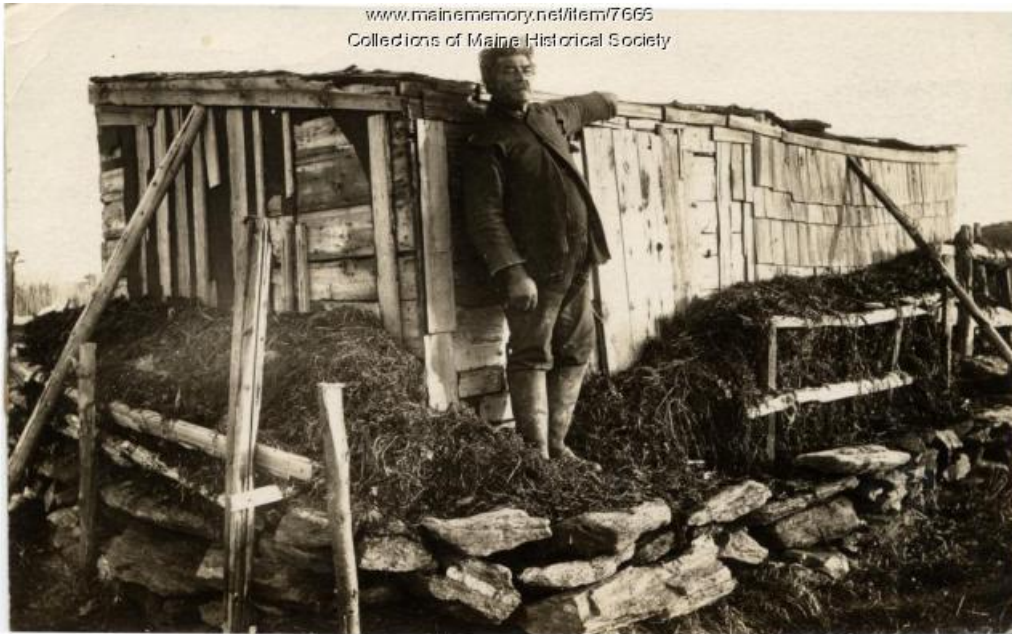


John Darling
Hermit of Pond Island
Fact from Fiction
by Gerry York



The story of this family is a mixture of fact and fantasy that is hard to sort out. Some folks were embarrassed by it, some were angered by it and some seemed to take delight in sensationalizing and embellishing it. The media of the time (and today as well) used the tale of the "Hermit of Pond Island" to scare and amaze readers. The "Hermit" was featured on postcards, in histories and as an example of what might happen to a child that didn't work hard and learn those ABC's. The story of finding John frozen solid in his bed of rags and eaten by everything from rats to seagulls has been told around many a campfire.

Photos of John Darling standing next to a rude building on Pond Island show a large man perhaps six feet or more and 250 pounds, dark complexioned with large hands, and a full beard. His signature has not been found on any town records or petitions and it is quite likely that he did not read or write. It may also be that he was just not a very sociable person and did not concern himself with the affairs of others or the town, preferring to keep to himself and therefore he just did not sign or make his mark on the public record.

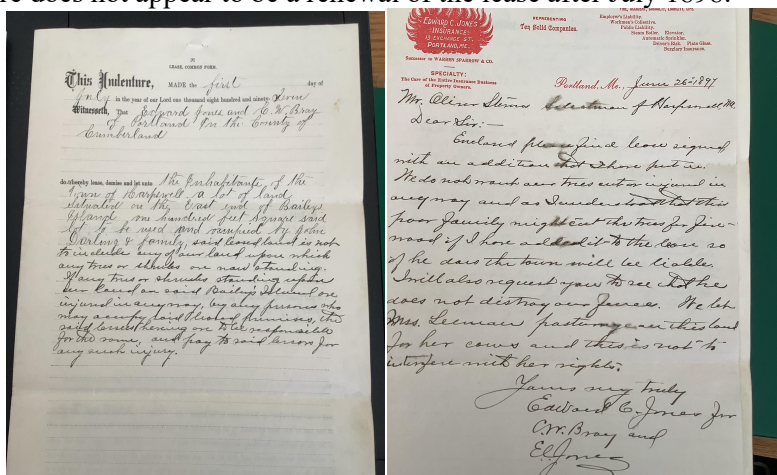
John Darling was a third generation descendant of Benjamin Darling, a freed slave who had settled on Horse Island (now called Harbor Island) in the New Meadows River in about 1794. He was born about 1850, the son of Isaac and Rebecca Wallace Darling at Sebasco Village in the town of Phippsburg. To the best of our knowledge he had one brother, Darius born about 1838 and a sister, Angenette born in 1853. Darius married and had a family the descendants of which still live in this area. Angenette married first James Eli McKenney and undoubtedly lived on Malaga Island, Phippsburg, having one child with him. About 1875 she married Joseph Andrew Dunning had 6 more children and passed away in 1925.

