

[From Winter 1997-98]

Settlement on Assateague Island

In 1687 Captain Daniel Jennifer received a patent for 3500 acres of "sandy and marshy and symposia land"... all of Assateague Island up to the Maryland state line.

In the early history of Chincoteague and Assateague Islands, animals were grazing freely on the mainland, destroying crops. To avoid the cost of fencing, possible law suits and impending taxes, farmers moved their stock out to the barrier islands where no one lived, no one owned land, no one farmed, and grass and fresh water were available.

Jennifer had purchased 1500 acres of Chincoteague Island as early as 1671, so he used both islands to pasture his livestock. According to law he would have needed a minimum of four men as rangers to attend the stock. He settled thirty people on Assateague, although research indicates that they may have been employed only seasonally. Bears presumes that the rangers may have slaughtered some of the animals and cured the meat for market. Other farmers used the islands for pasture land as well.

As long as young animals - calves, foals, kids and piglets - were with their mothers, roundup was unnecessary. However, when ownership couldn't be proven and stock men wanted to reclaim their animals, problems arose. A new code went into effect, "captors-keepers." If a man could capture a horse in the presence of others he could then legally claim it and brand it. Over the years this became a holiday with food and games and an auction of the unclaimed horses. The auction and festival appear to have taken place on Assateague Island. (Since the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department has owned the horses, the events have taken place on Chincoteague.)

Maximillion Gore bought the island in 1689, "for 12,400 pounds of tobacco." His step-sons and his son Daniel inherited the property. It is believed that Daniel lived on Assateague. By 1764 there were 25 people living on Assateague Island.

The property was bought and sold many times In the 18th and 19th centuries. Evidently not many farmers or stock men were successful because much of the island was returned to the state for non-payment of taxes. In 1841 eleven men acquired 880 acres of Ragged Point from the state. Sometime in the 19th century, the community of Assateague Village was formed. John Jones appears to have owned several plots in this location.

The village of Assateague lay between the present location of Assateague Lighthouse and Assateague Channel. Local folklore reports that one of Blackbeard's fourteen wives once lived in the village.

The Life Saving Service was established in 1847, and one of the stations was located on the Virginia end of Assateague Island. (The remains of its cistern are located at the right hand side of the beginning of the Woodland Trail on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.) Members of the Life Saving Station may have lived in Assateague Village. It is certain that

at least fifty of the village men worked at a fish factory on Toms Hook where menhaden were processed into fish oil and fertilizer.

The villagers gardened, raised chickens, ducks, sheep and hogs. Only the hogs were penned. Salt making was a major activity for several years as the salt was needed for preserving food. This was especially important during the Revolutionary War when the salt supply from England was cut off.

The first fish factory was the Seaboard Fish Oil and Guano Company built in 1912. In 1919 the factory burned, but the Conant Brothers Fish Oil Company set up another company that same year. This operation lasted only ten years. By then Toms Cove was filling with sand and the larger fishing boats were unable to reach the dock.

Samuel B. Fields of Baltimore purchased most of Assateague Island in the early 1900's. He fenced off lands for cattle grazing and hired Oliphant as overseer. Armed with a rifle, Oliphant patrolled the fields preventing the villagers from crossing to the seashore where they had harvested clams and oysters and worked at the fish factory. By 1922 the villagers accepted this as a final blow to their village and barged their homes over to Chincoteague Island. The exception was Bill Scott, grocer, who remained in his home until 1932. He did not move the house. He and his wife simply moved over to Chincoteague Island.

Now as you stand at Assateague Lighthouse and face Assateague Channel, you will see a stand of loblolly pine where the village once stood. In 1994 only a couple of walls of Scott's house still stand. Several door sills of other homes can be found on the site.

During the 1920's and 1930's sportsmen were attracted to the area to hunt and fish. Gun clubs were established.

In 1930 Fields left the island to his sister Nellie, the wife of Dr. W.M. Burwell of Chincoteague. In 1942, Mrs. Burwell et al sold eight thousand eight hundred and eight and one half acres to the federal government for the development of Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

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SOURCES

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