



Somes Harbor, Maine by Fitz Hugh Lane

This Island is a Gift: The Special Legacy of Bar Island

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One day, at the Somesville Library, I learned about a memorial monument that is on Bar Island. Situated at the mouth of Somes Harbor, this small island derives its name from the fact that it is connected by a sandbar to Squantum Point at low tide. A number of Maine's coastal islands have been named for sandbars that connect them to other land sources. According to one study, only bear, ram, birch and green are more popular names than bar.

I had previously rowed out to Bar Island and walked the island's spruce-bound acreage with no thought of looking for anything besides a cellar hole or two, but the day after I heard about the memorial, my wife and I manned the oars with a new gleam in our eyes.

Two clues as to the nature and whereabouts of what we were looking for made our search and the subsequent discovery relatively easy by treasure hunters' standards. One, the memorial was chiseled out of island rock; and, two, the inscription had once been visible from the water, so that people sailing past could make it out. Following these clues, we kept close to the shore (which isn't all that easy as the perimeter of Bar Island has a precipitous shoreline and outcropping of rock) and kept a lookout for the chiseled rock.

It didn't take us that long to find the memorial. The granite into which the words are cut remains quite prominent and can be seen from the water despite the intrusion of brush. It took a while to decipher the inscription, which was largely obscured by a thin but scruffy veneer of lichen. The words we eventually uncovered were:

This island is a gift
to Lafayette National Park
as a memorial to
James Williamson Pryor
and John Buckley Pine A D 1925

The history of Bar Island is given in Charles McClane's *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast: Mount Desert to Machias*,¹ which is a three-part island-by-island study of the Maine archipelago. McClane's history begins in 1866, when Bar Island was deeded by the trustees of William Bingham's² estate to Isaac and George Somes, descendants of Abraham Somes, the first permanent settler on Mount Desert Island. (Abraham Somes' own inscribed rock can be found near the Somesville Harbor landing.)

When I began to research the history of Bar Island, I found that in 1880, James Williamson Pryor of New York bought the island from George B., Lyman H. and John W. Somes for \$250. Pryor passed it on to his daughter Caroline Pryor Pine, who in turn bequeathed the island to Lafayette National Park (later named Acadia National Park) after the death of her husband, John Buckley Pine--hence the inscription on the rock.

The Mount Desert Island Historical Society sells a color postcard view of Somes Harbor that bears the caption "Pryor's Island, Somes Sound, Mt. Desert, Me." According to a summer resident,³ whose house overlooks Bar Island, the place was known for many years as Pine Island.

The heyday of the island's use for habitation lasted from the late 1800s into the 1920s. As McClane recounts, the Pryors took up residence on the island in a forthright manner, building a three-story log cottage and a tennis court, and digging an artesian well. Apparently, Lafayette National Park (later renamed Acadia National Park) which took over the ownership of Bar Island in 1925, pretty much ignored Mrs. Pine's gift, and the Pryors' dwelling fell into disrepair, its ruin assisted by various acts of vandalism. McClane notes that what was left of the cottage was finally removed by the park "to avoid further desecration."⁴

If not for the eye of the superb nineteenth-century landscape painter, Fitz Hugh Lane, and the imagination of a twentieth-century poet and novelist, Elinor Wylie, the island's story might serve as an example of what often happens to a typical small Maine island. In the hands of these two figures, however, this bit of an isle gained a slight, but significant, place in the history of American art and literature.

Lane, who was born and raised in Gloucester, Massachusetts, (1804-1865) was, according to art historian John Wilmerding, America's "... first native marine painter of real stature." Lane was among that formidable first wave of artists, such as Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin

Church, and others, who made their way downeast to Mount Desert Island in the mid-1800s, enticed by the rumor of landscape motifs that rivaled those of the Hudson River.

