

# The Coffin Family of Prince Edward Island

Elisha Coffin (1763-1851)

Farmer, Judge and Legislative Assembly Member

and

Captain William Coffin (1791-1843)

*Ross Coffin*

## ELISHA COFFIN (1763-1851)

Farmer, Judge and Legislative Assembly Member

Elisha Coffin was born 9 October 1763 on the Island of Nantucket, Massachusetts. He was the second child of Elisha Coffin and Eunice Myrick Coffin.

Elisha's family moved off Nantucket shortly after his birth, to Cape Sable, Nova Scotia where Elisha's father was involved with fishing and boat building. Shortly after, their family moved onto St. John's Island (P.E.I.) to a place called Worthy's Point, along the Hillsborough River. Elisha's father must have been a fairly educated man, as he was chosen to be a member of the Island's first Legislative Assembly. In 1783 the family settled in Savage Harbour, on the north shore, in King County, having purchased two hundred acres from George Burns. This homestead is considered to be the first permanent home on the Island for our Coffin ancestors. Shortly after purchasing the property, Elisha's father died, leaving behind his widow and nine children. Elisha was twenty two at the time of his father's death, his older brother Latham was twenty four.

In 1785, Elisha married a woman by the name of Jane Robbins, daughter of William and Helen Robbins of Stanhope, P.E.I. The Robbins family held the distinction of being among the first settlers to come over from Scotland aboard the ship *The Falmouth* in April 1770. The birth date of Jane is thought to have been in 1765, in Scotland. Her father William

moved from Stanhope to St. Peters in 1787 and was a half-brother of Duncan McEwen. Both of these families would figure into the Coffin family in later years. In 1788, Elisha and his brother Kimble commenced their ship building operation at Savage Harbour by building the small seventeen-ton schooner, *Rainbow*. In later years Kimble went on to become a major ship-builder, while Elisha's interest in shipbuilding was that of an investor more than a builder, although his sons would later show some involvement. Sometime after 1792, Elisha's brother, Latham, headed back to Nantucket to live, leaving Elisha behind as the eldest Coffin son on the Island. Latham married Elizabeth Coleman and had many children. He died at the old age of eighty four.

During the 1790s, Elisha and Jane were busy raising their children Kimble, Eunice and William. The family, during the 1790s was living on their farm at Savage Harbour, which consisted of ninety two acres of his father's original farm. It was during this period of time that the Coffin's of Savage Harbour would receive a very distinguished visitor. Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin was a man who held his Coffin kin, close to his heart, so it was no surprise that when chance had it he appeared on the shores of Savage Harbour. Elisha's father, Captain Elisha Coffin, was the admiral's second cousin, once removed. Sir Isaac's father, Nathaniel, was the Cashier of Customs prior to the American Revolution and his sister was Ann Callbeck of Charlottetown. Isaac Coffin was born in Boston in 1759. Like most of the Coffin's of that



*Coffin Properties, Savage Harbour, 1810 Survey.*

era he developed his sea legs at a very young age. He entered the Royal Navy in 1773 at the age of fourteen under the watchful eye of Lt. W. M. Hunter. It was not long after this time that Hunter was quoted as saying, "Of all the young men I ever had care of, none answered my expectations equal to Isaac Coffin, never did I know a man to acquire so much nautical knowledge in so short a time." Coffin's rapid rise up the ladder in the British Navy leaves little doubt of his brilliance. At the age of nineteen, Lt. Coffin was commanding the cutter *Placentia*. At the age of twenty he was serving under Admiral Pasley aboard the frigate *Sybil*. He was the signal lieutenant in the action off Cape Henry, at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, in March 1781, during the Revolution. Later that year, he was made a commander. After seeing action in the Caribbean aboard the *Borlfeur*, he returned to England where he was called upon to take the newly appointed Governor of Canada, Lord Dorchester (Sir Guy Carleton) and his family, to Quebec.

It was during this period that Isaac Coffin, aboard the frigate *Thisbe*, first sighted the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Half jokingly he asked his friend, Lord Dorchester, to grant him the Islands for his loyal service to the Crown. Dorchester later took it upon himself to set the wheels in motion and raise the issue with King George III. On 8 May 1798 The Magdalen Islands were granted to Captain Isaac Coffin. They remained in the Coffins' control for one hundred five years until 1903 and made Isaac and his heirs very rich men. Although Isaac never lived on the Islands, he made many efforts to advance the Islands forward by introducing healthy livestock and financial support.

