

HISTORIC RED HOOK

William Witherwax

C. 1835 - 1907

Old Red Church Cemetery, Tivoli

Dark grey granite rectangular pedestal monument near Clarke/Tompkins pink granite obelisk north of the church.

William Witherwax was a steamboat pilot. Strangely, so was William A. Witherwax c.1822-1882, also buried in this cemetery!

William A. married Eliza C. Harris (c.1825- 1894) and they had at least three children together, William E., Mary I. (married Abram Kerley), and Emma L.

However, this story is about William who married Matilda. They had four sons who didn't survive childhood, Charles, Frank, William, and Harry, and two children who lived to adulthood, but who never married, son Theodore and daughter Matilda.

Captain William Witherwax was one of the best known sailors of Long Island sound, but he started his career as a very young man (perhaps just over 12 years of age) working on the Hudson River. During the Civil War, William served on the steamer John Romer. He had been sailing the East River for 25 years in 1882 when he took a job with the Harlem and New York Navigation Company. For this firm, he piloted a steamboat between Peck's Slip (near where the Brooklyn Bridge would be built) and Harlem for 14 years, at one point serving as its superintendent of all four of its boats, the Sylvan Grove, Sylvan Stream, Sylvan Glen, and Sylvan Dell which operated on the East River and Harlem River and in New York Harbor. This company made over \$6,000 on freight and \$83,000 in 1870's dollars on "other sources." annually. While piloting the Sylvan Stream one foggy day on the East River in 1881 he assisted the steamer C.H. Norton which had struck rocks off Blackwell's Island. He helped 75 passengers onto the Stream and transported them slowly and carefully back to Pier 24.

William also captained the Crystal Wave, the Rosedale, and finally the William G. Payne run by the New England Navigation Company, which was the maritime department of the New York Central railroad. He was listed in the 1900 census of Bridgeport, Connecticut as a "purser," which according to Merriam Webster is "an official on a ship

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responsible for papers and accounts, and on a passenger ship also for the comfort and welfare of passengers.” He retired in 1905. His wife Matilda had died the year before and his obituary remarked that William had become disheartened by her loss. He had a stroke and passed away Monday afternoon, January 14th, 1907 in the parlor of his home in Bridgeport at 71 years of age. His son Theodore was home at the time. Theodore was also a captain of renown, piloting steamers Richard Peck, Nutmeg State, and Naugatuck. He was ill for a year or more before he died at 54 in 1916, leaving sister Matilda, to whom he was devoted, behind. Theodore left everything to her and she survived until 1958.