

1785

after all, an enemy ship, and if some Lower Caper came upon her safe in a receding tide off the back shore — and got it home without too much fanfare — he probably felt he was doing no harm in keeping quiet about it.

\$1,000 Reward

The "Portland" is back in the news with the announcement that \$1,000 in cash from Mr. Jenks' museum awaits anyone who can produce any part of the ship the finder can prove was obtained from the wreck site. What washed ashore from the steamer doesn't count. The collector of the award must be able to prove that the material actually comes from the wreck site.

THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 1965

TRURO TALES and TRAILS.

...by Grace DesChamps

Interest High In Wreck Of Somerset And Horace Turns Up More About It

A rocket hurtling to the moon may stir awe and excitement for the wonders of science and technology, but an old sailing ship with nothing but winds and canvas to take her where she was going — or send her to Davy Jones Locker if her skipper lacked the "feel" of the weather, or instinct failed him when storms made reckoning only a guess — there's something here, too, that can still stir the imagination. Whenever old sea stories have appeared in this column — many of them reports by the remarkable Mort Small of North Truro, who was a North Truro correspondent for the Advocate and marine observer for the Boston Chamber of Commerce — response from readers has followed promptly. Getting to the moon by jet propulsion may be the feat of the Twentieth Century, but the skipper sailing around Cape Horn or Cape Cod by "the seat of his pants" in bad weather — or surviving shipwreck on Peaked Hill Bar! — remains unfading adventure.

Recently in this column was a little piece about the British man-of-war, Somerset, which foundered November 5, 1778 on Peaked Hill Bar, and the remnants of whose bones will be sought again, come Summer, by skindivers.

The piece in the column asked what went on in Truro on that historic day in the American Revolution when 480 British triumphed over a howling Northeaster to get ashore alive, and cast themselves on the mercy of the Town. A number of Advocate readers, judging by their letters, would like to know, too.

Now comes Horace H. Snow, Sr., an unflinching source of old newspaper clippings and memorabilia, to contribute still another conjecture about what happened. Horace has been the possessor of valuable scrap books pasted up by the indefatigable Mort Small, with clippings of Mort's own reports or relevant items Mort clipped from city newspapers.

It was a safe guess Horace would have something to say about the Somerset and so we dropped in on him over the weekend. Horace, carpenter, builder, expert

with Myers' pumps, and veteran member of the Town Finance Committee, has lately turned his attention to painting. He has completed the seventh in a series of marine scenes — the familiar schooners of his boyhood against the background of bay or "back" shore.

He was presently working on another painting — and sure enough it was the Somerset! Horace had the old frigate riding in Provincetown Harbor, the harbor a wonderful blue basin Horace had conjured up by mixing some oils given him by an artist with some spare house paint left over from a job. Spurred by renewed interest in the famous British frigate, Horace had gone to work to re-create the war raider when she blockaded the harbor and prevented insurgent local colonists from getting out of it.

"I've got a whole piece on the Somerset!" Horace announced, and so he had. It was a yellowed, 89-year-old clipping from what Horace believed was a New York newspaper. It was written by Edward A. Grozier, who Horace says was one of the local Groziers. Mort Small had faithfully pasted up the clipping in his old scrapbook and Horace had the scrapbook.

In News Again

In 1886, a century, nearly, after she had foundered, the Somerset was making news again. Over the years all trace of the wreck had disappeared and only tradition could suggest where she lay. But in 1886, after a succession of great gales, the sea "like a great plough, cut away the land and

laid bare the ribs of the old ship whose guns had raked the heights of Bunker Hill and terrorized the commerce of the colonies." So ran the yellowed newspaper account of an event that made the pages of distant newspapers.

The site was Dead Men's Hollow, a low-lying depression on the shifting back shore into which winds and seas had hurled the timbers of many an old wreck. Winds and sand had formed a great mound there 30 feet high (so the account read) and on the mound the wiry beach grass had found a footing. No one had suspected what lay buried beneath it until those mighty seas rolled in and swept away the sand. And there lay the timbers of the British raider! Grozier offered a wealth of evidence in support of the local conviction that this was indeed the remains of the Somer-

set — and Grozier, himself, had personally viewed the wreck. The top of the hull had entirely disappeared but what remained lay exposed for a length of 60 feet.

His description of the old wood-er ghost, gaunt in her tomb, was impressive — the grim gun ports, the live oak planking, the numerals on her stern, the yard-long rusted iron bolts fastening her timbers (they looked like "long, drawn-out sticks of molasses candy") and the "tree-nails," wooden bolts also used for fastening that he found still sound. The oakum packing her seams was still to be seen. "None can number the shipwrecked mariners," Grozier muses, "who are sleeping their last sleep in this great catacomb of shifting sand."

