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THE GURNET

BY: Charles W. E. Morris

The Gurnet in modern times has enjoyed the mixed reputation of vacation spot and shipping hazard. Formed by glaciers during the ice age of the Pleistocene Era, the Gurnet's twenty-seven acres have guarded the northern approach to Plymouth Harbor against storms and attackers for some fifty to seventy thousand years. Edward Winslow in Good News from New England called the Duxbury Beach and its headland the "Gurnet's Nose," an allusion to a familiar English fish; popular usage has shortened the name to its present form.

Some historians look back to Norse sagas for the first recorded sighting of the Gurnet by Europeans. In 1004, it is said, the ship of Eric the Red's son, Thorwald, was damaged off Cape Cod. Putting into shore for repairs to the keel, the ship was attacked by natives, and Thorwald was mortally wounded. After completing repairs, Thorwald and his crew sailed into a large bay and landed at the foot of a hilly, heavily-wooded promontory. Tradition has it that a dying Thorwald proclaimed at that spot, it is beautiful here; I should like to affix my abode. Although evidence is scanty, archeologists have determined that the Norsemen made many voyages to, and landings on, the coast of North America; it is possible that they indeed set foot on the Gurnet.

For five hundred years European association with the Gurnet lapsed, but during the sixteenth century many explorers were in the vicinity. Before the arrival of the Pilgrims both John Smith and Samuel de Champlain had written about the area. Champlain described the Gurnet in 1605 as practically an island covered principally with pine trees.

Town records note that the Gurnet formally became part of Plymouth on January 7, 1638, and was sold in 1694 to John Doten John Nelson, and Samuel Lucas, who perhaps sought return on their investment in the harvesting of the thick pine forests. Clearing for permanent settlement did not take place until the early eighteenth century. The Burgess family was among the first to build a farmhouse, using native timber, sometime around 1720.

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It is thought that the first lighthouse, a primitive structure, was erected on the Gurnet in 1710. In 1768, a second lighthouse with twin beacons was constructed, and in 1842, two new lighthouses burning sperm oil in eight lights replaced the eighteenth-century structures. Although the town of Duxbury commemorates the twin lighthouses on its official seal, today there is only one; the Coast Guard removed the northeast lighthouse in 1924 and installed a revolving beacon in the remaining tower, 102 feet above the high water.

The Gurnet's position atop Plymouth Bay made it an excellent site for observation of shipping. Fort Andrew was erected in 1776 by the towns of Plymouth, Kingston, and Duxbury, under the direction of Isaac Partridge and Deacon Peleg Wadsworth. The fort mounted three twelve-pounders, one six-pounder, and two nine-pounder cannons, with a garrison of approximately sixty men, nearly half of whom were from Duxbury. The first officers were Captain William Weston, Lt. Andrew Samson, and Ensign Nathaniel Carver. They were succeeded by Deacon Smith and Ebeneezer Barker and later Captain Stephen Churchill and Lieutenant John Washburn.

In 1776, either on a chase or a routine sweep of the sea searching out American privateers, H.M.S Niger, commanded by Captain Talbot, sailed around the Gurnet headland toward Plymouth Harbor. Noticing new fortifications (or perhaps informed by local British sympathizers), the British frigate exchanged fire with Fort Andrew's battery, destroying one of the lighthouse beacons. Leaving the encounter, the vessel ran aground on Brown's Island but was refloated before the patriots could inflict damage. While there were no casualties, the ship's grounding convinced Captain Talbot that attempting to enter the harbor without a pilot could be risky.

Later in the war the militia at the fort raised an alarm when American Captain Manly in the Lee sailed into Plymouth Harbor with several captured British ships in tow. The Americans did not recognize him and feared that British ships had come to bombard or burn the towns around the bay. The alarm proved false but sentinels remained at alert with even sabbath services held under arms. The military actions of the Revolutionary War were the only ones seen by the fort, although the fortifications were rebuilt during the Civil War.

In addition to providing coastal protection, the Gurnet has been home to farmers and a haven to summer visitors despite chronic difficulties of access. Earliest visitors from Plymouth arrived by boat. According to an anecdote recounted by Henry David Thoreau, water transportation did not necessarily imply vessels. Thoreau told of an 1857 party, including one General John Winslow, who rode on horseback to the Gurnet, intent on enjoying themselves. The party must have been too much for the general, because he passed out.

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As a prank, his friends left him, returning to Plymouth overland as they had come. When the general awoke and found himself forsaken, he rode his horse to Saquish and swam the horse to Plymouth Beach Point and then rode to the town. Since his friends were taking the roundabout route through Marshfield, Duxbury, and Kingston, they were dumbfounded to find the general in Plymouth before them.

Normally, transportation in the late nineteenth century combined train and carriage. A traveler from Boston took the train to Marshfield, where he continued his journey by carriage nine miles over the beach. There were also four or five trains daily between Boston and Plymouth from which connections could be made.

