

# Great Whaleboat Island

**By Samuella Etnier**

*(From a report prepared to be given orally in the mid 1970's. We thank her son, David Etnier, for permission to use this report.)*

Great Whaleboat Island lies ½ mile off the westerly shore of Harpswell Neck in Casco Bay. It is a large island, 125 acres more or less, one and a half miles long, narrow, and heavily wooded at both ends. The middle section is barren save for scrub growth. This configuration, plus the high elevation at both ends, is said to resemble a whaleboat, the dories launched by whaling ships when a whale was sighted, and gave the island its name. The shores are bold with deep water just a few feet off, and are indented with several small coves which have made Whaleboat a popular picnic spot for Casco Bay boating parties for the last 70 years.

The island is wild. The stands of spruce and occasional birch on each end are impenetrable, and the center is a thicket of raspberry bushes, blackberry, gooseberry and bay. It is uninhabited save for the picnickers and - in the fall - hunters who anchor at one end of the island, row ashore, and drive deer out into the open section. Eider duck nest here, and osprey, and in July the air is heavy with the scent of wild rugosa roses.

It was not always this way. If you walk across the center of the island, you come across stone walls, an old dug well, weathered wooden fence posts, and the crumbling remains of a foundation. People lived on Whaleboat at one time; who, and where, and when, and why are what I am attempting to determine. The original island people were, of course, Indians. There is an Indian shell mound on this island and the earliest white inhabitants often moved to islands to escape Indian raids on the mainland, but we are dealing primarily with the 19th and 20th centuries, and with Whaleboat Island.

Four sources have been helpful in uncovering information about the early inhabitants of the island; Maine history books, the Cumberland County Register of Deeds, annual Reports of the Town of Harpswell, and the people now living who remember when there were houses on the island.

The history tells nothing of life on the island; they do identify it as such. Williamson in 1832 locates both Great and Little. Whaleboat islands "two miles east of the Northeast end of Great Gebeab (Chebeague)" and the Wheelers in 1878 describe and. locate Whaleboat and mention it as part of the town of Harpswell. The value of these books lies in the picture they give of the political and social background of the area. The Todds, who used Wheeler as a source, point out that "it was on September 22, 1680 that the region called Westcustago was incorporated as a plantation and called North Yarmouth. In 1731, North Yarmouth limits were determined by order of the general court. In 1733, North Yarmouth Plantation was incorporated as a town. A Committee was appointed two years later to run town lines. These lines then included what is now the Town of Harpswell." It must have been around that time Whaleboat Island was divided into 13 rights as referred to in later deeds.

The rules of the time required church attendance, and since the trip across the water from Harpswell to North Yarmouth where the church was located was rough going in winter, the residents of Harpswell petitioned, in 1740, the General Court to be annexed to Brunswick instead of North Yarmouth. The petition was granted, and then inexplicably rescinded by Harpswell the next year. Despite further petitions by both Harpswell and Brunswick, there the matter rested until 1758 when Harpswell was incorporated as a town. Whaleboat is not included in the list of islands belonging to the new town, however, and is not so described in a property deed until 1803.

The property deeds on file at the Cumberland County Courthouse date back to the middle of the 18th century and give us a clearer picture of the owners and inhabitants of the island. I have photocopies of 32 such deeds. A Mitchell family of North Yarmouth were apparently large landholders and deeds dated 1758 and 1761 refer to their acquisition of lots in the "division of Islands" which may be part of Whaleboat Island. The first mention of the island appears in a deed dated "this tenth day of May in the fourteenth year of his majesty's reign, Annoque Domini 1774" in which Jacob Mitchell "in consideration of love and good will and also in the further consideration of 40 shillings lawfull money" sells to his son David 3/13 plus 1/6 of 1/13 of Great Whaleboat island which is part of the township of North Yarmouth at the time. The rest of the island is already owned by David Mitchell and his brother Jonathan.

In 1788, the Mitchells sold the island to Jacob Blake whose family owned it and lived on it until 1861. During this period, the Blakes sold portions of the island to Daniel Randall. 1812 (31 acres for \$180), to Norton Stover in the same year (½ the island for \$300...Stover sold his property back to Susannah Blake in 1817 for \$117.93), to Phineas Webber in 1821 (41 acres for \$280), and a half an acre to John Pinkham in 1836 for \$25. (Pinkham sold this to Robert Blake 12 years later for \$10). Norton Stover had acquired the Daniel Randall property and sold it to Benjamin Blake for \$400 in 1847.

In 1855, the Webber family started buying the rest of the island, in addition to the 41 acres owned by Phineas Webber, from the surviving Blakes. In 1878, Paul Merryman of Harpswell started buying lots on whaleboat from the Webbers, and in 1889 he owned it all for a total, investment of \$1085. Merryman did not keep his island for long; in 1895: he sold the whole thing."125 acres and the buildings thereon" to Charlotte Duffet of Portland for 91 and other valuable considerations (no more mention is made of actual fees paid), retaining the right of pasturage for the 1895 season.

Ten years later, Duffet sold the land and buildings to Rufus Kilgore of Melrose, Mass.; he in turn passed it on to John Farwell of Boston in 1897. In 1940 Perley Hackett, Harpswell selectman, and his son David acquired the island from Farwell's executors, sold it to John Hanna in 1951 who sold it to Stephen and Samuella Etnier in 1954. The island currently belongs to the Etniers and their two sons.

