

HISTORY OF SWAN'S ISLAND

A HISTORY
Of the town of
SWAN'S ISLAND, MAINE

Second Edition



Revised and Enlarged, Together with a Genealogical Record of its
Settlers, and Subsequent Inhabitants



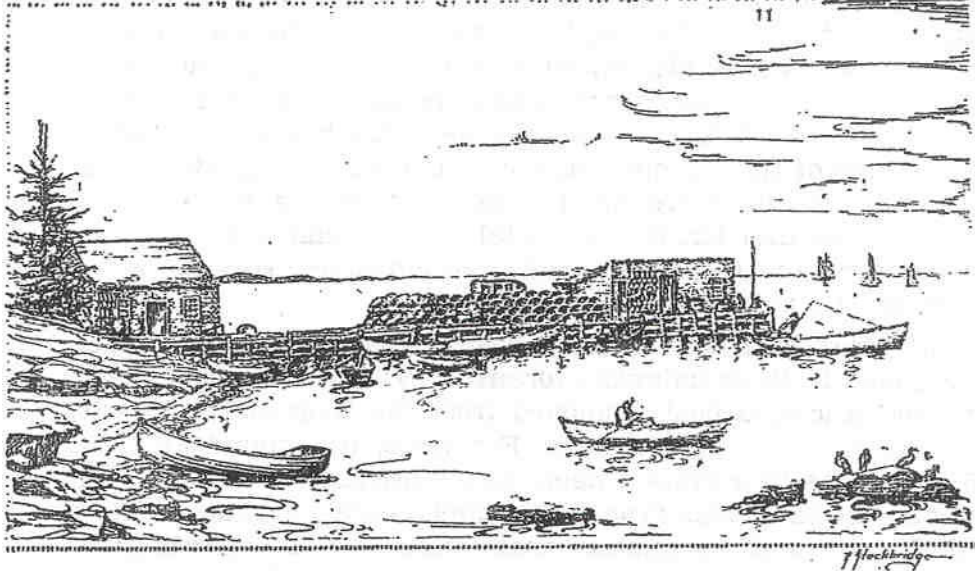
By
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“Their life’s the sea. By following any street
Your feet will find the waves at either end.
Old fish nets serve for fences, the land is shaken
Like a ship’s deck by all the storms that waken,
Darkening from sky to sky. There’s a calm seat
Where captains sit who sail the sea no more –
Aged, but hale and oaken to the core;
To whom the ocean was a trusted friend.
About the long-wharfed huddled fisher town
Men’s talk assumes the ocean’s undertone,
Their motions go like gradual nets let down;
And each man stands as on a deck alone.
Even when they group in waiting idleness
The sea tang stays about them. They confess
In every mood, they are the ocean’s own.
Their girls who tread the walks go trim and neat
Like ships whose sails and pennants gleam complete,
Their wives, too, serve the sea, who stay at home
While the men’s dancing vessels urge the foam,
The very earth’s a ship, and they its crew!
Their life’s the sea’s. Sometimes their death is, too.”

Harry Kempt.

FOREWORD

Since the publication of the first edition of the History of Swan's Island thirty-five years ago, I have improved opportunities presented to me, to gather additional data, not then available, of the early history of this island town. I have also collected, from time to time, the genealogical record of the settlers, their ancestors and descendents, from their arrival in America to the present date. This has been no small task. The records of these people most of whom came from Massachusetts, were well recorded there, but for the period of many years after they had migrated into Maine, such vital records that are left to us were fragmentary, and mostly obtained from old bibles, some of which had been preserved, but more often lost.

When these first settlers came here, over uncharted seas, and made their settlements in these unbroken forests, they built a log house near the shore, constructed a boat fashioned from the trees of the forest, and there raised their large families. For years, it required all their skill and endurance to provide a home and subsistence from the field, the forest and the sea, which grudgingly supplied their livelihood. They moved from one locality to another that offered better opportunities. It is not surprising under these conditions, that their family records should have been neglected, or if they had been made, not preserved in their one room cabin, or perhaps left behind in their migrations.

I have visited some of these deserted settlements which were the temporary home of our ancestors. Some were partly overgrown by trees, others small level fields stretching backward from the sea shore. Partly filled cellars and rock doorsteps are the only ruins left from their occupancy.

During this temporary pilgrimage, many of these people died, mostly the children and the aged. Privations, exposure, and often the lack of proper food was hazardous for these extreme of age. They were buried on the hillside near the cabin, and surf-worn rocks were placed at the head and foot of the graves, the best markers their condition afforded. By the action of huge waves breaking on the shore, these rocks had been rolled back and forth over sand and other rocks until they were round and as smooth as glass. For hundreds of years this process had been in action, which had prepared them for this humble service. Boats sailing along the coast, reported seeing these white stones on the hillsides. These little hillocks with their markers have now sunken beneath the soil, and Mother Nature has covered them with a carpet of green. As years passed they were forgotten. The little wreath placed there by the sad hard-working mother, when she left that location for a new home, has withered and blown to the winds for more than a hundred years. The birds in the tree tops still sing their evening song. The only tears now shed, are the gentle rain drops, which moisten the soil, and cause sweet-smelling wild flowers to grow over the graves in springtime, showing that God, alone, has not forgotten them. But no records of these events are left to us.

