

The
PHANTOM
SKIPJACK

A CARROWAY ISLAND STORY

ROBERT GILL, JR

First published in the United States by Robert Gill, Jr.



18 Bank Street, Suite 1
Summit, New Jersey 07901
www.teachingpress.com

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First Edition, 2026
Cover by Jessica Stacey

The Phantom Skipjack - A Carroway Island Story/Robert Gill, Jr. – 1st Edition

Softcover ISBN 979-8-9965144-8-9
Hardcover ISBN 979-8-9965144-9-6

Printed in the United States of America

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PROLOGUE

Visitors often arrive on Carroway Island believing they have discovered something.

The island generally allows them to keep that belief.

Situated somewhere among the marshes, channels, and working waters of the Chesapeake Bay, Carroway has never appeared on every map, nor has it felt any obligation to do so. Watermen know where it is. Ferry captains know where it is. Most importantly, the residents know where it is.

That has always been enough.

Like many small islands, Carroway has more stories than people.

Some of those stories found their way into the pages of the Old Waterman's Almanac. Others appear in the Island Cookbook, where recipes and advice have shared space for generations without complaint. Visitors occasionally discover additional stories in the Carroway Island Visitor's Guide, though the Guide has developed a reputation for straying from its stated purpose.

The rest are usually told at Haddie's Fish Shak.

That is where fishermen drink coffee before dawn.

Where weather predictions are debated.

Where ferry schedules are questioned.

And where, on winter evenings, an old waterman named Crazy Jack Mercer occasionally tells stories that may or may not be true.

The residents disagree on many things.

They disagree about tides.

They disagree about politics.

They disagree about who makes the best crab cakes on the island.

But nearly everyone agrees on one point:

If Crazy Jack begins a story, it is worth listening.

Particularly when the story concerns the winter of 1857.

Particularly when it concerns a vessel known as the Phantom Skipjack.



HADDIE'S
FISH SHAK

Today's Catch

OYSTERS
COD
CLAMS
FLOUNDER
WHELKS

OLD EYE
WHISKY

CHAPTER ONE

Haddie's Fish Shak

Haddie's Fish Shak occupied the same spot overlooking the harbor that it had for longer than anyone cared to calculate. The coffee was strong, the pie dependable, and the opinions free.

The bell above the door rattled once as the wind pushed it open.

A burst of cold air swept through the room.

Haddie Mercer looked up from the counter.

"So, either close it or come through it," she called.

The stranger stepped inside and quickly pulled the door shut behind him.

The warmth returned.

So did the smell of coffee, fried oysters, and whatever Haddie had been baking since before sunrise.

The stranger removed his gloves and looked around.

Haddie's Fish Shak sat near the harbor, facing the water. The building had once been a crab shed, then a bait shop, then a place where nobody seemed entirely certain what it was. By common agreement, it eventually became a restaurant.

The walls were crowded with photographs.
Storm photographs.
Fishing photographs.
Wedding photographs.
Pictures of boats that no longer existed and people who no longer lived.

A faded skipjack model hung from the ceiling by two nearly invisible wires.

Near the pie case stood an old cast-iron stove that glowed softly in winter.

Three men occupied a table near the window.
Two more sat at the counter.
Nobody seemed to be in a hurry.
On Carroway Island, January often moved at the speed of coffee.
The stranger found an empty seat near the wall.
Haddie appeared a moment later.
“You eating or just thawing out?”
“Maybe both.”
“Good answer.”
She poured coffee without asking.
The stranger wrapped both hands around the mug.
Outside, the harbor lay gray beneath a low winter sky.
Most boats remained tied fast to their slips.
A few gulls drifted over the water.
The stranger took a long sip and allowed himself to relax.
Then his eyes settled on a photograph hanging beside the pie case.
He stood.

The photograph showed a dozen men standing on what seemed to be open ice stretching toward the horizon.

One man held the reins of a horse.
Another stood beside a sled.
The stranger stepped closer.
He studied the image for several seconds.
Then he laughed.
“That can’t be right.”
Nobody answered.
He looked again.
The men clearly stood on ice.
Not a pond.
Not a river.
Something much larger.
He turned toward the counter.
“Where was this taken?”
Haddie glanced up.
“Out beyond the harbor.”
The stranger smiled.
“No, really.”
“Really.”
He looked back at the photograph.
“The bay froze?”
“The bay freezes now and then.”
“Not like that.”
“Sometimes like that.”
The stranger shook his head.
A low chuckle emerged from one of the window tables.
One of the older men pointed his coffee spoon toward the photograph.
“That one was before my time.”

"Mine too," said another.

"Thankfully."

The stranger laughed politely.

He had the distinct feeling everyone was enjoying themselves.

"What year was it?"

Haddie dried a plate.

"Eighteen fifty-seven."

The stranger raised an eyebrow.

"You're serious."

"Most of the time."

The room grew quiet again.

The stranger studied the photograph.

There was something unsettling about it.

The ice appeared endless.

The men in the picture looked calm.

As if standing in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay were perfectly ordinary.

He returned to his seat.

"Hard to imagine."

The chair near the stove creaked.

The stranger glanced over.

An older man sat there alone.

Gray beard.

Weathered face.

Heavy coat.

A coffee mug rested beside one hand.

The stranger had not noticed him earlier.

The old man was staring out the window toward the harbor.

Without turning, he spoke.

“That wasn’t the strange part.”

The stranger waited.

The old man continued watching the water.

“What was the strange part?”

The old man took a sip of coffee.

“The ship.”

Several people in the room smiled.

One man lowered his newspaper.

Another leaned back in his chair.

Even Haddie stopped drying plates.

The stranger looked around.

Apparently, everyone knew what came next except him.

Haddie nodded toward the old man.

“Go on, Jack.”

The old man sighed.

The sigh of a man who had told a story many times and secretly hoped to tell it again.

“You mean the Phantom Skipjack?”

Nobody spoke.

The wind rattled the windows.

Outside, a gull crossed above the harbor.

Inside, every eye had drifted toward the old man.

He pointed toward the empty chair across from him.

“Sit down.”

The stranger picked up his coffee and moved to the table.

The old man waited until he sat.

Then he looked once more toward the harbor.

“The winter of eighteen fifty-seven,” he said, “was cold enough to make sensible men doubt what they knew and foolish men believe what

they didn't."

He folded his hands.

"And that's exactly where this story begins."



CHAPTER TWO

The Great Freeze

The trouble started with a cold wind,” Jack said.
The stranger waited.

Around them, the room had grown quiet.

Even Haddie had stopped pretending not to listen.

Jack leaned back in his chair.

“Mind you, January is supposed to be cold. Nobody complains about the cold in January. That’s like complaining about mosquitoes in August.”

A few men nodded.

“First week wasn’t anything special. Wind came down from the north. Watermen pulled their collars up and got on with their business. Same as always.”

He paused.

“Then the second week came.”

Outside the window, a gull drifted past.

“The harbor started freezing around the edges. Not much at first. Just a little ice around the pilings. You’d push your skiff away from the dock and hear it crack.”

Jack tapped the table with a finger.

“Crack.”

The stranger smiled.

“Still doesn’t sound too unusual.”

“It wasn’t.”

Jack pointed at him.

“That’s the important part. Nobody knew what was coming.”

The men around the table murmured agreement.

“The ice spread into the coves. Then into the marshes. Every morning, there was more of it. Every morning somebody said, ‘Coldest winter I can remember.’”

“Was it?”

“No.”

The stranger looked puzzled.

Jack grinned.

“It became the coldest winter they could remember.”

A few chuckles moved through the room.

“The children loved it. Slid across frozen ponds. Threw snowballs. Fell through ice they shouldn’t have been on.”

“That part hasn’t changed,” Haddie said from behind the counter.

“No,” Jack agreed. “It hasn’t.”

The stove popped softly.

“The watermen weren’t laughing.”

Jack’s expression grew serious.

“The bay wasn’t scenery back then. It was the road. Every sack of flour, every letter, every barrel of supplies came across that water.”

He pointed toward the harbor.

“Take away the bay, and you take away the island.”

The stranger nodded.

That made sense.

"The ferry captain was the first man to admit trouble."

"What was his name?" the stranger asked.

"Samuel Pike."

"The mayor's family?"

"The same."

Jack took a sip of coffee.

"Old Samuel fought the ice for a week. Every crossing got harder. By the end, passengers had to stay below because sheets of ice were smashing against the hull."

The room remained silent.

Everyone seemed to know the story.

