

# History of Captree Island

Unnamed, Anonymous

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Cap Tree Island is one of the many marsh islands found in the Great South Bay of Long Island. While it was never one of the most utilized islands of the bay, it has an interesting and varied history. This paper is an attempt to bring together some aspects of the island into an organized collection of material. This will include the political, geographical, biological and social histories of the island.

The first task to accomplish would be to determine the origin of the name Cap Tree. There are references to "Crabtree" Island which only adds to the confusion but from other research, this misspelling is not unusual. Fire Island, for instance, stems from the misreading of "Five Islands". The name originally given to the five bay islands inside the Fire Island Inlet. One example of the name Crabtree Island is found in the **Gazetten Colonial History of the State of New York, 1836**<sup>1</sup>.

Early maps show that the word Captree was actually divided into two distinct words - Cap and tree. It has been said that a large cove existed on the island and was used as a dockage for a local schooner which was too large to navigate the bay. As a result, people would cross the bay and pick up and drop off material at this dockage. The ship Captain's last name was Tree, thus people were going to Captain Tree or shortened. Cap Tree for supplies<sup>2</sup>.

Another name often used on maps for part of all of Cap Tree is Seganus Thatch or Island. This would appear to be a name used by the Indians and still used by some map writers and historians.

The ownership of the island was not finally decided until September 16, 1890, more than two hundred years after the original dispute began. Ownership became a problem around the year 1666 when Governor Nicolls, an agent of the Duke of York, bought most of the area which is now Islip Town. In June of 1688, Governor Dongan granted Nicolls all the land east of the Huntington gut, which was an inlet near what is today Gilgo Beach, to south of the Connetquot River including all bay islands and barrier beaches for the amount of four shillings rent. Following the storm of 1693, when a seven mile wide inlet

opened from what is now Cap Tree Island east to about the Point O'Woods area, William Smith, of Brookhaven area, claimed he had bought the new islands that had been formed, including Cap Tree, from the Indian Chief Tobaccus, for ten British pounds<sup>4</sup>. Smith thereby claimed the same areas that Nicolls had claimed only six years earlier. Smith lost his claim.

Babylon Town did not exist independently at this time but rather was part of Huntington Town. Eighty years later, there was a dispute between Huntington Town and what was Islip Town formed in 1788 by a New York State Act taking over all of Nicolls land<sup>5</sup>. As these disputes continued it might be asked, why would the towns argue over some marsh land in the bay which could only be reached by boat.

The salt hay found in these islands was used to feed the cattle of the colonists. It was free and there for those who controlled it. The land was leased for hay cutting first in 1739 and then continuously for forty three more times until 1776<sup>6</sup>. In 1775 Huntington Town passed laws controlling the cutting of salt hay to specific times of the year. During these times, men would live on the marsh islands for a week at a time, cutting the hay and loading on the boats which carried the hay to the main island. As late as 1822, Islip Town passed a motion to continue to lease the grass rights on Cap Tree Island for the present year and at the same rate as the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason for the interest in the island was the shellfishing and hunting that it afforded the local people. As early as 1765, Islip passed laws protecting the fishing in o the bay and islands.<sup>8</sup> In 1815, Islip passed a law forbidding non-residents from shellfishing on the island. (These laws 9 continue today with some small changes.)<sup>9</sup>

The dispute continued for forty years when in 1819 Islip petitioned the State of New York for ownership of the island. The Nicoll heirs had lost all claims to the island at the State level courts in 1814, allowing Islip to apply for complete ownership. On July 13, 1819, a settlement was apparently reached between Islip and Huntington Town splitting the island in about equal halves by drawing a line from the mouth of Broad Creek due south to the Fire Island Inlet waters. East of the line would be Islip property and west of the line would be Huntington's.<sup>10</sup> This agreement was never signed until 1857 for what were probably political reasons.

When Babylon Town separated from Huntington in 1872 new problems arose and these problems were solved by the towns in an agreement in 1890.

