

'SOMERSET' RISES AGAIN



For only the third time in nearly 200 years, the wreck of the HMS Somerset, a 160-foot British warship that fought against the American colonies in the Revolutionary War, has appeared on a Provincetown beach.

A combination of wave action and the formation of a jetty-like sand bar just to the south of the ship's remains has left a 20-foot long section of the 225-year-old man-of-war exposed at low tide.

The Somerset's black oak timbers lie half-buried in the sand about two and a half miles southeast of the Race Point Coast Guard Station, in probably the same spot she was driven ashore in early November, 1778.

The timbers are charred from an attempt by the warship's first plunderers in 1778 to burn her after stripping off most of the easily removable trappings and there is little else visible.

Yet she is identifiable by a series of Roman numerals cut into either side of her stern. These numerals—XX, XXI, and XXII—were noted in 1886 by E. A. Grozier, a reporter for the New York World who was sent to the Outer Cape to write a story about the wreck the first time it reappeared on the beach.

Grozier, in his story, (reprinted in a pamphlet that year and again in 1894 by the Provincetown Ad-

vocate printery) determined that the markings had been made to measure the ship's draft.

"On the stem of the old hulk," Grozier wrote, "the letters 'XXII' are plainly cut, showing that the vessel was probably of deep draft for those days."

These markings are the only definitive clue that the planks on the beach facing the infamous Peaked Hill sandbars are those of the Somerset, although the heavy oak timbers and wooden pegs suggest a general antiquity.

The wreck was first re-exposed by erosion created by storm surf in 1886. Grozier reported that between 1776 and 1886, the Somerset had been covered by "a cairn of sand thirty feet high....The surf for generations pounded and thundered a half dozen rods away, and many less pretentious crafts scattered their wreckage at the foot of the apparently natural mound." After an unreported period of time, it was again covered by sand thrown up during winter gales.

In May of this year, the wreck reappeared, the result of the surf's chewing away the dunes and beach which had covered it (the wreck had not been underwater).

Another factor in its exposure this time around was the formation, this winter, of a long jetty of sand just south of the Somerset

extending several hundred feet out from the beach and connecting up with one of the offshore sand bars.

North Truro oceanographer Graham Geise, who Monday visited the site of the warship, noted that the beach on the south side of the jetty was much wider than the section of beach on the north side of the jetty where the wreck lies.

The jetty formation, Geise explained, would influence tidal currents in such a way that sand would be piled up on the south side, and taken away from the north, where the Somerset is.

The tidal current along that particular section of the Cape, Geise said, runs from south to north, and carries sand up from Truro and Wellfleet, depositing it on North Truro and Provincetown beaches.

The jetty, which Geise said is basically a winter sand formation and quite unusual to find in the summer, breaks up that current—leaving sand deposited on one side, and forcing the current to take it away from the other.

Under average circumstances, Geise said, sand would be building up over the Somerset, not being taken away.

Geise said he thought it was possible the wreck would remain exposed until the jetty formation disappeared. There are no records of how long the Somerset remained exposed in 1886.

The British vessel under command of Captain Aurey and carrying a crew of 480 men, foundered on the Peaked Hill sand bars on either November 1 or 2 in 1778.

She had anchored often in Provincetown Harbor, a neutral port, for the previous two years, and her crew, writer Grozier recalled, "helped themselves to water, provisions, and anything else that they wanted" when they went ashore.

Some time prior to November, 1778, the Somerset was ordered south in search of the French fleet, which had been aiding the revolutionaries.

She was not seen again by Outer Cape residents until "one morning early in November."

"The report spread that the British squadron was in hot pursuit of the French fleet at the back of the Cape. The people flocked to High Pole Hill, a great sand dune in the centre of town, and from that eminence the English ships were soon descried, the Somerset among them, driving the freshening northeast wind under all the canvas that could be carried."

The English ships stayed close to the backshore, trying to get to

Boston Bay to catch the French ships reported there. Quickly the northeast wind increased into a gale.