"One morning, he left the mainland before sunrise. Snow blowing sideways. Ice everywhere. Took him nearly six hours to make a trip that usually took less than two."

"What happened?"

"He tied up at the harbor, stepped ashore, and announced to everyone within hearing distance that he was finished."

"Finished?"

"Until spring."

A few men laughed.

Jack smiled.

"He used stronger language than that, but we're in Haddie's."

"Thank you," Haddie called.

The laughter faded.

"The next morning, the ferry didn't come."

Jack looked toward the window.

"The morning after that, it didn't come either."

The stranger stared into his coffee.

"And that was it?"

"That was it."

"No mail."

"No mail."

"No supplies."

"No supplies."

"No visitors."

Jack nodded.

"No visitors."

The stranger looked around the room.

"That must've been difficult."

"Difficult?" Jack snorted.

"It was Carroway."

The room erupted in laughter.

When it settled, Jack continued.

"People started rationing flour. Root vegetables disappeared from cellars. Salted fish showed up at every meal. Folks suddenly became very interested in whatever had been stored away the previous autumn."

"Sounds familiar," one man muttered.

"It always does," said Jack.

"The harbor froze solid. Oyster boats sat trapped in the ice. Nets froze stiff. Crab pots disappeared beneath snowdrifts."

He paused.

"At night, you could hear the bay moving."

The stranger looked up.

"Moving?"

Jack nodded.

"The ice talked."

Nobody laughed.

"It groaned. Cracked. Shifted. Sometimes it sounded like distant cannon fire."

The stranger glanced toward the harbor.

"That must've been unsettling."

"It was."

Jack folded his hands.

"Then one morning people woke up and realized they could walk farther than they'd ever walked before."

The stranger frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"The bay had frozen."

He let the words settle.

"Not the coves. Not the marshes. The bay."

The room remained quiet.

"Men walked beyond the channel markers."

"Really?"

"They did."

"All the way onto the bay?"

Jack nodded.

"Horses too."

The stranger thought of the photograph beside the pie case.

Suddenly, it didn't seem so impossible.

"The ice stretched farther than anyone could see. White in every direction."

Jack stared at the tabletop.

"That's when people started getting nervous."

"Why then?"

"Because when something becomes too large to understand, people begin imagining things."

The stranger waited.

The old storyteller smiled faintly.

“And sometimes they stop imagining.”

The room was silent.

Outside, the wind rattled the windowpanes.

Jack leaned forward.

“Three weeks into the freeze, Amos Vale went out to inspect some oyster gear trapped near the edge of the ice.”

Several heads nodded.

Everybody knew Amos.

“He left before sunrise and returned after dark.”

Jack pointed toward the door.

“Walked through that very door.”

The stranger glanced toward it.

“Was he all right?”

“He looked cold.”

A few men chuckled.

“Sat right where you’re sitting now.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed slightly as though seeing the moment.

“Haddie poured him coffee.”

“Then what?”

“Nobody said much at first.”

Jack paused.

“Finally, somebody asked if he’d seen anything.”

“And?”

Jack looked at the stranger.

“Amos said maybe.”

The room grew still.

“Maybe what?” the stranger asked.

Jack smiled.

“That’s exactly what everyone asked him.”

The old storyteller leaned back.

“He stared into his coffee for a long time.”

Then Jack lowered his voice.

“And finally, he said he thought he’d seen a sail.”

The stranger frowned.

“A sail?”

“Beyond the ice.”

“That’s impossible.”

Jack nodded.

“That’s what everyone told Amos.”

The stranger looked around the room.

“And what did he say?”

Jack’s smile widened.

“He said that was exactly what he thought.”

The old storyteller reached for his mug.

“But that wasn’t the strange part.”

The stranger leaned forward.

“What was?”

Jack took a slow sip of coffee.

Then he set the mug down.

“The kind of boat.”



CHAPTER THREE

A Ship Where No Ship Should Be

A skipjack?"

The stranger frowned.

"Beyond the ice?"

Jack nodded.

"That's what Amos said."

The stranger looked around the table.

"And people believed him?"

A few men laughed.

"No," said Jack. "That's the interesting part."

The old storyteller settled deeper into his chair.

"The whole room thought he'd lost his senses."

The stove crackled softly.

Outside, the harbor lay gray beneath the winter sky.

Inside Haddie's Fish Shak, nobody moved.

Everyone wanted to hear what happened next.

"Mind you," Jack said, "Amos Vale wasn't the sort of fellow who imagined things."

Several heads nodded.

“If Amos told you the tide was coming in, you’d best move your boat.”

The stranger smiled.

“So what did he actually see?”

Jack took a sip of coffee.

“That’s exactly what everybody asked.”

January 1857.

The freeze had entered its third week.

The bay stretched white to the horizon.

The ferry sat trapped at its dock.

No ships arrived.

No ships departed.

Every day looked like the one before.

Amos had spent the afternoon checking oyster gear frozen into the ice east of the harbor.

The walk had taken longer than expected.

By the time he headed home, daylight was fading.

The sky had become a dull silver.

The ice reflected what little light remained.

There was no sound.

No waves.

No birds.

No creaking docks.

Nothing.

Just wind.

Amos later claimed that was what unsettled him most.

The silence.

The Chesapeake Bay was never silent.
Until that winter.
He walked for nearly an hour.
Then he noticed something moving.
At first, he paid it no mind.
A shadow.
A cloud.
Maybe drifting snow.
The winter light played tricks.
He continued walking.
Then he stopped.
The shape moved again.
This time against the wind.
Amos narrowed his eyes.
Something dark stood beyond the ice.
Far beyond.
He could not judge the distance.
The fading light distorted everything.
For several moments, he watched.
The object seemed impossible.
Then he saw the sail.
A single dark sail.
Moving slowly across the frozen bay.
Amos stood still.
The sail continued drifting from north to south.
Steady.
Purposeful.
Silent.
He blinked several times.

The sail remained.
A vessel.
It had to be.
Yet no vessel could possibly be there.
The bay was frozen solid.
Even if open water remained beyond the ice, no ship could have
reached it.
The harbor entrances had frozen weeks earlier.
Every known vessel sat trapped in place.
Yet there it was.
Moving.
Amos later described it as a skipjack.
Not large.
Not small.
Dark against the pale horizon.
A working boat.
A vessel every waterman knew by sight.
He watched for perhaps a minute.
Maybe less.
Maybe more.
Years later, he admitted he could not remember.
Only that he watched.
And the vessel moved.
Then a low bank of snow swept across the ice.
For a moment, the ship disappeared.
When the wind cleared, it was gone.
Amos searched the horizon.
Nothing.
No sail.

No mast.
No vessel.
Only ice.
He stood there another ten minutes.
Perhaps fifteen.
The ship never returned.
So, he headed home.

The door of Haddie's Fish Shak opened.
Cold air rushed inside.
Everyone looked up.
Amos entered.
Snow covered his boots.
His beard was white with frost.
Haddie Mercer pointed toward the stove.
"Sit before you freeze."
Amos sat.
Haddie placed coffee in front of him.
Nobody spoke.
Not at first.
Somebody asked, "Anything interesting out there?"
Amos stared into his mug.
"Maybe."
The room became quiet.
"Maybe what?"
Amos took a sip.
Then another.
He said, "Thought I saw a sail."

Several men laughed.

“Out where?”

“Beyond the ice.”

That ended the laughter.

“What kind of sail?”

Amos looked up.

“A skipjack.”

The room erupted.

“Impossible.”

“You’re seeing things.”

“You spent too much time in the cold.”

“Whose boat?”

“Didn’t recognize her.”

“Did you follow it?”

Amos shook his head.

“No.”

The objections grew louder.

“You should’ve followed it.”

“You should’ve gotten closer.”

“You should’ve brought somebody back.”

Amos listened patiently.

Then he said something that silenced everyone.

“You would’ve done exactly what I did.”

The room grew quiet.

One man laughed nervously.

“No, I wouldn’t.”

Amos looked at him.

“Yes.”

The man stopped smiling.

Amos took another drink of coffee.

Nobody spoke.

Then he added, "There was no crew."

"No crew?"

"No."

"No lanterns?"

"No."

"Any sound?"

Amos shook his head.

"Nothing."

The room fell silent.

Outside, the wind rattled the windows.

The stove crackled.

Finally, somebody muttered, "Then it wasn't a boat."

Amos stared into his coffee.

"Maybe."

The door opened.

Everyone turned.

An older waterman entered carrying a sack over one shoulder.

He stamped snow from his boots.

Removed his gloves.

Then noticed the silence.

"What's wrong with you people?"

