

AN HISTORIC TRIP UP THE GREAT EGG HARBOR RIVER

Author Unknown

Somers Point

Early History. In 1677, Dr. Daniel Coxe of London, who was physician to the Queen of England, purchased a great area of land in West Jersey which is known today as Atlantic County. The price was 1250 pounds which would be about six thousand dollars today. Although Dr. Coxe never came to America, he acquired large possessions and was nominally governor of the province from 1687 to 1691.

In December of 1692, the doctor wrote to his agent in New Jersey advising him thus: "Sell none of ye lands that lies convenient for whale fishing until you hear further from us, for that we will not sell."

Jeremiah Passe, the agent, must not have taken the advice or Dr. Coxe changed his mind because in 1695 Thomas Budd owned the land all along the shore.

John Somers, a Quaker, was born in Worcester, England, in 1640. Religious sentiments impelled him to leave England and cast his fortune with the settlers in the land of Penn. One of the earliest records shows that he was appointed as supervisor of roads for Great Egg Harbor.

In 1695, John Somers purchased of Thomas Budd three thousand acres for two hundred forty pounds sterling. He settled on the mouth of the Great Egg Harbor River and the place became known as Somerset Plantation or Somers Point.

John and his wife Hannah had nine children. By his will made in 1720, he left Richard, his oldest son, all of his land and plantation provided "he pay his other ten pounds per annum

and that she have sufficient room in which to dwell, to provide her with firewood and fodder for six cows and six sheep as long as she remain my widow.”

Richard Somers made bricks and built the Somers Mansion at Somers Point which today is a museum and the home of the Atlantic County Historical Society.

Richard's son, James, owned slaves and built the old grist mill at Bargaintown. The story is told that the slaves were promised their freedom if they built an embankment for the road across the pond. This they did -- the women carrying loads of dirt and stones in their aprons until the task was done and their freedom was assured.

For more than two hundred fifty years the Somers Family has been closely identified with the history of Atlantic County on land and sea.

Somers Ferry. A stone marker stands on the grounds of the Ocean City Golf Club at Somers Point bearing this inscription:

Near this site at jobs Point was located Somers Ferry. Established in 1693 to connect Somers Point and Beesleys Point. Erected by the Richard Bowen Division Sons and Daughters of the Pilgrims.

In 1691, Dr. Coxe deeded to the West Jersey Society “certain town lots in Perth Amboy, Gloucester, and Egg Harbor.” As early as 1693 a ferry was established by the Legislature to cross the Great Egg Harbor from Somers Point to Beesleys Point.

Which person or persons appointed by them shall and may exact for the passage of every single person twelve pence and for horses and cattle twelve pence per head, and for sheep and hogs four pence per head, and for all measure of grain two pence per bushel.

The ferry was an open boat worked by sails and oars. This slow, cumbersome method of transporting goods was primitive but was as good as any used at the time and served the needs of the inhabitants.

Town lots were laid out on each side of the river in anticipation of its being a central point for trade and business.

The ferry prospered for a while but was discontinued when a bridge over the river a short distance from the present one at Mays Landing changed the lines of travel. The lines of the town lots disappeared and the land boom of over two and a half centuries ago was over.

Somers Point in the Revolution. Encounters with the British during the Revolutionary War were largely due to the location of Somers Point in the Great Egg Harbor Bay.

Mrs. Edythe Nickles recalled an old story of a raiding party putting off from a vessel anchored in the harbor. As the Redcoats approached the shore, they saw to their dismay that closely formed ranks of soldiers, with bayonets glinting in the sun, were marching down to the exact spot where they were landing. Turning around, they rowed quickly to their ship, weighed anchor, and sailed away. The "soldiers" never marched down the hill. The British had been frightened away by a field of corn standing on the rolling hill back of Somers Mansion. From a distance the tassels looked like heads and the uppermost blades glistened in the sunlight like bayonets.

There are reports that a tunnel led from the cellar of Somers Mansion to the harbor during Revolutionary days but no trace of it can be found today.

In war times privateers used the various creeks and lagoons as harbors and hiding places for their prizes. Thousands of dollars worth of enemy property were brought in and selling contraband was a profitable business.

