THE WRECK

OF THE

SOMERSET

BRITISH

MAN-OF-WAR.

Press of The Provincetown Advocate, N. T. Freeman, Proprietor.

THE

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OF THE

"SOMERSET,"

BY E. A. GROZIER,

Published in the New York World, May 16, 1886, and Re-Published in the Provincetown Advocate, May 27; with an authentic letter from H. M. Secretary of the Admiralty, Whitehall, London, confirming the Accuracy of the Discovery of the Famous Old English Man-of-War.

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PROVINCETOWN:
PRESS OF THE PROVINCETOWN ADVOCATE,
N. T. FREEMAN, PROPRIETOR,
1886.

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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.

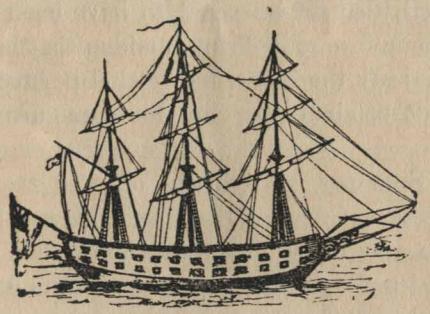
JUST over the Bluff, by Dead Men's Hollow, lies the wreck of the Somerset, British Man-of-war. For a century and more the hulk has been buried deep beneath these Cape Cod Sands. Above her charred and crushed timbers of live oak, old ocean had piled a cairn of sand thirty feet high. The wiry beach grass 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

a half dozen rods away, and many less pretentious crafts scattered their wreckage at the foot of the apparently natural mound. Nothing but tradition marked the spot until by some freak of the recent gales the sea like a great plough cut away the land and laid bare the ribs of the old ship whose guns had stormed the heights of Bunker Hill and terrorized the commerce of the colonies.

In this quaint and cosy village of Provincetown, which nestles on the inner shore by the sheltering forefinger of the Cape, there is much local excitement about the ancient wreck. Everybody in town has visited the "backside" to see the exhumed frigate and secure some relic.

Wrecks are common enough affairs in these parts, but the Somerset is a wreck of peculiar and exceptional interest. The discovery is the topic of the town. If two old sea captains are holding conference at the end of one of the long wharves, there can be no doubt as to the subject of discussion. If several citizens encounter one another at the street corner, they straightway expound their views as to the matter. But it is in the loafing rooms of the ship-chandlers' stores, about great stoves, hospitably provided for the gentlemen of leisure, that the subject receives its most thorough treatment. Here of a chilly evening a dozen veterans, who have sailed every sea and seen every land on the globe, light their pipes and devote themselves to an adequate investigation of the absorbing topic. They are mostly men of intelligence and wide experience. They know a ship from truck to keelson. If they cannot tell exactly how the Somerset was wrecked, they can at least inform you how she should have been wrecked according to all nautical precedents. They are posted moreover, on the ancient traditions of the town; and some of them are gifted with prolific imaginations, so that all missing links are readily supplied.

It has been irrevocably established in these councils that the Somerset was one of the oldest English war ships, and 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 Provincetown was neutral ground, and the Somerset, with other vessels of the squadron, often cast anchor in her harbor. The frigate's boats frequently landed, and the officers and tars helped themselves to water, provisions and anything else that they wanted. In return for the unwilling assistance thus

given him, Capt. Aurey sometimes sent the chaplain ashore to preach to the people and tell them how wicked and unchristian it was to cherish any rebellious feelings against King George. But to the feminine portion of the community the British officers showed much nautical gallantry. Cape Cod girls were as pretty then as they are now—which is saying a great deal—and even the state of hostilities did not prevent the formation of many romantic attachments The surgeon of one of the British ships is said to have been so infatuated with the winsome face of a Truro maiden that he left the service of His Majesty the King, and settled permanently on the Cape, where descendents bearing his name are living to this day.

But the Somerset was finally ordered to the south in search of the French fleet, and she sailed away from the harbor with the hearty ill-wishes of the loyal men of Provincetown, tempered perhaps by the soft sentiments of the damsels whose eyes had been dazzled by gilt bands and epaulets. The Somerset never cast anchor again in the pleasant haven of Provincetown. From time to time came rumors of her doings on the south shore.

