

Crew Murders Passengers, Fiery Ghost Ship Still Sails

(The following legend of North Carolina was read by Miss Ethel Whitehurst, Beaufort, at the meeting of the County Historical Association at Beaufort Oct. 25).

This legend appeared in a magazine published in Charleston in 1802.

Suggestion for it came from the history of the Palatines, German Protestants who fled to England in the 18th century. By 1709, 13,000 of these had settled in England and become a social problem.

Queen Anne agreed with the government upon a colonization scheme proposed by the Baron Christoph Von Graffenried, whereby, among other things, Von Graffenried was to transport 100 Palatine families to the Neuse-Trent area of North Carolina.

In January 1710, the Palatines left England. "After a disastrous and stormy voyage of 13 weeks, during which about one-half of the settlers died, the transports reached Virginia, and as they entered the James River a French privateer plundered one of the vessels and deprived the passengers of everything they had.

The group, greatly reduced in numbers, finally reached the Chowan River, where Thomas Pollock provided them with 'certain necessities' and furnished ships to transport them to their ultimate destination." Thus the Palatines were the first settlers of New Bern.

The story reads: "There is a tradition of the North Carolina shores, which we have at present in a crude state, but which, in the hands of some of our romancers, may be wrought into a most beautiful fiction. It has a subject of even recent assertion, certified by the sworn testimonies of credible persons, that, annually, at a certain period in every year, a luminous object, having the exact appearance of a ship on fire, appears upon the coast.

"Seeming to burn furiously, it yet speeds along, undiminished in fiery bulk and volume, — sailing with incredible rapidity until out of sight, but again suddenly re-appearing at the original point, and pursuing the same identical route—and in this progress, to and fro, it continues throughout that particular night of the year which is appropriate to its exhibition."

This singular spectacle is accounted for by the following story:

The burning ship goes by the name of the "Ship of the Palatines." The tradition is that some time in the reign of the first George, a small company of that class of emigrants, who were known as German Palatines, were provided with a ship in London, at the public expense, that they might be transported to this country.

It is well known that this sort of assistance was frequently rendered to a class of people who in most cases were exceedingly poor.

At all events, the captain, determined upon possessing himself of the wealth of the poor emigrants, contrived to baffle their purpose of landing upon the shores which seemed to them so high and inviting.

It was not difficult for him so to manage his vessel, as to convince them that landing was impossible until the ensuing day. The hope deferred, which maketh the heart grow sick, drove the greater part of them to their hammocks. Their baggage, with the unhappily exposed wealth, was again restored to the interior of the ship.

But a few young men sat upon the deck, watching the faint lines of the land, until swallowed up in darkness; even then, with eyes straining in the direction of the shore for which they yearned, conversing together, in their own language, in hope and confident expectation of their future fortunes.

While thus employed, the captain and his crew, in another part of the vessel, were concealing their

fearful scheme of villainy. The hour grew late, the night deepened; the few Germans who remained on deck, stretched themselves out where they were, and were soon composed in slumber.

While thus—under the peaceful cope and canopy of heaven—in a slumber which the solemn starlight, looking down upon them seemed to hallow, the merciless murderers, with cautious footsteps and bared weapons, set upon them. The cabin door of the vessel had been fastened—the entrance closed to the hold.

Each seaman stood by his victim, and at a signal they all struck together. There was no chance given for struggle—the murderers had planned their crime with consummate deliberation and skill.

A spasmodic throe of some muscular frame—a faint cry—a slight groan may have escaped the victims—but little more. At least, the poor sleepers below were unroused by the event.

The deck cleared of the murdered men, the murderers descended stealthily to the work below. Passing from berth to berth with the most fiendish coolness, they struck—seldom twice—almost always fatally—men, women and children; the old, the young—the tender and strong—the young mother, and the poor angel-innocent but lately sent to earth—all perished, or were incapable of arresting the objects of the criminals. We may fancy for ourselves the horror of such a scene.

We may imagine some one or more of the victims waking under the ill-directed knife—awakening to a vain struggle—unkindly alarming those into consciousness who had no strength for conflict. Perhaps, a mother may have found strength to rise to her knees, imploring mercy for the dear child of her heart and hope, and may have been suffered to live sufficiently long to see its death struggle, its wild contortions, in the grasp of the unrelenting assassin.

Art may not describe such a scene, truly, an imagination can hardly conceive it. They perished, one and all—that little family of emigrants — and the murderers, grouped around the treasures which had dammed their hearts into the worst hell of covetousness crime, were now busy among themselves; what divisions they made, and with what temper they carried on the consultation, is, of course, only matter for conjecture.

But tradition, which is always sufficiently courageous for conjecture, asserts, that having possessed themselves of all that was valuable in the ship—all that could be easily appropriated—they determined to set her on fire, as the only mode to conceal thoroughly the bloody testimonies of their crime.

Their boats were accordingly launched at midnight. The night was still calm, still beautiful, still looking down as innocently as if there were no crimes—as if death had never been born among the children of men.

Having transferred their spoils to the boats, and completed their preparations, the vessel was set on fire. The fire, fed by tar and other matter, seized instantly upon the combustible fabric.

The flames rose triumphantly in air, rushing from stem to stern, from keel to bulwark, from the deck to the highest point of the towering mast, involving shroud and sail, rope and line, in one general blaze; but, to the astonished eyes of the murderers, these objects soon became distinctly articulated, each in its own outline, by the bright, burning, but unconsuming fire.

Fast as they fled—stoutly as they pulled for land—they gazed with horror and consternation upon the wondrous spectacle behind them—a ship on fire that would not burn—a fire that would not destroy its object, nor conceal, in its smoke, the form which it so completely enveloped! Strange and wondrous spectacle indeed.

It continued all night to burn—speeding on with the wind—now passing out of sight, and anon, visible, flaming forever, back again, on the very spot where the crime had been committed.

With the dawn of day, it had

See PALATINE, Page 4, Sec. 2

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