Notice was given in the Pennsylvania Evening Post, March 4, 1777, of an act of the General Assembly of New Jersey to sell a prize vessel, the brigantine Defiance and her cargo which had been taken by Colonel Richard Somers, with a military detachment, which acted as sea coast guard at Great Egg Harbor.

Notice is hereby given, that the said brigantine called the "Defiance" with all her tackle, apparel and furniture, now lying at the mouth of the Tuckahoe River, in Great Egg Harbor inlet, and the cargo of the said brigantine, consisting of molasses, sugar, coffee, cocoa, salt, cotton, etc., and sundry whaling tackle, will be sold at public vendue, at the house of John Summers, jun. at Gloucester, on Wednesday, the 12th instant. The sale to begin at ten o'clock in the forenoon. The cash to be paid on the delivery of goods.

John Somers, Jr., was an influential property owner in old Gloucester County, an intense Whig, and, like his relative Colonel Richard Somers, was subjected to annoyances on the part of the Tories. Colonel Richard Somers served in the militia during the Revolutionary War. Afterward he served as judge at the county court.

A letter written from Great Egg Harbor dated July 14, 1777, gives an idea of the type of skirmish that occurred near Somers Point.

We should have sailed this day had it not been for an alarm we had yesterday, which diverted the people's attention from work:- About one o'clock we heard a smart firing of cannon, and soon after were informed that several vessels were off the beach about four miles Southward of this place; we immediately mustered all hands, 15 in number, and marched with as much expedition as possible; we soon discovered the enemy had been in chase of a small schooner, and drove her on shore. A frigate of 32 guns came up and anchored about three quarters of a mile from the shore, two tenders and three barges came much nearer, and all kept up a steady fire for four or five hours on the shore, without doing any damage, nor did it prevent the people from landing chief part of the goods that were on board; at high water the schooner bilged, the remainder of the cargo was drove on shore and secured, it consisted of rum, molasses, sugar, limes and dry goods. About seven o'clock another frigate came up and anchored up the beach, from the preparation we discovered them making, expected they would land in the night, we made a tolerable good breast work of the rum cask and sand, and were determined to prevent their destroying the goods; however they were disappointed in their design by the wind blowing hard from the Northwest, which obliged them to stand to sea, since which we have not discovered any more of these plundering pirates. The schooner is from Martinico, had 22 days passage; the Captain says some late papers were taken in a Bristol ship and carried into Martinico, and that they contain some interesting intelligence relating to American affairs, as they were transmitted to Congress.

During the Revolution privates usually enlisted for one year and were paid five dollars a month. Each was allowed one felt hat, a pair of yarn stockings, and a pair of shoes. The men were to supply their own arms.

A review of the service record of Lieutenant Jeremia Leeds when he applied for a pension may be typical of the activities of Revolutionary soldiers from this area. Leeds enlisted as a private in the regiment of Colonel John Somers in September of 1776. He remained in service one month without seeing any fighting and was discharged.

He entered again in November and marched from Egg Harbor by Blue Anchor to Haddonfield, then went on to fight in the battle at Trenton on December 26, 1777. The regiment went on to Princeton but did not arrive in time to engage in battle. The militia marched back to Haddonfield and Leeds was discharged again.

In March 1777, he re-enlisted as a private in Colonel Somers' regiment, marched from Egg Harbor to Cooper's Ferry, opposite Philadelphia, was stationed as a guard for one month and was discharged.

This was the pattern of Leeds' entire service record - in the service for a month or two, then out for the same length of time. Sometimes he was drafted and sometimes he volunteered. Once he was hired as a substitute but contracted measles and could not go. The whole length of time he served was ten months and a half. The last four months he served as a lieutenant.

His whole time in the army was characterized by the marching across New Jersey several times and to Red Bank and Chestnut Neck where he engaged in both battles.

When the last British vessel left Great Bay after the Battle of Chestnut Neck, the militia marched back to Somers Point and in October, 1778, Leeds was discharged for the duration.

Richard Somers, a Naval Hero. Somers Point proudly honors the memory of one of America's naval heroes, Richard Somers, the great grandson of the founder of Somers Point.

