

## A Summary of the Early History of Block Island, Rhode Island, and the Rathbun Family on the Island

After first being inhabited by Indians for hundreds of years the first exploration of the island was by the French navigator, Verrazzano, who gave a report of it to Francis I, king of France, in 1524.

In 1614 a Dutch explorer and trader, Adrian Block, sailed from Manhattan Island aboard his newly constructed yacht, which he called the Unrest, and explored the coast of Long Island Sound. The fact that he gave his name to the island probably means that he and his crew were the first of European descent to land on the island.

In 1636, twenty-two years after Block's explorations, a trader from Boston by the name of John Oldham and his crew sailed to the island to trade with the Manisseans a tribe of the Narragansetts, the local inhabitants, the Indians killed Oldham and his party. The news of the killing of Captain Oldham probably gave most of the people of New England their first knowledge of the island. An expedition was sent from Boston under the command of Col. John Endicott to punish the Indians. He not only accomplished that but established a claim to Block Island by the right of conquest, hence the island was transferred from the Indians to the Massachusetts colony. This was confirmed by an oral treaty in 1637 between Governor Henry Vane and the Narragansett Indians. The resources that he found on and around the island made it an ideal place for pioneer settlers of the colonies.

Block Island is not the only name by which this hunk of earth and rock has been known. Manisses was one of the first names given to the island by the Indians, perhaps meaning "Little God's" Island. Claudia was next. This name was given by Verrazzano in 1524, in honor of the mother of King Francis I. The Dutch named the island "Adrian's Eyland" in 1614 and in 1672, when the Island received its town charter from the Rhode Island Assembly, it was referred to as "New Shoreham", or as many of its residents wrote, "Shoreham" or "Shorum" of Block Island.

In 1658 possession of Block Island was transferred from the Massachusetts colony to four private individuals. The colony's gift was sold in 1660 to a group of 12 purchasers led by John Adcock, a doctor and a Harvard graduate, for the purpose of creating a town sustained by farming and fishing. The settlement began in 1661 with four additional owners.

Only seven of the 16 landowners actually moved to Block Island. The others were absentee landlords who sent sharecroppers to farm the land as tenants.

John Rathbun and his wife Margaret were among the first purchasers of land on the Island and one of seven to move to the Island in 1661. It is thought that they moved from the colony of Massachusetts after migrating from the area around Liverpool, England. The site of the original homestead was in the south center of Block Island just west of the present airport. It was thought that John also owned a home in Newport but he was considered a Block Islander.

John was very successful as a farmer and businessman. He was appointed several times as one of the Island's representatives to the Rhode Island General Assembly, and shared in Newport's prosperous town wharf. During this period Margaret was also very busy as she was not only a farmer's wife but raised eight children with John, five sons and three daughters. Each of his sons had between eight and eleven children, giving the Rathbun family a good start in America.

John and Margaret gave farms on Block Island to all five of their sons and at least one of their daughters, which was a common occurrence for the times. The practice kept the family close and encouraged them to remain on the Island. This was only partially successful. John Jr., Thomas, and Samuel remained on the Island and died there. The other two left about 1725, William to Westerly and Joseph to Exeter, both in Rhode Island.

What happened to the Rathbun land? Over the years land was probably bought and sold by many of John's descendants. The last large piece of property that was part of the original land homesteaded by John and Margaret was owned by Lucretia Mott Ball (1866-1941), inherited through her great-grandmother Catherine Rathbun (1768-1824), whose great-grandfather was Samuel (1672-1757), the youngest son of John and Margaret. Upon Lucretia's death she willed that the 77 acres of land owned, known as "Nathan Mott Farm", be converted into a public park to be named the "Nathan Mott Park" for use and enjoyment of the public. This park exists today but is much smaller in acreage than the original grant because the government has used several portions of it for other purposes. Part of the current airport is on part of this land.

Lucretia also inherited the Rathbun Bible which is now in a safe belonging to the Block Island Historical Society on Block Island. The earliest date inscribed in this book is Samuel's birth in 1672 and the last is Lucretia's in 1866.

From the time that William and Joseph left the Island, as did many of the children of the other sons and daughters of John, the Rathbun family moved, first to the rest of New England and then west, south, and north into this great country. Some moved to our neighbor, Canada, and some may have even left North America to live in other parts of the world.

As a Rathbun Rathbone or Rathburn living in North America today you can probably trace your lineage back to John and Margaret Rathbun. As stated in "Block Island, The land" by Robert M. Downie All From Two "buns, "bones, and burns".

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6-15-2013

Reference: "Block Island The Land" by R.M Downie  
"History of Block Island" by The Block Island Historical  
Society  
"The Historian" by Frank H. Rathbun