

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

The Village At Monomoy Point

by Spencer Grey

Since 1944 Monomoy has been a wildlife refuge under the care of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, providing a safe habitat for wildlife, particularly birds. While human beings now are allowed only restricted access to the area, the point (or island, depending on nature's frequent changes) in earlier times was host to settlements, one particularly active.

The first was Stewart's Tavern, which was built in 1711 at Wreck Cove, near what is now Inward Point at the northwest corner. The tavern offered shelter, food and drink to mariners who took refuge in the cove or whose ships were wrecked on the point.

In the 19th century the southern tip of the point made a wide arc to the north and west, creating a large and deep harbor known as the Powder Hole which provided safe anchorage for the many fishing boats in Nantucket Sound that prospered because of the abundance of cod and mackerel. Equally plentiful was lobster, which at that time was regarded as a lower class food. A large one sold for two cents, while culls and smaller lobsters could be bought for one cent each.

Around 1835 a small community developed at the point to supply the fishing boats with everything from materials for rigging to bait. Two wharves were erected for this purpose, one on the south side of the harbor and another on the northwest point. Associated with these wharves were chandlers, supply stores, and storage sheds. Because most of these simple shingled buildings were painted with the traditional whitewash, the community became known as Whitewash Village.

Besides these facilities, the community consisted of over a dozen houses, some rather substantial but others simply shacks. Central in the town was a tavern called the Monomoit House, described by Giddings Ballou as "... a weather beaten amphibious structure with a fishermen and coasters' fitting store on the first floor, lodging house and excursionists' inn on the second, and [surrounded by] a motley array of storage and packing sheds perfumed with fish-oil." Ballou explains that he designated the Monomoit House as "amphibious," because "...at certain rarely occurring winter tides the sea comes part way up the front stairs, and the inmates go a visiting in boats. At lesser and frequent floods the boys wade to school and carry the girls..." A chart of 1837 shows a school, called the "little school house," that was privately supported by the approximately 200 Whitewash Village residents. In 1857, however, the newly formed school committee decided that the number of students at the Point warranted a school that was part of the town system and appropriated \$193.36 to construct what came to be known as "the big school" and was designated school #13. There were four terms, fall, winter, spring, and summer. The summer term had the fewest students, as most of the boys spent that season with the fishing fleet. Correspondingly, wages for the winter term ranged from \$35 to \$105, while for the summer they were \$16 to \$48. Most of the teachers were women, often the wives of fishermen, but between 1858 and 1860, Giddings Ballou was the schoolmaster.

Because he was well known as a portrait painter and because he published a detailed article about his years on Monomoy in Harpers Monthly Magazine in 1864, he is the best known of the teachers at Whitewash Village. His article is profusely illustrated with his own sketches, which provide some of the best images that we have of life there, including a view of one of the wharves and its buildings, one of a shipwreck, and another of sailors gathered around the stove at the Monomoit House in which he depicts himself sitting there listening to the sailors yarns. He speaks of it as a place of refuge for "exhausted and frost-bitten mariners," who have been rescued from a shipwreck and have been given a chance to warm their "life-blood behind the stove of 'mine landlord the Captain of Monomoit House.'" In speaking of his students, Ballou says, "...the young gentlemen were quite orderly; and were duly amenable except on particular occasions, as, for instance, on news of 'wreck ashore,' when they were apt to leave pretty suddenly, forgetting even to say 'By'r leave.'" In December 1859, Ballou wrote a letter, apparently in

desperation, to the selectmen, in which he said: *I mentioned that affair of an outhouse to you last winter but you remarked that so much expense had been made in school houses that it was best o defer the thing. An outhouse is needed. Estimated cost 7 or 8 dollars; the people here will set it up. Yours resp'y, G. H. Ballou* Apparently this time his urgent request was approved, as the Town Report for 1860 -1861 under Monomoy Point shows the item: "J. B. Rogers for new privy--\$8.50, Reed and Lewis—labor \$6.30."

The end of a year-round village on Monomoy was precipitated by a big winter storm of 1860, which not only caused considerable distress to the inhabitants but also changed the whole coastline. The northwest point was swept away, bringing sand into the Powder Hole harbor so that it was too shallow for most of the vessels that had used it. Moreover, the change in the configuration of the waters in the area drove away the vast numbers of fish that had brought so much wealth to the community.

As the fishing business declined, the villagers moved to the mainland, in most cases leaving their houses to decay. But a few were flaked, rafted to the mainland and reconstructed there, including that of William Bloomer on Bridge Street, now the Johnson family house.

Giddings Ballou provides us with the best description of the decline and end of Whitewash Village: *But the golden age of Monomoy has passed away. And the sand is sweeping about the entrance to the little harbor, and its habitants, mindful of the encroaching wave, have begun to forsake the beach for the main,taking with them even roof-tree and hearth-stone. And the 'Captain' no more shells the native clam for the big pot upon the stove, ... the good landlady is dead. And there is a shadow of sadness on the glory of Monomoy.*



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