Richard was born at Somers Point on September 15, 1778. He was educated at Burlington where he studied until the death of his father in 1794.

The sea seemed his natural heritage. He was reared near the sea, watched ocean-going vessels depart for foreign ports, and heard the talk of sea-faring men. He learned the ways of the sea when he sailed as a hand and later as a mate on a coastal vessel owned by members of his own family. He gained experience voyaging between Great Egg Harbor and the ports of New York and Philadelphia.

Richard joined the navy while it was still in its infancy. The first vessel sent out was the Ganges 24 in 1798. The fourth vessel was the United States in which Somers made his first cruise a midshipman. These ships with other famous frigates of the day gave our country a sense of naval power during John Adam's administration.

In the spring of 1799, Somers was made third lieutenant and when only twenty-one years of age he was commissioned lieutenant of the United States when she sailed for France with the American Embassy.

During Jefferson's administration American affairs with the Barbary States reached a climax. These countries subsisted almost entirely by piracy and the United States as well as European nations paid tribute. Thousands of Americans were taken captive and millions of dollars were spent for ransom. Notices of captivity of church members were commonly read in various churches and the ransoms raised for their release. It required four thousand dollars to rescue a captain or a passenger.

A humiliating incident occurred which even Jefferson, with his dislike for war, could no longer endure. The frigate George Washington had been forced to carry tribute from the Barbary States to the Sultan at Constantinople under their flag.

In 1801, Tripoli, anticipating our actions, declared war on the United States. Jefferson sent four of our six American vessels to the Mediterranean. Somers was put in command of the schooner Nautilus. Many small engagements were fought with no notable results. It soon became common for the Americans to destroy the enemy's vessels and crews without loss to themselves. The Tripolitans actually were not good fighters. They had relied upon surprising their victims for their piratical successes. And their victims had been peaceful merchantmen whom they terrorized by their wild manner and show of bloodthirstiness.

In 1803, the American squadron in the Mediterranean was increased to nine ships which carried in all two hundred and fourteen guns. The Americans continued fighting under more hazardous conditions, losing a small proportion of men as compared with the enemy. An engagement occurred in which eighteen Americans were killed. Most of these were injured by the explosion of the magazines in one of the gunboats.

This must have given rise to an idea which was put into operation a few days later. A ketch, previously captured from Tripoli and christened the Intrepid was fitted up as an "infernal." One hundred barrels of powder and missiles were put in her hold in tightly planked rooms. On the deck above were piled one hundred and fifty shells and a large quantity of shot and fragments of iron. Somers' plan was to take her to the harbor at Tripoli and there explode the boat in the middle of the enemy's ships. He hoped that this would create such havoc that it would mean an end to hostilities.

Even though the plan was to give the seamen a chance to escape in rowboats after firing the ship, everyman knew it meant risking his life. That great amount of ammunition must

not fall into the enemy's hands; the ship would have to be scuttled to avoid capture. Yet so great was the en's devotion to Somers that every man on board the Nautilus volunteered to serve.

Four men were selected to go with Somers and another officer. There was a thick haze over the water and the vessel's movements could not be seen by the enemy. She neared the enemy's batteries before they saw her and they were able to open fire. Exactly what happened is not known but a light was seen moving horizontally along her deck, then to drop out of sight. There was a frightful explosion and the blazing rigging and canvas were lifted high in the air. The bodies of the crew were found two days later mangled beyond recognition. Little or no harm had been done to the enemy. The bodies were buried on the beach near the walls of Tripoli.

In 1804 the war was over. The United States no longer paid tribute, the prisoners of the Tripolitans were ransomed and the Barbary States ceased to trouble America.

Tributes to the memory of Richard Somers have been many. Congress erected a monument in his honor which now stands on the grounds of the Naval Academy at Annapolis. A stone marks his birthplace in Somers Point. Four navy crafts have been named for him. A vessel named Somers is always kept in the United States Navy honoring his memory. In the old family burial ground in the New York Avenue School is a stone erected by the United States Navy as a memorial.

