Chebacco

HARBORING RELIGION: MISSIONARIES, CONVERTS, AND SOJOURNERS

Cover: "Pine Boughs," 1969, Gabriel Loire, France. *St. Saviour's Episcopal Church, Bar Harbor.*

Chebacco

The Magazine of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

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Detail of south
wall window,
ca. 1916, artist
unknown. *St.
Edward's Convent,
Bar Harbor (currently
the Bar Harbor
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Detail of "Archangel Michael," 1932, Reynolds, Francis & Rohnstock, Boston. *Church of Our Father, Hull's Cove*

The Episcopal Church Comes to Gott's Island

By Craig D. Townsend

Gott's Island — formally, Great Gott Island, semi-attached to Little Gott Island by a tidal bar — lies just a mile south of Mount Desert Island. It remains reachable only by boat, and there is no longer any regular or even irregular service to it. My family and friends and I had to ask around Bass Harbor until the affable Eli Strauss of Island Cruises allowed that his family summers over there and that his uncle used to serve as a boat taxi until he quit, just this summer, because he was sick of it. But, Eli thought, maybe I could talk him into it with my story of writing about the history of the Episcopal chapel on the island and not wanting to write about someplace I'd never been. Eric Strauss did agree to take us over, and a few days later we were off for a quick visit.

It had to be quick, because the tidal bar blocks the only harbor on the island, so the window for landing and leaving is two hours either side of high tide. The island is a mile and a quarter across, shaped like a beaver in profile with its tail at the eastern end, and has a quiet beauty on a soft summer day. There are a small number of long-time summer vacationers. About a quarter of the island was donated to the Maine Coast Heritage Trust as a preserve in 1992.[1] There are no hotels, inns, restaurants, or stores, no electricity and no cars, though most of the summer folk use ATVs and golf carts to get around, and cell phones work to some degree.

Strauss is shouting over his throbbing outboard motor tales that he heard from Russell Gott (descendant of the Daniel Gott who first settled the island in the 1780s), previous deliverer of people and mail and groceries, who died in 1991.[2] We tie up and Strauss insists we take a look in the ramshackle house right there by the dock: the former home of the last year-round resident of the island, Montell "Mont" Gott, another descendant. The small red building is unlocked, and when we enter, it becomes apparent that nothing in it has been touched since Gott left nearly sixty years ago. The dishes are still in the cupboards, the spice jars are still on their shelf by the stove. It's rather eerie.

The island had a permanent year-round fishing community from the first Gotts until the 1920s. The population was never much above one hundred persons, usually hovering in the 50–60 range. The last of them left following the closing of the post office in 1927. The advent of the gas engine that removed the advantage of living closer to fishing grounds, the lack of a high school that forced all teenagers to live off-island most of the year, and the pressure of summer tourists wanting to buy property combined to make maintaining a permanent community impossible. Mont Gott came back to the island in 1929 or 1930 and lived there, alone in the winters and alongside the vacationers in the summer, until he moved into a nursing home in 1960. He died in 1963.[3] Now his empty place lends the feeling of a ghost town to the island, despite those devoted summer residents.

The islanders built a church, Gott's Island Methodist, in 1893. As the only church, it served as a social center as well as a religious one.[4] The island's most famous resident was Ruth Moore, the best-selling novelist and poet who chronicled with affection the social dynamics of the isolated populations of Gott's and other nearby islands, fictionalizing them to greater or lesser degrees. In *Speak to the Winds* (1956), she tells the story of "Chin Island" and "Roxinda Greenwood," a summer visitor in the 1910s who becomes a permanent resident and then decides to build an Episcopal chapel, dividing the community. The novel is a barely-disguised version of what actually happened on Gott's, as the Greenwood character is said by Moore's sister to be an accurate portrait of the eccentric Elizabeth Peterson and as the plot's depiction of the dynamics of the community has been corroborated by island historian Rita Johnson Kenway's more factual account. An earlier short story version, probably written by Moore in the 1940s, uses Peterson's name and reads more like anecdotal history.[5] It is plausible that the community's religious division, and resulting social division, was another factor in the island's abandonment.