As for John's early life little is recorded but the 1870 census lists him as 19 years old living in Phippsburg and a cod fisherman. On August 28, 1871 at the approximate age of twenty, John married his first cousin Aurilla Darling who was younger than he was by several years. A month later Aurilla gave birth to stillborn twins. Two years after that in September of 1873 she again gives birth. This time to a son named James. James lives, but Aurilla dies soon after the delivery. So we find John at the age of twenty-three, widowed and with a newborn son. Again, over the next six years we lose track of John Darling and family.

The next recorded event takes place on August 3, 1879 when John weds Albertina Gilliam of Orr's Island. Known as Tina, she is the youngest child of nine and the fifth daughter of William Gilliam and Hannah Dinslow of Sinnett's Point on Orr's Island. She is born about 1864 which makes her fourteen years junior to John and fifteen years old on her wedding day. Six year old James now has a mother but we do not know who has cared for him since his own mother's death.

The 1880 US Census has them listed as living on Great Island. John is a fisherman. They are listed living between Samuel Beals and on the same property as John's brother Darius but in a separate dwelling. They may be in the vicinity of Bethel Point or on North Yarmouth Island.

In June of 1897, Edward Jones of Portland, owner of Edward C. Jones Insurance Agency, Portland Maine, and Charles W. Bray also of Portland, entered into a one year lease for \$25.00, with the Town of Harpswell for a 100 foot square lot on Bailey Island to be used and occupied by John Darling and family. According to deeds recorded in Cumberland County, this lot seems to be part of a larger piece which was sold to Edward Jones and Charles Ingraham by Charles P. Ingraham of Bridgton, New Jersey and is bound as follows; beginning at the east corner of Water Cove at a square point of ledge thence running NE to the end of the point thence easterly and southerly by the shore until a straight course to the first mentioned bound will contain ten acres of land with the buildings thereon. The same premises conveyed by Joseph Johnson to Edward Ingraham by deed dated 1825, book 102/172. There does not appear to be a renewal of the lease after July 1898.



Between 1879 and 1897 John and Tina continue the struggles of making ends meet while having either four or six more children. Charles Nelson Sinnett records six children, Tina, Loiza Ellen, Anna May, Fred Wilbert, Arthur Edward and a child born June 2, 1897.

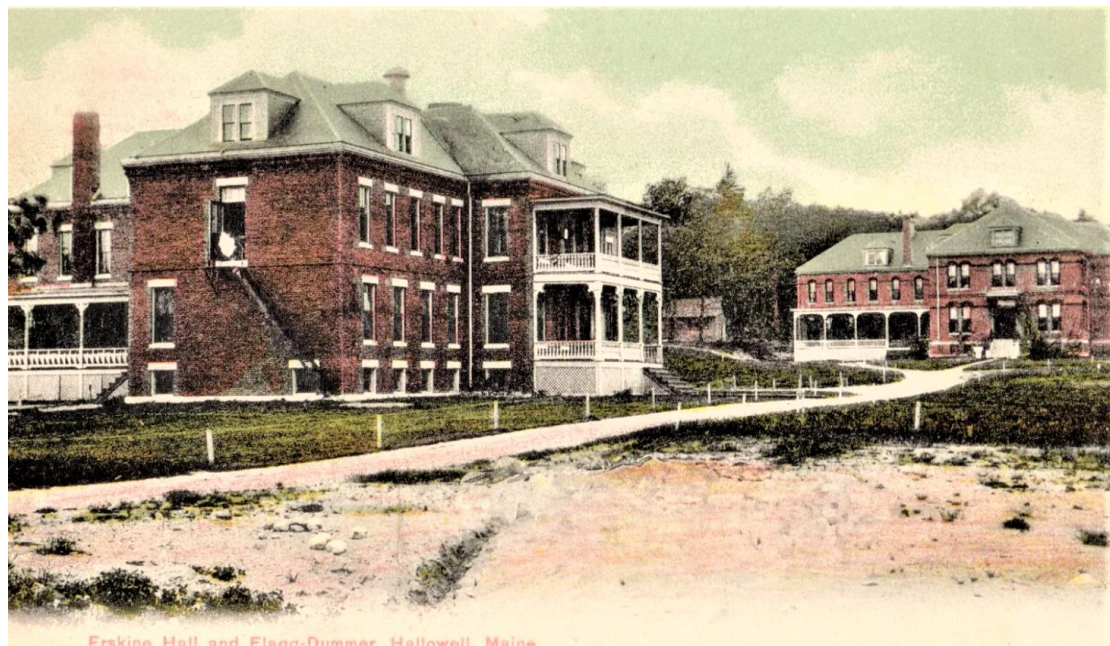
Arthur Edward Darling and the child born June 2, 1897 are the same person or twins. (The obituary for Arthur confirms the date of birth.) There is no additional information listed for a child named Tina and other than Sinnett, none has been found. While this child may have died young or at birth, the lack of any other reference to her life leads me to wonder if Sinnett didn't record the name Tina as an additional child rather than as Albertina's nickname. The

