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Author(s): Robert David Lion Gardiner

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GARDINER'S ISLAND¹

ROBERT DAVID LION GARDINER

Our president has asked me to tell you something about Gardiner's Island. I would rather describe to you the life on the island and what it produced than give you an account of its owners. I have purposely not attempted a genealogy and leave that work to those more competent and experienced.

Gardiner's Island was the first English settlement within the geographical boundaries of what is now the State of New York, and is the only one of the English manors that has remained intact. Since its purchase from the Indians, by Lion Gardiner in 1639, its ownership has remained in the Gardiner family. On March 10 of the same year, James Farrett, agent for the Earl of Stirling, confirmed Lion Gardiner's right to the Island by the King's patent. One generation has lived there after another; all persons apart from the family have been either slaves or servants of the proprietor, or tenants, as the case might be.

On Gardiner's arrival from Saybrook, he immediately undertook the labor of extensive cultivation and improvement, using oxen, cattle and sheep which were the first domestic animals to be introduced. The island was over 3,000 acres in extent, of good soil, much of which had already been planted by the Indians and was covered by a good stand of large timber. It is interesting, I think, that one of Lion Gardiner's children, his daughter Elizabeth, was born on the island and was the first child of English parentage to be born in what is now the State of New York.

The Indians did not molest the island as they did other British settlements of that day. Lion was always just in his dealings with them. On one occasion he rescued the daughter of Wyandach, an Indian chief. She had been kidnapped by the Pequots

¹A paper read before the New York State Historical Association at its annual meeting, October 7, 1932, at Southampton.

Mr. Gardiner is a member of the class of 1934, Columbia College. In the tenth generation of direct descent from Lion Gardiner, first Lord of the Manor of Isle of Wight, on Gardiner's Island, he is well versed in the family records and traditions.—*The Editors.*

on her wedding night. Wyandauch never forgot this. Lion was ever after called the friend of the Indian. For several generations each owner could speak the Indian dialect, and was frequently called upon to give advice and to settle disputes for them. Lion Gardiner also distinguished himself in his efforts in behalf of Goody Garlich, the only Long Island witch I know of, who was the wife of an East Hampton carpenter. After being charged with witchcraft, she was ducked in the village pond and about to undergo severer punishment, when Lion, who loudly scoffed at the idea of witches, took her to the island where he gave her a cottage and where she lived the rest of her days.

I would like to say something about the old manors of New York. It is incorrect to say that such holdings were not feudal in character, for socage or fixed rent payment was an integral part of the old system. Despite the fact that the feudal manor was abolished by a statute of Charles II, since it failed to name the colonies as affected, the statute was inoperative in New York and consequently did not actually affect the island. But the relation of the New York manor lord to the government above him is not as interesting as his rights within his own domain. That which distinguished him from other large proprietors and landlords was his undisputed right to hold court on his own property, court leet and court baron with himself or his stewards sitting in judgment. Court baron in historic usage dealt with manorial relations such as involved meets and bounds, trespasses, alienations and the like. At such a civil court in mediaeval England, the attendants would have been largely serfs, but there were no such people in the American colonies. A test of a free man's status was that he should never, under any circumstances, be at a master's beck and call. In this sense all the tenants on American manors were free, although many held land for specified service payments as well as rents in kind. The jurisdiction of the court leet included crimes and misdemeanors occurring on the manor, whether committed by inhabitants or others, and a jury judged the facts. In New York and Maryland, where records of St. Clements and Gabriels manors are sufficiently preserved to indicate the practice, the two courts were sometimes merged. However, unlike the manors of Rensselaerswyck, Livingston and Philipsburg, and despite its patent rights, on Gardiner's

Island all disputes, sheep stealers, and irritants to the public calm generally, were disposed of before the tribunals of the justice of the peace, the county court of sessions or the court of common pleas.

There were other special privileges of the manor law. All property by which death was brought to a person on the manor passed into the possession of the manor lord. If a man were drowned in a boat, for example, that boat became the property of the manor lord. The goods of felons were forfeited and likewise came to him, all waifs and moving property of unknown ownership as cows, pigs, horses, etc. automatically increased the wealth, as well as the commotion in the manorial barnyards. It was the right of the manor lord to appoint his own pastor, a custom still practised in England. The Gardiner family retained their chaplains until one of them, a Mr. Blagne, married a daughter of the house. After Mr. Blagne's departure, the family attended church in East Hampton.