After Canada was ceded to Great Britain in 1763, the British made little effort to supply official currency for their North American holdings. In 1815, Sir Isaac Coffin became possibly the first one to rectify this by issuing an unofficial copper penny for the Magdalen Islands. The coin had the image of a seal on it with the words, "Magdalen Island Token," on one side and "Success to the Fisheries," on the other. However, the residents, mainly French fishermen, disliked Coffin and showed him little respect. It has been said that Coffin, once tried to expel his tenants on the Island but the British government frowned on the idea.

After his death, the control of the Islands went to his nephews, the sons of his brother John and sister Ann. The Islands were later sold to Quebec by a third generation of Isaac's nephews for \$100,000.00. It was also during this time that Coffin brought gifts of horses and cattle to Elisha's family at Savage Harbour. One story tells of Isaac requesting some of the Coffins of Savage Harbour to relocate onto his newly acquired Islands, but there were no takers. In 1804 Isaac Coffin became a baronet while serving as a rear admiral in Nova Scotia. He married Elizabeth Browne in 1811, but later separated due to their intolerance of each other's ways. Back in England in 1818 he

served as a member of Parliament for the Borough of Ilchester, and was highly regarded in the House for his naval expertise. It was his love for his homeland back in America that cost him what would have been the crowning jewel to his career. It is said that King William IV had his friend Sir Isaac Coffin in line to become Earl of Magdalen and intended to make him the Governor of Canada, however, the British Parliament didn't take kindly to the idea of his appointment due to Coffin's strong American ties. The man himself stood over six feet tall, he was robust and energetic, until an accident at sea injured him severely. Having witnessed a man being swept overboard by a wave, Coffin rescued him by going overboard after him. He saved the man's life, but injured his back in doing so; this injury continued to follow him for the rest of his days.

Isaac enjoyed good conversation and had a dry wit. One story tells of a time when he returned to England after one of his numerous voyages across the ocean (forty voyages in his lifetime). Upon his arrival he was informed that a man who was being held in confinement, a prisoner, claimed to be his relative. With his curiosity leading him, he went to the prison to further investigate. To his surprise he was brought to a black man. Both surprised and amused, the coloured man told him that he was an American and therefore must be related, since Coffin was also an American. While listening intently, Coffin finally interjected saying, "Stop, my man, stop! Now let me ask you a question." Pausing he went on, "How old may you be?" "Well," replied the black man, "I should guess about 35." "Oh then!", Coffin said, turning to leave, "There must be a mistake, you cannot be one of my Coffins, I don't recall any of us ever turning black before the age of forty."

Another story reveals his love and hate relationship with his wife. After a short time of living together they both decided that what their marriage needed was a lot of distance be-

tween them. His wife's late night sermons gave Sir Isaac nightmares and the admiral's frolicking about the British taverns caused his wife to write late night sermons. A few years after their mutual agreement to live apart, Mrs. Coffin caught wind that Sir Isaac was about to set sail for Boston. Not being at all behind the fashions of the day, she requested her estranged husband to purchase her a Boston rocking chair while in Boston. Sir Isaac grudgingly agreed and upon his arrival in Boston he located a splendid chair, the best money could buy, but before shipping it back to England, he took a saw and cut a few inches off the back of the rockers, to ensure that every time his dear wife rocked, the chair would tip over backwards, putting her on her pompous fanny.

Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin died in England 23 July 1839 at the age of eighty and left a good portion of his fortune back in America spread out among his numerous kin. The Coffin school in Nantucket, was just one of Coffin's donations to his friends and family. His beloved Magdalen Islands were left to his nephews. In later years, Elisha's son, Benjamin Coffin, was asked to describe the old Admiral. His quick reply was "Big feet, long legs and a big nose, just like all the other Coffins."

The late 1790s in P.E.I., saw the first Presbyterian Church in the area being built about one mile south east of Savage Harbour, in what is now West St. Peter's Cemetery. It served a wide area including the Coffins of Savage Harbour. They would travel by boat across the bay in summer and by sled over the bay ice in winter. Upon landing on the south shore, they would remove their shoes for the dusty walk along the trail to the church, so as not to get their best shoes dirty. This church existed for close to ninety years, until being replaced by a new one at Bristol. Elisha's grave lays within feet of where the old church once stood, and is probably one of the few remnants of the church's past history.

I suspect it was Elisha's wife, Jane who first

introduced Elisha and family to the religion of Scotland, Presbyterianism. It was also from this congregation that one of the Island's most famous ministers developed. Elisha's grandson, Fulton J. Coffin, son of Elisha's son Benjamin, was born and raised in Savage Harbour. He was educated at Prince of Wales College before heading off to Princeton and Oxford Universities. Reverend Coffin became well acquainted with the leading scholars of the day, not only in North America, but also in Europe and Asia. He eventually settled in Trinidad where he became the principal of the Presbyterian Theological College, a post he held for twenty-five years. He was known as an expert in the Old Testament, and was thoroughly trusted by the East Indian population of the Island. Reverend Coffin was also a noted Hindu scholar, and lectured in Hindi as well as English. He died in 1936 and was buried in the Peoples Cemetery, in Mount Stewart, P.E.I., where all but one of the gravestones face the rising sun; Reverend Fulton Coffin's faces south, towards his friends in Trinidad.

