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On the Problems of a Shipwrecked Seaman Remembering the Advice of Blunt's 'American Coast Pilot,' 12th Edition

In 1837 the entire outer coast of Cape Cod was a menace to mariners and many a seaman found himself on the beach, drenched, cold, and faced with the need to find shelter in a hurry. Blunt's "American Coast Pilot", 12th edition, 1837, gives a description of the location of six Humane Society huts, and a method of identifying the various sections of the coast, valley by valley, where dwellings might be found, inland anywhere from a quarter of a mile to a mile.

In the following piece, Earle G. Rich traces the identification marks down the beach from Race Point to Chatham's Mallebarre Point, with an indication of how hard it might have been for a shipwrecked seaman to find the shelter on which his life depended.

BY EARLE G. RICH

"Blunt's American Coast Pilot, 12th Edition, year 1837" carries in its pages a description of the Atlantic shoreline of Cape Cod and the locations of the first six huts erected between Race Point, Provincetown, and Monomoy Point, Chatham. The article is worded in a manner requiring me to go

over it several times to fully comprehend which pieces of topography it expects stranded seamen to recognize in the process of rescuing themselves.

We are told that on Race Point stand about a dozen fishing huts containing fireplaces and other conveniences. The beached mariner would do well to find one of these huts because the overland distance between them and Provincetown is three miles. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for a stranger to find his way in the dark to town. The woods are so full of ponds and entangling swamps that, if the road were missed, the sailor would probably expire in his attempt to penetrate them.

The first Humane Society hut was erected there on Race Point.

Not far from Race Point is a ridge which extends to the head of Stout's Creek (a part of Provincetown with which I am not familiar). It could be what is now known as the "Race Run."

On this spot the Humane Society erected a second hut. It stands a mile from Peaked Hill, (now known as Peaked Hill) a landmark well-known to seamen and is about 2½ miles from Race Point. "Seamen cast away on this part of the coast will find a shelter here, and in a north-east storm, should they strike to the leeward of it, and be unable to turn their faces to the windward, by passing on to Race Point, they will soon come to the fishing huts beforementioned."

Several years before the Humane Society erected a hut at the head of Stout's Creek, but it was built in an improper manner, having a chimney in it and was placed on a spot where no beach grass grew. The strong winds blew the sand away from its foundation and the weight of the chimney brought it to the ground so that in January, 1802 it was entirely demolished. This event took place about six weeks before the 'Brutus' was cast away. If it had remained it is probable that the whole of the unfortunate crew of that ship would have been saved, as they gained the shore only a few rods from the spot where the hut had stood.

The Pilot goes on: "The shore which extends from this valley to Race Point is unquestionably the most exposed to shipwrecks. A north-east storm, the most violent and fatal to seamen, as it is frequently accompanied with snow, blows directly on the land; a strong current sets along the shore; add to which, that ships, during the operation of such a storm, endeavor to work to the north-ward, that they may get into the bay. Should they be unable to weather Race Point, the wind drives them on shore, and a shipwreck is inevitable, accordingly the strand is everywhere covered with the fragments of vessels. Huts, therefore placed within a mile of each other, have been thought necessary by many judicious persons. To this opinion the Trustees are disposed to pay due respect, and, hereafter, if the funds of the Society increase, new huts will be erected for the relief of the unfortunate."

The Pilot mentions the "Highland's" of Cape Cod, North Truro, referred to as the "Clay Pounds" and the lighthouse which every navigator should impress on his mind. The shore here turns to the south, and

the highland extends to the tableland of Eastham. It is this section of the coast line that I found the most intriguing. A castaway seaman is expected to find shelter, provided he knows the "lay of the land". He must find the right "hollow" to find his way inland the nearest house to it.

The shipwrecked seaman is told the first of these valleys is Dyer's Hollow 1½ miles from the lighthouse. It is a wide opening. In it stands a dwelling a quarter of a mile from the beach.

Can you imagine being a sailor washed ashore from some shipwreck on a foreign shore, soaked to the skin in freezing temperature and a north-east blizzard? He must orient himself to his immediate surroundings before setting out to locate the haven a quarter of a mile inland.

