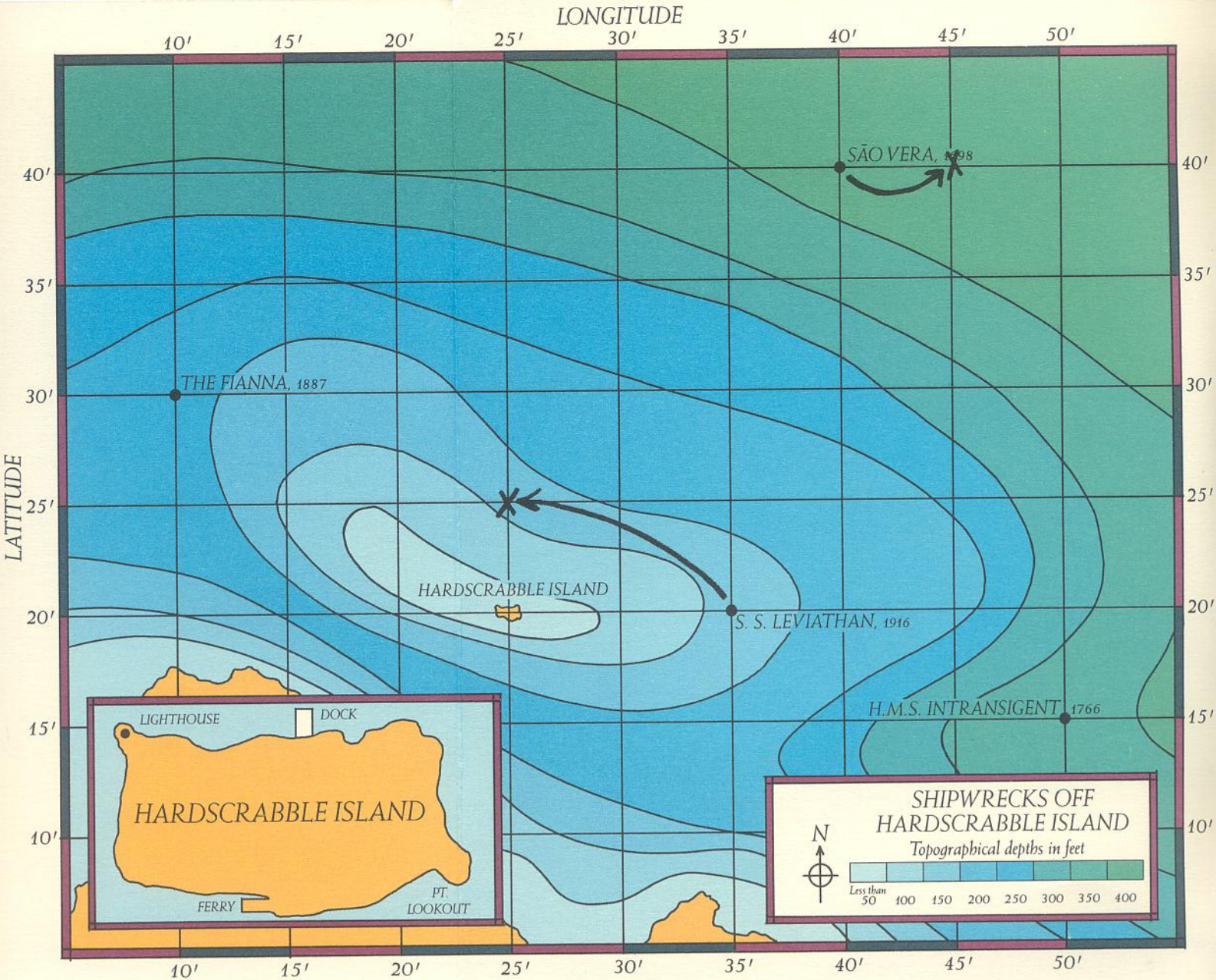
Four Shipwrecks off Hardscrabble Island

Hardscrabble Harbor Historical Society


LONGITUDE
10′
15′
20′
25′
30′
35′
40′
45′
50′
LATITUDE
40′
35′
30′
25′
20′
15′
10′
SÃO VERA, 1498
THE FIANNA, 1887
HARDSCRABBLE ISLAND
S. S. LEVIATHAN, 1916
H.M.S. INTRANSIGENT, 1766
LIGHTHOUSE
DOCK
HARDSCRABBLE ISLAND
FERRY
PT. LOOKOUT
SHIPWRECKS OFF HARDSCRABBLE ISLAND
Topographical depths in feet
N
Less than 50
100
150
200
250
300
350
400

