

ASK THE GLOBE

A Boston shipwreck. A 'cursed' figurehead. And a monument miles from the sea

By [Steve Annear](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 20, 2019, 6:00 a.m.



A monument in the Old Village Cemetery in Dedham memorializes the Maritana, a ship that wrecked in Boston Harbor in the 1860s. Historian Joan Pagliuca helped us unravel the mystery behind the monument's home far from the sea. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Have you seen something out there that you'd like answers to? [A giant door](#)? Or perhaps [a graveyard of rocking horses](#), a strange [stone marker on an island](#), or [old trophies](#) under a bridge. Let us know [by filling out this form](#). If your suggestion is picked, we'll check it out for you.

DEDHAM — The Maritana neared Boston Harbor after its long journey from Liverpool, England, laden with a rich cargo of coal, wool, potash, iron, and steel, and more than two dozen passengers and crew.

It was well past midnight on Nov. 3, 1861, and Captain G.W. Williams was in command. The weather was thick and the tide was high as they entered the bay. The ship had been navigating a disastrous southeasterly gale. From on board, a man on the lookout caught a glimpse of Boston Light through the storm, a sign of welcome and voyage's end.

But as soon as the light came into view ahead, so too did something else: the froth of waves lashing nearby rocks.

All hands were already on deck at the time. Orders came from the revered captain to tack ship. Before the vessel could change course, it crashed onto the jagged rocks about a mile from the lighthouse.



This figurehead, informally called The Lady Maritana, used to be on display in the Old State House Museum. The figurehead is said to have rested on three different ships that faced tragedy: the Berceau, the Caroline, and the Maritana. She was moved to Lincoln Wharf, which burned down three days later, and then the Old State House, which also caught fire. JOHN TLUMACKI/FILE/GLOBE STAFF

For hours, the Maritana was pummeled by the unforgiving sea. The waves churned up by the storm were relentless, [delivering incessant jabs](#) as it sat stuck amidships. Eventually, the sturdy wooden vessel could no longer endure, [according to books about the shipwreck](#) and [several](#) varying [newspaper accounts](#) from the time.

A gap opened beneath Williams's feet, as the ship split in half later in the morning. "Look out for yourselves!" he shouted to those on board.

The demise of the Maritana in 1861 has been called one of the region's "[most violent shipwrecks](#)," a catastrophic event that reportedly claimed the lives of 13 passengers and 11 members of the crew. But the area's towering monument to the tragedy was erected some 16 miles inland, near the back of a sleepy historic burial ground in Dedham.

"What is it doing there?" reader Brian Keaney wondered. The town's Old Village Cemetery, where the marker bearing Williams's name can be found, certainly doesn't offer sweeping views of the Atlantic or the distant harbor islands. The closest water is the tendrils of the Charles River.

Our journey to connect the dots between a suburban town and a deadly shipwreck meant navigating through folklore about a cursed artifact, and wading into New England's rich maritime history.

First, the Maritana.

It was "a fine vessel," reported a Nov. 9, 1861, issue of [The Boston Pilot](#), which recounted the shipwreck six days after the storm, "991 tons, built at Quincy, Mass., and owned in Providence."

Every great ship needs a figurehead, the decoration placed at its bow, and the Maritana was no exception. When it was built in 1857, the ship's owner, Suchet Mauran II, took interest in an intricate carving of a woman, maritime historian and Massachusetts native [Edward Rowe Snow](#) wrote in his book, "[Storms and Shipwrecks of New England](#)."

While noted by some for its beauty, the figurehead had a checkered past. The carving had been salvaged first from a commandeered French warship, and then, later, a ship built in Maine that wrecked off New England.

But the figurehead's time on the Maritana was largely uneventful, Snow said — until the ship set sail from Liverpool in September 1861.

In the stormy early morning hours of Nov. 3, the ship — stocked with its precious bounty of goods and passengers — finally made its approach to Boston Harbor.

