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The Whydah Pirate Ship: Cape Cod's Greatest Underwater Treasure Story

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

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Off the Atlantic coast of Wellfleet, roughly 1,500 feet from shore in about 14 feet of churning sand and water, lies the most significant pirate shipwreck ever discovered. The Whydah Gally sank in a violent nor'easter on April 26, 1717, taking with her more than a hundred men, the most audacious pirate of his era, and an estimated $400 million worth of treasure in today's dollars. For more than 250 years, the wreck stayed hidden beneath the shifting Cape Cod seabed. Today, it is a National Historic Landmark still being actively excavated — and the Whydah Pirate Museum in West Yarmouth gives visitors an extraordinary, hands-on encounter with the real artifacts pulled from the deep.

This is not a legend. It is documented history, and Cape Cod sits at its center.

The Ship: Built for Darkness, Captured by a Legend

The Whydah Gally was built in 1715 in England as a slave ship — fast, heavily armed, and designed to make the brutal transatlantic crossing profitable. She was 102 feet long, carried 18 cannons, and was named after the West African slave-trading port of Ouidah (in present-day Benin). She completed at least one voyage in the slave trade before her fate changed entirely.

In early 1717, the Whydah was on a return voyage from Jamaica when she was intercepted by a pirate fleet commanded by Samuel Bellamy — known to history as "Black Sam" Bellamy. After a three-day chase through the Windward Passage, the Whydah's captain surrendered the ship. Bellamy, then just 28 years old, claimed her as his flagship.

At the time of his death just months later, Samuel Bellamy was the wealthiest pirate in recorded history. In little more than a year of raiding — beginning in 1716 — he and his crew had captured more than 50 ships across the Caribbean and Atlantic seaboard. He was known, unusually for his era, for a kind of egalitarian ethos among his crew: the Whydah's articles of agreement gave every man an equal vote and an equal share of the plunder. His crew was multinational — English, African, Caribbean, Native American, and more. The Whydah under Bellamy's command carried wealth stripped from dozens of vessels: gold and silver coins, jewelry, weapons, trade goods, and the personal possessions of hundreds of people from across the Atlantic world.

The Wreck: A Cape Cod Storm Claims Everything

Bellamy was sailing the Whydah north along the Atlantic shore of Cape Cod in late April 1717, reportedly intending to careen the ship — scrape the hull clean — somewhere along the Cape. On the evening of April 26, a ferocious nor'easter moved in without warning. Winds reached hurricane force. Visibility dropped to nothing. The Whydah and at least two other vessels in Bellamy's fleet were caught in open water.

The Whydah struck a sandbar off Wellfleet's outer Atlantic shore. Within minutes, the force of the surf capsized and broke apart the ship. Of roughly 145 men aboard, only two from the Whydah itself survived: Thomas Davis, a Welsh carpenter, and John Julian, a young Miskito Native American from Central America who had sailed with Bellamy from the Caribbean. In the days after the storm, 102 bodies were recovered and counted along the Wellfleet shore.

The colonial authorities at the time were merciless. Davis and Julian were arrested. Davis was eventually acquitted at trial; Julian's fate was far darker. He was enslaved by a Massachusetts colonist — a grim coda to the story of a man who had survived the impossible only to lose his freedom on the shore.

The Crown's investigators arrived quickly, led by a Justice of the Peace named John Cyprian Lothrop, and several bodies and scattered goods washed ashore. Cotton Mather, the Boston minister, visited two of the surviving pirates

from companion vessels who were later hanged, and wrote about the wreck in his journal. The historical record was clear and detailed. The wreck itself, however, would not be found for another 267 years.

The Discovery: A Cape Cod Diver Changes History

Barry Clifford grew up on Cape Cod hearing local stories about the Whydah. As an adult, he became a commercial diver and, eventually, a maritime explorer. He spent years in archives and libraries piecing together the historical record — contemporary accounts, court documents, salvage reports from 1717 — to triangulate where the ship had gone down.

In 1984, Clifford's team used a magnetometer to survey the seafloor off Wellfleet's outer Atlantic coast and located a powerful anomaly. When divers went down, they found cannonballs, rigging, and coins. Then they found the ship's bell.

The bell bore an inscription that eliminated any possible doubt: **WHYDAH GALLY 1716**. It was the first legally recovered pirate treasure in United States history. The discovery made international headlines, but for Cape Codders, it felt like confirmation of something they had always known was out there, just offshore.

The Excavation: 200,000 Artifacts and Counting

The excavation of the Whydah has continued for four decades and is still ongoing. More than 200,000 artifacts have been brought to the surface, making this one of the most significant underwater archaeological excavations in American history.

The finds span the full breadth of life aboard a pirate ship in the early 18th century: gold and silver coins from Spain, Portugal, England, and the Americas; gold dust and nuggets still in leather pouches; jewelry, including a silk stocking with gold coins and a human leg bone still inside; cannons, blunderbusses, pistols, and cutlasses; navigational instruments; personal items like combs and buttons that tell the story of individual crew members. Among the most remarkable recoveries are items identified as belonging to Bellamy himself — the most powerful pirate of his time, whose personal effects now rest in West Yarmouth.

The wreck site was designated a National Historic Landmark, and excavation continues under permits from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Each summer diving season, the team works the site, and new artifacts continue to emerge from the sand.

