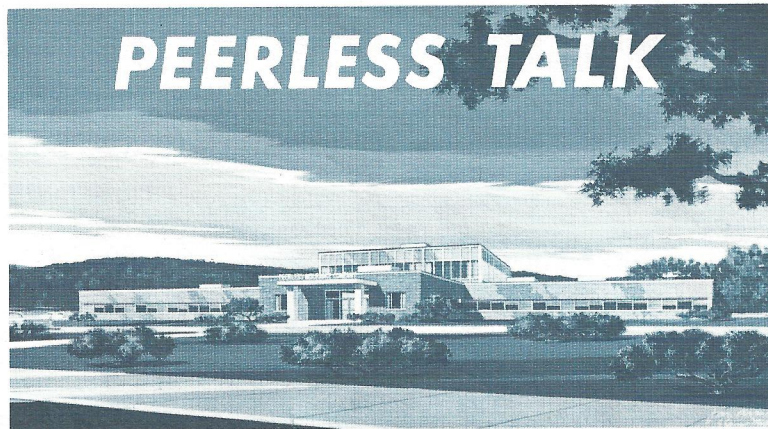




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# PEERLESS TALK



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## A New Look at an Old Legend

A mile or two south of the New Hampshire town of Henniker, stands a stately old colonial dwelling that is alleged to be haunted by the ghosts of a pirate captain and his beautiful housekeeper.

Tales of the supernatural have always been an important part of a New England storyteller's repertoire, and of all the ghost stories that have found their way into folklore anthologies, no folk tale, of recent years, has caused as much comment or aroused more interest than the legend that surrounds the Ocean Born Mary House. Few yarns are more fascinating, easier to believe or more fanciful.

The story of Ocean Born Mary had its beginning in 1720 when a band of Scotch-Irish immigrants sailed from Londonderry, Ireland, to join settlers in Londonderry, New Hampshire. Among the passengers were James and Elizabeth Wilson, who had become parents while at sea. As their ship neared the mainland of America, it was intercepted and boarded by pirates. While the buccaneers securely bound the passengers and crew, their captain went below to search the quarters. In a small, dimly lighted cabin he came upon a woman huddled in a corner with her arms protectively wrapped about an infant. The captain stared piercingly at the terrified mother.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" he demanded gruffly.

The trembling mother an-



*History and legend are combined in the Ocean Born Mary House on a side road near Henniker, New Hampshire.*

swered, "Girl".

The captain lowered his cutlass.

"Name the child Mary, and no one aboard this ship will be harmed."

Without another word he took his leave and returned topside. Avoiding explanation, he ordered the captives released, and quickly led his band of cutthroats off the vessel. A few minutes later he returned. While the passengers and crew gaped in silent misgiving, he went below. The captain gallantly approached Elizabeth Wilson and handed her a bolt of costly blue and white silk.

"When Mary weds, have this made into her wedding gown", he said.

Before Elizabeth Wilson could reply, he bowed his goodbye and again returned

to his own vessel.

A few days later the ship carrying the settlers docked in Boston. Ocean Mary, as she was now called, was looked upon with reverence, and the first generation of Londonderry settlers never forgot their debt to the child.

Each year a fast day was observed to thank God and Mary for their deliverance from an unmerciful death.

As the years passed Ocean Mary grew into a tall, statuesque beauty. In 1738 she married Thomas Wallace, and took her vows in a gown made from the silk given to her mother by the pirate captain. Pieces of this gown are now on display in the D.A.R. Museum in Washington, D.C., in Hillsboro, New Hampshire, and in the Tucker Free Library in Henniker.

Whether or not Ocean Mary was the first to be wed in the gown is still a matter of conjecture. The old records of Londonderry hint that Mary's mother, who had become a widow shortly after arriving in Boston, was remarried in the gown before handing it down to her daughter.

Ocean Mary became the mother of four sons and a daughter who grew into adulthood before she herself was left a widow in 1791. (The burial records of Londonderry substantiate the date of Thomas Wallace's death.) In 1794 Mary moved to Henniker.

The glitter of romance that had surrounded Ocean Mary in her lifetime dimmed with her death in 1814.

Not until 1900 was there a revival of interest in the story of Ocean Mary's encounter with buccaneers. In that year a Henniker poetess, Ida Graves, composed a poem about Mary for a national publication. In her poem she referred to Mrs. Wallace as "Ocean Born Mary". Closely following the publication of Ida's verse, a picture postcard of the Henniker house Mary supposedly lived in was offered for sale, and Ocean Born Mary was rescued from obscurity.

Sometime during the war years of World War I, L.M.A. Roy and his wife purchased the house that was pictured on the postcard. A short time later Mrs. Roy reported seeing strange lights in her upstairs windows. Another

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# A New Look at an Old Legend

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time she told of hearing death groans from the orchard and of seeing a shadowy image in the shape of a coach and four that was driven by a tall, beautiful lady. The story she related to Carl Camer for his book *The Hurricane's Children*, which was published in 1937, caused nationwide interest in the old house.

According to Mrs. Roy, the pirate captain who had named Mary never lost trace of her, and when he learned that she had become a widow, he purchased a large tract of land far removed from the sea, in Henniker, New Hampshire. Taking his ship's carpenter and a work crew of slaves to Henniker, the captain ordered them to build a house that was in keeping with the size and style of the very rich. When his retreat was completed, the buccaneer contacted Mary and asked her to become his housekeeper. She accepted, and the captain, to show his gratitude, bought her a handsome coach and four and surrounded her with the luxuries his ill gotten gains could afford. The two lived contentedly, but the captain still returned to the sea whenever he felt the need for adventure.

