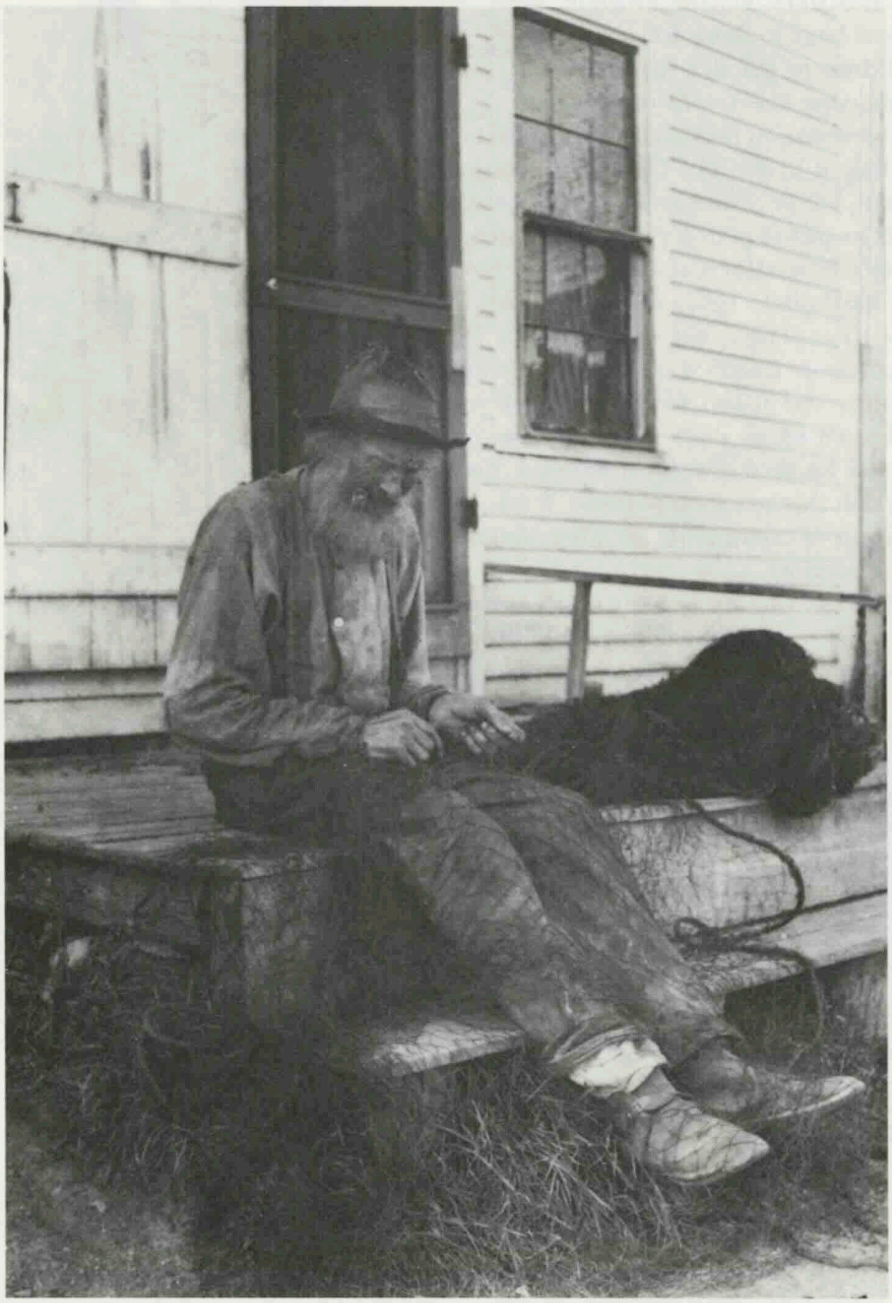
SOLSTICE ON BAKER'S ISLAND

'Then' and 'now' are not so far apart when you're weathered in

ARN H. PEARSON AND MARY LOU WENDELL

Courtesy Irene Bartlett



Elisha Gilley, 19th century patriarch of Baker's Island

December 21, 1989. Arn:

Our first Winter Solstice on Baker's Island started like every other day that December—bitter cold, windy, and starkly beautiful. Scraping the frost from our bedroom window, I took a quick look at the miles of whitecaps and seasmoke separating us from the mountains of Acadia, then hurried downstairs to revive the night's embers in our two wood stoves and fix a cup of coffee for Mary Lou.

