

by Hank Foglino

In the past, I have written descriptions of some of Long Island's north shore harbors; now I'd like to take a look at the south shore. The south shore is bordered by barrier islands, and the mainland is separated from the Atlantic Ocean by bays along its length. There are five inlets: East Rockaway (Debs) in the west, and Jones, Fire Island, Moriches and Shinnecock in the east.

One of the most marine-oriented areas is the village of Freeport, in the Town of Hempstead, which has often been referred to as a "Fisherman's Paradise". At least 2,000 boats are docked at available slips. Freeport lies almost due north of Jones Inlet and the inlet can be accessed through salt marshes via several canals, the oldest being the Woodcleft Canal.

The earliest recorded settlers were the Meroke Indians, who were attracted to the region's assets, including streams, abundant game and easy transportation. They began making wampum from the seashells that were found easily in the area. The inhabitants were harassed by tribes from upstate New York and may have avoided being invaded by bartering wampum, which was used for money and ornaments. One of the first settlers to the region was Edward Raynor. He emigrated from England to Boston in 1634 as a 10-year-old orphan. At the age of 21, he made his home in Hempstead. In 1659 he left Hempstead and moved to what then was called

the Great South Woods, cleared land and built a cabin. More cabins sprang up as settlers arrived in the area around what is now the Recreation Center. Descendants of the founders fished, clammed, crabbed and multiplied. The area was initially known as Raynor South, and later Raynortown.



The Sportsmen's Channel near Woodcleft in 1900

One of the descendants, Raynor Rock Smith, a sea captain from Freeport, became a hero on January 2, 1837. He came upon a ship, the *Mexico*, filled with Irish immigrants, that had hit a rock off what is now Seaford. The passengers, having been driven up from below by the rising water, were huddled on deck. The spray that was coming across the

ship was so cold that it covered the deck and the people topside with a frozen veil. Captain Smith and his crew, which included three of his sons, dragged their boat over the frozen bay to the beach. Launching the boat, they made their way to the *Mexico* and were able to save the captain, his son, five passengers and a sailor before being driven back by the elements.

Days later, when conditions allowed, local inhabitants were able to reach the wreck. There were no survivors; 77 bodies of the 116 who perished were recovered. Entire families were found frozen, huddled together in a final embrace, and one sailor died with his hands clasped in prayer. The frozen bodies were piled crosswise on wooden sleds and taken to the barn of John Lott to be identified by friends and relatives. Those that were not identified were placed in coffins made of donated lumber until the ground in a donated plot in Old Sand Hole Cemetery thawed so graves could be dug. The funeral procession of the unclaimed bodies consisted of 52 wagons. No other shipwreck on Long Island's south shore has incurred such grief from the local population. Captain Smith and his crew received a \$350 reward from the *Mexico*'s owner, which Smith turned over to his crew. Today a monument in Rockville Center commemorates the wreck of the *Mexico* and the brave actions of *continued on page 14*

The New Name In Offshore Fishing

Demand The Difference



Sailfish boats feature proven hull designs, all glass construction, superb fit & finish and an extensive list of standard features.



218 WAC

Specifications:

L.O.A.21'3"
 Fuel Cap..... 100 Gal.
 Deadrise22-24 Deg.
 Beam8'6"
 Dry Weight 3500 Lbs.
 Approx. Draft.....18"



218 CC

Specifications:

L.O.A.21'3"
 Fuel Cap..... 100 Gal.
 Deadrise22-24 Deg.
 Beam8'6"
 Dry Weight 3,100 Lbs.
 Approx. Draft.....18"



2660 WAC

Specifications:

L.O.A.26'2"
 Fuel Cap..... 200 Gal.
 Deadrise22-24 Deg.
 Beam9'
 Dry Weight 4,750 Lbs.
 Approx. Draft.....18"



3006 CC

Specifications:

L.O.A.30.6'
 Fuel Cap..... 300 Gal.
 Deadrise22-24 Deg.
 Beam10'
 Dry Weight 7200 Lbs.
 Approx. Draft.....22"



MOST MODELS IN STOCK • CALL FOR AVAILABILITY

17' - 30' Center Consoles / 21' - 26' Walkarounds

3875 LONG BEACH RD., ISLAND PARK, NY

516-431-1865

WWW.KANDKOUTBOARD.COM



by Hank Foglino

continued from page 13

those men who risked their lives.

It was difficult to maintain friendly relations with the original inhabitants. The Merokes did not know about “keep off” signs. They had lived unencumbered by boundaries and rules, taking what they needed from nature’s larder. The early settlers purchased some of the land from the Indians, but the contracts were so vague that, for example, the Indians thought this was just a down-payment and more was to follow. To the settlers it was payment in full. The Meroke’s evolution progressed from friendly to helpful, then to misunderstanding, fighting, defeat and near slavery. A writer at the time noted that “The South Side Indians are too worthless to live, but not bad enough to hang”.

In 1853 the 600 inhabitants elected to name the village Freeport. At the time merchant seamen could avoid the dock fees charged in New York and Sag Harbor by sailing through Jones Inlet and unloading in Raynortown. The ships’ captains began calling it Free Port. This was merged into Freeport.

The oyster industry began to thrive shortly after the Civil War. In 1901 a shellfish harvest of more than 3.5 million bushels, mostly oysters, was recorded. A combination of factors brought the industry to an end. Brooklyn’s mushrooming water requirements necessitated the pumping of water from Nassau County. The reduced flow of water into Freeport’s



Wreck of the Mexico

waterways dried up some of them. This drastically diminished the supply of fresh water-carrying microscopic nourishment required by the shellfish. Later, sand dredged to build the Wantagh Expressway spilled into the waterways, smothering the oysters and negating any future use of the beds. Finally, the ever-increasing population and ensuing pollution put an end to the oyster industry.

Being very “boat friendly,” Freeport was a major rum running center during prohibition. Rumrunners went in and out with their cargoes and were often chased by the Coast Guard. Both organizations purchased their boats from the Freeport Point Shipyard, founded by Fred and Mirto Scopinich just after World War I. The shipyard moved to East Quogue in the 1960s. Freeporter Al Grover’s family started with a marina and a dealer-

ship in the 1950s. The family built fishing skiffs from the 1970s to about 1990. In 1985, Al Grover and his sons took one of their 26-footers from Nova Scotia to Portugal, marking the first outboard motor crossing of the Atlantic Ocean

Hydroplane racing was a passion of one of Freeport’s inhabitants, Guy Lombardo. Originally from Canada, he migrated to the United States and became a famous band leader. The band played at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City from 1929 to 1959 and their New Year’s Eve broadcast (which continued at the Waldorf Astoria) lasted until 1976. He began racing hydroplanes in 1940, and four years later he won the Red Bank Sweepstakes and the Gold Cup with his 450 hp *Tempo VI*. In 1948, while attempting to recapture the Gold Cup on the Detroit River, his boat overturned while trying to avoid a disabled boat in front of him. The crash resulted in a broken arm. He gave up racing in 1954. In his later years, Guy moved to Freeport, bring *Tempo VI* with him. He invested in a seafood restaurant, which eventually became Guy Lombardo’s East Point House.

So, if you are fond of good boats, fishing and good seafood, look no farther than Freeport, Long Island, New York.

(I’d like to thank the Freeport Historical Society for their assistance and cooperation in researching this article.)