One morning early in Nov., 1778, the report was 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 the town, and from that eminence the English ships were soon descried, the Somerset among them, driving before the freshening northeast wind under all the canvas that could be carried. They were evidently striving to weather the Cape by a close tack in their haste to reach Boston bay, where the French fleet was reported to have made harbor. The lowering skies in the northeast grew black and portentious with danger. The sea tossed its great white-caps in air and the surf rolled over the outer bars in ominous fashion. The Somerset found herself on a lee shore, in more danger than she had ever been from the guns of her enemies. She struggled to weather the Cape. She "missed stays." The merciless wind beat upon her and wrought havoc with her sails. The billows broke over her. The incoming current of the tide seized her. She drifted helplessly in the trough and struck upon the outer bar. A shout went up from the watchers on the hill. They knew they would suffer no more from the depredations of the Somerset. The beach was soon black with people from the neighboring towns. The man-of-war lay fast on the bar, a half mile from the shore, flying signals and firing guns of distress. Her sister ships could not aid her. Though the people on the beach were enemies, yet, like true men of Cape Cod, they would have gone to her relief, but there were no life-boats at hand in those days. For hours the Somerset pounded upon the bar, and the blinding seas broke over her. Her boats were washed away, crushed like egg-shells and tossed in fragments on the shore. Her spars came crashing down from aloft. A score or two of her men were swept from the rigging, in which they had sought refuge and disappeared in the green sea. Gun after gun was run through the ports and magazines of solid shot thrown overboard to lighten the ship. Finally at high tide, a succession of great waves lifted the frigate from the bar, bore her over the intervening shoals and landed her, a dismantled wreck, high upon the beach. The next day a detatchment of militia marched down from Truro, took posession of the wreck and made prisoners of the captain and crew in the name of the Commonwealth. Colonel Doane, of Wellfleet, was put in charge of the frigate, and under Capt. Enoch Hallett, of Yarmouth, the prisoners were marched to Barnstable and thence to Boston, where there was much jubilation over the disaster. Capt. Aurey was fortunate enough to secure an exchange as prisoner of war.

According to the account of General Joseph Otis, the commander of the forces of the country, there were riotous proceedings at the wreck and some lively scrimmages between

the Provincetown and Truro men over the division of the spoils. This is denied by some of the local accounts, but it is certainly not strange that after years of pillage and impoverishment, the Cape people felt like doing a little plundering in return when such a good opportunity presented itself. After a while the general Court appointed a sheriff to take charge of the wreck, and rewarded the salvors. Under the direction of the Board of War everything of value was stripped from the ship. The guns remaining on board were removed and utilized in the fortifications at Gloucester and on the coast of Maine. The small arms, ammunition and stores of every description were devoted to the use of the Continental troops. When the wreck had been abandoned by the authorities the local wreckers took her in hand again. They wrenched off her chain plates; they tore up her decks for fire-wood; they pried her timbers apart to get at her iron bolts; then they set fire to the hull; but her heavy wooden walls which had for so many years withstood the stress of storm and battle, could only be charred by the flames. Finally, in the course of years, the drifting sands charitably buried the remains of the old frigate.

DEAD MEN'S HOLLOW.

The approach to the scene of the wreck is through the most barren and desolate tract imaginable. After leaving the wooded hills at the rear of the town one comes upon a region of great sand dunes and gullies, where in the wild winter nights the gales play fantastic freaks with the topography. The hills here at least are not everlasting. They are often shifted in a season and deep gulches dug at their base. Ravines are choked up, towering terraces of sand piled up across the valleys, and all the features of the landscape jumbled together by the wind like the toys of a fretful child. No trace of vegetation can be seen except an occasional batch of sinewy beach-grass, whose long tufts, whisked by the breeze, describe curious circles in the sand as though drawn by a pair of compasses. Here and there the yellow waste of sand is disfigured by an upturned strata of the black subsoil with projecting stumps and roots of trees that flourished centuries ago before the ocean of sand had buried everything beneath it. Trudging over this barren waste and through Dead Men's Hollow, where several of the Somerset's crew are said to have been buried, and about which many ghostly stories are told, we come to an ancient wreck.

A week or two since only a few black heads of the timbers of the frigate projected above the beach, but within a few days the sand has been dug rapidly away by the combined efforts of the waves and the shovels of the relic-hunters, and the outlines of the hull are becoming more plainly visible. There seems to be no question as to the identity of the wreck. All accounts and traditions agree as to the location. During the early part of the century the old hulk was partly uncovered several times, and was always regarded as the wreck of the Somerset. Certainly no merchant ship of those days had such ponderous timbers of live-oak so closely wedged together, with such heavy outside planking and inside sheathing. Several apertures on the lower port deck have every resemblance to portholes, and are thought by some to conclusively establish the identity of the wreck. Some sixty feet of the hull is now above the sand, and at the present rate of excavation every timber will soon be visible. The top of

the hull seems to have entirely disappeared, and it is reported that about forty or fifty years ago, when the wreck was partly unearthed by a heavy storm, it was broken off and swept away to another part of the beach. There are many curios in town, said to have been made from pieces of the wreck secured at that time. Old-fashioned flint-lock muskets, reported to have been picked up at different times in the vicinity of the wreck, are also quite numerous. On the stem of the old hulk the letters "XXII" are plainly cut, showing that the vessel was probably of deep draft for those days. The sampson-post, a block of live-oak weighing several tons, has been detached from the wreck, and lies stretched upon the sand, a magnificent piece of wood. By sounding in the sand with an iron rod one of our party managed to find the keelson for the first time, and to trace it for several yards. From its position, and that of the starboard timbers, it is apparent that the hull has been split from stem to stern by the force of the sand and water. The ribs and most of the planking though somewhat charred by fire, are in an excellent state of preservation, and doubtless good for another century or two. Both bolts and tree-nails—a sort of wooden bolt—were used in the fastening of the ship. The bolts are of wrought iron, and being wasted away by rust, look like long, drawn-out sticks of molasses candy. Some of them are nearly a yard in length. The tree-nails are split in a square at the end and the seams packed with oakum, a peculiar practice of ship carpentry said to have been obsolete for generations.

