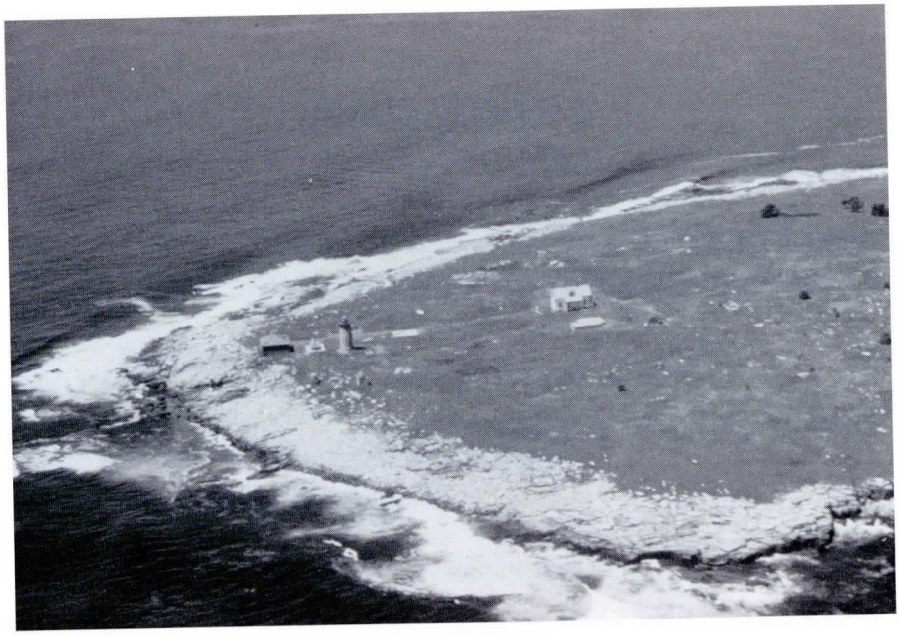


Great Duck Island



Stone Wall and Pony on Great Duck Island

# Great Duck Island - At Sea and on Memory's Horizon

*by Peter P. Blanchard III*

> Islands present us with a unique opportunity to do something we cannot do on the mainland. Because of their watery isolation from contiguous ecosystems, they become experimental natural laboratories that record the passage of time, here, on this exact piece of ground. On the mainland, effects of the hands of the past are frustratingly masked by the influence of neighboring pieces of land. It is very hard to sort out. But on islands, each with a unique history, the centuries of human and natural history are carefully indexed in the landscape, and the reading is curious, diverting and pleasurable. (Philip Conkling, *Islands in Time*, 1981)[1]

