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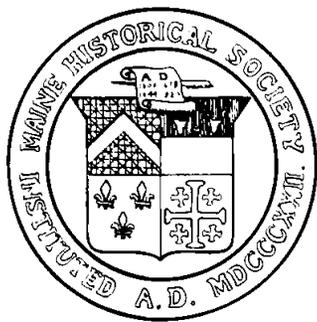


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*A Pioneer Family:
The Richardsons of Mount Desert*
by
Charles F. Hamblen

Around the end of October, 1770, Captain William Owen of the Royal Navy, directed his pilot to put in at Bass Harbor in the southwest corner of Mt. Desert, Maine. The ship was the *Campo-Bello* (Owen having founded the New Brunswick settlement of the same name) and its pilot was one Aaron Bunker from nearby Cranberry Island.

Bunker had indirectly provided Owen with an intriguing week. The schooner had spent a couple of days in nearby Cranberry Harbor, where the crew and the local citizenry, comprised to a large extent of Bunkers, commingled with zest. A crisis of sorts erupted when Aaron found a sister of his engaged in libidinous fulfillment with one of the sailors. Nuptial arrangements ensued. There being no clergyman or justice of the peace within reasonable distance, Captain Owen made things official by performing, presumably, a shipboard ceremony.¹

The reception, as imprompt as the wedding, seems to have been, nonetheless, convivial, and Owen's journal entry for that day indicates that he enjoyed himself immensely. Still, it must have been with some relief that he clambered ashore in the sleepy, green stillness of Bass Harbor and went exploring.

Maine at this time was as sparsely settled in most areas as the American West would be two generations later. Mount Desert was no exception. At Bass Harbor, Owen records finding only two families, those of Stephen Richardson and Job Dennings. Owen contents himself with one or two compliments for Dennings' daughter and a remark about the obvious integrity and industry of the two rustic families.² There is no indication that Owen recognized Richardson as one of the Founding Fathers of the region, as he certainly was.

Stephen Richardson was born in dramatic circumstances somewhere between Ireland and Gloucester, Massachusetts on October 23, 1738. He was the son of Stephen and Jane (Montgomery) Richardson, the latter of whom was a bona fide Scottish aristocrat. Lady Jane (as Samuel Eliot Morison calls her while referring to Stephen Jr.'s brother James as the "offspring of an early *Lady Chatterley's Lover* affair")³ apparently decamped with the elder Richardson who was employed as a gardener on her father's estate, married him, settled temporarily in Ireland, bore James, and emigrated to the New World, though the order in which these events transpired remains obscure. It is certain, however, that Stephen II was born at sea.⁴

Upon reaching America, the Richardsons settled in Gloucester, probably in the parish of Sandy Bay (now Rockport), which seems to have adopted the kind of proprietary attitude toward colonizing the Deer Isle-Mount Desert area that NASA has taken toward stak-

ing out the surface of the moon. The Someses, the Thurstons, the Gotts and the Hamblens—all families that would later interrelate socially, geographically and maritally with the Richardsons of Mount Desert — migrated from the same Massachusetts town.⁵

It was Francis Bernard, the Royal Governor of Massachusetts Bay, who triggered the Gloucester exodus to the North. Bernard was interested in acquiring Mount Desert as a personal fief and applied to the Crown for the necessary land grant. While awaiting George III's permission, the Governor persuaded two Gloucester men, Abraham Somes, who was already familiar with Mount Desert through his trading activities, and James Richardson to settle there on land he would give them.⁶ Accordingly, Somes and Richardson became the first permanent settlers in 1761, selecting for their site the head of Mount Desert Sound which thereafter became Somes Sound; the settlement itself was named Somesville.⁷

In the next few years, other Gloucester families became Mount Desert pioneers. By 1765, both Thomas and Stephen Richardson and their families had joined their brother James.⁸ All three were destined to play significant roles in the colonial history of the region.

Those early years on Mount Desert were harsh and bitter, as a small handful of families fought both their rugged, untamed environment and the solitude it imposed on them. A story involving the Thomas Richardson family is illustrative of the strenuous and precarious existence the settlers led.

