

ABSEGAMI:
ANNALS
OF
Eyren Haven and Atlantic City
1609 to 1904

Being an account of the settlement of Eyren Haven or Egg Harbor, and Reminiscences of Atlantic City and County during the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

ALSO
Indian Traditions and Sketches

of the region between Absegami and Chichacki, in the country called Scheyechbi.

With Maps of the New Netherlands (1656), West New Jersey (1698), New Jersey (1904), Atlantic County and Atlantic City

BY

ALFRED M. HESTON,
ATLANTIC CITY

Member of the New Jersey Historical Society and Honorary Member of the Monmouth County Historical Association; author of "Hand Book of Atlantic City," "Slavery and Servitude in New Jersey," "Defence of Fort Mercer" and "Queen of the Coast."

VOLUME I

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Somers Family and Somers Point.

1585. to 1900.



ONE of the earliest settlers in Atlantic County was John Somers, who was born in Worcester, England, about the year 1640. Worcester was also the home of Lord Chancellor John Somers, with whom the immigrant John Somers was contemporary, and to whom, also, he was distantly related.



Another member of this family, but of an earlier generation, was Sir George Somers, of the English navy, who, in 1609, was tempest-tossed and shipwrecked and cast ashore with his crew on the Somers Islands, now known as the Bermudas. His ship, the Sea Vulture, was broken to pieces on the rocks and the rigging was utilized in the construction of a small craft, in which the unfortunate mariners set sail for Virginia. Later on they returned to the Somers Islands, where the gallant Admiral Somers was taken sick and died. His heart was removed and buried beneath a cross on one of the islands, but the body was embalmed and taken to England in a little bark commanded by Captain Matthew Somers, nephew of the Admiral.

SOMERS FAMILY AND SOMERS POINT.

Somers Family in Old England. An account of the discovery of the Somers Islands is given by Washington Irving in his "Knickerbocker Miscellanies," and Shakespeare's play of "Tempest," written about 1612, is believed to have been founded on incidents connected with the wreck of the Sea Vulture and the "still vexed Bermoothes."

The Somers family were the owners of a dissolved nunnery called the White Ladies, situated a short distance beyond the walls of Worcester. After the expulsion of the nuns the dormitory and refectory were fitted up as a modern mansion. This property was granted to the Somers family at the time of the Reformation, and here they received Queen Elizabeth in 1585; the bed in which she slept and the cup from which she drank being preserved by them as precious relics, even after they had joined the Whig party.

Religious sentiments divided the Somers family in England. John Somers, the immigrant, became a follower of George Fox, and cast his fortune with the settlers in the land of Penn, whither he embarked in 1681 or 1682. He had been previously married, and his wife died in childbirth during the passage across the Atlantic. Both mother and child were buried in mid-ocean. He subsequently married Hannah Hodgkins, also a native of Worcester.

At what period John Somers located at Somerset Plantation, as Somerspoint was then called, is not definitely known, the earliest record being that "at the first court held at Portsmouth, Cape May County, March 20, 1693, John Somers was appointed supervisor of the roads and constable for Great Egg Harbour." He had previously moved from Dublin, Pa., and remained a member of the Dublin Meeting long after his settlement at Egg Harbor. He purchased 3,000 acres of land of Thomas Budd in 1695. This same Budd was the original owner of most of the land and beaches in the eastern part of Atlantic County. The history of Absecon dates from 1695, when Budd disposed of large tracts of land to actual settlers.

* * *

As early as 1693 a ferry was established across the

Ferry Over Egg Harbor River. Egg Harbor River, from Somerspoint to Beesleyspoint. An act of the Legislature reads:

"Whereas, there has been complaint made to the House for want of a ferry at Egg Harbor, in order to redress which grievance, be it hereby enacted by the Governor, Council and Representatives in the present Assembly, met and assembled, and by the authority of the same, that the justices of the county of Cape May are hereby empowered to erect and set up a ferry at the said Great Egg Harbour, which person or persons appointed by them for the purpose aforesaid, shall and may exact for the passage of every single person twelve pence, and for horses and cattle twelve pence per head, and for sheep and hogs four pence per head, and for all manner of grain two pence per bushel."