Nobody answered.

Haddie nodded toward Amos.

"He's been seeing things."

The newcomer snorted.

"Like what?"

"A skipjack."

The man's expression changed.

Only slightly.

But enough.

Jack paused.

The stranger leaned forward.

"What happened?"

The old storyteller smiled.

The room around them had become silent.

The man in the story set down his sack, looked at Amos, then at everyone else and quietly said,

"I saw it too."

Jack took a slow sip of coffee.

Then set down his mug.

"That's when people started paying attention."



CHAPTER FOUR

Tracks Across the Ice

Two men seeing the same thing still doesn't prove anything," the stranger said.

Jack smiled.

"No."

He leaned back in his chair.

"But it does make people uncomfortable."

The men around the table chuckled.

"That night," Jack continued, "there were two opinions in Haddie's Fish Shak. One was that Amos Vale had seen a skipjack. The other was that he had frozen his brains a little loose."

"Which opinion did you hold?" the stranger asked.

Jack looked offended.

"I wasn't alive yet."

Haddie snorted from behind the counter.

"That has never stopped him before."

The room laughed.

Jack ignored her.

"By morning, the argument had improved itself into an expedition."

"Improved itself?"

"That's what arguments do on Carroway. They either become expeditions or town meetings. Expeditions are usually shorter."

Several men nodded as if this were an established fact.

"So, they went out?"

"They did."

Jack folded his hands.

"Amos went because it was his story. Samuel Pike went because he didn't believe it. Two watermen went because they didn't want to miss anything. And young Benjamin Pike went because nineteen-year-old boys are defective in judgment."

"Related to Mayor Pike?"

"Grandfather's grandfather's side. Or near enough that the family still takes blame."

The stranger smiled.

Jack continued.

"They set out just after sunrise."

The morning was clear and bitter.

A cold that made breath hang in the air and froze eyelashes white.

The bay stretched ahead of them in every direction.

White.

Gray.

Silver where the low sun touched it.

No waves moved.

No gulls called.

No boat creaked against a dock line.

The Chesapeake lay silent beneath its hard winter skin.

Amos Vale walked first.

He carried a walking staff and kept his eyes on the ice.

Samuel Pike followed several paces behind him.

He had declared the whole business foolish.

More than once.

"Men see all sorts of things in bad light," Samuel said.

Amos did not answer.

Samuel kicked at the snow.

"Maybe."

Amos kept walking.

"Snow lifting off the ice."

Still, Amos said nothing.

Young Benjamin Pike walked at the rear.

He listened to everything and said almost nothing.

That was unusual for a Pike.

They crossed beyond the harbor.

Then, beyond the channel markers.

Carroway Island shrank behind them.

The houses became low shapes along the shore.

The church steeple stood thin and dark against the winter sky.

At last, Amos stopped.

"Here," he said.

Samuel Pike looked around.

"Here what?"

"Near enough."

"Near enough to what?"

"Where I saw her."

Samuel turned in a slow circle.

There was nothing.
Only ice.
Snow.
Wind.
And distance.
One of the watermen spat onto the ice.
It froze almost before it spread.
“Well,” Samuel said, “there’s your ghost ship.”
Amos did not answer.
He moved ahead another twenty paces.
Then he stopped again.
This time, he crouched.
“What is it?” Benjamin asked.
Amos raised a hand.
The others came forward.
At first, no one saw anything unusual.
Then Benjamin did.
A line.
Not a crack.
Not a ridge.
A line pressed into the snow.
He stepped closer.
There were two.
Parallel grooves cut across the frozen surface.
Long.
Straight.
Too clean to be ordinary.
They ran north to south across the ice and vanished beneath a drift.
Samuel frowned.

“Could be sled tracks.”

“No sled came this far,” Amos said.

Samuel studied the grooves.

For a moment, he said nothing.

“I don’t know whose.”

One of the watermen bent low.

“Too wide for a hand sled.”

“Then, a horse sled.”

“No hoof marks.”

The men stood silently over the grooves.

The wind moved loose snow across their boots.

Benjamin followed the lines with his eyes.

They stretched toward the horizon.

Not far.

Not visibly.

But enough.

“What do you think made them?” Benjamin asked.

Samuel stared at the grooves.

The wind moved snow across the ice.

He said, “I don’t know.”

Nobody spoke.

A moment later, he added, “But I don’t believe it’s a ghost ship.”

Nobody spoke.

Benjamin stepped into the groove and pressed his boot beside it.

The mark was deeper than it first appeared.

Whatever had made it had weight.

He looked at the second groove.

Same depth.

Same direction.

Samuel Pike straightened.

"It proves nothing."

"Nobody said it did," Amos answered.

That was when one of the watermen called from several yards away.

"Over here."

They turned.

He was kneeling beside a low patch of broken ice.

Something dark lay half-frozen beneath the surface.

Wood.

The men gathered around it.

Samuel struck it with the end of his staff.

The ice cracked, but did not release it.

Amos knelt and cleared snow with his glove.

The object was a length of weathered timber.

Not large.

Perhaps two feet long.

Tar-stained along one edge.

A rusted iron fastening still clung to it.

Benjamin stared at it.

"Boat timber?"

Samuel hesitated.

"Could be dock scrap."

He didn't even sound convinced.

"Out here?"

"Storms carry all kinds of trash."

Amos said nothing.

That was true.

The bay collected wreckage.

Planks.

Barrels.
Crab pot floats.
Broken oars.
Things lost in storms and found years later in marsh grass.
A piece of timber proved nothing.
And yet.
They all looked toward the horizon.
No sail.
No mast.
No movement.
Only the frozen bay under a pale winter sun.
Samuel kicked snow over the grooves.
“Enough.”
Samuel lingered a moment.
“Well?” Amos asked.
Samuel looked back toward the horizon.
“I was hoping we wouldn’t find anything.”
Then he started walking.
Benjamin was the last to leave.
Before he followed, he looked once more at the two long lines in the snow.
Then at the timber.
Then at the empty horizon.
He had expected to find nothing.
Nothing would have been easier.
This was worse.

“By supper,” Jack said, “there were ten versions of the story.”

The stranger smiled.

“By breakfast?”

“Fifty.”

Haddie nodded.

“That sounds low.”

Jack pointed toward her.

“It is low.”

The men around the table laughed.

Jack continued.

“One person said the boat carried flour. Another said gold. Another said it was a pirate vessel frozen since the Revolution.”

“The Revolution?” the stranger asked.

“Carroway never lets a date interfere with a good story.”

Someone at the counter raised his mug in agreement.

“By the next day,” Jack said, “some folks claimed the skipjack belonged to a dead captain. Others said it belonged to no man living or dead. One woman declared it was a warning.”

“Of what?”

“Everything. Warnings are easier when you don’t have to be particular.”

The stranger looked toward the old photograph by the pie case.

“And Benjamin Pike?”

Jack’s expression changed slightly.

“Benjamin was the problem.”

“Why?”

“Because he was young.”

The stranger waited.

“Young people dislike mysteries that stay put.”

Outside, the wind rose and moved along the windows.

“That night, Benjamin couldn’t sleep. He kept thinking about those tracks. Those two grooves running across the ice as if something heavy had passed where nothing heavy could pass.”

Jack’s voice lowered.

“So, he got dressed.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“Near enough.”

“And went outside?”

Jack nodded.

“The moon was up. The whole bay was white. Carroway looked asleep.”

The room had gone quiet again.

“Benjamin walked to the harbor.”

Jack stared toward the window.

“He stood there a long while.”

“What did he see?”

“At first?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing.”

The stranger leaned in.

“And then?”

Jack smiled faintly.

“Far out on the ice, past the channel markers and almost too far to name, he saw something dark move against the horizon.”

“A ship?”

“Could’ve been cloud.”

“But he thought it was the skipjack.”

He knew what it looked like.

What troubled him was that he could think of no reason it should be

there.

“Did he tell anyone?”

Jack shook his head.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Jack looked at the stranger.

“Because the first sighting belongs to the eyes.”

He lifted his mug.

“The second belongs to the mouth.”

Nobody spoke.

Jack took a sip.

“And Benjamin Pike was not yet ready to hand his fear over to other people.”



CHAPTER FIVE

The Crossing

So, Benjamin told nobody?" the stranger asked.

"Nobody."

Jack nodded.

"Not Amos. Not Samuel Pike. Not his mother."

"What about Haddie?"

Jack smiled.

"Haddie wasn't Haddie yet."

The room chuckled.

The old storyteller rubbed his beard.

"Benjamin kept his mouth shut for three days."

