

RECOLLECTIONS OF GREAT ISLAND  
FIRST SETTLEMENT

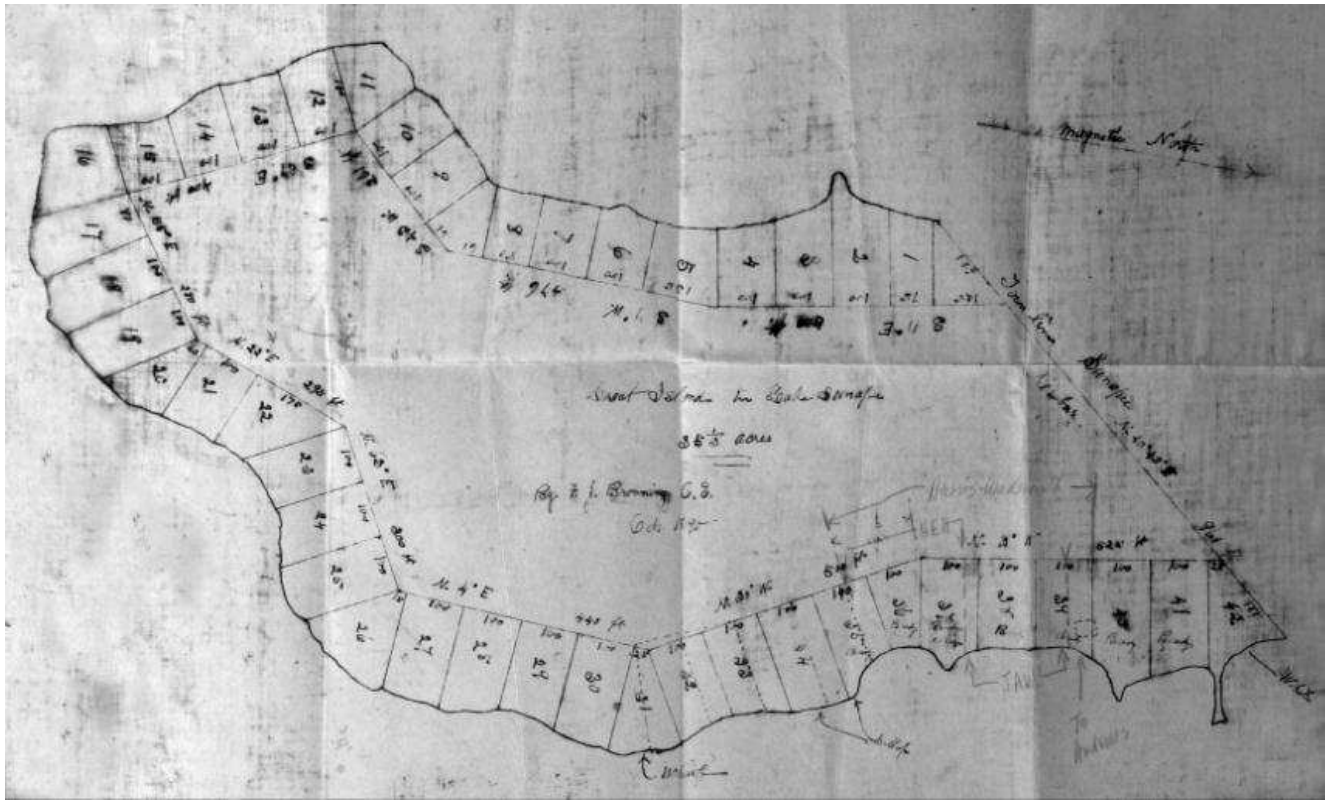
by Helen Wadsworth Harris written circa 1970's

There are legends that sheep were pastured on the island. Jim says there used to be a meadow back of Breen's. In the 1870's plans were made to build a big hotel there. But for us, Norman Brockway started it all. He was a mechanical engineer from Bellows Falls. In the 1880's, he bought land on the island and built a house, the present Burford house [now the McLean house]. My grandparents visited him there and fell in love with the island. My grandfather, James Brady, was also a mechanical engineer. He chose the land facing Blodgetts Landing with the view of the upper lake and the morning sun.



