

The mates of those captured told their story so that the families and friends of those kidnapped would know they did not go willingly.

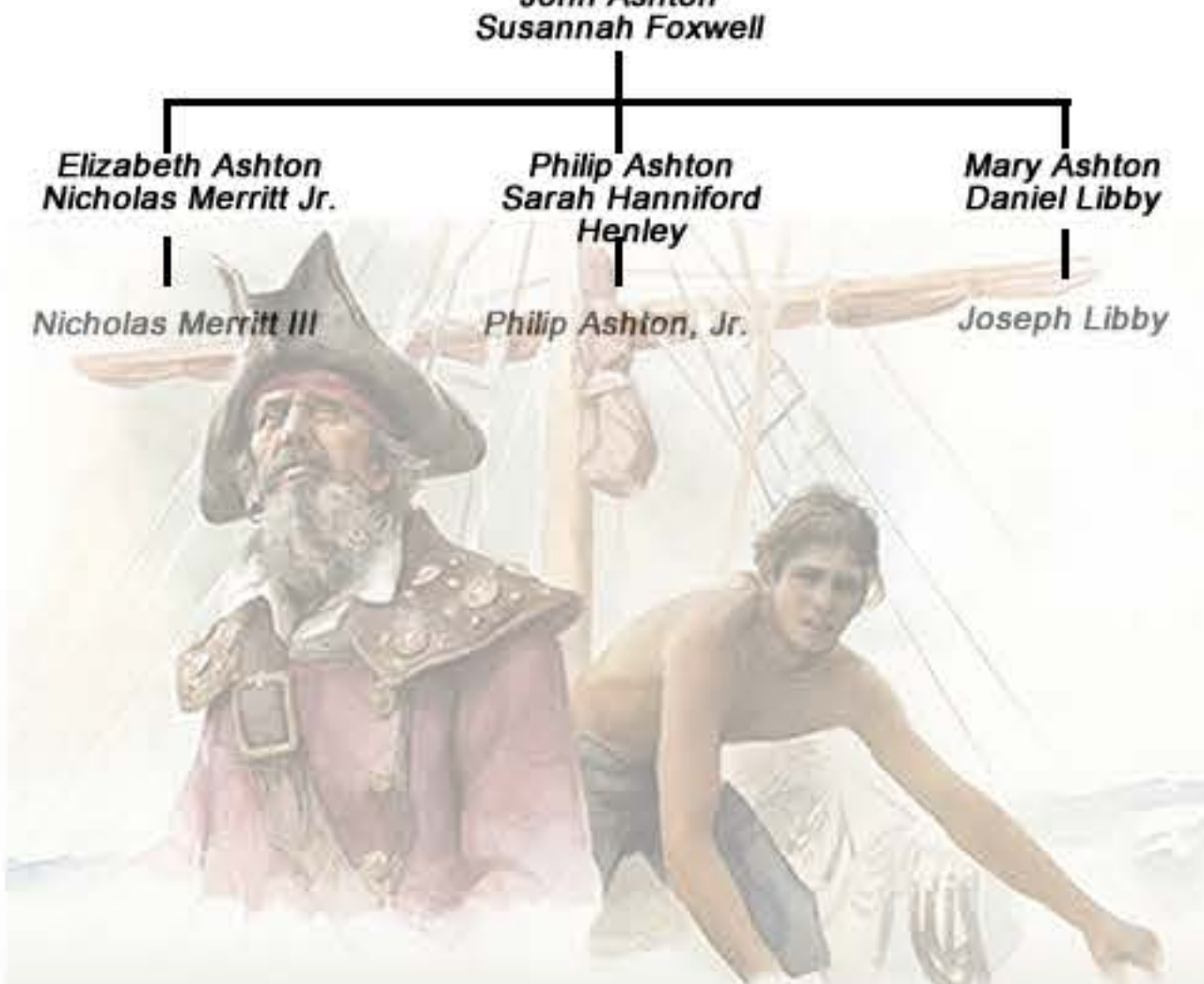
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Advertisements.