Introduction

From the time it was founded by Reverend Ezra Gladstone and his followers in 1692 until the decline of the fishing industry in the 1920s, Hardscrabble Harbor was an important port for the sailing ships of the world. Its deep channel offered sufficient draught for everything from sloops to the giant five-masters of the late nineteenth century. (Islanders who remember the Harbor's boom years say that at times there were more foreign sailors roaming the Wharf Road than there were Hardscrabble natives.)

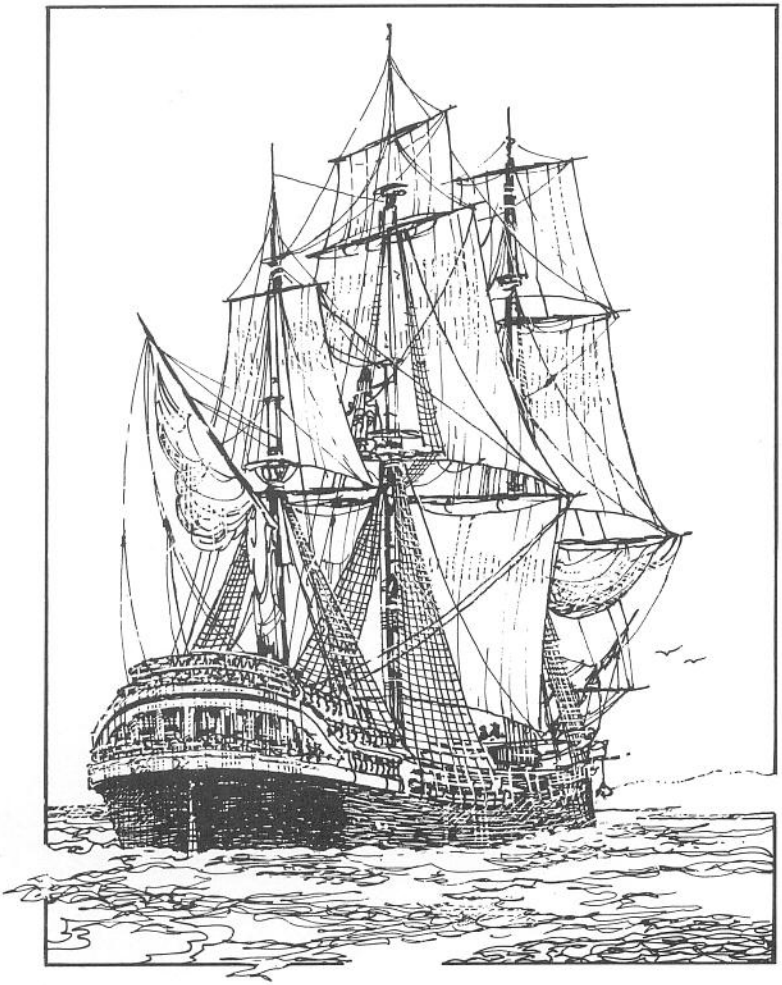
However, like any other seaport, Hardscrabble has its treacherous shoals and narrow straits. Consequently, a side effect of the great sea trade was a number of shipwrecks. This volume concerns four of the most famous vessels to go down in our waters: the *São Vera*, the *H.M.S. Intransigent*, *The Fianna* and the *S. S. Leviathan*.

Many stories have sprung up over the years in regard to the fates of these ships. Some of these tales are based on fact; others are little more than strands in the fabric of local legend. By searching through the town archives (and in the case of the *Leviathan*, conducting interviews with survivors), we have endeavored to separate truth from fiction.

While the subject of this book is one of tragedy and great loss of human life, we hope it will prove enlightening to the reader, as well as valuable to anyone who might wish to explore these old and historic wrecks.

