

THE WRECK OF THE HMS SOMERSET ON CAPE COD

By Jack Duggan, Duncan Oliver, Bob Poskitt, and Diane Rochelle

One of the more under-researched events of the Revolutionary War on Cape Cod was the wreck of the HMS Somerset and the marching of 480 prisoners from the outer Cape to Boston. There is a fine book about the Somerset by Marjorie Hubbell Gibson (**H.M.S. Somerset 1746-1778: The Life and Times of an Eighteenth Century British Man-O-War and her impact on North America. Published by Abbey Gate House, Cotuit, MA (1992)**), but few details of the individual parts that each town played.

MYTHS

- Somerset was never in Provincetown before wreck, according to her log
- Not 70 gun according to Wikipedia, but 64
- Only 21 men drowned
- Captain Ourry (correct name) was on second boat to leave the wreck – Capt. wasn't last off
 - He and officers walked to Boston, didn't sail – Ourry's letter of Nov 6 says this (Gibson, p173)
 - Then walked to RI in Feb 1779 and were traded for American officer prisoners
- Thoughts that ship surgeon was American is false – he was English Henry Watson
- Were American prisoners on board the Somerset? Edward Rowe Snow says yes – but nobody else ever mentions it. Is it another of Snow's myths?

OVERVIEW (Originally published on Facebook by HSOY and the Yarmouth and Dennis Revolutionary War Recognition Committee on November 7, 2021.)

A Revolutionary War event that directly impacted Yarmouth (Dennis was part of Yarmouth at that time), was the wreck of the HMS Somerset, a 64 gun British Royal Navy ship of the line, which came ashore in a storm at Truro on November 2, 1778. Twenty-one of the crew died escaping the wreck. The remaining 480 sailors and marines were captured by local militia soldiers and marched to Boston.

The prisoners left Truro on November 6 under guard from that town's local militia. Lieutenant Colonel Enoch Hallet, of the 1st Barnstable County Regiment and also the county sheriff, was in charge of the overall operation on the Cape. The prisoners overnighted in different towns along the 155 mile route, probably spending November 7th in Yarmouth, marching on to Barnstable the following day. Seventy-three soldiers from three different Yarmouth militia companies guarded the prisoners through the current towns of Dennis and Yarmouth following a general route that is now Route 6A, moving inland to get around large inlets and streams. One of the militia captains must have been feeling kindly toward four of the Somerset's young midshipmen and bought them supper & breakfast at a Yarmouth establishment for which he later requested reimbursement.

Soldiers from the Sandwich militia took over guarding the prisoners at the Barnstable town line. Ultimately the Somerset crew ended up as POWs in Boston, although by the time they got there about a third of them had disappeared to where we know not. Some escapees may have made their way back to British forces in New York, but it is a good

bet that a large number of those British sailors and marines slipped away to begin new lives outside the hardship of Royal Navy service.

Below, readers will find a collection of data related to the wreck of the Somerset that we have gathered during our research.

TIMELINE

The Somerset log ends October 12, 1778. She left Sandy Hook, New Jersey with 16 ships of the line to cruise off Boston looking for French fleet. The weather around Cape Cod as not good.

Weather in Sandwich during this time, according to Benjamin Percival's diary;

- November 2 – very violent storm at the back of the Cape – the wind blew exceedingly hard the later part of the Day - Monday
- November 3 – a fine warm day
- November 4 (no entry)
- November 5 – is a squally Day it thundred this morning
- November 6 – it was a cold night it froze the land
- November 7 – a smart storm
- November 8 – a Dull Day the wind at the Northward - Sunday
- November 9 – a Smart Storm this forenoon
- November 10 (no entry)
- November 11 – There has been a smart storm to Day wind about E blew hard

The storm on Monday, November 2 had a strong NE wind. Just after 6 pm, the Somerset struck bottom. Cannon and other weighty items were tossed overboard to lighten the vessel, to no avail. Weather the next two days made rescue difficult, and all were not off the wreck until Wednesday, November 4.