next child listed by Sinnett is Loiza Ellen. He records her birth as April 5, 1883. Again, other than Sinnett there is no other reference to Loiza anywhere. There is an obituary for Loring Ellis Darling of Westpoint, Phippsburg, son of John and Albertina with a date of birth of April 3 1883. Either Loiza and Loring are twins or again Sinnett has made a mistake. Loring is mentioned in several later news accounts about the Darlings but Loiza is never mentioned again outside of Sinnett. Anna and Fred are both established children of John's. By working out her date of birth from the age at time of death we know Anna was born in 1888 and Fred was born November 7, 1891. Arthur Edward Darling born on June 2, 1897 died April; 27, 1969 in Brunswick at the age of 71. He was married twice and had fifteen children.

By the end of 1897 John is now forty-seven years old, Tina thirty-three and they have been married for eighteen years.

The local newspaper has an unnamed Orr's Island correspondent who writes what is for the most part a gossip column. Sometimes cryptic comments are made referring to events which the island residents may understand but which are rather difficult to understand for others.

In one such column dated March 9, 1900 we find that *".....W. H. Doughty made some remarks about the Darling scandal which acted like stepping on a gouty mans toe...."* and a week later *"....Many unjust remarks have been made as to the men who have insisted on the Darling family being kept from absolute want."* Much of it was caused by a Portland reporter who exaggerated the situation. The truth was well enough known before and the town has only been damaged without doing any good by his sensational lies...." The column concludes by making reference to the town farm and how without it it is hard to see how the Darling family can be kept in a "civilized condition." The column for March 23 1900 tells us that a move has been made to provide for the Darling family and that Anna, the oldest girl, has been sent to the House of Industry in Hallowell.



Erskine Hall and Flagg-Dummer, Hallowell, Maine

Womens House of Industry, Hallowell, Maine

Lets look again at this information. First, apparently the Darlings are unable to fend for themselves. Second, although no reason is given, some town residents feel compelled to have

the Selectmen deal with this, (they are, in fact, overseers of the poor) while others feel strongly that the town should not assume any responsibility. It is also apparent that the story has spread beyond the town and is considered a news item in Portland. Harpswell is also having some questions concerning whether or not it needs a town "poor farm". The article also proposes that the situation has been used to make a candidate for selectman seem uncaring and incompetent to the voters in order to discredit him. Details of that aside, the article states that the Darlings are living on Gun Point, Great island in a building that had been used as a boarding house in connection with the ice house standing near by. The house being on a ledge in an exposed position.



Sometime about 1899 or 1900, Tina discovers she has cancer and moves in with her parents and the Town of Harpswell began paying for a doctor to treat her.

We have to assume that Tina is no longer able to take care of her children and John is not able or not willing. By this time James is old enough to be out on his own unless he has some mental incapacity which prevents this. (He is the offspring of first cousins) Later in life James is in fact a resident of the Pineland Center in Pownel. (Maines Home for the Feeble Minded). The reason I bring up the status of James is because about six months after Anna goes to Hallowell, Harpswell selectmen receive a receipt from Henry Allen whereby he has paid Fred Fides of Orr's Island to transport the John Darling family to the poor Farm and in a newspaper article titled "The Myth of Pond Island dated April 1, 1948 Margaret Todd of Orr's Island records that while Loring went to Small Point, Fred, Anna and James became wards of the Town. James, even at age twenty-seven does not appear to be capable of being on his own.