The geological history of Cap Tree Island would appear to be very closely related to, if not the same as, the great barrier beach on the southern shore of Long Island. This would include its inception until approximately the last sixty years. The barrier beach of the south shore was the last geographical land mass to form on Long Island. Its formation is generally due to the western movement of eroded material from the Montauk Point area of the island. The littoral, or long shore current, moves sand particles from the eastern end towards the western end of the island. The littoral, or long shore current, moves sand particles from the eastern end towards the western end of the island. As the sand particles move in a westerly direction they are also moved north and south by wave action. The summer wave action is slow enough so that the sand began to form a bar which became dry at low tide and continued from that point into the barrier, beach. As the sand dried it was blown by the wind to form sand dunes.

With this description in mind, one might still ask what this has to do with Cap Tree Island located inside not one but two barrier beaches, namely the west end of Fire Island and the east end of Oak Beach. According to the United States Geographical Survey, Cap Tree Island was "never connected to Fire Island and is older than Fire Island and therefore is a pure barrier beach".<sup>11</sup> The map of 1798 (figure III) is a drawing of Cap Tree Island not only split in two but located behind only one beach called West Beach. The map of Cap Tree Island of 1834 (figure IV) shows Cap Tree connected to or part of the West Beach. But the West Beach has been separated from the rest of the beach by an inlet. There is the possibility that the "century storm" of 1815 caused the difference in the shape of the island between 1798 and 1834. The map of 1873 by Beers and Comstock (figure V) indicates this inlet had closed by this date as does the Islip Town map of 1890 (figure I). The map of 1834 also shows that the east end of Fire Island is about four miles east of its present position exposing the south side of Cap Tree to the ocean.

Besides using maps to substantiate the fact that Cap Tree was at one time part of the barrier beach formation, one should look for signs of barrier beach formation on the island today. As previously discussed, sand dunes would be an indication of a barrier beach. The photographs of the present Cap Tree Island (figure VI) show old sand dune formation, on the south eastern side of the island (figure II). Large dunes still exist on the east end of the cove.

Another indication of barrier beach formation is that on the bay side of all barrier beaches is located an extensive salt marsh area. This phenomena is due to the silting of organic material on the calm shallow water found on the bay side of the barrier beach and sand being blown off the top of the dunes in a northward direction. Cap Tree has one of the largest salt marshes of the bay area on the south shore as indicated on the Islip Town map of 1890 (figure II) and photographs of the island.

The large cove that Cap Tree Island now encloses had a natural channel that led from "Matt's" dock located on Oak Beach, north towards "Willow Point" or "Jessie's Creek" and then east towards the head of the cove. As shown on the overlay map of 1834, there was an inlet that would have lead through the cove at about the direction of the east channel and then headed south as it ran into the western side of the cove. Added to this would have been the current running through Jessie's Creek which would probably be the explanation for the nature channel that was used by residences of Cap Tree to reach their houses (figure I).

Up until about the year 1900, all appearances of the island were arranged by natural forces. From this point on, however, Cap Tree was altered by man to a point where people of today would have little idea of where the original Captree Island was located and what it looked like. With the growth of the Long Island State Park Commission in the early twenties, it was proposed by Robert Moses that a road the entire length of Jones Island east to Oak Beach and Short Beach be constructed allowing a number of inlets along the way to be closed. The sand needed for this road construction would come from a State Boat Channel dug parallel to the road through the marsh lands of the Great South Bay. As shown on the map of Fire Island State Park (figure VIII), Captree Island was cut in two different places by the construction of this channel in 1934, the western most end of the island, known as Seganic Thatch, and the main body of the island from the end of the big cove to Whig Inlet in the east end. It is interesting to

note that on the map of 1935, construction of the Cap Tree Bridge connecting the main land with Cap Tree and Jones Beach Parkway is shown.

