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The story of Orr's Island, Maine

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THE
STORY OF ORR'S ISLAND
MAINE



THE STORY OF ORR'S ISLAND MAINE

BY
ANNIE HAVEN THWING

AUTHOR OF

"The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston,"
"A Chronological Chart of the Principal Men and Events of the World's
History," "A List of Books for Boys and Girls," etc.



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by

ANNIE HAVEN THWING

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ROOMING
ALBION
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IN ROOMS

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To My Old Friends

WHOM I REMEMBER WITH PLEASURE AND
TO WHOM I AM INDEBTED FOR
MANY HAPPY DAYS

On Orr's Island

AUTHORITIES

History of Maine, by Abbott and Elwell

Maine Historical Society Publications and Collections

History of Brunswick, by Wheeler

Boston Town Records

Probate Records in Portland and Alfred, Maine

THE STORY OF ORR'S ISLAND MAINE

Many years ago, when I was happy to be able to pass the summers on Orr's Island, it interested me to try to learn something of its history and of the life of the inhabitants. Therefore I collected a number of facts from public records, and talking with the older people on the island gave me many interesting details. The following pages, though by no means all that I gleaned, contain what is thought may interest those now living on the island either as permanent residents or as summer visitors.

To those who have passed one or more summers on Orr's Island, and who love and appreciate the beauties of nature, there is no need of an introduction to its many attractions, and they may be interested in its early history. They have no doubt enjoyed the beautiful walks through the pine woods or by the rocky shore, or sat on the

rocks with the pines around them, watching, with a never-ending source of interest, the sea which is ever changing in color and motion, and with a view of the open ocean only broken by the few islands in the bay. Though not exempt from sea fogs, they are rare and not as dense as is felt farther down the coast.

They have delighted in the charm of the picturesque village; heard the sound of the bells coming across the bay from the old church in Harpswell, seen the Mt. Washington range on clear days, and better than all, have felt the full benefit of the bracing and invigorating air. Though the south coast has its votaries, it has often been said that there is no air more health-giving than that on the coast of Maine.

Though not a fashionable resort, there are plenty of recreations for active natures. Fishing—either deep sea with one of the fishermen, or from the rocks where, on the incoming tide, perch may be caught. Bathing—for those who like a plunge in cold water. Excursions in motor boats to the various islands, or picnics to more distant places by autos. And clam bakes are always a great resource.

Fishing has been the principal industry of the people, though there are some farmers; and all



THE SHORE ON THE EAST SIDE



THE SHORE AND ISLANDS IN BAY

inherit the sturdy, honest character borne by their forbears. They are quiet and industrious, the fishermen going out at early dawn to haul in their nets or to get the fish which they find in their traps set the day before. After the coming of the summer visitors, they were interesting companions when taking people out for a row, or later in motor boats. Of late years there has been a great improvement in the appearance of the island. Spring cleaning goes on with a will. Houses are freshly painted, and gardens planted with vegetables and flowers and kept in good order. Though one might think that in the cove where the boats come in and are unloaded there would be some confusion, here also they are as careful of appearances as around their homes.

In the early days there was one Union church, but after a time the Methodists built a church of their own, and for a time both Baptists and Methodists flourished, owing their existence in a measure to the summer visitors who helped to support them. The Episcopal church was built comparatively recently, and is open only for a few weeks in summer. Soon the Baptists were obliged to close their weekly services, but the Methodists still live.

The details of the early years of the Library can be read in the First Report, 1906. Therefore only an outline will here be given. It was proposed in the summer of 1899, when money was raised for the purpose; and in January, 1900, a small room was provided, which was opened for the delivery of books once a week. It began with three hundred volumes, many of which were donated. For the next few years, some one of the island residents gave out books once a week throughout the year and twice a week in summer. A few years later, the trustees thought that the demand justified them in buying a lot of land and putting up the present building. This was dedicated June 26, 1905, two of the professors from Bowdoin College coming over for the purpose. The building was well filled by those interested, and Jupiter Pluvius came down in torrents to give us his blessing. The Library was duly incorporated and well organized with a board of trustees, committees, visitors, etc.

The trustees decided to keep the Library open all day and every day throughout the year, and for this purpose kind friends, many of whom had no especial interest in the island, contributed to pay for the service of a trained Librarian. For two years this was done, and one of the island

residents was trained to succeed; and the experiment of keeping a country Library open throughout the year was deemed by the trustees well worth the money. Besides providing good reading matter for grown-ups as well as the children, it was found that it was well worth the while to provide the children with a place where they could find amusement on rainy days as well as when the school was not in session. Here the story of the Library must be left for those now interested in its welfare to fill out.