The Episcopal Church as a denomination arrived on Mount Desert Island when the earliest wave of postbellum tourists requested services in that tradition. These services began in the first destination towns, Bar Harbor and Northeast Harbor, in hotels, rented halls, and private homes, offered by Episcopal clergy who were themselves vacationers. Soon year-round residents joined the summer people, and churches were eventually built: St. Saviour's in 1878 in Bar Harbor and St. Mary's by-the-Sea in Northeast Harbor in 1882. The clergy of these parishes continued the practice of holding services elsewhere by request, which soon led to the erecting of St. Jude's in Seal Harbor (1889) and the Church of Our Father in Hull's Cove (1890).[6] By the 1900s, though, the

Bar Harbor clergy were being called ever farther west: Episcopalians in Eden, Indian Point, and Pretty Marsh were being served by them, such that by 1910 "the work on the west side of the island had so increased, that it was hardly possible for the two Priests to take care of it." This western movement was solidified with a week-long preaching mission in August 1911 in Seal Cove, resulting in anywhere from 100 to 175 year-round residents attending weekly Thursday evening services and making plans to build a church.[7] At this point, the Bishop of Maine stepped in.

The Right Reverend Robert Codman launched what came to be called the "Southern Mount Desert Mission." The goal was to settle on a central location for the west side, and he mused about Bass Harbor, Somesville, and Seal Cove equally as having both summer supporters and year-round possibilities. Then, in 1913, he instead bought a house in Southwest Harbor for a missionary to live in, touting advantages in access to other locales and in education for a priest's children. Finally, the bishop appointed the Rev. William T. Forsythe, an Englishman who had served churches in Quebec and Vermont, to begin serving as the missionary in May of 1914. Forsythe understood his charge to be the entire western side of Mount Desert, and he therefore continued holding services by request in Pretty Marsh, Somesville, and Bass Harbor. But while keeping up this outreach to the scattered summer Episcopalians, his focus was really on Seal Cove and Southwest Harbor. The congregation in the former village was building a church that summer, yet

Forsythe was already suggesting to the bishop that the latter town was destined to be the real center of the mission. Codman was pleased with the progress and urged the diocesan missionary board to provide funding for a horse and buggy (the plea fell on deaf ears and Forsythe became renowned for the miles he covered on foot).[8] The Southern Mount Desert Mission was now firmly institutionalized.

That same summer, Forsythe gathered area Episcopalians, mostly vacationers with some year-round residents, in Southwest Harbor and secured twenty-seven pledges toward supporting the Mission, totaling $569 a year for eight years. They included "Miss Peterson of Philadelphia," the first mention of her in this regard.[9] She had started summering in the Bass Harbor vicinity with her mother around the turn of the century, renting rooms from another Gott family branch. At that same time, some of the residents of Gott's Island had started letting out rooms in their houses for summer vacationers, and by 1901 the Peterson women were summering there and had purchased land to build on. And while she had agreed to support the Mission with a $25 per year pledge, Elizabeth Peterson had more specific plans in mind. She was apparently beginning to make it known that she wanted an Episcopal chapel on Gott's.[10]

Peterson's father, Lawrence, managed the financial department for a Philadelphia silk-trading firm in which his father-in-law was a partner. According to his biographer, he was a committed Presbyterian. He died of tuberculosis at 46 in 1862, leaving his wife and daughter,

The arrival of the Episcopal mission at Gott's Island in 1916 proved divisive to the community, where the Gott's Island Methodist Church had stood since 1893. *Courtesy of the Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive, item 7275*

St. Columba's Episcopal Chapel, Gott's Island. *Undated photograph courtesy of Sven and Muriel Davisson*

both named Elizabeth, financially well-off.[11] Having purchased land on the far eastern point of Gott's, on the opposite side of the island from all the other residents, by 1905 mother and daughter had built a grand house, filled with furniture, silver, and fine linens from their Philadelphia home. They named it "Petite Plaisance," after the first name given to the island by seventeenth-century French sailors. The two women summered there until 1909, when they spent their first winter and announced they were permanent residents. Sadly, the elder Elizabeth was essentially housebound, and died the following year, but the younger Elizabeth stayed in the house alone for the rest of her life. She was a peculiar presence, apparently determinedly self-sufficient through the harshest parts of the winter, enigmatic about herself in conversation, and described by Moore in her more anecdotal piece as "calamitously homely."