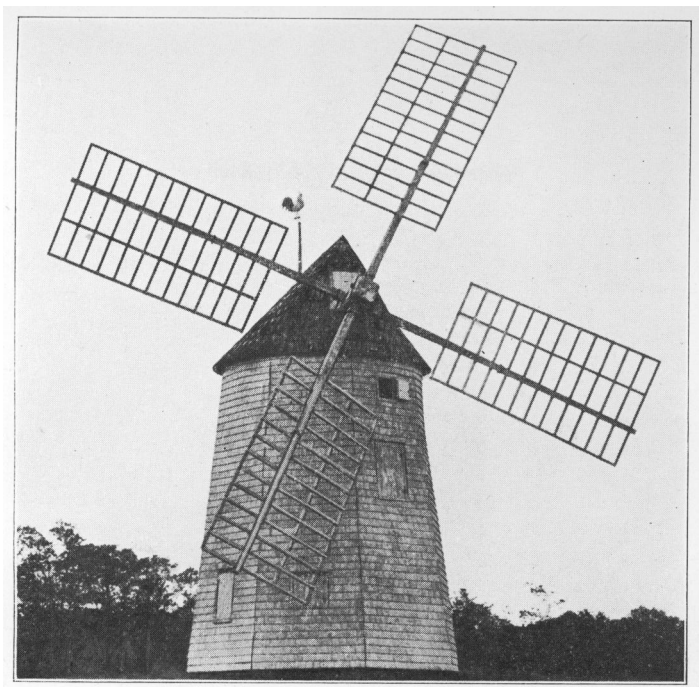
The system of manors and lords was based on land tenure, and it necessarily comprised a ruler and a population dependent on him. A characteristic trait of the system consisted of various forms and degrees of economic dependence. In this country there were the tenant farmers, the slaves and the bound boys and girls, who came under the rule of the lord of the manor. The term "lord of the manor" however was always a broad one. It could apply to the Duke of Lancaster, a wealthy bishop, or the humblest of squires. This explains the inscription on the tomb of the third owner of Gardiner's Island at New London. It reads: "Here lie buried ye body of His Excellency, John Gardiner, third Lord of the Isle of Wight. He was born April 9, 1661, and departed this life June 25, 1738." This inscription never meant that John Gardiner was a lord of the British peerage, but that he was a lord of the manor, which is quite a different thing and carries no title in the peerage or baronetage of England.

The Isle of Wight was the original name for Gardiner's Island before the Revolution. It inherited the name because of its shape, which is roughly that of the Isle of Wight off Southampton, England. The Indian name of the island was Manchonach, which meant the place where many died. At one time there had been a pestilence there. The island was originally purchased for

ten coats of trading cloth, a black dog and some other articles totalling about \$20 in value, approximately the same price as was paid for Manhattan Island by the Dutch when they purchased it from the Indians. Farrett's confirmation of the purchase as agent for the Earl of Stirling allowed Gardiner to do as he pleased on his own lands in regard to the laws of church and civil government. He apparently could do what he wished without giving any account thereof to anyone, so long as it were according to God and the King.

Lion Gardiner's son, David, acknowledged his submission to New York, and received from Governor Nicolls a renewal of the privileges for a consideration of five pounds in hand, and a yearly rental of the same amount. Each governor who came to New York levied five pounds for issuing a new patent. Finally, Governor Dongan, for a consideration, gave David Gardiner the patent which created the island a lordship and manor. Governor Dongan's grant is still preserved by the family. Attached to the parchment is the great seal of the province.