During the 1790s, Elisha's name appears on various documents and census reports. A list of subscribers to a copy of a memorial relative to the streets and commons of Charlottetown, presented to Lt. Gov. Fanning dated 1 January 1792, bears Elisha's signature, along with his brothers' Latham and Kimble. The Island census for 1798 shows three Coffin families living on Lot 38, which included Savage Harbour. The census shows Kimble Coffin's family of five, two males and three females, Widow Coffin (Eunice) along with her sons Andrew and Joseph, and Elisha's family with nine, five males and four females. Elisha's family in 1798 only consisted of seven, Elisha, Jane, Kimble, Eunice, William, Margaret and Harriet. The leftover persons are two males who are under sixteen and whose identity remains a mystery. The census also shows Uriah Coffin, Elisha's great uncle, living on Lot 47 in East Point with his family of eight.

In 1801, Elisha and Jane had a son named Benjamin. In later years he would become known as "neighbour Ben." In 1803, their son James was born, and two years later in 1805 their daughter Rebecca was born. On 16 February 1805 a congratulatory letter was sent to Lt. Gov. Fanning, upon his retirement from public duty. It was signed, among others, by Elisha Coffin. It was during this time that Elisha was becoming involved in politics. He ran in the 1806 election, and won a seat as a member for Kings County in the Legislative Assembly, alongside his brother Benjamin.

Some of the debates in the House during this session dealt with Loyalist land claims and compensation for broken promises. Parliament also dealt with regulation of liquor sales. This topic was of interest to Elisha, and possibly even brought to the House by him, since he had a vested interest. According to the book, *History of Mount Stewart*, Elisha was running a tavern in the Mount Stewart area, and so was his younger brother Andrew. It would appear that anyone and everyone who wanted to, was selling rum from their homes. This no doubt would have been taking business away from their established taverns. It was also common in the rural areas for a judge to hold a court of law in the local tavern, in later years, Elisha did just that. Another issue in the House was what to do with people who intentionally maimed or killed cattle; it was stated as a growing problem. Perhaps this issue stemmed from an incident when some privateers sailed up St. Peter's Bay, shot some cattle, turned around, and left. It was also stated that even though Britain was preparing for a possible war, (War of 1812), the government had put aside sixteen hundred pounds, for the erection of government buildings and gaols (jails).

In 1807, the Coffin's daughter Phebe was born. Shortly after or possibly during Phebe's birth, Elisha's wife, Jane died. It is not documented until Phebe's baptism, 5 April 1809, the mother (Jane) is listed as deceased. In 1810, a

survey map drawn-up on 15 September shows Elisha owning one hundred sixty acres of farm land at Savage Harbour. This property was part of his father's original purchase. To the north his younger brother Andrew is situated on the coastline with eighty three acres and south lies the homestead of his brother Benjamin. Although their mother was still alive, I believe she was now living with her son, Kimble, possibly at St. Peters, where her death was recorded in 1814.

Elisha was sworn in as a Justice of the Peace for Kings County in 1812. He was also farming during this period of time, and shows up on the MacDonald ledger (and old merchant's account book), in 1814 as the purchaser of nails, iron and rum. He paid with oats and hay. Elisha continued to live on the north-east shore of Savage Harbour.

In 1996, I visited Savage Harbour to view this landscape. As we came down the dusty road toward the harbour, my first observations were the mailboxes along the road on top of fence posts that read "Coffin," thus telling me that indeed, I was on the right road. The green meadows were bordered by spruce trees. As the red rust-coloured road rounded a bend, I could see the harbour at the bottom of a gently sloping hill. At the base of the hill, I could see small grey fishing shacks by the dock. This is where early maps show Elisha's home being situated. The location is perfectly sheltered from the sea, which lies just north, over a small hill. The mouth of the harbour has nearly closed off completely from the sea. Only a small channel remains in which the fishing boats enter and leave. The beach front is wide, flat and rocky and probably very different than it was over one hundred years before. Gone are the forests of evergreen trees and tiny fishing shacks that once dotted the beach, changed by the wind, sea and time. Savage Harbour still remains a peaceful, thought provoking area, bathed in Coffin history.

In 1818, Elisha was named constable for the



Meacham's Atlas Map of Lot 38

area of Savage Harbour, by the Island's Supreme Court. Constables were responsible for handing out warrants and keeping the peace in their jurisdiction. They were men who were well regarded in their communities. On 25 November 1820, the lieutenant governor named Elisha to a new Commission of the Peace, along with his brother Benjamin. For many years after, Elisha represented the law in the Savage Harbour area.