Tina Darling hangs on until August 2, 1901 when she passes away we assume at her parents home. The town of Harpswell pays \$26 for a casket. It is unlikely that John had a burial plot and there is no grave marker for Albertina in the Orr's Island Cemetery but Tina's father William Gilliam had one and it would seem logical William buried Tina in his plot. There is no more John Darling family. The family has dispersed.

John may have still been living on Great Island in the old Ice House boarding house or he might have moved to the property belonging to his in-laws on the backshore of Orr's Island where he has now been sold to a syndicate of Philadelphia businessmen who will be selling off lots for summer cottages. This deed was executed 4 Sept. 1896, book

641/80. The plot plan for sale of the lots was drawn and recorded in Cumberland County Reg. of Deeds in 1897, therefore this is the assumed time frame in which John has to go. John must move, but to where?



My suspicion is that 1901 is when John removed to Pond Island, a treeless rocky low island about a half mile to the south of Orr's Island.

At this point in time the island was owned by James W. Coffin. He [John Darling] built a two room shelter on the treeless island. [I believe at the Northeast end of the island alongside of the pond and close to the small beach] and banked it well with seaweed and driftwood. It was probably insulated with newspaper, rags or earth. The roof was flat and there was some sort of wood stove. Quite likely one room was for sleeping and one was for cooking and eating.

A story told about John was that while working in the Prince and Daniels Store on Orr's Island he had seen a pot bellied wood stove on the second floor of the store. John mentioned that he would like a stove like that for his hut. Store owner Prince jokingly told John if he could pick up the stove and carry it to his dory he could have it. Prince, believing that John could not lift the stove which must have weighted several hundred pounds, was astonished when John walked through the store with it on his shoulders and putting it in his boat, rowed it back to Pond Island.

Many accounts say John then spent the next 20 years on Pond Island. A news account of Johns arrest for not having his name on his lobster crate [he could not write] says he is living alone on Pond Island in 1905. However, he died in 1918 and had lived in a town provided cabin on "the Mountain" beginning in 1915 which would make his time on the Island more on order of 1901 -1915. No more than 15 years. It is unlikely that his wife and children ever resided with him on the island.

Edward Rowe Snow in The Romance of Casco Bay relates that John was "marooned" on the island because he was constantly in trouble in town. [I suspect John caused problems for the Selectmen but there is no evidence that he was involved in much criminal activity] As a

matter of fact, with one exception, no record of any criminal activity has been found. John's obituary in the Brunswick Record states that at age 55 (about 1905) John was called to Portland to answer charges that he was using a lobster car without his name upon it. The county attorney did not prosecute the case but recommended that John be shown the city as it was his first visit there.



JOHN DARLING AND HIS SHACK WHERE HE DWELT, MAROONED FOR 20 YEARS. POND ISLAND, CASCO BAY

One of Albertina's nieces has said that John Darling never had a cross word to say about anyone even though many people played tricks on him. "If Uncle John had ever wanted to, he could have broken any one of them in two but he never did. He always had a nice even temper." John found seasonal employment with Prince and Daniels and later S.J. Prince and Sons on Orr's Island salting fish, unloading fishing vessels, shoveling coal and other laboring jobs. He lobstered and fished the waters around Pond Island from his dory and, while there is no doubt his was a rugged life, he apparently found it suited him well. Edward Rowe Snow also paints a picture of John as a businessman. It seems that John would hire out to the folks that came to the island looking for pirate gold and for fifty cents a day he would dig a hole as deep as the customer wanted. *[Pond Island was said to have been the site of buried treasure]*

Eventually the town officials who are overseers of the poor, determined that John was unable to continue living on Pond Island. The Town of Harpswell provided him with a small cabin on Long Reach Mountain at the south end of Great Island near the Joel Alexander place and Thomas Alexander was contracted to look in on him. (Thomas was the son of Joel Alexander.) Thomas Alexander owned property abutting Strawberry Creek. The 1918 town report shows that Charles Pinkham and Edward Morgan received \$32.00 and \$36.00 respectively for "caring" for John Darling. The 1948 article by Margaret Todd states that John became seriously ill and was taken to Maine General Hospital in Portland where he died. He may have been "seriously ill" and he may have gone to Maine General but he definitely did not die there. His death certificate records the place of death as Harpswell, Long Reach Mountain and indicates he was a resident there for four years and gives the date as January 15, 1918. It is signed by Dr. G.M. Elliott of Brunswick and gives the cause of death as an "uncared for

