

The Legend of the Bear and the Sign.

By Paul St. Germain

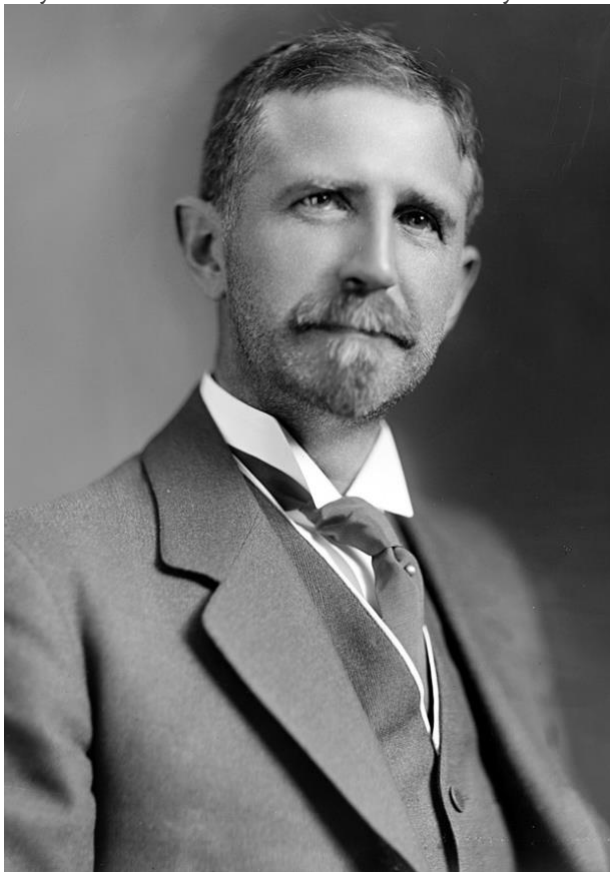
The Bear and "Uncle Babson"



The oldest known record of how Rockport's Bearskin Neck received its name has been a question mark for many years. In Eleanor Parsons' book *Bearskin Neck*, she related that the name goes back at least 300 years. By 1700, much of the dense hemlock forest surrounding all of Cape Ann had been harvested and used for the wharfs in Boston and other ports, which allowed the bears and other wild animals to roam freely right down to the ocean front. As they became more of a nuisance, bears especially were singled out by the men of the area to be hunted. The most common version of the Babson-killing-the-bear story was told by young 10-year-old Henry Witham, who recounted how his "Uncle Babson" confronted a bear on the Neck and slaughtered the animal with a fourteen-inch knife. He then skinned it and laid out the pelt to dry on the rocks.

Many historians later identified the bear slayer as Ebenezer Babson (1667-1695), although he had died in 1695 at the age of 25. In their book *History of Rockport* (1888), Ebenezer Pool, Lemuel Gotts, and John W. Marshall verified this fact. However earlier, in John J. Babson's *History of Gloucester* (1860), we read that it may have been John Babson (1660-1737) who slew the bear.

George Babson wrote in his *A Brief and True Report concerning the Colonial Babsons* of 1958 that a local saying was created, "The knife that Babson killed the bear with." The legend now appears in this couplet: "Babson, Babson, killed a bear, with his knife, I do declare." One would think that in writing this couplet, the author would have used the first name of the slayer. At least it would sound more lyrical.



Roger Babson. Photograph by Harris & Ewing. From the Harris & Ewing photograph collection of the Library of Congress.

In his "Story of Bearskin Neck," Roger Babson (1875- 1967), puts it as follows: "... Ebenezer Babson, who then resided at the Farms (this is before the Babson Farms became the Babson Farm Quarries in the 1830's at Halibut Point) saw the bear ready to attack the boy (his nephew, Henry Witham). He immediately attacked the bear to get his attention away from the child but having no gun he permitted the bear to follow him into the water. There-after a terrific struggle-Ebenezer killed the bear with a fish knife. He then brought the bear onto

the shore, skinned him, and spread the skin on the rocks to dry. Ebenezer died shortly afterwards, presumably lost at sea, but his nephew Henry Witham, whose life he saved, lived to a ripe old age. Naturally, he often told the story of his rescue and when people asked how Babson killed the bear, he would reply: 'With his knife, I do declare.'

Both Ebenezer Babson (1667-1695) and John Babson (1660-1737) were brothers and uncles of Henry Witham (1695-1777), who at ten years of age may have confused which brother saved his life.