In 1942, a dedicatory celebration was held at Somers Mansion when it was turned over to the New Jersey Historical Sites Commission. At the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox wrote these words of tribute:

There is no prouder name in the history of the United States than that of Richard Somers, who in an attempt to destroy a flotilla of pirate galleys in our war with Tripoli blew up the explosion ship which he commanded, sacrificing his own life rather than

see the ship captured. As long as the American flag flies on the seven seas, the heroism of Richard Somers will not be forgotten.

War of 1812. Shortly after the declaration of war by the United States against Great Britain, John R. Scull, who lived in Scullville, a few miles from Somers Point, formed a company of infantry to protect the seacoast. This company selected a spot near the Great Egg Harbor River which gave them command of the harbor and full view of the inlet. A semi-circular fort was erected by the residents of Egg Harbor Township, twenty feet wide at the base and fifteen feet at the top, about six to ten feet high. It was called the Sand Fort, a ridge of beach sand and meadow muck thrown up along the water at what is now Bay Avenue from Somers Avenue to Anna Avenue. Six smooth bore cannon, furnished by the state, were mounted on top and were capable of carrying a four to six pound ball. Eight companies of foot soldiers were stationed there as well as two companies of cavalry called horse guards.

Men stood guard at this fort day and night. A command of residents of the county, about 400 men, was organized and came on call. The sentinel fired two shots as a signal to be ready. The next sentinel, who might be at work on the farm, fired two shots notifying neighbors to turn out for duty or be ready for action. In this way all the enrolled men within eight miles of the fort were alerted.

Stories are told of a tunnel in the fort a thousand feet in length which protected the men from being trapped. They could go from one end to the other in safety. Local opinion is that the tunnel led to the powder magazines.

This historic spot remained untouched for more than seventy years when it was removed to make way for building operations. The workmen found mounds of balls as they were placed in 1814. This tunnel, too, has disappeared.

Stories are told of American privateers hiding in the harbor, capturing British war vessels as well as merchantmen. Up to nine British ships were interned near the shipyard.

In the latter part of 1813 several small coasters, sailing from Cape May, had a skirmish with a British armed schooner. She fired on the boats, chased and captured the New Jersey which was owned by Captain Burton and hailed from Mays Landing. A British officer was put in charge with three other men. The officer was a poor seaman and after some difficulty directed Captain Burton to steer for Cape May. He purposely steered the vessel so no headway was made. Morning found them off the mouth of the Great Egg Harbor Bay. Burton feigned ignorance of the place. At an opportune moment, he overpowered the British crew and brought the vessel to anchor off Somers Point.

Captain Job Gifford, of Scullville, who frequented Somers Point as a boy around 1870, said that he recalled seeing the ribs of wrecks around the harbor, which were believed to have been the skeletons of the sloops of war.

Custom House. The custom house was established in Somers Point in 1797 by the United States as this was the point of entry for Gloucester County. Constance Somers was named the first Collector. The building was located near the harbor on the main street north of Somers Mansion. All ships wishing to enter the harbor or leave the river received their clearance papers there.

In February of 1894, President Cleveland appointed Enoch High bee as the Collector of Customs at Somers Point for the District of Great Egg Harbor.

Edmund Somers was the last Collector of Customs. He served as collector for fourteen years until the custom house was discontinued in 1915. All business pertaining to shipping in this area is now carried on through the port of Philadelphia.

Shipbuilding. In 1800, Christopher Van Sant built a full-rigged vessel along Patcong Creek. A few years later five ships were built along the same creek.

In the half century beginning around 1830, shipbuilding was at its height. The United States at that time built some of the world's finest ships and carried on trade in the Mediterranean, the West Indies, and South America.

Basset Steelman ran a packet steamer between Philadelphia and Somers Point, bringing back iron work all fitted for use in local shipyards.

The last ship to be built on the ways of the Somers Point shipyard near Somers Avenue was the Eva J. Smith, a schooner built by Israel Scull in 1895.

Travel by Stagecoach. Stage wagons used in the early days were like the early farm wagons and changed very little until after 1750. They were heavily built and were drawn by four or six horses. The body had straight sides with a canvas top stretched over hoops. Passengers sat on three or four wooden benches without backs. There were no springs and passengers were "bounced like corn in a popper," and would try desperately to maintain their seats as the lumbering wagon lurched over rough roads and corduroy roads through the swamps. A corduroy road was made by cutting trees into lengths and placing them side by side to make a road bed. It is said that more robust passengers, on arriving at their destination, were able to climb out of the wagon; the more feeble ones had to be lifted out.