Lane made several Maine coastal cruises with fellow Gloucester man, Joseph L. Stevens, Jr., a doctor who had a practice at his family's homestead in Castine, Maine. In an article published in the *Gloucester Daily Telegraph* on September 11, 1850, Stevens described entering Somes Harbor in August of that year:

...the old boat [the General Gates] went leisurely up the current [of Somes Sound], and so engrossed had we become in the grandness of the scenery on every hand, and so illusive the distances were that it seemed as if we could be but halfway up the inlet when we passed through the narrows into the basin forming the head of the Sound. Just as the sun was setting we encamped opposite the settlement, at the entrance of the miniature bay, on an island well wooded and covered with a profusion of berries....⁵

Bar Island was the well-wooded, berry-covered island observed by Stevens and his colleagues. This fact is supported by the title of a drawing Lane made at the time, "At Anchor off our Encampment at Bar Island in Somes Sound." According to Stevens, the artist "made good additions to his portfolio" on this trip. Indeed, from one of his Somes Harbor sketches, Lane painted "Bar Island and Mt. Desert Mountains from Somes Settlement," which is judged today to be one of his finest Maine oils.⁶

Over the years, the view of Bar Island has been rendered by other artists as well. It was the subject of an 1844 pencil sketch by Thomas Cole (1801-1848),⁷ the leader of the Hudson River School. Carroll Tyson (1878-1956), an impressionist, also painted the scene;⁸ and recently Joellyn Duesberry, an artist who has painted on Mount Desert Island for more than 20 summers, exhibited several large-scale canvases of Somes Meadow and Bar Island at Graham Modern Gallery in New York city.⁹

In Lane's painting, a prominent place is given to Bar Island, which lies dead center on the canvas. One can make out a small dwelling on its shore, with a campfire nearby--no doubt the "encampment" of Stevens and his entourage. A number of sailing vessels are anchored in the harbor, their sails mostly down; and, in a left-hand corner, two men

appear to be working with lumber, which reminds one that Somesville once had an active sawmill at the site of what now is the village library.

Lane was aware of the Somes name before coming to Maine for in his home town of Gloucester many Somes families still flourished. Dr. Virginia Somes Sanderson notes in her history of Somesville, *The Living Past*, that the artist painted a portrait of Captain John Somes, which was "copied from an original by Benjamin Blyth."¹⁰ John was a brother of Abraham Somes, the founder of Somesville.

Dr. Sanderson also points out some changes Lane made when he turned a sketch into a finished oil: the artist penciled in "himself and Stevens rowing ashore in a small rowboat," she writes, "and the bright red, long-johns on the forestay of the vessel [to the right] added balance, emphasis, and charm to the completed picture."¹¹

Less than a decade before Lane made his Bar Island painting, the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley voiced the desire, in the June, 1841, issue of *Fraser's Magazine*, "... to find two young persons of not more than four or five years of age; and [I] should prefer females..., and bind myself to watch over the children as if I were their own father."¹² Shelley wished to "withdraw from the world" with these girls, "and in some sequestered spot direct their education...to ascertain...what the impressions of the world are upon the mind when it has been veiled from human prejudice," an idea he never carried out in real life.

Elinor Wylie (1885-1928), an acclaimed writer and authority on Shelley's writings, fantasized what it would be like to carry out the experiment described by the poet. In a short story published in the September, 1927, edition of *Harper's Bazaar*, she chose Bar Island as the "sequestered spot" for her story about Shelley and his pupils. Wylie's fanciful tale, titled "A Birthday Cake for Lionel,"¹³ opens this way: "It was the fourth of August in the year 1832, and upon the round piny islet which lies at the head of Somes' Sound two little girls were engaged in icing a birthday cake." Artemis and Jezebel are making the cake for 40-year-old Lionel Anon (a.k.a., Percy Bysshe Shelley), who is away that day, "fishing the deep waters past Little Cranberry"--a long row even for the most robust of Romantic poets.

How did Wylie come to choose Bar Island as the setting for her tale? She had spent many of her childhood summers on Mount Desert Island, in Bar Harbor and Asticou village. In 1910, Elinor, then Mrs. Philip Hichborn, left her husband and infant son to elope with Horace

Wylie to England where they lived under an assumed name--one of the most scandalous affairs in the history of American letters. When war broke out, they returned stateside, married and in 1917, settled in Somesville, Maine where they rented Captain Abraham Somes III's cottage.

The Wylies hoped to escape their past in a small village on the coast of Maine, but such was not to be: according to one of Elinor's biographers, Stanley Olson, at one point "...the islanders took against her. Shopkeepers boycotted her, and she could buy no food."¹⁴ Although this treatment eventually drove the couple to flee to New York city (where they were taken in by Helen de Selding Melcher, a friend they had first met in Northeast Harbor), the Wylies returned to the cottage in Somesville for two more summers.

