

GOTTS ISLAND, MAINE

Jane M. Holmes
Ellsworth, Maine
February 8, 1953

In 1940 when my husband and I went to live on Gotts Island, many people spoke of our venture as pioneering. In the three years that we lived there, I often contrasted our life—with our comfortable farm house, running water, stoves and a powerboat—with the isolation and primitive living conditions of the first settlers, and took off my hat to the pioneers.

I have given a great deal of thought to those early Gotts and have read all the material I could find on the first Daniel Gott, the history of the island and of the nearby mainland. I have talked with some of the older residents of the island, and from it all I have pieced together a picture of the island's settlement and development.

Gotts Island lies one mile south of Bass Harbor Light at the end of Bass Harbor Bar, but it is three miles from the landing at Bass Harbor to the only real harbor at the island. When the French visited Mt. Desert in 1604 and named it and many surrounding islands, it was heavily wooded and uninhabited, though there is evidence that bands of Indians visited it and camped there to fish and clam. The French called it "Petite Plaisance," but in 1688, when Sir Edmund Andros took a census of settlers from Castine to Calais, we find it corrupted to "Pettit Pleasure." This census, a copy of which is still in existence at the Massachusetts Historical Society, records sixty-two people living in this vast area, and on Pettit Pleasure it lists Lowry and wife, Hind's wife and four children, English. It can only be presumed that Lowry and Hind were spending the summer fishing. Many lumbermen and fishermen from villages far to the westward are known to

have camped on the shores of Mt. Desert and nearby islands during the mild weather, but no permanent settlement was made until much later. The first permanent settlement of Mt. Desert Island seems to have been in 1762, a year before the arrival of settlers in the Union Bay Settlement, later Ellsworth. Daniel Gott, Sr. came to what is now Southwest Harbor from Gloucester with his wife and five of his seven children. His first child had died in infancy, and his son John did not join in the family migration. His daughters Rachel, Elizabeth and Margaret had married three Richardson brothers and James Richardson settled at the head of Somes Sound; Elizabeth and Steven went to the west side of Bass Harbor after a year or so at Somes Sound; Margaret and Thomas built a house at Bass Harbor on the eastern side. Abraham Somes had settled the same year at Somesville. Daniel's daughter Patience had also settled at Somes Sound with her husband, Stephen Gott with their three children. Three more children were born to them in the next ten years, and then Stephen returned to Massachusetts, where he immediately remarried. No formal divorce is recorded. From 1772 to 1776, Patience seems to have managed alone with her six children, but in 1776 she married Andrew Tarr and moved to his home in Manset. The fifth child, Daniel Jr., settled at the head of Somes Sound with his wife Hanna and their infant son in 1763, seeming to have followed the rest of the family a year later. In 1785 he built a house at Bass Harbor which he sold to a nephew, moving in 1786 to what was then known as Little Placentia. In 1789 for eighteen pounds' lawful money, he obtained a deed to Little Placentia and the smaller island, Bar Island, from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This is the earliest deed of this area.

By 1786, when Daniel made the move to this lonely island, he and his wife Hanna had ten children, ranging in age from twenty-three to one year. An eleventh was born on

the island the next month,, and the twelfth and last a year later. Daniel and Hanna and at least ten children lived in a one-room cabin, the foundation of which is still discernable. The eldest son was already married and living at Beach Hill, but the second son made the move with his father, and the following fall brought his bride to the island. The third son married soon after and settled on Bar Island, now known as Little Gotts Island. Daniel himself and his sons Charles and David were drowned near Gotts Island in 1814, but there bodies were recovered and buried in the little burying ground on Gotts Island.

What made Daniel and his wife move from Bass Harbor to this isolated island? There were only sixty-two families on Mt. Desert, so it could not have been crowded. With his large and growing family, Gotts Island must have soon been relatively as populous as Mt. Desert. Daniel was a farmer and a fisherman, and he and his sons must have done an heroic job of clearing the woods and plowing the land. One can only be thankful that of his twelve children, eight were sons. His son Nathaniel was cursed with twelve daughters and a lone son, which must have been difficult in a pioneer community. Hanna must have been a resourceful woman to have gone to the island with no neighbor women at all, just her children and her son's seventeen-year-old bride for company.

When Daniel and his sons were drowned, his wife Hanna was sixty years old and her children all grown, but Hanna was evidently lonely, and seven years later married Daniel's widower cousin, Peter Gott, who was living on Swans Island, whose family were also scattered. Peter obligingly moved to Gotts Island, where he lived until Hanna's death, returning to Swans Island to live with his children. David's wife, at the time of his drowning in July 1814, had a four-year-old daughter and two-year-old twin girls. Her only son had died in infancy in March. She moved to Blue Hill, where she raised her

family alone. Charles had married twice. When he was drowned he left his wife with three young step-daughters and five children of her own, ranging in age from nine to one year. She moved to Sedgewick with all eight children, where I hope she had relatives to help her.

