



History and treasures along our shores

Fierce New England storms leave shipwrecks and bounty in their wake

Bill Pappou Drew

Strong New England storms are treacherous. A warning of their power appeared in 2007 after the scrubbing away of loose sand by a severe storm exposed the remains of an 18th century shipwreck on Short Sands Beach in York, Maine.



Short Sands, York, ME (Courtesy of Seacoast Media, photo by Don Clark)

Neither the name of the vessel nor its origin is known, but it has the physical characteristics of an 18th century coastal "Pink," used for trade in the Gulf of Maine. A pink is described as a small sailing vessel with a sharply narrowed stern and an overhanging transom. Click [here](#) for more detail.

Many believe there may be a connection to the schooner *Nottingham Galley*, cast upon the rocks of Boon Island on December 11, 1710, and fictionalized in the novel, *Boon Island* by local author [Kenneth Roberts](#). The survivors spent three weeks on the island and by his account resorted to cannibalism to stay alive. A complete history of the island is [here](#).

Laying eight or so miles off the shores of York Beach this rocky ledge, Boon Island, presents a challenge to those who travel the coastal route. In 1682, the *Increase*, a local trading vessel, broke up on its shores. Four survivors ate a diet of lean fish and eggs on this barren outcropping of rock until they were discovered and rescued four months later. Known details of the story are [here](#).

Efforts to provide warnings of the dangers along the coast have been many and varied: towers, beacon lights, and "groaner" buoys all signal danger. Provisions

were stashed in remote locations to provide food for future survivors. Manned light houses were built to assist in navigating along the shore line.



Fort Stark / Jerry's Point, New Castle, N.H. (courtesy of Google Images)

To the north of Odiornes Point, the first settlement in New Hampshire in 1623, a neck of land, a peninsula, juts out to the southeast from the island of New Castle. Its location, at the mouth of the Piscataqua River, provides a broad view of the surrounding area, and the site has been used as a fortification for centuries. Currently it is known as Fort Stark. See "Notes" below, as to the current status of Fort Stark as described in previous articles in *Rye Reflections*. It is now a part of the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation.



New Hampshire Governor John Lynch presents an award for the efforts and results of the volunteers of the Fort Stark Brigade and Friends to Peter Rice, left, with Bev Hollingsworth, Councilor, State of New Hampshire, Executive Council, and George Bald, Commissioner of New Hampshire's Department of Resources and Economic Development, looking on at right. The "machine shop" building is in the background. (Bill Drew photo)

Because of its deteriorated state, local citizens have undertaken to bring the site back into a presentable condition; extensive clearing of the overgrowth of brush opened up views. The huge flag pole was refurbished and painted. All of the wooden buildings of the 20th century used in the establishment of a fort during World War I and II have long since been demolished. All that is left are the concrete remains of gun emplacements and associated powder storage locations.



Flag Pole with flag at half mast. (Jim Cerny photo)

There are two major buildings remaining: the Harbor Entrance Control Point building (HECP) and a long single story brick building labeled, "Machine Shop" that contained a few historical posters, miscellaneous hardware, remnants of a small museum and storage materials for the local N.H. State Parks.



The west side of the HECP building. (Jim Cerny photo)

Two volunteers took on the task, with assistance from many, to wrest the machine shop from former residents, members of certain species in the animal category. Now that the area has been cleaned out and some minor repairs made to the building, it is ready for occupancy.

Carol White and Joan Hammond work to clean up the mess and make the machine shop habitable. (photos by Jim Cerny and Bill Drew, respectively)

At one time in the late 1800's, Fort Stark became the site a local life saving station: "Coast Guard Station # 12, Life Saving Station at Jerry's Point." These stations were set up along the coast to provide support to vessels foundering in the local waters. A history of this life saving station can be found [here](#). It was in operation for about 25 years before it was removed and placed on Wood Island, Kittery Point, Maine, as Fort Stark was needed for military operations.

Carol White and Joan Hammond have become interested in and are compiling a record of the many shipwrecks in the local area. There are plans to prepare an exhibit for a newly formed Fort Stark Visitor Center detailing the fort's history along with shipwrecks in the Portsmouth area and rescues made by the Lifesaving Station. This is the beginning of a compilation of exciting tales of

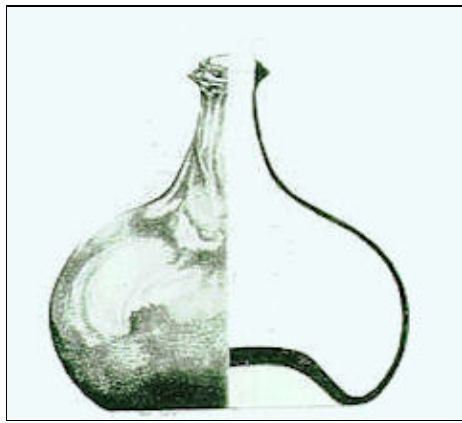


A turn of the century picture of the Life Saving Station at Jerry's Point, New Castle. (photographer unknown)

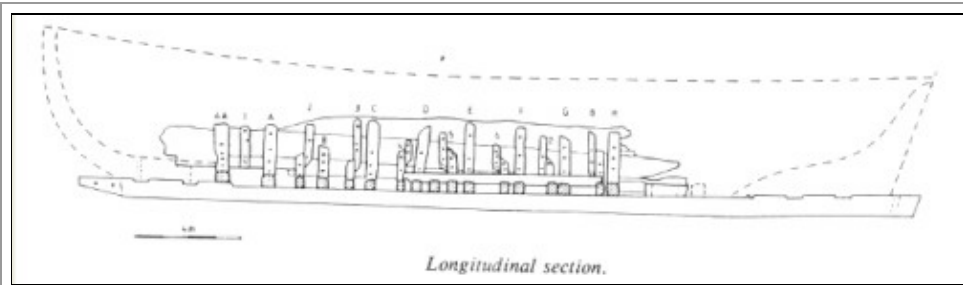
rescues and shipwrecks.