The first summer resident was Mr. George Sumner, but gradually others found out its attractions, until now it has become full of summer visitors. These mostly congregate on the main road, but there are a few cottages to be let on the shore, and there is a long stretch of woodland and shore lots waiting for those who prefer an open view of the ocean, and who like to be near the water's edge.

Orr's Island is part of the town of Harpswell, which extends over three islands, besides a long stretch of mainland. It lies at the end of Casco Bay, and is reached via Portland, by boat, a very beautiful sail of about two hours; or via Brunswick by auto, crossing the two bridges connecting Great Island and Orr's Island with the mainland,

also as beautiful a ride as the sail. The distance is about twelve miles.

"The underlying rock of this region is gneiss, distinguished from granite by its stratification, though it has the minerals, mica, quartz, and felspar. The layers or strata have the direction northwest and southeast. These formed by action of former glaciers."

"The Pearl of Orr's Island," written by Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, has done much towards making the island famous. Mrs. Stowe was born in Connecticut in 1812, the sister of Henry Ward Beecher, the famous preacher. She married Calvin Ellis Stowe, a theological writer, who was a professor in Bowdoin College, Brunswick, and in Andover. While living in Brunswick, Mrs. Stowe visited Orr's Island, and other towns in the neighborhood, and in her story she has shown her knowledge of the various localities. It was ten years before she actually published what she had been thinking over. When in Andover, in 1852, she wrote that she must go again to the island to see her "fish father" as she called him, and get more information from him. The book was not published until 1862. Old Jonas, to whom she refers, was no doubt one of the characters which she portrays, but there are several cottages

which have been pointed out as the one in which she was actually entertained at luncheon. The story is purely fictitious and one of her own imagination, but some of the incidents may well have been real. She apparently knew the island well, and many of the characters were no doubt taken from life there; but whom they personate has been a matter of much bitter controversy, and it is useless now to go into the subject. We must treat it as ancient history. The originals have long since passed into the Great Beyond, and their immediate descendants, to whom the subject was a burning question, have also passed. Tradition alone now remains. Not only the characters but the location of the points of interest and the houses where they lived have aroused the same controversy.

Let us recall some of the facts and see for ourselves what to us would seem the right solution.

The story opens in a lean-to house "down near the end of Orr's Island, facing the open ocean," the home of Zephaniah Pennel, where the Pearl was born. There was just such a house on the point now called Prince's Point, near the landing place. It disappeared many years ago, but I have talked with those who remembered it well. One would suppose that this was the house where

the Pearl lived, but a grandson or a relative of Deacon Ralph Johnson, who lived in the so-called present Pearl house, told me that he was certain that that was the house. Then again, where was the house of Captain Kittredge, which was about a mile from the house where the Pearl lived? One would think that this was what is now called the Pearl house, but Bradbury Wilson, who lived in the old Joseph Orr house, two miles from the Point, assured me that it was his ancestor who made the coffin, and found the body near by.

Of one point we are assured, the house of Aunt Roxy and Aunt Ruey, and this is the old farmhouse at the head of Long Cove; but Mrs. Stowe, with a writer's license, has put the gambrel roof of the Orr house on to the farmhouse.

The smuggler's cave can also be pointed out today. It is at the north end of the island on the left just before you cross the bridge. Here again, one of the older inhabitants took me for a walk and tried to impress upon me that the grotto at the south end of David Orr's Cove, on the east side of the island, was the smuggler's cave. The Pearl says that she saw the old church in Harpswell from where she sat. Perhaps those who have better eyes than mine can see it from the grotto.



THE DEVIL'S BACK



SMUGGLER'S CAVE

"The Pearl of Orr's Island" is an interesting story. Let each one read it for himself, and then try to verify the facts by actually going over the ground.

It is hard to disturb the tradition of years, but besides feeling myself that the house where the Pearl lived was in the old lean-to, I think it is time for others to read the book and face the facts for the sake of the truth. I may be found to be wrong. The character of Captain Kittredge is as interesting if not more so than that of Pennel, and the Pearl's little friend was also a heroine; and it would appeal to just as many visitors were they told that it was the Kittredge house and not that of Pennel which it would be interesting to visit.

