

TALES OF BURIED TREASURE AT PORT MOUTON

For many years there have been legends and rumors of buried treasure on the islands in Port Mouton Bay, and at various times people have dug small pits in search of it, on Spectacle Island, Massacre Island and on Port Mouton Island. Tales (and pits) like these are to be found all along the Nova Scotia coast. Probably all of them have their ultimate origin in the story of Captain Kidd, whose treasure was actually buried on Gardiner's Island in Block Island Sound (off the north-east tip of Long Island, New York State.) Kidd's treasure was recovered from Gardiner's Island, ^{in 1699} and produced in court at Kidd's trial in London; but the affair excited every fisherman in New England. It was believed that only part of Kidd's loot was buried on Gardiner's Island, and that the rest was still hidden somewhere along the coast. Kidd was arrested in Boston, hence these notions were particularly strong amongst the fishermen of Cape Cod.

When people from Cape Cod began to settle on the western coast of Nova Scotia in 1759-60 undoubtedly they carried the old legend with them. The tales got a new boost during the American Revolution, when Yankee privateers harried the Nova Scotia coast and made bold use of the uninhabited or sparsely settled harbors between Halifax and Cape Sable. Port Mouton, inhabited by a handful of poor fishermen, was a favorite rendezvous for Yankee privateers watching the port of Liverpool a few miles away. Here they brought some of their prizes for looting at their leisure. This was well known to the people of Liverpool (see Perkins' Diary). From time to time British warships of patrol looked into Port Mouton Bay, and on various occasions there was fighting in the anchorage. Thus it is possible that Yankee privateers hid some of their loot on the islands or even on the shore of the bay.

However, the chief tales or legends of buried treasure at Port Mouton ~~can~~ can be traced to two incidents, both of which are recorded in Simeon Perkins' diary. Here they are:-

In January, ~~1780~~ 1780, a party of recruits from Newfoundland, belonging to the Loyal Nova Scotia Regiment, and in charge of Captain George Henry Monk, were storm-driven to the west of their destination (Halifax) and their ship was wrecked on Spectacle Island in Port Mouton Bay. The only safe anchorage in the bay lies just inside Spectacle Island, and probably they were seeking shelter from an easterly gale when their ship struck. Those who got ashore, including Monk, must have suffered terribly on the island before they were discovered and brought to Liverpool. Certainly four of them perished and were buried there. See Perkins' Diary, Jan. 5 and Jan. 13, 1780.

In March, 1782, the Liverpool schooner "Ranger", Captain Elisha Hopkins, put into Port Mouton for shelter. She was on a homeward voyage from Bermuda, where Captain Hopkins had sold his cargo, and he had on board the sum of £200 in cash. When he anchored inside Port Mouton Island, Hopkins was discovered by a Boston privateer under Captain Morgan, which apparently had been hiding under the shelter of Spectacle Island, farther up the bay. Hastily Captain Hopkins put off with his money in a boat, and buried the money on Port Mouton Island. It probably took some time for the Yankee to beat up the wind to where the "Ranger" lay, and apparently he did not observe the passage of the boat. And apparently Hopkins made no attempt to sail out of the bay, preferring the risk of capture to the risk of the storm outside. The Yankees put a prize crew aboard the "Ranger", and when the weather moderated they sailed for Boston. They put Hopkins ashore at Cape Negro, to make his way home as best he could. It did not take him long to get passage in a fishing shallop as far as Port Mouton, where he sent word to Liverpool. An armed party from Liverpool sailed around to Port Mouton, picked up Hopkins, and recovered the money from Port Mouton Island -- then known as Doggett's Island. See Perkins' Diary, March 13, 14 & 15, 1782.

In 1939 I heard the following story from Wallace Hartlen, merchant, of Milton, Queens County:-

When I was a young lad I was very chummy with Arthur W. Freeman, who later became a sign-painter in Liverpool. His father, Charles "Siah" Freeman, was always talking about buried treasure at Port Mouton. A lot of people had these notions, but "Siah" claimed he had the facts.

Many years before, when he was a young carpenter, "Siah" and Stephen Brown (a half-brother of Eben Brown of Milton) got a job with a contractor's crew, building the wooden lighthouse on Spectacle Island. There were no inhabitants on the island. On a small knoll near the lighthouse site there was a grave amongst the trees. Four trees had brass ringbolts sunk in the wood -- one at each corner of the little clearing where the grave-mound was. Port Mouton people said that at one time, long before, there was a length of ship's hawser rove through these ringbolts, making a sort of fence around the grave. Nobody could remember when the grave was made, or who made it.

