

## MORE LIGHT ON THE HISTORY OF MARYLAND'S SEA COAST

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Since this author's short history of the sea-coast of Maryland was published <sup>1</sup> some additional facts relating to this subject have come to hand:

The incident of the year 1698, when a sloop belonging to a certain John Redwood, of Philadelphia, was captured by a French privateer or pirate, as she came out of (old) Sinepuxent Inlet, is further clarified by entries in the Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> The pirate, whose distorted French name is given as "John Canoot," was at

<sup>1</sup> *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. XL, p. 94-118 (June, 1945).

<sup>2</sup> *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania*, Vol. 1, p. 507. The author is indebted to Mr. C. A. Weslager, President of the Archaeological Society of Delaware, for calling his attention to this item.

that time in command of another sloop, which was said to belong to "one William," of Providence, which he, "Canoot," had taken somewhere near the Bahama Islands. His was the crew which plundered the town of Lewes. Redwood's vessel was taken "off Cinapuxon Inlett, 30 miles below ye cape" (Cape Henlopen).

After this, the inhabitants of the seaboard plantations of Somerset County doubtless felt that they had enough of French piracy; but other alarms from the same source were due. Both in 1708 and in the summer of the following year landing parties from French privateers (several of them each year) attempted to go ashore on that coast, to the great dismay of the local people. What deterred the desperados in the first instances is not made clear. The last attempt was frustrated by a company of militiamen hastily assembled by Colonel William Whittington, who candidly reported to the Assembly that this warlike move was no more than a bluff, since his men did not have time to repair to the plantation of Colonel Francis Jenkins, where all the county ammunition was then stored, so that, had there been action, they could not have put up much of a fight. It further appears that Colonel Jenkins, the ranking military officer of Somerset County, was aged, ill, deaf and in his dotage. Accordingly, the Assembly authorized Whittington to act in his stead in case of a future crisis of the sort, and ordered that one half of the county's supply of powder and shot be kept at his house. The Assembly further empowered Colonel Whittington to purchase "a Gun about 500 weight," and to place it "where he shall think fit to make an alarm on Occasion." It took cognizance of the "great Terroure of the Inhabitants" of Somerset County, occasioned by the constant threat of pirates, which seems to have continued into the year 1712, if not later. In that year the Assembly voted to reimburse four men, who were then serving as a kind of coast-guard in the emergency, namely: two horsemen, who must have been employed in patrolling the seashore; one man who kept watch on the coast for suspicious-looking ships; and one who manned the "Alarm Gun."<sup>3</sup>

It seems reasonable to infer that this "Great Gun," as it was styled, was mounted hard by the sea, so that the gunner, the horse patrol and the lookout man might keep in touch with one another; and it is hardly to be doubted that it was fired on occasion, though some of the alarms may have proved to be false. The noise of this cannon, booming out over the desolate seaside sand-hills and marshes, must have startled the lone fisherman or trapper as he poled his skiff up some reedy creek within sound of the ocean; and the excitement, which these unexpected detonations caused among the bayside plantations of the Somerset County seaboard, must have been intense. It is a pity that we can find no contemporary account of such alarms and their consequences.

The scarcity of information about shipwrecks on our sea-coast in colonial times and the manner of dealing with them is somewhat diminished

<sup>3</sup> *Archives of Maryland*, Vol. XXVII, p. 391; Vol. XXIX, pp. 28, 92, 147.

by the discovery of an early item. In the year 1695 a Mr. Edward Green, surveyor of Somerset County, who lived near the seaside and claimed to be the owner of the great part of the shore,<sup>4</sup> obtained from the Council, in answer to his request, a commission, which gave him authority over all "drift" (i. e., stranded, as in *driftwood*) whales "and other great ffish," otherwise styled "Royal fish," all of which, of course, were the property of the crown. He had permission to try out oil from blubber, and was further empowered to put down all meddling and interference, which might come from "strangers, intruders and interlopers," as well as from the local inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Green was afraid that even the timber growing on his seaside properties might be stolen.<sup>6</sup>

In those distant days the nearness of the sea tended to breed a spirit of lawlessness. In the year 1696 the most useful navigable inlet of our coast (*old* Sinepuxent Inlet)<sup>7</sup> was the cause of some concern to the Council of Maryland on account of the illicit commerce which was reported to be making use of that thoroughfare. It was testified that pork and tobacco had been shipped out of the county via this inlet without benefit of entrance or clearance papers, and the consequent loss of revenue to the Province. The goods seem to have gone to Philadelphia, which is interesting, in view of other evidence of these early commercial connections.<sup>8</sup> It was decided that, unless a special customs-officer should be appointed for the inlet, all ships entering there should be seized, together with their crews. Later the same year the Council appointed Mr. Thomas Poynter to be deputy naval officer at the inlet. The following year he petitioned the Council for a renewal of his commission, in response to which request the Council ordered Mr. John West, Naval Officer for Pocomoke District, and David Kennedy, Esq., Collector of his Majesty's Customs at that place, to consider the case and to do away with the office, if they should consider such a move to be in his Majesty's interest; but in no case to suffer any vessel to come in at the inlet, if no customs officer should be stationed there.<sup>9</sup> Further light on this subject has not been vouchsafed to us.

<sup>4</sup> This claim does not seem to have been based on fact. Green's heirs were taxed on a small part of "Winter Pasture," otherwise called "Winter Quarter" (Rent-Roll, Somerset County, Calvert Papers No. 885, f. 223); but, if Green ever had a claim to any other land on the Maryland seaboard, we have not found any record of it.

<sup>5</sup> *Archives of Maryland*, Vol. XX, pp. 292, 297, 298, 300-303.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292. In the spring of 1696 Mr. Green reported to the Council "the late casting up of two sprig [*sic*] Whales upon the sea side in Somerset County." (*Ibid.*, p. 421).

<sup>7</sup> In this author's opinion, there is no room for doubt that Old Sinepuxent Inlet was meant. Other inlets of Maryland's Atlantic seaboard were, about this time, regarded as navigable, however. (See *Archives of Maryland*, Vol. XIX, p. 331).

<sup>8</sup> We refer to the fact already noted that a sloop belonging to John Redwood, of Philadelphia, was taken by pirates as she came out of Sinepuxent Inlet in the year 1698.

<sup>9</sup> *Archives of Maryland*, Vol. XX, pp. 463, 487; XXIII, p. 279.