Swerves Of Wreckers

Even as Grozier wrote, he reported scores of "amateur wreckers and relic-hunters are swarming to the beach from near and far, and seem resolved upon carrying away the whole hull in sections." They came with saws, axes, shovels, crowbars and wedges. And they came by foot over what Grozier calls "the most barren and desolate tract imaginable."

Grozier then offers a theory as to what happened a century before when the mighty Somerset came a-cropper on the Cape Cod coast she had harried so long. It is theory only as Grozier put it together from the conjectures of local sea dogs, who "if they cannot tell exactly how the Somerset was wrecked, can at least tell you how she should have been wrecked, according to all nautical precedents."

The story he wrote is that the Somerset was sighted by local folk from "High Pole Hill" as the ship was striving to weather the Cape in a Northeast gale. The "merciless winds wrought havoc with her sails: The billows broke

over her. The incoming current of the great tide seized her. She drifted helplessly in the trough and struck on the outer bar. A shout went up from the shore. The watchers knew they would suffer no more from the depredations of the Somerset!"

The correspondent of 1886 had put together a vivid story: "The man-of-war lay fast on the bar, a half mile from shore, flying signals and firing guns of distress. For hours she pounded on the bar and blinding seas broke over her. Her boats were washed away, crushed like eggshells. Her

spars came crashing down. Men were swept from her rigging . . . and disappeared into the green sea. Gun after gun was run through the ports and magazines of solid shot thrown overboard to lighten ship. Finally, at high tide, a succession of great waves lifted the frigate from the bar, bore her over the intervening shoals, and landed her, a dismantled wreck, high upon the beach."

Could Have Happened

It could have happened. Horace, himself, has a photograph of a steamship virtually on the sands at low tide after she had landed there under the force of winds and tide. Viewing her ist it almost impossible to believe — so high and dry she was — that later at high tide in a calm sea, tugs could have gotten her off, although they did. So the Somerset could have been flung into Dead Men's Hollow, where seas came in. That would explain how survivors got ashore alive.

Grozier is probably on firmer ground when he reports that "the next day a detachment of militia marched down from Truro, took possession of the wreck and made prisoners of the captain and crew in the name of the Commonwealth. Captain Aurey (commander of the Somerset) was fortunate to be exchanged as a prisoner of war."

Grozier relies upon accounts of Gen. James Otis, commander of the Barnstable County military forces, that "there were riotous proceedings at the wreck and some lively scrimmage between Provincetown and Truro men over division of the spoils." There was a paymaster and good British currency on the Somerset and tales still persist that someone in Truro got it!

The General Court, Grozier writes, eventually appointed a sheriff to take charge of the wreck." As to the death throes of the Somerset, Grozier comments: "Though the people on the beach were enemies, yet like true men of Cape Cod, they would have gone to her relief, but there were no life boats at hand in those days. "According to Grozier, Capt. Enoch Hallett of Yarmouth had charge of the militia who marched the British prisoners to "Barnstable and thence to Boston, where there was much jubilation over the disaster."

Differing Theory

Research several years ago by

this correspondent brought to light a differing theory about the end of the Somerset and that picture of British prisoners looking for someone to surrender to.

According to Esther Forbes' book, "Paul Revere and the World He Lived In," the Somerset foundered at night — a "wild" night. Esther Forbes, who got a Pulitzer for her book, is an indefatigable researcher. The date of the foundering she pretty well documents from the diary of John Rowe, the Boston merchant, who

wrote on November 5, 1778: "A Good Deal of Snow fell this day. This Evening came news that the Somerset Man of Warr was cast away on the back of Cape Cod." The news could have been brought to Boston by other units of the British fleet that had escaped Peaked Hill Bar.

Her book says it was the New York World of May, 1886, which carried the story of the Somerset's "reappearance" from the sands of Truro "and the stir which swept the country." Miss Forbes, in a footnote, also quotes Mort Small, "whose professional interest in wrecks makes him a valuable authority." She quotes from his little booklet, "Shipwrecks on Cape Cod," printed in 1925. He wrote that since that uncovering of the sands in 1886, "no part of the Old Man of War has shown on the surface."

"Seemingly, however," Miss Forbes adds, "other wrecks have been pointed out to tourists as bona fide Somersets. In spite of the dynamiting her hulk received from the relic-seekers, much of her heavy oak verterbrae was still intact when she was covered again by the sand over 50 years ago." (Her book on Paul Revere was printed in 1941). Edward Grozier wrote that the live-oak timbers of the ship were "doubtless good for another century or two."

As for Capt. Aurey, the Somerset's skipper, Grozier says local mothers "were wont to frighten their children by saying that the black-whiskered Capt. Aurey was coming after them in his big ship." Meanwhile is it sand and not water that covers what remains of the Somerset?

This reporter thanks the writers of letters for their interest in the story of the Somerset and assures them it has been illness and a backlog of undone work that prevents separate answers to their letters. And when time permits, a manuscript and notes stacked away in the attic will be dug out to offer more about the Somerset.