I got the sense while reading John James Babson's History of Gloucester that he seems less than enchanted with Ebenezer. In Chapter XV he mentions John Babson being granted land in 1695 at Straitsmouth "to sett up fishing upon." Later in that paragraph he says, "One circumstance keeps alive the memory of Babson and the Chebacco fishermen. The former, [meaning John] *or some member of the family*, was attacked one day by a bear; and, after a terrible struggle with his antagonist, succeeded in slaying him with a knife." Note he never mentions Ebenezer at all but says "*or some member of the family*."

Later, John J. Babson makes the following observation: "Ebenezer Babson would have no further notice here if he had not found a place in the *Magnalia* of Cotton Mather, where, in a letter from Rev. John Emerson, he figures in the diabolical work by which, in 1692, the town was kept in a state of agitation and alarm for several months. He may have been distinguished in an encounter with a less ethereal enemy, and thus have been the occasion of the local saying, 'The knife that Babson killed the bear with.' He died before 1696."

I infer here that if Cotton Mather had never mentioned Ebenezer's name in his book *Magnalia Christi Americana*, which was the ecclesiastical history of New England and especially critical of the Salem Witch trials in which Ebenezer had some role, Ebenezer might not be part of this legend. He was only 25 when he died and not very popular, while John became very influential in the Fifth parish church and later in politics.



Babson's Knife

Today that fourteen-inch fish knife is carefully preserved and can be seen at the Sandy Bay Historical Society Museum (SBHS), a gift presented by Thomas Wilson Babson.



Ebenezer Pool. Photograph courtesy of the Sandy Bay Historical Society.

Interestingly, another Ebenezer was living at the time. His name was Ebenezer Pool (1787-1878), and he was an antiquarian and recorder of Rockport history who took it upon himself to keep detailed records of the people and events of the time. His diaries and papers are archived at SBHS in six volumes. He once stated that John was considered to be a “fearless chap” when he dared to challenge those involved in the witchcraft agitation in nearby

Salem. John's bravery during these tumultuous times may be the indicator that he rather than Ebenezer Babson was the actual hero.



Pool Papers in steel box

Pool also questions which Babson killed the bear. In Book 2 of his papers, he writes, " ...Eben Babson son of James Babson of Farm Village [Pool inserted 'perhaps it was John Babson'] killed a Bear on the neck leading onto Bearskin Neck point so called from this exploit. He killed the bear with his knife, as tradition—"There did Babson kill the bear with his knife I do declare.' He skinned him on the point and left the skins spread on the point to dry, hence the name Bearskin neck 1688."

As the local fisherman began to populate the area with their fish shacks and drying flakes for gear storage and salting fish. They began to refer to the area by the nickname Bearskin Neck due to many of them having witnessed the bear pelt drying on the rocks and heard the talk about the heroics of "Uncle Babson" in 1705.

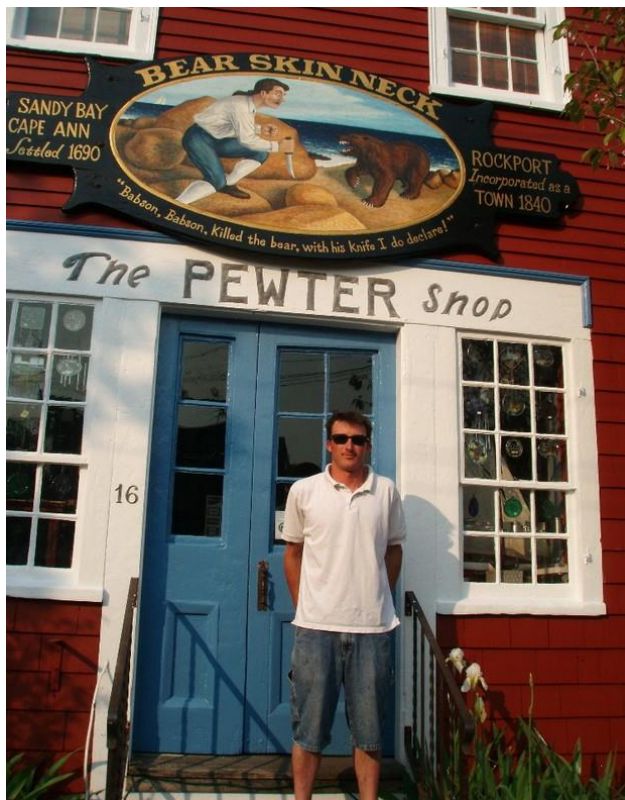
It should be noted that in the late 1600s, Bearskin Neck was a rocky-ledged peninsula connected to the mainland by a narrow, sandy, pebble-strewn path. Resident laid planks across this for easier access.