Peterson had some sort of severe facial disfigurement of unknown cause, such that another island contemporary said her appearance was a "skull with the skin stretched across the bones." She was seen therefore always as a bit apart, an odd duck but accepted and looked out for. And she became renowned for her annual Christmas parties for the islanders, one for the children and one for the adults, for which she did all the cooking and hosting.

It is unclear when Peterson began to desire an Episcopal church for her island home. She quickly recruited Forsythe to this cause, convincing him that first July of his ministry to hold a service in the island schoolhouse, and to see Gott's as fertile mission ground. He began returning

Detail of "A Guiding Angel,"
1888, Louis Comfort
Tiffany, USA. *St. Saviour's
Episcopal Church, Bar Harbor*

twice a month for services, and included the progress on the project in his regular reports. Peterson herself was indefatigable, raising funds from family, friends, and institutional supports. Episcopal prayer books and hymnals came that fall as donations from the Bishop White Prayer Book Society of Philadelphia. A $200 grant was given by the American Church Building Fund Commission. A small plot of land was purchased. By the next spring, the bishop himself had visited for a service and confirmed two persons.[12] Gott's Island was now clearly the third wing of the Southern Mount Desert Mission.

Peterson remained the prime mover, however. In 1916 Forsythe wrote, "Through the efforts of this earnest church woman, we hope to have a small chapel erected on the island this summer." The "earnest church woman" had also been gathering "most of the children on the island … for religious instruction." And so the chapel was built that summer, with the first service held on September 6. It was a small building, holding sixty persons, with windows of amber glass and a short cupola with a bell. Peterson herself hooked an aisle runner and made a stiff altar frontal.[13] It was the second church built under the Southern Mount Desert Mission: Seal Cove's St. Andrew's-by-the-Lake was finished in November 1914; the third, St. John the Divine in Southwest Harbor, would be erected in 1918. The Gott's Island church was named St. Columba's Mission, and was dedicated to the memory of Peterson's mother.[14]

By this time, one would have to ask, where did Peterson and Forsythe think the parishioners for this church were going to come from? The first baptisms in the schoolhouse, in August 1914, were of three Gott girls, Alma, Fannie, and Hilda, but they were not islanders — they were the Bass Harbor family with whom Peterson had first stayed, come over to the island. In his initial report about the mission in the diocesan magazine, Forsythe described

the situation: "Gott's Island … has a community of about thirteen families, making in all about sixty souls. Here the Methodists have monthly services."[15] But "the Methodists" were quite simply those island residents, who had one church to attend and so had all always done so. There were some summer vacationers renting rooms, but only a few, as there never were any hotels or other amenities beyond a general store — and those Bass Harbor families were not going to keep going to church on Gott's beyond special occasions — so this group of Methodists was the only source for members of this new chapel. For it to grow and survive, some of those thirteen families would need to become Episcopalians.

The idea of a "mission" on Mount Desert, of denominational leaders planting churches where none of that denomination had yet been, does not seem odd in a setting of multiple towns, growing populations, and a burgeoning tourist presence. But such a mission on Gott's was problematic. While Moore's versions of this dynamic may be fiction, they are supported by Kenway's report:

It becomes very apparent that the introduction of this chapel took members from the established Methodist Church, setting neighbor against neighbor in their loyalties, one religion vying with the other. Some proud islanders were insulted by the idea of being served by a missionary. … I understand that Miss Peterson came to recognize that it had been an unwise decision

to bring another religion to the island. She could see how it had divided this small community.[16]

The contrast between the establishment of this church and the rest of the Mission is here apparent: while the other churches were raised by communities developed by clergy over time, St. Columba's was always seen by the people of Gott's Island as Elizabeth Peterson's church. The families that joined her in it were part of a social fabric being torn in two.

