

# Church of Saint Mary of the Harbor

## Provincetown, Massachusetts

Story by Dan Hardison, photos by Kevin Thomas



The Epiphany Mural by Robert Douglas Hunter.

Since the early 1900's, Provincetown, Massachusetts, has been an art colony associated with some of the country's finest artists. So it is no surprise that at the Church of Saint Mary of the Harbor, there are paintings and sculptures by some of Provincetown's best-known artists. But Provincetown's history has also been long associated with the sea. In the church courtyard stands a large wooden cross commemorating the loss of 40 men in a U.S. Navy submarine accident just off its shoreline.

On December 17, 1927, just off a place known as Long Point, the Coast Guard destroyer *Paulding* collided with the Navy Submarine S-4. The sub went to the ocean bottom with 40 men onboard. With a gale building, a dramatic rescue effort was undertaken. Navy divers discovered that six men inside the sub were still alive. But after three days, the rescue attempt failed. In the last message tapped out by the trapped men came the plea, "Is there no hope?" and finally, "We understand." It would be three months before the sub would be raised.

Provincetown sits at the very tip of Cape Cod surrounded by water on three sides. It was a fishing and whaling village long before artists discovered its quaint streets and brilliant natural

light.

The Church of Saint Mary of the Harbor is a small Episcopal Church built on the edge of the harbor in the East End of Provincetown. The first service was held in 1904 and its first home was in the building marine painter William F. Halsall once used as a studio. The site of the present church, once a salt house, was purchased in 1919.

Before 1934 the summer services were held in the church building and winter services held at other locations since there was no heat at the church. Under the guidance of their first full-time priest, Rev. Robert Wood Nicholson, and with renovations designed by internationally known marine artist, Frederick Waugh, the building was transformed into the present day church. The Church of Saint Mary of the Harbor was dedicated in 1936.

In 1937 a large wooden cross constructed by Walter Cashman was erected in the church courtyard to honor the 40 crewmembers of the S-4 that had died. The original cross was built from the timbers of wrecked ships, but having deteriorated over the years it has been replaced with a new one. A broken sealing ring from the conning tower of the S-4 that was dredged up in a fisherman's net was added to the base of the

new cross. A bronze plaque attached to the cross lists the names of the 40 men who were lost in the accident. A memorial service is held at Saint Mary each December on the Sunday closest to the anniversary and a wreath is placed on the water.

Since the 1930's Provincetown's well-known artists have filled Saint Mary and its garden with fine art. Among the works of art: Richard Miller's painting *Triumphal Entry* behind the Altar; Constance Bigelow's *The Coming of the Holy Spirit* above the Altar; a crèche created by Frederick Waugh, Irene Millington, and Peter Hunt; sculptures by Arnold Geissbuhler titled *Christ on the Waters* and *Adoring Angels*; and Frederick Waugh's painting *Madonna of the Harbor*. There is also a Sanctus bell created by

RIGHT: The S-4 Memorial Cross in the churchyard of the Church of Saint Mary of the Harbor.

BELOW LEFT: **Madonna of the Harbor** by Frederick Waugh above the Baptismal Font.

BELOW RIGHT: The crèche by Frederick Waugh, Irene Millington, and Peter Hunt. The crèche is displayed during the Christmas season.





TOP: **Christ on the Waters** and **The Adoring Angels** by Arnold Geissbuhler, (atop the rood screen).  
BOTTOM: **The Triumphal Entry** by Robert Miller (behind the Altar) and **The Coming of the Holy Spirit** by Constance Bigelow (above the Altar).

sculptor William Boogar – its tone the same pitch as Provincetown’s fog-warning bell.

Even before tourists found Provincetown, it was a seasonal place with all but the hardiest folks leaving town during the harsh winter months. During a severe winter storm in 1978, the tide came over the seawall crashing through the church windows and leaving four inches of water in the church. The parishioners, accustomed to the harsh weather and life by the sea, took it in stride referring to their church as the Church of Saint Mary IN the Harbor.

Painter Robert Douglas Hunter captures the essence of Provincetown in *The Epiphany Mural*. Here he creates a triptych with Provincetown’s fishermen represented on the left and Provincetown’s artists represented on the right. The Trinity is at the center with the Greek letters Alpha and Omega – the Beginning and the End.

While at the Church of Saint Mary of the Harbor, surrounded by the work of Provincetown’s famous artists, and with the constant sound of the sea just beyond its door, one understands the relationship of this little church and the place it calls home. †



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ABOVE RIGHT: Mary with artist palette & brushes, stained glass window by Wilbur H. Burnham.

RIGHT: Church of Saint Mary of the Harbor, Provincetown, Massachusetts.