WOOD ISLAND TODAY BEARS BUT LITTLE RESEMBLANCE TO PLACE FEW YEARS AGO

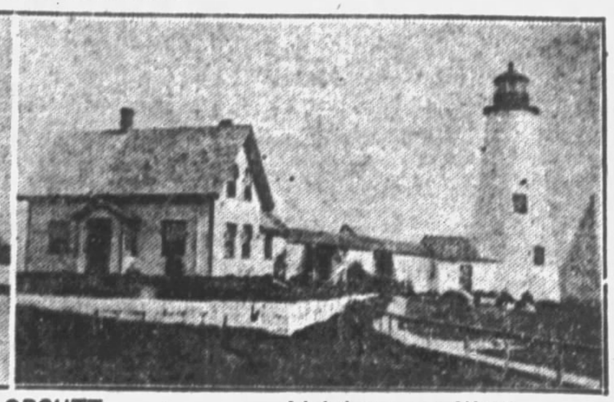
Robbed of Its Beautiful Trees by a Blight Which Raised Havoc on the Island. Interesting Legends and Stories Associated With Wood Island, One Time Called the Isle of Bacchus.



"Sailor" Rings the Lighthouse Bell



GEORGE H. ORCUTT
Who Saw Tragedy on Wood Island



Lighthouse on Wood Island

(By Chandler Briggs Allen)

Wood Island of today, save for the lighthouse and contour of its rugged shore line, bears little resemblance to the island of long ago. Even the last few years have made a great change, for we are told that a blight attacked the trees that once grew there and has wrought the change so painfully apparent to many eyes. Less than twenty years ago the island was covered thickly with dark evergreens that towered high above the surf breaking on the rocks below; now a few scattered pines only remain to offer pitiful testimony of the ravages of a hand more cruel than that of man.

When the island was discovered, who of the white race first climbed its rocky slopes is not known and can never be told. It is possible that the old Norse rovers may have dropped anchor in the bay. History says that Thorwald, a brother of Lief and who was killed by Indians in Boston Harbor in 1002 and is said by Danish records to have been buried on the hill where the State House now stands, visited the Maine coast. Thorstein and his wife, Gudrida, in 1005, and Thorfinn of Iceland, who married Gudrida after Thorstein's death, also left records which are said to offer strong evidence that the shores of New England were not unknown to them.

Sieur De Monts landed there in 1602 and christened it "Isle of Bacchus" because of the immense quantities of grapes that then grew there. The trees of the island were said by him to have been almost crushed by mammoth vines heavily laden with delicious grapes. Captain John Smith—of Pocahontas fame—Martin Pring, and others visited at about the same time.

Richard Vines, who passed the Winter of 1616-17 at the Pool, where he was stationed by Sir Ferdinando Gorges to observe the winter climate, was unquestionably another early visitor.

By a long and exhaustive search of early colonial records one may glean more or less knowledge of old Wood Island. Much that is learned is not of interest to the average reader and much that is mentioned is rather vague.

It was a favorite resort for the Sokoki fishermen previous to and for some time after the coming of the white men. From their summer villages or the islands in the river they paddled down the Saco and across the bay to catch and dry their winter supply of fish, and probably the moccasined feet of the great sachem Squando have pressed almost every square foot of its wooded height.

Legends of the island are not lacking. One is that of two warriors, both in love with the same Indian maiden. She refused to name the one of her choice, saying she would wed the bravest. The legend is that they agreed to meet on the island and fight to the death with knives, the survivor to claim his bride. In some way the girl learned of their proposed duel and that it was to take place at sunrise a certain morning. Unknown to either she paddled across the bay in her canoe and secreted herself where she could see the combat, wishing to satisfy herself by her own observation that the survivor was really fearless and skillful in battle.

Crouching in her covert she saw the warriors land in the gray dawn before the sun peeked over the ocean. As they stood, side by side, awaiting the signal to be flashed by the rising sun, one stepped forward and faced the east, his arms extended. He was invoking the aid of his Great Spirit and according to Indian ethics was immune from any attack while so occupied. To her surprise and horror the other drew his knife and stabbed him through his back.

The assassin tarried only long enough to bury his victim before returning to the village, but the girl lingered in hiding on the island all day. Under cover of night she went ashore and next day confronted the warrior with evidence of his crime. On the same place that he had killed his rival he was stabbed to death by a chieftain and his body was thrown into the sea.