Once the sailors were off the wreck, they were guarded by 3-4 unarmed men (Gibson, p173). Rather difficult to believe that fact. Only 21 of the crew drowned attempting to leave the Somerset.

On November 6, the prisoners began their 155 mile march to Boston. The captain marched with them to Boston, not taken by vessel as some have written. They generally took the northern route but had to avoid marshes and streams because there were few bridges before the War od 1812. The actual route is different from today's 6A – Had to ford at Jeremiah's Gutter, Factory Village (Brewster fish run); White's Brook – Yarmouth – We know Yarmouth because of a mile marker that has carved on it "1729" and is located on this road just east of the corner of today's Union Street and Route 6A; Shawme Pond brook – Sandwich. In November, feet must have gotten wet. Illness? Towns paid for the feeding and housing of prisoners, except for Barnstable. The Governor's Council, when asked how to feed the prisoners, responded; "If you have not bread for the prisoners let them live without as many better men have done before them."

Towns did feed the prisoners and then asked for reimbursement for food and supplies:

- Eastham -92 pounds 8 (includes Orleans)
- Harwich – 78 pounds 12 10
- Yarmouth – 19 pounds 1 (includes Dennis)

Enoch Hallet of Yarmouth received 18 pounds – he was Colonel In charge – perhaps acting as sheriff.

-Sandwich – 39 pounds 17

-Barnstable didn't pay – locals reimbursed almost 250 pounds for expenses (Gibson, p 175)

-People who got paid – all but one from Barnstable

Elizabeth Chipman

Enoch Hallet, Esq (from Yarmouth)

Lt. Ansel Howland

Job Howland

Zaccheus Howland

Atherton Hall

George Conant

Melatih Sturgis

Micah Hamblin, ESQ

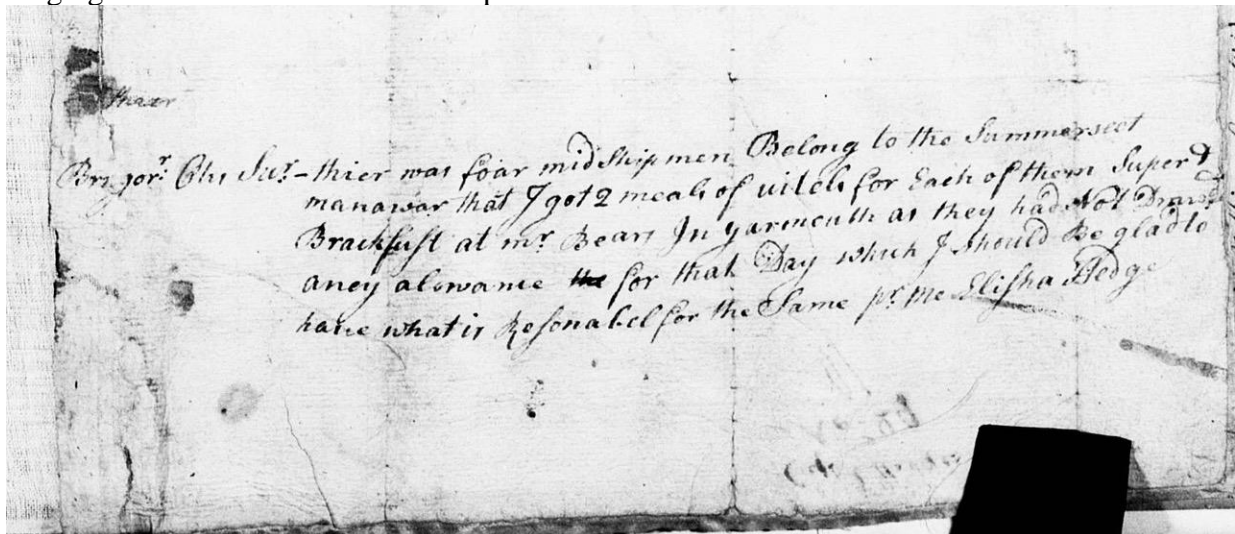
Nathaniel Howland

Joseph Otis, Esq

Thomas Stetson

-Pay for soldiers guarding prisoners determined by Governor's Council page 180

We know that the prisoners spent one night in Yarmouth, because a bill for food and lodging for the four Somerset Midshipmen was submitted



The prisoners arrived in Barnstable Nov 8– 480 passed through Barnstable, according to General Joseph Otis on Nov 8 (Gibson, p 175). It doesn't say whether they spent the night there.

