

Ghost Schooner: The Wreck of the *J.R. Moffett*

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Background

Tom Wisner (1930-2010) was an environmental educator, artist, writer, and folksinger with a passion for the Chesapeake Bay watershed and its people. He loved learning about the history and culture of the area from its storytellers who lived and worked around the water. One such storyteller was Capt. Watt Herbert (1911-1989) of Coles Point, Virginia, who told Wisner his story of a ghost ship that he saw as a boy.



Tom Wisner, left, with Capt. Watt Herbert, 1986
(The Center for the Chesapeake Story, CMM MS 055, Box 72, Folder 12, Calvert Marine Museum)

In 1983, Wisner composed a song titled “The J.R. Morphy,” later retitled “The Ghostship Morphy” with lyrics that he based on Capt. Herbert’s account of the sinking of a cargo schooner in a 1919 storm. The accident that sank the vessel claimed the lives of its crew. Just days after the accident, Herbert and his father witnessed what he described as the ghost of the schooner sailing down the Potomac River.¹

Watt Herbert first told his account of the ghost schooner to Wisner in October 1982, but he had related the story many times before and retold it many times thereafter. As the story goes, he was helping his father catch seed oysters in Upper Machodoc Creek on the Virginia shore of the Potomac River when a violent spring thunderstorm hit. The Herberts were in their thirty-two-foot Potomac River dory boat and stayed sheltered in the creek during the ensuing gale that lasted a couple days. While in the creek, they learned the storm had caused the loss of a schooner, which he called the *J.R. Morphy*, and its crew off the mouth of the Wicomico River.²

When the weather finally improved, the Herberts entered the river and began sailing downstream past Nomini Cliffs, tacking against a strong southeast wind. In the distance, they spied a freight schooner with all its sails set and running with a northwest breeze through Kettle Bottom Shoals. They slackened the dory boat's sails and set a course to cross the river to catch the northwest breeze home. After a while, they looked for the schooner, but it had vanished. Soon, the tops of the masts of the sunken sailing vessel came into view in the morning haze. When it capsized days earlier, the schooner had settled upright on the bottom of the river with a portion of its masts visible above the water. They never did find the northwest breeze and were convinced the schooner they had seen sailing was the ghost of the *J. R. Morphy*. Herbert said he knew watermen who had reported seeing the ghost of the schooner on this and other occasions.

Watt Herbert was just an eight-year old boy when the incident occurred and was not an eyewitness to the actual accident. To fill in some details and make the story more dramatic, Wisner used a bit of poetic license while composing the lyrics to the song. However, Wisner often wondered whether the passage of time had altered Herbert's recollection and how much of his story was based in fact.

