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Teaching with Historic Places

Life on an Island: Early Settlers off the Rock Bound Coast of Maine

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Determining the Facts
Reading 2: The Gilleys of Baker Island

About the year 1806, William Gilley and Hannah Lurvey Gilley decided to move their family from Norwood's Cove on Mount Desert Island to Baker Island. Until then, Gilley had made his living chiefly on fishing or coastal vessels, but--like most young men of the region--he also cut wood and farmed. Gilley and his wife had already accumulated a little store of household goods and implements, and tools for fishing and farming. They needed no money to buy Baker Island, for it lay unoccupied and unclaimed; they simply took possession of it.

William Gilley was a large, strong man, six feet tall, and weighing more than 200 pounds. Hannah Gilley was a robust woman, who had lived in Newburyport and Byfield, Massachusetts until she was 13 years old, and had had much better schooling than that available on the island of Mount Desert. She taught all her children reading, writing, and arithmetic; and all her life she valued good reading, and encouraged it in her family.

For William Gilley, taking possession of Baker Island involved much heavy labor, but few unaccustomed risks. Hannah, who already had three little children, would face a formidable isolation, and also share in the severe labors of a pioneering family. Even to get a footing and to build the first shelter on this wooded island was no easy task. However, health, strength, and fortitude were theirs; and in a few years they had established themselves comfortably on the island. Ultimately they had six sons and six daughters, all of whom grew to maturity. Nine of the twelve children married, and to them were born 58 children.

After 10 years, the family had transformed the island into a tolerable farm. William Gilley kept about six cows, a yoke of oxen, two or three young cattle, about 50 sheep, and three or four hogs. The girls tended the poultry, made butter and spun wool, while the boys helped their father. They had cleared a considerable portion of the island, broken up the cleared land, hauled off part of the stones and piled them on the protruding ledges, and gradually made fields for grass and other farm crops.

Food at the island was abundant. No traps were needed for lobsters, which could be picked up in the shallow water along the rocky shore. Fresh fish were readily available except in stormy weather and in cold and windy February and March. Although codfish were easily accessible, the family preferred mackerel. In the summer, the family could eat lamb and in the fall they killed from 10 to 15 sheep. When the weather turned cold, they killed a "beef critter" or two, and sea-birds also added to their store of food. During the summer and early autumn the family had plenty of fresh vegetables.

For clothing the family depended mostly on wool from their own sheep. There were spinning wheels and looms in the house, and Hannah both spun and wove. They raised flax from which they made a coarse kind of linen, chiefly for towels, but they had very

little cotton. The children went barefoot most of the year; but in the winter they wore shoes or boots made by the eldest brother, who had learned the shoemaker's art.

The Gilleys did need cash on occasion. Some essentials had to be bought at the Southwest Harbor store, a seven mile trip by boat each way. To get money, they could sell or exchange butter and eggs at the store. They also could sell dried fish and feathers in Boston. The boys shot enough birds in a single year to yield more than a hundredweight of feathers, worth 50 cents a pound. The feathers shipped to Boston every year represented the men's labor, whereas the butter and eggs represented chiefly the women's labor. Butter, which sold in the vicinity at twelve-and-a-half cents per pound, was by far the best of the cash resources. The Gilleys were also able to supplement their income by keeping the Baker Island lighthouse after being appointed in 1828.

In this large and united family the boys stayed at home and worked for their parents until they were 21 years of age, and the girls stayed at home until they were married or had come of age. It was not all work for the family, however. In the long winter evenings the family played checkers, or fox and geese. The mother read to the family until the children grew old enough to take their turn in reading aloud. As soon as they were 10 or 12 years of age, the boys were in and out of boats much of the time, attaining that quick, instinctive use of oar, sail, and tiller necessary for safety. When they grew older they had the sport of gunning. Nearly every Sunday in the summer Hannah took the eldest children 14 miles round-trip, in an open boat, to the Congregational Church at Southwest Harbor.