Arrived in Sandwich Nov 9 – 3 nights from Truro to Sandwich

Loosely guarded after Plymouth – many wandered away – Only 314 accounted for in Boston - where were the British marines?

Where the prisoners went after Boston – Some sent to NY aboard the HAPPY RELEASE – many sailors

Items from the wreck of the Somerset

- Money to reimburse towns for food and costs came from MA House of Representatives from sale of articles taken from Somerset
- Guns from the Somerset were used to fortify Castle Island in Boston. (Eleven 18-pound and five 9-pound cannon and powder)– Lt Col. Paul Revere was put in charge of this operation.
- Bilge pump – (see article at end – Appendix E, by Robert Dudley Kelley)

Topics that could be further researched

- A former slave from Virginia or N. Carolina, was on board the Somerset – Job Avery of Truro taking care of him – John Greenough’s letter (Gibson, p 176) – John Greenough was schoolmaster from Wellfleet, - was appointed Superintendent of the Wreck and oversaw removal and dispersal of the contents by Governors Council – This Council replaced the Governor during the war– Greenough was Representative to Mass General Court in 1777-78
- One of Somerset’s sailors was David Hallet, 22, from Barnstable – he was “discharged dead” Feb 1778 – died on board while anchored off Rhode Island
- March of British sailors from Boston to Providence – 70-80 men in December – order was December 9 – left Boston December 12 (Gibson, p184)
- Vessel taking Lafayette back to France – A large number of British seamen were part of the crew of the Alliance, the ship taking Lafayette back to France, which departed Boston on January 14, 1779. Were any of the Alliance crew, either seamen or marines, from the Somerset who escaped during the march from Truro to Boston? (Several days out of Boston an attempted mutiny was suppressed by the Alliance’s officers and loyal members of the crew.)