On account of the width of the river and its exposure to the winds from the ocean, this ferry was sometimes inoperative, as the means of crossing was an open boat, worked by sails and oars. Those appliances, however, answered the requirements of the people and were fully up to the times. The building of a bridge over the river a short distance below the present one at Mayslanding changed the course of travel; the ferry at or near Somerspoint sank into disuse and was finally abandoned. The town lots laid out there by Daniel Coxe, of London, in anticipation of the building of a flourishing town, became commons and pasture fields again, and their precise location is now unknown.



Beneath the escarpments of Tripoli, lulled in their everlasting sleep by the song of the sea, are the bones of Richard Somers, American patriot and hero. Within the grounds of the Naval Academy at Annapolis is a monument which perpetuates his name, and in the old family burial ground near Somerspoint, enclosed by a brick wall, is a cenotaph, whereon is chiseled:

IN MEMORY OF
RICHARD SOMERS,
SON OF RICHARD AND SOPHIA SOMERS,
MASTER COMMANDANT
IN THE NAVY OF THE UNITED STATES,
BORN SEPTEMBER 15, 1778.

He perished in the 25th year of his age, in the ketch *Intrepid*, in the memorable attempt to destroy the Turkish flotilla, in the harbor of Tripoli, on the night of the 4th of September, 1804.

DISTINGUISHED FOR HIS ENERGY,
HIS COURAGE AND HIS MANLY SENSE OF HONOR.

"*Pro Patria non timidus mori.*"

But the valor and the virtue of Richard Somers can



A Summer Morning on the Strand.

SOMERS FAMILY AND SOMERS POINT.

Jersey heroes not be told by sculptured urn or storied monument. These are but symbols of national or family pride—
in the Navy. memorials for the living rather than of the dead.

Richard Somers, "Master Commandant in the Navy of the United States," was the son of Colonel Richard Somers, a Revolutionary soldier, grandson of Richard Somers (born March 1, 1693) and great grandson of John Somers, the immigrant. Commander Richard Somers was therefore the third of that name in the family, and was born at Somerspoint, as above stated. He went to sea when quite a youth, after an academic education at Burlington. He joined the American Navy in its infancy, receiving his warrant as a midshipman in the spring of 1798, and soon became distinguished for great courage. He was intimately associated with Charles Stewart and James Lawrence, both Jerseymen, one a resident of Bordentown and the other a native of Burlington, who were also conspicuously identified with the American Navy early in the last century.

Stewart earned for himself, as commander of the Constitution, the soubriquet of "Old Ironsides," and Lawrence, while wounded and dying off Boston in 1813, gave the order, "Don't give up the ship," which has since become the watchword of the American Navy.

Of sterner stuff, perhaps, than any of these, was Richard Somers, whose exploit in the harbor of Tripoli demanded equal courage and greater sacrifice than that of Decatur, which Nelson pronounced the "most daring act of the age." Between Somers and Decatur there was a singularly loving friendship. The character of Somers was also much admired by Washington, and as a special token of his admiration he presented Somers with a ring, containing a lock of his hair. This ring is now in the possession of the Leaming family, of Cape May, descendants of Constant Somers, brother of the naval hero. There are but three locks of Washington's hair now in existence, one of which is the property of Richmond Lodge, No. 4, A. F. A. M. Another belongs to the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and the third is the ring given to Richard Somers, now owned by the Leaming family.