In the time of John, the third proprietor of the island, Captain Kidd paid a visit to the place and buried a treasure worth about \$30,000 in a small ravine between Bostwick Point and the manor house, which was subsequently called "Kidd Valley." Captain Kidd presented Mrs. Gardiner with a piece of gold cloth which is still in the family and which was a token of his appreciation for a neatly roasted sucking pig, prepared with all the savory flavorings of Mrs. Gardiner's culinary art. This gold cloth seems to have come from the *Quedah Merchant*, a ship bearing the trousseau of a daughter of the Great Mogul, which was captured and overhauled by Captain Kidd off the coast of Madagascar. I believe most of the treasure buried on Gardiner's Island came from this ship. After burying the treasure, Kidd said to John Gardiner, "If I call for it and it is gone, I will take your head or your son's." And after giving this warning, he presented Gardiner with a bag of sugar, which in those days was a highly prized commodity, and one of the few not grown on the island. After Captain Kidd was hung at Newgate the treasure buried on Gardiner's Island was claimed by the British government, and in a receipt given the proprietor of the island, dated July 7, 1699, and now in the possession of the present owner, a list of

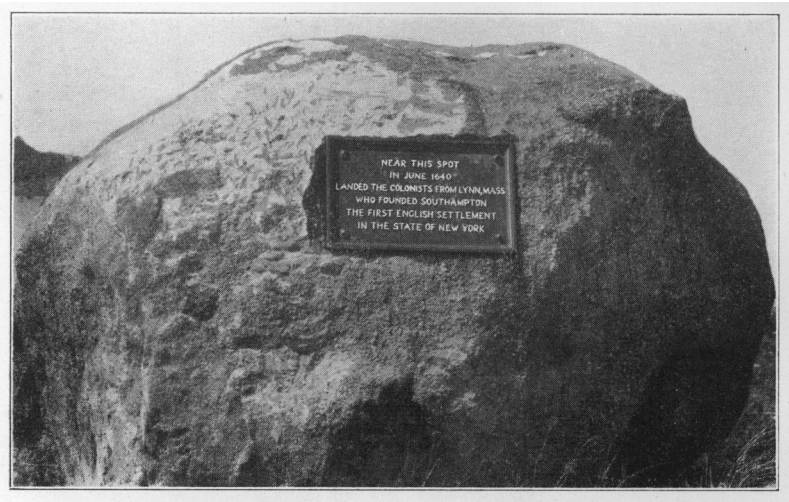


GARDINER'S ISLAND: THE OLD WINDMILL



GARDINER'S ISLAND: THE MANOR HOUSE

This House was built about 1775. The Island was acquired by the first Lion Gardiner by charter of 1639.



CONSCIENCE POINT

**"Near This Spot
In June 1640**

**Landed the Colonists from Lynn, Mass.
Who Founded Southampton
The First English Settlement
In the State of New York"**

the buried articles was set forth. John Gardiner's bit of booty was quite accidental. When he returned home he found that one diamond had been left in his portmanteau. The diamond, however, did not remain long in the family, for Mrs. Gardiner gave it to her daughter Elizabeth who promptly married the chaplain, Mr. Green, who was before the time of Mr. Blagne of whom I have already spoken.

During the early years of the century that followed, the manor was frequently visited by pirates, and consequently suffered much loss from their depredations. In 1728 it was completely overrun by a pirate band, eighty strong, a motley mixture of Spaniards, Frenchmen and Mulattoes. They came upon the manor house in the night and destroyed the furniture, the beds, the clothing and valuables of all description, and succeeded in carrying off all the family silver but this one tankard. Its appearance is misleading and would seem to contradict its venerable years. One day my grandfather was inspired to have its battered and worn contour restored. Gardiner's wrists were severely cut by the pirates, but his family escaped unharmed. Many of his laborers were wounded with knives and other weapons of the assailants. The pirates escaped with every available and movable article of value the island afforded. Later Paul Williams of Block Island, another famous pirate, visited the island in a schooner.

John Gardiner died in 1738. He could speak the Indian language and it was said of him that he was generous. The Indians called him Ginese. He was hardy, active and upright, a bit rough perhaps, but agreeable in the manner of his time. He was a good farmer and made great improvements on the island; also he made a great deal of money, bequeathing to his children large legacies for that time. To each of his daughters he gave five hundred pounds in cash. One of his servants, when asked concerning his master's character, said that on the main he might pass for a good man but on the island he was a devilish rogue! John was succeeded by his son David.