Traveling ministers sometimes came along the coast, and occasionally visited these isolated settlements. They conducted religious services,

officiated at marriages, and baptized children. If they made any record of these events, they carried them away, and probably never recorded.

When this island was purchased, there was not an incorporated town in that part of Lincoln County afterwards formed into Hancock County, and for fifty years after the settlement of this town there were no public records kept. There has been more or less migration from this island to other towns and states, for more than a hundred years, often leaving little knowledge of their abode. The links of these departed families are easily broken, especially in the second and subsequent generations. Their mutual interests wane and indifference and forgetfulness often lead the historian to a blank wall. It required him, persistent effort through long years of research, to locate these lost links, and connect them into a chain to make their family history complete, and then only after correspondence to all parts of the country. Most of the parties consulted have shown cordial cooperation, but a few have failed to reply, which leaves regrettable omissions.

When I came to this island in 1891, and found this lack of records existed, I began at once to secure from the oldest inhabitants the interesting information of the past which they could give. There were then several of the second generation living, whose memory extended back to many of the primitive settlers, and were well informed by their parents of the traditions of the past, the people who came here as settlers, and the conditions which confronted them. Among those living and which I consulted were Mrs. Hannah (Hunt) Sadler, widow of pioneer Thomas Sadler. She lived more than ninety years, and retained all her mental faculties. She gave me much information concerning the Hunt, Cromwell and Sadler families both here and in her former home. James Sprague was three years old when his parents moved here from Union, and remembered well the events of their settlement here. Thomas Ross told me of his relatives, the Kench, Benson and Ross families. There were four of pioneer William Stanley's family living. Capt. Michael Stinson, the youngest and last of Benjamin Stinson's family. Two "Daughters of the Revolution" children of "King" David Smith. Mrs. Susan Torrey, daughter of Jacob S. Reed. She lived to within a few weeks of the century mark, the greatest age ever attained by any person on this island. Mrs. Elizabeth Stewart gave me the names and dates from memory of her large family of descendents, and her husband was a son of pioneer Cushing Stewart. Capt. Orlando Trask was the lone survivor of the children of Joshua Trask, Esq. Mrs. Harriet Barbour, who remembered all the names of the first settlers at Atlantic, together with many interesting traditions handed down by her grandfather, Moses Staples, sr. Many of these traditions often led the investigator to facts. I was particularly indebted to Benjamin Smith, Esq., grandson of "King" David. His memory extended over a long and eventful life. His memory of names, dates, and events were most trustworthy. He held town office nearly all his adult life. He, as a boy, attended the first meeting to organize a Plantation in 1833, and he attended all subsequent meeting until his death. He was a Justice of the Peace for more than fifty years, and united more people in marriage than all the other magistrates combined. Rev. Oliver

L. Fernald, D. D., gave me valuable and complete records of the early history of the Gott family to whom he was related. Also the charts of the surveys made by Champlain, who gave this island the name of Brule Cote. Hosmer's History of Deer Isle gave the ancestry of the families who came from that town, and B. Lake Noyes, M. D. furnished data concerning the Sadler and Joyce families after they left here and made their permanent homes at Deer Isle. There were many other people who furnished me with their family history, too many to mention. Of course, I knew nothing personally of these early settlers, and have only been the instrument which recorded the information which others gave me. If much of this data had not been secured at the time I collected it, it would have been lost beyond recovery.

The old family Bibles were chief source of information of the early vital record. Some of these were found in other towns. "King" David Smith's Bible containing the records of his twenty-four children, was found at Deer Isle, where it had been taken by his daughter, Eliza, wife of Johnson Billings. A son, William Smith, had his fathers' will and other interesting documents in the same town. In some of these books, the writing had become illegible, but by the use of chemicals, the color of the ink was restored for a few minutes, long enough to transcribe the record. Other means of information was inscriptions on grave stones, deeds, old documents found stowed in attics. The Registry of Deeds in Lincoln and Hancock counties, gave the land owner's records of lots conveyed to purchasers on Swan's Island. There were found several store books, as early as 1820, that are interesting, giving the names of customers, the goods they bought, and the prices paid. Also in them was a record of vessels owned here, and their transactions with the store keeper.

After the organization of a Plantation there were some vital records made, but they were recorded only occasionally, and were incomplete. At the present time all vital records are required by state law to be kept by the town clerk, and a duplicate sent to the state librarian. So the historian of the future will not encounter the difficulties which I found to exist. I have visited most towns where our ancestors came from, and procured from their town records the data concerning them. Also as a member of the Maine Historical Society, the use of their valuable collections of town histories of Maine and Massachusetts, were obtained, no doubt some errors of dates will occur, but I have verified them wherever possible, and I think they are correct and complete as can be made at this time.