**Somers Sails
for Tripoli.**

Of the grandmother of Commander Somers we are told that during the early part of the eighteenth century the widow of Sir James Letart, a native of Acadia, came to reside in Philadelphia. She was the mother of several children, one of whom, a daughter, was adopted by a wealthy gentleman named Peter White, who subsequently moved to Absecon. It was here that Miss Judith Letart White, a very Evangeline for beauty and devotion, won the heart and became the wife of the first Richard Somers, at the early age of fifteen. Of their nine children, the second was the father of Captain Somers. He was colonel of the Egg Harbor militia, judge of the court and member of the Provincial Legislature. He was particularly obnoxious to the British and Tories during the Revolution, and Atlantic County being much exposed to depredations by the enemy, he was induced to remove to Philadelphia for protection. He remained there until near the time of his death in 1794. The house in which Commander Somers, the hero, was born, at Somerspoint, is still standing. The only picture of the hero now extant is a silhouette, with his signature underneath.

Somers was promoted to a lieutenancy in the spring of 1799, and was subsequently placed in command of the Nautilus. This was in the spring of 1803. The Mediterranean Squadron, which sailed in the summer and autumn of 1803, was that which became so celebrated under the orders of Commodore Preble. It consisted of the Constitution, the Philadelphia, the Argus, the Vixen, the Enterprise, and the Nautilus. These vessels did not proceed to their station in squadron, but sailed away for the Mediterranean as they were ready, being ordered to the Mediterranean to subdue the Tripolitans, who persisted in exacting tribute of the American merchant marine. After settling a similar difficulty with Morocco, without any waste of powder, Commodore Preble, in command of the squadron, declared the blockade of Tripoli, before which he believed the frigates Philadelphia and Vixen were then cruising, though, unknown to him, the former had run upon the rocks and had been

SOMERS FAMILY AND SOMERS POINT.

The Enemy captured by the enemy, Commodore
Hard Pressed. Bainbridge and crew being then prisoners of war. Somers, Lawrence and Bainbridge were all Jerseymen by birth and education, Decatur by education and Stewart by adoption.

EXPLOIT OF COMMANDER SOMERS.

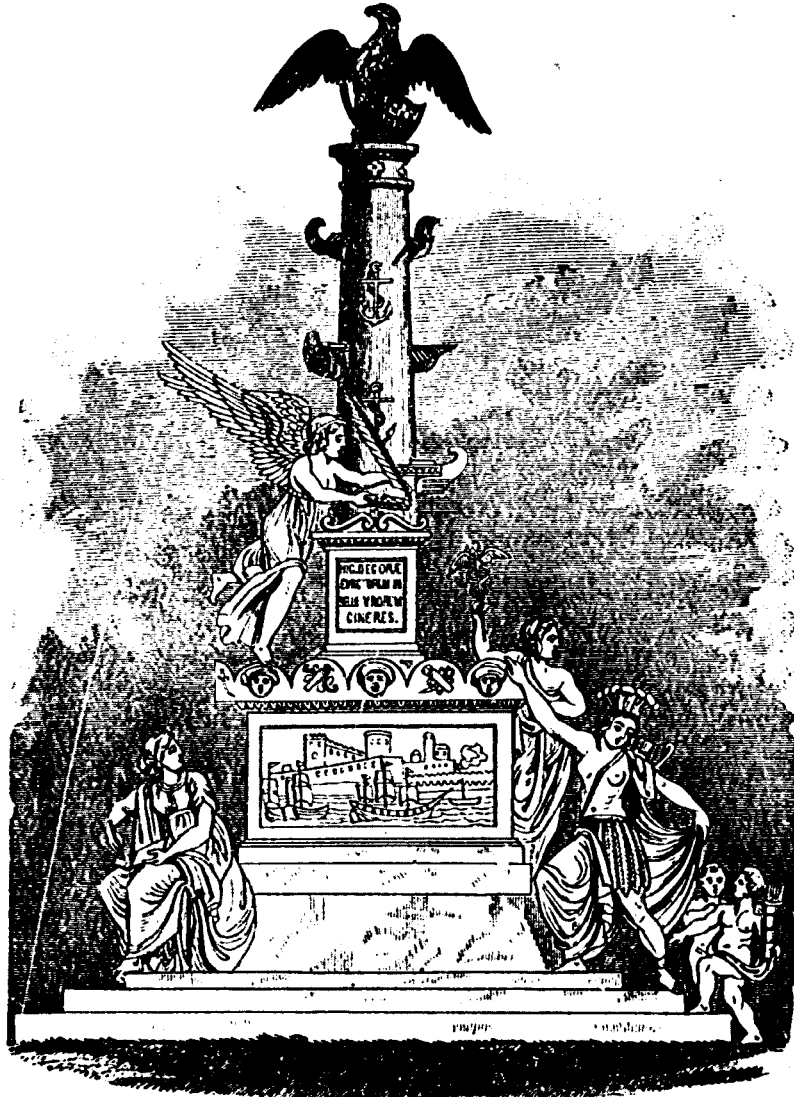
On September 3, 1804, a fourth and last attack was made on Tripoli. Preble sent Decatur and Somers, with gunboats, covered with brigs and schooners, into the harbor's mouth, while the ketches bombarded more to leeward. On this occasion Somers was desperately engaged for more than an hour, pressing the enemy into his own port. Somers' gunboat was smaller than any one of those of the enemy, but so true was the fire that not one of them succeeded in getting alongside of him to board.

