

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NAUSHON



by

Alice Forbes Howland

ANYONE WHO HAS READ *The Story of Cuttyhunk* by Louise Haskell knows of the discovery of the Elizabeth Islands by Bartholomew Gosnold in 1602 and the subsequent history of Cuttyhunk. The history of Naushon, the largest of the group, is not so well known. Owing to their discovery by an Englishman, the islands came under the jurisdiction of the British Crown and were included in a territorial grant of James I to the Council of New England in 1635. One of the Patentees was Alexander, Earl of Sterling, and though his claim was disputed by Sir Fernando Gorges (another Patentee), Sterling's claim to the Elizabeth Islands, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket was recognized. Through his agent, James Forrett, he sold Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard to Thomas Mayhew, Sr., a merchant of Watertown, Massachusetts, with "the right to plant on the Elizabeth Isles." This took no account of the Indians who had lived on the islands from time immemorial, but Mayhew and his son John were men of probity and justice and wished to deal fairly with them. In 1654 they began to buy up the Indian rights to the islands, the first deed being the one between Seayk Sachem and Thomas Mayhew, of the island called Cataymucke, now known as Naushon. Naushon has had several other names. As mentioned above, the Indian name was Cataymucke (spelled in various ways); then came Elizabeth's Island, and later Tarpaulin Cove Island. It was not until near the end of the 18th century that the name Naushon was used in official papers and in letters.

The Mayhews owned Naushon for twenty-six years. In 1682 it was sold by Matthew Mayhew, grandson of Thomas, Sr., to Wait Winthrop, grandson of John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts. Wait Winthrop, as far as is known, never lived on the island, though it became known as Winthrop's Island. In 1685 the Elizabeth Islands were transferred to

Martha's Vineyard Manor and were later assigned to the township of Chilmark, where they remained until 1864. Over the years several attempts were made to separate them, as the people living on the islands were compelled to pay taxes to Chilmark, for which they received nothing. It was a clear case of "taxation without representation" but their requests were always rejected.

On the death of Wait's grandson John in 1730, Naushon was sold to James Bowdoin, in whose family it remained for 113 years. In those days the island was divided into a number of farms, each with a tenant farmer who raised sheep, cattle, and produce for his family and also probably to sell to coastwise vessels, which were passing through Vineyard Sound in great numbers, often putting in to Tarpaulin Cove. During the Winthrop era there were several hundred sheep on the island, but under the Bowdoins the flocks had increased to about two thousand. Oxen and horses and a few mules were also raised for farm work and for occasional sale on the mainland, which provided additional income for the farm families.

The American Revolution did not spare Naushon. In 1776 we find Mrs. Bowdoin writing to the Committee of Safety to report the landing on the island of one-hundred armed men from the British sloop of war, *Faulkland*, who abused the inhabitants, stove their boats, and made off with sheep, cattle, and a large quantity of wool. As a result, a company of militia, some 100 men armed with muskets and small cannon, were sent to the island under command of Lt. Elisha Nye. Barracks were built and turf fortifications thrown up on hills overlooking Tarpaulin Cove where the cannon were placed. Other raids followed, as did skirmishes between the British forces and the "rebels," who put up such resistance as they could; but the invaders burned the barracks, carried off the cannon, and continued the depredations of livestock, which left the islanders in a sorry state of hardship and privation by the time peace came in 1779.

The following little item pertaining to Naushon at that time is taken from the journal of John Leavett, USN, in July, 1776: "at Philadelphia I went on board the Sloop *Providence* and found we were to sail under the command of John Paul Jones, Esq.—we sailed in a short time and stopped at Tarpaulin Cove—."

Due to the ever-increasing amount of coastwise shipping, much of it passing through Vineyard Sound with valuable cargoes from the West Indies, it was inevitable that pirates and privateers would attempt to attack and seize them. The two most famous—and perhaps the most successful—were Thomas Pound and William Kidd, whose exploits have been well recorded. They and numerous others were continually in and out of Tarpaulin Cove, from which they made forays on the passing ships. Legend has it that Capt. Kidd left “a small packet of goods” at Tarpaulin, but if so, it has never come to light. That was his last port of call before sailing to Boston, where he was taken prisoner and from which he was taken to England, where, it is said, he was hanged.