The language of the deeds give some idea of the tenancies. Reference is made to Jeremiah Blake's house, to the Samuel Blake homestead, to John Pinkham's ½ acre which is bounded by Samuel Blake's field, runs along a stone wall to the house thence to a clump of blue flag, maintenance of part of the fence to be Pinkham's responsibility, "to house and buildings owned by Simeon Webber. Reference to buildings on the island appears in deeds dating to 1897.

The early Harpswell Town-Reports deal with Whaleboat Island only from an educational point of view. The Town was divided into school districts, and an agent was appointed to oversee the school in his district and report on it to the superintendent. According to Alexander, Samuel Blake was agent for Whaleboat in 1822. The bound Town Reports start in 1882, and refer to Emma Mansfield of Cumberland as teacher of the school on Whaleboat Island. It is not yet known whether there actually was a schoolhouse, or the small number of children were taught in a home. The average wage of a female teacher at that time was \$3.54 per week exclusive of board, and six children attended the first 9 week session.

The reports on the Whaleboat island school are often only that bad weather prevented the agent from visiting it - reports from the other districts go into considerable detail as to the proficiency of the teacher, the quality of the discipline, the students' and parent's attitudes, and the academic emphases of the time.

Charles Bibber was living on the island in the 1880s and was agent for the school. Fannie Bibber was the teacher (nepotism?) in 1884 and received \$8 a month for five students. The 1885 report tells that "two terms of school have been taught, on "whaleboat island by Gertie Grady, and though the teacher was only fourteen years of age, she performed good work". Miss Grady was paid \$3 and taught four students. The agent reported in 1887 that Mary Tarbox was teacher for the spring term, "a good teacher and we think taught a very satisfactory school" to four students. Edith Webber taught the winter term. In 1889 "on the recommendation of the State Superintendent, a part of the money apportioned to the children of Charles Bibber while on Whaleboat Island is now being used for their instruction". Alice Randall is the teacher.

Beginning at the turn of the century, these island were transported to the Basin Point School on Harpswell Neck, and, when that school closed for lack of attendance, they went to the Ash Point School. In 1900, the report of the Superintendent of Schools included the directive that "the superintendent, be authorized to look after the transportation or board of the scholars on Whaleboat." Scott and Pennell Stover, C. N.- Bibber E. H.. Moody, E. G. Pinkham, E. G. Bailey were listed as beneficiaries of this system for fees ranging from \$25 to \$40. Money was paid for transportation and/or board of Arthur, George and Willie Hush up until 1905.

It would appear from these reports that school was kept on the island-for four or five children up until 1890, that the sessions were sporadic, and the teacher turnover considerable. Nevertheless, the town clearly felt a responsibility for the education of these youngsters.

Some oral history has been obtained from residents of the area who are old enough to remember when the island was inhabited. Iva Noble, now of Brunswick, age 90 reports two farms on Whaleboat and a Blake grave in the center of the island surrounded by a stone wall. Shubael Merriman does not go back that far, but does recall cattle being pastured on the barren section during the summer months and the ensuing problems in rounding them up in the fall. Sheep belonging to Henry Sandelin were pastured in the same place in the 1950s.

Everett Gatchell, age 84, identifies four different families as having lived on Whaleboat island: the Webbers, the Charles Bibbers, the Chadwicks, and the Rushes. The Webbers we know of from the deeds, and Mr. Gatchell believes there are two Webber graves on the island. Charles Bibber, originally from the Isle of Guernsey according to Theresa Bibber, age 72, appears in the Town reports. He lived on Flag Island, Chebegaue and on Whaleboat when his children were small, and finally moved to Peter Cove on the Neck where Mrs. Bibber now vacations. The Chadwicks are mentioned nowhere else, but the Rushes .... were known to be the last inhabitants.. George Rush of Brunswick, age 84, remembers living on the island as a child with pleasure. They lived off the sea, clamming and lobstering in sailboats and dories, The children were rowed across to the Neck in a 15' dory to attend school occasionally having to spend the night ashore if the weather was bad. The Rushes were probably squatters, and Mrs. Noble believes that raiding other peoples lobster traps made them unpopular and brought on the burning of this last remaining house about 1906.

There has been no building on Whaleboat since then. The island has reverted to wilderness. In 1973.a conservation easement on the southern half was granted to the Maine Department of Parks and Recreation that ensures that this property will remain undeveloped and forever wild. A similar easement, possibly allowing for the future construction of two houses, is under consideration for the northern end. (see view. south from the northern end slide #7). So the island is protected 'from the potential ravages of the twentieth century developers and oil refineries, but the search for its history continues. There are still unanswered questions;

- When and why was Whaleboat divided into 13 rights by the North Yarmouth Plantation?
- Who were the Chadwicks, and did they and Charles Bibber ever own property?
- Where were the houses located and what did they look like? How did the Blakes, Webber's etc. live- did they do business on the mainland?
- How many houses were there on the island at the most- what happened to them?

I visualize this as a continuing research problem. -new sources are still appearing - and hope ultimately to answer the questions about the early inhabitants of Whaleboat Island and to complete its history.

#### SOURCES. CONSULTED

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