## 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.

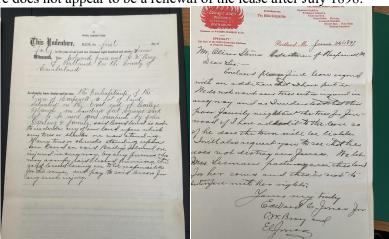
John Darling was a third generation descendant of Benjamin Darling, a freed slave who had settled on Horse Island (now called Harbor Island) in the New Meadows River in about 1794. He was born about 1850, the son of Isaac and Rebecca Wallace Darling at Sebasco Village in the town of Phippsburg. To the 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 loose 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.



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.

THE RESERVE OF THE PARTY OF THE	Mr. Allen is certainly resoonsible for	nal for an avalanche of stories and	were in an immeasurably worse confi-	in at the present tills. Their quarters	HARPSWEL
	their deplerable condition, and if na		tion than they are at present? They knew all about them, as every person		PAUPER
CHARGES AGAINST SEELESTITES			on the is and did. This is politics, . pure and simple and worthy only of		F
	Mr. Prince was seen at his store		the lowest politicians in the worst city of the country."		Continued from Page 6.
	strong terms in condemning the arg-	this article, although he would not	Those who were in the store, and the number was not small, backed up-		challenge to all present to just once. The intense feeting was carri-
Committee of Residents of Harpswell Says That John Darling	rehated Mr. Brown's statements are to their condition on the day which be	pork did not occur.	every statement of Mr. Robinson, and	beds, and if they haven't them now it	sole of the meeting and severa
	called. He said that many of the iv-	so long ago that I have forgotten, " ne	strong language to characterize the	away.	the 110 cast.
and Family, Paupers, Have Not Received Proper Treat=				ofter Brown and his friends were there	Menday the reporter was de John Darling's home at Ges healed Mr. Pribe's speed; and the way to the house and partial at the bad place in the read the
ment.==An Alleged Order for "Rotten Pork."	using the terms, "rotten perk." but explains that it was done in a joking	"One thing is certain that Durling got		and found the girl and children well and comfortably clothed. To be sure	at the tad places in the read the
	way and not to be taken literally. "If it was a Joke," continued Mr. Prince,	Mr. Brown and the others say that they	food enough to satisfy them.	they had nothing fancy and their coolies were not clean, but they were	horse.
The good and quiet people of Orr's found, and no one will acknowledge amongst fith, in one room of a tumbi-d sland have been having a sensation for destroying it or of ever needing H five down house. It was a cone of absolute	"It was a queer joke and a proceeding	shop it spoiled since they received it	the past year than ever before.		the bridge, connecting Orr's with teland he related in an inte
	dignisted for the high office which he	My grandfather never sold a pound of had pork or any other kind of most in		ciothes during the past year, which I thick is more than any of their	
talked of at the corner stores, on the Durling. Indians are a contractor	voters. What we want here is a fawn	mis life.	store while the reporter was there-	well-to-do neighbors have had in the	The seid piercing wind made
pork" for which it is alleged Select. twice a condidate for selectman has aurparase the worst a had	Darling is not so bright as he should	adainess was patutal mate or was then	wrappers, stockings and underwear	same time. The man has been given four suits of undercothes and many	had run away revry term of and how his greatest delight making teethpicks of the dash i The celd piercing wind made mits ride anything but comforts the half miles wan over the lat- of the read to rough for the added misery to his already bit.
			the island have given them children and	other articles of wearing apparel Mr. Boyce, the truant officer, has given the	Wine.
Possibly the town meeting, which one of that committee who investi- vass. The only window had two whole	vide for him at his nome for bother	pound of bad ment in my life and l	new suits of clathes during the Dall		posed position. It had former used as a boarding house in con with the ice house standing in
was held Monday, had something to do gated the condition of the bound in game in game in the same game game in the same game game game game game game game g				received two quarts of melasses a week.	All of the windows with one or were hearded up. The except the one window in the room of
subject talked of, and a large and in- the betterment of their lot. shingles and out clothen, seem lab.	should have someone to ook after	all time, and I take the action of our	were unable to care for themselves and	try them with a gallen and see if is would last them any longer. The next	
					but two lights of glass. The lights had been repaired by shingles over them and by stud- ciothes in the cracks. The doc-
to do with the present uguation, pefortunate man, and Henry Wilson, had no undercootnes, storages	care for thomselves?	host officers are horse area had and a		and when naked what he had done with the last let he replied: "Used it and	wreck, Beard pannets had been
to do with the present unmailten unfortunate man, and Henry Wilson, had no unaccrontent. Stockman who was once road surveyor and who is shoes. The youngest child a boy of fer the town of Harpswell, and a well-mappeted of having the laudable amfour years were a calico dress.	Henry T. Wilson, the third member	man through and through."	the store and upon calling service	come one else" "What they can do	The repurier's knock at the do
known and popular resident of Ovr's bitten of again serving his town in the fastened at the next and which, which has	to the investigating party desired	the other candidate by a vote of 113 to	ments was unable to discover the	with seven quarts of molarses in a	able braces and repre.
the good graces of the "big six," a solf- the junta of investigation. What they Two boys, I and to years of san,	ore He found the prompt clothed this	Continuing Mr. Robinson, said:			was at last opened.
			day admirted to the reporter that be had used the words "rotten perk" in		Matering the one room in the erly and of the bouse the fare franch buddled together on a rage in one corner of the room; the store. In the opposite corne
John Darling and his family were not motives of the three, by several of the pair of stockings in the name.	ings. He told of the finding of the de-	joking. We are the best of friends and	the order given to seem furnite, so	where he impound named who know	
					fills and dirt. There were two and torn comforters on the fillsy and dirty as every other to the rasm. Alongside of the led
			of that potten pork." He said that the	heen made to believe that the town	the room. Alongside of the led
and a disgrace to the board and the city of the competition of the water to be an an arter	fred Store of Great bland in order that	every way to be sweet and fresh.	comment man wantless limit my mil the bear	and affect on their part	
starved, has not been provided with wanted to work on the roads, and from Henry Allen, Mr. Airhis annual to have been been been an about these	the town was giving to its poor.	the culamity bowlers because I kneu	ed for flour, melasses and peck. At	it is possible to care for them without	recover of the family.  The two lights of slass in the let in but little light giving the aurer glossey appearance, but serving to hide much of the fifth Darling was warmly richted.
when the committee called upon him as licery Allen, held object and that people are at present and should make	"Calling at the door," he redired to	well as every other man who know me	"Soften boar", tot authors une sercor-	At the page meeting held of Harry.	Darling was warnly clothed.
they found the family almost caked. Sir. Prince, who weeps a source of the is most likely that legal measures will was placed by Selections Allen was town's greery orders. By proving Mr. be taken to save them their rights if an		their lies. I have not lost a cent's	ceive such stuff, "Robinson know what	inct of the Darling family was brought	
		not. There are stores in this town			things about the house. Mrs.
totally unfit the habitation.  Allen to be incompress they represent an of many.  But the most never charge which elect Trial Justice Brown, who in re- Darling also obliged to tramp five hey make against the relections is turn would see that Henry Wilson had miles each way for such provisions as	is some Harpawell is furnishing the	where rotten pork has been sold and some of these who have been loudest in	that he should have the heat the man-		That they did not have those in the house on Monday is corrished they had done with the
that one of his recent orders, given to the work on the roads, and that Mr. he received, when there are two orthon	Darring Limits, here at one related	their orice against me should be the	whiteeome food. I had priviously	the fact that Decem's friends were	things given to them is a c
and an outrage to good taste. As There are the reasons given by the better class of people are with us in our	is someting awill at that distance.	on the subject.	the thinner portions of the box, which	constinue these was corniderable feeling	The four children had three st
		to my attention. I called in a number	r good enough for any man. If there	MINI PARTICIPATION.	things given to them is a g which no one can answer satisf to himself or to anyone obe. The four children had three of areard a pair is good show. When the members of the were asked to stop to the door photographed four was express
who heard the order read, or who had sell and many of the islanders think had received, in my official capacity	pork on Mr. Allen's order. Joshus	from the same barrel. They found i	hand, there would not have been a	nome time and was ready to explode at	photographed fear was express
					they might be uncomfortable edd and snew outside. "Not a it," said John Darling, "they as to it and don't mind it more tha
					mous pork barrel stood dirty,
-Give this old foot five postulated for the court of selection old feel five postulated rotten	to do a mean act. Among the many	The whole stery about the fork ?	the road week. He can do the road	Darling of protocols (unioned to	mous pork barrel stood dary, and fittay beyond description of the would probably not be realized of the Extreme readers. It is not near the fittage of the state
It may be well to captain right here inigned I regret it and am deing all in. I thought such language from one of	with whom the reporter talked they	Daving is better of now than be	but he must work. The read common	The medicator ruled him set of order	
that Henry Allies denies writing such my power to oblige the tout oncers to tur specumen was ununfared to be funny.	Darling received bad pork from Josh-	has been at any time during in his	William tony stead that made halfs in the	rent blick out" carry from the voters	possition. Soin Durling said that he has hongry many times this winte that his wife and children has nothing to rai for a day at a time.
					that his wife and children ha nothing to cat for a day at a time
But more on this subject inter. It which they have been living this winter all good citizens to investigate. I two	meeting affairs and the throw down	lar. Why doing Mr. Broom and M.	e during the most ton years in four	to but him out and leaved a sweeping	hause with every sizem and i
is sufficient now to state that the order to absertain their time considered. I not upon the weighted offer a found the man code his family living have made several effects to do so.	ten peck and John Darling was a sig-	during the previous years when the	r times the fifth that they are nallewing	Continued on Fage 9.	the morning to find several in
					the morning to find several in- ter or water on the floor. It that he received the floor. It that he received the fort in the love in which Mr. Brown found that is was until for a dos to ea
de la companya de la					He wants riothes, a better home ter food and different treatment the town authorities, and he say