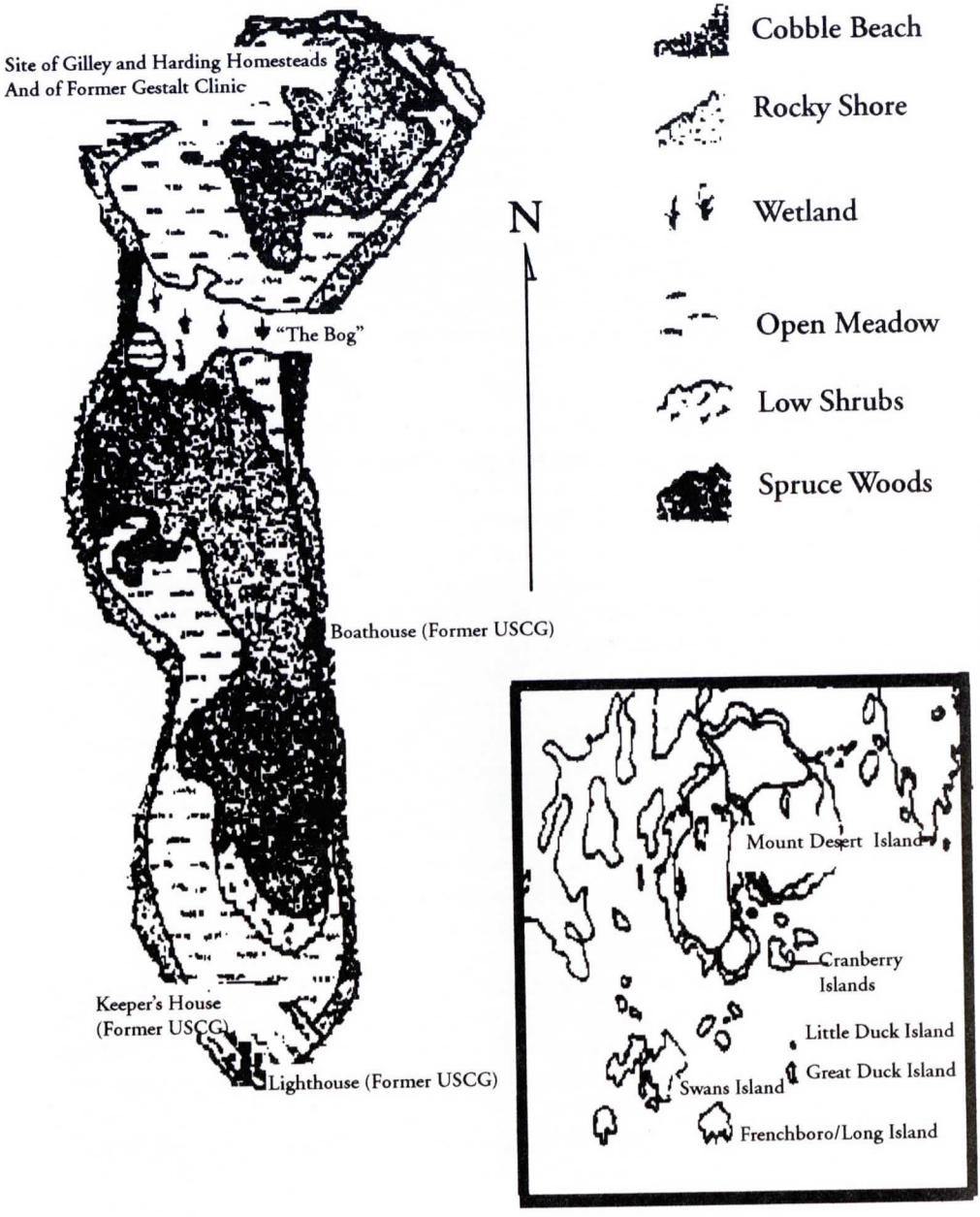
The Duck Islands, six miles south of Mount Desert Island, have long captured the imagination of mariners and of those who view them distantly from the solid footing of a broader swath of land. Isolated from the mainland by the rise of sea level some fifteen thousand years ago following the retreat of the Wisconsin glacier, two former hills of the coastal plain now ride alone at sea.

Whether in reference to their paired silhouettes rounding gently into the water, or in reference to the great rafts of black, white and brown eider ducks that frequent their shores, the two islands have long been known as the Ducks. One of the islands, though nameless, appears on Samuel de Champlain's chart of the Maine coast.[2] The earliest reference to the larger of the two islands as "Duck" appears in Southack's Coasting Pilot of 1720. Both islands bore their present names--Great Duck and Little Duck--by the time of the American Revolution, as documented by the Atlantic Neptune map of 1776.[3] Great Duck and Little Duck, its neighbor to the north, are located four-fifths of a mile from one another. Only the diminutive Mount Desert Rock, 15 miles to the southeast, stands between the Ducks and a vast ocean, and the coast of Portugal.

This paper will focus on the history of Great Duck Island, including an elusive pre-history, the era of island farms and their legacy, the arrival of the lighthouse and the period of the psychiatric clinic. The paper will also address the island's present time--its use for conservation, research and education.

Great Duck partakes of the sea's moods and harbors its own enigmas. Depending upon the time of day, the state of the tide and the weather conditions, the island presents different images. As surf roars against the eastern shore, as fog rolls in from the south or as a clearing wind rips down from the northwest,

# Great Duck Island Preserve



the island appears markedly different to those who stand upon it than it does to those who approach it from the sea. In all conditions, Great Duck confounds, if briefly, modern navigational technology. As it looms up on the radar screen after miles of open water, it appears to split into two islets. The radar is unable to interpret the low-lying area of the "bog" or great marsh (formerly a salt pond near the island's northern end) as land.

In a way paralleling the island's physical manifestations, Great Duck's past can be both accessible and elusive.

Despite relative isolation and apparent absence of shell middens, it is likely that the Ducks received seasonal visits from Native Americans. A plenitude of seals (using Little Duck's shoreline as a 'haul out' or resting area during low tide and using the surrounding waters for foraging), and occasional deer making the long swim from the mainland or from neighboring islands, a diversity of birds, fish and invertebrate marine life, underscore the rich habitat afforded by the Ducks, both in prehistoric and modern times. Samuel Eliot Morison related that tuna fishermen, one of the earliest Native American groups to leave archeological traces in the region, inhabited the Ellsworth area about 4000 B.C. and "must have pursued the big game fish in their canoes as far south as Baker's and the Duck Islands; certainly outside Blue Hill Bay and Frenchman's Bay."[4] Large shell middens on neighboring islands, which were closer to the mainland, fuel speculation about the possibility of Indian activity on Great Duck. As fog closes in, or as silence descends with nightfall, on Maine's uninhabited offshore islands, a solitary visitor finds it tempting to believe in a continuing ancient human presence.

