

THE ORIGINS OF THE TOWN OF ORLEANS

Ron Petersen – Author/Historian

In the Beginning

Native Americans were the first settlers of the land that became Orleans, and had lived here from the earliest of time. The predominant tribe east of the Bass River was the Nausets, an Algonquian tribe subject in some respects to the chief sachem of the Wampanoag. European explorers and fishermen, known and unknown, had been visiting the area at least from the 15th Century. Three years after Bartholomew Gosnold gave Cape Cod its name, in 1602, French explorer Samuel de Champlain sailed into what is now known as Nauset Harbor in 1605. In his narrative of his voyage, Champlain wrote:

The next day, the 20th of the month, we went to the place which our men had seen, and which we found a very dangerous harbor in consequence of the shoals and banks, where we saw breakers in all directions. It was almost low tide when we entered, and there were only four feet of water in the northern passage; at high tide, there are two fathoms. After we had entered, we found the place very spacious, being perhaps three or four leagues in circuit, entirely surrounded by little houses, around each one of which there was as much land as the occupant needed for his support.....It would be a very fine place if the harbor were good.....Many savages, men and women, visited us, and ran up on all sides dancing.....We named this place Port de Mallebare.

This early visit to what became Orleans is commemorated by a historical marker, placed by the Orleans Bicentennial Commission in 1976. This marker is located at what we now call Snow's Shore.

In 1616 Captain John Smith, of Jamestown fame, explored further north from Virginia and made a map of the New England coast, including Cape Cod. It is likely that the Leiden Separatists' knowledge of the area came in part from Smith's writings, and that they carried Smith's map on the Mayflower. In fact, Smith offered his services to the Separatists, but they declined in favor of an English soldier who was in Holland at the time, Captain Miles Standish.

Early Visits by the Mayflower Pilgrims

The history of the town of Orleans is closely linked to the town of Eastham, and has deep roots in the original Plymouth Colony established in 1620. The Mayflower spent approximately one month anchored in what became known as Provincetown Harbor after its arrival on November 11, 1620. While most of the passengers remained on board the ship during this period, armed parties conducted three explorations, where they began to familiarize themselves with the land that we now call the Lower Cape. This includes the area that they came to call Nauset, after the local Native American tribe (now Eastham, Wellfleet, and Orleans).

For our story, the most significant of these explorations was the third, beginning on December 6, 1620. The Pilgrim party was led by Myles Standish, and included Governor John Carver and future governor William Bradford. They engaged in brief hostilities with the local Nauset tribe led by the sachem Aspinet in what is known today as the "First Encounter". This event occurred at or near the Eastham beach that now bears its name.

After settling in Plymouth, the Pilgrims continued to send expeditions to visit the Cape Cod shores in search of trade with the Indians and for further exploration. These trips included several to Nauset, one of which occurred in late July of 1621. It was initiated for the purpose of recovering John Billington Jr., a child who had wandered off into the woods near Plymouth. William Bradford, now governor of the colony following the death of John Carver, learned from the local sachem Massasoit, that the boy had been transferred to the Nausets on Cape Cod, the tribe involved in the "First Encounter". With the assistance of Iyannough, sachem of the Commaquid tribe, and Tisquantum (Squanto), the Pilgrims arranged to compensate the Nausets for corn that they had earlier taken to avoid starvation, agreed to peace, and recovered the Billington boy. In the words of Edward Winslow in Mourt's Relation "There he delivered us the boy, behung with beads, and made peace with us".

In 1626, the vessel Sparrow-hawk wrecked off the coast of what became Orleans at a point just south of where the US Lifesaving Service Orleans station would be built in 1872, nearly 250 years later. This is the first of many shipwrecks recorded off the coast of Cape Cod. Aid to the Jamestown-bound passengers and crew was first provided by local Native-Americans, then by William Bradford and a rescue crew who landed by boat at Namskaket, traversed the two mile track of land that was to become Orleans to the wreck site, and carried the survivors back to Plymouth. Thus began the lifesaving heritage of Orleans, one hundred and seventy one years before our incorporation.

From these expeditions, the Plymouth colonists were well aware of the land and the conditions in the Nauset area.