The Whydah Pirate Museum: Where to See It All

16 MacMillan Wharf, Provincetown, MA 02657

The Whydah Pirate Museum, at 674 Route 28 in West Yarmouth in the Mid Cape, is the only place in the world where you can see actual, authenticated pirate treasure recovered from an identified pirate ship. This is not a replica exhibit. These are the real objects.

The museum houses an extraordinary collection of Whydah artifacts including:

- **The ship's bell** — the object that proved everything, inscribed "Whydah Gally 1716"
- **Cannons and cannonballs** recovered directly from the wreck site
- **Gold and silver coins** from the ship's plunder
- **Weapons** including muskets, pistols, and edged weapons carried by the crew
- **Personal belongings** of crew members — some of the most humanizing objects in the collection
- **Items attributed to Black Sam Bellamy himself**, recovered from the wreck

The museum does an exceptional job presenting the history at multiple levels. Children are engaged by the pirate narrative and the tactile elements; adults find the historical and archaeological depth genuinely compelling. Staff regularly discuss the current status of active excavation, and the museum updates its displays as new artifacts come in from the field. Budget at least 90 minutes. Most families find two hours passes quickly.

Practical notes: The museum is at 674 Route 28 in West Yarmouth, in the Mid Cape, and lists its hours as daily, 10 AM to 4 PM (discoverpirates.com). Hours can change with the season, so check the museum's site before you go; tickets are sold online there too. Being indoors, it's a strong rainy-day plan.

Pairing Your Visit: Wellfleet and the Wreck Site

While the wreck itself is not visible from shore — it lies offshore in open Atlantic water — a visit to Wellfleet's outer Atlantic beaches puts you as close as the public can get to where the Whydah went down. Marconi Beach and White Crest Beach in Wellfleet are roughly 1,500 feet from the wreck site as the crow flies. Standing on those beaches at sunrise — the Atlantic coast catches the morning light on its eastern face — with the sea churning in front of you, it is not difficult to imagine what April 26, 1717 looked like for the men aboard the Whydah.

The museum is in West Yarmouth and the wreck lies off Wellfleet, so a day that pairs the museum with the Wellfleet beaches along Route 6 covers both ends of the story.

Beaches & trails in this guide

- Marconi Beach, Wellfleet →
- White Crest Beach, Wellfleet →

FAQ

Q: Is the Whydah Pirate Museum in West Yarmouth worth visiting for families with young children?

Yes — it is one of the best museum experiences on Cape Cod for mixed-age groups. The pirate story is naturally compelling for children, and the museum presents real treasure, real weapons, and real artifacts in an accessible, hands-on way. There are interactive elements designed for younger visitors, and the staff are accustomed to explaining the history at different levels. Most families with children ages 6 and up find the museum genuinely engaging, not just tolerable.

Q: Can you dive on or visit the Whydah wreck site?

The Whydah wreck site is a designated National Historic Landmark on the seafloor off Wellfleet's Atlantic coast, and access to the site is controlled. Public recreational diving on the wreck is not permitted. The excavation team holds state permits for ongoing archaeological work. The wreck lies in shallow, rough Atlantic water — the same conditions that sank the ship — making it a challenging site under any circumstances. The Whydah Pirate Museum in West Yarmouth is the public access point for the story and the artifacts.

Q: How much treasure has been recovered from the Whydah?

More than 200,000 artifacts have been recovered since excavations began in 1984. The total estimated value of the treasure the Whydah carried at the time of her sinking is approximately $400 million in modern terms. The recovered artifacts include gold dust, silver and gold coins from multiple countries, jewelry, and personal goods plundered from more than 50 ships. Excavation continues, and significant finds are still being made each active diving season.

Q: Who was Black Sam Bellamy and why does he matter?

Samuel “Black Sam” Bellamy was the wealthiest pirate in recorded history at the time of his death in 1717, at around age 28. In roughly a year of active piracy, he captured more than 50 ships — a rate of success that no other pirate in the historical record matched in so short a time. He was known for a relatively democratic ethos aboard his ships and for a diverse, multinational crew. His story, and the physical evidence of his life recovered from the wreck, makes the Whydah more than a treasure hunt — it is a window into the Atlantic world of the early 18th century at one of its most turbulent moments.

Q: What is the best time of year to visit the Whydah Pirate Museum?

July and August are the Cape’s busiest weeks, and Route 28 traffic is heaviest then. If you prefer a quieter visit, late June or September are good choices; confirm the museum’s current hours on its site before you go.

Worth Having in the Car

Cape Cod Certified picks — essentials worth packing for this trip:

- **Sueños del Sol Linen Napkins (Set of 4)**: Hand-embroidered linen napkins with a bold sun-and-moon motif in coastal blue and yellow. They bring an effortless, elevated warmth to summer dinner parties and lazy Cape mornings alike.
- **McCrea’s Cape Cod Sea Salt Caramels (5.5 oz)** — $28: Boston-made, individually wrapped caramels finished with flaky Cape Cod sea salt for that sweet-salty coastal bite. The grab-and-gift treat people rebuy every visit and every holiday.
- **Amanecer Wave Yellow Tablecloth**: A sunshine-yellow cotton tablecloth with a softly embroidered wave along the border, inspired by sunrise over the water. It turns any deck or dining table into a warm, gathered place to linger.

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