Billingsgate Island

A Victim of the Tides

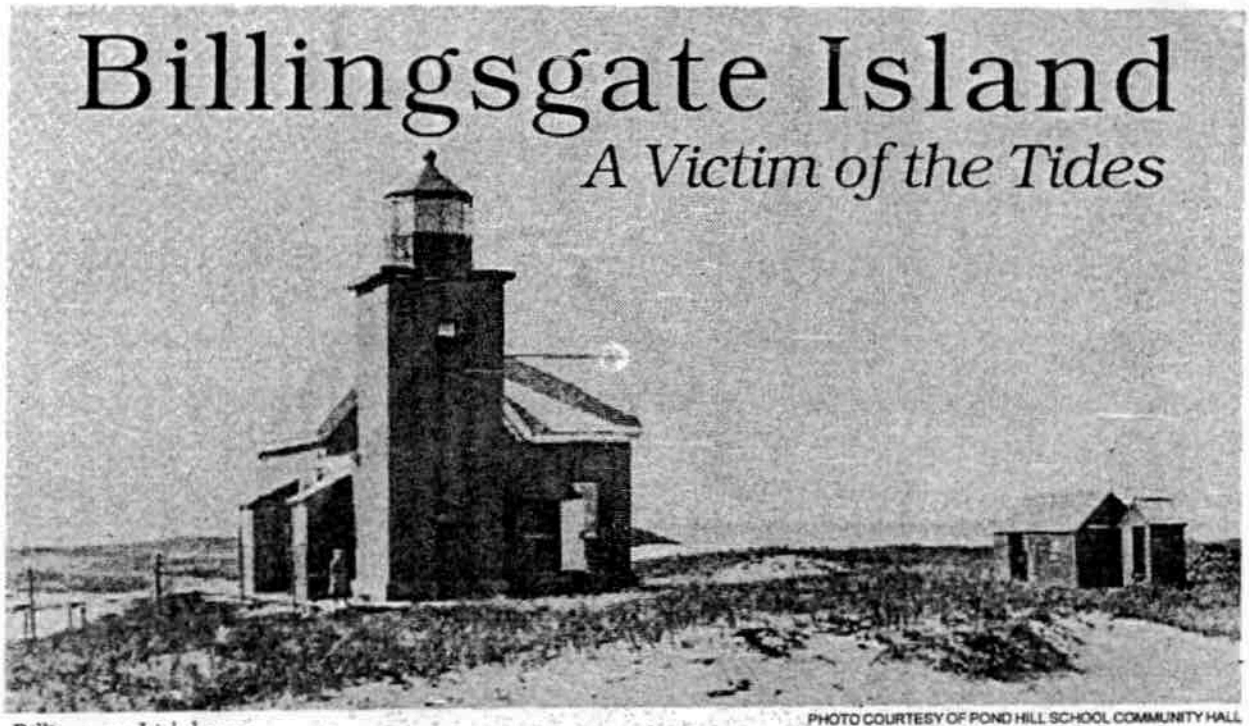


PHOTO COURTESY OF POND HILL SCHOOL COMMUNITY HALL

Billingsgate Lighthouse.

BY JACK SHEEDY

I remember an old-timer once telling me, "Time and the tides wait for no man." Nowhere is this more true than here on Cape Cod, especially in regard to the unceasing march of the tides.

Cape Cod is a peninsula in a constant state of flux. Over the millennia its shape has been altered repeatedly by the combination of wave and wind with formulae forever random. Five to ten thousand years ago, when the Indians began to appear on Cape Cod, it is believed that much of Cape Cod Bay was dry. The hemisphere was still recovering from the last ice age during which time much of the earth's water was stored in mammoth ice sheets.