As a young man Stephen Brown had been a sailor in Liverpool vessels in the West Indies trade. When he saw this grave he remembered something, a yarn he had heard in the West Indies. He had never put any stock in it, but now he did. On one of his voyages he had met an old negro who said he had sailed in an American privateer in the War of 1812. When Steve mentioned that he came from Liverpool N.S. the old darky said he remembered that coast very well. The privateer had cruised off Liverpool several times. At last a British cruiser showed up and the privateer ran into a bay called Port Mattoon and hid behind an island. The Americans said if the Britisher found them they would put their ship ashore and take to the woods. They had captured quite a bit of money and they decided to hide it. So they put the money into a keg and headed it up. They went ashore on the mainland in a boat. It was a sand beach, right opposite the island where the ship lay, and there was a brook flowing down through the beach from the woods. They carried the keg up the brook a mile or so to a small lake. There was a big tree standing on the shore where the brook flowed out of it, and the water there was deep. They dropped the keg in there. They marked it by the tree and said they would come back for the keg later on when it was safe. The British cruiser was coming in slowly, sounding her way by the main passage. The privateer hoisted sail and slipped out by the other side of the island. The cruiser gave chase, and the chase went on, day after day, to the southward. At last the privateer got into an American port. But after that there were a lot of British warships in those waters and the privateer never got back to Port Mattoon. The darky said he remembered the island well because one of the crew died when they were in there one time before, and they buried him amongst the trees.

Well, that was Steve Brown's story, and the carpenters all laughed and said it was a good yarn and let it go at that. But "Siah" had never forgotten it, and he was always saying we should go to Port Mouton and have a look for that treasure. So one summer about 1905 Arthur and "Siah" and I got a small sailboat and went out around Western Head and into Port Mouton. We landed on Spectacle Island, and not far from the lighthouse, sure enough, we found the grave-mound and the rotten stumps of four trees around it. We sailed over to the beach -- what's now called Wobankek Beach -- and there was the brook. We walked up to the lake. There was a big tree, a yellow birch I think, where the brook came out of the lake. We cut a long pole and poked about in the water. It was deep and black, and the bottom was thick mud. After a while we decided to quit. If there ever had been a keg full of money it must have sunk dear knows how far in that mud.

We hadn't brought much grub with us, so we sailed for home. A storm came up, I remember, and we had to put into the cove at Hunt's Point for shelter. We had a bit of canvas for a tent, so we pitched it on the shore. We had to lay there four days before the sea went down enough to make it safely back to Liverpool.

We ran out of grub and all we could get from the Hunt's Point fishermen was a few herrings. We were starved when we got home.

(Note by T.H.R. Wallace Hartlen, born in 1890, was a reliable informant. I endeavored to check the story with Arthur W. Freeman, then a whimsical old sign-painter of Liverpool. In the main his story agreed. But he added, with some pride, that he once "wrote up" the story for the Liverpool Advance; and he admitted that he had embroidered the original tale of "Siah" and Stephen Brown quite a bit in doing so. Hence I did not bother to take down his account.

Some years after I heard the tale from Wallace Hartlen, Miss Helen Creighton found a similar story at Lunenburg, the informant in her case saying that the treasure was buried near Blue Rocks. See her "Folklore of Lunenburg County, N.S.", pages 10 and 11.

During the 1920's and early 1930's, a Major J.W. Willis operated a summer resort for tourists at Wombamkek Beach, Port Mouton. He used to recite the local legend of buried treasure for the titillation of his guests. His knowledge was imperfect. He confused the genuine legend of French fishermen murdered at Skull Hill and Massacre Island by Indians during the early part of the 17th century; the money buried by "Captain Kidd"; the remains of Loyalist huts still to be seen on the slope above Wombamkek Beach; and mingled them all in one fantastic potpourri.

The late Dr. C.B. Trites of Bridgewater, N.S., formerly a resident of Liverpool, told me of a visit to Spectacle Island in the 1920's. At that time the lightkeeper told him there was a legend of treasure buried on the island, and showed him a rock with one or two mysterious hieroglyphics cut in it.