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PIRATES ON THE OHIO

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We are making our way along River Street in Savannah, Georgia. The road here is uneven stone blocks, so that even in the relative comfort of our 4-wheel drive it is a jarring ride. As we bump our way down the slope to the waterfront, I imagine what it would have been like in the 1700s when Savannah was fresh and new. Surely the bones of anyone making their way down here in a buggy would dance right out of their skin.

It is gloomy and cool, threatening rain. A morbid wind blows the damp into every crevice, and in the oldest buildings along the shore we catch whiffs of moldy, unhealthy air. Higher up and away from the water's edge, live oaks arch across the streets, Spanish moss draping their limbs.

Arrrgh, Matey!
We are hungry and chilled to the bone, so we make our way to the oldest house in Georgia, the Pirate House. We are seated in the oldest part of the building, known as the Herb House. Erected in 1734 by British General James Oglethorpe, it originally housed the gardener for Oglethorpe's experimental garden. Eventually the house was added on to until it became the rambling old structure that stands today.

While warming up with a helping of she-crab soup, I learned that Pirate House played a role in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. It is where the fictional character, Captain Flint, died, with Billy Bones standing vigil. However, as with many old stories and old cities, much of what we have come to believe about Savannah's pirate history is far from reality.

Savannah came about in the waning years of what historians have come to call the Golden Age of Piracy, an era that stretched from the latter half of the 1600s into the early part of the 1700s. By the time Oglethorpe founded the colony, the most famous pirates had already passed from life into legend, including Blackbeard, who had died at sea some 15 years earlier. If Blackbeard ever walked Savannah's shoreline, instead of a cityscape he saw a wilderness that was primarily the home of the Yamacraw tribe.

River Rogues

My disappointment at Savannah's lack of actual pirates was short-lived, for I soon learned that grasping the heels of Blackbeard's moldy corpse was a whole new brand of the same old thing. And this time, the pillagers were in our own very own back yard. They were the River Pirates.

As settlement in America spread toward the interior, the easiest way to deliver people, goods and the wealth was via inland waterways. Offering easy access to the Mississippi river and the bustling frontier, the Ohio River became prime hunting ground for pirates of the early 19th century.

The best known of these bloodthirsty bands are associated with Cave-in-Rock, Illinois, some 50 miles west of Madisonville. Their territories extended from the lower Ohio River and down the Mississippi all the way to New Orleans. Among the pirates associated with western Kentucky were Jim Wilson, Samuel Mason, James Ford and the Harpe Brothers.

Jim Wilson was the first river pirate to take up residence at Cave-in-Rock, and little is known about him as several ne'er do wells took on Wilson's name to confound authorities. Wilson is said to have been killed by his own men, but this may have been a ruse.



Moviepilot.com photo

Johnny Depp in his dashing portrayal of Captain Jack Sparrow.

The first to appropriate the name of Jim Wilson was Samuel Mason, a captain in the Virginia militia during the Revolutionary War. After the war, Mason settled in Pennsylvania where he became a justice of the peace and then a judge. He later moved to Henderson County where he abandoned propriety and became involved in a number of criminal activities. In 1797, Mason moved his criminal enterprise to Cave-in-Rock where, according to author Otto Arthur Rothert, he duped river travelers by posting a sign advertising a "Liquor Vault and House for Entertainment." Mason's portrayal as Jim Wilson was so thorough that to this day it is not known if the men were one and the same.

When under the authority of one Captain Young of Mercer County the so-called "Exterminators" got wind of Mason's location, he moved southward to Mississippi in what was then the Louisiana territory. Spanish officials later captured him and found \$7,000 and 20 scalps in his possession. He attempted to escape and was shot in the head.

At the same time that Mason was running his operation at Cave-in-Rock, another Kentucky pirate took up residence across from Mason on the Kentucky side of the Ohio River. His real name was James Ford, but he also adopted the name Jim Wilson. Like Mason, Ford was a military man, but he served after the Revolutionary war as a Captain in the Illinois Territorial Militia.

Ford was a wealthy man even before becoming a pirate. Among his many business endeavors was the operation of a tavern. By way of his second marriage he also gained a controlling interest in the Frazier Salt Works at present day Great Salt Springs, Illinois. He owned land in both Kentucky and Illinois along with many slaves, whom he treated with extreme cruelty. He is said to have killed one of his slaves by tying him to a mule and dragging him through a field of tree stumps, and he was accused of kidnapping free blacks and selling them into slavery.