"Why?"

"Because he was trying to decide whether he'd actually seen something."

The stranger nodded.

That seemed reasonable.

"Young men are often caught between curiosity and common sense,"

Jack said.

“Which one won?”

“Curiosity.”

“Doesn’t it always?”

“Nearly always.”

The stove crackled softly.

Outside, a gull drifted past the harbor window.

Jack leaned back in his chair.

“Benjamin spent those three days thinking about the grooves.”

“The tracks?”

“The tracks.”

Jack tapped the table.

“The timber too.”

He paused.

“And the sail.”

The room had grown quiet again.

“Everywhere he went, he found himself looking out toward the frozen bay.”

“Did anyone notice?”

“Everybody noticed.”

The stranger smiled.

“Then why didn’t anyone stop him?”

Jack laughed.

“You can’t stop a nineteen-year-old from doing something foolish.”

Several men around the table nodded.

One raised his coffee mug.

The others seemed to agree.

“Benjamin began carrying a chart of the bay.”

“A chart?”

Jack nodded.

"An old one. Folded and stained. He marked where Amos claimed to have seen the vessel. Then he marked where the second sighting occurred."

"And?"

"He convinced himself there was a pattern."

The stranger raised an eyebrow.

"Was there?"

Jack shrugged.

"Depends who tells the story."

That answer seemed to satisfy him.

For the moment.

"Eventually Benjamin decided there was only one way to find out."

"Which was?"

"To go looking."

The morning he left was bitterly cold.

The moon still hung over the bay.

Most of Carroway slept beneath a blanket of snow.

No smoke yet rose from chimneys.

No lamps glowed in windows.

The island seemed frozen as completely as the water around it.

Benjamin Pike dressed in silence.

Wool trousers.

Heavy coat.

Scarf.

Gloves.

He packed a lantern.

A coil of rope.

A blanket.

A loaf of bread.
 A wedge of cheese.
 A small hatchet.
 His father would have called it preparation.
 His mother would have called it evidence.
 Before dawn, he stepped outside.
 The cold struck him right away.
 His breath drifted white before him.
 The harbor lay motionless.
 Every boat remained trapped in the ice exactly where it had been the
 day before.
 And the day before that.
 Benjamin crossed the docks.
 The boards creaked beneath his boots.
 A gull watched him from a piling.
 The bird seemed puzzled by anyone being awake.
 At the end of the harbor, he stopped.
 The frozen Chesapeake stretched into darkness.
 Miles upon miles of ice.
 For the first time, he wondered if this might be a mistake.
 Then he thought of the sail.
 The hesitation passed.
 Benjamin stepped onto the bay.

 The first mile was easy.
 The second was less so.
 The third convinced him that no sensible person should ever attempt
 such a journey.

The ice was not smooth.
It rose and fell in ridges.
Some no higher than his knees.
Others taller than a man.
Wind had piled snow into drifts.
Hidden cracks zigzagged across the surface.
More than once, Benjamin stumbled.
Twice he fell.
The frozen bay seemed determined to discourage visitors.
As the sun rose, Carroway grew smaller behind him.
The church steeple became a dark needle.
Then a speck.
Then almost nothing.
Benjamin stopped.
Turned.
Looked back.
The sight unsettled him.
He had never been so far from the island.
Not on water.
Not on land.
Not anywhere.
For a moment, he considered returning.
The thought lasted perhaps five seconds.
Then he continued.
The farther he traveled, the stranger the world became.
No trees.
No roads.
No fences.
No sounds except wind.

Only ice and sky.
A man could lose himself out there.
Benjamin understood why sailors respected the bay.
It wasn't because of storms.
It was because the bay could make a man feel very small.
Hours passed.
The sun climbed higher.
Then slowly began to descend.
Benjamin had nearly convinced himself that the entire expedition was
foolish.
That Amos had been mistaken.
That the tracks had been nothing.
That the sail had been imagined.
Then he found the grooves.
They appeared suddenly.
Two parallel lines cutting through a patch of wind-blown snow.
Benjamin stopped so abruptly that he nearly lost his balance.
He knelt.
Touched one with a gloved hand.
The mark was fresh.
Or fresher.
Certainly, newer than the ones found days earlier.
The grooves stretched ahead of him.
Straight.
Purposeful.
Vanishing over a distant rise of ice.
Benjamin's pulse quickened.
For several minutes, he followed them.
Then he noticed something half-buried in a drift.

A scrap of canvas.
Weathered.
Frozen stiff.
He pulled it free.
The cloth was old.
Salt-stained.
One corner had a fragment of black stitching.
Sailcloth.
Or something very much like it.
Benjamin stared at it.
The wind tugged at the fabric.
The bay remained silent.
For the first time, he no longer doubted Amos Vale.
Something had passed this way.
Something real.
Something heavy.
Something that left tracks.
He folded the cloth and slipped it into his coat.
Then he climbed the nearest ridge.
The sun hovered low above the horizon.
Long shadows stretched across the ice.
Benjamin reached the crest.
Looked outward.
And froze.
Far away.
Almost too distant to identify.
A dark shape moved slowly across the pale winter light.
A mast.
A sail.

A vessel.

The Phantom Skipjack.

Benjamin stood motionless.

The bay around him seemed to disappear.

There was only the ship.

And the impossible realization that Amos had told the truth.

The dark vessel continued moving.

Silent.

Steady.

Unhurried.

Benjamin felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather.

For the first time since leaving Carroway, he wished he had stayed home.

And for the first time since the freeze began, the Phantom Skipjack was no longer a story.



CHAPTER SIX

The Black Hull

What happened next?"

The stranger had stopped pretending not to be interested.

Jack noticed.

So did everyone else.

The old storyteller smiled into his coffee.

"Benjamin followed it."

"Of course he did."

"Of course."

Jack nodded.

"He was nineteen."

The room laughed.

Then fell quiet again.

Outside the harbor window, evening light had settled over Carroway.

Inside Haddie's Fish Shak, nobody moved.

They all wanted to hear the rest.

Benjamin stood atop the ridge of ice.
The wind tugged at his coat.
Far beyond the frozen bay, the vessel continued moving.
Not quickly.
Not slowly.
Steadily.
As if it had all the time in the world.
Benjamin stared.
The dark hull seemed larger now.
No longer a distant shape.
No longer imagination.
A vessel.
A real vessel.
He could see the mast.
The angle of the sail.
The black outline against the fading winter sky.
For several moments, he watched.
Then the ship disappeared behind another ridge of ice.
Benjamin came to life.
He descended right away.
Sliding.
Stumbling.
Falling once and nearly losing his lantern.
By the time he reached level ground, the vessel was visible again.
Still moving.
Still silent.
He began following.

The pursuit lasted nearly two hours.
The sun sank lower.
The wind strengthened.
Snow drifted across the ice in thin silver sheets.
More than once, Benjamin lost sight of the vessel entirely.
Each time, panic tightened his chest.
Then the sail would appear again.
Dark against the horizon.
Waiting.
Always just beyond reach.
As though it wanted to be followed.
The thought troubled him.
He tried not to think it.
Failed.

Twilight settled across the bay.
The sky turned pale violet.
The first stars appeared.
Benjamin crossed another ridge.
Then he stopped.
The tracks lay before him.
Not grooves.
Not impressions.
Tracks.
Clear.
Distinct.
Undeniable.
Two parallel cuts carved deeply into the ice.

The edges bore long scratches.
Metal scratches.
Benjamin knelt.
Touched one.
The mark was sharp.
Clean.
Deliberate.
He ran his fingers along the frozen groove.
Iron.
Something fitted with iron had passed here.
He stood slowly.
The mystery shifted.
Not vanished.
Shifted.
The tracks belonged to something real.
Something built.
Something made by human hands.
Benjamin followed them.

Half an hour later, he reached the vessel.
For a long moment, he could only stare.
The Phantom Skipjack rested motionless upon the ice.
Black hull.
Dark mast.
Furled sail.
No lantern.
No smoke.
No movement.

The vessel looked older than the boats of Carroway.
Not ancient.
Simply worn.
Weathered by years of wind and salt.
Benjamin approached cautiously.
The ice groaned beneath his boots.
The vessel remained silent.
He circled the bow.
Then he stopped.
There they were.
The runners.
Heavy oak timbers mounted beneath the hull.
Long.
Curved.
Reinforced with iron.
Benjamin stared in amazement.
The answer.
At least part of it.
Someone had converted the skipjack into an ice vessel.
A boat capable of traveling where no ordinary boat could go.
The tracks.
The grooves.
The movement across the bay.
Suddenly, all of it made sense.
Benjamin laughed aloud.
The sound startled him.
He had solved it.
Or thought he had.