James Brady House - Circa 1910

Jim has [we had] an 1890 map drawn on linen by F.J Browning, C.E. which states that the island is 35 1/3 acres. The original lots are numbered with what is now Dr. Spillane's [now Stowell] as No. 1 and Ruth Davis's lot labeled White [now Wyman] as No. 42. They are all 100 ft. lots except for a few pie-shaped pieces and several larger ones. White, Brady and Gallup are the only names on the map.



Great Island Survey Map - 1890 - by F.J Browning



Hancox Map - 1911 - (Great Isle section)

Note: the 10 original families that settled Great Isle are listed on this 1911 Hancox map

The Gallup lots were the two adjoining ours on the south, at present part of the Cheever-King land. I remember an “Auntie Gallup” who used to visit us in the summer. I think she was from Bellows Falls and was my grandfather’s sister. This was probably the connection with Norman Brockway.

“Brady Cottage” is written in on the map so it must have been built by that year. Ruth Davis always said the Ozora Davis [McLean] was the oldest on the island, hers [Wyman] next and ours third. Jim agrees. [However, Ruth Davis’ niece has a snapshot showing the White’s house. Ruth had written on the back “Our house on completion in 1897”.]

Arthur Kerr was the son of my grandmother’s sister Marietta. They came from Springdale, Connecticut, just outside of Stamford. He owned and ran rooming houses on the Bowery, the famous ‘flop houses’ as they became later. He bought the lots down to the wharf “Melrose” owned by the Woodsum Steamboat company now the Raymond’s lot.

The Kerr house was built from the same plan as ours by Aaron Thompson and his son Fred, who lived in a farmhouse at Edgemont. The only changes the Kerrs made in the basic plan was to have one large bedroom instead of two on the north front side, lengthen the back porch and make a winding staircase where we had a landing. Later they put in a bathroom over the back porch. For many years, theirs was the only house on the island with a bath. Both houses had a balcony on the third floor front.



Arthur Kerr House - Circa 1910

Meanwhile other cottages were built. The Whites' house was already there. They were our neighbors to the north. Mr. White was an Englishman and I think he was a clergyman. Ruth was the only daughter, but she had two brothers. She had a beautiful soprano voice, and had had a musical education. I remember when she married Howard Davis, a music teacher from Yonkers. He was a handsome, dapper man with a "Dewey" moustache. Mr. White used to be there all summer. He had had a rustic white birch table on the hill back of their boathouse where he wrote. We children were cautioned not to disturb him when we went to play in the sand on their lovely beach, the first of many generations of island children to paddle around in that delightful cove.

The Breen house north of the Whites' was the grandest house on the island. They had their own private landing dock. Their launch was one of the largest on the lake. The big white house on the hill was well proportioned and could be seen from far away. It had oak woodwork, a billiard room and a windmill. But it was 'off limits' for us, for several reasons. Ruth Davis told me, a few years ago, the one I never knew. My grandfather was a jolly man who liked a drink. He used to go up to visit with old Jack Breen. They probably played a little pool and had a few beers, but my grandmother did not like it one bit.

Later, in the summers when the Breen family were not coming to the lake, it became one of my favorite places. I used to climb the windmill to look out over the world, and the pine trees in the grove where all the crows on the island lived. There was a tent platform there left from the times the Breen's invited the nuns from the convent up for vacations. At one time it was rumored they planned to build a camp for orphans in the middle of the island. Arthur Kerr, Mr. Southwick and Mr. Riegger went to Newbury and bought up all the unclaimed land. They put up granite markers to show where each one's land extended. Jim remembers Arthur Kerr showing him the markers when he was about nine or ten, and they had been there for several years.

Wild roses used to grow along the path between the Breens and the Fulkersons. Mrs. Fulkerson was Mrs. Breen's sister. Mr. Fulkerson was a teacher. They had three children about our ages, but we didn't know them until much later.

Little Island had a couple of fishermen huts and a small house with a bowling alley. It belongs now to one of the Breen daughters, Margaret, I think. She is the one who inherited and managed the family undertaking business. I believe she had eleven children, some of whom must be using the place. Another daughter, Lena, married Aiken and Charlie is their son. I think he has two sisters.