Men were expected to walk to lighten the load on hills and to help push the wagons out when they became stuck in the mud. Complaints were few if the trip were a speedy one. Some of the fastest wagons were called "flying machines."

Conditions were bettered by the keen competition in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

By 1772, the first stagecoaches were used in New Jersey for public transportation. The demand for comfort led to the introduction of coaches, even though the fares became higher. The coaches were flat on the top with leather or woolen side curtains that could be raised or lowered at the convenience of the passengers. The body was widened to look like a carriage and springs were added for comfort. Benches were replaced with seats having backs and were set on springs or suspended on leather straps. Twelve passengers could ride, three or each of four seats.

In addition to being easily accessible to coastwise shipping Somers Point was on the stage coach route to Camden and Philadelphia. In March, 1775, the following advertisement appears in Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet:

The subscriber informs the public in general and his friends in particular, that he has fitted a stage wagon from Richard Somers's on Great Eggharbour, to go to Samuel Cooper's ferry, opposite the city of Philadelphia, for the conveniency of passengers and transportation of dead carriage. It sets off from said Somers's on Monday and arrives at Samuel Cooper's on Tuesday afternoon. The subscriber puts up at the New Ferry in the city, where he waits for passengers and orders until Tuesday morning; he then sets off from Samuel Cooper's and returns to Egg-harbour on Friday afternoon. The passengers and the rates are as follows: for passage through, 10s. for passage; any shorter distance 2 d. each mile; for dead carriage, 1 d. each mile per hundred weight; for dealing in dry goods or sundries by wholesale, 10 d. per pound; by retail, 1s. 8d. per pound; for letters, 4 d. to be paid with the letter. For newspapers, 5s. per year All persons who will please to favor the subscriber with their custom may depend on having their order punctually discharged by their humble servant, Samuel Burton.

The first road was laid out in Atlantic County in 1716. It went from Nacote Creek (Port Republic) along the shore to Somers Ferry at Somers Point. Stage Passengers complained of the swamps and marshes through which they had to travel, so twelve surveyors altered the route to make traveling easier.

In 1840, records show that a coach left Pearson's Ferry in Philadelphia at 4 A.M. A half hour was allowed to cross the river and passengers boarded the coach in Camden at 4:30

o'clock. The coach passed through Haddonfield, Long-A-Coming (now Berlin), Tansboro, Blue Anchor, Winslow Glass Works, Weymouth Iron Works, Mays Landing, Bargaintown, Somers Point, and on to Absecon. The coach left Philadelphia on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings, and the return trips were made on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On the return trip the passengers left Absecon at 4 A.M. and expected to be at Somers Point at 4:30 A.M. About ten hours were required to make the entire trip.

Religion. In South Jersey Friends antedated by many years all other religious societies.

In 1676, William Penn and the Friends Society brought four hundred families to settle in West Jersey. Many Quaker families located in this area and formed the first religious organization in Atlantic County. Somers Point was one of three places selected for holding Friends meetings. The meetings were held in the Somers home and both John and Hannah Somers were preachers. Their son Edmund and daughter Millicent also preached the Word of God.

Thomas Chalkley from his Journal dated February 1726, wrote the following concerning a Friends' Meeting in Somers Point:

From Cape May, we traveled along the seacoast to Egg Harbor, swam our horses over the Great Egg Harbor Ricer, and went over ourselves in canoes, and afterward had a meeting at Richard Somers' home, which was a large one, as could be expected, considering that the people live at such distances from each other

After John Somers' death, his widow built a meeting house on the southwest corner of what is now New York Avenue in Somers Point. There is a story that during the War of 1812 a bullet fired from the enemy's guns passed through the church during meeting. Two dwellings were made of the building in the time of Jesse Somers, Jr.

By 1834, Sunday Schools had been established in most of the larger villages. There was a county Bible Society, various tract societies and many temperance associations.