One such wreck is the remains of a shallop, a merchant vessel observed by two UNH students scuba diving for scallops in Hart's Cove, New Castle, in the 1970's. Hart's cove is the body of water directly west from Fort Constitution. Using sonar and a magnetometer, a more comprehensive underwater search was undertaken in 1980 through a Sea Grant from the Seacoast Science Center at Odiorne's Point. Extensive remains were discovered with artifacts dating from the late 1600's. Two cannons and numerous other artifacts have been found in the sand and mud nearby possibly associated with this shipwreck. A report of the excavation of the site has been done by Brendon Foley and David Switzer and this information can be found [here](#).

An artifact retrieved from the depths of Hart's cove, an onion bottle.



(Courtesy of Institute of New Hampshire Studies, Plymouth State University)



Longitudinal view of the Hart's Cover Shallop. The vertical lines in the middle of the drawing represent the position of various lengths and position of known ribs within the vessel. (Courtesy of Institute of New Hampshire Studies, Plymouth State University)

On November 25, 1888, at 1:15 am, the schooner, *Oliver Dyer* anchored just inside the entrance to the Portsmouth, N.H., harbor. At 5.45 a.m. a surfman from the Jerry's Point Station noticed that the she was dragging its anchors.

The chains soon parted and the Dyer struck 150 feet offshore upon the ragged ledges east of the life saving station at Fort Stark. Raging seas pushed the Dyer farther onto the rocks. The ship could still be seen except when a big sea went over it and then only the topmasts and lower mastheads were visible. An official account of the disaster is described [here](#). A long and more descriptive story about the disaster and attempts to rescue are described in Dennis L. Noble's book, "Rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard, Great Acts of Heroism since 1878", [pages 32 to 35](#). It is an exciting tale told of the rescue by members of the New Castle lifesaving station at Jerry's Point and due to the bravery of these lifesavers, each was awarded a gold medal by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Treasury Department, May 21, 1889

Winslow A. Amazeen

Surfman Jerry's Point Life Saving Station, New Castle, New Hampshire.

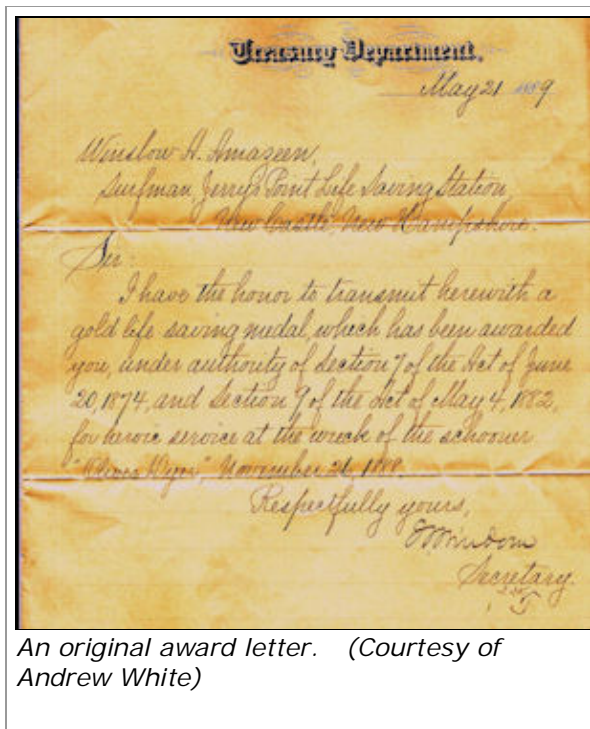
Sir:

I have the honor to transmit herewith a gold life saving medal, which has been awarded you, under authority of Section 7 of the Act of June 20, 1874, and Section 9 of the Act of May 4, 1882, for heroic service at the wreck of the schooner, *Oliver Dyer*. November 26, 1888.

Respectfully yours,

W. Windom, Secretary of T. (U.S. Treasury)

A request is made that any information regarding stories, artifacts, or



knowledge of shipwrecks in the area be brought to the attention of this research project. Already over 60 wrecks have been identified.

One New Castle resident related how his grandmother said she was in the business of making overalls because there was a lot of denim salvaged from the beach after one of these wrecks.

Another resident told of his parents picking up coal off the beach and bringing it home – another gift from a wrecked vessel.

Ideas and assistance in the design and creation and implementation of the displays at Fort Stark would be greatly appreciated.

Notes:

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Previous articles published in Rye Reflections:

September, 2007

[Citizens polish a gem in New Castle :](#)

[Take on reclamation of Fort Stark at entrance of Portsmouth Harbor](#)

And

October, 2007

[The Great Island gem releases new views : Volunteer reclamation shines new light on Fort Stark](#)

Another interesting shipwreck excavated and recorded:

The Defence: Revolutionary War Privateer, Penobscot Bay, Maine.

During the Revolutionary War, the privateer Defence, built in Massachusetts laid siege against the loyalist colony at Fort George in Penobscot Bay, Maine. It was scuttled when approaching elements of the British Navy came to the colony's rescue. David Switzer and David Wyman excavated the site from 1975 to 1981. General information can be found [here](#). A more detailed account of the challenges Switzer and Wyman faced can be found [here](#).

Schedule Note:

Dr. David Switzer, PhD, of the Department of Social Science at Plymouth State University, will give a talk at the Rye Library on April 23, on the Hart's Cove shipwreck excavation and another wreck, a schooner, located at Wallis Sands Beach.

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