



HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

First European Settlers/Invaders on Block Island

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Our modern world is one of specialization. This is clearly seen in considering the alphabetical list of medical specialists which starts with allergist and concludes with vascular surgeon. The 17th Century was radically different. Where the amounts of detailed knowledge were limited, the range of skillsets required for daily life overwhelms the modern reader. Those very first European settlers/invaders

landing on Block Island in 1661 needed competence in falling trees, harnessing oxen, birthing children, cooking, making clothing, and basic construction. The boundaries of these individual and collective systems are difficult to discern. The historian Richard Judd wrote, "New England families were immersed in a multilayered livelihood made up of commercial exchange, subsistence production, neighborhood barter, domestic crafts, and seasonal nonfarm labor, all proportioned to the soils and resources at hand."¹ For Yankee settlers, whether in the Berkshires or on Cape Cod, multiple skills meant focus could not only shift with the seasons but also with economic conveyances. Or as Judd wrote, "In an environment riddled with uncertainty, multiple sources of revenue offered a modicum of security."² While resourcefulness is a Yankee trait seen in all the settlement of New England, it would be doubly so on Block Island.

A key feature of the geography of the island, which differed greatly from Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, was the absence of a natural harbor. The original settlers envisioned a growing community centered around a manmade harbor. The Great Salt Pond, again a brackish water feature separated from the ocean by a thin sandbar, enticed these first settlers with visions of a bustling town and harbor. However, repeated efforts to create a permanent breach in the sand bar separating the pond from the ocean were unsuccessful. While nearby Nantucket in the late eighteenth century was not only the whaling capital of the world but also one of the richest communities in the United States, in contrast Block Islanders scratched out a living utilizing only the resources at hand. Skillsets in running households, farming and fishing operations were refined and honed over the generations.

Block Island was not unique for seventeenth century New England. It is not only radically different from the twenty-first century, but also from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The historian James Deetz argues that it is easy for modern Americans to think of seventeenth century New Englanders has just like us, just quainter. He wrote, "Were we to confront a seventeenth century Anglo-American we would experience a sense of culture shock as profound as if we had encountered a member of any other of the world's exotic cultures."³

The motives of these colonists can be summed up in a one word: land. In feudal Europe political power was based on land ownership which started with the monarch at the top who passed down allotments of property for loyalty to lords and vassals. For the average peasant making up eighty-five percent of the population, the concept of owning land was about as likely as a trip to the moon. The New



The oldest known gravestone in the Island's Main Cemetery, from which one has an amazing view of the Great Salt Pond. Genealogical researchers from all over the world travel to this graveyard, and others on the island, in tracking down past descendants.



World offered a host of hardships including death by drowning crossing the Atlantic, death by hostile natives, and death by disease contracted in the confines of a ship's hull but, on the other side, individual land ownership existed. One historian wrote, "The lure of the possessive pronoun was the defining attraction of the New World."⁴ Block Island had been surveyed and a plat map divided the island into four types of land use. These included woodlots in the southern portion of the island and planting lots on the northern part of the island, portions of which had already been cleared by the Mannisseans for horticulture. The last two uses were the smallest and both were centered around the Great Salt Pond, these being devoted to meadows and home lots. Each of the sixteen families that arrived on island in 1661 (either a settlement or invasion depending on your point of view) received one of each allotment devoted to a specific land use. With a range of labor from the settlers, African and native slaves and beasts of burden, Block Island witnessed rapid environmental transformation with ax, plow and hoe.

It is daunting to consider how these first pioneers on Block Island viewed the natural world around them. Where today we take beach walks to see fishing, kite-surfing and kids making sandcastles, they saw an environment trying to kill them. These transplants from England and Scotland encountered new weather phenomena such as days-long northeasters, thunderstorms and hurricanes. Of these early New Englanders one author wrote, "To them, Nature was no long-lost love, to be courted and admired at every opportunity. To them, indeed, she frequently presented herself in the guise of antagonist."⁵ Unpredictable currents, uncharted shoals, and violent storms only added to the isolation they experienced in leaving not only Europe behind, but also the small New England settlements on the mainland from which their organized invasion of Block Island began. At a time before such modern-day notions as lactose intolerance and carpal tunnel syndrome, it is difficult to overestimate the physical and psychological hardness of these women and men in the first decades of settlement. Farming required the labor of both men and women. One author summed up this backbreaking labor with, "men and women moving through the mire, bending over about six thousand times a day, making holes in the crowns of the hills 'with their fingers or a small stick' for the reception of the corn seeds."⁶ One island historian commented on this notion in the 1950s, making the point that for Americans, thoughts of pioneering immediately drifted to sod houses on the prairies of Kansas not coastal New England. She wrote of Block Island, "Pioneering had been just as noble on this island (of) sea-grit."⁷ For two centuries the pioneering life would only vary in minor ways in comparison of what would take place when the first tourists arrived on island.

Next month's issue will consider the individual experience of one of these settlers/invasers, Dermot Ross. Born in Scotland, he was captured in 1650 at the Battle of Dunbar and sold as an indentured servant (or prisoner of war, again depending on your point of view) to an iron works in the Massachusetts Bay colony. He would anglicize his name and land on Block Island in 1661 as Tormut Rose.



The Block Island Historical Society, founded in 1942, placed historical markers around the island in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This marker, located along Crescent Beach just to the north of the Beached Restaurant, marks several violent events in the history of Block Island. This includes John Endicott's attacking the Mannisseans in retaliation of the killing of the trader John Oldham (which sparked the larger Pequot War, 1636-1637) and the French invasion and plundering of the island in 1689.

¹Judd, *Second Nature*, 84.

²Ibid., 85.

³James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 156.

⁴Richard W. Judd, *Second Nature: An Environmental History of New England*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 46.

⁵John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), PAGE # NEEDED.

⁶Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1999), PAGE # NEEDED.

⁷Maize Rose, *Block Island Scrapbook*, 344.

OUR MISSION: To protect and enhance the environmental quality of the Great Salt Pond, including its shorelines and wetlands, and to promote appropriate and productive uses of the Pond's resources by residents, visitors and local businesses.

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