In 1632, the Plymouth Colony of England granted to Thomas Purchase and George Way the whole region around Brunswick, said to include both mainland and islands. If it was claimed by the Indians, there is no evidence that they were ever paid anything for it. But for many years there was no attempt at settlement. In 1659, Nicholas Shapleigh of Kittery bought from the Indians a tract which included what is now the town of Harpswell, and in 1684 his heirs sold it, still unoccupied, to Richard Wharton of Boston.

Wharton was Judge of the Common Pleas under Andros, and went to England in 1687 to oppose him, and here he died in 1690. He was largely involved in his dealings in real estate in Boston and elsewhere, and it was many years before his estate could be settled. In 1714, his heirs sold his tract in Maine to a company called the Pejepscott Proprietors, and thereafter various transfers were made and the region began to be populated. Some of the deeds are to be found among the York County deeds in Portland and Alfred, Maine, but many are not recorded. In 1743, Richard Jaques of North Yarmouth bought one hundred acres on Little Sebascodegan, now Orr's Island, but there is no further deed as far as I was able to find, at that time, of any transfers. Somehow it came into the possession of the Hon. Elisha Cooke and the Hon. William Tailer of Boston. In 1749 their heirs sold to "Joseph Orr of North Yarmouth, York County, yeoman, a certain island known as Little Chabascodegan for nine hundred pounds, old tenor." The island was said to contain one thousand acres. Orr paid for this purchase in wood, which he carried to Boston. In April, 1754, one of the corders on the wharf in Boston and William Wyer, a laborer, got into a dispute, and the records say

"April 6 1754 William Wyer, a laborer, struck William Chosholm and he died shortly after. The inquest was held April 27. Wyer was tried in August, and executed November 21 1754." November 6, 1760, Joseph Orr married the widow of Wyer and took her and her two children to his farm on Orr's Island, where in 1756 he had built the gambrel-roof house, still standing, and which had replaced the blockhouse which he had built when he first bought the island. This house stands in the middle of the island, about two miles from either end.

As many of the titles have changed during the last hundred years, no attempt will be made to describe the exact location of the land which Orr conveyed to others. Descendants of the first settlers are numerous. Some have removed elsewhere, but there are still many living on the island. It is not necessary here to go into the genealogical record of each family, and therefore merely the names of the first comers are given, whence they came, and where they settled.

October 16, 1760, Joseph Orr conveyed to his brother, Clement Orr, two hundred acres. This extended from shore to shore, and part of it is the present property of Mrs. Eunice Orr. Soon after, he conveyed to Michael Sinnett thirty

acres, part of which is now owned by the Graves family, and the line originally extended from the Clement Orr line.

In 1760, Orr released one-tenth of the island to Rebecca Byles, the daughter of William Tailer and the wife of the Rev. Mather Byles of Boston, as she did not sign off when the land was sold. This was the north end, beginning at Gurnet bridge, and extending to the land of the Wilsons, over the Devil's Back, so-called. It contained about one hundred acres. It has always been known as Byles Point.

In 1762, Orr conveyed to William Black one hundred and fifty-four acres, which includes Beal's Cove and all the land on the southern part of the island. Part of this came into the hands of the Prince family, and has long been known as Prince's Point. Here is the landing of the steamers from Portland.

Orr gave to his stepdaughter, Agnes Wyer, the Bryant place now owned by Lewis Wilson, a farm of about forty acres; and to his stepson, Robert Wyer, the land north of this which includes the Alvin Wilson farm and Hanson's Point. Robert Wyer sold off much of this. Part of Wyer's land on the east side of Long Cove became the Wilson homestead.



THE SHORE WITH THE PINES



THE WEST SHORE

Robert Wyer kept for himself that which is now the Hanson farm. His grandson, James Wyer, built the old house in which Mr. Hanson lived until he took it down about 1900. It has been said that no one ever died in the old house, but the wife of James drowned herself; and it was at her funeral that occurred the episode of the sleigh whose top was not fastened on by pins, and the occupant, Jane Reed, granddaughter of John Reed, fell backwards, thereby causing confusion, not to say merriment.

Joseph Orr gave the homestead lot, that is the Bradbury Wilson and the Thwing farms, to his daughter Lettuce Orr, who married John Reed from Topsham. Reed built the old farmhouse. Reed also bought what is now the Alvin Wilson farm, and his son William Reed built the house.