I have purposely closed these records just one hundred years to a day, since the organization of a Plantation government, Sept. 30, 1833—Sept 30, 1933.

What wonderful changes and inventions have been made in the time covered by these records. More than all the other centuries combined since the world's history has been written. These inventions have taken from labor the drudgery that made man a slave to his employment, and have given to him many of the luxuries, and time to enjoy them, which in former years were absent. It is interesting to note a few of the improvements which have come

into the lives of even these small communities. Compare some of the conditions with what the pioneer settlers encountered here.

Without mails or newspapers, not knowing of outside events for months after it occurred. Now we have the wonderful facilities of the postoffice department which brings us the news and wire photos from every part of the world within a few hours of their occurrence. Pitch pine torches and candles have been replaced by the electric light. When Edison invented the incandescent bulb all dark places of the earth were made as light as day. Ox teams drawn hub deep through the mud of wood roads; we now have automobiles gliding over smooth permanently constructed highways. The primitive fishermen here laboriously rowed his clumsy "wherry" out to the fishing grounds, and caught his scanty supply of fish by hand line. In like manner he returned to the harbor, weary and tired by such back-breaking labor. Now he speeds out in his handsome motor boat or vessel, and a large quantity of fish is taken, managed by motor, as described later in this book. The overworked women carded the wool, spun it into yarn, and wove it on hand looms into cloth, which was made into clothing for the whole family to wear. Sewing machines relieved them of the burden of sewing by hand, the making of these garments. Travel was by wood coasters, often taking as many weeks as it does hours now by steamboat and seaplanes. The electric washer has relegated the tub and washboard into the discard. Electrical inventions have brought to this island local and long-distance telephone, which freed this island from isolation. There are also telegraph, victrolas, X-ray, talking movies, and the wireless. How little our forefathers knew that the voices of people from all parts of the world could be transmitted through the air, bringing to us the best entertainments from all lands, and brought to our fireside by the wonderful inventions of Marconi. The airplane will soon come into as general use as the automobile. Although the airplane seems to have been plainly described in a vision in the tenth chapter of Ezekiel, it was not until the World war that the Wright brothers demonstrated their practical use.

But invention is still in its infancy. What will the next century reveal? Perhaps even within the next decade new inventions will displace the ones we now consider so wonderful, and render them as obsolete as the tallow candles and ox team.

It is an old saying—and true, that "Islanders love their home." Of course this is not the exclusive virtue of islanders, but there are especial reasons why their home ties linger long in their memory. Because of their isolation different members of all the old families have intermarried to such an extent that they have become like one large family, having a mutual interest in each others affairs, that does not exist in towns differently situated. Their love of the sea—restless and beautiful, is a part of their existence, and speaks to them a language that only those who can interpret it can understand. The tang of the salt breezes wafted over the land, make different conditions uncongenial.

Many of our people have sailed away from their island home, and have made their abode in many states from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Coast. To them the reading of records of their associates of the long ago, may be like

a letter from home, and the means of renewing old friendships broken by long years of separation. Perhaps today, some aged mother on the Pacific Coast is reading the life history of her former friends and companions of her youth, from whom in long years she has received no tidings, yet she has never forgotten them. Age has now rendered her footsteps too feeble to retrace the long journey homeward. Today she sits in her rose garden and in the sunlight, looking out over the placid waters of the great Pacific ocean, she watches the sun go down, and remembers it is the self same sun which in former years she saw rise out of the ofttime turbulent waters of the Atlantic, at the other extreme of the continent, at Swan's Island. A river of gold from the sunset shines around her snow white hair like a halo. The purple twilight deepens. She lays aside the book she has been reading, and sits and thinks—thinks of her youth now gone forever.

She is contented and happy in her adopted home, surrounded by her family, but after reading of her former companions, her thoughts turn Eastward to the land of the rising sun. Although her sight has grown dim, yet she can plainly see across the vast expanse of three thousand miles, her home at Swan's Island. She sees the unpretentious house that was her birthplace. She can see her father and mother, and the large family of brothers and sisters as she left them. Every detail of those surroundings pass before her vision. She remembers the little playhouse which she and the other children built on the ledges in the summer time. She sees her father and brothers sailing into the harbor after their day's employment and the mother with the help of the girls busily preparing the evening meal. After supper the young people of the neighborhood trooping in for the evening's enjoyment, where before the roaring log fire in the fireplace, they play games, and sing the old familiar folk songs, which she has so often sang, in later years, to her grandchildren as she rocked them to sleep. They were happy then because they were young. All of these companions have visited her tonight in her imagination. Time and distance cannot rob her of the pleasant memories of the past. She realizes that most of these old friends have sailed on their last voyage. A tear rolls down her time-worn face. Yes, Islanders love their home.