These are to give Notice, That on the fifteenth and sixteenth Days of June 1722. the following Persons were taken at Port Rossaway in Nova Scotia by a Pirate Brigantine one Lowe Commander, viz: Nicholas Merrit tertius, Joseph Libby, Philip Ashton, and Lawrence Fabens, all Fishermen of Marblehead in New-England, whom the said Low forced and compelled against their Wills from on board their respective Fishing Vessels to serve on board his said Brigantine.

Transcription: These are to give notice, that on the 15th and 16th days of June 1722, the following persons were taken at Port Rossaway in Nova Scotia by a pirate brigantine one Lowe Commander, viz Nicholas Merritt III, Joseph Libby, Philip Ashton, and Lawrence Fabens, all fishermen at Marblehead in New England, when the said Low forced and compelled against their will from on board their respective fishing vessels to serve on board his said brigantine.

The Relationship of Three of the Captives to our Direct Ancestors.



The Event Remembered 200 Years Later

THE BOSTON HERALD, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 23, 1927

Pirates Ahoy!

Astonishing Adventures of a Marblehead "Crusoe"

By Charles B. Driscoll

ROBINSON CRUSOE had a gun, ammunition, tools, some food, and substantial clothing, when he landed, alone, on the island.

Philip Ashton of Marblehead, Mass., landed upon Rattan island, in the Gulf of Honduras, barefooted, and wearing but three garments. He had no gun, no knife, no reserve supply of food. His hands were empty.

Robinson Crusoe undertook his adventure in lonely living because he couldn't help it. He was shipwrecked upon the uninhabited island. Philip Ashton went ashore voluntarily. He deliberately chose the hardships of the life alone upon an out-of-the-way island in the tropics, in order to escape from a company of pirates.

And there is another essential distinction between Ashton and Crusoe. Ashton was a real, flesh-and-blood young man. Crusoe was a character in fiction.

Philip Ashton was only about 20 years old when he was captured, off Shelbourne, on the southern Nova Scotia coast, by the pirate Ned Low. This was on Friday, June 15, 1722.

Ashton was one of a large company of fishermen, from Massachusetts Bay, making port for the week-end after several days of hard labor at the nets on the high seas. Low, sailing the brigantine Rebecca, made for the midst of the fishing fleet, and began looting the little vessels of whatever supplies he wanted. The fishermen were in consternation. When he had taken everything he wanted out of 13 boats, Low began to impress men from the fishing crews into his service.

Among those captured and carried off by the pirate was Philip Ashton, who lived in Marblehead, was unmarried, and was very religious. Low also took the largest and fleetest of the fishing boats, a schooner owned in Marblehead. Ashton begged hard for his liberty.

He cried like a child at parting from his companions of the fleet, and begged them to inform the world that he was taken by the pirates against his will and would never consent to adopt their way of life.

The companions of Ashton were not forgetful. On July 9 they published in the Boston News-Letter a solemn legal notice, with affidavits by several eye-witnesses, to tell the world that Philip Ashton was forcibly taken by the pirate, Ned Low, against his will. No sooner was Low out of sight of the fishing fleet than he had Ashton brought before him.

"You're a fine block of a young man," said the pirate captain. "Stick to me and I'll make a good pirate of you."

"I'll never be a pirate. You can kill me, but you can't make a pirate of me. I don't want to be rich. I don't want to kill people. I don't want to steal. You think those things are all right, but I don't. Why don't you turn me loose, next time you come to land, and take on somebody that would like to be a pirate?"

Low looked out to sea for a long time. Maybe it was 20 seconds. It seemed much longer to Ashton. Then the pirate captain called one of his men.

"Take this psalm-singer below. Lock him up. Give him bread and water for a week. Then bring him to me again."

But starvation, rough usage, floggings and keel-haulings failed to make a pirate out of young Ashton. Low was determined. He was, in fact, stubborn. But he had caught one whose stubbornness was equal to his own.