Yarmouth and Dennis specific Information

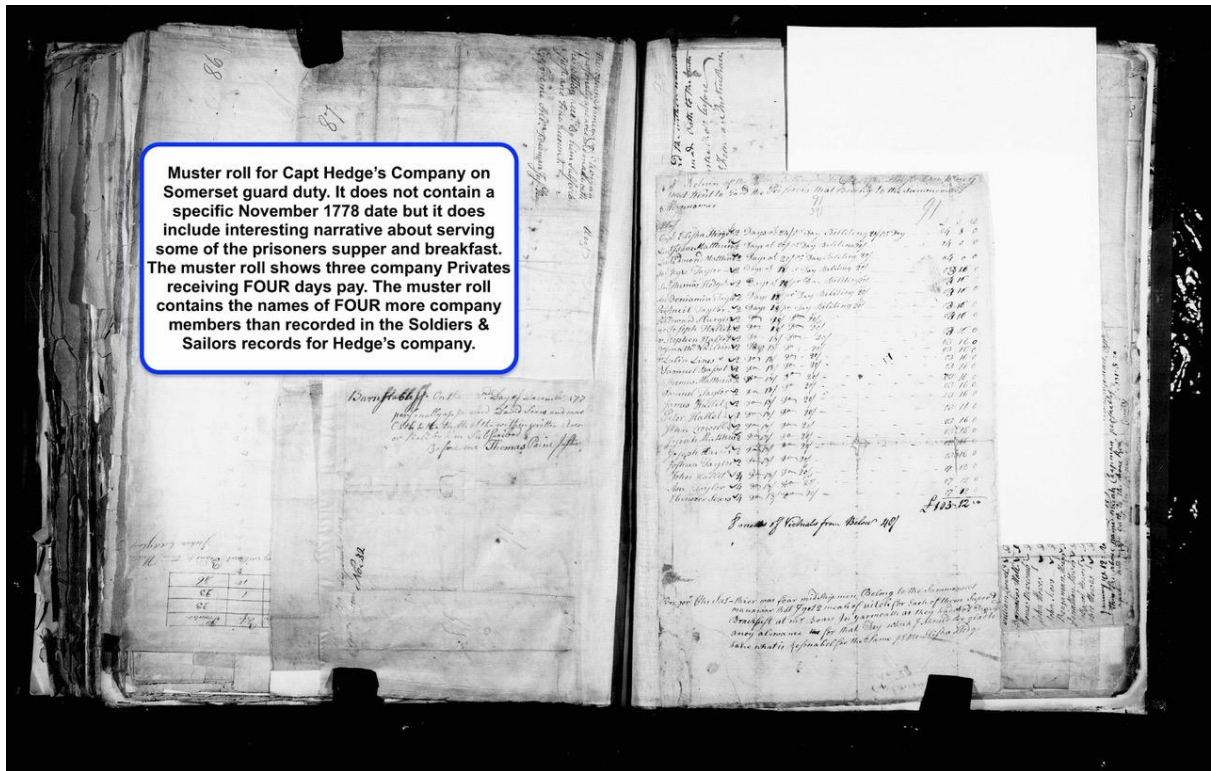
It is estimated that 73 men from Yarmouth and Dennis were involved. Dennis was part of Yarmouth at the time – East Precinct. In the appendices, pay requested from the three militia companies is shown, and the number identified in Soldiers and Sailors of the American Revolution, compiled in the 1890s, is included. Along with that, lists from Dennis cemeteries that list those who volunteered to help guard Somerset prisoners, are included.

One question is whether Joshua Gray is the same person who led Yarmouth militia to Marshfield in April 1775 and also to Dorchester Heights in early March 1776. The record states that the muster roll is dated November 9, 1778. The entry for Joshua Gray’s guard duty service, in Soldiers and Sailors of the American Revolution states”.

Gray, Joshua. Private, Capt. Lot Crowell's co. also, Capt. Abijah Bangs's co.; service, 2 days, guarding prisoners from the British ship " Somerset " at Harwich and thence to Barnstable; roll dated Nov. 9, 1778.

APPENDICES

Appendix A



Capt. Hedge's Company – Somerset (24)