THE HARDSCRABBLE HARBOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

August 1937

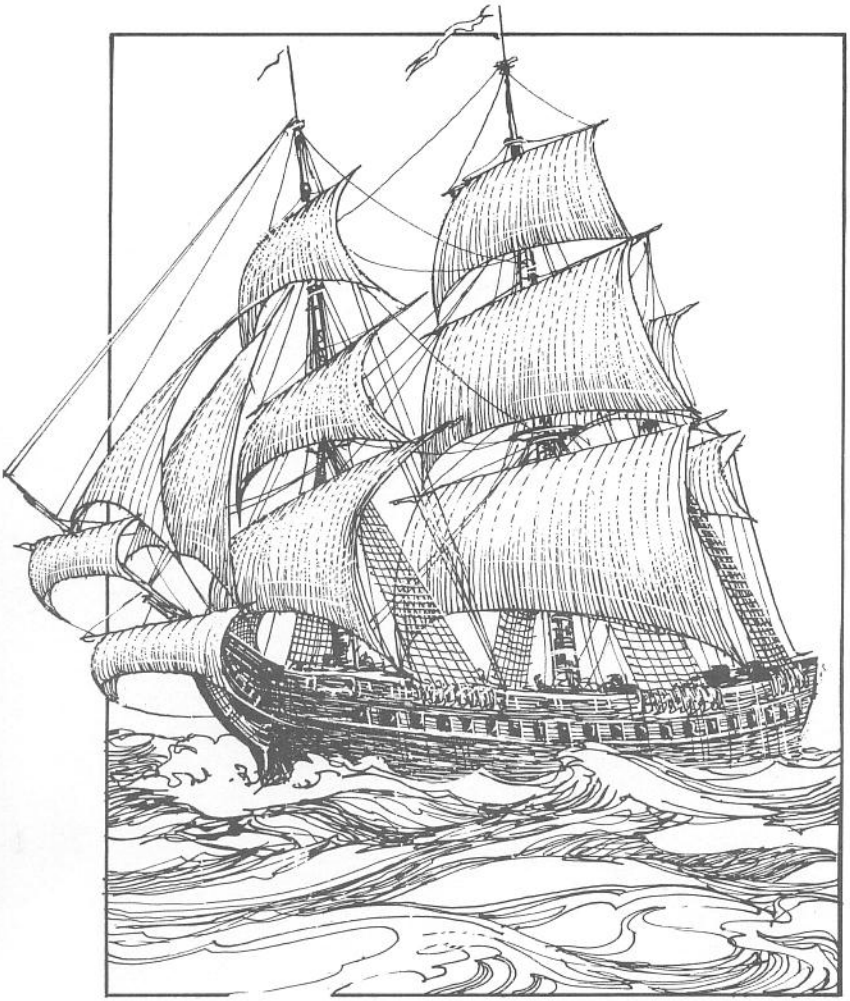


São Vera

The *São Vera* was one of the first transatlantic cargo ships, carrying gold coins and jewels to Portugal from its colonies in the New World. The ship was built to carry a crew of 110, and had a wide stern to allow for a great cabin aft in the style of the large merchantmen of the day. One of her most striking characteristics was a figurehead in the shape of a lion.

Dame Fortune seems to have smiled on the *São Vera* at first. During her maiden voyage, she struck a reef near the island of Santo, but against all odds limped to the Brazilian mainland with no loss of life or cargo. A year later, the Spanish set fire-ships laden with explosives adrift in Recife Harbor, destroying much of the Portuguese merchant fleet moored there; the *São Vera*, however, was in dry-dock for repairs and escaped unscathed.

Tragically, her luck failed to hold out through the succession of violent gales that pummeled her in the fall of 1698. The first of these blew the ship off her course for Rio de Janeiro in mid-October, causing severe damage to the hull. Before this could be repaired, a second gale swept down on the *São Vera*, carrying her into the waters near Hardscrabble Island, where she foundered for days. The fatal blow was struck when a third vicious storm broke upon the disabled vessel. The captain, Juan Estaban del Cano, went down with his ship, and all hands save two were lost. The survivors managed to make their way to Chocteague Neck by clinging to a broken spar. They were pulled from the icy waters, frostbitten and near the point of hysteria, by passing fishermen two days later.

