

J. E. LETSON
ROXBURY HILL
PORT MEDWAY
NOVA SCOTIA

Dec. 3-71

Dr. F. H. Raddall
Liverpool

Dear Dr.:

I have just read a very interesting
book. "Shipwrecks of the Western Hemisphere
1492 to 1825" by R. F. Marx

This gives an account of the wreck of
the ship "Aarona" in 1777 on Sable Island.
and when the survivors got ashore they found
seven Negro women who had been wrecked sixteen
years earlier on a French ship.

I could not find any mention of a wreck
in 1761, but did find the notice of the loss
in 1766 of the ship Minehead and in 1773
and of the ship Sophia, Capt Histington

No doubt there were other losses than those
noted in the sixteen years prior to 1777
and surely the Sable Island was visited
more than once. Why were not the women
found?

Did you ever hear of this tale?

Yours truly,
J. E. Letson

1777
16
1761

December 6, 1971

Mr. J.E.Letson,
Roxbury Hill,
Port Medway, N.S.

Dear Joe:

I have not seen the book by R.F.Marx, and I do not have a complete list of wrecks on Sable Island, by any means. Possibly there was a ship named "Aurora" wrecked there in 1777, but I doubt very much if the survivors found on the island "seven Negro women who had been wrecked sixteen years earlier on a French ship." That means that the French ship was wrecked in 1761.

There is an authentic record of a wreck in the early months of 1761. She was a transport carrying a number of soldiers of the 43rd Regiment from Quebec to Halifax. They were in charge of Colonel (or Major in another account) Elliott of that regiment. They managed to get ashore, and for shelter they built a number of huts from the wreckage. They also salvaged a good deal of stuff, which was left behind in the huts when they were rescued from the island later on. In a paper read before the N.S.Historical Society in 1884, entitled "Ships of War lost on the coast of Nova Scotia and Sable Island during the eighteenth century", S.D.Macdonald stated:- "At Sable Island some years ago a tempest completely removed a sand hummock, exposing to view a number of small houses built from the timbers of a vessel. Those houses were found to contain, besides many articles of ship's furniture, stores put up in boxes, bales of blankets, quantities of military shoes, and among other articles a brass dog collar on which was engraved the name of Major Elliott, 43rd Regiment. It was afterwards ascertained that the transport carrying this regiment to Halifax after the siege of Quebec was wrecked here, but the name was not mentioned."

It is possible that the Negro women in a French ship were wrecked on the island later on in 1761, after Elliott and his men had been rescued. But they could not have remained 16 years without discovery. The government surveyor J.F.W.DesBarres spent a considerable time on the island and around it, taking soundings and measurements for the excellent map of Sable Island which he included in his Atlantic Neptune, published in 1766 and 1767. He showed, in pen-and-wash drawings, pictures of the island in profile from the north and the south, with all the principal sand hills and features named -- "Mount Knight, The Naked Sand Hills, Evans Cliff, Mount ~~K~~uttrell, Gratia Hill, Entrance to Pond, Vale of Misery, Smith's Flagstaff, Ram Head, " etc. In short, he and his men covered the island very thoroughly.

Another British surveyor, Captain Montresor, also covered the island very thoroughly shortly after DesBarres, for in 1768 he published a map of his own, and gave names of his own to the island features and the various huts and camps his men used or found there:- "Sand Hills, South Tent, Dumplin Hills, Last Inlet, Riches House, The House, Brandy Point, Smoky Tent, Seal Tent, New Tent, Irish Tent."

If there were any castaways on the island at that time he or DesBarres would have found them.

While the island was not inhabited continuously until the establishment of the first lifesaving station in 1801, Sable was visited frequently by fishermen hunting seals and walrus, and by various sea-scavengers hoping to find loot from wrecks. These people sometimes built huts and wintered there, which may account for some of the "tents" and "houses" noted by Montresor.

In 1774 Governor Legge of Nova Scotia "gave permission to Michael Flanigan to reside on the Isle of Sable, together with four other persons he should take with him, on condition that they should help any who might be shipwrecked there."

So Marx's story about the Negro women doesn't fit the facts in any way.

I have a blueprint copy of the map made by Donald Johnson years ago, showing the names and positions of known wrecks all around the island, together with dates. I cannot find "Aurora" on it. However Johnson's list is by no means complete or accurate, even though it is based on a map made by Superintendent Boutillier of the lifesaving establishment many years before.

The story of Sable Island before the year 1801 is largely a mystery, with some light here and there, like the wreck and subsequent rescue of Elliott and his men. It's a mystery that has fascinated me ever since I spent a year there myself, half a century ago.

Drop in, some time, and I'll show you some snapshots of the island in my time there, and one or two interesting relics.

Sincerely,