Vented Hernia with Excessive cold of two days duration” as contributing cause. It appears that Thomas Alexander either did not check on John all that often or perhaps the weather prevented him from doing so. (My guess is that a winter storm and excessive cold prevented anyone from getting to Darling and he may possibly have been prevented from tending his own woodpile and stove due to the hernia.) Either way it appears that at least part of the legend of the hermit is true. John did in fact die alone and was likely frozen when he was found.

The Brunswick Record obituary does give his date of death as January 9, 1918 and so directly contradicts the death certificate. It also states that the internment was on Orr's Island. This agrees with the death certificate which says the date of burial was on January 18 1918 at Orr's Island and is signed by the undertaker WE. Gordon of Brunswick. As with Albertina, here is no memorial stone for John at Orr's Island and no record of his burial in the Orr's Island Cemetery. Again, as with Albertina we might suspect that John is buried with his wife on her father's lot. Then again they may have been buried in unmarked paupers graves. One account says the casket lay over night in the Gun Point Community Church and lay minister Charles Huff read a burial service. Another account says the service was in the Union Meeting House at Orr's Island which abuts the cemetery. The obituary states that John left three sons. Arthur, James and Fred. Loring who lived in Phippsburg until his death in 1942 is not mentioned. Loring's obituary says James and Fred reside in Pownel. James obituary says he died at Pineland Center in Pownel in 1953. The Harpswell Town Report for 1946 lists Fred's death on November 20. The 1918 Harpswell Town Report shows H.T. Wilson recieved \$5.00 for opening the grave of John Darling and Henry Allen [of Orr's Island] was paid \$4.00 for conveying the body of John Darling to cemetery.;The assumption is Orr's Island Cemetery

An unofficial Harpswell town census for 1904 lists a Loring Darling as a fisherman living on Orr's Island but not part of a household. It also lists a James Darling, Seaman, on Orr's and Fred as a pupil (no location given). Arthur is listed as a pupil at North Harpswell. We might conclude from this that in 1904 Fred and Arthur were still on the Poor Farm at North Harpswell and James has been released. Loring who had not been sent to the "Farm" had returned to Orr's Island.

Re: Town Poor Farm. There is no record of an official "Town Farm" having existed in Harpswell. There may not have been a "Town Poor Farm" but in actuality, the "Farm" may have been a collection of places which agreed to take in, feed and house those needing relief from their situation, what ever that might be. In return the "Farm" got reimbursed for expenses and had the use of free labor. It is assumed that the Selectmen were the authority which was empowered to assign inmates to a "Farm" in their role as Overseers of the Poor

Questions

1. Did Fred go to Pineland?
2. Was there a daughter Loiza?
3. How long did Anna spend at the Maine Industrial Center? She would have been 21 in 1908
4. Where is Anna buried?
5. Where is John Darling buried?
6. Where is Albertina buried?
7. Where was Joel Alexanders house and where was John's Darling's house on the Mountain?

Charles Nelson Sinnett, Benjamin Darling of Casco Bay and Descendants
Edward Rowe Snow, The Romance of Casco Bay , pg. 175
Herbert G. Jones, The Isles of Casco Bay (in fact and fancy) , pg 95
Dorothy Simpson, The Maine Islands (in story and legend), 90

Records of the Poor, Town of Harpswell, Maine
Portland Evening Express March 8, 1900
Cumberland County Registry of Deeds

- 1900 In the March 8, 1900 evening express the Darling family is reported to be living on Gun Point in an old house and in poor circumstances. Reference is made to their shack on Pond Island so the assumption is that they were residing on Pond Island prior to 1900. John Darling and family are listed as living on the Bayview Road on Orr's Island. They are shown as "paupers".
- 1901 Albertina Darling dies on August 2 1901 of cancer. Her place of burial is not marked but may have been on the lot with her parents on Orr's Island. The town paid for a casket for her. There are no cemetery records for her.
- 1910 John is recorded as living on Bailey Island. He is a widower, listed as age 65. Where on Baileys is not recorded.