

# HAUNTED CANADA 7

CHILLING TRUE TALES

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SUTHERLAND

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# GRAVEYARD OF THE ATLANTIC

## *Sable Island, Nova Scotia*

Captain Torrens of Halifax's 29th Regiment of Foot bowed his head and covered his face to keep the blowing sand out of his eyes, nose and mouth, then trudged into the howling winds of the Atlantic Ocean. It was an uncomfortable journey to say the least, but he needed to spend some time alone with his trusted canine companion to clear his mind. Behind him, the few men of his crew who had survived the shipwreck set about the grim and morbid task of burying their dead fellow crewmembers.

The captain was investigating the 1799 sinking of the *Francis*. The Duke of Kent, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in North America, had sent the *Francis* to the New World loaded with many of his personal items and carrying key personnel in advance of his own journey across

the Atlantic. But the *Francis* sunk off the coast of Sable Island, and most of the people on board died immediately. Some survived and washed up on shore only to be murdered before they had enough time to get to their feet. It was rumoured that pirates killed those who survived the *Francis's* sinking, while some claimed it was the island's ghosts that did the killing. It was a grim irony that Captain Torrens's ship, the *Harriet* — the gun brig sent to discover what had happened to the *Francis* — was also shipwrecked off the coast of Sable Island.

The captain's ship and the *Francis* were not the only vessels wrecked on what sailors called the Graveyard of the Atlantic. More than 350 shipwrecks have been recorded on Sable Island since 1583, and thousands of people have died there. Those numbers might actually be much higher if unrecorded tragedies could be added in. Some sources figure more than 500 ships have been destroyed there, and peg the death toll at ten thousand. The island, which is not much more than sand, grass and one lonely pine tree, is curved in a crescent shape that resembles a wide, mischievous grin. Seals, birds and more than 350 wild horses call it home. A handful of people live there year round. More if you count the ghosts.

Darkness fell and Captain Torrens and his men were on opposite ends of the island. The captain had been gone awhile but it was too late and stormy to head back. Luckily, he found a small hut that had been built years before to shelter the island's regular procession of stranded sailors, and he lit a small fire within it. He stepped outside, away from the hut for a moment, and then returned to an odd

and troubling sight. His dog, who had remained in the hut, was now standing outside. His hair was raised and his teeth were bared. He stood facing the door to the hut and was barking and growling at something inside.

Already shaken by the day's tragic events, Captain Torrens steeled his nerve, pushed open the creaky door and peered inside.

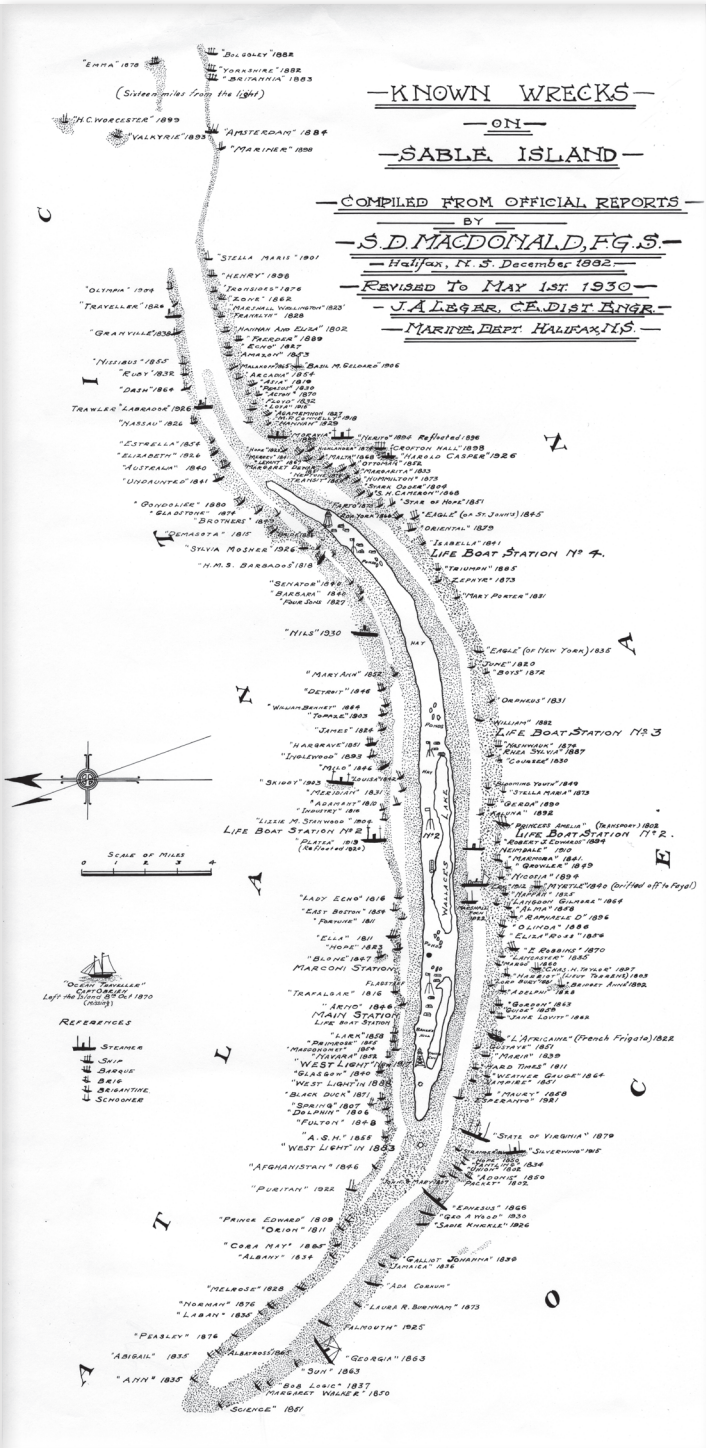
There was a woman sitting by the fire. She was very pale and her long hair was dripping wet. So were her clothes. And she was covered in sand from head to toe. She looked like she had been spat out of the ocean and had dragged her fragile body across the beach to the hut.