The Founding of Eastham

For some time, the colonists had considered moving the colony to a better location due to the "straightness and baroness" of the land at Plymouth. By 1644, serious consideration was given to moving the colony, and Nauset was a prime option. From previous visits, they knew of the good soil and abundance of fresh water ponds. A committee of freeman, led by Governor Bradford, travelled to Nauset to evaluate it as a possible relocation site. After deciding that Nauset was too small and remote for the entire colony, the idea was abandoned, but the seven freemen that comprised the committee and their families set out to establish a new town in that location. These freemen were Thomas Prentice, Nicholas Snow, John Doane, Edward Bangs, Richard Higgins, John Smalley, and Josias Cook. With their families, the entire town consisted of 49 persons.

The land that was to become Eastham (and subsequently Wellfleet and Orleans as well) was purchased from the local Indians. The land of Namskaket was purchased from Mattaquason, sachem of the Monomoyick, and the remainder of the land from Pochet north was purchased from George, sachem of the Nauset tribe and successor to Aspinet. Pochet Island was excluded from the purchase, and a strip of land lying by the harbor at the east side of the tract was reserved for the Nauset for growing corn. This land is now known as Nauset Heights. The Nauset were also granted rights to dig for shellfish in the cove and to receive a share of blubber from whales driven ashore.

On March 3, 1645, the General Court of the colony granted to the Plymouth Church "or those that go to dwell at Nauset", the lands from the Purchaser's bounds at Namskaket to the Herring Brook at Billingsgate. On June 7, 1651, the General Court ordered that the name of the town of Nauset be changed to Eastham. For 152 years, the tract of land that became Orleans existed as a portion of Eastham, being referred to as the South Parish or the South Precinct.

To be clear, Eastham was not the first town established on Cape Cod. It was, however, the first Cape Cod town to be founded directly out of the Plymouth Colony with the approval and support of the Plymouth Church and the Plymouth Court. Sandwich, Yarmouth, and Barnstable preceded Eastham, but they were settled by persons from elsewhere, notably the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was growing rapidly during these years. In fact, the number of European migrants to Massachusetts Bay in 1630 alone exceeded that for Plymouth for the years 1620 to 1630.

The first church meetinghouse was constructed in 1644, at the north margin of the Town Cove. According to Deacon Jonathan Higgins' history of the church, the meetinghouse was "twenty-five feet square with a thatched roof with holes in the sides through which they might fire their muskets in case of attacks from the Indians, by whom they were surrounded." From this humble beginning, the church has evolved into the Federated Church, which today stands on Main Street in East Orleans.

In the spring of 1657, William Bradford died. Bradford had been Governor of Plymouth Colony for most of the years since 1620, and had been the Colony's indispensable leader. Thomas Prence, who had served two previous one-year terms as governor (1634-5 and 1638-9), was unanimously elected to succeed Bradford, and served as the Colony's leader for the next sixteen years. It was expected that Prence would return to Plymouth and reside in the Governor's House during his term, but Prence expressed the desire to remain in Eastham and the General Court approved his request. Thus Eastham was virtually the capitol of Plymouth for eight years until the gift of a large farm enticed his return to Plymouth in 1665. During his term as Governor, Prence was known for his support of public education resulting in a law that all townships of fifty families or more maintain a teacher of reading and writing, and all townships of one hundred or more families establish a grammar school.

The Incorporation of Orleans

The Town of Orleans was born in 1797. On March 1, both houses of the Massachusetts legislature passed, and on March 3 Governor Samuel Adams signed "*An act to divide the town of Eastham in the County of Barnstable and to incorporate the Southerly part thereof into a town by the name of Orleans.*" The division of the towns resulted from long standing differences in interests and demographics, and there is evidence that the South Precinct had been operating somewhat independently since about 1717. The larger portion of the population of Eastham resided in the South Precinct, and at the time of the division, only one of the three selectmen resided in the northern portion of the town. This official was Joseph Pepper. Selectmen Hezekiah Higgins and Heman Linnell both resided in what became Orleans. At the time of the separation, the population of Eastham was about 475, while the population of Orleans was more than double that. Historical evidence suggests that both entities petitioned the state legislature in support of the separation.