The amateur wreckers and relic-hunters are swarming to the beach from far and near, and seem resolved upon carrying away the whole hull in sections. Sitting here, a dozen rods away, under the lee of the broken bow of the schooner Nimble—the beach hereabouts is strewed with the winter's crop of wreckage—I can see a score or two of men and boys at work on the Somerset with the evident intention of rending her limb from limb. They come to the beach well equipped with saws and axes and shovels, crowbars and wedges. No one among them 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. A similar company was here yesterday and the day before, and a fresh crowd will be here to-morrow and the day after. 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

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a Somerset horseshoe, a common ornament for the watch-chains on the Cape. But certainly, if the old Somerset has any of Shakespeare's solicitude about her bones, she must be extremely uneasy just now. To have one's remains exhumed after a hundred years' sleep and scattered to the four winds is not a pleasing experience. It happens to men on these shores as well as to ships, for none can number the shipwrecked mariners who are sleeping their last sleep in this great catacomb of shifting sands.

Though confessing a share in the depredations on the wreck, I could not help a certain feeling of compassion for the old craft as I lay under the shelter of the Nimble, drowsy and weary with the day's tramp. The afternoon is getting

late. A cloud seems to pass over the sun, and the wind freshens in the west. The sea rolls restlessly as at the change of tide. A few drops of rain patter on the weather-stained bulwarks of the Nimble. The relic-hunters gather up their tools and trophies and disappear over the bluff. Now they are gone, the shattered broadside of the Somerset stands out more prominently against the sky, and I can see through the grim portholes the white dash of the breakers on the outer bar. The sun sinks behind the heavy clouds in the west, and as darkness falls, the gathering storm sweeps down the beach and whirls in its path blinding eddies of sand. I lean back under the shelter of the schooner's bow, and wonder what strange mirage lifts the frowning bulwarks of the Somerset above the beach. Certainly in the indistinct light her hull seems something more than a mass of wreckage. The outlines of the bow and the shear of the taffrail to the high, old-fashioned stern can be clearly traced. Overhead there is a dim and shadowy semblance of masts and spars and running gear. As the new moon peeps for a moment through a rift in the clouds there appears to come a flash of polished steel through the open ports. By this time great seas are rolling up the beach and surging about the wooden walls of the Somerset. The night grows weird and wild. Was that a light upon the port bow of the old frigate, or but the phosphorescence of the sea? Was that the booming of a gun or but the thunder of the surf? There comes a ringing of bells, a boatswain's pipe to quarters. Who are these strange men who come shuffling over the bluff from Dead Men's Hollow? A hurried tramp of feet upon the decks, a peopling of the shrouds with ghostly seamen, the loosening and sheeting home of the sails, the bracing of the yards, the creaking of the cordage, the flaunting of a red flag with St. George's cross upon it, the wild hurrah of four hundred throats, the flashing of cannon, the boom of broadsides, the fumes of gunpowder.

At this critical juncture I awoke. My friend stood near me, taking some smoking shells from his breech-loader, with which he had been practicing on the sea-gulls. He said it was time we were starting for home. There had been no storm; the sun was sinking in splendor and the peaked hills were casting gaunt shadows on the beach. 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.

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Received from the Secretary of the Admiralty, Whitehall, London.

The following letter was received from the Secretary of the Admiralty by one of our interested citizens, giving reliable data regarding the Somerset:

ADMIRALTY, S. W.
28th May, 1886.

SIR: In reply to your letter of the 12th instant, asking for information respecting the British Man-of-War "Somerset," which was wrecked off Cape Cod in 1778, I am commanded by my Lord's Commissioners of the Admiralty to inform you as follows, viz:

The "Somerset"—3d rate—64 guns, was laid down to build in H. M. Dockyard at Chatham on 5th May, 1746, launched on 18 July, 1748, and fitted as a Guard Ship. She appears to have been employed as a Guard Ship and on Home Service until 1774, except during the time she was under repairs at Chatham, apparently between 1768 and 1770.

She left England in October, 1774 for the North American Station. She returned to England in 1776 and appears to have been fitted again as a Guard Ship. She left England in March, 1777 and was lost on Cape Cod on the 2d or 3d November, 1778.

I am Sir,
Your obedient servant,
EVAN MACGREGOR.