



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

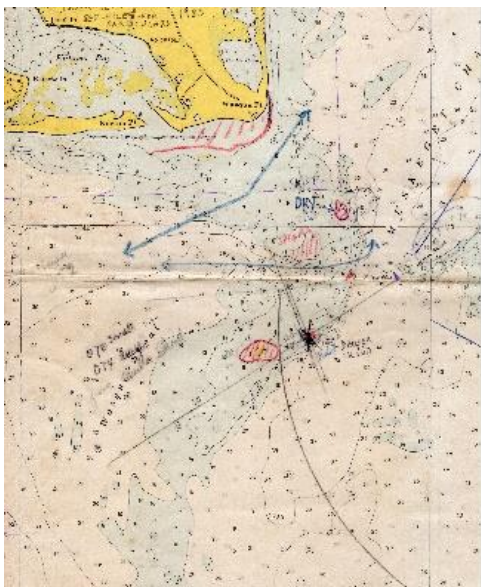
Hauser the Explorer

by Terry White and Meg Costello

The next time you drive down Gifford Street between Katharine Lee Bates Road and Jones Road, look for Lt. Hauser Lane. This short lane is named for a notable former resident of the street, USCG Lt. Albert H. Hauser. Nearly forgotten today is another landmark named after Hauser. It's a mere pinpoint off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, found on some navigational charts. In the 1970s and 1980s, this tiny island became a bone of contention between state and federal governments in a lawsuit that addressed the broader question of who would have jurisdiction over local waters, along with the fishing rights and natural resources associated with them.

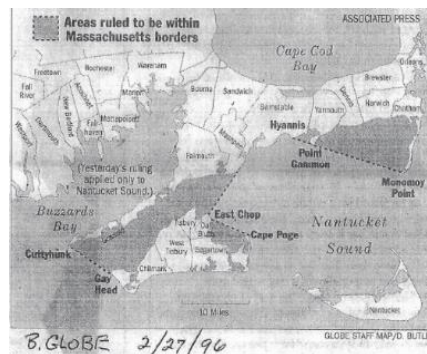


Flag, in the Museums' archives.



Chart, with notes by Hauser. Clipping from *Boston Globe*. Both items are in the archives.

it were determined to be part of Massachusetts territory, it would extend the state's three-mile limit over coastal waters out to the middle of Muskeget Channel, giving the Commonwealth control over the passage between Chappaquiddick and Nantucket.



The "island" had been discovered by Hauser during one of his many fishing trips in the area. "I always knew it was here," he told the *New York Times* (8/23/83); "I've fished from it often enough." Fisherman Edward Perry agreed, saying, "Of course it exists. . . . In '45 or '46 it had trees on it. Then it vanished for about 10 years in the mid '50s. But it's been around now for a good 15 years" (*New Bedford Standard-Times*, 8/22/83). Federal charts of the area, however, indicated eight or nine feet of water over a sandbar. Hauser described the "island" as 200 yards by 500 yards, and getting larger since he discovered it in 1976.

The mystery island was located in the Muskeget Channel between Chappaquiddick Island and Nantucket, on the Wasque Shoal. If



In August 1983, Albert Hauser, carrying a state flag, led a “landing party” to the island. The *New York Times* reported that the group “invaded” the “strip of sand.” The invaders arrived by helicopter and included journalists and Massachusetts state officials. Hauser unfurled the state flag while announcing, “We hereby take possession of this island for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts” (NYT, 8/24/83). Special attorney general Henry Herrmann suggested the island needed a name for legal purposes and offered the name “Hauser Island.”



At about the same time as the “invasion,” Hauser had written to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to call their attention to the potential danger resulting from the absence of the island on charts of the area. He received a reply in October 1983 from Capt. C. William Hayes of the Nautical Charting Division of NOAA, indicating that the “sand formation” had been investigated. The letter identified the location (41°18'56”N and 70°26'38”W) and confirmed the “sand formation [was] elevated above mean high water,” i.e., it was an island. Hayes noted that “Charts of this area will be revised to reflect the results of this survey.” He did not indicate if the formation had been named.



Photos from the archives, taken in August 1983 at Hauser's Island. Albert is standing third from left.

Meanwhile, the lawsuit, which involved several states and attracted sympathetic attention from others as far away as Alaska, dragged on for a decade. The federal government argued that even if the island existed, Massachusetts had no legal claim to it. In their view, Hauser’s flag-planting had been an irrelevant stunt. On the other side of the issue, lawyers for the commonwealth reached back much earlier than Hauser to argue the right of “ancient title,” contending that “under such doctrine, the English Crown acquired title to Nantucket Sound as a result of discovery and occupation by colonists in the early 17th century, and that Massachusetts has succeeded to the Crown's title.”

On February 25, 1986, the Supreme Court issued an 8-0 decision written by Justice Stevens, in favor of the federal government (*U.S. vs. Maine*, 1986). The ruling relied heavily on the report of a Special Master appointed by the court.

So Hauser’s Island may well exist, but if it does, it lies in the waters of the United States, not the commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Despite this disappointing outcome, Albert Hauser still belongs to a select club of explorers whose other members include Bartholomew Gosnold and Neil Armstrong. All of them experienced the thrill of planting their flag in a new land.

Long before this exploit, Lt. Hauser was well-known in the Falmouth community. As a 20-year-old Coast Guardsman, he had arrived in Woods Hole just in time to experience the Hurricane of 1938. He spent much of his career commanding the Coast Guard ship *White Sage*. Other assignments included postings in Greenland and Boston, as well as a 1951 stint at a LORAN navigation station in the Caroline Islands.

In June 1956, Hauser took command of the Coast Guard Base at Woods Hole. Once again, he arrived on the scene just before a disaster struck. This time it was the sinking of the Italian luxury liner *Andrea Doria*, which collided with MS *Stockholm* in a thick fog, south of Nantucket. One of Hauser's first tasks was to assist with the recovery effort. From the wreck he acquired a souvenir, an emergency light from one of *Andrea Doria's* lifeboats. Now owned by Museums on the Green, the light is currently on display in Conant House.

Retirement from the Coast Guard in 1958 was far from the end of Hauser's marine life. His great knowledge of the waters of the Woods Hole area led not only to his identifying an island, but also to the development of a new plan for the buoying of the Woods Hole channel in 1957 after a number of strandings there. Between 1962 and 1974, Hauser was chief harbormaster for Falmouth.



German by birth, Albert had been born in Oberhausen in 1918. He immigrated to the U.S. with his mother and his father, the well-known artist Henry Hauser, in 1927. Hauser saw service in both World War II and the Korean War and later became a district administrator for the United Nations in the Bismarck Archipelago. As if all these accomplishments weren't enough, he was also a talented amateur artist.

Albert Hauser died in 2001, about a year after the passing of his wife of 60 years, Grace (Sullivan). He was survived by their son Robert.



ABOVE: *Untitled painting by Albert Hauser, depicting the rescue of the crew of the Pendleton.*

LEFT: *Shell from Hauser's Island.*

As you read about wind turbines going up south of Chappaquiddick Island, imagine that they may cast a shadow over a small speck of land nearby which some people call Hauser's Island.

Both items are in the Museums' archives.

Learn more:

[New York Times article on the invasion of Hauser's Island in 1983](#)

[SCOTUS ruling in *U.S. vs. Maine* \(1986\)](#)

[The problem of disappearing islands](#)