



## Marion, Massachusetts: Land of Many Waters By Arden Miller, CZM

*During the summer months, many sailboats dock in Sippican Harbor.*

Sixty miles to the southeast of Boston, facing the Atlantic, lies Marion, Massachusetts. The 14-square mile town on Buzzards Bay is inhabited by just over 5,000 people during the winter, but in the summer months this number swells to more than 10,000. Many claim its harbor—known as Sippican Harbor on the nautical charts—is the prettiest in the Bay. During the summer months hundreds of small sailboats dot the harbor, giving it a quaint, picture postcard, timeless look that appeals to residents and visitors alike.

Also lending to the picturesque look of this coastal community are the well-preserved, still functioning historical buildings. While many no longer serve their original function—what was a place of worship from 1799 to 1841 is now Marion General Store and the former site of the Universalist Church is now home to the Marion Art Center—original architectural details abound, especially in the magnificent homes built between 1815 and 1890 by wealthy sea captains. A well-known early landmark, Handy's Tavern, was built in 1812. A short walk from the dock, the tavern was once the watering hole for the many sea-faring men

in search of spirits. Today it is the headquarters for the Sippican Woman's Club and is only operated as a tavern for special occasions.

One such "special occasion" took place on May 14, 2002, when the townspeople commemorated Marion's 1852 break from Rochester. Originally, Mattapoisett, Rochester, and Marion were collectively known as the Town of Rochester. Due to on-going arguments as to where the Town meetings were to be held, as well as larger issues around money and property, Marion petitioned the State House and the Legislature made Marion a separate town. Once incorporated, the town's first task was to choose a name. Rather than keeping the Native American name Sippican (meaning "land of many waters"), they named the town Marion in honor of Revolutionary War hero Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion (we can only speculate that the residents of that era didn't think Swamp Fox, Massachusetts had the right ring to it).

In the sailing world, Marion is known internationally, as sailors from around the world are familiar with the biennial odd-years-only Marion-to-Bermuda Yacht Race (please visit [www.marionbermuda.com](http://www.marionbermuda.com) for more information).



But perhaps the most famed association with Marion is the ghost of the sailing ship the *Mary Celeste*. The 100-foot brigantine of 282 tons was from Marion. In 1872, on the way to Genoa, Italy, by way of the port of New York where the ship was cargoes with 1,700 barrels of raw alcohol, something went awry. A number of theories exist—everything from fumes from the alcohol causing the crew to hallucinate and jump overboard to piracy to the ship running aground on a moving sandbar to a swimming contest off the bow into shark infested waters—but nothing has ever been conclusively concluded. What everyone familiar with the available details *does* agree on is this: the ship's last log, recorded days after they set sail, is dated November 24 and that, for some reason, on November 25 she was abandoned and none of the 10 people on board were ever found. How that came to happen is a mystery on which the living can only speculate. But the real mystery that holds intrigue for many marine historians is that, somehow, the *Mary Celeste* sailed herself, for 10 or 11 days (records vary on this count) across the Atlantic. Was it a ghost? An inexplicable convergence of wind and water conditions? When discovered by the captain of the *Dei Gratia* (a bark sailing from New York to Gibraltar), the ship was in first-class condition with hull, sails, and mast all sound and in place. There was plenty of food and water on the

ship and the cargo-barrels of alcohol were still lashed in place in the hold. What's most astonishing is that the sails were set to catch the wind coming over the starboard quarter, meaning that they had been completely re-positioned since leaving the Azores 10 days earlier.

Official explanations by the British and American authorities at the time suggest that the crew got at the alcohol, murdered the captain, and escaped to another vessel. But seeing as there were no signs of a visible struggle, and the alcohol was still in place, it seems unlikely that the ship fell prey to foul play. More recently, it was surmised that a known earthquake was recorded around the time *Mary Celeste* was abandoned, frightening the crew enough to cause them to jump overboard.

We'll never know for sure what happened to the "ghost ship" from Marion, but if you're looking for history, colonial buildings, and a land of many waters, Marion is the place to go!

For more information on Marion  
[www.townofmarion.org](http://www.townofmarion.org)

On the mystery of the *Mary Celeste*  
[www.occultopedia.com/m/mary\\_celeste.htm](http://www.occultopedia.com/m/mary_celeste.htm)



all photos by Bob Gass

Atlantic Ocean

Scenes in scenic Marion:  
the park  
(above) and the  
General Store  
on Main Street.