

ISLESFORD LIFE SAVING STATION 1879- ISLESFORD COAST GUARD STATION -1946)

By: Hugh L. Dwelley

Whose idea might it have been to establish a Life Saving Station on Little Cranberry Island? Very probably the fertile minds of brothers William and Gilbert Hadlock. They owned much of the island and, as owners and operators of a sizeable fleet of schooners engaged in fishing and the coastal trade, they were well aware of needs to protect vessels on rocky coasts. A good number of Cranberry islanders, including Hadlock cousins Johnathan and Epps, had been lost at sea. William, a member of the Maine Legislature, was undoubtedly aware of life saving stations being built along the Maine coast. They also knew of a good location for the station and had a good candidate to be its keeper.

The tip of Little Cranberry Island's far Southeast Point was gifted to the Life Saving Service by William E. and Gilbert T. Hadlock in 1878. The station was built in 1879 and 1880 and Gilbert T. Hadlock was appointed its first keeper on August 27, 1879. Gilbert was forty-two years old at the time of his appointment and he would hold the position for eight years. Gilbert would select the members of his crew - eight-men from among long-time family friends and acquaintances. In later years, many of them would come from further "down East" - from Lubec, Eastport, Jonesport, etc.

So, the establishing of the Little Cranberry Island (later Islesford) Life Saving Station was very much a Hadlock affair. Not only was the site for the station gifted by the Hadlocks and Gilbert its first keeper, but the road built from the village (although not suitable for much more than ox carts) was mostly along Hadlock land and woodlots. Finally, the deed of conveyance probably contained a provision of first refusal for the Hadlocks to recover the property and its improvements should the government wish to dispose of the property which it did in 1946.

Southeast Point was indeed an appropriate location for a Life Saving Station. It had a good view of vessels sailing off shore from both the east and the west. It would have served mainly the many vessels in the large coastal trade of that era. Fish and lumber were shipped west in great quantities from the Maritime Provinces as well from Eastern Maine to New York, the Southern States and the West Indies. Return trips carried sugar, rum, molasses, coal, flower and other produce. Fishing vessels from Maine and Massachusetts headed to and from the Grand Banks also found themselves in the area, especially in bad weather.

Southeast Point also served as the Little Cranberry end of The Bar that connected Little Cranberry to Baker Island at low tide. Vessels frequently got in trouble in the rock-filled Gut that stretched from Baker by the Bar to Great Cranberry Island or on Baker Island itself. Indeed, the Gilley boys, living on Baker Island, were noted wreck strippers.

When vessels came ashore, locals boarded them as soon as possible and removed anything of value. Everything from cargo to fittings was fair booty. Loads of coal and

lumber were frequently put to good use by Cranberry Islanders. Companies that insured the vessels and cargo often tried to salvage it and were not happy when local “wreck strippers” beat them to it. The large “donkey engine” that pulled boats in and out of boat houses at the Sandbeach for many years came from one of the wrecks. The dog named Jack that Francis Fernald had as a boy came ashore from a wreck as well. Wrecks were the source for a number of items currently preserved in the Islesford Museum.

Interestingly, not all shipwrecks were accidental. Many vessels were captained by their owners. Eventually these vessels became old and not very seaworthy. And there wasn’t much of a market for old and un-seaworthy vessels. But some of them were insured. Captains were sometimes known to stand off-shore, especially on the back side of Baker Island, and when the conditions were right, to run their old vessels onto the ledges. With luck, the insurance company paid off. And the Gilley boys got what little was left onboard.

Life at the Station

What sort of work or recreation would have kept the crew at the Station busy eight Hours a day? Indeed, it was more than eight hours a day, someone needed to be on watch at all times. Then there were the matters of training and of cooking and housekeeping. Someone needed to go to the village for mail or groceries once a day or so.

When this writer used to hike to that part of the island in the 1940s, there were little buildings with “key posts” in them on Marsh Head and at the beginning of Gilley Beach. In weather when the view out to sea from the Station was restricted, there were hourly patrols to each of these key post and back. Such foul weather patrols were probably the practice in the early days of the Station as well.

In the early days, one or two four to six-man surfboats were kept in a shed beside the Station. There were drills, probably weekly, in launching and manning these boats and rowing them as quickly as possible out along the Bar or into the Gut to a supposed location of a vessel in distress. Finally, as shown in the accompanying picture, there were drills with the breeches buoy. As in the picture, a dead tree served as the mast of a distressed vessel. The line must be shot from a small cannon out so as to catch in that tree firmly enough to allow the breeches buoy to be hauled out and then returned to shore with a sailor in it. A tricky job that called for a great deal of practice.

There is evidence, however, that not all of the men’s time at the Station was devoted to official duties. The photos on the following page show two handsome picture frames and a basket made of pegs whittled, it is said, by the men at the Station from cigar boxes in their spare time. There are a number of these picture frames in older homes around Islesford. The second picture is of a sturdy credenza made at the Station for Capt. Gilbert Hadlock’s daughter Agnes.

Neither was life among the men at the Station always sweetness and light. We have a copy of a letter from one of the crew men to the Superintendent of Life-Saving Stations

at Portland disputing an earlier report from Capt. Hadlock that he had told Hadlock to “kiss his ass” saying that instead he had addressed that remark to another individual.

In May 1881, Captain Hadlock joined other keepers of Life-Saving Stations petitioning their Congressmen to support an increase in pay. Hadlock’s letter points out that they receive only \$400 per year for work that involves a great deal of risk whereas Light House keepers receive \$600 for work that involves no such risk or supervisory responsibility.

Gilbert Hadlock resigned his position as keeper of the Islesford Life Saving Station at the end of August, 1887 having served almost exactly eight years. Gilbert went into the steam boating business having first the steamer FLORENCE that proved too large. Next he had the little GOLDENROD that proved too small for service among the CRANBERRY Islands and the nearby mainland. In 1893, Gilbert had the forty-nine foot steamer ISLESFORD built to his own specifications.

Captain Franklin Stanley was appointed in September, 1887 as the second keeper of the Islesford Life Saving Station. He was a descendent of John Standley, the first permanent settler on Little Cranberry Island. In his Islesford Journals, Vincent Bowditch noted that “Capt. Frank” was well thought of as keeper. Bowditch and his party enjoyed walking to the Station to pay a call on the crew. Cap’n Frank remained in the position for twenty-two years, retiring in October, 1909. He was replaced by Henry Stanley who served until at least 1915.

For at least 36 years (1879 to 1915) the command and most of the manning of the Islesford Life Saving Station as very much a local proposition. Certainly an asset to the island community.