As the winter of 1765 loomed ahead and promised to be unusually harsh, the families of Somesville and Bass Harbor found they were running dangerously low on provisions. Their only recourse was to ship some home-made barrel staves off to Gloucester far to the South, one of their few tenuous links with civilization. When the

provisions for which the staves were successfully bartered made it back to Mount Desert, they were stored on Thomas Richardson's premises on the east side of Bass Harbor. Having tucked young Thomas and his sister Puah into bed, the Richardsons yoked an ox to a cart for an arduous sixteen mile round trip by moonlight over the rugged, twisted terrain of an old Indian path. Their mission was to inform the families of Somesville to the northeast that the supplies were in.

Their trek completed, Thomas and his wife delivered their message then turned almost immediately toward home. As they neared Bass Harbor, their horror must have been intense as they perceived a reddish glow in the sky that could only have signified that their cabin was ablaze. Fearing that their children had been consumed in the flames, the parents, panic-stricken, urged the plodding ox as fast as he could go. Their relief and joy at seeing the youngsters running, unharmed, to meet them can only be imagined. H.W. Small, who relates this tale, concludes it by pointing out that the Richardsons' woes for that year were hardly over. With the rest of the families on the island they shared the cold and privations of a terrible winter. "This was a long, sad winter for them, all their families moved to Gott's Island and made all things common; fish, clams and some game helped them through the winter."⁹

But nature wasn't the only inimical part of their surroundings. Mainlanders, probably from the direction of Ellsworth, were making encroachments upon Mount Desert territory, carrying off needed hay and making free use of the pasturage for their cattle. The petition for redress of the situation which the settlers sent Governor Bernard, part of which is reproduced below, indicates that the literary sophistication of the region was still a thing of the future.

'To his Exelency Governor Bernard

We the inhabitants of Mount desart Humbly Craves Your Excelencys Protection against the InCrosins of the Naboring inhabents made upon us Consarning hay on ye island to keep our stoks as the People Cut the hay before it gits its Groth So that they Spoil the marsh & if we Cut hay and Stack it for Sleding it is Stole so that we cannot have ye Provilige of the marsh that we have cleared Rodes too, . . .

Abraham Somes
Andrew Tarr
Stephen Gott
Benjnm. Stanwood
James Richardson
Stephen Richardson
Daniel Gott
Daniel Gott, Jr.
Thomas Richardson
Elijah Richardson'¹⁰

Even with the relief the Governor granted, life remained strenuous in other respects. The concept of luxury was a totally foreign one to the Mount Deserters; simply to provide for the security and survival of one's family was the primary motivating factor behind each settler's daily activities. The men of the island were engaged mostly in fishing and lumbering and eliciting what produce they could from their small farms and livestock. For the women, life was even more unremittingly arduous. Frequently, they had large families, then wore themselves out raising their children and performing household chores that required all the stamina they possessed.

If life demanded much from the adult community, it was no less harsh on the children. Completely deprived of the colorful world of toys, books and amusements that we of the twentieth century automatically associate with childhood, the young people of Mount Desert had to rely almost exclusively on the satisfaction derived from a close and natural relationship with their surroundings. Still, learning at their parents' slides to cope with the un-

relenting pressures of frequently inimical circumstances had a bracing, character-building effect upon the children that was all to the good. Survival and recreation became almost synonymous, as boys learned to fish, sail, and cut timber, and girls acquired the sewing and spinning skills of their mothers, cooked and helped tend the livestock.

With the passing of the first decade, however, the quality of life gradually improved. By 1776, the democratic impulse had penetrated the woods of Maine and found a congenial home in the small, isolated communities of Mount Desert where self-sufficiency bred its natural concomitant, independence. By this time, more families had drifted north to mingle with the pioneers. As various needs, such as the laying of roads, the establishment of landings and the creation of schools and churches arose, the demand for a form of government presented itself.¹¹

Accordingly, an organizational meeting was convened at the home of Stephen Richardson on March 30, 1776. Among the matters weighed and decided were the establishment of a five-member Committee of Correspondence, Safety and Inspection (upon which both Stephen and Thomas Richardson served), plans for roads and landings, and the development of another committee for the protection of meadows.¹² (This last item of business was an indication that the Bernard mantle of protection had a few holes in it).