One day, after an exceptionally long absence from Henniker, he returned with a crew member who carried a huge wooden strong box that was obviously crammed with treasure. Mary watched as the captain and his aid, staggering under the weight of the chest, walked out toward the orchard in search of a safe cache. When the captain came back to the house, he was alone.

About a year after this incident, Ocean Mary, returning from an early afternoon ride in her elegant coach and four, discovered the captain lying quite dead in the orchard. A sailor's cutlass protruded from his midsection. Acting on her benefactor's earlier instructions, she tenderly carried the captain's body into the house and, with the help of her slaves, entombed it under a mammoth stone slab in front of the kitchen

fireplace.

The captain's passing was a shock to Mary, but she continued to live on in his house until her death in 1814.

It was this story that prompted me to drive to Henniker.

Situated on a mountain side with a panoramic background of blue hued hills and sleepy valleys, I found the Ocean Born Mary House. It still stands in shadowy splendor on its ancient foundation. Its brown, weather-worn unpainted facade lends credence to the tale told by the Roys. To stand in sight of the house is to stand in sight of pirates, buried treasure, murder and ghosts. I left the scene anxious to learn more about Ocean Mary and her buccaneer benefactor.

Driving into the town of Henniker, I stopped at the Tucker Free Library and asked the town librarian, Mrs. Evelyn Hollis, to direct me to the books on Ocean Born Mary. She led me to a shelf and withdrew one thin book that contained a three page story of Henniker's most talked about personality. I was disappointed and began to ask questions. At first my inquiries brought only casual response, but the deeper I probed, the more willing to talk Mrs. Hollis became. Her husband, a retired Coast Guardsman, joined the conversation, and I spent an hour or more with the Hollis'. After viewing a tiny patch of silk that came from Mary's wedding gown, the Hollis' suggested that I contact a retired Dartmouth professor who was writing a history of Henniker.

I called the professor and then drove to Hanover.

Francis L. Childs, for forty-five years a professor of English at Dartmouth, before his retirement in 1954, is in possession of most of the recorded data relating to Henniker. Professor Childs, now eighty-two, spry and alert, not only substantiated what I learned from the Hollis', but he added many significant details of his own.

Born in Henniker of ancestors who had settled in the town only six years after its

founding, Professor Childs has been acquainted with the story of Ocean Born Mary since early boyhood.

Mary Wallace never lived in the dwelling that is now known as the Ocean Born Mary House. Its construction was not supervised by a carpenter from a pirate's ship, but by Mary Wallace's oldest son, Robert. Robert Wallace, a judge of the court of common pleas from 1803 to 1813, had the house erected between the years 1784 and 1786. He lived in it until his death. In 1836 the dwelling was sold to a farmer named Washington Barry. The Barry family retained possession until 1864 when it was sold to Harris Campbell, who farmed the land for only five or six years. When Harris Campbell relinquished ownership, the house and land were acquired by the Dowlings, and remained with the family until the first decade of the twentieth century. The farm, no longer suited for productive cultivation, was free of occupants until it was purchased, sight unseen, by the Roys. The house is now owned by the David Russells.

Ocean Mary did live in Henniker, but it was with a younger son, William, who made spinning wheels and held a number of town offices, such as selectman, town surveyor and Justice of the Peace. His house, far less pretentious than his brother's, was built about 1790 and was located a half mile west of Robert's house.

Professor Childs is in possession of some interesting receipt books and account books that belonged to William. A receipt from a Henniker doctor, dated 1804 and signed with the words, "From son William, payment for treatment of his mother", lends proof to the fact that it was William and not Robert who cared for his mother.

William died in 1824, and his house was purchased twenty years later by the town of Henniker for use as a poor farm. The Wallace Poor Farm, as it became known, burned in 1920.

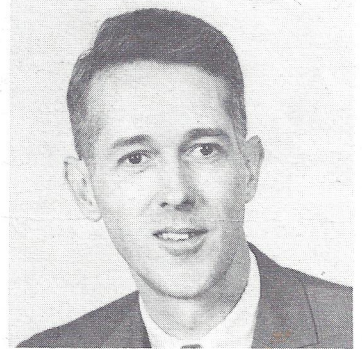
Neither the professor nor the Hollis', all natives of Henniker, remembered hearing talk of pirates or ghosts before the Roys purchased the Robert Wallace dwelling. And as Professor Childs stated, "If there had been a pirate captain living in the village of Henniker, the fact would have been known for miles, and the story would have been passed down from one generation to the next."

Professor Childs has spent a great amount of time researching the history of Ocean Born Mary. The facts he has amassed do not lend themselves to the story as related by the Roys. As Mr. Roy protested whenever a sceptic challenged his story, "I'd be a lot better off if Francis Childs wouldn't talk so much."

The first part of the Ocean Born Mary story is true and there is much to recommend a visit to the house in Henniker. And if you still prefer to believe in pirates, buried treasure, murder and ghosts, please ignore the facts in this article.

R.W.P.

## Underwriter



Stanley E. Hedner

Mr. Stanley E. Hedner has been appointed by Peerless as a casualty underwriter, to be stationed in the Company's branch office at 60 Glenwood Avenue, East Orange, New Jersey. This was done to give immediate and better service to Peerless and Netherlands Insurance Company agents in this territory.

Mr. Hedner graduated from Rahway High School, Rahway, New Jersey, in 1948. He attended Rutgers Univer-

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