The cabin was built on a slope looking out toward the south, and must have been protected from the desperate northwest winds of winter by the virgin woods, but there was little to break the southeast winds of fall which can lash that shore. Daniel must have had a sailboat built at one of the yards which sprang up on Mt. Desert Island, or built his own, but from November to April there must have been weeks at a time when it was impossible to reach Bass Harbor, and the only communication with the outside world, even from Mt. Desert, was by vessel. In 1777 a road was laid out to Trenton, but was not made passable to vehicles until 1800, and the first bridge to the mainland was not built until 1837. Until 1821 the nearest post office was Ellsworth, which was most easily reached from Gotts Island by sailing west of Mt. Desert and up the Union River, a long trip.

Early records give us little picture of life on the island except that it must have been religious, for in the summer following the Gotts' arrival, the six youngest children were all baptized on the island on July 28. It must have been difficult to arrange this as, at that time there was no minister on Mt. Desert Island, and communication between Gotts and Mt. Desert must not have been very regular. The minister seems to have come from Rockport, Mass., and it must have been a great event in this lonely community. The records show that the children of Peter gott had been baptized the day before at Swans Island, and Daniel's and Hanna's eldest son Daniel and his wife Deborah brought their

year-old daughter Suzanna from Beach Hill, considerable of a distance, so that she could be baptized with her young aunts and uncles on Gotts Island.

So in spite of these hardships, Daniel and Hanna seem to have kept communication with their relatives on Mt. Desert. They managed to get news of the minister coming for the baptism, Daniel is listed as taking the oath of allegiance to the new United States Government at a meeting at Abraham Somes' at Somesville, and Hanna and her son Nathaniel signed the original covenant of the First Congregational Church of Mt. Desert at a meeting in Southwest Harbor in 1792. Daniel joined the same church in 1796.

Some of Daniel's granddaughters married and stayed on the island with their husbands. And people moved from other islands through the years. In 1890 Charles Harding who, with his wife Mary, raised sheep on Duck Island, was burned out one bitter February night and went to Southwest Harbor for shelter. But Charles Harding could not bear living on the mainland and soon moved to Gotts Island with his wife and married nephew.

Gradually Gotts Island became populated so that in the late 1800s there were over one hundred people living there. Fishing and lobstering provided a livelihood, supplemented by subsistence farming. Most families had a cow and a garden, and the island people owned a horse together. There was a Methodist church, and the Seacoast Mission supplied preachers who were brought to the island on Saturday night staying over til Monday noon. In the winter they seldom appeared, but almost every summer Sunday there was a minister. The Methodist church had a large, well-equipped basement with a well in it, and Gotts Island was famous throughout the islands for its strawberry

festivals and church socials. There was a one-room schoolhouse from the first to the ninth grad. The teacher boarded with various island families, and the constant stream of new ones gave a steady supply of wives for the young men of the community. (Sometimes, of course, the teacher was a man, as in the case of Omar Tapley). The older living inhabitants tell of a lyceum held in the schoolhouse on winter evenings, which seems to have been a discussion group for men. Many of the young men of the community went on to the academy at Bucksport from the grammar school.

There was, of course, no doctor in the community, but there seems to have always been a midwife. A dory, known as the doctor's boat, was kept ready on the north shore for emergencies. A mile row, a mile walk into McKinley, a drive by horse and wagon to rouse the doctor, and then all the trip to do over again! Doctors were not numerous on Mt. Desert, but Dr. Spear, who came to Tremont in 1846, Dr. Neal, who came in 1867, and Dr. Philips, who practiced in Southwest Harbor from 1887 until his death, made many trips to Gotts Island when the island women thought a case was beyond them. The graveyard testifies to several deaths in childbirth and several infant burials, but not in any greater numbers than on the mainland during the same time.

With the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Mt. Desert Island became famous for its summer visitors, and Gotts Island began to have its share, though on a more modest scale. Several cottages were built on the outer side of the island, and a few of the village families took summer boarders. In the early 1900's a Miss Peterson and her mother came from Philadelphia to spend the summer. They came several summers and then, one fall, Mrs. Peterson was too ill to make the return trip to Philadelphia, so they rented a village house for the winter. Mrs. Peterson died that winter and her daughter