Around 12:45 a.m., the homeward journey began to unravel, however, when the breakers were spotted around the same time as the lighthouse. The Maritana was "soon to become the prey of the angry elements," the Boston Evening Transcript reported.

"Captain Williams ordered the helm hard up," according to the account, "and a minute later the ship struck, head on," at Egg Rock, [also known as Shag Rocks](#), not far from [Boston Light](#).

Things only worsened as the hours ticked on. The sea broke constantly over the stuck vessel, "which lifted and hung among the rocks amidships."

The masts were cut away at 3 a.m., reports said. Boats on the davits were "crushed to atoms," [The Boston Pilot recalled](#). The crew's many attempts to reach safety were futile.

"Capt. Williams maintained the utmost self-possession, and endeavored to make all as comfortable as possible under the circumstances," The Boston Pilot wrote. "The ship, being a very strong one, held together until morning."

Then, around 7 or 8 a.m. — accounts vary — it finally began to break in two, right where Williams stood.

"At the moment the vessel parted, Capt. Williams was standing on the quarterdeck," the Transcript reported. "He went down between the broken fragments, which closing suddenly caught the Captain by the head and crushed it in a frightful manner."



The monument in the Old Village Cemetery in Dedham includes a carving of the Maritana before she met her end in Boston Harbor. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Another publication, the *New England Farmer*, reported he was struck in the head by a falling beam as the ship went to pieces.

“The affrighted passengers and crew had lost the guiding spirit of the vessel,” *The Boston Pilot* wrote, “and amid intense excitement and confusion they struggled against the fearful death that stared them in the face.”

In all, about two dozen people died. Some were lost to the ocean’s gaping maw, while others, including Williams, washed ashore, their bodies returned to land along with some of the vessel’s cargo.

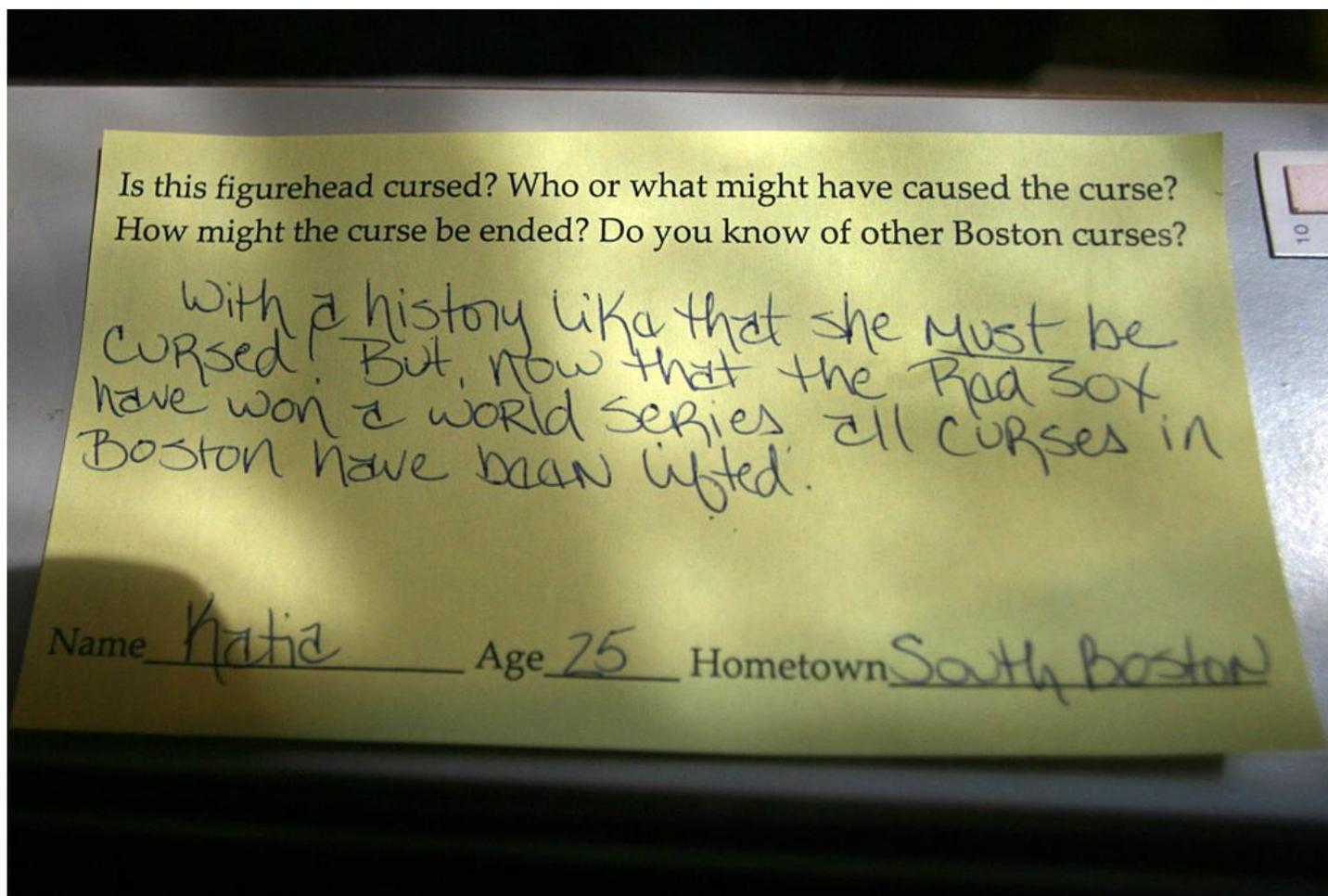
About a dozen people survived the ordeal. When the weather cleared by late afternoon, they were found, clinging to the rocks, by a rescue operation launched from Hull, according to “*Storms and Shipwrecks in Boston Bay, and The Record of Life Savers of Hull*,” [published in 1918](#).