The construction of the Powder Point Bridge to Duxbury Beach shortened the carriage portion of the trip considerably. By the fall of 1892, visitors could use the Duxbury train station on the Old Colony Line and then had to endure only six miles of carriage ride. By 1903, there were eight trains daily between Boston and Duxbury, some weekends pulling twelve or fifteen cars.

Although farming continued through the nineteenth century, tourists discovered the area quite early and enjoyed the hospitality of several noted hostelries. Many times during his residence in Marshfield, (1832-1852), Daniel Webster went hunting on the Gurnet. He stayed at Harvey Ransome's cottage, which perched on the rocks on the Bay side.

Between 1840 and 1860, a dance hall and cafe, known as "Old Sebastopol," stood at the Gurnet, attracting Plymouth visitors during the summer. The building sometime later was moved to Green Harbor, where it became a summer hotel, the "Riverside House."

Around 1880, George H. Hall of Marshfield purchased the old Burgess property, enlarging the farmhouse to more than twenty-one rooms, and adding a large barn, a pavilion for dancing, and a number of outbuildings, including an icehouse. (The pavilion was a remodeled building brought from South Duxbury.)

Soon after, in 1884, the Boardman family visited the Gurnet and fell in love with it. The following winter Joseph L. Boardman and George H. Hall agreed to swap farms, the Boardman farm in Lexington in exchange for the Hall's sixty acres of pasture, beach, and salt marsh on the Gurnet and the connecting beach. By Memorial Day, 1885, the Boardmans had opened their Gurnet farm, re-crhistened the Gurnet House, to summer boarders.

Summer visitors enjoyed a wide variety of diversions. In addition to hunting, fishing, lobstering, and clamming, vacationers could swim on either side of the Gurnet; the intrepid swimmers swam on the ocean side while the less hardy preferred the warmer waters of Saquish Beach.

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By 1900, the popularity of vacationing at the Gurnet was nearing its peak. The Gurnet House was nearly full for the summer, generally with guests from greater Boston. Each day "Sam" and "Gypsy" plodded through the sand pulling the solid beach wagon, while Mr. Boardman frequently wondered aloud why his guests brought such heavy trunks.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, ten cottages in addition to the Gurnet House clusted on the point. The best known of the residents was C. L. Willoughby of Chicago, owner of the Winslow House in Plymouth (now the headquarters of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants). The Harlows, Murphys, Holmeses, Grays, Barneses, Batchelders, and Watsons each had a cottage, and the lighthouse keeper and the Coast Guard Captain were housed in small cabins.

Although the Gurnet was never subject to real estate development, the Boardmans commissioned a full-fledged plat with streets named after members of the Boardman family. None of the mapped streets was ever constructed.

Little remains on the Gurnet to attest to its early historical interest. By the 1930's only a portion of the partially caved-in galleries of the old Fort remained, although diggers frequently found rusted tools and cannon balls. As late as 1976, no marker commemorated the Gurnet's claim to Revolutionary War fame. The Plymouth Bicentennial Commission and the Pilgrim Society agreed to rectify that situation with the installation of a bronze plaque on a boulder on Cole's Hill in Plymouth. The inscription composed by Charles W. E. Morris reads:

> In 1776, an earthwork fort was erected at the Gurnet for the protection of Plymouth Harbor and named Fort Andrew. Six cannons were emplaced at the Fort, which was manned by several companies of militiamen from Plymouth, Kingston, Duxbury, and nearby communities. The first lighthouse, built in 1768, stood alongside the fort. It mounted two beacons. While in search of American privateers, the British frigate, H.M.S. Niger, observed the fortifications and shots were exchanged during which one of the lighthouse beacons was destroyed. The warship grounded on Brown's Island, but was quickly refloated and sailed away without any further show of hostilities.

The sea poses the greatest danger to the remaining fortifications. Every major storm tears away at the beach and the few remaining sand dunes. High tides with gale force winds have driven channels from the ocean to the bay, and on a number of occasions the Gurnet temporarily became an island. Although many individuals interested in the Gurnet have apprised the Coast Guard of the dire threat to the fortifications, financial constraints prevent the government from taking useful protective measures to protect the historic remains.

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Mr. Charles W. E. Morris is a native of London who came to the United States as a young man to continue his engineering and architectural studies. The Depression found him seeking employment with the Christian Science Monitor; thirty-three years later, he returned as the Monitor's national advertising manager. Mr. Morris has reviewed books and written intensively on historical and military subjects. The above paper on "The Gurnet" was drawn from the text for a lecture delivered during the spring, 1981 Monday Morning Lecture Series at Pilgrim Hall.

For additional information, see a history of the Gurnet by Hebert Boardman, printed in the Duxbury Clipper from May 21, 1981 to August 13, 1981.

Edited By:

Laurence R. Pizer
Jeanne M. Mills