

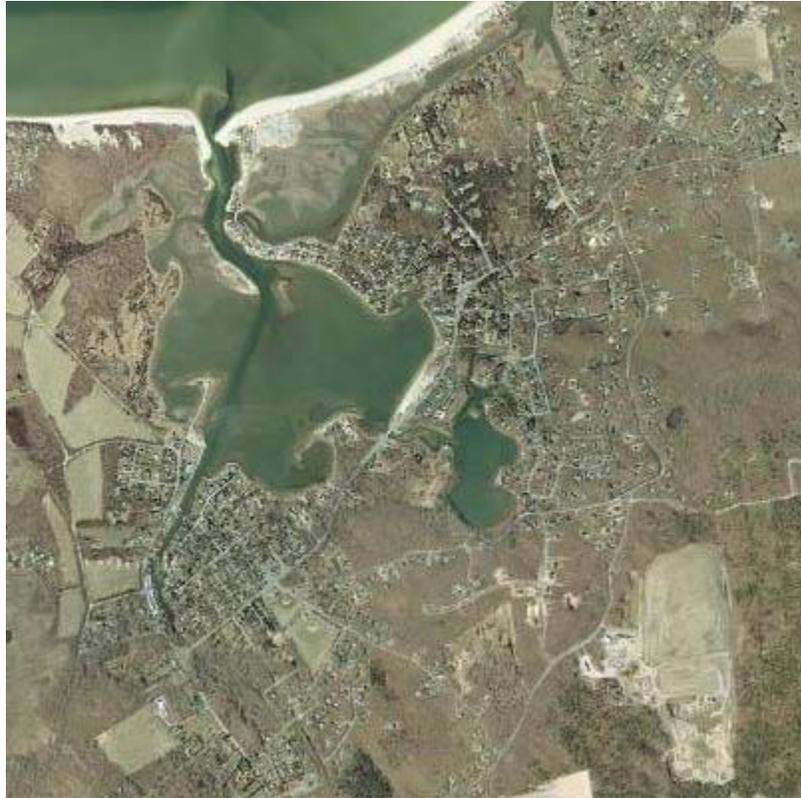
North Sea: The First Step

By Mary Cummings

There is no documentary evidence confirming that the Mayflower Pilgrims who first stepped ashore in the New World in 1620 did so on the granite boulder known as Plymouth Rock. Yet, in the popular imagination, the rock will ever be known as the place where it all began.

Likewise, no period document records the words of the travel-weary woman who is supposed to have exclaimed, "For conscience sake, we are on dry land once more," as she stepped ashore in 1640 on a small point of land jutting out into North Sea Harbor. And we know for a fact that the boulder, which now marks the spot known as Conscience Point, wasn't there.

It was put there in 1910 by the Colonial Society of Southampton which had just purchased the property and wanted to mark the landing place of Southampton's first settlers. A bronze plaque, attached to the boulder, bears this inscription: "Near this spot in June 1640 landed colonists from Lynn, Massachusetts who founded Southampton, the First English Settlement in New York State."



North Sea Harbor 2007 *Image courtesy of Google Maps*

So it was that the opening chapter of Southampton's history began at North Sea, though it must be acknowledged that North Sea was not in fact the first choice of the small band of Puritans who sailed into Peconic Bay in Captain Howe's sloop. Nor did they remain there after debarking, though the little harbor long continued to serve as their port. Instead, they are believed to have followed the route of the Indian trail that has become North Sea Road, proceeding southward to make their settlement at Olde Towne, close to the ocean and less than a mile east of Southampton's present Main Street.

Who Were They?

In the words of no less an authority than James Truslow Adams, the heavyweight historian whose 1918 *History of Southampton* remains the standard text on the subject, "Just who the very first arrivals were, or their number, we do not know, but all the evidence points to there having been between one and two hundred people here before the New Year." What is known is that they came from Lynn, Massachusetts, a coastal settlement north of Boston founded in 1629. Originally from England, they were among the wave of some 50,000 immigrants who had crossed the ocean to establish colonies along the eastern seaboard of America and in the Caribbean in the early 1600s. Many were Puritans fleeing the religious oppression of the British ruling class and looking for good farmland as their own countryside filled up.



North Sea Meadow *Collection of the Southampton Historical Museum*

for the purpose of founding a new settlement and hired a boat to take them there, were motivated partly by a desire to find new farmland and partly by their dissatisfaction with the level of self-determination and religious freedom prevailing in Lynn.

Though it did not specify the site of the new settlement, it defined the agreement with the captain of the "vessel," which was to make regular sailings to the settlement after leaving them at the site (three trips annually for two years between Lynn and Southampton). It also outlined plans for land distribution and taxation in the new settlement and guaranteed self-government as well as religious and political freedom for its members.