A rope ladder hung over one side.
Benjamin climbed aboard.
The deck creaked softly beneath his weight.
The vessel smelled of salt and old timber.
Snow covered much of the deck.
No footprints marked it.
That struck him as odd.
Very odd.
He pushed the thought aside.
The answer was obvious.
The crew had left.
The vessel had been abandoned.
That was all.
Yet as he crossed the deck, the feeling persisted.
The uncomfortable sensation that he was not alone.
Benjamin reached a small cabin.
The door resisted.
Frozen shut.
After several attempts, he forced it open.
The hinges complained loudly.
Inside lay darkness.
Dust.
Cold.
The remains of another winter.
Or maybe many winters.
A small table occupied one corner.
A narrow bunk, another.
And resting on the table was a book.
Benjamin lifted it carefully.

Leather.
Water-stained.
Weathered.
A journal.
His pulse quickened.
He opened it.
Many pages had become unreadable.
Others remained intact.
The handwriting was cramped.
Uneven.
Written by a man accustomed to labor rather than penmanship.
Benjamin turned pages slowly.
Weather notes.
Ice conditions.
References to crossings.
Then he found the final entry.
He held the book close to the fading light.
January 31, 1857.
Ice holds.
Crossing again tomorrow.
The entry ended there.
No signature.
No explanation.
Nothing more.
Benjamin turned the page.
Blank.
The next page.
Blank.
The rest of the journal remained empty.

As though whoever wrote it had intended to continue.
And never did.

The wind struck the cabin walls.
Benjamin looked up.
The vessel creaked.
Only slightly.
A tiny movement.
Almost imperceptible.
He waited.
Nothing.
Then it happened again.
A slow groan somewhere beneath the deck.
The sound of shifting timber.
Benjamin stepped outside.
The darkness had deepened.
Snow drifted across the ice.
The bay stretched endlessly in every direction.
Empty.
Silent.
He looked down.
The deck remained covered in snow.
Untouched snow.
No footprints.
Not a single one.
Not even old ones.
Benjamin frowned.
That was impossible.

Someone had sailed this vessel.
Someone had written the journal.
Someone had fitted the runners.
Yet the snow lay smooth and undisturbed.
As though nobody had stood upon the deck for years.
A sudden gust swept across the bay.
Benjamin tightened his coat.
The feeling returned.
The feeling of being watched.
He turned quickly.
Nothing.
Only mast.
Rigging.
Snow.
And darkness.
Enough.
He had what he came for.
The journal.
The proof.
The answer.
Or enough of one.
Benjamin climbed down onto the ice.

He walked perhaps fifty yards before stopping.
The journal rested safely beneath his coat.
The wind howled around him.
One last look.
That was all.

Then he would return home.
Benjamin turned.
The *Martha Jane* remained where he had left her.
Black hull.
Dark mast.
Silent against the frozen bay.
For several moments, he stood and looked.
Then something caught his attention.
A pale band drifting low across the ice.
Fog.
Benjamin frowned.
The bay had been clear all afternoon.
Yet the fog continued advancing.
Not rolling through the air.
Rolling across the surface itself.
Thin at first.
Almost transparent.
Then thicker.
The whiteness drifted toward the vessel.
Slowly.
Deliberately.
As though following a course of its own.
Benjamin watched.
The runners disappeared first.
Swallowed by the fog.
Then the lower part of the hull.
The vessel seemed to settle into the mist.
Benjamin took several quick steps forward.
The fog thickened.

The black hull faded.
The deck vanished.
Only the mast remained.
A dark line against the moonlit sky.
Then that too dissolved into the gray.
The world grew strangely quiet.
The fog surrounded him.
Ice.
Sky.
Mist.
All blended.
Benjamin could see only a short distance in any direction.
Then he heard it.
A sound so faint he almost doubted it.
A scrape.
Metal against ice.
He held his breath.
The sound came again.
Farther away.
Scrape.
Scrape.
Scrape.
Like iron runners crossing frozen water.
The sound continued for several moments.
Then faded.
The fog drifted onward.
Silence returned.
A cold wind swept across the bay.
The mist began to thin.

Moonlight emerged once more.

Benjamin looked toward where the vessel had stood.

Nothing remained.

No mast.

No hull.

No sail.

Only empty ice stretching into the darkness.

He stared for a long time.

The journal suddenly felt heavier beneath his coat.

Behind him lay Carroway Island.

Ahead lay the frozen Chesapeake.

And though the bay seemed empty, Benjamin could not shake the feeling that something had just left.

For the first time that day, Benjamin Pike was afraid.



HADDIE'S
FISH SHAK

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Thaw

Did anyone believe him?" the stranger asked.
Jack smiled.

"That depends on which part."

The room chuckled.

The stranger frowned.

"How can you believe only part of a story?"

Jack took a sip of coffee.

"Easy."

He set the mug down.

"You start with the parts that don't argue with you."

Benjamin Pike reached Carroway shortly after sunrise.

By then, he had been awake for nearly a full day.

His legs ached.

His hands hurt.

His face felt carved from ice.

The journal rested beneath his coat.

More than once during the journey home, he had reached inside to make certain it remained there.

Each time it had.

That fact alone reassured him.

The vessel might have vanished.

The journal had not.

As he crossed the harbor, several watermen noticed him right away.

One shouted.

Another pointed.

Within minutes, half the island seemed aware that Benjamin Pike had returned.

Benjamin headed directly for Haddie's Fish Shak.

He pushed through the door.

Warmth struck him like a wave.

Every conversation stopped.

Haddie looked up.

"Good Lord."

Benjamin removed his gloves.

"Porridge."

"What?"

"I'd like some porridge."

Haddie stared at him.

Then she nodded.

"That's how I know you've been somewhere dangerous."

The room laughed.

Benjamin sat down heavily near the stove.

Only after finishing two bowls of porridge and three cups of coffee did he remove the journal.

The room grew quiet.
Very quiet.
He placed the book on the table.
Amos Vale arrived first.
Samuel Pike second.
Several watermen gathered behind them.
Soon, nobody remained in their original seat.
The journal passed from hand to hand.
Carefully.
Respectfully.
As though age alone made it valuable.
“What does it say?” somebody asked.
Benjamin opened it to the final page.
The room leaned closer.
January 31, 1857
Ice holds.
Heard runners on the bay again tonight.
Crossing tomorrow.
Silence followed.
Several men read the words twice.
One read them three times.
Finally, Samuel Pike spoke.
“That’s all?”
Benjamin nodded.
“That’s all.”
“No name?”
“No.”
“No destination?”
“No.”

"No captain?"

"No."

Samuel sat back.

"Helpful fellow."

The room laughed.

But not much.

Everyone had expected more.

Benjamin had too.

The arguments began before noon.

They continued all afternoon.

And resumed after supper.

"The vessel was real."

"Of course it was real."

"The runners prove it."

"They do."

"The journal proves it."

"Agreed."

"The tracks prove it."

"Probably."

Samuel Pike folded his arms.

"Then where is it?"

Nobody answered.

Benjamin stared into his coffee.

That question bothered him more than any other.

The vessel had existed.

He had stood aboard it.

Held its journal.

Touched its rail.
Examined its runners.
Yet when he turned around, it had vanished.
No explanation satisfied him.
None.

Two days later, the weather changed.
The south wind arrived.
At first, nobody noticed.
Then somebody left a coat unbuttoned.
Then another.
By the end of the week, water dripped from the eaves.
The thaw had begun.
The bay awoke.
Cracks echoed across the ice.
Great sheets shifted and settled.
The frozen Chesapeake groaned like an old ship.
Jack paused.
The stranger looked toward the harbor window.
“Was it dangerous?”
“The thaw?”
Jack nodded.
“More dangerous than the freeze.”
Several men around the room agreed.
“The freeze makes promises,” Jack said.
“The thaw breaks them.”

Benjamin organized a search.
He insisted on it.
Three watermen joined him.
So did Amos Vale.
Samuel Pike came along mostly to argue.
The group retraced Benjamin's route across the bay.
The journey took nearly an entire day.
The thaw had already altered everything.
The grooves remained in places.
Faint.
Broken.
Half erased.
Several ice ridges had collapsed.
Others had shifted entirely.
The bay no longer resembled the place Benjamin remembered.
At last, they reached the area where the Phantom Skipjack had stood.
Nothing.
No vessel.
No runners.
No mast.
No sail.
Only ice.
One of the watermen kicked at the surface.
"Maybe it broke through."
"Impossible," said another.
"Why?"
"Because we'd see it."
Amos remained silent.
Benjamin walked in widening circles.