A Relrun(?) of the----- Captain Hedge's care, --

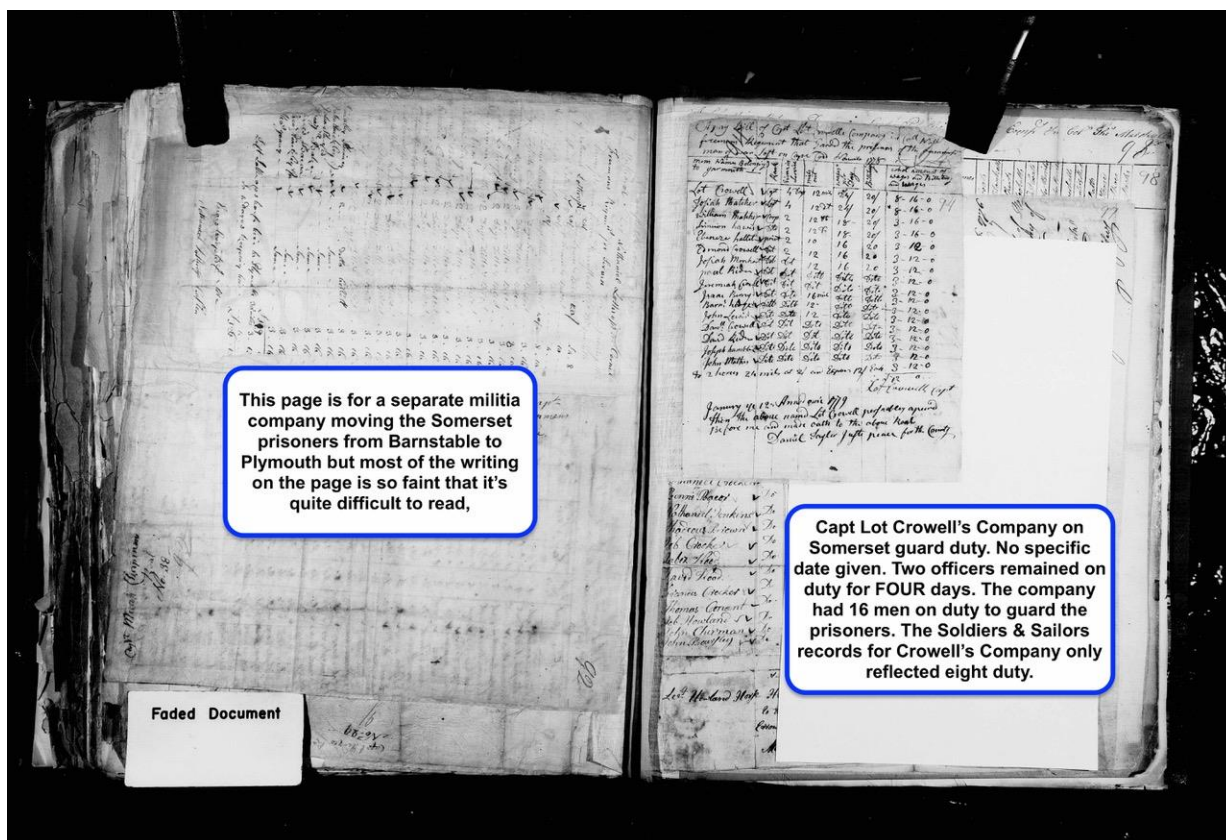
That went to Gard the Prisoners that Belong to the Summerset

- - - -
- - -

Cpt. Elisha Hedge	2 Days
Lieut. Sacias(?) Matthew	2 Days
Lieut Solmend(?) Matthew	2 Days
Sgt Jeyce(?) Tayler	2 Days
Corp Thomas Hedges	2 Days
(?) Benjamin Taylor	2 Days
Pvt Aneil(?) Taylor	2 days
Pvt. Edward Sturgis	2 do
Pvt Joseph Hallet	2 do
Pvt Stephen Hallet	2 do
- Jonathn Ridin (?)	2 do
- Laban Lines	2 do
Samuel Basset	2 do
Thomas Mattewis	2 do
Samuel Taylor	2 do
James Hallet	2 do

Peter Hallet	2 do
John Crowell	2 do
Josiah Matthews	2 do
Joseph Hawes (?)	2 do
Stephen Taylor	2 do
John Hallet	4 days
-hon(?) Taylor	4 do
Ebenezer Sears	4 do

APPENDIX B



This page is for a separate militia company moving the Somerset prisoners from Barnstable to Plymouth but most of the writing on the page is so faint that it's quite difficult to read,

Faded Document

Capt Lot Crowell's Company on Somerset guard duty. No specific date given. Two officers remained on duty for FOUR days. The company had 16 men on duty to guard the prisoners. The Soldiers & Sailors records for Crowell's Company only reflected eight duty.