## Island Farms

> Stone Walls are the anonymous epics of earlier generations, lyric forms in rock, which, when they were being composed on the face of the landscape, were never signed and rarely reflected upon--at least in writing.[5]

While there is evidence of occasional seasonal use of the island by white settlers of the area, documented year-round residence on Great Duck and the establishment of salt water farming did not begin until 1837 when William Gilley purchased Great Duck. In contrast to the Native Americans who may or may not have encamped seasonally on the island, farmers, such as Gilley, left durable reminders of their tenure by creating farm fields and stone walls.

William Gilley, who served as the light keeper on Baker's Island, midway between Mount Desert Island and the Ducks, made a farsighted real estate

investment. In 1837, he

> ...bought for three hundred dollars Great Duck Island, an uninhabited island about 5 miles southwest of Baker's Island, and even more difficult of access, his project being to raise livestock there. Shortly after he ceased to be light-keeper, when he was about sixty three years old, and his youngest children were grown up, he went to live on Great Duck Island and there remained almost alone until he was nearly eighty years of age.[6 & 7]

Visits by his wife, Hannah Lurvey Gilley, who settled on Little Cranberry Island after her life on Baker's Island ended, were limited because of her infirmity. William eventually moved back from Great Duck to Baker's Island, where he died at the age of 92, in the care of his son.[8] Gilley's deed to Great Duck Island for 100 acres from the Bingham estate, apparently an absentee landowner with vast holdings in the state of Maine, is actually dated to 1846 and signified ownership of the entire island.[9]

Great Duck Island presented unique challenges to island farmers. As preserved in oral history,[10] a number of the challenges relate to a specific topographic feature--the bog. According to Ralph Stanley, Gilley's descendant, while in his seventies, Gilley was visited by a granddaughter, Phoebe Jane Gilley (age 17) and her sisters, who came from Baker's Island to help with his housekeeping. Phoebe was enlisted (or enlisted herself) to herd the stray cows into an upper pasture. One summer evening, as the cows returned toward the homestead from pasture, William Gilley noticed with alarm that the animals were not attended by their shepherdess. In her successful attempt to rescue a cow that had become partly mired in the bog, Phoebe herself had become immersed and was sinking. When he reached the bog, William found Phoebe with her chin on a level with the mat of vegetation at the bog's surface. In a manner similar to that employed in an ice rescue, William extended a plank out to the girl. Phoebe was able to catch hold of it and was pulled to safety by her grandfather.

As also related by Ralph Stanley, a second story concerns the bog and underscores the great need, finally recognized in the last decade of the nineteenth century, to establish a light station on Great Duck. After the Gilley era had ended in the late 1860s and before the year of the lighthouse construction in 1890, the Hardings, the new island residents and farmers, were faced with unpleasant discoveries. On several occasions, they would find the drowned victims of shipwrecks washed up on the island shore. When the ground was too frozen to dig graves, the islanders would weight the bodies down and sink them in the bog.[11] If the wetland were a true and acidic freshwater bog, rather than a tidally influenced marsh, one might expect to find several crews preserved below.

Fortunately and whenever possible, the Hardings were also able to assist and shelter shipwreck survivors.[12]

The Hardings arrived in Maine from England in 1850. Clarence Harding obtained the title to Great Duck from William Gilley in 1868 for $2,200, a price which included all the buildings and livestock and that represented "a handsome profit" for Gilley.[13] Island ownership was eventually divided between the Harding and Driscoll families. The Driscolls came from Ireland and were initially farm helpers. The Harding's island farm flourished until a fire in the winter of 1882 destroyed all the buildings and forced the removal of the island's two families to Great Gott Island. After residing on Great Duck with his wife, Mary, for a quarter of a century, Charles Harding died on Great Gott the year after the fire.[14] The walls and foundations of the Harding's farm on Great Duck remain mingled with the stoneworks from Gilley's farm. The Hardings are memorialized on Great Duck in yet another way. Mariners have long called the shoal, just offshore from the northwestern end of Great Duck, Hardings Ledge and, even today, sailors are cautioned against being near or on it during conditions of heavy swell and low tide.[15]

**Island Stone Walls and Fields**

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
> And spills the upper boulders in the sun. (Robert Frost)[16]

Wending through high grasses, flanked by goldenrod, raspberry and seaside rose, the old stone walls of the Gilley and Harding farmsteads on Great Duck persist as toppled reminders of the island's former residents. They are particularly evident in the former pastures at the northern end of the island.

