



On this ship built for cargo you were huddled below deck
 Those with a few more farthings, above you in cabins took their rest
 You prayed there in the darkness and sang all the old songs inside your head
 And you dreamed of the far horizon and the promises it held.

In Cohasset Bay at the end of the day, arose the fiercest storm,
 The weary Brig embattled now, by crashing waves, and howling wind,
 Losing anchor, mast and rigging, tossed and shattered on Grampus Ledge,
 While Angels ferried perished souls, from their torment to eternal rest.

But it's not within this hallowed ground
 that your mortal bones are lain,

Those not claimed by a watery grave, it's beyond the gate you rest.
 But a Celtic cross stands proud and tall, towering over all
 And in solid stone your story etched to live on and on,
 Of when the hungry braved the ocean waves, on the ill-fated Brig St. John.

—Excerpt from *Lost Souls* by Mairín Uí Chéide

Read the entire poem on ssirishtrail.org.



Celtic Cross Monument
 Cohasset Central Cemetery
 Cohasset, MA

The South Shore Irish Heritage Trail is a journey into the past through scenic towns in coastal Massachusetts. These communities attracted Irish immigrants in large numbers. Their descendants comprise upwards of 40% of the South Shore's population. Small wonder the region bears the nickname, "The Irish Riviera." In traveling the Trail from Weymouth to Plymouth, you will see visual evidence of the

lives of these early Irish – places where they lived, worked and built new lives in a country far distant from their homeland. There are monuments to the tragedies that marked their escape from famine and disease, evidence of the industries they built to sustain their lives and the seaside places where they found entertainment and relief from the heat of the city. To follow the South Shore Irish Heritage Trail is to walk in the footsteps of one of the many ethnic groups that helped build America. We invite you to come along!

The Irish have always found sustenance from the sea and so it was when they began arriving in Cohasset. The town was originally part of Hingham and is named for the rock ledges that made farming difficult. So its inhabitants turned to fishing for cod and mackerel, a thriving industry.

The ships that brought Irish refugees to Boston during the potato famine were well aware of the dangers of the Cohasset rocks but tragically, on October 7, 1849, the *Brig St. John* was caught in a vicious northeast gale and driven onto Grampus Ledge. Ninety-nine men, women and children perished in the boiling seas. Only 21 survived.

The Irish victims of the St. John disaster were never forgotten. A massive Celtic Cross honors their memory in Cohasset Central Cemetery. In October, 2021, a granite bench was added on the site of their final resting place. Every year, a memorial Mass is offered in Cohasset for the victims of the *Brig St. John* and is always well attended.

The granite bench, situated just outside the boundary of Cohasset Central Cemetery, marks the final resting place of some who perished in this tragic shipwreck. The inscription keeps alive the memory of the ninety-nine Irish emigrants who died in the worst shipwreck in the history

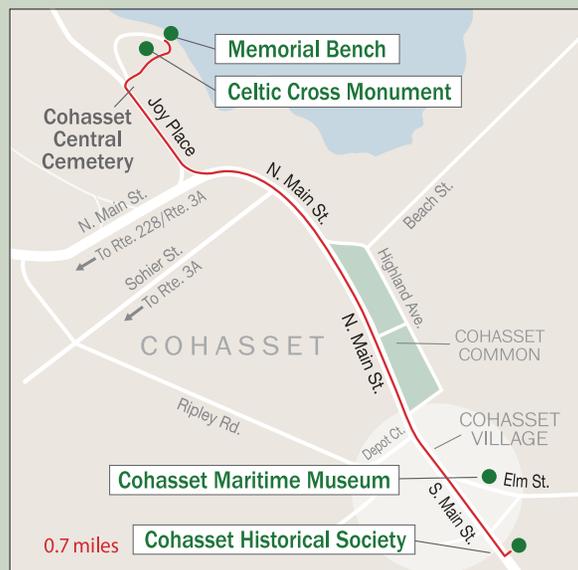


of the South Shore. Each year, on the Sunday closest to October 7th, the Plymouth Division of the Ancient Order of Hibernians hosts a Mass at Saint Anthony's Church, commemorating the Brig Saint John and honoring the men, women and children who drowned in the fierce nor'easter in October, 1849.