Searching.

Looking.

Refusing to accept what his eyes reported.

The vessel was gone.

Gone completely.

When they finally turned for home, nobody spoke much.

Even Samuel Pike seemed disappointed.

The answer arrived from an unexpected source.

Three days later.

Mrs. Tallow.

Jack smiled.

“Most mysteries on Carroway eventually involve Mrs. Tallow.”

The stranger nodded.

That sounded reasonable.

“She’d spent years collecting old newspapers. Nobody knew why.”

“Did she know?”

“Not particularly.”

The room laughed.

Jack continued.

“Anyway, she appeared at Haddie’s carrying a stack of newspapers tied together with twine.”

One of the men at the counter nodded.

“That sounds like Bea.”

“Exactly.”

Mrs. Tallow deposited the bundle on a table.

“I found something.”

Everyone gathered around.

The newspaper was old.
Very old.
Printed during the Great Freeze itself.
Benjamin unfolded the brittle pages carefully.
The article occupied only a few paragraphs.
Yet every person in the room read it.
Twice.
Then a third time.
The article described an experimental vessel.
A skipjack modified for winter travel.
Special runners.
Iron braces.
Designed to cross frozen parts of the bay.
Benjamin felt his pulse quicken.
The runners.
The grooves.
The tracks.
Everything matched.
He continued reading.
Then he stopped.
The room became silent.
“What is it?” Amos asked.
Benjamin looked up.
The newspaper trembled slightly in his hands.
“It gives the name.”
“What name?”
Benjamin swallowed.
Then he read aloud.
“The Martha Jane.”

Nobody spoke.

The room had grown very still.

The same name Benjamin had seen painted upon the hull.

The same name.

Exactly.

Samuel Pike stared at the article.

“That proves it.”

Benjamin nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

“It existed.”

“Yes.”

“The vessel was real.”

“Yes.”

For a moment, relief spread through the room.

The mystery had finally yielded.

Then Benjamin resumed reading.

The relief vanished.

“What now?” somebody asked.

Benjamin looked up.

The room waited.

“The article continues.”

He lowered his eyes to the page.

Then he read aloud.

Lost with all hands.

February 1857.

No wreckage recovered.

No survivors reported.

Search efforts suspended.

The room fell silent.

Outside, the thawing harbor creaked.

Nobody moved.

Amos spoke.

“That’s impossible.”

Samuel nodded.

For once, nobody argued.

Benjamin folded the newspaper carefully.

The vessel had existed.

That much was now certain.

The runners.

The journal.

The name.

All of it.

Yet according to the newspaper, the Martha Jane had disappeared more than a century earlier.

And no one could explain how Benjamin Pike had stood aboard her only days before.

That evening, Benjamin walked alone along the harbor.

The thaw continued.

Dark water showed between drifting sheets of ice.

The freeze was ending.

Soon, the bay would belong to boats once more.

The sun settled low against the horizon.

Benjamin stopped.

Far away.

Beyond the harbor entrance.

He thought he saw a sail.

Dark.

Small.

Moving through the evening light.

He blinked.

The shape disappeared.

Perhaps mist.

Perhaps shadow.

Maybe something else.

Benjamin told no one about it.

Not even Amos.

Not even years later.

By the end of the week, the ice had broken.

By the end of the month, the bay was open.

The grooves vanished.

The tracks vanished.

The vessel vanished.

Only the journal remained.

And even that answered fewer questions than it asked.



HADDIE'S
FOOD & LODGING

WATERMAN'S
ALMANAC
1867

JOURNAL
OF
BENJAMIN PIKE
1857

CHAPTER EIGHT

What Jack Thinks

The stranger sat quietly for a moment.
Nobody spoke.

The stove crackled.

A spoon rattled somewhere near the counter.

Outside, evening settled across the harbor.

The stranger looked up.

“So, what happened?”

Jack smiled.

The smile of a man who had been expecting the question for the last hour.

“Which part?”

“The Phantom Skipjack.”

The old storyteller rubbed his beard.

“The part where Benjamin found her?”

“No.”

“The part where she disappeared?”

“No.”

"The part where nobody could explain any of it?"

The stranger sighed.

"The whole thing."

Jack nodded thoughtfully.

"That's a larger request than most people realize."

The room chuckled.

The stranger folded his arms.

"Fine."

"What?"

"What do you think happened?"

Jack looked toward the harbor window.

The water beyond had darkened to steel gray.

Several gulls drifted above the docks.

For a while, he said nothing.

Then he pointed a finger toward the table.

"Let's start with the facts."

The room grew quiet.

Even Haddie paused in her work.

"The Great Freeze happened."

The stranger nodded.

"That's true."

"Amos saw something."

"Apparently."

"A second man saw it too."

The stranger nodded again.

"The tracks existed."

"Yes."

"The runners existed."

"Yes."

"The journal existed."

"Yes."

"The newspaper existed."

"Yes."

Jack spread his hands.

"And the Martha Jane existed."

Nobody argued.

The facts stood comfortably on their own.

Like old fence posts.

They required no defending.

The stranger leaned forward.

"So, what's your explanation?"

Jack shrugged.

"I think a group of watermen built a skipjack that could travel across ice."

"That makes sense."

"It does."

"I think they crossed the frozen bay."

"Reasonable."

"I think something happened to them."

The stranger nodded.

"Reasonable."

"I think the story grew larger with every retelling."

The stranger smiled.

"There we are."

Jack raised an eyebrow.

"There we are what?"

"That's the answer."

The old man shook his head.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

The stranger frowned.

"Why not?"

Jack pointed toward him.

"Because that explanation has holes in it."

The room murmured agreement.

"What holes?"

Jack counted them off on his fingers.

"No crew."

The stranger hesitated.

"Fair enough."

"No footprints."

"Maybe snow covered them."

"Maybe."

Jack raised another finger.

"The vessel vanished."

The stranger opened his mouth.

Then he closed it.

Jack nodded.

"Exactly."

Another finger.

"People kept reporting sightings long after 1857."

The stranger sighed.

"Stories travel."

"They do."

Jack smiled.

"But boats usually don't."

Laughter moved through the room.

Even the stranger laughed.
Reluctantly.

“You forgot the important part.”

Everyone turned.

Haddie Mercer stood behind the counter, holding a dish towel.

Jack sighed.

“What important part?”

“The part where you enjoy confusing people.”

The room erupted.

Jack looked wounded.

“I do not.”

Haddie laughed.

“You absolutely do.”

The laughter continued.

Jack waited patiently for it to end.

Then he pointed at Haddie.

“I only confuse people who deserve it.”

“That’s everyone.”

“Exactly.”

More laughter.

The stranger shook his head.

“No wonder nobody can get a straight answer around here.”

“You came to the wrong island for straight answers,” said Haddie.

The room settled again.

The stranger looked back toward Jack.

“So that’s it?”

“Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

Jack stared into his coffee.

“There is one thing.”

The room became quiet.

“What thing?” the stranger asked.

Jack looked toward the ceiling.

As though searching through old memories.

“Years ago.”

“How many?”

“Several.”

Haddie snorted.

“Helpful.”

Jack ignored her.

“Someone took another look at Benjamin’s journal.”

The stranger leaned forward.

“And?”

“There was a page stuck together near the back.”

“What was on it?”

Jack shrugged.

“Not much.”

The stranger waited.

“So?”

Jack took a sip of coffee.

He continued.

“A note.”

“What kind of note?”

“A scrap of paper.”

“From whom?”

“No name.”

The stranger groaned.

“Of course.”

Jack smiled.

The note had only a few words.

Written in a different hand than the journal.

The room waited.

“What words?” asked the stranger.

Jack looked toward the harbor.

Then he quietly recited them.

Ice thinner today.

Wind from the south.

One more crossing should do it.

Silence followed.

The stranger frowned.

“Why does that matter?”

Jack looked at him.

“Because the note was written on the back of a shipping receipt.”

“So?”

“The receipt was dated February 18.”

The stranger blinked.

The room remained silent.

“The vessel disappeared in early February.”

Jack nodded.

“According to the newspaper.”

The stranger stared.

The implication settled slowly.

Then completely.

"That's impossible."

"Maybe."

The stranger shook his head.

"Everything about this story is impossible."

"Not everything."

Jack nodded toward the harbor.

"The freeze happened."

The stranger sat quietly.

At last, he smiled.