But the Maritana was lost: [The New York Times reported](#) at the time that “not a vestige of the ship remained.”

That is, except for its carved figurehead, which was later recovered by fishermen unscathed, the *Globe* reported in 1899. Alleged to be cursed, the artifact passed from owner to owner until it eventually found a permanent home.

“She was now deemed unlucky and no ship’s captain wanted her aboard,” according to a blog post [by the Bostonian Society](#), a nonprofit and primary steward of the Old State House and its collections. “She was sold and placed in a shop on Lincoln’s Wharf in Boston and became a curious attraction. The wharf promptly caught on fire and burned!”

In 1908, the figurehead was gifted to the Bostonian Society, which “put the unlucky lass on display inside the galleries of the Old State House.” It’s said that a fire that broke out in the building in 1921 started near the carving. Again, it survived.



JOHN TLUMACKI/FILE

The figurehead is no longer on display at the museum, a spokesman for the Bostonian Society said, but it remains in their collections. (If it were out in the open, we’re not entirely sure you’d want to get near it.)

So what’s left of the memory of the Maritana, then, beyond tales of the sea? There is the one link that can still be seen, bearing us back to the past: the lichen-encrusted monument shaped like a ship’s broken mast.

Some of the archives following the crash listed Williams as “of Providence.” But a small blurb buried in a Nov. 8, 1861, edition of the Boston Post told a different story. It contained just 12 lines of text — a somber announcement about funeral services.

“The obsequies of the late Capt. G. W. Williams of the ill-fated ship Maritana . . . took place from the residence of his family,” it said, “in Dedham.”

The funeral was attended by a large crowd, the Boston Post reported, including 10 surviving officers and crew of the shipwreck. The services were “solemn and impressive” and “the remains were interred in the cemetery in that town.”

To glean a bit more about Williams’s grave marker, we contacted Joan Pagliuca, a [Dedham Historical Society](#) board member and tour guide. We met inside the Old Village Cemetery, where the four-sided marker sits beneath a large oak tree, guarded

by a shin-high border.