Viewed by Robert Frost in his poem "Mending Wall,"[17] both as evocative forms in the landscape and as primitive territorial markers, the rock walls of 18th and 19th century New England have recently been reinterpreted in a new light. Created to clear land of boulders and cobbles for agricultural endeavors and to retain livestock, stone walls have been seen by some contemporary historians as evidence of the land-use philosophy of domination associated with Western Europe. In contrast, Native American views of land-use during and preceding the same periods emphasized stewardship of communal resources rather than ownership. The European mode, with its emphasis on domination, stressed the subdivision and demarcation of property--elements that are still strong features of the New England landscape today. This thesis, proposed by William Cronon, an ecological historian, tempers a purely romantic view often held about New England's stone walls.[18]

Though the durability of Great Duck's nineteenth century stone walls might have been anticipated, the longevity of the island's former meadows was not. Ecologists predict with a high degree of certainty that fields and clearings, whether carved from woodland by natural agents, such as wind or fire, or by the hand of man, will revert to a wooded state through the natural process known as succession. If land is cleared, prepared for cultivation and later abandoned, an orderly progression of different plant communities is expected to follow, as plants of the high meadow and then scrub, shrub and finally woodland vegetation take hold. In contrast to abandoned fields on islands neighboring the Ducks, such as Placentia and Pond islands, where nineteenth century fields have fully reverted to spruce and fir forest, the fields on Great Duck appear to be frozen in time. While bearing copious seed-bearing cones, the great stands of red and white spruce bordering the island's numerous fields have not succeeded in fostering a new spruce generation capable of surviving beyond its first year. Spruce seedlings--minute blue green stars set in the rough tapestry of moss and grasses--seem to disappear at some point during their first winter.

The solution to the mystery of persistent fields and of the disappearance of the young spruces, which in other locations would be destined to reclaim those fields, appears to lie in a historical introduction by man of a non-native species--the European varying hare. Probably introduced by hunters in the last century, the hare, as is its nature, has greatly proliferated. From late winter until early spring, when the diversity of available vegetation is very low, the hares apparently turn to the young spruce seedlings for sustenance. A three-foot high "bunny browse line" on mature spruces at meadow's edge indicates that the hares are feeding on spruce to the greatest height the herbivores can reach. A one-to-two inch seedling is therefore totally vulnerable in the absence of snow cover. For the past seven years, the Nature Conservancy has been conducting experiments on Great Duck with rabbit-free wire enclosures. Thus far, the experiments indicate that a prolific growth of young spruce does occur if hares are excluded and adequate light is provided.[19] It nevertheless should be remembered that the island's old fields are rarities these days, and that they represent a diversity of habitat as well as relics of past agricultural activity. From the point of view of historians and some ethnologists, the hare may actually be valued as an old field maintenance specialist.

The experience of island farming, in particular the tending of livestock on Great Duck, was firmly etched in the mind of a young participant during the summer of 1943. At the age of 12, Russell Pettigrove of Bernard, on Mount Desert Island, enlisted in the annual shearing of the island's sheep. According to Pettigrove, the shearing process occurred on one day each year under the guidance of Charles and Clarence Harding, tenders of the herd and descendants of the island farmers of the last century. The previous year's temporary corral was pieced back together. The entire herd of 90 adult sheep and lambs were tracked down, some having strayed as far away as the lighthouse, and driven in to the corral. Individual adult

animals were held down and sheared either by hand or gas-powered shears. The tails of female sheep were docked to facilitate hygiene. Wool was carried in burlap bags to the shore, where it was transferred to an 18-foot dory for the short row to a waiting power vessel. Eight workers participated, including the young Pettigrove, who earned $6.00 for the day. The ewes and their offspring remained year-round on Great Duck, using the spruce woodlands in the absence of other cover. Rams, however, were removed and deposited on nearby islands, such as Green Island, until their services were needed.[20]

## The Light Station

> ...an IOV light; that is, kerosene or mineral oil is vaporized under pressure and burned in a gaseous state on a mantle in much the same manner as in some of the lamps used in rural communities before the extension of electric lines. (Sarah C. Kittredge, 1938)[21]