An interesting event in 1830 sheds more proof pertaining to the claim that Elisha's family landed on the Island earlier than most historians and genealogists thought. Many felt the Coffins did not come to the Island until the 1780s while others, me included, know now

that they landed in the early 1770s. The trial of John Stewart presented Elisha Coffin as a witness for the prosecution in this 1830 trial. While on the stand, defending the free access the Indians had always had to the Pisquid Road, Elisha reveals that he had known about this road for fifty five years. The math is simple: 1830 minus 55 equals 1775, which is how long the Coffins had been in this area. Add to this a few years at Worthy's Point and we are close to the early 1770s. A small humorous note about the trial stated that during the jury deliberations, the crowd became curious as to why a long time had elapsed since the jury went behind closed doors. They sent a clerk up to check on the jury. Having put an ear to the door to listen, he became suspicious when all was quiet. He opened the door only to have found everyone fast asleep.

To get a clear picture of what life was like on the Island in the 1830s, I read various books and articles on the subject. Although most writers paint a picture of health and prosperity, there is a diary written by Nathaniel Carrington in 1837 about his trip to the Island, which I found both informative and contradictory to statements made by other authors. Carrington's view of Island life tells of a harsh lifestyle adopted by a population of peasants. He writes:

*The Island is without doubt a healthy place, well and abundantly watered, good rich soil, plenty of timber, cloudless sky, but unfortunately inhabited by few poor and unenterprising people who are not well versed in agriculture. They are content to do as their predecessors did, live cheaply and be satisfied, never looking forward or thinking of improvements. We have now been here nine days and have never seen beef for the simple reason that there is none. We visited the market this morning and saw a little poor lamb, no feathered stock of any kind. The poverty of the people, leads them to salt cod and salt meats, which together with the great quantities of rum they drink, accounts for their general sallow look.*

Carrington's remarks about the laziness of Canadians brought forth a recollection by the editor, James Brandow, of the book *The Clock-maker*, in which the 1838 fictional character Sam Slick writes, "I have often been amazed when travelling among Canadians, to see the curious critters they be. They leave the marketing to the women and the business to their notaries, the care of their souls to their priests, and their bodies to the doctors, and reserve only frolicking, dancing singing, fiddling and gasconading to themselves." Perhaps these writers, confused lazy people, with frustrated people, who knew that no matter how enterprising they became, landlords always seemed to receive the lion's share of the deal.

My interpretation of life on the Island during the 1830s and 40s is somewhere in the middle of Carrington's view and a more upbeat view. There were many poor people who were trying to carve out an existence upon their arrival on the Island, but in most cases, they were still better off in the new land than they were in the old. The more established families such as the Andersons, Robbins, Websters and Coffins had managed to survive their hardships through their will to become more prosperous through farming, shipbuilding, retailing etc. Alcohol dulled the pain of poverty and despair for many, as it still does even today, however, the peaceful, isolated beauty of the land and sea made them stay on in hopes that their children may rise to the opportunities that the land may someday give to them.

In his later years, Elisha stayed on as a magistrate for Kings County. He was no doubt a man of intelligence and held public office on many occasions in his life. On 14 September 1851, Elisha died at the age of eighty seven. His obituary appeared in *The Examiner* on 6 October and reads as follows: "Died. At Savage Harbour, on the 14th ultimo, Elisha Coffin, Esquire, at the advanced age of 87 years. The deceased was the oldest Magistrate in Kings

County and was once a member of the Legislature. He enjoyed the respect and esteem of all who knew him." Elisha Coffin was buried in West St. Peter's Cemetery in an old section that is now found in the woods where the church once stood. His grave is among six others (only four are marked, including his son James) and is considered one of the oldest graves in the cemetery. The stone reads, "To the Memory of Elisha Coffin Sen. who died September 14, 1851 aged 87 years."

### **Captain William Coffin (1791-1843)**

William Coffin was born in 1791, at Savage Harbour, P.E.I. He was the second son of Elisha Coffin and Jane Robbins. William grew up on his father's farm on the west side of Savage Harbour among his numerous kin who had now settled many Coffin homesteads in this area. Although farming would have been demanding most of William's time, records show that, like his brothers and cousins, he was developing an interest in returning to the sea. Fishing and shipbuilding were becoming well established enterprises on the Island, and many of the Coffins had the skills to make a good living at it. William, along with his younger brother Benjamin, became involved in the boat building trade during the late 1820s. Their names appear on various shipbuilding lists in the area.

