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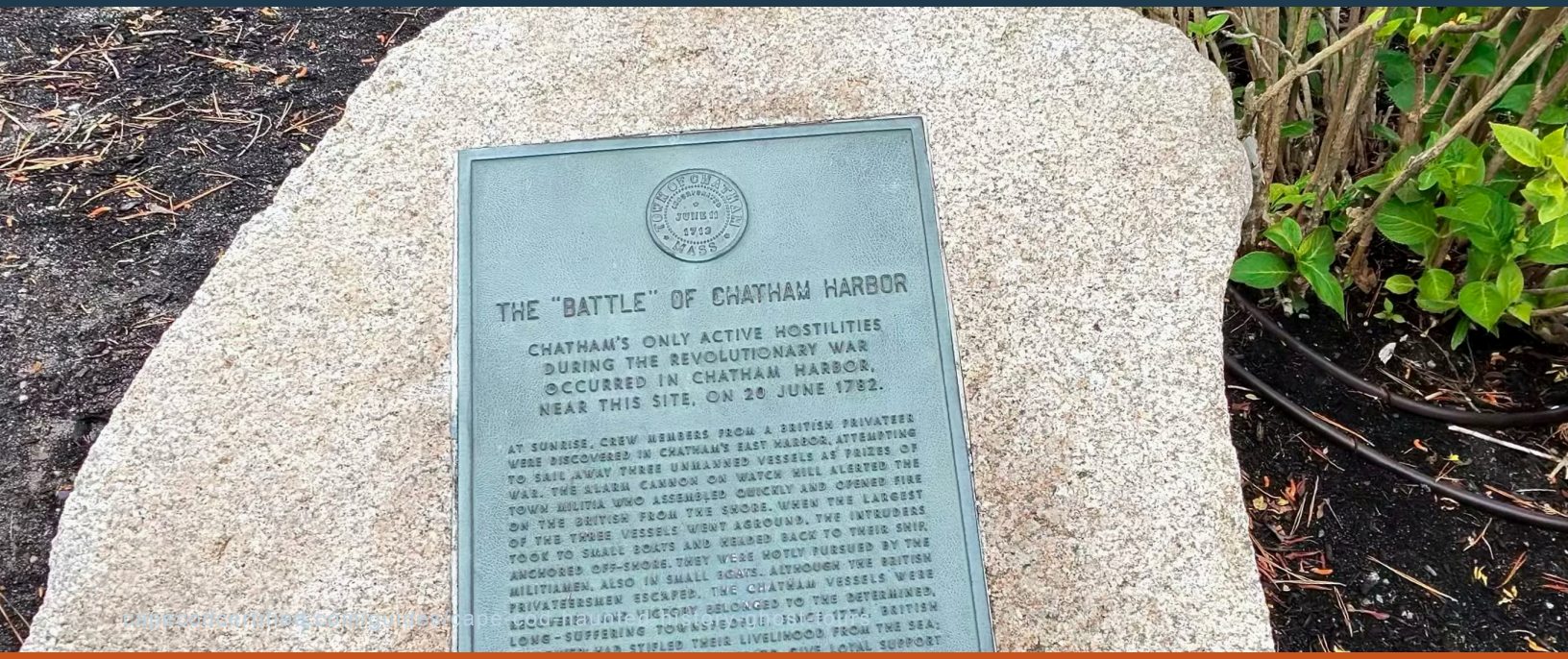
Haunted Cape Cod: Ghost Tours, Shipwrecks & Dark History

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



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October on the Outer Cape is unlike anywhere else in New England. The summer crowds have vanished, the fog rolls in off the Atlantic without apology, and the light — that famous, silver Cape Cod light — turns flat and strange. The dunes go quiet. The old cemeteries look exactly like what they are. This is the Cape Cod that haunts people long after they leave, and it is the Cape Cod that has been haunting the record books since the first Pilgrim ships dropped anchor in Provincetown Harbor in 1620.

Cape Cod has more shipwrecks per square mile than almost anywhere on earth. Sailors called this stretch of coastline the Graveyard of the Atlantic, and the name was earned. The outer bars off Chatham, the Peaked Hill Bars that run parallel to Provincetown's Atlantic shore, and the treacherous shoals of Wellfleet have collectively swallowed thousands of vessels over four centuries. The bones of those ships — and the men and women aboard them — still lie beneath the same water you swim in every summer. This guide covers the ghost tours, the dark history, the haunted landmarks, and the atmospheric Outer Cape towns that make fall the most compelling season to visit.