"I think you're avoiding the question."

"Which one?"

"What do you personally believe?"

Jack looked out the window again.

Toward the darkening water.

Toward the bay.

Toward all the stories that had ever crossed it.

Then he shrugged.

"I think a few watermen built themselves a remarkable vessel."

The stranger listened.

"I think they crossed the ice."

Jack continued.

"I think something happened that nobody ever fully understood."

"And?"

Jack smiled.

"And I think people have been arguing about it ever since."

"That's not much of an answer."

"It's the best one I've got."

The stranger stood.
Pulled on his coat.
The story was finished.
Outside, darkness had settled over Carroway Harbor.
He paid his bill.
Thanked Haddie.
Nodded toward Jack.
Then he stepped outside.
The bell rattled behind him.
Cold air met him at the door.
The harbor lay quiet.
A few lights glowed along the docks.
The bay stretched into darkness.
The stranger paused.
Looked outward.
Far away.
Very far away.
Something moved against the moonlit water.
A sail.
Dark.
Small.
Gone almost immediately.
The stranger stood motionless.
Maybe it had been a fishing boat.
Maybe a shadow.
Maybe moonlight playing tricks.
After a moment, he turned.

Reopened the door.

The bell rattled again.

Jack looked up.

“Forgot something?”

The stranger hesitated.

Then he smiled.

“Jack.”

“Yes?”

“I think I just saw something.”

The old storyteller nodded.

“Most people do.”

The stranger laughed.

“Was it the Phantom Skipjack?”

Jack looked toward the harbor.

A slow grin appeared beneath his beard.

Then he lifted his mug.

“If you want to know tomorrow’s weather,” he said, “be certain to check your Waterman’s Almanac.”

The room laughed.

The stranger shook his head.

“And if I want to know whether the Phantom Skipjack is real?”

Jack took a slow sip of coffee.

Looked out toward the bay.

Then he shrugged.

“Keep your eyes open.”

The bell above the door rattled softly as the stranger stepped back into the night.

And somewhere beyond the harbor, where history ended, and stories began, the bay kept its secrets.



FROM THE CARROWAY ISLAND ARCHIVES

The Great Freeze of 1857

Readers occasionally ask whether the winter described in *The Phantom Skipjack* actually occurred.

The answer is yes.

The Chesapeake Bay has frozen often throughout recorded history, but the winter of 1856–1857 remains among the most severe ever recorded.

Beginning in January of 1857, Arctic air settled across the Mid-Atlantic and remained for weeks. Rivers froze. Harbors froze. Large parts of the Chesapeake Bay became locked beneath thick ice.

Contemporary newspaper accounts describe steamboats trapped in place, ferry routes suspended, and island communities cut off from regular supplies.

Residents reported hearing the ice crack and shift for miles across the bay. Some compared the sounds to distant cannon fire.

For many watermen, the freeze was not merely inconvenient. The bay was their road, their marketplace, and their connection to the outside world.

When the bay froze, so did commerce.

APPROXIMATE ROUTE
ATTRIBUTED TO
THE MARTHA JANE
DURING THE
GREAT FREEZE OF 1857

---> *Supposed Route
of the Martha Jane*

Pressure Ridge

TANGIER SOUND

*To Annapolis
and Baltimore*

EASTERN
SHORE

FROZEN
CHESAPEAKE BAY
Winter of 1857

*Ice Measured
18 Inches*

*Dangerous
Crossing*

Church

*Traveler's
Meadow*

CARROWAY ISLAND

Harbor

*Ferry
Landing*

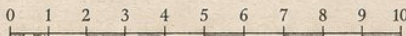
KENT ISLAND

*Frequent
Fog*

SMITH ISLAND



Scale of Miles



Nautical Miles

*Map Compiled From
Local Accounts and
Surviving Records*

CARROWAY ISLAND
ARCHIVES

FROM THE CARROWAY ISLAND ARCHIVES

Crossing the Chesapeake on Ice

Modern readers often find it hard to imagine the Chesapeake Bay frozen solid.

Yet during severe winters, parts of the bay have repeatedly supported foot traffic, horse-drawn sleds, and sometimes small freight movements.

During the Great Freeze, newspaper accounts reported people walking across stretches of water that would ordinarily require a boat.

Island residents relied on whatever means were available to move supplies, mail, and provisions.

Not every crossing ended safely.

Pressure ridges could form unexpectedly. Hidden cracks appeared beneath drifting snow. Sudden thaws weakened previously reliable routes.

Many experienced watermen considered frozen travel more dangerous than ordinary navigation.

As one Eastern Shore newspaper observed, “The bay gives warning before a storm.

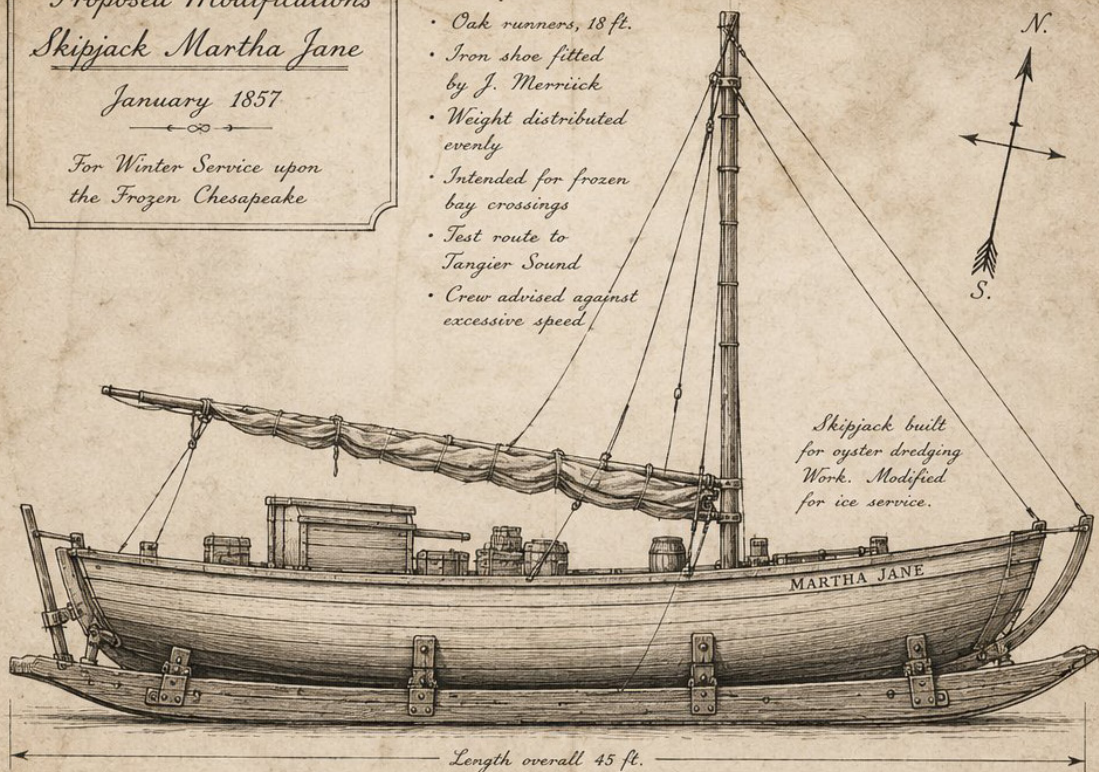
Ice often gives none.”

Proposed Modifications Skipjack Martha Jane

January 1857

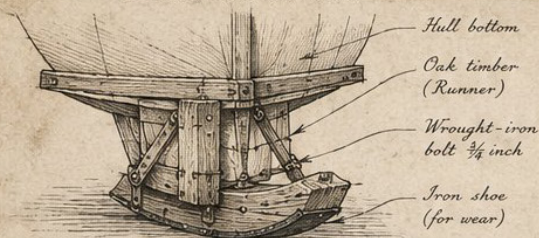
For Winter Service upon
the Frozen Chesapeake

- Oak runners, 18 ft.
- Iron shoe fitted by J. Merriick
- Weight distributed evenly
- Intended for frozen bay crossings
- Test route to Tangier Sound
- Crew advised against excessive speed



Skipjack built
for oyster dredging
Work. Modified
for ice service.