The early 1800s saw the Island developing strong trade ties with Newfoundland involving their sealing and fish trades. Shipbuilders in P.E.I. were finding a lucrative market for their Island built fishing vessels. Between 1830 and 1833 a total of one hundred twenty three schooners were built on the Island, with the majority of them finding their way to Newfoundland. William's uncle, Kimble Coffin, was a large employer involved in the shipbuilding trade. His will, dated 1830, mentions an outstanding debt owing to him by a Newfoundland fisherman for a schooner named *Hanna*.

Kimble, along with his father Elisha had developed shipbuilding skills, and sailing skills, from their father Captain Elisha Coffin, who himself, appears on shipbuilding records, as early as 1785 on the Island. Captain Coffin was involved with John Coffin back in Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, fishing and building boats. John Coffin had come with Elisha, from Nantucket in the early 1760s. John's family, in Nova Scotia later went on to establish a fine distinction in Maritime business and public life. John Coffin's great-grandson, the Hon. Thomas M. Coffin was a cabinet minister in the Mackenzie government in the 1880s.

Although a few smaller vessels were being built at Savage Harbour, the larger shipyards in the area were located down along the Hillsborough River near the town of Mount Stewart. Many of the Coffin families built ships along the banks of the river, and then towed them down to Charlottetown, where they were rigged and prepared for their first voyages.

The early part of the 1800s were important years for the smaller shipbuilding enterprises because of the development of the market in Newfoundland. It encouraged a degree of specialization, for boat builders, and showed others, that there was a demand for the type of boats that the smaller shipyards, on the north eastern part of the Island, could readily produce. The large scale builders such as the Peake Brothers and Thomas Owen, had little interest in this type of market at this time, however, in later years the Coffins were building larger vessels almost exclusively for the Peake Brothers.

William was interested in building the smaller vessels, usually under one hundred tons. In 1829 he built the schooner *Rainbow*, listed as seventy seven tons. Later that year he built the schooner, *Three Sisters*, with his brother Benjamin. In 1831 they built the schooner *Ann* and in 1833 they built *The Lady of the Lake*. Although their place of residence was listed as Savage Harbour, their building facilities were located near Mount Stewart. The reason for

this was that the mouth of the harbour, at Savage Harbour, was too shallow to enable the keel of a completed vessel to pass safely. Only a few small boats were ever launched there.

Most locally built ships were financed by groups of farmers or families, who would collectively finance, build and crew, the completed vessels to their buyers. Before the vessels left, they would be loaded with lumber, food, and other cargo, before setting off to foreign markets. The end results, would bring home a handsome profit for all those involved. Unfortunately, the market for these boats dried up in 1834. William returned back to fishing and farming. William's uncle, Kimble Coffin, died in 1830, however his sons, and grandson, Duncan, William and Edwin, continued on with their father's tradition, and became major builders mainly for the Peake brothers of Charlottetown. They built beautiful ships, such as the barquentine *Ethel Blanche* and the *Ralph B. Peake*, which was launched in 1876. This ship was seven hundred fifty seven tons, her length was one hundred seventy feet and her beam was thirty three feet across. The depth of the cargo hold was nineteen feet and was magnificently finished from bow to stern and considered one of the finest ships ever to be built on the Island.

In later years, it was the introduction of the steamships that brought an end to the wooden sailing ships, and caused the bankruptcy of their financiers, the Peake Brothers. Today one can still visit the homes and offices of James Peake in Charlottetown, they have been preserved by the government and now house the Provincial Heritage Foundation and Museum, known as Beaconsfield House.

The year 1834 was not only the end of William's enterprise with building boats for Newfoundland, it was also to be the start of new beginnings, with his engagement and marriage to his cousin, Margaret Anderson Davison. Margaret, a widow, was the daughter of David Anderson and Helen Robbins Anderson. Wil-

liam's parents were, as before stated, Elisha Coffin and Jane Robbins Coffin. This made William and Margaret first cousins through their mothers. Margaret was a widow of the former Captain Robert Davison, who drowned within site of his homestead while returning from Newfoundland. Margaret and Robert had two daughters Elizabeth, born 1819 and Helen born (?), and two sons, Henry born 1821 and Robert born 1828. After Margaret's remarriage on 5 February 1834, Margaret and William lived in the scenic area of St. Peter's Bay, in a town called Greenwich. This was Anderson country, which leads to the speculation that the newlyweds were given property, or was it that William moved onto the Davison farm?

In my visit to this area in 1996, I was stunned by the beauty of St. Peter's Bay. The gentle green hills, rolling down to the narrow bay, with the white steeples of the churches made for a postcard like setting. The French had settled here in the early 1700's and called it Saint Pierre. This community proved to be one of the few success stories during the early years of French settlement.