Some of the spoil from the dredging of the State Boat Channel through the Cap Tree Island was placed on the future sight of the Cap Tree Bridge as indicated by the lines of the map. The spoil remained there for about twenty years until the actual construction of the bridge began. As seen in so many other instances, the final and most damaging change to nature was caused by man. The subsequent building of the Captree State Park and the clover leaf interchanges for the park-way system, have forever changed the shape of Cap Tree Island.

Leaving the geographical aspects of the island, and changing to the biological aspects, there is observed a very important and thriving salt marsh. A salt marsh is considered one of the most productive biological areas on the earth. Cap Tree Island is one of the largest salt marsh areas of the Great South Bay consisting of approximately two hundred and ninety acres.<sup>13</sup>

A salt marsh contains many different organisms, some visitors and some full-time residences. The flora of the marsh consists of two major salt hay or grasses called *Spartina alterniflora*, found on the very edges of the many winding creeks throughout the marsh. *Spartina alterniflora* can withstand a very high concentration of salt water, thus it actually grows in the water. The other common grass is *Spartina patens* and can be identified as the grass that lays flat on the marsh and while it cannot withstand constant exposure to the salt water, it can stand occasional flooding.

As the elevation increases slightly, the organisms change and glass worts, beach golden rod, and bayberry are found in abundance. Bayberries were used by the early settlers to scent their candles. Continuing to slightly higher elevations found along the edges of the sand dunes are *Phragmites* filled with poison ivy.

Some of the larger varieties of plants on the island are pitch pines, cedar and a few willow trees. In a few locations beach plum can be found as well as some wild cherry trees.

The water in the creeks are full of algae such as sea lettuce (*Ulva lactuca*), widgeon grass, enteromorpha, and other common seaweeds. All of these plants found in the salt marsh produce a tremendous amount of organic material which is used by the animals that not only live in the marsh but also in the bay.

Some of the fauna found on Cap Tree are found in the marshes on Long Island. Starting at the bottom, material found in the creeks are hard clams (*Mercenaria mercenaria*), soft clams (*Mya arenaria*), sand worms, and other invertebrates. In the water are found the blue claw crabs, killie fish, jelly fish, stickle backs and many types of migratory fish that use the salt marsh as a spawning area.

The land organisms observed would include field mice, snails, rabbits, and red fox. The birds that inhabit the island include many varieties of sparrows, as well as sea gulls, skimmers and terns which all use the island as a nesting area. Hawks are also observed, because of the tremendous food supply that is available to them on the island. White herons are also seen nesting in the trees located on the dune which runs north and south just west of Jessie's Creek.

Many varieties of waterfowl use the island either as a summer nesting area such as the mallard or a wintering area such as the black duck. During the winter, many species show up as visitors which include the green-winged teal, sheldrake, broadbill, Canadian goose, and brant. These visitors have caused Cap Tree to become an ideal area for duck hunting.

One of the major organisms which is no longer found on the island or in the cove is the oyster. Oysters were found in abundance as late as the early 1950's but a combination of salinity changes and disease has destroyed them.

Cap Tree Island has a varied history in terms of the people who have used the island as a home, recreation area, and business place. Today Cap Tree continues to satisfy varied groups although it is much more inhabited than it was one hundred years ago. A channel of inlet found on Figure VII located on the east end of the island is called Whig Inlet. Whig Inlet as in 1690 cut through to the ocean as described by Captain Charles Suydam.<sup>14</sup> This inlet was apparently used during the Revolutionary War by the Americans to raid the various British ships patrolling the ocean front.<sup>15</sup> The inlet was too small for the British ships but for American ships, which were low draft vessels, it was ideal. Whig Inlet is no longer open to the ocean but many small summer houses are located on its northern edge.