In those early years, observers say that the outline of the peninsula looked like a bearskin stretched out on the rocks. Some went so far as to surmise that is how the area got its name. It wasn't until 1832 that the Sandy Bay Pier Company was authorized to purchase Bearskin Neck and over time rebuilt it to its current dimensions.

Was it Ebenezer or John? My bet is on John. If we believe that the birth date of Henry Witham was 1695 and that he was 10 years old at the time of the event, it would have occurred 1705. Ebenezer died in 1696. Therefore, it had to be John, as he was very much alive in 1705.

Still, we will probably never know who saved Henry Witham from the bear.

The Sign



Babson Sign on Pewter Shop with artist, Stefan Mierz

One of the ways that this legendary story has maintained a life of its own was a large sign that hung on the Punch Bowl Tavern. It depicts the scene of John Babson (or was it Ebenezer?) fighting a bear with only a knife, the harbor in the background. Besides being the oldest building on the Neck, the Punch Bowl Tavern location was also purported to be the site of the battle with the bear. The sign over the entrance became the building's most distinguishing characteristic and certainly helped keep the legend alive all these years. The Punch Bowl Tavern was built by Washington Tarr in 1775. Prior to that, the Neck was only a dirt path among large boulders that led to a point on the harbor.

The oval sign was about twelve feet long, painted in colors of yellow, black, and gold, and partially carved in relief to accentuate the design. This sign stood at the Tavern for over 150 years to welcome its patrons.



Recent poor condition of sign

Suddenly in the 1920s, the sign went missing. It was not discovered until two residents, George Solley (who lived above the Tavern) and its owner Henry Tarr, became interested in the history of Rockport and Sandy Bay. Henry totally restored the building, and on June 22, 1922, he found the sign covered in a storage shed, out of sight for many years in a Gloucester warehouse or sail loft. Both men were interested in promoting Bearskin Neck as a center for artists and their handcrafts and he decided to have the sign refurbished and repainted in order to hang it over the doorway, where it had been for more than a hundred years before.

In 1922, Henry Tarr and George Solley took subscriptions from locals (43 donations from .25 cents to \$2.00, with Henry Tarr starting the donation process with the largest of \$15.00) having collected a total of \$43.85 by July 22 to have the sign repainted and restored.

It wasn't until 17 years later on December 4, 1939 while preparing for their centennial that the handwritten minutes of the Sandy Bay Historical Society Council that said; "Moved- that the Bearskin Neck Sign be taken in charge by the S.B.H.S. and turned over to that Centennial House Sign Committee, Mr. Arthur J. Hammond, Chairman, together with Mr. Lewis Whitney, who shall arrange for its permanent location on the neck. The Society to pay the expenses of the same. Passed at Dec Mtg of the Council "

It was also mentioned in their minutes "that a note of thanks be extended to Mr. Hal Ross Perrigard of Bearskin Neck for repairing and redecorating the sign..."

The full list of donor subscribers and old handwritten meeting minutes was found by Les Bartlett in the SBHS archives.

But first, they wanted to make a big splash around its return and restoration.

The sign was initially erected on Harvey Tarr's stable, known as Harvey Tarr's Barn, at the corner of Main Street and Dock Square at the entrance to Bearskin Neck. That August, Henry and George threw a large celebration to rededicate the sign with speeches, organ music, a choir, and box seats on wagons for the hundreds of townspeople in attendance.

When Harvey Tarr sold his building, they needed a new place to hang the sign. Eventually it was hung a little further up on Bearskin Neck on two wood posts across from the Sea Fencibles Barracks at the entrance to Bearskin Neck.

In 1933, the year that Henry Tarr died, another mishap occurred when an automobile parked on a slight rise on Main Street rolled down the hill driverless and crashed into the posts holding the sign. After this accident, the sign was "laid by" in storage very much faded and damaged.

In the 30s, it was repainted by artist Peter Kerr (1857-1940).