Dr. Spillane's summer house was originally the Southwicks'. They came from South Norwalk?, Connecticut. In 1908 or 1909 the Andrews family visited them. They lived in a tent in the grove near the dock. They bought the two lots my grandfather had given to my mother, and lived in the tent while their house was being built. I have two snapshots dated 1909, one showing Mrs. Andrews with some of our

summer visitors and one of Stewart with Jim and me. Another, later one shows my mother and Mrs. Andrews on the steps of their house with their German book. They were studying it together one summer.

I don't know when the Cronin and Riegger houses were built. They were there in my childhood. Mr. Cronin was Mr. Riegger's partner in Goode manufacturing company, a plumbing hardware concern. Ben Davis now owns the Riegger house.

The Whitcombs' house was originally built by George Gale. It was struck by lightning and burned to the ground one summer. The Gales rebuilt it, living in a tent while this was being done. Later it was again struck by lightning, proving that you can't always believe those old adages. This time it did not have to be rebuilt, but the Gales were not young, and not long after Mr. Riegger bought the property. He fixed the house up for his mother and his two sons, Arnold and Wallingford. I remember when Arnold lived there with 'Grossmutter'. She was a tiny old lady who wore a cap like Queen Victoria, spoke only German and lived like a queen, waited on by all the family. I remember being presented to her, and the ceremony that surrounded her. Arnold looked very much like the Crown Prince of Germany with his little blond moustache, blue eyes and blond hair. It must have been difficult for him in World War One days. In fact it must have been a hard time for the whole family. I remember my mother impressing upon us that they were Americans and must not be judged by their origins. Wallingford was never at the Lake much. He later became very famous as a composer before his death in 1961, the last of his family. His obituary was in the New York Times April 6, 1961.

Arnold Riegger's widow inherited the house and lived there a few summers. Eleanor Riegger also used it as a guest house. Now the Whitcombs have again rebuilt it and have added the dock.

Next to the Whitcombs came the Woodsum Steamboat company dock, 'Auburn'. That landing is not shown on the 1890 map so it must have been put up after the cottages on that side of the island were built.

The next house is the Ozora S. Davis cottage. Elizabeth Burford will just have to tell the story of that house herself. But it is definitely the oldest house on the island.

On the rocky southern point, facing the mountain, the Allen's house was built by Dr. Smart, another clergyman. The Smarts had two sons, Paul and Bruce. Dr. Smart always wore starched high collars and a straw 'boater', even when out in his rowboat fishing. Mrs. Gale was also a great fisher. She used to fish off Auburn dock swathed in voluminous black and a hat with black veils.

The present Martin houses were built by the Robinsons who later sold them to Dr. Davis. I asked Elizabeth Burford to tell me about them. I quote from her reply. "There were two Robinson brothers: Willard, unmarried: Ben, but his wife hated the island and wouldn't stay here. Also a Robinson sister,

unmarried. Also father and Mother R. All of them were Ph.D.'s including Edna. Both brothers and father were ministers. A weird family. They all stayed up all night and slept all day and didn't wash enough."

The larger house was given to Elizabeth and the smaller one to Mrs. Davis for her 'study'. The little house on the shore was built for Willard; and Sandy was given a lot on which he built his own house, 'Sandy's shack'.

The Slaymakers house was originally the Tinkers. Mr. Tinker was Mrs. Ozora Davis's brother. The Tinkers had two sons. Later the house was sold to the Dressels who modernized it. It has had two or three owners since, until the Slaymakers bought it in 1963.

The Forrest cottage was built by the Smiths, a German family whose name was Schmidt before the first world war. There were three sons, but Frank, the oldest was the one who kept the house. Walter married one of Dean Andrews friends and went out west to live.

I don't know what became of Albert. The original cabin was completely demolished by the 1938 hurricane and Frank rebuilt it. His first wife was another wife who hated the island. She used to stay over at the Burkehaven Hotel when Frank had his vacation. But their daughter Natalie loved it, and most of us remember Frank with Irene, his second wife, and Natalie and her children. Irene helped Frank modernize the place. She also took care of Frank's mother, who was a very active and hard working woman, even in her old age. I remember her very well. She made wonderful cookies.

Those fifteen families were the original inhabitants. They were friendly, nice people, good neighbors who respected each others privacy. People who like islands like to have space around them. We did a certain amount of courtesy calling, but most families kept to themselves. It was not until we children were older that we got to know each other.