By comparison with neighboring lighthouses Great Duck's is a relative newcomer. Baker's Island Light was established in 1825 and Mount Desert Rock in 1830, Bear Island Light in 1839, Bass Harbor Head Light in 1858, Egg Rock in 1875 and Great Duck in 1890.[22] The old lighthouse, the keeper's house, a brick building for diesel generators,[23] and several small outbuildings and foundations that are now present indicate that a much larger compound existed when the light station was first established. At that time, a keeper and two assistants, with their families, lived in three separate houses, of which the present keeper's house is the only survivor. An active year-round community once centered around the light's function. By World War I, there were 30 children in full-time residence, enough to necessitate the establishment of a school at federal expense. The 'population boom' was short lived. By the 1920s, many of the residents--members of keepers' and lobster fishermens' families (squatters)--had removed to Swans Island or the mainland.[24] Just as it was one of the last light stations to be manned on the Maine coast, so Great Duck's light was one of the last to be automated, in 1986.

In recent times, Great Duck has afforded its rare visitors, the unparalleled experience--of witnessing the passage of an historic seafaring way of life. Lighthouse keepers were still in residence and maintaining a year-round watch at the time of the most recent change in the island's ownership to the Nature Conservancy. As a steward for the Conservancy, I landed on the north end of Great Duck with the intention of hiking the full circumference of the island. My solitary approach to the keeper's house from the cover of the forest elicited a gradual stir amongst the three Coast Guardsmen on duty. While they were accustomed to visitation by boat or helicopter, the Guardsmen were plainly intrigued by someone with a backpack strolling in from the high meadow. They

seemed glad to have company, showed interest in hearing about their new neighbor (the Nature Conservancy) and offered me a tour of the keeper's house followed by a cup of tea. The Guardsmen were primarily Midwesterners or "Flatlanders," as Mainers would call them. I couldn't help but notice that, while this posting in mid-ocean was a novel experience for the two youngest fellows, they appeared to have been gradually lulled by the quiet and remoteness of their situation. Their supervisor, a quiet, older man with a constantly lit pipe, appeared long attuned to the post. From my mainland perspective, all the men spoke distinctively and moved slowly.

At my first view from the top of old light tower, 65 feet above ground level, I noticed that the great arc of the island appeared to plunge away to the south, like one of the fin back whales so often seen at Mount Desert Rock.

## The Gestalt Clinic

After numerous changes in island ownership following the close of the Harding era, Dr. E. George Cloutier, a psychiatrist from Mechanics Falls, Maine purchased a large section of Great Duck Island from the Bigenho family of Pittsburgh in the 1960s,[25] and established a Gestalt clinic, a summer treatment facility that promoted psychological well being based on the wholistic approach. From 1975 to 1979, in the summers, approximately 20 patients, with varying mental problems, Dr. Cloutier, Lea Longnecker (his first wife) and several assistants formed a summer community for healing, based on milieu therapy. According to Dr. Richard Barofsky, a psychologist and former associate of Dr. Cloutier who held workshops at the Gestalt summer institute on Great Duck, nature and the island, in particular, provided the setting in which healing could occur, far from the stresses of civilization. The sense of the sacredness in nature and of sacred places on the island was palpable.[26] Former patients and colleagues of Dr. Cloutier who were interviewed remembered fondly the healing environment of Great Duck Island as well as the eccentricities of the doctor. One former patient remembers Dr. Cloutier leading the entire community, dressed in swimming attire, into the lee of the eastern cobble beach, where they directly experienced the fury and dousing of a storm.[27] Dr. Cloutier's orange/red seaplane, which he piloted from Bangor (where he also had a practice) to Great Duck's grassy runway, became emblematic of his unusual enterprise. A small "village" took form from lumber harvested from spruce trees on the island. The buildings which occupied part of the Gilley and Harding farmsteads, included a main cabin, which was designed to serve as dormitory, dining room, meeting hall and library. At least one cabin was built by a patient, under the supervision of the master builder for the overall construction project.[28]

In 1979, after five years of operation, however, the clinic was forced to close due to financial and managerial troubles. Dr. Cloutier moved to Billings,

Montana to establish a similar clinic at a high altitude rather than on the ocean. Meanwhile, his agents sought a buyer for Great Duck. An unusual and pioneering era in the island's long history had come to a close. Following the island's sale in 1985, most of the clinic's structures--cabins, yurts, wooden walkways and the fiberglass dome--were razed and the airplane runway was officially closed with crossed timbers. With the exception of the Coast Guard Station and private inholdings, and several remaining cabins, the island was allowed to return to nature. After his death in 1997, a memorial to Dr. Cloutier was erected by former patients near a large white seaside rugosa rosebush, south of the runway. His ashes were scattered on the island.[29]