The March 3 Act of Incorporation authorized Isaac Sparrow, justice of the peace of Eastham, to issue his warrant to a "principle inhabitant" of the new town for its first town meeting, and Selectman Higgins was selected. This meeting was held on March 16, where organizational issues were settled and the new town began to conduct routine business. Hezekiah Higgins and Heman Linnell from the old Eastham Board of Selectman along with Judah Rogers became the first Selectmen in the new town. Higgins was selected to be the moderator of the first Town Meeting, and Benjamin Taylor was selected as the first town clerk and treasurer. Among the first items of business was the appointment of ten fish wardens for the protection of the town waters from encroachment by other towns. The town was also divided into three districts, with the construction of a schoolhouse in each district, the appropriation of \$333.33 for support of the schools, \$300 for support of the Gospel, and \$366 for the support of the poor. In addition, a committee was appointed to ascertain and establish the boundary between Orleans and Chatham. The new town of Orleans was quickly in business for itself.

ORLEANS' FIRST RESIDENTS?

Strictly speaking, each of the nearly 1000 persons residing in Orleans at the time of incorporating act were among the first residents of Orleans. But did they have a predecessor? The historical record indicates that Governor Prence and others of the first seven families established their homesteads within the boundaries of what remained Eastham. Only Nicholas Snow, who established his homestead at Namskaket, was on the Orleans side of the division line of 1797. Nicholas Snow arrived in Plymouth on the *Ann* in 1623, and married Constance Hopkins, daughter of *Mayflower* passenger Stephen Hopkins. After relocating to Nauset/Eastham, he held the positions of surveyor, deputy, tax collector, constable, and selectman while there. He died in 1676, Constance in 1677, well before the separation, but can we claim them as our honorary first citizens? The grave of Constance Hopkins can be seen in the Cove Burial Ground in Eastham. The burial location of Nicholas is not known.

HOW DID ORLEANS GET ITS NAME?

The fact that our town has a French name may seem like an oddity today, as most of the other Cape Cod towns are named after counterparts in England. However, it's not so surprising given the context of the times that the name Orleans was chosen.

In 1797, pro-French sentiment was very strong in the new United States both in gratitude for French assistance during the Revolutionary War, and in admiration for the pro-liberty struggles that were occurring in France at the time. Eastham resident and Revolutionary War patriot Isaac Snow had been captured twice by the British during the War and was sent to England where he was confined to a prison ship. He managed to escape, and made his way to France, where, while waiting to return to America, likely became aware of the highly popular Louis Philippe Joseph, *duc d'Orleans*. (Duke of Orleans). At the time, Orleans was a 30 year old naval officer, cousin of the King, and one of the wealthiest men in France. He was then and remained a strong proponent for the cause of liberty. It is said that it was Isaac Snow's suggestion that prompted the local committee and the State Legislature to name the newly incorporated town in honor of the Duke of Orleans.

Sources

Bailyn, Bernard, The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America, 2012.

Barnard, Ruth L., A History of Early Orleans, 1975

Bradford, William, Of Plymouth Plantation, (Morison ed.), 1952

Carpenter, Delores Bird, Early Encounters, Native Americans and Europeans in New England, 1994.

Champlain, Samuel de, Voyages of Samuel de Champlain 1614-1618, (Elibron ed.) 1907

Deyo, Simeon L., History of Barnstable County, 1890

Freeman, Fredrick, The History of Cape Cod, 1862

Goodwin, John A., The Pilgrim Republic, 1888

Kittredge, Henry C., Cape Cod, Its People and Their History, 1930

Jalbert, Russell R., Where Sea and History Meet: 4000 Years of Life in Orleans, 1997

Lowe, Alice A., Nauset on Cape Cod, 1968

Morison, Samuel Eliot, The Story of the Old Colony of New Plymouth, 1956

Pattison, Lee S. A Pilgrim People: A Highly Unorthodox History of the Federated Church of Orleans, 1996

Pratt, Enoch, A Comprehensive History, Ecclesiastical and Civil, of Eastham, Wellfleet, and Orleans: County of Barnstable, Mass., From 1644 to 1844. 1844

Stratton, Eugene Aubrey, Plymouth Colony, Its History and People, 1986

Swift, Charles Francis, Cape Cod, the Right Arm of Massachusetts: An Historical Narrative, 1897

Winslow, Edward and Bradford, William, Mourt's Relation, 1622