The period spent in Maine corresponds with Wylie's flowering as a writer. Some of her best-known poems were written on Mount Desert Island, verse that would establish her reputation as one of the most important poets of her generation. Several of the poems were published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, a prestigious literary journal. A group of poems also appeared in her first commercial publication, *Nets to Catch the Wind* in 1921.¹⁵

Somesville would haunt Wylie's writing for many years after she had left the island. "A Birthday Cake for Lionel" is strongly flavored by her remembrances of this picture perfect New England village. One finds references in the story to actual townfolk, such as Mr. and Mrs. Fernald, Captain Pray and the Somes "lads," and to nearby locales, among them Prettymarsh (later Pretty Marsh), Bangor and Little Cranberry Island.

Wylie's descriptions of the landscape show that she was an individual well acquainted with the area. "Between the tall violet hills the Sound was a channel of fallen sky, profoundly azure," she writes in her Shelley story, "but under the shadow of the island's pines and hemlocks the pool lay clear and green as well water."

Bar Island remains much the same as it did in the days of Wylie and Lane, although it has become a part of Acadia National Park and has no longer has any dwellings on it. A resident who lives across from Bar Island reports that a few years ago a pair of eagles successfully raised a young bird whose early life in and about the nest was watched with much interest and pleasure.¹⁶

So Bar Island, has been settled by rusticators, painted by a master landscape artist, and, *via* the pen and the memories of Wylie lived upon by a renowned Romantic poet, all before becoming part of the monument that is Acadia National Park. In the process, it has regained its simple, earlier name and returned to a natural landscape without human habitation, with soaring eagles and lichen to cover its granite memorial.

This essay first appeared in The Bar Harbor Times, July 18, 1996.

¹ McClane, Charles, *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast: Mount Desert to Machias*, vol. 2, (Falmouth, Maine: Kennebec River Press, Inc., 1989), p. 34.

² Bar Island was granted along with most of the eastern half of Mount Desert Island on June 14, 1794 to Bartolemy de Gregoire and his wife, Maria Theresa, granddaughter of La Mothe de Cadillac. Their plea to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts General Court to have the land conveyed to them was entered in June, 1788, and, before the final terms were accepted, the couple gave much of the land to a Henry Jackson. On July 9, 1796, Henry Jackson transferred all of the unsold land to William Bingham of Philadelphia, Pa., which presumably included Bar Island. Bingham died in 1804 and, after his death, his trustees managed his property.

³ Cheston, George M., to the author, Mount Desert, Maine 2 November 1992.

⁴ McClane, p. 34.

⁵ Wilmerding, John, *Paintings by Fitz Hugh Lane*, (Washington, D.C., and New York: National Gallery of Art and Harry Abrams, Inc., 1988), p. 120.

⁶ 1850, Erving and Joyce Wolf Collection.

⁷ Owned by The Art Museum, Princeton University.

⁸ Private Collection, Mount Desert Island, Maine.

⁹ "Joellyn Duesberry: New Paintings and Monotypes," James Graham and Sons, New York, New York, October 5 through November 4, 1994.

¹⁰ Sanderson, Dr. Virginia Somes, *The Living Past*, (Mount Desert, Maine: Beech Hill Publishing Company, distributed by the author, 1982), p. 145. This copy of the Blyth pastel portrait is mentioned in *Fitz Hugh Lane: American Marine Painter*, (Salem, Massachusetts: Essex Institute, 1964), p. 69. The painting is owned by William Weber, Jr. of Gloucester. There is also a reference in Sanderson's book to a Lane painting of Isaac Somes' house on Pleasant Street. There is no known painting of this house by Fitz Hugh Lane according to the curator of the Cape Anne Historical Society in Massachusetts, nor did the Isaac Somes of that generation live there.

¹¹ Sanderson, p. 146.

¹² *Collected Prose of Elinor Wylie*, 1st edition, "A Birthday Cake for Lionel," (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Olsen, Stanley, *Elinor Wylie: A Life Apart*, (Boston: The Dial Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Wylie, Elinor, *Nets to Catch the Wind*, (New York: Harcourt, ca. 1921).

¹⁶ Cheston, George M., to the author, Mount Desert, Maine 2 November 1992.