

HISTORY OF THE GREAT SALT POND SERIES

A Settler Lands on Block Island in 1661– Dermot Ross becomes Tormut Rose

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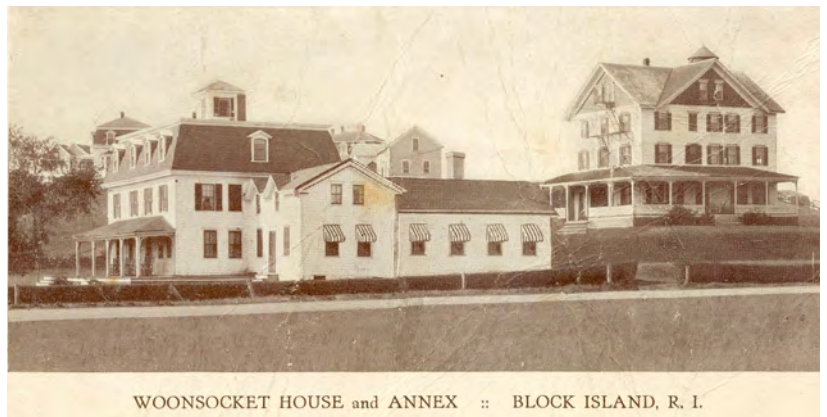
The transition from indigenous control of Block Island to that of the European settlers/inlanders in 1661 presents several challenges to historians. It is easy to get boxed into thinking of the world composed of the over-

simplified classifications of people as simply indigenous and Europeans. The diversity in world views, languages and customs on both sides of the Atlantic is staggering. Oversimplifying the diversity of populations on either continent invites whitewashing on the complexities of cultures in lumping divergent groups together with modern terminology that these historical actors might not even be able to comprehend, such as Caucasian or Native American.

The blanket term “Native American” today encompasses over 500 nations, ranging from the Hopi of the American southwest to the Seminole in the southeast. To this point, those groups migrating from Europe saw themselves as completely unique from their European neighbors. The harsh world, on both sides of the Atlantic, resulted in thinking of “us” verses the rest of the hostile world (which included man and beast alike.) During the seventeenth century, in the area referred to as the British Isles today, “Irish” and “Scottish” were not only distinct from each other, but were very, very different from each other.

Oversimplification can result if the historian only focuses on a single factor, whether these be based on culture or economics. A myopic fascination of the seventeenth century in New England can lead to streamlining to the point of only seeing the outer world in such terms as “red verses white” or “oppressed verses oppressor.” Closer examination of one original settler who landed on the island in 1661 yields a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of race within what we would call Europe today.

Dermot Ross was born in 1632 in the Scottish Highlands. He fought against the English invasion of Scotland and, after the Scottish forces lost badly, and he was captured at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650, he was sold as an indentured servant to an iron works in Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹ Transported on a vessel named the *Sarah and John* to Boston, along with other prisoners, these Scots labored as iron workers in Braintree, Massachusetts starting around 1652. In today’s parlance, one could argue that the term “prisoner of war” would be more fitting a concept than “indentured servant.” One historian wrote,



Some of the descendants of Tormut Rose still reside on Block Island. One descendant of Tormut was Gideon Rose, who in 1820 constructed a small home on the corner of Bridgegate Square. Gideon’s son, A.J. Rose, added onto this original structure in the 1870s to construct what was known as the Woonsocket House. In 1945, the Block Island Historical Society purchased the property for its mission of preserving the history of this unique New England community.

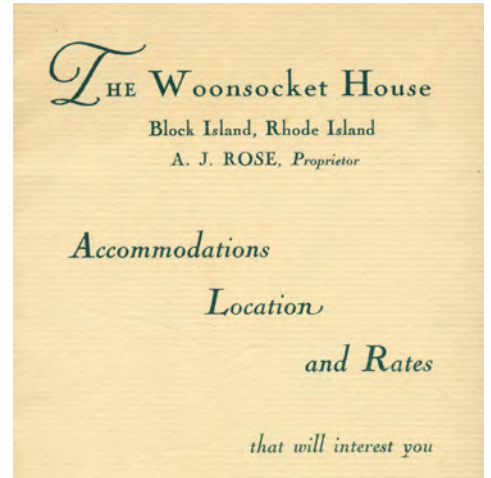


“During his years of bondage the servant was in effect a slave with no real rights. He had to come into a strange world as a solitary individual with no family ties to sustain or protect him.”² Dermot Ross after capture by the English enemy and then shipped across the Atlantic to labor in an iron works in an English colony anglicized his name to Tormut Rose. After nearly a decade of labor Rose received his freedom and would be among the first wave of English and Scottish to land on Block Island in 1661.³

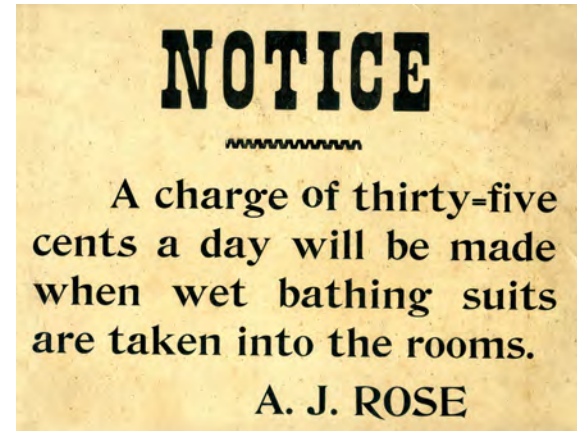
Piecing together what daily life would have been like for these first pioneers is difficult due to the lack of primary sources in comparison to the centuries to follow. One island historian, on reflecting on the difficulty of fully understanding seventeenth century Block Island wrote, “Many, many signposts of early history have been lost.”⁴ And Block Island was not unique for seventeenth century New England 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 as just like us, just more quaint. 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.”⁵

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 man-made 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.

For the Europeans arriving in 1661, including the many descendants in the Rose family, skillsets would be refined and honed over the generations. One object in particular, a wooden vessel, symbolizes the passing down of knowledge from generation to generation taking place in the colonial era on this speck of coastal New England. The double masted Block Island double-ender embodies the environmental factors of this topography. The evolution of this vessel’s design, and the generations of Block Islanders who handcrafted and sailed said vessels, will be the topic of next month’s article.



The front cover of a tourist brochure, circa 1900, of the Woonsocket House. This represents just one of the livelihoods of the descendants of Tormut. In the main island cemetery today rests over 140 members of the Rose family.



An sign that hung in the Woonsocket House reminding guests about swimsuit rentals, which includes the name of the proprietor A.J. Rose.

¹Martha Ball, interview with Block Island Historical Society, January 5, 2001, Block Island Historical Society Oral History Collection, Block Island, RI.

²David Freeman Hawke, *Everyday Life in Early America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 123.

³Martha Ball, interview with Block Island Historical Society, January 5, 2001, Block Island Historical Society Oral History Collection, Block Island, RI.

⁴Mazie Rose, Block Island Scrapbook, 219.

⁵James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, (New York: DoubleDay, 1996), 156.

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