In a later decade Roger Babson (1875-1967), a direct descendant of John Babson who was the founder of Babson College, called upon local art teacher Mrs. Clifton Fears to help find it. It was soon located, and the distinguished Canadian artist Hal Ross Perrigard (1891-1960), a member of the Royal Academy of Arts in Montreal, was engaged to restore and redecorate it once more. He spent summers in Rockport painting and teaching in his studio on the Neck, which was the 1802 Sea Fencibles Barracks, from 1923 to his death in 1960. After restoration, the sign was turned over to the Sandy Bay Historic Society, according to George Solley, who has owned it since. Babson paid for the work and the rehangings.

Lew Whitney and Arthur Hammond chose to erect it on the old Washington Tarr building, at that time the Whitney Pewter Shop. Lew Whitney had purchased the building in 1935. Whitney was purported to find it under a small building, which is now an ice cream parlor across from his building, just as it was being carted to the dump. Soon after, Whitney took on a young apprentice to learn and help in the skill of pewter designs. Lawson Murch was apprenticed to Whitney at the age of twelve. In the 1960s, he took over the business and has since turned it over to his son, Chris Murch.

Although this sign has apparently belonged to the Sandy Bay Historical Society since the 1930s, that organization has graciously agreed to let the sign hang on Chris Murch's Pewter Shop in order to be seen by thousands of visitors to Bearskin Neck.



Faded sign

In 2007 it was noted that the sign looked a little tired and faded again. The museum's board of directors asked around for artistically talented volunteers to take on the task of bringing it back to life. Stefan Mierz, an artist who has his studio, the Art Nook, further up at 58 Bearskin Neck, stepped forward and made a presentation of his skills that convinced the board to commission him for the chore. He did it again in 2015 and has stepped forward once more in 2021 to repaint the sign for a third time this coming winter. In the above photo, you can see how washed out the sign has become since its last repainting in 2015 due to sunlight, salt air, and many harsh Rockport winters.



Stefan Mierz works on its restoration in 2007



Sam Hershey



Jane Bickford

Over the years, other prominent artists have been commissioned to repaint the sign. Sam Hershey (1904-1987) and Jane Bickford (1921-2019) have each done so at least twice.



Sign design changed to a Pilgrim and no bear. Mrs. Whitney at the entrance of her home and Pewter Shop, June 1943. Photograph by Gordon Parks (1912-2006). Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information photograph collection (Library of Congress).

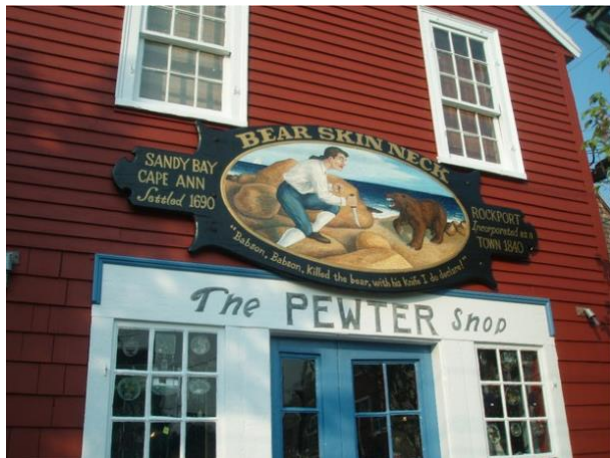
Upon review of the remaining photographs of the older signs, we notice that for a time in the '40s, Babson was depicted as a Pilgrim with the typical capotain or flat-topped pilgrim hat and a doublet, as seen in a photo taken around 1946. This change in design could have been created by Hal Ross Perrigard in the '40s. Most surprising of all, there was no bear on the sign! We are not sure why he eliminated the bear, but fortunately it was soon brought back sometime in the '50s.





Facial renditions of Babson changed frequently

Different renditions of Babson's face through the years had him at various times smiling, serious, almost cartoon-like, very young, and more mature. All these renditions depict a setting that is not true to the story. As Roger Babson's story states, "He immediately attacked the bear to get his attention away from the child but having no gun he permitted the bear to follow him into the water." However, all the versions of the sign show both the bear and Babson on the rocky shore and never in the water together.



Pewter Shop with newly restored sign in 2007

Stories persist about the old building where the sign hangs as they have about many structures on the Neck, and some believe that a ghost continues to haunt the premises. They assert that when a northeast wind whispers around the Pewter Shop, footsteps can be heard from time to time on the stairway. Some speculate that these footsteps may be those of the original builder, Washington Tarr. Or maybe they belong to John Babson, who is hoping that someone makes the correct identification of who really killed the bear. After all, the actual battle purportedly took place on the very same location as the Punch Bowl Tavern.

Photographs by Paul St. Germain except where listed.