St. Peter's Bay is a long narrow inlet working its way eastward from the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Approximately nine miles long from the north shore of the Island, its endings are inland at the town of St. Peter's. About half way along the Bay, on the north shore, lies the tiny community of Greenwich. The bay itself is only about one mile across. The history of St. Peter's Bay is an interesting one, beginning with the Micmac Indians, hundreds of years before. This area provided the natives with plenty of fresh fish and small game. At the time, the forests came down to the water's edge providing shelter from the cold and wood for their camps. The forests were teeming with deer, bear, raccoons and foxes. The bay provided salmon, trout, clams and lobsters.

Early in the 1700s the French were attempting to settle P.E.I. or Isle St. Jean, as it was then known. They saw great potential in the harbour



at St. Peter's Bay and started a fishing village called St. Pierre. Along with this village they built a fort at the mouth of the harbour in which today some remnants still remain. The Micmac were more or less a peaceful people, who shared the land with the French, trading furs and game with them. Eventually St. Pierre developed a reputation as a trading center, and prospered until the late 1750s, when the French were conquered by the British. The British tried to expel the Acadian population; their success was being hindered by the lack of British transport ships, however, many Acadians were rounded up and shipped back to Europe, and south to America. In the early 1760s, the British divided the Island into lots.

It was determined that St. Peter's was to be located on lot 41, in King's County. The development included the clearing of the forests that surrounded the Bay. Development was somewhat slow due to the fact that the new settlers could not purchase their property, but instead had to pay rent to landlords, back in England. However, to the credit of the first settlers, they carried on, cutting trees, removing stumps, and carving small farms from the forests, a task that could only be described as grueling, laborious and filthy. The letters of Walter Johnstone, a Scottish visitor to the Island in the early 1820s tell us:

*As the trees are cut the branches are lopped off, and the trunks cut into lengths of 12 or 14 feet. This operation they call junking them; if they are not junked before fire is applied, they are much worse to junk afterwards. Thus, when the space intended to be cleared is cut down, junked, and all lying in a promiscuous manner over the whole surface, fire is applied to it in as dry and windy a day as can be selected, and if the fire runs well, the greater part of the small branches will be consumed, but the trunks will only be scorched. These are next rolled together and made-up in piles, lying flat upon the ground; then the remaining small branches are gathered up and thrown*

*upon the heavier wood, to help it to kindle for burning a second time. The stronger part of the family then go on to make up more piles, while the weaker part set fire to those which are thus prepared. In this way they proceed till the whole of what was cut down is gone over; then when the piles go out they are kindled again and those that continue to burn are thrust closer together, until all is consumed. I must say this is a piece of work of the most dirty and disagreeable nature, and when the wood is heavy, it is as tiresome work as any I have seen in America. I have often passed by the settlers when engaged in this employment, and what with smoke, sweat, and the dust of the burnt wood, their faces were little fairer than those of the negroes in the West Indies, while their clothes were much the same as if they had been dragged up a sooty chimney.*

Johnstone goes on to recommend that new immigrants to the Island bring enough oatmeal and provisions, to see their family through for one full year, and recommends early springtime as a good time to arrive.

Many settlers didn't find out about the absentee landlord system until they had arrived on the Island, victims of smooth talking recruiting agents back home in the British Isles. One story tells of the ancestors of *Anne of Green Gables* author, Lucy Maud Montgomery. After their arrival from Scotland, having barely survived the ocean crossing due to fierce gales, they set foot on the Island, only to find out that there was no promised land to buy. Mr. Montgomery wanted to continue to Quebec, but the violent sea crossing caused his wife much anxiety about re-boarding any ship in the near future, and there, they stayed, giving a future country, a great author.

St. Peter's Bay, in the late 1700s and early 1800s was eventually settled by the Scots on the north side, near Cable Head and Greenwich, the Irish on the south, and scatterings of Acadian, English and Loyalists in between. Family names common to the area in the 1800s were

McEwen, Sanderson, Coffin, McLaren and Anderson. Along with Lapierre, Devoe, Sinnott and Larkin. Many churches were built to serve the faithful in and around the Bay. William's farm consisted of seventy acres and was located on the east side of Cable Head Road, where it intersects with Greenwich Road. From the Bay, it ran back across Greenwich Road, towards, and almost reaching Schooner Pond. It is back here, that the Schooner Pond grist mill was built. In later years, the Greenwich Presbyterian Church was also built along Cable Head Road. Today, the location is part of a farmer's field, however, there is a hint of the road that ran down to the Bay one hundred fifty years ago. This road, an extension of Cable Head Road ran down to the Bay from Greenwich Road to the water's edge. The farmers and merchants used to load boats on what was known as McLean's wharf. A closer look suggests that maybe at one time there was a ferry across the Bay from this point. It would have saved the residents of the north side much in the way of travel time, if they were heading to Morell and beyond. The book *Story of Prince Edward Island* by Blakeley and Vernon confirms that once there was a ferry across the bay, but does not say where. Across the Bay another road leading away from the Bay suggests where the ferry may have landed. This road continues up the hill and past the Midgell Cemetery to the main Island road, which leads into Charlottetown.