There is another; one of pirates and buried treasure. One morning, during the period that piracy thrived on the Spanish Main and along the coast, a boat containing two black-bearded, strangely attired men came ashore. There had been a heavy storm the day and night before and it was supposed they were survivors of a ship that went down. They stayed close to their boat all day, saying but little and that in a strange tongue. Food and drink was given them, which they accepted without thanks and ate and drank greedily. That night watchers saw them digging at the foot of a tree. Loud words were heard when they brought a box from the boat and one was seen to strike the other with his cutlass. Picking up the box he retreated to the boat and was never again heard of. It was thought that the box seen contained treasure and that there had been other boxes buried before they quarreled. Those who had ventured near the boat said they saw several small boxes and those who pursued the fleeing murderer said the boat contained but one when he put off. But the finest story about Wood Island is a true one and one of recent years. It is a story of a dog who was known to hundreds of seafaring men and yachtsmen.

The story is told by Mr. George Orcutt, now a resident of Biddeford Pool. His father, Thomas Orcutt, was for nineteen years keeper of Wood Island Light. "Sailor" was a Scotch Collie with an intelligence little short of human. When coasting skippers hailed the light with horn or voice Sailor always returned the salute by ringing the bell. The whistle of the Boston-Portland boats was invariably followed by Sailor's bell notes. Yachtsmen heard of him and bore in close to blow their whistles or sound their horns and watch Sailor tugging at the rope.

He knew the sound of every whistle and was particularly fond of hearing certain yachts that visited the coast each year and of the whistle of the tug-boat "Joe Baker," commanded by the late Captain Harrison Goldthwaite.

One night Captain Goldthwaite entered the harbor late after towing a vessel to Portland. Off the island he sounded his customary three whistles. Sailor was asleep in the house but at the sound he leaped up and rushed to the door. Every one but the lighthouse tender was in bed and the door was closed.

Sailor didn't hesitate. The signal of his friend Captain Goldthwaite had simply got to be answered. He dashed across the room and out of the window, taking sash and glass in his flight, and a moment later Captain Goldthwaite had audible assurance that if others slept Sailor did not.

Another time Mr. Orcutt send him to ring the bell. Sailor went out and returned. The bell had not sounded. He was sent again and again returned without ringing. The third time Mr. Orcutt sent him, saying if he did not ring it he should be obliged to scold him. This time Sailor came back bringing the broken bell rope and laying it at his master's feet.

In the parlor of Mr. George Orcutt's pleasant home at the Pool is a large picture of Sailor ringing the bell. If good old Jeremy Taylor was right—and lots of people think he was—Sailor is sojourning on a fairer Isle than his old home, for he passed away at the age of seven, known by hundreds and loved by all.

Mr. Orcutt remembers well the tragedy once enacted on Wood Island when Howard Hobbs shot Frederick Milliken. Hobbs, a man of about 40, had returned from Saco. He and Milliken had some words and Hobbs went to his house and got his rifle. Mr. Orcutt was just starting to row to the Pool when Hobbs came down to the boat and spoke to him. "Give me a shot?" was Hobbs' joking inquiry.

"No I guess not today," Mr. Orcutt informed him as he pushed off his dory.

Mr. Hobbs went up to Milliken's house and Mr. Milliken stepped to the door and asked a question. In some way the rifle was discharged and Mr. Milliken fell. Mr. Hobbs did not raise the rifle to his shoulder or throw it forward as though he intended to shoot. Mr. Orcutt's theory is—and it is reasonable and logical—that the discharge was accidental. Hobbs carried Milliken into the house and laid him on the bed and then ran to call Mr. Thomas Orcutt at the lighthouse. He remained close to Mr. Milliken's side, inquiring frequently how he was and seemed greatly agitated and depressed over the affair.

A Mr. Moses who accompanied Mr. Hobbs home from Saco rowed across and phoned for a doctor. Mr. George Hobbs rowed the doctor across when he arrived. Meanwhile Mr. Milliken had ceased to breathe. Mr. Hobbs, when Mr. Thomas Orcutt informed him of the death, walked dejectedly to his home and committed suicide. It was probably an accident, sad and tragic, and Mr. Hobbs' mind gave way temporarily under strain of grief and remorse.

Wood Island contains 48 acres of which the U. S. government owns an eight-acre reservation on which the lighthouse stands.

Mrs. Webber, widow of the late William Webber owns the remainder. Few men in York county have left more friends than this genial and hospitable gentleman who passed away a few years ago.

It is said the ill-fated Portland was last sighted from Wood Island as she steamed past in that blinding November storm of '98 on her way to a mysterious end.

Truth and legend, tragedy and romance seem to meet in this old island at the mouth of the Saco. Perhaps it is true of nearly all the island off the Maine coast. Perhaps some day some one will write a volume about the islands of Maine. If he is a historian his work will be somewhat briefer than it will be if he wanders into legendary research and fiction.

HIS FOOLISHNESS

"Confound that fellow, Pumpelly!" snarled Gideon Gadgrind. "I'll never take him motoring again. This afternoon I took him for a spin in my new Riproarer, and he actually said that as near as he could gather there were several other cars almost as good as mine!"

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