

Bell family founded Bellport in 1820s

It was only supposed to be a simple salvage operation for Captain Thomas Bell of yet another ship run aground off Great South Beach, as Fire Island was then known. Instead, it would change the course of his life, and that of the area now known as Bellport Village.

Bell, a deep sea captain employed by the American Coast Wrecking Company, had set off in 1815 to salvage what he could of the cargo and superstructure of the Irene, near the Old Inlet. When he had finished, he sailed through the inlet into the bay, coming ashore in Bellport. He saw opportunity in the area almost immediately.

Bellport was one of the highest points on the south shore of Long Island, second only to Montauk. Here, though, there were few settlers, most being farmers. Bell studied the area's rich hardwood forests, plentiful fishing and nearby access to the Atlantic through the Inlet, and decided it was the perfect place to settle, and develop a shipping center.

Not long after finding the area, Bell moved east from Islip to settle in the then-small village, bringing with him his older brother, Captain John Bell,

also a deep sea captain. Together the two purchased much of the land that now comprises Bellport Village, and began to develop the area into a shipbuilding and seaport.

On March 2, 1829 Brookhaven Town granted permission to the Bell brothers, along with Colonel William Howell, to construct and maintain a dock into the Great South Bay to reach out to where the water was six and a half feet at high tide. After building a double house for themselves on Bellport Lane, where the current village parking lot and village green are today, the brothers built a shipyard near the dock, and then bought and sold real estate to help develop the area. They called the village they had formed Bellville, but were forced to change the name to Bell Port in 1834 when the area's first post office opened, after dis-

covering that there was already a town named Bellville in New York State. The name was spelled as one word after 1871.

While the Bell brothers became successful with their shipyard, mother nature intervened in the course of the area's development less than 10 years after they had built their dock and shipbuilding business. During a winter storm in 1837 a brig carrying a cargo of grindstones and mill wheels sank in the channel of Old Inlet, and broke apart. Not long after a second ship, the Syracuse, laden with salt, also sank just off the inlet and drifted up on the brig. Sand collected around the two wrecks,

closing off the inlet forever. In 1838, a group of men from the area brought teams of oxen to Fire Island to carve another inlet nearby, but winter storms closed that passage to the ocean that

same year.

Shipping as an industry foundered in Bellport, but with a number of homeowners now living in the area, a thriving fishing industry, a post office, and a school, Bellport thrived. Eventually, around the time of the Civil War, it became a popular summer resort area, with hotels such as the Bay House, the Wyandotte, the Goldthwaite Inn and even rooms available in the Bell house. Tourists flocked to the area, staying in the hotels, cottages or many rooms available in the area, taking advantage of Bellport's proximity to the bay, enjoying swimming, sailing, fishing and hunting.

Today, summer tourists still enjoy the village, taking advantage not only of the Bay, but also the village-owned golf course, constructed in 1916 when Frederic Edey and Bernard Baruch each put up \$12,500 of the \$50,000 purchase price.

As for the Bells, Captain John Bell drowned in Bellport Bay during a storm in November 1841 while duck hunting. Captain Thomas Bell lived until he was 84 in 1880, having but one son, John Thomas, a deaf mute who predeceased him. ■



Captain John Bell