The Whydah: America's Most Famous Shipwreck

No story captures Cape Cod's violent maritime past quite like the wreck of the Whydah Gally. On the night of April 26, 1717, during a fierce nor'easter, the pirate ship Whydah struck the outer bars off Wellfleet and broke apart. The vessel had been a slave ship before the pirate Samuel "Black Sam" Bellamy captured her in the Caribbean and refitted her as his flagship. Bellamy — called the "Prince of Pirates" for his charisma and his contempt for the wealthy — went down with 102 of his crew. Only two men survived.

The Whydah lay on the bottom for nearly 270 years. Then, in 1984, underwater archaeologist Barry Clifford located the wreck approximately 1,500 feet off the Wellfleet coast. What Clifford's team pulled from the sand has made history: the Whydah is the only fully authenticated pirate ship ever recovered. Thousands of artifacts — coins, weapons, rigging, the ship's bell inscribed "THE WHYDAH GALLY 1716" — confirmed the identity beyond doubt.

The best place to encounter the Whydah story is the **Whydah Pirate Museum** in West Yarmouth, on Route 28 in the Mid Cape. The museum holds the actual artifacts recovered from the wreck site, including items belonging to Bellamy's crew. It is not a replica or a reconstruction — these are genuine objects that went down with a pirate crew in a storm three centuries ago. For visitors who want to pair the museum with the actual wreck geography, Wellfleet is out on the Outer Cape along Route 6, so plan it as its own stop.

The Outer Cape's Other Shipwrecks

The Whydah is the most famous, but it is far from alone. The Peaked Hill Bars off Provincetown's Atlantic-facing shore — the eastern side that catches sunrise — have claimed more vessels than historians have been able to count. The United States Life-Saving Service operated stations all along this coast in the nineteenth century specifically because the wrecks were so frequent and so deadly.

Off Chatham, the outer bars shift constantly with every storm and have destroyed ships from colonial times through the twentieth century. Chatham sits at the sharp elbow of the Cape, where the Atlantic runs hard against the shoals. Local fishermen still navigate these waters with caution. The **Cape Cod National Seashore**, which stretches from Chatham north through Wellfleet, Truro, and Provincetown, preserves much of this coastline largely as it was when those ships went down.

Ghost Tours: Walking the Dark Streets of Provincetown

Provincetown is the undisputed capital of haunted Cape Cod, and not only because of its maritime history. The town's 400-year layered past — Pilgrim landing site, whaling port, Portuguese fishing community, artists' colony, LGBTQ+ sanctuary — has produced a density of stories, legends, and documented unexplained events that rival any historic New England city.

Several companies run **Provincetown ghost tours**, particularly in the weeks surrounding Halloween. These walking tours cover the town's oldest neighborhoods: the narrow streets off Commercial Street, the historic cemeteries, the old waterfront buildings that once housed chandleries and whale oil rendering operations. The tours have become one of the most popular fall activities on the Outer Cape. Book in advance — spots fill quickly through October.

The **Pilgrim Monument**, which rises 252 feet above the town, offers a commanding view of the harbor and the Atlantic dunes beyond, and the surrounding Provincetown Heritage Museum holds artifacts connecting the town to its earliest and most turbulent history. At dusk in October, with fog moving in off Cape Cod Bay to the west, even the most skeptical visitor tends to go quiet.

Barnstable Village: The Hannah Screecham Legend

Down-Cape in Barnstable Village, the ghost lore takes a different form. The most persistent legend belongs to Hannah Screecham, a figure whose origin story varies depending on who tells it — a scorned woman, a colonial outcast, a presence said to haunt the marshes and woods around the Barnstable area. The name itself has been part of local oral tradition for generations.

The **Barnstable County Courthouse**, which sits at the center of Barnstable Village, has its own documented ghost lore. The building dates to the nineteenth century and occupies ground that has seen centuries of judicial proceedings, public punishment, and community grief. Local historians and paranormal researchers have documented accounts of unexplained sounds and activity in the building.

Barnstable Village rewards a slow walk. The road through the village runs along the bay side — the western shore — and on a clear October afternoon the light over Barnstable Harbor turns golden before it fades. The old homes, the ancient church, and the general stillness of the village make it easy to understand why ghost stories took root here.

Haunted Lighthouses: Highland Light and Nauset Light

Two of Cape Cod's most photographed lighthouses carry persistent ghost stories alongside their keeper histories.

Highland Light in Truro — also called Cape Cod Light — is the oldest and tallest lighthouse on the Cape, first lit in 1797. It stands on a clay bluff above the Atlantic, on the ocean-facing eastern shore, and it was a critical navigation point for sailors rounding the Outer Cape. The current tower dates to 1857. Former keepers and their families lived isolated lives at this posting, and the stories attached to the light reflect that isolation. The Highland Light area is part of the Cape Cod National Seashore and is open to visitors; the lighthouse itself offers tours seasonally.