They were all bearing straight down upon the rocks, and Somers could not spare enough men from the guns to man his sweeps. Preble, on the Constitution, saw his danger and, coming up in time, sent a broadside of grape among the pirates, who got out their sweeps and retreated when one united attack would have made the victory theirs. As they drew off, instead of returning to the Constitution, as Preble wished, Somers pursued them until within less than a cable's length of a twelve-gun battery, which had not fired before for fear of damaging the fleeing Tripolitans. When she opened fire at this close range the destruction of Somers' valiant little vessel seemed inevitable; but by a lucky chance a bomb exploded in the battery, blew up the platform, and drove the Tripolitans to cover.

The arrival of reinforcements had been expected in vain for several weeks. Somers finally conceived a plan for destroying the enemy's flotilla as it lay at anchor in the harbor. A ketch that had been captured from the Tripolitans by Decatur was in the squadron, and had been rechristened the Intrepid, for the brilliant occasion on which she had been used, when Decatur recaptured and destroyed the Philadelphia. Somers proposed to fit up the ketch in the dual capacity of fire ship and infernal, take her into the harbor of Tripoli, and there explode her in the midst of the Tripolitan vessels. The panic created by such an assault, in the dead of night, it was hoped, would produce peace and the liberation of Bainbridge and his crew. Somers, after some difficulty, secured the permission of Preble to engage in this hazardous undertaking.

Preble repeatedly warned the young officer of the desperate character of the work, and told him that on account of the Napoleonic wars the Tripolitans were short of ammunition, and that so much powder must not fall into the hands of the enemy. But Somers needed no warning. On the deck of the ketch, around the mast and over the magazine was piled a quantity of shells of different sizes, and in the hold was placed 1500 pounds of powder. Notwithstanding the desperate character of the service, so great was their devotion to Somers, that every man on board of the Nautilus offered to engage in it. This compelled him to make a selection, and after consultation with Preble, he selected four men from the Nautilus and six from the Constitution, which, with Lieutenant Henry Wads-

Somers' Errand of Destruction. worth, of the Constitution, an uncle of the poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Somers himself, made up the complement of twelve men who were permitted to engage in an undertaking which was likely to cost them their lives. Midshipman Joseph Israel, familiarly known as Pickle Israel, and recently promoted to a lieutenantcy, with the assistance of Quartermaster Daniel



Monument to Somers and others at Annapolis.

Dixon, as he afterwards confessed, eluded the eye of his superior and was found on board one of the lifeboats accompanying the ketch, under a tarpaulin, after Somers had started on his errand of destruction.

The ten seamen were James Simms, Thomas Tompline, James Harris and William Keith, of the Nautilus; William Harrison, Robert Clark, Hugh McCormick, Jacob Williams, Peter Penner and

SOMERS FAMILY AND SOMERS POINT.

Parting of Somers and Decatur. Isaac W. Downes, of the Constitution. These men were all Pennsylvanians and Jersey men. All told, they numbered thirteen—alas! unlucky number!