No doubt it was with a sense of great pride and accomplishment that the fledgling politicians of Bass Harbor adjourned their meeting until June 10, when they would reconvene at the Richardson home. At the subsequent meeting a "malitia" company was formed and a captain and two lieutenants were chosen to lead it. (Abraham Somes, the founder of the colony, was one of the lieutenants.) In addition, a formal appeal to the General Court of Massachusetts was drawn up requesting

protection of rights and titles to properties that, hitherto, had been theirs only by virtue of occupation. Finally, Stephen Richardson was appointed to convey the petition to the General Court and act as the representative for Mount Desert. He was provided with an expense account amounting to £ 4 2s 4d.¹³

George E. Street marvels at the capacity of these settlers for effective, non-acrimonious self-government.

The harmony, the ease, the efficiency with which all this social and political organization was accomplished by a small body of untutored fishermen and lumberers may well be a wonder to people unused to the exercise of democratic power. These people, possessed of little more wealth than was represented in their axes and fishhooks, were able without commotion or friction or resort to any authority outside themselves, to constitute a self-governing community and to provide for its successful administration.¹⁴

On April 6, 1789, Mount Desert was incorporated as a town.¹⁵ As they had for the previous two and one-half decades, the three Richardson brothers continued to play prominent roles in the political and social development of the region. Stephen and Thomas served upon the first board of selectmen, and James, who had been the first clerk of the plantation of Mount Desert, now held a similar position as town clerk, an office he filled for many years thereafter.¹⁶

One of the more amazing sociological features of life in any pioneer community was not only the degree to which intermarriage between the same families occurred but the awesome symmetry of it all. This is naturally enough explained by the small number of families indigenous to a given area and the lack of communication with more populous sections of the country. Children who grew up as neighbors developed a rapport and a sense of interdependence that could easily burgeon into real affection and, finally, matrimony — in short, a sequence of circumstances which, while providing benefits to

geneological research, must be a source of uneasy bemusement to geneticists.

Be that as it may, it is a fact that James, Thomas, and Stephen Richardson married three sisters, Rachel, Margaret, and Elizabeth Gott respectively.¹⁷ All three couples had numerous children who, in many instances, continued the matrimonial pattern established by their parents, in wedding either their first cousins or finding mates among the few other families in the district. Similarly, the third generation saw no reason to break with tradition. That a dynasty of sorts was established is still reflected by the fact that today the entire section of Maine coast of which Mount Desert forms the centerpiece is replete with Richardson-Gott descendants.

The Richardsons of Mount Desert were not the Adamses of Boston or the Lees of Virginia. Their influence was only local, not national in impact. Yet in another sense, they were of equal importance to the august figures we associate with the origins of our republic. It was the steady, enduring, rugged efforts of the Richardsons and hundreds of other pioneer families up and down the colonial seaboard that helped wrest a civilization from the wilderness and provide the raw material from which the Founding Fathers forged a nation.

— NOTES —

¹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Story of Mount Desert Island* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), pp. 24-35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴ William Otis Sawtelle, with further research by Leslie Victor Stanley and Dorothy Parker Phelan, "The Cranberry Island Families," (unpublished typescript, 1965), p. 17, Maine Historical Society Library.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-27.

⁶ Morison, *op cit.*, p. 23.

⁷ William Macbeth Peirce, *Old Hancock County Families*, First Series (Ellsworth, Maine: Hancock County Publishing Co., 1933), p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹ H.W. Small, *A History of Swan's Island, Maine* (Ellsworth, Me.: Hancock County Publishing Company, Printers, 1898), pp. 165-166.

¹⁰ Quoted in George E. Street, *Mount Desert – a History*, ed. by Samuel A. Eliot with a memorial introduction by Wilbert L. Anderson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905), pp. 141-142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 197-198.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-177.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.

¹⁵ Pierce, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁷ Sawtelle, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

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