The end of the story is fairly quick and tragic. Forsythe attended the first service in the Southwest Harbor church on June 2, 1918, but as a member of the congregation in a brief respite from a long illness; he died at the end of that month and a new missionary, Arthur Freese, was appointed.[17] Services at St. Columba's continued twice monthly, but the congregation was usually quite small. Then on January 29, 1925, Petite Plaisance burned to the ground, killing Elizabeth Peterson at age 69. Islanders still argue over whether it was an accident of curtains catching fire or, in the wilder rumors, a robbery and murder. None of the silver table settings or tea service everyone remembered from the Christmas parties was ever found in the ashes, not even melted down, but there were also no suspicious tracks in the surrounding snow when people got there the next day.[18]

Within two years, the permanent community had left the island for good. There were occasional services held in St. Columba's for the summer people over the years, but by the 1950s it was crumbling

By the 1960s, St. Columba's Chapel was in ruins. *Courtesy of the Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive, item 7336*

Did the bell on the shore of Gott's Island come from St. Columba's or the Methodist Church? Its origins are disputed. *Photograph by the author*

Detail of "Christ, Priest and King" window, 1907, by
Clement Heaton, UK. *St. Saviour's Episcopal Church, Bar Harbor*

from neglect. It was deconsecrated in 1959 and
demolished in 1966.[19] The rest of the Southern Mount
Desert Mission, however, continues to this day in
the merged Parish of St. Andrew and St. John, still
in the same building in Southwest Harbor, and in its
cooperative relationship with the rest of the island's
surviving Episcopal churches — St. Saviour's in Bar
Harbor, Our Father in Hulls Cove, and the Parish
of St. Mary and St. Jude in Northeast Harbor.

Ironically, St. Columba's had outlived the
Methodist church. In 1930, while Mont Gott was
the only person living on the island, his relative
William Gott developed cancer that needed
treatment. Kenway thinks the rumor that William's
abandoned house was set on fire by Mont for the

insurance, to cover the treatment costs, is
"very plausible." Unfortunately the house
was next door to the Methodist church,
so when the wind blew the flames over,
the church was destroyed as well.[20]

Kenway also tells the story of
arriving on Gott's in the fifties to find
that Mont had mounted a church bell
on a frame by the harbor landing, "to
be rung in emergencies." He claimed it
had fallen from St. Columba's belfry, a
story she found unlikely, thinking he
simply took it from the tumbledown
building. Some islanders claimed that
the bell was from the Methodist church's
steeple instead.[21] The rivalry, apparently,
lived on. We remarked on the bell as we
were leaving. Eric Strauss told us more
stories of the island's eccentrics as we
went back to Mount Desert, a harbor
porpoise surfacing along the way.

1. "Great Gott," Maine Coast Heritage Trust,
accessed December 21, 2018, https://mcht.org/
preserves/great-gott

2. Rita Johnson Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine: Its People 1880–1992* (Bass Harbor, ME: Penobscot Press, 1993).

3. Charles B. McLane, *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast: Penobscot and Blue Hill Bays* (Woolwich, ME: Kennebec River Press, 1982), 422–431; Kenway, *passim*; LaRue Spiker, "Gotts Island, Now Serene and Quiet, Was Once Heavily Populated," *Bar Harbor Times*, August 2, 1962; "History of Gotts Island: A Chain of Memories Linking Centuries," *Bar Harbor Times*, August 30, 1962.

4. Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 55–66.

5. Ruth Moore, *Speak to the Winds* (New York: William Morrow, 1956, reprinted Blackberry Press, 1988); "The Lonely of Heart," in Sven Davisson, ed., *When Foley Craddock Tore Off My Grandfather's Thumb: The Collected Stories of Ruth Moore and Eleanor Mayo* (Nobleboro, ME: Blackberry Press, 2004), viii, 31–55; Kenway, 101.