I was disappointed with the harsh weather. We had invited friends from Islesford to spend the solstice with us, but no one in their right mind would come on a day like today. We would miss the company. A week had gone by since we made our last supply run to the mainland, and several more would pass before we left our island again.

Still, Baker's looked glorious in her coat of fresh snow, and we settled easily back into our winter routine: stoking the stoves with spruce logs dragged out of the woods by sled, hauling buckets of water from the well outside, and making Christmas presents for far-off nieces and nephews. Mary Lou sat at the kitchen table most of the day hand sewing dolls, while I carved a block print of the northern lights over Cadillac mountain.

It was nearly dusk when I decided to give Gail and Henry Grandgent a shout on the marine radio. Our closest neighbors, they live at the other end of a mile-long bar that, at extreme low tides, connects us with Little Cranberry Island.

"Don't get your hopes up," warned Mary Lou. The northwest wind had held steady at around 25 knots all day.

Henry answered. "We'll be there in an hour," he said.

Their lobster boat was hauled up for repairs, and we thought he was stringing us along. But he was serious. They had picked up their rowboat from the harbor, brought it down to the bar, and were busy closing up the house.

Excited, we spent the hour straightening up, making the guest bed, and bringing in enough wood for the night, while watching Gail and Henry's progress through the binoculars. We met them at the landing just after sunset, Henry at the oars, Gail all bundled up in the stern, and their sheepdog in the bow with a big red Christmas bow on her collar. In addition to their own gear, they had brought us a cooler full of much-needed groceries, cookies left over from the Islesford Christmas party, and a big box of mail and presents.

We hauled it all up to the house on the sled, broke out the rum and eggnog, and made a solstice feast of kielbasa roasted in the wood stove. Only our cat, who is terrified of dogs, failed to appreciate the good company.



Lightkeeper Vurney King Courtesy Eleanor Walker

December 22, early morning. Mary Lou:

Last night was the coldest of the winter, and the wind hasn't let up a bit. I step out of our little red house and into the five-degree air. My cheeks burn with the cold, but it feels good to get outside. Arn is making coffee and pancakes for our guests, still asleep, and I like getting outside for a few minutes before breakfast.

Our island is small and round, and a 15-minute walk through the woods will bring me to the other side half a mile due south. It is all I can do to keep from slipping on the sheer ice just beneath the snow. So I walk carefully onward, past the snow-laden spruce and out through the jagged stillness of this winter morning.

Along the path, I pass the old Gilley house, the red one-room school house, and the crumbling stone walls and foundations of farms now crowded with wild rose and spruce. Up ahead, the Baker's Island light, long since automated, stands atop a granite ledge at the center of the island, with the white clapboard keeper's house close beside it.

I imagine these houses lit and warm, the school full of children. How different would it feel to have neighbors here? Gail and Henry are our first visitors since a surprise blizzard brought us winter just before Thanksgiving. But Baker's Island has not always been so deserted. William and Hannah Gilley moved their family here in the early 1800s and eventually turned the island into a thriving community. At its peak, Baker's was home to 24 people. We may be alone here, I am reminded, but we are not the first.

The Gilleys found Baker's Island much as we did, covered with forest and encircled by a jumbled granite shoreline swept bare by countless Atlantic storms. Several miles out to sea from Mount Desert Island, Baker's offered a convenient refuge to William while fishing outer waters. Lore has it that he found an abandoned log cabin near the northern shore, gradually fixed the place up and cleared some land, and took to staying there during summers with his wife Hannah. In 1806 they left Southwest Harbor altogether and declared the island their home.