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 told the land has 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.

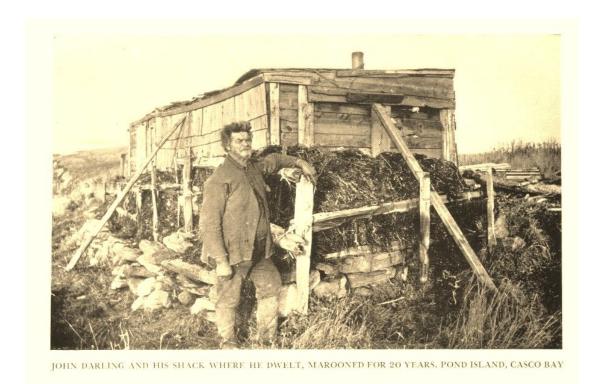
At this point in time the island was owned by James W. Coffin. He [John Darling] built a two room shelter on the treeless island. [I believe at the Northeast end of the island alongside of the pond and close to the small beach] and banked it well with seaweed and driftwood. It was probably insulated 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 <u>The Romance of Casco Bay</u> 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.



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 SJ. 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 recieved \$32.00 and \$36.00 respectivly 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. GM. 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 recieced \$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 inmated 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

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 cercumstances. Reference is made to
their shack on Pond Island so the assumpsion 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".

- 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.
- John is recorded as living on Bailey Island. He is a widower, listed as age 65. Where on Baileys is not recorded.