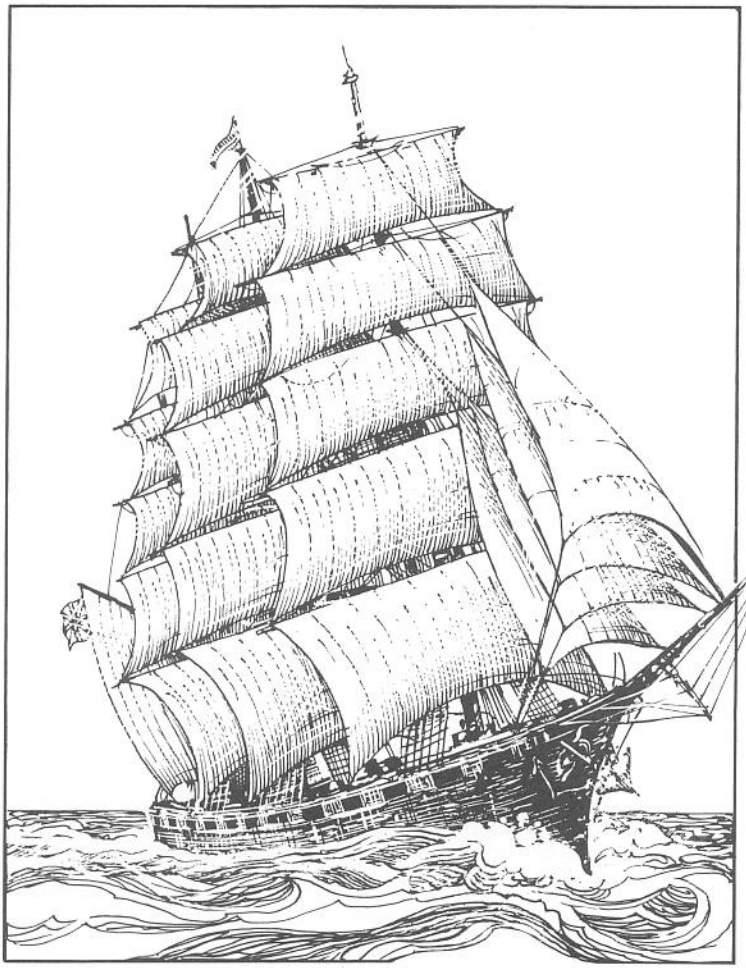


H. M. S. Intransigent

The *Intransigent* was a British warship of the frigate variety. She was used by the Royal Navy primarily for patrolling the sea lanes between Africa and North America in the eighteenth century, although it was rumored that one of her skippers, "Icy Will" Bose, secretly employed the ship for smuggling slaves and ivory to the colonies.

This man-o'-war was armed with 40 guns and led a colorful history. In 1745, for example, she was attacked by corsairs while anchored off the Ivory Coast, but managed to escape by cutting her cable. Three years later, she was engaged in an action against a French convoy near Gibraltar. Disaster was turned to victory, however, when the captain of the *Intransigent*, Sir Harle Perkins, skillfully lured the enemy into the Straits, where a detachment of British warships waylaid and routed the French forces. Pirates commandeered her for a brief time in 1759 by attacking at night and overpowering the sleeping crew, but they were caught and hung on what was then known as Hispaniola (an island which has since been divided into the Caribbean nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) shortly thereafter.

Captain Bose took command of the *Intransigent* in 1761. It sank under extremely mysterious circumstances five years later, in 1766. Bose, who was said to have survived, was never heard from again. A number of unreliable sources reported him living in luxury somewhere in the West Indies, and one story claimed that he eventually died in a duel over a certain lady of British nobility. None of these tales has ever been substantiated.