“It’s fascinating to find it here,” Pagliuca said. “To find the story of his ship is just an incredible story. Especially the headlines — ‘The worst shipwreck ever in Boston Harbor.’ And here he is; he’s here in our little town cemetery. Our Old Village.”



A details on the monument in the Old Village Cemetery in Dedham. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

The intricately designed monument has a nautical theme and resembles a shattered beam wrapped by a piece of torn rope at its base. On the side of its plinth is a description of its purpose.

“In Memory of Capt. George W. Williams of Ship Maritana, Who Perished In Boston Harbor Nov. 3, 1861, On The Homeward Passage. Aged 47 Years.”

On the front of the monument is a small replica of the Maritana, carved into the stone. The image shows the ship approaching what’s probably Boston Light. If you get close enough, you can see the details of its sails and masts, waves rippling beneath it with the gusts from the wind.

Now get down on the ground, on this patch of earth 16 miles from the harbor where the Maritana split and sank.

There, on the bow, is the faintest silhouette of a figurehead of a woman, staring blankly toward the shoreline.

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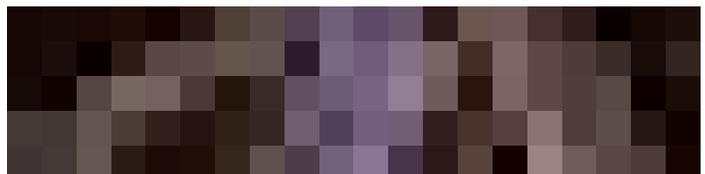
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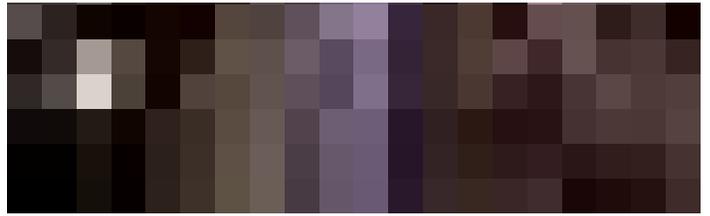
MOST POPULAR

SPOTLIGHT

Epic traffic paralyzes the region as gridlock grips the halls of power

Can Greater Boston continue to thrive — or even function — without fundamentally rethinking its relationship to the car?





ANALYSIS

Sondland's testimony could well add up for Democrats

In a day that saw Trump-appointed ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland alternatively eccentric and riveting, Democrats zeroed in on his account of what they see as a damning quid pro quo.



CLIPPERS 107, CELTICS 104 (OT)

Observations on the Celtics' overtime stumble vs. the Clippers

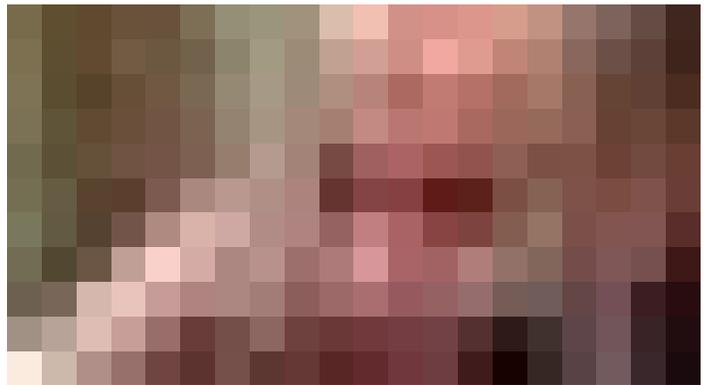
Kawhi Leonard blocked Kemba Walker's bid for a tying 3-pointer at the end of OT.