Nauset Light in Eastham, set back from the Atlantic coast near the National Seashore's main visitor areas, has a more layered history than its cheerful red-and-white appearance suggests. The light has been moved, rebuilt, and consolidated over its history — the original Three Sisters lighthouses once stood nearby, and their remains are preserved a short walk inland. Ghost stories tied to Nauset Light tend to involve the keepers' era, when the position demanded long solitary watches above a coast that regularly produced wrecks and drownings.

The Old Burying Ground, Eastham

The **Old Burying Ground in Eastham** is one of the oldest cemeteries in Massachusetts, with grave markers dating to the seventeenth century. It sits near the Eastham Town Green, quiet and accessible, shaded by old trees. The stones are weathered to the point where some inscriptions require effort to read — names and dates erased by three and a half centuries of Cape Cod winters.

In October, with leaves down and the light low, this cemetery is genuinely affecting. It is not theatrical or staged. It is simply very old and very present. The people buried here were among the first English settlers on the Outer Cape, and the lives recorded on those stones — short lives, many of them, lost to disease, childbirth, and the sea — are as close as you can get to the founding generation of this place.

Christa Worthington and the Dark Side of Truro

Cape Cod's dark history is not only centuries old. On January 6, 2002, the body of writer Christa Worthington was found at her home in Truro. Her two-year-old daughter was found alive beside her. The case remained unsolved for three years before Christopher McCowen was convicted of the murder in 2006.

The Worthington case became a dark chapter in the life of the Outer Cape community, exposing the year-round life of Truro — the off-season isolation, the class tensions between part-time residents and year-round locals, and the ways a small community can fracture under pressure. The case was documented in extensive journalism and later became the subject of a book and documentary.

Truro in October is one of the emptiest places on the East Coast. The population drops from summer thousands to a few hundred permanent residents. The roads go quiet. The fog comes in from the Atlantic side — the ocean-facing eastern shore — and sits for days at a time. It is beautiful and bleak in equal measure.

Planning Your Haunted Cape Cod Visit

Best time to visit: Mid-September through the end of October. The crowds are gone, the weather is cool and often foggy, and the landscape shifts into something unmistakably autumnal. The towns feel more like themselves.

Suggested route: Start in Barnstable Village for the courthouse and Hannah Screecham lore, drive north on Route 6 to Eastham for the Old Burying Ground and Nauset Light, continue through Wellfleet (the Whydah wreck site lies offshore to the east), push north to Truro for Highland Light, and end in Provincetown for an evening ghost tour. The Whydah Pirate Museum is in West Yarmouth, on Route 28, if you want the artifacts before or after the drive.

What to bring: Good walking shoes, a warm layer — the wind off the Atlantic in October is serious — and a flashlight if you plan to visit cemeteries or lighthouses near dusk.

FAQ

Q: Are Provincetown ghost tours appropriate for children?

Most Provincetown ghost tour operators describe their tours as suitable for older children — roughly ten and up — though parents should check with each specific company before booking. The content covers real historical deaths, shipwrecks, and colonial-era violence, which some younger children may find distressing. The tours are walking tours, typically lasting 60 to 90 minutes, and are conducted entirely outdoors, so dress for the weather.

Q: Where exactly did the Whydah sink?

The Whydah Gally sank approximately 1,500 feet off the coast of Wellfleet, Massachusetts, in 1717. The exact coordinates of the wreck site are managed by the Whydah excavation team and are not publicly posted, as the site is an active archaeological excavation protected under state and federal law. The best way to engage with the wreck is through the **Whydah Pirate Museum in West Yarmouth**, which holds the recovered artifacts and tells the full story of Barry Clifford's discovery and the ongoing archaeological work.

Q: Is the Old Burying Ground in Eastham open to the public?

Yes. The Old Burying Ground in Eastham is a public historic site open during daylight hours. It is located near the Eastham Town Green, off Route 6, and there is no admission fee. Visitors are asked to treat the site with respect — it is both an active burial ground and a significant historic landmark, and the old stones are fragile.

Q: Can you visit Highland Light in Truro?

Yes. Highland Light is located within the Cape Cod National Seashore in Truro and is open for tours during the summer and early fall season. The lighthouse is managed by the Truro Historical Society. Hours and admission fees apply; check current information before visiting, as the fall schedule differs from the summer schedule. The surrounding grounds, which sit on a bluff above the Atlantic's eastern shore, are accessible year-round as part of the National Seashore.

Q: What is the best base town for exploring haunted Cape Cod?

Provincetown is the strongest base for Outer Cape haunted history — it has multiple ghost tour operators, and a dense concentration of historic architecture and maritime lore within walking distance. Eastham is a good central alternative, with easy drives to Wellfleet, Truro, and Provincetown along Route 6. Chatham works well for visitors focused on the outer bars shipwreck history and the character of the down-Cape villages.

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