The Gilleys always had before them nature's splendor. From their dwelling they could see the entire hemisphere of the sky. To the north lay the grand hills of Mount Desert, with an outline clear and sharp when the northwest wind blew, but dim and soft when southerly winds prevailed. Every storm dashed a magnificent surf onto the rockbound isle. In winter, the low sun made the sea a sheet of shimmering silver; and all the year an endless variety of colors, shades and textures played over the surfaces of hills and sea.

Persons without the habit of reflection are often but half conscious of their delight in such visions, but find them to be a real source of happiness that is soon missed when gone. On the whole, the members of that isolated family look back on their childhood as a happy one, and feel a strong sense of obligation to their mother and father.

The Family of William, Jr. and Hannah (Boynton) Gilley

William Gilley, Jr., b. 11 September 1782 Mount Desert, Me., d. 17 September 1872 Baker's Island, Me., m. 30 November 1802 Hannah Boynton Lurvey, b. 8 December 1782 Byfield, Mass., d. 24 March 1852 Little Cranberry Isle, Maine.

Children:

1. Hannah b. 18 September 1803, m. Joseph Stanley.
2. William III b. 8 July 1805, d. 1894, m. 1) Clarissa Lancaster, 2) Phebe Douglas.
3. Elisha B. b. 12 September 1807, d. 28 July 1901, m. Hannah Manchester Stanley.
4. Eunice b. 1809, d. 1871, m. Elisha Crane.
5. Francis b. 6 June 1810, d. 19 November 1877, m. Bethsheba Crane.
6. Joseph b. 22 May 1813, d. 10 July 1894, m. Adeline Dolliver.
7. Samuel b. 15 May 1815, d. 27 May 1906, m. Emily Stanley
8. Matilda b. 5 October 1817, m. Oliver L. Allen.
9. Lucinda b. 29 December 1819, d. 18 February 1843, never married.
10. John b. 22 February 1822, d. 12 October 1896, m. 1) Harriet Bickford Wilkinson, 2) Mary Jane Wilkinson.
11. Mary b. 5 March 1824, never married.
12. Elmira b. 26 November 1826, d. 1853, never married.

Questions for Reading 2

1. How did the Gilleys obtain Baker Island? Would they be able to obtain land the same way today? Why or why not?

2. How did they use the resources of the island to support themselves?

3. In what ways was Baker Island an advantageous place to live? What inconveniences did the family have to contend with?

4. Describe Hannah Gilley's life on Baker Island. List five activities that would have been part of her weekly routine.

5. Develop a family tree for the Gilleys. Do you know any families as large as the Gilleys? Why was it considered a blessing to have such a large family?

6. This account of the Gilley's experiences was written nearly a century after they settled on Baker Island. In what ways might the narrator have romanticized their experiences? Do you think the description of their lives is realistic? Why or why not?

Reading 2 was compiled and adapted from George E. Street, Mount Desert: A History (Cambridge: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Riverside Press, 1905); and historical records at Acadia National Park.

Determining the Facts
Reading 3: The Lighthouse Letter

Following is a copy of the letter William Gilley received appointing him keeper of the newly built lighthouse on Baker Island.

Collectors Office
District of Portland and
Faimouth
June 19, 1828

I have the pleasure to inform you that the President has appointed you to be keeper of the light house on Bakers Island, near Mount Desert, with a salary fixed at three hundred and fifty dollars per annum.

It will be necessary for you to reside and be steadily in the house provided for the keeper.

Major Cornelius Grinnell will furnish the establishment with oil, tube-glasses, wicks, buff skins and whiting; and when the buildings are finished and the light house fitted up and furnished, you will have the light house lit up during the nights. Further instructions in relation to your duties with the forms of accounts and returns will be sent you as soon as they can be prepared.

W, lesley the agent will deliver over to you the buildings and appurtenances, for which you will give him your receipt. Please to acknowledge your acceptance of the appointment, and inform me of the night you intend first to light up the lantern.

I am respectfully,
Your obedient servant
Issac lesley
Superintendent of Light Houses in Maine

Mr. William Gilley
Keeper of Light House
Bakers Island

Questions for Reading 3

1. Describe what life might be like for a lighthouse keeper in the past and today. Do you think this position changed life for the Gilleys on Baker Island? If so, how?