

ing to Gen. Joseph Otis of Barnstable, who was the only person who seems to have taken time to write an account. "... there is wicked work at the wreck... the Truro and Provincetown men made a division of the clothing... Truro took two thirds, and Provincetown one third. There is a very plundering gang that way."

Evidently bureaucracy moved slowly then as now, because by the time the General Court got around to appointing Colonel Doane of Wellfleet to take charge of the wreck two months later, it had already been picked clean by the citizenry. Salvage worth \$150,000, a fortune in those days, was carted from the wreck almost before the storm had subsided.

"The Truro and Provincetown men made a division of the clothing... Truro took two thirds, and Provincetown one third."

Souvenirs of the *Somerset* have multiplied over the years, like the descendants of the *Mayflower*. Various museums hold several authentic relics. Adm. Chester Nimitz, of World War II fame in the Pacific, had a pistol presented to him by his mother-in-law, Mrs. Mary Manson Freeman of Wellfleet.

When the *Somerset* reappeared this year, officials of the Cape Cod National Seashore promptly posted two warnings against a new generation of mooncussers. The bones of the old ship are protected under the Federal Antiquities Act. However, the oak timbers, pickled two centuries in brine and preserved in sand, are probably harder to cut today than when they were laid down in Her Majesty's Dockyard at Chatham, England, in 1746. No casual stroller on the beach is going to pluck a plank from this wreck with his bare hands. Seashore personnel say they cannot post a guard over the isolated relic 24 hours a day, and there is evidence some intrepid souvenir hunters have been at work.

The reappearance of the wreck has posed a problem. Edward Lohr, National Seashore Historian, says "The Dead Man's Hollow area is still in dispute; we are not sure whether it is part of the Province Lands decided by the Commonwealth to the Seashore or part of the lands retained by the State. There are those in Truro who claim it is within their boundaries. It's a three-cornered issue right now with no settlement in sight."

In any case, digging the oaken bones from the sand would be a

monumental and expensive task. Before the job was completed a storm might lash the coast and bury the wreck for another century.

Because beachcombers have been "Souvenirs of the *Somerset* have multiplied over the years like descendants of the *Mayflower*."

lugging driftwood from the Dead Man's Hollow area for years, believing they had found relics of the *Somerset*, there was great skepticism when the present wreck reappeared. Hundreds of sailing vessels have foundered on the outer Cape over the centuries. The *Mayflower* just missed being one of the first. Captain Jones had put his unwieldy craft about just in time to escape the "shoulds and roiling breakers" and made the fateful decision to head north towards Provincetown rather than south towards Virginia. The *Mayflower* had nearly been trapped by what is now Chatham Bars. Over three centuries later, in 1957, Skipper Alan Villiers was off Peaked Hill Bars with *Mayflower II* and headed by a stiff southwester if he tried to round Race Point into Provincetown. Caught between shoals, tide rips, impatient welcoming committees on shore, and the prospect of beating about for days awaiting a fair wind, hard-bitten Captain Villiers disgustingly wound up the voyage at the end of a tow rope from the Coast Guard tug *Yankton*.

Although the two *Mayflowers* escaped the dangerous bars, what proof is there that the present wreck is not one of the many stout sailing ships known to have foundered?

Historian Lohr says: "We are sure it is the *Somerset* for a variety of reasons. First, Joseph Otis, in a letter to the Council in Boston, dated November 4, 1778, located the wreck four miles east of the Race. In 1886, when it reappeared, several accounts placed it in Dead Man's Hollow. In 1941, Levi Kelly, a veteran lifesaver, placed the wreck about 50 to 75 yards east of the Halfway House of the Race Point Coast Guard Beach Patrol.

"Recently we had a portion of the wood analyzed by an expert. It is English oak, not any of the varieties of oak that grow in the northeast. Lastly, there is the Roman numeral XXII carved on one of the timbers. This agrees with accounts from the 1880s. It probably referred to her draft."

The *Somerset's* 70 guns, with barrels ranging from seven to nine feet, were very heavy. Most of the guns

were salvaged during the Revolution and mounted in Castle Island and other Boston Harbor forts. Coastal historian Edward Rowe Snow says as many as 16 guns may be unaccounted for. The guns may have been jettisoned in the frantic efforts to lighten ship after grounding and may yet await some intrepid skin divers.

The *Somerset* was 160 feet on her gun deck. (Old Ironsides, a half century younger, is 180 feet on her gun deck.) The beam of the British ship was just over 45 feet, and she was rated at 1436 tons.

Lohr has communicated with naval authorities in England to obtain more information. He says many ships built in the Chatham district of England at the time of the *Somerset* were ballasted with flint nodules found in the limestone area near the shore. Lohr has investigated the tide-swept beach of Dead Man's Hollow after northeast storms to see if he could find traces of flint, which has about the same specific gravity as the quartz glacial sand of the Cape. Lohr says he has not found any flint, which leads him to believe the *Somerset* was beached intact, did not break up, and that the main part of the hulk is still buried.

Will Longfellow's phantom ship join the guests at Bicentennial celebrations? Louis Cataldo of the Barnstable Historical Commission is trying to get support from Massachusetts Senators Kennedy and Brooke and Cape Representatives in Washington and Boston to save what is left of the old frigate.

The *Somerset* had been a floating fort during the Battle of Bunker Hill, bombarding the rebel entrenchments as though seeking revenge for having let Paul Revere slip through her guard two months earlier. Later she ranged the Cape shoreline at will, forcing Cape craft needed by the natives for fishing and commerce to rot in creeks or fall apart on shore. However, after two centuries bygones are bygones and many Cape Codders, native and adopted, feel a new battle should be waged to preserve what is left of the past before it is too late.

Surely there is room in today's world for this solid-oak memorial to the nation's birth, fortuitously emerged from the glacial sands of Dead Man's Hollow in Aunt Sukie's Cove?

If you want to see the wreck, abandon your car in the Race Point parking lot of the National Seashore next to the Coast Guard Station. Walk



Cape Cod National Seashore officials examine an ancient skeleton. It has shown itself twice in the last 195 years—once in 1880 and again in 1886.

east (to the right!) about two miles. It is a 50-minute walk, allowing for the time spent in picking up interesting pebbles which the glacier probably brought from your backyard at home. Walk on the firm sand near the ocean's edge! If there is no firm sand, then, oh-landlubber Columbus, you are walking at high tide and the wreck will be submerged. Low tide or nearly low is the best time to visit His Majesty's Ship *Somerset*. ♦♦