

HERE, WAS A TOWN?

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A town with no name flourished deep in the meadows of historically famous Great Egg Bay, back at the turn of the Century. Few today have ever heard of Dan'l's Island, although Oak Island to the landward and of obscure importance, is shown on Geodetic Survey maps.

Dan'l's Island was home to scions of the Mathises, Allens and Crammers. In fact, these three families, whose names are synonymous with clamming, fishing, oystering, trapping and salt haying, occupied more than thirty houses of nondescript and individualistic design. The center of the clans was the "Great House" which is the sole surviving structure on the Island.

Eugene Mathis, 76 years young, is one of the few clansmen remaining who still remembers the humble community and its occupants. Eugene readily recalls visits of mainlander members of the families, making their regular Sunday visits to the Island by way of the causeways. That is, those who were well-to-do enough to have a horse and surrey; the most came by bateaux and across the meadows. Eugene says that it was a common sight to see a dozen flat-bottomed boats strung out about 10 minutes apart, wending their ways to Dan'l's Island.

Elderly Mathis likes to recall his most memorable character, old Sid Mathis who defied the elements for 93 years. Sid was different from the rest of the Islanders in many ways. Worthy of note were his two, 10 x 10 houses; "one his eatin' house and 'tother his sleepin' house". Eugene recollects that Sid's eatin' house had a stove, a cupboard, a single chair (Sid batched it) and a table that folded agin the wall. Sid took his meals when he was hungry and prepared his eatins before lowering the table on which to place his meal. His "meal" consisted almost entirely of "tater stew", 'cause that's the only thing that agreed with his supersensitive stomach. But Sid loved his pork and venison and was frequently wont to indulge, paying heavily for his wim for days on end. When he was so indisposed, he seldomly left his "sleepin' house" except to answer the call of nature. Sid couldn't afford time to tuck himself into "them thar new fangled" blankets; he preferred a shingle-like tunnel of warm overcoats, When he left the hutch of overcoats, they remained in position for him to pop back into with a minimum of effort. Sid's water supply came from a rather shallow dug well which consisted of two open-ended barrels. one atoo the other. Of course, after ladelling his water, Sid invariably paused to look for polywogs and other undrinkable objects.

Today so very little remains of the ghost town on Dan'l's Island. Cellar holes, now filling-in with green briar and wild cherry, remain as mute testimony to "Here, Was A Town?". Gaping cavities abound. Cavities created by the removal of sand to build and/or repair the numerous causeways connecting islet with islet. Fire has wreaked havoc and most vegetation is strictly a secondary growth of pines, pin and white oaks, sassafrass, and wild cherry.

Many of the island's paths are still well-worn by Eugene Mathis's daily tromps to attend his traps (in season, of course), or to the little fresh water pond on the outer edge of the Island where he has built an efficient duck blind. White-tailed deer, red and grey fox abound on the Island. Muskrats withstand the onslaught of the mosquito-control ditches. Eugene says that there were hardly any skeeters on the mainland until the ditchers drove them out of the meadows.

The "Great House" of weathered "black cedar" lifts its head forlornly above surrounding scrub and brush, its front porch now sagging badly, its windows smashed a few years back by a gang of "no-good kids", the plaster is falling in every room and wisteria has covered its back side. On the first floor, of three different levels, there is an old pine kitchen cabinet and a good old corner cupboard. Doubtlessly these relics were too large and heavy to take out across the decaying causeways. Under the upper end of the 2/2 story structure there is a small cellar hold with hand made bricks for flooring.

The "Great House" appears to be built of three different houses. The center section, and the oldest by far, was probably built where it now stands, but the ends were moved from other sections of Dan'l's Island. The oldest section could date back to 1825, while the upper end could date back to 1865. The lower end is by far the newest and was doubtlessly built near the end of the 19th Century.