A thousand years ago, around the time when Basque fishermen and Norse explorers were frequenting our shores, the sea level was still quite a bit lower than it is today. Around Cape Cod, land masses existed that are now long gone. Nearly four centuries ago the Mayflower Pilgrims arrived first at Cape Cod before journeying onward to start their lives at Plymouth. While on the outer arm of the peninsula in December 1620 they ventured along the coastline to explore the lands we know today as Provincetown, Truro, Wellfleet and Eastham. While on the bay side of Wellfleet they happened upon a long tapering outer beach with an island off to the south. The Pilgrims noticed that along the beach were a number of Native Indians, known as the Pononakanit, carving blubber off some "blackfish," most likely pilot whales. These leviathans had either beached themselves in the shallows or else had been captured by the Pononakanit out in the bay. Some reports state that it was the Pilgrims themselves who named the island and the nearby land Billingsgate because the multitude of fish reminded them of a London fish market that went by that same name.

Settlement of the area began rather early, in 1644, by Pilgrims who had become disenchanted with Plymouth Colony. First known as Nauset, and later as the town of Eastham, the area of Billingsgate resided in the northern territory of the new settlement. Legend has it that when the land was purchased from the Indians the settlers asked, "Who owns the land to the north?" The Indians, not understanding the whole concept of land ownership, answered,

"No one owns the land." So the settlers quickly announced, "Then, we own it." That land today comprises the towns of Wellfleet, Truro and Provincetown.

It is believed that settlement of Billingsgate began on her islands, mainly Great Island, Griffins (also referred to as Griffith's) Island, Lieutenants Island and at Billingsgate Island.

The smallest of the four, Billingsgate Island was about a three quarters of a mile to a mile long and perhaps a quarter to a half-mile wide at its most extreme point. In the 1880 Cape Cod Atlas it appears triangular in shape and resting three miles out into the bay due west of Hatches Creek at the border of Eastham and Wellfleet.

By 1722 the settlement of Billingsgate was considering a separation from its parent town of Eastham. It would take over 40 years before permission was granted, which occurred in May 1763. By that time, the area had become as famous for its rich oyster beds as for its whaling and fishing fleets. So, those who decided such things changed the name of the new town from Billingsgate to Wellfleet, most likely a misspelling of Wallfleet, England, another town also known for its multitude of delectable oysters. Others claim that the new name was to recognize the Whale Fleet. In either case, spelling was not the strong suit of the locals.

Meanwhile, the little island out at the entrance to Wellfleet Harbor maintained the name Billingsgate, keeping alive the memory of the 15th-century London fish market of the Pilgrim's former English homeland.

As early as the 1730s there was a tryworks on the island harvesting whale oil. During the 1750s the island and nearby beaches of the point became the scene of a battle over who had the rights to use the land as a whaling station. Native Indians from nearby Eastham had made use of the island for years, yet the Europeans could clearly see the importance of an island so close to the Cape Cod Bay whaling grounds. Over the following years, though, the Indian population diminished for a number of reasons, among them plagues, and by the beginning of the 19th century there is mention in the Wellfleet town records of only one remaining Indian woman. Ownership of the island had therefore been resolved by attrition.

Over the course of the 19th century a small village community sprung up on the island consisting of over 30 houses, a store, a schoolhouse, the tryworks, a wharf and five whaling vessels as well as a fishing fleet. In 1822 a brick lighthouse and adjoining light keeper's dwelling were erected on the eastern shore of the island. This original lighthouse tower was about 40 feet above the waves and had eight lamps to cast its beam. According to historian Edward Rowe Snow in his book "The Lighthouses of New England," the ocean began to threaten the island toward the middle part of the century. As the Civil War approached, likewise did the waters of Cape Cod Bay around Billingsgate Light. A new red brick lighthouse was constructed on higher ground in 1858, yet the waves of the bay continued their assault on the island.



THE WELLFLEET HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Billingsgate Island before it disappeared.

