

A Day on the Thomas Loughton by David Ramsay

May 24, 2021

O LORD, our Sovereign,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

(Psalm 8 NRSV)

During prayer in the morning, I recite one of my favorite Psalms and ending with a prayer that on our voyage out to the Isles of Shoals, we all may be inspired by His Presence, by the beauty of the ocean, the sparkling waters, the gentle sunlight and my words about history and the people that once called this lonely group of islands home.

As we back out into the Piscataqua River, I offer a warm welcome and begin by orienting them to the second most rapid flowing rivers in the United States. In 1603 a young sea captain, age 23, Martin Pring came from Bristol, England to explore and exploit this river, hoping to find sassafras, then thought to be a cure for the French Pox. Not finding any, what he did discover was far more important, a vast abundance of tall White Pine trees, dearly coveted by His Majesty, the King of England, as ship masts!

More stories: shipbuilding, the history of the Memorial Bridge, the origin of the lovely riverfront Prescott Park, created due to the generosity of two local schoolteachers, Josie, and Mary Prescott. And much more: The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, several forts, lighthouses, including references to the lighthouse keepers, some quite humorous characters.

As we leave the harbor, passengers have settled in and are enjoying the sea air and sun, expectant about reaching the Isles of Shoals and our tour of Star Island.

As we approach the islands, I provide an orientation, including history, geology and about the salty fishermen and women who once caught cod, once in great abundance.

The poet of the Isles of Shoals, once one of America's most popular poets described these islands:

“Landing for the first time, the stranger is struck only by the sadness of the place, - the vast loneliness; for there are not even trees to whisper with familiar voices, - nothing but sky and sea and rocks. But the very wildness and desolation reveal a strange beauty to him. Let him wait ‘till evening comes and he will find himself slowly succumbing to the subtle charm of the sea atmosphere. He sleeps with all the waves of the Atlantic murmuring in his ears, and wakes with the freshness of a summer morning; and it seems as if morning were made for the first time. For the world is like a new-blown rose, and in the heart of it he stands, with only the caressing music of water to break the utter silence, unless perhaps, a song-sparrow pours out its blissful warble like an embodied joy.” (*Among the Isles of Shoals*, Celia Thaxter, 2003, 1873, pp. 14-15).

After the passengers disembark, I provide a narrated tour of Star Island. Looking out at the White Island Lighthouse, I tell the story of how young Celia, four years old arrived with her father Thomas Lighton, her mother Eliza and two-and-a-half-year-old brother Oscar and how the family lived there for six years, enduring hardship but enjoying the ever-changing sea and rocks and stories from their father when it was too cold or stormy to venture outside. Then, marrying at the tender age of 16 her college graduated tutor, Levi Thaxter, she embarked upon a colorful life, but challenging marriage and became a famous poet, artist, gardener. “It was a life redeemed by art.”

And among my last stories is that of the Rev. John Tucke, who for 41 years, shepherded his flock of 600 rough-hewn fisherman and their families – often drunk and engaging in adultery and all sorts of disreputable behavior – as their minister, doctor, dentist, storekeeper, town records keeper and more.

Finishing my talk, I head to the highest point of the island, where the Captain John Smith monument stands and enjoy the view of the vast ocean, where seagulls are flying about, and I look down at the always changing surf, crashing on the rocky promontory below.

Inspired by the beauty of the islands and sea and the joy of storytelling, I say the Lord’s Prayer – aloud if alone – silently if others are abouts and feel the gratitude and warmth of a good day.

(Note: Since the late 1890’s Star Island has been a popular retreat center, where generations have come to find inspiration and inner peace, enjoy camaraderie, attend courses, and bask in the sun and sea air.)

Ramsay has been narrator and tour guide on the Thomas Lighton for nine years, is currently a guide at the Sarah Orne Jewett House in South Berwick, Maine with Historic New England, and gives talks at retirement communities

and libraries on historical and environmental topics. After a 30-year career in the environment, he lives in South Berwick, Maine with his wife, Marianne, has two sons, one in medical and one in graduate school; and his wife works in the medical field. He is a member of the Christian Community in New England, Brookline, Mass and is deeply engaged in the study of Anthroposophy. He loves walking in the woods and gardening with Marianne.