On the afternoon of September 4th Somers was ready to take the ketch into the harbor. He pointed out the desperate character of the service to the men, and said he wished no man to go who would not prefer being blown up to being taken by the enemy; that such was his own determination and he wished all who were with him to be of the same mind. It was said, by those who witnessed the scene, that in reply each man asked the privilege of applying the match to the fuse. Stewart and Decatur visited Somers before he got away. The latter took from his finger a ring and broke it into three pieces, giving each of his friends a piece and retaining one himself. He also handed to Decatur a sealed envelope wherein was his will, and a personal note to Decatur, which read as follows:

"Herein is my will, which I charge you to see executed, if I should never come back. For yourself, dear Decatur, I have no words that I can write. To other men I may express my affection, and ask their forgiveness for any injury I have done them; but between you and me, there is nothing to forgive—only the remembrance of brotherhood ever since we were boys."

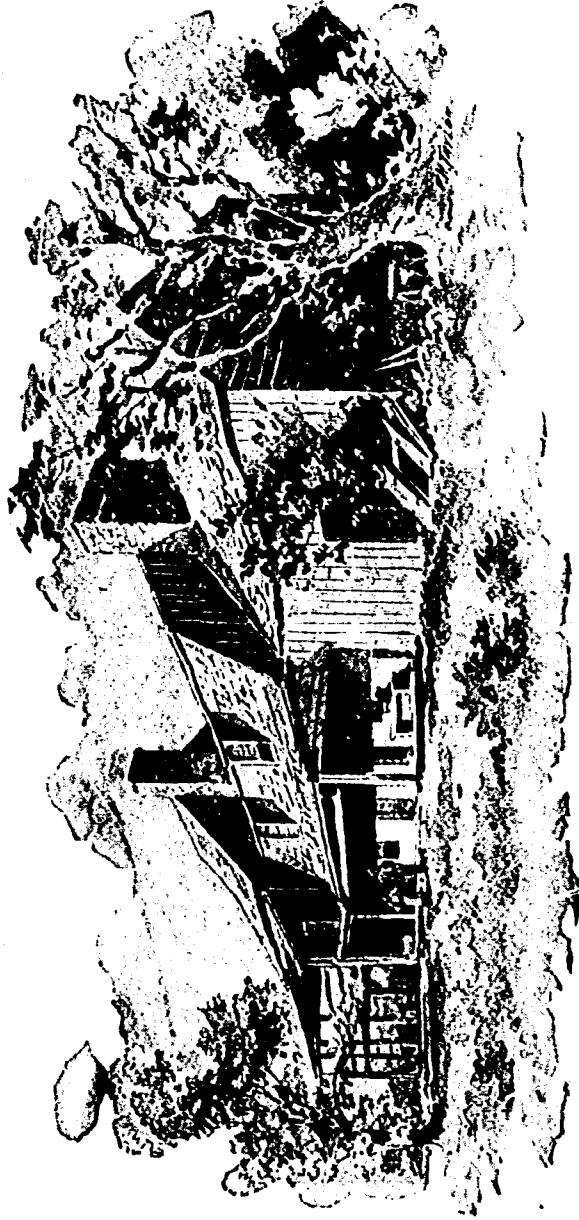
At nine o'clock that night all was ready and the Intrepid was started for the harbor in the tow of two lifeboats, manned by ten seamen, with muffled oars. Stewart and Decatur, in their vessels, followed the ketch as far in the offing as was prudent. Midshipman Ridgley, on the Nautilus, by the aid of a powerful night-glass aloft, managed to follow her until she got well within the harbor, and then she vanished. * * * The suspense soon became almost unbearable, for not a shot had been fired, and not a sound came from the direction in which she had gone. About nine o'clock a half dozen cannon shots could be plainly heard, and even the knowledge that she had been discovered and was being fired on was a relief from the awful silence. About ten o'clock Stewart was standing at the gangway of the Siren with Lieutenant Carrol, when the latter, craning his neck out into the night, suddenly exclaimed, "Look! See the light!"

