

1781 203-010



The Remains of the British Man-of-War "Somerset" wrecked off Peaked Hill Bars (2 miles east of Race Point Lighthouse) in 1778.

It was soon covered with sand and didn't show up again until 1866, when the above picture was taken by John R. Smith.

Over on the back side, covered with tons of wind-piled sand, lie the remains of His Majesty's frigate Somerset, sent to harass and subjugate the unstart colonists who presumed to defy his will. Armed with sixty-four guns, manned by almost five-hundred stalwart sons of Britain, it was one of the enemy vessels which at the beginning of the Revolutionary War sailed in and out of Provincetown Harbor at will. It was the Somerset, too, that covered the advance of the Redcoats in the attack on Bunker Hill. In fact it was the most powerful and important ship-of-war in the British fleet.

The people of Provincetown and of the Cape could do little about the situation save watch and wait. This they did with what was to them gratifying results. For when the captain of the Somerset took his ship out of the shelter of the inner harbors and risked his fortune attempting to round the back side he met the fate of so many proud vessels. The Somerset struck the outer bar near Dead Man's Hollow, not far from the Highland at North Truro.

It was a great day for Provincetown, for the Truros, for the Cape, and for the struggling colonies in their battle to free themselves to achieve the destiny that lay before them. The fingers of the mooncussing populace itched, their eyes glowed at the prospect of rich hauls of plunder. Here was loot which even those who retained a flicker of conscience could take and be better citizens for the taking. But they waited, waited until the crew was marched away through the cheering towns to Boston. Then they went to work. Truro's share, they say, was two-thirds, Provincetown's the remainder. In our museum is the fine ship's Bible of the Somerset and bits of the iron-hard English oak of which she was built. How many more relics of the famous ship are sequestered in Provincetown and Truro homes would be difficult to say, but there must be not a few, handed down from that day in November, 1778.

In the century and a half that has passed, the Somerset has been buried, unburied and buried again by the shifting sands. Some there are in Provincetown who have seen the bones of this once proud man-o'-war and they say that the English oak is as sound as ever and the copper fastenings just as secure.

Wreck of Somerset

One of the most famous wrecks in all Cape Cod history, that of the Somerset, British man-of-war, occurred on Peaked Hill Bars on Nov. 2, 1778. School children will remember the Somerset from Longfellow's reference to her in his poem, Paul Revere's Ride. She had anchored in Provincetown harbor, and then sailed out to intercept some French merchant ships bound for Boston, when a northeaster caught her. Swept around the Cape, she stranded on the bars, a total loss.

Of the Somersets' crew of nearly 500 men, historians record that many were drowned, but that 480, saved, were marched as prisoners of war to Boston. General Joseph Otis of Barnstable, writing of the event, noted: "From all I can learn,

there is wicked work at the wreck, riotous doings. The Truro and Provincetown men made a division of the clothing, etc. Truro took two-thirds and Provincetown one-third. There is a plundering gang that way."

The crew was rescued by the men of the lower Cape towns, made prisoners of war and marched to Boston. Dr. William Thayer, the surgeon of the ship, while on the march, got no farther than Truro, for he fell in love with a pretty maiden. The guards permitted him to remain there. After his marriage with the captivating maid, he practiced many years in Truro and Provincetown.

Her Bones Revealed

The Somerset carried 64 guns. Her grave was called, locally, Dead Man's Hollow. In 1866 shifting sands revealed bones of the Somerset. Several cart-loads of her timbers were cut away. Her ship's Bible and a chair made from her solid English oak may be seen in the Provincetown Historical Museum. Shifting sands, after disclosing the Somerset, soon covered her again. She lies entombed somewhere in her sandy Cape Cod grave today.

Mr. Henry J. Lancey built at his yard in 1872 a vessel of 15 tons, Sharkey Model, for Capt. Cushing Emery and others for the net fishing industry. Her keel is part of the Old Somerset, wrecked on the back shore of the Cape 100 years ago.