David Wilson came from Saint George, and bought the farm where Lemuel Wilson now lives. He married Lettuce Orr, the daughter of Clement Orr, and had thirteen children. The old house was near the cove, just before going up the hill to the Devil's Back, so-called. Some of the children moved away from the island. His daughter Deborah married William Sylvester, who came from North Harpswell, and whose descendants are still on the island. His son David also

left descendants, who are living here; and his son John Clark Wilson was the father of Alvin, Bradbury, Elbridge, Lemuel, and Henry, all good and faithful citizens of the town and living within the present century. The Orr homestead was bought by John C. Wilson, and for many years was the home of Bradbury. Lemuel still occupies part of the old David Wilson farm.

Clement Orr, the brother of Joseph, who bought the two hundred acres, married Deborah Ward, the sister of Michael Sinnett's wife, and many of their descendants are still on the island, marrying into the families of Perkins, Toothacre, Johnson, Alexander, Brigham, Linscott, Sinnett, Stover, Littlejohn, and others. Some removed to Bailey Island. One daughter of the third generation married four times, and said if occasion called she should marry again. Ephraim Johnson came from Bailey Island and married Martha Orr. He drove the first stage from Brunswick to Orr's Island June 1, 1868.

Michael Sinnett was born in an inland town in Ireland. With fellow workmen he went to Dublin in search of employment, and when loitering on the wharves they were invited to go down the harbor in a vessel, being assured they could return with the pilot; but when well out

and away from the city, they were told they must go to America. When they reached Boston, public notice was given that Sinnett and his companions, having embarked of their own free will and having no money, would be sold to pay their passage fees. Joseph Orr, who was accustomed to carry wood to Boston, paid the passage for Sinnett, took him home, and set him to work on his farm. When he had served for a length of time to reimburse Orr for his passage money, he was a free man. Soon after regaining his freedom, he married Mary Ward, whose relatives lived in Hingham. Shortly after their marriage, he went to Boothby, where he built a small house. Soon after, his wife went to visit her relatives, and in a few days a press gang came ashore and carried Michael off to New York, whence he was marched to join General Wolfe's army. He was discharged after the capture of Quebec. Meantime, his wife returned, and not finding her husband at Boothby, she went to see Joseph Orr. He took pity on her and promised to care for her. Her husband came to Orr's Island after his discharge, and then Orr sold him thirty acres of land for which he paid in labor. On this lot he built the house, which Royal Graves sold to James Pye.

Michael Sinnett married Mary Ward; and Sarah, the daughter of his son James, married Isaac Farr, who came from Harpswell Neck. James Sinnett lived in an old house, which then stood where the present orchard stands. Here also his daughter Sarah (Farr) lived. Royal Graves married Susan, the daughter of Isaac and Sarah Farr, and when she was two years old the house was moved to its present location opposite the Library, and her brother James Farr and his wife occupied it during their lives. Royal Graves bought much of the old place, and sold the old house built by Michael Sinnett to James Pye, who moved it to its present location back of the Black house, formerly Woodward's. It is almost the oldest house on the island.

Mr. Graves was an interesting man, who went about his work cheerfully and industriously and minded his own business. Like many of the men, he was a fisherman, and from owning his own boat and going farther afield was called Captain Graves. He boarded with his wife's father, and was thus brought up with her. When he had amassed sufficient money, he bought the land and built the house; and regardless of the popular talk, he said nothing about marriage until

the house was completed, when he asked Susan if she would come and live in it as his wife. They were married, and he did the man's work about the place, never allowing his wife to fetch water or do any of the heavy work. After a time, he kept cows and sold milk.

John Black with his wife and son came from Kittery, and were the first settlers on Bailey Island. Black and his wife died on the island, and their son William lived there to a good old age and was known as "Uncle Will." The island was known as "Will" Island until it was bought by Deacon Timothy Bailey of Hanover, Massachusetts, and the passage between Orr's and Bailey was called "Will Gut." William married and had two sons, and they both removed to Orr's Island. In 1762, William bought the one hundred and fifty-four acres of Joseph Orr, as before mentioned. He married and had one son John, who married in his turn and had seven children, who married into the Green, Linscott, and Doughty families. At one time, John Black lived on Little Island in Lovell's Cove, which became known as John Black's place, and later moved to Lambert Hole above the bridge. His son Joseph built a house across the cove, the builder being George Stevens.

Old Lizzie Smith came by chance to the island, and settled on the land across the cove. Her daughter married William Gillum, some of whose children and grandchildren still live on the island.

Though it would be interesting to bring the story further down and speak of those who have recently become owners of the land, successors of the early settlers, it would be better to leave this to be done by others more familiar with recent events.