The Somerset found herself caught in the surf, and the incoming tide pulled her onto the sand bar.

All the townspeople hurried to the beach where, having no lifeboats, they watched for hours as the frigate was broken apart by the waves and wind. Her crew threw the ship's cannon, ammunition, and ballast overboard.

Then the waves finally broke her free of the bar, and drove her on the beach itself. A group of Truro militia men took possession of the wreck and made the surviving crew members prisoners (they were later marched to Boston, although many escaped along the way).

Back at the wreck, Provincetown and Truro men immediately began fighting over who would get what. The colony's General Court finally appointed a sheriff to supervise the salvage job, and all war materials were sent to forts in Gloucester and Maine.

When the wreck reappeared in 1886, relic-hunters again attacked the remains. Using axes, crowbars, shovels, and saws, they cut away at the hull, leaving Grozier to observe "enough wood has already been taken to town to

make a cane for every inhabitant, and enough iron bolts have been drawn out to make a Somerset horseshoe... No one will go home without some substantial piece of the famous craft, and the especially enterprising individuals will cart off a cord or more of the wood."

Today, the wreck is protected by the National Antiquities Act, the provisions of which have been posted at the site on the beach. No one may take anything from it.

A plan to restore the vessel has been put forth by a Cape Cod historical society, Tales of Cape Cod, Inc.

Edward Lohr, historian of the Cape Cod National Seashore, said Monday, however, that he doubted any restoration would be possible with what little remained of the ship. He even doubted that the wreck would be dug up.

For the moment the ship remains on view where it was blown ashore 195 years ago, in almost exactly the same setting.

"The sun was sinking in splendour and the peaked hills were casting gaunt shadows on the beach," wrote Grozier as he left the site in 1886. "I glanced involuntarily at the ancient wreck. All that the relic-hunters had spared remained half imbedded in the sand. Then we trudged slowly over the sandy wastes into the town."

THE WRECK

—OF THE—

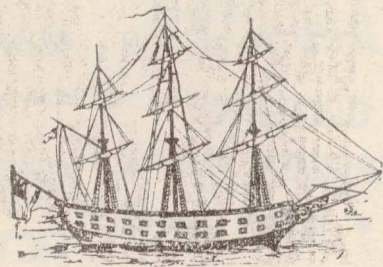
"SOMERSET,"

A Secret of the Cape Cod Sands
Disclosed by the Sea.

How a British Frigate of Revolutionary Times was Stranded on the Peaked Hill Bars and Buried for a Century in the Sands.—The Interesting Local Tradition About the Ship and Her Crew.—A Swarm of Relic Hunters at the Scene of the Wreck.

JUST over the Bluff, by Dead Men's Hollow, lies the wreck of the Somerset, British Man-of-war. For a century and more the hulk has been buried deep beneath these Cape Cod Sands. Above her charred and crushed timbers of live oak, old ocean had piled a cairn of sand thirty feet high. The wiry beach grass grew rank above it. The foxes made their nimble tracks across it; the men of the life-saving service trudged over it daily. The surf for generations pounded and thundered

that she was constructed of the stoutest live oak in the early part of the eighteenth century. She is supposed to have carried some two or threescore guns—32, 24 and 12-pounders—and to have had a complement of 480 men. After many years' good service in foreign seas she came to the colonies under the command of Capt. Aurey and joined the British squadron at the siege of Boston.



BRITISH FRIGATE SOMERSET.

Longfellow refers to the Somerset as lying at her moorings in Boston Bay on the night of Paul Revere's memorable ride. At the battle of Bunker Hill she stormed the fortifications in the early morning, and afterwards covered the landing of the red-coats. During the two following years she remained for the greater portion of the time about Cape Cod and the adjacent shores, capturing and burning much of the American commerce, and being generally a terror to the unprotected coast. Cape Cod mothers were wont to frighten their children by saying that the black-whiskered pirate Capt. Aurey was coming after them in his big ship. In those days