6. Edwin Atlee Garrett, "The Episcopal Church Comes to Mount Desert Island," *The History Journal of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society* 3 (2000): 20–31.

7. *Journal of the Ninety-First Annual Convention, Diocese of Maine* (Brunswick, ME: Press of the Brunswick Record, 1910), 9 [henceforth "Journal" with the year attached]; Journal 1911, 127; Annual Parish Meeting (December 5, 1911), Vestry minutes, Archives, St. Saviour's Episcopal Church, 138; "Mount Desert Island," *The North East: The Missionary Magazine of the Diocese of Maine* 38, no. 10 (April 1911): 18 [henceforth "*The North East*," with month and year attached].

8. Summary of letters of Robert Codman, December 28, 1912, October 20, 1913, and March 20, 1914, in "Copy of Documents Regarding Western [*sic*] Mt. Desert Mission," Archives of the Diocese of Maine, Parish Files: St. Andrew's Church, Seal Cove, anonymous notation: "(sent me by Miss Fanning, July, 1918)" [henceforth "Copy of Documents"]; Roy Livingston Carson, "The History of the Southern Mount Desert Mission — Protestant Episcopal Church," in Nellie C. Thornton, *Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island* (Auburn, ME: Merrell and Weber, 1938), 71–74 (typescripts in the archives of both St. Saviour's Church, Bar Harbor, and the Parish of St. Andrew and St. John, Southwest Harbor, are dated 1937 by Carson); Journal, 1914, Bishop's Record, 37; "William Thomas Forsythe, Priest," obituary, *The North East*, September 1918, 22–25.

9. Summary of report [to unknown party], 1914, "Copy of Documents"; Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 111.

10. All biographical details here and in what follows are from Kenway, 99–113; McLane, *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast*, 430; and Spiker, *Gotts Island*, August 30, 1962, unless otherwise noted.

11. Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 99, and Moore, "The Lonely of Heart," 33, both assert that Peterson's father was the publisher of *Peterson's Magazine*, a well-known women's journal; according to Steven N. Winslow, *Biographies of Successful Philadelphia Merchants* (Philadelphia: James K. Simon, 1864), 206–8, that would be her uncle instead. See "Peterson — Elizabeth Safford Peterson (1855–1925)," Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive, accessed December 21, 2018, https://swhplibrary.net/digitalarchive/items/show/9066.item 13082

12. Forsythe, *The North East*, July 1914, 13; August 1914, 18; December 1914, 85; "American Church Building Fund Commission," *The Living Church* 62 (April 10, 1920): 787; Bishop's Report, Journal, 1915, 44.

13. Forsythe, *The North East*, January 1916, 93; May 1916, 156; October 1916, 44.

14. Carson, *The History of the Southern Mount Desert Mission*, 72–73; Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 100.

15. Forsythe, *The North East,* October 1914, 61; Register of services, The Southern Mount Desert Mission, Archives, Parish of St. Andrew and St. John, Southwest Harbor, 31; Forsythe, *The North East*, August 1914, 18.

16. Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 114; McLane, *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast*, 430, agrees.

17. *The North East*, September 1918, 22–25; Carson, 74.

18. Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 103–105; private email from Kim Strauss regarding a story told him by Russell Gott, July 24, 2018.

19. Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 103–105; letter from the Rev. Ralph Hayden to the Rt. Rev. Oliver Loring, July 23, 1959, Archives of the Diocese of Maine, Parish Files: St. Columba's, Gott's Island.

20. Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 66–67.

21. Kenway, *Gotts Island Maine*, 119–120.

Our magazine, *Chebacco*, is named for a type of boat built in the eighteenth century in Gloucester, Massachusetts and nearby towns. In 1762, Abraham Somes, his wife, and four young daughters sailed in a Chebacco boat to make their home in Somesville and become Mount Desert Island's first permanent Euro-American settlers.

We invite you to voyage through the histories of Mount Desert Island in this contemporary Chebacco.