

The Starved Ship A Halloween tale from old Nutfield's past

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Oct 18, 2016



This being the Halloween season, it is my usual lot to find a spooky tale from old Nutfield's past. Over the years I've given you stories of poltergeist haunting in Londonderry, of East Derry's goblet of blood, of little green men on Barry Road, and of fairies near Beaver Lake.

Recently I was exploring an old, dark bookstore in Scotland when I came across a book with a title that really whets my appetite. It was called "Is Eating People Wrong?" A disgusting subject certainly, but it inspired me to write this article.

This story goes back about 274 years ago when times were not good in Ireland. Most people have probably heard of the Great Irish Famine of 1845–52 when the potato crop failed, killing more than a million people in Ireland and forcing another million to immigrate to North America and elsewhere.

The Irish famine of 1740 was actually worse and resulted in the deaths of an estimated 38 percent of the country's population. It was caused by a long spell of extreme cold. The "Great Frost" began in 1739 and continued for several years, destroying both the grain and potato crops. The harbors were so frozen that it was often impossible for shipments of coal or food to arrive at the Irish ports. The starving, the dying, and the dead were everywhere, and soon the living were rioting in the cities.

Many in Ireland tried to escape the famine by emigrating to England and the British colonies, such as New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Those fleeing to America were, for the most part, poor and desperate for the cheapest possible passage across the Atlantic. In order to lower their costs, ship owners would cram as many passengers as possible into the holds of the vessels. The food provided would be of the worst quality and little of that to boot. Since a normal crossing from Britain to Boston would take about 70 days, only enough food or water for that number of days would be stowed.

One of these emigrants in 1740 was Samuel Fisher (1722–1806) of Londonderry, Ireland, the son of a weaver. Sam was truly strong in his Presbyterian faith, but very weak in fiscal solvency. He didn't have anywhere near enough money to buy a berth in a ship going to America, but he knew he couldn't stay in Ireland during this time of misery, so he sold himself as an indentured servant — someone else would pay for his ticket on a ship, and upon arriving in America, Sam would work as an unpaid servant to repay his passage to Boston. When the term of the indenture contract was over, Samuel would then be a free man again.

When Sam's ship set sail from Ireland, it was seriously underprovisioned. Food rations were very, very meager and to provide space for more passengers, the ship's owner likely also reduced the usual number of kegs of water. We do not even know the real name of this vessel; it has come down through history simply as "The Starved Ship."

Somewhere during the crossing, the ship became becalmed. The winds stopped blowing, and the sails hung straight down. For weeks the ship remained in place, and soon the passengers and crew began to realize their plight. In time all of the ship's stores of food and water were nearly exhausted. Even if the winds did start to blow, everyone would still starve before the ship reached land. The captain rationed a pint of oatmeal and just enough water to moisten it to each person each morning. As the days dragged on, the water became nearly exhausted, and the food rations were cut even more. When Sam begged for a teaspoon of water he was refused and told there was only half a bottle left on the entire ship. He was finally forced to mix saltwater into his oatmeal.

Soon many on board began to suffer the effects of starvation and thirst. Finally, as it was written, they responded “with hideous joy as death seized on the weaker ones among them.”

The newly dead were butchered, so that their blood and flesh could feed the living. When there were no more available corpses, it was decided to draw straws to see who would be sacrificed. By bad luck it was the 18-year-old Samuel Fisher who drew the short straw. Because it was Sunday, the passengers voted to wait until the next day before they killed and cut up the young man. On Monday, right before the knife was to be plunged into Sam, a ship was spotted on the horizon. This ship responded to their signals and everyone was saved.

Upon arriving in Boston, Sam became the servant of a man in Roxbury. After completing his 2-year term of his indenture he moved to Londonderry, where he eventually became a prosperous farmer and weaver.

He became a ruling elder in the local Presbyterian church, where it was remembered, “He knew what he believed and why and taught it here and abroad.” He was elected Town Moderator twice and was described as tall, solemn and not given to levity. All during his long life he would get very angry if he saw anyone wasting food — or even a cup of water. He married three times and had 12 children. In 1806, he was buried at the Hill Cemetery in Londonderry.

In 1850, it was estimated that he had 915 living descendants scattered across America. Today that number must be in the tens of thousands, all because in 1740 they decided to wait and not make a Sunday dinner of him.

Richard Holmes is Derry's town historian.

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