Across from these houses is located a small piece of land separated from Cap Tree by extremely shallow water. The local name given to this area is called Fisherman's Island because of the presence of the Sunrise Fish Company. This company is the last of the pound net companies of Long Island. They use Fisherman Island as a staging area for their equipment to maintain their pound nets located south of Robert Moses State Park. The nets consist of a long lead net dropped from the beach south to a large trap. The object is for the lead net to force migrating fish south towards the trap where they are caught and removed each day during the summer.

On the island are many small shacks (figure VI) which were once used to house the workers but used now primarily for storage of equipment and a couple are used as summer beach houses. Also seen on the island are the forty to sixty foot poles in the ocean to hold the nets and the boats used to tend the nets.

Slightly north of Fisherman's Island is a point locally called "Whirlpool Point". The reason for this name is the action of the currents as they pass from the inlet to Snake-hill Channel (figure VII). In approximately this area was located one of the most famous or maybe it should be called infamous structures on Cap Tree, that of the Wa-Wa-Yandas Club. The club house was floated into place around the year 1850. The club was the summer hang out for the Democrats from New York City called Tammanyites after Tammy Hall. It is said that the fate of New York City and all major decisions that concerned the city were decided at the club. The club boasted of no females and became the center for relaxation and drinking for this political group. The members leased the land from Islip Town for 999 years at one hundred dollars per year.<sup>15</sup> The name Wa-Wa-Yandas comes from mountains of the same name located in New Jersey and not an Indian chief as some suspect.

The club membership varied over its sixty years of existence from Boss Tweed, the political leader of New York City, to many theatrical greats of that period. Teddy Roosevelt as well as a millionaire named

Charles Mattlage, a produce merchant, became members. People of this stature would indicate a change in the purpose and make up the club. In the 1890's the club was the site of the famous Tile Club of New York.<sup>16</sup> It also became an exclusive sportman's club for the rich headed by Senator Charles Adler.<sup>17</sup> The location of the club was ideal for all types of water sports. Being directly north of the Fire Island Inlet, which made ocean fishing easily accessible, according to reports trolling for weakfish on the way to bottom fishing by the inlet made for a complete day of fishing with full fish boxes.<sup>18</sup> Sailing in the Great South Bay has always been excellent as has the sport of duck hunting. The location of the club lent itself to the hunting aspect of the water sports. The great flocks of sea birds seen on the bay until 1910 gave excellent sport. Behind the Wa-Wa-Yandas Club were many marsh canals which afforded great puddle duck hunting. In the map (figure II) of Cap Tree there would appear to be a pond almost directly behind the location of the Wa-Wa-Yandas Club which could have been fresh water, ideal for puddle duck hunting.

The method of getting to the Club was by boat and a Captain Enslin and later his son Charlie Enslin were operators of several boats which ferried men from the Babylon Dock to the Club and on fishing trips.<sup>19</sup> In the summer of 1912, the original club burned down but was replaced by several buildings in a few years. The Club continued until after the Depression when it was finally abandoned.

Broad Creek is a channel where the bay bridge touches land on Cap Tree Island and was filled when the State Boat Channel was constructed in 1934. At the very east end of Broad Channel near the Wa-Wa Yandas Club stood the home of Sherm Pearsall, one of the famous Great South Bay duck hunters. Pearsall would spend much of each winter in this house isolated on a small hill of sand surrounded by pine trees (which still remain although the house has since burned down) in the middle of the marsh. From this vantage point he would gun the inlet, marsh or bay depending on the type of weather, until his death in 1910.<sup>20</sup>

Slightly southwest of Cap Tree is found Oak Island which has been densely populated for two hundred years. The accessibility due to a natural channel and protection from the ocean by a barrier beach called Oak Beach has made Oak Island and Oak Beach a resort area. While Cap Tree never became as popular a resort area as Oak Island, Cap Tree depended on the same transportation system as did Oak Beach and Oak Island.