OPINION | JOAN VENNOCHI

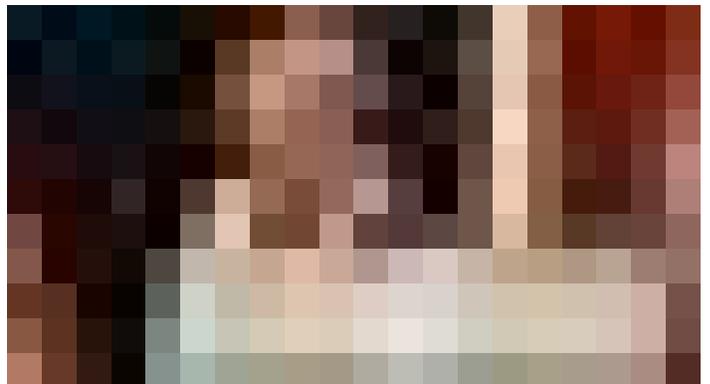
Sondland to President Trump: Bye, bye

Thanks to Ambassador Gordon Sondland, President Trump's impeachment is essentially a done deal.



State lawmakers pass nation's toughest restrictions on sale of flavored tobacco and vaping products

The legislation — a forceful response to an epidemic in which one out of every five Massachusetts high-schoolers use e-cigarettes — was completed after midnight Thursday and just before lawmakers broke for a weeklong recess. It now awaits action by Governor Charlie Baker.

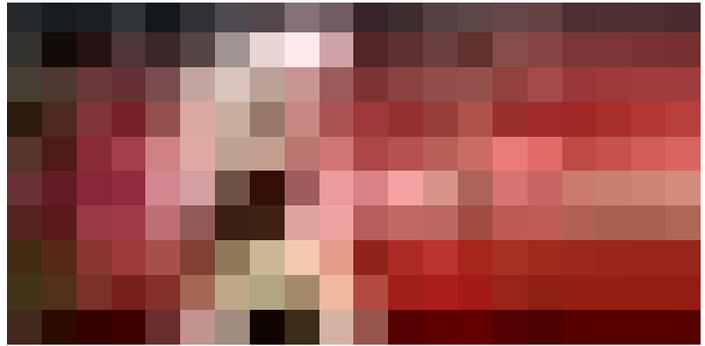


Yankees release ex-Red Sox outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury, owe him



\$26.1 million

His underwhelming career in New York ends after he missed two full seasons because of injury.



Never heard of 99 Ranch Market? It's the Asian Wegmans, and it's coming to Quincy

99 Ranch, the nation's largest Asian grocer, will open its first New England outpost early next year.



225-pound security guard charged in assault of 11-year-old alleged shoplifter at Primark

A security guard was indicted for allegedly assaulting an 11-year-old girl who allegedly shoplifted at a Primark store in Boston in June, tossing her to the ground and pummeling the child, prosecutors said.



Suspect charged in Brookline playground slaying

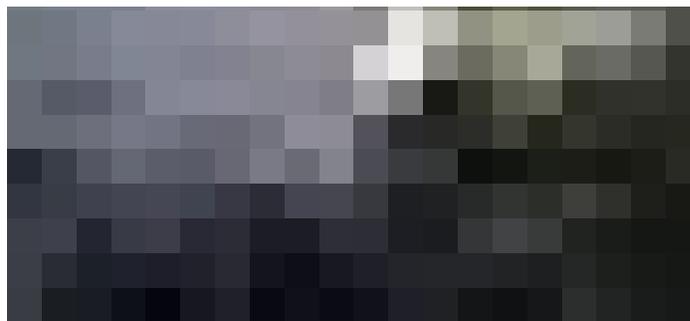
Singha Oeun, 21, of Brookline is being charged in the slaying of 20-year-old Nicolas "Cole" Kern, who was fatally stabbed at the Amory Playground early Tuesday morning.



It's been a year since Mass. started selling recreational marijuana. Some frustrations remain



The doomsday scenarios envisioned by opponents of legalization have largely failed to materialize. But the state's cannabis market is having growing pains.



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