Capt. Lot Crowell's Company (16)
 A pay Bill of Capt. Lot Crowells Company in Coll Nath
 Freemans Regiment that Garded the prisoners of the Somerset
 Man of war Lost on Cape Codd November 1778

Mens Names Belonging to Yarmouth	Rank	length of service
Lot Crowell	sgt(?)	4 days
Josiah Thatcher	Lut.	4
William Thatcher	Corp	2
Simuen(?) Hawes	dit.	2
Ebinezar Hallet	privt	2
Edmond Crowell	dit	2

Josiah Monhat (?) dit dit
 Paul Rider dit dit
 Jeremiah Crwell (?) dit dit
 Isaac Berry (?) dit dit
 Barn s Hedge (?) dit dit
 John Lewis dit dit
 Danll (?) Crowell dit dit
 David Rider dit dit
 Joseph Hamblin dit dit
 John Matheu dit dit
 To 2 hemes(?) 24 mils at 2/ anExpens 12/

January ye 12 Ano domi 1779
 Then the above named Lot Crowell preferably apaired
 Before me and made oath to the above Roal
 Daniel Taylor Justi peace for the County

APPENDIX C

Capt Chapman's militia company on Somerset guard duty. Two officers remain on duty for FOUR days. This muster roll contains the names of 33 on the comopany roster. The Soldiers & Sailors records only produced the names of 15 on Somerset duty for Chapman's Company. No specific date for Chapman's Company in November 1778 is given here.

Somerset, Dec 11th 1778

Name	Rank	Days	Pay	Whole amount
Noah Chapman	Capt	4	4-0-0	16-0-0
Josiah Monhat	Capt	4	4-0-0	16-0-0
Paul Rider	Capt	4	4-0-0	16-0-0
Jeremiah Crwell	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
Isaac Berry	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
Barn s Hedge	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
John Lewis	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
Danll (?) Crowell	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
David Rider	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
Joseph Hamblin	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
John Matheu	Capt	2	2-0-0	8-0-0
...

January ye 12 Ano domi 1779
Then the above named Noah Chapman preferably
apaired before me and made oath to the above Roal
Daniel Taylor Justi peace for the County

Capt. Micah Chapman's Company (33 names)

A Pay Role of Capt. Micah Chapman's Company Col. Freeman's Regiment that went to Guard the Prisoners of the Somerset manofwar Cpt on Shoard at the Cape

Mens Names	Rank	Days in Servis
Micah. Chapman	Capt.	4
Micajah., Sears	Lieut	4
Jeremiah Hewes	Lieut	2
Elipha. Bassett	Clark	2
Solemen. Hears (?)	Sergt	2
Enoch. Crowel	Corpl	2
Joseph Hall	do.	2
Davis Chapman	do	2
David Hall	Privat	2
Isaac Vincent	do	do
Isaac Hewes	do	do
Elisha Hewes	do	do
Enoch. Hall.	do	do
Aaren Crowel	do	do
Josiah Crowel	do	do
Nathanel Sears	do	do
Lot. Sears	do	do
Kema.(?) Hewes	do	do
Lamuel Hewes	do	do
Joseph. Vincent	do	do
Ebenazar Crosby	do	do
Nathan Hall	do	do
Christopher Crowel	do	do
William Cherlk(?)	do	do
William Crowel	do	do
Barnabus Hall	do	do
Thomas Newcomb	do	do
John Howes	do	do
John. Sears	do	do
Benjaman Heases (?)	do	do
Jonathan Howes	do	do
Nathanel Howes	do	do
Obed Howes	do	do

January (?) 12 Ano domy 1779

Then the above named Micah Chapman perfrably

----- under oath to the above Real(?)