"Good heavens, madam!" Captain Torrens gasped. "Who are you and where did you come from?"

The woman didn't answer either question. She slowly turned her head and fixed her watery eyes on the captain, then raised a shaking hand in the air. In the flickering light of the fire, the captain saw a grisly sight. The woman's ring finger had been crudely hacked off. The gory stump squirted blood that ran down her hand and forearm.

Assuming she was a survivor from the *Francis*, Torrens grabbed a bandage from an emergency kit he'd found, but the woman stood suddenly and walked out the door. When he followed her she moved faster. When the captain picked up his pace the woman began to run. Fearing she might be suffering from shock, Torrens ran as fast as she did. She ran all the way to the centre of the island, into a small lake . . . and then vanished from sight.

That was when Torrens realized he had seen a ghost. She confirmed this suspicion when she reappeared in the



Map of Sable Island showing known shipwrecks since 1583

same hut the following night. As before, she spoke not a word and held up her bloody hand in the firelight.

That night, recognition suddenly struck the captain. He'd seen the woman before. She was the wife of Dr. Copeland, a medical officer who had commanded the *Francis* and was among the casualties on Sable Island.

"Is that you, Mrs. Copeland?" Torrens asked, sure it was her, but still having a hard time believing it.

The ghost nodded.

Torrens began to connect the dots and made an assumption. "You have been murdered for your ring?"

Again the ghost nodded.

She stood then, and backed out of the hut to disappear into the night once more. Over the years others have spotted her wandering up and down Sable Island after nightfall, always soaked to the bone and covered in sand. She forever prowls in the moonlight, searching for her missing ring and finger. It's possible she regularly walks past the island's other infamous ghost.

During the late 1800s, a twelve-man crew was tasked with rowing to Sable Island whenever there was a shipwreck. However, their rowboat was regularly joined by a mysterious thirteenth man. The man walked out of a cloud of island fog and into the shallow part of the ocean as the boat approached. He then boarded the rowboat without a word, picked up a spare oar and helped the crew row the rest of the way. And as they departed the island, the mysterious man would help row for a short distance before hopping out and floating back to the island, where he remained until the lifeboat returned. His silence was

creepy enough, but worse was the bloody gash on his right cheek, revealing the man's teeth even when his mouth was closed. The skin around the wound was angry, red and oozed puss. And his facial wound never healed, not even during the long months between visits to the island.

In September 1899, one of the lighthouses on Sable Island burned to the ground during a big storm. The men tasked with cleaning up the charred debris made an unsettling discovery. A spade struck something hard that had been buried in the sand. It was a metal box. When the men pried it open they found a weathered lighthouse log inside it.

Flipping through the pages, a particular passage jumped out.

*September 10th, 1856. Stormy. Wind blowing S. E. No vessels spoken. Howard Murray is dead. He died at ten o'clock this morning. The gash in his right cheek festered and blood poisoning set in. Before he died he said he would come back; that he would always go out with the lifeboat in which he had rowed stroke oarsman for many years. I wonder if he will. We buried him this afternoon on the point.*

Chances are, with so many shipwrecks over the years and such a high death toll, the point where Howard Murray was buried was likely incredibly crowded. An island doesn't earn the name Graveyard of the Atlantic for nothing. It's little wonder that one or two of the people who have died there haven't remained beneath the sand.