As previously mentioned, a natural channel led through the large cove of Cap Tree Island. Numerous ferries used this channel as well as the "Old Oak Island Channel" that led northeast away from Oak Island into the bay. One of the earliest ferries was the side wheeler named the "Oak Island" and her captain was Captain Rich. The "Henry Ludlow" captained by Norman Sith replaced the "Oak Island" followed by the "Ripple" owned by Matt Sumner.<sup>21</sup> Matt Sumner operated a general store on Oak Beach and supplied Oak Beach, Oak Island, and Cap Tree with their necessities.

"Matt's Dock" can be seen on figure I as a building with a long dock extending into the natural channel. Matt Sumner would take the "Ripple" up to the "Town Dock" on Cap Tree to deliver the groceries. The people on Cap Tree would walk or take their boats to the dock to collect their goods. At the location of this dock were a few shacks and a barn. These were used by oystermen who seeded oysters in the cove

and then after maturation would harvest them.<sup>22</sup> A couple of these buildings remain eighty years later and are now homes.

There is a large creek which runs basically north and south from the cove to the bay. The creek has always been called "Jessie's Creek" and its name apparently comes from Jessie Conklin who built a house on the edge of the creek in about 1840.<sup>23</sup> A house at the mouth of Jessie's Creek is named Willow Point. It was built by Shep Farrington in the early 1920's. A large willow tree on that point gave it its name.

Northwest of the Farrington house is a rise of sand covered with bayberry trees. At one time there was a house on that hill used almost exclusively for hunting. It overlooked a small pond nicknamed "Snipe Pond" because of the numbers of snipe that were shot by the gunners in this pond. On most up-to-date maps this area is titled Seganus Thatch.

At the western most end of Seganus Thatch the State Boat Marina is located. Originally this was owned by a family named Resky who were boat builders. The original boat yard consisting of railways and large barns in which the boats were built and was located just east of Matt's Dock on Oak Beach. When the boat channel was dredged in 1934, through Cap Tree Island, the state moved the boat yard to its present location. The Kiesel brothers of Babylon bought the boat yard and converted it mostly to a bait and gas station although the boats belonging to Oak Island and Cap Tree residents were stored in the barns during the winter.<sup>24</sup> Only one small building remains today, although the railways can still be seen.

Some other local names given to certain areas or creeks in the "meadows" behind the houses on Cap Tree are named after the men who used the area for gunning. Names such as "Mott's Harbor", an area gunned by George Mott a photographer from Babylon, "Koronsky's Pond", an area gunned by Steve Koronsky of Oak Island and "Tweedy's Cut", a rectangular area dug out of the meadows for Tweedy's duck boat to fit are some examples. Other creeks and ponds were named for their shape such as "Ramshorn Creek", the "Big Pot", and "Ramshorn Point".<sup>25</sup> (These areas are labeled on figure VIII.)

No history of Cap Tree Island would not be complete without mention of John Tooker (1876-1938). Mr. Tooker spent the last thirty years of his life on Cap Tree. He would do odd jobs for the residents and the Coast Guard to support himself. He had a garden, fished, clammed, and hunted for his food. Mr. Tooker also trapped and raised mink in pens located behind his house of which some remnants can still be found. The "Lazy Shack" as John Tooker called his house, was extremely close to the water, and in fact, at high tide, the water would be at the front door. He was considered a hermit by many and was the only casualty of the 1938 hurricane on the island.<sup>26</sup>

Mr. Tooker is remembered for his insight into man's effect on the environment, for he had first-hand knowledge as he watched the changes on Cap Tree from his shack. The elimination of wild ducks that he found dead or dying in the meadows, left there by careless hunters, were one of his major concerns. He is also remembered for his poetry which spoke of nature and man's feeling toward nature. An example of his work is the following piece entitled "Morning Song of The Fisherman".<sup>27</sup>:

"I cast my fishing line,  
And feel the joy,

The pleasure that life brings  
Away from toil and things  
Where cares annoy."

#### FOOTNOTES

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12. Gottsch, Brewster, interview
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15. Starace, Carl, interview
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