

## AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE Mooncussers And Wreckers Of Chatham

by [Spencer Grey](#)

A mooncusser is defined as: "A land-based pirate who, on moonless nights along dangerous coasts, would demolish any legitimate lighthouses or beacons, erect a decoy signal fire in a different, deliberately misleading location, and, after having induced a shipwreck, subdue any survivors and plunder the wreckage for valuables."

Because its treacherous shoreline has seen so many shipwrecks over the years, Chatham is often associated with these nefarious men. The town even is recognized as home to mooncussers in Kipling's "Captains Courageous," when a crewmember of the fishing boat at the center of the story yells to a Chatham fisherman, "Ye Scrabbletowners, ye Chatham wreckers, git aout with your brick in your stocking..." Another persisting legend is that of a member of the crew of a schooner that was wrecked off of Monomoy swimming toward the shore. As he approaches the beach, he calls out, "What town is this?" "Chatham," those on the shore answer. "Goodbye," he says and heads back out to sea.

But according to authorities on Cape Cod history, notably Henry C. Kittredge in his book *The Mooncussers of Cape Cod*, there never was a mooncusser on Cape Cod. As he explains, there have been plenty of wreckers and beachcombers, many of whom have used the name of mooncussers because in both cases, they salvaged the cargoes of shipwrecks. But rather than incapacitating or killing the crews of wrecked vessels, the wreckers first saved them and only then proceeded to garner what they could from the wreck. In fact, wreckers and life saving crews usually cooperated in saving the lives of shipwrecked sailors. Often the wreckers would venture out in weather that the life saving crews considered too treacherous.

One of the most notable wreckers in Chatham during the end of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th was George Bloomer. At that time hundreds of sail and steam vessels passed by Chatham's eastern shore daily and often they ran afoul of the treacherous bars off of our coast. So as to be ready at any moment to go to the rescue of a stranded ship, Bloomer and his crew kept a twenty-two foot dory in a strategic spot on the beach.

Early in the morning of Dec. 6, 1885, a fierce storm came up, with winds so powerful that a man had to lean into it simply to stay on his feet. George Bloomer, his brother Billy, his uncle Francisco, and Willis and Andrew Bearse rowed across the cut through between Morris Island and Monomoy to the Life Saving Station captained by Nat Gould. From there they could see the Grecian, a two-masted schooner aground beyond the Outer Bar being pounded by the waves. Captain Gould told George that because no boat could go out in such fierce weather, they would have to hope that the wreck would wash across to the Inner Bar, where they could rescue the crew with a breeches buoy. But George told Nat that he was going to call for a crew to go out. Nat said, "Are you crazy, George?" and he replied, "No, not crazy, just the same as ever, Crazy George Bloomer."

Fifty men volunteered to help launch a boat through the 15-foot-high surf so that George, Billy, Francisco, and the Bearse boys could row out to the wreck. Twice they ran into the frigid water up to their armpits to send the boat over a wave, but twice the boats broached and were washed back onto the beach and smashed to splinters. The third time they succeeded in rowing clear of the surf on the beach and struggled out toward the wreck. It took them over an hour of strenuous rowing just to go 200 yards before approaching the wreck close enough for the five men clinging to it to attempt to jump, but it was not until they passed by the wreck for the third time that the men got up their courage to leap. Four of them landed in the boat, but the captain went into the sea. Bloomer managed to grab him with his one free arm and slowly pull him aboard. A huge wave caught the boat and carried it the 350 yards to the beach and safety.

But when the crew of any wreck had been saved, the wreckers would reap their reward. One famous wreck was that of the *Horatio Hall* that ran aground off Chatham in 1909. It lay on the bottom of a shoal, but her upper decks were out of the water, making it possible for anyone with a boat to make free with her

cargo. Many houses in Chatham stocked their china cupboards from this wreck, and mirrors of various sizes were also salvaged, including one that used to hang on the wall of Elmer Emery's pool room, whose billiard table, balls, and cues also came from the wreck. One of her quarterboards adorns the barn of the house on the corner of Cross Street and Kent Place.

Even more famous was the wreck of the Onondaga that washed ashore in 1907 a little north of where Chatham Bars Inn now stands. The ship was so large that they had to send for professional wreckers to refloat her, but in the meantime the townspeople of Chatham and Orleans made free with its cargo of potatoes, candy, gravestones, whiskey, blankets, sheets, pianos, wrapping paper, champagne and coffee, and much, much more. There were so many five-pound boxes of Lowney's chocolates on the beach that boys became tired of carrying them home and so would just take a handful from each box and leave the rest behind. Other popular items in this loot were beer, Scotch, and champagne. There were so many potatoes that people took them home by the cartload.

Although mooncussers were only legendary, wrecks were so plentiful during the 19th and early 20th centuries that nearly everyone in town became a wrecker, both to furnish his house and to make some extra money.



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