On the north side of the Bay the Anderson family built and operated ships. David Anderson was Margaret's father, David and his sons were involved with the trade to Newfoundland.

In the year of 1838, the Coffins of Greenwich, welcomed their new born daughter, named Jane Margaret. Also in 1838, their eldest daughter Elizabeth met and married a man named Frank Sterns. Frank was the son of Dr. Benjamin and Mahetabel Sterns from Truro, Nova Scotia. The Stern family of Truro were descendants of an old New England family

from Boston, who descend from a Loyalist named Isaac Stearns. In later years, the mother of President Calvin Coolidge, proved to be a Stearns, as was the poet and Nobel Prize winner, T.S. Elliot. The T.S. stood for Thomas Stearns. In Canada the Stearns dropped the "a" from their name, to spell "Sterns". After the Sterns' arrival to Nova Scotia, a minister by the name of Robert Douglas came to Truro, Nova Scotia, at the turn of the century and became very close to the Sterns family. After awhile, Reverend Douglas moved onto P.E.I. and settled in the town of Morell, near St. Peters. The following summer the Sterns' daughter, Nancy, went to visit the Reverend Douglas and met William's cousin, Kimble Jr. After a short courtship, they were married and settled near St. Peters. Soon after, Caroline, Nancy's sister, came to visit and fell in love with William's brother Benjamin; they too were married and settled near Savage Harbour. Shortly after, the brothers Frank and William came to the Island, settling at Morell. Frank was a carriage builder and William was involved with the retail grocery and postal business. Later Frank met Elizabeth Davison Coffin, William and Margaret's daughter, and they were married.

During this time in 1838, William was doing more farming than fishing. He lists his trade on his new daughter's birth certificate as that of a farmer. His family now numbered six. It is probable that William's main crops were hay and oats. Their personal garden would have been potatoes, turnips, squash and beans. Some of the hay and oats would be used as currency to trade for other materials. An old merchant's ledger, which dates back to 1812, shows William, Elisha, Andrew and Kimble all listed as purchasers of various items such as tea, sugar, buttons and nails. One common purchase was rum. The alcohol was not only used for social gatherings, but was also the medicine of the day. In some cases such as in Donald McCormick's case, the rum was used to preserve his dead father until distant kin could make the

journey for his funeral. Most items were paid for by oats and hay, or in exchange for labour, as money was very scarce on the Island. In 1840, Margaret gave birth to their son William Montague. William was born 23 September and baptized the following March.

The following years marked the beginning of what was to become some sorrowful years. The death of Margaret's father in 1842 at the age of seventy came as a blow to the community of Greenwich. Margaret along with her brothers and sisters, twelve in all, lost a father and community leader. David Anderson's signature appears on many of the important documents I have in my possession. Perhaps the death of Margaret's father prepared her for what was to come. In the fall of 1842 their daughter, Elizabeth, gave birth to a baby named Mehetabel, but the birth had complications, and Elizabeth died. Frank Sterns became a widower with a new born and a three year old son named Robert. Elizabeth was only twenty three years old, and died on 17 October 1842.

During these years, William was fishing for a living in the waters off the north coast of the Island. They fished for cod, mackerel, herring and lobster off the north coast, just a few miles off shore. Today one can still find the boats fishing the same waters. The danger with this location on the north coast, during the old days of sail, was that the Island, being shaped like a crescent moon with the gulf being on the north side, easily trapped unsuspecting boats if the wind suddenly changed and came in from the north or north-east. Often the warnings of a gale, was a calming of the winds, "the calm before the storm," as it is known. The lack of wind would trap the boats off the coast, robbing their sails of power. Unable to make for shore or round the ends of the Islands, the boats would only have time to reef sails, and pray, before a wall of wind came down on them like an avalanche, often with driving rain or sleet, only the lucky escaped unscathed, the rest were remembered in song and verse:

## The Drowned

On the bar of St. Peter, where the loud roaring  
billows  
Heaved their form-crest tips with the tempests  
that rave  
The stranger lies buried; there no sweet droop-  
ing willows  
Will point out the spot 'tis a chill watery grave  
Far, far from his home  
The storm may grow louder, Heaven's power  
may be shaken  
He heeds not, he hears not, he's free from all  
pain  
He sleeps his last sleep, from earth's scene he  
was taken  
No sound will awake him, to action again  
Thus closes the tale Death fells a man in his  
glory  
Today all is well, we rejoice with a smile  
Tomorrow, alas, brings a heart wrenching story  
And is then we see plainly how hopes often  
beguile  
And leave a sad wreck to be forgotten in  
death's tale.  
St. Peter's Bay 1848 by J.M.K.