Thus far the feudal estate had flourished in its independence of the colonial government. It was in no way disturbed by the political agitation of the times, but with the coming of the Revolution a fleet of thirteen British ships anchored in Gardiner's Bay and a party of British officers landed on the island to procure

supplies for the sailors. They helped themselves to great numbers of sheep and departed. Henceforth Gardiner's Island was a foraging field for the British. During the summer of 1780 Vice-Admiral Arbuthnot remained in Gardiner's Bay with eleven ships. The horses were taken for the use of the officers on shore, and the timber was greatly damaged. Sir William Erskine, Lord Percy, Major Andre and General Clinton made frequent trips to the island, where they found great pleasure in hunting. In stormy weather they took possession of the manor house and diverted themselves by playing quoits in the dining room. Its oaken floors still bear the marks of the game. The island was mercilessly plundered, with the result that in 1784 there was scarcely personal property sufficient to pay back the taxes. The administrators of David Gardiner's estate reported a deficiency of \$13,000 in personal property.

In 1812 a British fleet, under the command of Sir Thomas Hardy, came to anchor in Gardiner's Bay. Oxen were taken from the plow and killed. Sir Hugh Pickell came on shore with a number of men and made unreasonable demands, threatening to fire the buildings. Gardiner sent his servants and family into the cellar for safety. The British finally left and sometime later a letter of apology reached the island from the commander in chief. After the War of 1812 the estate was never again visited by plunderers but continued to be managed as a self-supporting community.

The house now standing was built by David Gardiner in 1774, 135 years after the first house of Lion Gardiner in 1639. The dairy produced butter in large quantities and averaged as many as 120 pounds per day in the season. The owner of the island rarely stabled less than 60 horses. There used to be a trotting track at the back of the manor house, and the trotters commanded quite a fair price in New York and Riverhead. The cheeses became quite famous. The records show that a new cheese house had to be built to meet the increasing demand. A hundred hogs were raised annually. There were also numerous wild turkeys which came to the yards daily to be fed with the tame fowls and a large herd of deer remained in the woods. The island had its own blacksmith shop and forge. The working men numbered about 60, including the bound boys or apprentices. These boys were orphans sent to the island to learn a trade. My grand-

mother said her mother told her that these boys had to come in every Saturday night to the parlor of the manor house to recite their catechism before old Madam Gardiner. They used to run away to join the whaling fleet but invariably they returned from sea to tell of their adventures, and were received with open arms while the fatted calf was killed for them. One boy related the story of how he was shipwrecked and, while he was tossed about upon the ocean in a boat for days and nearly mad with thirst, used to dream in his delirium of the beautiful spring on Gardiner's Island.

A great event was the visit of the pedlar who brought in his pack not only knives and scissors and useful things, but ribbons and gew-gaws and imitation jewelry. On one such visit the old madam bought ribbons for the maids. After the pedlar had departed, she found Lucindy, a colored maid, crying bitterly behind a door. She asked her what was the trouble and Lucindy said that she wanted that beautiful green glass emerald ring which cost fifty cents, but which she could not afford to buy. The kindly old lady sent after the pedlar, had him return, and gave Lucindy the beautiful ring and the girl was happy.

The life though patriarchal was simple. They traded the produce of the island in return for things they wanted. There was in the old days a large orchard, and from the apples much cider was made, which they exchanged for useful articles such as pots and pans. Wool from the sheep was washed and carded. After it was spun, it was sent over to the mainland where it was woven into homespun and blankets. When the colored slaves were freed and settled at Freetown, near East Hampton, they used to come back to work as laborers on the island and would often be paid with a suit of this homespun. Flax was also grown in large quantities, and was spun and woven into sheets. Linen sheets were a very valuable possession and a luxury in those days and much in demand.

At the present time Clarence Mackay, who has leased the island from Jonathan T. Gardiner, has made it into a game preserve and stocked it with pheasants, deer and wild birds of every variety. It is called the home of the American ospreys, which never fail to come there on the 20th of March where they remain until they migrate south the 20th of September. The

island makes an ideal game preserve because it is nine miles from the nearest town, and poachers can be seen approaching from any direction. Today the extent of its acres is as vast as in the days of its first cultivation; and its beauty preserved through the generations remains a silent but eloquent tribute to its founder.

Because the province of New York was both Dutch and English, and because its geographical position made it the barrier for all the colonies against the Canadian French, its history is more varied and picturesque than that of the others.

Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, *History of the City of New York in the 17th Century* (1909), 1: vi.