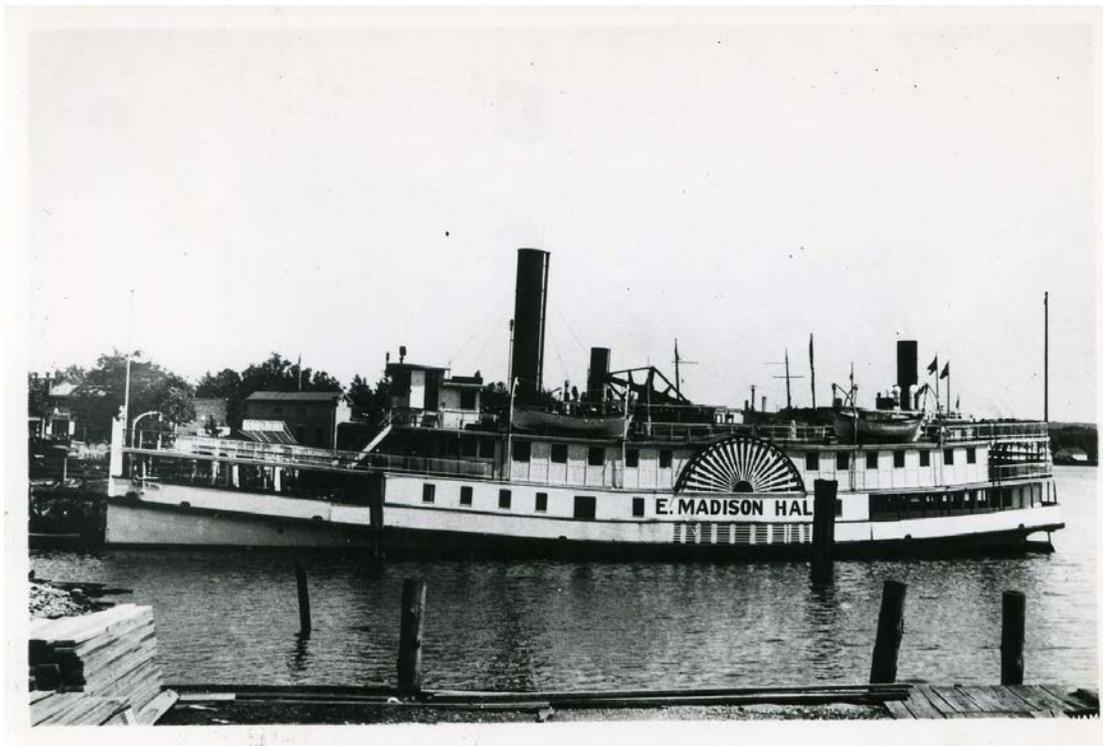
In 2008, a quarter-century after writing the lyrics, Wisner contacted the Calvert Marine Museum and inquired whether any documentary evidence existed for a schooner named *J.R. Morphy* that had sunk in the Potomac. Consulting a compilation of vessel losses extracted from the *List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, a close match to the name and circumstances was the schooner named *J.R. Moffett*.³ Armed with the schooner's actual name and official registry number, Wisner contacted the National Archives and obtained copies of the Consolidated Certificate of Enrollment and License for the *J.R. Moffett*. The document confirmed that the vessel, captained by John Rainier, had indeed foundered on March 27, 1919, in the Potomac River and both men aboard were lost.⁴ Despite the slight difference in the vessel's name, Watt Herbert had correctly related the basic facts.

Reports of the Accident

Knowing the name of the schooner and the date of the incident, museum staff began reviewing newspapers and other sources. The earliest published eyewitness account was found in the March 29 edition of the *Washington Post*. E. Madison Hall, aboard his passenger

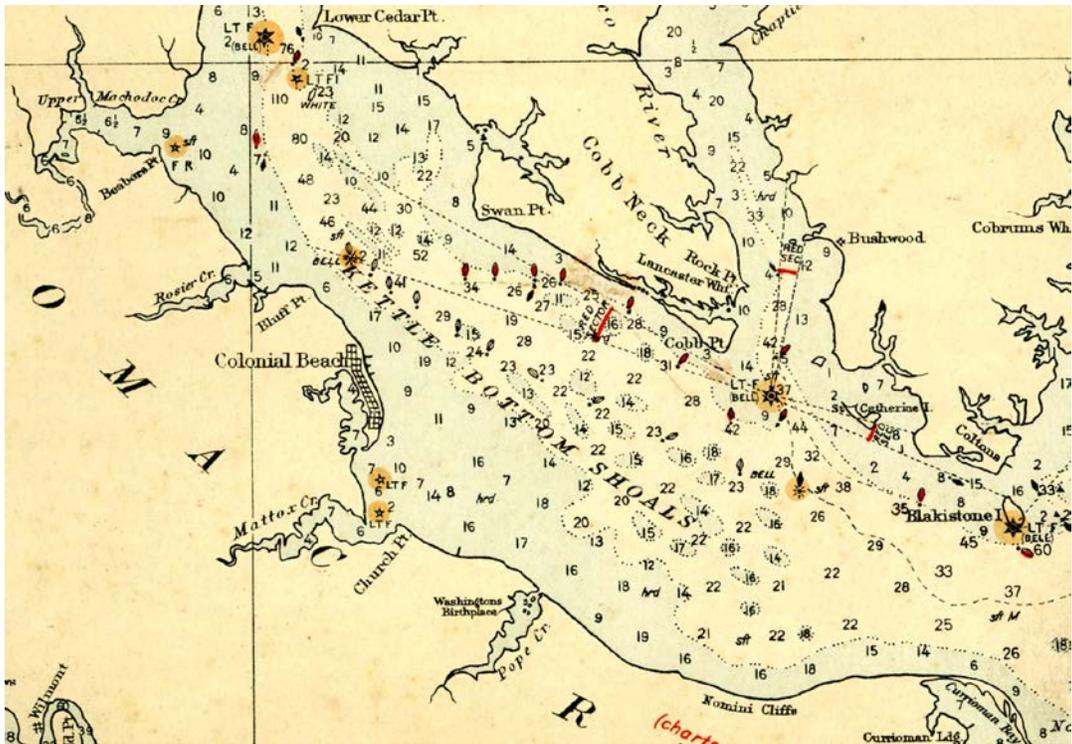
steamboat by the same name, was en route from Nomini, Virginia, to Washington, D.C., when he witnessed the accident.⁵ Hall was about a half mile from the schooner that was in an area he called Kettle Bottoms. He saw the squall cause the schooner, which had all its sails down, careen twice with its masts nearly touching the water. The third time it careened, it capsized and settled on the bottom of the river in an upright position with about a third of its masts above the water.

