Jones, the first wife of early island developer and eccentric millionaire, Sam Jones. She was the granddaughter of George Gregory Howard, island sea captain who built the large house with widow's walk that backs up to Howard Street.

[9] One early Methodist Church was located on Howard Street, and the present Methodist Church, completed in 1943, is also located in the Paddy's Holler area.

[10] The WWII Navy Base was built where the NPS Visitors Center is today.

[11] Ocracoke's first paved road was a one-lane concrete strip starting at the Navy Base, turning where the Anchorage Inn is today, turning again down the Back Road, through Paddy's Holler, then turning across from the library, and "T-ing" at the end of the road. From the "T" the Navy added short aprons, and there they stored ammunition, hence the local name "Ammunition Dump Road," though it is officially called "Sunset Blvd."

[12] Maggie is "Mad Mag Howard," widow of John Simon Howard, sea captain, who took Margaret Eaton from Rockland Maine when she was only fifteen years old, married her, and brought her to Ocracoke. She became legendary for her quirky, odd, and very peculiar habits; hence her local name, Mad Mag.

[13] The interview was part of an endeavor called "Lifeways of the Outer Banks" sponsored by the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, National Park Service and The Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The original transcript is on deposit at the southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library.

[14] ***After Visiting the Tomb of Napoleon***

by Robert G. Ingersoll, 1882

A little while ago I stood by the grave of Napoleon, a magnificent tomb of gilt and gold, fit almost for a dead deity, and gazed upon the sarcophagus of black Egyptian marble where rests at last the ashes of the restless man. I leaned over the balustrade and thought about the career of the greatest soldier of the modern world.

I saw him walking upon the banks of the Seine contemplating suicide; I saw him at Toulon; I saw him putting down the mob in the streets of Paris; I saw him at the head of the army of Italy; I saw him crossing the bridge at Lodi with the tricolor in his hand; I saw him in Egypt in the shadows of the pyramids; I saw him conquer the Alps and mingle the eagles of France with the eagles of the crags. I saw him at Marengo, at Ulm and Austerlitz. I saw him in Russia, where the infantry of the snow and the cavalry of the wild blast scattered his legions like winter's withered leaves. I saw him at Leipsic in defeat and disaster, driven by a million bayonets back upon Paris, clutched like a wild beast, banished to Elba. I saw him escape and retake an Empire by the force of his genius. I saw him upon the frightful field of Waterloo, when chance and fate combined to wreck the fortunes of their former king. And I saw him at St. Helena, with his hands crossed behind him, gazing out upon the sad and solemn sea.

I thought of the orphans and widows he had made; of the tears that had been shed for his glory and of the only woman who had ever loved him pushed from his heart by the cold hand of ambition.

And I said I would rather have been a French peasant and worn wooden shoes. I would rather have lived in a hut with a vine growing over the door and the grapes growing purple in the kisses of the autumn sun. I would rather have been that poor peasant with my loving wife by my side, knitting as the day died out of the sky, with my children upon my knee and their arms about me. I would rather have been that man and gone down to the tongueless silence of the dreamless dust than to have been that imperial impersonation of force and murder known as Napoleon the Great.

And so I would ten thousand times.