

When Did Put-in-Bay Harbor Move from Middle Bass to South Bass?

When I first read that Burgundy Bay on Middle Bass Island was called Put-in-Bay (or Pudding Bay; the record is unclear about this) in 1786, at a time when Put-in-Bay harbor was known to be named Hope's Cove, I was shocked. I took the missionary's diary that I was reading to several staff of the Lake Erie Islands Historical Society, and they came to the same conclusion. And I then took it to a few other local historians, who also agreed with the interpretation.

In the past I have done a lot of research into the history of the Lake Erie Islands in the 19th and early 20th centuries for the Lake Erie Islands Historical Society. But up to this year I had done little research on the islands in the 18th century. In the past few months, however, I have found a number of detailed text references from the 1780s and 1790s to Put-in-Bay being called Hope's Cove during that period. I also found a 1794 map of the islands by Pilkington that clearly labeled Put-in-Bay harbor as Hope's Cove. The map also identified Gibraltar Island as St. Georges Island, and I have found several text references that clearly referred to Gibraltar with that name. Interestingly, there is an island off the British coast named St. George's Island that is approximately the size and shape of Gibraltar, so that may be where the name came from.

How could Burgundy Bay have been a major harbor? In the 18th century, Sugar Island was still connected to Middle Bass Island, and Pilkington's 1794 map shows this clearly, as do a number of others. The missionary's diary entries of interest start on Saturday, April 29, 1786. They start with "we went into the lake (from the mouth of the Detroit River) having wind from the side, quite a strong wind too, and with few exceptions everybody was sea-sick. Yet we came, towards evening, after sailing forty miles, to Pudding (Put-in)-Bay, among the islands, when the captain came to anchor in water six fathoms deep, for from this point he had to change his course, and must wait for a suitable wind, and here, moreover, the harbor is good and protected from all winds. Here we stayed until May [23d], for the captain would not venture to run out unless he had a good wind."

Six fathoms are 36 feet, and while parts of Burgundy Bay are that deep, no part of Put-in-Bay harbor is even half that deep. But many more precise clues follow in the diary. On the island (which we will later deduce is Middle Bass), "the Indians (who were part of the missionaries' party) shot ducks and pigeons, and found wild potatoes and onions in abundance. The captain and ship's crew fished, and got fish enough for us and everybody. The island is good and fertile, three miles long by two wide. South of it, about a mile off, is another much larger, indeed there are many islands here in the midst of the lake." This fits the description of South Bass Island

"May 5. The wind changed to the north-west and blew hard. We were all ashore. The ships raised anchor, and went to the east side of the island, out of the wind". If the ships had been in today's Put-in-Bay harbor, they would have been safe from the northwest wind." There are several references to other ships that came into Put-in-Bay (Burgundy Bay) during their stay there. The night of May 22 the winds got much worse again and we finally come to the key entry:

"Tuesday, 23. We had all to go aboard early. Both ships ran toward another island lying to the south, opposite the first, into a better harbor, where no wind could get at them, come from what quarter it might. This island is as large again as the former (South Bass Island is almost exactly twice as large as Middle Bass, so this sounds correct). The harbor is called Hope's Cove, for the ship, Hope, that passed the winter here, being frozen in." The diary goes on with more information about the stay on South Bass Island. The wind stayed bad, so the party eventually went from the south tip of the island across to the north tip of Catawba Island, and the next few pages are a fascinating description of the overland journey to Sandusky.

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All of the people who have reviewed the entire text for me, including several colleagues at the Lake Erie Islands Historical Society, say that the text states clearly that Put-in-Bay was on Middle Bass Island, and that the party moved their ships from Put-in-Bay (today's Burgundy Bay) to Hope's Cove (today's Put-in-Bay).

We do not know for certain when Sugar Island became completely separated from Middle Bass, but it was probably in the period 1800-1815. The only good place for a ship to "put in" then became Hope's Cove, so that is probably how the name was changed to Put-in-Bay.

There are other 18th century accounts of travelers who had to spend about a month on the islands waiting for the right winds to go east, sometimes leaving 3 or 4 times only to have to come back after a day or two on the water. There are also accounts of 18th century visits to the Bass Islands that I have been able to identify clearly, but not obtain yet. I know I will get one of those in late August or early September, so there will be more to the story.

For the record, Charles Frohman's 1971 book *Put-in-Bay: Its History* cites several of the same sources, but comes to the conclusion that Put-in-Bay was at its current location, and that Hope's Cove was at Kelleys Island. But all the people I have shared the full original material with agree with the new interpretation that Put-in-Bay was on Middle Bass Island.

But a bit of speculation needs to be done at this point. An 1874 map shows that the Sugar Island dock was just where it is today. Isn't it likely that the same dock was used in the 1780s? Since the water is deeper on the Sugar Island side than on the Middle Bass side, it's quite possible that in the 18th century, the Sugar Island dock was the main Middle Bass dock for large sailing ships. If this dock was used to load lumber from Middle Bass cedar trees onto ships, the lumber would have been brought across the narrow piece of land which is now the submerged reef. And the land above the reef would likely have been a road for the lumber carts. That might explain why the reef is so consistently level and flat. There is a picture of the reef entirely above water at http://www.middlebass2.org/images/wIMG_1347.jpg. This picture is from seiche conditions in November, 2003 when the water was extremely low for a few hours. In fact, the original caption for that picture in the photo gallery at <http://www.middlebass2.org/200311Album.shtml> is "The new road to Sugar Island". Perhaps the title should have been "The old road to Middle Bass".

Perhaps it was the cutting of trees on the reef that led to its eventual disappearance. And perhaps the dock was a "put in" place for logs. "Put in" is actually a term used in logging. We may never know for sure, but all of a sudden we have lots of interesting new theories about island life in the 18th century.

About the author: Mike Gora is a seasonal Middle Bass resident and is the Middle Bass Island Historian for the Lake Erie Islands Historical Society. He runs the Middle Bass Island web site at www.middlebass.org and has published several books about the history of the islands including *Lonz of Middle Bass* and *Lake Erie Islands: Sketches and Stories*.