Ashton finally was put to work. He was made to swab the deck, splice ropes, serve aloft, and do almost everything except fight when there was an engagement. Low saw that it would be useless to try to make the boy handle a gun or a cutlass. So Ashton did his share of the work, but did not share in the prize money.

The young rebel determined on the very first day of his servitude that he would escape at the first opportunity. That opportunity did not present itself until nine eventful and bloody months had passed.

In March, 1723, Ashton was serving aboard the pirate schooner at the usual drudgery. The vessel lay at anchor near Rattan island, in the Bay of Honduras, where wood and water were being taken aboard, in preparation for another cruise against peaceful shipping in the Caribbean.

The cooper was going ashore on the island with casks and a small party, to bring back to the ship a load of drinking water. Ashton hailed the cooper and asked if he might go ashore, since he had never been allowed off the ship since his service for the pirates began. The cooper consented, seeing that the young man was without shoes, and thinking that nobody would run away upon so desolate an island.

Ashton gave the boat's company the slip, and hid among the dense thickets of the island, some distance from shore. He heard his name called repeatedly when the boat was leaving for the ship that evening. He trembled, but he did not waver. He would escape from the pirates at any cost.

For five days after that, Ashton kept himself hidden among the bushes in the interior of the island, since during all that time he could see that the pirate vessel was still at anchor off shore. When the pirates weighed anchor and disappeared over the horizon, this intrepid youngster began to look about him.

The island was about 30 miles long, and possibly 12 miles wide at the widest part. It was heavily timbered. There were mountains, high hills, deep valleys, streams of fresh water, and sheltered harbors.

Ashton found abundance of fruit. Some of this fruit he felt sure was poisonous, and it was with great fear and nervousness that he ate of unknown fruits, since he always expected to die soon after tasting them.

The young castaway knew nothing of woodcraft. Almost any Boy Scout of our own day could get along fairly well on a tropical island. But Ashton did not know how to make fire

with dry sticks. He had heard that it could be done, and he spent hours of painful effort, rubbing dry sticks together without ever striking a spark.

Having no fire, the young man could not have cooked any meat, even if he could have caught any. There were wild animals in plenty on the island. Among them were wild hogs that would have been most luscious if roasted by a crackling wood fire. But Ashton knew of no way to kill the hogs and dress

them, and he couldn't provide himself with a fire. There were fish of many varieties in the coves, and also edible turtles. Ashton spent many weary hours looking at all these good dinners swimming, crawling and running about the island and its adjacent waters, but he continued to live upon fruits. He found a use for the hogs, however. He watched them eat fruits that he was in doubt about. If the hogs didn't die, Ashton thought he might risk the fruit also. Thus he broadened his diet a little.

The greatest hardship, aside from loneliness, was caused by walking barefooted over the hot sands and the stony ground. Within a few months the young fellow's feet became so badly bruised and infected that his life was endangered. He was not good enough at woodcraft even to make himself sandals. But before you condemn him for this, remember that he had no knife.

Ashton lost count of the days and months. Several times he fainted from pain, upon lacerating anew his sore feet. He did not know how long he lay unconscious at these times. But he began to feel that he could not last much longer. His health was sadly undermined by insufficient variety of food, by hardship, and by loneliness.

It was in the November following his landing on Rattan island that Ashton, sitting on the beach in despair, saw an old man paddling toward him in a canoe. The visitor landed, and the two became friends. The newcomer was an Englishman who, for some unstated reason, had lived many years with the Spaniards on the mainland. He was, for another unstated reason, then in flight from the Spaniards. He shared his belongings with the castaway.

Thus came to Rattan island and its hermit the blessing of fire. The old man left the island for a hunting trio after three days, and never returned. It was Ashton's belief that his friend was drowned in a storm. But he had left with Ashton flints, powder, a knife, and a little food. Life was never so severe again for the lonely inhabitant of Rattan Island.

