

South Haven's 1813 Tragedy

THE Indians of Long Island, and later the white men, were wont to signal with fire from beach to beach for succor or supplies. Some of these localities were known by the picturesque name of Fireplace.

No such place is listed in Tooker's Indian Place Names on Long Island and Islands Adjacent published in 1911. However, in East Hampton town, not far distant from Sag Harbor, there was once a Fireplace and another such signal station at the easterly tip of Gardiner's Island across the channel. Centuries before submarine cables and wireless communication the Lion Gardiners and their kin built signal fires at these Fireplaces.

In southern Brookhaven town on the neck of land west of where the river once called Connecticut, then Carman, empties into the Great South Bay there was in early days a hamlet of fisherfolk known as "ye fierplace at ye South," otherwise as South Haven.

A crew of whalemens made up in part of Indians lived in huts on the dunes across the bay opposite this Brookhaven Fireplace. There they watched for their prey. Ever ready were they to put to sea in their man-powered small boats whenever a whale blowed off shore. A watch was also maintained across the bay at Fireplace for any signal fires that might burn on the dunes. Such a signal might mean that a whale had been sighted or that supplies were needed. A corresponding fire on such occasions would be lit at night on the mainland to guide the supply boat back to Fireplace.

One late fall during our second war with England eleven hardy fishermen from the vicinity of this Fireplace met tragic death several hundred yards off shore in the ocean. Had they flares at hand or

By Clarence Ashton Wood

Editor's Note

Although the Forum from time to time has carried brief references to the incident here described, we believe this to be the most complete account yet given. That it is by an author whose high regard for facts is well established lends authenticity, we feel, to the data here presented.

other possibility of signalling with light or had their desperate cries been heard, or if heard heeded, six women, perhaps eight, would not that night have become widows and their children fatherless.

History, with moisture-laden eye but stern visage, turns a black bordered page bestrewn with terrible interrogation marks. Did a rival gang of fishermen with whom these unfortunate eleven but recently had had "a great quarrel" commit a crime of negation, neglect or refusal to act, when the lives of their neighbors were involved? Were they safely ensconced in their shack on the dunes? If so, did they in fact hear the death cries of others when an inexorable tide engulfed them? Is it but cruel gossip that unjustly maligns the memory of

the other company that fished in the nearby water?

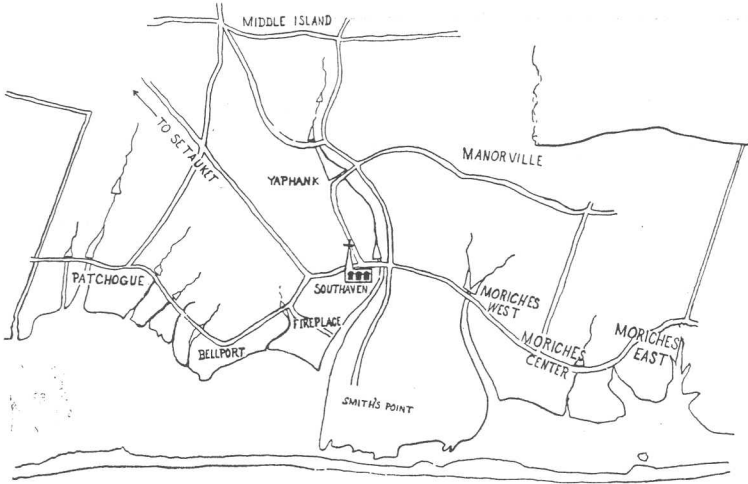
There is no question as to how these several men of Fireplace met their fate. As darkness fell over the beaches and dunes, November 5, 1813, they left their homes at or near Fireplace to draw their seine in the ocean beyond the sandbar. Their fishing ground was on the town's rights near Smith's Point Inlet. To the west of the town's rights another company of fishermen were accustomed to fish on "Smith's right on hire."

The eleven men of the first mentioned company never returned alive. The bodies of eight of them were later found along the ocean shore.

The boat in which they had crossed the bay to the dunes was found on the morning following their departure tied on the north shore of the dunes where they had left it. Their footprints in the sand led to the ocean's edge where they had rowed off in their larger, round bottom boat equipped with seine and draw ropes. That boat came ashore, empty.

There being a war in progress it was first thought likely

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The South Haven Parish in which lived the victims of the tragedy. This map shows shore front, bay and beach near Fireplace as they existed about 1813.

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that the missing men of Fireplace had been impressed into the British navy and might at war's end probably straggle home. As the bodies of most of the lost fishermen drifted ashore along the ocean front that supposition was painfully dispelled. Then it was that, justly or unjustly, accusing fingers pointed to a certain shack.

When the eleven men reached the outer bar the tide was out. They hauled their boat upon the exposed sand in order to shake the seaweed out of their net and otherwise make last minute preparations for casting the seine into the sea.

Partly because of the darkness that had overtaken them and partly because of their busy preoccupation in preparing their seine, no one observed the rising tide that quietly and stealthily encircled their boat lightened of its burden which they had failed to anchor.

Too late they discovered that they were marooned on the bar and that soon the Atlantic would be licking their boots. The boat was out of sight and beyond their depth. Their agonizing calls of distress were directed to the unlighted shacks on the dunes and beyond to the homes at Fireplace. Fireplace, however, had retired and the shacks were quiet and unresponsive.

It was a quiet night. There was no wind and the sea was comparatively calm. The wife of one of the eleven back at Fireplace is said to have thought she heard the voice of her husband calling and to have aroused a neighbor. No one, however, went to the rescue.

Were the men of the rival company in their shack? It has been so stated. The human heart repels the suggestion that in a group of several men, though angered and em-

bittered because of a quarrel, not one man would respond to the cries of his drowning neighbors. Men of the sea do not usually act that way. The woman who thought she heard her husband's voice may have labored under an hallucination. At least if she did in fact arouse her neighbors they seem not to have taken her alarm seriously.

One of the most painful pastoral tasks of "Priest" Ezra King, a native of Cutchogue in Southold town, was to conduct the funeral of some of the victims. The graves of several of them may still be seen and identified in the burial ground of that church. Some were buried in other South Side cemeteries.

Nehemiah Hand was a little over 41 years of age. Mary, his widow, lived nearly fifty-eight years thereafter, dying May 15, 1871 at the advanced age of 87 years. She married T. W. Rowland and after his death she became the wife of David D. Forrest. In the South Haven Cemetery adjoining the church may be seen a stone reading: "In Memory of Nehemiah Hand who with 10 others was drowned off the South beach, Nov. 5, 1813."

Lewis and Daniel Parshall were brothers, aged 30 and 26 respectively, sons of Charles and Anna Parshall. On a stone erected to their memory in the Waverly Avenue Cemetery at Patchogue the inscription states that they perished in the sea near Smith's Point Inlet on the night of Nov. 5, 1813.

William Rose, another of the victims, was buried in the Brookhaven Cemetery and his stone says that he was drowned on the above date. The names of the others were Benjamin Brown, Charles Ellison, Henry Homan, James Homan, John Hulse, James Prior, Isaac Woodruff. Those who left families were Brown, James Homan, Hand, Lewis Parshall, Rose and Woodruff.