The 409-ton, 166-foot paddlewheel steamer *E. Madison Hall*⁶ weathered the squall and proceeded to the accident scene to render assistance. There, Hall and his crew readied buoys and lifelines to assist any survivors. After standing by the capsized vessel for thirty or more minutes, there was no sign of the crew. The steamboat resumed its trip to Washington where the sinking of the unidentified schooner was reported. Hall stated the capsized vessel posed a hazard to navigation.



Steamer *E. Madison Hall* docked at Washington, D.C. (Calvert Marine Museum P-617)

The next newspaper account of the incident was reported in the April 3 edition of the *St. Mary's Beacon*.⁷ The newspaper described the March 27 weather in Leonardtown as “one of the most violent storms that this section has ever known.” A separate article describing the effects of the storm in the Seventh District stated that a schooner, thought to be the *Harry P. Eli* (sic), sank mid-stream in about thirty feet of water between Nomini, Virginia, and St. Catherine’s Island off the Maryland shore.⁸ Chapman Slye, captain of the *E. Madison Hall*, stated that the steamer reached the stricken schooner about ten minutes after it capsized, but no survivors or bodies were sighted.⁹



Detail of 1916 edition of U.S. Coast Survey Chart 77, Chesapeake Bay, Northern Part, showing portion of Potomac River where J.R. Moffett sank. (Calvert Marine Museum Archives)

On April 8, the *Washington Post* stated that the Leonardtown newspaper's report had misidentified the vessel and the *Harriet P. Ely* was not the schooner that had foundered in the Potomac storm. It had been chartered by Wathen & Co. of Baltimore and had gone to the Rappahannock River two weeks earlier.¹⁰

In Virginia, the *Mathews Journal* newspaper reported in its April 10 edition that:

There is every reason to believe that Captain John Ranier (sic) of Blakes and Chris Brook (sic), colored, of the same place lost their lives in the Potomac river during the terrific gale last week. The schooner, J.R. Moffett, owned and run by Captain Ranier (sic) was known to be bound to Alexandria with a load of shells about this time and investigation by relatives shows that she has never reached that place."¹¹

A week later, the *St. Mary's Beacon* identified the vessel lost as the *J.R. Morfett* (sic) of Rappahannock River. The schooner was "loaded with oyster shells for a lime factory at Alexandria."¹² The same day, the *Mathews Journal* reported "Parties that went in search of missing vessel located it the last of the week and it lies in an upright position with 20 feet of the

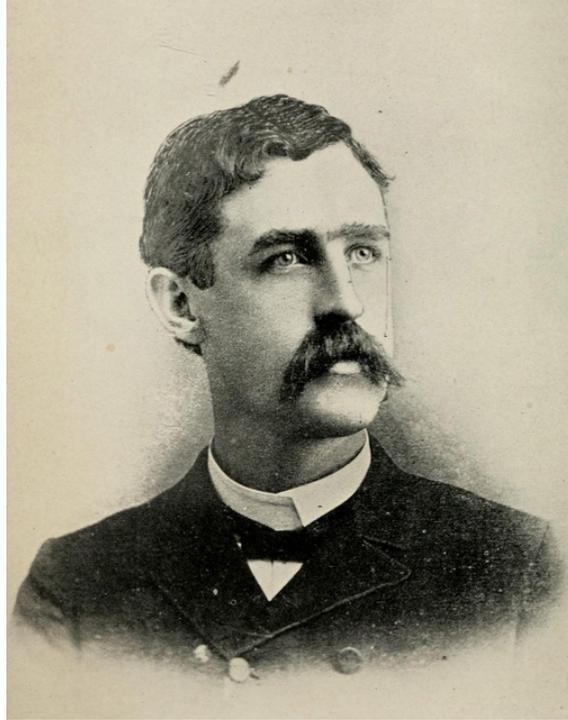
masts above water.” The men on board the schooner had not been heard from and it was assumed they lost their lives in the accident.¹³