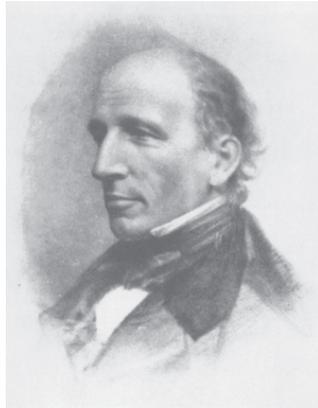
Vineyard Sound and its approaches have always been places that mariners treated with great respect and caution because of their shoals and strong tidal currents, yet it was not until 1759 that Zaccheus Lambert of Nantucket built a lighthouse on the west shore of Tarpaulin Cove, the first one in that entire area. He built and maintained it with his own funds, although the whale oil for the lantern was contributed by the people of Nantucket. After three years, Lambert petitioned the authorities in Boston for funds to maintain the light and was awarded six pounds. (Considering its commanding position on the western headland of the Vineyard and the treacherous Devil’s Bridge jutting out below, it is surprising that no light was established on Gay Head until 1799, and that Nobska Light at Woods Hole was not built until seventy years later.) Besides the lighthouse at Tarpaulin there was also an inn and a tavern, both of which were much frequented by the crews of passing vessels and also by the local farm families of the Robinsons, Weekses and Nyes. It is reported that many were the frolics and gay times there.

Because of the primitive conditions of life on Naushon and the difficulties of travel, the Bowdoins seldom visited their island until some ten years after the end of the Revolution. In 1805, James Bowdoin was appointed Associate Minister to France, where the family lived until 1808. After their return to America, they began making visits to Naushon and became so fond of it that they decided to build a summer home there. This was done according to Mrs. Bowdoin’s wishes. The Mansion

House, as it was called, was completed in time for the family to move into it in the summer of 1809. Unfortunately, Mr. Bowdoin's health failed, and after only two summers in the new house, he died there in October, 1811, at the age of fifty-nine. There being no immediate heir, the property was put into the care of William W. Swain of New Bedford.



Sarah Swain Hathaway Forbes



Pictures courtesy Alice Forbes Howland

John Murray Forbes

Mr. and Mrs. Swain used the Mansion House for summer stays and in turn came to care for it more and more, as did their only son, Robert, who loved to wander through the woods by himself. He was a frail youth who died at the age of twenty-one, and at his request, was buried in a favorite glade in the shelter of the tall oaks and beeches. One of the tenant farmers then living on the island was Tillinghast Gifford, who had a son born about the time of Robert's death. Out of respect and affection for the young man and his sorrowing parents, Mr. Gifford named his son Robert Swain Gifford, and it was he who became the well-known artist who painted many scenes along the shores of South Dartmouth and on Naushon.

It was due to the marriage of Mr. Swain's niece, Sarah Swain Hathaway, to John Murray Forbes of Milton, Massachusetts, in 1834, that the latter first came to the island. After some years in China, he returned to his native country and with Mr. Swain bought Naushon from the heirs of

the Bowdoin estate in 1842. Mr. Forbes's devotion to it grew, and he spared no pains to improve the pastures, drain the swamps to control mosquitoes, build stone walls, and plant thousands of small pine, larch, and locust trees to help prevent erosion of the bare hillsides. His fast-growing family shared his love for Naushon and grew up learning to sail, swim, and ride, often under his guidance.

Mr. Swain sold his share of Naushon to Mr. Forbes in 1854 and when Mr. Swain died in 1856, Mr. Forbes became the sole owner and manager.

As was mentioned earlier, the Elizabeth Islands had attempted to gain separation from Chilmark but with no success. In 1864, however, a well-organized group consisting of the inhabitants of Cuttyhunk, the owners of Pasque and Nashawena,¹ and Mr. Forbes, sent a petition to the State Legislature, and this had enough influence that it was granted, and the new township given the very appropriate name of Gosnold. Thus, Gosnold became the seventh township of Dukes County, the others being the six towns on the Vineyard, namely Tisbury, Oak Bluffs, Edgartown, West Tisbury, Chilmark and Gay Head.

John Murray Forbes died in 1898, leaving Naushon in trust, to be administered by his five children as Trustees for the benefit of his lineal descendants. And so it has continued, with the original trustees being succeeded by others of later generations. Descendants of the original deer still live in the woods and sheep are raised both for wool and meat. The island is occupied, not only in summer but in all seasons, by many of John M. Forbes's 359 living descendants and their friends, who sail, swim, fish, and ride there, caring deeply for their beautiful, unspoiled heritage left to them by a wise, generous, and far-sighted grandfather.²

Notes

1. At that time Nashawena was owned by Edward Merrill, a retired whaling captain of New Bedford. Pasque had been sold by Jesse and Samuel Tucker of Dartmouth to the Pasque Island fishing Club, of which John Crosby Brown of Philadelphia was the leading spirit. For a more detailed record of early owners of these two islands, see *Three Islands: Pasque, Nashawena, and Penikese*, by Alice Forbes Howland.

2. For many dates and anecdotes pertaining to the Winthrop and Bowdoin eras and to the events of the Revolution, I have been immensely helped by and am indebted to the *Early History of Naushon Island* printed in 1934 by my sister Amelia Forbes Emerson.