APPENDIX D

FROM SOLDIERS AND SAILORS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND DENNIS CEMETERY RECORDS

Basset, Samuel, Yarmouth. Private
Berry, Isaac. Private
Chapman, Micah, East Precinct
Crosby, Ebenezer – Private – East Precinct
Crowell, Aaron – Private – East Precinct
Crowell, Christopher – Private - East Precinct
Crowell, Enoch – Corporal – East Precinct
Crowell, John, Yarmouth. Private
Crowell, Lot. Captain
Crowel, William. Private
Crowell, Jeremiah, Yarmouth. Private
Gray, Joshua. Private
Hall, Barnabas – Private - East Precinct
Hall, David. Private
Hall, Enoch. Private
Hall, Nathan. Private
Hallet, John, Yarmouth
Hallet, Peter. Private
Hallet, Joseph. Corporal
Hallet, Stephen. Private
Hamblin, Joseph, Yarmouth. Private
Hawes, Joseph. Private
Hedge, Elisha, Yarmouth. Captain
Hedge, Thomas, Yarmouth. Private
Howes, Benjamin – Private - East Precinct
Howes, Elisha. Private
Howes, Henry - - East Precinct
Howes, Isaac. Private, - East Precinct
Howes, Jeremiah, East Precinct Ensign
Howes, John. Private
Howes, John “Amey” - East Precinct
Howes, Jonathan – Private – East Precinct
Howes, Jonathan Esq. – Captain – East Precinct
Howes, Josiah – Private – East Precinct
Howes, Lemuel. Private
Howes, Nathaniel, Yarmouth. Private
Howes, Noah - East Precinct
Howes, Obed – Private – East Precinct
Howes, Seth - East Precinct
Howes, Solomon – Sergeant – East Precinct
Howes, Thomas. Private.
Howes, Thomas, III – East Precinct
Howes, William - East Precinct
Lines, Laban. Private

Matthus, Edmond. Lieutenant
Matthues, Isaac. Lieutenant
Matthues, Thomas. Private
Rider, David, Yarmouth. Private
Rider, Paul
Sears, Ebenezer. Private
Sears, Lot, - East Precinct
Sears, Micajah. Lieutenant, - East Precinct
Sears, Nathaniel Sr – Private – East Precinct
Taylor, Ansel. Sergeant
Taylor, Asa, Yarmouth. Private
Taylor, Joshua
Taylor, Joyce, Yarmouth. Drummer
Taylr, Benjamin. Sergeant
Thatcher, Josiah, Yarmouth
Thatcher, William, Yarmouth
Whildin, Jonathan. Private

APPENDIX E

BY ROBERT DUDLEY KELLEY

In 1780 the hand pump from the wreck was salvaged by Capt. John Sears of East Dennis. Capt. Sears was in the fourth year of his invention, to extract salt from seawater by using the rays of the sun, or by solar evaporation.

In 1775 the English were in control of the fisheries in Canada. On the brink of war, the British issued **The Proclamation of 1775**. The main goal of this proclamation was to prohibit the colonists from fishing the waters of the Grand Banks and the Shoals of Nantucket, in order to **Starve them into submission**.

Basic commodities usually imported by the British were scarce. Salt was among these commodities in short supply. In 1776 Capt. John Sears had a notion to build an elevated vat near Sesuit Creek, ten feet wide by one hundred feet in length. He constructed fixed rafters over the vat with a shutter mechanism (sort of like louvers) that could be closed during inclement weather, and open, exposing the water to the rays of the sun during fair weather. This method called solar evaporation allowed the salt to properly crystallize. The vat was leaky and the yield in that first year was only eight-bushels of salt. He was ridiculed by local folks who called his invention “Sears Folly.”

The following year Sears pursued the project. He improved the tightness of the vat so it did not leak. Sears yielded thirty-bushels of salt. Capt. Sears’ progress was limited by having to carry the salt water by hand in buckets. He continued this process for a period of four years. He had learned that there was a hand pump still affixed to the wreck of the Somerset, which was stranded on the east coast of Cape Cod.

The hand pump allowed Sears to continue his experiment and to expand by building a few more vats, commensurate with the capacity of the volume of water that could be supplied by this pump. Capt. Sears used the pump from the Somerset for five years, when in 1785, in the ninth-year of his experiment, a suggestion was made to Sears by Major Nathaniel Freeman of Harwich, to build a wind driven mill-pump that could raise water, similar to an operation Freeman had witnessed from a distance.

John Sears contrived to build this mill which he did secretly in his barn to avoid further ridicule by neighbors. The mill pump proved a success, greatly reduced the labor by moving water through an aqueduct and was the catalyst for building hundreds of evaporators. Sears received a patent for his invention in January 1799.

The hand pump from the wreck of the Somerset played an integral five-year role in the development of Sears' invention.