The *Enterprise* reported on April 19 that the vessel had foundered about three miles from Blackistone Island while en route from the Piankatank River to Alexandria with a cargo of oyster shells. Like the *St. Mary’s Beacon*, the *Enterprise* called the schooner the *J.R. Morfett* (sic).¹⁴ It further stated that a son of the Capt. John Rainier had visited the scene on April 13 and identified the submerged vessel. It concluded its report “Efforts to have the boat raised are now under way.”¹⁵

Historian Edwin Beitzell recorded other contemporary accounts of the incident in his *Life on the Potomac River*. Capt. Harding Daiger of Virginia stated “I can recall, when the schooner, Moffett, sank off St. Katherine’s (sic) Island in the Potomac in a March gale.” Beitzell goes on to state that his uncle, Fred Cheseldine, then living on St. Margaret’s Island, was watching the vessel during a gale when it was hit by what he described as a waterspout. Beitzell himself had seen the tops of the sunken schooner’s masts the following summer while visiting his uncle Charles Beitzell on St. Catherine’s Island.¹⁶

The schooner *J.R. Moffett*

The vessel *J. R. Moffett* was named after the Reverend John Roberts Moffett, a leading prohibitionist and Baptist preacher who founded the North Danville Church in Virginia. Also the founding editor of the prohibitionist newspaper *Anti-Liquor*, Moffett published an editorial critical of a local lawyer and politician named J. T. Clark. On November 11, 1892, Clark shot and mortally wounded Moffett on the streets of Danville, Virginia. Clark was tried and convicted of voluntary manslaughter and Moffett became a martyr of the temperance movement.¹⁷



John Roberts Moffett from *The Life of John R. Moffett* by Rev. S. H. Thompson, Salem, Virginia, 1895. (New York Public Library)

In 1893, the year following Moffett's murder, the seventy-foot schooner *J.R. Moffett* was built at Pocomoke City, Maryland. Based in Virginia, the forty-four ton vessel engaged in the coasting trade, transporting cargoes from one port to another along the Atlantic coast from North Carolina to Connecticut.¹⁸

The schooner changed hands several times during its relatively brief life. Its first home port was Onancock on the Chesapeake Bay side of Virginia's Eastern Shore. It was sold and from 1896 to 1911 the vessel's home port was Chincoteague, Virginia. In 1912, it moved west and its home port became Tappahannock, Virginia, on the Rappahannock River. The vessel was sold and its home port moved south to Reedville, Virginia, on Cockrells Creek, from 1914 until she foundered in the Potomac River on March 27, 1919.¹⁹

According to its last Consolidated Certificate of Enrollment and License, John Rainier purchased the *J.R. Moffett* from John Hinton and licensed it at Reedville in January 1919 with Chris Brooks as master. Based on census records, Rainier was aged about 48 at the time of the accident and left a widow and eleven children. The 1910 census listed his occupations at that time as farmer and oysterman living in the Piankatank District of Mathews County, Virginia.²⁰ Brooks could not be positively identified in the census records.²¹

Since the men had operated the schooner for only a few months, it may be supposed the accident may have in part resulted from the relative inexperience of the captain and crewman, as suggested by Wisner's song lyrics. But, as an oysterman, Rainier would have had extensive experience operating boats in foul weather. The fact that the men had taken in the schooner's sails in anticipation of the squall demonstrates their knowledge and ability. However, they could not have imagined the effect of the severe weather conditions on their heavily laden vessel on that fateful day in the Potomac.²²

