

Summer 1988

## Mail Story

Albert "Cap" Collins

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Story: "Mail Story"

Storyteller: Albert "Hap" Collins

Town: Blue Hill, ME

NA 2144 V52

Collector: Jeff Todd Titon

Date: Summer 1988

In this story, Albert "Hap" Collins talks about his maternal grandfather who worked as a mail carrier, delivering mail from the mainland to Long Island in Blue Hill Bay (depicted in the map at the start of the video clip). Collins' grandfather moved to the Blue Hill area in the mid-19th century and this story likely took place sometime in late 1800s. The story clearly demonstrates the difficulty of living on one of Maine's many coastal islands then and now. The difficulties faced in even a short boat ride like the one described by Collins helps explain why the entire population of Long Island moved to the mainland in the early twentieth century. Both of Collins' parents were born and raised on the island, but they moved to Blue Hill shortly after Albert was born. The island was turned into a blueberry field for a while, but was abandoned for that purpose and in the ensuing years has grown into a forest. On a side note, later in the interview Collins provided witness to one of Maine's greatest legends: the island stocked with buffalo. He not only heard about the buffalo, but also claimed to have seen them on the shores of Long Island from his lobster boat.

A couple explanatory notes may help explain the story. Collins' grandfather used a skiff to carry the mail from Blue Hill to Long Island. "Skiff" is a generic term for several, unrelated types of small boats. In American usage, the term is used to apply to small sea-going fishing boats powered by sails and/or oars. They are typically a small flat-bottomed open boat with a pointed bow and a flat stern. In addition to Albert's grandfather and the postal inspector, the third man mentioned in the story is Ben Sylvester. It is not entirely clear who he was except for a store owner and postmaster in Blue Hill. Later in this interview, Collins described one member of the Sylvester family as an infamous bootlegger, though he did not provide a name.

Transcript:

Well, he come from Long Island and he, they had a thousand sheep, he and the old man together over there, and they were Scots, they come from Scotland anyway, from sheep country. My grandfather was a Scotchman. And he had come from Scotland to Digby, Nova Scotia. And then he come from Digby, Nova Scotia down here, and then he settled on Long Island.

He died in 1926, I think, or something like that. But he, when he lived on the island he farmed and he fished, and he carried the mail for about thirty years, back to the mainland. Well, he got a dollar a day. You think of it. Well, one of the postal inspectors was down here one time, 'twas late in the Fall, and they said that, told the postmaster down here, that was Sylvester, that was John's grandfather, he had the store, and he had the post office, too.

He said, "Mr. Henderson gets too much money." He says, "All he's got to do," he says, "That's the island right over there," he said; "All he's got to do is carry the mail across there."

Well, anyway, Ben Sylvester said, "Well, now, he'll be coming off with the mail pretty soon. You'll get a

chance to talk with him."

So Grandfather come off with the mail and it was late in the Fall. And so Sylvester told Grandfather what was up. And Grandfather said, "Well, now," he said, "You know, it's going to blow nor'west this afternoon a good breeze. And I'm going to wait until it gets a damn good breeze and I'm going to take him across with me."

So he did. It got blowing. And Grandfather only had a twelve-foot skiff with a sail on her. He got the old postal inspector in the bottom of the skiff, told him to set still and not move. And of course Grandfather started out and he had that skiff so the water was right on the rail, you know, and the fellow was scared.

"Oh," he said, "Mr. Henderson," he said, "Let's go back."

Grandfather says, he says, "I'm carrying the United States mail." He said, "It has to be delivered." He said, "I can't go back."

"Well," he said, "I'll make an exception," he said, "I'm the postal inspector."

"Oh," Grandfather said, "Nothing to it," he said, "I do this all the time," he said, "This is a nice day!" So finally he got him over there. When he got him on the island shore, the old fellow was so scared he couldn't get out of the skiff. Grandfather had to wait. He got out of the skiff and he couldn't walk.

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