*The Colonial Herald* on 24 June 1843 reads as follows:

*Melancholy Accident - We regret to learn that on the 15th inst.; while Mr. William Coffin, of St. Peter's was returning to that harbour upon his fishing boat, accompanied by a young man in his employment, the boat was struck by a sudden squall, which caused her to upset. The boat instantly disappeared, and both the individuals who were in her suddenly met a watery grave. Mr. Coffin has left a widow and several children, and numerous relatives and friends, to lament his loss. Peculiar sympathy is felt for Mrs. Coffin, as this is the second bereavement of this nature that she has been called upon to suffer, both having occurred near the same place, and in similar manner. Her former husband, Captain Robert Davi-*

*son, was returning from Newfoundland, some years since, and having arrived within sight of his home, fell overboard and drowned.*

On 1 July 1843 *The Colonial Herald* read: "The body of Mr. William Coffin, senior, of St. Peter's, whom we noticed last week as having been lost at sea, was found on Monday the 19th, in the surf near Black Bush (Hermanville), fully twenty miles to the eastward of where he went missing. He was buried on Wednesday last."

On 18 July 1843 *The Royal Gazette* read as follows:

*The body of a young man named Oliver Scott, who it appears was in the boat with the ill fated Mr. William Coffin, when she upset, was spotted floating up with the tide in the mouth of St. Peter's Harbour on Tuesday last. The body was brought to shore and decently interred in the burial ground of that place. The deceased was about 20 years of age and was nearly a stranger in this country, but was the son of a respectable farmer back in England. We do not know from which county he came, but there is a possibility that this notice may meet the eyes of some of his friends, if copied into English papers and they may learn the end of his worldly career.*

Once again Margaret was being called upon to grieve for a drowned husband. Her William had been taken from her by the sea on 15 June 1843, leaving her a widow for the second time in her forty three years. When I was in St. Peter's Bay visiting the sights of our ancestors recently, I could imagine back to that sorrowful time, picturing the wake at the house, with the casket containing William's body lying in the living quarters, then being carried by carriage down to McLean's Wharf at the end of Cable Head Road and on to a waiting boat for the ride across the Bay, up the hill on the other side, to where the small chapel once stood in what is now Midgell Cemetery. William, was

buried beside his step-daughter Elizabeth, and was among one of the first graves dug in the cemetery. Today the chapel no longer stands, however a marble bench in the cemetery marks the spot close to where it once stood. The four Coffin tombstones are distinctive by there originality and age.

From left to right lies William Coffin's head stone which reads as follows: "William Coffin who drowned in the harbour of St. Peter's on the 15th day of June A.D. 1843, age 52 years. His remains are here interred.

"Margaret Anderson Coffin, wife of William Coffin, died at Charlottetown on the 12th day of March A.D. 1893 age 93."

"Elizabeth Sterns, wife of Franklin Sterns, died October 17, 1842, age 23."

"Robert Davison Coffin, died April 10, 1850, age 21. He was distinguished for his innocence of manner and purity of character and he submitted to the last foe of man with cheerfulness and resignation. Also to commemorate the death of his father, Captain Robert Davison who was accidentally drowned off St. Peter's Harbour on the 7th day of December A.D. 1827, age 59."

After the death of William, Margaret continued on with their farm in Greenwich. The next twenty five years are a mystery to my research, which are periodically brought to life by events such as Margaret's purchase of John Leslie's grist mill in 1848, on Schooner Pond. This was an unusual purchase for a lady in these times, but once again it shows the determination of this Scot, to carry on despite the pitfalls along life's journey. In 1850, another death in their family, with the sudden illness and death of her son Robert, whom Margaret, had given birth to, shortly after her first husband Robert Davison had drowned.

There is a map of this area, entitled, "The Lake Map of 1863." On this map directly across the Greenwich Road, lies a store on the Greenwich Road. Could this store have belonged to Margaret? In later years her son Wil-

liam, my great-grandfather, would find himself involved with running a general store, and it is possible that this store provided a start to the Coffins' new life after the death of William.

Margaret Coffin, later moved with her son to Charlottetown in the year 1873 and continued on as a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother until her death in Charlottetown on 12 March 1893, aged ninety three. Margaret was buried beside her husband William in Midgell Cemetery, and her legacy of courage should be remembered, by those who can envision her hardships and loss through her long life.