The memorial bench

The inscription on the front of the bench, a traditional Irish prayer, translates as "May they rest in the company of the saints." The Celtic Cross is seen on the hill in the distance.



Cohasset Historical Society
 106 South Main Street, Cohasset, MA 02025
cohassethistoricalsociety.org
 (781) 383-1434

Cohasset Maritime Museum
 6 Elm Street, Cohasset, MA 02025
 Check with the venue for current hours of operation.

ssirishtrail.org



Ninety-nine souls were lost...



View from the beach to Minot's Ledge Light, showing rocks exposed at ebbing tide



(Inset) Michael Snow Photography

MINOT'S LEDGE

OFF BOSTON HARBOR



First Minot's Ledge Light, lithograph c. 1850

The iron structure was being built at the time of the *Brig St. John* but would be destroyed in 1851 by a nor'easter.

October 7th, 1849

The South Shore's most deadly shipwreck took place on October 7th, 1849. Ferocious winds and enormous waves smashed the *Brig St. John* onto Grampus Ledge off Cohasset, Massachusetts.



Second Minot's Ledge Light

A granite lighthouse was then constructed from 1855-1860 and Minot's Ledge Light still stands to this day. Photo by USCG

Hoping for a better future...

Skeletal refugees – men, women and children—from Counties Clare and Galway on the West Coast of Ireland faced a 4 to 7-week ocean voyage to America. They took little with them because, in truth, they had nothing.



This trunk from a shipwreck survivor is small, measuring a mere 16" across. All the possessions of a passenger or even of an entire family would have been in it.

Courtesy of the Cohasset Historical Society

"It was the nightmarish and appalling conditions throughout the country that forced so many to take the path to a famine ship."¹

Coffin Ships

"Coffin Ships" carried goods to Europe and desperate passengers fleeing *An Gorta Mór*, or The Great Hunger, on the return trip to America or Canada. Deplorable conditions caused many deaths on the voyage with many dying from "ships fever." Three or more people healthy and ill slept in the same bed spreading disease throughout the ship. Many famine victims died trying to reach "The Land of Hope."



Replica of the Brig St. John
Courtesy of the Cohasset Historical Society



On his way to Provincetown, Henry David Thoreau heard about the wreck of the *Brig St. John* and took a side trip to Cohasset. Thoreau wrote about his experience on the beach in "*The Shipwreck*" – the first chapter in his book *Cape Cod*. His musings might seem surprising to readers. Read excerpts on the South Shore Irish Heritage Trail website.

¹ From the introduction to *Coffin Ship: The Wreck of the Brig St. John* by William Henry, Mercier Press, Cork, Ireland, 2009

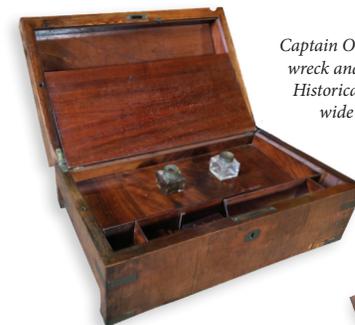
Captain Oliver and some of his crew escaped in a lifeboat, leaving many men, women, and children to drown in the hold.



Courtesy of the Cohasset Historical Society

An unsolved mystery...

Did Captain Oliver keep two logs on this fateful voyage? There is speculation that one log was for the owner, the other was for himself. More on Captain Oliver and the mysteries tainting his name are on the South Shore Irish Heritage Trail website.



Captain Oliver's writing desk survived the wreck and is now cared for by the Cohasset Historical Society. The desk measures 18" wide and still has the original inkwell and powder shaker.



A pull-out compartment on the left side may have housed two logs or perhaps it was where stationery was stored.

Courtesy of the Cohasset Historical Society