



Christy's Spa after the explosion at 1:10 PM on July 18, 1946

CHRISTY'S SPA EXPLOSION

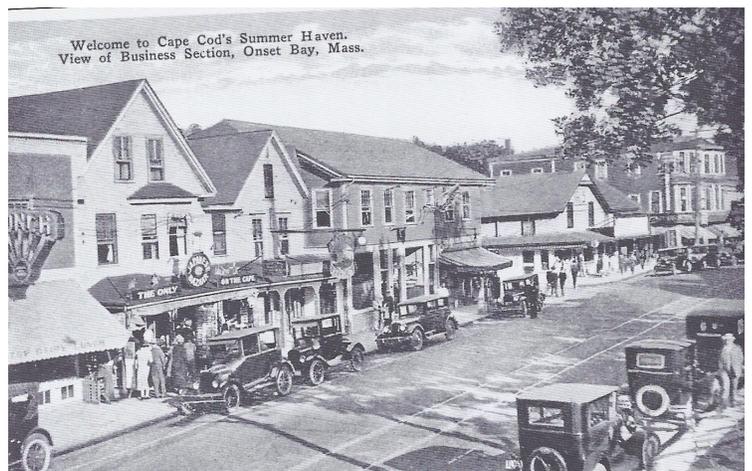
ONSET - JULY 18, 1946

On July 18, 1946, nine individuals lost their lives and 60 more were injured when Christy's Spa on Onset Avenue in Onset was destroyed in a gas explosion. In addition, four other buildings were demolished. They included a fish and chips business, two fruit and grocery stores, a gift shop, and several second floor apartments. In the 1930s-40s, Onset was a popular resort destination, which catered to soldiers from Camp Edwards and women who came from out of town to listen to the bands. Christy's was a common jumping off point for servicemen and couples.

The commotion started around 12:30 PM when the bar manager Cliff Downey smelled an odor of gasoline around the noon lunchtime rush and ordered everyone out of the building. Downey went to the basement and observed gas coming from a pipe where plumber Cecil Barrett had been working. Barrett had reportedly struck a pick through one of the gas pipes. Downey described the scene to the Boston Globe as a "sizzling white haze" streaming from a broken gas pipe. After the gas was shut off at 12:45, Downey called the Buzzards Bay Gas Company, who had trouble shutting off the rusty valve at the surface. In fact, the company had to dig underground to unearth another valve. The Fire Department was also notified and told those gathered around the restaurant to clear the area.

Once the gas was shut off and the scene secure, the local police advised everyone to continue to stay away from the building. As the clocks ticked past 1 PM, there was no reason to believe that anything was amiss from the gathering crowd on Onset Avenue when ropes were taken down from the front of the building. Even some of the Christy's restaurant workers went back to their posts inside to continue working on their tasks. But behind the building, Mrs. H.L. Pratt, a local rooming house owner on nearby Highland Avenue noted that she had smelled gas in the air about 10 minutes before the explosion while she walked past the restaurant getting her fish and chips for lunch. Additionally, the double cellar (without windows) may have filled up with gasoline between the pipe breaking and the supply being shut off.

It was around 1:10 PM when the explosion occurred in front of a crowd of curious shoppers, onlookers, and tourists. Witnesses told the Wareham Courier that the building was "lifted high into the air before mushrooming out and falling back, showering missiles, injuring many who escaped the direct concussion of the blast." Claire McMenimon told the Boston Globe she was walking through Flagstaff Square across the street, when the blast struck her like "a terrific blast of hot air." Area buildings were shaken from the burst and several windows within three quarters of a mile went crashing to the ground. The blast from the explosion sent broken glass more than 500 feet in all directions. Many were buried from the remains of the four collapsed buildings as cars in the immediate vicinity were overturned. It was reported that the blast could be heard from miles away at several local beaches.



Onset Ave, across from Flagstaff Square (now Dudley Brown Square) in the 1930s. Christy's was in the gray building just to the right of center.

Photos courtesy of the Wareham Courier, Onset & Point Independence (Michael Maddigan), p. 86, and Stone Research Room

Many stopped automobiles also helped bring victims to nearby Tobey Hospital, St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford and St. Luke's in Middleboro. It was also reported that nurses at area hospitals gave blood transfusions to victims. 38 of those injured were transported to local hospitals, seven were listed on the "danger list" for two days after the explosion. A crew worked at the scene searching for bodies until around 8 PM, as nine were found in the wreckage.