Our struggles here are slight compared to what the Gilleys must have endured. Arriving with two young children, they faced the challenge of making Baker's thin, rocky soil support a family with enough food for the winter. In addition to clearing virgin forest, William had to row provisions, tools, and livestock to the remote island and carry them ashore, weather permitting. Unprotected from the open sea, Baker's only landing place is a small rock beach, and even a modest northeaster can make it impossible to come or go.

In time, the Gilleys built up a successful farm. Hannah, in between cooking, cleaning, gardening, tending the animals, making butter, and spinning wool, somehow found time to give birth to 10 more children. An educated woman herself, Hannah schooled the children at home and had them take turns reading aloud during the long winter evenings. Like us, their closest neighbors lived on Islesford, and their trips off island were confined mostly to the summer months. For more than 20 years they raised their family on Baker's Island, alone.

The first winds of change came to the island in 1823, when the federal government commissioned the construction of the Baker's Island lighthouse. Virtually all the schooner traffic between eastern Maine and the Maritimes and the cities to the westward passed just outside of Baker's, loaded with cargoes of cordwood, lumber, potatoes, and coal. In foul weather, many a ship had foundered on the dangerous ledges nearby.

William won the appointment as first keeper of the Baker's Island light in 1828. The job was quite a windfall for the Gilley family, for with it came a new house, $350 per year, and all the sperm oil they could burn.

By the 1840s, Baker's Island had become a real community. Five of William and Hannah's children had married and moved away (five others still lived at home), but two of the sons, Elisha and Joseph, chose to bring their brides to the island, build new houses, and start their own farms. The brothers raised cows, oxen, cattle, sheep, and chickens, and planted hay and Irish potatoes. Like their father, they also fished and hunted wild ducks, both for home consumption and to earn cash from the sale of smoked herring and feathers.

The Gilley sons and their wives brought up another 15 children on Baker's, and the island air must have been full of young voices. But as the Gilleys soon learned, new neighbors are not necessarily good news.

In 1848 Zachary Taylor's election ended the Democrats' hold on the presidency, and William, as a federal appointee, was called upon to join the Whig party. A lifelong Democrat, he refused and was promptly stripped of his post as light keeper.

The new keeper, John Rich, appeared at William's door in 1849 and, as instructed by the Superintendent of Lights, "reported the facts to him and gave him six or seven weeks to vacate." William complied, but insisted that all of the island except three acres belonged to him. Leaving the island in care of his sons, Elisha and Joseph, William moved out to Great Duck Island, which he had bought in 1837 for a sum of $300. Hannah, her health failing, moved in with her son Samuel's family on Islesford, where she died three years later.

Elisha and Joseph showed no hesitation in taking charge of Baker's Island. Angry at the turn of events, they immediately began harassing the Rich family. The new keeper wrote the Superintendent in 1852 that he "can stand the base insults and insinuations no longer" and "cannot leave the island for one hour without [his] family being subjected to insults of the most indecent and vilest kind."

The Gilleys were repeatedly ordered to leave the island but each time they refused. By 1853 an exasperated Light



Letitia Baldwin, Bar Harbor Times

House Inspector urged Washington to eject the brothers by force."Their houses also should be taken down, wrote W. B. Franklin, "and I believe that the presence of the revenue cutter will be required to have the business thoroughly done."

Opting for a less extreme approach, the government filed suit against the Gilleys. At the center of the dispute lay a question that would simmer for more than 50 years—who owned Baker's Island anyway?

The government had purchased the entire island from trustees of the William Bingham estate in 1827 and therefore declared that the Gilleys were mere squatters. However, the Gilleys had lived there some 21 years by then and claimed they had won title to the land through their undisputed possession.

The Bingham estate's right to sell the island was also challenged. Around the turn of the century Bingham, one of the nation's wealthiest bankers, had used his political connections to lay claim to over a million acres in Maine. A ruling in favor of the government would have created a frightening precedent for many other coastal settlers living on "Bingham" land.