The enterprise that Ford used to his utmost advantage was that of ferry operator. Known as "Satan's Ferryman", Ford constructed roads along his stretch of the Ohio to control both the land and the waterways above Cave-in-Rock. Today, road signs in both Illinois and Kentucky indicate sections still known as Ford's Ferry Road.

Pirates In Hopkins County

Perhaps the most notorious of the Kentucky pirates did not begin the criminal careers as pirates at all. The Harpe



Lara Hunt Angel, The Messenger

The Herb House in the oldest section of Savannah's Pirate house dates to 1734.



She-Crab Soup

brothers were were actually cousins from a family of British loyalists in North Carolina. One of the men was large and the other quite short, so the two were given the nicknames, "Big Harpe" and "Little Harpe." Accompanying the Harpes were three women, thought to have been kidnapped but who seem to have also assisted the men at times.

After leaving a trail of blood from Virginia to Illinois, the men met up with Samuel Mason in Henderson and then hid out at Cave-in-Rock. Once there, they joined Mason's men in

robbing unwary travelers on the Ohio, but they were even more vicious than Mason and his pirates. After forcing a man and his horse off a cliff, Mason's men demanded that the Harpe brothers leave the hide out.

Big Harpe and Little Harpe wound their way through Tennessee and then back into Kentucky, where they ended up near Dixon. They had tried to murder Dixon area homesteader, Silas McBee, but McBee ran the men off with the help of his hunting dogs. On the run from McBee, the Harpes ended up a few miles away at

the cabin of Moses Stegall. Stegall was not there at the time but his wife, child, and a land surveyor named Major William Love were. Unaware that the men were fugitives, Mrs. Stegall invited the men to stay for the night. The next morning, the Harpes killed Mrs. Stegall, her child and the Major, then set fire to the cabin.

McBee and a posse of men from Christian County saw the fire and headed off in hot pursuit of the Harpes. From Dixon, Big Harpe and Little Harpe made their way through Madisonville to Free Henry Ford Road (located at the present day Pilot Truck Stop at Mortons Gap) where they crossed Pond River into Muhlenberg County.

McBee and his posse eventually caught up with the Harpes; Big Harpe was shot in the back by a man named Leiper. Still alive, Big Harpe asked for water, which Leiper provided by taking off his shoe and using it as a cup. Moses Stegall then cut off Big Harpe's head, placed it in his saddlebag and carried it to a crossroad in Webster Co. Once there, he put Big Harpe's head up on a post, and thereafter the nearby road has been called Harpe's Head Road.

Little Harpe escaped and is said to have met back up with Samuel Mason along the Natchez Trace, where he killed Mason for a reward. Using the reward as a lure, Little Harpe and his associate, John Setton, were caught and tried in Mississippi. Both men were found guilty and hung in 1804. The women were held at the Kentucky state courthouse in Russellville for a time, but were eventually released. From then on the women were said to be of good character and went on to lead relatively normal lives.

The Recipe

You never know where a simple bowl of she-crab soup might lead. What started out as a search for pirates along the mid-Atlantic seaboard took me all the way back home to the wild and woolly Kentucky frontier. I always thought that Johnny Depp looked so natural playing Jack Sparrow, and now I know why. Growing up in Kentucky along the Ohio River, he just couldn't help himself.

Crab roe and fish stock may not be very easy to get a hold of in our part of the country, however I thought that this recipe was too good to pass up. You can use clam juice in place of the fish stock, and if you can't find crab roe just skip it and call it plain crab soup. This makes a wonderful starter for a holiday supper.

She-Crab Soup

Adapt the creamy base of this soup to make clam chowder or oyster stew. Serve it simply with a salad and crackers or dress it up with crumbled bacon, chopped green onions and hot homemade garlic rolls.

4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter
1 small onion, diced fine
3 tablespoons flour
2 cups crab or fish stock, or clam juice
1 cup milk
1 cup heavy cream
1 teaspoon paprika
1 pound blue crab meat
½ cup crab roe
1 tablespoon lemon juice
Salt and pepper to taste
¼ cup sherry, optional

Melt the butter in a heavy saucepan over medium heat. Add the onions and saute until soft but not browned. Sprinkle in the flour and stir until velvety. Add the fish stock and stir or whisk until smooth. Slowly stir in the milk, cream and paprika. Pick over the crab meat and remove any bits of shell. Add the crab meat, the roe, if using, the lemon juice and salt and pepper to the cream mixture. Blend well and cook about 15 minutes, until thickened and heated through. Remove from heat and stir in the sherry. Serves 4.