If he was cast up on the beach a half mile south of Dyer's Hollow near Harding's Hollow he would have a little climbing to do because sand had accumulated at the entrance of this particular valley. He would also have to pass over several fences taking heed not to enter the wood on the right. He could expect to find a house three quarters of a mile inland provided the road was not under three feet of snow and he had not lost his compass.

The third valley would be the Head of Pamet. It is a wide opening and leads immediately over a beach to the salt marsh at the head of Pamet River.

The fourth opening three quarters of a mile south of Head of Pamet is Brushy Valley (now known as Brush Valley). This hollow is narrow and climbing is necessary. Entering it and inclining to the right three quarters of a mile will bring the seaman to the house, situated at the head of Pamet. By proceeding straight forward and passing over rising ground another house may be discovered, but with more difficulty (author's note: those same cellar holes are now in evidence).

South of the last named valley we come to Newcomb's Hollow, located to the east of Herring River in Wellfleet. On the north side of it stood a fisherman's hut.

Half a mile south of Newcomb's Hollow is Pearce's Hollow. It is a small valley. A house is little more than a quarter of a mile from the beach. (The old Kinnacom homestead, that sat on the edge of the pond also named after him.)

Cphoon's Hollow, (now Cahoon's Hollow) is a half a mile south of Pearce's Hollow. West from the entrance, several houses may be found at the distance of a mile. This Hollow lies East by North from Wellfleet Meeting House.

Two miles south of Cahoon's Hollow is Snow's Hollow (now Lecount's Hollow). It is smaller than the last. West from the shore a quarter of a mile is the county road which goes around the head of Blackfish Creek. Passing through this valley to the fence, which separates the road from the upland marsh at the head of the creek a house will immediately be found by turning to the right or north. There are houses on the left, but more remote.

The high ground gradually subsides here and 1½ miles south terminates at the ninth valley called Fresh Brook Hollow where a house is found a mile

from the shore. I would like to make a correction here on the number of houses that would have been found. There were six to eight dwellings existing at Fresh Brook at the time the Coast Pilot was published. Only cellar holes now remain.

The 10th valley is 2½ miles south of Fresh Brook Hollow. A house is found a mile from the shore. This is Plumb Valley, about 300 yards wide. Between these two valleys is the table land. After this there is no hollow of importance to Cape Mallebarre.

From Fresh Brook Hollow to Nauset Beach the ocean bank is about 60 feet high. There are houses scattered over the plain but none nearer than a mile from the beach. In a storm of wind and rain they might be discerned by daylight, but in a snowstorm, which rages here with extreme fury, it would be almost impossible to discover them, either by night or day.

On the beach about half way between the entrance of Nauset and Chatham harbors the trustees have erected a fourth hut.

The six huts are of one size and shape. Each hut stands on piles and is 8 feet long, 8 feet wide and 7 feet high with a sliding door on the south, a sliding shutter on the west and a pole rising 15 feet above the top of the building on the east. Inside is either straw or hay and a bench. (All the comforts of home).

The whole of the coast from Cape Cod to Mallebarre is sandy and free from rocks. Along the shore, at the distance of half a mile is a bar which is called the Outer Bar, because there are smaller bars within it perpetually changing. This outer bar is separated into many parts by guzzles or small channels.

Large heavy ships strike on the outer bar, even at high water, and their fragments, only reach the shore. But smaller vessels pass over it at full sea. When they touch at low water, they beat over it as the tide rises, and soon come to land. But seamen wrecked at full sea ought to remain on board till near low water, for the vessel does not then break to pieces, and by attempting to reach land before the tide ebbs away, they are in great danger of being drowned.

On this subject there is one opinion only among judicious mariners. It may be necessary, however, to remind them of a truth, of which they have full conviction, but which, amidst the agitation and terror of a storm, they too frequently forget.

Compiling this comprehensive study of the original version of the Cost Pilot report brought back many fond memories of the days I pounded the beach herein described as a surfer at the Race Point Station, the Highland Station and the Monomoy Station. In four years one can leave a lot of foot prints on the sands of time.

What was the beach then is now covered with at least 10 feet of water at high tide, caused by the rate of erosion that has taken place over the last 50 years on the back side of Cape Cod.

Ironically the first old lifesaving station to be claimed by the ever encroaching sea was the Peaked Hill Bars Station. If you will remember it was close by where the second Humane Society Hut was erected in 1837. This is 1973.