During the search for survivors, a US Army watch bearing the inscription "Andy" was discovered, and it was believed a tenth victim was killed, but no one was ever reported missing in the days following the explosion. The scene was largely cleaned up over the course of the next week by the Onset Fire Department and E.T. Gault Transportation Company, with some equipment on loan from Camp Edwards. It was estimated the explosion caused over \$200,000 worth of damage (over \$2,750,000 in 2021 dollars).

Guy Rizzuto and his wife Catherine, who had opened up their fish and chips establishment a month earlier, were both killed in the explosion as was Amy Heald, an employee in the bakery of the nearby gift shop. Barrett, the plumber, Christy's owner William English, Raymond Brune, who was working on the music box in Christy's, and Christy's cook Joanna Rose were also casualties of the accident. Elizabeth Ward, of New Bedford, was injured while walking on the street after leaving the gift shop and died at Tobey Hospital. Frank Albrecht of Onset was the last victim claimed by the explosion.

A reporter from the *Boston Globe* speculated in the next day's newspaper that the blast occurred from a refrigerator unit spark. Downey noted the fridge was one item that he did not turn off when he returned to the premises. An inquest was held by Judge Stephen B. McLeod, Associate Justice of the Brockton Superior Court, and it included more than 50 statements by witnesses, many of whom were injured in the blast. The three-page final report by McLeod noted that, "The cause of the explosion was the action of Cecil Barrett, who broke the pipe and ignited the gas with his carelessness." The Buzzards Bay Gas Company was also blamed for not having emergency crews ready to address the situation. More than \$115,000 (over \$1,500,000 in 2021 dollars) was paid in a settlement by Liberty Mutual and the Buzzards Bay Gas Company to the families who were killed and injured.

The area was eventually rebuilt. Onset Village Market quietly sits on the spot where the Christy's Spa explosion occurred 75 years ago this July.

For Further Reading About Wareham and Onset History

Books For Adults

Postcard History Series: Onset and Point Independence (By Michael J. Maddigan), Call Number – 974.4 MAD 2016

A Brief History of Wareham: The Gateway to Cape Cod (By Michael Viera), Call Number – 974.4 VIE 2014

Images of America: Wareham (By Susan Pizzolato and Lynda Ames Byrne), Call Number – 974.482 PIZ 2002

Life and Times in Wareham Over 200 Years, 1739-1939 (By Raymond Rider), Call Number – 974.482 RID 1989

The History of Onset (By Florence Spinney Ottke), Call Number – REF 974.482 OTT 1977

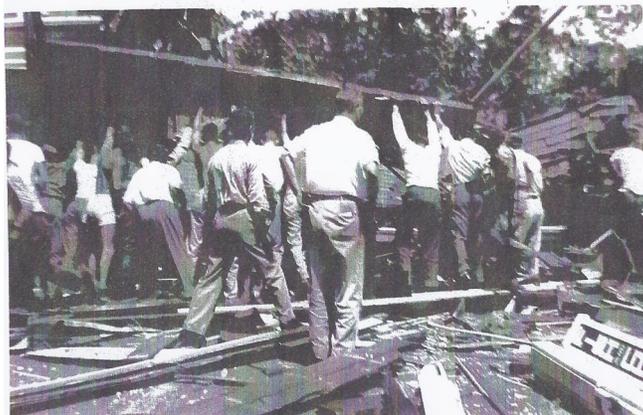
Glimpses of Early Wareham (By Daisy Washburn Lovell), Call Number – 974.482 LOV 1970

Books For Older Children

Chapter Book - *I Survived: The Great Molasses Flood, 1919* (By Lauren Tarshis), 2019; Call Number – J SERIES TAR

Chapter Book - *Lucy Fights the Flames: A Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Survival Story* (By Julie Gilbert), 2019; Call Number- J GIR

Chapter Book - *The Earth Dragon Awakes: The San Francisco Earthquake of 1906* (By Laurence Yep), 2006; Call Number – J YEP



Police, firemen, and onlookers trying to help clear the wreckage and search for survivors after the explosion