When Ashton landed in his isolated kingdom he did not know how to swim. During his long residence there he became a good swimmer. At first he ventured out into the water by lying flat upon a pole of bamboo. Once, having lost his supporting pole, he was obliged to swim alone to shore. After that he was a swimmer. He swam to and from all the little islands that clustered about Rattan. He chose a small, wind-swept islet for a sleeping place, because the wind there blew away the mosquitoes that so sorely tormented him upon Rattan.

Once the hermit found a good canoe on the beach, washed up there from somewhere. Thereafter, life was still better and more comfortable, and the young man made many trips to and from neighboring islands.

Ashton had been marooned 16 months when he acquired a large company of friends. Eighteen white men from the mainland, in two canoes, landed and made the acquaintance of the recluse. They had rum as an added consolation for loneliness, and indeed the young New Englander was in need of a stimulant. His health was bad, and growing worse.

The 18 Bay men, as they were called, were roving hunters and turtles. While they resided upon the island with Ashton there was an attack by pirates. These marauders were of Low's old crew, and fought for the fun of fighting. Ashton escaped harm by great good luck, and the pirates eventually sailed away.

The Bay men departed upon their own business, after six or seven months, leaving one old man with Ashton upon Rattan.

It was in March, 1725, that Ashton was delivered from his island. A brigantine from Salem, blown off her course, put in for water. Ashton told his story, and was taken on as a hand. Two years, 10 months and 15 days after his capture by Low, Ashton was back in his father's house at Marblehead. He had been upon his island for about two years.

Ashton became a hero and a wonder in his home town. He married and was the father of six children, and his descendants live in New England to this day.

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The News of the Trial of Joseph Libby

Date: Thursday, July 15, 1723 Paper: New-England Courant (Boston, MA)

POSTSCRIPT.

Boston, July 15. They write from Newport on Rhode-Island, that on the 11th and 12th Instant the Pirates lately brought in there by the Grayhound had their Trial. Twenty-eight of them were found guilty and receiv'd Sentence of Death. Among those that are clear'd are, John Kincaid the Doctor, Joseph Sweetter, John Wilfon, Henry Barnes, Thomas Jones, and Tom. Quimper an Indian. One Joseph Libbey of Marblehead is condemn'd. A more particular Account may be expected in our next. They all pleaded Not Guilty to their Indictment: The principal Article exhibited and proved against them was their attacking the King's Ship: The principal Evidences for the King were Capt. Solgardland his Lieutenant, and Capt. Welland and Company. We hear those condemn'd are to be executed on Wednesday next.

Prologue

July 19, 1723

Exactly one week before he died, Joseph Libbey stood in court and pleaded his innocence. Libbey had shown the judges a year-old copy of the *Boston News-Letter*, from July 1722, that contained depositions by the captains of three fishing vessels. Those statements, sworn under oath, attested that Libbey was a forced man. But over past thirteen months, Joseph Libbey had made enough mistakes for the witnesses who testified in court to claim he was in fact guilty of being an active member of a pirate crew that had been terrorizing the Atlantic coast. Libbey fired guns during the pirates' attacks on other ships, the witnesses said. He was a "stirring, active man among them" and had been seen going aboard captured vessels in search of plunder.

The gallows was erected on the long, narrow bar of sand and rock that formed Gravelly Point, at the edge of the harbor in Newport, Rhode Island. A large crowd of people had come to watch the condemned men die—not only Libbey, but twenty-five others accused of being pirates. Libbey was one of the youngest of the men, just twenty-one or twenty-two years old that summer. Before his capture he had been a fisherman from the small village of Marblehead, Massachusetts, where he had grown up. Like some of the other men who stood with him at the gallows, Libbey claimed he was the victim of cruel circumstances. He had not chosen to sail with the pirates; he and many of the others had, in one captive's words, gone with "the greatest reluctance and horror of mind and conscience." In time, however, Joseph Libbey must have given in to the crew's brutality—the threats, whippings, and beatings—and began helping out when the pirates attacked other vessels at sea.