decided to make Gotts Island her home. That summer she had a house built on Gotts Island Head, a promontory of huge rocks jutting out to sea. Her house was rather a city house of two stories and a porch. She had a beautiful rose garden surrounded by a stone wall to shelter it from the wind and sea. During the winter she was forced to continually wash her windows because of the spray from the waves breaking on the rocks in front of her house. She had her furniture and beautiful china and silver sent from Philadelphia. Here she lived all year around from 1910 to 1925, with occasional trips to Bar Harbor to visit relatives. She often entertained the island people, and is said to have had seven-course dinners which she cooked and served herself. My husband remembers going to her house as a boy with the village children and the younger married set for parties of charades and games. By this time there was a store and post office in the Philip Moore ell, and Miss Peterson used to push the wheelbarrow the mile and a half of woods road to the village to get her mail and groceries three times a week on mail days. She seems to have entered wholeheartedly into the island life, but being an Episcopalian, she was unhappy with the Methodist Church. So in 1916 she had an Episcopal chapel built. She called it St. Columba's Chapel, and at its dedication Bishop Lawrence, Bishop Manning and the Bishop of Maine were all present. Many famous ministers took services while summering at Bar Harbor and Northeast Harbor. This introduction of a second church on the island divided the island people. Some joined the Episcopal Church to please Miss Peterson, but some who were just as friendly with her stuck staunchly to the Methodist Church and, I am sorry to say, were belligerent about it. Miss Peterson herself was heard to say toward the end of her life that she thought the introduction of a second church had been a mistake, and I must say I agree with her.

One snowy day in February, 1925, she came to the village to get mail and supplies. She told Mrs. Moore, the postmistress, that she was cold and was going home to build up a good fire. When the men were out lobstering the next morning off Gotts Island Head, to their amazement they saw that her house was no longer there! They returned at once to the little harbor and went through the woods, where they found the house in ashes, only the tool house and privy unharmed, and Miss Peterson's cat wandering in the woods. An immediate and thorough search of the ruins revealed only enough bones to fill a kitchen match box. There has been much speculation through the years as to the cause of the fire. Miss Peterson always kept a lamp burning in the window as a guide to any fisherman caught out late, and some thought her cat had knocked over the lamp. Or she could have built up too big a fire and set fire to the chimney. There is a grim tale that someone from the village killed her, stole her silver and set fire to the house. And they are even willing to name names. The only support to this theory is that no silver was ever found, even melted down. Every year someone digs about in the ruins to see if they can uncover it.

St. Columba's Chapel still stands, in some disrepair, and every few summers services are held there. The Methodist Church was burned in 1930 when the house next to it caught fire.

In 1927 came the real end of the village. For some time the young people of the island had objected to the isolation of island life. They wanted movies, cars, telephones and electric lights. Also, the economic advantage of living on the island had diminished. In the days of sail being so much nearer to the fishing grounds had given Gotts Island fisherman a distinct advantage over fishermen from the harbor. Philip Moore had a weir

between the islands, so there was always plenty of lobster bait, and there were enough men carrying lobster to bring a buyer to the island periodically. But with the advent of the gas engine the island became a twenty-minute run from Bass Harbor, and harbor men were at their traps almost as early as island men. Also, the island had always had one great disadvantage. The only harbor, known as the Pool, is dry at low tide. This meant moving one's boat sometimes in the middle of the night to make it available in the early morning, and then sleeping with one ear to the wind so as to move it again if a gale struck on the side where it was temporarily moored. Perhaps nothing would have come of the idea of moving if Clarence Harding's house and barn had not burned one rainy night. But Clarence decided not to rebuild and moved with his family to Bernard. That began the exodus. The Babbages moved to Portland (Mrs. Babbage had always hoped the island would sink!). And finally the Moores, who had been very successful with summer boarders, bought the Davis house in McKinley to run as a hotel. This took the store, the postmistress, the weir and, as Mrs. Moore was the only one willing to board the teacher, the school as well. The heart was gone from island life, and by the fall of 1927 the last family was gone. To round out history the last to go was the family of Berlin Gott, great-great-grandson of Daniel. So ended the continuous community of Gotts Island.

But the island is still there, still beautiful, still used and enjoyed. Summer people have bought many of the old houses and built a few new ones. Gotts, Hardings, Moores and Trasks all come frequently to visit, and most of those who have died have been buried in the cemetery on the hillside. One Gott has returned and still lives there alone. Montell Gott left the Light Service, where he was stationed at Duck Island, and, separated from his wife, came back to the island in 1928. He left again in 1933 on a

romantic journey with an Irish girl who was working for a summer family, and was gone for five years. Since 1938 he has lived alone on the island and is weathering the winter gales now.

Of Gotts Island's beauty and charm I have said little, but its combination of woods and fields, rocks and sea, makes it unforgettable. Several summers ago Mr. Samuel E. Morrison of Seal Cove found an old travel book, published around 1860, which told of the glories of the West for five hundred pages, but ended with the lines, "I have seen many wonderful and beautiful places, but none of them compares with Gotts Island, Maine."