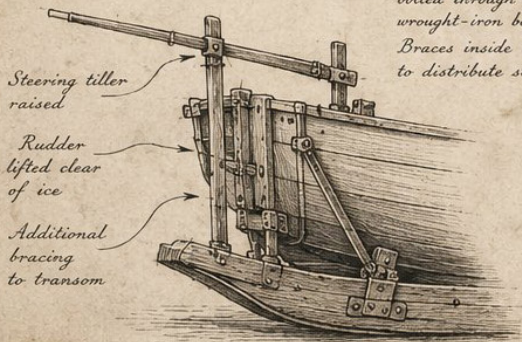
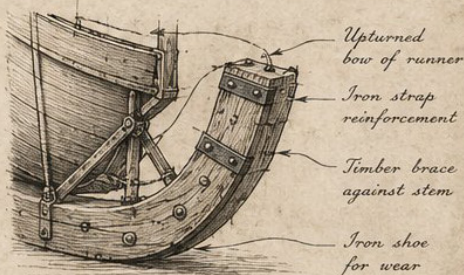
RUNNER CONSTRUCTION



Cross Section A-A

Hull bottom
Oak timber
(Runner)
Wrought-iron
bolt $\frac{3}{4}$ inch
Iron shoe
(for wear)
Runners of solid
oak, steamed and
shaped. Iron shoes
bolted through with
wrought-iron bolts.
Braces inside hull
to distribute strain.

BOW DETAIL

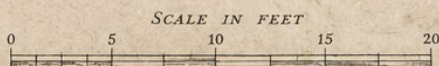


PLAN OF RUNNER (Top View)



Iron shoes extend from bow to midship.
Bolts spaced 18 inches apart.
Oak runners to be examined frequently
for cracks or wear.

Note: Ice thickness
must not be less
than 16 inches.



If Eli is wrong,
she'll make the crossing.
E.M.

FROM THE CARROWAY ISLAND ARCHIVES

Ice Boats and Winter Craft

Long before modern ice yachts, coastal communities experimented with vessels designed to travel across frozen waterways.

Some were purpose-built ice boats.

Others were ordinary boats temporarily modified with runners, skids, or reinforced timbers.

Historical records describe a variety of such craft operating in northern states, the Great Lakes region, and parts of the Chesapeake during unusually severe winters.

Whether any skipjack was successfully converted for extended travel across the frozen Chesapeake remains uncertain.

Local traditions differ.

Some insist such vessels existed.

Others remain unconvinced.

The editors of the Carroway Island Archives take no official position.

THE CHESAPEAKE BAY SKIPJACK

The skipjack is one of the most recognizable vessels ever to sail the Chesapeake Bay.

Developed during the late nineteenth century, skipjacks were designed as working boats for the oyster industry. Their broad, shallow hulls allowed them to operate in the Bay's often shallow waters, while their large sail rigs provided the power needed to tow oyster dredges across the bottom.

Hundreds of skipjacks were built primarily between the 1880s and the early twentieth century, and once worked the Chesapeake. They hauled oysters, carried cargo, and became a familiar sight from Tangier Sound to the upper reaches of the Bay.

Most skipjacks were practical vessels rather than elegant ones. They were built to work hard, endure rough weather, and earn a living for their crews. Their simple construction made them relatively inexpensive to build and maintain, while their ability to operate without engines helped keep operating costs low.

Today, only a few historic skipjacks remain in active service. Several continue to sail as educational and cultural vessels, preserving an important part of Chesapeake Bay history.

Although the events described in *The Phantom Skipjack* take place before the traditional skipjack era, the vessel known as the *Martha Jane* is imagined as an early Chesapeake working craft sharing many characteris-

tics that would later define the skipjack.

Its broad hull, shallow draft, and practical design made it a logical candidate for the unusual winter modifications described in the story.

Whether any vessel ever crossed the frozen Chesapeake on runners remains uncertain.

The skipjack itself, however, is very real.

For generations, these hardworking vessels helped define life on the Chesapeake Bay and remain among the most enduring symbols of the region's maritime heritage.

NOTES FROM THE CARROWAY ISLAND ARCHIVES

These facts are historical:

- ✓ The Great Freeze of 1857.
- ✓ Extended closure of Chesapeake navigation.
- ✓ Island supply shortages during severe winters.
- ✓ Travel across parts of the frozen bay on foot and sled.
- ✓ Experiments with ice-going vessels in North America.

These remain a matter of discussion:

- ✓ The *Martha Jane*.
- ✓ The Phantom Skipjack.
- ✓ Reports of runners heard crossing the bay after dark.

When questioned regarding the matter, local resident Jack Mercer offered the following statement:

“If you want to know tomorrow’s weather, check your Waterman’s Almanac.

If you want to know about the Phantom Skipjack, keep your eyes open.”

The Archives can neither confirm nor deny the accuracy of this advice.

OTHER BOOKS BY ROBERT GILL JR.

THE OLD WATERMAN'S ALMANAC OF CARROWAY ISLAND

Part weather guide, part local history, and part island folklore, this unusual almanac has tide tables, weather observations, seasonal advice, and generations of Chesapeake Bay wisdom. Readers will also discover island legends, curious events, and the observations of Carroway's colorful residents. It is a book a waterman might keep beside the kitchen table all year long.

THE CARROWAY COOKBOOK & ISLAND ADVICE JOURNAL

A collection of traditional Chesapeake recipes, practical household advice, and island remedies gathered from the residents of Carroway Island. Alongside crab cakes, oyster dishes, chowders, and desserts are the opinions, suggestions, and occasional arguments of the people who call the island home. Part cookbook and part community scrapbook, it offers a taste of island life both on and off the table.

THE CARROWAY ISLAND VISITOR'S GUIDE

For those planning a visit, or for readers curious about what they might find, this illustrated guide introduces the history, landmarks, customs, and attractions of Carroway Island. Readers can explore the harbor, beaches, marshes, museums, churches, and local businesses while learning about the people who have shaped the island's character. Whether used as a guidebook or enjoyed from an armchair, it offers an entertaining introduction to one of the Chesapeake Bay's most unusual destinations.

THE WATERMAN'S ESSENTIAL MARINE KNOT BOOK (NOT BOOK)

Presented as a practical reference assembled by generations of Chesapeake Bay watermen, this illustrated volume explores the knots, hitches, loops, and splices traditionally used around working boats. Along the way, readers will encounter stories, observations, and occasional warnings from the island's maritime community. Equal parts reference guide and island curiosity, it is a book best enjoyed with a healthy respect for rope.

THE CURIOUS TRIAL OF JOSIAH WREN

When respected craftsman Josiah Wren finds himself at the center of a baffling legal dispute, the residents of Carroway Island become witnesses, jurors, commentators, and occasionally part of the problem. Blending humor, mystery, and small-town life, this illustrated novel explores how truth, rumor, and human nature often travel together. As with many things on Carroway Island, the matter proves more complicated than it first appears.

THE MARSH BELL

A haunting literary tale set among the marshes and waterways of Carroway Island. When a mysterious bell sounds across the bay, old memories, forgotten histories, and long-buried questions slowly resurface. Rich in atmosphere and Chesapeake Bay tradition, *The Marsh Bell* explores loss, belonging, and the enduring pull of home.

THE OYSTER KEEPERS

As environmental change, economic pressures, and outside interests threaten a way of life, a group of island residents work to build a future rooted in the waters that have sustained generations before them. Centered on an ambitious oyster-growing project, this novel blends community, resilience, romance, and Chesapeake Bay culture. It is a story about stewardship, identity, and the meaning of home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBERT GILL JR. is the creator of the Carroway Island Library and the Carroway Island Bay Stories, a growing collection of books celebrating the people, history, folklore, and maritime traditions of a fictional Chesapeake Bay island.

Inspired by the watermen, working harbors, marshlands, and coastal communities of the Chesapeake region, he blends history, mystery, humor, and local legend in his stories. Through the residents of Carroway Island, from ferry captains and oyster growers to innkeepers, preachers, and storytellers, he explores the enduring character of small communities shaped by wind, water, and time.

Before turning his attention to Carroway Island, Robert spent decades in business, publishing, and commercial real estate. He is also the founder and publisher of the *ArtMolds Journal* and the author of many nonfiction books and articles on a wide variety of subjects.

Robert and his wife, Hong, live in New Jersey, where they have hosted international high school students for many years. Together they enjoy travel, local history, and discovering unusual stories that often find their way into his writing.

When not writing, Robert can often be found researching Chesapeake Bay history, collecting maritime lore, or imagining what might be happening today on Carroway Island.

According to island sources, the residents of Carroway continue to insist that most of Crazy Jack Mercer's stories are exaggerated.

Crazy Jack continues to insist that most are not.

*For more information about Carroway Island
and Robert Gill Jr.'s books, visit:*

www.carrowayisland.com

www.robertgilljr.com