In 1855 both sides reached an agreement and the suit was dropped. The Gilleys were allowed to remain in possession of the island in return for disclaiming their rights to a 40-rod square lot around the light house and allowing the government and its employees unrestricted pasturage and right-of-way from the landing to the lighthouse.

Life on Baker's returned to normal. William eventually returned to the island, where he lived with his son Joseph until his death at the age of 90. In the course of a generation, the community grew to embrace five households, including our little house, which was built for Joseph's daughter Phebe shortly after she married in 1862.

But the dispute surfaced again in 1896 due to the construction of a new school house and quarreling over pasturage rights. The U.S. government decided to assert its claim to Baker's once and for all, and renewed its suit to declare the Gilleys squatters. This time, however, the government found few allies.

In an 1898 letter to Washington, the U. S. District Attorney for Maine wrote, "It would certainly be unfair and oppressive at this late date to assert the paramount title of the Government as against the few poor and hardy fishermen living there; and if the United States has and intends to allow them peaceable possession of these scanty and sterile lands, I can see no earthly objection to allowing the town of Cranberry Isles to build a school house for the proper education of their youth."

The courts agreed. In 1909 the U.S. Circuit Court upheld the 1855 agreement and formally stripped the government of any rights to the rest of the island. The Gilleys had finally won title to the land they had lived on and farmed for more than a century.

With matters resolved, the old tensions soon faded away. Now when old-timers tell us stories about life on Baker's Island after 1909, they speak of the school house, their neighbors, and long, cold winters. Few remember that there was ever a land dispute at all.

"I first went to school in the little school house there," recalled Eleanor Walker when we went to visit her in Southwest Harbor. Her father, Vurney King, took the job as light keeper in 1915, when she was in the first grade.

"When we moved on there, there were 13 pupils. And then it got down to seven. Then it got down to three. And when it got down to three, they closed the school, and my father used to bring us off here to got to school," she said. "I'd get so homesick when he'd bring me off here."

Eleanor also remembers her neighbors—Samuel Gilley, Elisha's son, and Bert Stanley, a taciturn lobsterman who rarely took off his boots and spent many a day down at the baitshed whittling trap latches. Born and raised on Baker's, Bert lived with his mother, Phebe, in what is now our house.

"Bert used to come up to the light house, up to my father's house there, every single afternoon about three o'clock," Eleanor told us, smiling at the memory. "And it was funny. He'd come up there and...he wouldn't hardly ever say a word, just come up and make his little visit, you know. Maybe for 20 minutes or a half hour. All of a sudden he'd get up and out through the door and not say a word. He was kind of strange."

Bert was the last of the Gilley line to live here. When his mother died in 1929, he moved to Great Cranberry Island to live with his sister Mabelle, saying Baker's was too quiet for him. Just 20 years after winning title to their land, the Gilleys left Baker's Island to the light keepers and a few summer folk.

As I stand by the boarded-up keeper's house, the icy wind makes me think of the hot breakfast back at home. I bury my face in my scarf and head down "Main Street," now a narrow and overgrown path.

December 22, sunset. Arn:

Gail and Henry waited until mid-afternoon for the wind to die down, but it never did. It held at a gusty 25 knots and swung around north, which made for even rougher seas down at the landing. Mary Lou and I invited them to stay another night, but they needed to get home. After waiting for a lull in the chop, we helped them shove off and watched Henry row fiercely against the whitecaps. It was slow going.

Back at the house, I followed their progress through the binoculars and called them on the radio when they got home. "Did you get soaked?" I asked Gail. "No," she said. "The spray froze when it hit my jacket and just coated me with ice."

We thanked them again for coming and settled back again into our winter routine of fire-stoking and toy making. We are probably not much different from the Gilleys who lived here a hundred years ago except when winter rolled around for them they settled back into their little island, they had four or five families to keep each other company. Now it is just the two of us. Again.

Arn Pearson *and* ***Mary Lou Wendell*** *lived in the Pearson family home on Baker's Island year-round from July 1989 to August 1991 and celebrated their marriage there in June 1991. They now reside on the island of Manhattan, where Mary Lou is studying journalism and Arn is writing a book about Baker's Island.*