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ON CAPE COD

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17th Annual Cape Cod Maritime Days, May 2010



Cape Cod Maritime Days, sponsored jointly by the [Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce](#), the [Cape Cod Commission](#), and the [Arts Foundation of Cape Cod](#), celebrates the region's rich maritime history. Now in its 17th year, Maritime Days are comprised of numerous special events and activities held throughout the region during the entire month of May that salute our unique maritime traditions. Highlights include lighthouse tours, nautical art exhibits, lectures on maritime lore, boat-building exhibits, kayaking excursions, and a Maritime History Symposium.

With more than 500 miles of coastline, the ocean has been the defining spirit of Cape Cod throughout its history. To the mariner, the region can be both a hazard and a haven. On a balmy summer day, with light winds and calm seas, boaters can be lulled into a sense of complacency, blissfully unaware of the treachery that lies beneath. But the shallow sand bars that lurk several hundred yards off the coast of Cape Cod can present great danger to a mariner. Countless storms have driven ships aground over the years, breaking them into pieces under tons of water pressure, and spilling their fragile contents and hapless occupants into the bone chilling surf. So many ships have piled up off the coast that the fifty miles of shoreline between Chatham and Provincetown have been labeled an "ocean graveyard."

In the early 1800s, an average of two ships wrecked every month during the winter months. It was not, however, until 1872, that a really efficient lifesaving service was put into operation by the United States government. Special lifesaving stations were erected at five mile intervals along the beach. Six or seven surfmen, as they were known, plus a keeper lived at each station and kept a continuous watch for floundering vessels. When a ship in distress was sighted, a red signal was fired from shore to let the crew at sea know they'd been spotted. At that point the lifesavers went into action.



If the seas permitted, the men would launch special surfboats. These were equipped with air chambers to help keep them afloat, cork fenders to keep them from being smashed against the sinking ship, and righting lines to use in case the boat capsized. When the surf was too violent to launch a surfboat, a "breaches buoy" was deployed to the rescue. The breaches buoy consisted of a pair of canvas breeches fastened to a life ring and suspended from a life line. A pulley system was launched between the stranded ship and shore via a small cannon. The cannon was used to shoot a lightweight line to the ship, which was pulled on board by the ship's crew. Simultaneously, the surfmen would erect a twelve-foot wooden structure to suspend a hawser line to hold the

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