Away up the harbor Stewart saw a speck of light, as if from a lantern, which moved rapidly as though it were being carried by some one running along a deck. Then it paused and disappeared from view. In a second a tremendous flame shot up hundreds of feet into the air, and the glare of it was so intense that it seemed close aboard. The flash and shock were so stupendous that the guardships, though far out to sea, trembled and shivered.

The officers and men looked at one another in mute horror. Could anything have lived in the area of that dreadful explosion? The tension upon the men of the little fleet was almost at the breaking point.

The vessels beat to and fro between the harbor entrances, firing rockets and guns for the guidance of possible fugitives. All night the fleet kept vigil, but not a shot nor a voice nor even a splash came out from the harbor.

With the first streaks of dawn the Americans were aloft with their glasses. On the rocks at the northern entrance through which the Intrepid had passed they saw a mast and fragments of vessels. One of the enemy's largest gunboats had disappeared, and two others were so badly shattered that they lay upon the shore.



Old Somers Homestead, Destroyed by Fire in 1900.

SOMERS FAMILY AND SOMERS POINT.

Bravery on Board the Intrepid. The details of the occurrence were never actually known. Somers was a man capable of any sacrifice for the honor and welfare of his country. Being discovered and in danger of capture, he may have ordered the match applied to the magazine, and thus sacrificed his own life and the lives of his men, to keep from the enemy the means of prolonging the war. The whole was over in less than a minute—the flame, the quaking of towers, the reeling of ships and the bursting of shells. No one ever came back from the ill-fated Intrepid to tell the story of the explosion.

The late Dr. J. B. Somers, of Linwood, in a letter to the writer, under date of October 25, 1895, says:

"I do not think the facts will warrant the conclusion that he (Richard Somers) blew himself up, although this was the popular opinion at the time, based upon the reports of the commodore. He had signified his intention to do so, rather than allow so great a quantity of powder to fall into the hands of the enemy, but to do so without the occasion warranting it would indicate a rashness foreign to everything we know of his character. The account of their boat being surrounded and boarded by Tripolitans is all a myth. Many of the discrepancies arise from the statements made by his sister, Mrs. Sarah Somers Keen, in her later years, when dementia had begun its work. I have tried by corresponding with the Episcopal minister at Burlington to have some matters straightened out, but to no avail. I have also corresponded with the Bainbridges, McDonoughs, etc., but they think Decatur's friends captured most of the glory for him."

Commodore Preble, in his official report, alluding to the men on the Intrepid, said "they were officers of conspicuous bravery, talent and merit." The bashaw offered a dollar for each body recovered from the water, and within two days the entire thirteen were recovered. Two bodies, those of officers, were found in the bottom of the ketch, which had drifted among the rocks. The six-oared boat drifted on the beach and one body was found in this. Six more bodies were found on the shore southward of the city and the remaining four were discovered floating in the harbor. Captain Bainbridge, at that time a prisoner in Tripoli, saw the two bodies found in the ketch and the four floating in the harbor, and he described them as being "so much disfigured that it was impossible to recognize any human feature, or even distinguish an officer from a seaman." Surgeon's mate Cowdery, another prisoner, however, selected three of these men as officers, being guided by some fragments of dress remaining on the bodies and by the delicate appearance of the hands. The ten seamen were buried on the beach, outside the town, while the three officers—Somers, Wadsworth and Pickle—were interred in the same grave, "about a cable's length to the southward and eastward of the castle." Small stones were placed at the four corners of this last grave to mark its site, but they were shortly afterwards removed by the Tripolitans, who objected to the disfiguring of their land with a Christian monument.

Congress passed a resolution of condolence and erected a monument at the navy yard in Washington in honor of these heroes. At the burning of that city, in 1814, this monument was very much defaced. Subsequently it was restored and removed to the west front of the capitol, whence it was transferred, in 1860, to the grounds of the Naval Academy at Annapolis.