### Conservation, Research and Education

The island's most recent history bodes well for its future and preservation. In 1985, Great Duck was acquired by the Maine Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, a private non-profit organization, and the largest owner of nature preserves in the state. The Conservancy, in coordination with the State of Maine, manages the largest portion of the island's 262 acres as a nature reserve. The light station at the southern end and the boathouse and ramp on the southeastern shore of the island, formerly under the jurisdiction of the United States Coast Guard, have recently been transferred, through the Island Institute's Maine Lights Program, to the College of the Atlantic of Bar Harbor, Maine. Five acres at the northern end of the island are privately owned. Great Duck therefore now functions as a nature reserve with college facilities for a small number of students and faculty who are engaged in environmental research. The College of the Atlantic, which has recently also acquired Mount Desert Rock from the Coast Guard, is also planning artistic and literary programs appropriate for these island outposts.

Great Duck appears to be navigating a course in line with that of Little Duck, a National Audubon Society reserve since 1934. On the Ducks, the Atlantic combers and fogs roll in, as they have from time immemorial. In such places, historic imprints often vary greatly in longevity and legibility. For this is where Nature flourishes and continually claims her own.

To protect a diverse native flora and fauna, including large nesting populations of herring and great black-backed gulls, common eiders, Leach's petrels and black guillemots, the Nature Conservancy requests that visitors refrain from landing on the island between mid-April and mid-August. Camping and all pets are prohibited at all times of the year. When on the island, visitors are asked to stay on trails and avoid marked, biologically sensitive areas.

## Notes

[1] Philip W. Conkling, *Islands in Time: A Natural and Human History of the Islands of Maine* (Camden, Maine: Downeast Books, 1981), xii-xiv.
[2] Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Story of Mount Desert Island* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 36.
[3] Charles McLane, *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast: Mt. Desert to Machias*, vol. 2 (Falmouth, Maine: Kennebec River Press, Inc. 1989), 93.
[4] Morison, 3.
[5] Susan Allport, *Sermons in Stone - The Stone Walls of New England and New York* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 104.
[6] Charles W. Eliot, *John Gilley: Maine Farmer and Fisherman* (Boston: The University Press, 1904), 29-30.
[7] Ralph Stanley noted that members of the Bartlett family operated the island farm for William Gilley prior to his actual move to Great Duck.
[8] Eliot, 30-31.
[9] McLane, 94-95.
[10] Ralph Stanley, interview by Peter Blanchard, 1998. Ralph Stanley is a Southwest Harbor wooden boat builder and historian. He is also a great-great-great grandson of William Gilley, former owner of and farmer on Great Duck Island and the great-grandson of Phoebe Gilley, who was nearly lost in the "bog."
[11] Ibid.
[12] Rita Johnson Kenway, *Gotts Island, Maine: Its People 1880-1992* (Gotts Island, Maine: Penobscot Press, 1993), 14-15.
[13] McLane, 96-97.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Russell Pettigrove, interview by Peter Blanchard, 1998. Pettigrove is a native of Bernard, Maine.
[16] Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," in *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 47-48.
[17] Frost, 47-48.
[18] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land-Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983).
[19] Peter Blanchard and B. Owen, "Great Duck Island Herbivory Study" (Unpublished study for the Maine Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, August 1997).
[20] Russell Pettigrove.
[21] Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, *Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mt. Desert, Maine* (Bar Harbor, Maine: Acadia Publishing Company, 1988), 293.
[22] Richard M. Savage II, "Discovery," in *Mount Desert - An Informal History*, ed. Gunnar Hansen (Mount Desert, Me: Town of Mount Desert, 1989), 24.
[23] Diesel generators once powered the fog horn but were recently replaced by a large solar panel; coal burning steam generators had preceded the diesel ones

[24] McLane, 98-99.

[25] Kenway, 323.

[26] Dr. Richard Barofsky, private landowner at the northern end of the island, interview by Peter Blanchard, 1998.

[27] Former patient of the island clinic, interview by Peter Blanchard, 1997.

[28] Claude Bolduc, interview by Peter Blanchard, 1996. Bolduc was the master carpenter and builder of the island clinic.

[29] Second former patient of the island clinic, interview by Peter Blanchard, 1998.