Concerning their choice of destination, Adams wrote that "Long Island had evidently already been determined upon, for only a few weeks later, April 17, 1640, the company secured a deed from James Farrett, Attorney for the Earl of Stirling (the Grantee of Long Island) for 'eight miles square of land,' they being allowed to make their 'choyce to sitt downe upon as best suiteth them.'" Farrett, who has been described as "something of an old fashion real estate agent," represented the Earl of Stirling on whom King Charles I had bestowed Long Island as a gift. The document, known as "James Farrett's Patent," while not naming a Long Island location, did include a requirement that they buy the land from the Indians.

Thus, did the little band set sail in the sloop captained by one Daniel Howe, who took them around Cape Cod and made landfall not initially in Southampton but nearly 80 miles west at

By the end of the 1630s, however, there were some 3,000 people living in Lynn and it, too, was becoming crowded. A surviving document (the oldest preserved by Southampton Town) called "The Disposall of the Vessel," signed on March 10, 1640, indicates that the Massachusetts men who had formed a company

Schout's Bay in Dutch-controlled territory. Some have speculated that the choice of destination was Farrett's and that he was hoping to further the cause of the English with a deliberate incursion into territory claimed by the Dutch.

If so, he miscalculated. The settlers were arrested by the Dutch, imprisoned in New York (New Amsterdam at the time) and freed only on condition that they leave immediately. An account of the trial is in the archives of the State of New York in Albany and it reveals some details about Southampton's founders that are found nowhere else, including their English origins in Menkinshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire and their relative youth (the average age was 25). Also on record is the date of their departure from Schout's Bay: May 19, 1640.

From there they are said to have sailed to New Haven, where they picked up those members of the company who had not been part of the initial, ill-fated foray, along with a new deed, dated June 12, from Lord Stirling's agent, James Farrett, which granted them "all those lands lying and being bounded between Peaconeck and the easternmost point of Long Island with the whole breadth



Fish Cove Inn *Collection of the Southampton Historical Museum*

of the said island from sea to sea" (There were apparently exceptions: Gardiner's Island, which was already owned by Lyon Gardiner; and Robins and Shelter Islands, which Farrett had claimed for himself). Then they were off again, headed this time for North Sea.

While the actual date of their landing remains uncertain, the date on the deed has been indelibly etched in the popular conscience as Founder's Day and has been celebrated as such over the years - with varying degrees of fanfare. Yet another deed, dated July 7, was less expansive. It chopped off the easternmost area (roughly what became East Hampton Town) and set the boundaries of what we now know as Southampton Town, limiting the grant to land from Canoe Place (now the Shinnecock Canal) eastward, but not including East Hampton.

Arrival

The details of their arrival are not on record but the traditional account - that Captain Howe dropped anchor outside the harbor in the shadow of the landmark sand dune known as Homes Hill, and a smaller boat was used to reach land, seems reasonable. It is also easy to believe that the settlers were greeted by Indians since the Shinnecocks are known to have had a summer encampment nearby. Noting that the Sachem of the Shinnecocks lived in the area, Adams speculated that arrangements for the purchase of the land were made immediately, or at least permission to settle received, leaving definite terms to be arranged later.

Over the next 10 years North Sea continued as an important port. It was the place where new settlers debarked before traveling on, the harbor where boats bringing news and supplies made landfall. Meanwhile, the decade saw numerous additions to the number of settlers in Southampton, many from Lynn and a good number who had decided to follow their pastor, the Reverend Robert Fordham, from Hempstead when he left that settlement to become Southampton's second minister. (The settlement's first, Abraham Pierson, was a man of stern theology whose inflexibility had put him at odds with his flock, eventually precipitating his removal to New Haven, where rigidity reigned).



Breaking Ice *Collection of the Southampton Historical Museum*

Among those who had followed Fordham from Hempstead was John Ogden, who, in 1650, was given permission by the town to found a 321-acre settlement at North Sea, "all the meadow betwixt the brook by the Sachem's house and Hogneck Spring.' (The Sachem's house, mentioned in old records, was at the head of the harbor). Cow Neck and Jefferies Neck were granted to "Mr. Ogden and his company" under certain conditions, including the provision that Ogden place six other families in the settlement.

Adams notes that there had been a mill on the stream from earliest times and "as there were more or less frequent arrivals of boats from other ports, there may have been a few dwellings prior to 1650, but it was in that year that the real settlement took place." In a letter written at the time by Josias Stanborough, Adams finds evidence that the site was chosen as a logical area of expansion as well as for its advantages as a port: Southampton will be too strait [crowded] for Mr. Fordham's friends," writes Stanborough, "Easthampton is full, and Mr. Ogden begins a towne on or north side for trade..."

So it was that the original landing place of the first settlers, which had remained their port, acquired residents and an increasingly lively port life. It remained the most important port for the town for many years after that, until it was eclipsed by Sag Harbor. According to Adams, not long after Ogden and the other families settled in, there were two warehouses in North Sea, owned by William Barker and Joseph Fordham, respectively. And, "from 1683 to 1775, North Sea Harbor was full of pinks, snows and schooners," observed one local historian, writing on the occasion of Southampton's 325th anniversary, who noted that the vessels carried whale oil to Boston and London, cordwood to New York and traded in rum and horses in Barbados.