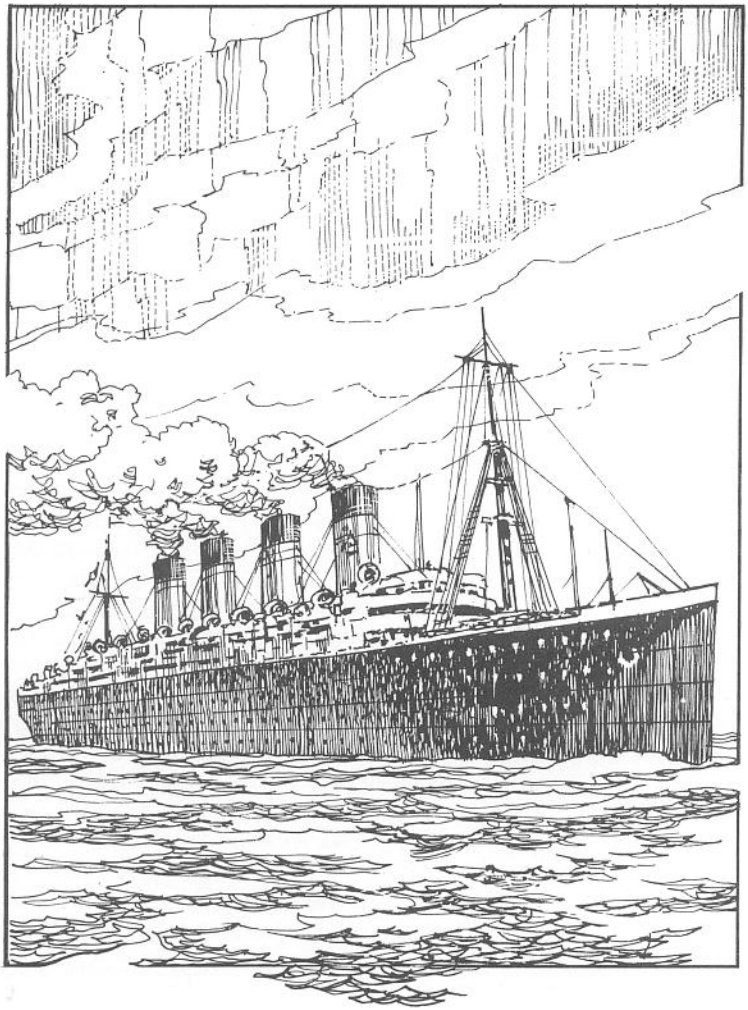


THE FIANNA

THE FIANNA WAS ORIGINALLY KNOWN as the *Gloria Dieu*, a British tea clipper built for speed to race across the great distances of the China Trade routes. She was designed by Phineas Hayes, then commissioner of Chatham Yard, and was laid down in Woolrich in 1869. The vessel was composite-built; that is, while she was an ironclad, her keel, stem and sternpost were of wood.

The *Gloria Dieu* did very well at the tea trade, and later, when the Suez Canal put it at a disadvantage to the newer steamships in that line, she was converted over to the Australian wool trade. It was while she was sailing from Melbourne to Liverpool in late 1878 that she was attacked, boarded and hijacked by "Iron Mike" Quinn, the last of the great pirates. Iron Mike's men ruthlessly murdered the entire crew of the *Gloria Dieu*, and the pirate king himself re-christened the clipper *"The Fianna"* after a legendary band of Gaelic warrior heroes. The next nine years were bloody pages in the story of the vessel. Under Iron Mike's iron hand, the cold-bloodedly efficient buccaneers pillaged and plundered the high seas, raiding more than 150 merchant ships.

There are several widely disparate versions of how *The Fianna* finally went down. The most believable of these stories is that after Iron Mike and his crew relieved the Scottish mercantile vessel *Donalwald* of its cargo of rare whiskey in 1887, they failed to notice a partially submerged ledge located to the northwest of Hardscrabble Island. It is believed that currents caused her to drift from the point where she was lost.



S. S. *Leviathan*

In 1903, Hollywood Cruise Lines announced its intention of constructing a new 30,000-ton express steamer. The *Leviathan* was to be the last word in all that constituted luxury, from the extremely rare materials used in the decoration and paneling of the ship's many saloons and lounges to the extraordinary plushness of the private suites and cabins. The *Leviathan* was also designed to be faster than any competing cruiseship of her time—without sacrificing passenger comfort.

The vessel's speed might have saved her had it not been for a last-minute compromise by the directors. A decision was reached to increase the amount of space allotted to first-class passengers. However, because of the extravagant size of each first-class compartment, it was necessary to "borrow" space from other parts of the ship.

This ultimately resulted in a modification of the hull, which compromised the *Leviathan's* ability to achieve her originally specified top speed. Otherwise, she might have been able to outdistance the German warship that sent her to the bottom near Hardscrabble Island in 1916—at least long enough for help to have arrived. As it was, all passengers escaped in lifeboats, but Mr. Alexander Moorehead's famed stamp collection, encased in glass, was lost, along with many other items of value. The Germans later excused the sinking by claiming that the U.S. was using the *Leviathan* to ship weapons to Europe, but this accusation was never substantiated.