Within twenty years much of the island was awash during extreme high tides. Homes were torn down and fer-

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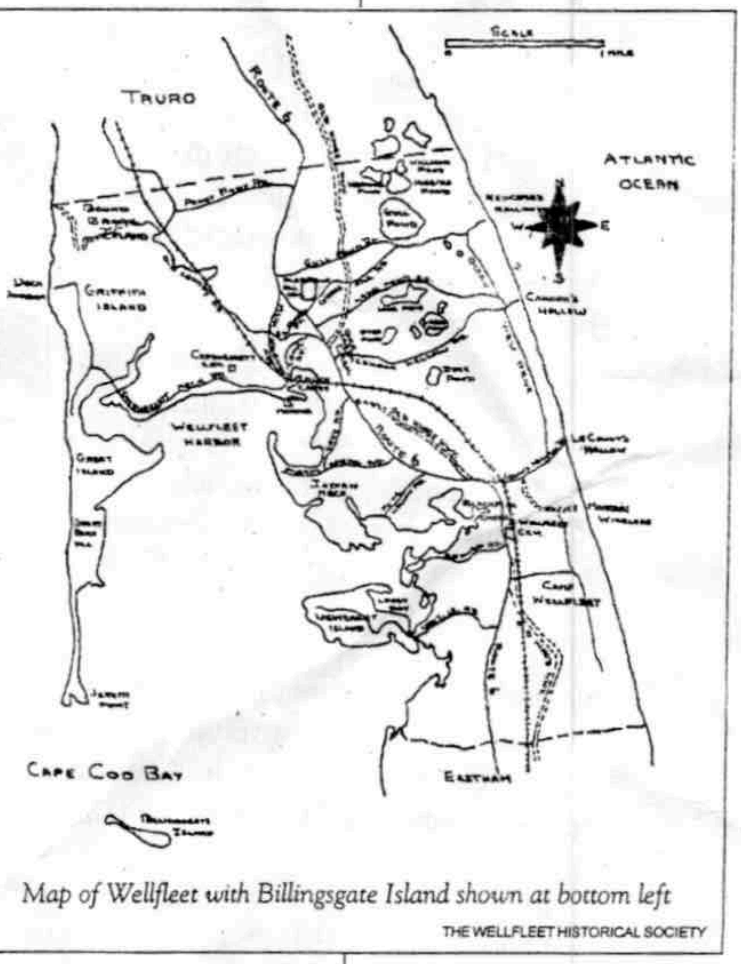
Billingsgate Island

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ried across the water to the mainland. Families vacated the island for higher and drier ground. By the 1870s only eight houses containing eight hardy families remained. Yet the tides kept coming and in the 1880s bulkhead walls were built around the lighthouse to protect her from the waves. After one high tide in 1876 the lighthouse keeper was found adrift on his boat in Cape Cod Bay, dead.

In 1882 the new keeper of the light reported that five feet of water covered the island during high tide, except for a 30-foot circle around the lighthouse. By the beginning of the 20th century even the hardiest families had vacated the disappearing island, leaving only the lighthouse keeper and the oyster bed watchmen to document the death throes of a once thriving community.

The year 1915 marked the end of Billingsgate Light. With the waters of Cape Cod Bay marching on the building like Hitler's army on Paris, the keeper evacuated and the light was removed from the tower. A temporary light was installed at the eastern end of what remained to warn mariners of the shoal that Billingsgate had become. By 1922, even that light was discontinued.



Map of Wellfleet with Billingsgate Island shown at bottom left

THE WELLFLEET HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Remarkably, an over 50-acre island that once supported vegetation, wildlife, a lighthouse and a busy fishing and whaling community had been wiped clear away by the relentless sea.

A Bostonian purchased the shrinking island, at that time no larger than 5 acres, and built a hunting lodge from the materials that comprised the abandoned buildings. Later Billingsgate became a bird sanctuary. By 1935 the island was no more. In Jeremiah Digges' 1937 classic book "Cape Cod Pilot" he reports: "Wellfleet has recently lost an island. The ocean, like an indecisive sculptor, putters around with Cape Cod, chipping off here and slapping on there, to suit its mood of the moment; and the recent disappearance of the island of Billingsgate is one of its most striking changes in the design."

For well over a century the sea had provided the residents of Billingsgate with their livelihood, and in the end the sea took it all away. A mighty fishing and whaling community was no match for the myriad of waves that one by one shaped and eventually devoured, foot by foot and acre by acre, an entire island. As that old-timer with pipe in mouth told me over twenty years ago, "Time and the tides ... they wait for no man." ■