One of North Sea's most notorious early residents was Captain John Scott, an entrepreneur or, as East Hampton historian Sherrill Foster prefers to describe him, "a wheeler and dealer."

Wherever, he went, Scott left a trail of the swindled and cheated. He even traveled to London, where he tried to con King Charles II. Actually, Scott began life in England, but was banished for bad behavior as a youth, landing in Salem where he became a bound boy to a Quaker family. In 1654, he went to sea, became a buccaneer, accumulated a fortune and began acquiring huge tracts of land, including considerable acreage in North Sea.

North Sea, at the time, was arguably something of a wheeler-dealer's paradise with land ripe for acquisition and a port that promised excellent opportunities for trade. Also on site and available was Deborah Raynor, the granddaughter of wealthy Thurston Raynor, whom Scott wooed and wed in 1658. While she raised their two children on their "manor" at North Sea, the captain himself was rarely at home. He was too busy selling land he didn't own, appropriating land owned by others, making dubious deals and promoting himself as president of Long Island.

When at last he was thrown in jail in Hartford, Deborah visited with a rope and helped him escape, after which he took off for Barbados, leaving her and their children to soldier on in North Sea. In 1681, having lived long without him, Deborah obtained a divorce and married Charles Sturme; a North Sea man of reliable rectitude who died 10 years later, freeing Deborah to make the move to Barbados, where she rejoined her first husband.

Certainly John Scott was not typical of North Sea's early residents, who were by and large solid citizens. Markers at the North Sea Cemetery, at the intersection of North Sea Road and Millstone Brook Road, bear the names of some of the community's founding families - Jennings, White, Terry and others. Of particular interest is the large stone marking the grave of Emma Rose Elliston. Daughter of Captain Jetur R. Rose, a pillar of the North Sea community who prospered, like many another on eastern Long Island during boom times, in the whaling industry, she was born on the Hawaiian island of Oahu on a whaling voyage. Captain Rose, who traveled the world in pursuit of whales when whale oil, a necessity for lamps and lubrication, was worth its weight in gold, had taken his wife with him and little Emma spent her first two years at sea.

At about the same time that the whaling industry declined because of new alternatives for illumination and the increasing scarcity of whales, North Sea was beginning to be appreciated for its rural beauty and recreational qualities. Parrish Road, a simple dirt road laid out by Southampton's benefactor Samuel Parrish amidst bucolic beauty, was a favorite drive by horse and buggy with its views of Big Fresh Pond under an oak forest canopy. Summer camps began to spring up on the shores of Big Fresh and Little Fresh Ponds and in 1915, the North Sea Beach Colony was founded.

These were the years when the North Sea Bathing Beach was one of the most popular places to swim and congregate, with its floats, bathhouses and handsome facilities. For years, people from surrounding areas who preferred its calm waters to the ocean surf flocked to the pavilion, which was torn down early in the 1940s.

In her history prepared for the North Sea Citizen's Advisory Committee in 1995, Alice Guldi Martin recalls that during the 1920s and 1930s, "Homes Hill had a carnival atmosphere. A ski slide was built atop the dune. The skier slid down a smooth wood chute onto the slope of the dune. The '38 hurricane destroyed the chute and ended this sport."

If Captain John Scott was North Sea's most colorful resident, Colonel H.H. Rogers, heir to a Standard Oil fortune, though no outlaw, was almost as fascinating. In the 1920s, he built the "Port of Missing Men" at Cow Neck where he gathered his wealthy buddies for hunting parties and stag parties. (He had another, more family oriented residence on the ocean in Southampton). He moved two of the older homes in the area, including the John Scott house, built in 1661, to his estate and began to acquire surrounding property. Eventually he took possession of Homes Hill, restoring it to its natural state.

In the 1930s, an elegant clientèle with a thirst for rusticity was drawn to North Sea by the Fish Cove Inn and Cottages. A brochure aimed at the tasteful traveler promised to furnish the vacationist with "an opportunity to enjoy to the utmost the pleasure to be derived from a stay at a sea shore resort without the usual prohibitive rates - complete comfort in the privacy of separate and individual quarters - with hotel service - no cares of housekeeping or preparing meals - in the heart of the playground of Long Island - the ideal vacation." There was a main lodge and 30 cabins of one, two and three bedrooms. Private baths and maid service were part of the package.

Several decades later the lakeside resort was a struggling weekend conference center which served briefly as the site of a last-gasp commune of sorts, an exuberant enterprise of the early 1980s that billed itself as "a growth community" and succeeded to the point of creating a restaurant and a wholesale, cooperative market before it was overtaken by changing times and operational obstacles. For years after that the derelict buildings stood unused as battles were waged over the use of the land.

North Sea has lost some of those battles in the war to preserve the best of its past, but its unaffected charm and natural beauty remain, and its place in the history of Southampton is secure for as long as Conscience Point remains part of the landscape.

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