It is unknown whether the bodies of John Rainier or Chris Brooks were ever recovered. No formal obituaries for the men were found in their local newspaper, the *Mathews Journal*.²³ Any efforts to salvage the sunken vessel were unsuccessful. According to Beitzell, the government later dynamited the schooner because it posed a hazard to navigation.²⁴ The *Report of the Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army, 1920*, confirms that the U.S. snag boat *York* removed the wreck of the *J.R. Moffett* from an area of the river about two miles southeast of Cobb Point Lighthouse at a cost of \$1, 250.²⁵



No known photograph of the *J.R. Moffett* exists, but this two-mast cargo schooner is similar in size and appearance to the vessel.
(Calvert Marine Museum)

Postscript

The reader may not believe in ghosts, but Capt. Watt Herbert was a believer and was convinced of what he and his father had witnessed on that late March day near the mouth of the Wicomico River. They knew they had seen the ghost of the schooner *J.R. Moffett* and its crew heading back home under full sail. As Herbert stated in later years, “there’s a lot of mysteries about the water.”²⁶

¹ Lyric sheet for “The J.R. Morphy” by Tom Wisner, 1983, Center for the Chesapeake Story Collection, Calvert Marine Museum, CMM2011.14.0949; CMM MS 055, Box 46, Folder 49; The song was later arranged by Dramtreeo and performed under the title “The Ghostship Morphy.”

² Videocassette recording of Capt. Watt Herbert, undated, Center for the Chesapeake Story Collection, Calvert Marine Museum, CMM MS055

³ Correspondence from Robert Hurry to Tom Wisner, 08/01/2008

⁴ Unpublished compilation of vessel losses extracted from volumes of *Annual List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, compiled by Robert Hurry for Maryland State Archaeologist’s Office, Baltimore, 1985.

⁵ “Gale Sinks River Ship,” *Washington Post*, 03/29/1919, page 3

⁶ *Annual List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, 1920, page 94

⁷ “St. Mary’s Storm,” *St. Mary’s Beacon*, 04/03/1919, page 3

⁸ The *Harriett P. Ely* was also a 70-foot freight schooner.

⁹ The *E. Madison Hall* was a side-wheel passenger steamer that operated between Washington, D.C., and various Virginia towns.

¹⁰ *Washington Post*, 04/08/1919, page 3

¹¹ “Fear Mathews Man Loses Life During Gale,” *Mathews Journal*, 04/10/1919, page 1

¹² *St. Mary’s Beacon*, 04/17/1919, page 3

¹³ “Find Schooner, But No Trace of Men,” *Mathews Journal*, 04/17/1919

¹⁴ This spelling of the vessel’s name “Morfett” is similar to Watt Herbert’s pronunciation of the schooner’s name as “Morphy”.

¹⁵ “Sunken Boat Identified,” *Enterprise*, 04/19/1919: page 5

¹⁶ Beitzell, Edwin, *Life on the Potomac River*, 1973, page 265.

¹⁷ *Baltimore Sun*, 11/12/1892; 02/10/1893; 12/08/1893

¹⁸ *Annual Report of the Operations of the U.S. Lifesaving Service*, 1899; 1903; 1905. *New York Herald*, 03/09/1899

¹⁹ *Annual List of the Merchant Vessels of the United States*, 1894: p. 152; 1895: p. 99; 1898: p. 93; 1912: p. 50; 1916: p. 37; 1920: p. 448

²⁰ U.S. Federal Census, Mathews County, Virginia, 1910

²¹ Cris Brooks, age 24, lived in the Piankatank District of Mathews County, Virginia, in 1910. At that time, he was married to Ora Brooks, age 19, and his occupation is listed as a laborer doing odd jobs. It is uncertain if this was the same man who worked with John Rainier in 1919.

²² Consolidated Certificate of Enrollment and License No. 77100, U.S. Department of Commerce

²³ http://www.gazettejournal.net/index.php/static_pages/find_your_ancestors

²⁴ Beitzell, Edwin, *Life on the Potomac River*, 1973, page 265.

²⁵ *Report of the Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army, 1920*, page 1988

²⁶ Videocassette recording of Capt. Watt Herbert, undated, Center for the Chesapeake Story Collection, Calvert Marine Museum, CMM MS055